

THE PEDDLER'S APPRENTICE

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Lord Buckry I of Fyffe lounged on his throne, watching his two youngest sons engaged in mock battle in the empty Audience Hall. The daggers were wooden but the rivalry was real, and the smaller boy was at a disadvantage. Lord Buckry tugged on a heavy gold earring. Thin, brown-haired Hanaban was his private favorite; the boy took after his father both in appearance and turn of mind.

The lord of the Flatlands was a tall man, his own unkempt brown hair graying now at the temples. The blue eyes in his lean, foxlike face still perceived with disconcerting sharp-ness, though years of experience kept his own thoughts hid-den. More than twenty years had passed since he had won control of his lands; he had not kept his precarious place as lord so long without good reason.

Now his eyes flashed rare approval as Hanaban cried, "Trace, look there!" and, as his brother turned, distracted, whacked him soundly on the chest.

"Gotcha!" Hanaban shrieked delightedly. Trace grimaced with disgust.

Their father chuckled, but his face changed suddenly as the sound of a commotion outside the chamber reached him. The heavy, windowed doors at the far end of the room burst open; the Flatlander courier shook off guards, crossed the high-ceilinged, echoing chamber and flung himself into a bow, his rifle clattering on the floor. "Your Lordship!"

Lord Buckry snapped his fingers; his gaping children si-lently fled the room. "Get up," he said impatiently. "What in tarnation is this?"

"Your Lordship." The courier raised a dusty face, wincing mentally at his lord's Highland drawl. "There's word the sea kingdoms have raised another army. They're crossing the coast mountains, and—"

"That ain't possible. We cleaned them out not half a year since."

"They've a lot of folk along the coast, Your Lordship." The horseman stood apologetically. "And Jayley Sharkstooth's made a pact this time with the Southlands."

Lord Buckry stiffened. "They've been at each other's throats long as I can

remember.” He frowned, pulling at his earring. “Only thing they’ve got in common is—me. Damn!”

He listened distractedly to the rider’s report, then stood abruptly, dismissing the man as an afterthought. As the heavy doors of the hall slid shut he was already striding toward the elevator, past the shaft of the ballistic vehicle exit, unused for more than thirty years. His soft-soled Highlander boots made no sound on the cold polished floor.

From the parapet of his castle he could survey a wide stretch of his domain, the rich, utterly flat farmlands of the hundred-mile-wide valley—the lands the South and West were hungry for. The fields were dark now with turned earth, ready for the spring planting; it was no time to be calling up an army. He was sure his enemies were aware of that. The day was exceptionally clear, and at the eastern reaches of his sight he could make out the grayed purple wall of the mountains: the Highlands, that held his birthplace—and something more important to him now.

The dry wind ruffled his hair as he looked back across thirty years; his sunburned hands tightened on the seamless, ancient green-blackness of the parapet. “Damn you, Mr. Jagged,” he said to the wind. “Where’s your magic when I *need* it!”

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The peddler came to Darkwood Corners from the east, on Wim Buckry’s seventeenth birthday. It was early summer, and Wim could still see sun flashing on snow up the pine-wooded hill that towered above the Corners; the snowpack in the higher hills was melting at last, sluicing down gullies that stood dry through most of the year, changing Littlebig Creek into a cold, singing torrent tearing at the earth below the cabins on the north side of the road. Even a week ago the East Pass had lain under more than thirty feet of snow.

Something like silence came over the townspeople as they saw the peddler dragging his cart down the east road toward the Corners. His wagon was nearly ten feet tall and fifteen long, with carved, brightly painted wooden sides that bent sharply out over the wheels to meet a gabled roof. Wim gaped in wonder as he saw those wheels, spindly as willow wood yet over five feet across. Under the cart’s weight they sank half a foot and more into the mud of the road, but cut through the mud without resistance, without leaving a rut.

Even so, the peddler was bent nearly double with the effort of pulling his load. The fellow was short and heavy, with skin a good deal darker than Wim had ever seen. His pointed black beard jutted at a determined angle as he staggered along the rutted track, up to his ankles in mud. Above his calves the tooled leather of his leggings gleamed black and clean. Several scrofulous dogs nosed warily around him as he plodded down the center of the road; he ignored them as he ignored the staring

townsfolk.

Wim shoved his empty mug back at Ounze Rumpster, sitting nearest the tavern door. “More,” he said. Ounze swore, got up from the steps, and disappeared into the tavern.

Wim’s attention never left the peddler for an instant. As the dark man reached the widening in the road at the center of town, he pulled his wagon into the muddy morass where the Widow Henley’s house had stood until the Littlebig Creek dragged it to destruction. The stranger had everyone’s attention now. Even the town’s smith had left his fire, and stood in his doorway gazing down the street at the peddler.

The peddler turned his back on them as he kicked an arresting gear down from the rear of the painted wagon and let it settle into the mud. He returned to the front of the cart and moved a small wheel set in the wood paneling: a narrow blue pennant sprouted from the peak of the gable and fluttered briskly; crisp and metallic, a pinging melody came from the wagon. That sound emptied the tavern and brought the re-mainder of the Corners’ population onto the street. Ounze Rumpster nearly fell down the wooden steps in his haste to see the source of the music; he sat down heavily, handing the refilled mug to Wim. Wim ignored him.

As the peddler turned back to the crowd the eerie music stopped, and the creek sounded loud in the silence. Then the little man’s surprising bass voice rumbled out at them. “Jagit Katchetooriantz is my name, and fine wrought goods is my trade. Needles, adze-heads, blades—you need ‘em?” He pulled a latch on the wagon’s wall and a panel swung out from its side, revealing rows of shining knife blades and needles so fine Wim could see only glitter where they caught the sun-light. “Step right on up, folks. Take a look, take a feel. Tell me what they might be worth to you.” There was no need to repeat the invitation—in seconds he was surrounded. As the townspeople closed around him, he mounted a small step set in the side of the wagon, so that he could still be seen over the crowd.

Wim’s boys were on their feet; but he sat motionless, his sharp face intent. “Set down,” he said, just loudly enough. “Your eyes is near busting out of your heads. They’d skin us right fast if we try anything here. There’s too many. Set!” He gave the nearest of them, Bathecar Henley, a sideways kick in the shin; they all sat. “Gimme that big ring of yours, Sothead.”

Ounze Rumpster’s younger brother glared at him, then extended his jeweled fist from a filthy woolen cuff. “How come you’re so feisty of a sudden, Wim?” He dropped the ring peevishly into the other’s hand. Wim turned away without comment, passing the massive chunk of gold to Bathecar’s plump, fair girlfriend.

“All right, Emmy, you just take yourself over to that wagon and see about buying us some knife blades—not too long, say about so.” He stretched his fingers.

“And find out how they’re fastened on the rack.”

“Sure, Wim.” She rose from the steps and minced away across the muddy road toward the crowd at the peddler’s wagon. Wim grimaced, reflecting that the red knit dress Bathecar had brought her was perhaps too small.

The peddler’s spiel continued, all but drowning out the sound of Littlebig Creek: “Just try your blades ‘gin mine, friends. Go ahead. Nary a scratch you’ve made on mine, see? Now how much is it worth, friends? I’ll take gold, silver. Or craft items. And I need a horse—lost my own, coming down those blamed trails.” He waved toward the East Pass. The townspeople were packed tightly together now as each, of them tried for a chance to test the gleaming metal, and to make some bid that would catch the peddler’s fancy. Emmy wriggled expertly into the mass; in seconds Wim could see her red dress right at the front of the crowd. She was happily fondling the merchandise, competing with the rest for the stranger’s attention.

Hanaban Kroy shifted his bulk on the hard wooden step. “Three gold pigs says that outlander is from down west. He just come in from the east to set us all to talking. Nobody makes knives like them east of the pass.”

Wim nodded slightly. “Could be.” He watched the peddler and fingered the thick gold earring half-hidden in his shaggy brown hair.

Across the road, the merchant was engaged in a four-way bidding session. Many of the townsfolk wanted to trade furs, or crossbows, but Jagit Katchetooriantz wasn’t interested. This narrowed his potential clientele considerably. Even as he argued avidly with those below him, his quick dark eyes flickered up and down the street, took in the gang by the tavern, impaled Wim for a long, cold instant.

The peddler lifted several blades off the rack and handed them down, apparently receiving metal in return. Emmy got at least two. Then he raised his arms for quiet. “Folks, I’m real sorry for dropping in so sudden, when you all wasn’t ready for me. Let’s us quit now and try again tomorrow, when you can bring what you have to trade. I might even take on some furs. And bring horses, too, if you want to. Seein’ as how I’m in need of one, I’ll give two, maybe three adze heads for a good horse or mule. All right?”

It wasn’t. Several frustrated townsfolk tried to pry merchandise off the rack. Wim noticed that they were unsuccessful. The merchant pulled the lanyard at the front of the cart and the rack turned inward, returning carved wood paneling to the outside. As the crowd thinned, Wim saw Emmy, clutching two knives and a piece of print cloth, still talking earnestly to the peddler.

The peddler took a silvery chain from around his waist, passed it through the wheels of his cart and then around a nearby tree. Then he followed Emmy back

across the road.

Ounze Rumpster snorted. “That sure is a teensy ketter. Betcha we could bust it right easy.”

“Could be . . .” Wim nodded again, not listening. Anger turned his eyes to blue ice as Emmy led the peddler right to the tavern steps.

“Oh, Bathecar, just lookit the fine needles Mr. Ketchatoor sold me—”

Sothead struggled to his feet. “You stupid little—little— We told you to buy knives. Knives! And you used my ring to buy needles!” He grabbed the cloth from Emmy’s hands and began ripping it up.

“Hey—!” Emmy began to pound him in useless fury, clawing after her prize. “Bathecar, make him stop!” Bathecar and Ounze pulled Sothead down, retrieved needles and cloth. Emmy pouted, “Big lout.”

Wim frowned and drank, his attention fixed on the peddler. The dark man stood looking from one gang member to another, hands loosely at his sides, smiling faintly; the calm black eyes missed nothing. Eyes like that didn’t belong in the face of a fat peddler. Wim shifted uncomfortably, gnawed by sudden uncertainty. He shook it off. How many chances did you get up here, to try a contest where the outcome wasn’t sure— He stood and thrust out his hand. “Wim Buckry’s the name, Mr. Ketchatoor. Sorry about Sothead; he’s drunk all the time, ‘truth.”

The peddler had to reach up slightly to shake his hand. “Folks mostly call me Jagit. Pleased to meet you. Miss Emmy here tells me you and your men sometimes hire out to protect folks such as me.”

Behind him, Bathecar Henley was open-mouthed. Emmy simpered; every so often, she proved that she was not as stupid as she looked. Wim nodded judiciously. “We do, and it’s surely worth it to have our service. There’s a sight of thieves in these hills, but most of them will back down from six good bows.” He glanced at Sothead. “Five good bows.”

“Well then.” The pudgy little man smiled blandly, and for a moment Wim wondered how he could ever have seen anything deadly in that face. “I’d like to give you some of my business.”

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And so they came down out of the high hills. It was early summer, but in the Highlands more like a boisterous spring: Under the brilliant blue sky, green spread everywhere over the ground, nudging the dingy hummocks of melting snow and outcropping shelves of ancient granite. Full leaping streams sang down the alpine

valleys, plunged over falls and rapids that smashed the water to white foam and spread it in glinting veils scarcely an inch deep over bedrock. The ragged peaks skirted with glacier fell further and further behind, yet the day-grew no warmer; everywhere the chill water kept the air cool.

The peddler and his six “protectors” followed a winding course through deep souging pine forest, broken by alpine meadows where bright starlike flowers bloomed and the short hummocky grass made their ankles ache with fatigue. They passed by marshes that even in the coolness swarmed with eager mosquitoes, and Wim’s high moccasins squelched on the soft dank earth.

But by late afternoon the party had reached Witch Hollow Trail, and the way grew easier for the horse pulling the merchant’s wagon. Somewhere ahead of them Ounze Rumpster kept the point position; off to the side were fat Hanaban, Bathecar, and Shorty, while Sothead Rumpster, now nearly sober, brought up the rear. In the Highlands even the robbers— particularly the robbers—journeyed with caution.

For most of the day Wim traveled silently, listening to the streaming water, the wind, the twittering birds among the pines—listening for sounds of human treachery. But it seemed they were alone. He had seen one farmer about four miles outside of Darkwood Corners and since then, no one.

Yesterday the peddler had questioned him about the area, and how many folk were in the vicinity of the Corners, what they did for a living. He’d seemed disappointed when he’d heard they were mostly poor, scattered farmers and trappers, saying his goods were more the kind to interest rich city folk. Wim had promptly allowed as how he was one of the few Highlanders who had ever been down into the Great Valley, all the way to the grand city of Fyffe; and that they’d be more than glad to guide him down into the Flatlands—for a price. If a little greed would conceal their real intentions, so much the better. And the peddler’s partial payment, of strange, jewel-studded silver balls, had only added to the sincerity of their interest in his future plans.

Wim glanced over at the peddler, walking beside him near the dappled cart horse. Up close, the stranger seemed even more peculiar than at a distance. His straight black hair was cut with unbelievable precision at the base of his neck; Wim wondered if he’d set a bowl on his head and cut around it. And he smelled odd; not unpleasant, but more like old pine-needles than man. The silver thread stitched into the peddler’s soft leather shirt was finer than Wim had ever seen. That would be a nice shirt to have— Wim tugged absently at the loops of bead and polished metal hanging against his own worn linen shirt.

Though short and heavy, the stranger walked briskly and didn’t seem to tire; in fact, became friendlier and more talk-ative as the afternoon passed. But when they reached Witch Hollow he fell silent again, looking first at the unusual smooth-ness of the path, then up at the naked bedrock wall that jutted up at the side of the narrow

trail.

They had walked for about half a mile when Wim volunteered, “This here’s called Witch Hollow. There’s a story, how once folk had magic to fly through the air in strange contraptions. One of them lost his magic hereabouts—up till twenty years ago, there was still a place you could see the bones, and pieces of steel, they say, all rusted up. Some say this trail through the holler ain’t natural, either.”

Jagit made no reply, but walked with his head down, his pointy black beard tucked into his chest. For the first time since they had begun the journey he seemed to lose interest in the scenery. At last he said, “How long you figure it’s been since this flying contraption crashed here?”

Wim shrugged. “My granther heard the story from his own granther.”

“Hmm. And that’s all the ... magic you’ve heard tell of?”

Wim decided not to tell the peddler what he knew about Fyffe. That might scare the little man into turning back, and force a premature confrontation. “Well, we have witches in these hills, like Widow Henley’s cousin, but they’re most of them fakes—least the ones I seen. Outside of them and the bad luck that folks claim follows sin”—a grin twitched his mouth—“well, I don’t know of no magic. What was you expecting?”

Jagit shook his head. “Something more than a piddling failed witch, that’s sure. The more I see of this country, the more I know it ain’t the place I started out for.”

They walked the next mile in silence. The trail pierced a granite ridge; Wim glimpsed Hanaban high up on their left, paralleling the wagon. Red-faced with exertion, he waved briefly down at them, indicating no problems. Wim returned the signal, and returned to his thoughts about the peculiar little man who walked at his side. Somehow he kept remembering yesterday, Hanaban whining, “Wim, that there little man smells rotten to me. I say we should drop him,” and the unease that had crept back into his own mind. Angry at himself as much as anything, he’d snapped, “You going yellow, Han? Just because a feller’s strange don’t mean he’s got an evil eye.” And known it hadn’t convinced either of them . . .

Perhaps sensing the drift of his silence, or perhaps for some other reason, the peddler began to talk again. This time it was not of where he was going, however, but rather about himself, and where he had come from—a place called Sharn, a land of such incredible wonders that if Wim had heard the tale from someone else he would have laughed.

For Sharn was a land where true magicians ruled, where a flying contraption of steel would be remarkable only for its commonness. Sharn was an immense

land—but a city also, a city without streets, a single gleaming sentient crystal that challenged the sky with spears of light. And the people of Sharn by their magic had become like gods; they wore clothing like gossamer, threw themselves across the sky in lightning while thunder followed, spoke to one another over miles. They settled beneath the warm seas of their borders, the weather obeyed them, and they remained young as long as they lived. And their magic made them dreadful warriors and mighty conquerors, for they could kill with scarcely more than a thought and a nod. If a mountain offended them they could destroy it in an instant. Wim thought of his Highlands, and shuddered, touching the bone hilt of the knife strapped to his leg.

Jagit had come to Sharn from a land still further east, and much more primitive. He had stayed and learned what he could of Sharn's magic. The goods he brought to Sharn were popular and had brought high prices; during the time he had spent in the enchanted land he had acquired a small collection of the weaker Sharnish spells. Then he left, to seek a market for these acquisitions—some land where magic was known, but not so deeply as in Sharn.

As the peddler finished his tale, Wim saw that the sun had nearly reached the ridge of the hills to the west before them. He walked on for several minutes, squinting into the sunset for traces of lost Sharn.

The trail curved through ninety degrees, headed down across a small valley. Half hidden in the deepening shadow that now spread over the land, a precarious wooden bridge crossed a stream. Beyond the bridge the pines climbed the darkened hillside into sudden sunlight. Along the far ridgeline, not more than a mile away, ten or twelve immense, solitary trees caught the light, towering over the forest.

“Mr. Jagged, you're the best liar I ever met.” Stubbornly Wim swallowed his awe, felt the peddler's unnerving eyes on his face as he pointed across the valley. “Just beyond that ridgeline's where we figure on putting up tonight. A place called Grandfather Grove. Could be you never seen trees that big even in Sharn!”

The peddler peered into the leveling sunlight. “Could be,” he said. “I'd surely like to see such trees, anyhow.”

They descended from the sunlight into rising darkness. Wim glimpsed Ounze's high felt hat as he walked out of the shadow on the other side of the valley, but none of the other gang members were visible, Wim and the peddler were forced to leave Witch Hollow Trail, and the going became more difficult for horse and wagon: but they reached the edge of the Grandfather Grove in less than half an hour, passing one of the soaring trees, and then two, and three. The dwarfed, spindly pines thinned and finally were gone. Ahead of them were only the grandfather trees, their shaggy striated trunks russet and gold in the dying light. The breeze that had crossed the valley with them, the roaring of the stream behind them, all sounds faded into cathedral silence, leaving only the cool, still air and the golden trees. Wim stopped and bent his head back to catch even a glimpse of the lowest branches,

needed with pungent golden-green. This was their land, and he knew more than one tale that told of how the trees guarded it, kept pestiferous creatures away, kept the air cool and the soil fragrant and faintly moist throughout the summer.

“Over here.” Hanaban’s voice came muted from their left. They rounded the twenty-foot base of a tree, and found Hanaban and Bathecar, setting a small fire with kindling they had carried into the grove—Wim knew the bark of the grand-father trees was almost unburnable. The struggling blaze illuminated an immense pit of darkness behind them; the gutted trunk of an ancient grandfather tree, that formed a living cave-shelter for the night’s camp.

By the time they had eaten and rotated lookouts, the sun had set. Wim smothered the fire, and the only light was from the sickle moon following the sun down into the west.

The peddler made no move to bed down, Wim noticed with growing irritation. He sat with legs crossed under him in the shadow of his wagon; motionless and wearing a dark coat against the chill, he was all but invisible, but Wim thought the little man was looking up into the sky. His silence stretched on, until Wim thought he would have to pretend to sleep himself before the peddler would. Finally Jagit stood and walked to the rear of his wagon. He opened a tiny hatch and removed two objects.

“What’s them?” Wim asked, both curious and suspicious.

“Just a bit of harmless magic.” He set one of the contrap-tions down on the ground, what seemed to be a long rod with a grip at one end. Wim came up to him, as he put the second object against his eye. The second contraption looked much more complex. It glinted, almost sparkled in the dim moon-light, and Wim thought he saw mirrors and strange rulings on its side. A tiny bubble floated along the side in a tube. The peddler stared through the gadget at the scattering of pale stars visible between the trees. At last he set the device back inside the wagon, and picked up the rod. Wim watched him cautiously as the other walked toward the cave tree; the rod looked too much like a weapon.

Jagit fiddled at the grip of the rod, and an eerie whine spread through the grove. The screaming faded into silence again, but Wim was sure that now the front of the rod was spinning. Jagit set it against the moon-silvered bark of the cave tree, and the tip of the rod began to bore effortlessly into the massive trunk.

Wim’s voice quavered faintly. “That . . . that there some of your Sharnish magic, Mr. Jagged?”

The peddler chuckled softly, finishing his experiment. “It ain’t hardly that. A Sharnish enchantment is a lot craftier, a lot simpler *looking*. This here’s just a simple spell for reading the Signs.”

“Um.” Wim wavered almost visibly, his curiosity doing battle with his fear. There was a deep, precise hole in the cave tree. *Just because a fellow’s strange, Han, don’t mean he’s got an evil eye . . .* instinctively Wim’s fingers crossed. Because it looked like the peddler might not be the world’s biggest liar; and that meant— “Maybe I better check how the boys is settled.”

When the peddler didn’t answer, Wim turned and walked briskly away. At least he hoped that was how it looked; he felt like running. He passed Ounze, half-hidden behind a gigantic stump. Wim said nothing, but motioned for him to continue his surveillance of the peddler and his wagon. The rest stood waiting at a medium-sized grandfather tree nearly a hundred yards from the cave tree, the spot they had agreed on last night in Darkwood Corners. Wim moved silently across the springy ground, rounding the ruins of what must once have been one of the largest trees in the grove; a four-hundred-foot giant that disease and the years had brought crashing down. The great disc of its shattered root system rose more than thirty feet into the air, dwarfing him as he dropped down heavily beside Hanaban.

Bathecar Henley whispered, “Ounze and Sothead I left out as guards.”

Wim nodded. “It don’t hardly matter. We’re not going to touch that peddler.”

“What?” Bathecar’s exclamation was loud with surprise. He lowered his voice only slightly as he continued. “One man? You’re ascaired of one man?”

Wim motioned threateningly for silence. “You heard me. Hanaban here was right, that Jagged is just too damn danger-ous. He’s a warlock, he’s got an evil eye. And he’s got some kind of knife back there that can cut clean through a grandfa-ther tree! And the way he talks, that’s just the least ...”

The others’ muttered curses cut him off. Only Hanaban Kroy kept silent.

“You’re crazy, Wim,” the hulking shadow of Shorty said. “We’ve walked fifteen miles today. And you’re telling us it was for nothing! It’d be easier to farm for a living.”

“We’ll still get something, but it looks like we’ll have to go honest for a while. I figure on guiding him down, say to where the leaf forests start, and then asking pretty please for half of what he promised us back at the Corners.”

“I sure as hell ain’t going to follow nobody that far down toward the Valley.” Bathecar frowned.

“Well, then, you can just turn around and head back. I’m running this here gang, Bathecar, don’t you forget it. We already got something out of this deal, them silver balls he give us as first payment.”

Something went *hisss* and then *thunk*; Hanaban sprawled forward, collapsed on the moonlit ground beyond the tree's shadow. A crossbow bolt protruded from his throat.

As Wim and Bathecar scrambled for the cover of the rotting root system, Shorty rose and snarled, "That damn peddler!" It cost him his life; three arrows smashed into him where he stood, and he collapsed across Hanaban.

Wim heard their attackers closing in on them, noisily confident. From what he could see, he realized they were all armed with crossbows; his boys didn't stand a chance against odds like that. He burrowed his way deeper into the clawing roots, felt a string of beads snap and shower over his hand. Behind him Bathecar unslung his own crossbow and cocked it.

Wim looked over his shoulder, and then, for the length of a heartbeat, he saw the silvery white of the moon-painted landscape blaze with harshly shadowed blue brilliance. He shook his head, dazzled and wondering; until amazement was driven from his mind by sudden screams. He began to curse and pray at the same time.

But then their assailants had reached the fallen tree, Wim heard them thrusting into the roots, shrank back further out of reach of their knives. Another scream echoed close and a voice remarked, "Hey, Rufe. I got the bastard as shot Rocker last fall."

A different voice answered, "That makes five then. Every-body excepting the peddler and Wim Buckry."

Wim held his breath, sweating. He recognized the second voice—Axi Bork, the oldest of the Bork brothers. For the last two years Wim's gang had cut into the Bork clan's habitual thievery, and up until tonight his quickwittedness had kept them safe from the Borks' revenge. But tonight—how had he gone so wrong tonight? Damn that peddler!

He heard hands thrusting again among the roots, closer now. Then abruptly fingers caught in his hair. He pulled away, but another pair of hands joined the first, catching him by the hair and then the collar of his leather jerkin. He was hauled roughly from the tangle of roots and thrown down. He scrambled to his feet, was kicked in the stomach before he could run off. He fell gasping back onto the ground, felt his knife jerked from the sheath; three shadowy figures loomed over him. The nearest placed a heavy foot on his middle and said, "Well, Wim Buckry. You just lie still, boy. It's been a good night, even if we don't catch that peddler. You just got a little crazy with greed, boy. My cousins done killed every last one of your gang." Their laughter raked him. "Fifteen minutes and we done what we couldn't do the last two years."

“Lew, you take Wim here over to that cave tree. Once we find that peddler we’re going to have us a little fun with the both of them.”

Wim was pulled to his feet and then kicked, sprawling over the bodies of Hanaban and Shorty. He struggled to his feet and ran, only to be tripped and booted by another Bork. By the time he reached the cave tree his right arm hung useless at his side, and one eye was blind with warm sticky blood.

The Borks had tried to rekindle the campfire. Three of them stood around him in the wavering light: he listened to the rest searching among the trees. He wondered dismally why they couldn’t find one wagon on open ground, when they’d found every one of his boys.

One of the younger cousins—scarcely more than fifteen—amused himself half-heartedly by thrusting glowing twigs at Wim’s face. Wim slapped at him, missed, and at last one of the other Borks knocked the burning wood from the boy’s hand. Wim remembered that Axi Bork claimed first rights against anyone who ran afoul of the gang. He squirmed back away from the fire and propped himself against the dry resilient trunk of the cave tree, stunned with pain and despair. Through one eye he could see the other Borks returning empty-handed from their search. He counted six Borks al-together, but by the feeble flame-cast light he couldn’t make out their features. The only one he could have recognized for sure was Axi Bork, and his runty silhouette was missing. Two of the clansmen moved past him into the blackness of the cave tree’s heart, he heard them get down on their hands and knees to crawl around the bend at the end of the passage. The peddler could have hidden back there, but his wagon would have filled the cave’s entrance. Wim wondered again why the Borks couldn’t find that wagon; and wished again that he’d never seen it at all.

The two men emerged from the tree just as Axi limped into the shrinking circle of firelight. The stubby bandit was at least forty years old, but through those forty years he had lost his share of fights, and walked slightly bent-over; Wim knew that his drooping hat covered a hairless skull marred with scars and even one dent. The eldest Bork cut close by the fire, heedlessly sending dust and unburnable bark into the gutter-ing flames. “Awright, where in the motherdevil blazes you toad-gets been keeping your eyes? You was standing ever whichway from this tree, you skewered every one of that damn Buckry gang excepting Wim here. Why ain’t you found that peddler?”

“He’s gone, Ax’, gone.” The boy who had been playing with Wim seemed to think that was a revelation. But Axi was not impressed; his backhand sent the boy up against the side of the tree.

One of the other silhouetted figures spoke hesitantly. “Don’t go misbelieving me when I tell you this, Axi ... but I was looking straight at this here cave tree when you went after them others. I could see that peddler clear as I see you now, standing

right beside his wagon and his horse. Then all of a sudden there was this blue flash—I tell you, Ax’, it was *bright*—and for a minute I couldn’t see nothing, and then when I could again, why there wasn’t hide nor hair of that outlander.’”

“Hmm.” The elder Bork took this story without apparent anger. He scratched under his left armpit and began to shuffle around the dying fire toward where Wim lay. “Gone, eh? Just like that. He sounds like a right good prize . . .” He reached suddenly and caught Wim by the collar, dragged him toward the fire. Stopping just inside the ring of light, he pulled Wim up close to his face. The wide, sagging brim of his hat threw his face into a hollow blackness that was somehow more terrible than any reality.

Seeing Wim’s expression, he laughed raspily, and did not turn his face toward the fire. “It’s been a long time, Wim, that I been wanting to learn you a lesson. But now I can mix business and pleasure. We’re just gonna burn you an inch at a time until you tell us where your friend lit out to.”

Wim barely stifled the whimper he felt growing in his throat; Axi Bork began to force his good hand inch by inch into the fire. All he wanted to do was to scream the truth, to tell them the peddler had never made him party to his magic. But he knew the truth would no more be accepted than his cries for mercy; the only way out was to lie—to lie better than he ever had before. The tales the peddler had told him during the day rose from his mind to shape his words. “Just go ahead, Ax! Get your fun. I know I’m good as dead. But so’s all of you—” The grip stayed firm on his shoulders and neck, but the knotted hand stopped forcing him toward the fire. He felt his own hand scorching in the super-heated air above the embers. Desperately he forced the pain into the same place with his fear and ignored it. “Why d’you think me and my boys didn’t lay a hand on that peddler all day long? Just so’s we could get ambushed by you?” His laughter was slightly hysterical. “The truth is we was scared clean out of our wits! That foreigner’s a warlock, he’s too dangerous to go after. He can reach straight into your head, cloud your mind, make you see what just plain isn’t. He can kill you, just by looking at you kinda mean-like. Why”—and true inspiration struck him— “why, he could even have killed one of your party cousins, and be standing here right now pretending to be a Bork, and you’d never know it till he struck *you* dead ...”

Axi swore and ground Wim’s hand into the embers. Even expecting it, Wim couldn’t help himself; his scream was loud and shrill. After an instant as long as forever Axi pulled his hand from the heat. The motion stirred the embers, sending a final spurt of evil reddish flame up from the coals before the fire guttered out, leaving only dim ruby points to compete with the moonlight. For a long moment no one spoke; Wim bit his tongue to keep from moaning. The only sounds were a faint rustling breeze, hundreds of feet up among the leafy crowns of the grandfather trees—and the snort of a horse somewhere close by.

“Hey, we ain’t got no horses,” someone said uneasily.

Seven human figures stood in the immense spreading shadow of the cave tree, limned in faint silver by the setting moon. The Borks stood very still, watching one another—and then Wim realized what they must just have noticed themselves: there should have been eight Bork kinsmen. Somehow the peddler had eliminated one of the Borks during the attack, so silently, so quickly, that his loss had gone unnoticed. Wim shuddered, suddenly remembering a flare of unreal blue-white light, and the claims he had just made for the peddler. If one Bork could be killed so easily, why not two? In which case—

“He’s here, pretending to be one of you!” Wim cried, his voice cracking.

And he could almost feel their terror echoing back and forth, from one to another, growing—until one of the shortest of the silhouettes broke and ran out into the moonlight. He got only about twenty feet, before he was brought down by a crossbow quarrel in the back. Even as the fugitive crumpled onto the soft, silver dirt a second crossbow thunked and another of the brothers fell dead across Wim’s feet.

“That was Clyne, you . . . warlock!” More bows lowered around the circle.

“Hold on now!” shouted Axi. There were five Borks left standing; two bodies sprawled unmoving on the ground. “The peddler got us in his spell. We got to keep our sense and figure out which of us he’s pretendin’ to be.”

“But, Ax’, he ain’t just in disguise, we woulda seen which one he is ... he—he can trick us into believing he’s anybody!”

Trapped beneath the corpse, all Wim could see were five shadows against the night. Their faces were hidden from the light, and bulky clothing disguised any differences. He bit his lips against the least sound of pain; now was no time to remind the remaining Borks of Wim Buckry— But the agony of his hand pulsed up his arm until he felt a terrible dizziness wrench the blurring world away and his head drooped...

He opened his eyes again and saw that only three men stood now in the glade. Two more had died; the newest corpse still twitched on the ground.

Axl’s voice was shrill with rage. “You . . . monster! You done tricked all of us into killing each other!”

“No, Ax’, I had to shoot him. It was the peddler, I swear. Turn him over. Look! He shot Jan after you told us to hold off—”

“Warlock!” a third voice cried. “All of them dead—!” Two crossbows came down and fired simultaneously. Two men fell.

Axi stood silent and alone among the dead for a long moment. The moon had set at last, and the starlight was rare and faint through the shifting branches of the grandfather tree far overhead. Wim lay still as death, aware of the smell of blood and sweat and burned flesh. And the sound of foot-steps, approaching. Sick with fear he looked up at the dark stubby form of Axi Bork.

“Still here? Good.” A black-booted foot rolled the dead body from his leg. “Well, boy, you better leave me look at that hand.” The voice belonged to Jagit Katchetooriantz.

“Uh.” Wim began to tremble. “Uh, Mr. Jagged ... is that . . . you?”

A light appeared in the hand of the peddler who had come from Sharn.

Wim fainted.

* * * *

Early morning filled the Grandfather Grove with dusty shafts of light. Wim Buckry sat propped against the cave tree’s entrance, sipping awkwardly at a cup of something hot and bitter held in a bandaged hand. His other hand was tucked through his belt, to protect a sprained right shoulder. Silently he watched the peddler grooming the dappled cart horse; glanced for the tenth time around the sunlit grove, where no sign of the last night’s events marred the quiet tranquility of the day. Like a bad dream, the memory of his terror seemed unreal to him now, and he wondered if that was more witchery, like the drink that had eased the pains of his body. He looked down, where dried blood stained his pants. *He’d took care of the remains*, the peddler had said. It was real, all right—all of the Borks. And all of his boys. He thought wistfully for a moment of the jewelry that had gone into the ground with them; shied away from a deeper sense of loss beneath it.

The peddler returned to the campfire, kicked dirt over the blaze. He had had no trouble in getting a fire to burn. Wim drew his feet up; the dark eyes looked questioningly at his sullen face,

“Mr. Jagged”—there was no trace of mockery in that title now—“just what do you want from me?”

Jagit dusted off his leather shirt. “Well, Wim—I was thinking if you was up to it, maybe you’d want to go on with our agreement.”

Wim raised his bandaged hand. “Wouldn’t be much pertection, one cripple.”

“But I don’t know the way down through that there Val-ley, which you do.”

Wim laughed incredulously. “I reckon you could fly over the moon on a broomstick and you wouldn’t need no map. And you sure as hell don’t need perfecting! Why’d you ever take us on, Mr. Jagged?” Grief sobered him suddenly, and realization— “You knew all along, didn’t you? What we were fixing to do. You took us along so’s you could watch us, and maybe scare us off. Well, you needn’t be watching me no more. I—we already changed our minds, even before what happened with them Borks. We was fixing to take you on down like we said, all honest.”

“I know that.” The peddler nodded. “You ever hear an old saying, Wim: ‘Two heads are better than one’? You can’t never tell; you might just come in handy.”

Wim shrugged ruefully, and wondered where the peddler ever heard that “old saying.” “Well . . . ain’t heard no better offers this morning.”

* * * *

They left the grandfather trees and continued the descent toward the Great Valley. Throughout the early morning the pine woods continued to surround them, but as the morning wore on Wim noticed that the evergreens had given way to oak and sycamore, as the air lost its chill and much of its moistness. By late in the day he could catch glimpses be-tween the trees of the green and amber vastness that was the valley floor, and pointed it out to the peddler. Jagit nodded, seeming pleased, and returned to the aimless humming that Wim suspected covered diabolical thoughts. He glanced again at the round, stubby merchant, the last man in the world a body’d suspect of magical powers. Which was perhaps what made them so convincing . . . “Mr. Jagged? How’d you do it? Hex them Borks, I mean.”

Jagit smiled and shook his head. “A good magician never tells how. What, maybe, but never how. You have to watch, and figure how for yourself. That’s how you get to *be* a good magician.”

Wim sighed, shifted his hand under his belt. “Reckon I don’t want to know, then.”

The peddler chuckled. “Fair enough.”

Surreptitiously, Wim watched his every move for the rest of the day.

After the evening meal the peddler again spent time at his wagon in the dark. Wim, sprawled exhausted by the camp-fire, saw the gleam of a warlock’s wand but this time made no move to investigate, only crossing his fingers as a precautionary gesture. Inactivity had left him with too much else to consider. He stared fixedly into the flames, his hand smarting.

“Reckon we should be down to the valley floor in about an hour’s travel, tomorrow. Then you say we head northwest, till we come to Fyffe?”

Wim started at the sound of the peddler’s voice. “Oh . . . yeah, I reckon. Cut north and any road’ll get you there; they all go to Fyffe.”

“All roads lead to Fyffe’?” The peddler laughed unexpectedly, squatted by the fire.

Wim wondered what was funny. “Anybody can tell you the way from here, Mr. Jagged. I think come morning I’ll be heading back; I... we never figured to come this far. Us hill folk don’t much like going down into the Flatlands.”

“Hm. I’m sorry to hear that, Wim.” Jagit pushed another branch into the fire. “But somehow I’d figured it you’d really been to Fyffe?”

“Well, yeah, I was . . . almost.” He looked up, surprised. “Three, four years ago, when I was hardly more’n a young’un, with my pa and some other men. See, my granther was the smith at Darkwood Corners, and he got hold of a gun—” And he found himself telling a peddler-man things everyone knew, and things he’d never told to anyone: How his grandfa-ther had discovered gunpowder, how the Highlanders had plotted to overthrow the lords at Fyffe and take the rich valley farmlands for themselves. And how horsemen had come out from the city to meet them, with guns and magic, how the amber fields were torn and reddened and his pa had died when his homemade gun blew up in his face. How a bloody, tight-lipped boy returning alone to Darkwood Corners had filled its citizens with the fear of the Lord, and of the lords of Fyffe ... He sat twisting painfully at a golden earring. “And—I heard tell as how they got dark magics down there that we never even saw, so’s to keep all the Flatlanders under a spell . . . Maybe you oughta think again ‘bout going down there too, Mr. Jagged.”

“I thank you for the warning, Wim.” Jagit nodded. “But I’ll tell you—I’m a merchant by trade, and by inclination. If I can’t sell my wares, I got no point in being, and I can’t sell my wares in these hills.”

“You ain’t afraid they’ll try to stop you?”

He smiled. “Well, now, I didn’t say that. Their magic ain’t up to Sharn, I’m pretty sure. But it is an unknown . . . Who knows—they may turn out to be my best customers; lords are like to be free with their money.” He looked at Wim with something like respect. “But like I say, two heads are better than one. I’m right sorry you won’t be along. Mayhap in the morning we can settle accounts—”

In the morning the peddler hitched up his wagon and started down toward the Great Valley. And not really understanding why, Wim Buckry went with him.

* * * *

Early in the day they left the welcome shelter of the last oak forest, started across the open rolling hills of ripening wild grasses, until they struck a rutted track heading north. Wim stripped off his jerkin and loosened his shirt, his pale Highland skin turning red under the climbing sun of the Valley. The dark-skinned peddler in his leather shirt smiled at him, and Wim figured, annoyed, that he must enjoy the heat. By noon they reached the endless green corduroy fringe of the cultivated Flatlands, and with a jolt they found themselves on paved road. Jagit knelt and prodded the resilient surface before they continued on their way. Wim vaguely remembered the soft pavement, a bizarre luxury to Highland feet, stretching all the way to Fyffe; this time he noticed that in places the pavement was eaten away by time, and neatly patched with smooth-cut stone.

The peddler spoke little to him, only humming, apparently intent on searching out signs of Flatlander magic. *A good magician watches...* Wim forced himself to study the half-remembered landscape. The ripening fields and pasturelands blanketed the Valley to the limit of his sight, like an immense, living crazy-quilt in greens and gold, spread over the rich dark earth. In the distance he could see pale mist hovering over the fields, wondered if it was a trick of witchery or only the heat of the day. And he saw the Flatlanders at work in the fields by the road, well-fed and roughly dressed; tanned, placid faces that regarded their passage with the resigned disinterest that he would have expected of a plowmule. Wim frowned.

“A rather curious lack of curiosity, I’d say, wouldn’t you?” The peddler glanced at him. “They’re going to make bad customers.”

“Look at ‘em!” Wim burst out angrily. “How could they do all of this? They ain’t no better fanners ‘n Highlanders. In the hills you work your hands to the bone to farm, and you get nothing, stones— And look at them, they’re fat. How, Mr. Jagged?”

“How do *you* think they do it, Wim?”

“I—” He stopped. *Good magicians figure it out* “Well—they got better land.”

“True.”

“And . . . there’s magic.”

“Is there now?”

“You saw it—they smooth-bedded streams, this here road; it ain’t natural. But . . . they all look as how they’re be-witched, themselves, just like I heard. Mayhap it’s only the lords of Fyffe as have all the magic—it’s them we got to watch

for?" He crossed his fingers.

"Maybe so. It looks like they may be the only customers I'll have, too, if this doesn't change." The peddler's face was devoid of expression. "Quit crossing your fingers, Wim; the only thing that'll ever save you from is the respect of educated men."

Wim uncrossed his fingers. He walked on for several minutes before he realized the peddler spoke like a Flatlander now, as perfectly as he'd spoken the Highland talk before.

Late in the afternoon they came to a well, at one of the farm villages that centered like a hub in a great wheel of fields. The peddler dipped a cup into the dripping container, and then Wim took a gulp straight from the bucket. A taste of bitter metal filled his mouth, and he spat in dismay, looking back at the merchant. Jagit was passing his hand over—no, dropping something *into* the cup—and as Wim watched the water began to foam, and suddenly turned bright red. The peddler's black brows rose with interest, and he poured the water slowly out onto the ground. Wim blanched and wiped his mouth hard on his sleeve. "It *tastes* like poison!"

Jagit shook his head. "That's not poison you taste; I'd say farming's just polluted the water table some. But it is drugged."

He watched the villagers standing with desultory murmurs around his wagon.

"Sheep." Wim's face twisted with disgust.

The peddler shrugged. "But all of them healthy, wealthy, and wise...well, healthy and wise, anyway...healthy—?" He moved away to offer his wares. There were few takers. As Wim returned to the wagon, taking a drink of stale mountain water from the barrel on the back, he heard the little man muttering again, like an incantation, "Fyffe...Fyffe...Dyston-Fyffe, they call it here...*District Town Five?*... Couldn't be." He frowned, oblivious. "But then again, why couldn't it—?"

For the rest of that day the peddler kept his thoughts to himself, looking strangely grim, only pronouncing an occasional curse in some incomprehensible language. And that night, as they camped, as Wim's weary mind unwillingly relived the loss of the only friends he had, he wondered if the dark silent stranger across the fire shared his loneliness; a peddler was always a stranger, even if he was a magician. "Mr. Jagged, you ever feel like going home?"

"Home?" Jagit glanced up. "Sometimes. Tonight, maybe. But I've come so far, I guess that would be impossible. When I got back, it'd all be gone." Suddenly through the flames his face looked very old. "What made it home was gone before I left...But maybe I'll find it again, somewhere else, as I go."

“Yeah ...” Wim nodded, understanding both more and less than he realized. He curled down into his blanket, oddly comforted, and went soundly to sleep.

* * * *

Minor wonders continued to assail him on their journey, and also the question, “Why?” until gradually Jagit’s prod-ding transformed his superstitious awe into a cocky curiosity that sometimes made the peddler frown, though he made no comment.

Until the third morning, when Wim finally declared, “Ev-erything’s a trick, if’n you can see behind it, just like with them witches in the hills. Everything’s got a—reason. I think there ain’t no such thing as magic!”

Jagit fixed him with a long mild look, and the specter of the night in the Grandfather Grove seemed to flicker in the dark eyes. “You think not, eh?”

Wim looked down nervously.

“There’s magic, all right, Wim; all around you here. Only now you’re seeing it with a magician’s eyes: Because there’s a reason behind everything that happens; you may not know what it is, but it’s there. And knowing that doesn’t make the thing less magic, or strange, or terrible—it just makes it easier to deal with. That’s something to keep in mind, wherever you are ... Also keep in mind that a *little* knowledge is a dangerous thing.”

Wim nodded, chastened, felt his ears grow red as the peddler muttered, “So’s a little ignorance ...”

The afternoon of the third day showed them Fyffe, still a vague blot wavering against the horizon. Wim looked back over endless green toward the mountains, but they were hidden from him now by the yellow Flatland haze. Peering ahead again toward the city, he was aware that the fear that had come with him into the Great Valley had grown less instead of greater as they followed the familiar-strange road to Fyffe. The dappled cart horse snorted loudly in the hot, dusty silence, and he realized it was the peddler with his wagon full of magics that gave him his newfound courage.

He smiled, flexing his burned hand. Jagit had never made any apology for what he’d done, but Wim was not such a hypocrite that he really expected one, under the circum-stances. And the peddler had treated his wounds with potions, so that bruises began to fade and skin to heal almost while he watched. It was almost—

Wim’s thoughts were interrupted as he stumbled on a rough patch in the road. The city, much closer now, lay stolidly among the fields in the lengthening shadows

of the hot after-noon. He wondered in which field his father—abruptly turned his thoughts ahead again, noticing that the city was without walls or other visible signs of defense. *Why?* Mayhap because they had nothing to fear— He felt his body tighten with old terrors. But Jagit’s former grim mood had seemingly dropped away as his goal drew near, as though he had reached some resolution. If the peddler was confident, then Wim would be, too. He looked on the city with magician’s eyes; and it struck him that a more outlandish challenge had most likely never visited the lords of Fyffe.

They entered Fyffe, and though the peddler seemed almost disappointed, Wim tried to conceal his gaping with little success. The heavy stone and timber buildings crowded the cobble-patched street, rising up two and three stories to cut off his view of the fields. The street’s edge was lined with shop fronts; windows of bull’s-eyed glass and peeling painted signs advertised their trade. The levels above the shops, he supposed, were where the people lived. The weathered stone of the curbs had been worn to hollows from the tread of countless feet, and the idea of so many people—5,000, the peddler had guessed—in so little area made him shudder.

They made their way past dully-dressed, well-fed towns-folk and farmers finishing the day’s commerce in the cooling afternoon. Wim caught snatches of sometimes heated bargain-ing, but he noticed that the town showed little more interest in the bizarre spectacle of himself and the peddler than had the folk they dealt with on their journey. Children at least ought to follow the bright wagon—he was vaguely disturbed to realize he’d scarcely seen any, here or anywhere, and those he saw were kept close by parents. It seemed the peddler’s business would be no better here than in the hills after all. *Like hogs in a pen ...* He glanced down the street, back over his shoulder. “Where’s all the hogs?”

“What?” The peddler looked at him.

“It’s clean. All them folk living here and there ain’t any garbage. How can that be, less’n they keep hogs to eat it? But I don’t see any hogs. Nor—hardly any young’uns.”

“Hmm.” The peddler shrugged, smiling. “Good ques-tions. Maybe we should ask the lords of Fyffe.”

Wim shook his head. Yet he had to admit that the city so far, for all its strangeness, had shown him no signs of any magic more powerful or grim than that he’d seen in the fields. Perhaps the lords of Fyffe weren’t so fearsome as the tales claimed; their warriors weren’t bewitched, but only better armed.

The street curved sharply, and ahead the clustered build-ings gave way on an open square, filled with the covered stalls of a public marketplace. And beyond it—Wim stopped, staring. Beyond it, he knew, stood the dwelling of the lords of Fyffe. Twice as massive as any building he had seen, its pilastered green-black walls

reflected the square like a dark, malevolent mirror. The building had the solidity of a thing that had grown from the earth, a permanence that made the town itself seem ephemeral. Now, he knew, he looked on the house for magic that might match the peddler and Sharn.

Beside him, Jagit's smile was genuine and unreadable. "Pardon me, ma'm," the peddler stopped a passing woman and child, "but we're strangers. What's that building there called?"

"Why, that's Government House." The woman looked only mildly surprised. Wim admired her stocking-covered ankles.

"I see. And what do they do there?"

She pulled her little girl absently back from the wagon. "That's where the governors are. Folks go there with petitions and such. They—govern, I suppose. Lissy, keep away from that dusty beast."

"Thank you, ma'm. And could I show you—"

"Not today. Come on, child, we'll be late."

The peddler bowed in congenial exasperation as she moved on. Wim sighed, and he shook his head. "Hardly a market for Sharnish wonders here, either, I begin to think. I may have outfoxed myself for once. Looks like my only choice is to pay a call on your lords of Fyffe over there; I might still have a thing or two to interest them." His eyes narrowed in appraisal as he looked across the square.

At a grunt of disapproval from Wim, Jagit glanced back, gestured at the lengthening shadows, "Too late to start selling now, anyway. What do you say we just take a look—" Suddenly he fell silent.

Wim turned. A group of half a dozen dour-faced men were approaching them; the leader bore a crest on his stiff brimmed hat that Wim remembered. They were unslinging guns from their shoulders. Wim's question choked off as they quietly circled the wagon, cut him off from the peddler. The militia-man addressed Jagit, faintly disdainful. "The Governors—"

Wim seized the barrel of the nearest rifle, slinging its owner into the man standing next to him. He wrenched the gun free and brought it down on the head of a third gaping guard.

"Wim!" He froze at the sound of the peddler's voice, turned back. "Drop the gun." The peddler stood unresisting beside his wagon. And the three remaining guns were pointing at Wim Buckry. Face filled with angry betrayal, he threw down the rifle.

“Tie the hillbilly up ... The Governors require a few words with you two, peddler, as I was saying. You’ll come with us.” The militia leader stood back, unperturbed, as his townsman guards got to their feet.

Wim winced as his hands were bound roughly before him, but there was no vindictiveness on the guard’s bruised face. Pushed forward to walk with the peddler, he muttered bit-terly, “Whyn’t you use your magic!”

Jagit shook his head. “Would’ve been bad for business. After all, the lords of Fyffe have come to me.”

Wim crossed his fingers, deliberately, as they climbed the green-black steps of Government House.

The hours stretched interminably in the windowless, featureless room where they were left to wait, and Wim soon tired of staring at the evenness of the walls and the smokeless lamps. The peddler sat fiddling with small items left in his pockets; but Wim had begun to doze in spite of himself by the time guards returned at last, to take them to their long-delayed audience with the lords of Fyffe.

The guards left them to the lone man who rose, smiling, from behind a tawny expanse of desk as they entered the green-walled room. “Well, at last!” He was in his late fifties and plainly dressed like the townsmen, about Wim’s height but heavier, with graying hair. Wim saw that the smiling face held none of the dullness of their captors’ faces. “I’m Charl Aydricks, representative of the World Government. My apologies for keeping you waiting, but I was—out of town. We’ve been following your progress with some interest.”

Wim wondered what in tarnation this poor-man governor took himself for, claiming the Flatlands was the whole world. He glanced past Aydricks into the unimpressive, lamp-lit room. On the governor’s desk he noticed the only sign of a lord’s riches he’d yet seen—a curious ball of inlaid metals, mostly blue but blotched with brown and green, fixed on a golden stand. He wondered with more interest where the other lords of Fyffe might be; Aydricks was alone, without even guards...Wim suddenly remembered that whatever this man wasn’t, he was a magician, no less than the peddler.

Jagit made a polite bow. “Jagit Katchetooriantz, at your service. Merchant by trade, and flattered by the interest. This is my apprentice—”

“—Wim Buckry.” The governor’s appraising glance moved unexpectedly to Wim. “Yes, we remember you, Wim. I must say I’m surprised to see you here again. But pleased—we’ve been wanting to get ahold of you.” A look of too much interest crossed Aydricks’ face.

Wim eyed the closed door with longing.

“Please be seated.” The governor returned to his desk. “We rarely get such . . . unique visitors—”

Jagit took a seat calmly and Wim dropped into the second chair, knees suddenly weak. As he settled into the softness he felt a sourceless pressure bearing down on him, lunged up-ward like a frightened colt only to be forced back into the seat. Panting, he felt the pressure ease as he collapsed in defeat.

Jagit looked at him with sympathy before glancing back at the governor; Wim saw the peddler’s fingers twitch impotently on the chair-arm. “Surely you don’t consider us a threat?” His voice was faintly mocking.

The governor’s congeniality stopped short of his eyes. “We know about the forces you were using in the Grandfa-ther Grove.”

“Do you now! That’s what I’d hoped.” Jagit met the gaze and held it. “Then I’m obviously in the presence of some technological sophistication, at last. I have some items of trade that might interest you...”

“You may be sure they’ll receive our attention. But let’s just be honest with each other, shall we? You’re no more a peddler than I am; not with what we’ve seen you do. And if you’d really come from the east—from anywhere—I’d know about it; our communications network is excellent. You simply appeared from nowhere, in the Highlands Preserve. And it really was nowhere on this earth, wasn’t it?”

Jagit said nothing, looking expectant. Wim stared fixedly at the textured green of the wall, trying to forget that he was witness to a debate of warlocks.

Aydricks stirred impatiently. “From nowhere on this earth. Our moon colony is long gone; that means no planet in this system. Which leaves the Lost Colonies—you’ve come from one of the empire’s colony worlds, from another star system, Jagit; and if you expected that to surprise us after all this time, you’re mistaken.”

Jagit attempted to shrug. “No—I didn’t expect that, frankly. But I didn’t expect any of the rest of this, either; things haven’t turned out as I’d planned at all . . .”

Wim listened in spite of himself, in silent wonder. Were there worlds beyond his own, that were no more than sparks in the black vastness of earth’s night? Was that where Sharn was, then, with its wonders; beyond the sky, where folks said was heaven—?

“ . . . Obviously,” the governor was saying, “you’re a precedent shattering

threat to the World Government. Be-cause this is a *world* government, and it has maintained peace and stability over millennia. Our space defense system sees to it that—outsiders don't upset that peace. At least it always has until now; you're the first person to penetrate our system, and we don't even know how you did it. That's what we want to know—*must* know, Jagit, not who you represent, or where, or even why, so much as *how*. We can't allow anything to disrupt our stability." Aydricks leaned forward across his desk; his hand tightened protectively over the stand of the strange metal globe. His affability had disappeared entirely, and Wim felt his own hopes sink, realizing the governor somehow knew the peddler's every secret. Jagit wasn't infal-lible, and this time he had let himself be trapped.

But Jagit seemed undismayed. "If you value your stability that much, then I'd say it's time somebody did disturb it."

"That's to be expected." Aydricks sat back, his expression relaxing into contempt. "But you won't be the one. We've had ten thousand years to perfect our system, and in that time no one else has succeeded in upsetting it. We've put an end at last to all the millennia of destructive waste on this world ..."

Ten thousand years—? As Aydricks spoke, Wim groped to understand a second truth that tore at the very roots of his comprehension:

For the history of mankind stretched back wonder on won-der for unimaginable thousands of years, through tremendous cycles filled with lesser cycles. Civilization reached highs where every dream was made a reality and humanity sent offshoots to the stars, only to fall back, through its own folly, into abysses of loss when men forgot their humanity and reality became a nightmare. Then slowly the cycle would change again, and in time mankind would reach new heights, that paradoxically it could never maintain. Always men seemed unable in the midst of their creation to resist the urge to destroy, and always they found the means to destroy utterly.

Until the end of the last great cyclical empire, when a group among the ruling class saw that a new decline was imminent, and acted to prevent it. They had forced the world into a new order, one of patternless stability at a low level, and had stopped it there. "... And because of us that state, free from strife and suffering, the world has continued for ten thousand years, unchanged. Literally unchanged. I am one of the original founders of the World Government."

* * * *

Wim looked unbelievably into the smiling, unremarkable face; found the eyes of a fanatic and incredible age.

"You're well preserved," Jagit said.

The governor burst into honest laughter. “This isn’t my original body. By using our computer network we’re able to transfer our memories intact into the body of an ‘heir’; some-one from the general population, young and full of potential. As long as the individual’s personality is compatible, it’s absorbed into the greater whole, and he becomes a revitaliz-ing part of us. That’s why I’ve been keeping track of Wim, here; he has traits that should make him an excellent governor.” The too-interested smile showed on the governor’s face again.

Wim’s bound hands tightened into fists—the invisible pres-sure forced him back down into the seat, his face stricken.

Aydricks watched him, amused. “Technological, initiative and personal aggressiveness are key factors that lead to an unstable society. Since, to keep stability, we have to suppress those factors in the population, we keep control groups free from interference—like the hill folk, the Highlanders—to give us a dependable source of the personality types we need ourselves.

“But the system as a whole really is very well designed. Our computer network provides us with our continuity, with the technology, communications, and—sources of power we need to maintain stability. We in turn ensure the computer’s continuity, since we preserve the knowledge to keep it func-tioning. There’s no reason why the system can’t go on forever.”

Wim looked toward the peddler for some sign of reassur-ance; but found a grimness that made him look away again as Jagit said, “And you think that’s a feat I should appreciate; that you’ve manipulated the fate of every being on this planet for ten thousand years, to your own ends, and that you plan to go on doing it indefinitely?”

“But it’s for their own good, can’t you see that? We ask nothing from this, no profit for ourselves, no reward other than knowing that humanity will never be able to throw itself into barbarism again, that the cycle of destructive waste, of rise and fall, has finally been stopped on earth. The people are secure, their world is stable, they know it will be safe for future generations. Could your own world claim as much? Think of the years that must have passed on your journey here—would you even have a civilization to return to by now?”

Wim saw Jagit forcibly relax; the peddler’s smile reap-peared, full of irony. “But the fact remains that a cycle of rise and fall is the natural order of things—life and death, if you want to call it that. It gives humanity a chance to reach new heights, and gives an old order a clean death. Stasis is a coma—no lows, but no highs either, no *choice*. Somehow I think that Sharn would have preferred a clean death to this—”

“Sharn? What do you know about the old empire?” The governor leaned forward, complaisance lost.

“Sharn—?” Wim’s bewilderment was lost on the air.

“They knew everything about Sharn, where I come from. The crystal city with rot at its heart, the Games of Three. They were even seeing the trends that would lead to this, though they had no idea it would prove so eminently successful.”

“Well, this gets more and more interesting.” The governor’s voice hardened. “Considering that there should be no way someone from outside could have known of the last years of the empire. But I suspect we’ll only continue to raise more questions this way. I think it’s time we got some answers.”

Wim slumped in his seat, visions of torture leaping into his mind. But the governor only left his desk, passing Wim with a glance that suggested hunger, and placed a shining band of filigreed metal on Jagit’s head.

“You may be surprised at what you get.” Jagit’s expression remained calm, but Wim thought strain tightened his voice.

The governor returned to his chair. “Oh, I don’t think so. I’ve just linked you into our computer net—”

Abruptly Jagit went rigid with surprise, settled back into a half smile; but not before Aydricks had seen the change. “Once it gets into your mind you’ll have considerable difficulty concealing anything at all. It’s quick and always effective; though unfortunately I can’t guarantee that it won’t drive you crazy.”

The peddler’s smile faded. “How civilized,” he said quietly. He met Wim’s questioning eyes. “Well, Wim, you remember what I showed you. And crossing your fingers didn’t help, did it?”

Wim shook his head. “Whatever you say, Mr. Jagged ...” He suspected he’d never have an opportunity to remember anything.

Suddenly the peddler gasped, and his eyes closed, his body went limp in the seat. “Mr. Jagged—?” But there was no response, none, Wim wondered numbly what sort of terrible enchantment the metal crown held, and whether it would hurt when the computer—whatever that was—swallowed his own soul.

“Are you monitoring? All districts? Direct hookup, yes.—” The governor seemed to be speaking to his desk. He hesitated as though listening, then stared into space.

Wim sagged fatalistically against his chair, past horror now, ignoring—and ignored by—the two entranced men.

Silence stretched in the green room. Then the light in the room flickered and

dimmed momentarily. Wim's eyes widened as he felt the unseen pressure that held him down weaken slightly, then return with the lighting. The governor frowned at nothing, still staring into space. Wim began ineffectually to twist at his bound hands. However the magic worked in this room, it had just stopped working; if it stopped again he'd be ready ... He glanced at Jagit. Was there a smile—?

“District Eighteen here. Aydricks, what is this?”

Wim shuddered. The live disembodied head of a red-haired youth had just appeared in a patch of sudden brightness by the wall. The governor turned blinking toward the ghost.

“Our reception's getting garbled. This data can't be right, it says he's ...” The ghostly face wavered and the voice was drowned in a sound like water rushing. “... it, what's wrong with the transmission? Is he linked up directly? We aren't getting anything now—”

Two more faces—one old, with skin even darker than the peddler's, and one a middle-aged woman—appeared in the wall, protesting. And Wim realized then that he saw the other lords of Fyffe—and truly of the world—here and yet not here, transported by their magic from the far ends of the earth. The red-haired ghost peered at Wim, who shrank away from the angry, young-old eyes, then looked past to Jagit. The frown grew fixed and then puzzled, was transformed into incredulity. “No, that's impossible!”

“What is it?” Aydricks looked harassed.

“I know that man.”

The black-haired woman turned as though she could see him. “What do you mean you—”

“I know that man too!” Another dark face appeared. “From Sharn, from the empire. But . . . after ten thousand years, how can he be the *same* . . . Aydricks! Remember the Primitive Arts man, he was famous, he spent. . .” the voice blurred. “... got to get him out of the comm system! He knows the comm-sat codes, he can—” The ghostly face dematerialized entirely.

Aydricks looked wildly at the unmoving peddler, back at the remaining governors.

Wim saw more faces appear, and another face flicker out. *The same man . . .*

“Stop him, Aydricks!” The woman's voice rose. “He'll ruin us. He's altering the comm codes, killing the tie-up!”

“I can’t cut him off!”

“He’s into my link now, I’m losing con—” The red-haired ghost disappeared.

“Stop him, Aydricks, or we’ll burn out Fyffe!”

“Jagged! Look out!” Wim struggled against his invisible bonds as he saw the governor reach with grim resolution for the colored metal globe on his desk. He knew Aydricks meant to bash in the peddler’s skull, and the helpless body in the chair couldn’t stop him. “Mr. Jagged, wake up!” Desperately Wim stuck out his feet as Aydricks passed; the governor stumbled. Another face disappeared from the wall, and the lights went out. Wim slid from the chair, free and groping awkwardly for a knife he no longer had. Under the faltering gaze of the ghosts in the wall, Aydricks fumbled toward Jagit.

Wim grabbed at Aydricks’ feet just as the light returned, catching an ankle. The governor turned back, cursing, to kick at him, but Wim was already up, leaping away from a blow with the heavy statue.

“Aydricks, stop the peddler!”

Full of sudden fury, Wim gasped, “Damn you, you won’t stop it this time!” As the governor turned away Wim flung himself against the other’s back, staggering him, and hooked his bound hands over Aydricks’ head. Aydricks fought to pull him loose, dropping the globe as he threw himself backward to slam his attacker against the desk. Wim groaned as his backbone grated against the desk edge, and lost his balance. He brought his knee up as he fell; there was a sharp *crack* as the governor landed beside him, and lay still. Wim got to his knees; the ancient eyes stabbed him with accusation and fear. “No. Oh, *no*.” The eyes glazed.

A week after his seventeenth birthday, Wim Buckry had killed a ten-thousand-year-old man. And, unknowingly, helped to destroy an empire. The room was quiet; the last of the governors had faded from the wall. Wim got slowly to his feet, his mouth pulled back in a grin of revulsion. All the magic in the world hadn’t done this warlock any good. He moved to where Jagit still sat entranced, lifted his hands to pull the metal crown off and break the spell. And hesitated, suddenly unsure of himself. Would breaking the spell wake the peddler or kill him? They had to get out of here; but Jagit was somehow fighting the bewitchment, that much he understood, and if he stopped him now— His hands dropped, he stood irresolutely, waiting. And waiting.

His hands reached again for the metal band, twitching with indecision; jerked back as Jagit suddenly smiled at him. The dark eyes opened and the peddler sat forward, taking the metal band gently from his own head with a sigh. “I’m glad you waited. You’ll probably never know how glad.” Wim’s grin became real, and relieved.

Jagit got unsteadily to his feet, glanced at Aydricks' body and shook his head; his face was haggard. "Said you might be a help, didn't I?" Wim stood phlegmatically while the peddler who was as old as Sharn itself unfastened the cords on his raw wrists. "I'd say our business is finished. You ready to get out of here? We don't have much time."

Wim started for the door in response, opened it, and came face to face with the unsummoned guard standing in the hall. His fist connected with the gaping jaw; the guard's knees buckled and he dropped to the floor, unconscious. Wim picked up the guard's rifle as Jagit appeared beside him, motioning him down the dim hallway.

"Where is everybody?"

"Let's hope they're home in bed; it's four-thirty in the morning. There shouldn't be any alarms."

Wim laughed giddily. "This's a sight easier than getting away from the Borks!"

"We're not away yet; we may be too late already. Those faces on the wall were trying to drop a—piece of sun on Fyffe. I think I stopped them, but I don't know for sure. If it wasn't a total success, I don't want to find out the hard way." He led Wim back down the wide stairway, into the empty hall where petitioners had gathered during the day. Wim started across the echoing floor but Jagit called him back, peering at something on the wall; they went down another flight into a well of darkness, guided by the peddler's magic light. At the foot of the stairs the way was blocked by a door, solidly shut. Jagit looked chagrined, then suddenly the beam of his light shone blue; he flashed it against a metal plate set in the door. The door slid back and he went through it.

Wim followed him, into a cramped, softly glowing cubicle nearly filled by three heavily padded seats around a peculiar table. Wim noticed they seemed to be bolted to the floor, and suddenly felt claustrophobic.

"Get into a seat, Wim. Thank God I was right about this tower being a ballistic exit. Strap in, because we're about to use it." He began to push lighted buttons on the table before him.

Wim fumbled with the restraining straps, afraid to wonder what the peddler thought they were doing, as a heavy inner door shut the room off from the outside. Why weren't they out of the building, running? How could this— Something pressed him down into the seat cushions like a gentle, insistent hand. His first thought was of another trap; but as the pres-sure continued, he realized this was something new. And then, glancing up past Jagit's intent face, he saw that instead of

blank walls, they were now surrounded by the starry sky of night. He leaned forward—and below his feet was the town of Fyffe, shrinking away with every heartbeat, disappearing into the greater darkness. He saw what the eagle saw ... he was flying. He sat back again, feeling for the reassuring hardness of the invisible floor, only to discover suddenly that his feet no longer touched it. There was no pressure bearing him down now, there was nothing at all. His body drifted against the restraining straps, lighter than a bird. A small sound of incredulous wonder escaped him as he stared out at the unexpected stars.

And saw a brightness begin to grow at the opaque line of the horizon, spreading and creeping upward second by second, blotting out the stars with the fragile hues of dawn. The sun's flaming face thrust itself up past the edge of the world, making him squint, rising with arcane speed and uncanny brilliance into a sky that remained stubbornly black with night. At last the whole sphere of the sun was revealed, and continued to climb in the midnight sky while now Wim could see a thin streak of sky-blue stretched along the horizon, left behind with the citron glow of dawn still lighting its center. Above the line in darkness the sun wore the pointed crown of a star that dimmed all others, and below it he could see the world at the horizon's edge moving into day. And the horizon did not lie absolutely flat, but was bowing gently downward now at the sides . . . Below his feet was still the utter darkness that had swallowed Fyffe. He sighed.

"Quite a view." Jagit sat back from the glowing table, drifting slightly above his seat, a tired smile on his face.

"You see it too?" Wim said hoarsely.

The peddler nodded. "I felt the same way, the first time. I guess everyone always has. Every time civilization has gained space flight, it's been rewarded again by that sight."

Wim said nothing, unable to find the words. His view of the bowed horizon had changed subtly, and now as he watched there came a further change—the sun began, slowly but perceptibly, to move backward down its track, sinking once more toward the point of dawn that had given it birth. Or, he suddenly saw, it was they who were slipping, back down from the heights of glory into his world's darkness once more. Wim waited while the sun sank from the black and alien sky, setting where it had risen, its afterglow reabsorbed into night as the edge of the world blocked his vision again. He dropped to the seat of his chair, as though the world had reclaimed him, and the stars reappeared. A heavy lurch, like a blow, shook the cubicle, and then all motion stopped.

He sat still, not understanding, as the door slid back in darkness and a breath of cold, sharp air filled the tiny room. Beyond the doorway was darkness again, but he knew it was not the night of a building hallway.

Jagit fumbled wearily with the restraining straps on his seat. “Home the same day ...”

Wim didn't wait, but driven by instinct freed himself and went to the doorway. And jerked to a stop as he discovered they were no longer at ground level. His feet found the ladder, and as he stepped down from its bottom rung he heard and felt the gritty shifting of gravel. The only other sounds were the sigh of the icy wind, and water lapping. As his eyes adjusted they told him what his other senses already knew—that he was home. Not Darkwood Corners, but somewhere in his own cruelly beautiful Highlands. Fanged shadow peaks rose up on either hand, blotting out the stars, but more stars shone in the smooth waters of the lake; they shivered slightly, as he shivered in the cool breeze, clammy with sweat under his thin shirt. He stood on the rubble of a mountain pass somewhere above the treeline, and in the east the gash between the peaks showed pinkish-gray with returning day.

Behind him he heard Jagit, and turned to see the peddler climbing slowly down the few steps to the ground. From outside, the magician's chamber was the shape of a truncated rifle bullet. Jagit carried the guard's stolen rifle, leaning on it now like a walking stick. “Well, my navigation hasn't failed me yet.” He rubbed his eyes, stretched.

Wim recalled making a certain comment about flying over the moon on a broomstick, too long ago, and looked again at the dawn, this time progressing formally and peacefully up a lightening sky. “We flew here. Didn't we, Mr. Jagged?” His teeth chattered. “Like a bird. Only ... we f-flew right off the world.” He stopped Jawed by his own revelation. For a moment a lifetime of superstitious dread cried that he had no right to know of the things he had seen, or to believe— The words burst out in a defiant rush. “That's it. Right off the world. And...and it's all true: I heard how the world's round like a stone. It must be true, how there's other worlds,' that's what you said back there, with people just like here: I seen it, the sun's like all them other stars, only it's bigger . . .” He frowned. “It's—closer? I—”

Jagit was grinning, his teeth showed white in his beard. “Magician, first-class.”

Wim looked back up into the sky. “If that don't beat all—” he said softly. Then, struck by more practical matters, he said, “What about them ghosts? Are they going to come after us?”

Jagit shook his head. “No. I think I laid those ghosts to rest pretty permanently. I changed the code words in their communications system, a good part of it is totally unusable now. Their computer net is broken up, and their space de-fense system must be out for good, because they didn't destroy Fyffe. I'd say the World Government is finished; they don't know it yet, and they may not go for a few hundred years, but they'll go in the end. Their grand 'stability' machine has a monkey wrench in its works at last . . . They won't be around to use their magic in these parts any more, I expect.”

Wim considered, and then looked hopeful. “You going to take over back there, Mr. Jagged? Use your magic on them Flatlanders? We could—”

But the peddler shook his head. “No, I’m afraid that just doesn’t interest me, Wim. All I really wanted was to break the hold those other magician sorts had on this world; and I’ve done that already.”

“Then . . . you mean you really did all that, you risked our necks, for nothing? Like you said, because it just wasn’t right, for them to use their magic on folks who couldn’t stop them? You did it for us—and you didn’t want *anything*? You must be crazy.”

Jagit laughed. “Well, I wouldn’t say that. I told you before: All I want is to be able to see new sights, and sell my wares. And the World Government was bad for my business.”

Wim met the peddler’s gaze, glanced away undecided. “Where you going to go now?” He half expected the answer to be, Back beyond the sky.

“Back to bed.” Jagit left the ballistic vehicle, and began to climb the rubbly slope up from the lake; he gestured for Wim to follow.

Wim followed, breathing hard in the thin air, until they reached a large fall of boulders before a sheer granite wall. Only when he was directly before it did he realize they had come on the entrance to a cave hidden by the rocks. He noticed that the opening was oddly symmetrical; and there seemed to be a rainbow shimmering across the darkness like mist. He stared at it uncomprehendingly, rubbing his chilled hands.

“This is where I came from, Wim. Not from the East, as you figured, or from space as the governor thought.” The peddler nodded toward the dark entrance. “You see, the World Government had me entirely misplaced—they assumed I could only have come from somewhere outside their control. But actually I’ve been here on earth all the time; this cave has been my home for fifty-seven thousand years. There’s a kind of magic in there that puts me into an ‘enchanted’ sleep for five or ten thousand years at a time here. And meanwhile the world changes. When it’s changed enough, I wake up again and go out to see it. That’s what I was doing in Sharn, ten thousand years ago; I brought art works from an earlier, primitive era; they were popular, and I got to be something of a celebrity. That way I got access to my new items of trade—my Sharnish magics—to take somewhere else, when things changed again.

“That was the problem with the World Government—they interrupted the natural cycles of history that I depend on, and it threw me out of synch. They’d made stability such a science they might have kept things static for fifty or a hundred

thousand years. Ten or fifteen thousand, and I could have come back here and outwaited them, but fifty thousand was just too long. I had to get things moving again, or I'd have been out of business."

Wim's imagination faltered at the prospect of the centuries that separated him from the peddler, that separated the peddler from everything that had ever been a part of the man, or ever could be. What kind of belief did it take, what sort of a man, to face that alone? And what losses or rewards to drive him to it? There must be something, that made it all worthwhile—

"There have been more things *done*, Wim, than the descendants of Sharn have *dreamed*. I am surprised at each new peak I attend . . . I'll be leaving you now. You were a better guide than I expected; I thank you for it. I'd say Darkwood Corners is two or three days journey northwest from here."

Wim hesitated, half afraid, half longing. "Let me go with you—?"

Jagit shook his head. "There's only room for one, from here on. But you've seen a few more wonders than most people already; and I think you've learned a few things, too. There are going to be a lot of opportunities for putting it all to use right here, I'd say. You helped change your world, Wim—what are you going to do for an encore?"

Wim stood silent with indecision; Jagit lifted the rifle, tossed it to him.

Wim caught the gun, and a slow smile, filled with possibilities, grew on his face.

"Good-bye, Wim."

"Good-bye, Mr. Jagged." Wim watched the peddler move away toward his cave.

As he reached the entrance, Jagit hesitated, looking back. "And Wim—there are more wonders in this cave than you've ever dreamed of. I haven't been around this long because I'm an easy mark. Don't be tempted to grave-rob." He was out-lined momentarily by rainbow as he passed into the darkness.

Wim lingered at the entrance, until at last the cold forced him to move and he picked his way back down the sterile gray detritus of the slope. He stopped again by the mirror lake, peering back past the magician's bullet-shaped vehicle at the cliff face. The rising sun washed it in golden light, but now somehow he really wasn't even sure where the cave had been.

He sighed, slinging his rifle over his shoulder, and began the long walk home.

* * * *

Lord Buckry sighed as memories receded, and with them the gnawing desire to seek out the peddler's cave again; the desire that had been with him for thirty years. There lay the solutions to every problem he had ever faced, but he had never tested Jagged's warning. It wasn't simply the risk, though the risk was both deadly and sufficient—it was the knowledge that however much he gained in this life, it was ephemeral, less than nothing, held up to a man whose life spanned half that of humanity itself. Within the peddler's cave lay the impossible, and that was why he would never try to take it for his own.

Instead he had turned to the possible and made it fact, depending on himself, and on the strangely clear view of things the peddler had left him. He had solved every problem alone, because he had had to, and now he would just have to solve this one alone too.

He stared down with sudden possessive pride over the townfolk in the square, his city of Fyffe now ringed by a sturdy wall ... So the West and the South were together, for one reason, and one alone. It balanced the scales precariously against plenty of old hatreds, and if something were to tip them back again— A few rumors, well-placed, and they'd be at each other's throats. Perhaps he wouldn't even need to raise an army. They'd solve that problem for him. And afterward—

Lord Buckry began to smile. He'd always had a hankering to visit the sea.

AFTERWORD— THE PEDDLER'S APPRENTICE

This is the only collaboration I've attempted so far; it was the second story I sold, after "Tin Soldier." It was conceived by my first husband, Vernor Vinge, who is also a writer, and who had written about half of the story and then gotten stuck on it I'd read the fragment before I'd begun to write seriously, and had liked it and wished that he'd find the inspiration to write the rest of it But then he got a job teaching mathematics at San Diego State University and didn't have time to do any writing for a number of years. Meanwhile, he had been encouraging me to take my own writing seriously, and I had written "Tin Soldier" and sold it I was casting around for something to work on next, and he offered me the novelette fragment of "The Peddler's Appren-tice." He said that he felt my writing style and inclina-tions seemed more suited to writing the second half of it than his did; the fact that he had that much confidence in my ability was something that did a great deal for my own confidence as a writer.

I began writing the second half, attempting to match my writing style to his style, which is basically sparer and more straightforward than my own. (I find that if I read enough of someone else's work, I can begin to pick up their style

almost instinctively, rather like doing voice imitation—which is something I have no ability at It’s a skill that can be both useful and dangerous, depending on what books you happen to be reading. I have to be very careful about reading other people’s work when I’m writing something of my own.) I felt that I had a responsibility to maintain both Vernor’s tone and his intentions about how the story should develop, since it was his idea in the first place. Generally he was quite pleased, although we had a number of disagreements at the very end of the story, where I kept insisting that I had made exactly the point he’d wanted made, and he kept insisting that I hadn’t; eventually we both agreed about what was really said on the page.

I rewrote the rough draft of his half and mine to make everything consistent and sent the finished novel-ette to Analog, which had published a number of Vernor’s stories previously. They bought this one too, and we were both delighted; but they ignored our request that our names be listed separately, and lumped us together like a nightclub act. We both felt that if I was going to seriously pursue a writing career, I needed to keep my identity independent, even in a collaboration. (The story was chosen for two Best SF of the Year anthologies, and both got our separate names correct)

A note for the curious reader: I took up writing the story at the point where Wim realizes that “Mr. Jag-ged” is posing as Axi Bork, and has just gotten rid of the entire Bork gang.

Vernor had originally envisioned “The Peddler’s Apprentice” as one of a series of stories about Jagit Katchetooriantz, the trader through time. It’s quite possible that one or the other of us (or even both) may do more of his strange life history someday.

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