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THE DARK CRYSTAL

and SODAS



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from the magical movie!



A NOVEL

A. C. H. Smith



An Owl Book

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THE DARK CRYSTAL

CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Titlepage](#)

[Copyright](#)

[1 In the Forge of Thunder](#)

[2 On Aughra's High Hill](#)

[3 With So Many Questions](#)

[4 In Country Mirth](#)

[5 At the Houses of the Old Ones](#)

[6 To the Castle](#)

[7 Into the Dark](#)

[8 The Fire Below](#)

[9 When Single Shines the Triple Sun](#)

[Movie Stills](#)

[Back Cover](#)



There was only Jen. Jen alone.

His favorite game was to blow his flute and imagine other Gelfling, from just beyond the first trees, summoned by his music, creeping up behind him as he sat beside the waterfalls. They would be smiling because they would think they were hidden from Jen by the rocks. And when he stopped playing his flute and quickly turned around and caught sight of them moving, they would be obliged to stay with him then, and live with him forever, in the valley of the urRu.

It was only a game he played, on his own.

Below the waterfalls were green pools in which he swam. He dived down to the weeds, then turned face-upward and floated very slowly back to the surface, watching the sunlight above him dance and shatter and dance again, like hot metals in the pans urTih the Alchemist used. The creatures of the pools swam past him, unafraid, knowing him: the yellow and brown Myrrhie, the long, wriggling Krikids. Jen had always swum with them in their pools, ever since the urRu had brought him to their valley to live with them. He pretended that the creatures in the pool, and those on the land and of the air, were his friends. As they were, indeed, but friends with whom he could not converse. Only the urRu could speak Gelfling to him, and they always did, because their own language was too difficult for him to learn. The urRu were his real friends, of course, but it was difficult to think of them as friends: they were so immensely old and slow and huge and abstracted from everyday things.

Jen squinted at the sky. It was behaving strangely today.

They were kind to him, the urRu, even though they never cooked food he liked. He could not remember what Gelfling meals were, could only remember his mother as a shadow over his small body, but he was convinced that somewhere there was food he would relish. It did not grow in the valley, the urRu would answer if he questioned them. When he pointed to berries he would have liked to eat, they forbade him to, in fear he might be poisoned.

“Wise Ones,” Jen would say – that was what their name meant, urRu, the old and wise ones – “won’t your wisdom tell you if these purple berries are poisonous or not?”

They would shake their great mournful heads, thin grey hair brushing over their ears. “Wisdom is not for knowing but for understanding” was their answer. “Our food is good for you. It will suffice.

We cannot know what is bad for a Gelfling. Eat up, and grow strong.”

The urRu loved him, Jen knew that.

Outside the valley, with its rocks and cascading pools, its trees, berrybushes, flowers, and grasses outside, beyond the boundary of the outer Standing Stones, there must be, he thought, a place where Gelfling food grew; a place where Gelfling had once lived, where he had lived when his mother and father were alive. He thought he could remember being among many Gelfling. Where had they all gone? He would ask, “Why may I not explore outside this valley?”

“You might lose your way,” the urRu would reply.

“One of you could come with me.”

“No, little one, we cannot leave the valley.”

“Not ever?”

“Not yet.”

“When, then?”

“Not yet.”

“One day, will you? And may I come with you?”

“One day,” they would say, “yes, one day you will leave here.”

“When?”

At that they would raise their old, lined faces, look pensively at the sky, and walk slowly away.

Oh, how sad they seemed to Jen, those weary, kind faces of theirs.

“I would take my flute with me,” he offered. “I would play it all the time I was outside the valley so that you could always come and find me again.”

“Not yet, little one.”

And so he stayed in the valley and played his flute. It was a double flute, and he had learned to play harmonies on it. The urRu encouraged him to practice, and he thought they must have given him the flute in the beginning. Anyway, he could not remember a time when he did not have it. Sometime urSol the Chanter sang while Jen played. He was a fine musician, urSol, and could sing a third row of harmony, holding Jen cupped in his hand, by his head. The only difficulty they had was that urSol’s voice was loud and deep, sufficient to make the rocks vibrate. To accompany quietly enough so that Jen’s flute could be heard, he had to keep his mouth almost closed, in a sort of humming, and that, he said, was hard work.

The sky today disquieted Jen. The wind kept changing its direction, as he could easily tell from the different patterns of ripples fleeting across the surface of the pools. He had been woken up by thunder although it was far away, and all day the sky had been rumbling. The Krikids were agitated in the pools. Once Jen had thought he felt the ground move, and had glimpsed something like a spark traveling across the valley and over the rim of rocks above it. It had gone so fast he could not be sure what it was. He had run along the spiral path, past the eighteen caves halfway up the cliff, to survey the valley. He thought he saw two or three more sparks flash across the land.

He wanted to ask his Master, urSu, what it all was. But urSu had not yet come out of the cave they shared, and Jen did not want to go in and disturb him if he was thinking.

The sky was turning black. Jen had seen storms before but none as dark as this. He remembered the day his mother had died. He was frightened of the darkness.

The ripples had altered again, and the thunder was getting louder. Only one sun was visible, and that was hazed by cloud. Jen decided that he would play on his flute. Harmony is the sound that goodness makes, urSol the Chanter said. Jen had to do something to answer the storm.



In a distant land, the storm raged across the sky above a brooding castle. Clouds boiled, purple, yellow, grey, black. Eerie lights glinted and vanished in momentary cloud caverns, lightning concussed the ground, and stray beams of sunlight swept across it like moving spokes. To the bleak crag on which the castle stood, now and then a pulse, a flash, surged across deserts, forests, ravines, craters, rivers, and mountains, along ley-lines of energy from the Standing Stones in the valley of the urRu. It was as though the castle were sucking up the land's power to withstand the storm overhead.

Some borrowed or stolen force might have accounted for the persistence, in that furious sky, of one vent in the clouds directly above the central tower. Through the vent steadily shone one strong beam from the sun, at noon. The beam penetrated the castle tower through a triangular portal at its highest point.

Within the tower it directly struck a huge crystal, wine dark in color, suspended in midair by its own gravity. The Crystal was quartzlike, with threefold symmetry, rhombohedral at its top and base. But what had once had a mineral magnificence was now cracked, decaying. Near the top was a cavity where a sliver of the Crystal, a shard, was missing altogether.

From the Crystal, the light was refracted into separate beams, which slanted sharply downward. The beams nearest to vertical traveled on down a shaft cut in the living rock, at the foot of which, deep beneath the Crystal, they met a lake of fire. Around the shaft opened a vast ceremonial chamber, triangular in shape, and there the Crystal's refracted beams created a circle of pools of dark radiance on the floor.

Nine of the pools of light were vacant. In each of the other nine beams stood the sinister, reptilian figure of a Skeksis. All of them, with hooded eyes uneasy above their beaklike jaws, were surreptitiously watching the door. In the thick layers of robes with which they had draped their skin, scaly bodies over eons, never removing a layer but adding another as one decayed, they stood bulky and almost motionless, imbibing the cosmic radiance from the Dark Crystal above them with a kind of thirst; but their unblinking eyes were not still, and their talons twitched as they watched for their Emperor.

Had he the strength to join them in the ceremony? If so, the sun's rays, enriched and vibrant from the Crystal, might revive him for the brief period until the Great Conjunction; and the power he would take on then would sustain him for eons more. If he was unable to join them now, he would not live long. In that event, one of the nine would become the new Emperor.

The design of the floor where the Skeksis stood was a spiral maze. An eye tracing it would eventually return to the point of the pattern from which it had started, except that the maze, being spiral, would appear to flow into a third dimension. It had no end and therefore no beginning, yet it progressed. Thus it was timeless, infinitely present, and so could be taken to be a representation of time, which cannot be pictured by those who imagine themselves linear subjects to it. The pattern of the spiral maze, subtly varied, connected the floors of all the ceremonial chambers in the castle.

The triangular walls of the Crystal Chamber, rising to meet at the open portal high above the crystal, had been fashioned by fine masons, honest to their craft. Throughout the reign of the Skeksis in that place, ugly embossments had been added, grotesque carvings made in the stone, symbols defaced, gaudy cloths and painted insignia hung, all emblems of power: the pentacle, the nine-pointed star, the four phases of the secret moon of Thra, the tetraktys, hexagrams, pyramids, tetrahedrons, double helices, left-handed and right-handed spiral swastikas, the alchemical symbols of the four elements and the three principles of nature, and, most obsessively pictured, a triangle containing three concentric circles, the icon of the Great Conjunction. Throughout the castle, along its dark passages,

through arches and aisles, in chambers large and small, in the filthy dungeons and cells drenched in death, that triangular icon was to be seen, a pilgrim's talisman, a hunter's supplication, a prisoner's reckoning.

In the ceremonial chamber, the pools of light lost their radiance. The sun had passed over. The Skeksis began to stir their swaddled bodies again, walking on their hind legs, forelegs poised in the air, talons arched, their heads, protruding from humped cowls, thrust out as if to strike. They watched each other closely.

The Emperor had not appeared.

SkekNa the Slave-Master nodded a signal to a balcony built into the rock high up beside the Crystal. A cover was slowly closed across the triangular portal at the summit of the tower.

Outside the castle, the storm started to intensify. A creature that might have been a bird or a bat rose into the air from the battlements. In its claws it clutched a small piece of crystal, as it flew away across the landscape, its wings beating with slow deliberation. Another creature of the same breed followed it, and others still heading off in different directions, each grasping a piece of crystal.



The storm was closer to the valley now. Jen looked up at the sky. Its colors were reflected on the shivering pool. Soon he would have to find shelter in one of the vacant caves along the spiral pathway. For the time being, he willed himself to stay beside the pool, above the waterfall, playing his flute, until the last possible moment. His quiet, secure life among the urRu seldom presented him with the opportunity to be a little brave.

He leaned forward and gazed directly down into the pool. "Is that a brave face?" he asked himself aloud.

Although the water was not still, he knew his face well enough to see it plainly reflected on the shifting surface. Under the fringe of thick, dark hair was a countenance made almost triangular by the wide cheekbones tapering to a small chin. His large eyes were set well apart, on either side of a flattish nose. His Gelfling face was framed by long hair, through which his pointed ears protruded.

"A brave face?" He had asked that question often enough, and others. A handsome face, was it? A intelligent one? Sad? Stern? Was it even memorable?

All he had for comparison were the lugubrious faces of the urRu. Their aged, wrinkled eyes were so different from his bright ones. The skin on their faces was old, deeply lined in runic patterns. Their faces were not even in the same place as was Jen's but thrust forward on long, thick necks that were covered with manes of gray hair. When they walked, with their heavy, slightly swaying gait, on their two powerful legs, their massive long tails were not heavy enough to counterbalance the weight of their heads. They had to lean on walking sticks, which they held in front of them with one of their pairs of forearms, while their hind arms hung down toward the ground. Their heads were ponderous with wisdom, perhaps, or with memory, or with listening.

Their immensely slow and considered movements were made weightier yet by the garment each of them wore, something between a coat and a saddle blanket.

These garments had been made for them by urUtt the Weaver and were fashioned to the individual by the system of knotting threads that he used. The complex pattern of knots formed a cybernetic store for each wearer's thoughts, be they the medicinal knowledge of urNol the Herbalist, the astronomic records of urYod the Numerologist, the macrobiotic balances of urAmaj the Cook, or any other of the bodies of erudition that the urRu had been collecting for many eons. The garments were dusty and worn with age, but the colors had remained fast and the threads had not frayed because urUtt had used no scissors.

How could Jen ever have learned about himself by comparison with creatures so entirely different and so much larger – a hundred times heavier, quite probably? Everything they had taught him, which was a great deal, had been taught by precept. They could give no examples, not only because of their different physical beings, but also because the knowledge they had was absolutely conceptual. Nothing happened, nothing was apprehended, but it was instantly translated by the urRu into an idea and matched with all the other ideas accreted over the eons like the dust on their garments. The spirals and runes in the skin of their heads were the grooves of coded thought, representing a symbolic interpretation of each urRu's total past, from which, at any moment, the future might have been projected by one who could systematically construe the signs. The habitual sadness of their expressions and the marked slowness of their low, resonant speech were evidence of their cerebral natures. Anyone who had never met the urRu might have supposed, at first, that they labored under a collective guilt, such was their lack of spontaneous action.

"A brave face?" Jen shrugged and sat down again. The storm was heading inexorably in the direction of the valley. The sky was dark now, and a chill edge in the air heralded the first rainfall.

Jen played a tune, trying to finger harmonies that might answer the thunderclouds. He double-stopped one pipe of the flute, as a kind of chanter, and on the other experimented with the quarter-tone effects he had discovered by partial stopping. He tapped his foot in a slow rhythm, shut his eyes, and improvised a sinuous melody. *Da da da datta da datta da da.*

When lightning cracked nearby, Jen opened his eyes again. Someone was behind him and towering over him, someone he had not heard approaching. He turned around quickly.

It was urZah the Ritual-Guardian, standing up straight on his haunched legs, his four arms spread eagled, with his cane pointing to the sky.

“Pardon, Ancient One,” Jen said, fearing his flute had interrupted urZah’s thinking. “I did not mean to disturb you.” Although, Jen reasoned, surely even an urRu’s contemplation must be penetrated by a storm such as this.

UrZah answered in the fashion of the urRu, very slowly, with long pauses. “To mean is not to do,” he said. “To make a sound” – he reflected for a long time – “is to trouble the roots of silence. To play the flute is ... to make a slave of air.”

Jen turned away impatiently. “I know,” he replied. “You’ve told me that before.”

At once he wished he had not sounded the note of rudeness. It was not that he had any fear of punishment. In all his time with the urRu, none of them had ever chastised him, however subtly.

Whenever he had spoken or behaved badly, the worst that had ensued, after a long meditative pause, was a somber sentence of philosophical correction. He doubted, in fact, that it was possible to upset one of them. No, he regretted what he had said only because it muffled the genuine respect he felt for urZah and all the others. Still, as the urRu themselves quite often said, a word spoken is a step taken.

Jen sat there, feeling awkward. He fingered his flute but thought he had better not play in case it was offending urZah. The urRu had not made a move but was still standing over Jen, his head cocked. Then he said, “In your cave there is one who has need.”

“My Master?” Jen asked. He stood up, with a little stab of anxiety. His Master, urSu, had never before sent for him in the middle of the day. Why now?

UrZah was gazing at the sky. “The storm comes,” he observed. “It is time. Time of change.” He paused. “Time of trial.”

So that was it. Something was to change and be tested. That was what the storm portended. Jen looked into urZah’s weary, kind face and nodded hesitantly. He had always known that this day, sooner or later, would come. The skills and intuitions that the urRu had cultivated in him, while sheltering his childhood, were always designed to prepare Jen for some task. The urRu had never told him what the task would be; and, truth to tell, Jen had never pressed them for an explanation. With all his wishing that things could be altered, that the urRu would let him roam more freely, and especially that all the other Gelfling would come back and live with him, he did not want to lose what he had.

He ran up the spiral pathway. He was only just in time. The storm was breaking on the valley now. The wind! It was blowing about more than dust and spray from the waterfalls. The very stones were being shaken by it. Jen could feel little pebbles pattering on his skin.

Why were urlm the Healer, urNol the Herbalist, and urSol the Chanter standing together outside the cave Jen shared with urSu? Was there danger in this storm? What were they talking about?

The three urRu moved aside, slowly, to let him pass. What must it be like for them, he wondered, to be so heavy and slow, and see one running as fleetly as he did?

Now his Master would tell him why the sky was turbulent. Such black force, scudding clouds that seemed to have a purpose. It was a day like none he had ever known, and he did not like it. Whatever was that the storm wanted of him, nothing in his life would ever again be as it had always been.

“Master, here I am.”

As Jen stepped into the cave, through the entrance carved with the most elaborate runes of all the caves along the pathway, the storm outside rose to a crescendo of gale and rain and thunderclaps.

Jen paused for a moment beside his own small bed, carved into the wall of the cave, while his eyes and ears and breathing attuned themselves. He could see his Master at the rear of the cave, draped across the sleepframe that supported his massive weight. That was another strange occurrence today. His Master never rested during the daytime but was always at work with his books and his instruments, or conferring with other urRu.

“Master?”

UrSu, his head in an awkward position, stirred and looked up at Jen.

“Master, what does this storm mean?”

UrSu gestured weakly for Jen to draw nearer.

When he had done so, Jen experienced an alarm much greater than that which the storm had caused him. UrSu was prostrate. His breathing was labored and noisy. His eyes seemed cloudy and unable to focus clearly on Jen. His face was pale.

“Master, what is wrong?”

UrSu panted for breath before he could answer. “I was born...” he said, and the rest of the sentence was a mumble.

Jen cocked his head to indicate that he had not understood. His Master waved his hand to ask for patience. He struggled to bring his breathing under control.

“I was born under a shattered sky,” he finally got out.

Jen swallowed hard, forcing himself to remain calm. “Please,” he said, “it’s me, Jen.”

Again the Ancient One waved his hand with impatience. His mouth moved, shepherding the words. “A Crystal sang ...” He breathed heavily in. “A Crystal sang to the three made one. The dark column, the rose column, and ... and the radiance ... itself.”

Jen moved closer, leaning down to speak.

His Master muttered, “Listen. You must understand. You must ... After nine hundred and ninety-nine trine plus one trine ... The Great Conjunction, the Crystal sang ... I was born, ah, Skeksis, too...”

Jen stood there quite wretched, afraid of the changes in his life, and bewildered by the responsibility that he felt his Master’s laborious muttering was imposing on him. He had no idea what he was to do with these fragments of knowledge – if knowledge they were and not merely the pointless ravings of someone mortally sick – any more than he could imagine what he ought to do to help his Master now.

“You are ill,” Jen said. “You must rest.”

If he could calm his Master, he would go fetch urIm the Healer, who, with his sense of an aura, could lay on hands, and perhaps everything would be right again.

UrSu took no notice. “Thrice times six were the urSkeks,” he went on, with a kind of chanting rhythm to conserve his breath. “Dark the Crystal, oh ... Shattered the sky, great pain, the Skeksis, the ... Evil, dark, their rule ...”

Jen was trying to concentrate on the torn words, in obedience to his Master’s injunction to understand, but at the same time he was miserable with the realization that urIm, whom he had seen outside the cave, must already have visited the Master and left because there was nothing more he could do there.

“Great power,” urSu continued, with a new access of breath, “not again, not renewed, not Skeksis not if Gelfling, you, ah ...” He groaned with the pain of his sickness. “You, make it whole, you must, you must, all whole, Gelfling. Again.”

Drawing on his last reserves of strength, urSu raised his arm and held it over a copper bowl of

liquid that was on the floor beside his sleepframe. His three long fingers and thumb pointed at the surface of the liquid, which at once turned cloudy. Outside the cave, a bolt of lightning struck with such force that Jen felt the ground shudder beneath him. Then, bemused, he watched the bowl of liquid, for it was forming itself into a shape, an image, a picture of a mountain. On top of the mountain he could plainly see a curiously domed building.

UrSu's eyes were shut fast. All his remaining energy was now concentrated into forming the picture in the bowl and the words he still struggled to speak. "A wanderer may come," he muttered. His voice was faint, but by now Jen's ears had attuned themselves. "Come from under the mountain bringing murder and birth."

"Master ..." In Jen's voice was bewilderment and tenderness. He was close to tears.

UrSu clenched his fingers and released them with an alacrity that was out of keeping with the rest of his inert body. The clouded picture in the bowl changed. What took its place was the image of a piece of crystal, a dagger-shaped fragment, which glinted in the cloudy liquid below the urRu's pointing fingers.

"Mark this crystal shard," urSu intoned in a faint, distant chant. "An orphan must restore it. Heal the wound at the core of being. Wanderer, orphan, Gelfling, Jen, with this tool you may forge a fate. Now" – urSu's eyes flickered open to look at Jen – "now you are alone."

The image of the dagger-shaped crystal shard faded beneath urSu's fingers. At the moment of its disappearance it sounded a high-pitched ring of two notes, which sang around the walls of the cave, then died away very slowly. All that was left was the noise of urSu's heavy breathing. The liquid in the copper bowl had evaporated. UrSu's hand hung down limp.

"Alone?" Jen asked. "But what about you? What about all the urRu? Master ..."

The ancient urRu's eyes were shut fast again. In a voice that sounded as though it came from the threshold of another world, he said, "Your journey must begin. The three brother suns will not wait." He paused. "Remember me, Jen. We may meet again, but not in this life."

Jen said nothing. He knew that words would be wasted. He stood, his face very still, aware of his small breathing in comparison with the gasping sound that came from his Master.



The storm continued to rage around the castle of the Dark Crystal. Through the dark halls of the castle swaggered the most massive and brutal of the Skeksis: skekUng the Garthim-Master, decked in a robe of armor pieces that glittered and rattled as he marched. His spurs struck sparks from the stone floor. The mad, cold eyes and the yellow fangs, revealed in a characteristic sneer, aroused a prehistoric fear in all who saw him, even in the other Skeksis. He was unusual among them in having held his position ever since their reign had begun. As their numbers had dwindled, from eighteen to ten, Skeksis had been promoted to fill the offices that had fallen vacant. But this was always and ever the Garthim-Master, from the first the strongest and most violent of them. The Garthim, he maintained, were his creation. To him was due all honor for the foul instrument by means of which the Skeksis had tyrannized the land. They were the strike force of the Skeksis, huge and black-carapaced, mighty-clawed, like giant fleas with their dangling tentacles. Always some were standing like sentries along the corridors of the castle, lifeless until activated by a command. Others were held in reserve in a pit beneath the castle floors. The Garthim were scarcely creatures at all, more like the impulses of a cruel brain made over into crustacean objects, nightmare crabs, swift monsters designed for one purpose only: destruction. For any one of them there was no singular noun. They were the plural extensions of one will of evil. The Garthim-Master took fierce pride in them.

Now he was marching to claim the reward he had been awaiting all these centuries: the throne. Everyone could see that the Emperor was dying. This time, no other Skeksis would be able to resist the Garthim-Master's accession.

As he approached the ornate doorway of the Emperor's bedchamber, he was startled by the sudden appearance of skekSil the Chamberlain, who insinuated himself into the middle of the corridor in front of him. In spite of himself, the Garthim-Master hissed, in a moment of alarm, and hesitated. Then he snorted and strode resolutely on, past the only Skeksis who might oppose him as the new Emperor.

The Chamberlain stayed where he was, twisting his scrawny neck around to watch the Garthim-Master. He turned then and followed him toward the doorway, his moist and unctuous body more obsequiously bowed as he entered the imperial bedchamber. Under his arm he carried scrolls and administrative papers. He knew the dying Emperor would be in no condition to attend to them, but he wished to remind the other Skeksis of his official position: the Chief Secretary, and therefore next in line to the throne.

He eyed the rest of the Skeksis, assembled around the sumptuous bed, and smiled at each one of them with oily suspicion. The Garthim-Master's ambition was plain, but would any of the others make a bid?

Not the Slave-Master, with his patch to cover a mucid eye socket and his hook for one hand. He had no fitting experience for it, no imagination, no nobility at all. Certainly not skekAyuk the Gourmand, who was too slovenly and slothful to care. Nor skekEkt the Ornamentalist, whose decadence and perversion could never command obedience. And least of all skekOk the Scroll-Keeper, that vacant idiot who continually mumbled to himself.

That left three to consider, and scuttle. SkekShod the Treasurer was no dangerous threat, being administratively subordinate to the Chamberlain and knowing nothing of executive responsibility. All he knew was how to bite gold. SkekTek the Scientist, however, was another matter. The others feared him because they could understand nothing of his work.

He had amputated his own leg and arm in order to fit himself with appliances he had invented that were more powerful than the natural limbs. Likewise, he had cut out part of his circulatory system and substituted a series of exposed, transparent tubes in order to study the operation of his own blood and

juices. Some thought him demented, and he was distrusted by all. Surely he would not be in contention.

Finally, there was skekZok the Ritual-Master. Yes, the Chamberlain aimed a special smile at him. With his hieratic dignity and his unmatched knowledge of the symbols, the cards, the auguries, and the rituals, there was no denying that the Ritual-Master could be a formidable contender. And yet, he had never given any indication of coveting the throne. Until now, at least, he had always seemed satisfied with the spiritual, cabalistic power he unquestionably exercised. He might well have no taste for the fight, which would surely be a vicious one, were the Garthim-Master to persist in his vain, absurd pretensions.

The Emperor lay on his bed, his face dark against the white pillow and growing darker all the time like a withering plum. The Skeksis knew what that portended. The imperial eyes were dull, unfocused. His breath rasped in his long throat, and his mouth gaped for air. Across the counterpane his hands were rambling, fingers twitching, as though they were seeking something firm to grasp. In one hand was the jeweled scepter, loosely held. Nine pairs of eyes watched it. None of the Skeksis said a word, but all of them were raptly attentive to every sound and motion.

The Chamberlain edged closer, in readiness.

When the scepter rolled out of the Emperor's feeble hand and lay on the counterpane near the edge of the bed, the Chamberlain moved in. He stretched out his hand for it, extending the long talons. The Garthim-Master jerked, taken by surprise. He stiffened, prepared to engage in an unseemly tussle with the Chamberlain.

But the Emperor's eyes were suddenly wide open and ablaze. His neck whipped from the pillow; and his jaws, full of yellow teeth, snapped like a trap an inch away from the Chamberlain's outstretched hand.

The Chamberlain withdrew his talon with as much dignity as he could muster. "Your Imperial Majesty," he said in the wheedling voice that all the others loathed, "I merely wished to restore the symbol of supreme office to your hand, where it rightfully belongs. It would be shameful were we to allow the scepter of state to fall on the ground."

The Garthim-Master laughed under his breath, loudly enough to be heard at the end of the corridor.

The Emperor's spiteful lunge proved to be the last action of a life passionately devoted to malevolence. He collapsed back onto the pillow and fell into a coma. The only evidence of enduring life was a small rattling noise in his chest. Then that stopped.

A black membrane slid over his eyes. Outside the castle, the last of the thunder died away.

Looking furtively around, the Chamberlain caught the eyes of both the Garthim-Master and the Ritual-Master, each of them similarly furtive. Well, now he knew, then. Three of them. If only the vicious old brute had confirmed the Chamberlain's natural succession there would have been no trouble. The Garthim-Master, like all who are competent at giving orders, was also punctilious in obeying them. As for the Ritual-Master, he would not have dared to question the expiring Emperor's command, else all his authority would have slipped from him, founded as it was on the mysteries of hierarchy, precedence, and predetermination. There would be a contest now.

Apart from the aspirants, the other six Skeksis had kept their gaze fixed upon their defunct Emperor. His corpse was decomposing with remarkable haste, having no soul to arrest the process. It was like the creation of volcanic rock within the space of a minute or two. His flesh seemed to boil, rise, blacken, and then transform into rock that rapidly developed gaping cracks and festering caves. Soon it crumbled into pebbles. A sour, grey dust thinly filmed the air.



Night came in fast, faster than an eye could adapt itself to starlight, and, later, to the small, pale-mauve moon. For a while the land was immersed in a darkness like ink. It was the time when every creature would fall quiet.

From deep within the labyrinthine bowels of the castle, strains of solemn music arose. It was a dirge in three-part harmony, sung by a chorus of slaves situated in choir stalls at the side of the mausoleum. All the Skeksis' slaves were captured Pod People, small and simple folk. Their voices had been alto in their natural state. Some of them, however, had been converted into lower registers by the Scientist, who, for hundreds of years, had experimented with the excision and implantation of vocal cords, and now felt he had achieved just the right blending of parts.

He had no ear for music himself, but the Slave-Master did claim to have one and had taken responsibility for selecting and providing promising Pod specimens to the Scientist. The results of the experiments were delivered over to the Ornamentalist, who was in charge of rehearsals. He made a further selection, incorporating those he liked into the chorus and destroying the rest. The final arbiter was the Ritual-Master, since the chorus sang only on ritual occasions. A harsh judge, he had been known to cross the chamber and tear the head off a singer who failed to sing his part in tune. That it had happened less often of late was the reason why the Scientist felt that, in this field of experiment, he had been successful.

It had been the Scroll-Keeper's job to collect the Emperor's remains and coagulated fluids from among the vacated robes lying on the deathbed, where the scepter lay beside them. The remains were wound in cerements and sealed inside an ebony casket, tetrahedral in shape, bearing on all four sides silver icons of the triangle containing three concentric circles. The casket was then borne into the mausoleum by the Ritual-Master, the Chamberlain, and the Garthim-Master, one at each corner. The other six Skeksis followed in single file: the strutting Slave-Master, the limping Scientist, the Treasurer wringing his hands, the Ornamentalist dressed in peacock silks and rich jeweled pieces, the Gourmand, wiping the corners of his mouth, and last the Scroll-Keeper, who had arrived late.

In arranging the procession, the Ritual-Master, the Chamberlain, and the Garthim-Master had disagreed over which of them should precede the others by bearing the foremost corner of the casket. The Ritual-Master argued that he was officiating at the ceremony; the Chamberlain pointed out that, at least for the present, he was the senior functionary of the state; and the Garthim-Master insisted that he had the chief-executive responsibility for maintaining order and security. In view of the sepulchral occasion, they found a temporary compromise, although each of them knew that it would not long outlast the Emperor's funerary casket.

As they trod the spiral maze of the mausoleum floor, the three of them also wheeled gravely around the axis of the casket in their hands, in a stately measure. The Pod People slaves, singing in the choir stalls, would have laughed at the spectacle had they been capable of laughter.

The procession threaded its spiral way to the center of the mausoleum, which was lit by urns whose flickerings cast grotesque shadows across the great vaulted room.

The Ritual-Master, the Chamberlain, and the Garthim-Master laid the casket on a broad obsidian catafalque, draped in black silk shot through with threads of gold. The Ritual-Master assumed his position at the head of the catafalque. The Chamberlain and the Garthim-Master withdrew to join the other Skeksis in a circle around the catafalque.

The Ritual-Master raised his eyes and intoned, "*Kekkon, Kekkon, Yazakaide, Akura, Kasdaw.*" The rest repeated it after him.

Then the Ritual-Master shook his bony claws free of his robes and pointed at the Treasurer, who

stood immediately to his right in the circle.

~~“*Hokkvatta skaun Kherron*” the Treasurer responded, leaning forward and bowing his head.~~

The rest repeated it in unison.

And so, around the circle, while the chorus of slaves chanted quietly, each Skeksis intoned the same phrase, which all then repeated, in a rite consigning their Emperor’s soul, which had never existed, to the protection of a higher being, in which none of the Skeksis could have tolerated belief. was a ceremony of reassurance to the survivors. It was also an opportunity for the Chamberlain and the Garthim-Master to vie with each other in expressing their piety of homage. Both were resentful of the advantage the Ritual-Master had in the matter.

At a signal from the Ritual-Master a slave came forward, bearing around the circle a large copper bowl ornamented with silver. From it, each Skeksis took a smoking orb made of a translucent material that glowed with some inner combustion.

They faced the casket. “*Kekkon, Kekkon, Yazakaide, Akura, Teedkhug!*” the Ritual-Master screeched, raising his talons high above his head.

The choir’s voices swelled to a climax. The Ritual-Master let his hands fall to his chest, and simultaneously the rest of the Skeksis threw the glowing orbs into the catafalque, crying “*Haakhaon.*” in their harsh, croaking voices. The catafalque was at once transformed into a pyre, blazing with the white brilliance of a dying star.

The Skeksis stood in a silent, watching circle as the gold-shot silks were consumed in flames and the casket was reduced to smoldering embers.



In the cave Jen stood quite still for a long time, gazing at the empty, runic garment on the sleepframe. He had seen death before, among the small creatures of the valley, but it had never been like this. His Master had seemed to evaporate, like a pure spirit. It was as though that weighty body had never been more than an idea in the mind of whatever it was that had inhabited the flesh, an idea that had now been forgotten, discarded. Whatever it was had passed on to another, invisible idea. Would that be in here? Jen wondered. Or somewhere else? He knew that for a long time, perhaps forever, he would have the sense that his Master was present wherever he went, always walking beside him. He could not have brought himself to say anything that urSu would not have liked to hear.

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How long he stood there he did not know, but eventually he turned and walked to stand in the mouth of the cave, looking out over the valley. The storm had cleared away, leaving behind it a sky scrubbed clean and blue. The creatures of the valley were running around, sniffing the sunshine. Down below, in the thalweg, the bottom of the valley, he could see the urRu, gathering around the Standing Stones that formed a triangle there.

Directed by urZah, they set out what was necessary for a funeral. Down the spiral path, from urSu's cave, they had carried his coat, which the process of de-materialization had now reduced to a cobwebby thing, frail and dry, an abandoned chrysalis. This, together with his few other personal belongings, they placed at the foot of the tallest of the stones. On another stone, which lay flat in the center of the triangle, they laid his walking stick, the Master's staff of office, totemically carved from one thick branch of hard nutwood. At the upper end of it was inset a small, perfectly formed rock crystal.

For hours they calculated the precise positions of the remaining objects that were needed to furnish the funeral ceremony: small fetishes, prayer sticks, stones, feathers, and pots. Watching them make the arrangements, Jen finally became impatient, in spite of his grief over the occasion. Throughout his life among the urRu, at the edge of his gratitude for their kindness to an orphan he had felt himself quietly chafing at their immensely patient attention to detail. What they called their "work" seemed to him to consist almost entirely of interminable attempts to connect one thing to another. Sometimes it was quite literal. He had seen urNol, with his eye-patch and splintered finger, spend days on end with a pebble and four blue feathers, seeking to discover all the permutations that could result from binding the objects together with a length of string.

Other connections the urRu made were figurative. When the wind was in a certain quarter, it blew down the spiral path; and filling tunnels and passing the mouths of caves, it resounded through the valley like a reed pipe. At such times, the urRu never tired of arranging their own bodies to stop some of the cave mouths so that the pitch of the wind would be modulated. Why bother? Jen wondered. On his own little bifurcated flute he could demonstrate the same effect and play a melody at the same time.

In their collective obsession with rituals there was something slavish about the urRu. It affected

everything in their lives, even the ordinary business of a day – sleeping, eating, walking, talking. It was always too slow for Jen, this labored, mannered, painstaking connection of things. What was the point? Turned inward, away from the world, they were, Jen thought, collectors of knowledge for its own sake. Why did they never do anything with it? Why could they not make the only connection that seemed to him useful: applying all their knowledge to change the world?

As he had grown older, he had tried, politely, to press his Master for the answers. UrSu, however, had simply traded concepts. One's body was a rehearsal of the history of the world. What one ate and thought was one's future. "The better you know me," urSu had said, "the better you will know the world as it will be without me."

And now Jen faced a world without urSu.

The new spark of confidence he had, to his surprise, found in himself at his Master's death was still there within him. But confidence to what end? "To forge a fate," urSu had said as he lay dying. "To heal the wound. To make it whole." What fate? What wound? What was expected of him? He had never been able to envision a future for himself except one in which his infant memories – his mother, father, other Gelfling – would become realities again. But whenever he had wished for that to happen – lying in bed at night, closing his eyes, pressing together the tips of his thumbs and forefingers – his concentration on those memories had led straight through to something he feared – some blackness, cruel pain, weeping. Was the past always stalking the present, waiting to destroy it? UrSu had told him that a two-dimensional question like that had no solution, and therefore no meaning. "Make a triangle with past, present, and future. Then each two will explain the third."

"Nothing is except energy," urSu had said another time. "Energy exists only when a connection can be made. Connect one to one, and you will have energy that will serve your life. Connect one to one to one, and nothing will ever be the same again. Look at my face, Jen. What you see was born when three were made one. Look harder now, harder than you have ever known how to look, and you might see that three will be made one again."

"What do you mean, Master? It is hard to understand. Can you not put it more simply?"

"It is already as simple as it can be. That is why you find it hard to understand."

Toward the end of the night, the urRu awaited the dawn, the twilight in which a spirit feels most at peace. Their funeral ceremony was prepared. Seven of them sat in positions that, together with three Standing Stones, formed a tetraktys. Set apart on one side was urUtt, with a harp; facing the rest from a knoll behind the tallest stone at the apex of the triangle was urZah. Jen, sitting beside him, was encouraged to play his flute throughout the night watch, because of his special relationship to urSu. In front of urZah were three pots.

When the first pale flush of dawn light tinged the mists rising around the stones, urZah gently pushed Jen's flute away from his lips. At the same moment, urUtt struck a plangent harmony that resonated for a long time.

The next to sound was urTih the Alchemist, who used his right front arm – an artificial limb of wood, like the right leg – to make a bowl sing. It was a bowl he had fashioned from seven metals, and when he drew his wooden arm firmly around the rim, the bowl howled as though with the voice of a wandering spirit, ululating when he tipped the water inside it from side to side.

Others joined in, working to a slow pulse of rhythm. UrAc the Scribe struck a gong, urYod the Numerologist rang a passing bell, and urSol the Chanter raised his mighty voice, leading the rest in a great chorus.

Meanwhile, the touch of dawn light had activated the small crystal at the end of the Master's staff where it lay on the central stone. First, the crystal glowed as though concentrating the light in itself. Then the wood around it smoldered and began to burn. The flame moved slowly down the stick, away from the crystal, leaving behind a line of white embers and a scorch-mark on the stone. The smoke

curled into the mists, which were filling with light.

UrZah picked up one of the three pots in front of him and tipped it upside down, pouring a stream of dry soil into Jen's hand. UrUtt was playing in the lowest register of his harp, and urSol directed the chorus accordingly.

"With the ground, be one," urZah told Jen.

He threw the pot away. It shattered on the tallest Standing Stone, scattering fragments over urSu's coat.

UrZah picked up the second pot. UrUtt and urSol moved to the middle register. From the pot urZah poured water over Jen's hand.

"With water, be one."

He threw the pot after the first and picked up the third. The harp and chanting soared. When urZah upturned the pot, nothing came out.

"With the air, be one."

He handed the pot to Jen, who looked at him questioningly. UrZah offered no answer. Jen threw the pot against the stone, where it shattered. UrZah nodded slowly.

The staff had burned itself away. Its expiring smoke rose to meet a lambent wraith of mist that seemed to be descending into the triangle of stones. Jen saw that the coat of urSu had now evaporated into nothingness. Only the shards of the smashed pots remained where the coat had been.

"Be one, Jen," urZah told him, "and make one. Now you must go, as the Master told you."

"Go?" Jen asked. "Go where?" "What must I do?"

For years he had learned to leave the valley. The urRu had raised him with loving care: at the appointed times they had cut his hair, taught him to swim, to tie knots, to sharpen a knife; had initiated him into the mysteries of music and the principles of geometry; had tested him by tasks and isolation – but never had they allowed him to explore outside the valley. And now that he was bidden to leave, he wished to remain, to say he was not yet ready. The truth, he realized, was that he did not want to abandon what was familiar and customary. Besides, it was one thing to wish to explore. It was quite another to be expelled.

"You must go where the Master showed you," urZah told him. "To the high hill, to the dome of Aughra, who watches the heavens and keeps her secrets."

"UrSu showed me such an image in a bowl. But I don't know where the place is. How do I get there? What am I supposed to do there? How do I know I can do it? And who is Aughra?"

UrZah replied, in his slow voice, "Your need is to go with questions, not with answers, as the cave needs the mountain."

Jen controlled a rising feeling of panic. "But, urZah, you can see the future, can't you? Please at least tell me what will happen."

UrZah paused. The urRu continued their chanting as the sun rose above the rim of the horizon.

"The future is many futures," urZah told him. "We see them all. Which one will be yours is for you to seek." He pointed at a carving on the Standing Stone near them. It pictured three concentric circles inside a triangle. "This I will tell you," urZah went on. "Very soon the three made one will look down. Great vibrations will be-felt by all who touch rock. Unless by then you have found the future you must seek, and made what was broken whole, what was dark light, then nothing can be whole, and dark will be the fate of all creatures on Thra."

"But I am frightened of what is dark, urZah."

"With reason," the urRu replied. "Darkness imprisons the light. Darkness destroys all beings, covets all energy. It is evil."

"What is evil?" Jen asked.

"Evil does not exist," urZah answered. "Evil is disharmony between existences. Now go, Gelfling

with your questions.”

UrZah turned away, faced the sun, and joined the chanting of the urRu.

Jen took his first steps up the spiral path leading out of the valley. When he reached the cave where he had lived with urSu, he paused and looked down into the thalweg. Rising up to him came the deep, nine-toned chant of the urRu. He saw that they were all staring up at him. Whether it was their gaze or their chant or the seed of courage he had experienced at urSu’s death, he did not know, but a force propelled him past the mouth of the cave and on up the spiral path.

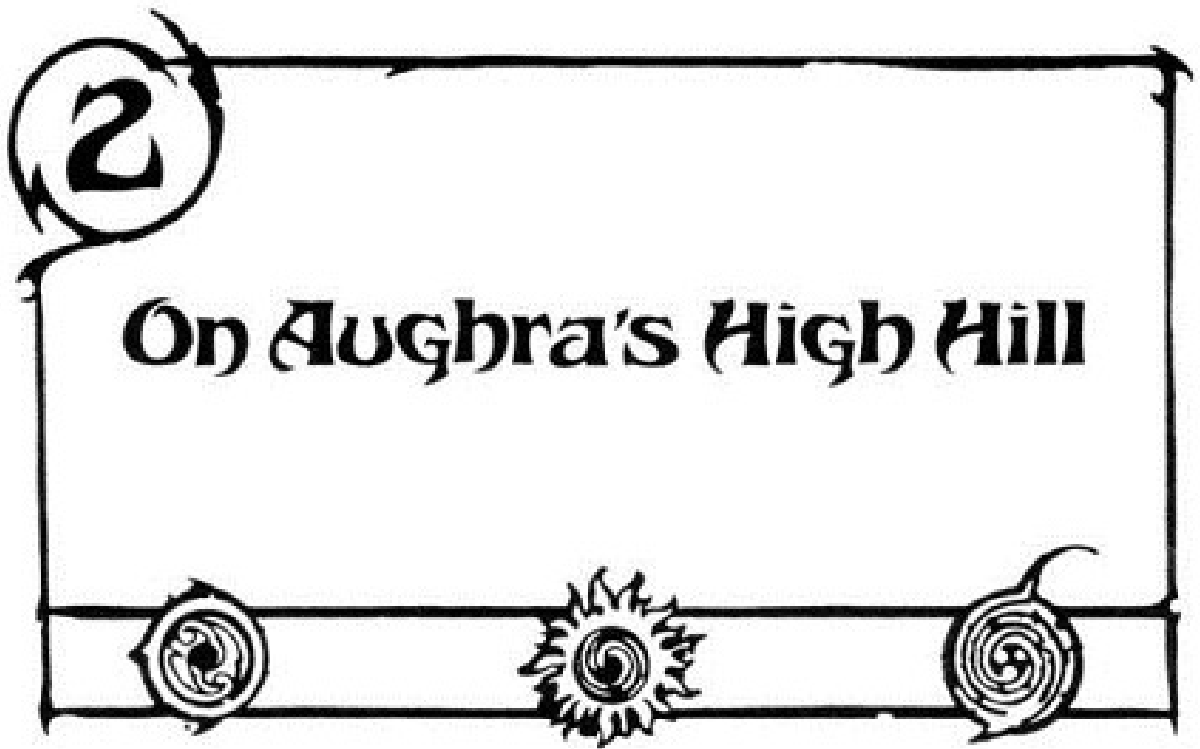
At the shoulder of the valley, higher than he had ever been on his own, he glanced back once more. The waterfalls were tiny, sparkling jewels in the early sunlight. He took a deep breath. For the reassurance of a familiar object in a strange world, he put his hand up to touch his flute, which he carried on a leather neck-string.

Near him was another line of Standing Stones. They were tall and narrow, shooting up from the ground like needles. Seen from the valley below, they had always marked the boundary of his world. On them he saw carvings similar to those on the stones that formed the triangle down below, where the chanting of the urRu continued, still surprisingly distinct even from where Jen stood. Perhaps, Jen thought, the carvings might offer him some indication of the direction he was supposed to take.

He approached the nearest stone to examine it. It had a black patina on it, like soot. He reached out to rub it off but withdrew his hand sharply. The stone was burning hot. He remembered what he had seen the previous day, sparks traveling across the valley and over its rim. These stones must have been struck by lightning.

He breathed deeply again and walked on, over the shoulder of the valley and out of sight of his home. After a few steps, the ground in front of him began to slope down again. Soon Jen was standing on the brink of a wide, bowl-shaped plain, lush with vegetation and sprinkled with woods. Far away, on the misty horizon, the plain terminated in a range of rounded hills.

“To the high hill,” urZah had said. That must be the direction he had to take.



The complex pattern on the ceremonial floors of the castle of the Dark Crystal represented a path. No one who saw it could doubt that. What was open to interpretation was where the path had started, where it might end, and, indeed, what the purpose of the journey might be.

With its forks and intersections, its arcs and spirals and spheres, leading from room to room, it would probably have been seen by one of a transcendentalist cast of mind as a pilgrim's path, the way of enlightenment, leading from station to station of ascending consciousness. Originating in brute, dark matter, the traveler would, metaphorically, rise toward pure spirituality, though never in a straight progression but always circuitously, even after the journey had apparently been accomplished. (For even the purely spiritual soul has unfinished work to do. The cycle of the floor's pattern extends infinitely.)

The Skeksis, however, did not take that view. The assumption that pure spirituality was in some sense a higher form of being than brute matter was not self-evident to them. How they interpreted the pattern on the floor was clear on the day following the funeral of their Emperor. For them it was a path to the throne.

He who aspired to clutch the scepter in his talons was well advised to be seen treading the path. It suggested some vestigial humility, a sense of due observance, a willingness to submit oneself to a proper discipline. Thus it was that three of them – the Ritual-Master, the Chamberlain, and the Garthim-Master – had spent some hours edging along the path, with the expected solemnity, while the rest of the Skeksis formed an audience. Round and round the path the three of them went. And as they went, they studied the complexities of the pattern and experimented by taking different forks, different routes always to the same end, in which was their beginning.

Each of them was hopeful that sooner or later some hitherto overlooked clue might present itself to him, some untrodden path that, by a psychic machinery he could not guess at, would yield the throne to him. How had the late deceased Emperor accomplished this? None of them could recall.

As their patience dwindled, their pace gradually increased. None of the three now left the Throne Room but studiously gyrated closer and closer to the dais and the throne itself. Their eyes were flickering around beadily. Each of them had to keep a close watch on the other two in order to forestall

a sudden lunge for the throne. But there were also factions to consider among the rest of the Skeksis. Would the Treasurer and the Scroll-Keeper preserve their traditional loyalty to the Ritual-Master? Would the Garthim-Master still command the powerful support of the Scientist and the Slave-Master? And would the Chamberlain still be joined in a triple alliance with the Gourmand and the Ornamentalist – the triad that, together with the old Emperor, had formed the largest, and therefore successful, faction at the previous enthronement?

It was the Chamberlain, filled with a righteous sense of his prior claim, who finally made a grab for the scepter. Wielding it shoulder-high like a scimitar, he spun round to glare at the other two contenders, screeching and snarling his defiance. From his bared, yellow fangs saliva dripped onto the silken floor of the dais.

The Ritual-Master was outraged. This was no way to behave on such a solemn occasion. Due rite and custom had to be observed, or everything was lost. He started to make a speech of protest, a quivering talon pointed at the Chamberlain in denunciation of his gross ambition.

The Garthim-Master's reaction was different but no less vehement. Striding up to the dais, he thrust his face out at the Chamberlain so that they were fang to fang. In his deep voice, the Garthim-Master pronounced one word. "*Haakskeekah!*"

A thrill ran through the watching Skeksis.

The Chamberlain had no option. He could not now be seen to shrink from the most solemn challenge of the Skeksis. Hissing back into the Garthim-Master's face, the scepter still held high, he returned the challenge in an eldritch shriek. "*Haakskeekah!*"

At this point, the Ritual-Master withdrew from the contest. Opinion among the rest of the onlooking Skeksis differed on his motivation. Some argued that his innate sense of ceremonial propriety inhibited him. Others maintained that, not being directly challenged, he was evading the ordeal of *Haakskeekah!* And a further view was that he was making a political calculation: against the sheer strength of the Garthim-Master and the constitutional claim of the Chamberlain, he could not hope to be the victor; but by withdrawing at this stage he would assure himself of the vice-regency beneath whichever of them triumphed, and thus he would be next in line to the throne.

Whatever his reasons, the Ritual-Master moved to the center of the Throne Room and took charge of the situation. He gave a nod in the direction of the watching Slave-Master, who waddled off to prepare for the ritual. The rest stood still, murmurous with eager anticipation. Many trine had passed since the trial of *Haakskeekah!* had been witnessed in that chamber.

The Slave-Master returned with a score of Pod People, whom he sent to the side of the room. There they hauled on a long rope running down from a pulley mounted high on the wall. In the middle of the floor, a slab of stone was slowly raised.

When it had cleared the surrounding floor, the Slave-Master called out a command. Having secured the rope, the slaves ran across the floor, and with their shoulders pushed the slab, which was supported on a pivot, through an arc of ninety degrees. It took them a long time, such was the dead weight of the stone. The Skeksis grinned and twitched with excitement. The Garthim-Master and the Chamberlain furtively watched each other out of the corners of their eyes. The Chamberlain had reluctantly laid the scepter back on the throne.

The Slave-Master then issued another order. The slaves ran back to the side of the room and hauled on another rope that was hanging parallel to the first. From the pit that the revolving slab had disclosed, a rock slowly emerged, finally coming to floor level. It was a remarkable rock. Six feet in height, made of granite, in origin it could have been a cromlech stone. But it had lost its gloss and pride; it was a dull, unreflective boulder, mutilated by gashed scars.

The Ritual-Master ceremoniously held out both his arms toward the Slave-Master, who strutted forward bearing two massive broadswords. The Ritual-Master bent his head over the weapons and sp

on each in turn. They were then presented to the duelists. The Chamberlain, having given each of them a trial whirl around his head, chose first. The Garthim-Master took his, the Slave-Master retreated to the margin of the floor, and the Ritual-Master intoned, "*Pih Tabrokh!*"

As the one challenged, the Chamberlain had had the advantage in choice of sword. His disadvantage was that he had to strike first. He approached the rock, dragging his sword on the ground where it made a trail of little blue sparks. Then he raised the sword to shoulder level, swung it around several times, gathering momentum, and smashed it into the rock with a defiant shout of "*Haakskeekah!*"

The sword made a dull clank on the stone. Nothing else happened except for a violent jarring of the Chamberlain's back and tepid applause from the Ornamentalist and the Gourmand.

The Garthim-Master stepped up with a derisive sneer. Grunting, then roaring, he swung the sword around once and dashed it against the rock. "*Haakskeekah!*"

A bright spark flashed and a chip of granite flew off from the impact and skittered across the floor. It was not a decisive blow, the watching Skeksis knew, but the Slave-Master and the Scientist cheered it in their guttural voices. The Treasurer and the Scroll-Keeper also croaked their admiration, in the hope that they had chosen the winning side. The Chamberlain took the applause to be a goad from his enemies. They always had underrated him. Very well then, as Emperor he would make them regret it.

This time, he wound up his momentum by spinning his whole body around, like a dervish, some yards away from the rock. Then, in a sequence of three advancing gyrations, he arrived with his sword singing through the air. He hammered it into the rock with such awful power that it would hardly have been surprising to see the stone sliced in two. "*Haakskeekah!*" he gasped.

There was a tiny spark at the point of impact. A scintilla flew off and over the heads of the slaves hitting the wall with an almost undetectable ping. The only other sounds in the chamber were the Chamberlain's groan of pain as he held his back and ambiguous rumbles in the throats of the Ornamentalist and the Gourmand.

With a stentorian bellow of laughter, the Garthim-Master stepped forward again. Standing beside the rock, he grimaced several times, swinging his sword. He balanced ponderously back on one foot, spun himself around once, and then, leaning on his front foot, drove the blade into the rock at full arm's length. "*Haakskeekah!*" he thundered.

With a flash and boom of released energy, a white-hot chunk of rock the size of the Chamberlain's head crashed to the floor.

"*Haakskeekah!*" bayed the watching Skeksis, in praise of their new Emperor. "*Haakskeekah, Khrokon! Haakskeekah! Haakskeekah!*"

In a minstrel gallery above, an assembled choir of Pod slaves struck up with an anthem of conquest. Up and down the chamber the Garthim-Master minced to it, receiving homage. The Ritual-Master held both hands on high, mumbling some words of benediction. At the side of the room, the slaves looked on mute and expressionless. Their eyes were milky and unfocused.

Beside the ravaged rock, the Chamberlain cowered wretchedly. He was nothing now. Worse than nothing: a magnanimous gesture to one's defeated opponent was no part of the Skeksis' tradition. At best he would be able to slink away when no one was looking and perhaps self-effacingly resume his duties as Chamberlain, since none could deny his administrative competence.

But the Garthim-Master was not so inclined. Slumped arrogantly on the throne, with the Ritual-Master kneeling before him, he affected an offhanded gesture in the direction of the rock. The rest of the Skeksis took their cue. Grinning and hissing, unsheathing their talons, they surrounded the Chamberlain. In moments they had stripped him of his insignia, badges, chains, precious gems, even his layers of mouldering robes.

In order to preserve his very skin, the Chamberlain bowed low to the ground and crept away,

whimpering, out of the chamber, clad only in rags and tatters.

Now was the time of high rejoicing in the castle of the Skeksis. The choir sang on, while a silken canopy was held aloft over the Garthim-Master. "*Khrokon, Khrokon!*" the Skeksis acclaimed their new Emperor, as the Ritual-Master gravely advanced to place the crown on his majestic head. The scepter was solemnly handed to him, and he leaned forward to allow a robe of satin, trimmed with fur and winking with rubies and emeralds, to be laid over his shoulders. The Ritual-Master stepped back from the dais and made deep obeisance. "*Khrokon, Khrokon!*" rang out the loyal cries, as the remaining Skeksis also fell to their knees.

The Ritual-Master rose again and held out his hand. The Ornamentalist stepped forward with a chalice, which he handed to the Ritual-Master. It was full of freshly drawn Pod vliya, the life-juice that the Scientist extracted from captives when they were first brought into the castle, ready to be turned into slaves.

The Ritual-Master raised the chalice above his head and turned, offering it votively to the new Emperor.

The chalice slipped from his hands and hit the floor. Vliya ran in rivulets across the spiral pattern. "Idiot archimandrite!" the Garthim-Master snarled at him, lapsing into unceremonial demotic speech.

The Ritual-Master's mouth and eyes were opened wide. "The Crystal!" he babbled. "The Crystal!"

The Garthim-Master's jaw snapped shut. He listened, as did all the other Skeksis. In the noise of their sycophantic rejoicing, they had not until that moment heard the warning ring emanating from the great Crystal.

The Garthim-Master leaped from his throne and rushed from the room, followed by the other Skeksis. Behind them, slaves came forward emotionlessly to mop up the vliya. Their own vliya had been distilled from them upon their arrival, and out with it had flowed both feeling and thought.

Still clad in his robe and crown, and clutching his scepter like a sword, the Garthim-Master led the charge along the corridors of the castle and into the Crystal Chamber. There the eight Skeksis, talking agitatedly, gathered to see what the Crystal had relayed to the castle from the Crystal Bats that monitored the planet.

There it was. A Gelfling! The Garthim-Master thrust out a quivering talon; and the rest, looking on, fell silent.

The Garthim-Master's eyes bulged with astonishment, then outrage. "Garthim!" he screamed. "Garthim!"

In response to the summons, all around the castle, from the ceremonial chambers to the Garthim pit itself, the waiting Garthim, standing like suits of armor, came suddenly to life, with a loud ticking sound.

"A Gelfling," the Garthim-Master was bellowing, "on Aughra's high hill."

Huge black carapaces lumbered along the corridors to the tube that was the only exit from the castle. Down it they vomited forth into the world outside.

Hidden in the shadows of an alcove, the Chamberlain watched the Garthim clatter past, then crept stealthily after them.

Around the Crystal, the Skeksis muttered ominously among themselves. This was inconceivable, Gelfling still alive. The entire race had been liquidated. Surely they could not have regenerated themselves spontaneously. Things of that sort did not happen. The Scientist was rapidly elaborating a theory of interrupted transmission: Suppose this inexplicable image in fact relayed an event that had taken place long ago and that, by some freak of physics he was not yet in a position to elucidate, was only now registering its electrical impulses on the receiving Crystal. As a theory it left a lot to be explained. But it was more plausible than a living Gelfling, and much less unnerving to the Skeksis.

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