

OF OREICHALKOS FORGED

In Victorian times Warren would no doubt have been a shady purveyor of mummies and Roman statues of doubtful ancestry. But nowadays all things classical were quite passé, while precolumbian pottery and ancient eskimo carvings were definitely in. Warren was willing to provide them in any required quantity. His clients seldom had reason to complain. None of them were archeologists.

He studied the knife the girl had just unwrapped. Leafshaped, almost a foot long it shone a particularly rich golden red. Burmese gold? He hefted the artifact. No, copper at most. Not even the customary core of lead to add weight.

He raised his head. "Looks good. Did you forge it yourself?" The girl frowned, pursed her lips. She had the finely sculpted face and flawless complexion of a Hindu princess Warren thought. "It isn't a forgery!" Her voice was thin and high, not pleasing at all.

Warren slowly shook his head. "Not a forgery then. All right. Perhaps then you would care to explain some... ah, let us call them anomalies?" He placed his index finger on the sculptured grip. "This here. An octopus. Nice clean lines. Late Minoan I would guess. Still, the shape of the blade is pure Celtic, while those decorations... well, with some fantasy one could call them Aztec. Several thousand years between them. Too much." He put the knife back on the cotton wrappings. "Good solid work, mind you, but criminally sloppy in the details."

The girl licked her lips. "You won't buy it?"

"No, not this. But any work you care to make on commission, work more disciplined, well... You have the talent. This ceremonial knife..." he tested the edge once more, "for ceremonial it must have been, much to dull to cut. This knife, it has an authentic feel of age." He smiled. "It would almost seduce me believe in some still undiscovered culture. Can you get me more?"

The girl nodded. "Yes, but they'll look just the same. I'm a diver. I really found them."

"I see. Care to tell me where?"

"A wreck. Its holds were filled with tradegoods. All kind of things."

"Never make you story too complicated. An exiled oil sheik forced to sell his heirlooms, ok. An old Yaqui sorcerer, why not? But look, this knife is what archeologists call virgin. Like new. Salt water is powerful corrosive. Copper won't last more than a few centuries."

"It isn't copper." She leaned forwards, her face a feral mask, all sharp planes, the eyes slits. "It's oreichalkos, you fool!"

He almost sent her away. Like most experts he didn't suffer fools gladly. But the knife, it was just too perfect: it had an inner consistency, a realness, for all its amateurish confusion of styles.

So he made the effort and smiled. He had had a lot of practise: his smile contained no hint of sarcasm.

"Oreichalkos. So your ship must have come from Atlantis." Put a bit of wonder in your voice.

OF OREICHALKOS FORGED

In Victorian times Warren would no doubt have been a shady purveyor of mummies and Roman statues of doubtful ancestry. But nowadays all things classical were quite passé, while precolumbian pottery and ancient eskimo carvings were definitely in. Warren was willing to provide them in any required quantity. His clients seldom had reason to complain. None of them were archeologists.

He studied the knife the girl had just unwrapped. Leafshaped, almost a foot long it shone a particularly rich golden red. Burmese gold? He hefted the artifact. No, copper at most. Not even

the customary core of lead to add weight.

He raised his head. "Looks good. Did you forge it yourself?" The girl frowned, pursed her lips. She had the finely sculpted face and flawless complexion of a Hindu princess Warren thought. "It isn't a forgery!" Her voice was thin and high, not pleasing at all.

Warren slowly shook his head. "Not a forgery then. All right. Perhaps then you would care to explain some... ah, let us call them anomalies?" He placed his index finger on the sculptured grip. "This here. An octopus. Nice clean lines. Late Minoan I would guess. Still, the shape of the blade is pure Celtic, while those decorations... well, with some fantasy

one could call them Aztec. Several thousand years between them. Too much." He put the knife back on the cotton wrappings. "Good solid work, mind you, but criminally sloppy in the details."

The girl licked her lips. "You won't buy it?"

"No, not this. But any work you care to make on commission, work more disciplined, well... You have the talent. This ceremonial knife..." he tested the edge once more, "for ceremonial it must have been, much too dull to cut. This knife, it has an authentic feel of age." He smiled. "It would almost seduce me believe in some still undiscovered culture. Can you get me more?"

The girl nodded. "Yes, but they'll look just the same. I'm a diver. I really found them."

"I see. Care to tell me where?"

"A wreck. Its holds were filled with tradegoods. All kind of things."

"Never make you story too complicated. An exiled oil sheik forced to sell his heirlooms, ok. An old Yaqui sorcerer, why not? But look, this knife is what archeologists call virgin. Like new. Salt water is powerful corrosive. Copper won't last more than a few centuries."

"It isn't copper." She leaned forwards, her face a feral mask, all sharp planes, the eyes slits. "It's oreichalkos, you fool!"

He almost sent her away. Like most experts he didn't suffer fools gladly. But the knife, it was just too perfect: it had an inner consistency, a realness, for all its amateurish confusion of styles.

So he made the effort and smiled. He had had a lot of practise: his smile contained no hint of sarcasm.

"Oreichalkos. So your ship must have come from Atlantis." Put a bit of wonder in your voice, but don't overdo it. He dredged a quote from his memory. "Orichalcum, the mountain copper with the shine of gold, most imperishable."

Now he had her. Quote madame Balvatsky and each of those true believers would gladly sell you their soul for pennies.

The girl hesitated. "Mind you, I don't claim that it was an Atlantean ship. It could have just been a trader from Mu. Or HiBrazil."

"Of course." Mu and HiBrazil, god forbid! She probably believed in flying saucers and Velikovsky too. People like her always went the whole way.

He took the the knife once more in his hand. It had a good balance, an an almost sensual rightness. Perhaps I'll keep it myself.

"Fifty pound."

"Fifty pound..." she repeated in a low voice. She frowned. He almost could see her calculations. The cost of the materials, the time spent. "I thought that from Atlantis itself..." She bit her lower

lip. "You get much stuff from the ancient countries?" For a fleeting moment he didn't like himself at all. His father had been a devout Catholic. It was like selling the old man a splinter from the True Cross.

"Look, this here, I like it. I like it very much. But I'm just not sure if there's a market for this kind of stuff." He opened his wallet and spread five ten pound bills. Nothing worked as well as seeing the money itself. He always paid contant. "Come back in about two weeks. Then I'll know more." He gestured to the money. "Take it. See it as an investment. If this works out I can pay you more the next time." He hesitated. "Two or three times more."

"All right." She took the bills as he had known she would. Her highheeled shoes had once been quite expensive, but now they were dull and scratched and she didn't look like the kind of girl who would gladly wear any but the best.

"I mean it," he said. "Come back. I'm almost sure I can give you a better deal the next time."

"Sure." She didn't sound too enthusiastic, but he knew she would return. Those who skirt the edges of poverty haven't a whole lot of choice.

For almost a quarter of an hour he fondled the strange knife, tracing the graceful curves deeply incised in the blade. No doubt it was a fascinating piece of work. Of art even. Though he

hesitated to use that word, knowing fully well that art was mostly fashion and that at least a quarter of all masterpieces in musea had been forged. Put out some feelers, he decided. There were lot of occult societies nowadays. Some of the members would perhaps be willing, and wealthy enough, to purchase a true artifact from long lost Atlantis. From the ancient countries. He must remember that term. It had a certain ring.

He wondered if the Theosophical Society still existed. Most of the original members would be quite old by now. And probably not inclined to be critical at all. Yes, sell it to one of those octagenarians as a favor. Tell him that it's a secret talisman of great potency.

Not to be exposed to the sceptical eyes of so called experts.

Gerald Belfour worked for a huge metallurgical combine on the outskirts of Liverpool. The combine was slowly losing its edge and beginning the long decline into genteel poverty. As one of his colleagues had once described it "Our knowhow is turning in knewhow". The whole industry was feverishly retooling for ceramics and the demand for the wonder metals of a generation ago was taking a nosedive.

After the third cut in his salary Gerald was more than ready to use the laboratories and time of his employer for clients of his own. Warren didn't mind to pay generously for expert

advice: it wouldn't do at all to have a golden broche of a good customer suddenly showing the telltale green of copperoxide. He had to be sure that his gold was real gold, his silver the pure stuff. The shape was often a lie, but he insisted on his materials being first grade. Belfour spread a long graph with cryptic trceries on his workbench.

"Is it all right?" Warren asked, his voice so soft it was almost a whisper. "I mean coming in the middle of the day? Won't nobody notice?"

Belfour shrugged. "For all they know you're a legitimate client. My supervisor is sick three quarters of the week and looking for another job the rest of the time." He indicated the row of empty

benches. "I'm one of the few who still believes in nine to five. I guess the Boss knows, but you don't go around killing killing the last chickens that're still laying eggs." He placed a finger on the graph. "Back to your copper. It is and it isn't."

"Isn't what?"

"Copper. Heat it and you get the right spectral lines. Copper all right. Astonishing pure. Should be soft, but I had to use a diamond to take shavings." He grinned. "You don't have to look so mournful! You need a loupe to see the scratches. So far so good, though one seldom encounters a metal that pure. The costs of refining..." He tapped on the knife. "To produce this amount of

chemically pure copper it would set you back... thousands of pounds? Perhaps much more. If anybody had any use for copper so pure. Now the next thing I did was trying some reagents. It simply refused to react. Not even with fluoride. As if it had no free electrons at all. Yet it melts at the right temperature." He scowled, abruptly no longer amused. "Where the hell did you buy this? From somebody who plundered a dragon hoard?"

"A rather confused young lady. She called it oreichalkos."

"Orichalcum?" For a moment he looked blank. " Ah, I get the joke!" He grinned, his misgivings forgotten. "Plato's wonderous mountain copper."

He gazed at the knife. "Yet, you know, according to my tests it could very well be oreichalkos.

George, I make you a deal. You get me an ounce of this stuff and I work a year for free. All right?"

Warren shrugged. "Good."

In the door opening Belfour called him back. "Hey, George?"

"Yes?"

"Don't let them catch you. This stuff was made by some very clever people. A multinational at least. The military perhaps and I don't mean our military."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Warren could think of several extremely useful things one could do with never tarnishing copper. Its very

inertness made it a beautiful substitute for real gold: to most acids and solvents it would react exactly the same. And the color was in truth more like gold than copper.

By the end of the week Warren was a paying member of no less than nine occult societies. One of these, DRUIDS FOR WORLDPEACE, he particularly liked. Perhaps he would continue his membership when the market was sated. Exept for their erroneous belief that one could resurrect a system of belief which had been declining even in Roman times they were a pleasant bunch of people.

He showed the knife to several of the more affluent members of the less rational cults. Each time the reaction

was all he could have hoped for. He didn't even have to go into his spiel about an 'incredibly ancient amulet of enormous potency'. The members did that themselves. A retired judge offered him two thousand pounds. To his own astonishment Warren refused. And continued to refuse when the man went as high as ten thousand. Warren, who had never felt the slightest inclination to hold on to any of the pseudoartifacts which were his stockintrade found it suddenly impossible to part with the knife. It was a very bad sign: somehow he was starting to believe in his own lies. A mistake no conartist should ever make.

She returned after only eight days.

The girl still wore the same highheeled shoes, which somehow made Warren think of arterial blood. Though he hadn't the slightest idea of what arterial blood looked like. Her face had lost some of its color and he wondered if it had after all only been the result of a sunbank she could no longer afford. She still reminded him of a Hindu princess, but this time one who had fallen on truly evil times. Abducted by pirates and misused in several unmentionable ways. There was red scratch on her forehead and her lipstick was hastily applied and slightly askew.

He found himself leaning forwards in eagerness, his hands trembling. This wouldn't do, he told himself sternly. This

wouldn't do at all.

"Good morning, miss. Did you perhaps bring anything new for me?" There. His voice sounded quite normal, though his choice of words was a bit tacky.

"It wasn't enough," she answered, her voice dull. "It's a long way from the coast. I have to hire a boat. My air. It all costs money."

"I quite agree," Warren said. He opened his wallet. "Let me put your mind at ease. There is a market for your kind of material. A small market, but a steady one I hope." She stared at the bills. "You're going to pay me three hundred pounds for every item I bring?" She didn't sound hopeful, only

incredulous.

Warren nodded. "But only if they are of the same quality as the knife."

"Hey, there must be thousands of them!" She suddenly sounded like a very young girl. "I can..."

Warren raised his hand. "Now one shouldn't get greedy. The same quality. Remember?"

"That's no problem! I have some stuff here." She upended her bag, shook. A plastic bag, tightly wrapped in cellotape, crashed on Warren's desk. He noticed the rich gleam of that strange copper, the muted glow of silver, perhaps even of platinum. "I think it's of even better quality."

"Good!"

She wrestled with the recalcitrant cellotape and finally, with a grunt of exasperation, used her teeth on the plastic.

There were nine items, each exquisite. A copper necklage in the form of a snake, each segment articulated, the scales fastened with hairthin threads. Two pieces of red glass, the exact color of a real ruby, refracted the light to baleful red glow. Somehow the girl had been able to suggest slit pupils, pupils moreover that fixed the beholder no matter how the head was turned.

"Good. Very good," Warren said, completely at loss for words. For the first time in years he wanted to sound sincere, to praise this excellent work, to

convey his appreciation. To his dismay he was no longer able to be that direct.

All those lies, he thought. All those lies.

He lifted a pendant of slightly green glass. In the nebulous depths a silver bull cavorted, his head wreathed with flowers. Minoan, he thought, except that the Minoans never used glass. Or at least not in that way.

He felt a twinge of regret that he had forgotten so much. Warren had started as a honest to god archeologist. After a few years he had tired of the game of publish or perish, of the digs in pebbly deserts where the autochtons once more heartily believed in the extermination of all unbelievers.

This is what I should have found. Not one more mess of broken armed throwaway statuettes of Tanit, no clumps of shapeless coins. Beautiful objects. Not the refuse, but the best a culture has to offer.

It took him a real effort to recall that these inviting gateways to the far past were bogus. Fakes.

"I can use them all." He certainly could. "I hope you don't mind taking a cheque? I don't have that much money on me," he lied.

"No, that's all right."

He opened his cheque book. "Your name?"

"Linda Weber." Definitely no Hindu princess then. A pity.

"Address?" He recognised the name. A village on the coast, which he had visited years ago. Cornwall, Devon? He had a vague recollection of a huge waterfall, a narrow gorge. The distant lights of Wales at night. And yes, the fishing at sea had been very poor.

"There you are."

She is certainly a diligent worker, he thought, admiring a palmsized mirror of polished obsidian. Seventy tiny faces bordered the glossy oval. Some of them seemed vaguely Egyptian, though the inscriptions were pure Toltec. Splendid! A telling argument for the clearly nonsensical notion that the Toltecs had learned to built their pyramids under the wise guidance of dynastic Egypt.

Such a lot of work in only eight days. He smiled. She must have stayed up late and worked like a horse. A divinely inspired horse. Once again he felt the strong urge to keep these objects himself, a squirrellike greed which was quite alien to his nature. He shook his head. It was impossibly that she had fashioned all these wonders in slightly more than a week.

She must have had them already. Or she was fronting for someone else. Several artists perhaps?

He reached for the telephone and dialed a number he had only used two times before.

It took the detective agency three days to report back. Yes, Linda Weber lived

in Linton. A single furnished room and poorly furnished at that. A former school teacher, now out of job. Probably permanently. Discharged because of, yes, religious proselytizing. Whatever that means, but it made some people quite angry. Taught History and Geography. I would have liked to sit in on one of her classes, Warren thought. Probably campaigned for equal time for Atlantis and Mu.

No, she owned nothing like a workshop. No lathe. No ceramic oven. Not even a hammer. Yes, it's true that she dives. A regular waterrat. Aqualung. A quite expensive sport for an unemployed teacher. Spent at least an hour each day underwater. Half a mile

out of the coast.

Warren thanked the man and assured him he now knew all he needed. He stared at the misty silhouet of the closed steelworks. Suddenly the grey towers seemed utterly alien, bizarre. Across his minds eye a trireme moved, the oars manned by rowers not quite human. The sky shone a brilliant blue, mediterranean azure like the tiles of Isthara's Gate. He broke the spell with some effort.

The road to Linton wound like a spastic snake through the mountains, vertiginous drops on all sides. Half the road signs were hidden in the undergrowth or undecipherable. Soon pure enertia would turn the whole British Isle in a green paradise again,

Warren mused. Despite all our acid rains and radioactive spills.

Three miles from Linton his gearbox produced a bloodfreezing rattle and he immediately stopped his car. He had to push the car for seventy meters before he found a safe place to park. Warren thanked whatever gods there were that the road went downhill: his reverse gear no longer functioned and the road was too narrow to turn.

Warren studied the greasy engine for half an hour, leafing through the instruction book. None of the parts bore the slightest resemblance to the pictures provided. The internal combustion engine he had always considered one of the things man was never meant to know,

an attitude he now bitterly regretted.

A full hour later the tractor he had cursed for all of two miles and had finally passed with an angry hoot of his claxon turned the corner. With a sheepish smile he raised his thumb.

He stowed his rented aqualung in the wardrobe of his hotelroom. Feeling ridiculous he donned mirror shades and a raincoat. Despite the slow drizzle it was summer after all and he hoped his mirror shades would be considered an eccentric expression of his holiday mood. He inspected himself in the mirror. He looked like nothing so much as an aged junkie come to haunt the places of his long lost innocence.

He put the mirror shades back in his

travel bag. It was the very opposite of a disguise. He would just have to hope he wouldn't run into Linda. She probably wouldn't even recognize him: she had only seen him in his office, clad in an expensive suit. With a little luck he had already become stereotyped in her mind. Big businessmen don't wear shabby blue raincoats with "I love Devon". Call it The Third Law of George Warren. Now to find some kind of garage.

There wasn't one, the single service station had closed years ago. You might try the next village but no, I'm afraid they went broke too.

Warren sighed. This could well become a quite expensive excursion. Late that night, the rain no longer a

sleepy patter but a true deluge, he passed Linda's apartment. It was a former hotel, the white paint cracked and peeling. behind one window shone a soft yellow light. He walked swiftly past, wondering what new treasures she was just now inspecting.

The next morning the sky shone a washedout blue, the sun a pale coin of a certainly debased currency. He rented a motorboat for the rest of the week, paying a truly astronomical deposit for a vessel which was little more than a drifting hulk. With the assistance of an amused teenager he was able to start the outboard motor. Warren circled the bay two times before setting out to sea. In the distance several sailboats passed, their

sails a clear plastic embossed with numbers of scintillating tinfoil. They moved with a dreamlike slowness, graceful insects of unknown heraldic significance. Warren checked his aqualung, the pressure of his tanks, the functioning of the automat. He had dived before, exploring the rather disappointing ruins of Nan Matol. Compared to the alga infested waters of the atoll this sea was crystal clear.

It was half past two when a small motorboat of white polyester cleared the concrete piers of the tiny harbor. He was so sure it must be Linda he didn't even bother to take his binoculars. The boat veered in his general direction, passed him at a distance of two hundred meters

to halt next to a buoy, een bobbing green fleck at the limits of his vision. Warren took his compact binocular from its dull black case and focussed on the distant boat. A slight pressure on the blue stud and he heard the faint whir of the electromotor. It was a recent invention, Japanese of course: once locked on a target it kept its orientation no matter how the hands of the observer trembled. Warren had a vague recollection that it was done with a miniature gyroscope and a free floating mirror. He loved those absurds products of hightech though he seldom understood them. In some ways those gadgets reminded him of his own tradeware: they had the authority of imminent future, his had the

ponderous dignity of times past.

He rotated the zoomlens all the way to 30 x. The boat ballooned until it filled his whole field of vision. Perhaps this gadget was more than a simple toy: the picture was amazingly sharp and absolutely steady.

Linda stood in the middle of the boat, fastening the straps of her airtanks. The tanks were a quite hideous dayglow orange. Clever girl he thought, feeling absurdly pleased. The second rule of diving: make sure you're visible. Too many divers favored a completely black outfit, which was both elegant and sexy, but which ignored certain very real dangers. The first rule, never dive alone, was impractical when one was looting a

treasure trove. A sudden movement, graceful like the dive of a seal, and Linda was gone. The buoy dipped and rose in the swell with a metronomic regularity which was quite hypnotic. He searched the heaving seascape, alert for bubbles. Two times he thought to find them but each time it was only a patch of foam.

She rose twenty minutes later, slick and black, the day glow orange tanks hurting his eyes. Linda tugged on a line. Twenty seconds later a bunched net cleared the gunwhale. The noticed the glint of copper. A spark of pure blue flashed.

So she really takes them from a wreck. He had flirted with the idea that she had

been telling the simple truth, but never more than flirted. It was hard to believe and he in fact he still didn't. He found himself constructing the most involuted rationalisations: a derelict with forged artifacts. She put them there herself, to keep them safe.

Stop, he ordered himself, stop right now! It was a thing that went all the way back to his childhood: an imitation of his mother. It was even her voice he mentally heard, but it was still effective: it put his wildly gyrating thoughts on hold.

I'll go down. Inspect the ship myself.

Linda descended two more times before she untied the ship and started for the shore. He waited until she was well

past the piers before he started his outboard motor.

He followed the cable of the buoy down reasoning she would have anchored it right above ship. The water turned a beautiful bottlegreen before the bottom came into view. The clarity was excellent: at least twenty meter. He hovered above a sloping shelf of grey rock with pockets of startling white sand. He searched the bottom, waiting for the slow emergence of an outline, a suddenly meaningful shape. It was a familiar process, a gradual adjustment to new surroundings one couldn't force. Soon a shapeless mass of waving seaweed would coalesce into a broken amphora, the curving outline of a beam.

Twenty minutes later it still hadn't happened. He searched in a slowly expanding spiral, all his senses alert. There was no trace of a wreck, even the stretches of sand seemed undisturbed.

The bottom was a smooth expanse, almost scoured clean, the seaweed confined to three, four sparse clumps. No place to hide even a partially decomposed wreck.

The sound gradually intruded, a low purring that slowly grew into a loud throbbing. The sound of an outboard motor.

He glanced to the shifting mirror of the surface.

The throbbing abruptly halted. Next to the keel of his boat drifted an oval of

white polyester.

Oh, oh. Company. It wasn't hard to guess who.

He peeled his mask off, stowed his tanks below his bench. His ears burned which hadn't happened to him since his teens. He felt unable to meet her eyes.

"I saw the flash of your binoculars," she said. "Like in a thriller. Also the weather isn't exactly fit for sunbathing and you brought no fishing tackle. It was all a bit too obvious. Especially when you went to the marker the moment you could no longer see me."

"I understand," he muttered.

"Didn't find anything, did you?" It wasn't exactly a question.

"There is no ship."

She laughed. It was the first time her voice matched the beauty of her face. "But there is. There is!"

He turned his head because it was absurd to pretend any longer he hadn't finished arranging his gear. She didn't smile at all when their eyes met. For a moment he found her face utterly strange, unreadable, because he refused to recognize the expression. Then it hit him. Pity. The girl pitied him.

"There's a quote that perfectly describes people like you," she said. "O ye of little faith..." She raised her fists, slowly relaxed her fingers. For long seconds he saw nothing. Empty hands. Quite empty.

"What...?" He blinked. There was a

shimmering, a flickering as if water moved in her palms, as if something was struggling to take shape.

In the left hand a silver coin gleamed, the profile of some wise, curly bearded king hauntingly clear.

"See," she whispered. Her right hand held a spiral of delicate jade, the translucent windings shaved and worked into an gossammer filigree. There was a moment of utter disorientation, a realignment of his short term memory and he suddenly knew that he had seen the jewels all the time. They had been lying on the palms of the girl from the moment she opened her fingers. But he had somehow refused to see them.

Hysterical blindness. The term

sounded right. Hysterical, selfinduced blindness. He exhaled, a shuddering sigh. "They... they are excellent. High grade." He clenched his teeth to stop further inane remarks. "You... There was no ship. I searched."

"Of course you did!" Her voice was edged with exasperation. "Of course you did." She smiled. "Have a look now."

The visibly must have improved, was his first thought. For he could see now all the way to the bottom. The wreck seemed to emerge from the dancing ripples of sunlight, an immense jumbled oval of torn planking, the broken beams. A porcelain amphora leaned against a rock, chests of black iron stood arraigned in long rows, their bronze

fastenings still secure.

"I... see."

"It is not so hard," she answered. "All you need is some belief."

"Or greed," she added thoughtfully.

He hauled his aqualung from the boat, set it with a rattling jar n the quay. He kneeled to test the knot of his mooring line once again. "I hope our agreement still holds?"

"Why?" The girl seemed genuinely surprized. "You have discovered my nasty little hoard. You can dive yourself. I have no claim or nothing. Right now nobody owns the wreck and I'm not going to tell the authorities. They would only take it all and put it in some stupid museum."

"Wouldn't be ethical," he mumbled, which wasn't the reason at all. If he never looked again there would be no wreck. Only empty shelving stone, white sand. In another three days he would believe it all a hallucination. Already he felt some buried part of mind starting to reason, to explain.

She shrugged. "Good, right. Our agreement still holds."

She probably doesn't believe me. Thinks I'll return with some monstrous dredge to suck it all up. Not for all the treasures of Montezuma.

"Hey, look!" she said in a pleased voice. He followed the direction of her finger. Three glowing pearls moved across the sky, trailing a daytime aurora

of swirling rainbow fire.

"What the hell..."

"Flying saucers," she said offhandedly. "I see them often." He felt no amazement, only a deep chilling apprehension. Which turned to helpless fear when he noticed that several tourist had seen the saucers too and gazed at the sky, nudging each other. It wasn't that the hallucination was shared, it was their amused delight, the total absence of surprise.

I see them often, she had said. Like all those people did.

I let her convince me, he thought. I followed her too far.

He knew himself as a man of few strong convictions, his enthusiasms at

best fleeting. Her belief is so much stronger than my own. I'm part of her crazy world now. A world of submerged continents, a world in which Egypt's pyramids were no mere tombs but Divine Wisdom coded in stone. Where perpetual motion probably worked if you tried hard enough.

"Hey," he said, "hey Linda..." He tried very hard to keep the whine out of his voice, but didn't completely succeed. "Hey girl, how do I get home?"

"There's a bus at half past four," she replied. She was already starting to ignore him. As if he was a crank, someone not quite in tune with reality.

"See you later," he managed. She nodded.

Warren stalked to the busstop. There would at least be a bus. Busses were part of Linda's world.

He felt the beginning of a crushing loneliness.