

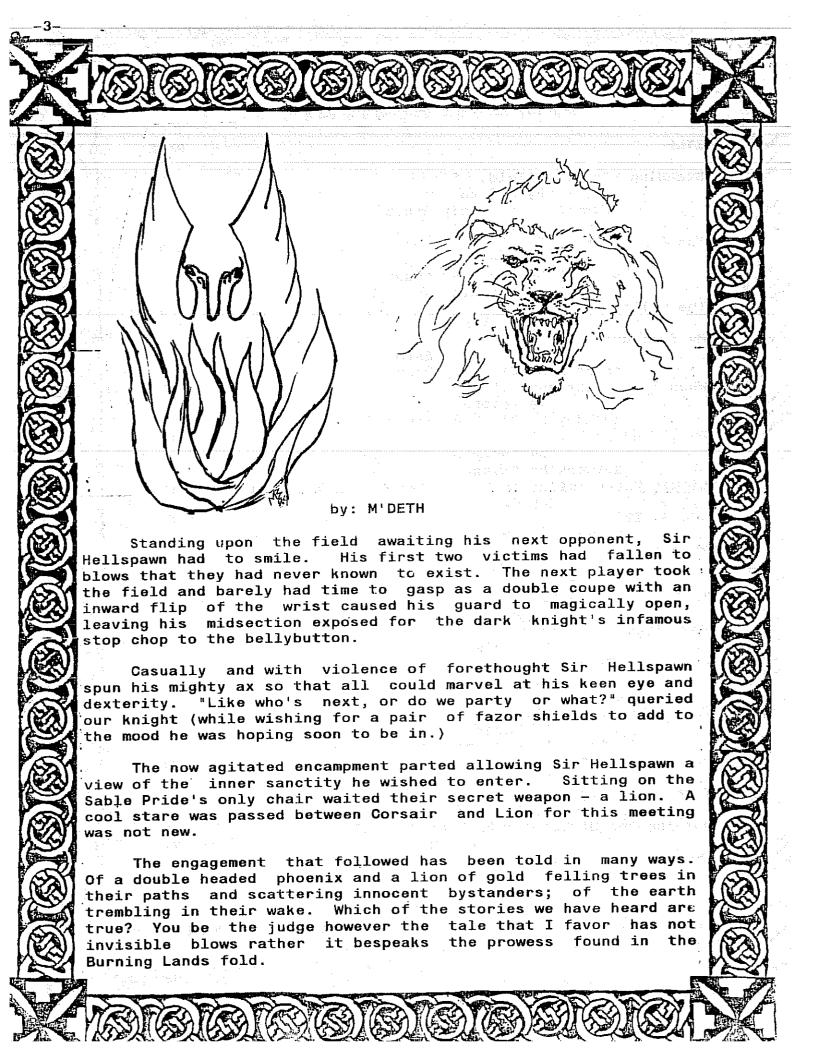
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february of of the year nineteen hundred eighty nine

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All borders and the cover are by Sir Lady Esuom, and many thanks to her.

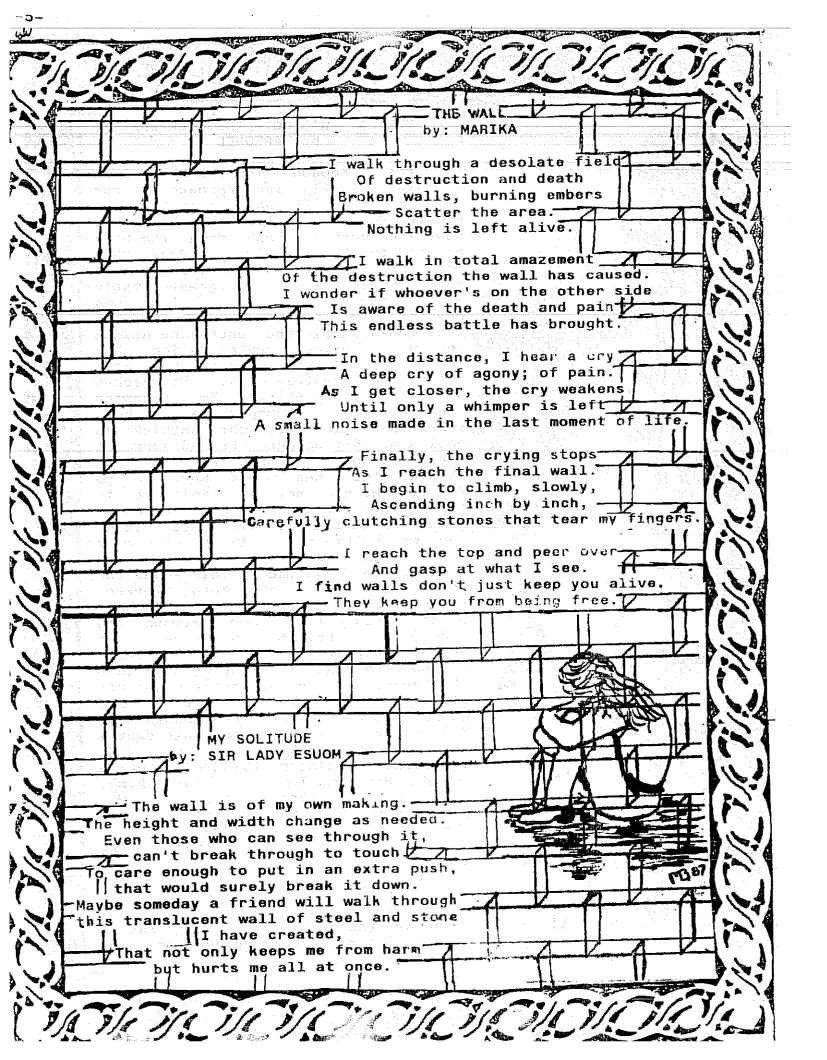


THE DAY WAS HOT- THE TEMPERS TOO by: AREDHEL

The hooded figure had been watching intently the approach of the fighters. It had taken him ten two minutes to creep unseen over the hill's edge from bush to bush, down the base an overhanging tree. From this had watched the two fighters point he take lightly, almost for granted their walk towards him. Now the time nearing. He began the deep breaths that would supply the energy he needed his nearing confrontation. beat quickly despite his best heart efforts to maintain calm. He checked his weapons quickly. Two throwing axes, one throwing dagger, and a short sword just in case the unthinkable could possibly happen. Now he surveyed their weaponry. Morning star shield, one would have to this He did not want this one to first. turn shield ready after his friend at arms had fallen at his feet. This, too, was unthinkable. An assassin must be thorough. The other fighter carried a short sword and madu. This meant the possibility of his shot being blocked. So he planned; throwing axe in the back of the shield man, sword between madu man's ribs. He would have to go unseen though, but this was the trade of the assassin. The gap between them shortened. He breathed quickly and his pressure raised. This was it. Leisurely, he thought, they passed him. They would go leisurely to their deaths was his last thought as he sprang from the bush. He closed the gap without a His axe leapt from his hand, sound. sword cut through the air. plan was superb. He was master, he was their better, he was...RIPPED OFF.

"Hey, cut that out, asshole, we're already dead."

His eyes stung for some unaccountable reason and his throat had grown a lump. He then returned to the trade of the assassin and went unseen by any to the overhanging tree and waited. He was an assassin.



### WHEN I WAS THIRTEEN... by: ARIONA

I turned thirteen the summer of 1977. This was an enviable advantage over my three younger brothers (aka "The Changelings" or the "Adorable Smith triplets"). I was a teenager and they were not! Actually being the oldest wasn't all it was cracked up to be but I'd cheerfully eat worms before I'd let them know it. For one thing my folks were always giving me the old Livingston, as the oldest you have to set a good example for your brothers. This meant there were a whole lot of marginal things that I should have gotten away with but couldn't because I was "The Good Example". A real pain in the ass. Swearing was another thing I didn't dare get caught at. Of course the three heathens to whom I was supposedly related swore like troopers (At age seven their command of four-letter words and phrases far outstripped mine). One obscenity out of their fat little faces and I'd get chewed out because I had probably set a bad example. No justice!

Another big disadvantage of the big one three was that I was patently too old to have a monster in my closet. I mean, at six or seven, even eight, you can get away with that sort of thing. Not at thirteen.

The monster had been hanging around in my closet for almost two weeks before my birthday. I think I invented teleportation the first time the snorting growls and frantic clawing at the door woke me. I do know I woke up in the usual manner, i.e., in bed, and was then instantaneously half way down the hallway outside with no idea how I had gotten there. "Nightmare," I thought glad I hadn't barged into my folk's room and made a complete idiot of myself. I went back to my room, turned on every light and armed with a hockey stick (maybe it wasn't a nightmare) checked out the closet. Nothing.

The next day was Saturday. Mom had her usual early tennis date and Dad would spend the day with his golfing buddies. Controlling the usual morning feeding time at the zoo, my three sibling's a.m. feeding frenzy, was usually dumped on my I had turned my back on the little beasts in unwilling head. order to clean up the mess they had created in the kitchen and they promptly invaded Dad's workroom in the garage. I ran towards the sounds of unholy glee and manic hammering not quite in time to save my father's latest carpentry job from about ten nail holes in its no longer glossy surface. Grabbing the hammer from one of the little hellions I shoved the second away from the electric drill while the third promptly sank his teeth in my leg. Figuring I was dog meat anyway when honorable father got a look at his new display case I proceeded to plummel the three into sullen obedience. The baleful glares and nasty snickering wonder what else they'd been winto. made

to ask Dad again for a lock on my door, cleaned up the best I could and literally drug the three of them over to Mrs. Watley's for the day. Her welcoming coos over "you sweet little dears" almost made me lose my breakfast. Back at the house and deciding to read the rest of the latest offering by Ann McCaffery I went up to my room. I was two steps inside the door and found the entire contents of my bookcase scattered all over Weeping with rage and frustration as I picked up scattered pages ripped out at random and others torn into confetti. Those dammed, misbegotten, little heathens! Their usual depredations heretofore involved only inconvenience and embarrassment (locked me out of the house for 45 minutes when I was wearing just a bathrobe or the times my homework had been hidden) but this! When I found the soggy remnants of my new Ann McCaffery I slumped down on the floor and plain bawled. I had reached the red eyed, nose dripping stage when I noticed I had left the light on in the closet. I stumbled over to turn it off when the growling and scratching began. This time I didn't teleport I shrieked and levitated!

Over the next couple of weeks the monster made at least two appearances a day. I had gotten over the panic reaction finally (after all, it never actually came out of the closet) was missing a lot of sleep. No one else noticed any unusual noises. I even got Dad to investigate by telling him I thought I had seen a mouse. We took everything out of the closet and found nothing but three blank walls and a door. No mouse and no monster. I also had my own blank wall. There was no one I could talk to about the closet monster. Certainly not my mom or "Good Examples" don't have monsters in their closets. Likewise the three apprentice barbarians. If they suspected anything strange going on they'd rat to the folks and here comes the month's restriction. Luckily I managed to convince Dad the lock on my door after he'd seen the ruin in his need of a workroom and of my bookcase. (The three fiends even got a lecture and a swat on the hand for their "little prank" have beaten them senseless!). Of course if I hinted about something sacred to myself and kept in the closet they'd certainly come barging in and get eaten by the thing. that had definite appeal! But then I'd have to explain the bodies. I had to come up with a plan.

I decided the only rational approach would be to approach the monster directly. Safety was my primary objective; curiosity second. After all, I didn't want to be eaten either. So a couple more weeks went by with my keeping close track of the thing; it's hours of activity, when it was most active, when it was not there at all and so on.

One complete spiral notebook later I had discovered a number of very interesting things about my resident beast. For one thing it didn't appear only at night. Obviously this

monster was not a traditionalist. In fact the periods of the heaviest activity were mid-morning and just before dawn with some minimal stirrings around 10:00 at night. Even more interesting the light shining under the door was definitely brighter during daylight activities and my monster smelled good! Sort of a cinnamon-oregano combination. (Try to imagine a sweetroll pizza.)

Armed with my timetable my first objective was to get the things attention - gently! I waited until 10:00 that night. soon as I heard it stirring I gave the closet door a tentative tap. The result was pandemonium! It sounded like an enraged wart hog and a bengal tiger having a fight in a garbage can for about 2 seconds and then total, absolute silence. I also reconfirmed my ability to levitate. I was now perched in the middle of my bed rather than by the closet door. Another ten minutes produced no other reaction other than my heart slowing down to a mere 200 beats per minute. I oozed over to the door Nothing. Uneasily aware that the thing may and tapped again. now suspect it had company (prey?) I crawled under the covers hoping I would be alive when the alarm went off in the morning when I could try again.

Naturally lying awake half the night expecting to be gobbled, rent asunder, absorbed, or in general misused by my noisy neighbor made me oversleep and I missed the chance to do some early a.m. rapping and tapping. School wiped out the early afternoon "Monster Activity Period" so it wasn't until that night I had a chance to do my welcome wagon routine. Ten o'clock rolled around and no sounds from the closet. By eleven thirty I gave it up. Monster was obviously a no show. By the end of the week I decided I'd blown the chance of a lifetime. Monster had found someone else's closet to rummage in.

That Friday night at dinner the folks announced they were going to Sommerville to visit my aunt and uncle Harding. Now I want you to understand the idea of spending four hours in the back seat of the family Buick with the gruesome threesome was not real high on my fun priority list. Aunt and uncle Harding and their sappy offspring, Norman the nerd and Sara the slut, occupied a similar desirability level. I immediately expressed immense enthusiasm/joy and assured honorable parents that the English paper due on Monday wasn't all that important. I added a look of greedy anticipation and threw in statements like "boy, Norman and Sara always had a lot of fun and different things to do" and "I can't wait to see what they have lined up this time". My unbounded albeit counterfeit enthusiasm guaranteed my folks suspected myself and my cloddish cousins would be up to no good. I was suddenly pronounced a mature young woman of 13 and could stay home by myself for two days and complete my English term paper. (Livingston, girl genius, strikes again! Also, I think Dad at least had some sympathy with my very real desire to be



badly in need of a manicure. Right about then I stopped looking and began reacting. I giggled. By now he was up to my short ribs and it tickled. Apparently it also tickled the monster as he gave a rusty sounding chuckle and moved the rather prehensile snout up to my hair (thoroughly encloved). Cloves were evidently a new ofactory treat to monster. He spent five minutes inhaling and uttering low snorts and chuckles. Finally, having evidently sniffed his fill he pulled back and squatted on the floor just in front of me and spoke four words; "What want good smells?".

We negotiated for about two hours. I'm still not sure just how we communicated. His English was pretty limited. A combination of snorts (I'm a pretty good snorter evidently), charades, chuckles, and some inspired growling and slurping on his part resulted in a contract between him and myself. I agreed to provide him with good smells on a weekly basis. He agreed to terrorize my hellish younger brothers on a demand basis!

All of this occurred two years ago. Monster is definitely out of the closet and my relationship with him is very satisfactory. The gruesome threesome are veritable models of good behavior – at least with me. A little midnight terrorizing by my good friend has had a marvelous affect on their moral structure. Monster's English is approaching near perfect although he still tends to growl his r's and slurp his t's. He

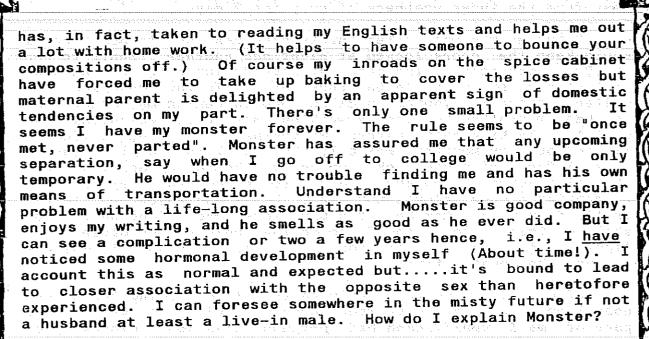
away from the three brothers if only for 2 days.)

after thirty reassurances to Mom Saturday morning would keep the doors locked at night and another twenty to Dad the Buick departed. The back end already lurching up and down in tortured testimony to the three devils in the back seat. waited a canny 30 minutes to allow Mom to remind my father that she had forgotten to pack something absolutely essential and went to the kitchen to gather my arsenal. You see, I finally figured out my monster was only shy and I had a plan Going to the spice rack I grabbed reason) for luring him back. Just to be on the safe side I cinnamon and oregano. appropriated some cloves and sweet basil and adjourned to the brat's dormitory. Mom kept the Christmas decorations on the top shelf of their closet and I needed the colored, revolving tree light. Light, an extension cord, and spices in hand it was off to lure the monster time.

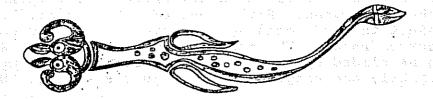
After setting up the revolving tree light facing the closet door I proceeded to use up four boxes of spices on myself. Any part of me I could reach had oregano, cinnamon, cloves, etc. thoroughly rubbed into the surface; tennie runners, levi's and all. I even dumped some down my Def-Leopard tee-shirt and in my I was taking no chances. My closet monster was socks. definitely going to identify with me. It was just before 10:00 so taking a deep breath I opened the closet door about half an inch and sat back clutching the hockey stick. (Before you question the hockey stick you will understand that after dealing with the three sons of my parents I firmly believe all friendly gestures should be backed up with the ability to commit mayhem when necessary. I was a real believer in the "carry a stick school of negotiation.)

I proceeded to wait. And wait. And wait. At 10:30 I gave it up, tossed the hockey stick on the bed, and went to closet to stow the light there temporarily I came face to face with my monster! Both of us flinched but whereas I flinched backwards he flinched forwards. Right out of the closet! I scrambled back against the bed reaching frantically for the hockey stick. It was out of reach! The monster however was not. Snorting and grunting he slided up close enough to sniff one of my gym shoes. I was slightly encouraged. He was just sniffing. Not chewing. Yet!

As he worked over the shoe I did some fast and slightly hysterical looking. Monster was short, maybe 3 or so feet tall. Hard to tell actually as he had a typical monster like knuckles dragging the ground posture. The nose, rather snout, now busily snorting at my left knee was sort of pig like but hairy as was the rest of him. The fangs were truly outstanding! Eyes a hellish red and barely visible under a heavy brow ridge. Paws (no, hands) suitably equipped with inch-long black claws



When the question of possible future complications was put to my usual room mate he growled something about checking with the Cosmetics Division and promptly disappeared. Two days later not only was Monster suddenly socially acceptable but downright lovable. The cat disguise was inspired. As an added bonus I figure I'm assured of at least a six figure income for the rest of my life (which will be shared with Monster of course). I'll have to start out on a small scale but I bet within a year or the cat will be the media hit of the season (a less "Morris" Even better Monster assures natural for TV commercials). wonders even on that the gang in Cosmetics can work their humans. What with all the special effects monsters in the movies I do believe I have just made career choices for my three charming brothers



Peace and grace once ruled this place And angels would guard the doors. Now peace is dead, the angels fled, And grace became a whore.

by: ANONYMOUS



#### LITTLE KNOWN TITLES

or

HOW TO KNOW WHEN TO KISS UP by: GILOS

Although the Amtgard Corpora defines and describes many of Amtgard's titles and awards, it is not complete. Many lesser known titles have sprung up over the years, and the complete sycophant should have a complete knowledge of these.

Grouped by type they are:

#### EARNED TITLES

<u>ULTRADUKE</u>-An eight time ex-monarch, now a crimefighter in a major metropolitan area.

MAXI-COUNTESS-A five time ex-princess, or a feminine hygiene product.

COURT RODENTS-Appointed by the Monarch's whim, these individuals act as general court entertainment.

They have characteristic names based on their personality. Examples include:

Weasel-Not actually a rodent, these individuals are not exactly human

Bunny-The cute cuddly rodent, perennial consort favorite for reasons this monarch can't quite figure out.

RED BARON-An ex-prime minister who did not keep the records up to Aramithris's satisfaction.

MARQUET-Given to the individual who best markets his, or her abilities to the monarch.

#### TITLES BY MARRIAGE

DOXY -wife of a Duke

DUCK -husband of a Duchess

MISS COUNT -wife of a Count -wife of a Viscount

BARREN —old infertile wife of a Baron

DESOLET -sometimes written Desolate, as above but for a
Baronet

REALLY BAD OFF-As above but for a lord

#### OTHER TITLES

HIGH ABBOT-often the partner of a low Costello

KHAN -granted for excellent oratory, also written "con"

PREFECT -not quite perfect

SULTAN -a deep, rich bronze tan

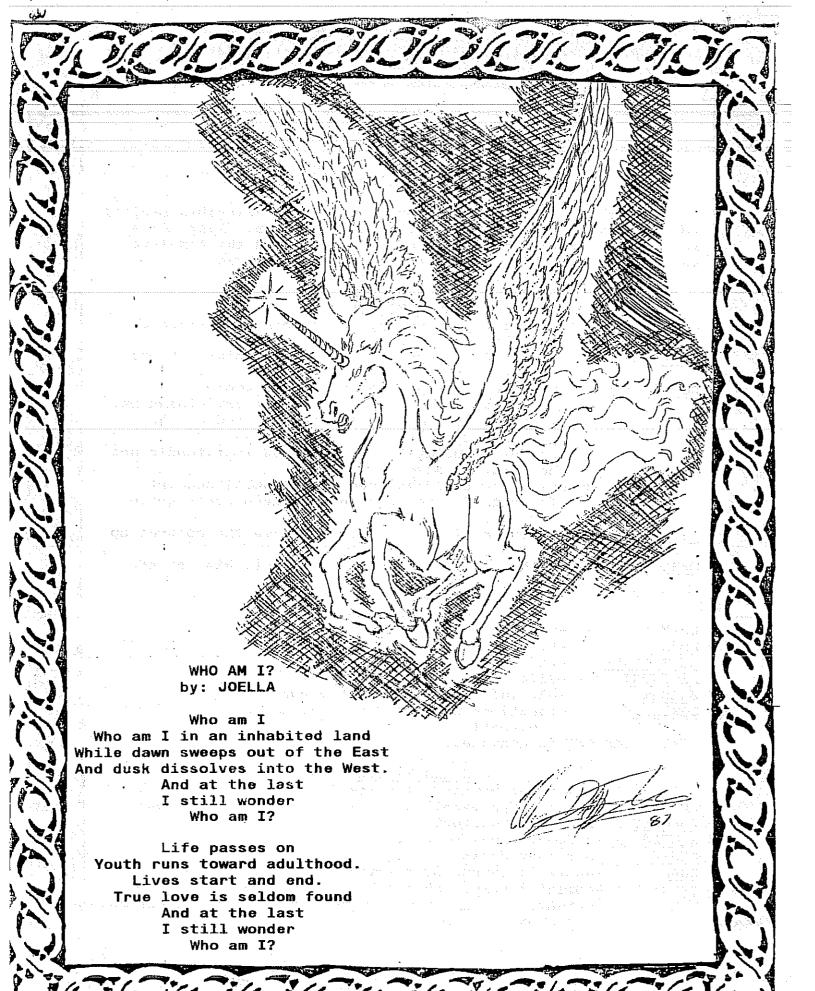
SHEIK —a trendy noble

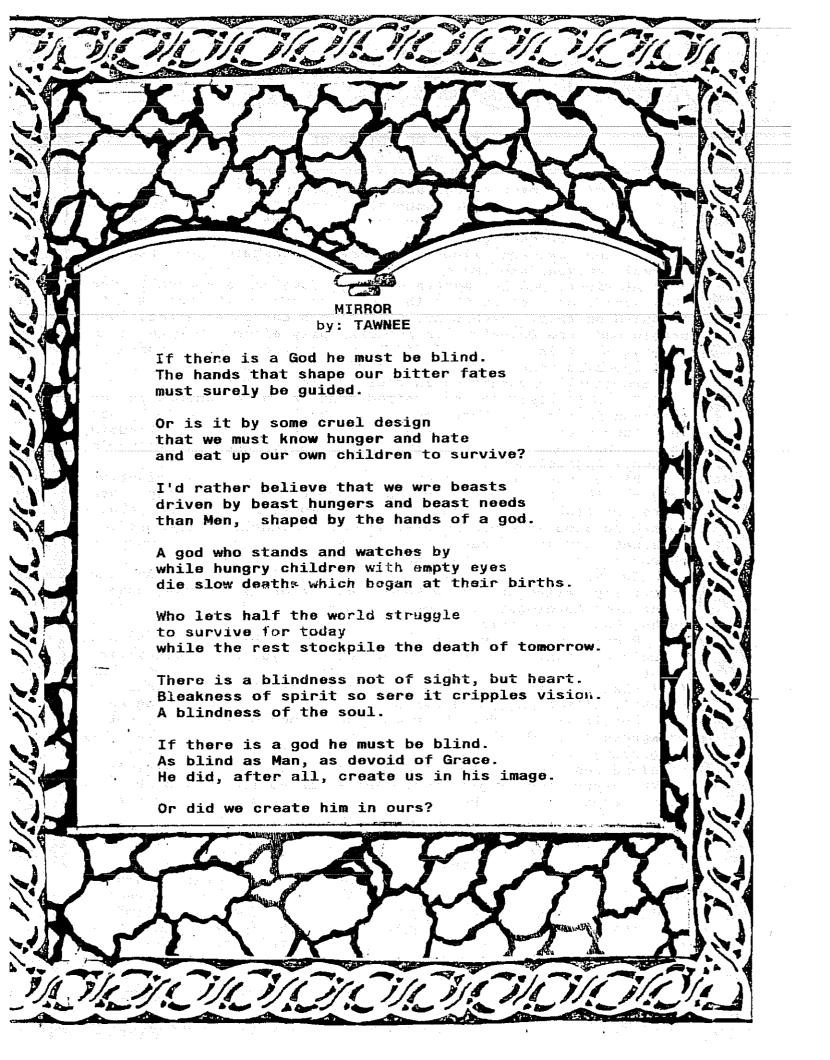
GRAF -Noble in charge of charting

CANCELLOR —administrative noble charged with T.V. scheduling

EARL —actually an English word for "throw", i.e. "I earled

a stone at 'im."





## TO BE OR NOT TO BE

One of the best things about a fantasy society like Amtgard is the ability to recreate yourself. You do not have to be who Mommy and Daddy have decided you to be nor what the rest of society has decreed you to be. You have no Social Security number nor drivers license number. Instead you recreate yourself in your own image.

At first, people wait a while to develop a persona. Once they decide on a class that they want to stay with, they may try to build on that. Each class has its own characteristics. Many people who are Oriental in persona play either a monk or an assassin. It is not a steadfast rule however, for a person to be a specific race for a certain class. There are many people who are widely diversified in their choice of classes.

It must also be recognized that a name chosen is not engraved in stone. There are people who have been known by more than four names. Some of them retain their names, just adding on another name as one suits their fancy such as Wolverine Darkwolf Nightstalker.

Since choosing a persona is a chance to be imaginative, many of the names chosen are of people's own devising. Some names are taken out of context; for example, a person saw a name somewhere else and just adopted it for Amtgard. There are some personas that have travelled the dungeons of games or were the characters of a story that the person had written.

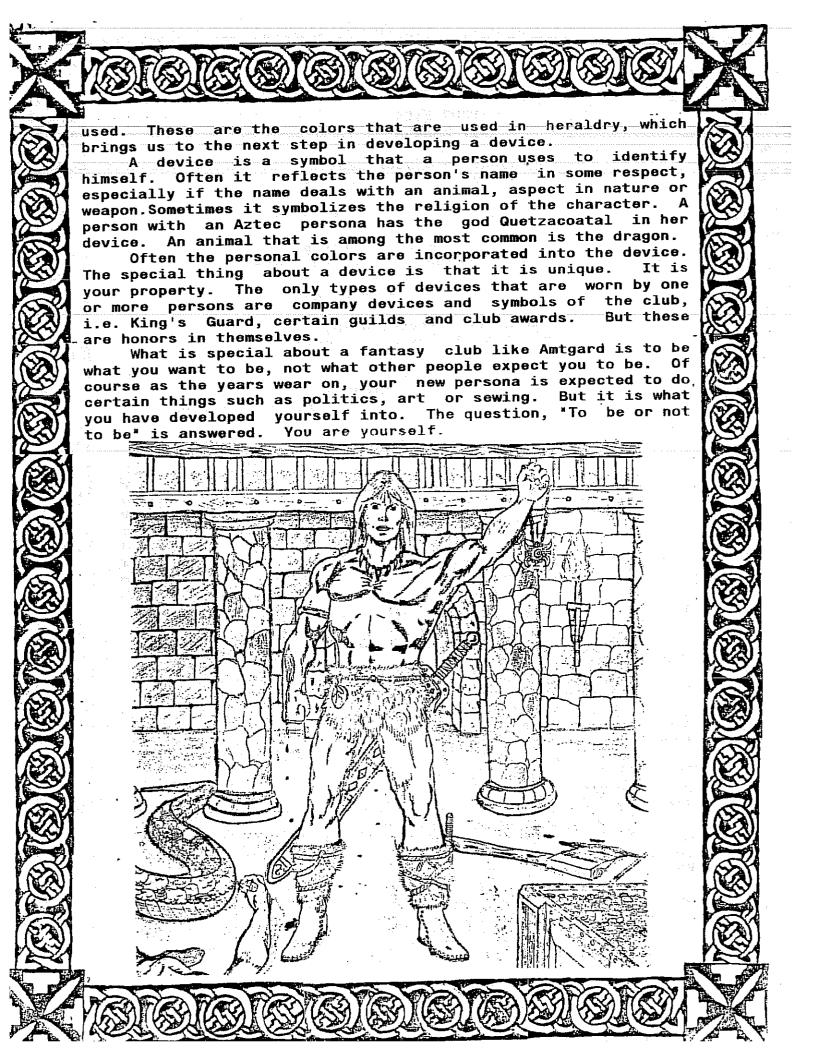
In some, the imaginative process is stumped or they especially desire to be a known character as in the case of Conan Ator Morningstar. Some characters are derived from comic books, books and movies.

People may derive their names from objects in nature. Aspects of animals, celestial objects, physical chacteristics, prowess with certain weapons can help influence a name. This falls back to the ancient and medieval practice of identifying yourself with a job, a happening at birth or a favorite animal.

But it is not just the name that a person uses. An entire background is developed. The places of origin that an Amtgardian can chose from is limitless. Such choises of homeland can be obtained from books, movies, past history of Earth or your own imagination. There is no limit. The Burning Lands is populated by humans, elves, the eternals and even a few lizard men. It is a chance to let yourself go.

Another thing that people like to develop is their own personal colors. Companies have their colors, of course, but individuals can choose their own as well. Normally they contain the favorite colors of the person. These can be worn in conjunction with company colors. This also allows for creative sewing and clothes. In Amtgard, the imagination is the limit.

There are just a few colors that the person can choose from. They are green, red, blue, purple gold (yellow) and silver (white). Of course, any shade of these colors can be



Thus I left your relative security, rediscovering that I could sustain myself. And to my surprise, I found that my affection did not fade. My love will never dim, for it was never lost. Whenever I choose, I can close my eyes,

and drink in the light reflected by your shimmering depth.



The charger had seen better days. Time was, it had stood at the vanguard of the column, charging a glinting wall of heathen steel; now it plodded implacably down the rutted track, oblivious to the clouds of dust and insects raised by its passage, taking one weary step after another. Its harness was splotched and dotted with black, to the point where one could scarce distinguish where sweat blended into blood blended into battered leather.

In all, the steed presented a sight as disreputable as its rider, a grizzled, sun-baked mound of a man, planted in his saddle as if he had taken root and sprouted there. His eyes, hollow and haunted, kept to the road, which flowed underneath with the monotonous regularity of a dead streambed.

He took no noticed of the blasted landscape through which he rode, an expanse of riven and blackened fields, bounded on each side, far from the road, by a stand of charred timber.

"Another fine day for a canter through the countryside, wouldn't you say?" The tinny voice sounded from somewhere over the veteran's shoulder. "Join the Crusades and see the world. Frankly, I don't see what keeps you going; these liberated sectors all look alike to me."

The warrior gritted his teeth (and discovered, to his discomfiture, grit).

"I would explain to you, heathen, but I doubt it is within your wretched heart to understand."

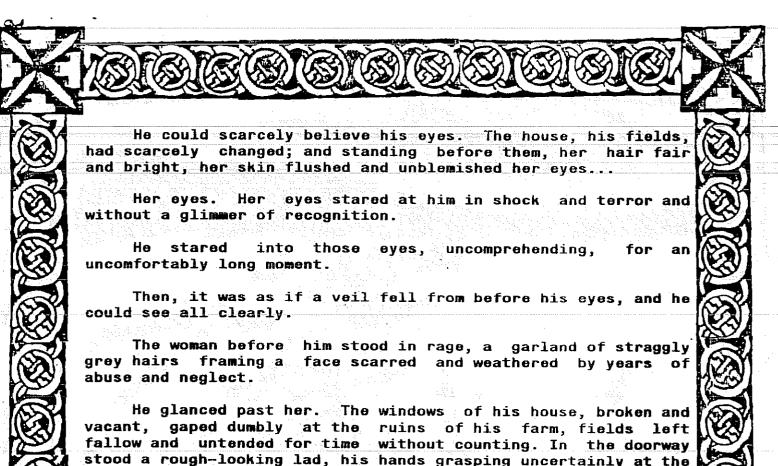
"Enlighten me," his companion urged.

"I'll tell you, then, what keeps me going on. The same thing that kept me going through year after year of battle, assaulting one damnable citadel after another, watching my comrades drop like flies with pagan steel in their bellies.

"What I <u>fight</u> for," he snarled, "lies at the end of this road. A home and hearth, a bountiful land, a woman and a child who have sheltered in safety while we kept the pagan hordes at bay.

But I wouldn't expect you to to understand any of that," suddenly yanking the reins and turning his horse about—but his tormentor, as always, leapt nimble as a sprite out of his view—damn him!— just a flash of an impudent grin as he dashed to his perpetual position over the warrior's shoulder. "You, who have obviously never seen fit to go into battle for your

lord and liege." "No," came the reply, "it's odd how seldom men invite me to accompany them onto the field." And so it went, the incessant yammering attending his progress down the road, plaguing him like some noisome pest. Just when he had acquired this fellow traveler, he could not say. Some time since his troops had disbanded, and turned dispiritedly back to the trail leading to home, if not to glory. How many days had passed since then, the fighter could not answer either. Day after day passed in a ceaseless succession of barren homesteads, rubbled villages, and hostile citizenry. nothing but a horse on a road, now, league after league creeping by under the weary steed's hooves, until he no longer remembered the last nightfall, or whether they had even stopped to rest. Until there came a day. He had noted with only marginal interest a change in the landscape, the hills swelling along the road, the woods (or what remained of them) crowding thicker at his side, until suddenly he caught his breath, finding the road cutting a pass between two sheer walls of rock, and over a rise in the road, there it was. Life seemed to return to the heavy veteran's eyes. lifted his head, sat straighter in his saddle, the planes of his face shifting to accommodate an expression of unutterable joy. Even his steed seemed to revitalize, years of drudgery and leagues of travel sloughing off of his frame. is what I fought for, unbeliever, " he all but "Here is what I have kept safe in my heart, clean and shouted. pure, through all these years of horror! His follower was strangely silent. With a whoop of exaltation, he kicked the sides of his charger and dashed into the valley, which sprawled lush verdant beneath him. He rode through fields of grain bowing golden and sweet and ready for harvest, past orchards of trees all but groaning under the weight of fruit hanging fat and ripe and (you could just tell) succulent, through streams that ran pristine and clear, not choked and swollen with the wreckage of an army. The hoofs all but pounded down the road, heading for the soldier's final destination.



stood a rough-looking lad, his hands grasping uncertainly at the handle of a scythe, defiance in his posture, mingled fear and hatred in his eyes.

The three of them stood, frozen in place, an unlikely tableau of homecoming.

Then, with a cry of despair, the warrior whipped his steed about, fleeing past the spare and barren fields, stumbling over the rutted and rocky trail, until he had put the valley behind him.

companion had not abandoned him after all, discovered; the fay fellow was waiting for him at the pass, perched on the ramshackle remnants of a neighbor's fence.

"Why?" he asked. "Why was I allowed to see this?"

"Because," the voice told him, almost gently, " this is what you fought for. This is what you have carried in your heart all these years."

The warrior sat a long time, pondering the ground. Then he urged his horse forward, and nodded almost imperceptibly for his demon to follow him.

There is a man on horseback on a dusty road. He doesn't know where the road will lead him. No one can tell him where it will end.



# OUTLANDISH DREAMS by: HONTO

I wake up sometimes feeling as though I'm still there, snaking through the ghostly scrub pines of Outlandish, their spectral branches outlines starkly in the silver moonlight. Swiftly, quietly, like a shadow in the night, I run reveling.

Look, over there! Pirates!! We would do well to stay away from them. I hear they be devious knaves, who will stop at nothing to spirit away a stalwart soldier's drinking mug, leaving the beggardly lout with nothing to quaff his libations but his own dirty hands. Aye, a sticky situation when honey mead is the fare.

Do you see, up yonder hill, that banner snapping bravely in the breeze? Red it is, emblazoned with a great wolf's head snarling at the world. 'Tis the flag of the dreaded Crimson Company. Yes, that infamous band of roving, mercenary slavers. Listen, you can hear the drums of Rolling Thunder and the bells of the dancing slave girls echoing down the steep hill.

As we start up the eerily dark and treacherous path, we hear a tremendous crashing in the brush. As we draw back affrighted, we see that it is but the Great White Pumpkin. His cherubic face is red from exertion and his eyes full of horror. He runs blindly past us, heading to the comparative safety of Amtgard hil, leaving in his wake a black omen of things to come should we earn entry to Crimson camp.

As we staggered 'round the last turn of the purposely misleading path, we see the stout walls and imposing moat of fabled Crimson castle. We start to cross the drawbridge and are challenged by an unseen voice.

"Halt. From whence do ye come!"

"We be from the far reaches of Amtgard, kingdom of the burning lands!" I call back boldly.

"State your business here, Amtgard dog."

"We be not curs, but brave soldiers seeking adventure."

"Well spoken, bold one, but before thy motley crew enters our domain thee must answer one question."

"Ask me thy question gatekeeper, I am not afraid."

"What be thy favorite color?"

Knowing that my reply should indicate the color red, I



"Ho, ho! Yet another good answer, articulate one. Come ye hither so that we may see from what stuff ye be made."

We move cautiously into the confines of the awesome encampment. Our inquisitor steps from his enclosure and looks at us appraisingly.

"Ye may enter but first leave thy blades on our Tree of Many Things."

We unbuckle our sword belts and hang them from the impressive pine. The tree is a thing of great beauty, brilliantly festooned with pouches, blades, baubles, and myriad other forms of medieval paraphernalia glittering in the bright torchlight.

The sentry turns to face me and says, "By merit of thy glib tongue, thou will be the one to earn entry for thy group. I dearly hope, for thy sake, that thy back is as strong as thy words."

Sensing that my brave words have somehow antagonized this guard, I remain silent.

Where are thy bold words now, adventurous mongrel? Come along and I'll show thee to thy labors."

He leads me down a wide avenue which is lined with large, red, "A" frame tents, their protruding support poles topped with grimacing golden dragon heads. The air is filled with the wildly chaotic drumbeats of Rolling Thunder. We pass by a large open area which is surrounded by a teeming multitude of boisterous revelers. Between gaps in the mob I catch glimpses of the dancing girls. Their firm, supple flesh gyrating savagely with total abandon that only sex slaves can possess. I yearn in my very soul to be amongst them.

We turn and proceed down a dark alleyway which ends in a large, guarded corral. The gate guard turns to the corral guards and orders, "Make sure this vociferous lout cuts a full cord of wood before he gains access to the revelry." One of the corral guards leads me to a huge pile of dead trees and hands me a woodcutters' axe. He points to a large box and says, "Fill this crate with logs and thee may celebrate the entire duration of Grand Outlandish with the Crimson Company."

With this as my incentive, I attack the wood pile with much vigor. However, the blade of the axe be blunted and the onerous task becomes well nigh impossible. I turn to the guards and

jibe sarcastically, "Be there not any sharper steel than this butter-cleaver in all of illustrious Crimson?" One of the guards looks at me piteously and throws me his own mighty battleaxe. "Many thanks, good sir," I say. He merely looks at me and chuckles quietly. With renewed strength, albeit puzzled, I return to my labors. One stroke. Two strokes. CRACK! The ornate haft of the beautiful weapon snaps cleanly in half. The guards rush at me with drawn weapons and furious expressions:

"Ye will pay for that, progeny of scum!" The axe's owner exclaims as he slips a slave's collar around my neck. He jerks on my chain and half drags me back down the alleyway with the other guard bringing up the rear. We reenter the brightly lit dancing area and widely skirt the crowd. It appears that the guard is leading me to...the pillory! This arcane torture device stands about eight hands tall and is constructed to hold the victims head and hands whilst leaving them vulnerable to the depredations of malevolent passersby.

The guards open the obscene contraption and, forcing me head and hands into the deep grooves, brusquely slam it shut. The guards then leave me to my brooding.

Much to my chagrin the crowd, mightily bemused by my plight, begin pelting me with pieces of half eaten food and rotten fruit along with the occasional rock. I watch shocked as the members of mine own group laughingly join in on the fun.

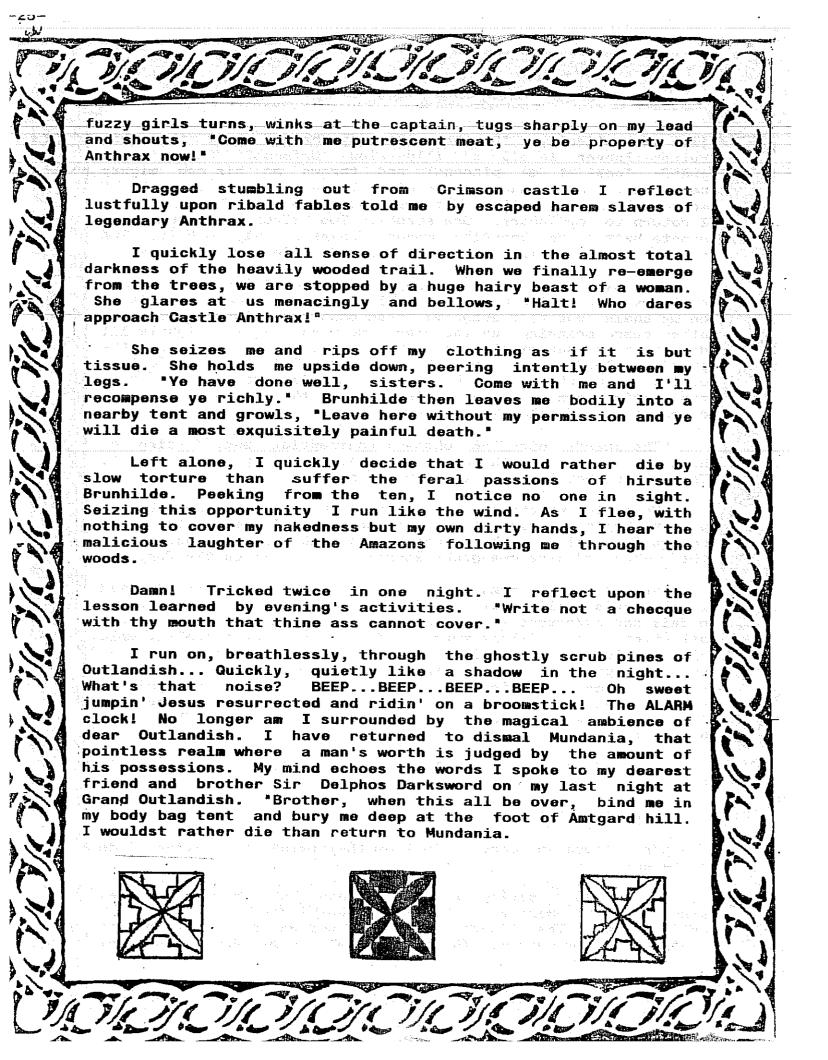
Suddenly, the drums stop on a single beat and a man dressed in the garish uniform of the Crimson Company captain steps up on a dais and addresses the crowd. Lords and ladies, I direct thy attention to the pillory where we have on display a healthy male slave. Please examine him at your leisure and consult me about possible purchase. Hearing this, the jolly mob begins subjecting me to poking, prodding and pinching. One pair of Amazon beauties, clad in fur bikinis, seem particularly interested in the region beneath my breechcloth. Their hot breath and ingracious touch excites my loins.

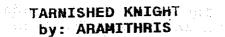
"A good find for Brunhilde's harem, don't ye think sister?" says one of them.

"Aye!" exclaims the other.

They leave and once again I am the recipient of a fusillade of refuse.

I am beyond caring, however. I have been chosen as a sex slave for the Amazons of Castle Anthrax! My heart races in anticipation. The Amazons reappear accompanied by the Crimson captain and tow guards. The guards release me from the pillory and hand the end of my leash to the women warriors. One of the





In your diminished glory,
you fret,
wondering why the taste was of ashes;
as the crowd roared,
and your sloe-eyed fans sang
your praises to heaven.
Now you are a chosen paladin—
the machine worked,
spat out yourheart's desire.
Your glitter is the product;
yet the soul is unfulfilled,
and now your fans know the price.
You stand in the portal.
Tomorrow you will need a new drug,
and your fans will come for what you have...
From ashes to ashes.





The aftermath of battle has an ambience of its own. Dawn in the highlands was a daily reaffirmation of the Goddess, a waxing of the life force. However, no birds trilled their morning greetings, and the small furry life so prevalent in these broken woods stirred slowly as if reluctant to emerge from the security of tunnel and burrow. Only the faint groaning of the wounded carried with the breeze off the not-so-distant moors. A brisk promise of winter mingled with the stench of carrion, giving pause to the cowled figure that picked its way among the dead.

"Goddess, I will never grow used to the smell of blood," mused Mearna as she knelt to ease the passage of the last of her charges. He had been young, and strong to have lasted the night, but he had not resisted her offering. "Yes, a gift," she thought bitterly, her gaze locked on the ruin of what had once been a young man, almost as young as herself when the first glimmerings of power had stirred. Power and responsibility, the cold and the dead were unpleasant reminders of darker times.

"Stop this foolishness," Mearna chided herself. To be drawn into despair was tempting fate before its time. "Fight the critical battles on your own terms," she silently intoned, and rose with a decisive swirl of robes. In emphatic counterpoint, the first rays of the sun burst over the ragged horizon, lending a crimson cast to the residue of carnage. If she noticed the grim symbolism, Mearna gave no sign. "Oh man, what have you done?" she breathed, and turned back towards the trees.

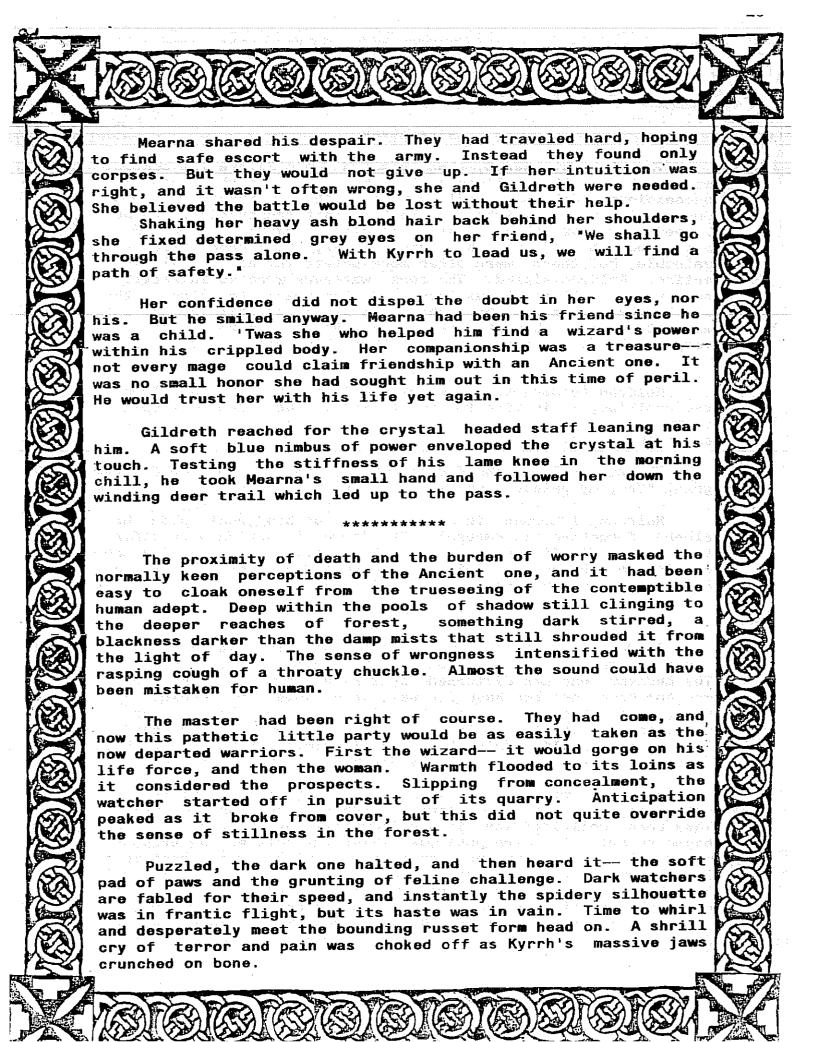
Moving quietly, her worn travel cloak close against her, she returned to her waiting companions. As ever, the human did not hear her approach. He leaned in the crook of a tree, face drawn and tired after the night's long vigil.

"Gildreth," she called softly.

He started, turning to where she had seemingly materialized from the brush. Kyrrh stared unblinking at her, amusement in his lambent gaze. Rising, the great cat moved into the woods, his protective duties relived. Now it was time to hunt.

Reluctantly, Mearna answered the question in Gildreth's violet eyes. "Dead. All dead, torn apart. Around sunset, the best I can know."

The young man's shoulders slumped in defeat. "They were our only real chance of getting through the pass."



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The slave staggered, then screamed once before the contact was broken. She collapsed to the floor, either dead unconscious. Keldran hardly noticed. Those without the power were frail vessels at best. In the last tenday alone he had burned out some three score. It didn't matter-- there True, the watcher had been always enough slaves to be found. valuable, but there were other more potent forces to call into action. Keldran sighed. The dark watchers were so intractable anyway, so full of themselves, and too quick to consume the spoils that were his by right. He dismissed his fallen spy without another thought. Mearna and her pet wizard were now temporarily beyond his sight, and thus, his control. That could never do.

Keldran turned to the stocky officer at his side, "Rouse the captains, it is time for us to move. And inform our allies at the pass to be vigilant. Tell them that a special treat approaches. Go."

The man saluted and did not bother to hide his predatory grin, "Yes, my prince," and spun to take his leave.

Keldran, immersed in other facets of his great plan, had already forgotten his general. The forces in action were coming together. His finger paused on his battle map, tracing an outline on the great plain just beyond the pass. There, at Runestead, would his destiny be fulfilled.

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Gildreth and Mearna walked together in silence, senses straining to pierce the gloom of the strangely menacing wood. The Ancient one was disturbed by this disharmony. The forest was her home, and she knew its ways as no human ever could. Yet here, the shadows seemed hostile, each rustle of brush threatening, the trees towering ominously above their heads. The told herself firmly to stop imagining things, but her fingers sought the weight of the pouch at her belt nonetheless.

Although winter was weeks away, there was already a scattering of snow on the lower reaches of the Skull's teeth. They were well into the jagged foothills by the time the sun began to set. The hard pace was taking its toll on the crippled wizard already, though he masked it. Leaving him to rest in a lee of tumbled rocks, Mearna gathered wood. After she arranged the branches and twigs carefully in the shelter of stone, Gildreth laid his hand on the wood and muttered a word of power. The fire blossomed to life. Kyrrh made a brief appearance to drop a mangled rabbit at the wizard's feet, then vanished into

the gathering shadows. Mearna busied herself rearranging her pack, trying to ignore the human as he cleaned the animal and set it over the fire to cook. In deference to her, he carefully buried the inedible parts and moved to set the wards while his dinner cooked. Taking three carven, stubby stakes from his belt, he set them at the perimeter of the shallow depression of stone and passed his hands over them, chanting briefly in the tongue of magic. A white glow spread between them, warding the half cave. He sat down near Mearna, the lines of weariness on his smooth face now carved deeper.

"You should conserve your magic," she warned gently, touching his hand.

"If I don't set the wards, how can we sleep?" he asked, reaching for the stick of sizzling meat.

Mearna ate sparingly of the nuts, dried berries, mushrooms she had gathered along the path. She had no answer, so she remained silent. Finishing his meal, Gildreth licked his fingers appreciatively and buried the bones. Settling his back against the chill stone wall, he massaged his knee. She came to curl her small body against him, head resting on his shoulder. Making certain his staff was near to hand, Gildreth tucked the cloaks around them and closed his eyes, asleep immediately. Mearna watched the dying firelight dance over the hollows of his listened to his quiet, even breathing. No longer his human-smell, his man-smell, disturbed by she comfortably against him, sharing warmth. For a long time she stared out at the darkness, pressing thick against the ward's pale glow.

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The wizard woke first, remaining still to let Mearna sleep a little longer. Her face rested against his shoulder, one small hand lay on his chest. He wondered at her childlike beauty, unchanged since the day he had accidentally stumbled into her tree home as a boy. He believed that was why so many humans hated the Ancient ones. While humans withered and died, that race marked the years like days.

She stirred and looked up at him, blinking sleep from almond shaped eyes. He blushed to be caught staring, sat up and began binding his long raven hair back with silver cord. She watched him affectionately for a moment, then went to collect the pack and make certain the fire was out. Gildreth dropped the wards and collected the stakes, nodding amiably in the direction of Kyrrh, who lay sunning atop a nearby rock. The feline growled unconvincingly and stretched.

They wasted no time breaking camp, munching on dry travel

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cakes as they followed the rough trail through the broken rocks. By midday they had reached the foot of the skull mountains. At least a day was needed to cross the pass, to continue on now would mean camping in the mountain's cleft. But the sense of urgency pressed hard against Mearna's heart. They would press on. Entry into the pass was blocked by a rubble of huge, shattered stones, marking some mammoth avalanche of winters past. Mearna quickly became exhausted, hands and knees abraded helping the crippled wizard scramble up and down the sheer rock faces. By the time they reached the flatter ground of the pass, Gildreth's forehead was creased with pain, and he had difficulty walking. But the Ancient one's urgency had communicated itself to him, and he grimly determined to cover as much ground as possible by sunset.

By dusk, they were a third of the way up the side of the pass. Several inches of snow masked the trail, and the air was thin and cold. As the light faded, they took poor shelter between two boulders. Hunting had evidently been poor, for Kyrrh brought no meat for the human.

It was just as well. There was no wood for a fire, and immediately upon setting the wards, Gildreth had sunk into an exhausted sleep. After forcing herself to eat a handful of dried fruit, Mearna rolled herself in her cloak and snuggled against the sleeping human for warmth.

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Koldon rubbed his tired eyes and straightened with a groan and the crack of popping limbs. He managed a wry smile, and nodded towards his advisor, "I'm groad too old for the campaign, Luirne. There are times I en you and your sister your longevity and youth."

The grey one's answering grap was and with a hint of sadness, "Ahh- my friend, we hare age your standards, but we are certainly capable of growing old are our time. One can see far too much misery in a

The general's sober response interrupted by a deferential scratching at his cent's lap. "Enter," he commanded. A tall young man in ringmail, with the pallid blue eyes of his kind, ducked in and sketched a brief salute. One of the northern esperai mercenaries, the soldon, good men if a trifle undisciplined. He did not recognize this young officer, the fresh white paint marking his cheeks indicating a rank of triune. The apparent incongruity of youth with command rank no longer shocked the general, this war had been hard on everyone. Koldon nodded for the warrior to speak.

"Sir, scouts report movement among the Darkling's host."

TRIPATED TO

Energy seemed to rush through Koldon's demeanor. Instantly he was alert and erect, every inch a fighter and a commander still in his prime. "Keldran stirs already? His audacity never ceases to amaze me."

"No sir, a column of tchara and dark watchers have been observed moving back up into the pass."

A harshly indrawn breath drew both men's attention to the temporarily forgotten Ancient one. Something almost feral glinted in Luirne's eyes, his renewed hope and happiness contained and expressed in one explosive word, "Mearna."

Koldon's head swiveled to lock gazes with his friend. A split second of tense silence, and then another brief nod. "Yes, I believe that. Who better than you to know, and who better than your sister to win through when it is totally unexpected?"

Luirne accepted the praise with a mute bow. "And now how will you utilize this 'unexpected' good fortune?"

Koldon's wide smile was instilled with renewed enthusiasm.
"Why, my dear Luirne, the situation is obvious. We are outnumbered, unprepared, pinned in an inferior position at the base of this damned mountain, and our best mages are trapped behind enemy lines. There can only be one course of action.
"Truine!"

The mercenary stepped forward.

Koldon glanced once at the quizzical expression on the Ancient one's face, then focused on his officer. "Truine, callitogether my battle staff. We attack in one hour."

In the wake of the officer's hasty departure, grizzled veteran turned to face longtime friend and advisor. "As your philosopher sister would say, 'It is folly to refuse the gifts of the Goddess.' Surprise appears to be on our side. We will continue to utilize the 'unexpected'."

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At mid-morning, the weary travellers reached the bottom of a rocky slope, Mearna's hand on the wizard's arm to certain his balance on the treacherous ground. Looking up, her heart turned to ice. The tiny vale was unnaturally dark, malevolently still. The sheer rock face to the right swallowed all sound of their passage. The crisp, chill mountain air had turned foul and heavy. Tendrils of fog curled about their ankles and obscured their path. Gildreth started to speak, but Mearna motioned him to silence. Hand on his arm, she led him quietly forward. It

was only a hundred yards across the depression, but it seemed

was only a hundred yards across the depression, but it seemed farther as the fog thickened and curled about them with almost sentient threat. A damp, flapping sound passed near them and they froze for a hundred heartbeats before moving on. Gildreth stumbled at the foot of the upward slope which marked the end of the vale. Both were shivering, the damp fog reaching inside their warm travel clothing to wrap icy fingers around their bones. Helping one another, they scrambled up the slope. Suddenly, a pair of dark figures loomed out of the fog.

Tchara. Dark Watcher. Names to keep children quiet at night. Monsters stepped fresh from storytellers' myth, unknown to this world for a hundred Ancient ones' generations. here, and all too real, all too close, almost upon them. Mearna froze like a deer poised in flight, eyes locked with the poisonous green orbs of tchara. The Ancient one steeled her will against the monster's silent call. Its eyes glittered with Since its return to this world it had supped on many a human soul, its helpless victims walking gladly into its maw. It had found none able to put up more than token resistance. With a ripple of alien muscle, it freed a portion of its mass to seek along the ground toward the prey still locked in the battle of wills.

Gildreth reached to shake Mearna out of her trance, but the Dark Watcher moved blike lightning to stop him. One furry, chitinous leg lashed out at the human, striking his shoulder and knocking him to the ground, shredding his heavy Clutching his staff, the wizard barely rolled from beneath a second languid attack. The Watcher was toying with its intended dinner. From the corner of his eye, he saw that the black slug had reached Mearna's foot and was oozing up her leg, groping for a portal. The tchara would please its master by wearing home her shell. With an inarticulate cry, Gildreth gained his feet. Pouring raw power into the orb at the head of his thrust it deep into the spongy mass of the tchara. The orb's light glowed through the monster's flesh as it crisped and curled to ash. As the monster and its sluglike extremity died, the orb shattered, withe backlash of Power sending Gildreth sprawling in time to avoid the Dark Watcher's spring.

Mearna clutched her head, the tchara's scream of tearing through her brain. Through pain glazed eyes, the Dark Watcher pin her human friend to the stony ground. stroked his face with its claws in a grotesque caress, savoring the moment before the kill. Flinging herself forward, knocked the spindly creature to one side. With a staccato shriek of rage it leaped at her, claws raking through her cloak to blood her thigh as she dodged away. Pushing himself to one knee, the wizard desperately sought to order his Power without the aid of the shattered orb. He watched helplessly as the Dark and the Ancient one circled warily. Intent on

battled before him, he was taken completely unawares when the third monster came flapping out of the fog. Its damp wings slapped against his face, tiny arms and legs encircling his neck as it buried its long fangs deep in his throat.

Mearna moved to help her friend, but the Dark Watcher blocked her, a rasping chuckle escaping it. She feinted, its response was lightning. Using Power, she ordered its death, it blocked with casual ease. It cocked its slavering, half-human visage at her and leered, rubbing itself crudely with all too clear promise. The Ancient one shuddered and snatched up the remnants of the mage's broken staff.

Gildreth pried at the wizened creature locked around his neck. The needle fangs set into the vein at his throat brought both pain and ecstasy. Unbidden, the thought came to him that if he should only relax, stop fighting, the creature's bite would be purely pleasurable. His own body, traitor that it was, longed for that surrender. Rejecting the thought, he struggled harder.

Using the staff as a crutch, Mearna feigned a limp on the leg hurt by the Watcher's first attack. Circling slowly, she tested the creature's magical defenses and found them sound. Suddenly, her foot turned on a stone and she stumbled awkwardly to the ground. The monster sprang instantly, impaling itself on the shattered point of the staff Mearna thrust at it. The Dark Watcher thrashed and shrieked in death agony. Its twisted face so close she gagged on the charnel stench of its breath, Mearna said softly, "I tricked you, Deceiver."

Shoving the corpse aside, she ran to where Gildreth writhed on the ground, his struggles growing weaker. Laying her hand on the creature's matted mane, she willed it dead. It tumbled lifeless to the ground. Kneeling beside the human, she staunched the twin wounds at his throat while he regained his senses. Finally she helped to his feet, where he leaned weakly against her, one arm around her shoulders. They stared at the trio of corpses.

"We won," he said, wonder in his voice.

"There are more." The tone of her voice drew the wizard's eyes to her, as she continued he realized she was Seeing. "Many more. The trail is dark with their presence." The distance faded from her eyes, replaced with hopelessness.

Gildreth drew her close against him, face lowered to the sweet, meadow scent of her hair. She was so small, so delicate. "We can only try," he said softly.

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Mearna couldn't have been more right. There were many more. Kyrrh, beset by the closing ring of dark watchers, had been unable to come to the aid of his mistress. Flattened ears and a yowl of defiance betrayed his rage and frustration. One watcher, either more brave or more foolish than its fellows, strayed too close to Kyrrh's position in the thronbrush. Kyrrh slashed, and was rewarded by a squeal of pain, the dark watcher flapping on the ground, staining the earth and brush with gushing black ichor. The remainder scuttled back, waiting for reinforcements, and conversely, as the sun approached zenith, a mist rose, and the darkened. Once again the circle began to tighten.

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Luirne gasped, "Mearna, she's under attack. We've got to

Koldon reached out to steady his friend, their relative positions of counselor and the counseled for this one time reversed. "Steady, my friend. The advance units should make contact any minute now. It's out of our hands."

The young triune who had been Koldon's attache a mere hour before surveyed his command. Ethorai longbow armed mercenaries crouched side by side with easterner clansmen. Down below their ridge sprawled the Darkling's camp. Something was going down. "They prepare for battle," mused the mercenary. "Well, their arrogance will cost them. Goddess, for my clan, for the pain, for the slaughtered innocents, guide my heart and hands true." The triune raise his hand, and a score's score of breaths stilled, arrows nocked, targets chosen and and singled out in that frozen instant. Then, a flash off of a ringmail gauntlet, and four hundred arrows leaped into flight, each to seek an unprotected and unsuspecting target.

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Rolaf spat and heaved himself off the trembling northerner woman, "Silence witch, we haven't hurt you too much, at least not yet." He chuckled. The coming of the dark prince had been a boon. Before, he and his fellows had been outlawed, and hunted like animals. But the Darkling had changed that, and now men like Rolaf found employment, paid good silver to do what they were best at, looting, pillaging, and raping. Life as an outrider in the Darkling's army was good.

Hiking up his trousers, Rolaf scratched at his lice infested beard and pushed through the thatch doorway. "Yo,

Thalon, your turn... Rolaf paused, alarm penetrating his dimperception as he viewed the corpse of his friend splayed in the mud. Suddenly, the small village was full of howling figures. "Shit," Rolaf turned turned to run and was confronted by a snarling, paint besmeared visage. A searing pain and the world was tumbling end over end. As consciousness faded, his last sight was of the northener already turning away from the toppling headless trunk that had once been Rolaf. Darkness closed in.

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"My prince, we must withdraw. Our lines have been breached \_in several places."

Keldran's voice was ice, "You dare to tell me what I must do?"

Alarm filled the officer's features as he belatedly realized his predicament, "Why, no, I mean—." The man had no breath to scream as a green aura enveloped his frame, instantly reducing the body to a desiccated husk.

Keldran turned to the closest guard, "You!"

"Ye, yes, m- my prince?"

"Give the word to my captains, we will withdraw for the nonce."

As the man scurried to obey and find relative safety out of his master's sight, Keldran savagely turned and muttered to the empty air, "This is not over Koldon, you have only purchased a little time."

Gildreth and Mearna huddled together, waiting for the end.
For a quarter of an hour they had rested and tried to recoup
their energies. Bushes rustled, and Gildreth's head snapped up,
"They come."

Mearna tensed as Gildreth's hands began to weave another spell. A last invocation, and he was poised to deal death yet again. "No, wait!--," Mearna's hand shot out to grasp his wrist.

A bloodied figure burst into view. Kyrrh. Gildreth stared, then laughed, "It appears we have a reprieve." The human saluted the great cat, who loped over and made an elaborate show of ignoring the mage as he licked himself clean.

