

THIEVES

by

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Directed Studies

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I

I had Letita on my lap, enjoying her charms and attentions as I had many times before. Suddenly the front door of the Rat's Den burst open letting in that little jerk of a pickpocket, Metal. Something had him very excited; probably a fat purse he'd succeeded in flinching. That was a rare feat for him. He hurried through the thick, smoky air of the large room to a table where his dirty little pals hung out. He began to energetically tell them about whatever it was that had him so heated up.

I figured that since it took so little to excite such a petty person it probably wasn't important at all. With that thought, I turned my attention back to Letita. Perfume cloaked her slender form more heavily than the cloth which adorned her. I watched expectantly each time she smiled, waiting for her heavy make-up to crack. This was my choice of all the whores present;

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odor, false face and all. She was the cleanest one here, or at least as clean as can be expected. Besides that, she was almost pretty, which is more than can be said for most of the Rat Pack's whores. We'd just decided to find a more private place to pursue our pleasures when Squirrel, my sometimes partner, burst in upon our activities.

"Slinker!" he said grabbing my shoulder and shaking it.

I've never been fond of people who come between me and my pleasures, so I rounded on him, standing as I did. I had forgotten about Letita, who hit the floor screaming. Like a cat, she attacked me with her claws. Bitchy women have always been a sore spot with me also, so I kicked her aside to save the skin on my legs. She got up from the floor spitting invectives interspersed with screeches that she'd get her revenge for that insult. Knowing how she carries on I ignored her. She finally ran off, cursing me loudly. I turned my attention to Squirrel.

Before I could speak, he blurted out the news which had induced him to set all this off. "We've been out-thieved!" The words came out in a rush. His tension stood out in the lines of his body and tone of his voice.

"Who could've out-thieved us?" I demanded.

"Metal!"

I stood dumbfounded, my mouth hanging open. For a minute I doubted Squirrel's sanity. Then I decided that

I had misheard him. "Who?" I asked again.

"Metal, just tonight."

He was serious. But how could that rabbit pick-pocket out-thieve us? We were the best thieves in the Rat Pack which was the best thieves guild in this city of thieves.

"What'd he thieve?" I asked.

"The Baron Kiest's Jewels," Squirrel answered.

"Somehow the little jerk succeeded in thieving them."

"It's not possible," I said. "We cased that set-up and decided that we couldn't even do it. How could a no-talent jerk pull it off?"

Squirrel shrugged. "The only reason I believe he did it is that I saw the jewels in his possession. If it hadn't been for that I'd be sure he was lying."

For nearly a decade now, Squirrel and I had been the best thieves in Cantol and suddenly a dirty, no-talent pick-pocket has pulled off a theft we'd opted to not even try. My anger rose to match that in Squirrel's eyes. "He had to have help," I said.

"Yea, but who?"

We peered around the room. There wasn't anyone in the Rat's Den who could have done it, especially Metal. But it had been done! Either Metal had been simply a messenger for the thief or else lucked up and flinched the right bag. The latter didn't seem likely though. Whoever thieved those jewels wouldn't let a bumble-fingered

fool lift them from him.

"What'd you actually see of what Metal did?" I asked Squirrel.

"Nothing really, I saw him fleeing the vicinity of the Baron's keep, so I chased him down to see what was happening. That's when he showed me the jewels and said that he'd thieved them."

"You're sure they were the Baron's jewels?"

"Yea, you can't make a copy of the Crown's Eye. They were the Baron's."

"Okay. I still find it hard to believe he could've pulled off a theft like that."

"Me too, but he did have the jewels."

"And you let him keep them?"

"Would you have me thief from a fellow Pack Rat; even if it was Metal."

"No, of course not. It just seems such a shame to let a poor thief like Metal have such rich booty. Damn, it looks as though he may have really done it."

My mind began reviewing what I knew of the jewels and their keeping. These jewels were the most valuable collection within a thousand leagues. Some of them even carried curses, or so it was said. The Crown's Eye, which was larger than my clinched fist, carried a curse which ended its possessor's life within five years. The curse appeared real, since each owner had died within that time period after getting the jewel. The Baron had

owned the Crown's Eye for five years now and still lived. Maybe the curse was broken.

Various other jewels had lesser curses on them. One supposedly made the owner impotent or infertile. Another causes a ravenous hunger in anyone near it. Whether or not those things had affected the Baron, I didn't know. Even so, it made me wonder why anyone would want to possess jewels that were cursed.

These jewels and the rest were kept in a metal vault deep below ground. Four eunuchs guarded this vault and were themselves enclosed in an iron barred cage. This cage was set into the floor of the large room where the vault lay and was guarded by three shambling beasts that resembled men but obviously weren't. Squirrel and I hadn't even been able to figure out how the eunuchs were fed, much less how to get the jewels out. The more I thought about it, the less likely it seemed that Metal could have thieved them. He had to have had inside help.

Groco's appearance broke into my thoughts. He was the oldest thief in the guild and had been, in his day, the best. He'd taught Squirrel and I much of our art; yet by his own admission, we had transcended his own ability. He had been heard to brag on occasion that he'd been responsible for making us the best and he may have had reason to make that claim. I won't deny it. We liked this old man who'd been the closest thing to a father either of us had ever known.

"Does that garbage Metal's spouting have any truth in it?" he asked.

"What's he saying?" I asked.

"That he thieved the Kiest jewels." Groco's face showed his disbelief.

"It seems he has," Squirrel answered.

"But how?" Groco cried out. "That jerk couldn't put his hand into a blind man's purse without being seen."

"True," I said. "We think he had help."

"Help! He'd have to have ^{had} help. He certainly couldn't have done it alone. He's bragging that he's now the best thief in the Rat Pack. You'll prove him wrong, of course."

"Of course," Squirrel said.

We glanced over at the table where Metal and his pals sat. "Let him enjoy his bragging," I said. "His fame won't last long. Even if he did pull that theft, he can't do it twice. He'll be back running the gutters next week."

"But if he had help getting those jewels, he might get help again," Groco said.

"Maybe," Squirrel replied. "I tend to think, though, that he was the one used, not the other way around. It's not likely he'll get help again."

"But more importantly," I said. "Who helped him and why?"

"He claims he did it alone," Groco said. "But he's a liar."

"What do you mean, 'why?' , Slinker?" Squirrel asked.

"Whoever thieved those jewels is letting Metal take the credit. How many thieves would allow that?" At my question, Squirrel's face assumed a thoughtful look.

"Why would the real thief allow that?"

"It could be because the Baron would hang the man who thieved from him," Squirrel replied.

"True," said Groco, "But when was any good thief afraid of being caught. No, I think it's probably because they weren't really stolen."

"What do you mean?" Squirrel and I asked simultaneously.

"Someone could be using them for bait," he replied.

"Bait for what?" I asked.

"A trap."

"For us?" Squirrel asked.

"Probably," Groco answered.

"But why us?" I asked.

"Because you're the best and they probably need your talents for a special theft. That, or else they want you removed from the scene all together, which I doubt."

Neither Squirrel nor I had thought of that. It could be the answer. "Whatever their plan is," Squirrel said, "It won't work. We won't take the bait."

"No, we won't," I said. "Let's talk to Metal though and find out what he knows."

Squirrel smiled at my suggestion.

"Don't hurt him," Groco cautioned. "Even you couldn't get away with that."

"We won't," I assured him. All thieves' guilds had an unwritten law which protected its members within its den. Of course, any member who betrayed the guild would die shortly after leaving the den. We wouldn't hurt Metal but we would question him here and, if necessary, do him hurt elsewhere.

"Fix him good though," the old man said.

We smiled at him. "Certainly," Squirrel said.

Then we crossed the room to the table where Metal sat. We stopped just behind his chair, one of us on either side of him. Metal was chattering away about the theft he claimed to have performed. The rest of the table's occupants had fallen quiet upon our arrival, most of them looking frightened. A couple of them even excused themselves and left the table hurriedly. Nobody doubted that we were angry at Metal. Those who remained at the table sat watching us intently; ready to flee at the least sign of violence. The entire room had fallen silent, except for Metal.

Slowly catching the expectant attitude of the room, Metal fell silent. Then following the looks of his fellows, he glanced over his shoulder to stare into my eyes. His face twisted in terror and his body began to twitch, wishing to flee, which I'm sure he'd like to do.

"We'd like a word with you," I said nodding toward Squirrel. I wanted Metal to know we were both here. Twisting his head around so that he could see Squirrel, Metal let out a gasp of pure fright. Had he been able to cringe any deeper into his chair, he would have.

"What's wrong, little man?" Squirrel asked. "You act as though we'd caught you with your hand in our purses. Why should you fear fellow guild members within our own safe den?" His words were phrased reassuringly, but his tones were too reassuring to be convincing. Metal succeeded in cringing lower, somehow.

"Wha...what do you wa...wa...want?" quivered Metal.

"We just came over to hear about your latest theft," I said. "We'd like to celebrate with you."

"That's right," Squirrel added. "Tell us ALL about your theft." His emphasis on the word 'all' wasn't wasted on Metal. He knew we suspected that there was more to it than he had told. The little man appeared to be trying to sink through the seat of his chair.

"I...I...just went in and...ah...took the jewels," Metal said. His fear could have accounted for his shaking voice, but I think it was because he was trying to fabricate a lie as he went. He wasn't very convincing.

"It couldn't have been that easy, now could it," Squirrel said. "Surely the task was more difficult than that."

"We've been within the keep's walls," I added.

"We know that it requires more than simply walking in, lifting them and walking out again. Won't you give us the details? We'd like to know how it was possible. You could teach us all something."

I think Metal was as terrified by then as he could be. He kept looking around for help, but no one seemed inclined to offer any. It could have been that they were as interested in the details as we were, or that they were afraid of Squirrel and I. Whatever the reasons, Metal stayed alone.

When he realized that, he began speaking so rapidly that his words fell over one another becoming totally incomprehensible.

"Calm down," I said "You're among friends." He understood what I really meant because he shut up, swallowed, and began talking more slowly.

"I...I had help," he said. He winced at the looks of disgust that crossed the faces of his once called friends. "It was one of the house servants," he went on, too afraid of us to worry about what the rest would think of him. "His name was Cantoes, I think, a floor sweep or some such."

"How could a floor sweep be of any help?" Squirrel asked.

Metal sighed. "I was the one who helped," he said.

"Cantoës did the actual thieving. I simply carried the jewels from the gate of the hold to the Lizard House..."

A hiss arose from the room's occupants. The Lizard House was the den of the thieves guild who called themselves The Reptiles. We weren't on friendly terms with them and to enter their den was rank betrayal of the Rat Pack. I almost felt sorry for Metal, but not quite. He had gone into this open-eyed. "Why'd you aid this floor sweep?" I asked.

"Well," he looked more embarrassed now than afraid. "He caught me with my hand wrist deep in his purse. He didn't turn me in for helping him. I had no choice." Fear suddenly returned to his face when he realized he'd no longer be welcome here. Where could a guildless thief go? No guild accepted new members except those born of its whores.

I softened a little toward this jerk then. He hadn't gone into it wide-eyed. He'd been trapped and forced to make an impossible choice. He had to either betray his guild or lose his hand. A handless thief could only beg ^{where} and in this city ~~where~~ everyone took rather than gave, beggars starved.

"Where are the jewels now?" Squirrel asked.

"Cantoës paid me to take them to the wizard, Selmonto."

A new hiss arose. Metal felt it this time. He

cringed and began to look around, eyes filled with terror. Selmonto's the biggest fence in the city; but the Rat Pack had no dealings with him which they could avoid. The pack despised this viper more than we did the Reptiles which Metal had mentioned earlier. Even though Metal had dealt with them ~~wikkingly~~ ^{unwillingly,} he'd dealt with them and the guild's code was strict--Metal would be dead by morning.

"I had to do it!" Metal screamed. "Don't you see, I had no choice. I had to!" His eyes were wild, darting around the room, looking for an ally. There were none. He leapt from his chair, fled across the room and darted out the door. No one made a move to stop or pursue him. He was safe--until the next time he crossed the path of any member of the Rat Pack. Someone would probably find him by morning. He'd find no sanctary in or out of the city. I doubted he could survive outside the city walls; like most thieves he'd never been out of the city. This little man had no ability to survive in the wild. He probably wouldn't even think of leaving the city anyway, he'd been here since birth.

Squirrel and I returned to our table. I didn't feel elated by Metal's being outcast or his imminent death; but I was relieved to know we hadn't passed up an easy theft, but one that required inside connections. What puzzled me was how could a mere floor sweep pull

it off. We sat at the table and I asked Squirrel what he thought about it.

"It's not likely that this Cantoos was a floor sweep," he said. "It could be that he only told Metal that to disguise his trail. I doubt that his name was even Cantoos. He is either a trusted servant in the Baron's hold, or else a close relative."

"Or a pawn just as Metal was," Groco butted in.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Just that there's more to this than a simple theft. I don't think those jewels were really stolen."

"But if Metal had them...?" I protested.

"It was meant for you to think they were thieved," Groco replied.

"I agree," Squirrel said: "The Baron Kiest and the wizard are friends. If those jewels had been stolen then the wizard wouldn't have bought them, at least not directly. He'd have had an emissary buy them and then kill the emissary. If they'd actually been stolen Metal would still be in the wizard's tower waiting for the Baron. As it is, I think it's a trap."

"For who?" I asked.

"Us," Squirrel replied.

"Why us?" I asked; sure of the answer.

"You're the best thieves in Cantol," Groco replied.

"So?"

"They have a difficult theft they want you to perform."

That was probably the case. Thank the Gods we could see through it. Whatever damn-fool plan they had would probably get us killed. I wanted no part of a theft planned by barons or wizards.

"You've got to get those jewels," Groco said.

"What?" Squirrel cried. I turned startled eyes to the old man. Squirrel spoke again, echoing my thoughts. "Are you crazy?"

"No, I'm not," he replied calmly. "But do you think they'll give up so easily."

"So you want us to walk into their trap and make it easy for them?" Squirrel asked.

"No. You've been warned that this is a trap, so you can go in prepared not to get caught. The next time you might not realize it in time. This way, you get the jewels and can flee the city so that no harm comes to you."

We both stared at the old man. True enough, once wizards noticed you, it was just a matter of time until they had you, unless you fled quick enough to avoid it. I didn't like the idea, but fleeing beat being entangled in majiks.

"We don't need those jewels," Squirrel said. "We can get all the money we need easily enough."

"But you need speed right now," Groco said. "You must get away quickly and quietly."

"It won't be quiet if we thieve those jewels," I said. "And who'd buy them anyway?"

"You don't sell them here," Groco said. "Sell them in Aparos. An innkeep there offered me five hundred silvers for the Crown's Eye."

I whistled. The Crown's Eye was the largest of the jewels and the most deadly to possess. I wondered why the innkeep wanted it, even for a little while.

"With those jewels," Groco went on, "You can go anywhere you want. And besides, you'd add the insult of thieving from those who wished to trap you."

"Okay," Squirrel said. "We'll get them."

I nodded agreement. "It is time the Baron relinquished those jewels to a new owner."

We laughed, then took our leave of Groco and the Rat's Den. We had a job which required precision and planning. We wanted to do it in darkness which had just fallen. We hoped that dawn would find us with the jewels and away from the wizard's tower. We'd return to the city, if possible, and hide there. Then, as soon as possible, we'd be off and headed for Aparos and a pouch full of money.

Our boat bumped softly against the bank of the river where Selmonto's tower was making a deep shadow in the darkness, hiding the moon from us. The tower met the water, jutting out slightly past and below the water's surface. The tower was round and smooth walled. There was a window on the water side, half-a-bow-shot upward and directly above the water. It was the only break in the tower's wall on this side. On the landward side there were two openings; a door at ground level and a window two-bow-shots upward, directly above the door. These three openings were sure to be guarded against us.

Looking upward to the window on this side, Squirrel asked, "Do you think we can reach it?"

"Yes," I replied.

"And be caught for our troubles," Squirrel said pessimistically. "That's how they probably expect us to enter."

"Then why don't we do the unexpected and enter through the front door?" I asked.

Squirrel frowned. He'd never been one to accept ridicule easily. "Then let's walk in," he sneered.

"Sure," I said. "I just hope you have no plans for walking back out again."

"Don't make fun of me," he said. "How do you see

the situation?"

"This window is too obvious," I said. "The other one is lit by the moon and in full view of the guard barracks. Surely the door is a trap, waiting to be sprung and the tower's top is unreachable by rope or grappling hook."

"So what do you conclude we do?"

"There may be a door below," I answered, pointing to where the tower wall extended below the water's surface.

"Or we could go to the top."

Squirrel peered into the water's depths. "There could be a door down there. Why don't you go down and check it out?"

"Why me?" I asked.

"It's your idea. And besides, you swim better than I do."

Squirrel had reversed the role of ridicule on me. He sat there acting innocent as if he wasn't attempting to goad me into a foolish act. The current under the surface was so strong that I'd have been swept away to fast to have had time to search for a door, much less find and open it.

"If there is a door," I said, "It's probably well guarded." I wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of getting one over on me.

Then there's no sense trying it, is there?" he asked.

"I wondered why you even mentioned it. Now what are you harping about the tower's top for? You already said it was unreachable."

"Unreachable by grappling hook or rope. It is reachable though, and our only way in."

He peered upward. "I suppose we'll crawl up it like spiders."

"Exactly!"

Squirrel stared at me for a moment. "Stop joking and let's get out of here. We can't reach the top and every other entrance will be well guarded. Let's not waste time here and chance being trapped by the wizard while we sit outside his tower contemplating our possible metamorphosis into spiders."

"I didn't say 'as spiders'," I retorted, "But 'like spiders'."

"Just as ridiculous."

"Not really," I said as I removed two sets of suction cups from my pouch. "With these," I said, holding them up for Squirrel to see, "We can climb the tower's wall like spiders."

"I'm convinced," he said.

"Good. Put them on and follow me."

"Hold it. I said I was convinced, not stupid. I'm convinced that you've gone crazy, not that you're idea will work."

I laughed. "Then watch, and see how crazy I am." I pulled the suction cups on over my hands and around my knees. Then I eased myself out of the boat attaching one cup at a time to the wall.

"Play spider if you like," Squirrel said. "I'll meet you back at the Rat's Den."

I continued climbing upward. I'd only gone about ten feet when Squirrel hissed, "Wait. I'm coming up." Moving carefully he donned the suction cups and began his ascent. The boat, released by Squirrel, slid out into the current and floated down river. We were committed now to at least try.

Squirrel climbed up beside me. "You're sure this is smart?" he asked.

"We're fine," I said. "Just move slow and easy and we'll make it."

He grunted something too low for me to understand. I don't think he was at all sure that this would work; well, neither was I. I'd never tried this before, but Handle had, and had assured me they would work if we were careful. If they didn't, I'd see to it that the Rat Pack was short one member by nightfall tomorrow.

They worked! We reached the tower's top just as the dawn sun peeked over the horizon. We lay down on the flat roof to catch our breaths and collect our bearings. I doubted that we'd been spotted. The wizard

would want us to be inside when we got caught and was so over confident that he wouldn't have anyone watching for us, so I figured we could get in easy, but getting out may be impossible.

The roof door was set flat in the roof with a large ring to lift it open. This was our entrance into the tower, and it was probably the only one that was unguarded.

"Look Slinker," Squirrel said. "We're the best thieves in Cantol and we know it, right."

I agreed.

"Then why are we here trying to prove it?"

"We aren't trying to prove it."

"Then why are we walking into this trap?"

"We've already covered that," I answered. "We're going to steal those jewels as the ultimate insult to the Baron and ^{the} wizard and make ourselves rich in one fell swoop."

"But what need do thieves have of being rich? We can get all the money we need at any time."

"Don't you want to repay those two for trying to trap us?" I asked.

"Yes, but not by letting their trap work. Then we'll have played the game their way, and we'll have lost."

"We've never lost before," I reminded him.

"And we've always avoided majiks also."

"We won't get caught," I assured him. "This entrance is most likely unguarded. The wizard wouldn't expect us to be able to reach it. We can go in this way and out by whatever route seems the most promising at that time.

"Alright. I still think this is crazy, but let's go." I knew Squirrel liked a challenge as much as anyone else did, but to deal with majiks was to ask for trouble. Few of us dealt with users of majiks if we could avoid it; but I had a fear within me that we couldn't, so we might as well get it over with. I just hoped we were doing the right thing.

The door was heavy. It took both of us to open it. We worked our way around it to the opening that led inside and began our descent. We tried to ease the door shut while walking down the stairs; but instead it fell, shutting with a loud thud, and nearly crushing us. Squirrel and I stood still, ready to push the door open again and leap off the tower into the river. That wouldn't be wise, but I'd rather chance making it that way than becoming a plaything of majiks. No sounds came from below to show we'd been betrayed; even so we stood still, listening for any sound of movement from below. None came. Finally we began our descent into the tower.

The stairs spiraled downward, probably to the tower's base or even below. It was so dark in here

that we had to move by feel alone. The smell of majiks in the air was so thick that we nearly choked on it. The stench hung around us like heavy smoke, following our every step. It had to be endured. Within this tower we'd find no relief from that odor.

We peered carefully into each room we passed, not entering but wondering if each held what we were searching for. We didn't want to chance any rooms that might harbor some majiks creatures who could give us away, or even kill us. We had gone about half-way down the tower when we heard two voices.

There was a sing-song nasal tone which probably belonged to the wizard and a deep baritone we both recognized as the Baron's. They were in a room not far below us. We stood listening intently.

"...Are you sure this is going to work?" This in the Baron's voice.

"It can't fail," replied the other. "those two thieves, Slinker and Squirrel, pride themselves on being the best thieves in our city. They'd never let anyone best them."

Squirrel and I both started at the mention of our names. We were right, it was a trap for us. Now all we had to do was turn this trap to our advantage. Sounds simple, doesn't it. With a lot of luck it just could be, but I've never counted heavily on luck when

the odds were against me.

"I just don't feel comfortable using the jewels as bait," the Baron went on.

"They're safe with me," the wizard said. "I've got every ~~xxxx~~ entrance guarded by majiks that will immediatly notify me when the thieves enter."

That was an interesting statement. Apparently the wizard didn't consider the roof an entrance we could reach, Otherwise, they'd already have known we were here and the game would already be up.

"But what if they get out again before we catch them?" The Baron's voice was nervous.

The wizard laughed. Then he said with confidence, "Once they enter, my majiks guards will instantly become alert and they won't be able to get back out. Nothing could."

"But what if only one comes in?"

"They both will. They're thieves aren't they; and as such wouldn't trust one another enough to let one go in alone. The shares might not come out equal in that case. Besides, they know that they'd have a better chance if both of them come in. One of them can watch for the other, or whatever they need to do. They'll both come inside."

It might be true of many thieves that there is no trust between them; I didn't trust all thieves, but

between Squirrel and I was an unbreakable trust. We'd been partners too often for that. We had no qualms about one of us letting the other one hold whatever we'd thieved.

The possibility of being trapped bothered me though. Of course, they hadn't been alerted to our presence yet, so the tower door was probably unguarded. That meant we still had an exit; which set my mind to rest. The look on Squirrel's face said that he agreed. Of course, it was only an exit if the guards worked like the wizard said; or, was their conversation simply a vice. They could be toying with us, knowing we were inside and couldn't get out. I didn't like the idea.

"What if they throw the jewels out?" the Baron asked. "They'd do that just to spite us if they get trapped."

"Once two bodies pass through any of the entrances," the wizard explained, "Nothing else can go in or out." That relieved me a little. If we hadn't sprung the trap then we could still get out easily.

"You understand, of course," the Baron said, "That I'm simply concerned about my property. Those jewels are the most valuable of my properties. If I lose them, I'd be a near pauper."

"You'd still be the richest man in Cantol," the wizard said. "Besides, your jewels are safer here than

in your own hold. My majiks are safer guards than any you have. Besides, those two thieves would need a strong bait to draw them out. Few thieves would enter a house of majiks for less bait."

"True, but couldn't you have just barricaded the entrances of my keep with majiks and left them there?"

It sounded as if the Baron didn't fully trust the wizard, and I began to feel that the wizard was starting to take offense. Good. I had hoped that they would have had a falling out over this; after we'd gotten the jewels, of course.

"Thieves are sensitive to majiks. They'd be able to smell the majiks in the air and wouldn't come in. Here they expect the smell, at your hold they wouldn't. Besides, unless someone out-thieves them, we don't have anything big enough to hurt their pride and bring them running out to prove they're the best." The wizard sounded as if all this explanation was boring him. "Your jewels are safe and the thieves'll soon be here and we'll have them."

"Okay, but will they steal the page for us?"

"Certainly. Would you rather steal a page or die by majiks?"

"They could die anyway in the sorcerer's keep."

"True, but if they succeed, they'd be free. It's a chance they'd take."

"Then you plan on ~~freeing~~^{freeing} them afterwards?" the Baron asked.

"Certainly. After I get that page, I'll have no need to fear any man. They can go free, until I need them or tire of them."

Silence hung heavy for a short while after that ominous statement. The Baron was quiet, doubtless because he was as busy digesting the wizard's words as Squirrel and I were. Whatever that page was, I wanted to keep it out of the wizard's hands.

"I want to see my jewels," the Baron demanded.

"Certainly," the wizard replied. "Follow me."

Squirrel and I retreated up the stairs into darkness. The two men left the room they'd been in and headed downstairs. We followed as they descended. They entered a room much lower than the one they'd left. We slipped in behind them and quickly hid behind a large divan that sat at one side. This was the room with the window which opened onto the river. We settled in to watch and listen.

The wizard lead the Baron to a small table that sat in the room's center. They peered into a vase which sat upon that table.

"The jewels are safe as you can see," the wizard said.

"That's very easy to get into. Shouldn't they be

better protected than that?" the Baron demanded.

"They are well protected," the wizard explained. "The guards are invisible and of a majiks nature. After they come inside, we'll let them find the jewels before we come after them. One of them will have to touch the vase to get the jewels out and he will be instantly frozen to that spot. The other one will try to flee and then hide of course, but we'll find him. Majiks can see where eyes can't"

"It sounds good," the Baron mused.

"It is, and so simple." the wizard crossed the room to a low table near the door and lifted a scroll from it. He unrolled the scroll and showed it to the Baron. "This is why we need those two," he said. The Baron scanned the scroll, nodded and asked the wizard for some wine.

"Certainly," the wizard responded. Then he carefully rerolled the scroll and replaced it on the table. He and the Baron left then and headed back upstairs.

Squirrel and I waited only a couple of minutes before we came out of hiding. I stood a moment, considering how we could get the jewels out of the vase without touching it while Squirrel lifted the scroll the wizard had just laid down and slid it into his pouch. Squirrel returned to my side just as I formulated my plan. I took a cloth from the divan and spread it around the

vase. Then with a light stool, I shattered the vase. The jewels fell upon the cloth. A high pitched scream went up from the vase. It must have been given life by some of the wizard's majiks and now lay dying. Quickly I gathered the jewels in the cloth, careful not to touch any of the vase's pieces. Then I stuffed the cloth and all under my jerkin. Squirrel had already sprang out the window and hung at an ^{odd} angle by his suction cups. I followed. Luck had been on our side. We'd gotten in and back out.

"Want to stay for the fun?" Squirrel asked.

"Certainly," I replied. "It'll take time for the wizard to remove that spell from the window."

As we watched, the Baron burst into the room, followed closely by the wizard. They both took in the shattered vase and absence of the jewels at a glance. Then our faces at the window were spotted. The Baron roared in rage and charged us, only to recoil when he struck the majiks barrier over the window. We laughed at him. The Baron hit the floor bellowing for the wizard to do something. The wizard tried the same stunt the Baron had, with similiar results. Then he rose and began making the motions necessary to erase the spell.

That was our cue to leave. We pulled the suction cups free and dropped into the river below to be swept downstream. We surfaced far down river and began to

swim with the current trying to put as much distance between us and the tower as possible. The last we heard from the tower was a loud high-pitched scream which cut off in the middle. It chilled my blood.

The countryside near Cantol was in turmoil when we approached it just after dawn. We weren't sure why, but I would have laid odds that it was because of us.

"Let's go in by the sewers," I said.

"Why?"

"They're probably looking for us," I said, indicating the masses of people combing the countryside. "I don't want to get caught out here after we got out of the tower safely."

"Look Slinker," Squirrel said. "Cantol is our city and I'm just too tired to do anything but walk back to the Rat's Den and find a bed and sleep. I'm not going to crawl through the sewers like a rat."

"We are rats," I reminded him, "Or have you forgotten to which thieves guild you belong. Besides, if you try to stroll through the gates of the city, you'll wind up being the wizard's plaything. We've thieved from the Baron who controls this city. Do you think they'll forget that? We won't be welcome at all."

"Then why bother even going back at all?"

"I'd like to find out everything I can about how the wizard and Baron are taking our theft. It'll complete our revenge."

"It would at that," Squirrel agreed. "Alright, it's the sewers then."

We made our way to the sewers and entered carefully. We didn't spot any guards there, they'd probably not even remembered that the sewers were here. The city guards weren't known for being any too bright.

"Where shall we go?" Squirrel asked.

"The Rat's Den is sure to be guarded," I answered as we dodged pools of sewage, many of which nearly blocked the way. "We'll do better going to Groco's house. Even if they have it under guard, we can get in. He's got some very ingenious doors leading in and out. I'm sure he'll have a door into the sewers."

Groco was one of the few thieves who'd ever bothered to build a house for himself. When he did, he had many secret passageways and rooms built into it. I'd only seen one of those rooms but he'd mentioned more rooms and concealed passageways in his cryptic way. That would be our best bet; at least until we knew what was happening.

Suddenly Squirrel yelped as he tripped over something that sprawled in the sewer. A piteous mewling rose from the object over which he'd stumbled. Chills ran up and down my spine at the sound. It sounded nearly human, but it couldn't have been. I felt sick.

Squirrel got up from the sewer's floor and fumbled

around until he found one of the torches which were kept unlit throughout the sewers for maintenance purposes. Using the flint from my pouch, I lit the torch. It caught, burned slowly, but soon cast enough light for us to see what lay there.

It was Metal; or, at least, it had been Metal at one time. We recoiled from the sight of that hideous, broken, but still living thing. It mewled again. With bile rising in my throat, I held the torch closer while Squirrel ~~XXXXXX~~ ran the thing through. It mewled once again, then lay still. I doused the torch, tossed it aside and we stumbled away.

The guild has a quick and terrible vengeance but what had happened to Metal couldn't be a result of guild vengeance. We'd never before seen anything like it. Death in itself has never bothered me. I've killed before without qualms and I'm sure I'll do it again; but this mutilation without death is more horrible than dying could ever be.

"What do you think did that," I asked.

"One of the wizard's pet demons no doubt. The wizard was probably so angry when we pulled off that theft that he came after Metal to see if he'd betrayed them. By telling us his actual part in the theft, he tipped us off, so being what he is, the wizard sent one of his pets after him. He'd feel no regrets killing

someone for whom he had no more use."

"Then, if he was angry enough, he'd send a demon after us," I said.

"Probably," Squirrel agreed. "But I don't think he will as long as he has a chance of getting us to do that theft he wants done. We'll be safe for a while and then we'll be far enough away that his little demon can't find us. I hope."

We continued winding our way through the sewers until we reached a street opening across from Groco's house. From our vantage point, we couldn't see any soldiers. I hoped there weren't any. It seemed clear, so we made our move. Squirrel aimed his sling; that was his one talent which far exceeded my own, almost to the point of embarrassment. He released the stone which bounced off the center of Groco's door with a resounding thwack. A moment passed, then the door opened and Groco peered out into the street.

Using a small piece of metal, highly polished, I succeeded in flashing a bit of sunlight into Groco's eyes. He glanced around looking for the light's source. I moved the mirror-like metal again and he caught another flash. He glanced down into the gutter, noticed us, stifled a squeak of surprise, and hurriedly shut the door.

I sighed. Now we had to wait too see if he was

going to help us, or if even this friend was going to desert us at this bad point in our lives. Squirrel looked as if he had no doubts about Groco's loyalty. Until today I had never had any either, but with the Baron and wizard searching for us, we wouldn't be welcome by many, if any.

Time dragged slowly. It seemed like hours later when we heard the sound of stone grating on stone. We came instantly alert, wondering which stone was moving, and I wondered if Groco came alone or brought betrayal with him. One of the stones moved back into the sewer wall. The opening revealed Groco's face peering out anxiously. He motioned us to crawl in, which we did quickly and as quietly as we could. Then, we helped Groco shove the stone back into place and reset the bolts that held it before any of us dared speak. "Why'd you come back?" Groco asked.

"To see how well our revenge went over," I replied. "We seemed to have turned this whole city upside down."

"You did," Groco said. "Wasn't it enough for you to know that the Baron is dead?"

"What do you mean?" Squirrel asked.

"The Baron's dead," Groco replied. "Didn't you know?"

"He was very much alive the last time we saw him," I said. "He was spewing a stream of invectives like I'd never heard."

"What happened?" Squirrel asked.

"Apparently, when you two got the jewels and got out of the tower, the Baron attacked the wizard accusing him of planning the whole thing," Groco said.

"Without giving us the least bit of credit probably," Squirrel said.

"I don't know," Groco said. "But the wizard killed the Baron instead. Now the wizard's in charge of the city and wants you. I'd get out of here as quickly as possible before I ended up being feed for a demon or something worse."

"Fine mess we're in now," Squirrel said. "I knew we should have just left; but no, you wanted revenge. Now the wizard'll probably see us dead."

"Alright, so I didn't forsee this," I said. "Still, we got the jewels and we're still free. Let's get out of here and stay that way."

"You needed to get those jewels," Groco said. "No one else could have done it and they'd have used them to lure someone else into a trap."

"Better someone else than us," Squirrel said. "I've no use for majiks or their users or those users' plans."

"Then why'd you lift the scroll that the wizard showed the Baron?" I asked.

Squirrel looked surprised. Apparently he'd forgotten about the scroll. He pulled it from his pouch and handed

it to me to read; since he'd never learned how.

It read:

"Aramenagor, the Supreme Sorcerer, has in his possession one of the spells of Menamentos. The dead sorcerer treasured this spell so greatly that he refused to teach the spell to any of his students but instead, wrote it upon a page and set it upon a pedestal that was protected by a multitude of spells which keep prying hands and eyes away. This page still resides on it's pedestal which is now in Aramenagor's keeping. The spell is purported to give its caster power over all majiks of this world. I don't understand why neither sorcerer had never used the spell. It would be a power worth obtaining."

The words astonished us. That was what they wanted us to do. No doubt the wizard had planned to arm us with some of his meager majiks, compared to a sorcerer's; which would have proved little help in succeeding in such a theft. I was relieved to be out of that; of course, until we got away from Cantol we weren't out of it. I was ready to go.

"We're out of that," I said. "Let's get out of this city and stay that way."

"I'm ready," Squirrel said. "As little as I like leaving this city, I like being a pawn for a wizard even less. How do we find that innkeep in Aparos you

said would buy the Crown's Eye?"

"Simple. Go to the Hand and Eye in Aparos. The innkeep there is a fence who sells to rich men from far away. When you go in, ask him for lamb cooked slowly in butter. That was a code he gave me to use if I had to send someone else to sell my goods for me. He'll buy the Crown's Eye and probably be able to direct you to places where you can sell the rest of the jewels. There, no one will care who once owned any of those jewels."

"Thanks Groco," I said. "I'd like to stay but that wizard has majiks ways of seeing which won't be blocked by stone. He'd find us even here."

"True," Groco said. "May Hagan, the God of Thieves, be with you."

"I hope not," Squirrel said. "He'd steal our lives for a jest."

"And a good one it would be, too," Groco said. "The wizard would rant and rave and curse him for that."

"I don't care to be the jest of any God," Squirrel said.

"Nor I," I added. "Open the hole and we'll be gone."

We unbolted the movable stone and slid it out of the hole. Then we crawled through, leaving Groco inside.

"Take care," he whispered. We nodded and began making our way rapidly out of the city. Behind us, Groco slowly closed the hole. We left the city and set out down river

far to one side; we were sure that the water was being
watched.

8

Two days later found us at the Var River, to which the river we'd been following was a tributary. The Var River wound its course from the Canth Mountains in the west to the Veiled Sea in the east. Since Cantol's gates were closed to us and Aparos was our first stop, we'd opted to travel on downriver to the Veiled Sea. With a boat, this river would provide a quick and easy road with many rich cities and villages along the way where we could purchase or thief what we needed.

There was a fishing village half-a-day's journey downriver. We hoped to obtain a boat there and enough supplies to reach Aparos which lay two days downstream from there. The village wasn't rich but we were prepared to pay for whatever we needed. The boat, we'd get at all costs, even if it meant thieving.

It was nearly dusk when we reached the little village. We walked boldly into it and found ourselves immediately surrounded by armed men who had emerged from some of the huts. They were carrying long tri-pronged spears they used for fishing and large bladed knives used for gutting fish. One of them demanded very loudly that we state our business here.

"We would like to purchase a boat and supplies enough for a day or two," I said. We had enough silver

with us to pay for that and we wished to be further from Cantol before we began plying our trade again. It wouldn't be wise for us to leave a trail which could be easily followed; though we would thief if necessary.

The men stood blinking at us, looking confused. I don't think they were sure whether or not to believe us. Then, at a command from one of them who seemed to be in charge, we were directed by spear points toward the largest hut in the village which must belong to the headman. When we arrived at the hut, the leader pounded his fist once against the wooden frame just beside the door hanging. A gravelly voice called out an inquiry from within which was answered by the guard. With a curse for being interrupted at whatever he was doing, the headman--or rather, as it turned out to be, the headwoman emerged. She was no taller than I, who stood short compared to the men who surrounded us. I stood tall among the Rat Pack, but the thieves of our city were all below average height. Being small and wiry though, was no disadvantage when thieving; it aided in getting into places too small for most men.

The headwoman was ancient, sixty or more winters and very harsh ones they must have been, too. They'd hardened ~~her~~ her to a toughness that was core deep and reflected in the dignity with which she carried herself.

Her stringy hair was even more dusty grey than my own, which was not the grey of age as was hers, but was grey from the day of my birth. Her eyes were a washed out brown that was much lighter than the leathery brown of her skin. She eyed us critically, then spoke, "Who are you and what business have you here?"

"I am Slinker, Madam," I answered, bowing deeply as I did so. "This is my companion and good friend, Squirrel." Squirrel bowed also.

"Strange names," she said. "They sound as though they might belong to thieves of that vile city of thieves." She looked in the general direction of the city we'd so recently quitted.

"Our names sound strange," Squirrel said, "Because my friend and I are both victims of our fathers poor senses-of-humor. They thought it would be a good joke to so name us; or at least, that is the story our mothers tell us."

"Don't you believe your mothers?" she asked.

"Certainly," he replied. "My mother is a good and noble woman who raised me along with my seven sisters and two brothers even after my father died at a gaming table. Slinker's mother is also a good and noble woman who raised her six daughters and one son after his father fled her wrath for daring to make advances toward a young woman of our village; who, of course,

rejected him. Both of our fathers were gone before such time as we can remember them. I am only glad that my mother is such a strong woman. May the Gods watch over her."

If I hadn't known how serious this situation was I'd have burst out laughing at Squirrel's lie. Our families could have had the number of brats Squirrel quoted, but we could never know that. We didn't even know which of the whores who lived with the Rat Pack had borne us, or which thief had fathered us. Had our mothers not been hangers-on of the guild, we would probably have met our deaths in some gutter of Cantol within a few days of our birth. As it was the Pack cared for us because we were one of its whelps. Without the children of the whores, the guild would die since it didn't allow outsiders to join. The lie Squirrel spun was well done and seemed to please the headwoman.

This village was a matriarchal society and as such, the women were valued far above the men. If Squirrel could gain their trust because of nonexistent mothers, that was fine with me. Even so, I'd love to have laughed at his outrageous lies but didn't because we needed to stay in the good graces of this woman.

"What was it you wished from us?" she asked almost tenderly.

"A boat and enough supplies for a day or two,"

Squirrel answered.

"Food and warm furs for the nights?"

"Yes, that would be nice. We can pay in silver for it."

With clipped tones she ordered the guards away. "You'll surely want to eat with us and rest tonight," she said.

"We should be going on," I replied. I had no liking for spending an evening in this pest-ridden place.

"We'll eat very soon," she said. "Surely you'll at least stay that long."

Squirrel and I glanced at one another. I shrugged to indicate that it was alright with me if we ate. I was hungry and the trip here was accompanied by eating only roots and berries.

"We'll eat," Squirrel told the headwoman.

"If you decide to stay the night," she said, "You can sleep in here." She indicated a little wooden hut that was so badly constructed it probably let the wind blow through. The odor of it indicated that it had rarely been cleaned and not well even then.

"We'll eat and then you can choose to leave, if you still wish to," she said and smiled. She left us to ponder her ~~cryptic~~^{cryptic} words while we waited for the meal to begin.

She'd mentioned no price for the boat and supplies but that would surely be rectified after the meal. We'd probably pay whatever amount they could get us to admit we had on us. I had hidden most of my silver in my boot just in case. It wasn't comfortable there but it would be there even if our purses were emptied.

"What do you think she meant by that remark?"

Squirrel asked.

"I don't know," I replied. "There aren't any rumors of cannibals or head-hunters around here are there?"

"No, but she has something in mind."

Our conversation broke off when one of the women called us over to a cooking pot that steamed and smelled of fish. We accepted the offered bowls when we arrived at the pot and following the example of the villagers we dipped our bowls into it. We knelt next to the others and, having no other eating utensils, spooned it into our mouths with our fingers. The stew was warm and quite good. It tasted like some combination of fish, vegetables and roots; just which vegetables and roots were in it eluded my ability to discover. Cups of some steaming brew were passed around. I sipped from my cup to be rewarded by a bitter but not unpleasant ale. The meal ended when everyone was satisfied with the amount they'd eaten. It was then that what the headwoman had hinted at became obvious.

Two of the women who'd eaten from the same pot as we had approached us, making moon-eyes and trying to smile seductively. They were both dirty and rugged looking with washed-out brown eyes and light brown hair. They made me think of younger, uglier versions of the headwoman; probably her daughters. Smiling at us, they revealed teeth rotted off nearly to their gums. I've bedded many an ugly woman, most of them quite dirty, but these two had to be the most repulsive I've ever set eyes upon. They were scrawny, hardly more than skin stretched across their bones; flat-chested to a point that made me feel more womanly endowed than they. Their faces made those of sewer rats appear almost comely in comparison.

Squirrel assessed the situation with his usual good judgement and speed. He started in immediately, weaving the lie that was our escape from those creatures. "Hello ladies," he said. Then directing his attention to the one who appeared older, he stated, "You remind me of my dear wife."

I had to smile at that. If I had a wife that ugly, I'd probably never stay home or have any children; at least, not by her.

Squirrel continued weaving our escape. "Yes, you remind me of my wife. What a shame she couldn't accompany me on this journey. She stayed home with my

three lovely daughters. Oh well, I won't be long in returning to her, if I can soon accomplish my task."

The women had both drawn back from Squirrel at his words. Then they shifted their attentions toward me. I was prepared to start weaving my own escape since Squirrel had seemed reluctant to do so, but Squirrel started speaking before I got the chance. "My good friend, Slinker here, is alas, unwed." I stiffened at his words as the two women smiled. "Yes, Slinker was to wed but his poor woman died before the wedding. He's been such a lonely man since that time, in need of love and companionship."

I couldn't believe my ears. Squirrel had very neatly gotten himself out of even possibly having to bed one of those horrid specimens of womanhood and had, just as neatly, all but promised that I'd bed one gladly. Had this village been anything but a matriarch, Squirrel would have died right then. Here though, a wedded man was valued above an unwedded one and the killer of the former would never leave here alive. My eyes shot fires of anger at my partner, he smiled in return.

"Yes, poor Slinker has not been the same man since the woman of his dreams died," Squirrel went on. The older of the two women began to move closer to me. I leaned away, prepared to rush to the river and fling

myself in rather than submit to the touch of that abomination. I was saved from that necessary move by the headwoman. "What did the woman die of?" she asked urgently.

"Oh...ah..., a rare disease, Madam," Squirrel replied. "It has struck our women heavily."

The headwoman drew back hastily, copied by everyone within hearing distance. "Tell us of this disease," she demanded.

"I regret to say that it only strikes women," Squirrel said. "It takes their minds, leaving them dead to thought and unable to even sit or eat. It's very sad to watch them die that way."

"Why have you left your women in their time of need?" she demanded. Behind her several men began fingering the hilts of their knives. I groaned, thinking that Squirrel had over done the lie. He quickly began smoothing the situation.

"We were sent to find a special herb our witch healer needs for the cure. This herb is known to those who dwell along the shores of the Veiled Sea. We're hoping they will aid us in finding it so we can take it back to our women. I hope we get it in time. My wife and daughters were still unstricken when I left them. I do hope they remain that way."

I sighed in relief when the men released the hilts of their knives.

"Then you must hurry on your way," the headwoman said. "Get the boat ready." She was calling to those around us. Then she led us to the river, still talking. "You must leave immediately. Your women need that herb and you shouldn't delay getting it. It's a pity you can't stay longer but your mission is too important for that."

"Oh, yes," I replied, relieved of being free of the prospect of bedding one of those ugly women. "We should go on. Our women await that cure which we must bring. My mother is still unaffected by the disease, I hope."

We arrived at the shore then. We were hustled into a boat which had been pulled up there for us. We called out our thanks as the river current took us from the grips of the men who pushed us into the stream. We had no time to rejoice over our escape with a free boat and supplies because we were too busy trying to keep the boat upright in the swift current. As soon as the boat was stabilized and its nose pointed downstream, we relaxed.

We laughed over our escape for a moment, then I rounded on Squirrel, standing as I did so. "What was the idea back there?" I demanded. "Why'd you try to set me up with one of those weasel-faced women?"

Squirrel smiled. "Would I do that to you?"

"It was beginning to look as if you were doing it."

Squirrel smiled. "You didn't have to bed either of them, did you?"

"No, but only because the headwoman heard you say my woman died and wanted to know why. If she hadn't asked then you probably wouldn't have fashioned that lie to get me out of that. You'd probably have enjoyed seeing me take one of those beasts to bed. You'll pay for that."

"No, I won't," he said laughing. Then he dipped his paddle deeply into the water, slewing the boat around and flinging me into the cold dark river. I surfaced, cursing him loudly. Then, with his help, I climbed back into the boat.

The water had chilled me to the bones and I began groping for something with which to cover myself. The bottom of the boat was empty. There were no furs, nor food either. We'd gotten the boat free, but they hadn't taken the time to load the supplies we'd asked they to sell us. It would be a hungry trip to Aparos. With a sigh, I slid down into the bottom of the boat shivering with the cold. My argument with Squirrel was forgotten.

It was midday when we rounded a bend in the river and the walled city of Aparos came into view. It was a city that neither of us had ever visited, but Groco had assured us that we'd be able to sell at least one of the Baron's jewels there. We were now a day-and-a-half downriver from the fishing village where Squirrel had claimed to be wed to a woman just as ugly as one of the headwoman's daughters. I kept reminding him of his supposed wife's charms, and at such times found him unwilling to exchange banter.

We turned the boat toward the shore and landed at the first spot we could. We were upriver of Aparos. Walking to the city, we hoped to meet some of its citizens and determine from them what the state of the city was. Hauling our boat ashore, we hid it among the thick bushes there. It might come in handy later. Our last bit of food, consisting of roots we'd dug earlier that day, filled our bellies without satisfying our hunger. We were ready to reach the city and the inn called the Hand and Eye.

Leaving the boat, we pushed our way through the brush until we reached a road that ran in the general direction of the city. It was a well traveled road, deep-rutted and hard-beaten. The road curved and from

beyond that bend came a team of four horses drawing a badly constructed wagon. Four men rode in the wagon; two in the seat and two atop sacks piled high in back. At sight of us, the driver halted the wagon. We stopped also, thinking that that was smarter than running into the horses. The four men sat impassively, staring down at us as if we just happened to be in their line of vision, not as if they truly saw us.

"Good day," I said, raising my right hand to show that it held no weapon. "Could you tell us if Aparos lies ahead?"

None of them answered. They simply sat, blank looks upon their faces. "Could you name us a good inn where we might get a good meal?" Squirrel asked. No response.

Their lack of response began to irritate me. I'm not an unreasonable man but there are simple courtesies due strangers and when they aren't given, I tend to feel insulted. When I feel insulted, I start becoming spiteful. "You ride that junk heap as you would a wagon," I said. Squirrel looked at me as though I'd lost my mind. The men remained passive.

"I'd lay odds," I went on, "That the lot of you are as close to falling apart as that excuse for a wagon. The only difference between you and it, is that the wagon is merely an eyesore while you are quite repulsive."

"Are you trying to get us killed?" Squirrel whispered.

For an answer, I merely gestured to where the men sat unmoving. Squirrel looked at them and said, "I don't guess you've offended them by anything you've said. They even appear mindless."

"Do you think they're truly mindless, or simply trying to anger us?" I asked.

"That'll be easy to determine," Squirrel said. "The horses seem skiddish already; I don't think it will take much to set them off."

I gestured toward the men on the wagon. "It's probably those things up there which have them spooked. They make me nervous too. Let's see if they will react."

Squirrel and I exchanged smiles, then set about determining whether or not they were truly mindless. We walked past the horses, one of us on either side of them. As we passed the rumps of each horse, we lashed them with the straps of our purses. The horses bolted, throwing the men on top of the sacks heavily to the ground; while those in the seat were thrown back against the sacks. Squirrel and I watched unbelieving as the two on the ground stupidly got up and set off at a shambling pace after the retreating wagon. We didn't wait to see if they caught it; it didn't matter; we walked away. We'd found out what we wanted to know when we saw how little response they made to

the whole episode. They'd reacted so numbly that we didn't even find it funny.

We passed several other groups of people along the road. They offered no more response to us than the men in the wagon had. All their faces were slack, as if no emotions had ever crossed them. It sent an eerie feeling up my spine.

"Are they real?" Squirrel asked.

"The men on that wagon were," I replied. "We may be entering a city that utilizes zombies as servants."

"Surely we'd have heard of that in Cantol."

"Not if they'd recently begun," I said, "Or, if they didn't want it known."

"True, so they probably only recently began."

"But what kind of people would use those undead creatures. An insane kind, I'd guess."

"A lot of cities use them," I reminded him.

"But only majiks ruled cities. I'd never heard that this was so ruled. I didn't think it even had a wizard living near it as Cantol does."

"Things can change quickly. A wizard could move in and take over in a day. As a matter of fact," I speculated, "these people could be citizens made mindless and not zombies at all."

Squirrel halted, "If they are, we could be walking into trouble. We just got away from one wizard."

"True," I said. "But we might be able to sell some of these jewels here. Besides, I could be wrong and they are simply zombies. Surely a wizard would be selective about who he bewitched."

"Maybe," Squirrel said. "But do you remember the tales of Sandor, the dead city?"

"It was ruled by a powerful sorcerer, wasn't it?"

"Yes it was. He was called Jpantha and he tried to make his city live."

"What's that got to do with this?"

"The sorcerer cast a spell on the city and its inhabitants to make it all one large living creature with the sorcerer as its mind, the city itself the body, and the people its blood to keep things going. The problem was that even as powerful as he was, Jpantha was nonetheless only a man learned in majiks. It stopped as cities are wont to do, and eventually died of its own weight. The sorcerer wasn't knowledgeable enough about how a city works to do it all, and he wasn't smart enough to leave the people enough of their minds to keep it alive without being told to do so. Anyway, the city lies now broken and dead. Aparos may have a wizard or sorcerer who thinks he can do what Jpantha could not. I don't want to walk into anything like that."

"Nor I," I said. "Still we're not sure that that's what's going on. Would you be willing to go into the

city, find the Hand and Eye, and sell the jewel to the innkeep if he seems to have a sense about him?"

Squirrel thought a moment. "I'll go in, but if I decide to leave, we get out quickly with no dispute."

"Fine," I said. "If the innkeep is bewithced or we meet anyone who uses majiks, you'll be a pace or two behind me all the way out."

"Okay, let's go in."

The gate of the city stood open. There were no guards posted, not even one to observe those who came and went. Our confidence was bolstered a little by that. At least, when we left, we didn't have to expect to find the gate barred before us.

There was a large market along the main street. The only difference between this market and dozens of others I'd seen was that the people here were all silent. The intensity of the quiet was frightening. Neither Squirrel nor I spoke for fear of being struck mindless as these people seemed to be. Goods here were exchanged with no bartering or mentioning of price. We often saw people, if I can call these mindless things that, simply pick up goods from stalls as they went by, leaving nothing in return. The merchants made no move to stop them either. It was quite bizarre.

We were also painfully aware of the lack of attention we received. Even in this crowded market, our

clothes stood out, being drab grey while the locals were dressed in brilliant colors of all kinds; yet no one paid us any heed. The most attention we got was when we stood directly in the path of one of them; and then, they simply went around us as they would have gone around a pole, nothing more.

We left the market through a narrow lane which wound between close-set buildings. Since no one had paid us any attention, and we were afraid to break the silence ourselves by speaking, we were going to have to find the Hand and Eye on our own. It took us nearly an hour, which left us only about three more of daylight, to finally spot a sign cut like a hand holding an eye between its thumb and index finger. This was the inn for which we'd searched. We went up to the door, pushed it open and went into the main room.

The room was in deep gloom. All of the windows were shuttered, blocking out the sunlight. A single lamp sputtered pitifully, fighting for its life. Within its small circle of illumination, a fat man lay on a bench, snoring softly. That simple act was oddly reassuring. It was the first act of simple humanity we'd observed so far in this city. I felt a slight kinship to this barrel of a man who needed sleep and snored while getting it.

"Should we wake him?" I whispered.

"It'd be a shame to if he turns out like the rest," Squirrel replied.

"Still, if he is the innkeep, then we need to talk to him, so I guess we'll have to wake him."

"Innkeep," Squireel called out softly. We didn't want to frighten the man for two reasons. One was that we felt softened toward him for this human act he was performing. The second and more important reason is that many men upon being awakended, suddenly have dispatched the lives of those who wake them before they have gained their wakeful senses. Even men as fat as this one were sometimes astonishingly fast. Muscle can be well hidden under that much cover. Neither Squirrel nor I cared to test this man's speed.

"Innkeep," Squirrel whispered louder. He shivered a little this time, but remained asleep. This man slept too heavily to be a warrior, but you never know what people hide.

"Innkeep." This time the word was loud.

The man jumped, snorting loudly. He squinted his pig eyes searching about rapidly for the source of disturbance. His face held none of the slackness that covered the faces of the rest of the city. He sat up quickly, trying to focus his vision by blinking rapidly. Then he saw us. The apathetic state, which marked this city was a cloth suddenly thrown over him. He donned its mask, an actor on a stage. This man, at least, affected the deadness that surrounded us rather than wore it naturally.

"We'd like a meal and talk," Squirrel said quietly.

The fat man gazed at us blankly. His jaw worked jerkily as if trying to stifle a yawn that threatened to break his composure.

"Actually, we'd like a meal of lamb cooked slowly in butter," I said. "We can talk later."

The innkeep remained impassive, but he gestured for us to follow him and walked stiffly to an inner door. He opened this door and waved us silently through. We went into the next room which had no windows and only one other door. Inside we saw only one table and a few chairs, nothing else. The innkeep followed us in, then closed and bolted the door. With a sigh, he leaned against it and said, "I'm sorry about the mindless act I put on out there, but since Kentanos took over this city, we're all afraid to do anything."

"The name sounds like a wizard's," Squirrel said.

"It is," the innkeep replied. "Those who've spoken out against him, or not done as he commands, are either now dead or mindless. The rest of us pretended to be mindless to prevent becoming that way. It's not a life we find pleasant but it's life nonetheless."

"No one's tried to get rid of this wizard?" I asked.

"Certainly," he replied. "They are now dead or mindless. They never reached him before he stopped them. You two startled me terribly coming in like that and talking."

"Aren't you afraid that we're agents for this wizard?" Squirrel asked.

"No," he replied. "You used the code I gave to Groco about three or four years ago. It's not been mentioned in this city since that day and I can't see how the wizard could have found out about it. It couldn't have been a lucky guess on your part either; no one would want to eat lamb cooked slowly in butter. By the by, how is Groco these days? We were friends of a sort."

"He's fine," Squirrel replied. "He's done well in his thieving and has even built a house with the money he made."

"A thief with a house." mused the innkeep. "Interesting. Still, Groco was never your ordinary thief. He was the best."

"Yes, he was," I said. "He'd still hold that title today if he hadn't taught Squirrel and I so well. Now he prides himself on having helped us exceed his own ability."

"If you're better than he was, you must be exceptionally good. Let me get you a bit of pork and some bread. After you've eaten you can tell me about the deal you've brought me, though I'm afraid you'll be sorely disappointed. I don't have any chance to sell my goods anymore since no one comes near this city with Kentanos here. It was a rueful day when Aparos fell to his vile majiks."

The innkeep had kept talking as he walked back into the kitchen which was through the only other exit from this room.

"It sounds bad," Squirrel said.

"That it does," I said. "Do you want to leave now?"

"Not yet. Let's eat and find out if the innkeep will buy any of our jewels. We can still get out before dark."

"Let's be sure we're out by dark," I said. "I don't fancy spending the night under the cloak of majiks."

The innkeep returned with a tray laden with pork, bread and two large flagons of ale. "My business is poor these days," he said. "A few soldiers come in but they never speak to me. They eat the pork, bread, and ale I place before them without complaint. I can give them nothing better, nor you either, because all the food I get is brought to me by emissaries of the wizard. I don't pay money for it and I don't get paid for what I give the soldiers. I never see money anymore."

Squirrel and I exchanged glances. We'd sell nothing here, but we were hungry and this fare was better than the roots we'd been eating. We fell to it like we hadn't eaten in days, which except for the roots, was true. The pork was greasy but good. The bread was well cooked and washed down easily with the ale which was weak and bitter. We ate while the innkeep

droned on and on. We were probably the first people he had been able to talk to since the wizard had shown up here.

We finished eating and sat back to let our food settle. "What was it that you wished to sell me?" The innkeep asked.

"The Baron Kiest's jewels," I replied. "Or at least, the Crown's Eye."

He let out a whistle. "That's a rich haul," he said. "I wish I could buy them, but I couldn't sell them even if I could. I'm sorry."

"Not your fault," Squirrel said.

"We'd better leave now." As if we were minstrels, fools, or actors giving a cue, a knock sounded at the door. It was loud and insistent.

The innkeep was struck by sheer terror. He began looking around quickly as if expecting the walls themselves to divulge soldiers, and maybe he did.

"You've got to hide," he whispered through chattering teeth. He lifted the room's only rug to reveal a trap door. "I used to hide my fenced goods here," he said. "It'll have to do for you also."

It went against our grain to, but there were no exits from here or the kitchen except through the door being knocked upon. We climbed down into the hole, feeling trapped. The hole was small and cramped.

Each movement one of us made, jabbed an elbow into the other. The closing door shut off all escape. There was no bolt on this side of the door. It wasn't meant for someone to hide here, just objects. I hoped it would prove to be a good hiding place, but was sure it wouldn't.

The wait was unbearable. Footsteps upon the floor above told us that someone besides the innkeep was in the room. Our breathing was so loud in my ears that I was sure whoever was above us could hear it. A mumble of conversation began, incomprehensible to us, so we could only speculate as to what was said. I kept dredging up scenes of the innkeep betraying us to soldiers, or worse. I desperately wanted to know what was being said. The time we spent in that dark hole lengthened until it seemed like hours or possibly days had passed. I didn't know how long we actually stayed there, but finally, the wait was over.

The door began to lift away. My heart nearly stopped as light burst in blinding us momentarily. My vision cleared to reveal the fully raised trap door, the face of an officer and six pikeman all pointing their pikes at us. I glanced at Squirrel to see my fear reflected in his face. We'd been caught by the wizard's pawns.

"Come up," ordered the officers who stood directly above us.

We complied.

"Come with us," the officer said and led us out the door we'd earlier come in through. The pikemen all kept the points of their pikes aimed at us. I didn't notice the innkeep anywhere as we were marched out of the inn and into the street. It was still daylight, though nearing dusk. Once outside, the officer stopped us and pointed to the inn's sign.

"The fate of all who cross Kentanos," he said.

Squirrel and I glanced up to see the innkeep hanging from the sign, a pike driven through his stomach impaling him to it. He struggled feebly, still alive. We turned away, sickened. We were thieves and often - killed ~~then~~ without qualms, but it had been quick and clean. Torture was as repulsive to us as majiks and we were now in the midst of both. I was convinced now that we should have fled Cantol at the first sign of a trap. We hadn't and now it was too late. Those damned jewels had involved us in majiks anyway.

We were kept standing just outside the inn until the sounds of the innkeep's thrashing stopped. Then the officer signaled us to move out and we followed him away from that death. None of the city's inhabitants ^{noticed} ~~noticed~~ our existence or that of the soldiers, but since meeting the innkeep, I knew that some of them might be faking.

The soldiers took us to a building which differed from its neighbor's only by its height. Where all the rest of the buildings were one level, this one was two. It wasn't exactly a wizard's tower but maybe this wizard hadn't had time to build one, or just didn't care to keep up his image. It didn't really matter to us, since a wizard is trouble no matter where you find him.

We were taken into the building and put into a small room that had no openings other than the door. The soldiers shut the door behind us and put its bar in place. I couldn't see Squirrel but I had to assure myself of his presence, so I spoke. "This city is bewitched," I said.

"That it is," Squirrel returned. "I wonder how long they plan to make us wait?"

"I don't know." Our conversation died then. We had little else to say really. Only for the sake of assuring ourselves we weren't alone had either of us spoken. Now we waited in silence.

The door opened later to reveal a new escort. Night has fallen and lit torches illuminated the hallways. We were led to two large ornate doors. An audience with the wizard/king of this city probably lay just beyond. The doors opened to disclose a large throneroom gaudily decorated in gold, with a throne upon which sat the wizard.

We were prodded into the room; made to bow to the wizard, by pike points, and then allowed to stand upright though only a few feet away from the pike points.

"Who are these men?" asked the wizard.

"Strangers in the city," answered the officer of our guard. "They were found hiding at the Hand and Eye. The innkeep was properly chastened of course."

"Why did you come to Aparos?" the wizard asked.

"We were but passing buy," Squirrel answered. "It does appear to be a pleasant enough place too."

The wizard laughed. "Pleasant?" he asked mockingly. "You lie smoothly little one, but no one would find Aparos pleasant. Don't bother lying to me. I've a spell which shows me lies from truth."

Just then a counselor or court-hanger-on, or something, leaned over toward the wizard and whispered to him. The wizard motioned to another man who approached him carefully. The wizard said something to the man who glanced at us then shook his head, yes. The wizard smiled, a smile calculated to inspire fear. It did.

"So you two are the best thieves in Cantol, Slinker and Squirrel," he said. "You have recently put that entire city in turmoil, have you not? You upset my fellow wizard, Selmonto, very much. He'd be very glad to learn you've been caught. I'm sure he'll come right away to deal with you. By the way, what was in that scroll you took from him? He seems greatly concerned about it."

I exchanged glances with Squirrel. Kentanos might already know what was in the scroll, but I doubted it. I think that Selmonto wanted to hide the scroll's contents; but, if so, he shouldn't have mentioned it to Kentanos. Now Kentanos wanted to know what was said in the scroll. By giving the scroll to him we might be able to create a conflict between the two of them that could save our lives. "Give it to him," I whispered.

Squirrel gave a mock bow and then pulled the scroll out of his purse and extended it toward him. "Here it is," he said.

One of the guards took the scroll from Squirrel and carried it to the wizard who unrolled it, read it and then nodded twice, smiling. "Ah, my friend would have kept this from me," he said. "No matter, I have it now." He looked down at us again. "You were, of course, on your way to steal this page for yourselves?" he asked.

"Of course," I answered without thinking. Squirrel was startled by my answer. We'd made no plans to steal that page and Squirrel's face showed his anger at my suggesting we had. I shut up.

"The page would be useless to someone like you," the wizard said. "Only one versed in majiks would benefit by it. How long will it take you to thieve it?" he asked.

"We can't," Squirrel answered.

"Why not?" the wizard asked.

"We can't overcome a sorcerer's majiks," Squirrel said. "We'd be dead before we got near that page."

"But you'd try with a little majiks protection, wouldn't you?" he asked.

"No!" both Squirrel and I replied.

"Would you rather feed a couple of demons?" he asked gesturing to his right. We looked in the direction he indicated. Perched on a wooden post were two demons. They resembled winged men, but weren't men. Their mouths were filled with sharp teeth for ripping flesh, surrounded by big lips over which they drooled at the sight of us. Their arms were long, hanging past the ledge on which they stooped, to end in powerful hands. Squirrel and I both swallowed at the sight of them.

"You don't care to feed them, eh?" the wizard asked. "Dying would be better than inhabiting a demon's soul even for a little while, wouldn't it?"

"Living would be better still," I said.

"Ah, sarcastic aren't we." The wizard smiled as he spoke. "Well, that's not one of your choices; not yet anyway. Bring me that page and your lives will again become your own. Fail to get it, and either the sorcerer will have your souls to play with, or I will. What are you going to do?"

"What choice have we?" I replied. I glanced at Squirrel who shrugged and remained surly. "We'll try." It sounded forced even to my ears, but then it was, so why shouldn't it sound that way. The wizard knew that we weren't to be trusted, but he had no intentions of trusting us.

"Let Slinker approach me," he said.

I looked around, scared. Squirrel said nothing, made no move. He wouldn't even look at me. I was on my own. I approached the wizard who pulled a small blue stone from a pocket somewhere in his robe. The stone had a hole through its middle and a leather strap had been threaded through it, knotted at one end to form a loop. He hung the stone around my neck. "This stone will protect you from the majiks' sight which would otherwise see you. It has no power though over normal sight, so to avoid that you must use the talents you've spent your lives learning. The only other defense I'm going to give you is a simple spell which will draw you instantly back here by simply whispering the words. "Kentanos is Lord."

I nearly laughed then, but Squirrel spoke first what was on both of our minds. "Call you Lord? Surely you jest."

The wizard smiled, a smile which sent shills up my spine. "You will call me Lord," he said, too sweetly. "Maybe not today, but one day and I shall

laugh you into the dung heap for that comment. I'm not your God of Thieves who enjoys a jest, I'm the wizard who will soon control all the majiks in this world. Think of that before you next insult me."

Squirrel shrugged.

"You will thief that page for me," the wizard went on, "and bring it back here. Just in case you have any plans of fleeing without performing your task, remember my little demons. They can follow you anywhere."

If his words hadn't been enough to instill fear in us, the way both demons began to lick their lips as they stared at us, did. Those demons would gladly have us as a meal.

"One last thing," the wizard said. "Before you leave, I wish to have the Kiest jewels. Which of you have them?"

Knowing that he'd get them anyway I pulled the jewels from my pouch. Since I still stood before him, I handed them to him. "Thank you," he said. "Now be off."

We were led quickly out by the guards.

"How do we get out of this?" Squirrel asked as we bumped along in the cart.

"We thiefe the page," I answered dryly.

The wizard's men had given us a two wheel, wooden cart pulled by an old nag. The cart was slow but this journey was to long to make on foot. We were glad not to have to walk. We had been traveling for little over half-a-day now and were sore from bumping along. That probably helped make us both irritable.

"And just how do you propose to get that page?" Squirrel asked, his voice full of bitterness. He lifted the blue stone which hung around my neck until it was before my face. "Surely, you don't think that this little babble will be any protection against a sorcerer's power. The wizard overrates his own power, but why should we? To Aramenagor, this will be only a decoration."

"True," I said, "But how do you propose we get out of this?"

"Flee!"

"And the dem_ons?"

"I'd rather face them, than whatever the sorcerer can bring against us. Besides, there's always the chance that the wizard is bluffing. He won't kill us until he's sure we won't aid him. We don't even know that he has any power over those creatures. They

could have been chained to those perches, not sitting there obedient to the wizard's will. And what if we do succeed? Will he release us then? I don't think so. We'll face those demons or something worse even then."

"That may be true," I said. "But think. If we get that page what's to keep us from casting the spell ourselves? Then we could control the majiks and rid the world of the likes of these wizards and sorcerers. We'll be more powerful than they."

"But which of us will cast the spell?"

"Both of us. We'll read it together."

"You know I can't read."

"I'd forgotten for a moment. Any way I can and then I'll send the majiks away to another world."

"Or else the power will go to your head and you'll want to rule the world. Besides, we'll have to get the page first, then you'll need time to cast the spell."

"Aren't we the best thieves in Cantol?" I asked.

"Yes we are. But we're not in Cantol anymore and Aramenagor is the most powerful sorcerer in the world. Don't forget that."

"I won't." That was the greatest danger we had to face. "What do you want to do?"

"Flee and take our chances with the demons," Desperation filled his voice.

"Okay," I said leaping out of the cart.

"What are you doing?" Squirrel asked.

"If we're going to flee we'd best do it on foot. That nag'll plod along fine, but running's not its style. We'll have to move fast and right now our feet are the fastest things available.

"Not yet," he said. "Let's keep the cart as long as we can. We run for it only when we have to."

"Then it'll be too late," I said.

"Maybe," he replied in that fatalistic tone he'd so recently acquired. "I still want to keep this cart as long as possible."

"Alright," I said climbing back onto it. "Let's."

"First," Squirrel said pointing to the stone hanging around my neck, "Get rid of that. It could be what those demons are attuned to rather than us."

I grasped the stone and tried to lift it from around my neck. I pulled it upward and began choking as something seemed to clamp on my throat. The blood rushed up into my face. I dropped the stone, drew air into my lungs and screamed. Then I lay back and gasped out, "It won't come off."

Puzzled, Squirrel reached over and tried to lift the stone off, but I slapped his hand away. "Are you trying to kill me?" I demanded. "That stone nearly choked me to death and you want to try it again."

"I'm sorry," Squirrel said. "I didn't realize

what it was doing to you."

"It only did when I tried to remove it," I said. "It'll have to stay. Now, if we're going to flee, get this cart moving."

Squirrel turned the cart off the road and headed away from it. We moved out under the trees hoping to avoid detection for a little longer. It didn't work. I glanced up into one of the trees and froze in terror. "Squirrel," I squeaked out, fear clutching my throat. He looked at me, saw the fear in my face and then followed my gaze until he saw the two demons perched in the tree before us. They squatted, wings folded behind their backs as they stared at us, their fangs gleaming in the sunlight.

"Turn around," I whispered. "They haven't attacked yet so we may have a chance to get back on the road. I don't think that the wizard will want them to act too fast, not as long as we might try to get the page for him."

Squirrel turned the cart around and headed back for the road. "I guess he can control them," he muttered. Then he fell silent, looking defeated. I felt that way too. We had no weapons with which to fight and even if we had, we'd probably have lost.

We got back onto the road and continued our interrupted journey to Aramenagor's keep. Behind us came the soft rustle of leather wings. I glanced

back to see the demons flying slowly back toward Aparos. I tapped Squirrel who simply looked at me surly. "They've leaving," I said. Squirrel looked back quickly then. He didn't seem to be too relieved about it probably because it only reinforced the fact that if we tried to flee our task, then they'd come after us quickly. I was relieved to see them fly away though. Having them drooling over us wouldn't make this theft any easier and added difficulties we didn't need. Still, we had to perform this task or face those creatures. We rode on toward the sorcerer's keep.

It was dusk six days later when we finally sighted the keep. It sat upon a small hillock surrounded by a shallow valley which was too perfectly round to be natural. The keep itself was surrounded by a high stone wall which followed the curve of the top of the hill perfectly. We could see the vague shape of a building inside. A few trees lifted their branches higher than the wall. A tower rose from the keep's center with a single light burning in the only window that faced us. All else was dark and forboding.

"Shall we just rush in?" Squirrel asked. "Or do we try to find a better vantage point and see what we can first?" His voice still held that fatalistic tone.

I thought a moment. "We'll need all the information we can get about the keep. We're going to be

working almost blind as it is."

"But where can we go to get a better view?" Squirrel asked. His voice was sarcastic. "There's^d no place near us higher than this."

I looked around. The land was flat except for the shallow valley and hillock within it. There was no higher vantage point. I was suddenly unsure of what to do. I said as much to Squirrel.

He glanced at me harshly. I began to feel a change in him; almost as if he were holding me responsible for what had happened. His eyes reflected hate. The change frightened me. This man had been my closest friend and now he was becoming someone else. I wondered how this change would affect our task. It could get us killed.

"Let's go in now," Squirrel said. "We can't get a better view and the longer we sit out here the greater the chances are that the sorcerer will see us."

"But we need some kind of plan," I protested.

"A simple one then. We move through the circular valley to the hill, up it to the wall, over the wall, across the grounds and into the tower. Then we find the page, lift it and get out again. It's simple."

Bitterness poured out in those last two words. His eyes were hard, challenging me to accept his plan. I tried to think of a better one, but couldn't. Without more information, we couldn't formulate a better

plan. "Okay," I said finally. "Let's go, before I get too scared to try."

Without another word we climbed from the cart and headed into the valley. We crossed it quickly and reached the wall without incident. Even so, we couldn't be sure that we hadn't been seen. The road we'd been on ended at the wall, yet there was no opening into the keep or, at least, not one we could see.

We began to pace along the outside of the wall, hoping to find a gate or low place in it. After several hundred strides, we found nothing but the same grey expanse of wall. There didn't appear to be any entrance through the wall. "Shall we climb it," I asked.

"Might as well," Squirrel said already unlimbering the rope and grappling hook. "This'll get us in."

He cast the hook upward. It climbed past the wall, arced inward and fell upon it. Squirrel pulled on the rope, trying to lodge the hook. The hook scraped stone, slipped from the edge to fall at our feet. Undaunted, Squirrel recoiled the rope, lifted the hook and cast it upward again. It failed to catch this time also. Six more tries and we were finally rewarded with a securely caught hook somewhere upon the wall above.

Without a word, Squirrel began to climb hand-over-hand to the wall's top quickly.

I peered into the darkened keep beyond.

There was a garden just inside the wall. It was circular like the wall and went all the way around. The garden was forbidding. The trees were twisted, gruesome things with blood red or black blooms. It was hard to tell in the dark. The space between the trees was covered by flowers having blooms of the same hue as the trees. Gnarled bushes were set in intervals alongside stone paths that ran throughout the garden, but never reaching the edge on either side. It was the most foreboding garden I'd ever seen.

Beyond the garden, a squatted, circular, grey stone building sat. There was a doorway which was a black opening in the dark wall. There were small stones protruding from the top and bottom of the doorway; blunt teeth in an open mouth. There were two windows which looked the same, only smaller. The building was one level high, the tower rising from somewhere within it.

"That building looks hungry," Squirrel said. His voice was dead sounding, not like my old friend.

"True," I muttered in return, not wishing to converse with this stranger. "I doubt that the page is in there, though. It would more likely be kept in the tower."

I looked up at the tower which resembled a needle stuck in the ground. Shadows flickered back and forth

through the window of the lit room; as though made by someone pacing within.

"In that room?" Squirrel asked, gazing upward at the window.

"I hope not," I replied. "Though it's probably not far below it."

We fell silent then, watching the shadows flicker through the window. I shook my lethargy slowly; the shadows were hypnotizing me as a fire can sometimes do. I shook Squirrel, who was effected the same way. Dawn was a long way off, but I wanted to finish here and be far away by then; unless, of course, I could cast the spell written upon that page.

Quietly, we hung the rope down the inner side of the wall. Then we climbed down to stand upon the barren strip of earth which ran around the keep at the base of the wall. It was barely wide enough to stand upon. Squirrel shook the hook loose, coiled the rope and stored it in his pouch. Only then did we face the dark garden.

The nearest end of one of the stone paths lay twice the length of my body away from us. The path began there and ran toward the other side stopping before it reached the living building. Why the paths had been built that way was beyond my understanding. Maybe it was the sorcerer's idea of a jest. Whatever, we'd have to reach

one of them to pass through the garden. For some reason, I was sure we wouldn't get through if we walked on the black grass or any of the flowers. Down here, I could see that the blooms were blood red. Possibly the plants fed on flesh. Leaping to the path was going to be difficult with our backs to this wall and no room to run. I swallowed, trying to muster my courage; then I leapt outward. I had to put a foot down once to reach the path and crushed some plants as I did so, but reached the stone path before I had to step down again. The faint smell of burned leather reached my nose; and glancing down I saw that my boot smoked mildly. A noxious vapor wafted over me from the crushed plants. I staggered backward to get away from it, being careful to remain on the path.

After I'd escaped the vapor, I turned to see where Squirrel was. He stood with his back to the wall, his eyes glassy and his face growing blue from holding his breath. "Jump," I whispered as loudly as I dared, sure he couldn't hold his breath long enough for the vapor to dissipate, if it would at all. I saw his muscles tense and then he leapt outward toward me.

My attention was suddenly diverted from Squirrel when something grabbed my ankle and yanked me from my feet. I was dragged slowly toward the path's edge. I drew my sword and hacked at what turned out to be a sinuous limb from one of the gnarled bushes. The entire

plant withered in agony as I hacked through the limb. Other limbs began to snake toward me, from that bush and several others. I leapt to my feet, saw Squirrel sprawled half-on, half-off the stone, unconscious. I lifted him, flung him across my shoulder and staggered to the far end of the path. All along the way limbs grabbed at me, but didn't quite make contact. The stones began to move, trying to tumble me into the garden.

I reached the other end of the stones. Then I moved back a few steps, took a running start and tried to fling both Squirrel and myself out of the garden. Just as I realized we weren't going to make it, a limb wrapped itself around my waist and jerked me sideways. The sudden movement caused me to lose my hold on Squirrel. I looked toward him in alarm, only to see him suspended beside me by another limb. Glancing toward the source of the limbs, I saw that it was one of the blood-red blossomed trees. It was slowly drawing us toward its center through the blood-blossoms which gave off more noxious vapor as we touched them. I swung my sword, which I'd somehow managed to hang on to, at the limb which held me. It withered at the impact but wasn't even dented by the blade. I chopped again, to no effect. Then I was lifted up higher by the limb and held over an opening in the bole of the tree. The edges of the opening began to ripple and I knew that it was a mouth. I screamed and threw my

sword point-first into that maw. The tree twisted, the limbs snapped up and down, the blossoms released their noxious fumes until the air became thick. I lost my senses.

I awoke, lying underneath the tree which had collapsed upon its death. My sword had killed it. Squirrel moaned beside me and I reached out to touch him. He tried to elude my touch until I whispered that it was me. Then he lay shuddering for a few moments. "Where are we?" he whispered.

"Under a tree in the sorcerer's garden," I replied.

"What happened?" Squirrel asked.

"You were knocked out by the fumes and when I tried to jump out of the garden with you, the tree grabbed us and tried to eat us."

"Eat us!?" he cried out, looking fearfully around.

"I killed it!" I said, hoping to ease his fear.

"I lost my sword doing it though."

"A tree tried to eat us?" Squirrel's voice was frightened and confused.

"It was a majiks tree," I said. "It had a mouth and tried to devour us."

Squirrel shuddered. "Let's get out of here," he said, starting to crawl out from under the tree.

"Carefully," I said. "Make sure you're crawling out of the garden and not deeper into it."

Squirrel stopped for a moment and studied the situation, then he continued to crawl in the direction he'd been moving. I followed. We emerged from under the tree at

the garden's edge. No fumes had risen from the plants we crushed as we crawled. I could only guess that the grass and flowers were all part of the tree somehow and died with it.

It was still dark, but whether of the same night or not, I wasn't sure. It didn't really matter though; we still had to get that page. Since dawn could slip up on us unexpectedly, it might come in an hour or not for several, we knew we'd have to hurry so we could be out of here by dawn.

We reached the stone building but didn't dare enter through any of its mouth-like openings. We started to circle the building, not daring to touch it. We moved even further away from the doors and windows when we passed them, fearing that they'd try to eat us as the tree had. After a couple of minutes, Squirrel stopped walking. "It's probably like the wall," he said. "Completely encircling the tower. Are we going through it or over it?"

"Over," I replied. "I'm not taking any chances. We could be eaten alive by that majiks creature." I had the feeling that the shape of the doors and windows was more than just decoration.

Our choice made, Squirrel threw the grappling hook upward where it landed inaudibly upon the roof. A shiver ran up my spine. If that roof had been made of

stone, then we'd have heard a slight clink when the metal hook struck it. Squirrel yanked on the rope to secure it. It hung on the first try. Then the rope quivered a little as if something above was trying to shake the hook loose. At sight of that, Squirrel held the rope out to me in gentlemanly fashion; I think he really did it because he was as scared as I was. I swallowed the lump in my throat and climbed.

I reached the roof's edge and peered out across it before I climbed up onto it. The roof's expanse was smooth as it curved away in both directions. It wasn't stone; there were no seams where they'd have been mortared together. The building was about five paces wide. There was a gap of half-a-bow-shot between it and the tower it surrounded. What lay in the space between wasn't visible from here. I climbed on up the roof and signaled Squirrel who climbed up to stand beside me. He coiled the rope, returning it to his pouch, and we prepared to walk to the building's other side.

Suddenly, the roof came alive. It convulsed, sending waves of itself from the outer wall to its inner side. The first wave knocked us from our feet and carried us part way across the roof's expanse until we rolled over its crest into the depression between it and the next one. Two more waves and we were pitched off the building into the courtyard surrounding the tower. The yard was of some

hard surface, probably stone, covered with a soft mold-like substance. The hardness jarred us badly, nearly knocking me senseless.

As I lay stunned, the mold-like cover began creeping upward around my body. When I realized what was happening, I tried to leap to my feet but was held down by the creeping stuff. I twisted around until I could reach my knife, then pulling it, began slicing away at the stuff until I finally broke free. Squirrel lay groaning softly, while the mold-like stuff grew slowly over him. I growled; then attacked the stuff with my knife, freeing Squirrel. I pulled him to his feet and pushed him toward the tower door. He stumbled, but stayed on his feet and moved woodenly into the building with my guidance.

No door hung in the opening to offer resistance to our entrance. I was thankful for that because the mold clutched at our feet with each step. The sorcerer probably felt no need for a door. It's unlikely that he expected anyone to get this far; and he had majiks guards which were better protection than a door could ever be. From here it wouldn't be easy. Somewhere in this tower lay the page we'd come after, and probably also sat, stood, or layed the sorcerer. I became afraid anew.

I started for the tower steps when Squirrel's light touch stopped me. "This place stinks of majiks," he whispered.

I nodded in reply. The smell was so strong, it nearly sickened me.

"The demons might be easier to face than this," Squirrel said.

He was showing life again, for which I was thankful. The direction it took though, curbed most of that feeling. "If we go back," I said. "Then we'll have to face all those majiks traps we just passed."

"We'll have to pass them as we leave anyway," he retorted. "Going up this tower means new dangers also. I'll take my chances with that mold, or whatever it is out there, and the building and the garden; rather than face the sorcerer himself."

I felt a pang of loss. Squirrel had never backed away from danger before; but, of course, he'd never faced a sorcerer's power before either. Whatever he really felt, he wasn't going to be of any use in this theft. "Okay," I replied. "I'm going on. I'll see you after it's all over."

"Okay," he said. "Maybe you can use this." He handed me the rope and grappling hook.

"You can't climb that wall without it," I said.

"I've still got these," he said, holding up the suction cups we'd used while climbing Selmonto's tower.

"I can get out with them."

I didn't agree, but there was no arguing with him right now. I was afraid to let him go, but couldn't stop him. "Good luck," I said.

Squirrel gave me a look of commiseration as if I needed to be pitied rather than him. "The luck's for you," he said. "You're going to need it a lot more than I will." Then he turned and left the tower.

I stood for a moment, feeling deserted. Being in a place like this is bad enough when you've got a friend at your side; but it was so much more oppressive alone. I had a very strong urge to follow Squirrel but pushed it away. I wanted to get to that page and cast the spell. Then we'd all be free. Fleeing now would mean facing again all those dangers out there with the added danger of those demons afterward. I had to go on. Taking a deep breath to smother my fears, I began ascending the tower steps.

As I climbed, my skin began to crawl. The smell of majiks, which was already stifling, grew thicker as I went higher. An eerie sensation of eyes on my back seemed to burn it. I glanced around continually but never spotted anything that appeared to have life. Even so, the walls might live by majiks. I moved upward, never shaking the eyes.

The stairs wound upward along the outer wall of the tower, the rooms in its center. I came to the first door and touched it, feeling it wiggle under my fingers.

I jerked my hand away, knowing that this building lived. No wonder I'd felt as if I was being watched. Living stone must have some way to sense an intruder in its midst. The sorcerer probably already knew that I was here. I hoped he'd play me against time, so I'd have a chance to put my plan into action.

It took all my will power to force my hand to touch the doorknob again and turn it. The door opened silently, as everything here was silent. The room beyond was dark; except for a dim glow from the top of a flat pedestal which sat in the room's center. I crossed to the pedestal and glanced down at a page which lay upon it. The page was glowing, casting the room's only light. This must be what I'd come for. I looked at the words, preparing to cast the spell only to find that it was written in a script I couldn't understand. I should have known that it would be written in a language long dead, or else one known only to those who used majiks. My last hope of freedom from those users fled me.

Resigned to my fate of being a pawn, I reached for the page. My hand touched it and froze. I tried to draw my hand away but it was stuck fast to the surface of the page. Panic shot through me. I threw myself away from the pedestal, only to be rewarded by nearly tearing my arm off at the shoulder. My hand remained where it was.

Just as I contemplated using my knife to part my hand from the rest of me; a low, cruel laughter sounded behind me, freezing me with sheer terror. I began yanking at the hand, throwing myself away from the pedestal in both directions and then began to beat on it with my free hand. That hand froze to the page beside the other one. My panic subsided as I realized how totally helpless I'd become. I slumped to the floor, my hands remaining where they were.

A figure stepped into my line of vision. I looked up to see a man adorned in sorcerer's purple. "I see you found my page," he said mockingly.

I shuddered. No spoken threat could have frightened me more than his eyes did. He probably expected no reply from me, so I gave none.

"Do you realized how dangerous that page is?" he asked.

I remained silent, as he'd probably expected because he went on without pause.

"Mentamentos wrote this page for reasons even he didn't understand. He wrote this and many other spells and bound them into a book. When he realized what he'd done, he tried to destroy them. You see, these pages are the most dangerous spells the sorcerer knew. Some of them could destroy our very world, while others would only destroy parts of it, or at least he who

cast it. He tried hard to destroy those pages, but failed. The spells apparently protected themselves, from all the destructive spells he knew. Finally, in despair, Mentamentos cast a spell which slid the book into another world where the spells were powerless. All of the book left, save for this page. It wouldn't follow the others, no matter what spell was cast upon it. That was when Mentamentos knew the spell would remain here until someone cast it. Only then would the page become useless or follow its fellows. The only problem was that whoever cast the spell would find his new-found power of little use, because he too would find himself in that other world with the now useless book.

"So, not willing to leave this world, Mentamentos cast the spell on that page which now binds you. You see, now, why I'm so upset at you for trying to thieve it."

I was very glad that I hadn't been able to read the page. I'd almost sent myself into some other world. I might not be able to live there. Of course, having been caught by this sorcerer might make life just as short. I had no idea how he would treat a thief.

"You're a pawn of Selmonto's, aren't you," he said.

I nodded.

"I knew he'd act sooner or later. Perhaps I should let you take the page to him. That would serve him right for being so presumptuous as to think his pawn could thief from me. Oh well, I've made a vow to never allow the page to leave this tower, so I must find another way to teach that wizard a lesson." Then he spotted the stone around my neck and said, "so Kentonos is in on this also. Surely he didn't expect such a babble to blind my seeing powers." Then he squinted, as if seeing something only dimly visible. "Oh, now I understand. He used that only to keep track of you and to make it possible for his pet demons to follow you." He waved his hand at me. "Fear those pitiful beasts no more. They can no longer find that stone." He reached for the stone, sending fear through me. I'd nearly been choked to death trying to remove it before. Then he stopped reaching and said, "Keep it. Maybe you'll have need to hide from a witch or some other user of small majiks. That will be compensation small enough for what you'll soon be going through. I'll be back for you in a moment."

He left the room, leaving me upon the floor, my hands still frozen to the page. The sorcerer seemed to know all that was going on. He probably knew that Squirrel and I were on our way here, even before we did. Whatever punishment he dealt to those wizards was fine

with me, they deserved that much or worse. If this sorcerer allowed me to live, then I'd find some sort of vengeance to reap upon them myself. The sticky part of this was my continuing to live. The sorcerer had alluded to something happening to me. I've heard tales of men being turned into all sorts of creatures, or even into things like these buildings or even moons. Whatever he planned for me might be worse than what he planned for the wizards. I might even be the tool he planned on using to punish them. His return cut off my thoughts which were threatening to drive me mad.

"Your friend awaits you," he said, waving his hands above mine.

My hands were freed. I rose to my feet, but not under my own control. Whatever spell he'd used to free me from the page had put me under his control. He started me walking, out the door and down the stairs. I couldn't even control my blinking; my eyes remained open. Suddenly what he'd said sank in; something was happening to Squirrel.

We reached the bottom of the tower and walked out into the courtyard which was carpeted by that mold-like substance. There, lying near the circular building, was Squirrel. The vile stuff had nearly covered him. Only his face and part of his chest yet remained uncovered. His body twisted and twitched under its

covering. I tried to go to his aid but the sorcerer's power held me fast, unable to aid Squirrel or avert my eyes. My fingers twitched, but were unable to reach the knife at my side. My struggles matched those of Squirrel and were no more effective. When the mold had fully covered him, I tried to scream out my anger, only to find myself unable to. Slowly Squirrel's struggles ceased. Then I did scream, the sorcerer was human enough to allow me that; though no movement beyond it. Tears began to run down my cheeks, something I could never recall doing before. My body sagged, held up only by the majiks around me. Slowly my mind went blank.

I awoke in darkness. The air around me was heavy and foul as if it were stale. Reaching out I touched wooden walls that enclosed me on all sides. There were small holes bored through the walls in several places. I reached through one of them to discover something beyond which felt like wool. There was also a slight sensation of motion, a jarring up and down and a swinging back and forth. Possibly I was in a box under a pile of wool all loaded in a wagon and being carried someplace. I tried to break out of the box but found it too strong for me.

The wood of the box scraped at my skin as I bounced around inside it. Whoever had put me here had taken my clothes from me first. All I had on was the blue stone with its leather thong, shortened, around my neck. There was nothing in the box besides that and me.

The moving sensation halted abruptly. I heard something shuffling above me as though the wool was being shifted about. Then there was a thud against the side of the box and it was lifted roughly, with no concern for what might be within, me. Light came bursting in through the holes, blinding me. Suddenly the bottom of the box dropped from under my feet. I felt as though I was floating for a moment, then I was

slammed into the bottom of the box, very hard. Whatever had lifted the box had just dropped it.

Something was thrust into a seam along one side of the top of the box. Then, with a levering motion, the lid of the box was pried upward. There was a screeching sound as the nails pulled loose from the wood. Fresh air poured in, helping me recover my stunned senses. Two hands, far too large, reached into the box and finished prying the lid off. I layed on my back, staring up into a world much too large.

A giant leaned over the box, his face nearly filling the space of the opening through which I could see. Panic welled within me. The sorcerer must have sent me to another world; one in which giants dwelled. I wanted to scream, but I feared angering this giant by doing so.

"Hello, Little One," the giant said, not unkindly. "You must have crossed the sorcerer pretty badly for him to have done this to you."

"Done what?" I squeaked. My voice was higher pitched than before.

The giant laughed. "The elves would welcome you on sight now," he bellowed, still laughing. "Til they discovered you were truely a man, though a tiny one."

Elves! That comment brought answers to many of my unasked questions. This was not some world of giants

I had been transported to, but rather my own world. I'd been shrunk to the size of an elf. Compared to this, I'd rather be in a world of giants; of course, for all intents and purposes, I was.

But elf-size! All men would turn on me, cursing me for being one of those mischievous little imps. The elves wouldn't welcome me because I'm still, in truth, a man. What a supreme jest the sorcerer had played upon me. Hagon, the God of Thieves, was probably behind this; it was a jest he would enjoy immensely. I would rather have died My memory turned to Squirrel. He had died and I hadn't. That left me, the only one who could avenge his death and I would; somehow.

The man who'd opened the box reached in, lifted me out and set me upon the ground. Then he tossed me a small package tied up with twine. "Here's a robe and boots for you," he said. Then he held out a sword, made for someone of my size. "You may need this, also," he said.

I took the sword, muttering thanks as I did so. Then I set it aside and began to dress. It was cold here. "Where are we?" I asked.

"In Kant," he replied.

"And where is that?"

"On the eastern slopes of the Canth Mountains," he replied. Then he climbed up onto the wagon filled

with wool. "I must be off," he said. "The sorcerer would be angry at me if I stayed longer. Good luck," Then he rode away, leaving me standing here, alone.

I was high in the mountains here and the wind came off the snow above chilling me. Somehow I'd been shrunk, then sent across or around this mountain range until I was on the side opposite the one where Cantol lay. The sea route to here was several weeks long and if I'd been sent that route then I doubt I'd have slept through it. Of course, the sorcerer's majiks could make that possible. If I'd been brought over the mountain then . . . but this was early winter and all the higher passes would already be closed by snow. Oh well, it didn't really matter how I got here. What mattered was what to do now. Having no other option, I set out walking downslope hoping to find a place where I might get some food and a warm place to stay.

I'd been walking for about two hours when I finally spotted an inn alongside the road. The sign over the door depicted a Stilted Dwarf. I didn't like the name. Dwarves rarely bother other people but when riled they could be as vindictive as elves or witches. To so name an inn was a blatant insult to them. No dwarf would desire to be stilted. They dig their mines for people of their size and anyone of them who chose to be stilted would be forced to live elsewhere. Since

dwarves prefer the company of their own, which is the way of most peoples, they wouldn't try to change their heights and live elsewhere. No, this sign wouldn't please the dwarves. These mountains were swarming with them like a bee hive swarmed with bees. If they took offense at this sign then they'd probably be getting their vengeance very soon. I just hoped that they'd wait until I was gone. I needed food, so I headed for the inn.

The door handle was twice my height. Before I'd been shrunk, this door wouldn't have presented such a formidable barrier. Now, it would be a task equal to climbing a hold wall. I lept upward and succeeded in grabbing the end of the door handle. The handle began to move downward, making it hard for me to hold it. As I started to slide off, I kicked out against the wall with my feet. The door moved outward slightly. I dropped off the door handle and hit the ground. Then I reached my hands into the slight opening I'd made and pulled hard. The door opened a little more. As soon as it was open enough for me to squeeze in, I did. The interior of the inn was warm.

Several heads turned in my direction as I entered. They stared at me as if I were a ghost or some sort of majiks creature. Uh, Oh! To them I was a majiks creature; an elf. The viewers' eyes grew hard as they

stared. I could feel hatred behind them. "Excuse me," I said quickly. "I'm looking for something to eat." Since elves never ate man-food, I was hoping to allay their fears about my being one of those imps.

The innkeep came into the room from the kitchen just as I'd spoken. He turned toward me frowning. He was a big man, even among this group of big men. He sat down the tray he carried and started toward me, saying, "This is a man's inn. We don't serve the likes of elves, or trolls, or dwarves here. Now get out before I lose my dogs on you."

I had decided that it'd be best to leave quietly when a man in a brown cloak said softly, but loud enough for everyone to hear, "Let him stay, innkeep."

The big man spun around angrily to see who had spoken out against his decision. He spotted the brown-robed man quickly. "And who are you to tell me to whom I must allow the use of my inn."

"A simple traveler," he replied and he did appear to be such. He didn't have the look of a wizard, sorcerer or holy man about him; though the robe was the color of those which holy men wore. He spoke again. "If the little one there was an elf, you'd do well to leave him alone. Your dogs would be hard pressed to hurt such a majiks one. And after such an insult, I'm afraid that an elf would wreak havok among your customers

and yourself. Have you never met an elf before?"

"No," the innkeep admitted. "I've heard of their antics though and don't want that sort of mischief around here."

"Well, that one wouldn't cause it," the brown-robed man said as he pointed at me. "Elves don't enter the haunts of men by the front door as he did. This one is simply a small man."

"Too small," the innkeep muttered.

"But still a man, and men must eat." The brown-robed man held out some coins to the innkeep. "This should cover the expense. Now get him some food and ale. He'll dine with me."

I glanced after the innkeep as he headed for the kitchen, then back to the brown-robed man. It had been his money that had finally won the innkeep over. Much to my chagrin I now owed this man for aiding me. It was embarrassing for me, a master thief, to be without money; but the sorcerer hadn't seen fit to supply that along with the clothes and sword, so now I owed this stranger for helping me. Since there was nothing else for me to do, I strolled across the room to where my benefactor sat. Then I scrambled up onto the bench opposite him. Even standing, I could barely see him over the table, so I climbed up and sat upon the table top.

I looked up into the man's eyes. They were smiling; and a friendly smile it was too. He was unusual, though. This close I could detect the odor of majiks about him. I considered fleeing then, but something about him relaxed me and made me feel almost safe. "I'm Slinker," I said, deciding to stay at least long enough to eat.

"My friends call me Gilbert," he said. "You're very much out of place, aren't you."

"Out of place and size," I replied. "How can you be so sure I'm not an elf?"

Gilbert laughed. I liked him for that, even though I didn't see what was so funny. It might have something to do with that air of mystery and majiks about him but I felt, oddly, a sort of kinship with this man.

The innkeep returned with a platter of roast beef and bread and two mugs of ale; one large enough for Gilbert and a much smaller one for me, though it was still too large. Without a word, he set the food down and headed back into the kitchen. I began to eat as we talked.

"You couldn't be an elf," Gilbert said in answer to my question. "I've learned a bit of majiks and can detect another user of them. The smell of majiks clings to you like a skunk's scent clings to a dog he's sprayed, but the majiks aren't part of you. The

smell is also of sorcerer's majiks; not elf's. Knowing that, you couldn't be what you seemed."

"But why help me?" I asked. "I'm a stranger to you."

"That you are," he replied. "But I think we can help one another."

"How?" I asked suddenly suspicious of his motives.

"You've recently crossed a sorcerer who calls himself Aramenagor, haven't you," he said.

"Yes. How'd you know?"

"His favorite spell against those who bother him is the one he used on you. That means you now have a score to settle with him, don't you."

"Yes, I do. And do you?"

"I do. You see, I was once apprenticed to Aramenagor. He didn't think I had the makings of a sorcerer and so he threw me out. He was right though. I wasn't narrow-minded enough to become a sorcerer as he was. You see, I didn't learn a good many of the spells he felt were important to obtaining great majiks. I'd always been a curious sort and had explored his library in depth. There were volumes there that Aramenagor had either never read or else had figured weren't worth bothering about after a quick glance over them. I read them and learned a lot of things which my ex-mentor never knew. He grew angry at me and threw me out for

sticking my nose into every place except the one in which he wanted it. I owe him for that."

That made sense. "How can I help you though?"

I asked.

"What were you doing that caused Aramenagor to shrink you?"

"I was trying to steal a majiks page from him."

"A page which sat upon a pedestal?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then you can help me by going back and stealing it."

"I tried and got caught," I cried. "Squirrel died in our attempt. I'll not go back."

Gilbert smiled. "You didn't have the right kind of help before," he said. "I'll see to it this time that you succeed."

I'd been made promises before, but they hadn't been kept. Trusting this man wasn't smart, but I decided to at least hear any plans he might come up with. I did want vengeance for Squirrel's death, and for what had been done to me. I'd stay around a little while.

I awoke the next morning on a corner of Gilbert's bed. Since I'd decided to hear him out, I had chosen to spend the night. During the evening, I hadn't really learned anything more about Gilbert's plan to steal the page. What had happened was that I'd grown to like the friendly, not-quite, sorcerer. He wasn't like all the other majiks users I'd run across; this man remembered that he was a man. Even so, I didn't think he had enough majiks to pull this theft off. Sleep had helped me decide to get out while I still could.

Quietly I slipped off the bed to the floor. I glanced up at the door. The handle was like the one on the outer door. I couldn't open it without making a lot of noise. Curse this size! Always before I'd found entering and leaving a locked room to be quite simple; now here I stood, before an unlocked door, unable to get out quietly

Gilbert still slept soundly, so I had time to think. The window received my scrutiny next. It was easy to reach the ledge by pulling myself up. Then I stood there, pressing my face against the glass. Glass was rarely found in windows of inns, but this one had glass, possibly due to the cold temperatures at night. I tapped on the pane lightly, feeling trapped.

"Lovely view of the refuse heap, isn't it."

I jumped at the sound of the unexpected voice. I spun to face its source and tumbled off the ledge. Quickly I scrambled to my feet and stood glaring at Gilbert. "Are you trying to scare me to death," I demanded.

Gilbert broke into laughter. He looked quite undignified doubled over like that with his feet moving up and down as he laughed. I almost broke into laughter myself watching him, but forced myself to stay straight.

"What's so funny, sorcererlet?" I demanded. My insult passed unnoticed.

He covered his mouth trying to stop laughing. Finally, he was able to gasp out some words between fits of laughter. "Excuse me . . .," he said. "But you . . . look so funny . . . glaring like that . . . I wouldn't want to . . . to make fun of . . . you . . ., but you were so . . . funny."

I never liked being the butt of a joke, but I guess it was pretty ludicrous for someone my size to scold someone his size. Still, I was sensitive about being this size and his laughter wasn't helping my ego one bit. I sat down and waited until his laughter finally subsided.

"Forgive me, my friend," he said. "I'm usually more controlled than that; but, well, we all need some

honest laughter now and again. I thank you for lightening my morning."

I made a mock bow in his direction. It was hard for me to enjoy being laughed at, but I couldn't quite take offense at his honesty. Still, when the time came I would be ready to part company with this not-quite sorcerer.

"The view was refreshing though?" he asked.

"No," I replied. "That's where the innkeep dumps his garbage. I was looking for dwarves." It wasn't the truth, but I had to save a little face. How could I tell my unwanted partner that I was looking for a way to escape him?

"And well you should be watching out for dwarves," he said. "They'd carry you off and skin you as they would a rabbit, I fear."

"What?" I shouted as the jerk doubled over in laughter again. "I might be half the size of a dwarf, but not one of them could skin me." This would-be sorcerer was making me the butt of a joke, again.

He stopped laughing quickly this time. "I am truly sorry, but I couldn't resist the joke. I will try harder to accomodate your feelings in the future. Still, you're right to be on the watch for dwarves. They've raided this ill-named inn twice this week. That buffoon of an innkeep not only insults them by

the naming of this place, but also by dumping refuse on their land and denying them use of his establishment. I don't think that this place will last long."

As Gilbert talked, I thought that I could feel a subdued vibration as if something were pushing the inn back and forth. "Do you feel anything?" I asked Gilbert.

"So, you've finally become aware of it," Gilbert said. "I wondered how long it would take you. The dwarves will soon have this inn for their own, I think. We should depart immediately before we discover ourselves their guests along with the rest of the customers when the inn falls below ground.

Without another word, Gilbert rose from his bed, hoisted his bag which held his meager belongings onto his back; motioned me to follow him and set out down the stairs. The inn was silent, except for the subtle vibrations of the dwarves' digging. None of the inn's other inhabitants were stirring.

We left the inn and had walked several hundred paces before I dared speak. "What do you think the dwarves will do to the inn?"

"They'll probably sink it into the earth," Gilbert replied. "Imagine the look that'll be on the innkeep's face when he discovers he's suddenly underground."

"Will they kill him?"

"After a fashion. He'll live, but it won't be a life to envy. They'll change the inn's name to reflect the new appearance of the old innkeep. They'll call it the Legless Man or possibly the Stooped Fool, depending on the manner of their vengeance. Whatever they do, he'll be their slave."

I shuddered at the visions his words conjured. Dwarves aren't evil, but they are vindictive when insulted. The innkeep would pay highly for his prejudice. I tried to feel pity for him, but he had named the inn and should have known better.

A crashing sound emanated from behind us. Looking back we were unable to see the inn even though we'd only gone about a thousand paces and should have been able to see it clearly. The dwarves now had it.

"That was close," I said.

"I knew it would fall sometime today," Gilbert said, "but I hadn't expected it so soon. I'm glad we left by the deadline the dwarves named me."

"You knew all about it?"

"The dwarves told me of their plan when I traveled through their domain last week."

"Why didn't you warn everyone?"

"The dwarves are my friends. They warned me of their intent only because of that. If I had warned the innkeep, then I would have betrayed their trust

and they would have had a vengeance against me. As it is, we shall pass through their domain unmolested and with their good wishes."

"We're going into the dwarves' mines?"

"It's the only route through the mountains this time of year. Besides, they're my friends and need not be feared."

"They're not my friends!" I protested.

"They can be," Gilbert said softly. "That is, if you wish it." He looked down at me with a questioning look on his face.

"I'm not sure," I said, stopping.

Gilbert reached down and lifted me from the ground. "Think about it," he said. "Meanwhile, we'll head for the mine entrance at a quicker pace than the one at which we've been traveling." With that, he sat me upon his shoulders and began striding at his pace. My short legs had been incapable of such strides and had forced him to walk very slow. Now, we'd make much more rapid progress.

Trying to take my mind off the thoughts of traveling through dwarf territory, I decided to probe for more information about Gilbert and his plans for stealing the page from Aramenagor. "You said that you've learned some majiks, but that you're no sorcerer. How then, do you plan on getting the page away from the sorcerer?"

"I said that I never learned the majiks of a sorcerer, true; but I did learn many majiks of which Aramenagor himself has no knowledge."

"How?"

"I studied the obscure tomes in his library. They taught me many majiks no longer practiced in this world. They also led me to other sources of majiks which aren't known to anyone else of this world."

"Then you're a stronger sorcerer than Aramenagor is?"

"No. I have a different variety of majiks. To say they are more powerful would be misleading; say, rather, that they are simply different."

"Then he could defeat us?"

"He could, but I'm counting on surprise and his arrogance to defeat him. To him, I'm an ex-apprentice who is incapable of but the simplest spells; while, in truth, I am the only necromancer in this world."

"Necromancer?"

"A name I borrowed from another world to name my particular variety of majiks. I'm afraid that I chose it because it sounds impressive. Possibly not a good reason, but the true one. I'm not as egotistical as most users of majiks, but I do have pride in my unique accomplishment at having learned these majiks."

"So how do we get the page?" I asked. "So far, you've only talked about yourself and not about how

we're going to steal the page."

"All in due time, my good friend. Right now, we're going into the dwarves' domain. You've got to choose whether or not you wish to befriend them before long."

"Must I choose now?"

"No, but very soon. Once we pass by the council chamber it'll be too late to decide. You must be ready by then."

I swallowed, unable to say anything. My good sense kept telling me to make friends with the dwarves; but my fear told me to just keep going until we got out of there. I didn't have long to decide.

Gilbert had to duck to enter the dwarf mines. I'd been uncomfortable enough riding on his shoulder before, but stooped over like he was made it like riding a wild horse or possibly a unicorn. To stay on, I had to scramble onto the back of his neck which caused him to have to stoop even lower. He walked through the mines like that.

As we entered, I got the uneasy feeling that we were being watched. There seemed to be eyes peering out of the darkness. This necromancer (it did have an impressive sound to it) had said that he'd been granted safe passage but doubts kept nagging at my mind. My inclination now was to put my trust in Gilbert and meet the dwarves, but I still wasn't quite ready for that.

"Wondering about the eyes?" Gilbert asked.

"Yes," I answered. "They seem to penetrate to my soul."

"They do."

I was startled by that. "Dwarves can read minds?" I asked.

"No. Though they can feel the presence of good or evil in a man's soul. That's why they trust me. They know I won't betray them."

"What if they don't like what they see of me?"

"Then they'll let you pass because you're with me. But, if you ever come back here then they'll separate your soul from your body. They dislike men of evil intent."

"If I try to make friends and they don't like me, what'll happen?"

"They'll like you."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"I can see into you just as they do."

I nearly fell off his neck at that revelation. I had been aware of the penetration of his eyes, but I hadn't felt that it had gone that deep. Apparently it had. We were quiet for quite awhile after that.

Suddenly, we came into a large cavern. Gilbert stood up abruptly, nearly throwing me to the ground. I had to grab hold of the collar of his robe to stay on. "Don't make those sudden moves!" I scolded as I crawled onto his shoulder again.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm not used to carrying a passenger upon my shoulder. But hush, we're in the council chamber. It's time for you to make your choice."

"What do you think I should do?" I asked.

"Befriend them. You'll never regret it."

I thought for a moment. Befriending them would be in my favor. Dwarves were as faithful in their

friendship as they were vengeful in their hatred. That meant that if I needed aid and was their friend, then they'd aid me; if not, well I'd rather not think about that. Of course, if I gave them no cause to hate me, then they wouldn't harm me; but would rather ignore me. I made my choice. "I'll meet them."

"Okay. Do as I tell you."

He stepped around a stalagmite and we found ourselves on the edge of an open area which was bordered on three sides by wooden tables. At each of the three tables, sat three dwarves. They looked up at our approach and nodded toward Gilbert. It looked to me as if we had been expected.

Gilbert strolled up to the center table and set me down upon it. "Esteemed members of the Council of Nine," he said. "I would like to present to you my friend, Slinker, who is petitioning for acceptance into your clan as a friend and honorary clan member. He is a simple man who has been treated ill by the sorcerer, Aramenagor; and, as a result, finds himself as you see him now."

I stood without speaking. This formality was new to me and I didn't know what was expected. Without turning my head I could only see the three dwarves in front of me and I was afraid to turn my head without first getting permission. It was the center dwarf which

finally spoke to me.

"You are the thief, Slinker."

I stood for a moment, surprised that he knew that. Gilbert nudged me with his finger and whispered, "it's alright if you answer him."

"I am," I said hesitantly.

"You were recently used as a pawn by the wizards, Kentanos and Selmonto, to attempt the theft of a majiks page from the sorcerer Aramenagor?"

"I was."

"And your friend, Squirrel, was killed during that attempted theft; while you were shrunk to your present size?"

"He was and I was," I replied.

"Why do you wish to befriend us?"

I thought for a moment and then answered. "You are a good people who wish to be left mostly alone. I was happy being a thief in Cantol, but was forced to flee that city by the attentions of wizards. You too, are plagued by those who would harm you simply for being yourselves. That creates within me a feeling of kinship with you that transcends our different backgrounds."

"Would you aid us in our times of need?"

"I would gladly," I answered without hesitating.

"Even at the peril of your own life?"

"Even at that price."

"Move to the Seat of Waiting while we discuss this. We'll call you when we've reached a decision."

Gilbert lifted me from the table and sat me upon his shoulder. "We wish to speak to you more about this matter, Gilbert," the dwarf spokesman said.

"After I take Slinker to the Seat of Waiting, I'll return."

The dwarf nodded. Gilbert then took me to the far end of the open space where there was a dwarf-sized stone seat. It was still too large for me, but I sat there after Gilbert set me down. "They'll accept you," Gilbert said. "It won't take long.

It might not have taken long, but it seemed like hours. Gilbert and the dwarves discussed me in tones too low for me to hear. Finally, they motioned for me to come forward. I slid off the seat and met Gilbert part way across the open area. Gilbert lifted me from the floor and carried me to the table where he set me down again. I faced the center dwarves again.

"We have considered your petition," the spokesman said. "The Council of Nine has decided to accept you as a friend and as an honorary member of the Clan of Alfar; which is the clan of the fourth member of the Council of Nine." The spokesman pointed to one of the dwarves on the right hand table who nodded when I looked toward him. "Do you accept this?"

"I do," I replied.

"Are you prepared to undergo the Ceremony of Friendship and the Ceremony of Clan?"

"I am."

"You understand that these ceremonies seal not only our brotherhood of blood, but of heart as well?"

"Yes."

"You must also understand what the breaking of those bonds will mean to you. Betraying our friendship will bar you from entering our domains again, under the penalty of death. The breaking of clan bond will bring clan vengeance against you no matter where you may go. Do you understand that?"

"I do."

"Then; with your sponsor, Gilbert; prepare for the Ceremony of Friendship after which will be the Ceremony of Clan."

Gilbert lifted me from the table and sat me upon his shoulder. "I'll prepare Slinker for the ceremonies."

"Then we meet at the Ceremony Chamber in one hour," the spokesman said. "At that time, Slinker will join our people as one of us."

Gilbert bowed, but not deep enough to dislodge me and retreated to a small room at one side of the council area. Inside, Gilbert set me down and said, "remove your sword and leave it here. There are no weapons allowed

in the Ceremony Chamber. You must also remove your clothes and wrap a cloth around your loins so that you won't be totally naked."

I did as he told me; wrapping my loins with the cloth he supplied. Then I took the jug he handed me and smeared the oil inside it over my entire body. The oil was warm and felt good as I rubbed it in. After that, came the waiting time. I had to sit in the center of a large chamber, which had a domed roof, until the ceremony began.

At the appointed time, dwarves of all sizes and shapes and of both sexes came into the chamber. They all sat upon the floor in a circle around me. We sat thus, in silence, for several long moments. Then the dwarf who'd spoken to me before, arose from where he had sat and stood to tower over me. "Stand, Slinker," he said.

I did.

"You are my friend, whom I trust and will aid in times of need."

Gilbert had coached me in the proper response, so I replied with the same words. "You are my friend, whom I trust and will aid in times of need." Then I added the words Gilbert had told me to say. "I offer you my hand to show the lines which mark my friendship and loyalty." The dwarf had to bend down to take my hand,

but did and then followed the lines with his eyes.

"Those lines are long for a hand so small," He said. "You will be a true friend. I am Drek, head of the Kobold Clan. Here is my hand for you to trace its lines."

The giving of his name was the ultimate mark of trust for a dwarf. Only friends were told that. I took hold of one of his fingers and glanced at his palm. "You have long lines upon your hand also. You will be a true friend. My name is Slinker."

Drek bowed deeply and returned to his place on the floor. One by one the other heads of clan came to me and performed the same ritual. Each dwarf who spoke pledged friendship, not only for himself but for his entire clan as well. The last to pledge his clan's friendship was the dwarf which Drek had said was the head of the clan which was soon to adopt me. "I am Frey, Head of the Alfar Clan," he said. This then was the dwarf who would perform the Ceremony of Clan with me. We completed the Ceremony of Friendship and then, rather than returning to his seat, Frey said, "Let the Ceremony of Clan begin."

All of the dwarves rose then; most of them leaving the chamber, while those who remained moved closer to form a smaller circle than the one which had been formed before. They sat again, except for Frey. These

dwarves were all members of the clan which I was soon to be initiated into. "You, Slinker, are a brother to my blood. To show that brotherhood, let us mingle our blood together."

With a knife, he pricked a small hole in his left wrist. Then he passed the knife to me and, with great difficulty due to the knife's size, I did the same. We crossed wrists, allowing our blood to mingle as it flowed slowly from the punctures. Not much blood was necessary and so it was only a minute or so when we separated our wrists and pressed our fingers over the holes to aid in stopping the blood's flow.

"Slinker is now a brother of the Alfar Clan," Frey said loudly.

A cheer rose from the other dwarves. Their enthusiasm seemed so genuine that I warmed up to them quickly. I'd never had a family before and it felt good to have gotten one, even if I wouldn't see them often or live with them at all. Just knowing they were there was good enough for me. The Ceremony of Clan was over and the celebration began.

We were preparing for our theft of the sorcerer's keep in a room the dwarves had provided for that purpose. The room was near the exit which would bring us out of the mountains above the keep. The dwarves aided us gladly, not only because of our bonds for one another, but because of their hatred of Aramenagor. The sorcerer had used and abused the dwarves in this area for some two thousand years and any revenge, large or small, they could bring against him was partial recompense for what he'd done. They believed that Gilbert could pull this off; which increased my faith in this necromancer. I now felt we could do it.

Gilbert's preparations took on two forms. One was that of majiks spells. The first was the spell of displaced image; which caused whoever looked at me to see me three paces (my paces) to the south of where I actually was. It didn't make me invisible but it did give me more time to act if attacked, because my attacker would be striking at my image rather than at me.

The second spell was one which gave me the power to remove the majiks barrier from around the page and pedestal. All I had to do was say the word "gone" and the barrier would vanish for about half-a-minute. That gave me time to thief the page before the barrier returned.

The other form the preparations took was that of a small metal rod, which was half the length of my arm. This rod, when squeezed at one end, would carry me through the air in whatever direction I pointed it. That would be useful for getting in and out of the tower and would prevent my needing to cross through the dangers of the keep. The power of the rod was limited though and Gilbert warned me not to use it unless it was necessary.

"These are all the protections I can give you," Gilbert said after he had finished the preparations. "Thieving the page is your job and you have the talent to do it, not I."

"But what about Aramenagor?" I asked. "Nothing that you've given me will protect me from him. It might aid against his majiks guards, but not against the sorcerer himself."

"I'll be having tea with Aramenagor while you're upstairs thieving the page," Gilbert said. "Just do the job quickly and if he discovers your presence I'll whisk you away before he can do any harm. Besides, I plan on keeping him too preoccupied with our conversation for him to have time to do anything to you."

"Can you control him?" I asked.

"If I'm lucky and he's still as arrogant as he was four hundred years ago," he replied.

"How would you know what he was like four hundred years ago?"

"I was apprenticed to him then," Gilbert replied. At my puzzled look, he explained. "I'm older than I seem. Even as sorcerers, wizards, and such learn spells of long-life, so did I. I am nearly five-hundred years old right now."

I stared at him for a moment. He didn't appear to be any older than I was. Twenty-five winters was the age I would have guessed for him. Suddenly I find out that I was off by four-hundred, seventy-five years. I now believed fully that Gilbert could do as he claimed.

"We're ready," Gilbert said. "I see no reason to delay your vengeance any longer. Let us play at being witch hunters for a short while."

I hadn't compared our present venture to witch hunting, but it was similar. To thief the page was my only objective; which would also avenge Squirrel's death and my having been shrunk to elf-size, at least in part. Witch hunters were people who hunted down those who used majiks for evil, and either slew them or removed their powers. It was possible that Gilbert had in his mind more than a simple thieving of a valuable page. Apparently, the loss of face the sorcerer would feel for having the page taken from under his nose wasn't enough to satisfy Gilbert. I wondered

just what he'd do.

Deciding that I'd really rather not know Gilbert's plans, I said, "let's go."

"Okay. Now, when you see the sorcerer and I enter the living building, fly into the tower. Don't move before, but don't wait too long afterwards either."

"I won't."

"Then we're off." With that Gilbert placed me on his shoulder and then ducking to walk through the mines, he carried me out of the dwarves' domain. Once outside, I could see that we weren't very far from the sorcerer's keep. Half-a-day's journey would get us there easily.

The trip to the wall was very uneventful. Gilbert and I chatted about whatever came to mind, but the topic of the theft never seemed to arise. I personally was afraid to broach it because I didn't want to think about it any more than I had to. Finally we reached the wall and the time had come. It was dusk of the same day we'd left the dwarfmines.

"Up," Gilbert said, waving his hand slowly. I floated upward to the top of the wall and settled easily down onto it. Fearing being seen, I layed down on the wall and used my ears to know what was occuring rather than my eyes.

Below, Gilbert called the sorcerer's name in a loud voice. Then he waited quietly for what seemed

like hours. There was no way I could know what was happening during that time because no sound was made. Finally I heard footsteps approaching the wall from the inner side. Gilbert spoke again. "So, you finally decided to acknowledge my presence at your gate, ex-mentor."

"I'm only surprised that you could find it," said another voice.

"You'll find that I've achieved many new powers since last we saw one another," Gilbert went on.

"That wouldn't necessarily grant you the power to lighten the darkness without a pitch torch," the sorcerer gibed.

"You still retain all your charming ways, I see. Do we stand here and chatter through this imaginary wall?" Gilbert asked. "Or may I come inside and speak with you at length over tea?"

"And what would we have to discuss that would require any length to accomplish, my ex-apprentice."

"You have several manuscripts in your library which I don't believe you've ever bothered to read, don't you."

"What of it? They are simply histories and have no impact on the business of majiks."

"Possibly, but I found much of interest in them."

"And were sent away from here for wasting your time and mine. What had they to say which would interest a user of majiks?"

"They tell of majiks, the like of which you have never dreamed."

"I know the most powerful majiks there are!" The sorcerer's voice was almost a scream.

"There are many majiks which I have learned that you've never heard of."

"And what majiks would those be?"

"Majiks of other worlds." Gilbert's voice was full of confidence. I could only hope that he wasn't putting more value on his majiks powers than they had.

"Majiks of other worlds mean nothing here."

Gilbert laughed then. It wasn't a laugh of pleasure, but of mockery. I began to understand that Gilbert had come back to return the humiliation the sorcerer had given him by sending him away. Hearing that laugh, I knew he could do it; or else, was insane.

"What madness has overcome you?" the sorcerer demanded. "You act as if you have no reason to fear me, who is your better in all ways."

"I don't fear you. And as for being my better, you're not, in any way. Now, let us have tea."

"Wait! You can't enter without my opening the gate for you."

Gilbert's voice answered from the inner side of the wall. "But I have entered. Let's go inside for tea."

The sorcerer suddenly screamed with rage. I glanced down from my vantage point to see him walking stiffly ahead of Gilbert, who seemed to be moving casually. The sorcerer continued to scream in rage as they entered the living building. I shuddered at the very thought of walking into such a majiks thing's mouth. The door through which they entered closed behind them as a mouth would have, then the building swallowed. I shuddered, feeling that I'd just lost my second friend to this vile place.

I swallowed, forcing my fears away. Then, grasping the flying rod firmly, I flew toward the window of the tower from which I had seen the moving shadows last time I'd come here. I wanted to shut my eyes so that I wouldn't have to see the ground pass underneath me, but I was afraid that I'd miss the window if I did. I stared at the window and that saved me from looking down. Reaching the tower, I passed through the window quickly and released my grip on the flying rod. I dropped rapidly to the floor. Landing easily, I'd had long years of practice; due to jumping out windows and such; I reached out and caught the rod as it fell toward the floor.

I glanced around the room I was in and saw nothing which inspired fear. Then I went out the door of the room and began descending the steps of the tower toward the room in which the page lay on its pedestal. On my earlier trip, the steps had been no problem, but this time I had to leap down from each one because they were as tall as I was. After the second time I fell because I couldn't get my balance after leaping down to the step below, I decided to use the flying rod to prevent falling again and to save time. The rod took me quickly down to the level of the room I needed to enter. I landed lightly and entered. The page lay just as it had before.

I approached the pedestal carefully, not ready to **remove** the binding spell until I was sure I could reach the page quickly and get away before the spell returned. Suddenly, a dark shape leapt from hiding and pounced on something near me. I turned to see a small feline-like demon attacking nothing. It must have thought it attacked me, but had instead pounced on the image of me which Gilbert had cast with his spell of displaced image. Drawing the sword that the sorcerer had supplied me, I stabbed the beast through its left eye. The blade sank to its hilt. A scream tore from the beast's throat just as the beast's thrashing tore my sword from my hand.

I stumbled backward, momentarily stunned by the beast's twitching and leaps. It tore at the sword in its eye but failed to dislodge it. Death came to the thing slowly, but it died finally; lying in a pool of foul smelling gore which had served it as blood.

I shook my head to clear it, then remembered why I was here and turned my attention to the page. Stepping up close to the pedestal, I said, "gone," and then leaped upward snatching the page away from the place it had lain for nearly three hundred centuries. I landed on my feet and started to flee, but was stopped by the sight of my sword lying alone on the stone floor. The demon beast was gone; along with the blood that had spilled from it. I snatched up my sword, shoved it into my belt and ran to the door.

From below came a scream. It was the sorcerer's voice and I was suddenly afraid that he'd broken free of Gilbert's control and having been alerted by one of his majiks guards was coming after me. Unable to see any quicker way out, I fled back into the room and using the flying rod flew out the window toward the wall opposite the side where I'd entered.

I flew lower than before, but was still far above the carpet of mold in the courtyard. After only a moment of flying, the rod's power gave out. I was a stone dropping. Throwing the rod away from me in despair,

I clutched the page fearfully. Crying out Gilbert's name was my last hope of rescue. A soft whisper reached my ears, which said "Squirrel." It was Gilbert's voice. Suddenly, I found myself above a river, falling towards it. I stuffed the page inside my jerkin and twisted as I fell to strike the water as nearly upright as I could. I was nearly straight when I hit, sinking rapidly into the dark, cool water. Somehow I floundered to the surface to be swept downstream by the current. Several boats were out in the river, with nets cast for fishing. I tried to swim ashore but ended up being tangled in one of the nets. The net was drawn aboard the boat and dropped into the bottom. Fish covered me as I lay there, wondering what I'd gotten into now.

The boat was pulled up onto the shore and the net thrown onto the ground. The motion of that rearranged the fish so that I now lay exposed to the sight of the fishermen. A shout went up when I was sighted and then several faces moved in close to peer at me. Looking up I recognized the face of one of the headwoman's daughters from the fishing village Squirrel and I had passed through before. If she recognized me, she might be angry about my not having married her or her ugly sister; then again, she might not recognize me and think I was an elf. I hoped she recognized me, because I thought that gave me a better chance to live than being thought of as an elf.

Several of the villagers asked the men who'd netted me what kind of strange fish I was. I hissed between my teeth when someone answered, "an elf!"

Instantly a crowd formed around me, all of them staring. I lay unable to move, staring back up into the frightened faces.

"Do you think we can get him to use his majiks for us?" someone asked.

"How can you get an elf to aid us?" someone else asked. "Elves only care about making trouble."

"He'll probably vanish at any moment," another voice called out. More voices started talking rapidly. "Elves are evil." "It'll take vengeance on us for this treatment." "Kill it now, before it casts a death spell on us."

I suddenly realized how deadly my position was. I was elf-size and few men would ever see beyond that to what I truly was. Most people feared elves enough that they'd kill one on sight if possible. It was doubtful that many elves died that way, but someone in my position might die instead. An elf could have vanished from here with no trouble; but I wasn't one of those majiks ones. I was a man faced with a frightened mob that might soon end my life.

"Kill it," several voices called out.

One of the men had his tri-pronged fishing spear raised to strike. It was going to be over soon if I couldn't think of something to do.

"Where is your headwoman?" I called loudly. "She knows me. I passed through here not long ago."

Everyone stepped back in surprise. "No elf has passed through here before," someone said.

"I'm a man," I cried desperately. "I came through here with a friend and you gave us a boat."

"He can't rightly be a man."

"An elf morelike."

"I'm only elf-sized," I screamed. "I am a man. The sorcerer Aramenagor shrank me."

"Cursed!" was the new cry from the crowd. "Kill it and cast it into the river to float away."

"Hold!" cried a new voice. The crowd parted and I looked up to see the headwoman approaching. She peered down at me in the squinted-eye fashion of one who has poor sight.

"What are you called?" she asked.

"Slinker," I answered. "I came through here with my friend, Squirrel, a few weeks ago."

She squinted her eyes even more. Then she shook her head and signaled for someone else to step forward. The ugliest of her two daughters, who I'd noticed earlier, came forward to peer into my face. "Is this the one

who called himself Slinker?" the headwoman asked.

"The face is his," she replied. "Though much spaller like his body."

"I met with some trouble," I said. "I was shrunk. Listen, if you'll let me go then I'll be off and we can pretend that I was never here."

"Where is the other one?" the headwoman asked.

"Dead. My friend died trying to keep me alive." That wasn't exactly true, but close enough for anyone else's business. I knew that his fear of majiks had been too much for him. He'd have given his life for mine though, if that had been the situation.

"And you are now an elf," the headwoman said.

"No!" I retorted loudly. "I'm only elf-sized; no elf! If I were an elf then this net could never hold me. I'd simply pop up over there someplace and cast a curse on all of you."

I'd been trying to reason with them; but my plan went awry. A hiss rose from the crows. Cries of, "Destroy it," rang out. They must have thought that I'd been threatening them.

"Kill it," the headwoman said.

Three of the fishing spears flew toward me. I flinched and drew back as they embedded themselves not far to my left. I'd forgotten the Spell of Displaced Image which Gilbert had cast upon me. Using the illusion

to advantage, I lay still as if speared by their weapons. The men who'd thrown the spears came forward to retrieve their weapons. They each, in turn, placed one of their feet on the spot where they thought I lay and pulled their spears free. Two of them nearly did step on me, one having stepped on my hair.

"Cast it into the river," someone cried. The net was lifted by several pairs of hands. Maybe I wasn't so smart after all. If they threw me into the river still tangled in this net; then I'd drown and be just as dead as if their spears had hit me. My only hope now was that all this handling would loosen the net enough for me to get my sword out and cut free. Of course, if they dropped the net, then that might loosen it enough too.

Forming my plan, I set about implementing it instantly. I started struggling and cried out, "a curse on this village and all within. A plague on you and your crops." The net dropped as the men carrying it fled in terror. They'd thought I was dead and so when I cried out the curse, they were probably certain I was an elf and that the curse would come true. Cries of terror came from all over the village, as people rushed about knocking things over and shouting to one another.

The net had loosened when it was dropped. I drew my sword slowly, not wanting to tighten the net again

and carefully sawed through enough strands of rope to get free. Then I stood up and shouted for joy at my new found freedom.

The village was empty. Silence had fallen sometime during my efforts to saw through the net. I hadn't noticed it at the time, though. All of the villagers had fled out of fear of my curse. I looked around the village, hoping to catch one of the villagers still lurking near-by, but I saw no one. Deciding that they weren't coming back soon, I loaded two fish in a cloth, tied it up and slung it over my back. I set out toward Aparos. I wanted to hand the majiks page to Kentanos personally, and may it curse him for life as Gilbert assured me it would.

I'd gone about a thousand paces or so when I heard a voice calling from behind. I turned, thinking that the familiar voice belonged to Gilbert; but was shocked to see who had really called. It was Squirrel! I was looking at my dead partner standing there, breathing; alive. I dropped my make-shift pack, staring at him. Behind him stood Gilbert. "Squirrel!" I cried excitedly and rushed towards him.

We embraced like long lost brothers who had been close. I was excited. My partner and friend was alive again. Pushing him out to arm's length, I stared at him. "Are you real?" I asked, afraid he'd answer, "no".

"He's as real as you are," Gilbert answered.

"I am real," Squirrel added. "And you're back to your old size."

I stared at him, in the eye. I hadn't noticed it before, but I was as tall as Squirrel. Gilbert couldn't have put me on his shoulder then, if he had wanted to. Somehow Squirrel was alive and I was my old height; just like we were before this all began. "How?" I asked, looking toward Gilbert for the answer.

"I told you I'd learned majiks from another world," Gilbert said. "With them I can bring Squirrel back from the realm of the dead; but, only for a short while. I can't keep him alive, no majiks is that powerful. And you won't be this height for long either. My majiks can't destroy a majiks spell of this world, but can banish it temporarily. You'll both stay this way long enough to get your revenge against Selmonto and Kentanos. That's not as good as giving back everything, but it's the best I can do."

"It's enough," Squirrel said and I nodded agreement. Gilbert was a true friend. I'd trade my life for his any time after this.

We stood in the otherwise empty village. "Where'd the people go?" Gilbert asked.

"They fled when I cursed the village and the people of it for trying to kill me. They thought they had killed

me and would've been right too, except for that spell you'd put on me."

"It's gone now, so don't depend on it to save you again," Gilbert said. "I am sorry though, that they'll never come here again." His face looked very sad.

I exchanged puzzled glances with Squirrel. Then Squirrel asked, "did you know the people of this village?"

Gilbert looked into Squirrel's eyes. "I was born here," he said. "Long ago, that was. None of those I knew still live; but their children's children's children do, and they are my people."

I stared into Gilbert's face, trying to see a resemblance to any of the villagers I'd seen. It wasn't noticeable; but he was as tall as they were, with the same long-fingered hands and high cheek bones. These people probably were his; but now, as a necromancer, he walked alone.

"We must get to work," Gilbert said, breaking out of his reverie. "We've got to bring Selmonto and Kentanos together so that we can get them both to cast the spell. We'll need a messenger." He waved his hand and a pigeon appeared, perched on one of his fingers. "I need you to carry a message to the wizard, Selmonto," Gilbert said to the bird.

"That jerk," the bird said. "I'd rather not get within a turd's drop of him. He's no brother to bird or beast."

"True," Gilbert said, "But how'd you like to see his end and Kentanos' too?"

"I'd love to. Those two have plagued my kind for centuries. Will this message help bring that about?"

"It will. I want to get them together so we can give them Mentamentos' Majiks Page."

The bird whistled. "That's a pretty permanent way of handling them. Still, I like it. There's no chance of them going to Wandout, is there?"

"None at all," Gilbert replied. "None at all."

"Good. I'll carry your message then."

"Tell Selmonto that two of his thieves are going to hand over the page to Kentanos, this very evening. If he wants the page then he'd best hurry over there."

"Will do, Gil," the bird said. "By the way, who are these two?"

Gilbert laughed a short laugh. "These are the two thieves who'll deliver that page. Meet Slinker and Squirrel. This is Tak." Gilbert indicated the pigeon.

"Good to meet you," we all three said. "Well I'm off," Tak added and flew rapidly away.

"I didn't know pigeons could talk," Squirrel said.

"Tak's not a regular pigeon," Gilbert said. "He

was an experiment of Aramenagor's that didn't work quite as the sorcerer planned. Tak wasn't as easy to control as he was supposed to be. I set Tak free while I was apprenticed to the sorcerer. After I'd gotten thrown out, Tak came to see me. We got to be good friends. When I'd learned the proper majiks, I sent him to a world called Wandout which is a world of intelligent birds and a lot of them pigeons. It's his home now."

Gilbert looked sad again. Tak had probably been the closest friend he'd had in a long time, possibly since he'd left this village. I realized how much I'd come to like him. He could even laugh at me now and I wouldn't mind.

"Shall we go?" Gilbert asked.

"Let's," I replied.

We stepped into one of the fishing boats which moved out into the water without being touched. Gilbert's majiks were making it move. The trip downriver was quicker than it'd been before.

While we traveled, Gilbert told us about his confrontation with Aramenagor. "You heard what I said up until the time I entered the hungry house, Slinker; Squirrel watched nearly the whole thing from the world of the dead. But to go with the story:

I'd placed a spell of binding on my ex-mentor while

we talked at the gate. Once inside he kept trying to bind me with his spells, but I'd already taken pains to prevent just that. We talked a little, mostly about how I'd discovered him to be narrow-minded, petty and completely evil. He cursed me constantly. To shut that up, I had to finally let him see you thieving the page. He screamed when he'd seen that."

"I heard him" I said. "That was when I tried to flee, but that flying rod of yours ran out of power. How'd you save me, anyway?"

"I didn't," Gilbert said.

"But I heard you whisper Squirrel's name," I protested.

"Only to give him enough solidity in this plane to save you himself."

"What?" I said, looking at Squirrel.

"I whisked you away to that place over the river. I didn't have enough power to hang on longer so I had to drop you. I was watching the whole time though, ready to materialize long enough to scare them off. It was all I could do then."

"Thanks," I said, meaning it.

Gilbert went on then, while Squirrel and I sat silent. "During our talk, I came to realize that I couldn't let the sorcerer roam free anymore. He'd never stop torturing creatures and experimenting with

everything. There was only one thing to do; so I did it." Gilbert sighed.

"What'd you do?" Squirrel asked quietly.

"I funneled all his majiks into his mouth and through his body to spew from his anus and fall into useless after-spells."

"What'd that do to Aramenagor?" I asked.

"You don't want to know," Gilbert said; and suddenly looked his age for a moment. It was a task he hadn't enjoyed performing. "After that," he went on, "I returned here and brought Squirrel back to life long enough to do what we must." He sighed and fell silent.

Our trip continued with only Squirrel and I talking, trying to make the most of our short time together. Gilbert listened and occasionally smiled a sad smile at us. I think he envied us for having a friendship he didn't have.

It was dusk when we reached the city.

Gilbert propelled the boat up to the piers at Aparos' quay. The people along the river front still moved as they had before. "Still no life here," Squirrel said. I felt a chill run up my spine at the thought of these living-dead people.

"There'll be life here again, soon," Gilbert said. "Once Kentanos is out of the way, these people will live again."

The boat bumped up against the pier and the ropes tied themselves to the moorings. We climbed from the boat and were still standing on the dock when Tak flew up to perch upon Gilbert's shoulder. "That sleezy Selmonto is already here," he said. "He lit out for this place like someone had lit his tail."

"Maybe that's just what you did," Gilbert said, smiling.

Tak laughed. "Is it going to be long before the fun begins?" he asked.

"Not long," Gilbert said. "You and I will watch while Squirrel and Slinker deliver the page to the two of them together. Be sure they are together," he said to Squirrel and I.

I pulled the page from under my jerkin and handed it to Squirrel. The greater vengeance should be his, since he'd paid the higher price for their meddling in

our lives.

Gilbert smiled at us and said, "hurry." Then he changed into a pigeon and flew away with Tak.

Squirrel and I set off afoot for our meeting with revenge. The city still repulsed us as it had before. Putting an end to this wizard would feel good because of that, too.

We reached the building where Kentanos stayed and walked through the front door, which stood open and unguarded. It was like an invitation, or bait for a trap. I didn't look forward to that prospect. Sure Gilbert wouldn't let us get hurt, we headed up the stairs, where we found the two wizards quarrelling.

"What page are you talking about?" Kentanos demanded.

"The page those two turn-coat thieves of mine gave you," Selmonto bellowed back.

"No thieves, turn-coat or otherwise, have given me any page," Kentanos replied hotly. "And if they had, do you really think I'd let you get your hands on it? I'd have already cast it by now and melted you like a flame melts a candle."

"Is this the page you're talking about?" Squirrel said, holding the page close to himself.

The two wizards spun to see us for the first time since we'd entered. Selmonto hissed, "So you did betray me."

I bristled in anger. "You betrayed us. That trap you set wasn't for our good. You wanted to use us for your gain. If anyone did any betraying, it was you. We were never your thieves, anyway."

"And without your demons," Squirrel said to Kentanos, "we wouldn't have brought this page to you." Squirrel held the page out to them.

As one, they leaped forward, snatching the page from Squirrel's hand and ripping it into two pieces. "Give me that," they both cried to one another. They stood, almost nose to nose, hissing between their teeth.

A small, wizened old man appeared behind them. "Why not read it together," he said.

They stared at the man for a moment and then seemed to recognize him. Taking the old man's advice, they held the two halves of the page together, then they began intoning the spell in unison. Their volume increased as the spell progressed until their voices filled the room with booming loudness. Then, with a shout, both of them threw the page halves upward where they burst into flames and vanished. Then, both wizards began screaming as flames, brighter than any I'd ever seen, seemed to consume them. The flames licked upward and the wizards seemed to melt into nothingness.

All that was left was Squirrel and I, Tak and the wizened old man. The bird and old man burst into laughter.

The bird had been perched on the man's shoulder. The man's shape began to shift, changing into Gilbert. Their laughter subsided slowly.

Squirrel and I had stood silent. What had occurred was beyond our understanding, but the wizards had seemed to burn into nothingness. Even though they were our enemies, we felt no desire to laugh.

Gilbert turned to us and spoke. "Don't you find it an amusing jest?"

"I'm afraid I misunderstood it," Squirrel said. "I don't think men burning are funny."

"Ah, yes," Gilbert said. "You don't really know what happened do you? My guise of a moment before was of the wizards' father. They were brothers who grew jealous of each other and learned to hate. When they saw me, they momentarily forgot their hate and worked together. It was just the push they needed to get them to read the page."

"And the burning?" I asked.

Gilbert sobered a moment. "They weren't consumed by those flames," he said. "The jest here was that by casting the spell which gave them power over all the majiks of this world, they also invoked the Majiks Flame of Transference which shifted them to a world where their majiks are useless. Those flames didn't burn them in the sense you mean."

Understanding the jest now, we burst out laughing. When our laughter subsided, Gilbert informed us that it was time to go.

"You first, Tak," he said. Squirrel and I called out our good-byes as the bird was sent back to Wandout. Then Squirrel and I said our good-byes, and Gilbert released Squirrel from the spell that kept him in the land of the living.

"Now you," he said to me. A wave of his hand and I was again elf-sized. He lifted me to his shoulder and left the building. We left the city, in which the people seemed to be coming out from under the spell. As the animations and laughter of those who had been truly bewitched began, those who were only acting ceased to do so. "They'll soon be honest folk in an honest city again," Gilbert said.

Outside the city, Gilbert set me down. "Here's some money," he said, handing me a small bag. "We part here, little friend. Are you heading back to Cantol?"

After thinking for a moment, I replied, "No. That city's no longer mine. Squirrel is gone and Groco is an old man who'll die soon. No one else can claim my friendship there. I'd rather stay with you."

Gilbert smiled. "That's the way I'd have it too, but my road is long and lonely; while your path leads

elsewhere. You've a sword, that bauble of a blue stone around your neck and will soon have a friend by your side. You're better off here than with me. You'll get by, little one."

I smiled up at him. "Good luck," I said.

"Good luck to you, also," he replied. "I'll see you again."

Then without another word, he walked away headed for whatever awaited him. I set out in his wake wondering what awaited me.