Kalifriki of the Thread

Roger Zelazny

Tops of different sorts, and jointed dolls,

and fair golden apples from the clear-voiced Hesperides...

Orpheus the Thracian

This is the story of Kalifriki of the Thread, the Kife and the toymaker’s daughter⁠—in the days of the shifter’s flight from the Assassin’s Garden, wherefrom it bore a treasure almost without price. But even a Kife can be followed by a Master of the Thread. For the Thread may wander anywhere and need not have an end; the Thread has more sides than a sword; the Thread is subtle in its turnings, perhaps infinite in the variations it may play in the labyrinths of doom, destiny, desire. No one, however, can regard every turning of fate from the Valley of Frozen Time. Attempts to do so tend to terminate in madness.

When the man tracked the Kife to the ice-feik and slew it there, the Kife knew it was in trouble, for it was the third time the man had reached it, the third world upon which he had found it and the third time that he had slain it, a feat none had ever accomplished before.

Now, five times in a year is the charm for destruction of a Kife, and it seemed that this one suspected as much, for he had managed the pursuit as none had ever done before. The Kife did not understand how the man had located it and reached it, and it realized it was important that it learn as much as possible before the lights went out.

So it stared at the hunter⁠—hammer-jawed, high of cheek, dark-eyed beneath an oddly sensitive brow, dark hair tied back with a strip of blue cloth. The man still held the trident which had emitted the vibrations that had shattered several of the Kife’s major organs, one of the few portable weapons capable of dispatching it from the high dragon form with such ease. The man wore mittens, boots, and a heavy white garment of fur, the hood thrown back now. The midnight sun stood behind his head, and stars glittered like ice-moths beside his shoulders.

“And again it is you,” the Kife hissed.

The other nodded. The Kife noted a slight irregularity to the man’s lower teeth, a small scar beside his right eye, a piece of red thread wrapped about his left wrist.

“What is your name?” the Kife asked him.

“I am called Kalifriki,” said the man.

“How do you do what you do?”

For the first time, the man smiled.

“I might ask the same of you,” he replied.

“Shifter’s secret,” the Kife answered.

“To all tricks their trades,” said the man.

“And why you?” the Kife asked.

Kalifriki continued to smile. If he replied, the Kife did not hear it. It felt the death seize and squeeze, and as the world went away it saw the man reach to touch the Thread.

Kalifriki watched as the body collapsed, fuming, leaving him with only the green and silver-scaled hide. As the essence emerged, he reached forward and trailed the Thread through it. At that moment, it was difficult to see precisely where the strand began or ended. The man’s gaze followed it into the smoky distance, and then he moved.

There is a timeless instant when the world hangs frozen before you. It is map, sculpture, painting; it is not music, words, or wind. You may survey the course of your Thread through its time and space, attempt a rapid adjustment. Then the ice of Time is broken, the flow tugs at the strand of your existence, and you are drawn into the game.

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The Kife came to consciousness without breaking the rhythm of its six arms as they chipped delicately at the mineral encrustations. The sky was black above its burnished head, gem-quality stars strewn wherever it looked. Frost came and went upon its body surfaces, dialogue of thermostat and environment.

It had not had time to choose well because of the conversation preceding its departure from the other world. This shifting had almost been a shot in the dark. Almost.

But not quite. Here, there was a little mental trick, a turning...

Yes.

It could reach back into the larger brain, shielded within the distant cave, which oversaw the operation of the entire robot prospecting team. The brain operated at perhaps ten percent of capacity. It drowsed. It almost sleepwalked its charges through their chores. But this was sufficient. The job was, in this fashion, adequately performed. If more brainwork were needed, it would rise to the occasion. Only⁠—

It infiltrated several circuits, then paused. There was no resistance. Like a rising tide, it flowed farther, ebbed, flowed, ebbed. The processor in the cave drowsed on. The Kife saw that it had long ago set alarms. So long as nothing interfered with the robot team’s collection of minerals, it was content to contemplate a randomized hypothesis program it had designed, called “dreaming.” Perceiving this, the Kife extended the rest of itself into the thinking space it required.

Now, now there were places beyond the routines, room to manipulate memories and ideas, to reason, to imagine at levels none of the other robots could achieve.

The Kife recalled the man who had slain it a world away. It remembered how the telepathic hunting pack, the Necrolotti, had fled from the man, having sensed a predator more dangerous than themselves. The man Kalifriki was a hunter, a killer, with the ability to traverse the side-by-side lands. It struck the Kife then that the two of them had much in common. But it did not believe that the man was of its own kind. That is, he shifted, but the means he employed bore no resemblance to the Kife’s own methods.

It pondered the hunter’s motives. Vengeance? For any of the numerous acts which might have gained it the hatred of someone it had underestimated? It thought then of their duel on the world before the ice-feik. No, there was no passion there. If someone wanted vengeance, it had to be some other; which, of course, would make the man a professional at the business.

Recovery? The man might be after it to obtain a thing it had taken. The Kife sought, in its hip-compartment, after the item it had transformed considerable dragon-mass to energy in order to transport. Yes, it was intact. It occurred to it then that a mission of both vengeance and recovery was not out of the question. The one certainly did not preclude the other...

But might it be made to? It toyed with the thought. It had died twice now because it had been surprised, and once because it had underestimated its adversary. And it had been surprised and had underestimated because so few creatures were truly a threat to Kife-kind. The Kife were rare in the side-by-side lands because of their ferocity. Each required a large range, and they kept their numbers low by means of quick, lethal, territorial disputes with each other. But, beyond another Kife, there wasn’t much that a Kife feared. Realistically, the Kife now added Kalifriki to the list. The man was particularly dangerous because the Kife was uncertain as to his motives or the full range of his abilities. Best to devote thought to insuring against another surprise. But perhaps, just possibly, it should consider the terms of a bargain.

The days passed, barely distinguishable from the nights, and the Kife fell into the rock-harvesting routine. It conveyed the minerals to a truck, troubled only by the occasional seizing up of a limb. Twice, the truck’s storage compartment was filled and the Kife drove it to the warehousing area where other robots unloaded it. The second time this was being done a servicing unit approached, fastened leads to sockets beneath its backplates and performed a series of tests.

“You are due for a major overhaul,” it broadcast. “We will send another to tend to your diggings and perform this servicing now.”

“I am functioning fine, and I am in the midst of a complicated excavation,” the Kife replied. “Do it next time.”

“There is some leeway,” the servicing unit admitted. “We will do it next time, as you say.”

As the Kife headed back to its diggings it pondered a fresh dilemma. It could not permit itself to undergo a major servicing, for the special item it carried would be discovered and perhaps damaged during the course of it. Nor was the item the sort of thing it could merely hide for a long period of time. The low temperatures which prevailed in this place would doubtless damage it.

Perhaps it were better simply to flee to another place. Only⁠—

Only this might represent a problem. It had heard stories of shifters who could wait in the Valley of Frozen Time, watching another, waiting until that other moved to shift and then pouncing. The Kife could not perform this feat, though it had often tried. The tale could well be apocryphal, for he had also heard that that way lay madness. Still, it were better not to underestimate the one called Kalifriki.

Therefore, it was better to remain at work. To remain, and to figure a means whereby it might manage the overhaul.

And so it slowed its pace, collecting minerals at half the rate it had earlier, saving wear and tear on its body and postponing another confrontation with a servicing unit. Still, the call took it by surprise.

“Prospecting unit, are you damaged?” came the broadcast message.

“I am not,” it replied.

“You have been in the field much longer than usual. Is there a problem?”

“The work goes slowly.”

“Perhaps the vein has been played out and you should be relocated.”

“I think not. I have just uncovered a fresh deposit.”

“It has been a long while since you have been overhauled.”

“I know.”

“Therefore, we are sending a mobile unit to your diggings, to service you in the field.”

“That will not be necessary. I will be coming in before long.”

“You are beyond the safety limit. We will dispatch a mechanic unit.”

The transmission ended. The Kife made a decision. It was difficult to estimate when the service unit would arrive. But it was determined to undergo servicing rather than flee. This required that it secrete the item. At least, it had discovered a means for preserving it outside its own body for a brief while, with the recent discovery of a cave subjected to geothermal heating by way of a deep pit in its floor.

It departed the work area, traveling to the opening in the side of a fractured ridge. Wisps of steam moved about it, and when the ground rumbled lightly these puffed more forcefully toward the heavens. It flicked on its dome-light as it worked its way into the opening and entered the chamber where the pit glowed red-orange and gravel occasionally rattled across the floor. It halted at the rim, staring downward. The level of the bubbling magma seemed somewhat higher, but not so much so as to represent a danger to anything left in the chamber. Nor, according to its sensors, was there an increase in seismic activity since the time it had discovered this opening. Yes, this would be an ideal place to store it for a few hours while⁠—

There came a flash of light from the entranceway, and its sensors read heat overload as one of its forelimbs was fused. Turning, it beheld a humanoid figure in a pressurized suit, light in one hand, pistol in the other. It also noted the strand of red wrapped around the figure’s forearm.

“Kalifriki!” it broadcast on the wavelength used for general communication in this place. “Hold your fire or you may defeat your own purposes.”

“Oh?” The man answered at the same frequency. “When did you become aware of my purposes?”

“You were not hired simply to destroy me, but to recover something I took, were you not?”

“Actually, I was hired to do both,” Kalifriki replied.

“Then it was the Old Man of Alamut who retained you?”

“Indeed. When the Assassins need to hire an assassin they come to Kalifriki.”

“Would you consider making a deal?”

“Your life for the vial? No, I’d rather collect the entire fee.”

“I was not really offering. I was merely curious,” said the Kife, “whether you would accept.”

Kalifriki’s weapon flared as the Kife charged him.

Two more of its six forearms were melted by the bright discharge, and a large block of sensors was destroyed. This meant very little to the Kife, however, for it felt it could spare considerable function and still remain superior to a human. In fact⁠—

“It was foolish of you to follow me here,” it said, as it swung a blow which missed Kalifriki but pulverized a section of the cave wall. “Another robot is even now on the way.”

“No,” the man replied. “I faked that call to get you to come here.”

“You chose this place? Why?”

“I was hoping you’d have produced the vial by the time I arrived,” he replied, diving to his right to avoid another charge. “Unfortunately, my entry was a trifle premature. Pity.”

He fired again, taking out several more sensors and a square foot of insulation. The Kife turned with incredible speed, however, knocking the pistol upward and lunging. Kalifriki triggered the weapon in that position, threw himself to the rear and rolled, dropping his light as he did so. A section of the cave’s roof collapsed, half burying the Kife, blocking the entranceway.

Kalifriki rose to his feet.

“I can take a terrific beating in this body,” the Kife stated, beginning to dig itself out, “and still destroy you. Whereas the slightest damage to that suit means your end.”

“True,” said the man, raising the weapon and pointing it once again. “Fortunately for me, that problem is already solved.”

He pulled the trigger and the weapon crackled feebly and grew still.

“Oh,” said the Kife, wishing his robot features capable of a smile.

Kalifriki holstered the weapon, raised a boulder, and hurled it. It smashed against the Kife’s head and rolled off to the side where it fell into the pit. The Kife increased its efforts to uncover itself, working with only two appendages, as the fourth of its arms had been damaged in the rockfall.

Kalifriki continued to hurl rubble as the Kife dug itself out. Charging the man then, the Kife reached for his throat. Its left arm slowed, emitted a grating noise and grew still. The right arm continued toward Kalifriki, who seized it with both hands and ducked beneath it, springing to the robot’s side, then again to its rear. The Kife’s treads left the ground in the light gravity of the moonlet. As it was turned and tipped, it felt a push. Then it was falling, the glow rushing up toward it. Before it struck the magma it realized that it had underestimated Kalifriki again.

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The Kife regarded the Valley of Frozen Time. As always, it tried to stretch the timeless moment wherein it could consider the physical prospects and some of the sequences available to it. For reasons it did not understand, the hovering process continued. It rejoiced, in that this time it saw the means whereby it might plot and manipulate events to an extent it had never achieved before. This time, not only would it be able to lay a trap for Kalifriki, but it would create one of subtlety and refinement, by a shifter, for a shifter, worthy of a shifter in all respects.

It was able to hold back the flow until almost everything was in place.

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As Kalifriki followed the Thread through the placeless time into the timeless place he was puzzled by its course thereafter, into the world to which he was about to follow the Kife for their final confrontation. It ran through the most unusual pattern he had ever beheld. It was too complicated a thing for him to analyze in detail before its force drew him to the level of events. Therefore, he would have to trust the instincts which had served him so well in the past, regarding the array only in gross, seeking the nexus of greatest menace and providing a lifeline of some sort. Here, he would have chuckled⁠—though laughter, like wind or music, could not manifest in this place. He twisted the strand and whipped it, the hot red loop following his will, racing away from him among canyons and boulevards of his latest world-to-be. He followed...

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...Setting foot upon the rocky trail which gave way immediately beneath him. He reached for the passing ledge and caught hold, only to have it, too, yield as his weight came upon it. Then, through risen dust, he beheld the long, steep slope below, with several rocky prominences near which he soon must pass. He raised his left arm to protect his face, let his body go limp and attempted to steer the course of descent with his heels as he reflected upon the prudence of dealing with a great and distant menace while neglecting a smaller but nasty one so close at hand.

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When he woke he found himself in a large, canopied bed, his head aching, his mouth dry. The room was dark but daylight leaked about the edges of shutters on the far wall. He attempted to rise so as to visit the window, but the pain in his right leg told him that a bone could be broken. He cursed in Norman French, Arabic, Italian, and Greek, wiped his brow, fell to musing, and passed back to sleep.

When next he woke it was to the singing of birds and the soft sounds of another’s presence in the room. Through slitted eyelids, he beheld a human-sized form advancing upon him, areas of brightness moving at its back. It halted beside the bed and he felt a cold hand upon his brow, fingertips at the pulse in his wrist. He opened his eyes.

She was blonde and dark-eyed with a small chin, her face entirely unlined, expressionless in her attention. It was difficult for him to estimate whether she was tall, short or somewhere between, in that he was uncertain as to the height of the bed. Behind her stood a gleaming simulacrum of an ape, an upright, bronze-plated chimpanzee, perfectly formed in every detail, bearing a large, dark case in its right hand. On the floor beside it stood a huge silver tortoise, a covered tray on its back, its head turning slowly from side to side.

Only for an instant did the metallic bodies cause a rush of apprehension, as he recalled his battle with the Kife in its robot form.

Then, “Do not be distressed,” he heard her say, in a language close to one of the many he spoke. “We wish only to help you.”

“It was a memory come to trouble me,” he explained. “Is my leg broken?”

“Yes,” she replied, uncovering it. He beheld an ornate swirl of black and yellow metal about his lower right leg. It seemed a work of art, such as might be displayed at the Byzantine Court. “Dr. Shong set it,” she added, indicating the metal ape, who bowed.

“How long ago was this?” Kalifriki asked.

She glanced at Dr. Shong, who said, “Three days⁠—no, three and a half,” in a voice like a brassy musical instrument played low and slow.

“Thank you. How did I come to this place?”

“We found you on one of our walks,” Dr. Shong said, “mixed in with the remains of a rockslide, beneath a broken trail. We brought you back here and repaired you.”

“What is this place?” he asked.

“This is the home of the toymaker, Jerobee Clockman, my father,” the lady told him. “I am Yolara.”

The question in her eyes and voice was clear.

“I am called Kalifriki,” he said.

“Are you hungry⁠—Kalifriki?” she asked.

He nodded, licking his lips. The smell of food had become almost unbearable. “Indeed,” he replied.

Dr. Shong raised him into a seated position and propped him with pillows while Yolara uncovered the tray and brought it to the bedside. She seated herself on an adjacent chair and offered him the food.

“Still warm,” he observed, tasting it.

“Thank Odas,” she said, gesturing toward the tortoise. “He bears a heating element in his back.”

Odas met his gaze and nodded, acknowledging his thanks with, “My pleasure,” rendered in a high, reedy voice, and, “Come doctor,” he continued, “let us leave them to organic converse⁠—unless we may be of some further service.”

Yolara shook her head slightly and the pair departed.

When he finally paused between mouthfuls, Kalifriki nodded in the direction the pair had taken. “Your father’s work?” he inquired.

“Yes,” she answered.

“Ingenious, and lovely. Are there more such about?”

“Yes,” she answered, staring at him so steadily as to make him uncomfortable. “You will meet more of them, by and by.”

“And your father?”

“He is, at the moment, ill. Else he would have overseen your awakening and welcomed you in person.”

“Nothing serious, I hope.”

She looked away before replying. “It is difficult to know. He is a reticent man.”

“What of your mother?”

“I never knew her. Father says that she ran away with a Gypsy musician when I was quite young.”

“Have you brothers, or sisters?”

“None.”

Kalifriki continued eating.

“What were you doing in these parts?” she asked after a time. “We are fairly remote from the avenues of commerce.”

“Hunting,” he said.

“What sort of beast?”

“It is rare. It comes from a place very far from here.”

“What does it look like?”

“Anything.”

“Dangerous?”

“Very.”

“How is it called?”

“Kife.”

She shook her head.

“I have never heard of such a creature.”

“Just as well. When do you think I might get up?”

“Whenever you possess the strength. Dr. Shong says that the device you wear should protect your leg fully⁠—though you might want a stick, for balance.”

He lowered his fork.

“Yes, I would like to try...soon,” he said.

Shortly, she removed the tray and drew the cover higher, for he had fallen asleep.

When he woke that afternoon, however, he attempted to get up after eating. Dr. Shong rushed to assist him. While Yolara fetched a stick, the ape helped him to dress, performing neurological tests and checking his muscle tone during their frequent pauses. Dr. Shong picked away the thread that clung to Kalifriki’s wrist and tossed it aside. He did not see it drift back several moments later, settling upon his own shoulder, depending toward his hip.

They were halfway across the room when Yolara returned with the stick. Both accompanied him outside then and along the corridor to a balcony, whence he looked down upon a courtyard containing six sheep, two goats, four cows, a bull and a flock of chickens, all fashioned of metals both dull and gleaming, all seeming to browse and forage, all producing peculiar approximations of the sounds made by their flesh and blood models.

“Amazing,” Kalifriki stated.

“They are merely decorative machines, not possessed of true intellect,” Dr. Shong observed. “They are but child’s play for the Master.”

“Amazing, nevertheless,” said Kalifriki.

Yolara took his arm to steady him as he turned away, heading back inside.

“We’ll return you to your room now,” she said.

“No,” he replied, turning toward a stairwell they had passed on their way up the hall. “I must go farther.”

“Not stairs. Not yet,” said Dr. Shong.

“Please do as he says,” she asked. “Perhaps tomorrow.”

“Only if we may walk to the far end of the hallway and back.”

She glanced at the metal simian, who nodded.

“Very well. But let us go slowly. Why must you push yourself so hard?”

“I must be ready to face the Kife, anywhere, anytime.”

“I doubt you will find it lurking hereabouts.”

“Who knows?” he replied.

That evening, Kalifriki was awakened by strains of a wild music, faint in the distance. After a time, he struggled to his feet and out into the corridor. The sounds were coming up from the stairwell. Leaning against the wall, he listened for a long while, then limped back to bed.

The following day, after breakfast, he expressed his desire for a longer walk, and Yolara dismissed Dr. Shong and led Kalifriki down the stairs. Only gradually did he come to understand the enormous size of the building through which they moved.

“Yes,” she commented when he remarked upon this. “It is built upon the ruins of an ancient abbey, and over the years it has served as fortress as well as residence.”

“Fascinating,” he said. “Tell me, I thought that I heard music last night. Was there some sort of celebration?”

“You might call it that,” she answered. “My father left his rooms for the first time in a long while, and he summoned his musicians to play for him.”

“I am glad that he is feeling better,” Kalifriki said. “It was an eerie and beautiful music. I would like to hear it again one day⁠—and perhaps even be present when the musicians perform it.”

“They are returned to their crypts, somewhere beneath the floor,” she said. “But who knows?”

“They, too, are creations of your father?”

“I think so,” she answered. “But I’ve never really seen them, so it is difficult to say.”

They passed an aviary of bronze birds, a peculiar blue patina upon their wings, warbling, trilling, crying kerrew and fanning their feathers like turquoise screens. Some of them sat upon iron perches, some on nests of copper. A few of the nests contained silver eggs, while some held tiny birds, unfledged, beaks open to receive flies of foil, worms of tin. The air blurred and flashed about the singers when they moved.

In a garden in a southern courtyard she showed him a silver tree, bearing gleaming replicas of every sort of fruit he had ever seen and many he had not.

Passing up a corridor, Yolara halted before what Kalifriki at first took to be a portrait of herself, wearing a low-cut gown of black satin, a large emerald pendant in the shape of a ship riding the swells of her breasts. But upon closer regard the woman seemed more mature⁠—

“My mother,” Yolara said.

“Lovely,” Kalifriki replied, “also.”

At the end of the corridor was a red metal top as large as himself, spinning with a sad note, balanced upon the point of a dagger. Yolara told him that the top would rotate for ninety-nine years undisturbed.

She stated this so seriously that Kalifriki chuckled.

“I have not heard you laugh nor seen you smile,” he said, “the entire time I’ve been here.”

“These things are not as fresh to me as they are to you,” she replied. “I see them every day.”

He nodded.

“Of course,” he said.

Then she smiled. She squeezed his hand with a surprisingly firm grip.

The following day they went riding great horned horses of metal⁠—he, mounted upon a purple stallion; she, a green mare. They sat for a long while on a hilltop, regarding the valley, the mountains and the fortress of Jerobee Clockman. He told her somewhat of himself and her fascination seemed genuine, well beyond the point of courtesy. She seemed awkward when he finally kissed her, and it was not until the slow ride back that she told him she knew no humans other than her father, having met only an occasional merchant, minstrel, or messenger for brief spans of time.

“That seems a very odd way to live,” he commented.

“Really?” she replied. “I was beginning to suspect this from reading books in the library. But since they are fiction to begin with, I could never be certain what parts are real.”

“Your father seems a peculiar man,” said Kalifriki. “I would like to meet him.”

“I am not sure he is entirely recovered,” she said. “He has been avoiding me somewhat.” Riding farther, she added, “I would like to see more of the world than this place.”

That night when Kalifriki heard the music again he made his way slowly and quietly down the stairs. He paused just outside the hall from which the skirls and wailings flowed. Carefully, then, he lowered himself to his belly and inched forward, so that he could peer around the corner of the entranceway, his eyes but a few centimeters above the floor.

He beheld a metallic quartet with the blasted forms and visages of fallen angels. They were all of them crippled, their gray, gold, and silver bodies scorched, faces pocked, brows antlered or simply horned. Broken bat-wings hung like black gossamer from their shoulders. There were two fiddlers, one piper and one who performed on a rack of crystal bells. The music was stirring, chaotic, mesmerizing, yet somehow cold as a north wind on a winter’s night. It was hardly human music, and Kalifriki found himself wondering whether the metal demons composed their own tunes. Behind them, in the floor, were five grave-sized openings, the four surrounding the fifth. Seated before them in a large leather chair was a white-haired fat man whose features Kalifriki could not see, for the man had steepled his fingers and held them before his face. This did, however, draw his attention to a large sapphire ring upon the man’s right hand.

When the piece was ended the creatures grew still. The man rose to his feet and took hold of a slim red lance leaning against the nearest wall. Taking several steps forward, he struck its butt upon a crescent-shaped flagstone. Immediately, the musicians swiveled in place, approached their crypts, and descended into them. When they were below the level of the floor, stone covers slid into place, concealing all traces of their existence.

The man placed the lance upon a pair of pegs on the wall to his left, then crossed the room and went out of a door at its far end. Cautiously, Kalifriki rose, entered and moved through. At the far door, he saw the form of the man reach the end of a hallway and begin mounting a stair, which he knew from an earlier walk to lead to the building’s highest tower. He waited for a long while before taking down the lance. When he struck its butt against the curved stone, the floor opened and he stared down into the crypts.

The demon musicians emerged and stood, raising their instruments, preparing to play. But Kalifriki had already seen all that he cared to. He struck the stone once more and the quartet retired again. He restored the lance to its pegs and departed the hall.

For a long time he wandered the dim corridors, lost in thought. When, at length, he passed a lighted room and saw it to be a library with Dr. Shong seated within, reading, he paused.

“Kalifriki,” said the doctor, “what is the matter?”

“I think better when I pace.”

“You are still recovering and sleep will serve you more than thought.”

“That is not how I am built. When I am troubled I pace and think.”

“I was not aware of this engineering peculiarity. Tell me your trouble and perhaps I can help you.”

“I have not yet met my host. Is Jerobee Clockman aware of my presence here?”

“Yes. I report to him every day.”

“Oh. Has he any special orders concerning me?”

“To treat your injury, to feed you and to see that you are extended every courtesy.”

“Has he no desire to meet me in person?”

The doctor nodded.

“Yes, but I must remind you that he has not been well himself of late. He is sufficiently improved now, however, that he will be inviting you to dine with him tomorrow.”

“Is it true that Yolara’s mother ran off with a musician?” Kalifriki asked.

“So I have heard. I was not present in those days. I was created after Yolara was grown.”

“Thank you, doctor,” Kalifriki said, “and good night.”

He limped on up to the hallway. When he turned the corner the limp vanished. Farther along the corridor he seated himself upon a bench, rolled up his trouser leg and removed the elaborate brace he wore. Slowly, he rose to his feet. Then he shifted his weight. Then he smiled.

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Later that evening Yolara heard a scratching upon her door.

“Who is it?” she asked.

“Kalifriki. I want to talk to you.”

“A moment,” she said.

She opened the door. He noted she was still fully clothed in the garments she had worn that day.

“How did you know which door was mine?” she asked him.

“I stepped outside and looked up,” he replied. “This was the only room with a light on⁠—apart from mine and the library, where I left Dr. Shong. And I know your father’s rooms are in the North Tower.”

She granted him her second smile.

“Ingenious,” she stated. “What is it you wish to talk about?”

“First, a question⁠—if I may.”

“Surely.” She stepped aside and held the door wide. “Please come in.”

“Thank you.”

He took the chair she offered him, then said, “When I awoke several days ago, Dr. Shong told me that I had been found at the scene of my accident three and a half days earlier.”

She nodded.

“Were you present when I was discovered?”

“No,” she answered. “I heard of you later.”

“He used the pronoun ‘we,’ so I assumed that you were included. Do you know who else was with him?”

She shook her head.

“One of the other simulacra, most likely,” she said. “But it might also have been my father. I think not, though, because of his illness.”

“Yolara,” he said, “something is wrong in this place. I feel that we are both in great danger. You have said that you would like to leave. Very well. Get some things together and I’ll take you away, right now, tonight.”

Her eyes widened.

“This is so abrupt! I would have to tell my father! I⁠—”

“No!” he said. “He is the one I fear. I believe he is mad, Yolara⁠—and very dangerous.”

“He would never harm me,” she said.

“I would not be too certain. You resemble your mother strongly, if that portrait be true. In his madness he may one day confuse you with her memory. Then you would be in danger.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“You must tell me why you say this.”

“I believe that he found your mother after her affair with the Gypsy, and that he killed her.”

“How can you say that?”

“I’ve been to the hall where he keeps his demon quartet. I have opened their crypts⁠—and a fifth one about which they assemble to play. In that fifth one is a skeleton. About its neck is the chain bearing the emerald chip which she is wearing in the painting.”

“No! I do not believe it!”

“I am sorry.”

“I must see this for myself.”

“I would rather you did not.”

“To make a charge like that and ask me to accept it on faith is too much,” she stated. “Come! It would not be as bad as you may think, for my mother is a stranger to me. I would see this crypt.”

“Very well.”

He rose to his feet and they passed outside. Reaching into a shadowy alcove, he produced a length of bright steel which he kept in his right hand as he led the way to the stairs.

“Where did you get the sword?” she asked.

“Borrowed it from a suit of armor downstairs.”

“My father is a sick old man. It is hardly necessary to arm yourself against him.”

“Then no harm is done,” he replied.

“There is even more to this,” she said, “isn’t there?”

“We shall see,” he answered.

When they came to the hall he had visited earlier, Kalifriki took the red lance down from the wall.

“Stand here,” he directed, leading her to a place near the middle crypt, and he stepped back and smote the crescent stone with the lance’s butt.

The stones slid back and he hurried to her side. Her scream was not caused by the demons which rose to surround them, however. Looking down into the crypt, Kalifriki beheld the body of a fat, white-haired man whose head had been twisted around so that it faced completely to the rear. The body lay in the embrace of the ancient skeleton from whose neck the emerald chip depended.

“Who did this?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Kalifriki said. “He was not there earlier. I don’t understand. I⁠—”

He knelt suddenly and reached down into the crypt. He raised the man’s right hand.

“What is it?” she asked.

“A ring with a blue stone in it,” he said. “He was wearing it earlier this evening. Now he is not.”

“His signet,” she said. “His seal as Master Toymaker. He would never part with it willingly.”

Just then the demon quartet began to play and words became impossible. Lowering the toymaker’s hand, Kalifriki picked up the red lance which he had laid aside. He rose to his feet.

He passed between the crippled demons, and when he came to the crescent stone he struck it with the lance. Immediately, the music died. The performers retired to their crypts. The crypts began to close.

“Now do you at least believe that there is danger?” he said.

“Yes,” she replied. “But⁠—”

“Indeed there is,” said the fat, white-haired man who entered through the far doorway, a flash of blue upon his right hand. “I heard your scream.”

“Father’s simulacrum,” she said. “He’d often considered making one. I didn’t know that he had. It’s killed him and taken his place!”

The fat man smiled and advanced.

“Excellent,” he said. “Hard to put one over on you, isn’t it?”

“Where’s its weakest spot?” Kalifriki asked her, raising the blade.

“Slightly below the navel,” she answered, and he lowered the point of the weapon.

“Really,” the simulacrum said, “beneath this guise of flesh you will find that you face metal against metal. It would take a good arm and a good blade to puncture me.”

Kalifriki smiled.

“Shall we find out?” he asked.

The simulacrum halted.

“No, let’s not,” it replied. “It seems an awful waste of talent.”

Its gaze moved past them then. Kalifriki turned his head, to see Dr. Shong enter through the other door.

“Doctor!” Yolara cried. “He’s killed Father and taken his place!”

“I know,” the ape replied, and she stared as he grinned. “He had an offer he couldn’t refuse.”

“My leg,” Kalifriki said, “is not broken. I believe that it was, but it is healed now. That would have taken considerably longer than the few days you said it had been. I think I’ve been here for several weeks, that you’ve kept me drugged⁠—”

“Very astute,” Dr. Shong observed. “Also, correct. We had a special request of the late Jerobee Clockman. He did not finish the final adjustments until only a little while ago.”

“And then you killed him!” Yolara cried.

“Just so,” said the simian, nodding, “though his simulacrum did the actual physical business. But it is lèse majesté to call us killers in the presence of assassin royalty such as your guest. Isn’t that right, Kalifriki?”

“Come closer, ape,” he said.

“No. You seem to have figured out everything but why. So take the final step and tell me: what was Clockman’s last creation⁠—the thing he assembled that long while you slept?”

“I...I don’t know,” Kalifriki said.

“Come in!” Dr. Shong called out.

Kalifriki watched as his own double entered the room, a sword in its hand.

“Built according to your specifications,” the ape stated. “Considerably stronger, though.”

“I thought the Kife had fled.”

His doppelgänger bowed.

“You were incorrect,” it told him.

Kalifriki slammed the butt of the lance against the crescent stone, Yolara cried “Killer!” and rushed toward the portly simulacrum, while the doppelgänger advanced upon Kalifriki, the point of its blade describing a small circle in the air.

“By all means, let us dance,” said his double, smiling, as the musicians took up their instruments and tuned them. The ape laughed, and Yolara cried out as she was thrown across the room to strike her head upon the hearthstone.

Snarling, Kalifriki turned away from his advancing double and, with a quick leap and an even quicker lunge, drove his blade into the simulacrum of Jerobee Clockman with such force that its point passed through its abdomen and protruded from its lower back. The weapon was wrenched from Kalifriki’s grip as the figure suddenly raised both arms to shoulder height, extending them out to the sides, twisted its head into a bizarre position, and began the execution of a series of dance steps. With this, a small ratcheting noise commenced in the vicinity of its midsection.

Turning then, swinging the red lance in a circle, Kalifriki succeeded in parrying his double’s attack. Retreating, the music swirling wildly about him, he ventured a glance at Yolara, discovering that she still had not moved. The glance almost cost him an ear, but he parried the thrust and riposted with a double-handed blow of the lance which would have cracked a human’s ribs but only slowed the simulacrum for a moment. During that moment, however, he struck it between the eyes with the butt of the weapon and, reversing it with a spin, jabbed for the abdomen with the lance’s point. The attack was parried, though; and seeming to shake off all its effects, his doppelgänger pressed him again. In the distance, he heard Dr. Shong chuckle.

Then he began to retreat once again, turning, passing behind the simulacrum of Jerobee Clockman⁠—which was now dancing in extreme slow motion and emitting periodic clanging sounds. As it shifted its weight from left foot to right, he kicked it hard and it toppled in that direction, falling directly in the path of the double. Laughing, the doppelgänger leapt over the twitching figure to continue its attack.

Kalifriki passed among the musicians then, dodging the fiddlers’ bows, side-stepping to avoid collision with the bell rack. And his double came on, stamping, thrusting, parrying and riposting. When he reached the position toward which he had been headed, Kalifriki pretended to stumble.

Predictably, the other attacked. Continuing his drop onto one knee and turning his body, Kalifriki executed a downward, rowing stroke with the lance which caught the simulacrum behind the knees, sweeping it off-balance. Springing to his feet then, Kalifriki struck it between the shoulder blades and rushed away as it toppled into the opened crypt.

Slamming the butt of the lance against the crescent stone silenced the musicians immediately, and they tucked away their instruments, retreating toward their own crypts. Rushing among them, Kalifriki raised the lance once more to club down his doppelgänger, should it try to emerge before the crypt sealed itself. It looked up and met his gaze.

“Fool!” it cried. “You guard me while the Kife flees!”

“Dr. Shong?” Kalifriki exclaimed, suddenly knowing it to be true.

Whirling, he hurled the lance at the running ape form, just as the crypt’s lid slid shut above the simulacrum. The red shaft struck the hurrying figure’s left shoulder with a terrific clang as it was about to cross the threshold of the nearer door. The impact turned it completely around. Miraculously, the ape did not fall, but teetered a moment, regained its balance, then rushed across the room toward the fireplace, left arm hanging useless.

Arriving before Kalifriki could take more than three paces, Dr. Shong knelt and reached, right hand fastening about Yolara’s throat.

“Stop!” cried the ape. “I can decapitate her with a single movement! And I will if you come any nearer!”

Kalifriki halted, regarding the smear of blood on her temple.

“There was a time when I thought she might be a simulacrum,” he said.

“I had toyed with the notion,” said the other, “of replacing her with a version designed to kill you after you’d fallen in love with it. But I lack sufficient knowledge of human emotions. I was afraid it might take too long, or that it might not happen. Still, it would have been a delightful way of managing it.”

Kalifriki nodded.

“What now?” he asked. “We seem stalemated here. Except that she does not appear to be breathing. If this is true, your threat is meaningless.”

He began to take another step.

“Stop!” The Kife rose slowly, clasping her to its breast with forearm and elbow, its hand still at her throat. “I say she still lives. if you wish to gamble with her life, come ahead.”

Kalifriki paused, his eyes narrowing. In the dim light, he saw the Thread, upon the shoulder and waist of the simulacrum. Slowly, he raised his left arm. The Thread was also wrapped about his wrist. It extended back over his left shoulder. It extended forward. It joined with the segment of itself which hung upon the metal ape. It passed beyond, out of the door of the room. As Kalifriki flexed his fingers, it grew taut. As he continued the movement, the Kife turned its head, bewildered, as if looking for something in several directions. When Kalifriki closed his hand into a fist, the segments of Thread which had been looped about the Kife vanished from sight, slicing their ways into the metal body.

Moments later, the simulacrum had collapsed, falling to the floor in three pieces. It had been decapitated and the torso separated from the legs at the waist. Yolara lay sprawled across its mid-section, and its head rolled toward Kalifriki.

As Kalifriki stepped past it, it addressed him: “I lied. She is not breathing.”

Kalifriki halted, picked up the head and drew back his arm to hurl it against the nearest wall.

“But she may breathe again,” it said, lips twisting into a smile, “if you but use your head.”

“What do you mean?” Kalifriki asked. “Talk!”

“That which I stole from the Old Man of the Mountain⁠—the Elixir of Life⁠—it would revive her.”

“Where is it?”

“I will tell you, in return for your promise that you will not destroy me.”

Kalifriki turned the face away from his so that the Kife would not see him smile.

“Very well,” he answered. “You have my word. Where is it?”

“Hidden among the gold and silver fruit in the bowl on the table beside the far door.”

Kalifriki crossed the room, searched the bowl.

“Yes,” he said at last, removing the small vial.

He unstoppered it and sniffed it. He placed his finger over the bottle’s mouth, inverted it, returned it to an upright position. He placed upon his tongue the single droplet which clung to his fingertip.

“It is odorless and tasteless,” he observed, “and I feel nothing. Are you certain this is not some trick?”

“Do not waste it, fool! It takes only a drop!”

“Very well. You had better be telling the truth.”

He returned to Yolara’s side and drew downwards upon her chin to open her mouth. Then he removed another drop from the vial and placed it upon her tongue.

Moments later she drew a deep breath and sighed. Shortly thereafter, her eyelids fluttered and opened.

“What,” she asked him, “has happened?”

“It is over,” he said, raising her and holding her. “We live, and my job is finished.”

“What was your job?” she inquired.

“To recover this vial,” he explained, “and to bring back the head of its thief.”

The brazen ape-head began to wail.

“You have tricked me!” it cried.

“You have tricked yourself,” he replied, stoppering the bottle and pocketing it, helping Yolara to her feet.

“You are in charge here now,” he told her. “If the memories are too bad for you, come with me and I will try to give you some better ones.”

\* \* \*

Now, as he led her through the Valley of Frozen Time, Kalifriki halted in a place that was sculpture, painting, map. He squeezed Yolara’s arm and gestured at the incredible prospect which lay before them.

She smiled and nodded, just as the head of the Kife, which Kalifriki bore in his left hand, opened its mouth and bit him. He would have cursed, save that this was not a place of words (nor music, nor wind). He dropped the head, which rolled away, and he raised his hand to his mouth. The Kife’s head fell into a crevice, where it rolled a considerable distance before coming to rest in precarious balance at the top of another incline, its position masked in darkest shadow. Search though he did, Kalifriki never found it, and he had to settle for only half of his pay, for the Old Man of Alamut is a harsh taskmaster. Still, this was not an inconsiderable amount, and with it he took Yolara on an amazing odyssey, to Byzantium, Venice, Cathay⁠—but that is another story. The while, the Kife went mad of contemplating the turnings of fate; its brazen head fell from the ledge when it opened its jaw to scream, though this was not a place of screaming (nor music, nor wind); and it rolled the side-beside slopes down to a lane near Oxford, where a Franciscan named Roger Bacon found it. That, too, is another story. The Thread is always arriving and departing. It may wander anywhere and need not have an end.

A Word from Zelazny

“[This story] was written at the request of Diana Wynne Jones (to whom I owe special thanks for introducing me to Gorky’s autobiography, as well as for writing so many fine works of her own). In variation/imitation terms, I was playing with some of the gimmickry and feelings from E. T. A. Hoffman’s tales when I wrote this piece for her collection Hidden Turnings [Hoffman’s most famous story was “Nutcracker and Mouse King,” which Tchaikovsky adapted into the ballet The Nutcracker]. And yes, I was winging it most of the way through, rather than working from a completed mental outline.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

“With some of my stories a character such as Dilvish, Kalifriki, Mara or Conrad comes in out of the night, takes my attention hostage, and waits. Circumstances then suggest, events coalesce, and the story flows like a shadow. Generally, tales such as these are longer pieces; novels, even. Once I’ve seen their shapes, they exist as ghosts for me till I’ve pinned them to paper.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Kalifriki returns in “Come Back to the Killing Ground, Alice, My Love.”

Notes

Orpheus in Greek mythology was married to Eurydice, who was bitten by a serpent and died. Orpheus sang so mournfully that he made the gods weep and counsel him. He traveled to the underworld where his music softened the hearts of Hades and Persephone and made the Furies weep. Eurydice was then allowed to return with him to the world of the living, on the stipulation that he precede her and not look back until he reached the upper world. Anxious to know if she truly followed him, he turned around, and she vanished forever.

The quote that begins the story is attributed to Orpheus. The poem refers to Dionysus, Zeus’s son, who was distracted by toys while the evil Titans approached. The Titans tore him to pieces, boiled his flesh, and ate of it before Zeus stopped them and allowed Dionysus to be reborn. Like Dionysus, the Kife can regenerate.

Lèse majesté is an affront to the sovereign. A doppelgänger is a person’s ghostly double. Apocryphal tales suggest that Franciscan friar Roger Bacon created a brazen talking head which could answer any question put to it.

1. Gone to Earth, Pulphouse 1991. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Frost & Fire, William Morrow 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)