FOUR STORIES OF FANTASY
AND SCIENCE FICTION

THESIS

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By

Cynthia L. Drolet, B.A.
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This thesis contains four stories of fantasy and science fiction. Four story lengths are represented: the short short ("Dragon Lovers"), the shorter short story ("Homecoming"), the longer short story ("Shadow Mistress"), and the novel ("Sword of Albruch," excerpted here).
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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis are the four major story lengths that, in fantasy and science fiction, are popular today: the short short (less than 2000 words), the shorter short story (2000-4000) words, the longer short story (4000-10,000 words), and the novel (over 50,000 words, excerpted here).

I exclude the novella and the novelette (10,000-50,000 words) simply because works of these lengths are not commonly found in today's market. I do not denigrate their value; I am only trying to cover here the types of works that the reader is most likely to come across and to provide insight into the structuring of these works.
CHAPTER I

DRAGON LOVERS

Preface

The short short is probably one of the most difficult lengths of short story to write. Generally less than two thousand words in length, the short short usually ends with a twist. In order for the ending to surprise the reader, then, the subject matter must be relatively fresh, either in its approach or in its conclusion.
The trail-weary pony stood patiently at the gate, flicking its tail across its dusty flanks.

A mountain pony, the Baron thought with disgust, not even a proper horse. A sherka--like its owner.

Reluctantly, the Baron returned his attention to the mesha standing calmly before him. Her cloak and breeches, like her pony, were dusty from the trail, but they fit her well and were in good repair. Her boots, once the mud was uncaked from them, would be nearly new and her wheat-blond hair was sensibly tied into two braids to keep it from flying into her face while she rode. A lady of the lower nobility, then, the Baron guessed. Which was going to make it harder for him to simply dismiss her. She was small, he saw, with the barest outlines of a woman curving her coarsely-woven tunic. But it was to a point above her shoulder that the Baron's eyes kept straying, for flung across her back was a broad-bladed shortsword no longer than the Baron's own arm, yet still looking too large for the mesha's small hands.

"So," and the Baron didn't bother to try to hide the scorn in his voice, "you have come to do battle with Diadom, Eater of Souls."

Ignoring the Baron's tone, the mesha said, "If you are still offering a thousand in gold for the dragon's
head, then yes, that is why I am here."

The Baron sneered. "And just how do you propose to take its head? With that mouse-pricker of yours?" He gestured rudely toward the sword she carried.

"I wasn't aware that it mattered how the dragon was slain." The mesha's voice betrayed nothing in its evenness. "Have you a preference then, Excellency?"

"Mesha," the Baron said slowly, angered by her attitude, "have you ever seen a dragon? Do you comprehend their size? Diadom has been known to drag fatted bulls from the fields. With no more than a sherka for a steed and a carving knife for a blade you will never come within a dozen yards of the beast! If it's suicide you seek, girl, go somewhere else. I'll not have the responsibility of your blood on my lands!" He fought down the impulse to strike the girl, to beat some sense into her. Instead, he turned sharply away on his heel.

"Excellency." Her calm voice stopped him dead. When he turned to face her, there was a dark look building in his eyes. "Which way to Diadom's lair?"

The Baron's voice shook as he strove to master his temper. "Why, I should think a clever dragonslayer like yourself ought to be able to track down her own prey. Shouldn't she?"

He laughed, cruelly.

And the sound died in his throat.
The mesha's face blurred. Her body blurred. As the Baron watched, tail and claws appeared, attaching themselves to the frail-looking woman who was a woman no longer but a sizable, and quite formidable, dragon now.

"Shapeshifter!" The word was no more than a breath on the Baron's lips.

The dragon-mesha whuffed about a little, getting used to its voice, then raised its head and roared. From the green hills to the north an answering cry came. The dragon-mesha lumbered off in that direction.

The little mountain pony watched after her awhile, then dropped its head, resigning itself to another long, companionless night.

The little spider stepped gingerly onto the strands of the alien web. Pulled forward step by slow step by an instinct it was powerless to fight, it advanced toward the center of the web where the sleek black female awaited him. The little male hesitated, but the female fell swiftly upon him. She wrapped her legs around him, forcing him to mate with her, moving against him with a fierce and unmistakable joy.

Then, even before the act was finished, the female's legs tightened around the small body between them, stilling the male's violent struggles.

Calmly she began to munch on his head.
The Baron woke, sweating. In the distance he could hear the roars and moans and squeals of dragons and the strange and eerie sounds, coupled with his repulsive dream, made him shiver.

Toward daybreak he heard a loud and angry roar, cut off abruptly just as the sun's first rays touched the greening hills. Last night's dream-image of the female spider with the male's nearly severed head stuck in her mouth flitted through the Baron's mind.

Later, the Baron found the mesha standing in his courtyard. On the ground beside her rested Diadom's great bloody head.

The Baron pressed a pouch of coins gratefully into her small hand. "My Lady, forgive me for what I spoke earlier. I heard the dragon's cries the whole night through. It ... it must have been horrible!"

"No, Excellency," the mesha said, a contented smile on her lips. "I think you misunderstand entirely. The pleasure has been all mine. Truly. In fact, I spent a most satisfying night." Her eyes momentarily lost their focus. "Aye, a most satisfying night indeed. And, confidentially," she leaned toward the Baron to whisper, "it takes a lot to satisfy me."

Grinning, she mounted her sherka. "Oh, you were right about one thing, Excellency," she called over her shoulder.
"I didn't realize how big a dragon could get." With her knees she urged her pony forward. "But I do now. Ah, sweet and blessed goddesses, yes, I truly do now."

The contentment in her smile deepened as the mesha rode off into the morning.
Characterization and plot are often sacrificed for idea in the short short story. In "Dragon Lovers," for example, neither the mesha nor the Baron are named and only the barest details which are necessary to the theme or idea of the story are given.

As the short short is the smallest slice-of-life writing around, it usually incorporates only those backgrounds and descriptions necessary to understand its moment of climax or revelation. Nothing further is necessary since the short short is normally built only to showcase its main idea. The surprise, or twist, at the end can be humorous or revealing, the intention primarily being to leave some impact on the reader, be it a smile on his lips or a moment of thoughtful meditation.

For "Dragon Lovers," I chose the former. As fantasy, its central premise creates a new kind of dragonslayer. The twist is found in how much the mesha enjoys her work and in what form she finds her pleasure. Since the dream-image of the spider consuming her mate is illusory, it reveals the details about the dragonslaying without being too blatant about it. The plot twist given to the dragonslaying should come as a surprise to all in the end.
CHAPTER II

HOMECOMING

Preface

Roughly twice the length of the short short, the shorter (2000-4000 words) short story allows both reader and author more time to spend with the story's character(s). While not quite so important as in the short short, motivation and intent become pivotal factors to the plot. Although there is still generally only one basic idea, that idea can now be told at a more leisurely pace.
"Lady! Hey, lady!"

The cab driver was a fat men with swinging jowls and a stupid look. His hair was greasy, looking as if it hadn't been washed in weeks, while his clothes looked like Nicaraguan issue from the Fourth World War.

"Hey, lady! Can I plot ya a course?"

She knew she should stay here for the night, get a room, and wait for them to pick her up in the morning. But the open spaces here were stifling her. And the shuttleport, with its lines of people queuing at every terminal, huge plexiglas windows opening out on acres of concrete, and flat, lifeless voices calling out arrival and departure times in stereo, was making her ill. She felt lost here. Lost as she hadn't felt even in the lonely depths of space.

A businessman in a blue serge suit and mirrored glasses jostled past her without so much as looking at her and she knew if someone else touched her now it would all fall apart. With quick resolve she picked up her small flight bag and headed for the battered yellow cab that hovered at the curbside. The cabby turned his lip up at her in a crooked yellow smile. Gloating, she thought. She was a credit card to him, nothing more. This month's solar bill or payment for his weekly stash. When she got closer
she found he stank of garlic and some perfumed aftershave that almost made her gag.

Those all the bags ya got?"

She nodded, wondering if she could bear to get into the same cab with him. But when the taped voice coolly announced the departure of Flight 714 she scrambled into the backseat of the cab and slid the climate control panel between her and the driver as quickly as she could. An experimental sniff of the air told her that she could breathe in here and that the garlic and aftershave would be taken of by the filtering system. She let out her breath.

"O.K. Where to?" The voice came at her through the intercom.

"I'm sorry?"

"Where ya going to, lady? I don't read minds, ya know."

Don't read . . . . Shanna cringed.

Steel and tungsten. White glare. Too-white sunlight bouncing off the silver finish. A small flag--red and blue and white paint blistering in the--

"N . . . no, of course," she stammered. "Lexington Square. Rosedale."

"Rosedale?" The driver's rheumy eyes glimmered. "That's really gonna cost ya, lady."

"My credit's good."

passed him a card through the window slot. He barely glanced at the red approved letters which blinked from the console before he began punching up their travel route. The red letters burned across Shanna's eyes even after they flickered off the screen.

**Flame. Starfire dripping, dripping . . . painting the emerald sky with blood--**

She shook her head to clear away the images and regretted it immediately. Pain stabbed through her from her temples to the nape of her neck. She fumbled in her flightbag for her capsules and popped two almost without thinking. Glancing through the clear panel between her and the driver's seat she saw the driver reclining, his eyes closed, his mouth slack, apparently asleep. The car sped on through the night.

She touched the passenger's console and the clear panel clouded and turned opaque. She let her head fall against the back cushion and closed her eyes. It didn't ease the pain. The images now crawled across her eyelids like animated photographs, their features distorted, their colors too brilliant to be real. Red and orange, green and purple pulsed behind her eyes. The images turned and twisted upon themselves.


She started to scream.

Back. Receding now. The thunder of wings subsided.

The pain was gone. Shanna bit her lower lip to keep back the sobs of relief that rose in her throat. Outside the traffic flowed quickly and steadily, the soft glow of the headlights and sensor plates a welcome sight. She watched grotesque tree-shapes and pre-fabbed, multi-form buildings blur past her window and wondered how far they'd come. Not too far, she decided. Another two hours more probably before she'd be home.

Home. The word had never felt so concrete to her as now. Down-soft pillows. Cinnamon spice cake. The orange fluffball that passed itself off as her cat. The slightly greying woman who always smelled of scented talcum. The slightly stooping man who always knew how to fix everything from junk cars to the newest laser-optic vid modules. The lanky teen-age boy she hadn't seen for two years now. God, how she missed them all.

Only those memories were a lifetime ago. Two years had passed in space for her, but a hundred years were gone on earth. She'd been briefed, of course, while on the Orbiter about new customs, politics, all the normal things
she was likely to encounter before she was fully readjusted earthside again. Funny how little things had actually changed.

And now home was a couple of tiny cubicles tastefully but sparsely decorated in the colors of her choice in a city known as Rosedale in a suburb called Lexington Square on a street where she knew no one in a building she'd never seen.

Home.

For the rest of the drive she kept her thoughts on nothing at all. Her open eyes stared out the window as she willed herself into the hypnotic state that is neither sleeping nor waking through which the nightmare terrors couldn't find her.

"We're here, lady."

The cab driver shoved a pad into her hand. Shanna took the stylus and scrawled her name and account number on it, not even bothering to look at the charges or at the sizable tip the cabby had added to them. With a whir he and the car disappeared into the night.

Shanna picked up her flightbag and dug her combination out of the pocket of her flightsuit. Apartment 103. She stared at the string of numbers on the piece of paper she held and dutifully began punching them into the lock-panel on her door. 4-7-3--
Three thousand k's and losing it fast . . . . Twenty-
five hundred . . . . Crash positions, everyone! . . .
God, would you look at her burn! Would you look--

No! She wouldn't look. Not again. The lock-panel
was all she'd look at. Concentrate on-- Damn it, where'd
she leave off? She jabbed her finger at the cancel button.

4-7-3-2-9-8-B-4. The door slid open with a pneumatic
swoosh. Her hand fumbled along the wall until she found
the light sensor. The lights flared on. Too--

bright! White sun. White glare. Can't keep your
eyes open too long. You'll go blind. Survival kit.
Sunshades. Sunscreen. What did the manual say? 'UV
concentrations intolerable after . . . ' after . . . how
long? Can't open my eyes to read the damn manual.
Can't--

see. Shanna blinked, her eyes slowly adjusting to
the soft glow from the light panels. She looked around
the room. A blue sofa? She ran a hand over the back
cushion. Hadn't she requested brown? It didn't matter,
though. Not really. And even though the furniture was
cheap, anything was better than the bolted down furnishings
on the starship.

Besides, this was home now. Her home. Even without
the smell of spice cake. Even without the quick dart of
orange fur from table to chair to windowsill. Even
without--
water. 'Small pockets may form shortly after
snowmelt.' The words were black black dots on stark white
paper. ' . . . quickly absorbed into the water table
. . . .' 'Artesian wells . . . .' Dig far enough and
with the right equipment . . . . The jagged shard of
metal bit deep into her hands as she scooped a hollow in
the sand . . . . Dry . . . dry . . . The only moisture
the blood that dripped from her fingers . . . dripped
. . . dripped--

She cupped her hands under the dripping faucet and
splashed water over her face, in her mouth, down her neck,
sucking on her lips to retrieve every precious drop. She
was shaking. Would it never end? Maybe if she slept.
In the morning she could unpack. Find out more about her
new apartment. Tonight all she wanted was escape.

She spilled two more capsules out of her flightbag
into the palm of her hand and swallowed them. The bedroom
was a small one, but the waterbed looked large and inviting.

God, to sleep on water.

When she laid down between the covers, though, the
distant thunder of wings began again.

No! She struggled against the crashing assault of
images, sounds, textures that caught her up and twisted
her mind.

She was crawling. Belly-down, inch-by-inch, worming
her way toward--what? Blisters . . . painful . . . lips,
nose, cheeks, shoulders . . . red, raw, ugly blisters.

White, white sun. White sand. White world. The color of death isn't black, she thought. It's white. Burning, blazing white. What was she doing here anyway, crawling to her death? Why had she allowed herself to be forced from her home by people already dead, dead, dead?

The wings rattled closer.

Black shadow. Had it been there before? No matter, it was shade. Sweet, sweet shade. She crawled closer.

Orange-red-blue-green. The insignia burned itself across her eyes.

The wings hovered nearer.

No! No! God, no!

The enemy . . . enemy . . .

Her blistered hand moved in her pocket. The L-12 moved to her hand. 'Concentrated beam . . . . ' 'High degree of . . . . ' 'Accuracy to within . . . . ' 'Aim and squeeze, just like taking a picture. 'The manual said-- Forget the damn manual! Aim and squeeze. Aim and squeeze


The wings beat again. Not far away now. They would be here soon. She could feel the wind cupped in their
black shadow, surging across, lifting her up . . . .

What was there behind the shadow? What hideous thing lurked in the darkness?

Shanna moaned. She was sweating, her breathing ragged as she tried to gulp down air. Her hand clutched spasmodically at the sheets, only it wasn't cloth she held in her hands, it was--

the L-12. Salvation. They would come for her but she would be there first. She had only to wait . . . wait . . .

And all at once they were there. Before she was ready.

Purple-orange-red-green. Bright, bright colors.

Joseph's coat of many colors. She laughed. The dry sound cracked in her throat. Huge robes billowed in the wind. The colors hurt her shaded eyes. So used to white on white.

The wings pounded somewhere nearby. Close now. Very close. The black shadow spread over her as the wind pummeled her, drove her down . . . down . . . down . . .

"Get out of my mind!" she screamed, but the apartment walls, soundproofed by law, held in her cry and the night swallowed her screams.

The L-12 trembled, a frightened rabbit in her hand.

No, she trembled. Shook. Forced herself to look. Shapes lost in billowing robes. Eyes were all she saw. All she remembered. Warm eyes. Brown eyes. Deer eyes. Huge and somber. She fell into their depths . . .
The wings were almost over her now. Hammering. Driving. Her heart was caught by their rhythmic pounding.

The L-12 fell from fingers gone senseless and numb. She waited. David. Miriam. She felt them close, waiting too--for her. She closed her eyes. Would there be pain? She hated pain. Feared pain. Feared death even more.

The wings were here now. Overhead. The black shadow spread everywhere. Her ears roared with the noise. She had only to look up... look up to see--

that they were gone. Thrusters roared above her, scorching her with their heat. The shade around her dwindled... dwindled... disappeared. She was alone. Whiteness blazed around her. She looked--up into the shadow. The wings were the world... closing in on her beat... by beat... by beat.

Shanna's heart labored in the darkness. Her hand fumbled in the pocket of her flightsuit, drew out the L-12 that still rested there. Efficient... accurate. The manual said it all.

The shadow engulfed her and the world was wings and wind and night and nothing more.

She gave herself up to its black heart.

But now she knew what lay beyond the wings and shadow. Now she knew the color of Hell.

She looked deep into its very heart... past blistering paint that drew a flag in blue and white and
red . . . past orange flames and emerald skies . . . past
soft warm browns that colored the universe. And when she
had looked beyond all that, she saw all of what remained--
White. Burning white. White glare, white sun, white sand, white world.

White Hell.
"Homecoming" is my experiment in the uniting of the genres of horror and science fiction, as well as an attempt to create not just one or two levels of consciousness in a story but a third level as well. The physical appearance of this story becomes as important as the more basic elements of the short story. Each different typeface cues the reader as to which of the three levels he should be reading on. In that respect, this story is atypical, although all the other necessities are here.

In the shorter short story, there is more room for characterization than in the short short. Thus, the reader learns more about Shanna in "Homecoming" than about the mesha in "Dragon Lovers." The characters in the shorter short stories begin to acquire roots. Bits of Shanna's past are revealed, giving her a history, unlike the spontaneous generation of the mesha. The reader is allowed glimpses into the mind of the protagonist so that the three-dimensionality of the character makes itself felt.

As stories increase in length, the depth of characterization may increase as well. In the longer short stories especially, characterization may take a more prominent place alongside theme and plot. As the stories grow longer, the characters are given more room to grow and to develop or, if not to develop, at least to change.
In most fantasy stories, protagonists and antagonists are easily identified. Characters, by thought and by deed, are quickly labeled 'good' or 'evil.' Perhaps they are labeled too quickly. Therefore, in my next story--a longer short story of about 7600 words--I chose a character who is neither entirely good nor totally evil. Like most of us, she is a mixture of virtue and vice. Unlike us, she is not mortal. She has a decision to make, and my intentions are that the reader be kept guessing just what she will ultimately do.
Shadow Mistress

I am the unnamed Mistress of the Shadowed Ways and I speak to you now from the heart's mind, for I no longer have a proper mouth with which to shape the words of man.

Once . . . ah, but that was long ago in a time when men's souls were blind and their spirits dumb, a time when men chose to call me Diala, goddess of the raging storm and the violent sea, of the searing waste and the shuddering earth. A time when all that was destruction was mine to command and the men who feared me feared my very name.

But of such things I am forbidden to speak.

Forbidden also am I to speak of another of my self-names--Chandra, for whom twice five thousand men once offered up a thousand black-horned bulls in a time when the Trayton Hills ran with the blood of Allerton's best and the moonless night was filled with the sweet smell of sacrifice--beast and human alike.

Nor am I allowed to speak of Henti the Sorceress who forged the shadowed blade of Lyrden which brought ruin to the peerless Shartun Dynasty. Or of Kerna who brought low the Dragonlord of Bunther, the ravager beast of the Highland Moors whose scattered teeth and rain of dark blood blessed the dry and wasted land.

Nor can I tell you of Leah the Wanderer or Ehrie the Protector. Not of Tartin the Waster or Martella the Savior.
Not of Nydril the Child Queen or Carlanna the Hag.

For though I have been all of these and more—so many more that time has drawn a veil over some and I scarcely remember all of whom I've been—I come only to speak of Arwyn.

The very Arwyn who loosed the Firehounds from the flames of Multon's Forge and drove the brave Lochlarians to sea.

Arwyn, who wrested the bright blade of Tarlen from King Hronjeld and held that bastard sword until—

But I get ahead of myself.

I am the Non-Born Seer and the Mistress of the Shadowed Ways from the sky-domed hold of Perisea, abode of gods.

Today I am Arwyn.

I awoke in the mist-wreathed cave of Helsadore in the Volgar Mountains. Awoke, I say, for I am the Non-Born Seer and all who I have been have never passed through the loins of women.

Yesterday—at least it seemed only yesterday although it could have easily been a hundred years or more ago as time is difficult to judge in cave-dark Helsadore and one day's being is very much like another there—I had been Preelahna, concubine of the princeling Jareed and inheritor to a dozen major schemes to overthrow the throne of neighboring Orinia. And I had been the mistress of Lord
Geoffrin, Orinia's Minister of Arms, to both his woe and to Jareed's.

As I lay on the cool cave floor listening to the tiny sounds of beetles scuttling through the dark interior, I realized that whatever feelings I might once have held for Geoffrin or Jareed were now as dead as both of them. Volatile men they had both been and it had taken so little to ignite their hot battle-blood. A whispered word to a trusted friend, a carefully couched comment over dinner, the other's name cried aloud in bed during the height of passion.

From my barred window high in the palace keep of Orinia I had seen them fall, honorably, each on the edge of the other's blade. Even as the familiar darkness, blacker than the nether side of a raven's wing, closed over me I could already see the legions of men marching one toward the other, eager to avenge their murdered lords.

Who won I did not see. Not before that nameless sleep had carried me far from Orinia. Already, though, I could not in truth care which of my lords' men had been the victors. Jareed and Geoffrin were dead; that at the moment was all I needed to know about a day whose sun could just as well have set yesterday or a hundred years ago. Even now the memory of Preelahna who had laughed and sung and danced for her lords, who had catered to them and known their intimate pleasures, and who had, in the end, betrayed
them, that memory was fading like a spiraling hawk drawn into the fierce glare of the sun as my new self-name asserted herself.

Gone was the flighty, precocious Preelahna. Arwyn the subtle, Arwyn the seducer, Arwyn the sorceress was who I had become—heart, mind, body, and soul.

I wasn't sure that I liked her, but I was her and she me now. And what choice did I--Fortune's Fool--have? What choice have I ever had?

Soon I lifted myself off the dank floor and crept through the Helsadore's depths, following the raveled way to the face of the Volgar Mountain. Starlight shone brightly through the cave's mouth and the argent moon lit the surrounding peaks with an eerie white-globe glow.

I ducked at the sudden rush of wings behind me as a flight of night-blind bats winged out into the sky. Their sable bodies passed darkly over me and for a moment all I was aware of was the close press of a thousand beating wings. The stench of sweat-stained, urine-soaked bodies was nauseating. I held my breath until the last echo of their shrill voices reverberated from the mountainside and died on the whispering wind.

Then I was alone once more and the Non-Born Seer in me bade me east. Like the quivering of a divining rod at water's source my Sight told me truly that to the east, past the Volgar Mountains and beyond the Daybreak Sea,
lay Lochlaria, my doom and my destiny.

I stepped out beyond the cave and the wind caressed my gardenia-white skin—sharp contrast to Preelahna's burnished brown!—and lifted the red-as-sunset tresses that flowed about my shoulders and curled about my waist. High summer, I noted almost absently, seeing the cluster of stars that framed the Flying Wyvern hanging low against the earth. It was a good night for traveling, the mountain weather mild and clear. Easily in the moonlight I picked out the rutted path that led down the cliff's face to the thick-treed valley below. And as I began the steep descent the image of a man, dark and moustached with sharp-as-flint eyes, flitted across my inner eye.

Although I had never met him, never before seen him, I knew at once who and what he was.

Hronjeld.

My quarry.

Softly I smiled.

A hunt.

I stretched young, lithe muscles feeling power both magical and physical course through me.

Inhaling the sweet night air I lowered myself over the cliff's edge leaving the Helsadore gaping behind me.

I felt well—strong and happy. This time I would be no court pawn. Arwyn was not one to stand for such as that.
Arwyn was a huntress. And my prey waited.
Swiftly, then, I ran into the night.

It was some time after the Wyvern had set that my memories began to blur. I recalled the flat plains of Lochlaria where I had grown from swaddled babe to manhood. Where the summer sun parched the tall prairie grasses and the winter's cold crusted the lakes with layers of frost-white rime. Where the Daybreak Sea swelled with each change of the moon and the lonely gulls cried their solace to the sky.

I saw myself as monarch there, given to the bandying of platitudes and the signing of treaties, all intended to keep a measure of peace in my land. I saw myself as others saw me--the striking face with iron-grey eyes that seldom smiled while they hid a jester's sense of humor, the moustache that seemed always ready to droop into my mouth and which some said gave my face a softness, a little-boy-lost look that melted the mother in all women.

This was Hronjeld, I knew, and I was remembering through his eyes. I forced myself deep into his mind and it was then I saw the Blade of Tarlen. An ensorcelled sword with power, perhaps, to match my own. A blade of the goddess and the fountainhead of the cloying peace that had spread itself over all of Lochlaria. Even in memory I felt the tempered keenness of that Blade and saw through
Hronjeld's sight that there was little that was mortal
that could stand against its power so long as Hronjeld
held it in his hands.

And it was to destroy it and him that the Goddess
had chosen for my task. A blade of Her own forging, a
king of Her own making.

Why?

But it has never been my place to question the choices
of the Goddess. It is for me, like a faithful hound or
a trusted steed, to obey Her will in all things. I am
a tool, an instrument of Her fate, nothing more.

And yet--

I shook away Hronjeld's memories. They were too
disturbing, too confusing, conjuring in me emotions and
desires not befitting the tool of the Goddess. I turned
my own thoughts to the task at hand--how to destroy both
Blade and man--and by the time the sun had tipped the
greening hills, I had made my plans.

It took two days to reach the entrance to Multon's
Forge. I needed immortal power to battle the Blade of
Tarlen. An edge to add to my own sorceries and it was
here that that edge could be found. Chained deep within
the Forge eight Firehounds, birthed from the flames of
the Fire at World's Beginning, waited. Eight--one for
each power of the Goddess: Earth, Sea, Storm, Moon, Fire,
Metal, Air, and Light. None can stand against them, for
no substance that is of the Goddess can harm them. Their
hides turn steel and torch with equal ease. Only powers
not of this world or of this world's making hold sway over
them. Power such as only the gods can wield. Power such
as I wield.

Cautiously I began my descent. Four-footed beasts
with red-shot eyes and tusked mouths rooted near the
entrance where a chance ray of sunlight sometimes falls.
Farther down, drab-white beasts with gnarled claws and
pupil-less eyes worked their way through slug-slimed
tunnels, digging blindly for whatever morsels scuttled
between the rocks. Farther down still I heard the dry
whispering of scales and I saw a giant serpent, with no
more color than a phantom, disappear into a cleft beside
me.

All the shades of night are there deep within the
bowels of the world. And only near the very heart where
the World's Fire roars as it eats the land is there any
sense of remembered light. There the passages glow with
a fire-brand red and the shadows shift like fluttering
banners in that hot light. All that lives--all that can
live--near the World's Fire lives there under the blessing
of Reah.

My ivory skin blushed like a bright rose as I made
my way nearer to the Fire. My Goddess moved beside me
and though I felt the heat fierce against my skin I did
not burn. Not so lucky had been the others, I thought, for charred bones littered the passageway. Misshapen bones from the gods' forgotten beasts who had wandered through the Forge, drawn to the Fire by its heat and light.

The World's Fire is a living thing, not content with burning placidly in the hollow core of the earth. The Fire reaches out, grasping, roaring up through mountains, bubbling up through springs. Enchained, it seeks escape. Slowly it eats its way through the earth until one day men will no longer call it the Birth Fire but the Death Fire and it will spread itself over all the world, eating until there is nothing left to eat, until it starves its own self out and nothing is left of the world but a fire-cooked husk.

The World's Fire rose around me, its pulsating flames towering into the hollow core of the earth's heart. White fire and red and orange blossomed before me. Intense sight-stealing flames that have burned since the world was new. I fell on my knees in awe.

When I rose the Fire parted and I saw them there—the Firehounds. Such magnificent beasts! Curled red fur growing thick over iron-forged muscles, yellow eyes smouldering in their shadowed depths, quick ears alert for the smallest whisper, and long swift legs to carry them wherever I would choose to send them.

Their dark star-collars swallowed the light.
"Poor beasts," I crooned, feeling their steady gazes cold upon me, the yellow sparks of their eyes lost in the flickering flames. How could Reah keep such proud, beautiful creatures leashed so deep within the Forge? Such creatures were never meant to be slaved so harshly.

Shaking, not with fear but with anticipation, I approached the nearest Hound. He knew what I was about to do. I could see it in his eyes but nowhere else. He did not beg nor whine nor wave his tail, but his gaze was steady, his body still--waiting. Beneath his burnished fur I could sense muscles gathering, power ready to explode the moment the star-collar fell from his neck.

I spoke a word first. Not the one of unbinding that he was expecting, though. Acceptance of what I'd done rested in his eyes. It was, after all, a small price for what I was about to do.

"Mrek'taw-a," I whispered then, and the star-collar shattered, leaving only its impression behind in the Firehound's fur.

The bast stood motionless, its head held high, its flat gaze boring through me as I moved on to the next Hound. Within moments there was a line of them standing at attention like a row of well-trained warriors while the World's Fire blazed at their backs.

Free. I could hear the thought quivering like a drawn quarrel through their minds.
"Yes," I assured them. Free. Soon." There was just one small thing I required from them in payment for their freedom. A debt they accepted, not out of any sense of gratitude, for the Hounds are too proud to bow their noble heads to anyone, but which they accepted with the same solemn fatalism that they had accepted Reah's rule. Beside such creatures as they I felt small and humbled, no matter that it was I who controlled them.

"Hronjeld," I burned the name into their brains with subtle magics. No further explanation was needed. As one they leapt past me, fleeing swift as arrow-flight. As they disappeared beyond my sight I felt a sharp ache clench at my heart. Was it regret that I might never see them again? I wondered. Or did my heart feel yet another hurt? I did not know, but as I turned away from the towering beauty of the World's Fire I thought I caught a glimpse of a darkly handsome face with flint-grey eyes and a soft moustache mirrored in the flames.

Hronjeld.

Why did it have to be that the Goddess had set me to destroy?

What was done, though, could not now be undone. The Firehounds would follow Hronjeld and keep him from the Blade if they could. The Blade I would deal with myself. But I knew my power to be far from limitless and there were still the Lochlarians to consider. I reached once
again into Hronjeld's memories and found one suited to my need. Then I struck out north, toward the rock plains of Goran, heading for the ancient city of Robinal.

Those days of travel wearied me, for while Arwyn was not as soft as those northern ladies who are not allowed to set foot outside their noble houses, neither was she as strong as Henti or Tartin or others who I had once been. Arwyn's power lay not in the prowess of her limbs but in the powers of her sorcery. She was formidable, but she was also vulnerable.

I felt that vulnerability acutely as I entered Robinal.

Once, in the days before political boundaries had separated Goran from Lochlaria, the city of Robinal had flourished. Had flourished even before those lands' names had formed themselves in men's language. Before some men began seeing themselves as different from others, superior to them, and had set out to prove it. In those early days Robinal had stood proud.

But Robinal was an old city now. Almost as old as the rock foundation on which it had been built. Its youth had passed and it was dying now. Its stone stockade, twenty feet high and half that thick, which had stood against attack twice two hundred times and more, now stood crumbling and forgotten. Where warriors and war machines had failed to breach that stolid wall, nature and neglect now took it apart block by block.
I saw that the great iron portcullis which had once guarded the road into the city had rusted into place, winched high across the space between the failing walls. It was night when I entered Robinal, passing warily beneath that gate groaning to itself in the wind. Few people were on the streets for the hour was late and those that were about were either drunk or looking for trouble or both.

I jumped at the touch of a hand on my shoulder. I must have been more tired than I knew to have not heard the man approach. The breath that drifted into my face was heavy with the smell of mead.

"How much?" The voice was thick, the words slurred. Whether by design or accident the man, old and bearded, stumbled against me, his groping hands pressing against my chest. I tried to push him away, but he was too strong. Tartin would never have had this problem, I thought grimly as the man thrust his wet lips against my throat.

"I am not for hire," I hissed at him.

"Doesn't matter." I could barely make out the words, muffled as they were in my neck. "I wasn't going to pay anyway."

My struggles were useless. I realized that long before I could tire myself out completely. Better, then, to use this man for my own purpose. I screamed, hoping to attract the attention of some of the late-night customers from the still-lit taverns up and down the street. It wasn't
their help I wanted--Arwyn was perfectly capable of handling drunken lechers, just wait and see--it was audience that I desired. An audience of the mercenaries that I knew populated Robinal.

About a dozen men drifted out onto the street, not to aid me, but rather hoping, I think, for a share in the spoils. There was not even a dagger drawn among them though each of them had a small arsenal about his person.

Inwardly I smiled.

Apparently the man at my neck was well known on these dark streets. The on-lookers began shouting encouragements and the old man, getting into the spirit of things, clutched at my tunic and began dragging it over my head. At this there were more shouts, obscene now, from the crowd.

The old man was slowed with drink and I struggled just enough to ensure that my clothes remained on my body. Not that nakedness held any embarrassment for me--in fact, Arwyn's body was a flawless one, meant to be seen and appreciated--but I wanted only to bring my audience to the peak of excitement and not to drive them over.

The right shoulder seam of my tunic gave with a satisfying rip. I flung my arms up, Reah's Truth-name on my lips. Power coursed through me, filling me with hot magic. Long it had been since the Goddess had granted me such power. Not since I had walked the earth as Chandra at time's beginning had I felt my limbs go weak with its
force. I drew forth the barest whisper of magic—a thimbleful from that vast ocean—and turned it on the lecher pawing at my clothes. A bright halo of light sprang up around me and for a brief space night on that cobbled street in Robinal burned as brightly as day.

The old man screamed and fell back, sprawling among his friends. Blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth. His gnarled hands raked uselessly at the corners of his eyes and cheeks. One of the men holding him staggered away, swallowing air in great gulps to control his heaving. Him I would remember later when the time came to choose among these men, for I had no need of cowards to serve me. There was nothing so grotesque about the old man as to turn the stomach. Chance faced him my way and looked with mild interest into the white-on-white pupil-less eyes that gaped out between his twisted fingers.

"You are lucky, old man," I told him as my aura waned and night fell once more over the street. "I could have left you impotent as well. Had I not restrained myself . . ." I let it rest there, letting imagination do more than words could to chill the hearts of those around. I stood before them, my torn tunic half-exposing one full ivory breast. Power, beauty, and horror worked on their minds and I knew that I had them thralled. Whatever I would ask now they would grant.

"I am in need of hirelings," I told them. "An army's
worth. Those who would consider taking my pay I will meet with here tomorrow noon. Spread the word." As I turned away I felt twice twelve eyes following the red banner of my hair until I'd disappeared into the night.

First the Firehounds. Now an army of Robinal's own. It could not be long before Hronjeld felt the breath of Reah's wrath moaning through his soul.

I took a room at an inn no more than a street away and eased between the linen sheets. I closed my eyes and when I slept I dreamed--dreamed as I could not remember having dreamed for ages past. That in itself was disturbing enough, but there was a thing that disturbed me even more, for the face which filled those dreams was the face of the Lochlarian king.

Nooning of the next day found a crowd thronging the street. A few old men--some lamed, all useless--looked on from the scattered doorways. Several women of pleasure in loose gauze gowns and unbound hair, curious as all the rest, wandered through the crowd. Other women, old and dour, peeped out through the shuttered windows while bare-legged children raced each other up and down the street.

Far outnumbering the rest, however, was a group of lean-muscled men. They were, for the most part, bearded and dirty, but I had expected no less. These men were warriors who made--or had made--their living by the blood
of others. For a price, for a cause, for glory, for whatever reason they found in their hearts, these men would fight. And for my purpose I wanted no prim courtiers, no proper diplomats; I wanted men who would put only the condition of their weapons above their lives. The more filth over their bodies, the more grease in their hair, the more spittle in their beards, the more I wanted them.

I climbed onto some scaffolding of a grey-wooded tavern to speak.

"I have need of an army," I began with no preamble, for these were men used to making life decisions at the drop of a coin of gold. Opening my hands I showed them the glitter of my treasure. It was illusion only, the stuff of dreams, but those before me knew nothing of the extent of my power. Not yet. Dull dry eyes sparked with interest at sight of the gold and gems. I smiled, recalling that the easiest way to any man's soul is through his greed.

"The pay," I continued, "will be substantial, the work short. Those whom you will go against are grown lazy with peace, their weapons rusty with disuse. My cause is of the Goddess and it is She who will see us safely through this. All I want for myself is the victory. What spoils there are you may divide among yourselves. Lochlaria is a rich land."

The surprise that murmured its way through the crowd at that was not unexpected.
"Lochlaria is it that you want us to be going against?" someone cried out. "That's lunacy and I want no pardon from you for saying so, m'lady. I'd say the same to the Goddess Herself were She standing before me now."

Smiling, for the man knew not how close he came to his claim, I spoke above the crowd. "Are you men that a name could frighten you so?"

"Not a name, m'lady," another spoke up. "A man and a city's reputation. Do you not know why Lochlaria has known peace for so long?"

I knew, of course, but I wanted to see what others thought they knew of the circumstances. "Tell me."

"Because twenty years ago King Hronjeld took a handful of his Blood Soldiers and cleared Lochlaria of dissent. With no more than a few great bloody swords he felled the empire which surrounded him."

"You know this for a fact?"

"M'lady, I was there. In the side of Emperor Gercum, I'm sorry to admit. A Blood Soldier it was who dealt me this." He held up his right hand with its missing last three fingers and the rest of the hand so pulled and withered I doubted he had any use of it at all. "Look to Robinal if you don't believe me. This was once a proud city."

It was once, I thought, But not in your lifetime, warrior. Robinal had not held her head high in over fifty
generations. What was true, however, was that Hronjeld had cut off trade, both economic and political, to the city to punish those who had taken hire with the Emperor. A stubborn man, Hronjeld had not relented his policy and, with peace being so scrupulously maintained, there was little need anymore for the particular talents of Robinal's citizenry. The result was a near-destitute city in the middle of a great wasteland. Smuggled ale proved to about the only intra-city commodity and most of the inhabitants, it appeared, buried themselves in its consumption.

Had I made a mistake? I had told them Hronjeld's Blood Soldiers had grown lazy, but what of these men that I wanted? What of their courage?

Of course, what had I offered them yet save a few trinkets? If I could give them back their souls . . . .

Times change," I told them. "Leaders age." Not that Hronjeld had seemed to, though, remembering the face the Goddess had chosen to show me time and time again. "Leaders die. If I could guarantee that Hronjeld would not stand as leader against you, would I have my army?"

"The Blood Soldiers--" one man began.

"Will be no more than discarded puppets without Hronjeld to guide them!" I snapped. "Is it Hronjeld you fear--or is it fighting?" Have you grown soft? If there are no longer men in Robinal then I shall go elsewhere!"

"M'lady?"
Irritably I turned toward the soft voice, expecting to find some timid old man who wished to offer his apology for the cowardice I had found in Robinal. Instead, my eyes met those of a man who must have still been in the cradle when the Empire fell. And there was no apology in that clear steady gaze that fixed itself to mine.

"Can you truly offer such a guarantee?" The man did not raise his voice, but the intensity with which he spoke set my nerves aflame.

"Would you follow me if I could?"

The young man's jaw firmed and I knew I had at least one warrior to call my own. "Yes! The Lochlarians have cut Robinal off from the world thinking there is no great harm in its shriveled, defeated, besotted, foolish old men. But there are some of us here who were mere sucklings when their fathers fought and died for the Empire. Twenty years is a long time to live as an outcast for a father's mistake. For the mistake of any who took the Emperor's pay instead of Hronjeld's. None but Hronjeld would strip a mercenary of his livelihood. None but Hronjeld would punish a warrior whom he might have need of in a day, a week, or a year hence. The sun may shine on Lochlaria today while Robinal cringes in its shadow, but one day Robinal will creep again from the darkness. I think, m'lady, that you are here to lead us once again into the light."
"If only Hronjeld is not there to meet you, is that it?" I sneered. I had to be sure.

The man's gaze didn't even flicker. "If stories about him are true, m'lady, Hronjeld with his cursed Blade could snuff the city's flames with no more than a single word. But without him--"

"Without him Robinal will see light again." I raised my voice for all to hear. "Give me my army and I will give you Lochlaria. My word on it."

"How?" several voices asked at once.

A fair question and I felt I had to give them truth. "I have loosed the Firehounds."

There was silence for a moment broken only by one or two nervous laughs. Most of the men, I could see, did not believe me; several wanted not to believe. Among the handful who did believe, though, I suspected most had been on this same street last night. Strange, I was sure everyone by now knew what had happened, but man's faith is little--only those who had actually seen my power believed. But whether the others believed or not did not matter yet. They would listen and, for now, that was enough for me.

"The Firehounds are after one thing alone--Hronjeld. Until he is theirs they will destroy all that may come between them and their prey. If Hronjeld chooses not to fight, then your work becomes quite simple. You would
have only to follow the Firehounds and remove the spoils as your own."

"And what of the Firehounds?" a voice from the edge of the crowd asked. "What will prevent them from turning on us after Hronjeld is destroyed?"

"I will prevent it. You have only to lay your trust in me."

"And who are you that we should trust our lives to you?"

I looked over at the speaker, a tall, hard-muscled man with the look of a smithy about him and a strident voice that brooked no fear. Oh, if I could have had but half a thousand of his likes . . . . It would take no mean feat to convince him to follow me, but once he accepted my pay he and others like him would give their all for my cause. Even my bright eyes on him brought no discomfiture—he met my gaze with wolfen eyes, strong and sure and unflinching. I was hard-pressed to hold that predator stare, but in the end he dropped his gaze first.

"Look to your legends for what I am. The ancient prophets named me Arwyn. Men call me Sorceress. I carry with me the Truth-names of the Non-Born Seer and the Mistress of the Shadowed Ways. I am The Fate, called from the Goddess to do Her will. If you will prove your piety then follow me. But if you cannot trust your lives to Reah then stay behind and wallow in the filth of this dead
and forgotten city. You deserve it as it deserves you."

My eyes met those of the tall smith's one more time and I could see plainly on his face what my words of challenge were doing to his soul. Almost grudgingly he moved forward, moving the way a man moves when he is spelled against his will. But I had laid no magic on the smith. It was his own doubt that dragged at his steps while a simple conviction in his heart spurred him forward. At last he reached the scaffolding on which I stood and with a sharp, determined motion unsheathed his sword and laid it at my feet. He neither bowed nor bent his knee to me and my heart raced as I saw him standing there as straight and stolid as an oak. A half-thousand like him? No, that would be an embarrassment of riches. How could I hope for even a hundred such as he?

Behind the smith the crowd surged and scores of blades clattered down beside the smith's.

"Arwyn!" The single shout rose into the clear daylight to be picked up and reechoed by four hundred gruff throats.

"Arwyn!" My name thundered across the city.

I would have my warriors and we would, in the wake of the Firehounds, march on an unsuspecting Lochlaria.

This because my Goddess commanded it be done.

But did She also command the dream which haunted me still—even in my waking life? Was it She who put the face of my enemy constantly before my eyes? Was it She
who stricken my breath and clenched my heart each time
I thought about the moment when the Firehounds would finally
find their prey?

Heart and mind were torn assunder by an emotion I
could not yet name, and while a part of me exulted at the
prospect of Lochlaria falling under an army of my own
warriors as it had at the freeing of the Firehounds, there
was another part of me that grieved at the coming
destruction.

"Reah, my thoughts whispered, "Goddess, give me the
strength to see your will done."

But somehow I doubted that things would be so easy.

The runner-scout, tired and dirty, flung himself to
his knees at my feet. He had come, I noticed, straight
through the camp where a score or so of tents littered
the Lochlarian plain. The wind was up and, faintly from
my right, I could hear the pulsing rhythm of the waves.

"Report." My voice was crisp and full of command.
It appeared Arwyn was a natural leader. I enjoyed riding
at the head of an army, though I would have preferred
Hronjeld's Blood Soldiers over these ragged men I led.
No more than a handful of these Robinalians could call
themselves warriors without embarrassment, but even so
the power of command was too intoxicating to let such
realities worry me overmuch.
"The Firehounds have been in the city three days now, Lady," the young scout told me. "They destroyed a whole section of the Innish Quarter and I overheard someone say that half the palace had fallen in ruin. The people talk of nothing else."

"And what of the king?" My heart quickened as I waited for the answer.

"Still alive, Lady, by all accounts. The Firehounds have him cornered somewhere in what's left of the palace and he's protecting himself with that magicked sword of his."

I flicked my hand in dismissal. A part of me noticed the boy's hurt expression and I wondered briefly if perhaps I shouldn't have thanked him for his service. But it was past done now. Shrugging, I turned to the officer seated beside me.

Have the men ready to march at daybreak, Captain," I told him. "Tomorrow we take Lochlaria."

The captain twisted his lips into a smile.

The poor fool. He actually believed me.

Lochlaria's walls were easily breached. The Firehounds at the palace kept the royal guards too busy contending with the internal threat to give more than nominal attention to the gate posts.

But the Blood Soldiers would be quickly roused and
my men, a ragged, outnumbered lot at best, would in all probability be cut down to a man. It wouldn't matter, though, so long as they bought me enough time with Hronjeld. But enough time to do what?

I found the king deep within his chambers, his personal guard slain, and the Firehounds worrying at his heels. He looked gaunt and drawn and the Blade in his hand moved wearily as he fended the Hounds from him, keeping them at bay. I don't know exactly how long this had been going on, but clearly the Hounds had been here for a long while, days perhaps.

I spoke to the Hounds and they drew back, sitting on their haunches, still stretching their necks out eagerly toward their prey. My prey now.

I studied the king. Of everything I saw etched in his face one thing stood out more clearly than the rest--no fear showed there. Pain, aggravation, fatigue, anger—all these were plainly visible there, but no fear. What is this man, I wondered. And what is the Goddess that She fates men such as he to die while thieves and braggarts and death-dealers live on?

I felt the blood rush from my face, but I had my duty. Didn't I?

I had thought so. Once.

"What's going on out there?" He tilted his head in the direction of the fighting. Battle sounds filtered
in, muffled by the doors and walls and distance. Since I had called off the Hounds Hronjeld had ignored them. His first thought was for the safety of his kingdom. That didn't escape me.

"The Robinalians have risen in revolt," I told him, trying to keep my voice neutral. "It is between the Blood Soldiers and them now. Their concern is no longer yours. You are mine."

He rounded on me then, his grey eyes flashing. "And who are you to say what should or should not concern me?" he shouted. Two or three of the Hounds growled and the skin on their flanks twitched. Only my words of binding kept them seated. Hronjeld lowered his voice. Barely. "Why are you doing this?"

The anguish on his face twisted in my heart. What could I answer him? "It is fated thus," I said at last, knowing as I said it how inadequate the words were. But why should I have tried to explain it to him anyway? Why should I trouble myself with answering questions that so many die without ever knowing?

"Blast the fates!" he raged. "Those are my men out there, dying on your whim. You will tell me why!" He advanced on me, every inch the king, his moustache standing tight across his lip. I hope never to face the look he had in his eyes again.

Had I been anyone save Arwyn, I would have known fear
then, seeing the greatness in this man as he came at me. But the Goddess had been wise and it took no more than a word from Arwyn to send the Firehounds at him once again.

Immediately he raised his Blade to stem the Hound's attack. They shrank back from the Blade which gleamed a dull red, reflecting the sheen from their coats. It looked to be an ordinary sword, but the Hounds and I knew better.

Like the Hounds, like myself, this Blade was a tool of the Goddess. It could stop the Hounds. Kill them, too, I supposed, though I hoped not to have to find that out for certain, but the Hounds could not touch its steel. Seeing it now, I realized I knew this Blade, knew the hands it had passed through down the centuries. Death-dealer and King-maker. This Blade in the proper hands could turn evil from itself and from its wielder. And it always struck true. Power hummed along its length. The Goddess had put it alone into the hands of heroes. None who had touched its hilt had abused its power. So far. Had Hronjeld? Was that why she wanted both of them destroyed?

But no, I had looked into the king's mind and remembered his own thoughts. Hronjeld was pious to a fault. And courageous. Handsome. Noble. All the things a subject could wish his king to be.

What in the name of Flame could my Goddess be thinking? "If it's me you want, take me and get it over with,"
he cried. "Only stop this senseless rebellion. Leave my soldiers--and yours--to live."

For that, too, I admired him. For his unfailing loyalty to his men, though I in fact had no care as to which side won. The fame of the Lochclarian Blood Soldiers was wide spread. The Robinalians had touched my pride, made me yearn to command a true army again. But I felt nothing for either side. Maybe Arwyn could not feel anything.

No, that wasn't true. Every time I looked at Hronjeld I felt pain, sharp and bitter, clutch at my heart.

"Damn you," I whispered, not knowing whether it was to Hronjeld or to Reah that I threw my curse.

I raised my hands and called down Reah's power then. The magic flowed through me, filled me with a rush. It was sun and moon and stars burning firebright within my body, the strength of gods coursing through my blood. Eagerly I gathered it around me, losing myself to its sensual, pounding touch.

I abandoned myself to the power and to the Goddess, my heart crying treachery and betrayal. Resolute, I flung my sorcery at the Blade.

The backlash as Blade and sorcery met threw me to the ground. Barely conscious, I tried to rise and, unbelievably, I felt the power drain away, like water trickling down through rock. I yelled Reah's Truth-name
again and again, all to no avail.

Too late I realized what had happened. Like the Blade, my power, too, was Goddess-forged. Goddess-tool and Goddess-tool, meeting, could produce only one of two results. That we had both been neutralized rather than destroyed was simply a stroke of the purest luck. Or of fate.

I looked up then and something wrenched inside me. Hronjeld was face down on the floor, like me laid low from the backlash of the Blade. Around him the eight Firehounds gathered, their jaws grinning in anticipation. A few yards away, flung from his hands, the Blade of Tarlen stretched its useless length along the floor.

Before I could think, I had crawled beside it and lifted it into my hand. The Firehounds were circling the fallen king now and I couldn't tell whether Hronjeld was alive or dead. With a sickening sensation I realized that, with neither Blade nor sorceress powers, the Firehounds were beyond my control. Here with them now, I was as helpless as the king.

Perhaps the Goddess put that knowledge into their brains for at that moment they, too, realized that they were free. Truly free. Neither Goddess nor sorceress could call them back now.

As one the Hounds whirled and charged for the door. The stubborn oak snapped from its hinges behind their
combined weight and they were gone.

I think a part of me fled with them.

Hronjeld opened his eyes and groaned, still too weak to sit up. My own strength was returning, slowly, and when I could I stood and walked over to where he lay.

He looked up at me, at the Blade which I still held. I looked back at him, at his passive face, at the resignation in his eyes. Not defeat, just resignation.

At the cost of my own power I had destroyed the power of the Blade. Half my task was done. The second half waited patiently at my feet.

I lifted the Blade.

And it wavered in my hand.

After all, what harm could Hronjeld do now? The source of his power was gone. Destroyed. Surely the Goddess didn't command his death still.

Looking into Hronjeld's deep grey eyes, I read the question held there yet. The one I had never really answered for him.

Why?

My fingers went numb, slipping on the hilt of the Blade.

"Damn you!" I cried again and I saw the change in his eyes. He knew. He understood, at least a little, now.

Tears sprang to my eyes.
I let the Blade fall before those tears could blind me.

With the swiftness of a hawk the Blade fell and fell and fell.
I never felt it strike.
I wonder if Hronjeld did.
Why? he had asked.
Because I am an instrument of the Goddess, Hronjeld, I would have told him. Because I always obeyed her and I always shall.
Because I am not mortal and I can never truly love.
Because--
But what does it matter now? Arwyn is dead, dissolved in mist and time. I am the Mistress of the Shadowed Ways now and I tend the Fire in Multon's Forge, doomed to endure its light and heat throughout eternity.
Doomed to walk this lifeless pit until the Birth Fire becomes the Death Fire and all is swallowed in Flame.
Doomed.
Why?
Afterword

In a longer short story, more attention can be given to the internal state of the characters than can be done in shorter works. Some mystery still remains about the characters, but in the longer short stories a good deal more about the characters--both their physical states and their mental states--can be revealed.

With the longer short stories, as in the shorter ones, there is still usually a single plotline although more divergence from the plot is permissible the longer the work becomes. For example, Arwyn's ultimate goal is the destruction of King Hronjeld and the Blade of Tarlen. Along the way, however, she has two adventures which, while being necessary to the action, are not so necessary to the plot.

The longer short story also provides the author with a framework in which to broach philosophical questions. One of my reasons for writing "Shadow Mistress" was to examine a Christian concept in a pagan setting. Readers will assuredly be asking the same question that Hronjeld and Arwyn ask--Why? The answer in "Shadow Mistress" is no clearer than the stock Christian explanation. Simply, the answer is that 'the Goddess wills it so,' and since man is not god or goddess, there are some things in this world that he is destined never to know. Clearly, there
is something tragic in the idea that man's purpose on this world, or any other, may be a futile one at best. It is this sense of tragedy that I have tried to incorporate in "Shadow Mistress."

I have also wanted to create my own myth and the fantasy setting of this story allowed me the opportunity to do so. The Firehounds, Multon's Forge, and the World's Fire were all influenced to some degree by the stories of creation found in Genesis and Hesiod's Theogony and by the prophecies of the world's destruction found in Revelation and the old Norse Ragnarok, the Twilight of the Gods.

The extent of character definition, plot, and setting, however, are still hampered by the limitations of a short story. Too much of anything—action, exposition, whatever—crowded into a story can turn off a reader's interest as quickly as too little can. Theme and plot must still be visible at all times in a short story and though a character can—and ought—to grow or change in the course of a short story, it is only in a longer work, like the novel, that every facet of characterization, plot, setting, or theme can be fully explored.
CHAPTER IV

SWORD OF ALBRUCH

Preface

Methods for constructing novels are as varied as the authors who write them. While some authors begin with a plot and add characters only as they are required to fulfill the functions of the plot, other authors begin with a set of characters and must create a world for them to operate in. While some authors visualize the entire novel from opening to ending before ever putting pen to paper, other authors, with perhaps only a vague idea of how the novel will progress 'experience' the novel as they write, often times as surprised themselves as the reader is to where their writing takes them.

I usually write from a very general outline, knowing points 'A' and 'Z' and most of the other major points in between before I start. The fun of writing comes when I discover all the little sidetracks that are there for the taking as well. Sometimes, for plot expediency or whatever, I have to try to avoid a certain appealing sidetrack. Sometimes I am successful, but more often than not, I find that my characters have a will of their own.

Sometimes I wish I could be as assertive as they are.
Chapter One

"Tory!"

Jerel's shout was swallowed in the tramp of iron boots and the clatter of steel. A sword swished by his ear and instinctively he ducked, bringing his own blade up to block the blow. His teeth vibrated with the rasp as the swords slid off each other.

"Tory!" he shouted again as he lifted his blade into the faceplate that bobbed before him. Steel folded in on itself and Jerel's swordedge bit into flesh bone and brain. He wrenched his blade free.

Across the dining hall he saw his step-brother pressed to the wall by three red-tabarded men. Blood ran like sweat down his brother's face.

"Tory." Scrambling over a table, Jerel shouldered his way through the melee until he was within sword reach of the three fighters surrounding his brother. With a cry he ran his blade into the soft, unprotected area beneath the first man's sword arm. Whirling, he struck at a second man, glancing his sword off the man's helm. He leapt back, recovering, and the man's sword arm snaked out, leaving a deep slash in Jerel's forearm. Countering, Jerel's blade smashed into the man's chest, shattering ring mail and leather, cleaving him through from breastbone to spine.

Beside him the third man fell, riven through, the
edge of Tory's sword buried in his neck.

"Come on!" Jerel tugged at his brother's arm and pointed to the side-door with his hilt.

At the main doors a warrior, blood streaking his blond beard and drying in dark stains in his red tabard, burst into the room, shouting, "The king is slain! Elinich lives no more!"

A cry went up from the fighters. Red-clad warriors cheered the news and, heartened, re-doubled their efforts, striking blows with renewed vigor. From thethroats of the unmailed fighters, clad in dress-green tunics, came a hoarse wail of despair. They quailed beneath this blow to the spirit, worse than any swordthrust yet endured.

"Father! No!" Tory swayed in Jerel's grip.

Ashen-faced, Jerel stumbled out the side-door pulling his brother behind him. "If it's true," he panted, "then above all else we must get you to safety." He risked a glance backward in the close corridor that led from the dining hall to the pantry. "How's your head?" He didn't like the rivulets of red streaming down Tory's cheek nor the dazed look in his brother's eyes.

"Not broken at least. Jerel--" He tried to say more but the words couldn't get past the grief in his heart.

"I know, Tory. But we don't know for sure what's happened. In all events you need to get out of here. Now."
They had reached the pantry and Jerel fumbled at the latch, his hand shaking. The door swung in on the darkness. Slowly they felt their way through the room and when they reached the far door they could feel the heat of the cookfires on the other side of the wood. Jerel lifted his sword.

Tory found his voice. "Jerel," he whispered in the dark. "If Father isn't--gone--then he needs our help. We can't just leave him. We can't--" his voice, for the moment, caught again.

"No." Jerel's whisper was firm. "We go on. They'll be expecting us to go to him. Tory, if he's dead, then you're king now. For Linarch's sake you can't go back." He pulled Tory to him, embraced him quickly. "I'm sorry. This isn't my choice either." Oh, Elinich. Surely you understand. I know you would want your son to stay safe above all--above even your own life. If I'm doing wrong, forgive me, please.

He slipped the latch on the door to the kitchens and opened the door a crack. Peering through he saw no one about. Neither red-clad warriors nor any of the kitchen servants who had all more than likely fled the cookfires at the first gleam of steel. Blade at the ready he stepped into the room motioning Tory to follow him. Cautiously they made their way through the kitchens and into the corridor beyond. A length of hall, a turn to the right
and there, they knew, was the passage to the caverns beneath the palace. Once underground they would be safe enough—the caverns were known to none but the royalty. Not even Retnar knew about them. Dear Uman, he couldn't possibly know. Could he? It was the one risk they would have to take. There was no other way out of the palace that would not be guarded.

They were halfway down the torchlit corridor, just beginning to breathe easier, when three men in red turned out of a hall passage ahead. The warriors halted mid-stride, as surprised as Jerel and Tory.

"Stay back," Jerel hissed at Tory as he lifted his sword to his shoulder. "I'll hold them off. You get down to the caverns."

"No, brother." Tory smiled but there was no humor in it. "You can't get rid of me that easily." And before Jerel could stop him Tory was moving forward, closing the distance between him and the warriors. Jerel hurried after him.

In the flickering torchlight brothers and warriors engaged. Jerel's sword flashed out creasing a helm and, as he danced back out of the warrior's reach, he threw his blade up again to block a blow from a second sword. Because the warriors were armored in ringmail and helms, he and Tory had the advantage in speed. But the narrow space of the corridor hampered movement. The fighting
necessarily was close and, speed being their only asset, the brothers had to make the most of it.

Jerel stepped inside the first man's reach, feinted left and threw a wrap-around shot to the back of his helmet. The man crumpled to the ground without a sound.

"Jerel!"

Tory's cry spun him around at once. He was still too late. Tory looked too much like his father for anyone to doubt his lineage. And the red-clad men no doubt all had orders concerning the royal family--extermination. The two remaining warriors had Tory up against the wall and, even as he sprang forward, Jerel saw one bright blade flick across Tory's abdomen, trailing a ribbon of blood behind it. The man never got a chance to gloat, though, for he suddenly found himself with a face full of steel. Tory's sword hung in his faceplate while Tory slumped to the ground.

With a vengeance Jerel struck out at the last warrior, fear for Tory lending strength to the blow. His blade landed on the man's shoulder and struck through rings, leather, lungs, and heart, stopping only when the steel connected with the thick waxed hide of the man's belt.

"Tory?" Jerel pressed his hands to his brother's wound, watching Tory's eyes cloud with pain. In the distance he heard the heavy stamp of boots in wooden floors. Hastily he sheathed his sword and lifted Tory into his
arms. It wasn't far now to the cavern passage. A press of a stone with his knee set the rusty mechanism of its opening into motion.

Then they were within the dank, dark tunnel and with a grating rasp the opening closed behind them, concealing its secret with a stolid pride. They were safe. For a time at least.

Moving with the slow caution of the blind, one hand balancing his brother, the other sliding along the damp, lichen-covered wall, Jerel worked his way through the unlit passage. It seemed that he traveled for miles and that hours were passing as he listened to his brother's pain-filled breathing, but at last he came to the end of the tunnel. To his left he could feel space, a great domed emptiness, silent and waiting. A lonely space, far lonelier than the council hall at night. In candlelight, the great cavern shone with crystal and housed twisted shapes, grotesque and beautiful, along its walls. It was an old place, dark and brooding--perhaps even a haunt or barrow full of the ghosts of old gods. Jerel had never liked the caverns, never liked the idea of stirring up old wraiths.

He liked them even less with no torch to see them by.

Shuddering, he turned to the right, turning his back on the emptiness, groping for the ring that would open
the wall at his hand. When he found it, he breathed in relief and pulled hard on it. Like a winched portcullis the wall ground its slow way up and Jerel stumbled through onto the path that led ever upwards toward the sea.

He heard the pounding of the surf long before he saw the faint patch of light above. Encouraged, he pressed on, shifting Tory to his other shoulder when the first one grew numb. The movement brought a stifled cry from Tory andImmediately Jerel cursed, his heart swelling with fear for his brother.

At last he stood in the dimly lit cave that looked out over the sea. As crabs scuttled across the cave's floor with each step, Jerel moved cautiously to the cave's lip and peered out.

Only the foam-washed beach stared back.

Behind him, cave-pocked cliffs rose, cutting off his view of the palace. Though he was only half a league away, standing here on the beach with the roar of the waves crashing angrily at the jagged rocks of the shore, it was as if the palace didn't even exist. The world here was only rock and cave and sea. And his brother's blood.

Tory coughed. "Widia," he whispered and Jerel had to strain to catch the name. "She'll help."

Jerel nodded. Widia indeed would help them. After all, she had been Elinich's diviner since the day he had taken the crown. She had been the boys' counselor, teacher,
and even sometime-mother after Jerel's mother, Gotelind, had died six years back. She would help them. And she would know whether or not Elinich was truly dead.

Glancing up once more at the cliffs to be sure no watch yet patrolled them, Jerel struck off east toward the little cottage nestled securely between sea and trees where Widia lived.

It was neap tide and the water splashed at the eroding cliff face not thirty paces from Widia's front door. A procession of trees that grew nowhere else along the naked coast angled back from the home's wooden frame to the edge of the Andenwood a league and more away. And more marvels even than that crowded around Widia's two room home. Often Jerel and Tory had played within the ring of stones that sprouted from the land barely a dagger's throw from the eastern corner of the cottage. And even in winter's worst gales when the massive stone structure of the palace groaned under the fierce onslaught of ice and wind and no matter how well stoked the hearths the rooms refused to warm, Widia's fires burned gaily under the summer thatching that was the roof's only insulation. When such storms threatened, the brothers had more than once taken refuge in the warmth of Widia's home and, while the sky raged outside, they would pass the time listening to tales of kings and dragons, gods and magic that Widia wove for them in the firelight. Even now the brothers couldn't be sure
which of the tales she spoke were true and which were merely wild fancies told to sate the imaginations of two growing boys.

Banging on the cottage door, Jerel called out, "Widia! By Uman's grace, let us in! Quickly!"

When the door opened, Jerel's eyes went wide with shock. The diviner's eyes were glazed and her grey hair hung in damp strands against her weathered brow. There were dark hollows beneath her eyes and tear stains on her sunken cheeks. She was trembling and the doorframe under her darkly veined hand seemed her only support. When she spoke her voice was thin and shaky, not with age but from grief.

"My boys. I Saw you walking in darkness. I felt pain. I thought you were dead as well."

Jerel swallowed hard. "As well?"

Widia's eyes met his then flinched from their sorrow. Elinich is gone. Did you not know?"

Tory groaned and Jerel could feel his brother stiffen against him.

"We heard--rumors," Jerel said through the pangs of his own heart. "We didn't see him fall--couldn't be sure."

He carried Tory into the cottage and laid him on Widia's down mattress. The diviner bent over him, her aged but competent hands searching Tory's wounds. Her face was grave when she looked back up. Fear tightened
Jerel's gut.

"They will be looking for you." Widia crossed to the cupboard where she kept her herbs of healing. Picking out two little jars she dumped their contents into a clay pot, added a measure of water, and set the mixture over the fire to warm.

"There are many in the palace who know me and know where I live," she continued, tearing strips of cloth from an old sheet. "For a price some will alert Retnar as to my whereabouts. Count on it. There is no place of safety. Not for you or me."

"I didn't know where else to turn," Jerel admitted. "Not with Tory hurt."

Widia sighed. "We'll dress his wounds here but then he must be moved. To one of the caves perhaps. Somewhere we'll be able to care for him without fear." She picked up a jar of ointment and a strip of cloth and handed them to Jerel. "For your arm," she told him. "I daresay you wouldn't think to look after it yourself." Deftly she spread some of the ointment into the slash in Jerel's forearm and tied a bandage around it. Her hands might be old, Jerel thought, watching her, but they had lost none of their dexterity. She handed him a water-cooled cloth for Tory's forehead while she sank into a chair by the fire and waited for the herbs to boil.

"I have failed Elinich," she whispered. "Almost you
two as well." She stared into the flames. "I never saw this. Not Retnar. Not--" She bowed her head into her hands. "You must tell me what happened." Her words were muffled in her palms. "I must know where my Sight failed me."

Jerel spread the cool cloth over Tory's forehead and gripped his brother's hand. "What's there to tell? Elinich was holding audience in the throne room and Tory and I were at supper. Retnar's men came from nowhere. No alarm was raised, not even a shout from the gate guards. They must have anchored their ships well away from here; I saw no sign of them from the shore. It was as if the men flowed out of the walls in full armor. The masters in the dining hall all had their swords about them--Uman be thanked for that custom--even as Tory and I did. But no other protection. And we were outnumbered. We fought and then one of Retnar's men cried out that Elinich was dead. There was blood on the man. Tory and I managed to escape, but not before he took wounds. We came up through the caves and I don't think anyone saw us. Not that lived to tell, at least. Then we came straight here."

"Before Retnar's men appeared, had there been no word of enemy movement?" Widia began dropping the strips of cloth into the clay pot, stirring everything with a wooden spoon.

"Nothing I was told about." Letting go of Tory's
hand Jerel retrieved the pot from the fire and carried it to the bed. Widia laid the first soaked strip across Tory's abdomen. Tory cried out once then swooned at the touch.

"Tory!" Jerel shook with concern, but Widia laid a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"It will be better for him now. We can dress his wounds without hurting him further."

"Will he be all right?"

"He will, in a month or so. The wound will be slow to heal."

"Do you speak from your divining?"

Widia shook her head. "I speak as a healer. And, as one who has lived long in this world, I can also say that it will take much time before his spirit heals as well. The loss of his father, of his kingdom--"

"He'll not think about Linarch soon," Jerel broke in. "It's not that he has no love for the kingdom, but Tory's sight has always been narrow there. I don't think he ever seriously considered that someday he would indeed be king." Jerel's eyes closed briefly. "It looks now like he may never get the chance."

"Destiny has a way of working things out." Widia finished tying the last bandage around Tory's waist and began wrapping his slighter head wound. "The throne Retnar usurped today may well pass into other hands tomorrow."
"Or a hundred years from now," Jerel said bitterly. "Can you see nothing, then?"

Slowly Widia shook her head. "Nothing comes clear to me these days." Jerel sensed rather than heard the old woman's self-reproach. "Not like when I was younger. If Elinich had taken on another diviner years ago, perhaps today would never have happened."

"And if the alarm had been raised as it should have been, and if Elinich had had more retainers at his side, if Retnar had been drowned at sea as a babe then, too, maybe none of this would ever have happened. You did your best, Widia." He took her thin, blue-veined hand in his. "No one blames you. As you say, seen or not, destiny will have its way."

Widia bowed her head, accepting Jerel's comforting in her grief. "Here," she said at last, "we must move him to the caves. Carry him on down. I'll come with blankets and flint and food and whatever else you'll be wanting. When the country is settled again and I have no more fears for you two, then I'll spare a day or two divining your futures. Until then, go with Uman's grace. I'll join you soon." With that she wrapped a blanket about Tory and Jerel lifted him once again into his arms.

Gently he stooped down and kissed Widia's gaunt cheek. "Thank you. For all you've done and all that you're about to risk. For Tory's sake, thank you." Then he turned
and was gone.

"Not just for Tory's sake," Widia whispered after him. "Someday you'll realize you're just as important as he is. She nodded to herself, her lips pouted. Yes, Jerel, someday.
Afterword

From a reader's standpoint, the first few pages of a novel are the most important ones. If by the third or fourth page the reader is not enthusiastic, or at least curious, about what is being read, then more than likely he or she is going to put the novel aside and go on to something else. For this reason, my novel opens with an action scene, immediately involving the reader in the story. Only later, after I have successfully 'hooked' the reader—gotten him or her to read past those first crucial pages and made the reader care, at least a little, about what happens to my characters—do I slow the action and begin to fill the reader in concerning the how's and why's and who's of the plot.

The opening chapter sets the framework of the book, as well. The protagonist(s) is introduced, the complication is explained (or at the very least implied), and often the antagonist makes an appearance as well. In Sword of Albruch, Jerel and Tory are introduced quickly. There is more to learn about them later, of course, but their basic personalities have already been established before chapter's end—namely that they are princes, step-brothers, and devoted to each other. The major complication is the usurpation and the first minor complication is the battle resulting in Tory's wounds. The usurper, Retnar—
antagonist--is at least mentioned, even though the reader has yet to be introduced to him.

To give too much away in the first chapter, however, can lose readers very quickly. Throughout the book the author must keep the reader's interest piqued by making sure there is always a question of 'how' or 'why' left unanswered. Even a crime story where the murderer is known in the first paragraph can continue to capture the reader's interest so long as there remains a question of how--or even if--the murderer will be brought to justice.

In *Sword of Albruch*, Tory will indeed depose Retnar and gain the throne of Linarch. But first he will have to enlist the help of mercenaries, gamblers, and thieves. He will have to make a trek that will take him to the farthest corner of the kingdom and beyond. And he will have to pay a cost, one that changes him irrevocably, for his success.