

FUTURES YET UNSEEN

by

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The field continues to thicken dimming the room about me. Already the sword is no more than a golden glow at the foot of the steps. I try to shift for the chair is uncomfortable, but can force no movement from my heavy limbs. I wish it held one of Signe's herb-filled cushions. A mirthful thought, that. Soon I will be beyond all physical pains or pleasures. The thought of pleasure brings to mind the delicate face of my wife, and I wonder if she is safe beyond the mountain. Perhaps I should have— But no. That way leads only to madness, and I vowed I would indulge in no regretful might-have-beens. The choice was mine; I, and I alone, bear the responsibility for my fate.

And there is always hope; that someday wanderers will find me and free me from these bonds of my own creation. But that hope is, I think, slim. Better to think of some distant day when one of my blood will stumble upon this buried fortress, and take up my sword in combat against Darkness so that some of what I wrought will not be forever lost to the world. Elation dies, and tears prick at my lids, for that too is foolishness, all of my kin have left our land never to return.

My eyes slide again to the sword, and I think how ironic that I, who sought to turn Escore from magic, have now

been reduced to placing all of my dreams into just such a magical vessel.

The room is almost gone, and with it the essence of myself. Best to remember while there is still time. *My name—my real name—is Sytry, heir to the House of Rashinaya!* I fling the thought proudly, like a man issuing challenge. But there are no witch-folk about to shake their heads, and purse their lips, and frown disapproval at my heedlessness. Like the room they are gone. For a long moment I strain, trying to hear some murmur from the earth above. They said they would turn the mountains behind them. Surely some rumor of such titanic workings of Power would carry even to my private self-chosen prison. But there is nothing.

My head falls back against the carved back of the chair. At least I have placed myself beyond Dukkar's reach. *Ah, Signe.* The lethargy is creeping over me, and panic beats in my throat. I do not rail at my fate, only at the swiftness of the taking. Only grant me a little more time . . . to remember.

There was pandemonium in the great hall. Morquant had ridden in with a score of Green People. Sweat darkened the red hides of the Ranthans, and even the Lady of the Green Silences swayed in the saddle. I had been drawn to the window by the clatter of hooves in the courtyard, and had realized, with a thrill of fear and also a sense of weary exhaustion, that some new crisis had arisen to bedevil us. Reluctantly I set aside my notes and figures knowing I would have to join them and hear the worst.

At least I'd had a good day until now. Tahon and I had successfully tested our theory that it was possible to accelerate those tiny particles which formed the bases of reality. But the usefulness of this knowledge . . .

I shook myself free from the seductive lure of my work, and limped heavily down the stairs. My diseased hip pained me after a day spent seated in the cold tower. My father, Styron, tugging at his mustache, glanced up as I entered the hall, then looked quickly away. He has never accepted

the fate which sent him a sickly son, and no other heirs. At Signe's orders maids were scuttling for food, while my wife quickly poured out mugs of mulled wine for the weary valley dwellers. She might have been the chatelaine of any great house, except for the wand of Power thrust through her girdle, and the aura of command which she wore as other women wear gems.

Her dark eyes met mine and she said tersely, "Jahalli has fallen."

I felt for a chair with the back of my leg, and sank down. "What was it this time?"

Morquant answered. "A choking and noisome wood flowed about them tumbling down the walls in a single night, and releasing a poison which drove the defenders mad. They turned upon each other in their fury." Her delicate features wavered and flowed, but I could still see her mouth tighten with disgust. "The shadow folk had naught to do save feed upon the dead. Their wise woman sent forth a call, but we arrived too late."

"It is perhaps just as well. Had you arrived in good time you might even now be sharing their fate," I replied. "I suppose it was Dukkar?"

"Who else. He and his like have divided Escore like a ripe melon, and we fall within his holdings."

"Goddamn these witches and warlocks!"

"And what would you have us, brother?" came the voice of my sister-in-law Yacinda, and the wise woman of the House of Rashinaya. "Put aside all Power, and rely upon your stinks and noises."

I flushed beneath her mocking designation of my work. "Those *stinks* have enabled me to increase fivefold the power of the force whips, and I'm close, very close, to understanding how to split the power of these tiny elements which form reality," I snapped back.

"It is a foolish man who breaks a thing to discover its secrets," cautioned Morquant.

I turned impatiently upon her. "And if such were true, O Lady of the Green Silences, then we would never have

learned that oysters hold pearls, or that nuts are good to eat. I do not break wantonly. I theorize first." I tapped my skull. "Then I test."

"But to what purpose," growled my father.

Signe drew close to me, and seated herself upon the arm of my chair. I slipped an arm around her waist, grateful for the support. She at least understood why I pursued my studies.

"Once our land was blessed. Peaceful, prosperous, a place of magic, but the adepts have taken that magic, and pushed it beyond all reason. And what have we, the defenders, to rely upon? More magic. But weaker than theirs for we will not walk the shadow path." I forced myself to relax my tense grip on my wife. "Also, I believe that each time we use Power in our defense we add to the strength of our enemies. It is like a system running out of control. Each act feeding upon itself. An endless feedback loop.

"More of your *science*?" inquired Yacinda sweetly.

"Yes, or at least my theory."

"You walk a mechanistic path which is very foreign to those of us of the Green Silences," sighed Morquant.

"And to the Old Race," snapped Yacinda. "I have seen into such worlds through Gates such as those built by Hilarion, or Candra. Those who follow the machine face only destruction."

"And we don't? There is risk in everything, every path. I would see us take the best of both, a blending of magic and technology. We could create a paradise." I flung my hands into the air. "But first we must defeat this black tide that is creeping inexorably over the land. And we can't do it with magic without becoming as they are." I gestured out into the darkness beyond the castle. "We must have new weapons—"

"And what do you know of weapons or warfare," rasped my father. "You who have never carried steel, nor ridden into battle."

"Through no fault of my—" I pressed my lips together, holding back the hot, angry words. He was my father, and

any man would be ashamed to have sired such an unprepossessing specimen as myself. Besides, our private quarrel was far from the subject.

"We have no other choice," I concluded in a milder tone, though inwardly my guts felt as if they had been stirred with a hot iron.

Signe's fingers played through my hair, and she sent me a wave of calming, soothing thought.

"There is another choice," contradicted Yacinda. All save Morquant stared at her bemused while the lady gazed sadly into her cup. "The Council of Wise Ones is discussing . . ." She cleared her throat as if she feared she had already said too much. "A way to save ourselves."

"No details, girl?" demanded Styron.

"I cannot say more lest word of this reach our enemies."

The old man drew himself upright. "There are no traitors in this house."

"I said not so, but I am sworn."

He sighed, and rubbed a hand across his lined face. Then taking her gently by the shoulders he bestowed a feather-soft kiss on her forehead. "Aye, and you'll hold to your oath, so proud and brave are you, child. May a blessing ride with you."

No other man would have dared to call a wise woman "child," or embrace her as he would a daughter, but my father is not as other men. Despite the troubles that lay between us I admired him, and felt pride at his strength and honor.

Signe slid from the arm of the chair. "But let there be no talk of riding tonight. Tomorrow is time enough to reach your destination."

And I realized with a start of surprise that though Signe had renounced Power when she wed me, Yacinda had trusted her with the location of this great meeting of the Council. I stroked thoughtfully at my chin, and quickly jerked my hand away when I felt the beard stubble bristle sharp against my fingers. My eyes met Morquant's and I wondered what the Lady of the Green Silences thought of

a lord who would greet his guests unshaven and in stained tunic and breeches. My only excuse was my obsession with my work.

My thoughts tumbled and whirled, but one came every to the surface. *Signe knows the location of the meeting . . .* And my eyes locked on my wife's slender back as she arranged housing for our guests.

The bedchamber was dim, lit by only two large candles set in floor holders on either side of the dressing table. Signe sat before the mirror, pulling out her braids, and brushing smooth the rippling dark hair.

I lay on my back in the great bed, frowning up through the canopy to the hidden ceiling. In my workshop in the old wing of the castle there were glowing globe lights set into the ceiling. Set there by my far distant Gate-traveling ancestors, they burned steadily on, powered by an unknown source. From my childhood those lights had fascinated me. And now they had become a symbol of what ailed our society. What was their fashioning? What substance gave them light? Such questions never disturbed those around me, they simply took and used the lights though they had no understanding of their inner workings. Such a "monkey see, monkey do" attitude horrified me, for just as we had lost the knowledge to fashion, someday we would also lose the ability to repair, and then candles would be our only source of illumination, and candles, like knowledge, could be far too easily snuffed out.

Those lights had been the focus of my erratic quest to relearn the wisdom of our elders, and in this I had had the aid of my father's steward, Tahon. Knowledge in all its forms and varieties fascinated him, and he had a large collection of the scientific writings of our forefathers. Most of his collection consisted of mathematical formulas, but such narrow application was not a hindrance for mathematics is the mother of all science. In my childhood Tahon had guided me through this wondrous collection, and I had learned to calculate the circumference of our world, its dis-

tance from the sun, the speed of light, and now those formulas were leading me from the vastness of the stars to the most minute fragments of matter.

A discreet tap interrupted my musings. With a grunt I rolled off the bed, and limped to the door. A serving maid bobbed a curtsy, and handed me a bowl and ewer of hot water. Signe set aside her brush, and made room for me on the bench. I lathered my face, and lifted my razor, and she dropped a kiss onto the back of my neck.

“You are a very thoughtful husband and father.”

“I didn’t think you’d want to sleep with an old porcupine.” I squinted, drawing the blade up my neck. “And the children would have been wakened by the roughness of their father’s cheek when I go to kiss them good night.”

I tossed the last gobbet of whiskery lather into the bowl, and ran a towel across my face. Then placed my cheek next to hers, and studied our features in the mirror. She was classical Old Race: translucent white skin, large dark eyes, narrow chin, and black hair. My reflection was less perfect. My chin is so pointed that it gives me a foxy look; my eyes are a strange blue-gray, and my hair dark brown rather than the true black of my people.

I am also very short. My father, and even Signe and Yacinda, tower over me, and with my halting limp I have sometimes felt that I am a changeling left by the Thas to bedevil the noble race that inhabits the surface of the earth.

Signe’s hand stroked gently across my cheek. “Is your leg paining you? You look very grim.”

“More thoughtful than grim. I was wondering whatever possessed you to give up your vocation, and become hand-fast to me.”

“I fell in love with you.” Her silk dressing gown whispered like a promise of love as she rose.

“As simple as that.”

“As simple as that.” Her arms snaked around my neck, and I could feel the soft press of her breasts against my back. “Each time your father brought you to the Order for

treatment I was struck by your bravery and patience. You bore uncomplaining all that we did to you, and it pained my heart to see you go away with your hopes again unrealized."

"More my father's hopes than mine. I adjusted to the leg. He couldn't . . . hasn't," I amended. I shifted on the bench, and wrapped my arms about her waist. "And why do you think the Order, and even Morquant, failed to heal me?"

"Because at base I don't think you really accept the Power, and hence blocked it."

There was no malice or anger in the answer, it was a simple statement of fact with a touch of amusement overlaid at my stubbornness, but its effect on me was profound. For a few moments I sat like a stunned ox and gaped at her.

"Not . . . not believe. I can live in Escore where the very earth itself is befouled with Power gone mad, and not believe?"

"You asked."

"But how could I block?" I made a helpless gesture. "Twist your Power to avoid being cured?"

"Because I think you are a powerful adept in your own right. But fearing the magic you have suppressed it, and turned to your stinks and noises," she concluded with a gentle and ironic echo of her sister's earlier remarks.

"And you reproach me for this?"

"No, each must choose their own path, but I do not think yours will be easily accepted."

"It certainly won't be accepted unless I have an opportunity to present it to the Council." She stiffened in my arms, an almost imperceptible wary withdrawing. "You know me too well. Yes, I am going to ask you."

"No, please do not."

"Signe, you know where this great meeting is to take place, don't you?"

"Sytry, don't be a devil." She lifted a hand to cover her eyes. "And don't look like an appealing six-year-old." She

grimaced, but her heart wasn't in it. It only brought out her dimples, and made her look like a young girl. "Your son cannot wheedle as well as you," she concluded in exasperation.

"I haven't said a word," I exclaimed with wounded innocence.

"You don't need to."

"Shall we go say good night to our children?"

Her look was expressive, and though I felt it to be of paramount importance that I reach that meeting, I found myself relaxing and enjoying the game. We had played it often, and I blush to admit that I often as not won. This might be harder, but sooner or later my wife would tell me what I wanted to know.

Ziven was deeply asleep, his cheek pillowed on a stuffed toy, but Viviana was terrifyingly awake. I sighed, foreseeing a long stint of storytelling before those bright black eyes would close. Both the children had been given names meaning "alive," for far too many children had been lost in this great war, their joy and sweetness forever silenced. It was perhaps rank superstition in the way the common folk of field and hearth are superstitious, but where my children were concerned I set aside all pride or doubt.

"You are very wakeful, my poppet," whispered Signe, seating herself on the edge of the bed, and lifting our daughter into her arms for a quick kiss.

"Everyone's so upset. It makes me want to cry."

"Vi, you must not wander out of body. You know not the safeguards for such journeyings, and it is rude to read the thoughts of one's guests."

"I'm not snooping, they're shouting. I can't help but hear."

"*She is too precocious,*" Signe sent to me, and we both started when Viviana chuckled, and we realized she had caught the thought.

"She has too much of you in her," Signe said severely.

"Ah, yes, the great adept," I replied as I seated myself on the other side of the bed.

"A story, Papa."

"What kind of story?"

"About the stars."

"Once upon a time there was a beautiful lady who—"

"No, not a baby story. A real story."

I slid a glance to Signe whose expression remained non-committal, and I began.

"Do you remember what we've learned about stars?"

"That they're big balls of fire."

"That's right, and like our star . . . sun, they give light and warmth to other earths so that the waters may run, and the trees grow, and the people prosper. And there are many stars, more stars than there are grains of sand on the beach at Old Port. And some will have planets like our planet, and some of those planets will have people."

"Just like us?"

"Well, I don't know."

Her look clearly indicated that I should, and I thought how wonderful it was to be all knowing in the eyes of children, and how unfortunate that such confidence did not last. I then thought of my relationship with my father, and decided that perhaps it would not be so wonderful. Without questioning there could be no growth, and although a man or a culture could linger in a dreaming time the end result was inevitably death.

"Our ancestors," I continued. "Came from such a world, but they came through a Gate which allowed them to step through time and space in the blink of an eye. But such Gates are difficult to build, and you don't know until you step through if the world on the other side will be a beautiful place where you can live, or a place of . . ." I shot a glance to Signe. "Of stink and noise where our kind cannot live."

"So is there another way to go, Papa?" Sleep was deepening the little voice, and she struggled to keep her lids up.

"Yes. I believe that we could build great ships that would sail through the heavens the way the raiders sail upon the inland sea. Someday, perhaps, I'll build you such a ship,

and you can journey about the universe, and look down at worlds, and find the ones that are nice, and meet the people who live there, and learn many . . . many . . . wonderful . . . things," I whispered, matching the words to her gradually deepening breaths.

Her dark lashes quivered once on her cheeks, then lay still, and soft breaths escaped sweetly from between her parted lips. Cautiously I bent down, and pressed my lips against her warm cheek. The child smell was overwhelming, and I found myself having to blink back tears.

While Signe pulled the covers about Viviana's shoulders, I slipped quickly to Ziven's bed, and kissed the tumbled hair where it lay across his forehead. Signe closed the door to the nursery behind her, and rested her back against the wooden panel. Her dark eyes were thoughtful as she gazed down at me.

"The meeting is at Loskeetha's, in the Garden of Stones. Two days hence, at dawn."

No words of thanks were necessary. All that was necessary was said later in the darkness of our chamber, and the giving was sweet.

Loskeetha was no kin to the Old Race. In fact, none knew what race or place had given spawn to the mistress of possible futures. She was normally jealous of her privacy, I ruminated as my Ranthan, Haquilla, trotted easily along the river, but perhaps she, like all of us, had realized that we had reached the crisis point, that united we might stand while divided we would assuredly fall.

I traveled without escort for it was going to be hard enough to get myself into the meeting without having to worry about a pack of men-at-arms, and though I was wary (and, yes, a bit afraid), I enjoyed the sense of freedom which came with being out on my own. Nor was I completely defenseless. A force whip hung at my belt, and my grandsire's sword had become . . . well, something more than a sword.

I fingered the hilt of yellow quartz, and worried again,

for if I drew this weapon against any magical foe, the Wise Ones would know that Signe had broken her vows of silence and secrecy, and begun to train me in the ways of Power. *Just what we need*, I thought sourly, *another damn magic user in a world already overburdened with magic users*. But as Signe had rightly pointed out, in such desperate times we could scorn no weapon, and even her cursory teachings over the past two days would be enough to get me past the wards and into the meeting.

"If you don't mind I will not accompany you into the Garden of Stones," came Haquilla's thought. *"I am but a junior in my people's councils, and I have no mind to be punished."*

"I understand, and thank you for carrying me however far you will. Besides, this is my fight."

"And for what do you fight, Sytry?"

"I won't know until I hear of their great plan. Could be I'll agree." There was a dubious snort, and I wondered if everyone viewed me as such a contrary troublemaker.

Well, questioning was good. Too much conformity led to stagnation or worse—to everyone barking vigorously up the wrong tree. Unfortunately it was just such a spirit of inquiry that had unleashed the Power on Escore, and I feared that the reaction of the Wise Ones would be a rigid limiting of experimentation both in magic and science that would spell the end of the Old Race.

"Sytry," came the warning, and I looked up from my reverie to see a long gray form disappearing into the bush to my right like a cloud of mist from a hot spring. My mouth went suddenly dry, my breath stopped momentarily in my breast, and my diseased hip gave a sharp twinge as if to remind me of my disability. My reaction shamed me, and I wondered if perhaps my father was correct and I was a coward.

But there was no time for such mind games and self-analysis. Only action could save us, and if I was too much of a coward to defend myself, I must at least think of my

faithful companion. The Gray Ones oozed from the bushes as if drawn by the raw stink of my fear.

"If we run they will pull us down."

"And if we stand they will circle us, and bind us forever. Give all your speed, and I shall try to keep them from your hindquarters."

"So be it," and with a great bound that almost threw me from the saddle, Haquilla launched himself into a run.

The Gray Ones gave voice, the wailing clamor rising from eleven throats, and I felt the hair on the nape of my neck rise in answer. It was one thing to listen to their cries from behind the safety of castle walls, another to hear it here in the wastes with two long lines of the evil creatures racing at my flanks. One darted in toward Haquilla's muzzle. I slashed, whip meeting werewolf at the apex of his leap. There was a brilliant flash and crackle, the odor of burning hair and flesh, and a string of fading whines as we shot past the first attacker.

The victory gave me confidence until I remembered that ten yet remained. I lay about us with the force whip. Missing more often than not, but at least holding the pack at bay while Haquilla raced for the opening to Loskeetha's basin. A Gray One settled onto the Ranthan's neck, sharp fangs snapping shut on the loose skin in front of his wither. Blood coursed between the white teeth, and over my mount's shoulder while I beat desperately at the creature with the whip until it released the Ranthan. But as it fell its jaws opened wide, its breath washed over me, rank with the smell of putrefaction, and the teeth snapped shut on the butt of the whip, yanking it from my grasp as the Gray One fell heavily to the ground. Haquilla's sharp hooves finished the creature, but it had also finished us, for it had taken my one weapon, and its grip on Haquilla had slowed our progress. The entire pack was now almost upon us.

Haquilla struggled to regain his stride while I clung like a burr to his long neck. A painful pressure in my side suddenly reminded me that I was not completely disarmed. I

have never been a good swordsman, my leg ensured that, but I know the basics, and last night I had filled my ancestral weapon with a large part of my essence, making it my wand of Power. The sense of being a limp victim passed away, and anger replaced the hopeless terror.

Lifting my head I focused on the red and black cliff face rising before us. "At that curve stop briefly and let me off. Then run for your life."

"No, I'll not leave you."

"You are wounded, you can do no good here. Save yourself, and find help."

Haquilla reluctantly agreed. His speed, despite his injury, had given us the few seconds of breathing space we needed. We reached the bend in the trail, he executed a haunch-sliding stop, and I leaped from the saddle. And immediately regretted the action for a brand of agony shot down my leg, and up into the groin. I bit back a groan, placed my back against the cliff face, and drew my grandfather's sword. It had fought many evils in the dark places of the world. Perhaps it would serve me now. I noticed again as the blade hissed from its sheath that the steel was no longer blue-tinged, but glowed with a golden fire, and I marveled that my feeble attempts at magic could have wrought this change. Then there was no more time for thought, the pack was upon me.

I am left-handed, and that offhandedness disoriented my first attacker, giving me an opening. I slipped the blade between his ribs, and jumped back awkwardly as the Gray One coughed blood across my boots. The survivors became more cautious then, darting in and out like raging gray shadows. The sword wove a net of protection before me, but soon a burning fire began to lick at the muscles of my arm, and my breath grew short. I raged at myself for becoming so out of condition. Hours spent in my lab, and at my desk, might have strengthened my mind, but they had done nothing for the body save grow an incipient paunch, and shorten my wind. And now I was truly living to regret it.

I blinked hard, clearing the stinging sweat from my eyes, and brushed across my forehead with the back of my free hand. My troth ring, placed there by Signe at our betrothal, touched cold against my moist skin, and I was shaken by a deep inner vibration as if a spirit gong had been struck within my breast. Last night I had lain with my head in her lap, roving out of body with the help of Illbane, while Signe wove dreams that separated my soul from my body, and taught me various spells and rituals to help me on my way. Most had concerned the passing of warded places for she knew the entrance to the Garden of Stones would be carefully guarded, but perhaps there had been spillover from her mind which my unconscious had absorbed, or perhaps she had given me more than I realized for suddenly words of Power reverberated through my mind.

I cried aloud the strange words, and the sword blazed in answer. Ruby red runes glowed from deep within the metal of the blade, and I felt a great draining as if part of my self had passed into the blade, and out into the glowing eyes of my enemies. The effect upon the Gray Ones was electric. They dropped to their bellies, and whining like whipped curs scuttled backward out of range of both sword and voice. Soon all that was left were traces of blood on the rocks where I had succeeded in striking a few of them.

The artificial energy provided by fear and danger passed, and left me limp and gasping. Coupled with this was the draining by the sword, so I was a sorry figure when I finally resumed my journey. With apologies to my ancestors who had carried the sword into honorable combat, and to the sword itself (it had begun to take on an aura of life in my fevered mind), I used it as a cane as I hobbled down the path toward Loskeetha's garden. Haquilla's tracks and blood marked the path, then several other Ranthan tracks joined his, and I breathed a prayer of thanks. He would now be safe.

As Signe had predicted, there were wards set at the wall. In my exhausted state I would have blundered into the in-

visible lines of Power like an ox going down to water, but the sword again came to my rescue. The runes glowed, less bright than when we had faced the Gray Ones, but enough to catch my attention. I gaped at them (Why *hadn't* Grandfather mentioned this peculiarity of the blade? Or was it something my fumbling attempts at magic had wrought?), then realized what their presence must signify. I made a sign in the air before me. Despite Signe's coachings I still felt awkward and guilty using Power, and I was very surprised when it worked. The intricate lines hung like golden fire in the air, there was an answering gleam from the ward, and then it collapsed.

Feeling rather cocky I hobbled briskly across the hard-packed sand, around a corner of the wall, and came upon a pair of guardians who could not be witched away by a wave of the hand. Two men-at-arms stood on the rim of the basin, swords drawn, expressions grim. I cursed myself for a fool. Did I think that no one would have noticed the falling of the ward? The men advanced on me, and I hurriedly slammed my sword back into its scabbard, having no wish to invite a fight, especially with men who were not my enemies.

Suddenly one of the soldiers pulled off his helmet, exclaiming, "Sytry!"

"Adorjan!" I cried, surprised in my turn at the sight of my childhood friend.

"Sytry, you fool, I might have spitted you like a Thas before I realized my mistake."

I tried not to let it hurt that he compared me to the squat, evil underground dwellers, but some of my pain must have shown on my face for he leaped to my side, and dropped an arm over my shoulders. "Oh, gods, I'm sorry. Often and often my father has told me that my witless mouth would get me in trouble. Forgive me."

"Of course. I probably do look like the remains from—"

"But what are you doing here?"

"I must speak with the Council. Hear their plans."

“Why?” And his face had suddenly become closed and cold.

“Because I fear what they will do in their desperation to escape the adepts. And I can offer another alternative. Please, let me go in. I will leave my sword with your companion as token of my good faith, and you may escort me yourself.”

He stared, considering, at the sandy ground beneath his feet, then nodded. Not for nothing had he lived in my father’s house as a squire for six years. He knew I could be trusted, and that I brought no evil.

I handed over the sword, and Adorjan led me to the edge of the basin. In the hollow below lay the raked blue sands, and tiny rock islands of Loskeetha’s garden.

“Step not upon the blue sand,” my friend cautioned, and I needed no second reminder. I had had quite enough of magic for one day.

The trail down was steep, and with my bad leg treacherous, but Adorjan kept his hands on my shoulders steadying me. Soon the murmur of voices became apparent trickling from the cave mouth. As we entered conversation died, and what seemed like a sea of blank and angry faces turned to face me. Only my sister-in-law gave voice, calling out my name in a tone that dripped acid.

“What are you doing here?” demanded the wise woman who commanded all the witches of Escore. Her true name was unknown to me, and I was so far beneath her notice that she had never even bothered to provide me with a false one. I knew her only as the Guardian.

I bowed, my leg trembling with strain, and looked longingly at a nearby stone.

“Oh, by the Power let the creature sit before he collapses,” came a sharp, dry old voice.

The speaker was a tiny wizened woman of indeterminate years whose white hair hung pale pennants about her face, but whose green eyes shown with the light of great wisdom.

Though I had never beheld her I knew from the stories that this must be Loskeetha.

“To the giver of the—” I began the ritual greeting, but was cut short by my acerbic hostess.

“The man is a fool as well as a cripple. You have not been invited to enter here, you are an interloper, and I would know the reason.”

“I would hear this great plan for our salvation, because I may be able to offer an alternative.”

“What alternative?” snapped Yacinda.

“Wait,” spoke up the Guardian before I could reply. “How came you to know of our location, or make your way past the wards?” I stared mulishly down at my hands. “Did Signe tell you, give you aid?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” and the words sounded childish even to my ears.

There was more disgruntled murmuring, then Morquant, a soft smile on her ever-changing features, said, “Such valor and perseverance deserves some reward. What harm will it do to have Sytry join in this Council?”

“He is not one of the chosen.”

“You err, Yacinda. He has Power else Signe could not have trained him, and he could not have crossed our wards.”

A number of interested glances were directed toward me, and I huddled deeper into my cloak. “I want it not. Magic has been our bane.”

Morquant, the Guardian, and several men with wands thrust through their belts, huddled about Loskeetha. When they broke apart the ancient seer of futures gazed at me.

“Very well, man, you may stay. Thus far in our deliberations we have agreed that those of your kind must leave Escore, cross the mountains to the east, and seek safety.”

“What of you?” I looked to Morquant.

“We are one with this land,” explained the Lady of the Green Silences. “We cannot leave the earth that spawned us, and forgive me, but it is your kind who have unleashed the evil. If you go, perhaps the evil will wither away.”

"Or feed upon itself," added Loskeetha sourly.

"And perhaps it won't or will follow after," I cried, horrified at the idea of fleeing from our golden land, of retreating before our enemies.

"We will see that it follows us not," spoke up the Guardian.

"But none of this is necessary."

"Oh? You would have us stay, and continue this losing battle. Loosing more Power upon a land already reeling beneath such assaults?"

"No, I would have us try another way."

"What other way?"

"We came from a world where science held sway, or if it was not supreme, at least shared an honorable place with the exercise of Power. Let us rediscover those tools, and use them against our enemies."

"You talk of machines."

"Yes."

"My god, he would make us slaves to the machine. It is not to be born." The horrified whispers ran like frightened animals about the rock walls.

"NO! I am not advocating that we forget our heritage, I am merely saying we should use all the gifts and talents with which the Creator has endowed us. What sin in there in easing the lot of the man who tills the fields, in speeding the journey of the peddler, using new methods to heal old injuries? Steel comes from the synthesis of iron and carbon, and is stronger than either alone. So might we be if we use not only our Power, but our minds."

"But you have not come here to advocate peace, and these devils' inventions of yours can only lead to death."

"Madam, with all due respect, there is no item that can fit to the hand of man that cannot be used as a weapon. Would you therefore have us live like the grazing herds on the plain? Naked and defenseless, fleeing from our enemies lest we learn and in learning lose our innocence? We can build weapons which would be immune to sorcery for they have no souls, could pass through the deadly woods for

they breathe not, could bring down the walls of the strongest castle . . .”

“No,” the Guardian said flatly.

The battle did not end there, but raged on for several more minutes, for I am not one to be easily gainsaid; in fact, Signe has often remarked that I am as stubborn as a pig. But nothing I said this day swayed my listeners. They were determined upon their course.

“Since you now know of our plans, return to your keep, and prepare your people for the exodus,” the Guardian imperiously ordered.

And wearily, with tears pricking at my lids, and my heart bruised by the coming parting from the home and land that I loved, I obeyed.

“You are mad, mad!” Tahon shouted into my face. So close was he, and so great was his anger, that tiny drops of spittle landed wetly on my cheeks.

“With this machine we can entomb Dukkar and all his servants in a kind of living death within his castle. That will *prove*—”

“*NOTHING!* The plans are set. The people begin their flight. They will not listen to you. Use your wonderful toy to aid in the escape. Do not go looking for trouble, or it will by god find you.”

“Tahon, god knows I am no great hero, but this is something I *must* do.”

He stared desperately to where my wife leaned against the table. “Signe, *talk* to him.”

“I have, for many hours, and to no purpose.”

I lifted my eyes from my final tinkering, saw that her face was blotched as if by long crying, and my heart withered. She was like a statue in my arms as I held her close, but we were too closely linked mind to mind for me not to sense her agony.

“My love, if I fail nothing is lost. I will leave my uselessly humming machine on the hill overlooking Dukkar’s keep, and ride to join you.”

"Little in life is ever so simple."

"I'm the pessimist, remember?"

Her hands cupped my face, and her eyes seemed to bore into mine until they filled the entire room. "You must truly do this thing?"

"I must, or live forever with regret."

"Then go with all the blessings and wardings I can place upon you."

"Signe!" Tahon cried in anguish, but I waited no longer, simply fitted the stasis device into my saddlebag, and limped quickly for the tower door.

"Delay your own departure no longer. If I fail I will catch you before the mountains."

"See that you do, my lord, for the Wise Ones will turn the mountains behind us to guard our flight, and any caught in those forces will be as if they never existed."

I swallowed fear, and nodded. Then ran back, and embraced her once more. Her lips held mine in a frenzied kiss, and I tasted doom and parting. The premonition (if it was such) shook me to my soul, and I thrust her away, lurching for the door.

Her voice husky, she whispered, "We will remember."

"In crystal memories, in futures yet unseen," I answered, and her blown kiss seemed to actually fall upon my face. I whirled, and clattered down the stairs.

I took a back way out of the castle, avoiding the assemblage already gathered in the courtyard. I had taken leave of my father last night, and my children this morning as they nodded over their porridge. It had little to do with sparing them pain; if I had seen them I would instantly have foregone this mad attempt.

Haquilla set his fastest pace as we raced across the plain toward Dukkar's fortress of Darkness. Occasionally my hand slipped to my sword, and back to the device, an ordinary-looking lump beneath the leather of the saddlebag.

We crested the ridge overlooking the castle, and Haquilla leaped sideways into a sheltering bush for the gate

was open, and to my fearful eyes it seemed that all the inhabitants of hell were issuing forth. A great army already spread across the plain like some noxious, creeping growth, and more followed. I pulled a glass from my bag, and swept the front ranks of the multitude.

He was easy to spot, a glowing figure mounted upon a coal-black Kephon. An aura of red-gold flame surrounded his body as if the human vessel were too small to contain the force of his Power. And though the fire and the form were beautiful to look upon, I was not deceived. Here rode Dukkar, a prince among demons, greatest among the Dark Ones who gambled with and for our land.

“Sytry, your machine?”

“It is hopeless. Had I caught them within, but they are spread too far. It has not the range.” Haquilla seemed to slump beneath me, and I laid a comforting hand upon his sweating neck. My own body felt heavy and cold, and I longed for some comfort for me.

We continued to sit and watch, mesmerized, I think, by the sight of so much evil gathered in one place. My sword was a blazing gold and red beacon at my side, and I suddenly and fearfully wondered if the presence of an opposing Power within his realm would alert Dukkar.

As if in answer to my thought the black one rose high in his stirrups, and gave a great cry. And like a surging wave the entire host plunged forward at the gallop. My hand tightened on the rein, but they were not headed for me, but rather . . . west!

“NO!” I screamed, and Haquilla needed no urgings but shot like a red comet down the ridge directly before the advancing army.

Sobbing, shouting, cursing whatever traitor had given to this hell-born creature the very time of the great exodus, I rode forth; a mad general of an army of one. I stared at the looming host, and thought of it falling upon the rear of my people. Women, children, old people, peasants. Wains filled with household goods and supplies adding to the confusion, while the few protectors who rode at the flanks

tried to engage the black thunderbolt that had fallen upon them. Saw swords rise, fall, rise again dripping gore. Saw slaving jaws close upon tender baby flesh. *Viviana, Ziven!*

Disorder began to radiate from the front ranks like ripples in a pond as I plunged on. Dukkar rose again in his stirrups, raised his hand, and I drew my blade. The runes were so bright that they threw a ruby glow about Haquilla and me, and as a bolt of black shot from Dukkar's hand the sword blazed in answer, throwing up a shield of golden fire. The blast of Power ricocheted away, striking one of Dukkar's lieutenants in the chest. He shuddered, his flesh ran like molten wax, and his mount went mad, plunging back into the ranks.

I swallowed bile, and hauled my eyes away from that gruesome spectacle for the worse one that faced me. Dukkar, fair face thrown to the sky, eyes closed, chanted, and as they emerged from his mouth the words took form. Nothing so simple as monsters (he had enough of those at his tail), this was a drifting miasma which floated with deceptive slowness toward my ward, and explored its golden surface with searching figures seeking for any weakness. I dredged up some more words of Power from where Signe had placed them in my subconscious, and a great sweet-smelling wind raced across the grass, tossed the trees, and carried away the mist with tattered wailings.

Dukkar again attacked, and I again countered, and so it went minute after endless minute. I could do no more than stand and parry, for I had not the strength nor the training to initiate combat, but it . . . was . . . enough! For I held him furious and stymied as his easy prey moved farther and farther to the west beyond his reach.

Eventually (I know not how long it took for time had ceased to have any meaning for me), the ache and weakness in my limbs became a burning agony, and I knew I was spent.

"Haquilla," I whispered. "I'm not quite ready to become a dead hero."

"Nor I, and if we flee, they may follow."

"That is not very encouraging, but is of course to be fervently hoped for. For if they're—"

"Following us, they won't be following our people," we concluded together.

And with a great bound that great-hearted Ranthan, my dear friend, leaped away, and raced to the northwest toward the under-mountain caves where my grandfather had established a stronghold in case of total destruction upon the surface. And follow they did. Perhaps the long battle had weakened Dukkar's logical thought processes, or perhaps he merely concluded that the people had traveled too far beyond his reach.

Haquilla left me at the mouth of the underground river. Wading into the river I pulled a small flat-bottomed boat from beneath some concealing reeds, loaded in the saddlebags, then turned, and clung to the Ranthan's slender neck.

"I will not see you again in this life." His thought was mournful, and I choked back tears.

"No, but see to it that you finish out this life."

"I will try. Farewell, old friend."

"Farewell. If you see Signe again tell her—"

"I know." And he was gone with a flick of his white bob tail, and the clatter of hooves on stone.

Slowly, painfully, I maneuvered my way into the boat, and paddled into the stygian darkness beneath the mountain. It wasn't long before I heard sounds of pursuit from behind. Apparently Dukkar was determined to have a scapegoat for his failure, and I shuddered to think what exquisite agonies he might concoct for my pleasure. I paddled harder until the steps and looming rock-cut buildings rose before me. I quickly scrambled up the steps dragging the saddlebags, and a faint silver glow marked my passing. I cursed my grandfather for his courtesy and concern for people's toes, for I was clearly silhouetted by the pale light.

I passed through one of the ten doors, and gaped momentarily at the piles of chests which lay about the dais and chair. My old grandsire had apparently already made use of

his underground vault, and with a hysterical giggle I wondered if my father knew of the wealth which lay moldering beneath these mountains. It would truly have killed him.

And speaking of killing . . . there was the scrape of metal on stone, and soft footfalls. Quickly I knelt, and feverishly pulled out the stasis device. Unbuckled scabbard, and dropped it. Then with sword in one hand, and device in the other, went up the stairs, seated myself on the chair. It had been designed for a far larger man so there was room for my little invention at my side. I set the controls, narrowing the range, and waited, hand poised over the triggering switch.

Dukkar entered, and stared at me. "So, it is the cripple of Rashinaya who has stood against me. You will wish before the end that you had fled with your own, or fallen to one of my spells."

"Brave words, and you may wish you had exercised more prudence, and not followed me. A badger is more dangerous in its own lair." I only hoped my words were not mere bombast and bravado, for the mad flight across the plains and the dunking it had received might well have damaged my precious toy.

"Give me the sword."

"With pleasure." I tried to smile, but it felt more like an expression of rictus as I tossed the blade onto the floor at the foot of the dais, and triggered the device.

Blue light shot from its intricate cone, and instantly a strange lethargy enveloped my limbs. "Out! Out!" I heard Dukkar shouting as if from a great distance, and watched as he and his men staggered like men caught in deep water toward the door. The door slammed shut behind them, and I was alone. And trapped for all time; for within the widening stasis field I could not turn off my creation . . .

We will remember.

Her voice echoes ghostlike within my mind, and I release my desperate struggle against the forces I have unleashed.

They have let me remember. No more is necessary. I am content to wait upon the future.

Afterword

I'm no stranger to the Witch World books. In fact, they, together with the Heinlein juveniles, introduced me to science fiction lo these many years ago. And I read and enjoy them still today. One of the things that always intrigued me was the hint that some of the inhabitants of the Witch World passed through a gate from a more technological world. Which started me wondering why they abandoned technology, and so "Futures" was born.

I am primarily a science fiction writer so that unnaturally I have a bias toward science and technology as a means of problem solving. I sense in this country today an alarming anti-technological, and anti-scientific mentality, and I think it endangers us both as a nation and as a species. I have little patience with people who urge us to return to the good old days of living in harmony with nature. The bottom line is that nature can kill you, and I personally think antibiotics and other modern discoveries represented a great leap forward for mankind. So I let Sytry speak for me, and I hope someday he will be awakened from the stasis which holds him.

We need good minds.

—MELINDA M. SNODGRASS