



NU ORMENEL COLLECTED  
VOLUME 4

# NU ORMENEL COLLECTED

## Volume 4

BY FERN MARDER AND CAROL WALSKE

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## AUTHORS' PREFACE

Writing introductions is always tricky, but in this case, the situation is particularly strange. Generally the intro is the last thing before going to the printer; the sigh of relief as it were; the calm before the collating storm.

This intro is somewhat different. Volume 3 is all over our living room about to be collated. Two days ago we added yet another vignette to Volume 4 (our second new story this week), so that isn't quite done yet either. The songbook grew again last night--and why did we tell the printer we'd present the originals on 11x17 paper before we located the 11x17 paper that was supposed to be in the closet? Fern is under strict orders not to write any more music till after Labor Day, 'cause the poetry and song list has just been typed.

And it's hard to think logically as one looks around at not one, but three sets of zine boxes--the remaining Volume 1's and 2's and Arakenyo's, the loose Volume 3's--and the now arriving boxes of other people's zines that we're going to be selling at the next con. Well, at least the cats are happy with all their new perches.

But to the matter at hand:

Volume 4 is probably the most unusual thing we've done in the *Nu Ormenel* series so far--in mood, format and appearance.

In typical fashion we told anyone who asked us at August Party that there would be only two sequel stories to Alkarin Warlord presented in Volume 4. Nevertheless:

"I'll Give You the Wind" and "The West Corridor Wars" describe what happened to Tavia after the *Ormenel*-Federation war, in the form of a fantasy piece and a short, lighthearted vignette. "Song of the River" and "Shelter from the Storm" show Roan's long-considered return to the *Ormenel*.

In "The *Vakkfar*," we bring Karras back from his stay in the Federation and show him in command of his own ship and motley crew.

This, of course, means that Volume 4 is the most fragmented volume we've done so far. The two stories about Tavia follow immediately at the end of Alkarin Warlord. The two stories about Roan are set well after Warlord and after "A Kilington Heritage" and "A Broken Sword" (both in Volume 2). Arakenyo follows directly after "Shelter from the Storm." "The *Vakkfar*" is set in time right after Arakenyo, though the actions are totally unrelated. If all this has thoroughly confused you, the new timeline in the back of this volume should help to sort things out.

The final story in Volume 4 is--well, that's a story in itself. Some months ago we were approached by Anne Elizabeth Zeek to do a *Nu Ormenel* story for her projected Mirror Worlds zine. The result, "Deathblow," is our view of

a 'mirror-universe' *Ormenel* during the *Orashathnavi* Revolution. It is included in Volume 4--apart from the other revolution material in Volume 3--to emphasize the fact that this is a non-series-outline story. (Thanks, Anne, for letting us publish "Deathblow" here. We know that Mirror Worlds will be a gem. Good luck.)

Visually, Volume 4 has some new features. We welcome Kyrol Waters' artwork in the two 'Tavia' stories. (A thousand thanks for the 'instant illo' of the West Corridor.) Fern pitched in on "Song of the River." All three, Fern, Carol, and Kyrol, have artwork in the songbook Supplement.

As for the Supplement itself, we'd been talking about doing something about the music in the series for a long time. Songs of Fire, Songs of Life presents the *Nu Ormenel* music to date in as convenient a form as we could muster. It's center-stapled so that it will stay open on a music stand, and the music indicates guitar chords, where appropriate.

But as we approach the end of the latest installment in writing madness, we realize that we have to contemplate over the next few months the thought of a newly metamorphosed Klingon in the person of Mark Lenard, in all his iridescent mother-of-pearl-uniformed glory. *Ashavanau* Maraku; this time Alargor has gone too far!

--Fern Marder  
--Carol Walske

# I'll Give You The Wind

by Fern Marder and Carol Walske

Tavia Nelson, also called Katlena Alkarin, life-sharer to the Emperor and Warlord Kor Alkarin, was troubled. Her deep brown eyes were filled with pain. Her expression was downcast, and her sungold hair hid her face.

She had come to this world in a time of great unrest. Even as the universe warred around her, Tavia had learned harmony. And yet now that the world in which she lived and the world of her birth had at long last met in peace, Tavia despaired.

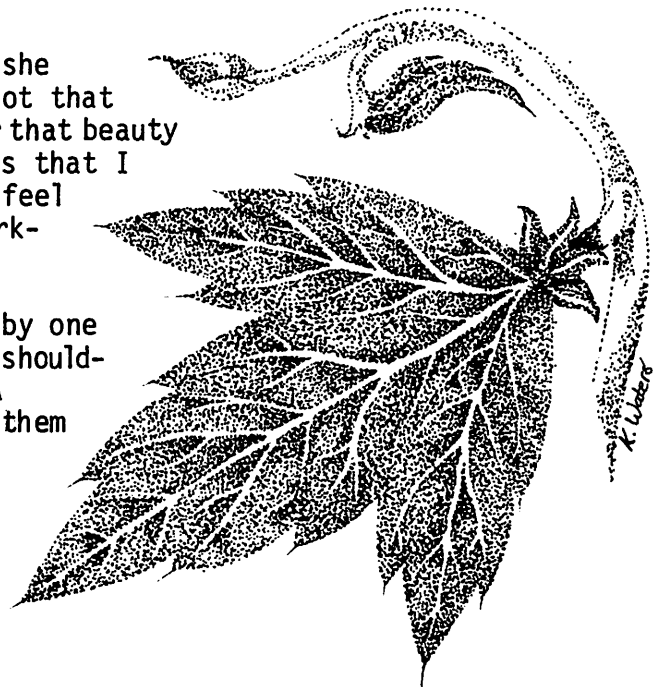
So intent was she on her burden that she didn't even hear her lord's approach. His hand reached out, and gently raised her chin. Her hair fell away from her face, and she looked up into his dark eyes.

"My lady, you are distressed," Kor said softly, a frown furrowing his brow. "But look---the sun is shining, and there's beauty all around us. If you reflect on the beauty of a single leaf, how can you be troubled?"

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "It's not that the sun is any less bright, or that beauty has gone out of the world--it is that I cannot see the beauty; I cannot feel the sun's warm light. I carry darkness, my lord. I'm sorry---"

Tavia turned away, but Kor caught her by one arm. He drew her back, and held her by the shoulders, gently but firmly. They were alone. A spear of sunlight brightened the air around them to gold.

His look was a caress of concern. "Katlena, may I help?"



K. Walske

She yielded to that look, and his question, knowing that he was the only one with whom she could share.

"You mean everything to me, Kor. Yet---"

Her pause stretched out into an unhappy silence.

"Yet---" Kor prompted softly.

Tavia raised her eyes to his. They were filled with pleading, pleading for understanding and guidance. "Yet I have another life, and another home."

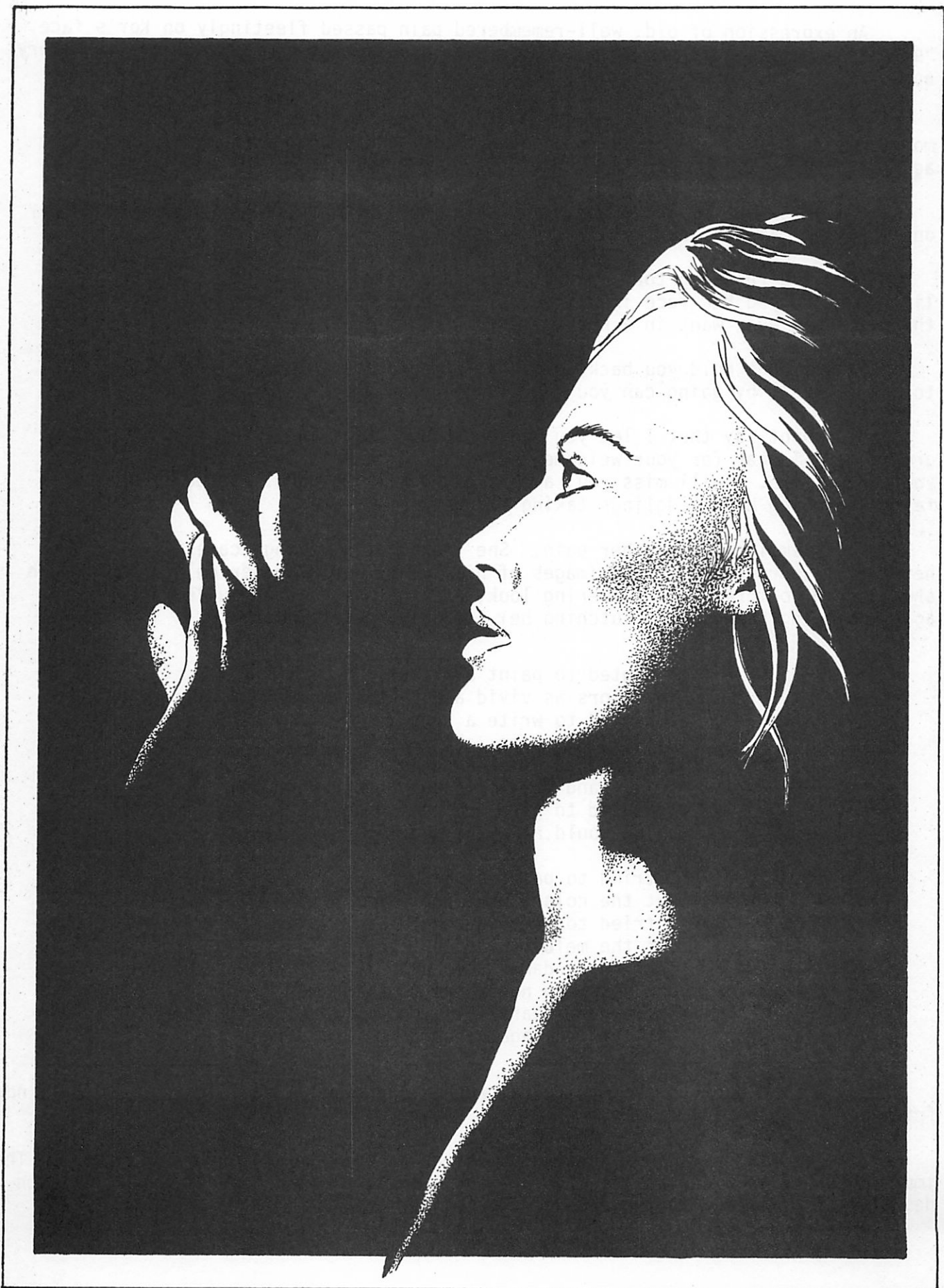
Though I want you,  
I must leave you;  
something calls me--  
I must go home.  
Though my heart is  
ever with you,  
I must know that  
this is right.

All this time I've  
lived here in joy  
and yet my heart is  
burdened now.  
All my past,  
my birthright calls to me--  
though I want you,  
I must go home.

Ever will I think of you,  
ever in love;  
ever will I long for  
you and dream of  
all we shared in gladness,  
all we bore in sadness,  
all I'll hold in my  
heart for all time.

Yet I must be strong,  
I must return  
to my world and see  
what there is to learn  
of my home, my loved ones  
whom I'd lose forever  
if I gave myself  
only to you.

All this time I've  
lived here in joy  
and yet my heart is  
burdened now.  
All my past,  
my birthright calls to me--  
though I want you,  
I must go home.



C. WALSKE



An expression of old, well-remembered pain passed fleetingly on Kor's face. "Home," he echoed softly. "Family, friends, a past, the comforting arms of memory and heritage. I understand your trouble, Katlena."

Eyes wide, expression tremulous, she looked into his face. She was deeply moved by the gentle compassion she found there, and suddenly she buried her face against his chest.

"I don't want to leave you," she said, her voice muffled. "You're the only one who knows all my heart."

"But you're being torn apart," he said gently. He pulled away from her a little and cupped her face in his hands. "You've given me ten years and everything I could ever want in a heart-sharer."

"I will not hold you back, Katlena; I could not. In fact I would tell you to go, for only by going can you set your mind at peace."

"I cannot say that I let you leave without misgivings, for that would be a great lie. I fear for your welcome there, and I fear that you may not like what you find. Also, I will miss you; a part of me will be gone. I feel like the falcon watching her fledglings taking flight."

Tavia smiled through her pain. She looked at him long, caressing him with her gaze, savoring a thousand images of him. They would be her only comfort when she saw him no more. His answering look, and the way he then pulled her to him again, holding her close, clutching her fiercely, quieted her.

I wanted to paint a picture  
in colors as vivid as the rising sun.  
I wanted to write a song  
of joy, and hope, and warmth, and fun.  
I wanted to dance a dance  
so gay and vital it would touch your heart.  
I wanted to give you something  
so we would never be apart.

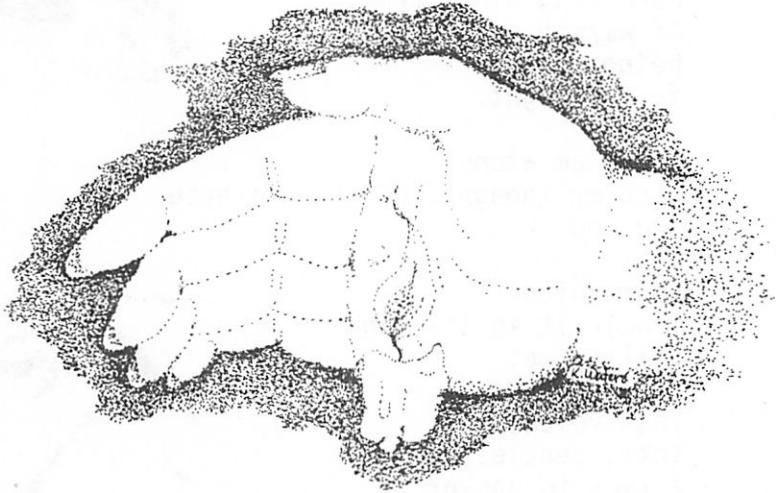
I tried to paint a picture,  
but the colors were too dim.  
I tried to write a song,  
but the melody would not begin.  
I tried to dance a dance,  
but you were not there to guide me.  
So keep my heart with you, my love,  
till you are again beside me.

Tavia went back to the world from whence she came. She found not comfort, nor friends, nor welcoming family.

The lords of her homeland treated her as an enemy, judging her a traitor. They imprisoned her in a dark cell. On the long, lonely nights, the air was thick with despair, and filled with the sounds of quiet torment.

Then, after a time, she was allowed to return to the world of her birth. There she was put to servitude, relegated to ignoble labor in a fortress of misery.

But she would not let her heart turn cold. The warmth of her memories was within her, and in her mind's eye, she saw a hand cupped protectively around a tiny, curling flame.



When she thought of Kor, the flare of love would blaze, inspired by his strong life's fire. But then, like a blanket of weariness drifting down, her numbed thoughts of futility would return, and the fire would fade.

Black wonder  
pierced by the glow of  
the yellow flames of civilization  
and the glory of  
the heavens' stars.  
It is night.  
And you are far from me.

Awesome in infinite darkness.  
The deepest of blue.  
Velvet robes  
with celestial gems adorned.  
Majestic.

And I am alone  
with my thoughts of the universe  
and you.

Softness.  
Warmth.  
Warmth in the cold blackness  
of the galaxies.  
Warmth.  
Your eyes radiant  
with the warmth  
that is your soul.



And comfort.  
 The comfort of a heart  
 caressing another heart.  
 Of arms  
 caressing other arms.  
 Of warmth  
 being shared  
 in the night.

But I am alone  
 with my thoughts of the universe  
 and you.

Your voice.  
 I hear it in the night.  
 Calling me.  
 Caressing me.  
 Your voice,  
 soft, gentle.  
 I seek to answer  
 and yet cannot.

For I am alone.  
 And you are far.  
 And it is night.



K. Waters

Away in a distant kingdom, the lord of the land also walked in loneliness.  
 Both sleep and endeavor failed him, as he thought of her only.

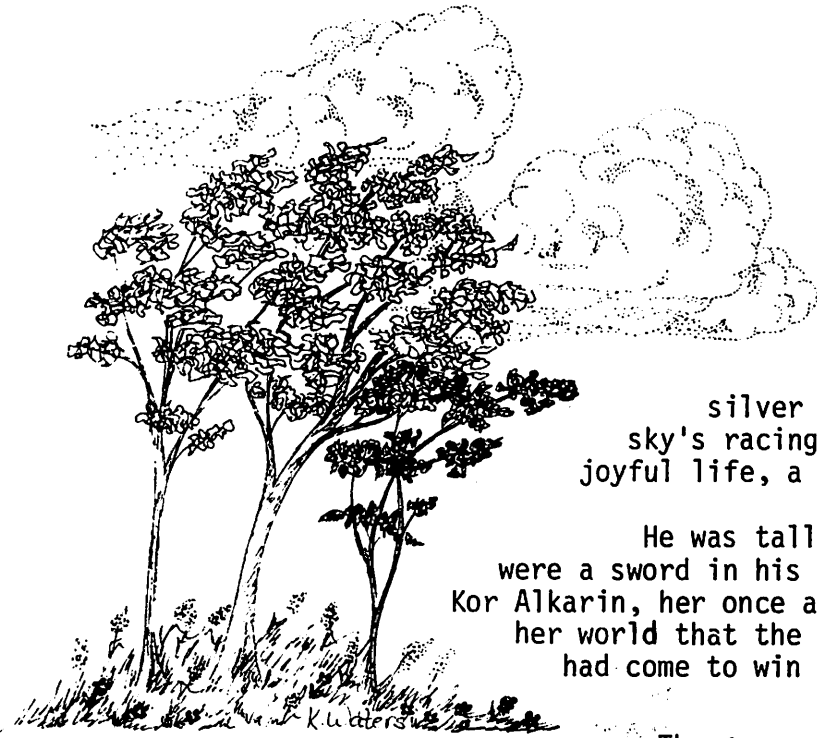
Know you the land of sea-breezed air,  
 of emerald fields and roses of wine?  
 Remember me to one who lives there,  
 she once was a true love of mine.

A fair-haired princess with sparkling eyes  
 who came to seek her father and kin  
 was stolen away 'neath the morning skies  
 to a sorcerer's fortress and kept there within.

She was made to toil all the waking day  
 at menial tasks not befitting her birth  
 with others also hidden away  
 in a tower devoid of both color and mirth.

In a faraway land lived a noble lord  
 of courage strong and honor deep;  
 he vowed to avenge her with his sword  
 and so set out for the sorcerer's keep.





One day, a new day, a sun-filled silver day, when the trees grabbed at the sky's racing clouds and flowers burst out with joyful life, a hunter came to Tavia's world.

He was tall, and dark, and carried power as if it were a sword in his hand and a shield at his back. He was Kor Alkarin, her once and true love, and he was so alien to her world that the earth quivered at his approach. He had come to win her back.

The *Ormen* Alkarin made all the preparations for battle. He honed and polished his sword until it shone like a streak of sunfire. For he knew that Tavia's people, although they wanted her not, would be loath to surrender her to him. He was ready to fight for her, by word and wit, and also by strength and skill of arms, if need be.



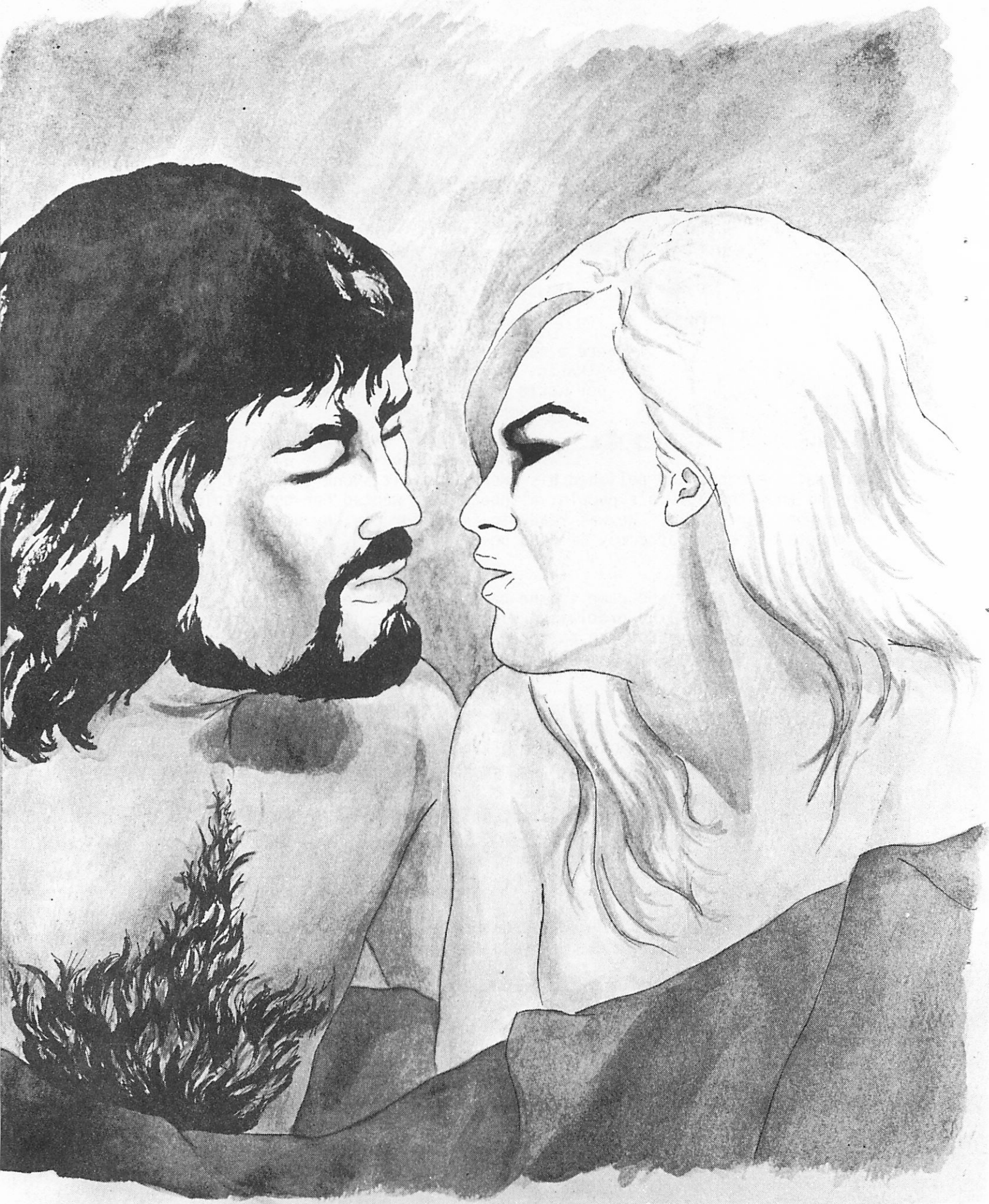
He came to the castle and sounded the bell; he proclaimed his cause and called for a fight, but the sorcerer chanted a sinister spell, and the glow of day turned to blackest night.

Then the lord heard a terrible sound as a horde of imps descended on him; he fought them off and scattered them 'round, and his heart grew hard and his countenance grim.

The unnatural night then exploded in light, as a dragon fierce in enchantment was born; the brave lord battled with all of his might, till his breath came short and his armor was worn.

But slowly the darkness again turned to day, even as the dragon's fires did wane, for the mighty lord the dragon did slay, and with it fell the sorcerer's reign.

The Warlord called forth his power, and strode through his enemies like a storm roaring through a tree-lashing forest. Victory was his when the master lord of Tavia's homeland surrendered.



After the battle, the hunter leaned wearily on his sword and gazed at his fair-haired prize.

"My lady, will you come with me?"

"You would take me away from my home and my family," she said, her brown eyes considering him gravely. "You would take me far from here, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," he answered boldly. "I have already stolen your heart, have I not?"

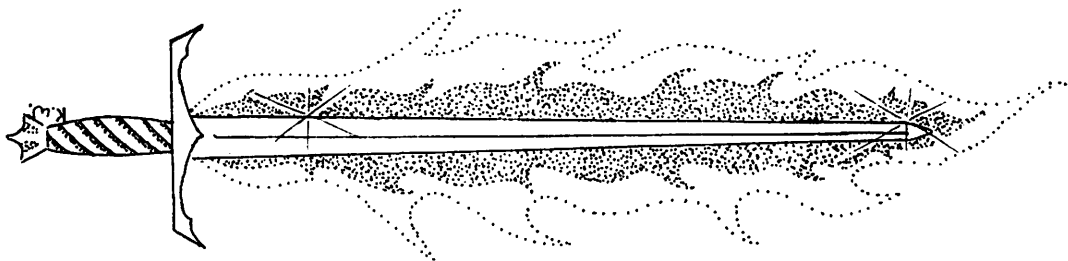
Tavia lowered her head and whispered so softly that her words came to Kor on a breeze. "Yes, you have, my lord." She raised her head again, and met his gaze fairly and honestly. "Would you have it said that you are a thief? Would you have it said that no one of your own race could please you? Would you have it said that you went through needless peril merely to win your light-of-love?"

He straightened, and stood as tall and proud as the Wargod Maraku. "I would," he said simply, his voice strong and sure. "My lady, come back with me. I'll show you twin suns rising over a fair river-palace, and take you wildfire-dancing in the golden wood. My love, if you come back, I'll give you anything you ask for. . . I'll give you the wind, if you wish it."

To be light and free as an eagle soaring high. . . Tavia's heart quickened, and she drew in a deep breath. "Your words are like knives," she whispered unsteadily. "They have pierced me to the heart. O my lord Alkarin, I love you. I want you. Even if we must go through fire and Chaos and live in a dark storm-land of barren rock, I would go, and stay forever with you."

The fortress breached, the princess was free;  
she pledged her heart to the lord in love,  
and so from the evil lands they did flee,  
to his castle away in the skies above.

Know you the land of sea-breezed air,  
of emerald fields and roses of wine?  
There I won the princess most fair,  
forever she'll be a true love of mine.



They went aboard his ship the Star-Dancer, and took the long journey by starlight and through the jet-black space-sea, until they came at last to the Flameworld, the Warlord's home.



The Renewal brings a warming glow  
to land, to sky, to all those living;  
a time to share the joys of life  
as nature makes a new beginning.

Burnished hills alive with warmth,  
plains and rivers rolling on,  
tawny skies above the mountains,  
reaching far:  
Home.

Summer's colors try to match  
the reds and golds of both the suns;  
the land takes on the sun's own fire;  
the blood is stirred by carefree play.

Burnished hills alive with warmth,  
plains and rivers rolling on,  
tawny skies above the mountains,  
reaching far:  
Home.



Cooler breezes mark the coming  
of a change in nature's cycle;  
happy harvest dances mark  
an end to growth and a time to rest.

Burnished hills alive with warmth,  
plains and rivers rolling on,  
tawny skies above the mountains,  
reaching far:  
Home.

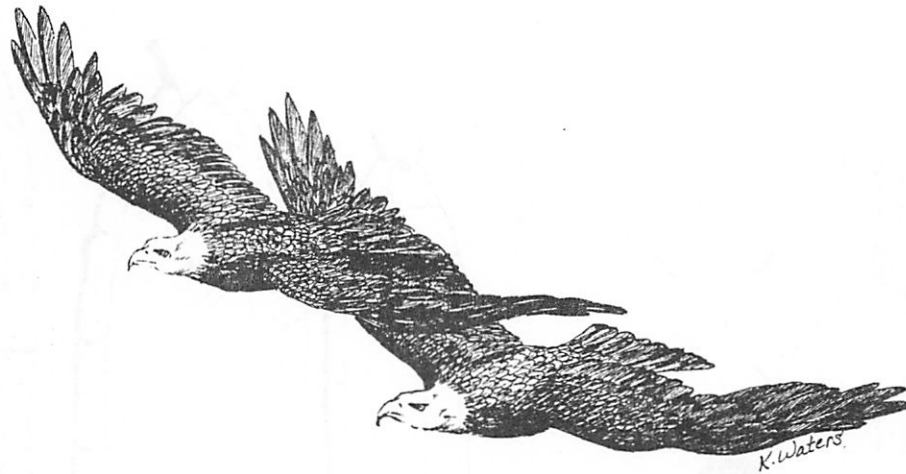
In the mountains ice will form,  
and even warmer climates cool;  
all is dormant and awaiting  
winter's end and the year's Renewal.

Burnished hills alive with warmth,  
plains and rivers rolling on,  
tawny skies above the mountains,  
reaching far:  
Home.



And the Warlord caught and tamed the wind for her. As on eagle wings she and her lord roamed the skies of the Flameworld.

There was joy for the taking, like plucking ripe fruit from a tree. There was joy in surrendering to each other, in declaring vows of love and triumph.



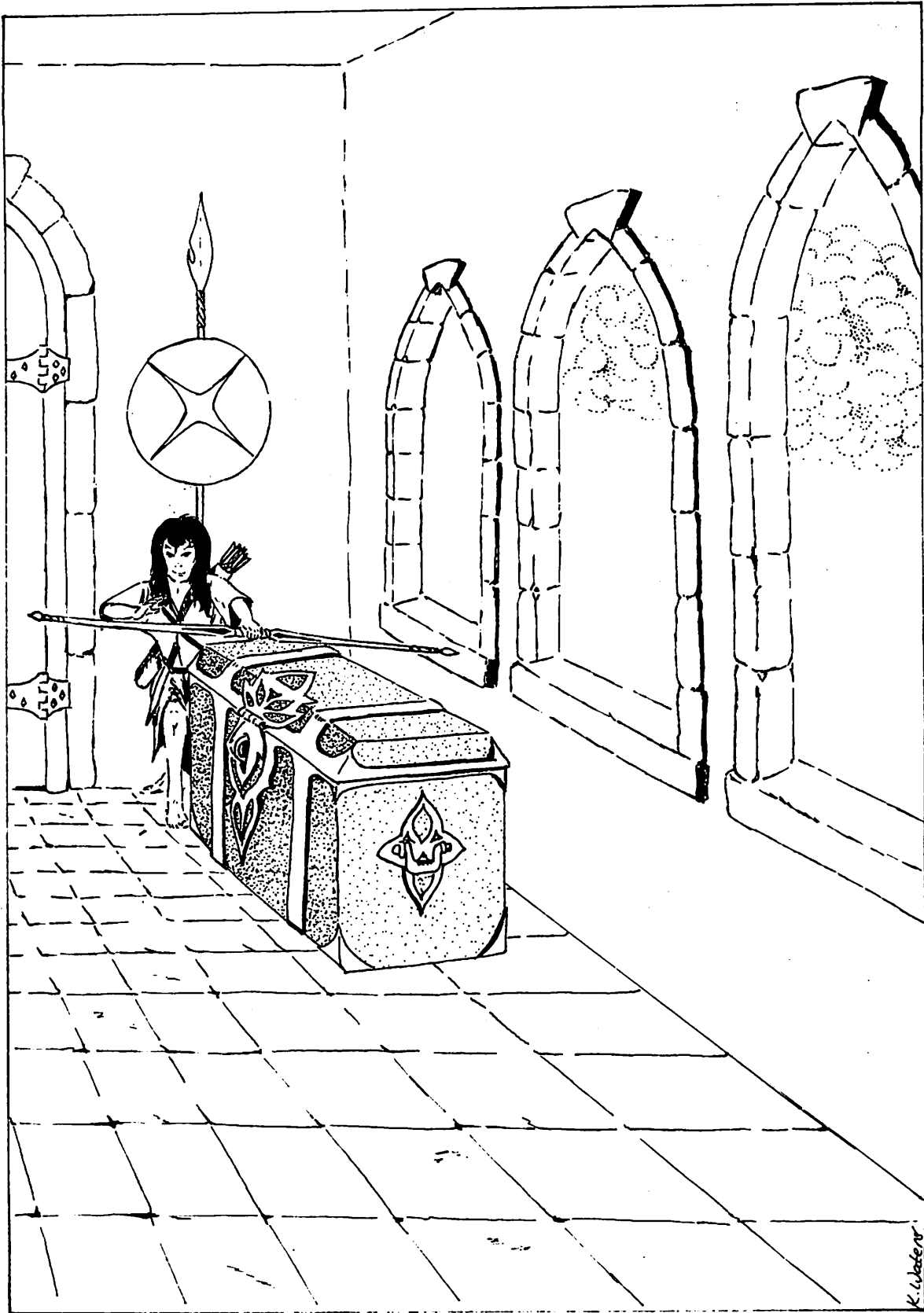
In the quiet of the night  
I hear you, softly;  
I feel your warmth,  
and smile.

In the peace of the dawn  
I hold you close;  
I touch your heart  
awhile.

In the light of the day  
I gaze at you;  
I strive with you,  
my friend.

In the calm of dusk  
we share our joy;  
we know our love will  
never end.





# The West Corridor Wars



Whi-i-i-ish!

The arrow went flying past Tavia's head, missing her by only a few centimeters, and continued sailing down the long corridor. Tavia instinctively flattened herself against the nearest section of open wall. Then she peered down the hallway toward the arrow's direction of origin. She saw nothing, at least nothing out of the ordinary.

She ventured slowly down the corridor. Suddenly she heard a very small gasp, and she realized that the large, ornate storage chest was breathing. All she could think was, 'but it isn't that large.'

"Who's there?" she demanded.

Silence.

Tavia slowly walked right up the chest. She slammed her fist down on its lid and asked again, "Who's there?"

A weak "ulp" responded, as a small tousled head looked up from behind the chest. It was a small girl with short black hair and vivid dark eyes. She stared up at Tavia, and with as much ferocity as she could muster, the child growled, "Who are you?"

At sight of the little one, Tavia's anger mellowed to mere annoyance. With equally feigned indignation, she said, "I am Katlena Alkarin, *karushir* of the *Ormen*. Who are you?"

The child thought better of asking 'since when' the *Ormen* had taken a bond-mate. Her bold answer came. "I am Aravka Taralkarin, *Usmitekka* of the *Ormen*."

Second Daughter of the *Ormen*? Second Daughter?? Tavia blanched. When she had left the *Ormenel*, Kor had only one daughter, Koshira, who by this time had to be a quite grown up young woman of twenty or so. Second Daughter?

Tavia wasn't given the chance to wonder any longer, as the youngling demanded, "What are you doing in our corridor? And why do you have yellow hair?"

The neat dichotomy of the questions was more than Tavia could calmly bear. She started to laugh and squatted down next to the child. "Why shouldn't I be in this corridor?" she managed.

"'Cause I'm waiting to shoot Kartharn."

"Kartharn?"

"My brother. Why do you have yellow hair?"

Tavia closed her eyes. 'Brother?' Kartharn? There was Karras and Kirdan, but. . . Kartharn? Involuntarily her mind added, 'But I was only gone for six years!'

The insistent voice broke in. "Well?"

Tavia shook her head to clear her confusion. Exasperated, she said, "I have blonde hair because I'm a human."

"A *Federen*?" Aravka said in horror, using the pejorative term.

"No! A human. How old are you?" Tavia decided to use the youngling's own tactics on her.

Aravka scowled. "Four years and three-quarters."

Uh-oh. Tavia went on quickly. "And. . . ah. . . your brother?"

"We're twins."

Whew. Whew? Why was she relieved? Two the same age were just as. . . annoying. . . troublesome. . . oh, admit it, ego-shattering, as two children at two different ages.

Without any warning, Aravka bolted right past Tavia and disappeared into one of the rooms on the corridor. She left in her wake a very startled Tavia and her small, but very real bow, lying on top of the chest. Tavia looked behind the chest and found, on the floor, three blunted arrows. She picked up the weapons and headed purposefully around the corner and down the stairs. Now, even more than before, she was looking forward to her destination--breakfast with Kor.

Kor had gone down to his office early that morning. It was his first day back in the *OrmeneL* after his rather lengthy--and extremely successful--visit to the Federation. He had awakened at dawn, and, before leaving the bedroom, had asked a very sleepy Katlena to join him for breakfast when she got up.

Now, Tavia strode up to the door of Kor's office, knocked twice and went in, as she had done so often, years ago. Kor looked up, smiling, then frowned as he saw what she was placing on his desk in the middle of all his backed-up paperwork. He looked down at the bow and arrows with a pained expression, and asked lamely, "You went down the west corridor, didn't you?"

"What?" For the moment it didn't occur to Tavia that she had indeed chosen to come down the west wing's stairs, rather than the east. Slowly she sorted it out. "Yes," she said, in a very dry tone.

Kor picked up the bow and examined it. "You've met Aravka."

Tavia folded her arms in front of herself and glared down at Kor. "Yes, I have," she said. "Why does she want to, ah, shoot Kartharn?"

Tavia didn't realize the trap she'd laid, but Kor walked right into it. "Well, Aravka is my second daughter, while Kartharn is my third son, and he's resentful that she has the greater status. . ." Finally, it dawned on Kor that he was in trouble, but he went on anyway. ". . .Er. . . especially since he was first out, I mean, he's the older of the two. So. . . ah. . . Kartharn. . . started this war with her. . . oh, damn."

Tavia's amusement at Kor's embarrassment almost overcame her indignation. She commented, archly, "I'm quite well aware of the fact that Aravka and Kartharn

are both yours. What I want to know is when, where, and with whom?"

Kor swallowed hard. He gestured at a chair to his right. "Maybe you should sit down, Katlena." She did so, with exaggerated formality.

Kor cleared his throat. "The first spring after you left was. . . lonely. The bed was cold. So I asked Kang if I could visit *krasaia* Keorl."

"But *krasaia* Keorl is even colder," remarked Tavia snidely.

Kor ignored her. He picked up the bow, fidgeting. "Well, while I was there, I met one of Kang's cousins, Tasilaiki. And, well, you know I'm not in the habit of taking precautions."

"What you're saying is that the twins are Tasilaiki Keorl's."

"Yes. But I didn't expect to have them here! Tasilaiki is a ranger up in the mountains and she didn't want. . . well, she couldn't keep the infants with her, so. . ."

"So she foisted them off on you."

Kor took in a deep breath, and let it out in a sigh. "Yes."

Tavia burst out laughing. The idea of someone leaving a pair of newborns on the *Ormen*'s doorstep delighted her. "Oh, Kor. I really don't mind your having had children while I was gone--actually I would have been more surprised if you hadn't had any children, given the way you tend to leave them littered all around the planet. But why didn't you warn me?"

For a moment, Kor's eyes gleamed as he grinned at her. "Frankly, I had other things on my mind. And then I figured it would be better if you just met them."

"What a way to meet someone!"

"I didn't expect you to go down the west corridor. No one goes down the west corridor anymore, not since Tasilaiki gave them both bows and arrows."

"Why do you allow it?"

Kor squirmed, and looked sheepish. Tavia thought of the soft spot he had for his younglings and knew the answer before he said it. "Well, it was rather difficult to stop from using the bows. . . actually, they're getting to be good hunters. . ."

'Uh-huh,' Tavia thought. 'Good people hunters.'

"But I did restrict them to the west corridor on the third level. We simply removed all the breakables."

Kor was grinning by now. Tavia looked at the exuberance in him, and she sighed and gave in. "You know, I think the thing that annoyed me the most was that here I have two more children to put up with, and they're not even mine!"

"That can be arranged," said Kor gently.

For the moment, Kor's meaning escaped her; then she stared at him in disbelief. "You mean you want more? It would serve you right if I had triplets!"

"Why not?" said Kor, laughing openly.

"Why not indeed?" Tavia echoed. "But I think that better be postponed till after breakfast."

"By all means," agreed Kor. "Let's gather everyone together--all the children--and eat. Now that we're a family again."

Tavia grinned, realizing belatedly that she'd just received, without pomp or formality, a welcome home.

# SONG OF THE RIVER

by Fern Marder and Carol Walske

"I come seeking audience with the *Ormen* Alkarin," said the man quietly.

The Watcher at the gates of the Rasethi Sarin studied the stranger, sensing something different about the fair-skinned, slender man who stood before him. But he bore a kilingaven tunic and cloak, spoke Agavoi fluently, and showed a manner of courtesy and respect.

"May I know your name and purpose?" the Watcher asked politely.

The stranger inclined his head in a bow, and shook his head very slightly. "Unless propriety--or the *Ormen* Alkarin--demands it, I would rather not say."

"No matter." This was common enough, and a kiling's name and business were part of inviolate privacy. "You stay in the city of Orthonik? Good. Then listen at the day's rising for Strangers' Rights to be called by the *Ormen*'s Messenger."

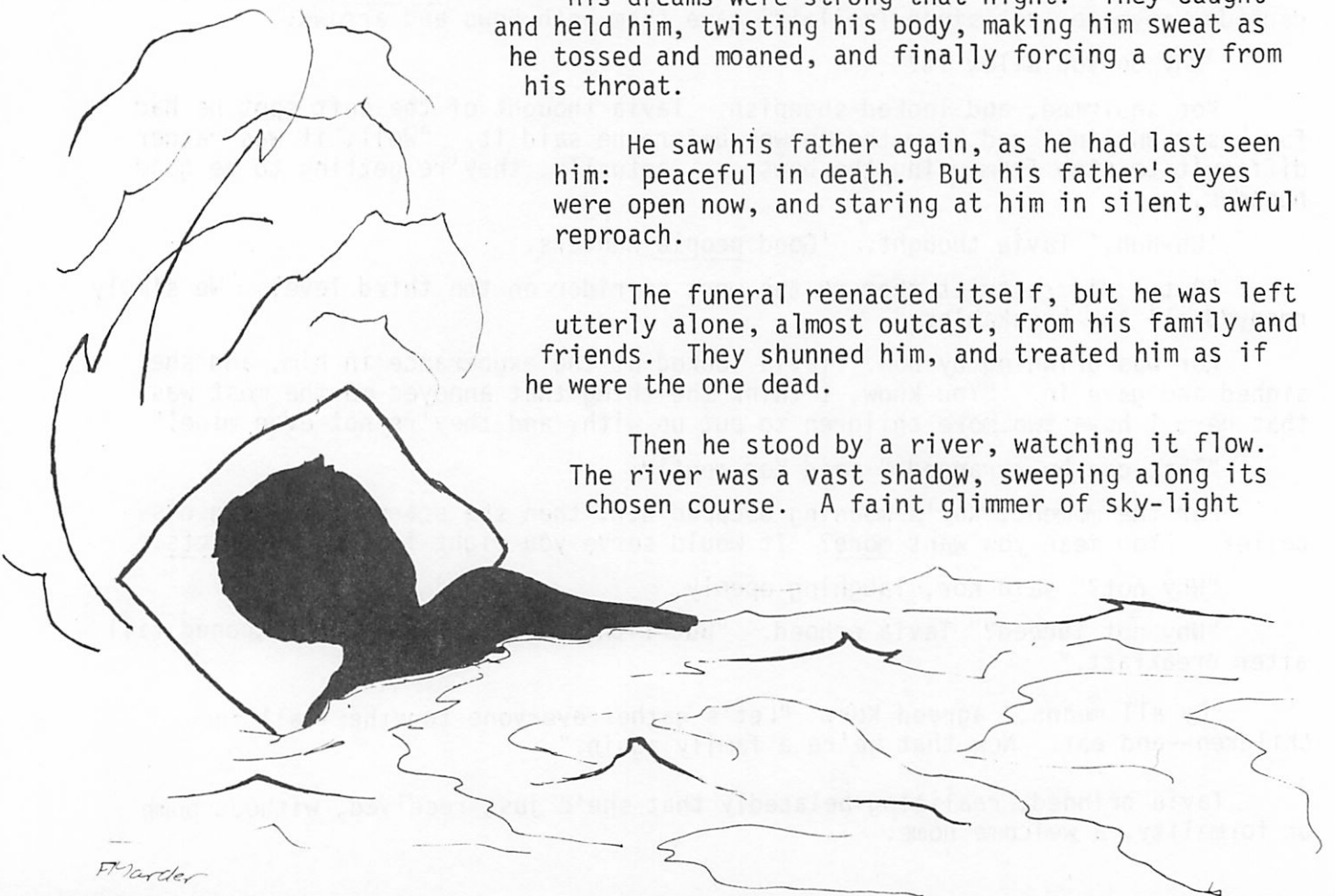
The stranger bowed again. "My thanks." Then he turned and walked away, heading for the boat that would take him back downriver to the *Torshir* Orthonik to await the summons.

His dreams were strong that night. They caught and held him, twisting his body, making him sweat as he tossed and moaned, and finally forcing a cry from his throat.

He saw his father again, as he had last seen him: peaceful in death. But his father's eyes were open now, and staring at him in silent, awful reproach.

The funeral reenacted itself, but he was left utterly alone, almost outcast, from his family and friends. They shunned him, and treated him as if he were the one dead.

Then he stood by a river, watching it flow. The river was a vast shadow, sweeping along its chosen course. A faint glimmer of sky-light



played on its surface, highlighting the small rapids, the flotsam floating near the surface, and the eddies and swirls of the river's current.

The water held its own peaceful, mystical, powerful strength. Its flow was ceaseless; its music was eternal. It went through a hundred towns and through farmlands, through cities and open country, emptying finally into an ocean or disappearing underground.

But the river where he stood was changing in color and speed and sound; it was full of mud and debris, and its racing curls were lapping at his feet. It was brown and viscous and utterly secure in its own power. He stared at it, caught by the river's strong spell, and watched with stark horror as his father's body was borne swiftly by. He yanked off his boots and leaped into the current.

The river took him and would not let go. To death it was taking him, as it had taken his father. He was very heavy; his arms seemed to have no strength against the river's force. As he went under the surface of the river, as brown eels of water curled around him to drown him, he lifted up his head and gave out one last, keening cry of despair.

Roan Morgan woke up, sweating. He sat up, his arms pushing him away from the bed as if the bed were trying to hold on to him. In moments, Roan's eyes adjusted to the dark, and reason began to return. He threw off the sheet that he'd tangled and twisted about himself, got up from the bed, and stalked to the window.

This room at the inn had eight beds; five of them were occupied. Roan sent a worried glance around, fearing that his shout had disturbed the others, but they were all asleep, or trying to appear so. Even in the most inexpensive room in an inexpensive inn, where sharing a room was a matter of course, utmost respect was given for each other's privacy. It was too dangerous not to.

The window was a diamond shape cut through the wall. There was no glass. Hot air moved sluggishly in the window and out again, like the slow breathing of a sleeper. Roan stood and looked out the window until the sweat dried on him and the tremor in him finally subsided. Then he allowed himself to consider his dream.

The reality was bad enough without the elements of nightmare. Roan had gone home on compassionate leave at news of his father's death. For two weeks he had wandered in and out of an empty house, his mind lost, his hopes gone, his emotions heavy and dull. The trappings of death had hung all around him, plucking at his clothing. The funeral had been held, and Roan had felt something inside him die. A door was shut, and now whole



corridors of memories that should have been joyful were cold and dark and grim.

He had run from his father's house, running like a frightened child fleeing unseen enemies. He came the river that flowed near his father's home, and for a moment he played with a fleeting idea of throwing himself in. But it was only whimsy, and so he sat down on the riverbank and watched it through a whole night and another day.

The river took his thoughts, and carried them far away. He had never settled the turmoil of his heart; he had always locked the conflicts away in the part deepest inside himself.

Now, finally, without his father, he was alone, bereft of all ties. He had never found a place to live that he liked; he had never found a woman to love; he had roamed restlessly in search of excitement and momentary happiness. 'It's time to stop running,' he said to himself.

The river sighed by and spoke softly in his mind. 'Go as the river goes: free, unchecked, alone. Go home, Wanderer.'

"Home," repeated Roan out loud. "But where is that, really?"

Certainly not on Proalfalfa. Roan could not think of anywhere in the Federation that could be home. . . Then his treacherous mind gave him an image of a rocky island, rising stark black out of a grey sea, silhouetted by a westward sun. It was so strong and vivid a picture that Roan blinked his eyes and looked around in surprise.

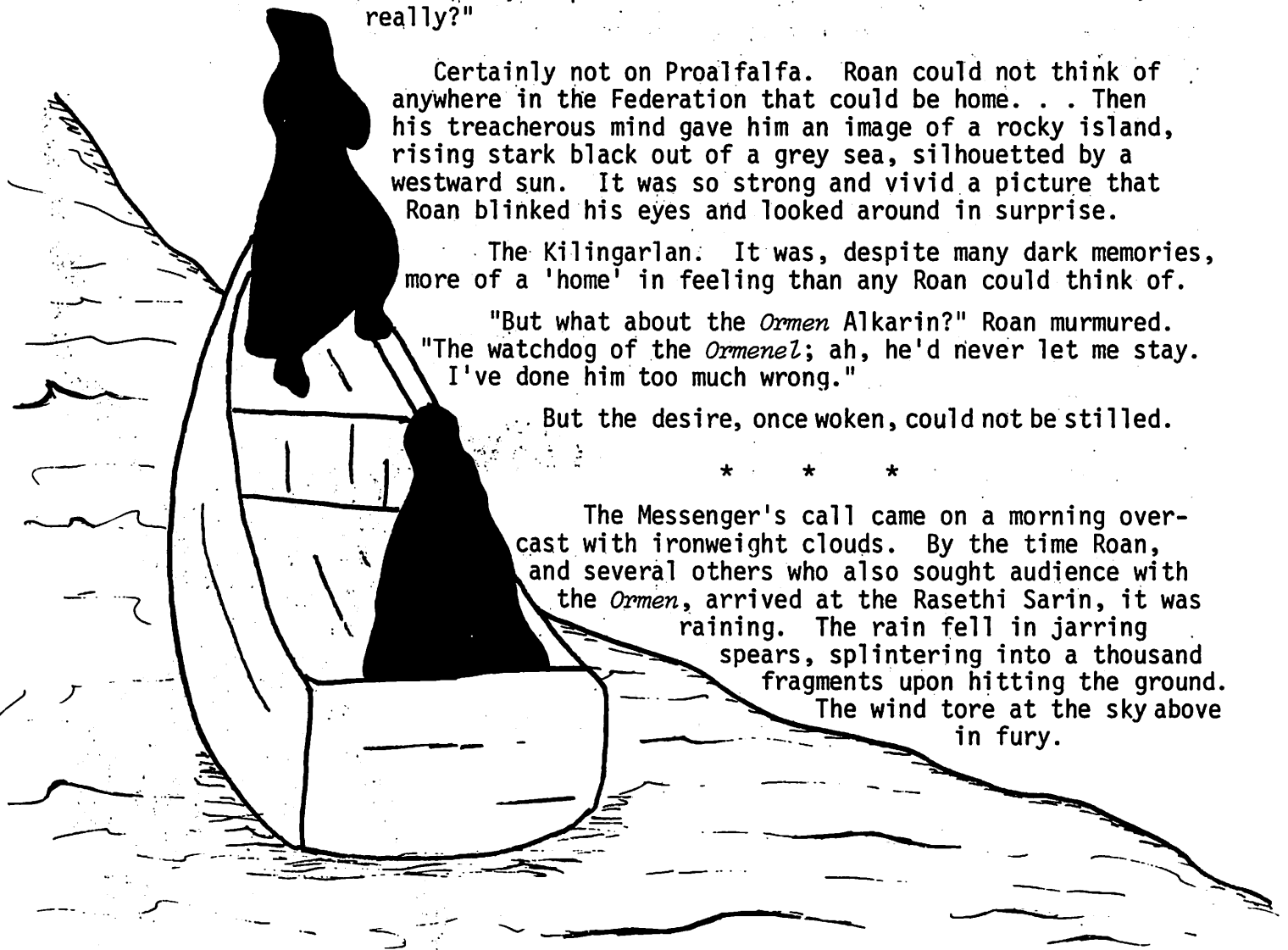
The Kilingarlan. It was, despite many dark memories, more of a 'home' in feeling than any Roan could think of.

"But what about the *Ormen* Alkarin?" Roan murmured. "The watchdog of the *Ormenel*; ah, he'd never let me stay. I've done him too much wrong."

But the desire, once woken, could not be stilled.

\* \* \*

The Messenger's call came on a morning overcast with ironweight clouds. By the time Roan, and several others who also sought audience with the *Ormen*, arrived at the Rasethi Sarin, it was raining. The rain fell in jarring spears, splintering into a thousand fragments upon hitting the ground. The wind tore at the sky above in fury.



Roan got out of the boat, wondering with a shiver which was wetter, the river or the land. He pulled his tightly woven, hooded cloak more closely about him, and shivered again. The ground, sodden with water, threatened to sink under his footsteps; quickly he strode up the bank to firmer ground.

They were admitted to the Audience Hall, the only chamber of the vast building that nestled among the trees by the gates of the Rasethi Sarin. This was not part of the palace itself, but had been built separately, for the sake of the supplicants' privacy and the palace's sanctity.

The Audience Hall was more a succession of courts than a single hall; arches and colonnades set off courtyards, one or two empty, some holding fountains at their centers, others containing miniature gardens. The supplicants were invited to take off their cloaks, wander about and relax. The *Ormen* would come to each one of them in turn.

Roan kept his dark cloak. The rain had mostly run off it, and it was soon dry. He separated quickly from the others, and sought the place that seemed the farthest from the Hall's entrance.

The cloister he discovered to be a miniature world. He walked in through trees, and immediately looked up, because of the change in light. Overhead, in the vaulted ceiling of the Hall, were skylights, closed that day because of the harsh rain.

He looked around in fascination and delight. A narrow strip of earth ran around the inside of the courtyard; beyond this was a pool, and in the center of the pool was a tiny island. The water was not deep, but there were no bridges, and the stranger would never have dreamed of crossing the water to the small island. It was meant to be private. He stared at the small knoll of rock and earth, planted with dwarf trees and tiny wildflowers. He looked very close, and saw that hidden among the trees was a stone fortress half-gone back to the wild: rent walls, a tree growing through a window; only one tower stood tall and unbroken. Though it was tiny, the ruin was very real, and Roan was touched with wonder.

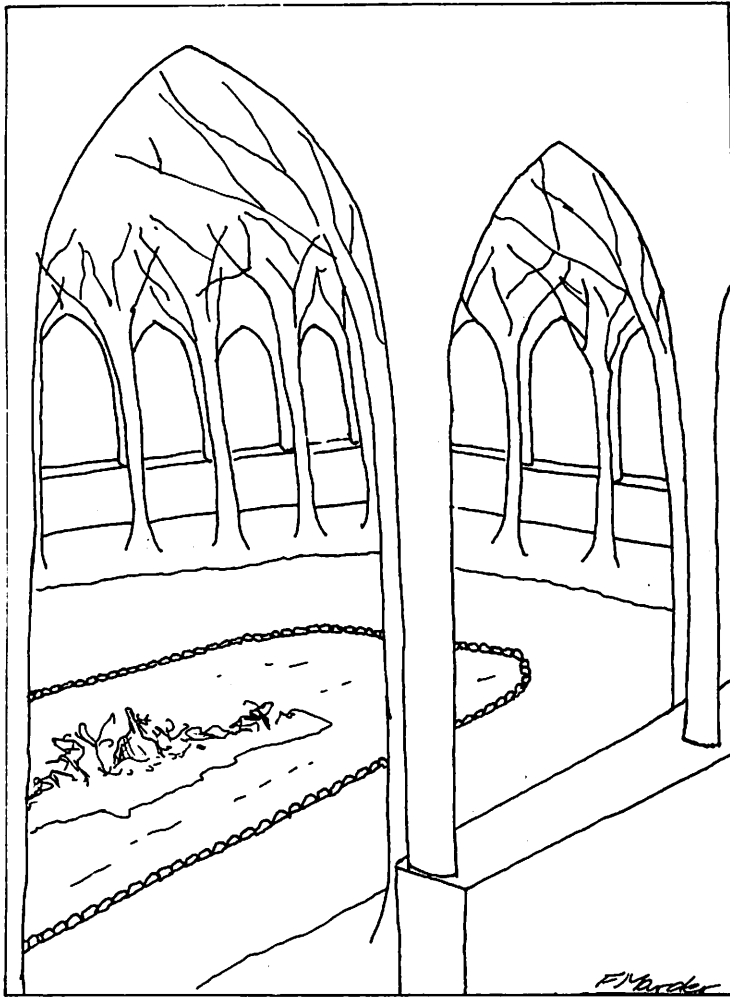
"*Sinish krassav*," said a voice from behind him. "I am Lord Alkarin; I have come to hear you."

Roan stood rigid. He did not turn to face the *Ormen*; he could not. "Thank you for coming, my lord," he said in a low voice, his head bowed. "I am sorry, *Ormen* Alkarin--I do not have the right to seek audience, because I am a human. But it was the only way I knew how to find you alone."

Kor Alkarin frowned at the man's back. He was silent for a long moment, but then curiosity won out over annoyance. "How did you know to request audience? Why do you want to see me?"

The stranger chose not to answer the first question. He still did not dare face the *Ormen*. "Because you alone can grant citizenship in the *Ormenel*, Lord Alkarin."





Alkarin's response was both quick and sharp: "I do not grant citizenship to just anyone, intruder. Show yourself, and give me your name."

"If you insist," said the stranger after a short pause.

"Why should you not wish me to see your face?" asked Alkarin, irritation strong in his voice.

The stranger turned, and lifted his head so that his hood no longer shadowed his face. Alkarin stood and stared, thunderstruck. He stared and stared, as if waiting for the man's features to change, or for his form to disappear entirely.

Roan waited for the *Ormen* to speak. When it appeared that Alkarin would not, or could not speak, Roan said again, "I wish to become a citizen of the *Ormenel*, my lord."

"How did you come here?" whispered Alkarin.

Roan did not want to meet Alkarin's demanding gaze; his gaze darted over the

kiling. The *Ormen* was simply, elegantly dressed, in a mid-thigh-length tunic of shimmering cream fabric, full sleeves gathered at the wrist, the tunic subtly embroidered with leaves and small animals in a light yellow thread. He looked as much a part of his world as Roan felt a stranger to it.

Roan forced a smile. "The river brought me. A restless, lonely river."

"Why did you send no word, Kirin? I would have welcomed you at the Border, and brought you home in honor---"

It hurt Roan to hear his kilingaven name. "Would you have?" he asked, more harshly than he'd intended. He was afraid. "I seek no favor from you, *Ormen* Alkarin, save the right to stay in the *Ormenel*. Or get rid of me, and have done with it."

The wonder and hope left Alkarin's face as quickly as if a candle had blown out. His eyes became dark. Kor looked at his brother in an intense silence and finally said, uncertainly, "You want nothing of me?"

Words came easily to Roan, as if they'd been waiting a long time to come out. This was payment of a debt long due. "*Ormen* Alkarin, you once called me traitor and outcast, and you were probably right. Many years later, you forgave me, and asked me to come with you. I refused you, which was not only rude but hasty. So I would impose on you no further than to ask to live here."

Kor looked at him, nothing but stark anger in his face. He abruptly turned

aside, and stared out into the cloister's center pool. The sight brought him no peace, however, for he made a sharp gesture with his arm, a gesture of denial and defiance, and he turned back to face Roan.

"Why did you leave the Federation at all?" he asked.

"I have no home left in the Federation," said Roan quietly. He accepted Alkarin's anger without the slightest dismay or surprise; he'd been expecting it. "There are no more bonds to keep me there. My father is dead. I hardly know my relations. My career in Star Fleet was about to take me into a desk job, or politics, and my heart failed me at the thought of either."

"Then why do you come to the *Ormenel*?" There was a look of disbelieving pain on Alkarin's features, a look that seemed to wish that this was all just a nightmare.

"I have lived my life so far caught between the two worlds. I have debts. I wish to recapture a memory or two, and rest in privacy."

The silence stretched in all directions. It strained, singing with tension, until both men were sure that it would break into a scream. Kor's hands clenched, and he broke the silence himself, abruptly. "You would have no part of me."

The words were spoken tonelessly. Roan's breath whistled in through his teeth; it was a breath of pain and fear. He looked into his brother's eyes, seeing the angry, baffled, tormented look there, and his own gaze slid away in shame and turmoil. "I cannot---"

He was grabbed by the shoulders and shook. Roan felt the power surging through Kor's arms and into his clenching hands, and Roan looked up again into Kor's face.

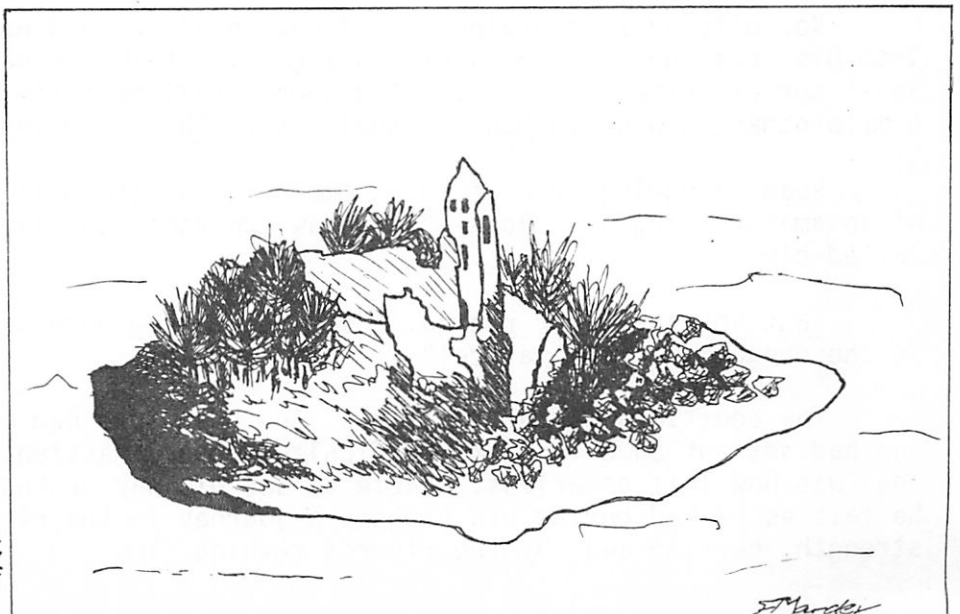
"Why?" Kor cried. "Why do you return to mock me like this? Am I so hateful to you? Do you taunt me with loneliness?"

"No, not that. But I--I am afraid."

Again Kor stood transfixed, this time with shock and hurt so cruel he did not even have the strength to fight it. "Afraid of me," he repeated, dully.

"Afraid of what I feel when I look at you, and afraid of what you make me feel."

The words echoed again and again in Kor's mind. They were horribly familiar--they were almost the same words Kor himself



had spoken to his father on a day more than twenty years ago, just before Kor had killed him. Kor had never forgotten those words; now he stood blind, powerless to the storm of feelings that shook him.

He murmured as one lost in a dark dream. "So I have caused you that much pain. . . would you kill me, then?"

Roan stared at him in horror, not understanding where the words came from. "No," he whispered. "I wanted to see you, and set things right between us."

"You call this 'right'?" interrupted Kor savagely.

Roan just looked at Kor, empty of words and strength. He felt his legs tremble with weariness.

"Name your Challenge," demanded Kor, a blind, shuttered look of rage in his features. "If you will have no part of me, then I will know why." He spread his arms wide away from his body. "Take your revenge, Kirin Kothir; I will grant it to you!"

Roan stared at him helplessly, understanding and yet not understanding. A thousand thoughts scurried to the front of his mind, but none were true or meaningful. "I do not want revenge," he said finally, in a voice so tight and strained that he hardly knew it as his own. "You are the *Ormen*. I am the outlaw. I would think you would want nothing to do with me."

Kor's look slowly went from anger to disbelief to amazement. All his brother's strangeness, his fear, were suddenly clear, and Kor felt like hitting himself for not seeing it before. Color and hope of a sort returned to his face as he stared at Roan. "After all your explanations, are you trying to say that you're too dishonored to stand near me? You think I don't want you near me? Do you think I would let you get away from me again?"

Roan gazed him, like a child looking wonderingly at a teacher. "*Ormen* Alkarin, I half expected you to kill me. After all the pain I have caused---

Kor uttered a strangled cry of exasperation, and he grabbed Roan and pulled him into his arms, holding on to him so tightly that Roan gasped in startled pain. "Kill you?" Kor exclaimed joyously. "I'd sooner kill myself! You lackwit, you swamphead--o my brother, how could you be stupid as to think I hated you still?"

Roan struggled free of Kor's embrace, and stood as astonished and frightened as of an amatory dragon. "But---" He saw the dangerous light in Kor's eyes, and words failed him.

"But nothing!" Kor roared. "You're staying here with me, if I have to lock you in the dungeons of the palace!"

The courtyard seemed to whirl. And Roan, who had made his earlier decisions and had set out on a long and difficult course of action, culminating in this meeting, was now left powerless, unable to see his way or know what to do. For a moment, he felt as he had during his nightmare journey in the river: formless, without strength, carried away by the river's rushing flow.

"I never looked for this," he murmured. "I saw a possible death, and trouble, certainly. . . but never did I look for a welcoming home."

Kor spoke quickly. "And for me, a thousand times I've looked for you, waited for you. . . I invited you, to no avail. My son Karras tried to entice you here in the time he spent on your ship, but even he couldn't. Never did I foresee such a homecoming as this."

He reached out to grasp Roan's shoulder, but he did it hesitantly, as if unsure of his right. "I know so little of you now--obviously--that your words, and your looks, are beyond my understanding much of the time. But you were my brother once, a brother in love far more than name, and I don't think such a tie can ever really be broken. I would like to welcome you back, brother, and give you a place at my side."

Roan felt very, very unreal. The reminders of life around him were fading, as he struggled for footing. There was still a knife-edge in him, a perilous road over a precipice, and he didn't quite know how to walk it.

He fought off the rising voices, the thoughts within him that were so alien. He was Roan Morgan, looking out of a human's eyes, an ex-Star Fleet Commodore's eyes. . . Or was he? For long, unexpected moments he would look out of a killing's eyes, a young killing's eyes, and he would be afraid and amazed at the difference.

Kor was looking at him a little oddly. He waited, watching his brother, not sure if he should break the silence. "Kirin. . ."

"Don't call me that!" the changeling exclaimed, and then he put his hands to his face in shocked pain.

"I'm sorry," he said awkwardly after a moment, not daring to look at the expression on Kor's face. "It's just that I don't know who I am yet." The feeling of unreality returned to him, this time so strong that he bit the side of his mouth. Pain was a very real thing.

Kor said nothing; he just looked at Roan from under his dark brows, his look neither questioning, nor disbelieving, merely calm and accepting.

"Success as a killing, a spy, an officer, even a prisoner of war--but never much success as a person," said Roan, in the sort of embarrassed, shy voice usually used when talking about oneself. "I know it's a stupid joke, but my right hand doesn't know what the left is doing. One body, two minds---and each one of me wars constantly for supremacy. Something I've never resolved."

"Roan and Kirin do not coexist." It was halfway between a statement and a question.

"How long have killingau and humans been enemies?" Roan asked simply.

"Some of us aren't," said Kor.

"Yes, and you don't know how much I envy you and Tavia--or Katlena, as I

understand she's called now." Roan was somewhat surprised to hear the bitterness seep out into his words.

The *Ormen* didn't seem at all surprised. Kor knew well what had existed between Katlena and Roan; she had been, besides his lover, his only comfort, his source of understanding and confidence when he first joined Star Fleet. Kor looked at Roan. Kor saw the uncertainty and loneliness that lay in Roan's features, in his outward play of thoughts, and Kor knew that Roan still needed someone to share with, as much as Kor himself had come to need Katlena.

The killing said reflectively, "There's Arika Keorl."

Roan, startled, stared at the *Ormen* accusingly. "How could you possibly know about---" He broke his own question off. Obviously Kor knew--from his son. Roan said wryly, "Karras has a big mouth."

"You've only just noticed?"

Roan's mind gave him an image of Arika, the witty and knowing, dark-eyed killing who had also served aboard Roan's ship. Arika had been sent to ease matters for Karras, but had become close to Roan. Roan Morgan, Karras Taralkarin, and Arika Keorl had become inseparable friends. No, more than friends, but Roan didn't allow himself to think further on that. He declared flatly, "Arika Keorl is--well, she is a Keorl. And I am nothing. No. I am a human, and for those of Domain Keorl, that's even less than nothing."

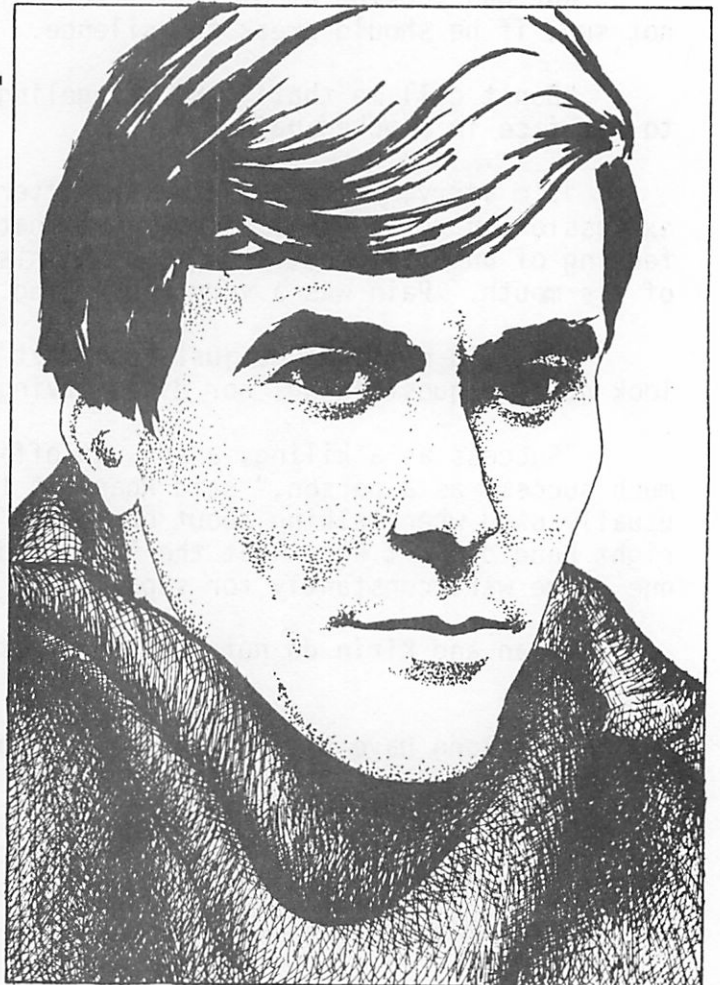
Kor laughed abruptly, the laugh emerging as though surprised at itself. "You don't think much of yourself, do you?"

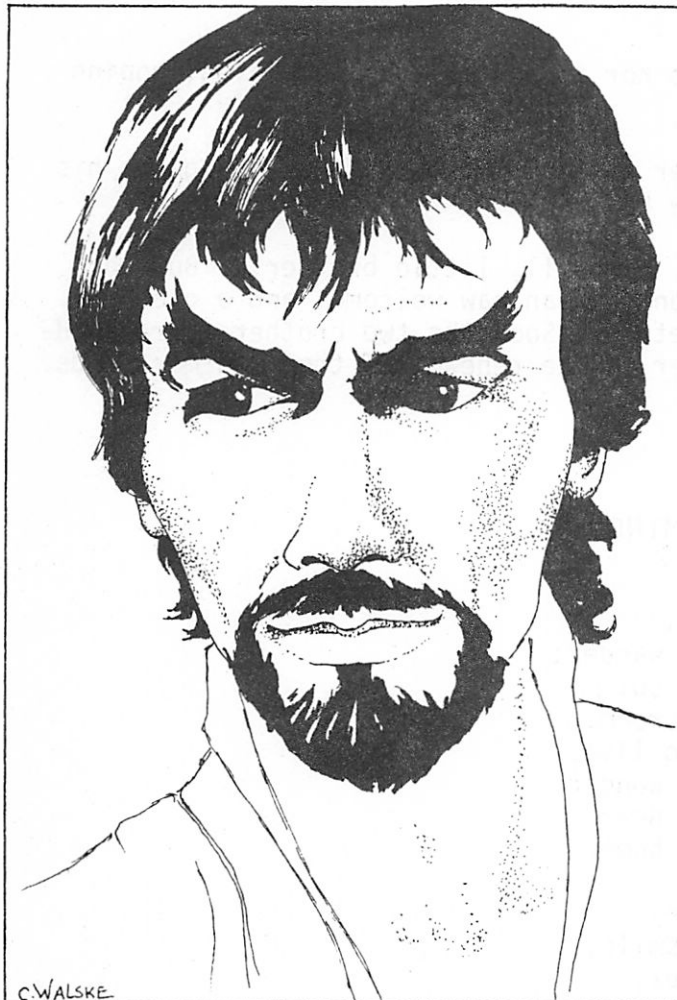
"No," answered Roan without much feeling.

Kor gave him a sharp look but didn't pursue it. "I mention Arika Keorl as one of the bonds that could hold you here, and help you to win your unresolved struggle. As I will help, and so will Karras."

Roan felt suddenly strengthened, as if a weapon had been put into his hands, a solitary fighter who had suddenly found comrades protecting his back. "It was lonely without anyone there," he said, mostly to himself.

When he realized he'd spoken his thoughts aloud, he looked up and smiled ruefully. "Loneliness was driving me out of Star Fleet. And my father's death forced me to look at thoughts I'd buried. At the end of my compassionate leave, I resigned my commission in Star Fleet, and decided to leave the Federation." Roan seemed to want to end it there, for he didn't go on.





Kor looked at him expectantly, and then prompted, "Aren't you going to tell me how you managed to get out of the Federation? I can't imagine they were too eager to let you go."

Roan looked somewhat shamefaced. "Actually, I'm only here on a tourist permit--and it took me a while to get it, too. The authorities won't be too happy when they realize that I'm not coming back."

"Well, they can't harm a citizen of the *Ormenel*," said Kor reasonably.

Roan's face softened in a quick, but uncertain grin. "They're not going to be too happy about that, either."

Kor smiled too. "As long as you're pleased. . ." He let the line trail off as his mind began making plans. He spoke quickly, excitedly. "We must send to the inn for your baggage, and I'll have a set of rooms opened and prepared for you--"

Roan laughed. "I don't have much 'baggage.' In fact I didn't bring much of anything with me--'tourists' don't generally empty their bank accounts before

they go on a 'vacation.' Could the Rasethi Sarin use an extra dishwasher, perhaps?"

"Nonsense," Kor snapped in mock indignation. "You are Rifalkarin, brother to the *Ormen*." He stopped abruptly, as the enormity of that statement struck both men.

Finally Roan spoke. "In that case, I guess you should call me Kirin."

Roan's first night in the Rasethi Sarin was a peaceful one. The water was about him now, with cool fingers reaching out gently to touch. He relaxed into that caressing grasp, and allowed himself to listen to the thousand voices of the river's current. He heard the river chattering to itself, excitedly as it swept down through rapids, then murmuring softly as it drowsed over a plain.

He heard, and felt, a hundred rivulets, streams, brooks and springs, each leaping out of the land to wander free for a while, but coming at last to the body of the great river.

So the river was as divided as he was, but its movement was sure and purposeful, confident and regal. A thousand voices blending into one song.

In his dream, Roan looked at Kor, seeing the irrepressible good humor in his brother, his immense vitality and strength of will, his capacity for compassion and understanding. Kor was a man who had endured hardship and loss and great strife and had come through all the better for it. Roan felt suddenly like a

youngling of ten years again, looking up to Kor in wonder and admiration, hoping that he would someday be as worthy.

Roan called to Kor, naming him brother again. The word felt strange on his lips. "*Rafkir*. . . *rafkir*, help me to come home."

Kor looked at him with love and hope. "I will, little brother." But Kor could not remain so grave and intent for long. Roan saw welcome, and a gleam of triumph, in Kor's eyes, and he smiled in return. Soon the two brothers were holding each other, laughing and crying together in the renewal of their former bonds.

## THE HOMECOMING

Time to learn,  
and a time to wander;  
time to reach out,  
and a time to roam.  
Freedom now to live,  
to rejoice in wonder  
at all that's new  
and a welcome home.

So much to see,  
to awake and smile;  
so much to feel,  
to accept as my own.  
Freedom now to laugh,  
to lie back awhile,  
sharing the warmth  
of a welcome home.

Feeling pride  
and peace and harmony,  
knowing that I  
am no longer alone.  
Feeling as one  
with what I've found here;  
knowing that I  
am finally home.

Time to strive,  
and a time to explore;  
time to share,  
and a time to grow.  
Trying to regain  
what I knew before;  
happy to embrace  
a welcoming home.

## CHANGELING

One day by chance Roan came to meet  
 his brother from the *Ormenel*;  
 they spoke harsh words and fought with knives  
 and Roan was banished to a call.

He spent long years in slavery hard,  
 while war raged on between his homes;  
 when he returned to human lands,  
 he felt again so much alone.

Changeling knows not where to roam,  
 where his heart will find a home.

Then there came from the *Ormenel*  
 his brother and his brother's son;  
 they made Roan think about his past  
 and all the things he might have done.

Then came a woman, a kiling,  
 to serve aboard his ship awhile;  
 she won his heart and he won hers,  
 and when she left, he missed her smile.

Alone again with humans all,  
 Roan soon found he could not live;  
 so he set out for his former home  
 to see what comfort it could give.

Changeling knows not where to roam,  
 where his heart will find a home.

His brother welcomed him with pride;  
 his brother's son was still his friend;  
 his lady was yet his true love;  
 they all knew joy until the end.

And so the Changeling found at last,  
 peace and joy as ne'er before;  
 he chose to be kiling again  
 and so remained forevermore.

Changeling knows not where to roam,  
 where his heart will find a home.

(Note: This is a continuation of "Changeling," which appeared in Threshold)



# Shelter from the Storm

When the sky hisses in icy anger and the mountains shake their shoulders in rage, then it is time to seek shelter. When the dark rises and storms blow, remember that there is a place of warmth and light. Enter the arched door; close out the fury of the night. Set the fire to burning high. Relax in the warmth of a refuge from the winter's tumult.

It was a small, dark room, a room of stone hollowed out of the mountainside. It was lit only by the blaze of a fire. A thick fur rug, a spotted cavebear's skin, was the only addition to the stark surroundings.

Kirin lay quietly by the fire. Dark lay around him. The fire cast changing shadows on his body, wavering light brightening to white, then deepening to gold across his supple form.

Just beyond the glow of the light there was a form, a woman's form, just beyond Kirin's reach. A lithe form, with rich black hair. Arika.

Kirin and Arika had found little welcome among her family. Their first reunion, days ago, had much of courtesies but was bereft of intimacy. And so they left the walls of Domain Keorl to seek privacy among the mountains.

In this place, Arika looked fully at home. Her dark eyes reflected the firelight; her smile was wicked and proud, like a victorious predator. Slowly she moved toward Kirin, coming into the light of the fire. She slipped her arms around him, letting them float up his back and across his shoulders.

She stretched like a beast relaxing before the fire. Kirin smiled as he looked at her, feeling a little bit like a man befriended by a wolf: a combination of wariness and awe.

Kirin reached for her, drawing her close against him, their bodies coming together in warmth. At first, they played their hands over one another, lightly, softly. But soon they became more and more deeply absorbed in the quicksilver embrace, the soft touch, the flare of heat along smooth skin.

They lay back, contentedly holding one another, savoring the stillness. No need for speech now, when they could relax in sharing by look and touch; silent, in the face of a bonding stronger than any cumbersome words.

And when they emerged, it was to herald the bonding of their lives.

# THE BARKEEP

by Fern Marder and Carol Walske  
poetry by Fern Marder

Ksileth Rafkalehmaras, *Ormenez* military officer on shore leave, was looking forward to a large, cool drink. She walked into the nearest bar, a crowded, noisy place, and ducked just in time to avoid a flying beer bottle. The bottle sailed past her and smashed against a wall, and a rain of beer splattered on her and the floor.

"What the---" Ksileth, a tall, slender woman with gleaming blue-black hair, tossed her head. Her expression, normally full of vivacity and irrepressible good humor, showed her baffled anger.

The bar was packed with people. Just in front of the counter, a space had been cleared for a fight between two of the bar's patrons. As Ksileth craned her neck to see over the mob, she noticed that one of the fighters wore the blue and silver dress uniform of her ship's personnel. She scowled and pushed her way through the crowd of drunken, laughing onlookers.

As her crewman staggered back from a blow, she grabbed his shirt at the neck and yanked him backwards. "What in the name of Chaos is going on here?" she exploded.

The crewman whirled around, furious, then gaped as he recognized her. He shrank. "Uh, Commander---"

"Shut up." Ksileth pointed an accusing finger at her crewman's opponent, who was apparently a civilian. "You, the tall one with the stringy hair. Do you know the penalty for brawling?"

The man brushed himself off and stood up straight, trying to regain his dignity. "I was engaged in a Challenge," he said stiffly.

"Not anymore you're not." Ksileth put her hands on her hips and looked around the bar. About half the audience had mysteriously disappeared. There was broken glass, and liquid underfoot; and a man, probably the barkeep, was

walking around grimly tallying the mess.

Ksileth turned on her crewman angrily. "Thamil, you're the poorest excuse for a Navigator I've ever seen. Get back up to the ship and put yourself on report. I'll deal with you later."

"Yes, sir," said the crewman feebly.

Ksileth glanced at the 'civilian' now leaning on the counter. "You! You, insolent rabble-rouser, are coming to Base Security with me."

"Whatever you say. . . Commander," answered the man with mocking politeness.

The barkeep came over, stepping nimbly over bottles. "Trouble-maker," he hissed at the fighter.

"Barkeep, I'm *Kfar* Ksileth Rafkalehmaras, in temporary command of the Warship *Kentak*," declared Ksileth. "I don't know what happened here, but I can assure you that you'll be amply repaid for the trouble that's been caused you."

"I'd better be. I've lost over four hundred *rieshi* worth of liquor," said the barkeep in a surly tone. "This one--" he pointed at the civilian, who raised his eyebrows disdainfully in response--"this one fights like a demon. The first I knew of the fight was when I saw this scoundrel pouring the contents of a bottle over the other one's head. Then he hurled the bottle across my bar."

Ksileth gave the brawler a look. "Come with me," she said, biting down hard on each word.

Once out of the bar, Ksileth set a brisk pace. She cast angry glances at her charge as they strode down the main corridor that connected the recreation area with the administration center of the base complex. The man, who was keeping up without seeming to try, looked like the most common of roughnecks. Long, curly hair trailed down to his shoulders. He wore well-used workclothes. His shirt, a blue short-sleeved rag, had a design on it, and bore red characters that spelled out 'A-ch-i.'

She caught his attention. "What's that stand for?" she snapped, pointing a finger at the design on his shirt. "'*Achichik*'--'swamphead'?"

"No," said the 'civilian,' and had gall enough to chuckle.

Outside the Base Security Commander's office, Ksileth stopped and looked balefully at her companion. "You'd better produce a good explanation, or you're likely to spend a long, long time in jail."

"I believe you're making a mistake," said the man politely. "It was Challenge agreed upon by both parties. There's no law against that on any base."

Ksileth, ignoring him, gestured at the door. "After you."

The man shrugged and went in.

Ksileth spent the next fifteen minutes or so trying to explain what had

happened. The Security Officer, a harried, busy man with other things on his mind, listened impatiently. "The punishment for brawling is a month in prison or a thousand *rieshi* fine," he said tiredly. "It happens often enough here, Commander, so there's no need to get so agitated."

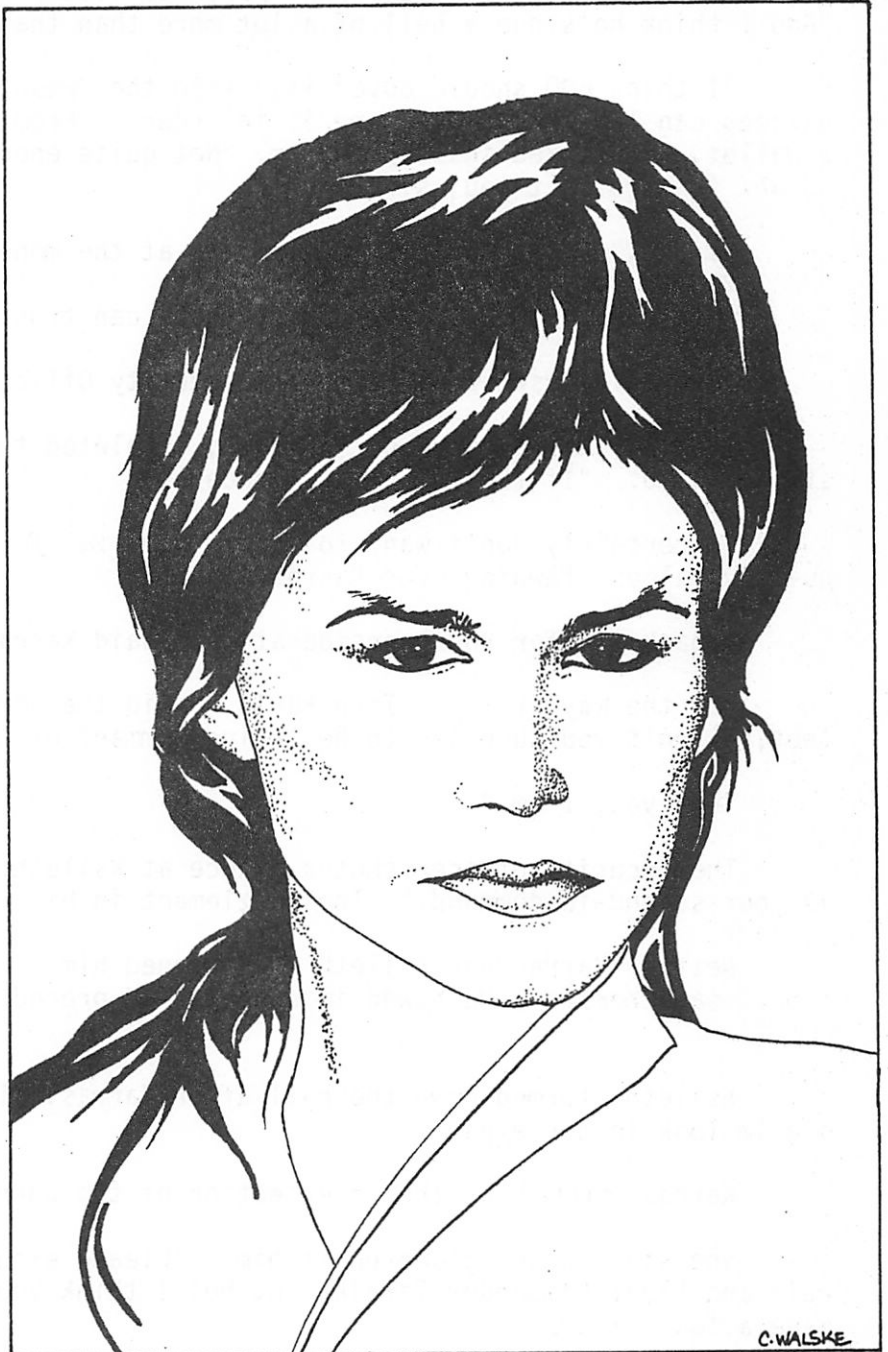
Ksileth, mad enough to spit blood, just glared. "Since I don't think this man has the price of a drink on him," she said haughtily, "you'd better lock him up."

"I'll pay the fine," volunteered the malefactor quietly. "Do you want cash?"

Ksileth looked at him in shock. Something in the back of her mind was screaming a warning. The man's demeanor here was totally at odds with his earlier behavior and looks.

"I have to fill out the proper form," said the Security Officer, sounding even more tired and harassed than before. He opened a drawer in his desk, pulled out a folder, and took out a blank form. "Your name?"

"Karras Taralkarin Tertemisar," said the man cheerfully.



Ksileth choked. The Emperor's son! She glanced around for a hole to sink into.

The Security Officer looked suddenly interested. "Will 'Karras Taralkarin' do?" he inquired. "The full name's too long for my form."

"I think it'll be recognizable enough," assured Karras. From the lilt in his voice and the quirk in the corners of his mouth, Ksileth realized sourly that he was thoroughly enjoying himself.

The Security Officer extracted a few more details from Karras, then glanced up at Ksileth. He, too, was smiling. "What was the extent of the damage?" he asked.

"The barkeep said 400 *rieshi* worth of liquor had been lost," snarled Ksileth. "And I think he's due a hell of a lot more than that."

"I think 600 should cover it," said the *Ormen's* son casually. "Of course, the barkeep can let me know if more is in order." From his back pocket, he pulled out a wallet, and looked inside. "H'mm. Not quite enough. You did mention a thousand *rieshi* fine, didn't you, sir?"

"I did," said the officer, looking at the money with pleased anticipation.

"I'll have to give you a check. You can trust me for the amount, I hope?"

"Oh, of course, sir," said the Security Officer pleasantly.

"Good." Karras made out a check, completed the form and signed it, then straightened. "If that's all, Commander---"

"I certainly don't want to detain you, *Vakkfar* Taralkarin," said the officer quickly, almost fawning over Karras.

"Thank you for your consideration," said Karras kindly.

"By the way, *Vakkfar* Taralkarin," said the Security Officer, getting to his feet, "aren't you supposed to be taking command of the *Kentak*?"

"Why yes, I am."

The Security Officer shot a glance at Ksileth. "Then *Kfar* Rafkalehmaras here is your second-in-command." The puzzlement in his voice was very plain.

Neither Karras nor Ksileth enlightened him. "I believe she has that distinction," said Karras. He bowed impeccably and preceded Ksileth out the door.

Ksileth stormed down the hall after Karras, lips pressed together in anger, a grim look in her eyes.

Karras halted at the intersection of two corridors. "*Kfar* Rafkalehmaras---"

She stopped and glowered at him. "Please excuse me for saying so, Imperial Heir and Fleet Commander Taralkarin, but I think you're an obnoxious wretch! You made a fool of me."

"Then we're even," said Karras, smiling. "In interrupting my Challenge, you made a fool of me."

Ksileth saw the sense of that, but she wasn't about to admit it. "Why didn't you tell me who you were?" she demanded.

"I still would have had to go down to Base Security, wouldn't I?"

"Yes, but---" Ksileth's voice trailed away. She was gazing down at his midriff in horrified fascination. "I just realized what the 'A-ch-i' stands for," she

said uncertainly, and looked up into his face.

"It's short for 'Achirinos,'" said Karras helpfully. "My name---"

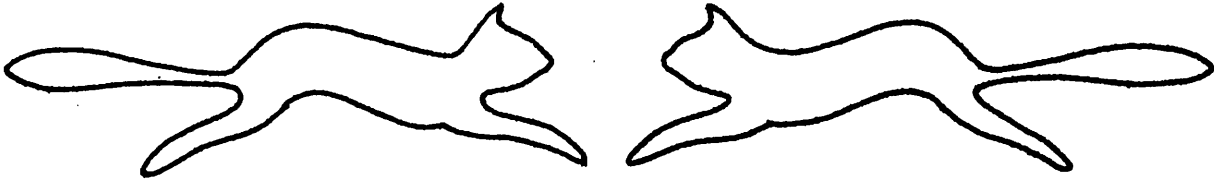
"Your heritage-name when you become the next *Ormen*. Yes, sir, I know." Ksileth sighed heavily and fell silent, realizing that she should have stayed in bed that day.

"*Kfar*, if you'll excuse me, there are some belongings in my base quarters that I should retrieve. Then I'd like to come aboard the *Kentak*."

"Naturally, sir," said Ksileth dully. "We'll be on hand to receive you with the highest honors, *Vakkfar* Taralkarin."

"Thank you. Until later, *Kfar*." Karras gave her a parting glance, then strode off down the corridor briskly.

"Miserable bastard," muttered Ksileth, and made ready to return to her ship.



Ksileth and a few other crewmembers were on hand to welcome the new *Vakkfar* aboard. She made the formalities as brief as possible and the group dispersed.

"*Kfar*, there are a few things I'd like to discuss with you," called Karras to Ksileth as she was about to walk away. "A few matters to clear up before the change-of-command ceremony tonight."

"Yes, sir," said Ksileth stiffly.

Two junior crewmen, carrying the luggage, followed Karras and Ksileth to the *Vakkfar*'s quarters. At his request, they put his belongings down by the closet. They saluted, and left.

"We can talk while I unpack," said Karras, tearing open a box.

"Whatever you say, sir," said Ksileth morosely, taking a seat.

Karras stopped what he was doing and looked at her directly. "You haven't forgiven me for this afternoon's incident, have you?"

"Not really," answered Ksileth honestly.

"Then take your revenge, and let's be done with the matter," said Karras, smiling a little.

Ksileth almost smiled back, despite herself. She got up, looked the *Vakkfar* dead in the eye, and slapped him across the face. "Thank you, sir."

Karras grimaced. "You're welcome, *Kfar* Raf--" He stumbled on the last name. "Excuse me," he said politely. "Rafkalehmaras."

"You needn't pronounce it as if it were a disease," remarked Ksileth caustically, unable to repress the insult in her voice.

"It's not one of the more well-known domains," said Karras, taking no notice of her irreverent tone. "Where is it, anyway?"

"Your ignorance is showing, sir. The *Ormen*'s son should know better," Ksileth said. "We're a far southern house--famed for our wine."

"Yes, of course!" Karras looked at her with new interest. "Rafkalehmaras wine. I should have realized. Tell me, is it true that you all have grapes in your beds?"

"I beg your pardon, *Vakkfar*?" Ksileth stared at him, eyes wide. She said, with a straight face, "No. Only pits."

Karras looked at her in disbelief, then turned away, his shoulders shaking in silent merriment.

Ksileth felt greatly relieved. She'd hardly expected the new *Vakkfar*, much less the *Ormen*'s son, to have a sense of humor. Her estimation of Karras began to rise--slowly.

They fell to discussing the ship and the crew. Ksileth came to appreciate his knowledge and insight as they talked together. Perhaps he was overly proud and stubborn, but he was also--and his record confirmed it--an excellent commander.

Karras finished unpacking, at least for the moment. He sat down at the table across from Ksileth. "Now, *Kfar*, I expect you to fill me in on all the latest goings-on in the military. If you don't already know, I've just come back from the Federation."

"How was the exchange program, sir?" Ksileth asked with interest. "Are the *Federen* all as barbaric as is said?"

"Not all of them," said Karras, smiling. "My tour of duty had its good points. But a couple of things were particularly intolerable: the food, sex. . ."

"My sympathies, *Vakkfar*," said Ksileth sincerely. She leaned forward, and in a confidential tone, began, "Well, the latest scandal in the military is. . ." She proceeded to tell him several stories, which were all the more incredible because they were true.



The *Vakiakirs Kentak* (the Warship Mountain-Cat) went on its way. In spite of a few minor problems of adjusting to the new commander, the crew settled down very quickly. They returned to their normal pursuit of inventing novel and devious ways to pass the time enjoyably.

The *Vakkfar*, of course, had little time for such diversions. He spent his first days on board acquainting himself with his new charges.

Needing a certain report, he showed up one day in front of Ksileth's office, and buzzed for entry. When no answer came, he went in. His second-in-command wasn't there.

He stared at the surroundings in amazement. "Someone as messy as I am," he declared out loud, admiring the three-dimensional sculpture of books, stacks of paper, and miscellaneous objects arranged on her desk and wall shelves.

Upon approaching the desk, he noticed a piece of paper lying on the commu-net. He glanced at it briefly, then did a double-take as the words written there registered.

It was a poem. A poem about him. He picked up the paper and read aloud carefully,

"The *Vakkfar* is in command;  
The *Vakkfar* rules with an iron hand.  
The *Vakkfar* thinks he's got so much class;  
The *Vakkfar* deserves a kick in. . ."

Karras stopped. He put the paper down, hit a button on the commu-net, and bellowed "Ksileth!"

His second-in-command came on, sounding distinctly taken aback. "Sir?"

"This is the *Vakkfar*, Ksileth," said Karras, taking great care to enunciate his words with the proper ferocity. "I want to see you--in your office. Immediately."

"Yes, sir." Ksileth switched off and sat where she was for the moment, looking perplexed and alarmed.

As she walked into her office and recognized what Karras was holding, her fears were confirmed. She swallowed hard. "Yes, *Vakkfar*?"

"Am I correct in assuming that you are the author of this piece?"

"Yes, sir." She looked at him, wondering what method of punishment he favored. There was a ruler on one side of her desk, and a heavy book. . .

"Then I'd like you to sign the poem and give me a copy," said the *Vakkfar* calmly.

Ksileth gaped at him. "Sir?"

"For a person who uses words so well in writing, you don't seem to



understand even the simplest command," said Karras impatiently, hiding a smile.

"Sir, I don't understand---"

"Just do it." Ksileth took the paper from him. "Do I really deserve to be kicked?" inquired Karras amusedly.

Ksileth retreated to familiar ground. "Since you ask--yes, you do."

"By all means, then, go ahead and try."

Ksileth saw that he was laughing, gave in, and laughed with him. "You're not angry--" she said hesitantly.

"A little disrespect is refreshing," remarked Karras cheerfully. "In my position, I too often get the bowing and scraping, the hand-kissing and servile flattering types. I like you, Ksileth. You're honest."

Ksileth stared at him, experiencing a sudden and uncomfortable reversal of all her feelings about Karras. "You're an unusual man, *Vak-kfar* Taralkarin," she said, slowly and thoughtfully.

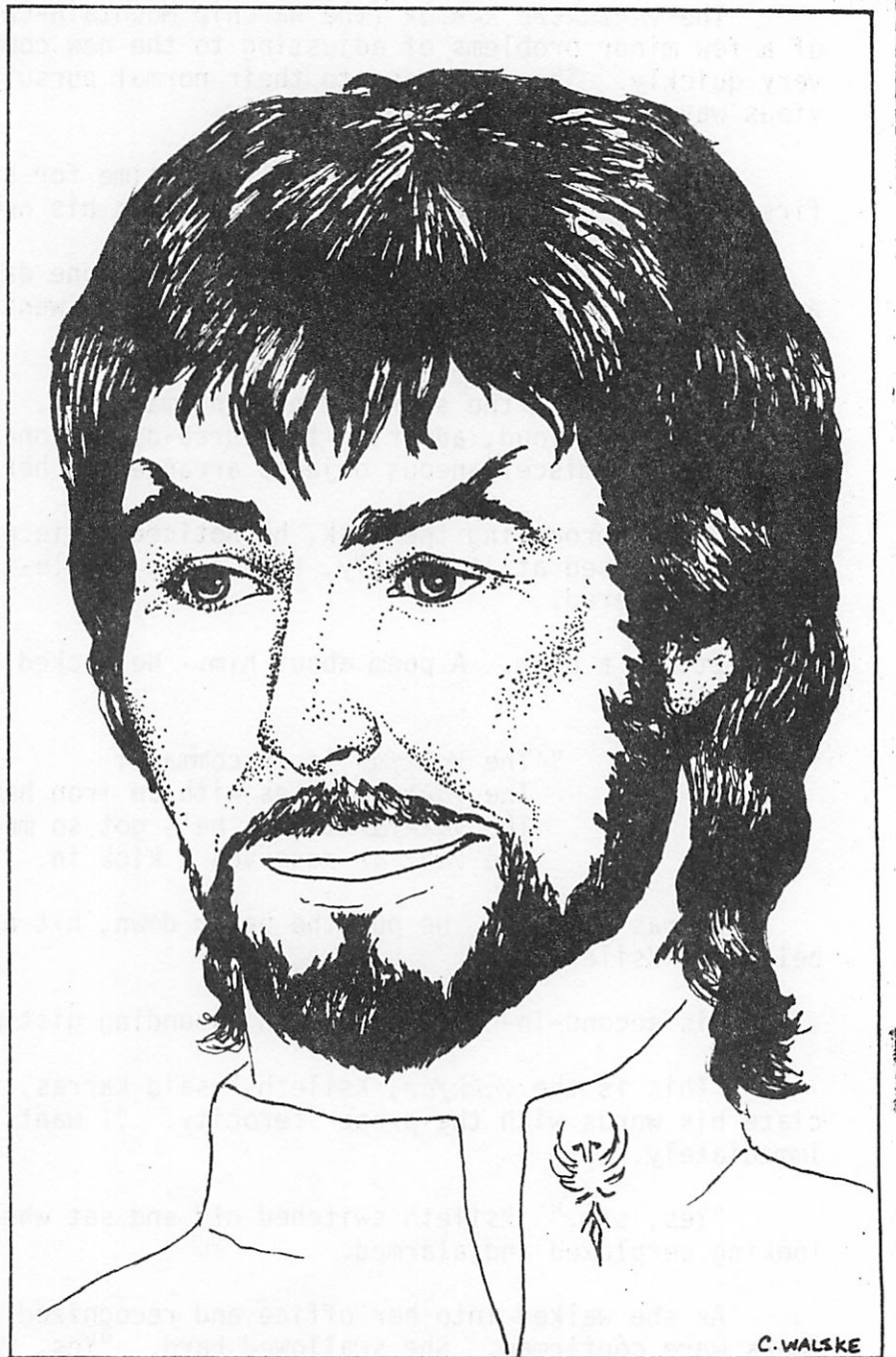
"What did you intend to do with this poem, Ksileth?"

She looked at him, and let her sense of humor get the better of her. "Actually, I was thinking of sneaking up, pinning it on your nose, and running off shouting the warcry, 'Harak Harai!'"

Karras laughed. "The Phantom Poet strikes?"

"At the worst times and in the worst places," Ksileth assured him.

"I'll look forward to it. Remind me to sharpen my sword, and keep it near at hand."



"Yes, *Vakkfar*." Ksileth grinned, feeling positively exuberant. "And I'll be pleased to give you a copy of the poem, if you're sure you really want it."

"I can always use it as blackmail," Karras commented.

Ksileth winced. She took a step toward the door, remembering her duties on the bridge. "Did you want anything else, sir?"

"Yes. I actually came here to look at your previous commander's Final Report."

Ksileth promptly dug out the report, and handed it to him. "Here, sir." She went to the door, and stopped to smile at him. "May I say, *Vakkfar*, that I'm very glad to see that you are one of us."

"Hush," hissed Karras. "I have my dignity and my reputation to maintain."

After two weeks of the new *Vakkfar*, Ksileth had several comments to make:

"Achi is a funny name.  
Achi likes to play a game:  
He pretends he is not he  
To see whom he can trap--like me.

Achi has a funny shirt.  
Achi's always covered with dirt.  
He pretends he's just like us;  
But if we agree, he makes a fuss.

Achi is the *Ormen*'s son.  
Achi's always number one.  
He pretends he doesn't care,  
But his rank's even sewn on his underwear."

She sent a copy to the *Vakkfar*, of course, who immediately challenged her to a duel--practice fighting down in the gym. They battled, thrust and parry, blade to blade, until both were ready to drop. They discovered that they were both 7th Level Swordmasters of equivalent skill. Their friendly duel ended in a draw, and added to their mutual respect.



As time went on, Ksileth realized that her outlook and the crew's morale had never been better. The *Vakkfar*, who'd taken the trouble to get to know each member of the crew, was greatly admired and even cherished. Ksileth had to admit that she, too, cherished the *Vakkfar*, although perhaps not in the same way as the rest of the crew.

Their first sharing came naturally, as if both of them had been waiting for the proper moment. One evening, after a long day of working together on reports in the *Vakkfar*'s office, they looked at each other and grinned simultaneously. "It's getting late," said Ksileth.

"Yes, it is." Karras gazed at her with a warm glow in his eyes. "Why don't you stay with me tonight, Ksileth, and share my bed?"

Ksileth smiled. "You just beat me to the invitation. Thank you, Achi."

"I like that name, 'Achi,'" said Karras, joyous now that she'd met his gesture.

Ksileth came toward him and slipped her arms around him and up his back. "Ksileth--" Karras paused. "No, I've got a better name for you." Ksileth looked up at him, expecting the worst. "I shall call you 'Ksiki.'"

"Thank you." They laughed together; another barrier of privacy had fallen aside. "Come," said Ksileth, and pointed at the door.

Ksileth woke in the middle of the night. She gingerly extricated herself from Karras' arms, which were wrapped possessively around her.

Feeling wide awake, she sat up. She looked at Karras, and was just able to discern his face and the unruly hair falling across his forehead. Gently she reached out to touch his face.

Suddenly she grinned as an idea struck her. Ksileth reached over Karras to find the pad and pen that she'd noticed he kept by the bed, and wrote busily.

Karras woke at the sound of tearing paper. He pushed himself up on one arm and blinked at the dark. "Ksiki?"

"I'm here," said Ksileth absently.

A few moments passed as Karras tried to fathom what was going on. Finally, in a dry voice, he said, "Ksileth, don't you ever think of anything but poetry?"

Ksileth, quite adept at writing in the dark, finished rewriting her poem and put the pad on the ledge behind the bed. She recited happily,

"The *Vakkfar* is a weary man;  
The *Vakkfar* performs as long as he can.  
The *Vakkfar*'s work is never done;  
The *Vakkfar* is a lot of fun."

Karras laughed. "That's one of your best so far. You have many talents, Ksiki."

"I don't know why, *Vakkfar*, but you motivate me to write poetry."

"I'm not sure whether that's a compliment or an insult," muttered Karras. He pulled her against him and bit her softly on the neck.

"Mmm," said Ksileth. Concentrating hard, she ignored him as he renewed his attack. She spoke into the darkness, thoughtfully.

"The *Vakkfar* is snarling and scowling;  
The *Vakkfar* is cursing and howling.  
The *Vakkfar* is bright and witty;  
The *Vakkfar* is just a big kitty."

"Rrrrngrowf," commented her partner as he sunk in both claws and teeth.

After a pleasant interlude spent in exploring one another's skills, they nestled together, contented and relaxed. Karras lightly caressed the outlines of her cheekbone and brows. "You inspire me," he said softly.

"So I noticed."

"No, I mean you inspire me to try a poem myself."

Ksileth moaned quietly. "I didn't know you could write poetry."

"I can't. But I'm getting envious of your clever words."



Ksileth tried to show astonishment. "Well, then, *Vakkfar*, please go ahead and create."

Karras pulled away from her, shifting onto his right side. Resting his head on his right elbow, he stared at the dim contours of his bedmate. "I swear/It's not fair. . ." he began, thought furiously, and went on. "Ksiki can rhyme/In measured time---"

"That's very good, Karras," broke in Ksileth.

"Hush. Don't interrupt the Master." Karras frowned and continued uncertainly, "I can't make/Cake rhyme with bake/I don't know how to say/What I want to relay. . ." his voice trailed off.

The pause stretched out into a long silence. "Yes?" said Ksileth hopefully.

"And it's too much trouble to try," finished Karras and chortled.

"Nasty beastly bastard," growled Ksileth, and hugged him.

The next morning, the *Vakkfar* found a missive affixed to his mirror. He read, with growing amusement:

'Last night the *Vakkfar* winked at me;  
I think he's seen past my poetry.  
He knows I've watched him from afar;  
I'm trying to catch the *Vakkfar*.'

Later that day, Karras couldn't resist making a remark to Ksileth as they encountered each other in the hall. "Declaration of Intent to Challenge, Ksileth?"

"Sir?"

"The, ah, message you left in my quarters."

Ksileth grinned and looked him straight in the eye. "Yes. I Challenge you for your life and your heart."

Karras bowed. He said formally, with a small smile, "I accept your Challenge, Ksileth Rafkalehmaras. It will be an honor to meet you in battle."

"An honor and a privilege for me as well," Ksileth answered, returning his bow. "And may both of us win."

A week or so later, Karras came into Ksileth's office, frowning. "Ksileth---"

"I already know why you're here," she interrupted. "You've been summoned home by your father."

Karras looked at her blankly. "How could you possibly have learned---" He broke off and shook his head. "No, no, I'd better not ask. Information travels faster than light on this ship."

Ksileth left her desk and walked to within arm's length of him. She looked up into his face. "It'll be boring without you, Achi."

Karras raised his eyebrows at her. "So why don't you come along?"

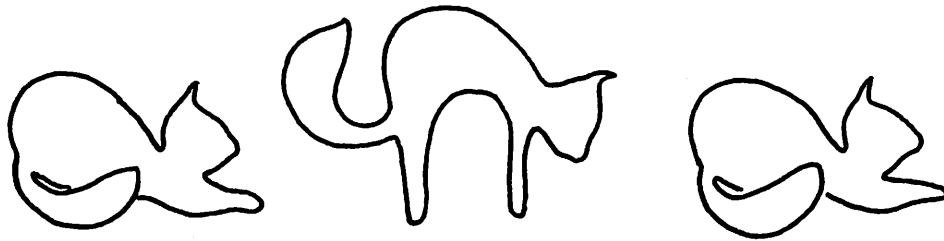
Ksileth drew back. "That's impossible. The commander and the second-in-command can't---"

"That has nothing to do with it. You just don't want to meet my father." Ksileth swallowed and avoided meeting his gaze. "You will have to, someday, you know," added Karras. "Before I ever formally make you my *karushir*, my life-sharer, for instance."

Ksileth yelped. "What?"

"You heard me." Karras took a step toward the door. He grinned at her. "Don't get into any trouble, Ksileth. Be seeing you."

Ksileth felt like running out after him and accosting him in the hall, but she restrained herself. She sat down again, a silly, mad grin on her face. 'Me?' she asked herself wonderingly. 'Life-sharer of the heir to the *Ormenel*? Impossible.' He had hardly walked out the door, but already Ksileth wished his leave was over.



"Good morning, Ksileth," said Karras as he came aboard. "Have you been good while I was away? Did anything happen?"

"Not much," she assured him, her face radiantly innocent. "Just a lot of routine work."

"Mmph," said Karras, gloomily, not liking the reminder of work. "I'll be in my quarters, Ksileth," he said wearily, yawning, "catching up on the time-zone difference."

"Yes, sir," said Ksileth. She thought about what his reaction would be when he walked into his cabin and suppressed a giggle. "Welcome back, *Vakkfar*."

Karras shot her a suspicious glance. He shook his head and strode off down the corridor.

On the bridge, the communit beeped. Ksileth punched the button. "Bridge."

Karras came on, sounding frustrated. "Ksileth?"

"Yes, *Vakkfar*?"

There was an edge of barely controlled annoyance in Karras' voice as he spoke: "Ksileth, I've got a problem. . ."

"A problem, sir?"

"Stop sounding like a cloudheaded half-wit! I know you're behind this. Send someone from the Bio-Lab to my quarters."

"The Bio-Lab, sir?"

The roar that came through the intercom effectively squelched further conversation. Ksileth smiled contentedly, and returned to work.

Karras grew increasingly irritable as a week passed. A number of acid exchanges with Ksileth helped not at all.

Karras didn't look up as Ksileth walked into his office. "I've got my Monthly Report done, sir," she said.

"You're early this month," said Karras sourly.

"There wasn't much to report," Ksileth remarked. "Things were so quiet while you were gone--and you've only been back a few days---"

"Really? It feels like an epoch."

"Epic, not epoch," muttered Ksileth to herself.

Karras pointed an accusing finger at her. "You still haven't solved my 'problem,' *Kfar*," he said. "And though I can't prove it, I know you caused it."

"I would never think of causing you trouble, sir," said Ksileth demurely. "I'm here to work only for your welfare." She leaned over and slipped the plastic-covered report under Karras' hand. "Pleasant reading, *Vakkfar*."

"Out," Karras growled. He glared at the door as it closed behind her. Then, for lack of something better, he opened Ksileth's report.

The foreword gave him a small taste of what was to come. He read the line, ". . . a novel and intriguing approach--a departure from the routine format. . ." and sighed.

The next page was titled simply, 'The Epic of the Eeps.'

#### THE EPIC OF THE EEPS

An eep lay down upon its nest.  
It thought to get a little rest.  
Another eep was resting, too--  
the next month, there were quite a few.

She kept the place all nice and neat  
and didn't worry about the heat,  
for she'd found the perfect nest:  
the *Vakkfar*'s dress uniform--only the best.

Now eeps are small and soft and nice;  
they're rather clean, and smell of spice,  
and deep within their velvet paws  
are hidden tiny little claws.

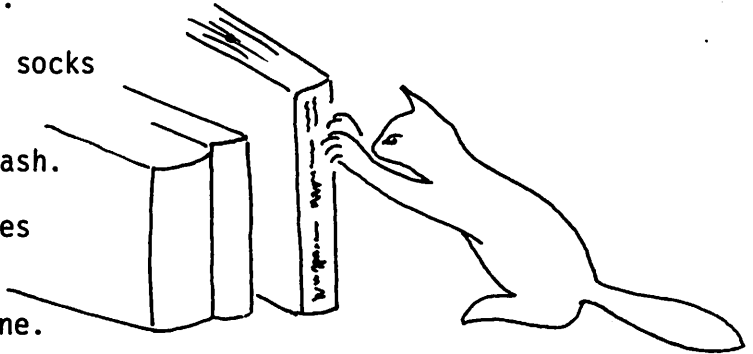


And so it was when they moved on,  
the shirt was frayed, the pants were worn.  
The shirt was now a furry bed--  
newborn eeps are apt to shed.



The *Vakkfar* from leave returned.  
It was not long before he learned  
that a pride of eeps had made themselves  
at home on bed, and desk, and shelves.

They'd learned to chase his balled-up socks  
and swat his medals into a box  
that once had held his extra cash,  
but now held pens, a ring and some trash.



They'd learned to pounce upon his shoes  
and knew just which books to choose  
to sharpen teeth and claws upon--  
his training manual was completely gone.



Now the eeps were happier still  
with shoes that walked around to kill.  
They launched themselves at the *Vakkfar*'s feet  
as though they had nothing better to eat.

They climbed his legs and hugged his thighs;  
they purred with little eeplet sighs.  
The *Vakkfar* was at a loss--  
the eeps had let him know who was boss.

And so the *Vakkfar* went to sleep--  
on each arm and leg, a little eep,  
and one on his chest, and one on his head:  
it was a very crowded bed.



In the morning he tried again  
to lure the eeps out of their den..  
He tried to give them all away,  
but none of the crew would save his day.



The *Vakkfar*'s been back a week.  
He's looking pale, and tired, and bleak.  
The family of eeps has won so far.  
Welcome home, *Vakkfar*!



Karras soon found it in his heart to forgive Ksileth. He had to. A copy of "The Epic of the Eeps" had made the rounds of the ship and everyone was feeling a bit more sympathetic toward his plight. It also produced some rather unique problems.

From the expression on Karras' face, it was clear that he was thinking hard. "Ksiki," he said presently, "yesterday the Communications Officer gave me a message--and it was rhymed and metered."

Ksileth's eyebrows tried to merge with her hairline as she absorbed that statement. "You can't be serious," she said.

"I am so. Your poetry is infectious." Karras gave her a sidelong glance. "So, I was thinking that you should propose a contest."

"A contest," repeated Ksileth blankly.

"The ship's paper, *The Cat's Meow*, could run it. Submissions open to everyone except you, Ksileth. You and I will be the judges."

"Of what?"

"The best *Vakkfar* poem, of course."

Ksileth moaned. It was plain that she didn't favor the idea. "Karras, I don't want to read one hundred and twenty-five horrible poems!"

"Afraid of the potential competition?" inquired Karras.

"Of course not, but---"

"Then it's settled. The author of the best piece will win. . ."

"An evening with the *Vakkfar*!" Ksileth broke in gleefully. She added quickly, "Contestants to be judged on the basis of their poetry only."

A notice went out in *The Cat's Meow*, and within two weeks Karras' desk was overrun with poetry. The response was excellent--over sixty entries of varying length, legibility, and quality. Karras and Ksileth set aside an entire evening to judge the poems.

Karras' eeps were fascinated and delighted by the poetry contest. They showed their approval by sitting on the piles of paper and leaving tooth marks in page corners.

Three of the six beasts quickly lost interest, once they discovered that poems weren't edible. But the two eeps that Karras had nicknamed Amik and Amak, after two mythological, prank-playing demons, stayed to join in the fun.

"Cursed animals," growled Karras as Amik scampered off with one of his pens. "Ksileth, whatever possessed you to give them to me, anyway?"

"Well, they keep you warm at night---"

"So do you."

"They bring luck---"

"Bad luck," snarled Karras.

"And every *Vakkfar* should have at least one eep, to give him something to smile at," finished Ksileth. Karras gave her a look that was half amusement, half sneer.

Karras leaned back in his chair, just before they waded into the piles of poems, and surveyed the paper-littered table. "Just think," he said complacently, "all these poems are about me."

"Not all of them are flattering," said Ksileth dourly.

Ksileth put down the tenth illegible entry, and stared at Karras with a peculiar expression on her face. "Judging by some of these poems. . ." she began, but hesitated.

"Yes?" Karras glanced up from his reading.

"Well. . ." Ksileth looked sidelong at him, and decided that she could get away with it. "Just how many people on this ship have you been to bed with, anyway?" she exclaimed.

Karras tried to look simultaneously surprised and pleased. "I beg your pardon, *Kfar*?"

"This one, for instance." Ksileth picked up a piece of paper and read:

"The *Vakkfar* likes little eeps;  
The *Vakkfar* likes crottled greeps.  
The *Vakkfar* is good in bed;  
The *Vakkfar* has a swelled head."

Ksileth picked up another one. "Or, there---

"The *Vakkfar* is drunk all day;  
The *Vakkfar* is on holiday.  
The *Vakkfar* is quite carefree;  
The *Vakkfar* wants to play with me."

Karras moaned. "Ksileth, you injure me. Those are terrible."

"The first one's very true," said Ksileth. "There're almost thirty of these. I repeat my original question: how many---"

"Not thirty," interrupted Karras in indignant tones. "Not even twenty, as a matter of fact."

"How about one person thirty times?" suggested Ksileth nastily.

"Rrrmmgh," snarled the *Vakkfar*.

They read on in silence, broken occasionally by a snicker or a moan. After a few minutes, Karras asked, "Ksileth, am I particularly weird?"

"No more than expected. Why?"

"I have five entries here which begin with 'The *Vakkfar* is very weird.' Here's two of them, both peculiar." Karras proceeded to read them out loud---

"The *Vakkfar* is very weird;  
The *Vakkfar* suddenly cheered.  
I don't know what I did to make it---  
The *Vakkfar* just said to fake it."

Ksileth groaned. "I'm not sure if I'm ready for it, but go ahead with the other," she said.

"The *Vakkfar* is very weird;  
The *Vakkfar* just disappeared.  
I'm not sure what he's gonna do---  
I hope I'm still living when he's through."

Ksileth shook her head in violent negation. "No, no, no! They ruined all the lines. It's too bad, because there are some wonderful things you can say beginning with 'The *Vakkfar* is very weird.'"

"Such as?" Karras asked skeptically.

Ksileth thought a moment, then recited spontaneously,

"The *Vakkfar* is very weird;  
With long shaggy hair and a scraggly beard.  
He always seems ready to pick a fight;  
He growls all day. . ."

Ksileth paused, watching Karras.

". . . but he purrs all night."

Despite himself, Karras grinned.

"I've got one for you," said Ksileth after another pause. "Take a look at this." She handed Karras a poem so loaded with vulgarities as to take one's breath away.

Karras handed it back after a moment. "Not even the Wargod Maraku in heat could perform---"

"Precisely."

The next entry Ksileth came to was a unique one. Most of the others were scribbled on shreds of paper, as if written furtively and in haste. This one, however, was neatly lettered and bore an illustration--a line drawing of a large, curly-haired bear with a ferocious expression. Ksileth read the poem that accompanied it and burst out laughing. "Achi, I've got a poem from someone who knows you very well."

Karras grabbed the paper and saw:

'The *Vakkfar* has a pretty nose;  
The *Vakkfar* has very cold toes.  
The *Vakkfar* has curly hair;  
The *Vakkfar* has the temper of a bear.'

Karras looked up indignantly. "What do you mean, 'cold toes'?"

"It's a good *Vakkfar* poem," insisted Ksileth, still chortling.

"I disagree. Now here's someone who shows the proper sentiment." Karras cleared his throat.

"The *Vakkfar* is handsome and smart;  
The *Vakkfar* is noble of heart.  
The *Vakkfar* does things that no one else can;  
The *Vakkfar* is a wonderful man."

"Sounds like someone's looking for a promotion," said Ksileth disparagingly. She lifted the entry out of Karras' hands and glanced at the name on the back of the paper. "The *Vakkfar*?" she asked incredulously. Karras looked sheepish.

"Achi, you are a wonderful commanding officer, and you will undoubtedly be a marvelous *Ormen*. You're even becoming a fair poet." Ksileth grinned at Karras and went on, "But you're a terrible judge of character."

She crumpled up his poem and threw it on the floor, to the delight of the eeps. They immediately pounced upon it and began tearing the paper ball into shreds.

Karras glanced down at the beasts. "Considering the number of rejects. . . I have a feeling that by the time we're done, I'll have a new rug--a white shag." Ksileth laughed, and they both resumed their reading.

Finally, they began to evaluate the poems kept as potential winners. Several more rejects joined the debris on the floor. The field was now considerably narrowed; only a half dozen or so remained.

"Let's go through them, and each pick out one or two favorites," Karras suggested. "I'm very fond of this one, for instance:

"The *Vakkfar* is warm at night;  
The *Vakkfar* has a very sharp bite.  
The *Vakkfar* tastes of cinnamon spice;  
The *Vakkfar* has a very high price."

Ksileth smiled smugly. "Yes, that is a nice one, isn't it?"

Something about her expression warned Karras. He looked at the back of the paper, but all it said was 'The Phantom Poet.' He looked at her and tapped his fingers on the table. "Ksileth, is this yours?"

"Whatever gave you that idea, *Vakkfar*?"

"You're not allowed to enter the contest. It's unfair."

"You entered."

Karras looked at her, half in exasperation, half in amusement. "The rules specifically stated that you couldn't enter. They didn't say anything about me. 'The Phantom Poet' indeed."

Ksileth bowed her head, graciously acknowledging her defeat. "This one is one of my favorites," she said. "In fact, it's so apt that it should be mounted and hung on your wall." Ksileth recited:

'The *Vakkfar* is big and strong;  
The *Vakkfar* is never wrong.  
The *Vakkfar* is bold and brave;  
The *Vakkfar* is a wily knave.'

"That one also sounds like one of yours, Ksileth," commented Karras.

"It isn't," said Ksileth. She gave him a quick appraising glance. "If you want to know, it's from the Navigator, the one you got into the fight with in that bar, before you came aboard."

"He's a better poet than he is a fighter," remarked Karras and put the poem aside. "That's a reject."

Ksileth looked up at him. "Then it has to be this one, Karras. Unquestionably." He leaned over her shoulder to look at the entry she was holding.

'The *Vakkfar* is a demanding beast;  
He always wants the best, at least.  
He likes good food and he likes good wine;  
And his women must be really fine.

The *Vakkfar* is an artful devil;  
He's always thinking on the highest level.  
He runs his ship as he runs his life;  
Everything must be as sharp as his knife.'

"Yes, I like that one too," Karras said, his tone highly amused. "I'd like to know who has such thoughts about me."

Ksileth turned the poem over and showed him the name. "I don't recognize it," said Karras, puzzled.

"She's one of the doctors. She's the ship's only 8th Level Swordmaster--and the only one who's ever beat either you or me in swordplay."

Karras grinned appreciatively, remembering. He said warmly, "I'll look forward to my evening with her."

Ksileth scowled at him, but marked 'The Winner' across the top of the poem.



Karras and Ksileth joined for a private dinner a few days after the end of the contest. Karras brought out some delicacies from his personal food-ward--bread, some meat, some expensive chocolate--and Ksileth brought fruit and wine. They looked at the fare arrayed on Karras' table and agreed that it would make a very fine dinner.

They ate in amicable silence for a while, enjoying the seclusion of their meal. It had been a very good day, and this evening their companionship seemed to be a perfect mixture of warmth and easy intimacy.

"I enjoyed my evening with the poetry contest winner," remarked Karras, smiling, speaking through a mouthful of bread and meat.

"I'm glad to hear it," said Ksileth agreeably. "Is she as good in bed as she is with a sword?"

"Really, Ksileth," said Karras reprovingly. "You have only one thought. For all you know, we could have talked about politics or the weather all night."

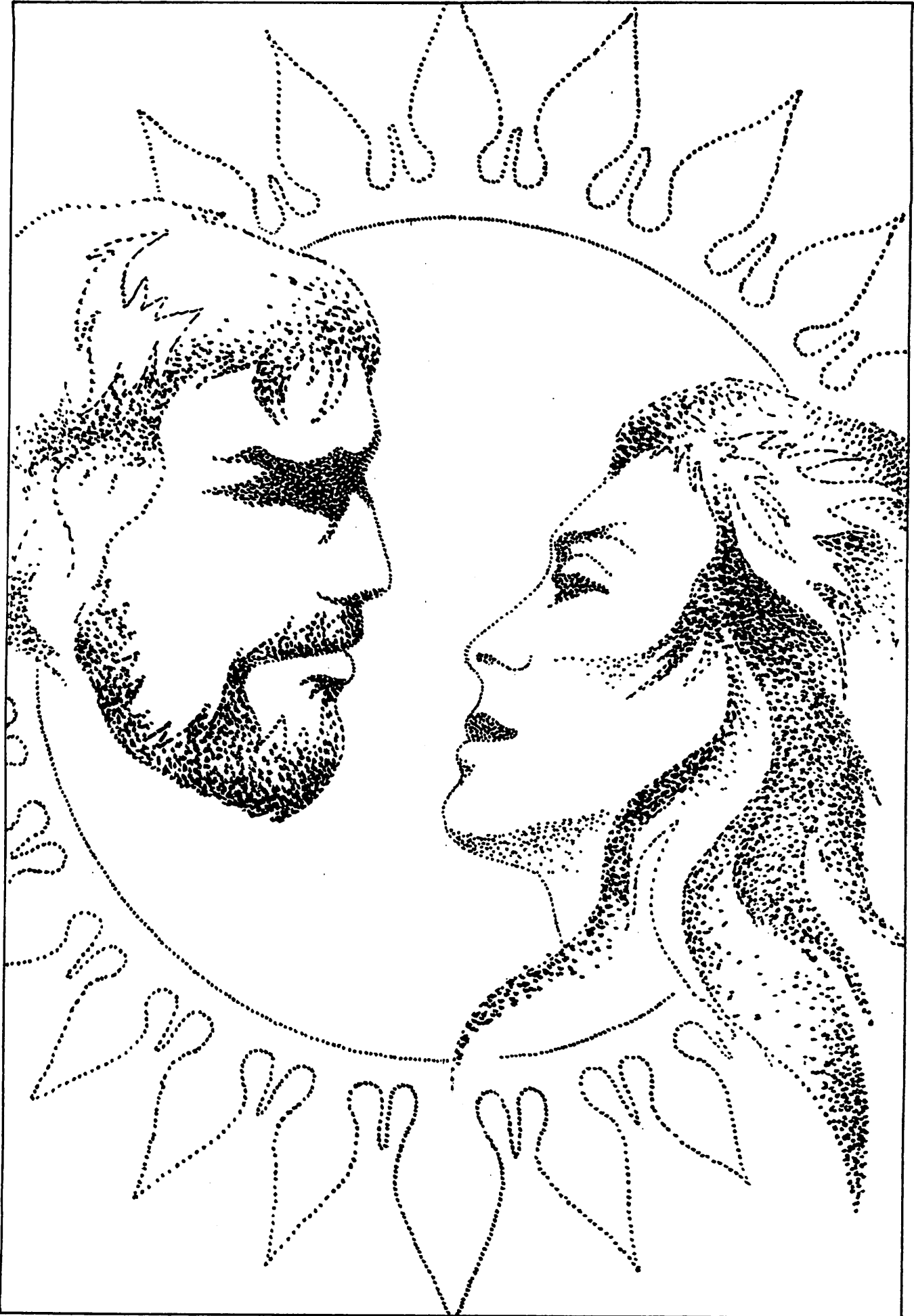
"I doubt it," said Ksileth cheerfully.

"H'mmmn." Karras helped himself to some more wine. "What I was trying to tell you is that, although I appreciated her, I found myself missing you, Ksiki."

"Why thank you, Achi." Ksileth reached across the table to take his hand in hers briefly.

"If you'd been allowed to enter, you would have won that poetry contest easily," said Karras. "Just as you won your contest with me."

Ksileth looked at him, puzzled. Karras only smiled and finished his glass of wine. Finally, he stood up, walked over to Ksileth and held himself at attention.



"I wish to declare End-of-Challenge, Ksileth," he said formally.

Ksileth rose and looked at him curiously. "Karras?"

With two outstretched fingers, Karras touched her in the center of her forehead, then took her hand in his and gently bit each fingertip. "You have won my heart," he said gravely. "I also give you my life."

Ksileth's expression of confusion cleared. "You have claimed my heart as well," she said, her face aglow with joy.

Karras glanced behind himself and picked up a small box he'd left on the table. She gave him a wondering look. From the box Karras took out a piece of jewelry. Ksileth, after a moment's hesitation, lifted her shoulder-length hair.

Karras carefully fastened the chain around her neck. "My gift for you, Ksiki. There."

Ksileth touched the pendant hanging at the base of her throat. She went to the mirror and saw a gold necklace of unusual design. A black stone bearing tiny gold flecks was set in the center of the design. "Karras, it's beautiful!"

"This is one of the symbols of my domain," said Karras intently. "I want you to carry it."

She looked up at him, her face troubled. "But I have nothing to give you in return. My domain is not a wealthy one, Karras."

"You have already given me more than I can repay," Karras said softly, his hand caressing her cheek. "Ksileth, you're a woman of many guises. Poet and wine-maker, commander and strategist, bed-partner and life-sharer. Who could ask for more?"

Ksileth smiled. "Your honesty and courtesy are disarming, Achi. I cherish you." She held her arms open wide, and pulled him in against her. "Me. And the Imperial Heir Karras Achirinos Taralkarin Tertemisar." She looked up at him and grinned wickedly. "Do you think you can tolerate being associated with so lowly a form of life as a Rafkalehmaras?"

"I think I can," said Karras, smiling indulgently. "Do you think you can stand sharing your *karushir* with all the *Ormenel*?"

"You'll still be my life-sharer," said Ksileth, with all the haughtiness she could muster.

Karras smiled with assured pride. Ksileth knew that look. It bore the fire, and the power and the grace that would assure his valor as the *Ormen*. It was that which made him the unique man he was.

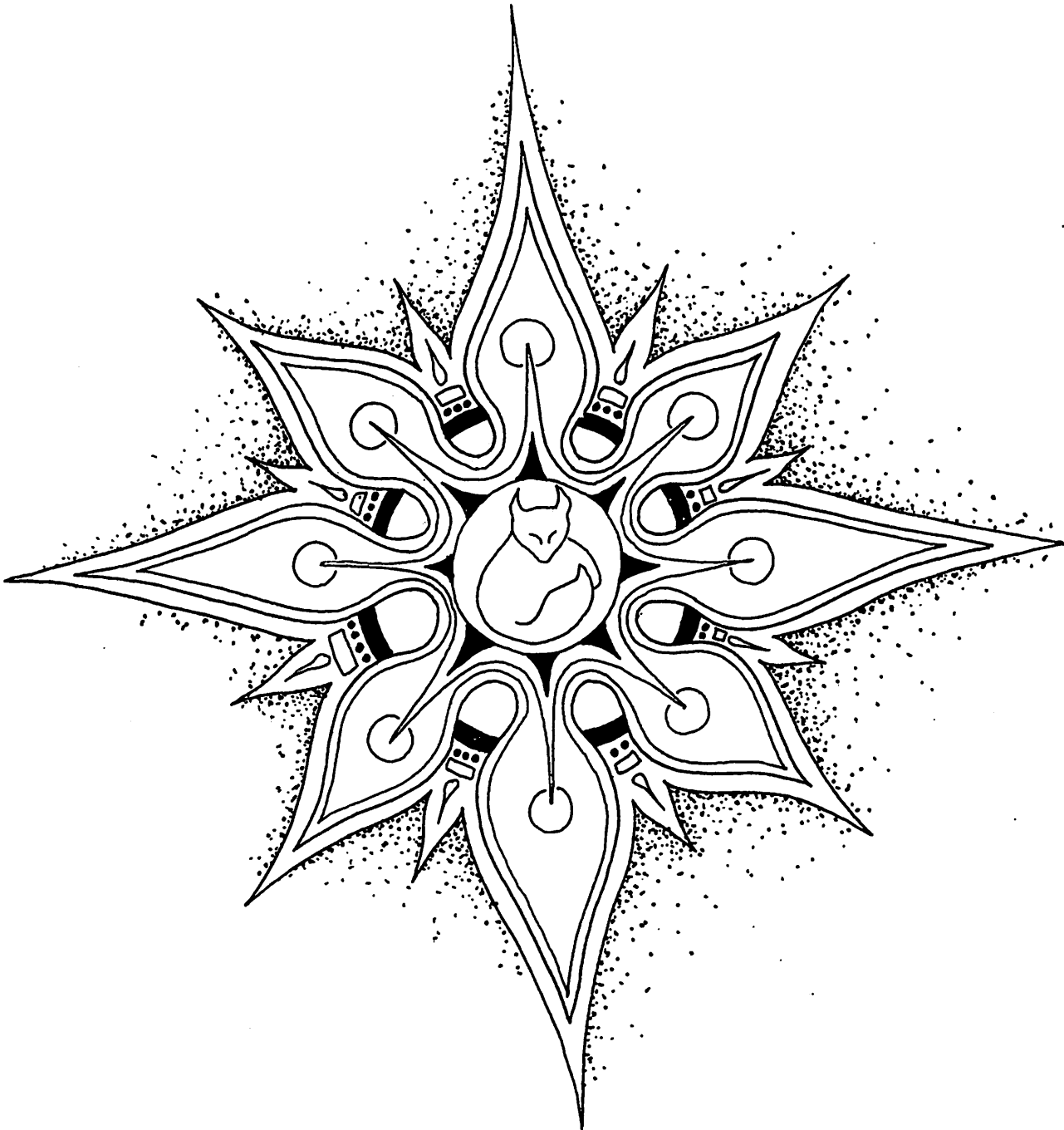
She glanced up at Karras. "I feel a poem coming on," she remarked with a laugh.



"How predictable," said Karras dryly. He put his arm around her shoulders.  
"But also how appropriate. Bind me with your poem, Ksileth."

Ksileth said softly,

"The *Vakkfar* is kind and sweet;  
The *Vakkfar* is really neat.  
The *Vakkfar* gives gifts and such;  
I love the *Vakkfar* very much."



# Deathblow

by Fern Marder and Carol Walske

The drum-beat was slow, resonant, and coincided exactly with the beat of the condemned's heart.

Mid-sun was drawing nigh. Knife-edged shadows crept over things and around things. The heat and the light shimmered, incandescently brilliant. The white sun Vinithir was alone in the sky.

The prisoner was standing, flanked by an escort of two guards. There also stood the drummer, who patted his stretched drum-skin lovingly, at times softly, at times forcefully.

The prisoner wore a plain beige overtunic, open at the neck, belted at the waist. He was barefoot. All his own clothing, his insignia, his decorations of honor had been taken from him. He stood very still. There was a look of timelessness on his face; he cast a circle of silent submission.

In front of him was a waist-high block of stone. Even in the sun's fire, the grey stone looked cold; very old, very forbidding. It had stood there through centuries of death.

Beyond the stone stood two men. One was the executioner, who stared at the moving shadows with an air of perfect indifference. A stocky man, he stood with feet well apart; the death-sword lay across his outstretched hands.

The *Ormen* Alargor, the executioner's master, waited next to him. He alone of the group was richly, elegantly dressed, in a tunic and tabard of shifting reds and whites and golds. There was a look of calm triumph on his strong, cunning face.

All of them awaited the passage of the sun. The prisoner's hair had been cropped close, baring his neck, and he could feel the nape of his neck

getting burned. He watched his shadow before him. The silhouette already rested partially on the block; when it fell full across it, his death-time would be at hand.

Kalim Alargor was also staring at the block. He raised his head and smiled gently at his victim. "Treachery and murder and rebellion against my *Ormenel*," he commented. "Those are your self-avowed crimes, *Emistarkan* Kothir."

Kor Kothir, hunter and warrior supreme, herald of the *Orashathnavi* revolution for honor, lifted his head. He strove to keep his expression empty. "I don't see them as crimes," he said steadily. "My only crime was in failing to kill you."

Alargor laughed at that. Grinning widely, he gestured to the executioner and the block. "What else do you have to say?"

In trying to think of an answer to the *Ormen*, Kor's mind turned back. A thousand images swarmed like sting-flies; all the twists of ill fortune and Chaos that had brought him to this dark fate.

\* \* \*

They ate their meal hurriedly, for neither one of the two was really thinking about food. Kor pushed his plate away with a gesture of finality and raised his wine cup to the woman across the small table.

"To life. . . and to you, Katni my love."

Katni Koerin, a tall woman with a proud, strong face and lovely dark eyes, smiled gently. There was a wicked twist to her smile. She raised her own glass in salute. "To your successes, Kor Alkarin. May your battles never be short nor easy."

Kor grinned, thinking she referred to the day's victory, which had been a hard-earned and long-hoped-for triumph. Alkarin's warband had returned to their stronghold to celebrate. They had brought huge casks of wine and strong ale up from the cellars. Soon, fires were blazing, food was cooking, and the wine was flowing more swiftly than blood. Kor and Katni had retreated upstairs, hoping for privacy and an intimate celebration.

Kor remarked lightly, "May our battles be always victorious. I'd like to win this revolution."

Katni smiled but made no comment. She put down her emptied wine cup and rose from the table. She came around his high-backed wooden armchair, and touched her hands lightly to his neck.

Kor leaned his head back against the chair. He grinned up at her and purred.

Still wearing that strange, almost sinister smile, she ran her fingers down his throat to his tunic. The tunic laced up at the neck with braided silk, and the ends were tied in a knot over the base of his throat. She pulled a string, and the knot came loose.

Kor inclined his head further back. He was laughing silently. His black

curls were in disarray over his forehead; his dark eyes were filled with a brilliance brought on by wine and the prospect of delight.

Slowly, Katni pulled the laces out of the eyelets. The tunic was of soft russet suede, warm and supple to the touch. The lacing undone, she let the ends dangle free from the last eyelet.

Kor had closed his eyes. His hands were gripping the ends of the chairarms and he sat very still.

Katni, enjoying herself, pushed aside the tunic and let her fingers wander through the fur and over his warm skin. It was very comforting, very relaxing. . . very sensual. She ran her fingernails over his chest and neck, and the sharp tickling sensation made Kor shiver.

Kor reached up and gently but firmly removed her hand from inside his tunic. He gave her an upward glance that spoke of both threat and promise. Then he pushed himself out of the chair, and took a few deliberate steps in her direction.

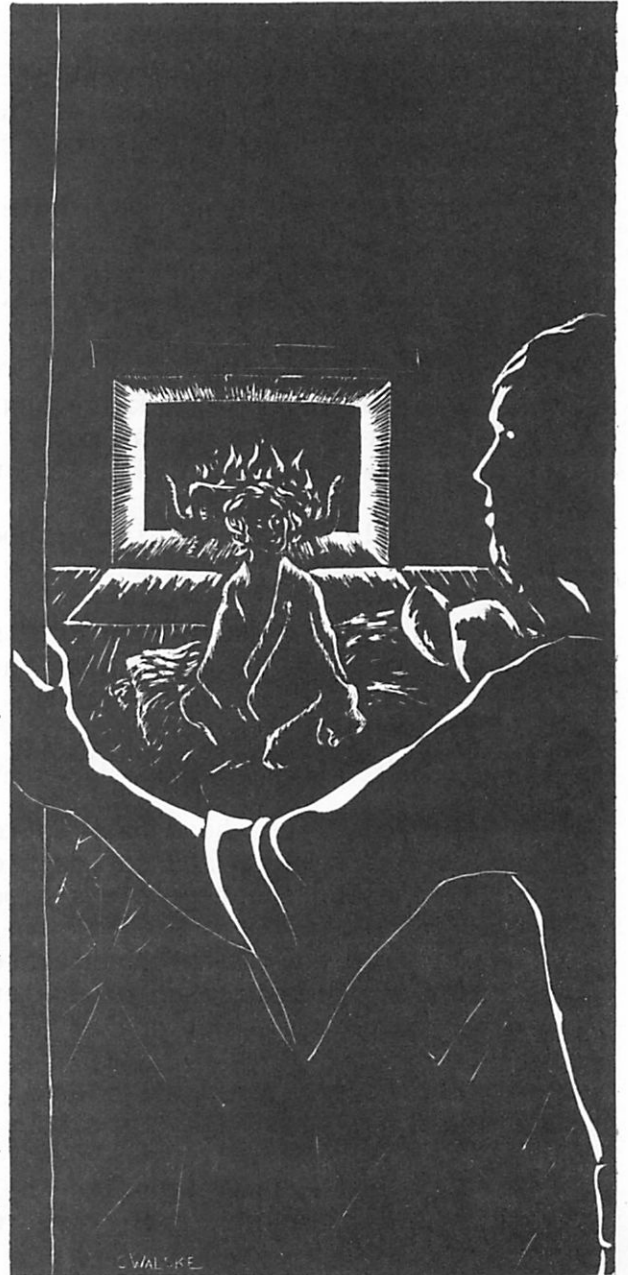
Katni grinned at him. She had cut her hair short for convenience, and the curls framing her face gave her an air of subtle, devious playfulness. She backed away from him and then ran out of the room.

Kor waited a moment, watching the doorway she'd left by. He reached back to the table, downed the last of his wine, and followed Katni.

He had few doubts as to where she'd gone. A smile touching the corner of his mouth, he strode down a corridor, not bothering about the doors that opened to left or right. Another corridor. . . and then, a closed door. He pushed the door open silently and stalked in.

Their retreat was a small room on the outer walls of the broad valley. The walls were of carefully fitted stones of varying tones of grey, beige, and dull red. A fire had been set in the fireplace, and a load of furs and blankets had been laid on the floor for a soft, warm bed.

Katni was sitting by the fireblaze, wrapped in a gold-flecked rust fur. She raised her eyes to watch his slow approach. As he came near, she got to her feet, holding the fur close about her.



The warlord reached out to take her in his arms. As she lifted her arms to meet his embrace, the fur fell away from her shoulders, and Kor drew in a sharp breath. She was naked. She laughed at the expression on his face, and reached to pull off his tunic.

Their lovemaking was neither tender nor sweet, but fierce, fierce as the day's battle. Both had triumphed over their enemies; now, they fought for victory over each other. Their wrestling was strong, passionate, and stirred their feelings to flame.

Katni was the first to seek her dagger and use it in their play. When wielded by skillful hands, the knife's point, like a fingernail, could stimulate; and the blade was cold and sleek. The danger and menace of the weapon only added a touch of fear and mystery to its allure.

For a while, after a peak of fire and emotion, they collapsed into each other's arms and lay as close as threads in fabric. Languorously, they continued their play. Need no longer drove them; desire and mood now directed their pleasure.

But Katni would not stay quiet long. Her spirits were high; she was almost savage in her delight. Aggressively, she wrestled with Kor. Kor, laughing, thinking it was a game, let her pin him on his back. He was captivated by her; his eyes and mind were delighted by her form and movements, by her moods and show of skills.

She snatched up her knife again and teased him with it. She was merciless--she'd discovered that he was more ticklish, more susceptible than she was. Their laughter grew, until the slightest word or look would bring forth further merriment.

Abruptly, Katni's knife slipped as she was tracing a gentle line across Kor's chest. Kor jumped as the knife bit him, and he made a reproachful sound.

"It's only a small scratch," said Katni. She gave him a measuring look, then lightly scratched him again with the blade.

"Stop it!" said Kor sharply, irritated that she'd broken their infectious joy. "Haven't you spilled enough blood today?"

She tossed her head back to keep the curls out of her face and smiled at him. She pushed herself up and sat down on his abdomen. She leaned forward a little. "You like seeing other people's blood," she remarked, "why not your own?"

Kor frowned. He propped himself up on his elbows and looked at her curiously. "If combining pleasure and blood-letting excites you," he said, "then find someone else to share with. Get off of me."

Her knees gripped his flanks. Suddenly, she thrust him back against the bed, and pinned his arms with her elbows. Her long dagger was at his throat.

Kor growled and struggled--helplessly. "Your games grow too violent for my taste," he said angrily. His eyes were bright and his breath came a little fast.

"It's no game," Katni said briefly. In the firelight, she looked like a dark beast ready to pounce. "Stop struggling! I want your surrender."

Kor hissed in sudden trapped rage. "I don't like your joke, Katni. You act like a starved she-cat with prey."

She made an abrupt vicious move with her knife, and Kor grunted in astonished pain. A gash below his collarbone welled red. "You see I mean what I say," she spat. "One move or word I don't like---and I'll kill you."

"Why?" he burst out, furious and bewildered.

"You're a fool, that's why!" Katni felt him gathering and tightening his muscles. She struck him in the throat with the side of her hand. His windpipe constricted, he coughed and choked.

"Don't even bother to try," Katni snarled. "I mean what I say--I will kill you."

Kor eyed her. Although confused and helpless, he tried to keep his wits. He realized he couldn't dislodge her--if he kicked her, or wrested his arms free, her knife would plunge forward into his throat.

Katni felt his resignation in the slight relaxing of his muscles and an indefinable look on his face. She smiled approvingly. "I didn't think you'd choose to die. Not you. Not while there's even a hint of a chance to escape."

Kor glared up at her, tense with shock and rage. "Why? What is your purpose?" he whispered.

She pressed the tip of her blade into his skin. "To destroy you," she said calmly. He made a sudden frenzied surge, and she savagely chopped at his windpipe again. His back arched as his body tried to convulse in pain. Tears ran from his eyes as he fought for breath.

Katni watched impassively. "Your dreams of honor and glory would destroy us all--but you don't see that. You forge ahead with talk of justice and honesty and harmony, forgetting all we've learned over a thousand years of war and conquest. You don't know the first thing about seizing and holding power.

"Your revolt's not even a year old and already you talk of final victory. You have a ragtag mob whose number is barely a tenth of the *Ormen* Alargor's forces. Most who once stood by you gave their loyalty back to the *Ormen* as soon as they saw your madness; those few who remain loyal to you are blinded by your words and promises--as you are blinded. In one move, with your capture, Alargor will kill the rebellion. He is the mastermind, and you are only an unruly child standing in his path."

Kor shook his head back and forth, as if trying to keep her words away. They stung and bit at him. "Only you would choose to take a man this way," he said venomously. "You tease me with pleasure, then attack. I should have remembered that watching you smile is like looking into a pit full of spears."

Katni backhanded him across the face. Kor snarled at her.

Katni turned her head. "Chanai! Theremir!" she called. The door opened, and in came two fighters from Alkarin's warband.

One of the two was Theremir Keorl, Katni's eldest son and one of Kor's closest friends. He was also the leader of Kor's intelligence force.

"Theremir," said Kor, his voice full of pain, "why do you betray me?"

Theremir, one of Alkarin's younger followers, had dark, vivid eyes. They flashed now in anger. "You're an idealistic fool," he said. "Chaos knows how you've come this far with your wild dreams. You're one in a million, Rebel Alkarin. . . a one-in-a-million aberration who should have been smothered at birth."

Katni didn't leave Kor time to respond. She turned to Theremir. "Before you tie him, get him dressed." Katni smiled to herself at the thought of taking Kor naked to Alargor. "Look through his clothing. He wears one knife in a neck-sheath and he has a throwing knife in his boot. Get rid of them."

Chanai moved silently to comply. After a few moments she came back, and tossed pants and tunic down beside Kor. She stood and surveyed him thoughtfully, giving him a cold, disdainful appraisal. "Is he good in bed, Katni?"

"Timid," said Katni succinctly. "He's scared of knife-play." She gave Kor a shove with her foot. "Get up."

Kor struggled and kicked and spat, just like a captured wildcat. They treated him with less respect than they would a hunted animal, taking a certain amount of delight in mastering one so strong. They forced his tunic and pants on.

Katni nodded in approval. "Bind his hands in front of him. Bind his feet, too, but leave a length of rope between them so that he can still walk."

Kor had never been in this position before--impotent, powerless. His sense of desolation ran deeper than ever it had during his long imprisonment on Salao. There, some independence had been left him, and a spirit of rebellious fury had helped him to survive and, eventually, to escape.

No defiance nor show of strong will would serve him here. He tasted hopelessness, and bitter fear.

Chanai continued to look him over, and noticed the ring on his right hand. "Say, Katni," she remarked, "what about his domain-ring? Surely he doesn't have the right to wear that."

"It doesn't come off," said Katni briefly. She turned her head to consider Kor. "Of course, we could cut it off."

Kor flinched. The ring was a symbol of his name and status in Domain Kothir. It had never come off in thirty-five years; not even when he went to Salao did his captors try to take it from him.

Katni came closer to Kor and looked him in the face. "You're not a Kothir anymore," she declared. "You gave up any and all rights to be a killing when you committed your treason. Yes, I will take it from you."

Kor strove futilely against his bonds. He tried to keep a begging tone out of his voice. "Please leave me the ring," he asked. "It's a small thing."

"If it's so small, why does it matter so much to you?" she jeered.

"You've already claimed my freedom and my life; must you claim my name and honor too?" cried Kor.

Katni hit him in the face. "Shut up. You have no honor." She drew her knife again. "Hold him fast," she ordered briefly.

Though he strained and his face blackened with tension, he was powerless. Katni pried loose the fourth finger from his tightly clenched right fist. Then, with a deft, forceful movement, she took her prize. Kor cried out in pain and grief, and struggled convulsively.

Working swiftly, Katni tore a long strip of cloth from Kor's tunic and bandaged the hand. Kor shut his eyes and almost fell, nearly unconscious from torment and shock.

"Theremir, give me your flask of *akai*," snapped Katni. Theremir pulled a flask out of an inside pocket in his tunic. She took it from him, removed the cap, and forced it between Kor's half-parted lips. He coughed and spat at the taste of the fiery liquor, but after a moment color came back to his face and a measure of his strength returned.

"We'll take the back way out, and go up into the hills to a waiting ship." Katni caught Kor's look of numb disbelief. She remarked, "I've been wanting this long enough; did you hope that my plans were hasty and ill-conceived?"

Only then did Alkarin realize how deep the betrayal ran, and how many friends Katni must have sworn to her purpose. She was right. Corruption ran deep in his forces; he had been a fool to think them honorable or loyal.

"How long have you been a traitor?" Kor asked suddenly. His eyes were very bright. Though his hand was afire with pain, a throbbing pain that surged up his arm with every pulse-beat, he refused to surrender to it.

She glared at him. "I retain my loyalty to the *Ormene*l--unlike you. I'm merely doing my duty."

His eyes were narrowed. "Yet you've fought at my side--I've seen you kill Alargor's soldiers."

She lifted her shoulders in an indifferent shrug. "He has plenty to spare. I weed his ranks of defectives and poor fighters."

Kor's upper lip lifted in an unconscious snarl. He asked bitterly, "What's your reward?"

Her expression was smugly cat-like. "How does Empress sound? Kalim Alargor has promised me all the power and glory I could ever desire."

Kor shut his eyes and shook his head slowly. "You rage at me for being trusting," he murmured, "and then you trust the most devious of thieves."

A week later, Kor was once again on the Kilingarlan. He had hoped to return there victorious, not in ignominious dishonor.



Katni Koerin took him directly to the *Ormen's* palace, the Rasethi Sarin, leading him like a farmer taking cattle to market. Kor was stared at, jeered, prodded and pushed. Some few recognized him; others saw only that he was a prisoner being led to judgment.

They were given leave to enter the halls of the Emperor. They walked through the palace, Katni in front, holding a rope that led to a yoke around her prisoner's neck. Kor paced, erect and proud, suffering the noose and the bonds on his wrists without a sign of anger or pain. There-mir Keorl followed behind the two, knife in hand.



Katni was permitted to pass unquestioned through the Rasethi Sarin, but she was stopped at last by four soldiers. "I'm here to see the *Ormen* Alargor," she said coldly, inclining her head at the door beyond the guard. "My name is Katni Koerin. And if you know what that means, you'll let me in without further interference!"

The leader of the guard looked her over without comment. "Wait here," he said curtly, and went inside Alargor's office. He came back out in a moment and silently indicated that the three should go in. Katni swept past the guard, head held high. Kor kept his eyes empty and avoided looking at anyone.

The *Ormen* Alargor's grey eyes widened with shock at sight of the prisoner. The face was very familiar, but the name eluded him. He stepped forward, head stretched forward on a long neck, staring at Katni's prey.

"What is this you've brought me, Katni?" he asked. "An appetizer for the carrion-birds?"

"Rather a feast for you, my lord," she replied. "As I promised long ago--- I bring you Alkarin."

Alargor stepped back, and drew himself up to his full height. He had both fear and wonder in his face. "Alkarin the Traitor!" he exclaimed. "Why does he look so familiar?"

Kor muttered something under his breath. Katni's eyes gleamed with delight

at her coup. "You would remember his name better than his face, my lord," she said. "Escaped from Salao, back from the dead--Kor Kothir, First-Son of Domain Kothir."

Alargor's surprise turned quickly to anger. He demanded, "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"It would only have frustrated you, my lord *Ormen*," said Katni smoothly, if a little hurriedly. "I thought to tell you when I could deliver him."

Alargor grunted. He slowly walked around Kor, staying a meter or two from him. There was obviously some fear in Alargor, some measure of grudging respect for the prisoner.

He turned away, and looked at Katni. "You've brought me a great prize," he said slowly. "Knowing that he is also Kor Kothir makes this all the sweeter."

Katni smiled at his obvious pleasure. She handed the end of the rope controlling her captive to Theremir. She came forward to the *Ormen*, and slithered her arms around him and up his back. "You've got all you wanted now, Kalim."

The *Ormen* Alargor looked down at her patronizingly and smiled in secret amusement. "Yes, I have." Cautiously, he pulled a knife from inside his sleeve and held it poised above her back. She was grinning up at him, eyes full of fierce exultance.

"How shall I reward you?" he asked.

Katni's mouth curved in a complacent smile. "I'll leave that to you, my lord," she murmured.

"My pleasure." He smiled gently down at her and thrust the blade home to the hilt.

Katni cried out in horror and furious pain. She clawed at Alargor. He pulled away from her, and watched indifferently as she sank to the floor.

He looked first to Theremir Keorl, whose only reaction to his mother's death was a tightening of his mouth. "Are you a danger to me?" asked Alargor, in a tone horrible for its calm viciousness.

Theremir looked away from Katni and across at Alargor. "No, sir," he answered steadily. "I make it a point not to see or hear things I shouldn't. I have no wish to risk my life."

Alargor smiled approvingly. "Good." His gaze went to his captive. Kor looked at him with disgust. Alargor remarked pleasantly, "Your death, believe me, will not come so unexpectedly. . . yet it will be quite as bloody."

\* \* \*

With a shiver of fear, Kor noticed that the shadow of his head was centered on the stone. He raised his head bravely and stared at the Emperor.

"You captured me through deception and betrayal--the kind of dishonor I rebel against. Even though I die today, the revolution cannot die. We will triumph, eventually."

"There is dishonor and corruption woven throughout your ill-planned revolution," commented Alargor contemptuously. "I've already begun to strike against your so-called rebel leaders. In a very short while, all those who dared revolt will be dead. A thousand heads speared on the gates of the Rasethi Sarin--and yours foremost among them."

Amidst open space, under the sun, Kor felt cornered. Alargor's words were making him retreat to his last defenses. "You can take my life," he said slowly, "but you cannot claim victory over me. I am still myself--defiant, filled with hope."

"Killing you is victory enough for me, traitor," said Alargor harshly. "And your surrender will be in losing your head to the executioner's blade." He gestured, and the two guards moved forward and grasped Kor's arms. Kor didn't resist. His face bespoke his anger, and bitterness, and an unyielding will.

The sun was blinding. The grey stone was flecked with flashing glints. Kor was forced to his knees in front of the stone; his tunic was pulled down from his neck and shoulders.

Bared and helpless, Kor fought down rising fear. A tremor ran through him that he could not control.

"Bow your head down, *Emistarkan* Kothir."

Kor raised his chin high and stared up at Alargor. His voice shook. "I will not."

Alargor made a gesture of disgust. "Force him," he said. One of the guards stepped around to the front of the stone, and grabbed Kor by the hair. He wrenched the prisoner's head down until Kor's forehead touched the cold stone.

A chill like a knife ran from the back of Kor's neck down his spine. Almost to the ends of his courage, he shook with exhaustion and despair.

His senses were open; his heart was very full. He had shut his eyes, but his ears were sensitive to all the sounds of the people around him, the rush of air, the distant sounds of birds and rustling trees. A cold musty scent rose from the death-stone.

His last thoughts were of fire, and the sun; of war and terror and fury. In a moment of utter timelessness, he thought of the legacy he would leave behind, and hoped that someone would remember him with honor.



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NU ORMENEL TIMELINE

The following timeline reflects the events depicted in the *Nu Ormenel* series to date. It is not meant as a complete timeline for the history of *Nu Ormenel* and/or its characters.

For each story on the timeline there is a notation indicating in which volume of the collected series the story appears. The following abbreviations are used: *Nu Ormenel* Collected--Vol. 1, 2, 3, or 4; Alkarin Warlord--AW. (This is an updated timeline from the one in *Nu Ormenel* Collected Volume 1.)

(Dates are Solar Standard Time--Federation time)

- SST 2169 Birth of Kor Kothir
- 2189 Kor's older brother dies  
"Passage," Vol. 1
- 2197 Birth of Roan Morgan
- 2200 *Ormenel* meets Federation  
"First Meeting"
- 2201 Birth of Tavia Nelson
- 2207 Roan/Kirin brought to Kilingarlan
- 2210 Birth of Arika Keorl
- 2213 Birth of Karras Kothir
- 2216 Kirin/Roan sent to Federation  
  
Roan and Kor, 2207-2216  
"Brothers," Vol. 3
- 2217 The One-Day War of Organia  
The Treaty of Organia is signed  
"Challenge," Vol. 1
- 2218 Incident on Kor's ship  
"The Wolf's Den," Vol. 1
- 2221 Kor tried for treason and sent to Salao  
"A Shade of Treason," Vol. 1  
"Counterstroke," Vol. 1
- 2223 Kor leads escape from Salao  
"The Gathering Storm," Vol. 1  
  
*Orashathnawi* revolution planned  
"Dawn of the Warlord," Vol. 3  
"The Wolf and the Bear," Vol. 3

- 2224 Revolution begins  
 "To Bell a Cat," Vol. 3  
 "The Price of Freedom," Vol. 3  
 "Gift of Fealty," Vol. 3
- 2225 Revolution grows  
 "The Red Grass Growing," Vol. 3  
 "A Dragon on the Wind," Vol. 3  
 "On the Battlefield of Dreams," Vol. 3  
 "Fireside Song," Vol. 3
- 2226 Kirin/Roan learns who he really is  
 "Seesaw," Vol. 1
- 2227 Victory for rebels assured  
 "Tide of Thunder," Vol. 3
- Revolution ends  
 Kor Alkarin becomes *Ormen*  
 "The Celebration of Alkarin," Vol. 1  
 "The Usurper," Vol. 1  
 "Ties of Blood," Vol. 3  
 "And Tribute Given," Vol. 3
- Organian sun goes supernova
- 2228 Kor goes to Ashkaris  
 Roan sent to Salao; Tavia taken as prisoner to Kilingarlan  
Threshold  
 "The Victor's Right," AW
- 2229 *Ormene1* declares war on Federation
- 2230 Tavia adjusts to life on Kilingarlan  
 "To Tame the Tiger," AW
- 2231 Karras wounds his swordmaster  
 "To Know Dishonor," Vol. 2
- Birth of Kirdan Taralkarin  
 "Birth," AW
- 2233 Tavia accused of spying  
 "An Obligation of Trust," AW
- 2235 Strengthened ties among Kor's family  
 "A Pride of Wolves," AW
- Kor and Tavia discuss Roan/Kirin  
 "Two Voices," AW
- 2236 Kor and Tavia become *karushirsin*  
 "The Promise," AW
- 2238 Kirdan learns about hunting  
 "The Hunter," AW
- 2239 *Ormene1*-Federation war ends  
 "The Final Challenge," AW

- 2239 Tavia returns to Federation; Roan returns to Federation
- 2240 Tavia tried for treason by Star Fleet  
Birth of Kartharn and Aravka Taralkarin
- 2244 Karras sent to Federation on exchange program
- 2245 Karras assigned to Roan's starship  
Kor and Roan meet again  
"A Kilington Heritage," Vol. 2
- Kor visits Tavia in Federation  
Tavia and Kor, 2239-2245  
"I'll Give You the Wind," Vol. 4
- Tavia returns to *Ormenel*  
"The West Corridor Wars," Vol. 4
- Karras becomes *Ormen*'s heir
- 2246 Karras in trouble over woman on Roan's ship  
"A Broken Sword," Vol. 2
- 2247 Arika Keorl assigned to Roan's ship
- 2249 Karras and Arika return to *Ormenel*
- Roan/Kirin returns to *Ormenel*  
"Song of the River," Vol. 4
- Kirin and Arika have reunion  
"Shelter from the Storm," Vol. 4
- 2250 Kirin and Arika become *karushirsin*  
Arakenyo
- Karras becomes commander of warship *Kentak*  
"The *Vakkfar*," Vol. 4
- 2259 Kor Alkarin abdicates; Karras becomes *Ormen* Achirinos

Additional works in the *Nu Ormenel* series:

Stories: A Mirror-*Ormenel* story of the revolution  
"Deathblow," Vol. 4

A children's tale about *imleth*  
"The Legend of Akim Korosten," Vol. 2

An *Ormenel*-Federation skirmish  
"Honor the Hunter," Vol. 2

Articles: A general study of *Nu Ormenel*  
"*Aknauhraiand*: A Political Matrix," Vol. 2

Music in *Nu Ormenel*  
"The Hunter's Harmonies"

POETRY IN *NU ORMENEL*

The following list groups groups the poems by character(s). The poems are listed in series chronological order within category. An asterisk indicates that the poem appears in more than one category.

Kor

"Koros" - Vol. 1  
 "The Rebel" - Vol. 1  
 "Challenge" - Vol. 1; in "Voices of *Nu Ormenel*," Vol. 2  
 "Exile" - Vol. 1  
 "Keserek" - Vol. 1; Vol. 4 Supplement  
 "Lament"\* - Vol. 3; Vol. 4 Supplement  
 "Battlecry"\* - Vol. 1  
 "The Judgment of Alkarin" - Vol. 1  
 "Defiance" - Vol. 1  
 "The Return" - Vol. 1  
 "All my thoughts are lined with shadows. . ."\* - in "Ties of Blood," Vol. 3;  
     also "Legacy of Sorrow" - Vol. 4 Supplement  
 "Deception" - Threshold  
 "War" - Threshold  
 "Warcry"\* - Alkarin Warlord

Tavia

"All We Shared"\* - Vol. 1  
 "Changes" - Vol. 1  
 "Waterfall" - Alkarin Warlord

Roan/Kirin

"Alien" - Vol. 1  
 "All We Shared" - Vol. 1  
 "Conversation" - Vol. 1  
 "Changeling" - Threshold; Vol. 4 Supplement  
 "The Homecoming" - Vol. 4; Vol. 4 Supplement  
 "Changeling" (Part 2) - Vol. 4; Vol. 4 Supplement

Kor and Tavia

"Stranger" - Threshold  
 "Birth" - Alkarin Warlord  
 "Kirdan" - Alkarin Warlord  
 "Questions" - Alkarin Warlord  
 "Ceremony of Sharing" - Alkarin Warlord  
 "Though I want you. . ." - in "I'll Give You the Wind," Vol. 4; also "Though I  
     Want You" - Vol. 4 Supplement  
 "I wanted to paint a picture. . ." - in "I'll Give You the Wind," Vol. 4  
 "Black wonder. . ." - in "I'll Give You the Wind," Vol. 4



"Know you the land of sea-breezed air. . ." - in "I'll Give You the Wind," Vol. 4;  
 also in "In Faraway Lands" - Vol. 4 Supplement  
 "In the quiet of the night. . ." - in "I'll Give You the Wind," Vol. 4

### Kor and Roan/Kirin

"Discovery" - Vol. 1; Vol. 4 Supplement  
 "Rafkirsin/Brothers" - Threshold

### Karras

"Coming of Age" - Vol. 2  
 The "Vakkfar" poems - in "The Vakkfar," Vol. 4  
 "The Epic of the Eeps" - in "The Vakkfar," Vol. 4

### Orashathnavi Revolution

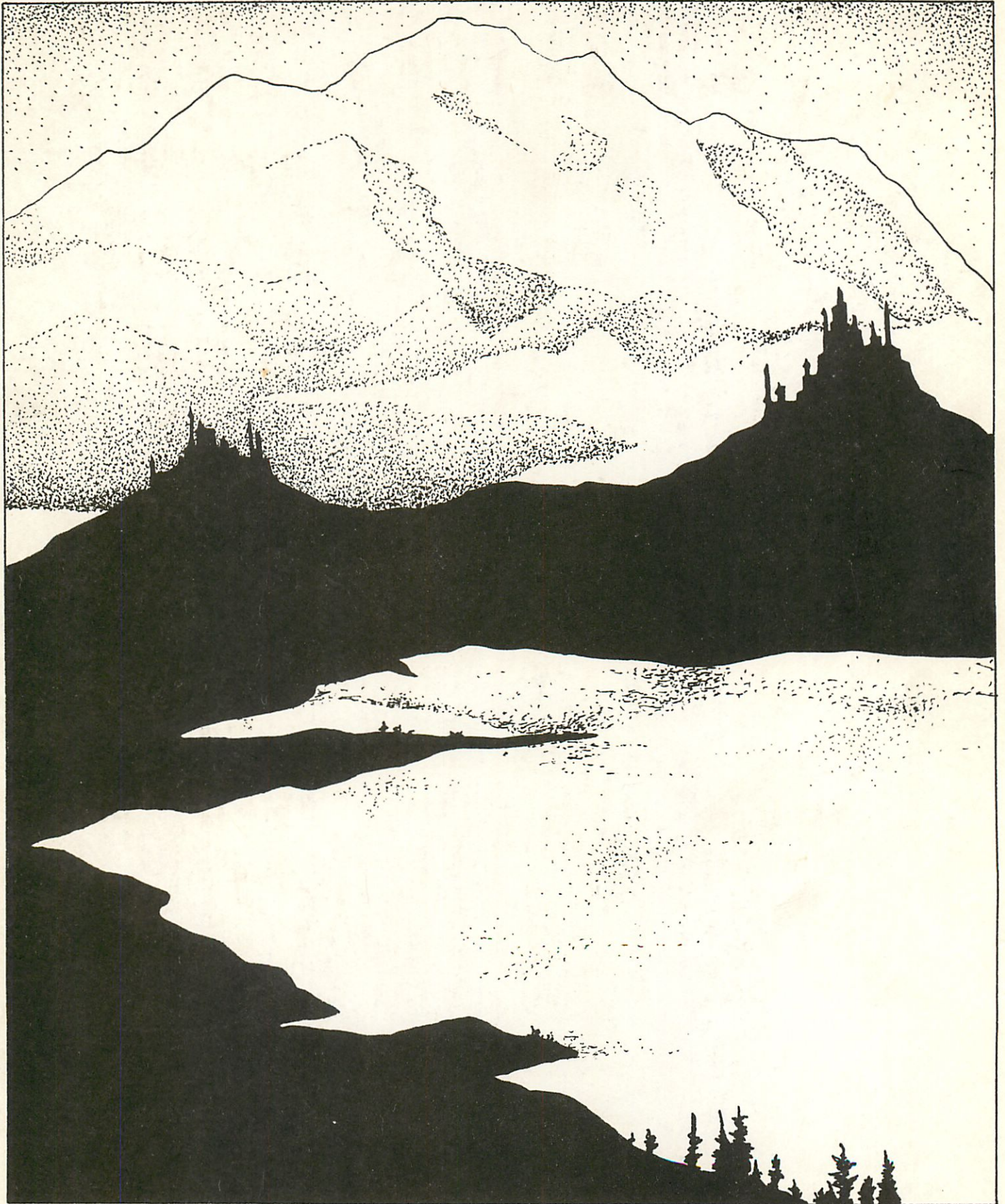
"Tomorrow's Promise" - Vol. 3; Vol. 4 Supplement  
 "March to Honor" - Vol. 3; Vol. 4 Supplement  
 "Fealty" - Vol. 3  
 "Where Are You, My Love?" - Vol. 3; Vol. 4 Supplement  
 "Lament"\* - Vol. 3; Vol. 4 Supplement  
 "Makhiri" - Vol. 3; Vol. 4 Supplement  
 "Piece of Mind" - Vol. 3; Vol. 4 Supplement  
 "Fight for Glory" - Vol. 3; Vol. 4 Supplement  
 "Battlecry"\* - Vol. 1  
 "All my thoughts are lined with shadows. . ."\* - in "Ties of Blood," Vol. 3; also  
 "Legacy of Sorrow" - Vol. 4 Supplement

### OrmeneL Tradition

"Patterns of Challenge" - Vol. 1  
 "Will you be first in battle. . ." - in "The Celebration of Alkarin," Vol. 1  
 "Call to Mourning" - Vol. 3; Vol. 4 Supplement  
 "Nu Evriand Fevesan Getheni/The Dance of Springfire" - Alkarin Warlord; Vol. 4 Supplement  
 "Bind her with silken chains. . ." - in "The Promise," Alkarin Warlord  
 "The Renewal brings a warming glow. . ." - in "I'll Give You the Wind," Vol. 4; also  
 "Home" - Vol. 4 Supplement  
 "Swordplay" - Vol. 2  
 "Aroi Rakishul" - in "Voices of Nu OrmeneL," Vol. 2  
 "The Legend of Kerrekurasarm" - in "Voices of Nu OrmeneL," Vol. 2

### Miscellaneous

Kang: "The Laughing Warrior" - Vol. 1  
 "Reflections" - in "Voices of Nu OrmeneL," Vol. 2  
 Karth: "The Worthy Rival" - Vol. 1  
 Ashkaris: "Sentinel" - Threshold  
 "Ashkaris" - Threshold  
 "The Domain of the Birds of the Sun" - Threshold  
 OrmeneL-Federation War: "Warcry"\* - Alkarin Warlord  
 "Beyond the Shadows" - Alkarin Warlord; Vol. 4 Supplement  
 General: "Threshold" - Threshold



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