

What Good is a Glass Dagger



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WHAT GOOD IS A GLASS DAGGER?

I

Twelve thousand years before the birth of Christ, in an age when miracles were somewhat more common, a warlock used an ancient secret to save his life.

In later years he regretted that. He had kept the secret of the Warlock's Wheel for several normal lifetimes. The demon-sword Glirendree and its stupid barbarian captive would have killed him, no question of that But no mere

demon could have been as dangerous as that secret.

Now it was out, spreading like ripples on a pond. The battle between Glirendree and the Warlock was too good a tale not to tell. Soon no man would call himself a magician who did not know that magic could be used up. So simple, so dangerous a secret. The wonder was that nobody had noticed it before.

A year after the battle with Glirendree, near the end of a summer day, Aran the Peacemonger came to Shayl Village to steal the Warlock's Wheel.

Aran was a skinny eighteen-year-old,

lightly built His face was lean and long, with a pointed chin. His dark eyes peered out from under a prominent shelf of bone. His short, straight dark- hair dropped almost to his brows in a pronounced widow's peak. What he was was no secret; and anyone who touched hands with him would have known at once, for there was short fine hair on his palms. But had anyone known his mission, he would have been thought mad.

For the Warlock was a leader in the Sorcerer's Guild. It was known that he had a name; but no human throat could pronounce it. The shadow demon who had been his name-father had later been

imprisoned in tattooed runes on the Warlock's own back: an uncommonly dangerous bodyguard.

Yet Aran came well protected. The leather wallet that hung from his shoulder was old and scarred, and the seams were loose. By its look it held nuts and hard cheese and bread and almost no money. What it actually held was charms. Magic would serve him better than nuts and cheese, and Aran could feed himself as he traveled, at night.

He reached the Warlock's cave shortly after sunset. He had been told how to use his magic to circumvent the Warlock's safeguards. His need for magic implied

a need for voice and hands, so that Aran was forced to keep the human shape; and this made him doubly nervous. At moonrise he chanted the words he had been taught, and drew a live bat from his pouch and tossed it gently through the barred entrance to the cave.

The bat exploded into a mist of blood that drifted slant-wise across the stone floor. Aran's stomach lurched. He almost ran then; but he quelled his fear and followed it in, squeezing between the bars.

Those who had sent him had repeatedly diagrammed the cave for him. He could have robbed it blindfolded. He would

have preferred darkness to the flickering blue light from what seemed to be a captured lightning bolt tethered in the middle of the cavern. He moved quickly, scrupulously tracing what he had been told was a path of safety.

Though Aran had seen sorcerous tools in the training laboratory in the School for Mercantile Grammmaree in Atlantis, most of the Warlock's tools were unfamiliar. It was not an age of mass production. He paused by a workbench, wondering. Why would the Warlock be grinding a glass dagger?

But Aran found a tarnish-blackened metal disc hanging above the workbench, and the runes inscribed

around its rim convinced him that it was what he had come for. He took it down and quickly strapped it against his thigh, leaving his hands free to fight if need be. He was turning to go, when a laughing voice spoke out of the air.

"Put that down, you mangy son of a bitch-"

Aran converted to wolf.

Agony seared his thigh!

In human form Aran was a lightly built boy. As a wolf he was formidably large and dangerous. It did him little good this time. The pain was blinding, stupefying. Aran the wolf screamed and tried to run

from the pain.

He woke gradually, with an ache in his head and a greater agony in his thigh and a tightness at his wrists and ankles. It came to him that he must have knocked himself out against a wall.

He lay on his side with his eyes closed, giving no sign that he was awake. Gently he tried to pull his hands apart. He was bound, wrists and ankles. Well, he had been taught a word for unbinding ropes.

Best not to use it until he knew more.

He opened his eyes a slit.

The Warlock was beside him, seated in

lotus position, studying Aran'with a slight smile. In one hand he held a slender willow rod.

The Warlock was a tall man in robust good health. He was deeply tanned. Legend said that the Warlock never wore anything above the waist. The years seemed to blur on him; he might have been twenty or fifty. In fact he was one hundred and ninety years old, and bragged of it. His condition indicated the power of his magic.

Behind him, Aran saw that the Warlock's Wheel had been returned to its place on the wall.

Waiting for its next victim? The real

Warlock's Wheel was of copper; those who had sent Aran had known that much. But this decoy must be tarnished silver, to have seared him so.

The Warlock wore a dreamy, absent look. There might still be a chance, if he could be taken by surprise. Man said, "Kpllr-"

The Warlock lashed him across the throat.

The willow wand had plenty of spring in it. Aran choked and gagged; he tossed his head, fighting for air.

"That word has four syllables," the Warlock informed him in a voice he

recognized. "You'll never get it out."

"Gluck," said Aran.

"I want to know who sent you."

Man did not answer, though he had his wind back.

"You're no ordinary thief. But you're no magician either," the Warlock said almost musingly. "I heard you. You were chanting by rote. You used basic spells, spells that are easy to get right, but they were the right spells each time.

"Somebody's been using prescience and farsight to spy on me. Someone knows too many of my defenses," the ancient

magician said gently. "I don't like that. I want to know who, and why."

When Aran did not reply, the Warlock said, "He had all the knowledge, and he knew what he was after, but he had better sense than to come himself. He sent a fool." The Warlock was watching Aran's eyes. "Or perhaps he thought a werewolf would have a better chance at me. By the way, there's silver braid in those cords, so you'd best stay human for the nonce."

"You knew I was coming."

"Oh, I had ample warning. Didn't it occur to you that I've got prescience and farsight too? It occurred to your master,"

said the Warlock. "He set up protections around you, a moving region where prescience doesn't work."

"Then what went wrong?"

"I foresaw the dead region, you ninny. I couldn't get a glimpse of what was stealing into my cave. But I could look around it. I could follow its path through the cavern. That path was most direct. I knew what you were after.

"Then, there were bare footprints left behind. I could study them before they were made. You waited for moonrise instead of trying to get in after dusk. On a night of the full moon, too.

"Other than that, it wasn't a bad try. Sending a werewolf was bright. It would take a kid your size to squeeze between the bars, and then a kid your size couldn't win a fight if something went wrong. A wolf your size could."

"A lot of good it did me."

"What I want to know is, how did they talk an Atlantean Into this? They must have known what they were after. Didn't they tell you what the Wheel does?"

"Sucks up magic," said Aran. He was chagrined, but not surprised, that the Warlock had placed his accent.

"Sucks up mana," the Warlock corrected

him. "Do you know what mana is?"

"The power behind magic."

"So they taught you that much. Did they also tell you that when the mana is gone from a region, it doesn't come back? Ever?"

Aran rolled on his side. Being convinced that he was about to die, he felt he had nothing to lose by speaking boldly. "I don't understand why you'd want to keep it a secret. A thing like the Warlock's Wheel, it could make war obsolete! It's the greatest purely defensive weapon ever invented!"

The Warlock didn't seem to understand.

Man said, "You must have thought of that. Why, no enemy's curses could touch Atlantis, if the Warlock's Wheel were there to absorb it!"

"Obviously you weren't sent by the Atlantean Minister of Offense. He'd know better." The Warlock watched him shrewdly. "Or were you sent by the Greek Isles?"

"I don't understand."

"Don't you know that Atlantis is tectonically unstable? For the last half a thousand years, the only thing that's kept Atlantis above the waves has been the spells of the sorcerer-kings."

"You're lying."

"You obviously aren't." The Warlock made a gesture of dismissal. "But the Wheel would be bad for any nation, not just Atlantis. Spin the Wheel, and a wide area is dead to magic for-as far as I've been able to tell-the rest of eternity. Who would want to bring about such a thing?"

"I would."

"You would. Why?"

"We're sick of war," Aran said roughly. Unaware that he had said we. "The Warlock's Wheel would end war. Can you imagine an army trying to fight with nothing but swords and daggers? No

hurling of death spells. No prescients spying out the enemy's battle plans. No killer demons beating at unseen protective walls." Man's eyes glowed. "Man to man, sword against sword, blood and bronze, and no healing spells. Why, no king would ever fight on such terms! We'd give up war forever!"

"Some basic pessimism deep within me forces me to doubt it."

"You're laughing at me. You don't want to believe it," Man said scornfully. "No more mana means the end of your youth spells. You'd be an old man, too old to live!"

"That must be it. Well, let's see who you

are." The

Warlock touched Man's wallet with' the willow wand, let it rest there a few moments. Aran wondered frantically what the Warlock could learn from his wallet. If the lock-spells didn't hold, then-

They didn't, of course. The Warlock reached in, pulled out another live bat, then several sheets of parchment marked with what might have been geometry lessons and with script printed in a large, precise hand.

"Schoolboy script," he commented. "Lines drawn with painful accuracy, mistakes scraped out and redrawn. The

idiot! He forgot the hooked tail on the Whirlpool design. A wonder it didn't eat him." The Warlock looked up. "Am I being attacked by children? These spells were prepared by half a dozen apprentices!"

Man didn't answer; but he lost hope of concealing anything further.

"They have talent, though. So. You're a member of the Peacemongers, aren't you? All army-age youngsters. I'll wager you're backed by half the graduating class of the School of Mercantile Grammmaree. They must have been watching me for months now, to have my defenses down so pat.

"And you want to end the war against the Greek Isles. Did you think you'd help matters by taking the Warlock's Wheel to Atlantis? Why, I'm half minded to let you walk out with the thing. It would serve you right for trying to rob me."

He looked hard into Man's eyes. "Why, you'd do it, wouldn't you? Why? I said why?"

"We could still use it."

"You'd sink Atlantis. Are the Peacemongers traitors now?"

"I'm no traitor." Aran spoke low and furious. "We want to change Atlantis, not destroy it. But if we owned the

Warlock's Wheel, the Palace would listen to us!"

He wriggled in his tight bonds, and thought once again of the word that would free him. Then, convert to werewolf and run! Between the bars, down the hill, into the woods and freedom.

"I think I'll make a conservative of you," the Warlock said suddenly.

He stood up. He brushed the willow wand lightly across Man's lips. Aran found that he could not open his mouth. He remembered now that he was entirely in the Warlock's power-and that he was a captured thief.

The Warlock turned, and Aran saw the design on his back. It was an elaborately curlicued five-sided tattoo in red and green and gold inks. Man remembered what he had been told of the Warlock's bodyguard.

"Recently I dreamed," said the Warlock. "I dreamed that I would find a use for a glass dagger. I thought that the dream might be prophetic, and so I carved-"

"That's silly," Man broke in. "What good is a glass dagger?"

He had noticed the dagger on the way in. It had a honed square point and honed edges and a fused-looking hilt with a guard. Two clamps padded with fox

leather held it in place on the work table. The uppermost cutting edge was not yet finished.

Now the Warlock removed the dagger from its clamps. While Man watched, the Warlock scratched designs on the blade with a pointed chunk of diamond that must have cost him dearly. He spoke low and softly to it, words that Man couldn't hear. Then he picked it up like-a dagger.

Frightened as he was, Aran could not quite believe what the Warlock was doing. He felt like a sacrificial goat. There was mana in sacrifice. . . and more mana in human sacrifice. . . but he wouldn't. He wouldn't!

The Warlock raised the knife high, and brought it down hard in Man's chest.

Man screamed. He had felt it! A whisper of sensation, a slight ghostly tug-the knife was an insubstantial

shadow. But there was a knife in Man the Peace-monger's heart! The hilt stood up out of his chest!

The Warlock muttered low and fast. The glass hilt faded and was gone, apparently.

"It's easy to make glass invisible. Glass is half invisible already. It's still in your heart," said the Warlock. "But don't

worry about it. Don't give it a thought. Nobody will notice. Only, be sure to spend the rest of your life in mana-rich territory. Because if you ever walk into a place where magic doesn't work-well, it'll reappear, that's all."

Man struggled to open his mouth.

"Now, you came for the secret of the Warlock's Wheel, so you might as well have it. It's just a simple kinetic sorcery, but open-ended." He gave it. "The Wheel spins faster and faster until it's used up all the mana in the area. It tends to tear itself apart, so you need another spell to hold it together-" and he gave that, speaking slowly and distinctly. Then he seemed to notice that Man was

flopping about like a fish. He said, "Kplirapranthry."

The ropes fell away. Aran stood up shakily. He found he could speak again, and what he said was, "Take it out. Please."

"Now, there's one thing about taking that secret back to Atlantis. I assume you still want to? But you'd have to describe it before you could use it as a threat. You can see how easy it is to make. A big nation like Atlantis tends to have enemies, doesn't it? And you'd be telling them how to sink Atlantis in a single night."

Man pawed at his chest, but he could

feel nothing. "Take it out."

"I don't think so. Now we face the same death, wolf boy. Goodby, and give my best to the School for Mercantile Grammmaree. And, oh yes, don't go back by way of Hvirin Gap."

"Grandson of an ape!" Aran screamed. He would not beg again. He was wolf by the time he reached the bars, and he did not touch them going through. With his mind he felt the knife in his chest, and he heard the Warlock's laughter following him down the hill and into the trees.

When next he saw the Warlock, it was thirty years later and a thousand miles away.

II

Aran traveled as a wolf, when he could. It was an age of greater magic; a werewolf could change shape whenever the moon was in the sky. In the wolf shape Aran could forage, reserving his remaining coins to buy his way home.

His thoughts were a running curse against the Warlock.

Once he turned about on a small hill, and stood facing north toward Shayl Village.

He bristled, remembering the Warlock's laugh; but he remembered the glass dagger. He visualized the Warlock's throat, and imagined the taste of arterial blood; but the glowing, twisting design on the Warlock's back flashed at the back of Man's eyes, and Man tasted defeat. He could not fight a shadow demon. Man howled, once, and turned south.

Nildiss Range, the backbone of a continent, rose before him as he traveled. Beyond the Range was the sea, and a choice of boats to take him home with what he had learned of the Warlock. Perhaps the next thief would have better luck...

And so he came to Hvirin Gap.

Once the range had been a formidable barrier to trade. Then, almost a thousand years ago, a sorcerer of Rynildissen had worked an impressive magic. The Range had been split as if by a cleaver. Where the mountains to either side sloped precipitously upward, Hvirin Gap sloped smoothly down to the coast, between rock walls flat enough to have a polished look.

Periodically the bandits had to be cleaned out of Hvirin

Gap. This was more difficult every year; for the spells against banditry didn't work well there, and swords had to be

used instead. The only compensation was that the dangerous mountain dragons had disappeared too;

Man stopped at the opening. He sat on his haunches, considering.

For the Warlock might have been lying. He might have thought it funny to send Man the long way over Nildiss Range.

But the dragon bones. Where magic didn't work, dragons died. The bones were there, huge and reptilian. They had fused with the rock of the pass somehow, so that they looked tens of millions of years old.

Aran had traveled the Gap in wolf form.

If Hvirin Gap was dead to magic, he should have been forced into the man form. Or would he find it impossible to change at all?

"But I can go through as a wolf," Aran thought. "That way I can't be killed by anything but silver and platinum. The glass dagger should hurt, but- "Damn! I'm invulnerable, but is it magic? If it doesn't work in Hvirin Gap-" and he shuddered.

The dagger had never been more than a whisper of sensation, that had faded in half an hour and never returned. But Man knew it was there. Invisible, a knife in his heart, waiting.

It might reappear in his chest, and he could still survive-as a wolf. But it would hurt! And he could never be human again.

Aran turned and padded away from Hvirin Gap. He had passed a village yesterday. Perhaps the resident magician could help him.

"A glass dagger!" the magician chortled. He was a portly, jolly, balding man, clearly used to good living. "Now I've heard everything. Well, what were you worried about? It's got a handle, doesn't it? Was it a complex spell?"

"I don't think so. He wrote runes on the blade, then stabbed me with it."

"Fine. You pay in advance. And you'd better convert to wolf, just to play safe." He named a sum that would have left Aran without money for passage home. Man managed to argue him down to something not far above reason, and they went to work.

The magician gave up some six hours later. His voice was hoarse, his eyes were red from oddly colored, oddly scented smokes, and his hands were discolored with dyes. "I can't touch the hilt, I can't make it visible, I can't get any sign that it's there at all. If I use any stronger spell, it's likely to kill you. I quit, wolf boy. Whoever put this spell on you, he knows more than a simple

village magician."

Man rubbed at his chest where the skin was stained by mildly corrosive dyes. "They call him the Warlock."

The portly magician stiffened. "The Warlock? The Warlock? And you didn't think to tell me. Get out."

"What about my money?"

"I wouldn't have tried it for ten times the fee! Me, a mere hedge-magician, and you turned me loose against the Warlock! We might both have been killed. If you think you're entitled to your money, let's go to the headman and state our case. Otherwise, get out."

Man left, shouting insults.

"Try other magicians if you like," the other shouted after him. "Try Rynildissen City! But tell them what they're doing first!"

III

It had been a difficult decision for the Warlock. But his secret was out and spreading. The best he could do was see to it that world sorcery understood the implications. The Warlock addressed the Sorcerers' Guild on the subject of

mana depletion and the Warlock's Wheel.

"Think of it every time you work magic," he thundered in what amounted to baby talk after his severely technical description of the Wheel. "Only finite mana in the world, and less of it every year, as a thousand magicians drain it away. There were beings who ruled the world as gods, long ago, until the raging power of their own being used up the mana that kept them alive.

"One day it'll all be gone. Then all the demons and dragons and unicorns, trolls and rocs and centaurs will vanish quite away, because their metabolism is partly based on magic. Then all the dream

castles will evaporate, and nobody will ever know they were there. Then all the magicians will become tinkers and smiths, and the world will be a dull place to live. You have the power to bring that day nearer!"

That night he dreamed.

A duel between magicians makes a fascinating tale. Such tales are common-and rarely true. The winner of such a duel is not likely to give up trade secrets. The loser is dead, at the very least.

Novices in sorcery are constantly amazed at how much preparation goes into a duel, and how little action. The

duel with the Hill Magician started with a dream, the night after the Warlock's speech made that duel inevitable. It ended thirty years later.

In that dream the enemy did not appear. But the War-lock saw a cheerful, harmless-looking fairy castle perched on an impossible hill. From a fertile, hummocky landscape, the hill rose like a breaking wave, leaning so far that the castle at its crest had empty space below it.

In his sleep the Warlock frowned. Such a hill would topple without magic. The fool who built it was wasting mana.

And in his sleep he concentrated,

memorizing details.

A narrow path curled up the hillside. Facts twisted, dreamlike. There was a companion with him; or there wasn't. The Warlock lived until he passed through the gate; or he died at the gate, in agony, with great ivory teeth grinding together through his rib cage.

He woke himself up trying to sort it out.

The shadowy companion was necessary, at least as far as the gate. Beyond the enemy's gate he could see nothing. A Warlock's Wheel must have been used there, to block his magic so thoroughly.

Poetic justice?

He spent three full days working spells to block the Hifi Magician's prescient sense. During that time his own sleep was dreamless. The other's magic was as effective as his own.

IV

Great ships floated at anchor in the harbor.

There were cargo ships whose strange demonic figure-heads had limited power of movement, just enough to reach the rats that tried to swarm up the mooring

lines. A large Atlantean passenger liner was equipped with twin outriggers made from whole tree trunks. By the nearest dock a magician's slender yacht floated eerily above the water. Aran watched them all rather wistfully.

He had spent too much money traveling over the mountains. A week after his arrival in Rynildissen City he had taken a post as bodyguard/watchdog to a rug merchant. He had been down to his last coin, and hungry.

Now Lloraginezee the rug merchant and Ra-Harrou his secretary talked trade secrets with the captain of a Nile cargo ship. Man waited on the dock, watching ships with indifferent patience.

His ears came to point. The bearded man walking past him wore a captain's kilt. Man hailed him: "Ho, Captain! Are you sailing to Atlantis?"

The bearded man frowned. "And what's that to you?"

"I would send a message there."

"Deal with a magician."

"I'd rather not," said Aran. He could hardly tell a magician that he wanted to send instructions on how to rob a magician. Otherwise the message would have gone months ago.

"I'll charge you more, and it will take longer," the bearded man said with some satisfaction. "Who in Atlantis, and where?"

Man gave him an address in the city. He passed over the sealed message pouch he had been carrying for three months now.

Aran too had made some difficult decisions. In final draft his message warned of the tectonic instability of the continent, and suggested steps the Peacemongers could take to learn if the Warlock had lied. Aran had not included instructions for making a Warlock's Wheel.

Far out in the harbor, dolphins and mermen played rough and complicated games. The Atlantean craft hoisted sail. A wind rose from nowhere to fill the sails. It died slowly, following the passenger craft out to sea.

Soon enough, Man would have the fare. He would almost have it now, except that he had twice paid out sorcerer's fees, with the result that the money was gone and the glass dagger was not. Meanwhile, Lloraginezeo did not give trade secrets to his bodyguard. He knew that Aran would be on his way as soon as he had the money.

Here they came down the gangplank: Uoraginezee with less waddle than might

be expected of a man of his girth; the girl walking with quiet grace, balancing the rug samples on her head. Ra-Harroo was saying something as Aran joined them, something Man may have been intended to hear.

"Beginning tomorrow, I'll be off work for five days. You know," she told Lloraginezee-and blushed.

'Pine, fine," said Lloraginezee, nodding absently.

Man knew too. He smiled but did not look at her. He might embarrass her. . . and he knew well enough what Ra-Harroo looked like. Her hair was black and short and coarse. Her nose was

large but flat, almost merging into her face. Her eyes were brown and soft, her brows dark and thick. Her ears were delicately formed and convoluted, and came to a point. She was a lovely girl, especially to another of the wolf people.

They held hands as they walked. Her nails were narrow and strong, and the fine hair on her palm tickled.

In Atlantis he would have considered marrying her, had he the money to support her. Here, it was out of the question. For most of the month they were friends and co-workers. The night life of Rynildissen City was more convenient for a couple, and there were times when Uoraginezee could spare

them both.

Perhaps Lioraginezee made such occasions. He was not of the wolf people. He probably enjoyed thinking that sex had reared its lovely, disturbing head. But sex could not be involved-except at a certain time of the month. Man didn't see her then. She was locked up in her father's house. He didn't even know where she lived.

He found out five nights later.

He had guarded Lloraginezee's way to Adrienne's House of Pleasures. Lloraginezee would spend the night on an air mattress floating on mercury, a bed Aran had only heard described. A

pleasant sleep was not the least of pleasures.

The night was warm and balmy. Aran took a long way home, walking wide of the vacant lot behind Adrienne's. That broad, flat plot of ground had housed the palace of Shilbree the Dreamer, three hundred years ago. The palace had been all magic, and quite an achievement even in its day. Eventually it had...worn out, Shilbree would have said.

One day it was gone. And not even the simplest of spells would work in that vacant lot.

Someone had told Aran that households of wolf people occupied several blocks

of the residential district. It seemed to be true, for he caught identifying smells as he crossed certain paths. He followed one, curious to see what kind of house a wealthy werewolf would build in Rynildissen.

The elusive scent led him past a high, angular house with a brass door. . . and then it was too late, for another scent was in his nostrils and in his blood and brain. He spent that whole night howling at the door. Nobody tried to stop him. The neighbors must have been used to it; or they may have known that he would kill rather than be driven away.

More than once he heard a yearning voice answering from high up in the

house. It was Ra-Harroo's voice. With what remained of his mind, Man knew that he would be finding apologies in a few days. She would think he had come deliberately.

Aran howled a song of sadness and deprivation and shame.

V

The first was a small village called Oath, and a Guild 'prentice who came seeking black opals. He found them, and free for the taking too, for Oath was

dead empty. The 'prentice sorcerer wondered about that, and he looked about him, and presently he found a dead spot with a crumbled castle in it. It might have been centuries fallen. Or it might have been raised by magic, and collapses when the mana went out of it, yesterday or last week.

It was a queer tale, and it got around. The 'prentice grew rich on the opals, for black opals are very useful for cursing. But the empty village bothered him.

"i thought it was slavers at first," he said once, in the Warlock's hearing as it turned out. "There were no corpses, none anywhere. Slave traders don't kill if they can help it.

"But why would a troop of slavers leave valuables lying where they were? The opals were all over the street, mixed with hay. I think a jeweler must have been moving them in secret when something smashed his wagon. But why didn't they pick up the jewels?"

It was the crumbled castle the Warlock remembered three years later, when he heard about Shiskabil. He heard of that one directly, from a magpie that fluttered out of the sky onto his shoulder and whispered, "Warlock?"

And when he had heard, he went.

Shishkabil was a village of stone houses

within a stone wall, It must have been abandoned suddenly. Dinners had dried or rotted on their plates; meat had been burnt to ash in ovens. There were no living inhabitants, and no dead. The wall had not been breeched. But there were signs of violence everywhere: broken furniture, doors with broken locks or splintered hinges, crusted spears and swords and makeshift clubs, and blood. Dried black blood everywhere, as if it had rained blood.

Clubfoot was a younger Guild member, thin and earnest. Though talented, he was still a little afraid of the power he commanded through magic. He was not happy in Shiskabil. He walked with

shoulders hunched, trying to avoid the places where blood had pooled.

"Weird, isn't it? But I had a special reason to send for you," he said. "There's a dead region outside the wall. I had the idea someone might have used a Warlock's Wheel there."

A rectangular plot of fertile ground, utterly dead, a foretaste of a world dead to magic. In the center were crumbled stones with green plants growing between.

The Warlock circled the place, unwilling to step where magic did not work. He had used the Wheel once before, against Glirendree, after the

demon-sword had killed his shadow demon. The Wheel had sucked the youth from him, left the Warlock two hundred years old in a few seconds.

"There was magic worked in the village," said Clubfoot. "I tried a few simple spells. The mana level's very low. I don't remember any famous sorcerers from Shiskabil; do you?"

"No."

"Then whatever happened here was done by magic." Clubfoot almost whispered the word. Magic could be very evil-as he knew.

They found a zigzag path through the

dead borderline, and a faintly live region inside. At a gesture from the Warlock, the crumbled stones stirred feebly, trying to rise.

"So it was somebody's castle," said Clubfoot. "I wonder how he got this effect?"

"I thought of something like it once. Say you put a heavy kinetic spell on a smaller Wheel. The Wheel would spin very fast, would use up mana in a very tight area-"

Clubfoot was nodding. "I see it. He could have run it on a track, a close path. It would give him a kind of hedge against magic around a live region."

"And he left the border open so he could get his tools in and out. He zigzagged the entrance so no spells could get through. Nobody could use farsight on him. I wonder...

"I wonder what he had to hide?"

"I wonder what happened in Shiskabil," said the Warlock. And he remembered the dead barrier that hid the Hill Magician's castle. His leisurely duel with a faceless enemy was twelve years old.

It was twenty-three years old before they found the third village.

Hathzoril was bigger than Shiskabil, and

better known. When a shipment of carvings in ivory and gem woods did not arrive, the Warlock heard of it.

The village could not have been abandoned more than a few days when the Warlock arrived. He and Clubfoot found meals half cooked, meals half eaten, broken furniture, weapons that had been taken from their racks, broken doors- "But no blood. I wonder why?"

Clubfoot was jittery. "Otherwise it's just the same. The whole population gone in an instant, probably against their will. Ten whole years; no, more. I'd half forgotten. You got here before I did. Did you find a dead area and a crumbled castle?"

"No. I looked."

The younger magician rubbed his birth-maimed foot- which he could have cured in half an hour, but it would have robbed him of half his powers. "We could be wrong. If it's him, he's changed his techniques."

That night the Warlock dreamed a scrambled dream in pyrotechnic colors. He woke thinking of the Hill Magician.

"Let's climb some hills," he told Clubfoot in the morninug. "I've got to know if the Hill Magician has something to do with these empty villages. We're looking for a dead spot on top of a hill."

That mistake almost killed him.

The last hill Clubfoot tried to climb was tumbled, crumbled soil and rock that slid and rolled under his feet. He tried it near sunset, in sheer desperation, for they had run out of hills and patience.

He was still near the base when the Warlock came clambering to join him. "Come down from there!" he laughed. "Nobody would build on this sand heap."

Clubfoot looked around, and shouted, "Get out of here! You're older!"

The Warlock rubbed his face and felt the wrinkles. He picked his way back in

haste and in care, wanting to hurry, but fearful of breaking fragile bones. He left a trail of fallen silver hair.

Once beyond the mana-poor region, he cackled in falsetto. "My mistake. I know what he did now. Clubfoot, we'll find the dead spot inside the hill."

"First we'll work you a rejuvenation spell." Clubfoot laid his tools out on a rock. A charcoal block, a silver knife, packets of leaves...

"That border's bad. It sucks up mana from inside. He must have to move pretty often. So he raised up a bill like a breaking wave. When the magic ran out the hill just rolled over the castle and

covered up everything. He'll do it again, too."

"Clever. What do you think happened in Hathzoril Village?"

"We may never know." The Warlock rubbed new wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. "Something bad, I think. Something very bad."

VI

He was strolling through the merchants' quarter that afternoon, looking at rugs.

Normally this was a cheerful task. Hanging rugs formed a brightly colored maze through this part of the quarter. As Aran the rug merchant moved through the maze, well-known voices would call his name. Then there would be gossip and canny trading.

He had traded in Rynildissen City for nearly thirty years, first as Lloraginezee's apprentice, later as his own man. The finest rugs and the cheapest, from all over this continent and nearby islands, came by ship and camel's back to Rynildissen City. Wholesalers, retailers, and the odd nobleman who wished to furnish a palace would travel to Rynildissen City

to buy. Today they glowed in the hot sunlight.. . but today they only depressed him. Aran was thinking of moving away.

A bald man stepped into view from behind a block of cured sphinx pelts.

Bald as a roc's egg he was, yet young, and in the prime of muscular good health. He was shirtless like a stevedore, but his pantaloons were of ~.high quality and his walk was pure arrogance. Aran felt he was staring rather rudely. Yet there was something familiar about the man.

He passed Aran without a glance.

Aran glanced back once, and was jolted.

The design seemed to leap out at him: a five-sided multicolored tattoo on the man's back.

Aran called, "Warlock!"

He regretted it the next moment. The Warlock turned on him the look one gives a presumptuous stranger.

The Warlock had not changed at all, except for the loss of his hair. But Aran remembered that thirty years had passed; that he himself was a man of fifty, with the hollows of his face filled out by rich living. He remembered that his greying hair had receded, leaving his widow's peak as a shock of hair all alone on his forehead. And he remembered, in great

detail, the circumstances under which he had met the Warlock.

He had spent a thousand nights plotting vengeance against the Warlock; yet now his only thought was to get away. He said, "Your pardon, sir-"

But something else occurred to him, so that he said firmly, "But we have met."

"Under what circumstance? I do not recall it," the Warlock said coldly.

Aran's answer was a measure of the self-confidence that comes with wealth and respect. He said, "I was robbing your cave."

"Were you!" The Warlock came closer. "Ah, the boy from Atlantis. Have you robbed any magicians lately?"

"I have adopted a somewhat safer way of life," Aran said equably. "And I do have reason for presuming on our brief acquaintance."

"Our brief-" The Warlock laughed so that heads turned all over the marketplace. Still laughing, he took Aran's arm and led him away.

They strolled slowly through the merchants' quarter, the Warlock leading. "I have to follow a certain path," he explained. "A project of my own. Well, my boy, what have you been doing for

thirty years?"

"Trying to get rid of your glass dagger."

"Glass dagger? . . . Oh, yes, I remember. Surely you found time for other hobbies?"

Aran almost struck the Warlock then. But there was something he wanted from the Warlock; and so he held his temper.

"My whole life has been warped by your damned glass dagger," he said. "I had to circle Hvirin Gap on my way home. When I finally got here I was out of money: No money for passage to Atlantis, and no money to pay for a magician, which meant that I couldn't get

the glass knife removed.

"So I hired out to Lioraginezee the rug merchant as a bodyguard/watchdog. Now I'm the leading rug merchant in Rynildissen City, I've got two wives and eight children and a few grandchildren, and I don't suppose I'll ever get back to Atlantis."

They bought wine from a peddler carrying two fat wineskins on his shoulders. They took turns 'drinking from the great copper goblet the man carried.

The Warlock asked, "Did you ever get rid of the knife?"

"No, and you ought to know it! What

kind of a spell did you put on that thing? The best magicians in this continent haven't been able to so much as touch that knife, let alone pull it out. I wouldn't be a rug merchant if they had."

"Why not?"

"Well, I'd have earned my passage to Atlantis soon enough, except that every time I heard about a new magician in the vicinity I'd go to him to see if he could take that knife out. Selling rugs was a way to get the money to pay the magicians. Eventually I gave up on the magicians and kept the money. All I'd accomplished was to spread your reputation in all directions."

"Thank you," the Warlock said politely.

Aran did not like the Warlock's amusement. He decided to end the conversation quickly. "I'm glad we ran into each other," he said, "because I have a problem that is really in your province. Can you tell me something about a magician named Wavyhill?"

It may be that the Warlock stiffened. "What is it that you want to know?"

"Whether his spells use excessive power."

The Warlock lifted an interrogatory eyebrow.

"You see, we try to restrict the use of magic in Rynildissen City. The whole nation could suffer if a key region like Rynildissen City went dead to magic. There'd be no way to stop a flood, or a hurricane, or an invasion of barbarians. Do you find something amusing?"

"No, no. But could a glass dagger possibly have anything to do with your conservative attitude?"

"That's entirely my own business, Warlock. Unless you'd care to read my mind?"

"No, thank you. My apologies."

"I'd like to point out that more than just

the welfare of Rynildissen City is involved. If this region went dead to magic, the harbor mermen would have to move away. They have quite an extensive city of their own, down there beyond the docks. Furthermore, they run most of the docking facilities and the entire fishing industry-"

"Relax. I agree with you completely. You know that," the magician laughed. "You ought to!"

"Sorry. I preach at the drop of a hat. It's been ten years since anyone saw a dragon near Rynildissen City. Even further out, they're warped, changed. When I first came here the dragons had a mercenary's booth in the city itself! What

are you doing?"

The Warlock had handed the empty goblet back to the vendor and was pulling at Aran's arm. "Come this way, please. Quickly, before I lose the path."

'Path?'

"I'm following a fogged prescient vision. I could get killed if I lose the path-or if I don't, for that matter. Now, just what was your problem?"

"That," said Aran, pointing among the fruit stalls.

The troll was an ape's head on a human body, covered from head to toe in coarse

brown hair. From its size it was probably female, but it had no more breasts than a female ape. It held a wicker basket in one quite human hand. Its bright brown eyes glanced up at Aran's pointing finger-startlingly human eyes-then dropped to the melon it was considering.

Perhaps the sight should have roused reverence. A troll was ancestral to humanity: *Homo habilis*, long extinct. But they were too common. Millions of the species had been fossilized in the drylands of Africa. Magicians of a few centuries ago had learned that they could be reconstituted by magic.

"I think you've just solved one of my

own problems," the Warlock said quietly. He no longer showed any trace of amusement.

"Wonderful," Aran said without sincerity. "My own problem is, how much mana are Wavyhill's trolls using up? The mana level in Rynildissen City was never high to start with. Wavyhill must be using terrifically powerful spells just to keep them walking." Aran's fingertips brushed his chest in an unconscious gesture. "I'd hate to leave Rynildissen City, but if magic stops working here I won't have any choice."

"I'd have to know the spells involved. Tell me something about Wavyhill, will

you? Everything you can remember."

To most of Rynildissen City the advent of Wavyhill the magician was very welcome.

Once upon a time troll servants had been common. They were terrifically strong. Suffering no pain, they could use hysterical strength for the most mundane tasks. Being inhuman; they could work on official holidays. They needed no sleep. They did not steal.

But Rynildissen City was old, and the mana was running low. For many years no troll had walked in Rynildissen City. At the gate they turned to blowing dust.

Then came Wavyhill with a seemingly endless supply of trolls, which did not disintegrate at the gate. The pea-pie paid him high prices in gold and in honors.

"For half a century thieves have worked freely on holidays," Aran told the Warlock. "Now we've got a trollish police force again. Can you blame people for being grateful? They made him a Councilman-over my objections. Which means that there's very little short of murder that Wavyhill can't do in Rynildissen City."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Why did you say over your objections? Are you on the Council?"

"Yes. I'm the one who rammed through the laws restricting magic in Rynildissen City. And failed to rain through some others, I might add. The trouble is that Wavyhill doesn't make the trolls in the city. Nobody knows where they come from. If he's depleting the mana level, he's doing it somewhere else."

"Then what's your problem?"

"Suppose the trolls use up mana just by existing? . . . I should be asking, do they?"

"I think so," said the Warlock.

"I knew it. Warlock, will you testify before the Council? Because-"

"No, I won't."

"But you've got to! I'll never convince anyone by myself. Wavyhill is the most respected magician around, and he'll be testifying against me! Besides which, the Council all own trolls themselves. They won't want to believe they've been suckered, and they have been if we're right. The trolls will collapse as soon as they've lowered the mana level enough."

At that point Man ran down, for he had seen with what stony patience the Warlock was waiting for him to finish.

The Warlock waited three seconds longer, using silence as an exclamation point. Then he said, "It's gone beyond

that. Talking to the Council would be like shouting obscenities at a forest fire. I could get results that way. You couldn't."

"Is he that dangerous?"

"I think so."

Man wondered if he was being had. But the Warlock's face was so grave . . . and Man had seen that face in too many nightmares. What am I doing here? he wondered. I had a technical question about trolls. So I asked a magician. . . and now...

"Keep talking. I need to know more about Wavyhill.

And walk faster," said the Warlock.
"How long has he been here?"

"Wavyhill came to Rynildissen City seven years ago. Nobody knows where he came from; he doesn't have any particular accent. His palace sits on a hill that looks like it's about to fall over. What are you nodding at?"

"I know that hill. Keep talking."

"We don't see him often. He comes with a troupe of trolls, to sell them; or he comes to vote with the Council on important matters. He's short and dark-."

"That could be a seeming. Never mind, describe him anyway. I've never seen

him."

"Short Wand dark, with a pointed nose and a pointed chin and very curly dark hair. He wears a dark robe of some soft material, a tall pointed hat, and sandals, and he carries a sword."

"Does he!" The Warlock laughed out loud. "What's the joke? I carry a sword myself sometimes."

-Oh, that's right, magicians have a thing about swordsmen."

"That's not why I laughed. It's a trade joke. A sword can be a symbol of masculine virility."

"Oh?"

"You see the point, don't you? A sorcerer doesn't need a sword. He knows more powerful protections. When a sorcerer takes to carrying a sword, it's pretty plain he's using it as a cure for impotence."

"And it works?" -

"Of course it works. It's straight one-for-one similarity magic, isn't it? But you've got to take the sword to bed with you!" laughed the Warlock. But his eyes found a troll servant, and his laughter slipped oddly.

He watched as the troll hurried through a

gate in a high white wall. They had passed out of the merchants' quarter.

"I think Wavyhill's a necromancer," he said abruptly.

"Necromancer. What is it? It sounds ugly."

"A technical term for a new branch of magic. And it is ugly. Turn sharp left here."

They ducked into a narrow alley. Two and three story houses leaned over them from both sides. The floor of the alley was filthy, until the Warlock snarled and gestured. Then the dirt and garbage flowed to both sides.

The Warlock hurried them deep into the alley. "We can stop here, I think. Sit down if you like. We'll be here for some time-or I will."

"Warlock, are you playing games with me? What does this new dance have to do with a duel of sorcery?"

"A fair question. Do you know what lies that way?"

Man's sense of direction was good, and he knew the city. "The Judging Place?"

"Right. And that way, the vacant lot just this side of Adrienne's House of Pleasures-you know it? The deadest spot hi Rynildissen City. The palace of

Shilbree the Dreamer once stood there."

"Might I ask-"

"The courthouse is void of mana too, naturally. Ten thousand defendants and thirty thousand lawyers all praying for conviction or acquittal doesn't leave much magic in any courthouse. If I can keep either of those spots between me and Wavyhill, I can keep him from using farsight on me."

Man thought about it. "But you have to know where he is."

"No. I only have to know where I ought to be. Most of the time, I don't. Wavyhill and I have managed to fog each other's

prescient senses pretty well. But I'm supposed to be meeting an unknown ally along about now, and I've taken great care that Wavyhill can't spy on me.

"You see, I invented the Wheel. Wavyhill has taken the Wheel concept and improved it in at least two ways that I know of. Naturally he uses up mana at a ferocious rate.

"He may also be a mass murderer. And he's my fault. That's why I've got to kill him."

Aran remembered then that his wives were waiting dinner. He remembered that he had decided to end this conversation hours ago. And he

remembered a story he had been told, of a layman caught in a sorcerer's duel, and what had befallen him.

"Well, I've got to be going," he said, standing up. "I wish you the best of luck in your duel, Warlock. And if there's anything I can do to help. . ."

"Fight with me," the Warlock said instantly.

Man gaped. Then he burst out laughing.

The Warlock waited with his own abnormal patience. When he had some chance of being heard, he said, "I dreamed that an ally would meet me during this time. That ally would

accompany me to the gate of Wavyhill's castle. I don't have many of those dreams to help me, Man. Wavyhill's good. If I go alone, my forecast is that I'll be killed."

"Another ally?" Aran suggested.

"No. Too late. The time has passed."

"Look." Aran slapped his belly with the flat of his hand. The flesh rippled. "It's not that much extra weight," he said, "for a man. I'm not unsightly. But as a wolf I'd look ten years pregnant! I haven't turned wolf in years."

"What am I doing? I don't have to convince you of anything," Aran said abruptly. And he walked away fast.

The Warlock caught him up at the mouth of the alley. "I swear you won't regret staying. There's something you don't know yet."

"Don't follow me too far, Warlock. You'll lose your path." Man laughed in the magician's face. "Why should I fight by your side? If you really need me to win, I couldn't be more delighted! I've seen your face in a thousand nightmares, you and your glass dagger! So die, Warlock. It's my dinner time."

"Shh," said the Warlock. And Mari saw that the Warlock was not looking at him, but over his shoulder.

Man felt the urge to murder. But his eyes

flicked to follow the Warlock's gaze, and the imprecations died in his throat.

It was a troll. Only a troll, a male, with a tremendous pack on its back. Coming toward them.

And the Warlock was gesturing to it. Or were those magical passes?

"Good," he said. "Now, I could tell you that it's futile to fight fate, and you might even believe me, because I'm an expert. But I'd be lying. Or I could offer you a chance to get rid of the dagger-"

"Go to Hell. I learned to live with that dagger-"

"Wolfman, if you never learn anything else from me, learn never to blaspheme in the presence of a magician! Excuse me." The troll had walked straight to the mouth of the alley. Now the Warlock took it by the arm and led it inside. "Will you help me? I want to get the pack off its back."

They lifted it down, while Aran wondered at himself. Had he been bewitched into obedience? The pack was very heavy. It took all of Aran's strength, even though the Warlock bore the brunt of the load. The troll watched them with blank brown eyes.

"Good. If I tried this anywhere else in the city, Wavyhill would know it. But

this time I know where he is. He's in Adrienne's House of Pleasures, searching for me, the fool! He's already searched the courthouse.

"Never mind that. Do you know of a village named Oath?"

"No."

"Or Shiskabil?"

"No. Wait." A Shiska had bought six matching green rugs from him once.

"Yes. A small village north of here. Something.. . happened to it.. ."

"The population walked out one night, leaving all their valuables and a good

deal of unexplained blood."

"That's right." Man felt sudden horrible doubt. "It was never explained."

"Gath was first. Then Shiskabil, then Hathzorll. Bigger cities each time. At Hathzoril he was clever. He found a way to hide where his palace had been, and he didn't leave any blood."

"But what does he do? Where do the people go?"

"What do you know about mana, Aran? You know that it's the power behind magic, and you know it can be used up. What else?"

"I'm not a magician. I sell rugs."

"Mana can be used for good or evil; it can be drained, or transferred from one object to another, or from one man to another. Some men seem to carry mana with them. You can find concentrations in oddly shaped stones, or in objects of reverence, or in meteoroids.

"There is much mans associated with murder," said the Warlock. "Too much for safety, in my day. My teacher used to warn us against working near the site of a murder, or the corpse of a murdered man, or murder weapons-as opposed to weapons of war, I might add. War and murder are different in intent.

"Necromancy uses murder as a source of magic. It's the most powerful form of magic-so powerful that it could never have developed until now, when the mana level everywhere in the world is so low.

"I think Wavyhill is a necromancer," said the Warlock. And he turned to the troll. "We'll know in a moment."

The troll stood passive, its long arms relaxed at its sides, watching the Warlock with strangely human brown eyes and with a human dignity that contrasted oddly with its low animal brow and hairy body. It did not flinch as the Warlock dropped a kind of necklace over its head.

The change came instantly. Man backed away, sucking air. The Warlock's necklace hung around a man's neck—a man in his middle thirties, blond-haired and bearded, wearing a porter's kilt—and that man's belly had been cut wide open by one clean swing of a sword or scimitar. Man caught the smell of him: he had been dead for three or four days, plus whatever time the preserving effects of magic had been at work on him. Yet he stood, passively waiting, and his expression had not changed.

"Wavyhill has invented a kind of perpetual motion," the Warlock said dryly; but he backed away hastily from

the smell of the dead man. "There's enough power in a murdered man to make him an obedient slave, and plenty left over to cast on him the seeming of a troll. He takes more mans from the environment, but what of that? When the mana runs out in Gath, Wavyhifi's trolls kill their masters. Then twice as many trolls move on to Shiskabil. In Hathzoril they probably used strangling cords; they wouldn't spill any blood that way, and they wouldn't bleed themselves. I wonder where he'll go after Rynildissen?"

"Nowhere! We'll tell the Council!"

"And Wavyhill a Councilman? No. And you can't spread the word to individual

members, because eventually one of them would tip Wavyhill that you're slandering him."

"They'd believe you."

"All it takes is one who doesn't. Then he tells Wavyhill, and Wavyhill turns loose the trolls. No. You'll do three things," said the Warlock in tones not of command but of prophecy. "You'll go home. You'll spend the next week getting your wives and children out of Rynidisen City."

"My gods, yes!"

"I swore you wouldn't regret hearing me out. The third thing, if you so decide, is

to join me at dawn, at the north gate, a week from - today. Come by way of Adrienne's House of Pleasures," the Warlock ordered, "and stay awhile. The dead area will break your trail.

"Do that today, too. I don't want Wavyhill to follow you by prescience. Go now," said the Warlock.

"I can't decide!"

"Take a week."

"I may not be here. How can I contact you?"

"You can't. It doesn't matter. I'll go with you or without you." Abruptly the

Warlock stripped the necklace from the neck of the standing corpse, turned and strode off down the alley. Following the path.

The dead man was a troll again. It followed Aran with large, disturbingly human brown eyes.

VII

That predawn morning, Adrienne's House of Pleasures was wrapped in thick black fog. Man the rug merchant hesitated at the door; then, shivering,

squared his shoulders and walked out into it.

He walked with his sword ready for tapping or killing. The fog grew lighter as he went, but no less dense. Several times he thought he saw monstrous vague shapes pacing him. But there was no attack. At dawn he was at the north gate.

The Warlock's mounts were either lizards enlarged by magic or dragons mutated by no magic. They were freaks, big as twin bungalows. One carried baggage; the other, two saddles in tandem.

"Mount up," the Warlock urged. "We want to get there before nightfall."

Despite the chill of morning he was bare to the waist. He turned in his saddle as Man settled behind him. "Have you lost weight?"

"I fasted for six days, and exercised too. And my wives and children are four days on their way to Atlantis by sea. You can guess what pleasures I chose at Adriernie's."

"I wouldn't have believed it. Your belly's as flat as a board."

"A wolf can fast for a long time. I ate an unbelievable meal last night. Today I won't eat at all."

The fog cleared as they left Rynildissen,

and the morning turned clear and bright and hot. When Aran mentioned it, the Warlock said, "That fog was mine. I wanted to blur things for Wavyhill."

"I thought I saw shapes in the fog. Were those yours too?"

"No."

"Thanks."

"Wavyhill meant to frighten you, Man. He wouldn't attack you. He knows you won't be killed before we reach the gate."

"That explains the pack lizards. I wondered how you could possibly

expect to sneak up on him."

"I don't. He knows we're coming. He's waiting."

The land was rich in magic near Wavyhill's castle. You could tell by the vegetation: giant mushrooms, vying for variety of shape and color; lichens growing in the shapes of men or beasts; trees with contorted trunks and branches, trees that moved menacingly as the pack-lizards came near.

"I could make them talk," said the Warlock. "But I couldn't trust them. They'll be Wavyhill's allies."

In the red light of sunset, Wavyhill's

castle seemed all rose marble, perched at the top of a fairy mountain. The slender tower seemed made for kidnapped damsels. The mountain itself, as Man saw it now for the first time, was less a breaking wave than a fist raised to the sky in defiance.

"We couldn't use the Wheel here," said the Warlock. "The whole mountain would fall on us."

"I wouldn't have let you use the Wheel."

"I didn't bring one." "Which way?"

"Up the path. He knows we're coming."

"Is your shadow demon ready?"

"Shadow demon?" The Warlock seemed to think. "Oh. For a moment I didn't know what you were talking about. That shadow demon was killed in the battle with Glirendree, thirty years ago."

Words caught in Aran's throat, then broke loose in a snarl. "Then why don't you put on a shirt?"

"Habit. I've got lots of strange habits. Why so vehement?"

"I don't know. I've been staring at your back since morning. I guess I was counting on the shadow demon." Aran swallowed. "It's just us, then?"

"Just us."

"Aren't you even going to take a sword?
Or a dagger?"

"No. Shall we go?"

The other side of the hill was a sixty degree slope. The narrow, meandering path could not support the lizard beasts. Man and the Warlock dismounted and began to climb.

The Warlock said, "There's no point in subtlety. We know we'll get as far as the gate. So does Wavyhill. Excuse me." He threw a handful of silver dust ahead of them. "The road was about to throw us off. Apparently Wavyhill doesn't take anything for granted."

But Man had only the Warlock's word for it; and that was the only danger that threatened their climb.

There was a rectangular pond blocking the solid copper gates. An arched bridge led across the pond. They were approaching the bridge when their first challenger pushed between the gates.

"What is it?" Man whispered. "I've never heard of anything like it."

"There isn't. It's a changed one. Call it a snail dragon. . ."

A snail dragon. Its spiral shell was just wide enough to block the gate completely. Its slender, supple body was

fully exposed, reared high to study the intruders. Shiny leaflike scales covered the head and neck; but the rest of the body was naked, a soft greyish-brown. Its eyes were like black marbles. Its teeth were white and pointed, and the longest pair had been polished to a liquid glow.

From the other side of the small arched bridge, the Warlock called, "Ho, guardian! Were you told of our coming?"

"No," said the dragon. "Were you welcome, I would have been told."

"Welcome!" The Warlock guffawed. "We came to kill your master. Now, the interesting thing is that he knows of our

coming. Why did he not warn you?"

The snail dragon tilted its mailed head.

The Warlock answered himself. "Ho knows that we will pass this gate. He suspects that we must pass over your dead body. He chose not to tell you so."

"That was kind of him." The dragon's voice was low and very gravelly, a sound like rocks being crushed.

"Kind, yes. But since we are foredoomed to pass, why not step aside? Or make for the bills, and we will keep your secret."

"It cannot be."

"You're a changed one, snail dragon. Beasts whose energy of life is partly magical, breed oddly where the mana is low. Most changed ones are not viable. So it is with you," said the Warlock. "The shell could not protect you from a determined and patient enemy. Or were you counting on speed to save you?"

"You raise a salient point," said the guardian. "If I were to leave now, what then? My master will very probably kill you when you reach his sanctum. Then, by and by, this week or the next, he will wonder how you came to pass his guardian. Then, next week or the week following, he will come to see, or to remove the discarded shell. By then,

with luck and a good tail wind, I could be halfway to the woods. Perchance he will miss me in the tall grass," said the bungalow-sized beast. "No. Better to take my chances here in the gate. At least I know the direction of attack."

"Damn, you're right," said the Warlock. "My sympathies, snail dragon."

And he set about fixing the bridge into solidity. Half of it, the half on the side away from the gate, really was solid. The other half was a reflected illusion, until the Warlock-did things.

"The dead border runs under the water," he told Man. "Don't fall into it."

The snail dragon withdrew most of itself into its shell. Only his scaly head showed now, as Aran and the Warlock crossed.

Aran came running. -

He was still a man. It was not certain that Wavybill knew that Aran was a werewolf. It was certain that they would pass the gate. So he reserved his last defense, and came at the dragon with a naked sword.

The dragon blew fire.

Aran went through it. He carried a charm against dragon fire.

But he couldn't see through it. It shocked hell out of him when teeth closed on his shoulder. The dragon had stretched incredibly. Man screamed and bounced his blade off the metallic scales and-the teeth loosed him, snapped ineffectually at the Warlock who danced back laughing, waving- But the Warlock had been unarmed!

The dragon collapsed. His thick neck was cut half in two, behind the scales. The Warlock wiped his weapon on his pantaloons and held it up.

Aran felt suddenly queasy.

The Warlock laughed again. "'What good is a glass dagger?' The fun thing about

being a magician is that everyone always expects you to use magic."

"But, but-"

"It's just a glass dagger. No spells on it, nothing Wavyhill could detect. I had a friend drop it in the pond two days ago. Glass in water is near enough to invisible to fool the likes of Wavyhill."

"Excuse my open mouth. I just don't like glass daggers. Now what?"

The corpse and shell of the snail dragon still blocked the gate.

"If we try to squeeze around, we could be trapped. I suppose we'll have to go

over."

"Fast," said Aran.

"Right, fast. Keep in mind that he could be anywhere." The Warlock took a running start and ran/climbed up the curve of the shell.

Aran followed almost as quickly.

In his sanctum, the snail dragon had said. The picture he had evoked was still with Aran as he went up the shell. Wavyhill would be hidden in his basement or his tower room, in some place of safety. Man and the Warlock would have to fight their way through whatever the enemy could raise against them, while

Wavyhill watched to gauge their defenses. There were similar tales of magicians' battles...

Aran was ravenously hungry. It gave him a driving energy he hadn't had in years, decades. His pumping legs drove a body that seemed feather-light. He reached the top of the shell just as the Warlock was turning full about in apparent panic.

Then he saw them: a horde of armed and armored skeletons coming at them up a wooden plank. There must

have been several score of them. Man shouted and drew his sword. How do you kill a skeleton?

The Warlock shouted too. Strange words, in the Guild language.

The skeletons howled. A whirlwind seemed to grip them and lift them and fling them forward. Already they were losing form, like smoke rings. Aran turned to see the last of them vanishing into the Warlock's back.

My name is legion. They must have been animated by -a single demon. And the Warlock had pulled that demon into a demon trap, empty and waiting for thirty years.

The problem was that both Man and the Warlock had been concentrating on the plural demon.

The Warlock's back was turned, and Man could do nothing. He spotted Wavyhill gesticulating from across the courtyard, in the instant before Wavyhill completed his spell.

Man turned to shout a warning; and so he saw what the spell did to the Warlock. The Warlock was old in an instant. The flesh seemed to fade into his bones. He looked bewildered, spat a mouthful of blackened pebbles-no, teeth-closed his eyes and started to fall. Man caught him.

It was like catching an armload of bones. He eased the Warlock onto his back on the great snail shell. The Warlock's breathing was stertorous; he could not have long to live.

"Aran the Merchant!"

Aran looked down. "What did you do to him?" The magician Wavyhill was dressed as usual, in dark robe and sandals and pointed hat. A belt with a shoulder loop held his big-hilted sword just clear of the ground. He called, "That is precisely what I wish to discuss. I have found an incantation that behaves as the Warlock's Wheel behaves, but directionally. Is this over your head?"

"I understand you."

"In layman's terms, I've sucked the magic from him.

That leaves him two hundred and twenty-six years old. I believe that gives me the win.

"My problem is whether to let you live. Aran, do you understand what my spell will do to you?"

Man did, but-"Tell me anyway. Then tell me how you found out."

"From some of my colleagues, of course, after I determined that you were my enemy. You must have consulted an incredible number of magicians regarding the ghostly knife in your heart."

"More than a dozen. Well?"

"Leave in peace. Don't come back."

"I have to take the Warlock."

"He is my enemy."

"He's my ally. I won't leave him," said Aran.

"Take him then."

Aran stooped. He was forty-eight years old, and the bitterness of defeat had replaced the manic energy of battle. But the Warlock was little more than a snoring mummy, dry and light. The problem would be to get the fragile old man down from the snail shell.

Wavyhill was chanting!

Aran stood-in time to see the final gesture. Then the spell hit him.

For an instant he thought that the knife had truly reappeared in his heart. But the pain was all through him! Like a million taut strings snapping inside him! The shape of his neck changed grindingly; all of his legs snapped forward; his skull flattened, his eyes lost color vision, his nose stretched, his lips pulled back from bared teeth.

The change had never come so fast, had never been more complete. A blackness fell on Aran's mind. It was a wolf that rolled helplessly off the giant snail shell

and into the courtyard. A wolf bounced heavily and rolled to its feet, snarled deep in its throat and began walking stifflegged toward Wavyhill.

Wavyhill was amazed! He started the incantation over, speaking very fast, as Aran approached. He finished as Aran came within leaping distance.

This time there was no change at all. Except that Aran leapt, and Wavyhill jumped back just short of far enough, and Aran tore his throat out.

For Aran the nightmare began then. What had gone before was as sweet dreams.

Wavyhill should have been dead. His

severed carotid arteries pumped frantically, his windpipe made horrid bubbling sounds, and-Wavyhill drew his sword and attacked.

Aran the wolf circled and moved in and slashed-and backed away howling, for Wavyhill's sword had run him through the heart. The wound healed instantly. Aran the wolf was not surprised. He leapt away, and circled, and slashed and was stabbed again, and circled...

It went on and on.

Wavyhill's blood had stopped flowing. He'd run out. Yet he was still alive. So was his sword, or so it seemed. Aran never attacked unless it seemed safe, but

the sword bit him every time. And every time he attacked, he came away with a mouthful of Wavyhill.

He was going to win. He could not help but win. His wounds healed as fast as they were made. Wavyhill's did not. Aran was stripping the flesh from the magician's bones.

There was a darkness on his brain. He moved by animal cunning. Again and again he herded Wavyhill back onto the slippery flagstones where Wavyhill had spilled five quarts of his blood. Four feet were surer than two. It was that cunning that led him to bar Wavyhill from leaving the courtyard. He tried. He must have stored healing magic

somewhere in the castle. But Aran would not let him reach it.

He had done something to himself that would not let him die. He must be regretting it terribly. Man the wolf had crippled him now, slashing at his ankles until there was not a shred of muscle left to work the bones. Wavyhill was fighting on his knees. Now Man came closer, suffering the bite of the sword to reach the magician...

Nightmare.

Aran the Peacemonger had been wrong. If Aran the rug merchant could work on and on, stripping the living flesh from a man in agony, taking a stab wound for

every bite-if Aran could suffer such agonies to do this to anyone, for any cause- Then neither the end of magic, nor anything else, would ever persuade men to give up war. They would fight on, with swords and stones and whatever they could find, for as long as there were men.

The blackness had lifted from Aran's brain. It must have been the sword: the mana in an enchanted sword had replaced the mana sucked from him by Wavyhill's variant of the Warlock's Wheel.

And, finally, he realized that the sword was fighting alone.

Wavyhill was little more than bloody bones. He might not be dead, but he certainly couldn't move. The sword waved itself at the end of the stripped bones of his arm, still trying to keep Aran away.

Aran slid past the blade. He gripped the hilt in his teeth and pulled it from the magician's still-fleshy hand. The hand fought back with a senseless determined grip, but it wasn't enough.

He had to convert to human to climb the dragon shell.

The Warlock was still alive, but his breathing was a thing of desperation. Aran laid the blade across the Warlock's

body and waited.

The Warlock grew young. Not as young as he had been, but he no longer looked dead. He was in the neighborhood of seventy years old when he opened his eyes, blinked, and asked, "What happened?"

"You missed all the excitement," said Aran.

"I take it you beat him. My apologies. It's been thirty years since I fought Glirendree. With every magician in the civilized world trying to duplicate the Warlock's Wheel, one or another was bound to improve on the design."

"He used it on me, too."

"Oh?" The Warlock chuckled. "I suppose you're wondering about the knife."

"It did come to mind. Where is it?"

"In my belt. Did you think I'd leave it in your chest? I'd had a dream that I would need it. So I kept it. And sure enough-."

"But it was in my heart!"

"I made an image of it. I put the image in your heart, then faded it out."

Aran's fingernails raked his chest. "You miserable son of an ape! You let me

think that knife was in me for thirty years!"

"You came to my house as a thief," the Warlock reminded him. "Not an invited guest."

Aran the merchant had acquired somewhat the same attitude toward thieves. With diminished bitterness he said, 'Just a little magician's joke, was it? No wonder nobody could get it out. All right. Now tell me why Wavyhill's spell turned me into a wolf.'

The Warlock sat up carefully. He said, "What?"

"He waved his arms at me and sucked

all the mana out of me, and I turned into a wolf. I even lost my human intelligence. Probably my invulnerability too. If he hadn't been using an enchanted sword he'd have cut me to ribbons."

"I don't understand that. You should have been frozen into human form. Unless...

Then, visibly, the answer hit him. His pale cheeks paled further. Presently he said, "You're not going to like this, Aran."

Man could see it in the Warlock's face, seventy years old and very tired and full of pity. "Go on," he said.

"The Wheel is a new thing. Even the

dead spots aren't that old. The situation has never come up before, that's all. People automatically assume that werewolves are people who can turn themselves into wolves.

"It seems obvious enough. You can't even make the change without moonlight. You keep your human intelligence. But there's never been proof, one way or another, until now."

"You're saying I'm a wolf."

"Without magic, you're a wolf," the Warlock agreed.

"Does it matter? I've spent most of my life as a man," Man whispered. "What

difference does it make-oh. Oh, yes."

"It wouldn't matter if you didn't have children."

"Eight. And they'll have children. And One day the mana will be gone everywhere on Earth. Then what, Warlock?"

"You know already."

"They'll be wild dogs for the rest of eternity!"

"And nothing anyone can do about it."

"Oh, yes, there is! I'm going to see to it that no magician ever enters Rynildissen

again!" Man stood up on the dragon's shell. "Do you hear me, Warlock? Your kind will be barred. Magic will be barred. We'll save the mana for the sea people and the dragons!"

It may be that he succeeded. Fourteen thousand years later, there are still tales of werewolves where Rynildissen City once stood. Certainly there are no magicians.