

The Hunger's Eye

by Wrestlr

[M/M, MC, Magic]

Synopsis: Two thieves learn the Wizard's secret.

Disclaimer: The naked hypnotist strides confidently into your room. His lips curl in what might be a smile as he dangles his shiny crystal pendulum before your eyes and announces, "Listen and obey. If you are not of legal age, or if you offended by sexual situations, you will leave this place immediately. From here on, no matter how realistic it may appear, everything will seem like fiction to you, a pleasant dream where scientific possibilities and laws may change according to my suggestion. Now, if you are willing, sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride."

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Comments to wrestlr@iname.com

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1. The Keep

In the long, dangerous hours after the sun had set and the darkness settled, the narrow cobblestone streets of Harper's Keep as always belonged to the lowest of the low, the thieves and whores, the murderers and kidnappers. Those brave enough to stagger home through its alleys lined with trash and puddles of excrement, both animal and human, found torches to light the streets were few and far between; watchmen were fewer still, since most had been bought with dirty coins and told to look the other way. Even the otherwise uncaring moon seemed to avert its light from this place.

If a visitor were to approach The Strutting Cock, far from the Keep's best tavern but not quite its worst, he would hear the noise of drinking flagons and fists being slammed against rough wooden tables before he smelled the stink of spilled ale and sweaty bodies. At the doorway, the near-deafening jumble of conversations and snatches of obscene drinking-songs would make individual voices indecipherable. If a visitor were undeterred and pushed inside, he would find the low-ceilinged hall packed with criminals, lowlifes, and wolves from many far-flung nations: solemn pickpockets, leering kidnappers with knives in

their belts and slyness in their hearts, nervous-eyed thieves with twitching fingers, stone-faced wandering mercenaries and deserters from a dozen defeated armies who wore their steel swords openly, and swaggering whores in clothes meant to incite lust.

If a visitor looked closely in the far corner, he would have seen a pale-skinned youth sitting alone and apart, his age perhaps nineteen summers or so and face unlined, his body slim and strongly framed, tight-muscled, blond of hair--which was rare enough itself in these parts to attract attention--but whose sharp eyes and stone-like bearing suggested that to approach him was to invite his hidden and dangerous dagger between one's ribs. The youth sat and drank slowly, looked and listened. By that part of the evening, his eyes had no doubt thoroughly appraised some of the mercenaries for their orgy potential--this one's chest, that one's particularly full crotch, this other's mouth that would look good pierced by a cock-shaft--but he was there to listen, not orge, and he was listening intently to one tavern patron in particular at the adjoining table.

That patron, an enormous pig of a man, both tall and fat, was well into his cups and boasting loudly to a group of bored mercenaries of his plans to kidnap the daughter of some local noble family. "By the Nine Remaining Gods, I'll have her across the border before dawn"--he paused to thrust his jowls into a tankard probably more froth than ale--"where her new masters will be waiting to receive her and pay me my two hundred gold. And she is a pretty package to be sure, and worth every coin they will pay for her. Two hundred gold! Can you believe? That's more than a man would pay me for the secrets to the Tower and for less trouble than I had earning them!" He laughed at his own joke before returning his mouth to his ale.

The boaster did not sense the nearby mercenaries shift nervously, but he did feel the touch on his tunic sleeve and turned his head, already scowling at whatever interruption. He saw the blond youth standing beside him. The youth's cheap gray tunic and tight black trousers did not disguise the hard and rangy lines of his body, a coiled strength, which moved with a calm efficiency of a skilled fighter. This close, the pale youth's eyes that seemed brown from a distance were smoldering amber, and the dagger at his waist was sheathed in a leather scabbard whose wear and stains bore witness to much use. The mercenaries eyed him warily, knowing they might have had the edge in muscular strength, but the youth would likely be quicker--and a quick youth skilled with a long dagger would have an advantage over strength in the close-packed room where the mercenaries had no room to draw and swing their longer swords. Too, the blond northern tribes were famed for their fighting arts, and had ways to kill a man with no weapons at all, only their hands or feet, strikes to the throat or kicks, effective and deadly in close quarters like this.

"You talked of the Tower of the Hungers," said the blond-haired stranger, with an accent. Definitely northern--Perhaps one of the barbarian nations? They produced hair this light, but this youth was taller, sleeker than most of them. "I've heard much of this Tower," continued the youth. "What is its secret? You say you know it?"

The youth's attitude did not seem threatening, and by now the ale had well bolstered the boaster's courage. He turned to his audience and swelled with self-importance, a grand sweep of his arm. "The secret of the very Tower of the Hungers itself?" he exclaimed. "Will you listen? This *boy* from the north, hardly more than a cave-rat, talks as though he aims to steal the treasures from the Tower before I can come for them!" To the youth, the boaster added, "Which secret, boy? The Tower holds many. By the Nine Remaining, any fool knows the Tower contains tributes paid by a dozen nations over nearly a hundred years, treasure enough for a thousand men. The Wizard of the Keep lives there at the very top of the Tower, with the jewel called the Hunger's Eye, which holds the secret of his magic."

"I've seen the Eye with my own eyes, boy," one of the mercenaries added, voice even and slow but not friendly, a warning. "I was there at the Battle of Korra Keep, when the Wizard held it aloft. Large as a man's head it was, and glowing from the power inside. The Wizard held it to the skies and called out a spell that sent forth lightning that destroyed the wall of the Keep and killed most of the army defending it too, in less time than my telling of it. You would do well not to bring yourself to the Wizard's attention."

The youth considered what he had heard and half-nodded. He said, "I have seen this Tower myself, here in Harper's Keep. It rises from a broad garden surrounded by a high wall. The outside wall looks easy enough to climb, and I saw no guards. Why has someone not already stolen this jewel and looted the treasures of the Tower?"

The boaster stared open-mouthed at the youth's simplicity, then roared a derisive laugh, and after a moment the listening mercenaries joined him. "Hear this boy!" the boaster bellowed. "He would simply stroll into the Tower to steal the treasure from the Wizard!--Hear him, everyone! I suppose, boy, you are some sort of northern tribesman whose people still live in caves and do not believe in the stories of the Wizard? Then, by the Nine Remaining, lend me your ear and I will teach you a bit of wisdom." The boaster pointed his ale mug at the youth. "Here in Harper's Keep are more bold thieves than anywhere else in the world. If any mere mortal man could have entered the Tower and stolen the gem kept somewhere inside, it would have been taken long ago. Even I who have learned its secrets know not to approach this lightly. You think climbing the wall is a simple matter? The wall is not there to keep thieves out but to keep the dire protectors of the place inside. In the watch-chambers, four of them just inside the walls and ringing the Tower are armed soldiers; they guard the garden and the outside of the Tower during the day. But at night when thieves are likely to be about their mischief?--You've seen no guards in the gardens at night because the Wizard needs no human guards there. Dark things patrol the inner garden around the Tower at night. And even if you were to reach the Tower itself and find its hidden door, even if you knew the secret words to open its locks, you would encounter even darker things waiting for you within. That's the least of the secrets of the Tower, boy, and I give you that one free for the telling."

"But," considered the youth, "if a determined man could pass through the gardens, why could he not climb the Tower and enter from the upper part of it? Surely coming into the Tower from above would avoid the defenders awaiting those who would try to break in from the ground?"

Again for a moment the boaster gaped at him, then shouted, "Listen to this boy! The Tower is taller than thirty men and has rounded sides slicker than polished glass! This boy is no cave-rat!--He is a crow who would fly above the dangers and alight on the jeweled rim at the very top to steal its trinkets!"

The youth glared about, embarrassed by mocking laughter of the growing audience attracted by the boaster's words.

"Come, *boy*," shouted the boaster with exaggerated sarcasm, relishing the attention and working up the crowd, "and enlighten us ignorant men, who have only been thieves since years before you dropped from your mother's cunt--tell us how *you* would steal the gem!"

Annoyance tightened the youth's voice. "When desire is bound to even one man's courage, a way can be found."

The drunken boaster seemed to take this as a personal insult; he flushed red with fury and bellowed, "You dare tell us our business and call us cowards as well? You think we lack courage? By the Nine Remaining, boy, go back to the caves where your tribesmen cower in the cold!--Get out of my sight before I decide to run you through with my blade!" He pushed the youth hard.

"Do not lay hands on me," replied the youth, and he returned the push with an open-palmed strike that knocked the boaster back against the rude-hewn table.

Ale spilled across the table, and the boaster roared his rage, clumsily tugging forth his short sword. Another bellow: "I'll part your fool head from your neck for that!"

Steel flashed as blades were drawn in the crowded space, and the throng shoved themselves rapidly back out

of the way, causing the crashes of upset benches, the pounding rush of feet and limbs, shouts, oaths of people stumbling over one another. When the crowd paused enough to make sense of the dimly lit room, the gray-and-black-clad blond youth had disappeared during the confusion.

2. The Wall

The tavern's stink and noisy confusion fell away behind the blond youth. He walked bare-chested through the darkness, in only his black trousers and boots, having wriggled out of his tunic when a hand grasped it as he slipped past to make his escape. No matter--he had taken the tunic from a passed-out beggar, and he preferred the feel of the night chill against the skin of his shoulders and back; the coolness reminded him of the mountains and home where, in spite of the boaster's insults, his tribesmen did **not** cower in caves but confronted the world under the open skies and survived. He moved with the confident grace of a mountain jaguar, steely muscles shifting under his pale skin in the faint light. He would have liked to spend time testing one or two of those taverners' mettle in a bed, but he had no coin left for even a cheap room and he had to meet his comrade soon. The shadowed moon--an unclear omen--was nearing the agreed hour in the sky. Well, after tonight, if his comrade was to be believed, they would have plenty of coin and more riches by the morning.

He passed into the part of the Keep reserved for temples and shrines, some devoted not only to the Nine Remaining Gods worshipped here but also to myriad other gods, great and minor, from lands near and far. These worship-places glittered with marble, domes of gold and silver, statutes painted in vivid colors, glittering jewels for eyes. He passed no watchmen, for thieves by an understanding both innate and sensible never came here to practice their art: to rob from a house or business would bring the wrath of the offended citizen and a watchman or two if they cared to bother and hadn't been sufficiently bribed, but to steal from the temple of a god would incur the relentless righteous indignation of the entire Keep and the deity besides--more trouble than a few pilfered coins and gems were worth.

The youth knew little of the Keep's various religions and cared for them even less; like all matters of a civilized and long-settled place, the daily affairs here seemed based on complex conventions, the gods themselves held at a distance by rituals that had lost most of their connection to anything divine. His own gods were simpler and more immediate; they were motivated by war or lust, harvests or hunts or tides, things understandable to any man. They sat in their great palaces in the clouds or crouched in dark and fiery places under the mountains, watched the masses of mortal men from afar if they cared to or ignored them completely. But they gave each man at birth a share of their defining essences--their lusts and hungers, their strengths, their speed or slowness to love or anger, the cunning of their fingers--which to the youth seemed all any mortal man should expect of a god. Above all else the youth's gods prized courage, a wordless and direct thing: to hear the unknown sounds in the night and remain standing beside one's comrades, ready to face whatever came out of the darkness.

Even the cobblestones were cleaner here. His boots, of good leather and taken a few weeks ago from the body of some traveling merchant who died in the snow of a harsh mountain pass and therefore had no more need of them, made little sound on the street. Ahead was the great outer wall, and beyond that against the night sky and stars stood the Tower of Hungers.

No one seemed to know why it had been named such. He had never seen a Hunger but had heard of them, a monstrous creature, shaped like a man but all emptiness and darkness inside; they were creatures of the darkest, foulest magic, who could enter into a pact with a mortal human who could then draw that dark magic forth and manipulate it; but such pacts were risky and according to the stories often left the mortals as mere shells enslaved to the Hunger's bidding. The Hungers and their human thralls had warred with the gods for some unknown ambition, but the gods finally prevailed and ended the war when they locked magic away beyond any pact and beyond any expression. Some few mortals born of the old blood might sometimes be

able to find enough access on their own to perform a simple trick, and even then they risked the displeasure of the deities, because the gods in their wisdom declared that no man who worshipped them and respected their power should ever again toy with magic or enter into a profane pact to gain more. The youth and his comrade had met and traveled with a party on the road to Harper's Keep; at night around the fire, one of the party told them a story of Hungers, swearing that he had seen such beasts by the hundreds in a land far to the west, and there the monsters walked openly among men at night and slaked their dark thirsts for sex and life upon them even in public!--Truly a land of corruption and perversion, all would agree! But all men knew that stories told around campfires are just fantastical lies told to shock and scare the hearers. Anthoc put little stock in stories of gods, for every tribe of mankind had its own stories and its own gods, and seldom did they align one to another. At any rate, the youth had seen no Hungers in Harper's Keep.

In front of him stood the outer wall, bricks and stones whitewashed some years ago but not recently, perhaps the height of two and a half men, enough to keep out most. This wall enclosed first a confusing labyrinth of bushes, just taller than a tall man's head, then a lower inner wall, and within that a garden of exotic trees and bushes from a dozen lands. From those trees and in the precise center of the garden, the Tower itself rose, tall and straight as a virile phallus. The shaft, built of some type of polished white stone and silver metal embellishments, sparkled like ice under the moon and its attendant stars. By day, in sunlight, the cylinder shone so brightly that none could look at it. By night, it still shone but too modestly to defeat a gazer's eye. Slim, an impossibly perfect cylinder. That tavern booster had said it was the height of thirty men, which seemed right. Its sides and the wide rim of pure silver around the top glittered in the starlight, as did the great jewels embedded into the tower. No lights shone from within it--the Tower seemed to have no door or windows, at least none the youth or his comrade had been able to see from outside the garden, as if the Tower was all of one piece, perhaps formed entire of magical means, which seemed foolish, or more likely molded entire by the clever tricks of tradesmen of the stonework craft. Only the gems and silver decorations in its sides sparkled in the night. He hesitated, thinking about the strange dangers said to be within, but he and the comrade he would soon meet had come too far to turn back.

Thick, thorny bushes crowded the Keep side of the base of the outer wall, a further deterrent against climbers. The youth crept close and removed his boots, stashed them behind a distinctive bush for retrieval later, for they were too good to leave behind. He stood alongside the barrier, assessing the irregularities in its bricks and stones. The northern realms were mountainous--windswept, stern, cold--and like most of his people he was skilled at climbing with his fingers and toes, even sheer rock cliffs. The outer wall was high, but he reached, found purchase at the uneven end of a brick, and pulled himself upward, up, up. When he reached the top and could sling an arm over, most of his struggle was done. He swung his body up and over before he could be seen. A glance below to ensure a clear landing, and he dropped into the labyrinth.

3. The Garden

He touched down on the ground, bare feet light and silent, and rolled to the cover of nearby bushes. The labyrinth, once entered, would be more of a delay than an obstacle, not an impediment to a determined seeker like himself. But first he caught his breath and watched for dangers, signs he had been seen; and he thought of the Wizard, who was said to work strange magics of doom, leaving his jeweled tower of magic only rarely and always to bring evil down upon a man or nation that had committed some offense against him. The skin of the youth's bare chest prickled as he remembered a tale told by an administrative clerk he had bedded in another lowlife tavern upon first arriving at the Keep two days before. The clerk had been looking for the thrill of a bed-partner chosen from among the dangerous criminals and low-castes, and the youth had allowed himself to be approached and courted by the clerk's promise of a coin afterward. As they relaxed after uneventful sex in a cheaply rented room upstairs, with the youth letting his new friend think him a naive and ignorant refugee from the north, the clerk had been only too happy to tell stories of the Keep, including a tale about the Wizard confronting some invading minor prince of an adjoining province who thought to have an easy victory and end the Keep's near-autonomy, and thus opposed the Wizard's aims; how the Wizard laughed

in faces of the prince and his army; how the Wizard held up the glowing Eye gem before him and called upon the names of demonic abominations men were not meant to know; how rays of blinding and evil light shot out of it to envelop the prince, who screamed and fell and shrank to a withered blackened lump the size of a dog, a lump that changed before everyone's eyes into a large black spider that scurried about until the cackling Wizard brought forth intense fire from the Eye to burn the spider to ash.

The governor here at Harper's Keep feared the Wizard, the clerk had said, more than he feared any earthly foe, the gods, or even Death Himself, and so stayed drunk nearly all the time because his fear was more than he could bear sober. The Wizard was very old, centuries old some said, and the clerk recounted another story wherein the Wizard declared that he would live forever because of the magic in the gem, which men called the Hunger's Eye for no reason other than they had named the Wizard's stronghold the Tower of Hungers.

The youth, lost in these thoughts, shrank quickly against the wall. Along this perimeter edge of the labyrinth a watchman passed with a measured stride. The youth heard him pause some number of steps away, the clink of steel, and then the sound of a bladder being relieved. So guards did pace within the walls after all--at least this outer rim? The youth waited, hand on his dagger-hilt, but the man finished and continued on, and silence again took over the dark garden.

At last the youth moved, crouching low, deeper into the labyrinth, a path leading indirectly toward the second, inner wall, this one just an arm's length taller than a man. He almost tripped over a form lying crumpled at the edges of the bushes. A quick look around showed him no new enemy, none in sight at least, and he bent close to investigate. His keen eyes, even in the dim starlight, made out the body, a strongly built man in the silvered armor and crested helmet of the Harper's Keep watchmen. A half-drawn sword lay near him, and in the man's neck was the tiny dart that had felled him in silent seconds. The youth glanced about. This must have been the guard he had heard pass his hiding-place beside the wall. In the short time that had passed, unseen and unheard nameless hands had reached out of the dark and sent the soldier into the embrace of Death Himself. No, not death, for the soldier's breathing chest still rose and fell slowly and shallowly, but a kind of sleep, an imitation of death from which he would not awaken for some hours.

The youth was unafraid. The drugged dart was his comrade's work, and they were to meet inside the inner wall. The youth ran toward it. Leaping lightly, he grasped the wall and swung himself up to the top. He pressed himself flat on the broad coping and looked down into the inner garden. Inside were exotic trees and another labyrinth of carefully trimmed shrubbery, leaves turned gray-silver under the plainspoken moonlight, and in this inner garden would be his comrade--but also the real defenses and dangers. He cautiously lowered himself down on the inside and drew his dagger, staring about him. He moved softly around the curve of the wall, hugging its shadow, until he was hidden from anything that having seen him drop inside might be coming for him.

Straining his eyes through the shrubs and gloom, he glimpsed a hint of motion a few paces away. He glided toward it, hand on the pommel of his dagger. Like a panther stealing through the night, he made no noise, yet the man he was stalking heard. The youth had a dim glimpse of a larger body close to the wall, and he felt relief that the form was at least human, as the form wheeled quickly and they faced each other, daggers half-drawn. For a tense instant neither spoke, ready for anything.

"You're no watchman," whispered the other man at last in mock outrage. "You're a common thief like my very self."

"Very funny, Cousin Horsus," the youth hissed back with a small smile, re-sheathing his blade.

Horsus took his hand off his dagger and cuffed the youth's shoulder affectionately with his other. "About time you got here, Anthoc. Now that you're finished skulking about in the shadows and playing Prince of All Thieves, did you learn anything useful in the taverns?"

A low laugh at the gentle taunting as the youth Anthoc shook his head and replied, "No, just the usual wives' tales and fairy tales, worn threadbare from the tellings. And no one worth fucking, either."

"Well, next time you can do your skulking in a whorehouse, where maybe you'll learn something useful." Horsus shook his head gently. "That dick of yours will be the harbinger of your doom, Anthoc, no mistake about it." He looked around cautiously, searching for danger. "I told you the taverns were a fool's errand. But not wasted time--for it gave me enough opportunity to surveil the Tower and its defenses without you being noisy and underfoot."

Horsus was taller than the slim youth, wider of shoulder and heavier with muscle, four summers older. As blond and as handsome in a more rugged and worldly way, enough of a facial resemblance that someone seeing them together would assume kinship or at least of the same village. Horsus' chest was furred with blond hair where the youth Anthoc's torso was all smooth skin. The elder, like the youth, wore only black trousers, bare of chest and of foot, with a small black pouch at his waist. "Now, by the gods, we'll get to this matter of thieving, or me thieving and you trying to learn something in the process, if that damned cock of yours has no other bright ideas."

Anthoc remembered when he was twelve and thirteen summers, the first flush of his manhood. Horsus, four summers older, had been more than willing to help his cousin Anthoc learn what his cock could do, how good it could make him feel, how to use it and his mouth and ass to bring pleasure to others too. They had spend many hours nearly working themselves raw as they pursued their satisfaction in each other's body. Then Horsus had left their village to seek his fortune in the southern realms, and was away some six summers. Anthoc had missed with a soul's true ache, until Horsus had finally returned a few months ago for a short visit, with a purse full of coins and tales of his successes. When Horsus spoke of turning south again, Anthoc had convinced his cousin to take him along, teach him the thieves' craft Horsus had learned well, and reluctantly the elder man agreed. Alas, though Anthoc had tried often in their journey here to Harper's Keep, rumored to hold great riches in its famous Tower, Horsus seemed to have lost any interest in sharing physical intimacies with him as they once had, replaced by gentle ribbings against Anthoc letting his cock do the thinking, and Anthoc had felt his soul ache anew.

But, snapping back to their circumstances, Anthoc put his memories aside. He nodded his head toward the way he had come. "What of the watchman? You left his body in the walkway?"

"What of him? I slid over the wall and hid in the bushes; perhaps he heard some small sound and came blundering over to investigate. Like most city-men, he was half-blind in the night. A good thief should have the eyes of a mountain jaguar. Putting a dart in his neck was no trouble at all. He will sleep for the better part of a day, and by then we will be long gone."

Anthoc considered a moment. "But you made a mistake."

"Oh?" Horsus's eyes flashed as an eyebrow raised. "What mistake did I make?"

"You should have dragged his body into the bushes."

"This is why you are the apprentice, cousin, and I the master thief. Should any of the watchmen come searching for their comrade now, they will stumble upon his body and flee at once to bellow the news to their fellows; we will hear them and have time to escape. But if they come searching and do not find him, they'll go on searching and will catch us like mice in a trap."

Anthoc thought on this, then nodded gravely. "You are right."

"Now, listen. The inner garden has no watchmen, no human guards at all. Its guards are even more deadly, but I used my time tonight to take their measure and plan ways to circumvent them. The Tower itself has no

gate or door or window in its base, none that I can discern at least, so the way must be concealed by magic. But earlier I saw someone other than the Wizard, one of his concubines perhaps, come to the edge of the Tower-top, so perhaps the top has an entry that can be used by those not possessing magic. That is our route in--and out, if we cannot find a better exit from the inside. We'll climb the Tower to its top, then sneak down through the top and steal from the old Wizard before he can cast his spells upon us. If we are successful, we will have wealth and power. If not, we will be killed or turned into frogs or--"

"Spiders," Anthoc said.

Horsus looked about with quick alarm. "What? Where?"

"No--I meant the Wizard turned that prince into a spider, not a frog."

"What prince?" Horsus rolled his eyes, not for the first time. "You and your tavern-tales. Hush. As I was saying, all good thieves know how to take risks, if they have the courage."

"Teach me what secrets of thieving you know," groused Anthoc, also not for the first time, "and I'll prove my courage again. You know I am braver than ten men."

No sooner had he said this than he felt a sudden nervous prickle on his skin, as if stung by the glare of unseen eyes, and he caught a subtle scent that made the hairs on the back of his neck rise as a guard dog bristles at the smell of an intruder.

Horsus, also on alert, whispered, "Get behind me; stay close if you want to stay alive."

Horsus pulled a small metal tube from the pouch at his waist. Anthoc stood close behind him, dagger ready, but Horsus pressed him back, close to the wall, and stood ready to confront whatever foe was coming their way. His poise spoke of tense expectancy; his gaze, like Anthoc's, was trained on the shadowy clot of bushes a few paces away. The shrubs barely rustled in the still night air, and two golden eyes blazed from around their shadows. Something like an eagle's beak, a human face, and a lion's forepaws emerged, then a scorpion's tail. "Manticores," Horsus swore quietly. Behind the first, other sparks of glowing eyes appeared and burned in the darkness.

"Five of them!" muttered Anthoc, counting rapidly. "Perhaps more in the bushes."

"Be silent, cousin," hissed Horsus, and he crept a short, cautiously step toward the beasts, as if walking on knife-blades. He lifted the metal tube to his mouth. The first pair of blazing eyes moved a half-step forward too, while low growls rose from the shadows. Anthoc could see the great poisonous tail of the lead beast. He gripped his dagger, expecting the charge and the slashing of beak and lion-claws and tail-barbs.

A weak breeze rose at their back. Then Horsus blew powerfully. From the end of the metal tube, a long plume of yellow-green dust billowed out and rode the breeze forward and settled over the shrubbery and manticores, blotting out the glaring eyes.

Horsus jumped back hastily. Anthoc stared without understanding. No sound came from the thick cloud. "What is that? What did you do?" Anthoc whispered uneasily.

"Death!" hissed Horsus. "If a wind blows it back at us, climb over the wall as fast as you can. To breathe it is death. Wait until it dissipates."

Soon enough the cloud began to disperse and settle. Anthoc gawked. Laying in the shadows were five great tawny shapes, the fire of their grim eyes dimmed forever. "They died without a sound!" he muttered in awe. "Horsus, wha--what magic was that?"

"No magic. Poison, made from the pollen of a flower that grows only in the swamps of Khar Tor far to the south. The flowers bring death to any who smell them. I stole the pollen from monks there who use it in their rituals to monstrous gods; the story of that theft, were it to be told, by itself would make me famous among thieves throughout the world. But come, in name of all the gods! Are we to waste this night in useless talk until something even worse stumbles upon us? That was all of the poison."

They glided through the shrubbery to the gleaming foot of the tower. Anthoc laid his ear to the smooth wall and listened, but could hear nothing within. Still, a strange nervousness filled him.

Some instinct made Anthoc wheel suddenly, for again death was upon them upon them with no sound. He had a glimpse of a tawny mantichore shape, rearing upright against the stars to deliver a death-blow. Anthoc's dagger flashed like an ice-shard in the moonlight with every ounce of desperate strength, and youth and beast went down together.

Cursing beneath his breath, Horsus bent above the mass and pulled the dead mantichore off of Anthoc, who thrust it aside and staggered to his feet, still gripping his bloody dagger.

"Are you hurt?" growled Horsus.

"No," panted the youth, attempting to wipe the creature's ichor from his hand and arm and blade on a nearby thick-leaved shrub.

"Then come--little sound was made in that, but other dangers surely will have heard. We must climb now. If we stay on the ground, we become their pray. Follow me."

"The wall holds a fortune in gems, Horsus," Anthoc whispered. "Why do we not just pry a few ..."

"The jewels are held in place by magic, like the silver ward-signs among them--they are surely part of some binding magic and cannot be removed by mortal men--waste of time and strength to try," his cousin answered impatiently. "Now come; the entrance into the Tower is there. Once we steal the Eye, an even greater fortune will be ours."

Turning, Horsus reached for the wall of the Tower itself--a perfect gleaming cylinder, smooth except for the many fist-sized jewels embedded in its surface--and he gripped one of the gems, tested its ability to hold his weight, and, began to haul himself up. The man's supple progress, gripping with his fingers and toes, made his comely body seem to glide up the wall, because the northern tribesmen climb in the way of spiders or of crabs moving across the sea floor. Anthoc followed him, pressing his body tight against the wall as he reached for and found his next purchase, moving slowly, following his handsome cousin toward the distant top.

They spoke in wary whispers as they moved upward, ever upward, commenting on their progress, encouraging each other. The Tower seemed windowless, all of one piece except for its gems and silver decorations shaped like wards or magical signs. Both were skilled climbers from their childhoods, like all of their tribe, and had made more difficult climbs before. They climbed until the garden below was only shadows in the starlight. Anthoc's wary soul felt the aura of waiting menace that brooded under them, where the feathery bushes and low spreading trees below hid invisible eyes waiting in case they might slip and fall.

Focus on the wall and the climb, he told himself, not what lurked beneath. The wall and its great fist-sized gems whose gleams dazzled his eyes--diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, rubies, moonstones. From a distance that afternoon, their different gleamings had merged into the Tower's white glare; but now, at close range in the near-dark, they shimmered as if threatening to entrance him with their frosty rainbows and flecks of light.

Up and up they climbed, silently, the remaining lights of the Keep spreading out further and further to their

sight as they climbed, the stars more and more sharp above them. Now Horsus in the lead reached up his hand to the rim itself, found a grip, and pulled himself up--and then over. As Anthoc reached the rim and lifted his hand for it, Horsus leaned down and took his wrist and helped pull him over the top.

They crouched, panting, to get their bearings. The thrill of confronting the unknown and the proximity of his comely cousin gave Anthoc a strange arousal, a stiffening in his manhood. Perhaps, he thought, Horsus was right and his cock would be the death of him, but not tonight. Anthoc forced himself to focus on their surroundings.

The Tower's top was flat and recessed from the rim, covered in some sort of glossy dark material, like frozen pitch but not cold under their bare feet. Across from the point where they stood was a small sort of chamber built upon the roof, of the same silvery material as the Tower walls, worked in smaller gems. Its single door was of silver, crusted with jewels that gleamed like the first winter ice. They crept and halted at the sparkling door. No lock to it, at least not from the outside, just a simple loop of ancient rope for pulling the door open or closed. Unlocked? Perhaps the Wizard in his arrogance thought the garden and the Tower's height to be defense enough? Or perhaps this was a trap for the unwary?

Horsus pulled. The rope creaked as though it might break, but the door stayed shut. "Let me try," Anthoc said, for he could see a faint ... something, like a string of the dimmest red woven through the rope. A trick of the light, perhaps. Surely not a ward of some old lingering magic? The barely visible pattern suggested a direction. Anthoc gripped the rope. His hand tingled as if a dozen ants crawled in his grip, but he pulled the rope in that direction. The door swung easily.

"Excellent. Follow me, cousin," said Horsus, "and have a care--the real danger begins now. We are in the Wizard's lair, and we know not what threats await below."

4. The Tower

Tensed for anything, they looked inside. A narrow stairway led down, not into darkness but into a faintly illuminated space. Horsus, dagger drawn, eased down the stairs, slowly, silently. Anthoc followed and eased the door partially closed behind them, not fully shut, leaving it open enough in case they needed to escape through it in a hurry.

At the bottom of the stairs, over Horsus' shoulder, Anthoc had a glimpse of a glittering chamber. The walls and parts of the ceiling which were crusted with large white jewels that glowed softly, together providing enough light--barely, but enough--for them to see. The space seemed silent, no guards or life.

Cautiously Anthoc eased from behind Horsus. The chamber lay bathed in the cold, steady glow of the white jewels. The room seemed larger, the ceiling high enough to be lost in darkness, larger and higher than the outside of the Tower would have suggested. Some trick of the Wizard's magic? Across the room was another silver door, like the one that had led into the Tower. Was that the direction from which danger and death would approach?--Or did it lead to even greater treasure?

His cousin advanced into the chamber, and a moment later the youth did the same in another direction, amazed at what he saw around him. His bare feet made no sound on the floor, which seemed to be carved from slabs of some cloudy quartz-like crystal. The space had no real furniture, only four small silken couches embroidered with silver and worked in strange designs. Around the space were piles, mounds, of gold and silver coins, loose gems of varying colors mixed in, and several silver-decorated chests of dark wood. Some chests were sealed with heavy locks; others had their lids thrown back, revealing heaps of jewels inside; some chests held gems of only a single type and color, while others showed a mix of splendid colors to the youth's amazed eyes. "By the Nine Remaining," he swore beneath his breath, trying out the oath used by the citizens

of the Keep. He felt awed, looking upon more wealth than he had ever dreamed to exist in the world, and they had yet to find the Tower's most important treasure, the Hunger's Eye.

Anthoc neared the center of the room, knelt to touch an open reliquary, particularly ornate and filled with jewels of palest blue, to reassure himself it was real.

"Move!" Horsus hissed, at the same time as the hairs on Anthoc's neck prickled again. By instinct he threw himself to the side, dropping, rolling, and sprang back to his feet with his dagger in hand.

A shadow from above was even then landing on the spot where the youth had stood two heartbeats before. He had the impression of a hairy dark horror, an enormous black and brown nightmare that turned and rushed at him with shocking speed. Anthoc sprang back, dagger ready to bite. A huge spider, its multiple eyes sparking with a ghastr intelligence.

A spray of Horsus' darts raked the creature. The poison on their tips could fell a man instantly and make him sleep for over a day, but instead of piercing, the darts ricocheted like pebbles off the spider's abdomen.

As the creature rushed, Anthoc leaped high, and it passed under him. He knew now he and Horsus had been fools to not suspect the upper chambers might be guarded, or that death could come from above them. This spider-guardian was the size of a small pig, and its eight hairy legs were capable of speed. It charged back and Anthoc leaped sidewise, kicked back at its abdomen, like striking a watchman's leather armor. His dagger ticked off one of the legs but did no damage. So the monster was difficult to slash as well as pierce. Anthoc barely avoided the creature's fangs as it swerved by him. The spider did not turn but instead scuttled to the wall and up it, toward the high ceiling. A pause, and then with no warning it launched itself into the air, trailing a grayish-white cord.

Anthoc dodged backward and avoided the hurtling body--and he had to twist frantically away just in time to keep from being slathered by the trailing web-rope. He understood the monster's intent and sprang away before a turn of the rope could make it adhere to him and make him a prisoner. He dared not try to slash the stuff with his dagger, for he knew it would cling to his blade, and he would not be able to shake it loose before the creature would be sinking its poisonous fangs into his flesh.

Anthoc found himself in a desperate game, his quickness and wits against the fiendish speed of the giant spider. Rather than scuttle at him across the crystalline floor or launch itself through the air at him, it raced across the ceiling and walls, throwing long loops of sticky webbing with great accuracy, seeking to ensnare him in strands thick as ropes. Anthoc understood the monster's strategy: once the web-cords were coiled about him, he would not be able to tear himself free before the monster struck.

Their game ran across the entire chamber, silently except for the youth's quick panting, his bare feet scuffing on the shining floor, the rattle of coins or jewels disturbed by the smack of moist webbing. The gray strands accumulated, coiling on the floor, looped down the walls, draped across jewel-chests. Anthoc's quick eyes and agile muscles so far had kept him untouched, though he knew he would not be able to avoid them much longer; the accumulation meant he had to watch out for strands swinging from above as well as keep his eyes on the floor so that he would not stumble into the coils there. Sooner or later, a gummy loop would strike him, wrap about him, trap him into a cocoon, and he would be the monster's prisoner and prey.

The spider charged across the floor, pulling a gray web-rope behind it. Anthoc leaped high, clearing a large chest of coins. As the monster wheeled and ran up the wall, the cord jumped off the floor like a living thing, whipped about the youth's ankle at the end of his trouser-leg, and pulled. As he fell, he caught himself on his hands, and he jerked his leg frantically at the gooey rope that held his ankle like a coiled snake. The spider was already racing down the wall to complete its trap. Panicking, Anthoc caught up a melon-sized chest heavy with coins and hurled it at the spider with all his strength. The creature was not expecting this move,

and the chest struck its torso where its legs connected, smashing the spider to the floor under a squelching crunch. The scattering jewels on the floor mixed with greenish blood. The black body lay pinned under the chest--so the creature could not be pierced or cut but could be crushed! Anthoc pulled himself up. He picked up a nearby chest, larger than the first, nearly beyond his strength, and heaved it up, and he brought it down on the creature's head and fangs. The legs stilled.

The crashing chests made more than enough noise to summon guards or other monsters. Were the Wizard and his guards still unaware of his presence? Killing the spider made loud noises, but perhaps the Wizard and his men were used to such in the night?

Anthoc immediately set himself to working free of the web-cord, which clung tightly to his ankle and his hands, but at last he was free. Taking up his dagger, he looked about. No new horror had appeared, but Horsus was nowhere to be seen. The inner door was ajar. Horsus must have gone through it, but had he gone willingly or as a captive? And what monstrosities might lay through that door? All he could do was go through it himself, rescue Horsus if needed, and find whatever lay beyond.

Beyond the door was a short hallway, dark, but it led to another room, lit with enough silver light to see comfortably. But the room was not silent, for Anthoc could hear a man's low voice, melodious, as though talking and singing a lullaby at the same time. He approached quietly, gripping his dagger.

5. The Eye

At the threshold, Anthoc stepped into the room, ready to fight or flee in an instant. This was an impossibly large chamber with a high domed ceiling. Most of the light came from a yellow-white orb suspended in a woven sling around the chest of a man, black-haired and naked and muscular, arms stretched upward and chained inside a framework like a torture-device, an upright square made of thick and strong ancient wood beams reinforced with metal bars at the corners. The beams themselves were carved with intricate symbols, and looking at them made Anthoc's eyes itch somehow, as if these symbols carried some powerful force.

Inside the frame, the dark-haired man's head hung forward, and the low singing came from him. From the size of it, Anthoc knew this orb slung around his neck must be the Hunger's Eye they had come to find--but did wizards chain themselves like this? Having never met one, Anthoc thought such unlikely but considered the possibility. Too, this man looked only slightly older than Horsus, and did not appear to be ancient as the Wizard was rumored to be. Anthoc was struck by the sense of the trapped man's force, as if the man could have easily broken free if something, perhaps the orb, were not sapping his strength.

Beside the frame and facing it stood Horsus. He stood passively, swaying slightly, arms hanging limp at his sides, face slack, as if spellbound somehow. Anthoc tightened his dagger-grip. Had the Wizard ensorcelled Horsus in some way? Anthoc crept into the room; surely the chained man was not a threat, and Anthoc saw no other, but his senses were screaming at him to leave this place and run far away.

Anthoc moved closer his cousin. "Horsus?" he whispered, nudging his cousin with his shoulder. Horsus gave no sign, simply continued to stare at the prisoner with half-closed eyes that somehow still managed to convey lust and attraction. Anthoc remembered nights, summers ago, when his handsome cousin had looked at him with eyes like that and had introduced him to the pleasures of--

"Another yellow-haired northerner?" A masculine voice, rich and melodious. "And you survived the guardian? Good, for I am very hungry." The prisoner's head slowly raised, smiling, staring directly at Anthoc, and something about his voice, the quiet lullaby he sang almost too softly to hear, seemed to coil like a serpent through Anthoc's ears and deep into his thoughts. "Don't worry about your friend, boy; he serves a new master now, as shall you."

Anthoc's thoughts seemed to slow and a haze seemed to come over his senses. Everything became distant, less important; only the prisoner's eyes, sparkling like dark pearls, and his honeyed voice seemed to matter. Anthoc felt a seductive wooziness spread through his head and limbs, which seemed too heavy now for him to move of his own volition, except for his cock; that stirred and began to stiffen within his trousers. The wooziness and a tingling arousal mixed into a feeling that was both a calmness and an intense focus on the man, as Anthoc's cock continued to harden. Something about the prisoner's voice, his gaze--the touch of magic?--some spell being woven around him? "Wizard," Anthoc began, his tone a warning.

"Feh," snarled the prisoner. "I am not that fool! No, I am far more powerful than that charlatan can dream of being. Or I would be, were he not always draining my magic with this infernal orb of his in this cage that prevents me from working spells. Once he was my apprentice. He sat at my feet and learned my teachings. But he wished to enslave kings and glut his fiendish ambition on the world and its riches. Through his treachery he created this orb to pull my magic from me and I have been his prisoner for a hundred years or more. And now **you** are my prisoners. For my song takes little energy, hardly more than a charm but no untrained mortal man can long resist it. Just look into my eyes, and listen to my voice."

Something buzzed like a thousand distant summer cicadas in the back of Anthoc's mind. He shook his head, failed to clear it, and stumbled back a step. The song made thinking difficult, caused the strange torpor to deepen through his head and limbs, threatened to paralyze him where he stood. Anthoc took another step back, in horror, realizing he was face-to-face with a captured thing of darkness and the wastelands, a Hunger, and the terror in that realization threatened to rob him of his senses.

"Stop fighting and accept your fate, pretty one," the human-shaped thing cooed. "Do not run from me. You are mine and I will quench my great hunger on you, and your last moments will be filled with an ecstasy such as you have never known before." The song changed ever so slightly, and Anthoc felt all fear and repulsion slowly begin to ebb from him, to be replaced by a heavy drowsiness and an urge to sleep, a heavy arousal making his cock begin to rise and harden in his trousers.

"I am not yours, monster," he said. "I ... I ..."

"Come near that I may touch you," the creature said, "and kiss you, and feed my hunger upon you. Don't you want to pleasure I offer? Part of you does--I can smell your arousal from here. It smells delicious. I am so hungry, for the Wizard takes too much and does not feed me enough in return."

Anthoc felt the odd, insistent buzzing in his head increase, to be answered by an eager tingle in his balls that spread to his asshole and fattening cock. The sensations were insistent. The stranger was some comely, as handsome and sensuous as Horsus--no, more, much more, increasingly more. Anthoc's cock was aroused, and it--he--needed to cum, wanted to cum, wanted ... what? His feet, to the command to come closer, took a faltering step forward. **No-no-no!** Anthoc screamed in his thoughts, as his feet made a second step. He managed to fight off the urge to take a third, though he feared he might not be able to hold back for long.

The prisoner tilted his head. "How do you resist me? No mortal man can resist me unless he has magic in his blood ... Ah, I see it now! You **do** have a spark of magic--a small one, but it can be nurtured and fed until it becomes a fire. The Wizard never brings me men with magic, for fear I might ..." He glanced at the table whereupon something sat. "That orb and these bonds--they defeat my magic. I cannot free myself directly, but I have enough that I can work through someone who has a thread of magic in him. But do you have enough to be useful? I must know! Boy, give yourself to me--**now**!"

Anthoc felt the force of the prisoner's will clamp around him like a vice, compelling, threatening to crush, and he grunted from the strain of holding back.

"Do not resist me, boy. If you will not obey, I have other tools at my disposal. Your friend here has no magic

to protect him, and he is mine utterly."

"Anthoc," Horsus said quietly, voice tight with fear. Anthoc turned to see that his cousin had drawn his dagger, held the blade pressed to his own throat. Though his expression was still spellbound and slack, staring at the prisoner, Horsus' voice quivered: "Do what he says. Please! I--I don't to die. Don't make him ..."

Anthoc felt his stomach twist at the thought of his beautiful cousin, bare-chested and barefooted, slashing the dagger across his own throat and dying helplessly as his blood spread along the crystalline floor. No!--Anthoc could not cause Horsus' death. He had to find another way. Perhaps ...

Anthoc drew his own dagger and hurled it at the prisoner's chest; the blade flew true--until mere finger-lengths away the orb flashed and the dagger veered aside, as if knocked away by some unseen hand or shield.

The prisoner laughed. "If my death were so easily achieved, boy, I or some other would have done that years ago. The Wizard has seen that I remain beyond harm, except that he uses this infernal orb to drain my magic, and these bonds of silver to defeat my strength. Now, stop your useless resistance, or your friend will ..."

"Don't hurt him. I'll do what you say." And though everything he knew told him to continue to fight, to find a way, Anthoc made himself relax and wait.

The conquest came as a pressure squeezing his mind, and his instincts called for him to shout and resist, but Anthoc willed himself to wait and allow this, and then--then--

A sense of being pierced by a frigid coldness, like ice blades cutting deeply, followed by a pervasive feeling of peace. Of focus and obedience. Of absolute certainty.

And horniness, as his already hard cock became impossibly harder, pulsing, craving release.

"Come closer, boy. First, look to that table. Do you see the key?"

Anthoc looked. "Yes." On the table near the framework was a key, oddly shaped but recognizable as such. A trick of light like an inverted bowl covered it, iridescent as a soap bubble. The table's top was thick with dust, but within the bowl and around the key was clean. This key had remained undisturbed for a very long time, temptingly close to the prisoner but beyond his ability to reach.

The prisoner's voice had an undertone of eagerness, perhaps hope. "Put out your hand. Can you touch it? Pick it up? None but those with magic can reach the key. Do you have enough to touch it?"

Anthoc reached. The bubble tingled as his fingertips made contact, and the iridescence resisted his pressure at first, and then his fingers passed through the bubble as though reaching through a shaft of light. His hand closed around the key.

"Excellent, boy! Quickly!--Bring it here! Unlock these bonds!"

The key in the first lock turned with difficulty. Anthoc had to obey the order, but he feared breaking the key. Would the prisoner then unleash his wrath on Horsus? But at last the key turned, and the first lock opened. Then to the second lock--

Soon the naked man stood freely, a prisoner no longer. "Give me your hand." Anthoc offered his hand and the man gripped his wrist, pulled Anthoc's hand closer until the youth's palm touched the cold orb. He felt something crackle in the air, in and around his hand, and something that felt like a hundred pricking needles seemed to pass through his flesh and into the orb. He recalled the tales that, after the gods' wrath, Hungers must work through men with magic. The orb's glow diminished for a moment, some connection being

severed.

"At last!" The man released Anthoc's wrist. The former prisoner pulled the Eye from its hammock around his torso, and he placed the orb on the table. "After so long! I am finally free of this infernal thing. My former apprentice, the one you call Wizard, caught me unaware and bound it to me, and it has drained me until I am a shadow of myself." The man shrugged out of the hammock-weaving around his neck and chest that was his only vestment, if it could be called such. "No matter--once I escape this infernal tower, I will feast and regain my strength." The man looked at Anthoc and smiled, revealing needle-like teeth. "You have little magic but perhaps, if properly used, you will have enough that I can use you for a last errand before I leave this thrice-damned tower--"

"No--" Anthoc began, for he understood now that this thing that looked so like a handsome man was nothing of the sort, a dark and insatiable thing that took the shape of a man to consume the lifeblood of the unsuspecting and the strong alike.

In a rush almost too quick to be seen, Anthoc suddenly felt the prisoner behind him, cold body pressed against his back, the prisoner lifting him from his feet. One chilly arm around Anthoc's torso pinned him in place, his back against the man's chest, while the man's other hand wrenched Anthoc's head back and to one side, exposing his vulnerable throat.

"--And that means I must ensure your compliance. Be still, pretty one. I am told this hurts at first, but then it will bring you bliss such as you have never known." Anthoc felt the thing-that-was-not-a-man's lips against his vulnerable neck, a quick flick of the man's tongue against his skin there. The Hunger's skin was cold, as if wanting to steal the very warmth from Anthoc's bones. "Don't be afraid. Trust that I need you and your spark of magic to remain alive, at least a little while longer."

"No!" Anthoc whimpered, less forcibly than he meant, for in their pose so like lovers embracing, he felt an odd influence flowing from the man-thing and into him, urging his limbs to leadened stillness, and he could not effectively struggle. He knew how to free himself, a leg driven back, or a quick bend forward, or an elbow thrust into ribs, but he could hardly make his limbs twitch. Worse, this will-deadening torpor had an opposing effect too, for it made his skin feel extremely aware of every touch, every movement of air. An odd arousal filled him, and inside his trousers his cock had somehow hardened still more and pushed at the fabric in a rough friction that was almost more pleasurable than Anthoc could bear.

"You there--thrall--come here." The man-thing was speaking to Horsus, who shuffled over with entranced eyes. "Your friend here," the man said to Horsus, "is going to soil himself in a moment. Perhaps you should give him a receptacle for his spend as a distraction? I believe such acts are common among your northern tribes, yes? Kneel, and take down his trousers."

As if from a distance, Anthoc watched as Horsus slowly went to his knees, watched as his cousin reached for and untied the drawstring knot at the waist of Anthoc's trousers pants. Anthoc had dreamed many times of his cousin performing just such acts upon him, but now?--*No!* Anthoc saw his cock spring free of his trousers, hard and needful, and saw Horsus open his mouth to capture the head. His cousin's familiar mouth began to suckle, and the familiar rush of pleasure filled his cock and then his body. Anthoc, too aroused, knew he could not long hold off the inevitable.

At his neck, the man-thing's tongue flicked across Anthoc's skin, a reminder of the danger, and that stimulation pushed Anthoc past his limit and he felt himself tip into orgasm, his seed rising through his shaft and into--

The man-thing's needle teeth pierced Anthoc's neck--

And Anthoc cried out in orgasm and agony that seemed to tear his body apart from opposite ends--

And then the ruckus at his neck turned into something wonderful, a bliss even stronger than his orgasm, pushing the mere sensations of his climax far away as this new feeling skewered him to his core, sending him flying and drowning in something both dark and bright, almost too strong to recognize as pleasure, but too ecstatic to be anything except.

Anthoc wasn't aware of having fallen into a semi-conscious state until he began to rouse, finding himself standing, trousers around his knees, in front of the table where the man-thing had placed the Eye. The man-thing stood close behind him, one arm around Anthoc's torso and pressing his chest, so that his back was pinned to the thing's chest, and the other arm woven around him so that the thing's hand fit around the side of Anthoc's skull. Anthoc could feel something of himself inside the man-thing, and something of it inside him, like a veil over his thoughts, compelling him to wait to be told what to do, a puppet without the puppeteer's attention upon him. Surely the thing had not drunk much of his blood, for he still felt strong, but his strength was not at his command and he could make no action without instruction to do so. Surely this would be only temporary? He had but to wait until the effect of the feeding wore off and then he would be able to--to--

Something inside him screamed and twisted again, the feeling that had snapped him from his stupor a few moments before. Some force seemed to flow into his body. A part of him was being forced to awaken and perform--but what? And why did it feel so good, so seductive?--A growing pleasure that began to drown the screaming inside of him, until soon only the pleasure would be left. Was this what wizards felt as they went about their magic? He stopped trying to resist and let the flow happen as it wanted, a conduit forming. Anthoc's hands were upon the Eye, and a feeling flowed down his arms and hands and into the orb, working some evil with the Eye, a weaving in the magic-heavy air that made the Eye's glow dim from yellow-white to a paler blue. In spite of everything he knew about magic and its users, Anthoc wanted more, to feel more, to weave more.

Abruptly the flowing stopped, and the man-thing stepped away, leaving Anthoc feeling an odd emptiness. "Replace your clothing," the man-thing said. As Anthoc pulled up and retied his trousers, which had still bunched around his knees, his master mused as if to himself, "Men with magic are rare. Perhaps I will take you as an apprentice, but I must take steps to make sure you never betray me like my last."

The man-thing lifted the Eye and examined it, then handed it to Anthoc. "Take this. In a chamber below, one level or two perhaps, you will find the Wizard dreaming his dreams. Place this before him, and return here. Do not tarry, for time is short, and we must escape this thrice-upon-thrice accursed Tower quickly.

Having been told, Anthoc found he could move. His hands reached, and he took the great round Eye from his master.

6. The Wizard

Holding the dimly glowing blue sphere gingerly, in the outer treasure room, Anthoc came upon stairs leading down, stairs that appeared have been cast of pure silver. Something in him had been awakened and it twisted at the feel of his bare feet on the silver steps. If the sensation was uncomfortable to him, surely it would be an agony to a creature of magic like his master.

He did not look back, and he did not think to ignore the instructions his master had given him. He had his task; he had to complete it.

The next level held nothing but more treasure, much more, riches of gold and silver and gems beyond measure piled as if they were but baubles.

The level below led him to a door. He sensed some complex web of trickery, like threads of light no ordinary man should have been able to see, woven along the intricate carvings decorating the door; it threatened to stop him, and would have, had his clever eyes not picked out the release point to unlock the warding. The door swung open for him now.

Beyond, the chamber consisted of living quarters, carpets, a canopied bed of finery Anthoc could not have imagined had he not beheld it himself. Through a curtain sheer as a winter breath before one's face, Anthoc could see an elderly man--the Wizard, no doubt--sleeping alongside two naked youths who were likely his concubines for the evening. He halted at the edge and pushed back the curtain.

The Eye's glow brightened, the blue somehow angry, and an iciness seemed to fill the air, cold prickling at Anthoc's skin.

The Wizard awakened and his face immediately twisted into anger. "Who are you? How did you--? What have you done to the Eye? No!--Listen to me: You mustn't listen to him--You mustn't free him! You--!"

Anthoc reached a bit of magic into the Eye to unlock it. The glow inside the Eye flickered, and something long and quick uncoiled its tendrils from deep inside the orb. In less than a heartbeat, the tendrils seemed to catch Anthoc's scent and find him wanting; then they turned as one toward the Wizard and, like great snakes of light and smoke, struck at the Wizard faster than gale-driven snow, not bound by weight or solidness, and pierced him to his core. The Wizard screamed, a tormented sound that snapped off as he froze, his face a rictus of unnatural fear. The blue light turned frigid as the soul of winter, while the Eye began to pull something from him, perhaps feeding on the Wizard's store of stolen magic. His bed-companions fled the room with cries of terror as the orb's blue glow began to brighten.

Anthoc placed the Eye on the bed beside the Wizard. His first task done, Anthoc began his second: his return to the room two floors above where his master waited.

He found Horsus, trousers down at his ankles, pressed against the wall by their master, who knelt before him. Beautiful Horsus moaned in bliss as the master sucked at his erection. At the last moment, the master's mouth left Horsus' hard maleness, which began to ejaculate, as the master's head turned and bit into the inside of Horsus' thigh, as if seeking the important veins there, and began to feed on him. Horsus gasped and cried out in bliss as his body trembled and impossibly more seed shot from his potent cock.

The master pulled away, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "Dress yourself," he said to Horsus. Turning and seeing Anthoc, the master said, "Ah, so it is done. Good. We have little time, but now I have the strength to ensure your obedience." He gestured and two crystals, green, each the length and width of a finger, rose into the air. From the treasure room beyond, a fist-sized blob of grayish web-rope from that infernal spider floated in. It split into two and each lump began to refine itself, weaving itself into complex threads around a crystal, and two longer cords for tying. The workings became a pair of necklaces suspended in the air. One drifted toward Horsus, the other toward Anthoc. "Tie these, and know that what you do with your own will, you can never undo."

Horsus reached for the necklace, took it by the cords. He brought it to his neck and tied the cords behind his neck. The crystal sat just beneath his throat and seemed to glow a faint green in the dim chamber.

Anthoc looked at the second necklace before him. What choice did he have?--He could not leave Horsus to walk this road alone. He took the cords from the air and pulled them around his neck and began to tie them. The necklace felt like the sense of belonging and obedience from the feeding, only permanent, not to wear off once the effects of the feeding would otherwise have left him.

When Anthoc had finished, Horsus wore a leather traveler's satchel on his bare back, straps over the front of

his shoulders and under his armpits. He handed Anthoc's dagger and a similar pack to the youth, who took it. Heavy. No doubt the satchel was filled with gold and silver coins and jewels from the next chamber, enough that they would live more than comfortably for the rest of their lives wherever they went. Enough that their master could begin to rebuild.

"Come," their master said, "for we have little time left now."

Anthoc and Horsus had left the stairway doors open, in case of needing a quick escape, so the silvered doors made no barrier to them or their master. They made their way up the stairs quickly and soon stood at the edge of the roof. "I have precious little magic left until I feed again, but I have enough." The master stepped carefully over the jewel-crusted silver coping that ringed the Tower's roof and into the air beyond--

And did not fall. He stood on the air as if it had substance and held his weight.

"Come," he said to them.

Horsus went forward without hesitation. His foot passed over the edge, and Anthoc imagined his beautiful cousin plunging to his death at the foot of the Tower below, his broken body to be food for whatever prowled there--but Horsus did not fall either.

Anthoc was compelled forward by his master's will. He found his courage and stepped beyond the rim, and somehow the air held his footing--like standing on slippery swamp leaves after a rain: not as solid as dry ground, but he could pick his way carefully without falling.

The master led them, a strange procession through the air. With each step further away from the tower, they descended a short way, as if on an unseen sloping incline downward. Away and down, away and down. Over the garden and its dangers, over the inner wall, the labyrinth beyond. Their steps barely cleared the outer wall, and their feet descended more rapidly after that, touched the cobblestones just outside the last wall.

Anthoc saw they were among the shrines of the Nine Remaining Gods. Wait, hadn't Anthoc left something near here? Behind a bush perhaps? Something of value? So difficult to remember. Already his life seemed to have split into his foggy time before the master and the vivid time after, the now. Whatever he had left was hidden in his memories, and therefore not important.

"The moment is here. My vengeance against that fool apprentice you call a Wizard is complete," the master announced and pointed back over the outer wall.

A heartbeat later, a boom like a thousand lightning strikes split the night, and the earth shook, and the Tower seemed to fold in on itself somehow. The silver filigrees and ensorcelled gems in its sides may have prevented magic from escaping, but they could not stop the Tower from imploding, a cataclysm of stone being crushed inward into nothingness by forces Anthoc did not understand.

In less time than a breath, the Tower of Hungers stood in the night sky no more, gone utterly. A column of dust flung violently skyward over where it had stood was the only evidence it had ever been there, already dissipating. And gone with it: the Wizard and the Eye and all of the wealth, aside from what they carried in their satchel-packs and around their throats.

"You there! By the Nine Remaining, identify yourselves!" The call came from a Keep watchman, perhaps attracted by the noise and fearing some act of mischief or sabotage against the surrounding shrines; he was near Anthoc's age by the sound of his voice, new to his post too judging by his spooked expression and fumbling for his blade.

Faster than Anthoc knew, one of Horsus' darts found the flesh in the two finger-widths of space between the

watchman's helm and the neck of his leather armor. The guard's eyes rolled because the sleep-poison worked in but a second, and his body went limp.

The master was upon the watchman before he struck the ground. The helmet was tugged away, and the master buried his mouth in the man's revealed neck, feeding hard and fast. The watchman's body was limp, whether from the poison or the master's need Anthoc did not know, and so the watchman was unable to show what he experienced, for good or ill. In moments, it was over, as the master sat back and wiped his mouth.

"I have much feeding before my strength is recovered. Tell me what you know of today's Keep. Where am I to find many men nearby before dawn?"

Anthoc thought of The Strutting Cock, the many strong mercenaries within the tavern. As if sensing his thoughts, the master's lips curled in a wet smile. "A tavern! And men who, once enthralled, will gladly fight for their new master! Perfect. Lead me there. Perhaps you will have worth after all, apprentice."
