

The Dream of the Sorceress

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THE SCREAM BROUGHT Stulwig awake in pitch darkness. He lay for a long moment stiff with fear. Like any resident of old, decadent Sanctuary his first fleeting thought was that the ancient city, with its night prowlers, had produced another victim's cry of terror. This one was almost as close to his second-floor, greenhouse residence as—

His mind paused. Realization came, then, in a nickering self-condemnation. Did it again!

His special nightmare. It had come out of that shaded part of his brain where he kept his one dark memory. Never a clear recall. Perhaps not even real. But it was all he had from the night three years and four moons ago when his father's death cry had come to him in his sleep.

He was sitting up, now, balancing himself on the side of the couch. And thinking once more, guiltily: if only that first time I had gone to his room to find out.

Instead, it was morning before he had discovered the dead body with its slit throat and its horrifying grimace. Yet there was no sign of a struggle. Which was odd. Because his father at fifty was physically a good example of the healer's art he and Alten both practised. Lying there in the light of day after his death, his sprawled body looked as powerful and strong as that of his son at thirty.

The vivid images of that past disaster faded. Stulwig sank back and down onto the sheep fur. Covered himself. Listened in the continuing dark to the sound of wind against a corner of his greenhouse. It was a strong wind; he could feel the bedroom tremble. Moments later, he was still awake when he heard a faraway muffled cry—someone being murdered out there in the Maze?

Oddly, that was the final steadying thought. It brought his inner world into balance with the outer reality. After all, this was Sanctuary where, every hour of each night, a life ended violently like a candle snuffed out.

At this time of early, early morning he could think of no purpose that he could have about anything. Not with those dark, dirty, dusty, windblown streets. Nor in relation to the sad dream that had brought him to shocked awareness. Nothing for him to do, actually, but turn over, and—

He woke with a start. It was daylight. And someone was knocking at his outer door two rooms away.

"One moment!" he called out.

Naturally, it required several moments. A few to tumble out of his night robe. And even more to slip into the tunic, healer's gown, and slippers. Then he was hurrying through the bright sunlight of the greenhouse. And on into the dimness of the hallway beyond, with its solid door. Solid, that was, except for the vent at mouth level. Stulwig placed his lips at his end of the slanted vent, and asked,

"Who is it?"

The answering voice was that of a woman. "It's me. Illyra. Alone."

The seeress! Stulwig's heart quickened. His instant hope: another chance for her favours. And alone—that was a strange admission this early in the morning.

Hastily, he unblocked the door. Swung it open, past his own gaunt form. And there she stood in the dimness, at the top of his stairway. She was arrayed as he remembered her, in her numerous skirts and S'danzo scarfs. But the beautiful face above all those cloth frills was already shaded with creams and powders.

She said, "Alten, I dreamed of you." There was something in her tone: an implication of darkness. Stulwig felt an instant chill. She was giving him a sorceress's signal.

Her presence, alone, began to make sense. What she had to offer him transcended a man's itching for a woman. And she expected him to realize it.

Standing there, just inside his door, Stulwig grew aware that he was trembling. A dream. The dream of a sorceress.

He swallowed. And found his voice. It was located deep in his throat, for when he spoke it was a husky sound: "What do you want?"

"I need three of your herbs." She named them: stypia, gernay, dalin.

This was the bargaining moment. And in the world of Sanctuary there were few victims at such a time. From his already long experience, Stulwig made his offer: "The stypia and the gernay for the dream. For the dalin one hour in my bed tonight for an assignation."

Silence. The bright eyes seemed to shrink.

"What's this?" asked Stulwig. "Is it possible that with your seeress's sight you believe that this time there will be no evasion?"

Twice before, she had made reluctant assignation agreements. On each occasion, a series of happenings brought about a circumstance whereby he needed her assistance. And for that, release from the assignation was her price.

Stulwig's voice softened to a gentler tone: "Surely, it's time, my beautiful, that you discover how much greater pleasure it is for a woman to have lying on her the weight of a normal man rather than that monstrous mass of blacksmith's muscles, the possessor of which by some mysterious power captured you when you were still too young to know any better. Is it a bargain?"

She hesitated a moment longer. And then, as he had expected after hearing the name of the third drug, she nodded.

A business transaction. And that required the goods to be on hand. Stulwig didn't argue. "Wait!" he admonished.

Himself, he did not wait. Instead, he backed quickly out of the hallway and into the greenhouse. He presumed that, with her seeress's sight, she knew that he knew about the very special person who wanted the dalin. He felt tolerant. That prince—he thought. In spite of all the advice the women receive as to when they are, and are not, capable of accepting the male seed, the youthful governor evidently possesses his concubines so often that they are unable to divert his favours away from the one who—by sorceress's wisdom—is most likely in the time of pregnancy capability.

And so—a miscarriage was needed. A herb to bring it on.

Suppressing excitement, the dream almost forgotten in his state of overstimulation, the healer located all three herbs, in turn. The stypia came from a flowering plant that spread itself over one entire end of his big, bright room. Someone would be using it soon for a persistent headache. The gernay was a mixture of two roots, a flower, and a leaf, all ground together, to be made into a tea with boiling water, steeped, and drunk throughout the day. It was for constipation.

While he worked swiftly, deftly, putting each separately into a small pouch, Stulwig pictured Illyra leaving her little stall. At the opportune moment she had pushed aside the black curtains that blocked her away from the sight of curious passersby. His mental image was of a one-room dwelling place in a dreary part of the Maze. Coming out of that flimsy shelter at this hour of the morning was not the wisest act even for a seeress. But, of course, she would have some knowing to guide her. So that she could dart from one concealment to another at exactly the right moments, avoiding danger. And then, naturally, once she got to the narrow

stairway leading up to his roof abode, there would be only the need to verify that no one was lurking on the staircase itself.

He brought the three bags back to the hallway, and placed two of them into her slender hands. And with that, there it was again, the reason for her visit. The special dream. For him.

He waited, not daring to say anything for, suddenly, there was that tenseness again.

She seemed not to need prompting. She said simply, "In my dream. Ils came to me in the form of an angry young man and spoke to me about you. His manner was ferocious throughout; and my impression is that he is displeased with you." She finished, "In his human form he had jet black hair that came down to his shoulders."

There was silence. Inside Stulwig, a blankness spread from some inner centre of fear. A numbness seemed to be in all locations.

Finally: "Ils!" he croaked.

The impossible!

There were tales that reported the chief god of old Ilsig occasionally interfering directly in human affairs. But that he had done so in connection with Alten Stulwig brought a sense of imminent disaster.

Ilyra seemed to know what he was feeling. "Something about your father," she said, softly, "is the problem."

Her hand and arm reached out. Gently, she took hold of the third pouch; tugged at it. Stulwig let go. He watched numbly as she turned and went rapidly down the stairway. Moments later there was a flare of light as the bottom door opened and shut. Just before it closed he had a glimpse of the alley that was there, and of her turning to go left.

Ils!

All that morning, after the sick people started to arrive, Stulwig tried to put the thought of the god out of his mind. There were several persons who talked excessively about their ailments; and for a change he let them ramble on. The sound of each person's voice, in turn, distracted him for a precious time from his inner feeling of imminent disaster. He was accustomed to pay attention, to compare, and decide. And, somehow, through all the numbness he managed to hold onto that ability.

A persistent stomach ache—"What have you been eating?" The flower of the agris plant was exchanged for a silver coin.

A pain in the chest. "How long? Where, exactly?" The root of the dark melles was eaten and swallowed while he watched, in exchange for one small Rankan gold piece.

Persistently bleeding gums. The flower and seeds of a rose, and the light brown grindings from the husk of grain were handed over, with the instruction: "Take a spoonful each morning and night."

There were a dozen like that. All were anxious and disturbed. And they took up his time until the morning was almost over. Suddenly, the visitors ceased to come. At once, there was the awful thought of Ils the Mighty, angry with him.

"What could he want of me?"

That was the persistent question. Not, what purpose could Alten Stulwig have in this awful predicament? But what intention did the super-being have in relation to him? Or what did he require of him?

It was almost the noon hour before the second possibility finally penetrated the madness of merely waiting for further signals. And the more personal thought took form.

"It's up to me. I should ask certain people for advice, or even—" sudden hope "information."

Just like that he had something he could do.

At that moment there was one more patient. And then, as the rather stocky woman departed with her little leather bag clutched in one greasy hand, Stulwig hastily put on his street boots. Grabbed his stave. And, moments later, was heading down the stairs two at a time.

Arrived at the bottom; naturally, he paused. And peered forth cautiously. The narrow street, as he now saw it, pointed both left and right. The nearest crossing was an alleyway to the left. And Stulwig presumed, as his gaze flicked back and forth, Illyra, on her leave-taking that morning, had turned up that alley.

—Though it was still not clear why she had gone left when her stall was to the right. Going by the alley was, for her, a long, devious route home...

His own destination, already decided, required Stulwig to pass her stall. And so, his stave at the ready, he walked rightwards. A few dozen steps brought him to a crowded thoroughfare. Again, a pause. And, once more, his gaze flicking back and forth. Not that he felt in danger here, at this hour. What he saw was a typical throng. There were the short people who wore the sheeny satinish cloth of west Caronne. They mingled casually with the taller folk in dark tunics from the far south of the Empire. Equally at ease were red-garbed sailors on shore leave from a Cleeen vessel. Here and there a S'danzo woman in her rich attire reminded him of Illyra. There were other races, and other dress, of course. But these were more of a kind. The shabby poor. The thieves. The beggars. All too similar, one to the other, to be readily identified.

For a few moments, as he stood there, Stulwig's own problem faded from the forefront of his mind. In its place came a feeling he had had before: a sense of wonder.

Me! Here in this fantastic world.

All these people. This street, with its ancient buildings, its towers, and its minarets. And the meaning of it all going back and back into the dim reaches of a fabulous history.

Almost—standing there—Stulwig forgot where he was heading. And when the memory came again it seemed to have a different form.

A more practical form. As if what he had in mind was a first step of several that would presently lead him to—what? Mental pause...

It was, he realized, the first dim notion of having a goal beyond mere information. First, of course, the facts; those he had to have.

Somehow, everything was suddenly clearer. As he started forwards it was almost as if he had a purpose with a solution implicit in it.

Illyra's stall he passed a short time later. Vague disappointment, then, as he saw that the black curtains were drawn.

Stulwig stalked on, heading west out of town across the bridge which spanned the WhiteFoalRiver. He ignored the hollow-eyed stares of the Downwinders as he passed their hovels, and only slowed his pace when he reached his destination, a large estate lorded over by a walled mansion. A sell-sword stood guard just inside the large, spreading yard. Theirs was a language Stulwig understood. He took out two coppers and held them forth.—

“Tell Jubal that Alten Stulwig wishes to see him.”

The coppers were skilfully palmed, and transferred to a slitted pocket in the tight-fitting toga. In a baritone voice the sell-sword called out the message—

Stulwig entered the throne room, and saw that gleaming-skinned black man sitting on the throne chair. He bowed courteously—towards the throne. Whereupon Jubal waved one large arm, beckoning his visitor. And then he sat scowling as Stulwig told his story.

Despite the scowl, there was no resistance, or antagonism, in the bright, wicked eyes; only interest. Finally, as Stulwig fell silent, the merchant said, “You believe, as I understand you, that one or another of my numerous paid informants may have heard something at the time of your father’s death that would provide a clue: information, in short, that is not even available from a sorceress.”

“I so believe,” acknowledged Stulwig.

“And how much will you pay if I can correctly recall something that was said to me in passing more than three long years ago?”

Stulwig hesitated; and hoped that his desperation did not show on that sunburned face of his; it was the one thing the chapped skin was good for: sometimes it enabled him to conceal his feelings. What he sensed now was a high cost; and the best outward show for that was to act as if this was a matter about which he was merely curious. “Perhaps,” he said, in his best practical tone, “your next two visits for healing free—”

“For what I remember,” said the big black, “the price is the medium Rankan gold piece and the two visits.”

Long, unhappy pause. All this trouble and cost for an innocent man who, himself, had done nothing. It seemed unfair. “Perhaps,” ventured Stulwig, “if you were to give me the information I could decide if the price is merited.”

He was slightly surprised when Jubal nodded. “That seems reasonable. We’re both men of our word.” The big man twisted his lips, as if he were considering. Then: “The morning after your father died, a night prowler who watches the dark hours for me saw Vashanka come through your door—not out of it, through it. He was briefly a figure of dazzling light as he moved down the street. Then he vanished in a blinding puff of brightness akin to lightning. The flareup, since it lit up the entire street, was seen by several other persons, who did not know its origin.”

Jubal continued, “I should tell you that there is an old story that a god can go through a wall or a door only if a second god is nearby on the other side. So we may reason that for Vashanka to be able to emerge in the fashion described there was another god outside. However, my informants did not see this second mighty being.”

“Bu-u-t-t!” Stulwig heard a stuttering voice. And only when the mad sound collapsed into silence did he realize that it was his own mouth that had tried to speak.

What he wanted to say, what was trying to form in his mind” and in his tongue was that, for Vashanka to have penetrated into the barricaded greenhouse in the first place, then there must already have been a god inside; who had somehow inveigled his way past his father’s cautious resistance to night-time visitors.

The words, the meaning, wouldn’t come. The logic of it was too improbable for Stulwig to pursue the matter.

Gulping, he fumbled in his pocket. Identified the desired coin with his fingers. Brought it out. And laid it into the outstretched palm. The price was cheap—it was as if a voice inside him spoke his acceptance of that truth.

For a while after Stulwig left Jubal’s grounds, his feeling was that he had now done what there was to do. He had the information he had craved. So what else was there? Go home and—and—Back to normalcy.

It was an unfortunate way of describing the reality to himself. It brought a mental picture of a return to his daily routine as if no warning had been given. His deep, awful feeling was that something more was expected of him. What could it be?

It was noon. The glowing orb in the sky burned down upon Stulwig. His already miserably sunburned face itched abominably, and he kept scratching at the scabs; and hating himself because his sun-sensitive skin was his one disaster that no herb or ointment seemed to help. And here he was stumbling in the direct rays, making it worse.

He was walking unsteadily, half-blinded by his own inner turmoil and physical discomfort, essentially not heeding the crowds around him when ... the part of him that was guiding him, holding him away from collisions, helping him find a pathway through an everchanging river of people—that part, still somehow observant, saw a familiar man’s face.

Stulwig stopped short. But already the man was gone by; his feet scraping at the same dusty street as were the feet of a dozen other passers of the moment; scraping dust and breathing it in.

Normally, Stulwig would have let him go. But this was not a normal time. He spun around. He jammed his stave against the ground as a brace. And took four, long, swift steps. He reached.

Almost gently, then, his fingers touched the sleeve and, through it, the arm of the man. “Cappen Varra,” Stulwig said.

The young man with the long black hair that rested on his shoulders turned his head. The tone of Stulwig’s voice was evidently not threatening; for Cappen merely paused without tensing. Nor did he make a quick reach of the hand towards the blade at his side.

But it took several moments before he seemed to realize who his interceptor was. Then: “Oh! the healer?” He spoke questioningly.

Stulwig was apologetic. “I would like to speak to you, sir. Though, as I recall it you only sought my services on one occasion. And I think somebody told me that you had recently departed from Sanctuary for a visit to your distant home.”

The minstrel did not reply immediately. He was backing off, away from the main stream of that endlessly moving crowd; backing towards a small space between a fruit stand and a table on which stood a dozen small crates, each containing a half-dozen or so small, live, edible, noisy birds.

Since Stulwig had shuffled after him, Cappen was able to say in a low voice, "It was a very decisive time for me. The herbs you gave me produced a series of regurgitations which probably saved my life. I still believe I was served poisoned food."

"I need advice," said Alten Stulwig.

"We can talk here," said Cappen.

It was not an easy story to tell. There was a rise and fall of street sounds. Several times he coughed from an intake of dust thrown at him by the heel of a passerby. But in the end he had completed his account. And it was then, suddenly, that the other man's eyes widened, as if a startling thought had come to him.

"Are you telling me that you are seriously pursuing the murderer of your father, despite that you have now discovered that the killer may well be the second most powerful Rankan god?"

It was the first time that meaning had been spoken so exactly. Stulwig found himself suddenly as startled as his questioner. Before he could say anything, the lean-faced, good-looking wandering singer spoke again: "What—what happens if he ever lets you catch up with him?"

The way the question was worded somehow steadied the healer. He said, "As we know, Vashanka can come to me any time he wishes. My problem is that I do not know why he came to my father, nor why he would come to me? If I could find that out, then perhaps I could go to the temple of Ils and ask the priests for help."

Cappen frowned, and said, "Since you seem to have these powerful purposes, perhaps I should remind you of the myth." He went on: "You know the story. Vashanka is the god of warriors and weapons, the wielder of lightning, and other powerful forces. You know of this?"

"What I don't understand," Stulwig replied helplessly, "is why would such a being kill my father?"

"Perhaps—" a shrug—"they were rivals for the affection of the same woman." He went on, "It is well known that the gods frequently assume human form in order to have concourse with human females." The beautiful male face twisted. The bright eyes gazed into Stulwig's. "I have heard stories," Cappen said, "that you, as your father before you, often accept a woman's favours in exchange for your services as a healer; the woman having nothing else to give pays the price in the time-honoured way of male-female. As a consequence you actually have many half-brothers out there in the streets, and you yourself—so it has been said have sired a dozen sons and daughters, unacknowledged because of course no one can ever be sure who is the father of these numerous waifs, unless there is unmistakable facial resemblance."

Another shrug. "I'm not blaming you. These are the truths of our world. But—"

He stopped. His hand extended gingerly, and touched Stulwig's stave. "It's tough wood."

Stulwig was uneasy. "Awkward to handle in close quarters, and scarcely a weapon to ward off the god of lightning."

"Nevertheless," said Cappen, "it's your best defence. Use it firmly. Keep it between you and any attacker. Yield ground and flee only when there's a good moment."

"But," protested Stulwig, "suppose Vashanka seeks me out? Shall I pit my staff against the Rankan god of war?" When Cappen merely stood there, looking indifferent now, the healer continued in a desperate tone, "There are stories of how Ils helped individuals in battle in the old days. But I grew up after the Rankan conquest and—" he was gloomy—"somehow the powers of the defeated god of old Ilsig didn't seem worth inquiring about. So I'm ignorant of what he did, or how."

Abruptly, Cappen Varra was impatient. "You asked for my advice," he said curtly. "I have given it to you. Goodbye."

He walked off into the crowd.

They brought Stulwig before the prince, who recognized him. "Why, it's the healer," he said. Whereupon, he glanced questioningly at Molin Torchbearer.

The hall of justice was all too brightly lit by the mid-afternoon sunlight. The sun was at that location in the sky whereby its rays shone directly through the slanting vents that were designed to catch, and siphon off, rain water... as the high priest said accusingly, "Your most gracious excellency, we found this follower of Ils in the temple of Vashanka."

With the brilliant light pouring down upon him, Stulwig started towards the dais—and the two Hell Hounds, who had been holding him, let him go.

He stopped only when he came to the long wooden barrier that separated the accused criminals from the high seat, where the prince sat in judgement. From that fence, Stulwig spoke his protest. "I did no harm, your highness. And I meant no harm. Tell his excellency—" he addressed Torchbearer—"that your assistants found me on my knees before the—" he hesitated; he had been about to say "the idol". Uneasily, his mind moved over to the word, "statue". But he rejected that also, shuddering. After a long moment he finished lamely—"before Vashanka himself, praying for his assistance."

"Yes, but a follower of Ils praying to a son of Savankala—" Torchbearer was grim—"absolutely forbidden by the doctrines of our religion."

There seemed to be no answer that he could make. Feeling helpless, Stulwig waited. It was a year since he had last seen the youthful governor, who would now decide his fate. Standing there, Stulwig couldn't help but notice that there were changes in the young ruler's appearance—for the better, it seemed to him.

The prince, as all knew, was at this time twenty years old. He had been representative in Sanctuary for his older half-brother, the emperor, for only one of those years, but that year had brought a certain maturity where once there had been softness. It was still a boyish face, but a year of power had marked it with an appearance of confidence.

The young governor seemed undecided, as he said, "Well—it does not look like a serious crime. I should think we would encourage converts rather than punishing them." He hesitated, then followed the amenities. "What penalty do you recommend?" He addressed the high priest of Rankan deities courteously.

There was a surprisingly long pause. Almost, it was as if the older man was having second thoughts. Torchbearer said finally, "Perhaps, we should inquire what he was praying for. And then decide."

"An excellent idea," the prince agreed heartily.

Once more, then, Stulwig told his story, ending in a humble tone, "Therefore, sir, as soon as I discovered that, apparently, the great gods themselves were involved in some disagreement, I decided to pray to Vashanka to ask what he wanted me to do; asked him what amends I could make for whatever my sin might be."

He was surprised as he completed his account to see that the prince was frowning. And, in fact, moments later, the young governor bent down towards one of the men at a table below him to one side, and said something in a low voice. The aide's reply was equally inaudible.

The youngest ruler Sanctuary had ever had thereupon faced forwards. His gaze fixed on Stulwig's face. "There are several people in these parts," he said in an alarmingly severe voice, "of whose whereabouts we maintain a continuing awareness. Cappen Varra, for several reasons, is one of these. And so, Mr Healer, I have to inform you that Cappen left Sanctuary half a moon ago, and is not expected back for at least two more moons."

"B-b-bu-ut—" Stulwig began. And stopped. Then in a high-pitched voice: "That man in the seeress's dream!" he stuttered. "Long black hair to the shoulders. IIs in human form!"

There was silence after he had spoken there in that great hall of justice, where a youthful Rankan prince sat in judgement, looking down from his high bench. Other offenders were waiting in the back of the room. They were guarded by slaves, with the two Hell Hounds that had brought Stulwig acting as overseers.

So there would be witnesses to this judgement. The wisdom of it, whatever course it might take, would be debated when the news of it got out.

Standing there, Stulwig suppressed an impulse to remind his highness of a certain night thirteen moons ago. In the wee hours he had been called out of his bed, and escorted to the palace.

On that occasion he had been taken directly into the prince's bedroom. There he found a frightened young man, who had awakened in the darkness with an extremely fast heartbeat—more than double normal, Stulwig discovered when he counted the pulse. The attending court healer had not been able, by his arts, to slow the madly beating organ. Stulwig had braced himself, and had taken the time to ask the usual questions, which produced the information that his highness had imbibed excessively all evening.

A minor heart condition was thus revealed. The cure: primarily time for the body to dispose of the alcohol through normal channels. But Stulwig asked, and was given, permission to return to his greenhouse. He raced there accompanied by a Hell Hound. Arrived at his quarters, he procured the mixture of roots, nettles, and a large red flower which, when steeped in boiling water, and swallowed in mouthfuls every few minutes, within an hour had the heartbeat down, not to normal, but sufficiently to be reassuring.

He thereupon informed the young man that according to his father persons that he had attended when they were young, who had the same reaction, were still

alive two decades later. The prince was greatly relieved, and promised to limit himself to no more than one drink of an evening.

Remained, then, the task of saving face for the court healer. Which Stulwig did by thanking that disgraced individual for calling him for consultation; and, within the hearing of the prince, adding that it took many individuals to accumulate experience of all the ills that men were heir to. "And one of these days I shall be asking your help."

Would the youthful governor remember that night, and decide—hopeful thought that Alten Stulwig was too valuable to penalize?

What the prince did, first, was ask one more question. He said, "During the time you were with the person who seemed to be Cappen Varra, did he break into song, or recite a verse?"

The significance of the question was instantly apparent. The minstrel was known for his gaiety, and his free and easy renditions under all circumstances. Stulwig made haste to say, "No, highness, not a sound, or a poetic phrase. Contrariwise, he seemed very serious."

A few moments later, the prince rendered his judgement. He said, "Since mighty Vashanka himself seems to be acting directly in this matter, it would be presumptuous of us to interfere."

The lean-faced young man glanced at Molin. The high priest hesitated, then nodded. Whereupon the prince turned once more to Stulwig.

"Most worthy healer," he said, "you are released to whatever the future holds for you. May the gods dispense justice upon you, balancing your virtues against your sins."

"—So he does remember!" thought Stulwig, gratefully.

Surprisingly, after he had been escorted outside, Stulwig knew at once which was the proper place for him to go. Many times he had been confronted by grief or guilt, or the hopelessness of a slighted lover, or a betrayed wife. For none of these had his herbs ever accomplished more than a passing moment of sleep or unconsciousness.

So now, as he entered the Vulgar Unicorn, he muttered under his breath the bitter advice he had given on those special occasions for what his father had called ailments of the spirit. The words, heard only by himself, were: "What you need, Alten, is a good stiff drink." It was the ancient prescription for calming the overwrought or the overemotional. In its fashion, however, liquor in fact was a concoction of brewed herbs, and so within his purview.

The smell of the inn was already in his nostrils. The dimly lit interior blanked his vision. But Stulwig could see sufficiently well so that he was aware of vague figures sitting at tables, and of the gleam of polished wood. He sniffed the mingling odours of hot food cooking. And already felt better.

And he knew this interior sufficiently well. So he strode forwards confidently towards the dividing barrier where the brew was normally dispensed. And he had his lips parted to give his order when his eyes, more accustomed to the light, saw who it was that was taking the orders.

"One-Thumb!" The name was almost torn out of his lips; so great was his surprise and delight.

Eagerly, he reached forwards and grasped the other's thick hand. "My friend, you had us all worried. You have been absent—" He stopped, confused. Because the time involved even for a long journey was long. Much more than a year. He finished his greeting with a gulp, "You are right welcome, sir."

The owner of the Vulgar Unicorn had become more visible with each passing moment. So that when he gestured with one of his big hands at a helper, Stulwig perceived the entire action; even saw the youth turn and come over.

The roly-poly but rugged One-Thumb indicated a table in one corner. "Bring two cups of brew thither for my friend and myself," he said. To Alten he added, "I would have words with you, sir."

So there they sat presently. And, after several sips, One-Thumb said, "I shall say quickly what need be said. Alten, I must confess that I am not the real One Thumb. I came because, with my sorcerer's seeing, when this past noon hour my body took on the form at which you are gazing, I had a visitor who informed me that the transformation to a known person related to you."

It was a long explanation. Long enough for Stulwig to have a variety of reactions. First, amazement. Then, progressively, various puzzlements. And, finally, tentative comprehension, and acceptance.

And since he held a drink in his hand, he raised it, and said, "To the real One Thumb, wherever he may be."

With that, still thinking hard as to what he could gain from this meeting, he sipped from his cup; took a goodly quaff from it, and set it down. All the while noticing that the other did not drink to the toast.

The false One-Thumb said unhappily, "My seeing tells me that the real One-Thumb is in some strange location. It is not quite clear that he is still dead; but he was killed."

Up came Stulwig's glass. "Very well, then, to Enas Yorl, the sorcerer, who in whatever shape seems to be willing to be my friend."

This time the other man's cup came up slowly. He sipped. "I suppose," he said, "no one can refuse to drink to himself; since my motives are worthy I shall do so."

Stulwig's mind was nickering again with the meanings of what had been said in that long explanation. So, now, he asked the basic question: "Enas," he mumbled, "in what way does your being in One-Thumb's body shape relate to me?"

The fleshy head nodded. "Pay careful heed," said the voice of One-Thumb. "The goddess Azyuna appeared to me as I was experiencing the anguish of changing form, and asked me to give you this message. You must go home before dark. But do not this night admit to your quarters any person who has the outward appearance of a man. Do this no matter how pitifully he begs for a healer's assistance, or how many pieces of gold he is prepared to pay. Tonight, direct all male visitors to other healers."

It took a while to drink to that, and to wonder about it aloud. And, of course, as Sanctuarites, they discussed once more the story of Azyuna. How Vashanka had discovered that she (his sister) and his ten brothers had plotted to murder the father-god of Ranke, Savankala. Whereupon, Vashanka in his rage slew all ten of the brothers; but his sister he reserved for a worse fate. She became his unwilling mistress. And at times when the winds moaned and sobbed, it was said that

Azyuna was again being forced to pay the price of her intended betrayal of her parents.

And now she had come down from heaven to warn a mere human being against the brother who exacted that shame from her.

"How," asked Stulwig, after he had quaffed most of a second cup and had accordingly reached a philosophical state of mind, "would you, old wise Enas Yorl, explain why a goddess would take the trouble to warn a human being against some scheme of her god-brother-lover?"

"Because," was the reply, "she may be a goddess but she is also a woman. And as all men know, women get even in strange ways."

At that, Stulwig, remembering certain experiences of his own, shuddered a little, nodded agreement, and said, "I estimate that we have been imbibing for a goodly time, and so perhaps I had better take heed of your warning, and depart. Perhaps, there is something I can do for you. A fee, perhaps."

"Make it one free visit when one of my changing shapes becometh ill."

"But not this night." Stulwig stood up, somewhat lightheaded, and was even able to smile at his small jest.

"No, not this night," agreed One-Thumb, also standing up. The big man added quickly, "I shall appear to accompany you to the door as if to bid you goodbye. But in fact I shall go out with you."

And so One-Thumb will vanish once more, perhaps this time forever."

"He has done nobly this day," said Stulwig. Whereupon he raised the almost empty third cup, and said, "To the spirit of One-Thumb, wherever it may be, my good wishes."

As it developed, Enas Yorl's plan of escape was made easy. Because as they emerged from the inn there, coming up, was a small company of Rankan military led by a Hell Hound. The latter, a man named Quag, middle-aged, but with a prideful bearing, said to Stulwig, "Word came to his highness that you were imbibing heavily; and so he has sent me and this company to escort you to your residence."

Stulwig turned to bid farewell to the false One-Thumb. And at once observed that no such person was in sight. Quag seemed to feel that he was surprised. "He went around that corner." He indicated with his thumb. "Shall we pursue him?"

"No, no."

It was no problem at all for a man with three cups of brew in him to step forwards, and walk beside a Hell Hound like an equal.

And to say, "I'm somewhat surprised at his highness taking all this trouble for a person not of Ranke birth, or—" daringly—"religion."

Quag was calm, seemingly unoffended. "These are not matters about which I am qualified to have an opinion."

"Of course," Stulwig continued with a frown, "getting me back to my quarters could place me in a location where the mighty Vashanka could most easily find me."

They were walking along a side street in the Maze. But a goodly crowd pressed by at that moment. So if Quag were contemplating a reply it was interrupted by the passing of so great a number of individuals.

When they had wended through the mob, Stulwig continued, "After all, we have to remember that it is Ils that is the god of a thousand eyes. Which, presumably, means that he can see simultaneously where everybody in the world of Ilsig is at any one moment. No such claim—of many eyes—is made for either Savankala or his son, Vashanka. And so we may guess that Vashanka does not know that—"

He stopped, appalled. He had almost let slip that the goddess Azyuna had come to Enas Yorl with a warning. And, of course, her brother-lover, with his limited vision, would not know that she had done so.

"These are all fine points," Stulwig finished lamely, "and of concern only to an individual like myself who seems to have earned the displeasure of one of these mighty beings."

Quag was calm. "Having lived many years," he said, "it could be that I have some clarifying information for you, whereby you may judge the seriousness of your situation." He continued, after a moment of silence, "In Sanctuary, the reason for the gods interfering in human affairs can have only one underlying motive. Someone has got above himself. What would be above a healer? A woman of noble family taken advantage of. An insult to a priest or god. Was your father guilty of either sin?"

"Hmmm!" Stulwig did not resist the analysis. He nodded thoughtfully in the Sanctuary way of agreement, shaking his head from side to side. "No question," he said, "it was not a chance killing. The assassin by some means penetrated a barricaded residence, committed the murder, and departed without stealing any valuables. In a city where people are daily killed most casually for their possessions, when—as in this instance of my father's assassination—the possessions are untouched, we are entitled to guess a more personal motive."

He added unhappily, "I have to confess that the reason I did not run to his rescue when I heard his cry, was that he had established an agreement with me that neither of us would intrude upon the other during the night hours. So it could have been a lady of quality being avenged."

For a small time they walked silently. Then: "I advise you to abandon this search." Quag spoke earnestly. "Go back to your healing profession, and leave murderers to the authorities."

This time Stulwig did the up and down headshake, meaning no. He said unhappily, "When Ils himself manifests in a dream, which unmistakably commands me to track down the killer, I have no choice."

The Hell Hound's craggy face was visibly unimpressed. "After all," he said dismissively, "Your Ils failed all his people in Sanctuary when he allowed the city to be overrun by armies that worshipped another god."

"The city is being punished for its sinfulness." Stulwig automatically spoke the standard explanation given by the priests of Ils. "When we have learned our lesson, and paid our penalty, the invader will be impelled to depart."

"When I left the palace," said Quag, "there was no sign of the prince's slaves packing his goods." Shrugging. "Such a departure for such a reason is difficult for me to envision, and I suggest you build no hopes on it."

He broke off. "Ah, here we are. As soon as you are safely inside—and of course we'll search the place and make sure there is no one lurking in a dark corner—"

It was a few periods later. "Thank you," said a grateful Stulwig. He watched them, then, go down the stairs. When Quag paused at the bottom, and looked back questioningly, Stulwig dutifully closed and barricaded the door.

And there he was.

It was a quiet evening. Two men patients and one woman patient knocked on the door. Each, through the vent, requested healing service. Stulwig sent the men down the street to Kurd; and they departed in their considerably separated times, silently accepting.

Stulwig hesitated when he heard the woman's voice. She was a long-time patient, and would pay in gold. Nevertheless, he finally directed her to a healer named Nemis. When the woman objected, he gave as his excuse that he had eaten bad food, and was not well. She seemed to accept that; for she went off, also.

Shortly after midnight there was a fourth hesitant knock. It was Illyra. As he heard her whisper, something inside Stulwig leaped with excitement. She had come, she said, as they had agreed upon that morning.

An exultant Stulwig unlocked the door. Admitted her. Motioned her towards his bedroom. And, as she went with a heavy rustling of her numerous skirts, he barricaded the door again.

Moments later, he was snuffing out the candles, and flinging off his clothes. And then in pitch darkness he joined her in the bed. As he located her naked body, he had no sense of guilt; no feeling of being wrong.

In Sanctuary everybody knew the game. There were no prissies. Every woman was someone's mistress whether she liked it or not. Every man was out for himself, and took advantage where he could. There were, true, codes of honour and religion. But they did not apply to love, liquor, or making a living. You drove the hardest bargain right now.

The opportunity seen. Instantly, the mind wildly scanned the possibilities. Then came the initial outrageous demand, thereupon negotiated downward by the equally determined defences of the second party to the transaction.

And that was what had brought the beautiful Illyra into his embrace. Her own agreement that, unless something happened to interfere, she would be available for him in the man-woman relation.

Apparently, once she realized that the bargain was binding, she did not resist its meaning. In the darkness Stulwig found her naked body fully acceptant of him. Complete with many small motions and excitements. Most of the women who paid in kind for his services lay like frozen statues, occasionally vibrating a little in the final moments of the act. After which they hastily slipped out of bed. Dressed. And raced off down the stairs and out into the Maze.

With Illyra so different, even to the point of sliding her palms over his skin, Stulwig found himself thinking once more of the huge blacksmith who was her established lover. It was hard to visualize this female, even though she seemed somewhat larger than he would have guessed, with such a massive male on top of her. Although—

A sudden realization: there were surprisingly strong muscles that lay under him. ... This woman is no weakling. In fact—

Presently, as he proceeded with the lovemaking, Stulwig found himself mentally shaking his head ... Those voluminous S'danzo skirts, he thought, conceal more than slender flesh—his sudden impression was that, in fact, Illyra was on the plump side. And that obviously she wore the skirts to hide a considerably heavier body than she wanted onlookers to know about. Not hard to do, with her face so thin and youthful.

No mind. She was a woman who had not been easy to capture.

And here she was, actually responding. Interesting, also, that her skin felt unusually warm, almost as if she had a temperature.

He was coming to the climax. And so the size of her was temporarily blanked out. Thus, the awareness of a transformation of her plump body into that of an Amazon, was like coming out of a glorious dream into a nightmare.

His sudden impossible impression: he was lying on top of a woman over six feet tall, with hips that spread out beneath him at least a foot wider than he was.

His stunned thought, immediately spoken: "Illyra, what is this? Some sorceress's trick?"

In a single, sliding motion he disengaged from that massive female body. Slid off onto the floor. And scrambled to his feet.

As he did so there was a flash of incredible brightness. It lit up the entire room, revealing an oversized, strange, naked woman on his couch, sitting up now.

And revealing, also, a man's huge lighted figure coming through a door that, before his father's death, had been a private entrance to Alten's bedroom. It was an entrance that he had, long ago now, sealed up... Through it came the shining figure into the bedroom...

One incredulous look was all Stulwig had time for. And many, many desperate awarenesses: the glowing one, the being who shone with a fiery body brightness was Vashanka.

By the time he had that thought, he had numbly grasped his stave. And, moments later, was backing naked through the doorway that led out to the greenhouse.

Inside the bedroom a god was yelling in a deep, baritone voice at the nude Amazon, who was still sitting on the edge of the bed. And the Amazon was yelling back in a voice that was like that of a male tenor. They spoke in a language that was not Ilsig.

In his time Stulwig had learned several hundred basic medically useful words in half a dozen dialects of the Rankan empire. So now, after a few familiar words had come through to him—suddenly, the truth.

The woman was Azyuma. And Vashanka was berating her for her infidelity. And she was yelling back, accusing him of similar infidelities with human women.

The revelation dazzled Stulwig. So the gods, as had so often been suggested in vague tales about them, were like humans in their physical needs. Fleshly contacts. Angry arguments. Perhaps even intake of food with the consequent digestion and elimination by stool and urination.

But much more important for this situation was the intimate act she had sought with a human male ... Trust a woman! thought Stulwig. Hating her incestuous relationship. Degraded. Sad. Hopeless. But nevertheless jealous

when her god husband-brother went off to earth, and, as gods have done since the beginning of time, lay with a human woman. Or two. Or a hundred.

So she had got even. Had taken the form of a human woman. And had cunningly enticed a male—this time, himself; three and a half years ago, his father—to lie with her. Not too difficult to do in lustful Sanctuary.

And thus, Ten-Slayer, in his jealous rage, had become Eleven-Slayer—if humans like the elder Stulwig counted in the arithmetic of the divine ones.

Standing, now, in the centre of the greenhouse, with no way at all that he could use as a quick escape (it always required a fair time to unbarricade his door) Stulwig braced himself. Clutched his stave. And waited for he knew not what.

He grew aware, then, that the word battle in the bedroom had come to an ending. The woman was standing now, hastily wrapping the S'danzo skirts around her huge waist. That was a momentary revelation. So such skirts could fit all female sizes without alteration.

Moments later, the woman came out. She had three of the filmy scarfs wrapped around her upper body. Her eyes avoided looking at Stulwig as she thudded past him on bare feet. And then he heard her at the door, removing the barricade.

That brought a sudden, wild hope to the man. Perhaps, if he backed in that direction, he also might make it through the doorway, once it was unblocked.

But his belief was: he dared not move. Dared not turn his head. As Stulwig had that tense realization, the brightness—which had been slightly out of his line of vision—moved. There was an awesome sound of heavy, heavy footsteps. And then—Vashanka strode into view.

There was no question in Stulwig's numbed mind. What he was seeing, suddenly, was clearly a sight not given to many men to observe so close up. The Rankan god, Vashanka. Maker of lightning in the sky. Master of weaponry. Killer of ten god-brothers. Murderer of Jutu Stulwig (father of Alten). The mighty being stood now, poised in the doorway leading from the bedroom. And he literally had to stoop down so that his head did not strike the top of the door jamb.

He was a massive figure whose every stretch and fold of skin was lit up like a fire. The light that enveloped him from head to foot actually seemed to flicker, as if tiny tongues of white heat were burning there.

Those innumerable fires suffused the greenhouse with a brightness greater than daylight.

Clearly, a human confronted by a god should not rely on force alone. At no time was that realization a coherent thought in Stulwig's mind. But the awful truth of it was there in his muscles and bones. Every movement he made reflected the reality of a man confronting an overwhelming power.

Most desperately, he wanted to be somewhere, far away.

Which was impossible. And so—

Stulwig heard his voice stuttering out the first meaning of those defensive thought-feelings: "I'm innocent. I didn't know who she was."

It was purpose of a desperate sort. Avoid this incredible situation by explaining. Arguing. Proving.

The baleful eyes stared at him after he had spoken. If the being behind those eyes understood the words, there was no clear sign.

The man stammered on: "She came as a sorceress with whom I had arranged a rendezvous for this night. How could I know that it was a disguise?"

The Ilsig language, suddenly, did not seem to be a sufficient means of communication. Stulwig had heard that its verbal structure was despised by Rankans who had learned the speech of the conquered race. The verbs—it was said—were regarded by Rankans as lacking force. Whereas the conqueror's tongue was alive with verbs that expressed intense feeling, absolute purpose, uttermost determination.

Stulwig, fleetingly remembering those comparisons, had the thought: "To Vashanka it will seem as if I'm begging for mercy, whereas all I want is understanding."

Feeling hopeless, the man clung to his stave. It was all he had. So he held it up between himself and the great fire-god. But each passing instant he was recalling what Quag, the Hell Hound, had said—about Ils having failed his people of Sanctuary.

Suddenly, it was hard to believe that the minor magic of a failed god, as projected into a wooden stick—however tough the wood—could withstand even one blow from the mighty Vashanka.

As he had that cringing thought, Stulwig grew aware that the god had extended one hand. Instantly, the flame of the arm-hand grew brighter. Abruptly, it leaped. And struck the stave.

Utter confusion of brightness.

And confusion in his dazzled eyes as to what was happening, or what had happened.

Only one thing was clear: the attack of the god against the man had begun.

He was still alive; that was Stulwig's first awareness. Alive with, now, a vague memory of having seen the lightning strike the stave. And of hearing a bass voiced braying sound. But of what exactly had happened at the moment of the fire interacting with the stave there was no after-image in his eyes.

Uncertain, still somehow clinging miraculously to the stave, Stulwig took several steps backwards before the awful brightness let go of his vision centres. And there, striding towards him, was the fire-god.

Up came the stave, defensively. But even as he was remembering the words of Cappen Varra, about holding the stave in front of him, Stulwig—the stave fighter—instinctively swung the stave in a hitting motion.

Swung it at the great being less than five feet away. And felt a momentary savage surge of hope, as mighty Vashanka actually ducked to avoid the blow.

Stave fighting! He had done a lot of it out there in the wilderness, where he either tended wild herbs, or gathered herbs for his greenhouse. Amazing how often a wandering nomad or two, seeing him alone, instantly unsheathed swords and came in for the kill.

In such a battle it would be deathly dangerous merely to prod with the stave. Used as a prod, the stave could be snatched. At which, it was merely a tussle of two men tugging for possession. And virtual certainty that some wild giant of a man would swiftly wrestle it away from the unwise person who had mistakenly tried to use it as if it also were a sword.

By Ils—thought a jubilant Stulwig—there is power in this stave. And he, the lightning-god, perceives it as dangerous.

With that realization, he began to swing with all the force he could muster: whack, whack, whack! Forgot was Cappen Varra's admonishment to use the stave only as a barrier.

It was fascinating—and exciting—to Stulwig to notice that Vashanka jumped back from the stave whenever it swung towards him. Once, the god actually leaped way up to avoid being hit. The stave went by almost two foot-lengths beneath his lowest extremity.

—But why is he staying? Why isn't he trying to get away if the stave is dangerous to him? ... That thought came suddenly, and at once brought a great diminishment to Stulwig's battle impulse.

The fear that hit the man abruptly was that there had to be a reason why Vashanka continued to fight by avoidance. Could it be that he expected the power in the stave to wear off?

The awful possibility brought back the memory of what Ils—Cappen Varra had said. The instant shock of what must already have happened to the stave's defence power sent Stulwig backing at top speed towards the hallway leading to the stairs. He gulped with joy, then, as he glanced back for just an instant, and saw that the normally barricaded door had been left wide open by Azyuna.

With that, he spun on his heels, and almost literally flung himself down the stairs, taking four, and once five, steps at a time. He came to the bottom. And, mercifully, that door also was open. It had been hard to see as he made his "wild escape effort.

At that ultimate last moment, the entire stairwell suddenly lit up like day. And there was instantly no question but that the demon-god had belatedly arrived, and was in hot pursuit.

Out in that night, so dark near his entrance, Stulwig ran madly to the nearest corner. Darted around it. And then ran along the street until he came to a main thoroughfare. There he stopped, took up position with his back against a closed stall, and his stave in front of him.

Belated realization came that he was still stark naked.

There were people here even at this late hour. Some of them looked at Stulwig. But almost everybody stopped and stared in the direction from which Stulwig had come—where a great brightness shone into the sky, visible above a long, low building with a dozen projecting towers.

Everywhere, now, voices were expressing amazement. And then, even as Stulwig wondered if Vashanka would actually continue his pursuit—abruptly, the brilliant light winked out.

It took a while, then, to gather his courage. But the feeling was: even though I made the mistake of fighting, I won—

Returning took a while longer. Also, the streets were darker again; and so his nakedness was not so obvious. Passersby had to come close before, in a city where so many were skimpily dressed, they could see a naked man at night. Thus he was able to act cautiously, without shame.

Finally, then, holding his stave in front of him, Stulwig climbed the stairs up to his darkened quarters. Found the candle that was always lit (and replaced, of

course, at proper intervals) at the bottom of a long tube in his office. And then, when he had made certain that the place was, indeed, free of intruders, he hastily replaced the barricade.

A little later.

Stulwig lay sprawled on his bed, unable to sleep. He considered taking one of the herbs he normally prescribed for light sleepers. But that might send him off into a drugged unconsciousness. And for this night that seemed a last resort. Not to be done casually.

Lying there, tossing, he grew aware that there were sounds coming to him out of the night. Voices. Many voices. A crowd of voices.

Huh!

Up and over into the greenhouse. First, removing a shutter. And then, looking out and down.

The streets that he could see from his second floor were alive with torchlights. And, everywhere, people. Several times, as passersby went beneath his window, Stulwig leaned out and called stentoriously: "What is it? What's happening?"

From the replies that were yelled back, totalling at least as many as he could count on the fingers of both hands, he was able to piece together the reason for the celebration—for that was what it was.

The people of Sanctuary celebrating a victory.

What had occurred: beginning shortly after the brilliance of Vashanka had dwindled to darkness in a puff of vanishment, messengers began to run along the streets of the Maze and through all the lesser sections of the city.

The messengers were Jubal's spies and informants. And as a result of the message they spread—

Myrtis's women whispered into the ears of males, as each in turn received that for which he had paid. An electrifying piece of information it was, for the men flung on their clothes, grabbed their weapons, and charged off into the night distances of the Maze.

The worshippers at the bar of the Vulgar Unicorn suddenly drained their cups. And they, also, took to their heels—that was the appearance. An astonished barkeeper ventured to the door. Peered out. And, hearing the pad of feet and the rustle of clothing, and seeing the torches, hastily locked up and joined the throngs that were streaming in one direction: towards the temple of Ils.

From his open shutter Stulwig could see the temple with its gilded dome. All the portions that he could see were lit up, and the light was visible through numerous glass reflectors. A thousand candles must be burning inside for there to be so many shining surfaces.

And inside the temple the priests were in a state of excitement. For the message that Jubal's informants carried to all Sanctuary was that Ils had engaged in battle with the lightning god of the Rankans, and had won.

There would be exultant worshipping until the hour of dawn: that was the meaning that Stulwig had had shouted up to him.

As the meaning finally came to him, Stulwig hastily closed the shutter. And stood there, shivering. It was an inner cold, not an outer one. Was this wise? he wondered. Suppose the people in the palace came out to learn what all the uproar was? Suppose Vashanka, in his rage at being made to appear a loser, sent his

lightning bolts down upon the city. Come to think of it, the sky above had already started to look very cloudy and threatening.

His entire body throbbing with anxiety, Stulwig nonetheless found himself accepting the celebration as justified. It was true. Ils was the victor. And he had deliberately sought the opportunity. So it could be that the ancient god of Ilsig was at long last ready for—what?

What could happen? How could the forces of the Rankan empire be persuaded to depart from Sanctuary?

Stulwig was back in bed, the wonder and the mystery of it still seething inside him.

And he was still awake, later, when there came a gentle knock on his outer door.

Instant shock. Fear. Doubt. And then, trembling, he was at the vent asking the question: “Who is it?”

The voice of Illyra answered softly, “I am here, Alten, as we agreed this morning, to pay my debt in kind.”

Long pause. Because the doubt and shock, and the beginning of disappointment, were absolutely intense. So long a pause that the woman spoke again: “My blacksmith, as you call him, has gone to the temple of Ils and will not be back until morning.”

On one level—the level of his desire—it had the ring of truth. But the denying thought was stronger. Suppose this was Azyuna, forced by her shamed brother-lover to make one more entrance into the home of the healer; so that the brother could use some mysterious connection with her to penetrate hard walls. Then, when death had been dealt, Ils would again be disgraced.

Thinking thus, a reluctant Stulwig said, “You are freed of your promise, Illyra. Fate has worked once more to deny me one of the great joys of life. And once more enabled you to remain faithful to that hulking monster.”

The healer uttered a long sigh; finished: “Perhaps, I shall have better fortune next time.”

As he returned to his sheepskin he did have the male thought that a night when a man made love to a goddess, could surely not be considered a total loss.

In fact—Remembering, suddenly, that the affair had also included embracing, in its early stages, an Illyra look-alike, Stulwig began to relax. It was then that sweet sleep came.

