

# THE TUG OF THE MACHINE

BY ALLEN EVANS

HAD THEY NOT BEEN RUNNING SO FAST, AT least one of them would not have died so soon. As it was, the length of the hall took them by surprise as they rounded the corner and they stopped short—seized by indecision.

The first one died then, the quarrel catching him high in the neck and sending him down before he had drawn two rasping breaths. The death rattle of their comrade seemed to serve as a catalyst for the others. They spotted him some thirty yards down the hall, winding his crossbow furiously in order to make a second shot. With a rushing of feet through dank air, the two survivors charged, drawn weapons displaying shivers of light as the guttering torches on the walls were reflected from the blades.

In futility, he tossed aside his useless crossbow and drew his weapon to meet their rush.

At the last second, two quick steps moved him to one side and forward, allowing him to engage the leader, who was preceding his stocky partner. The air hissed as steel met steel, and then reverberated with a scream as steel met body and the second of the trio joined his companion on the floor. The upward-slicing stroke which had ended his first attacker's life now went to work on his second, bending over to come to a full crashing stop against the other warrior's guard.

Almost a dance, the combat circled and spun, twisting this way and that as the men struck and parried and then counterstruck. Slashing, almost wild blows were aimed at his head, only to be deflected or ducked. The stocky figure made a lunge he would have thought impossible, save for the fact that it was deflected just enough by his own blade to slice through the outer folds of his tunic rather than through the skin for which it had been intended. But the effort proved to be his foe's final one, as his own circling blade swung down to almost decapitate him.

He stood for a few moments, breathing deeply to catch his lost breath and to feel the throb of the last blow slowly die away. They had left the initial meeting point of the combat farther up the corridor, and with slow and not altogether steady footsteps, he went padding down the hall to retrieve his crossbow and quiver.

He had just put his hand around the stock of the bow when the room blinked out.

When he woke, he was staring into the hulk of the Machine.

Very slowly, he sat up, then began removing the series of wires attached to his scalp. The breaking of contact between his scalp and the tiny brain-pads on the ends of the wires sent a pleasant pain coursing down his spine—which, in a way, he enjoyed feeling. There was no one in the apartment to notice, but the occasional glance he favored at the Machine was filled with a mixture

of pleasure and pride. It was the most expensive present he had ever allowed himself to buy, for him or anyone else. Nine thousand credits. For five years, he had dreamed and scraped and sacrificed to get the money.

"Time, please," he said, rising from the chair and kneading his head with his fingers.

The wall responded almost immediately with: "Five o'clock and twenty-five seconds, sir."

Almost twenty minutes late for his meeting with Michelle! But he caught himself midthought and debated going at all. The meeting was almost certainly a facade for a surprise birthday party. If there was one thing he couldn't stand, it was parties. Michelle was always doing that kind of thing and forever irritating him. He struggled with the thought of plugging another scenario into the Machine and gaming for another half hour, but then rejected it: picturing Michelle's crushed expression on the phone was too much.

He quickly got dressed, turned off the Machine and lights, and left, locking the door behind him.

And as he slowly walked down the hall, he could almost hear the Machine calling after him. ■





# CATACOMB

BY HENRY MELTON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY LARRY DAY



LUNAE, ASSASSIN FOR THE Witch Queen of the Hinterlands, paused in silence before the large stone door. <LISTEN, SMELL> There was no sound beyond the latched opening, but she had learned to distrust silence in this place. The walls were cubits thick. The door, though balanced to open with a light shove, was itself more than a foot thick, and when closed, it was sealed nearly airtight. Sound never traveled far in this twisty, dusty place, but the smells that the people and the beasts left behind had proved especially trustworthy to her.

She moved her torch to her left hand and leaned closer to the edge of the door, where she might catch a whiff of the scents within. There was, as always, a faint human scent and the musty tang of some beast that must frequent this set of corridors. She hoped never to meet that one in the flesh. There was something . . . compelling about that scent. She feared it. But now, there seemed to creep from behind the door a new scent—the smell of spice!

If there was any chance of a person behind the door, she had better be ready for a fight. The catacombs were more wild and dangerous than any other place she had been. There was gold here, and of course, there was greed. *Strike first!* had proved themselves sure words of wisdom in the seemingly endless time she had spent in these dark, dusty halls. Lunae took stock of herself. She had eaten hours ago, and she was in fighting trim. The tools of her trade were ready to her fingers. It was a momentary temptation to pass by this door, but she had no idea if this corridor would provide another exit soon enough to avoid the creature with the musty scent. There was no reason to delay. Her torch was more than half gone. Going back was out of the question.

<OPEN THE DOOR> The latch worked smoothly, but the hinges did not. The door moved unevenly with the popping grind of a stone pivot.

<LOOK> Glowstone lit the roomy chamber with its cool blue light. <PUT OUT TORCH> There were signs of travelers. A torn leather sack lay on a large, flat boulder next to a trickling spring. The rivulet barely parted the dust on the floor before vanishing into a fault-line crack. That dust was well stirred by prints of people and beasts. Seeing hoofprints amazed her. *Lead a pack animal down into the catacombs? The scents alone in this place would spook it.*

Two other stone doors faced her. This was a crossroad, if that term could be used in these underground passages. She quickly moved to check them. <LISTEN AT DOORWAYS> There was never too much caution in this place.

There were no sounds, and the smells of this oft-used stopping place masked anything that might be beyond them. A set of conveniently placed boulders were at hand, so she blocked all three entrances.

“Thank you.” It was a man’s voice.

<PIVOT LOW, PLACE THROWING KNIFE IN LEFT HAND, LOOK>

She spun into a crouch, ready to throw her knife as soon as she spotted a target. Though it wasn’t terribly bright, the glowstone light shone evenly enough to wash out shadows. A person could hide in two or three places among the jumble of boulders where the spring was sourced. Lunae was painfully aware that she was without the smallest boulder to protect her from any thrown weapon. She shifted her stance to give her better mobility. *Stupid! I’ve spent too much time getting this far into the catacombs to be killed by some clever thief.* There was nowhere to run. The doors were tightly wedged by the boulders she’d so carefully moved into place!

“Nervous one, aren’t you? You could at least say ‘hello.’ ”

She had his hiding place located now. There was a crack between the stones, through which he watched her. He was shielded from her knife, but if she could reach the brass vial of contact poison in her pack . . . <STAND UP SLOWLY, SAY: “YOU STARTLED ME. I EXPECTED TO BE ATTACKED.” TAKE A STEP TOWARD MY PACK>

He had not attacked, even though he had an obvious tactical advantage. Perhaps she could reach—

He spoke. “I would appreciate it if you stayed right where you are!” She froze, her mind in high gear. He could have a nocked arrow aimed her way. If so, the aim would be hampered by the very rocks that protected him; no other weapon would have a better chance. He was either stupid or bluffing.

<DIVE INTO A ROLL, GRAB MY PACK, USE MY PACK AS A SHIELD, GET THE BOTTLE OF POISON> She felt the embossed bottle in her pack just as the stinging bite of a dart found her arm. Lunae fought for consciousness as a wave of buzzing darkness rushed over her.

YOU HAVE BEEN RENDERED UNCONSCIOUS BY A POISONED DART. YOU ARE LOGGED OFF CATACOMB FOR 00:30 MINIMUM.

YOUR ACCOUNT BALANCE IS:  
\$0.78 FOR TODAY  
\$12.40 FOR THE GAME  
\$ 7.50 TREASURE BONUS  
{RESERVED}

JUDITH STARED MOROSELY AT HER SCREEN. Fat chance her treasure would be there when she checked back. It was even odds that Mr. Hide-and-Seek would kill her and she'd have to create another character. She bunched her right hand into a fist and hit the desktop. A stack of papers were knocked off the desk and landed on the floor with a fluid plop.

"Judith?" Her father's voice called from his office room down the hall. "Is anything wrong?"

Her finger stabbed the PAGE CLEAR key, and she called back, "No, Daddy. I just transposed a field. No problem." Her voice shook a little and her hand hurt. She didn't need to lose her temper. Catacomb was proving to be a harder way to make money than she had hoped.

Her gaze rested guiltily on the scattered pile of handwritten invoices that she needed to key into a file as her task for the day. Best get to it. Father wasn't one to let the kids slide on their chores. Even though she was seventeen, he could make her feel like her baby brother Georgie when he was caught with forbidden cookie crumbs all over his face. Maybe he wouldn't mind her Catacomb adventures, but play before work was against the house rules.

She picked up the first paper and invoked the home database. Get the file built, then check on Lunae again.

YOU ARE UNCONSCIOUS FROM THE EFFECTS OF A POISONED DART. LOGON TO CATACOMB IS NOT ALLOWED FOR 00:14 MINIMUM.

YOUR ACCOUNT BALANCE IS:  
\$ 0.78 FOR TODAY  
\$ 12.40 FOR THE GAME  
\$ 0.00 TREASURE BONUS

*Thief!* Well, at least he'd left her alive.

She cleared the screen and plopped down on her bed. Her flute case, half buried among books and cosmetics on her dressing table, was a black reminder of her problems. It was not going as she had planned. The ruby stolen from Lunae wasn't worth much in real money, but she'd counted on it to cover part of her time charges for playing the game until she could find more treasure. The three hundred dollars was due in two weeks. To be twelve dollars in the hole was not only depressing, it was embarrassing. She shouldn't have told her friend Diana about her plan.

With a whoop, her younger brother Barry skidded into her room and was followed by Jay, his friend from the house down the hill. A pair of suction-cup darts crossed in the air, one of them bouncing off the mirror of her dressing table.

"Barry, get out of my room this instant! You're messing up everything." She picked up the expended plastic dart and tossed it out the doorway.

"Hey! That's my dart!"

"Then go get it, brat!"

From down the hall, her father's voice silenced them both. "You kids be quiet. It's work time. Barry, do you want some file maintenance? Judith, are your invoices done?"

They both knew silence was the safest course. Barry gave her a sneer as his brotherly token of disrespect, then waved Jay out with him. If there had been a silent way of murdering her brother . . .

LUNAE CAME TO CONSCIOUSNESS WITH THE feel of her pack under her head as a pillow. Her thief had left her stretched out comfortably, concealed behind the rocks that had protected him. <TAKE INVENTORY> A quick survey of her pack and her person revealed only the ruby missing. Even her weapons were still in their places. She was puzzled. Most thieves would have left her dead and sold her provisions back to the Wizard of the Gate.

<SMELL, LISTEN> The smell of the thief was quite strong in the coffin-sized hidey-hole. He'd obviously spent considerable time waiting there for victims. She crawled from behind the rocks carefully. No one was in sight. A glance told her that the thief had cleared all three doorways and had obscured any footprints in the dust.

<STATE HOW I AM> The effects of the poison lingered in her system. She felt more tired than she ought to have been, and quick motion was an invitation to dizziness. But it should wear off quickly. Her only question now was whether she should follow her thief in order to turn the tables on him and recover her ruby, or search out another treasure before her supplies ran out and she had to make for the Wizard's Gate.

Before she could shoulder her pack, the decision was taken away from her. A sudden wave of acid stench hit her. Out of nothingness stepped trouble. The dim light of glowstone was adequate, this time, to tell her quite enough: a Tor beast!

Adventurers into the catacombs perforce did business with the Wizard of the Gate to purchase their supplies, but more than gold pieces and bronze weapons were exchanged at the market. Rumor and outright lies about the hazards and treasure in the catacombs were bought and sold as well. And nothing said about the teleporting half-humanoid/half-beasts that searched the chambers was comforting. Some said Tor beasts were adventurers from another plane, given access by some other Wizard of the Gate—perhaps one of their own number. They were not animals. They walked upright and sometimes were known to use magic. They didn't use swords because they didn't need to.

<PLACE THROWING KNIFE IN THE LEFT HAND, PLACE SHORT SWORD IN THE RIGHT HAND> She didn't attack. Armored like a beetle, with hands like the paws of a tiger, the Tor beast topped her five-foot height by six inches and outweighed her by at least two hundred pounds. The pelt—if it was a pelt—formed a half-dozen rings about its torso, and a ridge of bluish-black shag from one claw, across the shoulders, to the other. The head was piggish, but the eyes betrayed an intelligent malevolence. Its growl as it spotted her was a deep bass that seemed to shake her insides. Nothing in the rumors she had heard told of how to kill one.

The Tor beast seemed to have no such worry. It turned and stalked toward her with the body-twisting gait of a bear. She threw her knife directly toward where its navel would have been, had the thing been born. The

knife stuck for an instant, before the beast shook it loose. The wound only made it angrier.

Lunae was moving up on the rocks before her knife had left her fingers. The beast was powerful, but she was much lighter on her feet. She picked up her pack by the straps and slung it at the thing's head.

Maybe the Tor beast walked slowly, but there was nothing sluggish about the way it snatched the pack out of the air and ripped it wide open with its claws. Her goods spilled out, and she felt sick as the beast, with an angry growl, ground her food supply and spare torches to mush and toothpicks.

Then the monster crouched and jumped ten feet in one motion, landing on the boulders just below where Lunae stood. She scrambled higher, using her sword to keep him at a distance. It didn't work. Its arm shot out, a blur. Then—pain; she barely held onto the sword as the beast batted it aside. With the stench of the creature wafting over her and the sick feeling that her sword was bent, she grabbed the hilt with both hands and forced all her strength into a sideways stroke. Her sword twisted and slid out of her grip as the warped blade slapped rather than cut the beast.

The thing roared. She could almost feel the bone-shattering slap she knew the monster could give her. But the slap never came. The moment of grace wasn't wasted. As well as she could with the ruined sword in her grasp, she rolled over the top of the mound, down into the coffin-sized pit where she had regained consciousness.

The beast roared again. She knew the monster would be down on her the instant it navigated the rocks. The blade—now that she had a second to actually look at it—was in bad shape. Both bent and twisted, it would never take the force of an attack, even if the beast could be tricked into falling on it. It would bend like a hairpin. She gambled precious seconds in hopes of straightening the sword. She wedged the blade halfway into a crack in the rock and shoved all of her slight weight against it. When the blade was far short of perfection, but perhaps usable, she pulled the sword loose and held it ready.

For a hurried breath or two, she waited. There was silence in the chamber. Then the Tor beast growled, but it sounded . . . weaker. Gambling again: <LOOK THROUGH THE CRACKS> The limited view gave a puzzling sight. The thing was staggering, struggling to keep its balance.

Enlightenment hit. The poison! She looked to the chamber floor, where the fragments of her belongings were scattered. Among the debris was a bit of metal that might have been the brass bottle smashed flat by a powerful foot.

What would the poison do to it? A human would be dead the instant a drop touched skin. Could the Tor beast shake off the effects? The creature was very powerful. Perhaps it had protective magic. If it recovered, she didn't want to be around.

But there was always treasure. Magical beasts often collected treasure themselves. If her Tor beast died, she wanted anything of value it might have. She hefted the sword in her hand. Perhaps she could assist the poison a bit.

Shortly, the monster stumbled and fell. She was up and over her rocky barricade in an instant. The beast was on its back, still struggling against the powerful convulsions the poison was creating in its muscles. Fighting against its own mutinous body, the Tor beast desperately grabbed at a black leather armband that circled its left arm just above the elbow. The creature's life or death fueled its determination. If it could work the band's secrets, it might yet survive.

*That's it! The Tor beast's magic is in that armband!* Lunae watched its struggles for an instant more, then danced in close for an opportunity to slash at the arm with her sword. It cut the monster's flesh, but not deeply. She did it again. And again. Finally, arm and body were separated. She kicked the still-twitching limb out of the beast's reach and waited for the monster to die. Blood, looking black in the blue light of the chamber, squirted forcefully from severed arteries. Quickly, it stopped.

The trained assassin normally had no qualms examining a dead body, but something alien in it chilled her as she stepped near. The stench, now so much stronger in the spilled blood, made it difficult to breathe. The feel of the body was like an upholstered leather chair that remained warm from the life of the person who had sat there. It seemed surprisingly soft. Lunae expected hard, armor-like plate.

She searched the corpse for any natural or artificial pouches, pockets, or bags—anywhere the beast might have stored something of value. Within a minute, she admitted defeat. *Logical. Any being that can teleport won't keep too many possessions on its body, since it can go get them in an instant.*

As she felt the body, it grew softer by the moment. When she noticed this curious fact, she quit instantly and backed away.

Starting at the beast's chest, the body quivered slightly. Then it began to liquefy. In the dim light, her eyes could just make out thousands of sprouts, much like the fur on moldy bread. Tendrils of terribly rapid decay covered the body in half a minute. Slime from the rotting flesh dripped to the floor and formed a thickening flow to join the trickle of the spring.

In disgust, she turned from the sight to spot the beast's arm. It was whole. There seemed to be no sign of the decay that had already turned the body into an unrecognizable mound. Gingerly, she approached it. A cautious touch—first with the point of the sword, then with her hand—gave the impression of teak wood covered with leather. There was no softness. Quickly, before the decay could start, she slipped the armband off the dead limb.

The band was made of flexible leather with a ridge of worked metal along both edges. *It looks like silver, maybe. Almost the right size for a belt. It will sell. Magic always sells.* She eyed the claws. The arm, separated from the body, seemed to be spared the extremely fast decay. *That might sell too, but I want no part of it!*

The armband slipped loosely over her shoulder like a coil of rope. As of the moment, it, her sword, and the pair of knives she had hidden in her clothes were her only possessions. What was not smashed was probably contaminated with the spilled poison. It would not be

safe to touch for another day. With no supplies, no food, and no torches for light, she might be dead by then.

The Wizard's Gate was too distant for her to travel to without food, even if she could make her way in total darkness. There was really only one thing she could do: pursue her thief. Since he had spared her life, perhaps she could persuade him to give her provisions in exchange for some service. If not, perhaps she could steal from him what she needed to survive. Following him seemed to be worth the effort.

Yet the darkness still posed a problem. If only the glowstones could be used for lighting! But they were far too dim. Unless there existed a chamber lined entirely with glowstones like this one, the journey would have to be done in the dark.

She walked to each doorway and carefully sniffed the air. The stench of the beast covered everything, but her sensitive nose could still detect other scents.

"Judith! Supper!" Barry called from the base of the stairs up to her opened door.

*Oh no! I must chase him before the scent gets cold.*

"Just a minute! I've got to log off."

This was a horrible time to stop and search for a shelter. She grabbed a fist-sized piece of glowstone. Its light would be useless more than a few inches away, but it was the only light she had. With more desperation than confidence, she glided as

swiftly as she dared down the length of the corridor. With her sword sheathed, she let the fingertips of her left hand feel for openings in the wall. She imagined she was passing a dozen perfect shelters on the right-hand wall. Only two things were clear in the darkness: her time was running out, and the thief's scent was tantalizingly present.

If she had only gone back, retraced her path toward the Wizard's Gate, she would have known exactly where to shelter. She imagined the crypt carved in the wall, where she had spent the night before her disastrous encounter with the thief. That would be ideal.

"Judith! It's getting cold." It was her father's voice this time.

*"Coming!" If I log off now, Lunae will seek shelter and attempt to fight off attackers like a dim-witted robot programmed and operated by the computer. Her only real chance for survival is for her to find shelter under her own power.*

At that instant, her hand felt a carved doorsill in the rock. Not knowing nor caring what creature might be waiting within, she pushed aside the stone doorway. Groping about the room, Lunae found a foot-long stone slab that could be used as a deadbolt in order to seal the chamber from almost any terror that

roamed the corridors. She dropped her glowstone and secured the door.

There was barely enough room to lie down in the closet-sized, cold rock crypt, but she didn't care.

JUDITH RAPIDLY KEYED THE LOGOFF AND dashed out of her room, not waiting to view the message on the screen.

YOUR ACCOUNT BALANCE IS:  
\$ 1.58 FOR TODAY  
\$ 13.20 FOR THE GAME  
\$ ??.?? TREASURE BONUS  
(RESERVED) (CONDITIONAL = 53)

Supper was a table piled high with leaves. Even the meat loaf had green things in it. Mother was in that stage of gardening when she was spending fifteen hours a day just trying to keep up with the production.

A strong scent of spices and vinegar drifted in from the kitchen. Judith smiled at the thought that Lunae's sensitivities were infecting her own. She had seen other kids mimic the dress and habits of their online characters. But she wasn't going to start carrying a dagger up her sleeve!

Father had a distant, preoccupied look. Judith could sympathize with that condition better than her mother could. She and her father were the family members who spent the most hours on the terminals. The world on the other side of the glass tube absorbed one's attention.

Mother was giving a running commentary on her battles with the leaf miners and the fire ants. This was her year for trying totally organic gardening, and she constantly missed the use of her chemical weapons to fight against the ravening hordes.

Barry was unsympathetic. "Why don't you just use that white powder stuff you used last year? We won't tell on you."

"That's enough." Father had less interest in the war against the insects than Barry did, but there was such a thing as parental solidarity. "Barry, I won't need your help for a couple of days. It sounds like Mother could use a couple of spare hands with the garden. Starting in the morning."

"Aw! Come on, Dad! Jay and Toot and me, we've got a Commander game in the morning!" Barry visibly reined in his indignation and picked at the spinach leaves on his plate. To Judith's sisterly eye, it was an obviously staged acquiescence. Father would never stand for open disobedience.



“Just where were you going to have this game?” Father made the word sound indecent. “At home or at the arcade terminal?”

“Well,” Barry said cautiously, “the graphics are better at Spacer’s World than at home. And the faster baud rate there would give me an edge.”

“Just how were you going to pay for the time?”

Barry glanced up at his father’s impassive face and spotted the smirk on Judith’s. He mumbled something no one could hear and took another bite of the salad.

Father continued. “If I recall correctly, you blew all of last week’s allowance on Commander. I heard you ask your mother for some money yesterday. Since allowance day is the day after tomorrow, I don’t see where you could have gotten any money to pay for your game tomorrow. Since I don’t suppose Spacer’s World gives credit, you wouldn’t be able to play there tomorrow anyway. And since your games account suspension here at home doesn’t run out for another two weeks, you couldn’t play here either. So, it seems to me that you will have plenty of time to help your mother in the garden. Isn’t that right?”

Judith felt a little sympathy for Barry. Not much, but a little. Father’s logical traps were painful. There were ways to pay for game time that Barry could have lined up, but these were either forbidden or unacceptable methods. Who in the family could forget the time Barry’s games account was suspended because he had charged several games to Father’s business account?

“Judith,” her mother asked, “could you help me clean up after supper? I need to run to the store.”

Judith resigned herself to the delay and nodded. Now was not the time to plead that she had a game in progress. Barry shot her a sneer on general principles.

BARTON CREEK MALL HAD CHANGED OVER the years. Judith didn’t particularly like to shop there with her mother. It was a fun place if you went there with friends, but mothers were different. Most of the larger department stores had gone online and were gradually deserting the shopping malls. Sears and JCPenney had left, leaving their areas subdivided into a maze of market stalls. The mall was the place to go to sample a dozen varieties of egg rolls, to buy hand-carved earrings, or to lose a few hours in a Commander booth.

A trio of players, just old enough to grow beards, were waiting for a booth outside the entrance to an arcade and watching the pair of them as they walked by. Mother didn’t seem to notice, but Judith was glad she wasn’t alone. Lunae could handle any trouble from the likes of them, but Judith wouldn’t even know how to handle one of her sleeve daggers.

She shook her head to rid herself of the thoughts. Those boys weren’t like her thief, out for trouble in a lawless world. Maybe the mall did have some permanent residents that were a bit smelly, but no one was going to accost her mother and her during prime time.

They shopped their way through a bottle shop, an herb market, and an office supply house. Then, at Judith’s urging, they stopped for a slice of pizza.

“We’re not too far from Reitz. Did you want to stop and get that practice book you asked for?” Mother asked.

“No. Not tonight.” Diana worked at that shop. She didn’t want to see her just yet.

Mother frowned and put down her pizza. “Now, Judith, you aren’t going to give up on your music just because Brentwood Academy doesn’t have a school band program, are you? They have a nice orchestra!”

“No! I’m not going to quit.” Judith bit back on sudden anger. “I like my music. It’s you and Father who are trying to take me away from all the good teachers and all my friends.”

“Now, Judith. You know we are only trying to get the best education for you and Barry. Brentwood isn’t a big high school, but they have excellent teachers.”

“And no music program.”

“No band. They do have an orchestra. Are you sure you are interested in the music, not the football games?”

“Mother, that’s not true!” And with a flushed face, Judith left the table and headed out of the shop. Her mother, a little flushed herself, picked up the packages and followed.

Judith paid no attention to the other people in the mall as she made for the parking lot. *I’ll show them. I’ll get the money, go to the music camp, and make a showing that’ll force them to see where my talents lie.*

LUNAE WOKE WITH ONLY THE LIGHT OF A single glowstone to greet her. <TAKE INVENTORY, STATE HOW I AM> She was hungry. But there were no torches, no food, no water. The leather band was still looped over her shoulder.

If it weren’t for that, she might have given up right there. Dying would cost her nothing, but reincarnating in another character would. And while still in possession of a rare, possibly magical, artifact, she just might survive and turn her find into a treasure bonus.

The chamber—from what she could tell by feel and from examination at a nose-bumping distance with glowstone in hand—looked exactly like the chamber in which she spent the previous night. She stuffed the glowstones under her tunic and unbolted the door.

<SMELL, LISTEN> The musty scent gagged her. If there were any scent of her thief, it was masked. She just stood there, engulfed by the odor. Something about it seemed to dull her reactions. To her right, from the direction she had come, she heard a scraping, plopping, near-liquid sound, as if three tons of gelatin were moving down the corridor toward her.

<GET BACK INSIDE THE CHAMBER, LOCK THE DOOR> Her body started to move in response to her intent; however, it didn’t follow through. Her arm reached for the door, but it stopped in midair. It was the numbing scent that had her in its spell.

<TURN LEFT> She half turned. The sound of the approaching creature was noticeably nearer.

<TURN LEFT> Now that she no longer faced her approaching doom, talk overheard at the Wizard’s Gate came back to her. This was the Catacomb’s garbage collector. It was so huge that it entirely filled the width and height of the corridor; it digested anything organic in its path. Nothing she had heard, however, warned her of its stupefying scent.







was relaxed. She made no effort to watch what he was doing, relying on her ears to place him.

It worked. He came from behind his cover and stood beside where she lay. He wedged the toe of his boot beneath her to turn her over. He pushed.

As her body rolled, her bound arm snapped out and grabbed his ankle. She yanked. Standing on one foot and burdened with his blowpipe and sword, he toppled. Her dagger caught him in the arm. It wrenched from her hand. Grasping for anything that could be a weapon, she caught his blowpipe. She clubbed him with it. The slender tube snapped in two, but he slumped out.

She stood. He was crumpled and bleeding from the knife wound, unconscious on the ground. His torch flickered erratically where it had fallen on the stone floor.

Lunae labored for breath, light-headed. A familiar buzzing sounded behind her ears. The tourniquet must have slipped a little in the battle. Another twist on the dagger's handle tightened the force on the armband painfully. She would have to let it go soon or risk damage to the arm.

The torch flared yellow when she picked it up. There were two doors, and she blocked them both. This chamber was slightly smaller than the other, but it also had a spring. Again, there was a small but comfortable-looking hiding place.

Where he was sprawled on the ground, Lunae had the opportunity to see how large her thief really was; and he was big. She stared at the oozing wound for a moment before tearing a strip from his shirt and placing a pressure bandage over the wound. He was still alive and too dangerous to leave alone. She sought one of his darts from the broken blowpipe and stabbed him in the arm with it. Tying him up would be best, but . . .

it was getting . . . very difficult to move. Waves roared in her ears.

She slumped down and prepared to sleep it off. The dagger slipped a turn or two, loosening the band. Her arm and hand were an unhealthy blue.

Horror struck as she saw his eyes open, watching her. She tried to tighten the band and to get to her feet, but her legs wouldn't move. Slowly, he pulled himself up on his hands and feet and crawled toward her. She forced one knee up. Her leg was a lead weight.

"Sorry." His words came slowly. He was weak. "Immune to my own venom."

She was trapped by her own weight. One arm was paralyzed; one held desperately to the tourniquet. She couldn't get up.

He came relentlessly on. "Should have killed me. I should . . . have killed you." His hand reached hers and forced the tourniquet loose. "Both . . . too civilized . . . for this game."

YOU HAVE BEEN RENDERED UNCONSCIOUS BY A  
POISON DART. YOU ARE LOGGED OFF CATACOMB  
FOR 01:30 MINIMUM.

YOUR ACCOUNT BALANCE IS:  
\$ 2.21 FOR TODAY  
\$ 13.83 FOR THE GAME  
\$ ??.?? TREASURE BONUS  
(RESERVED) (CONDITIONAL = 53)

Judith stared at the screen. It was almost midnight, and the house was silent and dark, except for those glowing green letters on her screen.

Defeated twice in one day! This was supposed to be entertainment? She was feeling depressed.

Another hour and a half. Could she manage to stay awake long enough to log back on then? It was her only chance to turn the tables. Tomorrow would be a busy day with no time for this.

The treasure bonus puzzled her. <RUN 53>

CATEGORY 53 TREASURES ARE GENERALLY MAGICAL IN NATURE AND ARE WORTHLESS UNLESS PROPERLY USED. THEY CANNOT BE SOLD TO THE WIZARD OF THE GATE, SINCE HE WOULD TAKE THEM WITHOUT PAYING FOR THEM. THE VALUE SHOWN IS ONLY AN ESTIMATE OF THE TRADE VALUE OF THE ITEM.

*Strange. There's no value shown. What does that mean? Is it the armband? If so, I should have seen that message before.*

Judith tapped a key that disconnected her terminal with the timeline. Then <RESPOOL, \$.1800-2000> Back across the screen scrolled everything she'd seen or done on the screen between six and eight that evening.

*There it is! I must have missed it trying to get down to supper. It has to be the armband.*

With that resolved, she put on her muffs, plugged them into the terminal, and keyed a wake-up.

LUNAE WOKE TO YELLOW LIGHT AND THE smell of bacon and fresh trail bread. As she tried to lift her head, her whole body shook from hunger, fatigue, and the residual effects of the poison.

"Ah, good. I was hoping you wouldn't be out very long. Here." Her thief handed her a trail sandwich. She had no heart to protest. It vanished quickly.

The thief was even taller than she remembered, now that she was on the ground and he was standing.

"Not too bad looking," he commented, echoing her own thoughts, "even with some very sharp-looking teeth." He sat down on a rock next to her and handed her a bottle. While she made its contents vanish as well, he rambled on, "Of course, in this world, all you see are beautiful specimens or characters who like to make themselves deliberately horrifying. But most opt for beauty and strength, when they have any choice in the matter."

Lunae handed him the bottle. <SAY: "THERE WAS SAND IN THE BOTTOM. BUT THANKS. I LOST MY SUPPLIES.">

"I noticed that." He took her bottle and put it back among his things, even turning his back on her. By reflex, she reached for her knives and found them properly sheathed. He turned back to her. "I knew you would be out for a while—what with two doses of the dart in one day—so I tried to find your supplies. The sword was close, but all bent up. I backtracked to the Blue Chamber and saw your stuff. Frankly, from what I saw, I am very surprised you are still here. What got after you?"

<SAY: "A TOR BEAST.", TRY TO SIT UP AGAIN> She made it this time.

He saw her effort and offered her a hand to a more comfortable seat on a water-smoothed boulder. "Maybe it's a good thing I didn't kill you. It might be handy to know someone who can survive a Tor beast attack. How'd you do it?"

<SAY: "I KILLED IT.">

"That I don't believe. But tell me the tale anyway. You wouldn't believe how lonely this job is."

And so she did. The whole thing. Maybe Lunae wouldn't have divulged everything without taking some advantage in trade, but it was late at night and Judith was a bit lonely herself. Her thief made an appreciative audience, commenting appropriately during the telling.

<SAY: "AND I WANT TO THANK YOU FOR NOT KILLING ME, TWICE.">

"You did the same for me. I didn't come to until you were halfway through with the bandaging. I appreciate it. Surviving another day here pays the grocery bill offline."

<SAY: "YOU MEAN YOU REALLY MAKE A LIVING AT THIS? ">

"This life of crime, you mean?"

<SAY: "WELL, YES.">

"You have it in a nutshell: I live online. What I make from Catacomb has to be enough to pay for my bread and access charges, or I go hungry. Thievery is just a matter of the odds. I tried searching for treasure in every cubbyhole, but it turned out that I made more by surviving attacks from other characters and pocketing their findings than I could make on my own. When I bought the blowpipe and turned thief professionally, it even had some moral advantages. My victims usually survived. I'm really quite good at it. Rumor back at the Gate has it that the Phantom Thief is a native of Catacomb and can't ever be caught or killed."

<SAY: "I STILL DON'T KNOW WHETHER I COULD BE A THIEF, EVEN AS AN ONLINE CHARACTER.">

"Didn't you say you were an assassin?"

<SAY: "YES, BUT ">

"Yes, but what?"

<SAY: "I DON'T KNOW. YOU'VE GOT ME CONFUSED. LET'S GO BACK TO TALKING ABOUT YOUR SINS. WHY CAN'T YOU WORK FOR A LIVING OFFLINE? ">

For a moment, there was no response. Then, "Don't laugh, but there is a very good reason. Denver's child wage laws keep employers from hiring people of my age. Next year I'll be nineteen, and I won't have that excuse. You'll have to wait until then to tell whether I'm a sociopath or just a bright kid beating the system."

<SAY: "FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH, I'M SEVENTEEN, AND I DON'T THINK AUSTIN HAS THAT KIND OF LAW. BUT WHY ARE YOU HAVING TO MAKE A LIVING? I'LL STILL BE IN SCHOOL AT YOUR AGE.">

"That, my sweet, is the fate of everyone who's unlucky enough to be missing a set of parents and too cantankerous to abide by the whims of the state juvenile system. As long as I'm not arrested for an offline crime, the people here will let me make my own way. And to tell the truth, if I must be a thief, I'd much rather be one in a world like Catacomb, where such behavior is expected.

"And now for your sins. What is a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?"

Judith told her whole plan. She spoke of her goals of making enough money to attend the music camp and to win a first-chair position. By her parents taking her out of the public-school system, away from her friends, and

putting her in the academy, she wanted to show them that they would be depriving her of her true vocation.

“Whew! Angel, you make me feel old. I’m not going to discourage you by telling you what I think of your chances, but I must say I have every respect for your ambitions. If I had a spare \$300, I’d share it with you. But . . .”

The dollar sign on the screen triggered a memory, and for a moment, Lunae considered how to get the armband back from her thief and how to learn its secrets. Then Judith spilled the beans. She filled him in on the unusual logoff message she’d received, even replaying it and the condition code description back from her terminal’s local memory. Afterward, she explained her theory about the armband.

“Angel, this is not how you’re supposed to play this game. I’m supposed to kill you; you’re supposed to kill me; and we’re both supposed to steal each other’s treasures.”

<SAY: “AS GHOSTS, I SUPPOSE?”>

“I wouldn’t put it past us, in this world. But in any case, you’ve hit me with a problem. If your theory about the Tor teleportation magic and the armband is correct, then I am just the person to make the best use of it. I’ve used many of the magic spells of this world, and I know how they work. After all, that’s how I spotted your last attack. Also, I’ve been all over the catacombs, and I know where there are several treasures only a teleporter could get at. So I should cut your heart out, steal your artifact, and go to it. Instead, I’ll have to trade you for it. All I’ve got is a busted blowpipe and treasure worth about fifty dollars in real money.”

Judith thought about it for a moment. The Lunae in her clamored for a better deal, a percentage of the take. But as it was past four in the morning, Catacomb seemed far less real to her than a nice boy beating the system in Denver.

<SAY: “THROW IN A GOOD SAFE ROUTE BACK TO THE GATE AND IT’S A DEAL. I’VE BEEN LOST IN THIS MAZE FOR THREE DAYS NOW.”>

THE DAY WAS AN ORDEAL BECAUSE JUDITH never went to sleep, even after her thief shooed her off into a safety chamber and thus back into the offline world. She could barely drag herself through her chores. And Barry was no help at all. Deprived of his Commander game, his second-best sport was sister baiting. She was grateful when Mother forced him out into the garden at spade-point. Therefore, Judith didn’t mind at all that she was stuck with the job of making sure that Georgie didn’t get into anything but harmless trouble.

The day passed, but she never got logged back onto Catacomb. Alone, finally, after the evening meal, she fell asleep.

Morning brought a tempest. Barry rushed out of the house with Jay, and a call to Jay’s mother brought the information that the pair had gone off to the mall to play Commander. The news of Barry’s rebellion brought Father down from his office and put him into a black mood. He picked up the cane he always used for



walking in public, drafted Judith to be his scout, and left for the mall with her.

Judith thought her father looked very impressive, especially so when he was angry. Though he limped and carried a cane in public, his image was of a person in control. Walking beside him through the crowd, her Lunae perspective made her wonder just how handy a club his cane would make. She headed for the arcade.

Barry was there, joking with some friends around a Commander booth. The place was packed, mostly with boys Barry’s age and older. Today, they seemed much less threatening to her. In an uncharacteristic burst of sympathy, she didn’t report his location immediately to Father.

“Hello, Barry.”

He was surprised to see her. “Hello, Sis.”

“There’s a man with a cane outside who has brought a message for you.”

“Oh.” His face paled a bit, but the light was low. “Jay, I’ve gotta go. See ya.” And he was gone. His friends looked puzzled.

Judith smiled sweetly and explained, “Business.” Then she walked off.

Halfway to the door she overheard: “. . . played Catacomb like never before. The Alien Worlds column said he made a mint.”

There was an empty Catacomb booth. She slid into the seat and fed the machine a pair of coins.

LUNAE AWOKE IN A ROOM NEAR THE NOISY babble of the throng at the Wizard’s Gate. Her pillow was large, lumpy, and hard. Pinned to her sleeve was a note.

*Dear Angel,*

*Sorry we didn’t make this last connection. It worked. I’ve never had so much online fun since I started playing. Once I got to the right places, I found more gold in this world than I dreamed.*

*I’ve fulfilled my part of our bargain, though this Lunae of yours fights like a devil when you’re not inside her. I had to poison her again to get her back to the Gate. The bed is only rented for a week, since I figure you’ll connect up before then.*

*This may be the last time we talk. I have a strong feeling they’ll lock me out of this world when I go cash in my coins.*

*Kisses for my Angel,  
Your Thief.*

Judith keyed the logoff.

YOU HAVE REACHED A SAFE PLACE. YOU MAY NOW ADJUST YOUR ACCOUNT BALANCES.

YOUR ACCOUNT BALANCE IS:  
\$ 0.05 FOR TODAY  
\$ 18.34 FOR THE GAME  
\$ 534.25 TREASURE BONUS

DO YOU WISH TO CASH IN YOUR TREASURE {Y/N}?

DO YOU WISH TO PAY YOUR GAME ACCOUNT {Y/N}?

*Oh, Thief! We only bargained for fifty. I don’t even know your name. And you don’t know mine.*

Judith closed out her character and the game. Her bank account swelled nicely. *There it is—all the money I needed, and more. How come I feel like I just lost the game?* On the screen, her bank balance timed out and erased itself.

She sat back for a moment in the booth. *They’re waiting for me. I’d better go.* Her fingertips lightly tapped the keyboard. Then, on impulse, she typed:  
<\$USANET\$.ALIENWORLDS//>

The screen began scrolling the article.

ALIEN WORLDS BY OSRET CHUNER {1}

CATACOMB {2} HAS BECOME THE WORLD OF THE MOMENT SINCE YESTERDAY’S ANNOUNCEMENT {3} ABOUT A DENVER PLAYER {4} WHO CASHED IN AT A REPORTED \$50,000. MANAGEMENT {5} OF CATACOMB, OF COURSE, MADE A BIG SPLASH OF IT, HOPING TO ATTRACT MORE PLAYERS. AND IT’S WORKING, IN SPITE OF MY WARNING —

<RUN 4>

DENVER PLAYER CASHES IN BIG IN CATACOMB. {1} {DENVER POST} {2}

EARLY THIS MORNING {3}, THE MANAGEMENT {4} OF CATACOMB HELD A PRESS CONFERENCE, AWARDING A CHECK FOR \$50,355.75 AND A SPECIAL EMERITUS RANKING {5} TO AN UNNAMED DENVER PLAYER {6} FOR HIS FEAT OF LITERALLY BURYING THE WIZARD’S GATE {1} UNDER SACKS OF GOLD AND JEWELS. IT WAS SAID BY PLAYERS —

<RUN 6>

INTERVIEW WITH DENVER PLAYER POST: I HEARD YOU MENTION THAT YOU HAD HELP FROM AN ANGEL IN YOUR AMAZING WIN. DO YOU HAVE ANY SUGGESTIONS TO OTHER CATACOMB PLAYERS FOR INVOKING ANGELS?

PLAYER: SORRY—BUT TO GET THAT CHECK, I HAD TO SIGN AN AGREEMENT THAT I WOULDN’T SAY ANYTHING TO ANYONE ABOUT CATACOMB.

POST: CAN YOU TELL US WHAT YOU INTEND TO DO WITH YOUR WINNINGS?

PLAYER: I THINK I’LL MOVE TO TEXAS. I HEAR AUSTIN IS A NICE TOWN.

AT HOME, WITH BARRY IN THE GARDEN helping Mother, Judith again watched over Georgie. She played over in her mind all that her thief knew about her and all that she knew about him. Father, on the other hand, paced downstairs and never once went back up to his office.

Since he hovered around so long, Judith was finally prompted to say, “Daddy, don’t worry so much about us kids. Barry wasn’t being defiant. I noticed the expression on his face in the arcade when he realized his mistake. He was with his friends, and he just forgot about the gardening.

“As for me,” she smiled, “I’ve been a pain about the new school. I’m sorry. I know it won’t be as bad as I made it out to be. There will be plenty of new friends to make. And in fact, I can think of some advantages of being the only female flute player at Brentwood Academy.” ■