# Mr. Packer Goes to Hell

# C. M. Kornbluth

## 1

“Drat it!” cursed Almarish, enchanter supreme and master of all Ellil. “Drat the sizzling dingus!” Lifting his stiffly embroidered robes of imperial purple, he was dashing to left and right about his bedroom, stooping low, snatching with his jeweled hands at an elusive something that skidded about the floor with little, chuckling snickers.

Outside, beyond the oaken door, there was a sinister thud of footsteps, firm and normal slaps of bare sole against pavement alternating with sinister tappings of bone. “Slap-click. Slap-click. Slap-click,” was the beat. Almarish shot a glance over his shoulder at the door, his bearded face pale with strain.

“Young ’un,” he snapped to an empty room, “this ain’t the silly season. Come out, or when I find you I’ll jest take your pointed ears and twist them till they come off in my hands.”

Again there was the chuckling snicker, this time from under the bed. Almarish, his beard streaming, dove headlong, his hands snapping shut. The snicker turned into a pathetic wail.

“Leggo!” shrilled a small voice. “You’re crushing me, you ox!”

Outside the alternating footsteps had stopped before his door. A horny hand pounded on the solid oak.

“Be with ye in a minute,” called the bearded enchanter. Sweat had broken out on his brow. He drew out his clenched fists from under the bed.

“Now, young lady!” he said grimly, addressing his prize.

The remarkable creature in his hands appeared to be young; at least she was not senile. But if ever a creature looked less like a lady it was she. From tiny feet, shod in rhinestone, high-heeled pumps, to softly waved chestnut hair at her very crown, she was an efficient engine of seduction and disaster. And to omit what came between would be a sin: her voluptuous nine inches were encased in a lamé that glittered with the fire of burnished silver, cut and fitted in the guise of an evening gown. Pouting and sullen as she was in Almarish’s grasp, she hadn’t noticed that the hem was scarcely below her ankles, as was intended by the unknown couturier who had spared no pains on her. That hem, or the maladjustment of it, revealed, in fact, that she had a pretty, though miniature, taste in silks and lacework.

“Ox!” she stormed at the bearded sorcerer. “Beastly oaf—you’ll squeeze me out of shape with your great, clumsy hands!”

“That would be a pity,” said Almarish. “It’s quite a shape, as you seem to know.”

The pounding on the door redoubled. “Lord Almarish!” shouted a voice, clumsily feigning anxiety. “Are you all right?”

“Sure, Pike,” called the sorcerer. “Don’t bother me now. I have a lady with me. We’re looking at my potted plants.”

“Oh,” said the voice of Pike. “All right—my business can wait.”

“That stalled him,” grunted Almarish. “But not for long. You, what’s your name?”

She stuck out a tiny tongue at him.

“Look here,” said Almarish gently. He contracted his fist a little and the creature let out an agonized squawk on a small scale. “What’s your name?” he repeated.

“Moira,” she snapped tartly. “And if your throat weren’t behind all that hay I’d cut it.”

“Forget that, kid,” he said. “Let me give you a brief résumé of pertinent facts:

“My name is Packer and I’m from Braintree, Mass., which you never heard of. I came to Ellil by means of a clock with thirteen hours. Unusual, eh? Once here I sized things up and began to organize on a business basis with the assistance of a gang of half-breed demons. I had three wishes, but they’re all used up now. I had to send back to Braintree my grandson Peter, who got here the same way I did, and with him a sweet young witch he picked up.

“Before leaving he read me a little lecture on business reform and the New Deal. What I thought was commercial common sense—little things like bribes, subornation of perjury, arson, assassination and the like—he claimed was criminal. So I, like a conscientious Packer, began to set things right. This my gang didn’t like. The best testimony of that fact is that the gentleman outside my door is Balthazar Pike, my trusted lieutenant, who has determined to take over.

“I learned that from Count Hacza, the vampire, when he called yesterday, and he said that I was to be wiped out today. He wrung my hand with real tears in his eyes—an affectionate chap—as he said goodbye.”

“And,” snarled the creature, “ain’t that too damn’ bad?”

“No,” said Almarish mildly. “No, because you’re going to get me out of this. I knew you were good luck the moment you poked your nose through the wall and began to snicker.”

Moira eyed him keenly. “What’s in it for me?” she finally demanded.

There was again the pounding on the door. “Lord Almarish,” yelled Balthazar Pike, “aren’t you through with those potted plants yet?”

“No,” called the sorcerer. “We’ve just barely got to the gladioli.”

“Pretty slow working,” grumbled the trusted lieutenant. “Get some snap into it.”

“Sure, Pike. Sure. Only a few minutes more.” He turned on the little creature. “What do you want?” he asked.

There was a curious catch in her voice as she answered, “A vial of tears from la Bête Joyeux.”

“Cut out the bunk,” snapped Almarish impatiently. “Gold, jewels—anything at all. Name it.”

“Look, whiskers,” snarled the little creature. “I told you my price and I’ll stick to it. What’s more, I’ll take you to the right place.”

“And on the strength of that,” grinned the sorcerer, “I’m supposed to let you out of my hands?”

“That’s the idea,” snapped Moira. “You have to trust somebody in this lousy world—why not me? After all, mister, I’m taking your word—if you’ll give it.”

“Done,” said Almarish with great decision. “I hereby pledge myself to do everything I can to get you that whatever-it-was’s tears, up to and including risk and loss of life.”

“Okay, whiskers,” she said. “Put me down.” He obliged, and saw her begin to pace out pentacles and figures on the mosaic floor. As she began muttering to herself with great concentration, he leaned his head against the door. There were agitated murmurs without.

“Don’t be silly,” Pike was saying. “He told me with his own mouth he had a woman—”

“Look, Bally,” said another voice, one that Almarish recognized as that of a gatekeeper, “I ain’t sayin’ you’re wacked up, but they ain’t even no mice in his room. I ain’t let no one in and the ectoplasmeter don’t show nothin’ on the grounds of the castle.”

“Then,” said Pike, “he must be stalling. Rourke, you get the rest of the ’breeds and we’ll break down the door and settle Lord Almarish’s hash for good. The lousy weakling!”

Lord Almarish began to sweat afresh and cast a glance at Moira, who was standing stock-still to one side of the mosaic design in the floor. He noted abruptly a series of black tiles in the center that he had never seen before. Then others surrounding them turned black, and he saw that they were not coloring but ceasing to exist. Apparently something of a bottomless pit was opening up beneath his palace.

Outside the padding and clicking of feet sounded. “Okay, boys! Get it in line!”

They would be swinging up a battering ram, Almarish surmised. The shivering crash of the first blow against the oaken door made his ears ring. Futilely he braced his own brawny body against the planking and felt the next two blows run through his bones.

“One more!” yelled his trusted lieutenant. And with that one more the door would give way, he knew, and what they would do to him would be no picnic. He had schooled them well, though crudely, in the techniques of strikebreaking practiced by employers of the 1880s.

“Hurry it up!” he snapped at Moira. She didn’t answer, being wholly intent, it seemed, on the enlargement of the pit which was growing in the floor. It would now admit the passage of a slimmer man than the sorcerer, but his own big bones would never make it.

With agonizing slowness the pit grew, tile by tile, as the tiny creature frowned into it till her face was white and bloodless. Almarish fancied he could hear through the door the labored breathing of the half-breed demons as they made ready to swing again.

Crash! It came again, and only his own body kept the door from falling in fragments.

“Right—dive!” shrilled the little voice of Moira as the battering ram poked through into the room. He caught her up in one hand and squeezed through into the blackness of the pit. He looked up and could see a circle of faces snarling with rage as he slid down a kind of infinitely smooth inclined tunnel. Abruptly the patch of light above him was blotted out and there was absolutely nothing to be seen.

All Almarish knew was that he was gliding in utter blackness at some terrifying speed in excess of anything sane down to a place he knew nothing of in the company of a vicious little creature whose sole desire seemed to be to cut his throat and drink his blood with glee.

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## 2

“Where,” asked Almarish, “does this end?”

“You’ll find out,” snarled the little creature. “Maybe you’re yellow already?”

“Don’t say that,” he warned. “Not unless you want to get playfully pinched—in half.”

“Cold-blooded,” she marveled. “Like a snake or lizard. Heart’s probably three-ventricled, too.”

“Our verbal contract,” said the sorcerer, delicately emphasizing verbal, “didn’t include an exchange of insults.”

“Yeah,” she said abstractedly. And though they were in the dark, he could sense that she was worried. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“What’s the matter?” he demanded.

“It’s your fault,” she shrilled. “It’s your own damned fault hurrying me up so I did this!” The man knew that she was near distraction with alarm. And he could feel the reason why. They were slowing down, and this deceleration, presumably, was not on Moira’s schedule.

“We on the wrong line?” he asked coolly.

“Yes. That’s about it. And don’t ask me what happens now, because I don’t know, you stupid cow!” Then she was sniffling quietly in his hand, and the sorcerer was wondering how he could comfort her without breaking her in two.

“There now,” he soothed tentatively, stroking her hair carefully with the tip of a finger. “There, now, don’t get all upset—”

It occurred to him to worry on his own account. They had slowed to a mere snail’s pace, and at the dramatically, psychologically correct moment a light appeared ahead. A dull chanting resounded through the tube:

Slimy flesh,

Clotted blood,

Fat, white worms,

These are food.

From Moira there was a little, strangled wail. “Ghouls!”

“Grave robbers?” asked the sorcerer. “I can take care of them—knock a few heads together.”

“No,” she said in thin, hopeless tones. “You don’t understand. These are the real thing. You’ll see.”

As they slid from the tube onto a sort of receiving table, Almarish hastily pocketed the little creature. Then, staring about him in bewilderment, he dropped his jaw and let it hang.

The amiable dietary ditty was being ground out by a phonograph, tending which there was a heavy-eyed person dressed all in grey. He seemed shapeless, lumpy, like a half-burned tallow candle on whose sides the drops of wax have congealed in half-teardrops and cancerous clusters. He had four limbs and, on the upper two, hands of a sort, and wore what could roughly be described as a face.

“You,” said Almarish. “What’s—where—?” He broke off in confusion as a lackluster eye turned on him.

From a stack beside him the creature handed him a pamphlet. The sorcerer studied the title:

WORKERS!

FIGHT TO PRESERVE AND EXTEND

the GLORIOUS REVOLUTION which has BEFALLEN

YOU!

He read further:

There are those among you who still can remember the haphazard days of individual enterprise and communal wealth. Those days were bad; many starved for lack of nutritious corpses. And yet people died Above; why this poverty in the midst of plenty?

There were Above as usual your scouts who cast about for likely members of your elite circle, those who wished to live forever on the traditional banquets of the Immortal Eaters. Fortunate indeed was the scout who enrolled Ingvar Hemming. For it was he who, descending to the Halls of the Eaters, saw the pitiful confusion which existed.

Even as he had brought order into the vast holdings which had been his when Above, he brought order to the Halls. A ratio was established between production and consumption and civilized habits of life-in-death were publicized. Nowadays no Immortal Eater would be seen barbarously clawing the flesh from a corpse as in the bad old days; in these times your Safety-Tasty cans are the warrant of cleanliness and flavor.

Bug-eyed, Almarish turned to the back of the booklet and scanned the advertisements:

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| --- |
| There’s STRENGTH  s-p-e-e-d  grace  In A HEMMING HEARSE  “To serve we strive  The dead-alive.” |

|  |
| --- |
| For Those Guests Tonight!  Why Not  A Bottle of SAFETY-TASTY EYES  10 per bottle—Hemming-Pakt  “5 blue, 5 brown—remember?” |

He tore his eyes from the repulsive pages. “Chum,” he demanded hoarsely of the phonograph attendant, “what the hell goes on here?”

“Hell?” asked the ghoul in a creaky, slushy voice. “You’re way off. You’ll never get there now. I buzzed the receiving desk—they’ll come soon.”

“I mean this thing.” Gingerly he held it up between thumb and forefinger.

“Oh—that. I’m supposed to give it to each new arrival. It’s full of bunk. If you could possibly get out of here, you’d do it. This ain’t no paradise, not by a long shot.”

“I thought,” said Almarish, “that you all had enough to eat now. And if you can afford hearses you must be well off.”

“You think so?” asked the attendant. “I can remember back when things was different. And then this Hemming man—he comes down from Above, corners the supply, hires men to can it and don’t pay them enough to buy it in cans. I don’t understand it, but I know it ain’t right.”

“But who buys the—the eyes and hearses?”

“Foremen an’ ex-ex-ekky-tives. And whut they are I don’t know. It jest ain’t jolly down here no more.”

“Where you from?” asked Almarish.

“Kentucky. Met a scout, 1794. Liked it and been here ever since. You change—cain’t git back. It’s a sad thing naow.” He dummied up abruptly as a squad of ghouls approached. They were much less far gone—“changed”—than the attendant. One snapped out a notebook.

“Name?” he demanded.

“Packer, Almarish—what you will,” he said, fingering an invincible dagger in his sleeve.

“Almarish—the Almarish?”

“Overlord of Ellil,” he modestly confessed, assuming, and rightly, that the news of his recent deposition had not yet reached the Halls of the Eternal Eaters. “Come on a tour of inspection. I was wondering if I ought to take over this glorified cafeteria.”

“I assume,” said one of the reception committee—for into such it had hastily resolved itself—“you’ll want to see our vice-president in charge of Inspection and Regulation?”

“You assume wrongly,” said the sorcerer coldly. “I want to see the president.”

“Mr. Hemming?” demanded the spokesman. All heads save that of Almarish bowed solemnly. “You—you haven’t an appointment, you know.”

“Lead on,” ordered the sorcerer grimly. “To Mr. Hemming.” Again the heads bowed.

Almarish strode majestically through the frosted-glass door simply lettered with the name and title of the man who owned the nation of ghouls body and soul.

“Hello, Hemming,” said he to the man behind the desk, sitting down unbidden.

The president was scarcely “changed” at all. It was possible that he had been eating food that he had been used to when Above. What Almarish saw was an ordinary man in a business suit, white-haired, with a pair of burning eyes and a stoop forward that gave him the aspect of a cougar about to pounce.

“Almarish,” he said, “I welcome you to my—corporation.”

“Yes—thank you,” said the sorcerer. He was vaguely worried. Superb businessman that he was, he could tell with infallible instinct that something was wrong—that his stupendous bluff was working none too well.

“I’ve just received an interesting communication,” said Hemming casually. “A report via rock signals that there was some sort of disturbance in your Ellil. A sort of—palace revolution. Successful, too, I believe.”

Almarish was about to spring at his throat and bring down guards about his head when he felt a stirring in his pocket. Over the top of it peeked the head of Moira.

“Won’t you,” she said, “introduce me to the handsome man?”

Almarish, grinning quietly, brought her out into full view. With a little purr she gloriously stretched her lithe body. Hemming was staring like an old goat.

“This,” said the sorcerer, “is Moira.”

“For sale?” demanded the president, clenching his hands till the knuckles whitened on the top of his desk.

“Of course,” she drawled amiably. “At the moment a free agent. Right?” She tipped Almarish a wink.

“Of course,” he managed to say regretfully, “you know your own mind, Moira, but I wish you’d stay with me a little longer.”

“I’m tired of you,” she said. “A lively girl like me needs them young and handsome to keep my interest alive. There are some men”—she cast a sidelong, slumbrous glance at Hemming—“some men I’d never grow tired of.”

“Bring her over,” said the president, trying to control his voice.

Almarish realized that there was something in the combination of endemic desirability and smallness which was irresistible. He didn’t know it, but that fact was being demonstrated in his own Braintree, Mass., at that very time by a shop which had abandoned full-sized window dummies and was using gorgeous things a little taller than Moira but scarcely as sexy. In the crowds around their windows there were four men to every woman.

His Moira pirouetted on the desk top, displaying herself. “And,” she said, “for some men I’ll do a really extraordinary favor.”

“What’s that?” asked Hemming, fighting with himself to keep his hands off her. He was plainly terrified of squashing this gorgeous creature.

“I could make you,” she said, “my size. Only a little taller, of course. Women like that.”

“You can?” he asked, his voice breaking. “Then go ahead!”

“I have your full consent?”

“Yes,” he said. “Full consent.”

“Then—” A smile curved her lips as she swept her hands through the air in juggling little patterns.

A lizard about ten inches long reared up on its hind legs, then frantically skittered across the tabletop. Almarish looked for Hemming; could not see him anywhere. He picked up Moira. In a sleepy, contented voice she was saying:

“My size. Only a little taller, of course.”

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## 3

Back in the tube from which they had been shunted into the Halls of the Eternal Eaters, as the ghouls fancied calling themselves, Almarish couldn’t get sense out of Moira. She had fallen asleep in his pocket and was snoring quietly, like a kitten that purred in its sleep.

And more than ever he marveled at this cold-blooded little creature. She had had the routine of seduction and transformation down so pat that he was sure she had done it a hundred times—or a thousand. You couldn’t tell ages in any of these unreal places; he, who should be a hundred and eight, looked just thirty-five and felt fifteen years younger than that.

All the same, it would be a good thing not to give Moira full and clear consent to anything at all. That must be an important part of the ceremony.

He hoped that the ghouls would straighten themselves out now that their president was a ten-inch lizard. But there were probably twenty villainous vice-presidents, assorted as to size, shape and duties, to fill his place. Maybe they’d get to fighting over it, and the ghouls-in-ordinary would be able to toss them all over.

Just like Ellil. A good thing he’d gotten out of that.

Not that he liked this way of traveling, he assured himself. It couldn’t be anything half so honest as it seemed—a smooth-lined tube slanting down through solid rock. It was actually, of course, God-knew-what tricky path between the planes of existence. That thirteen-hour clock was one way, this was another, but more versatile.

Lights ahead again—red lights. He took Moira from his pocket and shook her with incredible delicacy.

“You ox!” she snapped. “Trying to break my back?”

“Sorry,” he said. “Lights—red ones. What about them?”

“That’s it,” she said grimly. “Do you feel like a demigod—particularly?”

“No,” he admitted. “Not—particularly.”

“Then that’s too damn bad,” she snapped. “Remember, you have a job to do. When you get past the first trials and things, wake me up.”

“Trials?”

“Yes, always. Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Norse—they all have a Weigher of Souls. It’s always the same place, of course, but they like the formality. Now let me sleep.”

He put her back into his pocket and tried to brake with his hands and feet. No go. But soon he began to decelerate. Calling up what little he knew of such things, he tried to draw a desperate analogy between molecules standing radially instead of in line and whatever phenomenon this was which made him—who was actually, he knew, not moving at all—not-move more slowly than before, when he had been standing still at an inconceivably rapid pace.

The lights flared ahead into a bloody brilliance, and he skidded onto another of the delivery tables of sardonyx.

A thing with a hawk face took his arm.

“Stwm stm!” it said irritably.

“Velly solly,” said the sorcerer. “Me no spik—whatever in Hades you’re speaking.”

“R khrt sr tf mtht,” it said with a clash of its beak. Almarish drew his invincible dirk, and the thing shrugged disarmingly.

“Chdl nfr,” it grinned, sauntering off.

A Chinese approached, surveying him. “Sholom aleichim,” he greeted Almarish, apparently fooled by the beard.

“Aleichim sholom,” replied the enchanter, “but you’ve made a mistake.”

“Sorry,” said the Chinese. “We’ll put you on the calendar at General Sessions. Take him away!” he called sharply.

Almarish was hustled into a building and up a flight of stairs by two men in shiny blue uniforms before he had a chance to ask what the charge was. He was hustled through a pen, through innumerable corridors, through a sort of chicken-wire cage, and finally into a courtroom.

“Hurrah!” yelled thousands of voices. Dazedly he looked over a sea of faces, mostly bloodthirsty.

“Tough crowd,” one of the attendants muttered. “We better stick around to take care of you. They like to collect souvenirs. Arms…scalps…”

“See him?” demanded the other attendant, pointing at the judge. “Used to be a Neminant Divine. This is his punishment. This and dyspepsia. Chronic.”

Almarish could read the sour lines in the judge’s face like a book. And the book looked as though it had an unhappy ending.

“Prisoner to the bar,” wheezed the justice.

THE COURT: Prisoner, give your name and occupation.

PRISONER: Which ones, Your Honor? There are so many.

(Laughter and hisses.)

A VOICE: Heretic—burn him!

THE COURT: Order! Prisoner, give the ones you like best. And remember—We Know All.

PRISONER: Yes, Your Honor. Packer, ex-overlord of Ellil.

THE COURT: Read the accusation, clerk.

CLERK: (several words lost) did willfully conspire to transform said Hemming into a lizard ten inches long.

(Laughter in the court.)

THE COURT: Poppycock!

RECORDING CLERK: How do you spell that, Your Honor?

THE COURT: Silence! I said Poppycock!

RECORDING CLERK: Thank you, Your Honor.

PRISONER’S COUNSEL: Your Honor, (several words lost), known (several words lost) childhood (several words lost).

THE COURT: Prisoner’s counsel is very vague.

PRISONER: My God—is he my lawyer?

THE COURT: So it would appear.

PRISONER: But I never saw the man before, and he’s obviously drunk, Your Honor!

THE COURT: Hic! What of it, prisoner?

PRISONER: Nothing. Nothing at all. Move to proceed.

PROSECUTING ATT’Y: I object! Your Honor, I object!

THE COURT: Sustained.

(A long silence. Hisses and groans.)

THE COURT: Mr. Prosecutor, you got us into this—what have you to say for yourself?

PROSECUTING ATT’Y: Your Honor, I—I—I move to proceed.

PRISONER: It’s my turn, Your Honor. I object.

THE COURT: Overruled.

(Cheers and whistles.)

VOICES: Hang him by the thumbs!

Cut his face off!

Heretic—burn him!

THE COURT: I wish it to go on record that I am much gratified by the intelligent interest which the public is taking in this trial.

(Cheers and whistles.)

PROSECUTING ATT’Y: Your Honor, I see no need further to dillydally. This is a clear-cut case and the state feels no hesitation in demanding that the Court impose maximum penalty under law—which, if I remember aright, is death per flagitionem extremum, peine forte et dure, crucifictio ultima and inundation sub aqua regia—in that order.

(Cheers and screams. Wild demonstration.)

THE COURT: I so—

A VOICE: Hey, blue-eyes!

THE COURT: I so—

A VOICE (the same): Hey, you, cutie-pants!

THE COURT: Prisoner.

PRISONER: Yes, Your Honor?

THE COURT: Prisoner, are you aware of what you have in your pocket?

PRISONER: Oh—her. Cute, isn’t she?

THE COURT: Bring it closer. I shall make it Exhibit A.

A VOICE (the same): Hey—that tickles!

THE COURT: Exhibit A, have you any testimony to give?

(Demonstration, mostly whistles.)

EXHIBIT A: Yes, Your Honor. Take me away from this horrible man! The things he’s done to me—

THE COURT: Yes? Yes?

EXHIBIT A: You can’t imagine. But, Your Honor, you’re not like him. You know, Your Honor, there are some men (rest of testimony lost).

THE COURT: (comments lost).

EXHIBIT A: (testimony lost).

THE COURT: Really! You don’t mean it! Well, go ahead.

EXHIBIT A: Have I your full consent?

THE COURT: You have—free, clear and legal.

EXHIBIT A: (gestures with both hands).

THE COURT: (turns into lizard approx. 10 in. long).

EXHIBIT A: Come on, whiskers—let’s beat it!

PRISONER: I hear you talkin’!

PROSECUTING ATT’Y: Go after them, you damfools!

COURT ATTACHÉS: Not us, bud. What kind of dopes do we look like to you?

(Screams, howls, whistles, yells, demonstrations, complete pandemonium.)

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## 4

“How will I know,” demanded Almarish, “when I’m supposed to turn left?”

“When the three moons show up as an equilateral triangle,” said Moira, “will be high time. Now, damn you, let me go to sleep.”

“Why are you always so tired after these little transformation acts of yours?”

“You, not being a real sorcerer, wouldn’t understand. But suffice it to say that any magic-worker would have to do as much. Watch out for ghosts. Good night.”

She was in his pocket again, either purring or snoring. He never could decide which was the right word. And Almarish realized that this little lady had somehow become very dear to him.

He was walking along a narrow, sullen strip of desert bordered on either side by devil trees that lashed out with poisonous, thorny branches. The things must have had sharp ears, for they would regularly lie in wait for him and lash up as he stepped past. Fortunately, they could not make the extra yard or two of leeway he had.

Above, the three moons of the present night were shifting in a stately drill, more like dancers than celestial bodies, sometimes drawing near to an equilateral triangle but never quite achieving it. And she had been most specific about it.

There was still la Bête Joyeux to face, from whose eyes had to be wrung a vial of tears for purpose or purposes unknown to the sorcerer. His French was a little weak, but he surmised that the thing was a happy beast, and that to make it weep would bear looking into. He made a mental note to ask her about it. He was always asking her about things.

The devil trees were at it again, this time with a new twist. They would snap their tentacles at him like whips, so that one or more of the darts would fly off and whiz past his face. And it was just as well that they did. One of those things would drop a rhino in full charge, Moira had told him. Odd name, Moira. Sounded Irish.

He looked up and drew his breath in sharply. The moons had formed their triangle and held it for a long, long five minutes. Time to turn left. The way was blocked, of course, by ill-tempered trees. He drew the invincible dirk, hoping that the trees did not know enough magic to render the thing just an innocent little brand, and deliberately stepped within reach of one of the trees.

It lashed out beautifully; Almarish did not have to cut at it. The tentacle struck against the blade and lopped itself clean off. The tree uttered a mournful squeal and tried to find and haul in the severed tentacle with the others. They had a way of sticking them back on again.

He slashed away heartily, counting them as they fell. With each fresh gush of pussy sap the tree wailed more and more weakly. Finally it drooped, seemingly completely done in. Treachery, of course. He flung a lump of sandstone into the nest of arms and saw them close, slowly and with little crushing power, around it. Were it he instead of the stone, he could have hacked himself free before the thing burst into sand.

Quite boldly, therefore, he picked his way among the oozing tendrils, now and then cutting at one from the wrist. He gumshoed past the trunk itself and saw the pulsing membranes quiver malevolently at his step. They had things like this back in Ellil; he felt more than competent to deal with them.

But ghosts, now—ghosts were something else again. He had never seen a ghost, though the rumors did go about. And if ever ghosts were to be seen, it was in this spot.

Here the moons did not send their light—he didn’t know why—and the grass underfoot was fatty, round rods. From shrubs shone a vague, reddish light that frayed on a man’s nerves. There was the suggestion of a sound in the air, like the ghost itself of a noise dispersed.

“Moira,” he said softly. “Snap out of it. I’m scared.”

A tiny head peeked over the top of his pocket. “Yellow already?” she insultingly asked. “The master of all Ellil’s turning green?”

“Look,” he said. “Just you tell me what we’re up against and I’ll go ahead. Otherwise, no.”

“Ghosts,” she said. “This place is a den of them. I suppose you’ve heard all the stories about them and don’t quite believe. Well, the stories are true. Just forget about the whimsy à la John Kendrick Bangs. Ghosts aren’t funny; they’re the most frightening things that ever were. There’s nothing you can do about them; none of the magical formulas work, because they aren’t even magical. They are distilled essence of terror in tactile form. There’s absolutely nothing you can do with, to or about them. I can’t give you a word of advice. You know what you have to do, whiskers. We’re after that vial of tears.”

“Right,” he said. “Keep your head out—here we go.”

He—they—walked into a vast glob of darkness that saturated their minds, seeped between their molecules and into their lungs and hearts.

“Oh my God!” wailed a voice. “Oh, my God!”

Almarish didn’t turn his head; kept walking straight on.

“Stranger—help me—here they come—” the voice shrilled. There was a sickening sound of crackling, then a mushy voice that spoke a few indistinguishable words.

“They’re at it,” said Moira tremulously. “Don’t let it get you down.”

“A big man like you,” said the sweet voice of a young girl, “consorting with that evil little creature! You ought to be ashamed of yourself. I’m ever so much nicer…”

In the gooey blackness appeared a figure—wispy, luminous—of a charming maiden whose head was a skull and whose hair was a convolution of pink, writhing worms. Gently they hissed in chorus:

Bold, big master,

Come to terms;

Feed the dainty

Maid of Worms.

The last line of the ditty echoed from all sides in a variety of voices, ranging from a new-born wail to the hoarseness of a death rattle.

Almarish shut his eyes and walked ahead as the Maid reached out her arms. He walked into her and felt a clammy, gelid coldness, the tightness of arms around him, and ropy things fumbling on his face. Repressing a shriek, breathing heavily, he strode on, finally opening his eyes. Again he—they—were in the blackness, without a sound or light. Fumbling for a handkerchief, he swabbed at his brow and cheeks, dripping with cold sweat. As he thought of the Maid again, his back rose into little prickles of ice.

“It was me,” he said, trembling violently, “who could never stand mice and roaches, Moira.”

“Keep going,” she snapped coldly. “This isn’t a picnic.” The little creature was upset again. Almarish walked on, missed his footing and fell, sprawling grotesquely. Slowly he drifted down through unimaginable depths of blackness, reaching out frantically for holds, and there were none.

“Stop it!” shrilled Moira. “Stop struggling!”

Obediently he relaxed. His fall ended with a bump, on a twilit road sloping gently downward as far as the eye could see. There was a vague, rumbling noise underfoot, as if there were heavy carts on the road.

He looked up along the road. Something was coming, and it was brutally big. Legless, it rolled along on iron wheels, coming at him. The thing was a flattened ovoid of dark, sharkish grey, and like a shark it had a gruesome, toothy slit of mouth. Growing bigger and bigger, it thundered down the road as he watched, petrified, his own mouth open in childish alarm.

A shrill scream from his pocket brought him to. “Jump, you dummy!” shrieked Moira. “Jump!” He leaped into the air as the thing, its triangular mouth snapping savagely, teeth clashing, thundered beneath him.

He watched it go on down the road, still cold with terror.

“Can it come back?” he asked.

“Of course not,” said Moira. “Could you roll uphill?”

“You’re right,” he said. “Quite right. But what do we do now?” He mopped his brow again.

“Look,” said the little creature kindly, “I know how you feel, but don’t worry. You’re doing a lot better than you think you are. We’ll be out of this in a minute, if you don’t break down.” She looked sharply into his face.

“Maybe I won’t,” he said. “I’m not making promises, the way I feel. What—what in Hades—?”

He—they—were snatched up by a gigantic wind and were sucked through the air like flies in an air-conditioning plant.

“Close your eyes,” said Moira. “Close them tight and think of something—anything—except what’s going to happen to you. Because if you think of something else, it won’t happen.”

Almarish squeezed his eyes tight shut as a thunderous droning noise filled his ears. “Ex sub one sub two,” he gabbled, “equals ei square plus two ei plus the square root of bee plus and minus ei square minus two ei bee over two ei.” The droning roar was louder; he jammed his thumbs into his ears.

He felt a hideous impulse to open his eyes. Little, stinging particles of dust struck against his neck.

Flying through the air, turning over and over, the droning roar became one continual crash that battered against his body with physical force. There was one indescribable, utterly, incomparably violent noise that nearly blew his brain out like an overload of electricity. Then things became more or less quiet, and he tumbled onto a marshy sort of ground.

“All clear?” he asked, without opening his eyes.

“Yes,” said Moira. “You were magnificent.”

He lifted his lids warily and saw that he sat on a stretch of forest sward. Looking behind him—

“My God!” he screamed. “Did we go through that?”

“Yes,” said Moira. “It’s a ghost—unless you’re afraid of it, it can’t hurt you.”

Behind them, the thousand-foot blades of a monstrous electric fan swirled brilliantly at several hundred r.p.s. The noise reached them in a softening blur of sound. Gently it faded away.

Almarish of Ellil leaned back quietly.

“The big calf!” muttered Moira. “Now he faints on me!”

## 

## 5

“Now,” said Almarish, “what about this happy animal?”

“La Bête Joyeux?” asked the little creature.

“If that’s what its name is. Why this damned nonsense about tears?”

“It’s a curse,” said Moira grimly. “A very terrible curse.”

“Then it’ll keep. Who’s in there?”

He pointed to a stony hut that blocked the barely-defined trail they were following. Moira shaded her tiny eyes and wrinkled her brow as she stared. “I don’t know,” she admitted at last. “It’s something new.”

Almarish prepared to detour. The stone door slid open. Out looked a wrinkled, weazened face, iron-rimmed spectacles slid down over the nose. It was whiskered, but not as resplendently as Almarish’s, whose imposing mattress spread from his chin to his waist. And the beard straggling from the face was not the rich mahogany hue of the sorcerer’s, but a dirty white, streaked with grey and soup stains.

“Hello,” said Almarish amiably, getting his fingers around the invincible dirk.

“Beaver!” shrilled the old man, pointing a dirty-yellow, quavering, derisive finger at Almarish. Then he lit a cigarette with a big, apparently homemade match and puffed nervously.

“Is there anything,” inquired the sorcerer, “we can do for you? Otherwise we’d like to be on our way.”

“We?” shrilled the old man.

Almarish realized that Moira had retreated into his pocket again. “I mean I,” he said hastily. “I was a king once—you get into the habit.”

“Come in,” said the old man quaveringly. By dint of extraordinarily hard puffing, he had already smoked down the cigarette to his yellowed teeth. Carefully he lit another from its butt.

Almarish did not want to come in. At least he had not wanted to, but there was growing in his mind a conviction that this was a very nice old man, and that it would be a right and proper thing to go in. That happy-animal nonsense could wait. Hospitality was hospitality.

He went in and saw an utterly revolting interior, littered with the big, clumsy matches and with cigarette butts smoked down to eighth-inches and stamped out. The reek of nicotine filled the air; ashtrays deep as water buckets overflowed everywhere onto the floor.

“Perhaps,” said the sorcerer, “we’d better introduce ourselves. I’m Almarish, formerly of Ellil.”

“Pleased to meet you,” shrilled the ancient. Already he was chain-smoking his third cigarette. “My name’s Hopper. I’m a geasan.”

“What?”

“Geasan—layer-on of geases. A geas is an injunction which can’t be disobeyed. Sit down.”

Almarish felt suddenly that it was about time he took a little rest. “Thanks,” he said, sitting in a pile of ashes and burned matches. “But I don’t believe that business about you being able to command people.”

The geasan started his sixth cigarette and cackled shrilly. “You’ll see. Young man, I want that beard of yours. My mattress needs restuffing. You’ll let me have it, of course.”

“Of course,” said Almarish. Anything at all for a nice old man like this, he thought. But that business about geases was too silly for words.

“And I may take your head with it. You won’t object.”

“Why, no,” said the sorcerer. What in Hades was the point of living, anyway?

Lighting his tenth cigarette from the butt of the ninth, the geasan took down from the wall a gigantic razor.

A tiny head peeked over the top of the sorcerer’s pocket.

“Won’t you,” said a little voice, “introduce me, Almarish, to your handsome friend?”

The eleventh cigarette dropped from the lips of the ancient as Almarish brought out Moira and she pirouetted on his palm. She cast a meaningful glance at the geasan. “Almarish is such a boor,” she declared. “Not one bit like some men…”

“It was the cigarettes that gave him his power, of course,” decided the sorcerer as he climbed the rocky bluff.

“My size,” purred Moira, “only a little taller, of course. Women like that.” She began to snore daintily in his pocket.

Almarish heaved himself over the top of the bluff, and found himself on a stony plain or plateau scattered with tumbled rocks.

“Vials, sir?” demanded a voice next to his ear.

“Ugh!” he grunted, rapidly sidestepping. “Where are you?”

“Right here.” Almarish stared. “No—here.” Still he could see nothing.

“What was that about vials?” he asked, fingering the dirk.

Something took shape in the air before his eyes. He picked it out of space and inspected the thing. It was a delicate bottle, now empty, designed to hold only a few drops. Golden wires ran through the glass forming patterns suggestive of murder and other forms of sudden death.

“How much?” he asked.

“That ring?” suggested the voice. Almarish felt his hand being taken and one of his rings being twisted off.

“Okay,” he said. “It’s yours.”

“Thanks ever so much,” replied the voice gratefully. “Miss Megaera will love it.”

“Keep away from those Eumenides, boy,” Almarish warned. “They’re tricky sluts.”

“I’ll thank you to mind your own business, sir,” snapped the voice. It began to whistle an air, which trailed away into the distance.

From behind one of the great, tumbled cairns of rock slid, with a colossal clashing of scales, a monster.

“Ah, there,” said the monster.

Almarish surveyed it carefully. The thing was a metallic cross among the octopus, scorpion, flying dragon, tortoise, ape and toad families. Its middle face smiled amiably, almost condescendingly, down on the sorcerer.

“You the Bête Joyeux?” asked Almarish.

“See here,” said the monster, snorting a bit and dribbling lava from a corner of its mouth. “See here—I’ve been called many things, some unprintable, but that’s a new one. What’s it mean?”

“Happy animal, I think,” said Almarish.

“Then I probably am,” said the monster. It chuckled. “Now what do you want?”

“See this vial? It has to be filled with your tears.”

“So what?” asked the monster, scratching itself.

“Will you weep for me?”

“Out of sheer perversity, no. Shall we fight now?”

“I suppose so,” said Almarish, heavy-hearted. “There’s only one other way to get your tears that I can think of. Put up your dukes, chum.”

The monster squared off slowly. It didn’t move like a fighter; it seemed to rely on static fire power, like a battle tank. It reached out a tentacle whose end opened slowly into a steaming nozzle. Almarish snapped away as a squirt of sulfurous matter gushed from the tip.

With a lively blow the sorcerer slashed off the tentacle, which scuttled for shelter. The monster proper let out a yell of pain. One of its lionlike paws slapped down and sidewise at Almarish; he stood his ground and let the thing run into the dirk its full length, then jumped inside the thing’s guard and scaled its shoulder.

“No fair!” squalled the monster.

He replied with a slash that took off an ear. The creature scratched frantically for him, but he easily eluded the clumsy nails that raked past its hide. As he danced over the skin, stabbing and slashing more like a plowman than a warrior, the nails did fully as much damage as he did.

Suddenly, treacherously, the monster rolled over. Almarish birled it like a log in a pond, harrowing up its exposed belly as it lay on its back.

Back on its feet again, the thing was suddenly still. The sorcerer, catching his breath, began to worry. The squawking pants that had been its inhalations and exhalations had stopped. But it wasn’t dead, he knew. The thing was holding its breath. But why was it doing that?

The temperature of the skin began to rise, sharply. So, thought Almarish, it was trying to smoke him off by containing all its heat! He scrambled down over its forehead. The nostril flaps were tight shut. Seemingly, it breathed only by its middle head, the one he was exploring.

His heels were smoking, and the air was growing super-heated. Something had to be done, but good and quick.

With a muttered prayer, Almarish balanced the dirk in his hand and flung it with every ounce of his amazing brawn. Then, not waiting to see the results, he jumped down and ran frantically to the nearest rock. He dodged behind it and watched.

The dirk had struck home. The nostril flaps of the monster had been pinned shut. He chuckled richly to himself as the thing pawed at its nose. The metallic skin was beginning to glow red-hot, then white.

He ducked behind the rock, huddled close to it as he saw the first faint hairline of weakness on the creature’s glowing hide.

Crash! It exploded like a thunderclap. Parts whizzed past the rock like bullets, bounced and skidded along the ground, fusing rocks as they momentarily touched.

Almarish looked up at last. La Bête Joyeux was scattered over most of the plateau.

Almarish found the head at last. It had cooled down considerably; he fervently hoped that it had not dried out. With the handle of his dirk he pried up the eyelid and began a delicate operation.

Finally the dead-white sac was in his hands. Unstoppering the vial, he carefully milked the tear gland into it.

“Moira,” he said gently, shaking her.

“You ox!”

She was awake in a moment, ill-tempered as ever.

“What is it now?”

“Your vial,” he said, placing it on his palm beside her.

“Well, set it down on the ground. Me, too.” He watched as she tugged off the stopper and plunged her face into the crystal-clear liquid.

Then, abruptly, he gasped. “Here,” he said, averting his eyes. “Take my cloak.”

“Thanks,” said the tall young lady with a smile. “I didn’t think, for the moment, that my clothes wouldn’t grow when I did.”

“Now—would you care to begin at the beginning?”

“Certainly. Moira O’Donnel’s my name. Born in Dublin. Located in Antrim at the age of twenty-five, when I had the ill luck to antagonize a warlock named McGinty. He shrank me and gave me a beastly temper. Then, because I kept plaguing him, he banished me to these unreal parts.

“He was hipped on the Irish literary renaissance—Yeats, AE, Joyce, Shaw and the rest. So he put a tag on the curse that he found in one of Lord Dunsany’s stories, about the tears of la Bête Joyeux. In the story it was ‘the gladsome beast,’ and Mac’s French was always weak.

“What magic I know I picked up by eavesdropping. You can’t help learning things knocking around the planes, I guess. There were lots of bits that I filed away because I couldn’t use them until I achieved full stature again. And now, Almarish, they’re all yours. I’m very grateful to you.”

He stared into her level green eyes. “Think you could get us back to Ellil?”

“Like that!” She snapped her fingers.

“Good. Those rats—Pike and the rest—caught me unawares, but I can raise an army anywhere on a week’s notice and take over again.”

“I knew you could do it. I’m with you, Almarish, Packer, or whatever your name is.”

Diffidently he said, “Moira, you grew very dear to me as you used to snore away in my pocket.”

“I don’t snore!” she declared.

“Anyway—you can pick whichever name you like. It’s yours if you’ll have it.”

After a little while she said, smiling into his eyes:

“My size. Only a little taller, of course.”