

A LAND OF ROMANCE  
by David Drake

The marketing bullpen at Strangeco Headquarters held seventy-five desks. Howard Jones was the only person in the huge room when the phone began ringing. He ignored the sound and went on with what he was doing.

It was a wrong number--it had to be. Nobody'd be calling seriously on a Sunday morning.

*Dynamic 25-year old executive....* Howard sucked in his gut as he typed, not that there was much gut to worry about. *Ready to take on adventurous new challenges....*

The phone continued to ring. It could be the manager of one of the Middle Eastern outlets where they kept a Friday-Saturday weekend, with a problem that only a bold--a *swashbuckling*--marketing professional like Howard Jones could take on. Did Strangeco have a branch in the Casbah of Algiers?

The company slogan circled the ceiling in shimmering neon letters: IT'S NOT A SANDWICH--IT'S A STRANGEWICH! SLICES OF KANGAROO, CASSOWARY, AND BUFFALO IN A SECRET DRESSING! STRANGEWICH--THE HEALTHY ALTERNATIVE!

The phone *still* rang. Howard's image staring from the resume on the screen had a stern look. Was he missing his big chance? The caller could be a headhunter who needed the hard-charging determination of a man willing to work all the hours on the clock.

Howard grabbed the phone and punched Line One. "Strangeco Inc!" he said in what he hoped was a stalwart tone. "Howard Jones, Assistant Marketing Associate speaking. How may I help you?"

"Oh!" said the male voice on the other end of the line. "Oh, I'm very sorry, I didn't mean to disturb anybody important."

Sure, a wrong number. Well, Howard had known that there wouldn't really be a summons to a life of dizzying adventure when he--

"I'm at Mr Strange's house," the voice continued, "and I was hoping somebody could come over to help me word an advertisement. I'm sorry to have--"

"Wait!" Howard said. He knew the call couldn't be what it sounded like, but it was sure the most interesting thing going this Sunday morning. It *sounded* like the most interesting thing of a lifetime for Howard Albing Jones.

"Ah, sir," he continued, hoping that the fellow wasn't offended that Howard had bellowed at him a moment ago. "You say you're calling from Mr Strange's house. That would be, ah, which house?"

"Oh, dear, he probably does have a lot of them, doesn't he?" the voice said. "I mean the one right next door, though. Do you think that you could send somebody not too important over to help me, sir?"

Howard cleared his throat. "Well, as a matter of fact, I wouldn't mind visiting the Strange Mansion myself. But, ah, Strangeco staff isn't ordinarily allowed across the skyway, you know."

"Oh, that's all right," the voice said in obvious relief. "Mr Strange said I could call on any of his people for whatever I wished. But I really don't like to disturb you, Mr Jones."

"Quite all right, mister...," Howard said. "Ah, I'm afraid I didn't catch your name?"

"Oh, I'm Wally Popple," the voice said. "Just come over whenever you're ready to, Mr Jones. I'll tell the guards to send you down."

He hung up. Howard replaced his handset and stared at the resume photograph. That Howard Jones looked very professional in blue suit, blue shirt, and a tie with an insouciant slash of red. Whereas today--Sunday--Assistant Marketing Associate Jones wore jeans and a Fuquay School of Business sweatshirt.

Howard rose to his feet. Daring, swashbuckling Howard Jones was going to risk entering the Strange Mansion in casual clothes.

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A transparent tube arched between the third floors of the Strange Mansion and Strangeco Headquarters to connect the two sprawling buildings. When Strange occasionally called an executive to the mansion, the rest of the staff lined the windows to watch the chosen person shuffle through open air in fear of what waited on the other side.

Shortly thereafter, sometimes only minutes later, the summoned parties returned. A few of them moved at once to larger offices; most began to clean out their desks.

Only executives were known to use the skyway, though it rumor had it that sometimes Robert Strange himself crossed over at midnight to pace the halls of his headquarters silently as a bat. Now it was Howard Jones who looked out over cornfields and woodland in one direction and the vast staff

parking lot in the other.

The skyway was hot and musty. That made sense when Howard thought about it: a clear plastic tube was going to heat up in the bright sun, and the arch meant the hottest air would hang in the middle like the bubble in a level. Howard had never before considered physics when he daydreamed of receiving Robert Strange's summons.

The wrought iron grill at the far end was delicate but still a real barrier, even without the two guards on the other side watching as Howard approached. They were alert, very big, and not in the least friendly.

*Muscle-bound*, Howard told himself. *I could slice them into lunchmeat with my rapier!*

He knew he was lying, and it didn't even make him feel better. Quite apart from big men *not* necessarily being slow, this pair held shotguns.

"Good morning!" Howard said, trying for 'brightly' and hitting 'brittle' instead. "I have an urgent summons from Mr Popple!"

Christ on a crutch! What if this was some kid's practical joke? *Let's see if we can scam some sucker into busting into the Strange Mansion! Maybe they'll shoot him right where we can watch!*

Howard glanced down, which probably wasn't the smartest thing to do now that he wasn't protected by the excitement of the thing. At least he didn't see kids with a cell phone and gleeful expressions peering up expectantly.

One of the guards said, "Who're you?" His tone would have been a little too grim for a judge passing a death sentence.

Howard's mind went blank. All he could think of was the accusing glare of his resume picture--but wait! Beside the picture was a name!

"Howard Albing Jones!" he said triumphantly.

"Nothing here about 'Albing'," said the other guard.

The first guard shrugged. "Look, it's Sunday," he said to his partner. Fixing Howard with a glare that could've set rivets, he said, "We're letting you in, buddy. But as Howard Jones, that's all. That's how you sign the book."

"All right," said Howard. "I'm willing to be flexible."

One guard unlocked the grating; the other nodded Howard toward a folio bound in some unfamiliar form of leather, waiting open on a stand in the doorway. The last name above Howard's was that of a regional manager who'd been sobbing as he trudged into the parking lot for the last time.

The first guard pinned a blank metal badge on Howard's sweatshirt, right in the center of FUQUAY. "Keep it on," he said. "See the yellow strip?"

He gestured with his shotgun, then returned the muzzle to point just under where the badge rested.

An amber track lighted up in the center of the hallway beyond. The glow was so faint that it illuminated only itself. Focusing his eyes on it meant that Howard didn't have to stare at the shotgun.

"Right," he said. "Right!"

"You follow it," said the guard. "I'll take you where you're supposed to go. And you *don't* step off it, you understand?"

"Right," said Howard, afraid that he sounded brittle again. "I certainly don't want you gentlemen coming after me."

The other guard laughed. "Oh, we wouldn't do that," he said. "Pete and me watch--" he nodded to the bank of TV monitors, blanked during Howard's presence "--but we ain't cleared to go wandering around the mansion. Believe me, buddy, we're not ready to die."

Howard walked away, holding a fixed smile until the amber strip led him around a corner. He risked a glance backwards then and saw that the light was fading behind him. He supposed it'd reappear when he was time for him to leave.

He supposed so.

Howard hadn't had any idea of what the inside of the Strange Mansion would be like. There were a thousand rumors about the Wizard of Fast Food but almost no facts. Howard himself had envisioned cathedral-vaulted ceilings and swaying chandeliers from which a bold man could swing one-handed while the blade of his rapier parried the thrusts of a score of minions.

There might be chandeliers, stone ledges, and high balconies on the other side of the blank gray walls but that no longer seemed likely. The corridor surfaces were extruded from some dense plastic, and the doors fitted like airlocks with no external latches.

The amber strip led through branching corridors, occasionally going downward by ramps. The building sighed and murmured like a sleeping beast.

Howard tried to imagine the Thief of Baghdad dancing away from foes in this featureless warren, but he quickly gave it up as a bad job. It was like trying to imagine King Kong on the set of *2001*.

The strip of light stopped at a closed door. Howard eyed the blank panel, then tried knocking. It was like rapping his knuckles on a bank vault, soundless and rather painful.

"Hello?" he said diffidently. "Hello!"

The corridor stretched to right and left, empty and silent. The amber glow had melted into the surrounding gray, leaving only a vague memory of itself. What would the Count of Monte Cristo have done?

"Hello!" Howard shouted. "*Mister Popple!*"

"Hello," said the pleasant voice of the girl who'd come up behind him.

Howard executed a leap and pirouette that would have done the Count--or for that matter, an NBA forward--proud. "Wha?" he said.

The girl was of middle height with short black hair and a perky expression that implied her pale skin was hereditary rather than a look. "I'm afraid Wally gets distracted," she said with a smile. "Come around through my rooms and I'll let you in from the side. The laboratory started out as a garage, you know."

"Ah, I was told not to leave..." Howard said, tilting forward slightly without actually moving his feet from the point at which the guide strip had deposited him. After the guards' casual threats, he no longer believed that the worst thing that could happen to him in the Strange Mansion was that he'd lose his job.

"Oh, give me that," the girl said. She deftly unpinned the badge from Howard's sweatshirt and pressed her thumb in the middle of its blankness, then handed it back to him. "There, I've turned it off."

She walked toward the door she'd come out of, bringing Howard with her by her breezy nonchalance. He said, "Ah, you work here, miss?"

"Actually, the only people who work here are Wally and the cleaning crews," the girl said. "And my father, of course. I'm Genie Strange."

She led Howard into a room with low, Japanese-style furniture and translucent walls of pastel blue. It was like walking along the bottom of a shallow sea.

"Have you known Wally long?" Genie said, apparently unaware that she'd numbed Howard by telling him she was Robert Strange's daughter. "He's such a sweetheart, don't you think? Of course, I don't get to meet many people. Robert says that's for my safety, but..."

"I've enjoyed my contact with Mr Popple so far," Howard said. He didn't see any reason to amplify the truthful comment. Well, the more or less truthful comment.

Genie opened another door at the end of the short hallway off the suite by which they'd entered. "Wally?" she called. "I brought your visitor."

The laboratory buzzed like a meadow full of bees. The lighting was that of an ordinary office; Howard's eyes had adapted to the corridors' muted illumination, so he sneezed. If the room had been a garage, then it was intended for people who drove semis.

Black silk hangings concealed the walls. Though benches full of equipment filled much of the interior, the floor was incongruously covered in Turkish rugs--runners a meter wide and four meters long--except for a patch of bare concrete around a floor drain in an outside corner.

"Oh, my goodness, Mr Jones!" said the wispy little man who'd been bent over a circuit board when they entered. He hustled toward them, raising his glasses to his forehead. "I'd meant to leave the door open but I forgot completely. Oh, Iphigenia, you must think I'm the greatest fool on Earth!"

"What I think is that you're the sweetest person I know, Wally," the girl said, patting his bald head. He blushed crimson. "But just a little absentminded, perhaps."

"Mr Jones is going to help me advertise for a volunteer," Wally said to the girl. "I don't see how we can get anybody, and we really *must* have someone, you know."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr Jones," Genie said, offering her hand with mock formality.

"Ah, Howard, please," Howard said. "Ah, I have a position with Strangeco. A very lowly one at present."

"That's what my father likes in employees," Genie said in a half-joking tone. "Lowliness. My step-father, I should say. Mother buried two husbands, but Robert buried her."

Howard shook her hand, aware that he was learning things about the Wizard of Fast Food that the tabloids would pay good money for. Remembering the uneasiness he'd felt while walking through the

mansion, he also realized that the money he'd get for invading Strange's privacy couldn't possibly be good enough.

An area twenty feet square in the center of the lab was empty of equipment. Across it, beyond Wally as Howard faced him, was what looked like an irregular, razor-thin sheet of glass on which bright images flickered. If that was really the flat-plate computer display it looked like, it was more advanced than anything Howard had heard of on the market.

"Well, Mr Popple...," Howard said. If the conversation continued in the direction Genie was taking it, Howard would learn things he didn't think he'd be safe knowing. "If you could tell me just what you need from me?"

"Oh, please call me Wally," the little man said, taking Howard's hand and leading him toward the thin display. "You see, this piece of mica is a, well, a window you could call it."

Wally glanced over his shoulder, then averted his eyes with another bright blush. As he'd obviously hoped, Genie was following them.

"I noticed that shadows seemed to move in it," Wally said, peering intently at what indeed was a piece of mica rather than a high-tech construction. Hair-fine wires from a buss at the back touched the sheet's ragged circumference at perhaps a hundred places. "That was six years ago. By modulating the current to each sheet separately--it's not one crystal, you know, it's a series of sheets like a stack of paper and there's a dialectic between each pair--I was able to sharpen the images to, well, what you see now."

Howard eyed the display. A group of brightly dressed people walked through a formal garden. The women wore dresses whose long trains were held by page boys, and the men were in tights and tunics with puffed sleeves. They carried swords as well, long-bladed rapiers with jeweled hilts.

"How do you generate the images, Wally?" Howard said. "This isn't fed from a broadcast signal, is it?"

"They aren't generated at all," Genie said. "They're real. Show Howard how you can move the point of view, Wally."

Obediently the little man stepped to the computer terminal on the bench beside the slab of mica. On the monitor was a graph with about thirty bars in each of the two superimposed rows.

Wally touched keys, watching the mica. A bar shrank or increased at each stroke, and the picture shifted with the jerking clarity of a rotated kaleidoscope.

"Hey!" said Howard as what he thought was a lion turned and raised its feathered head. Its hooked beak opened and the long forked tongue vibrated in a cry which the mica didn't transmit. "That's a chimera!"

"I thought so at first," said Genie, "but they're supposed to be part goat too."

"I don't think it's anything that has a name in our world," Wally said, making further small adjustments. "Of course the people seem to be, well, normal."

"Not normal where I come from!" Howard said. Except maybe in his dreams. "And what do you mean about *our* world? Where's that?"

He pointed. The image tumbled into a scene of vividly-dressed gallants fencing while a semicircle of women and other men watched. The duellists were good, *damned* good, and they didn't have buttons on their swords.

"Robert thinks it's fairyland," Genie said. Her tone was neutral, but Howard heard emotion just beneath the surface of the words. "He thinks Wally's a wizard. Robert also thinks he's a wizard himself."

"Your father has been very generous in supporting my researches, Iphigenia," the little man said, glancing toward but not quite at Genie. "I wish I could convince him that these effects are ordinary science--"

He paused and added self-consciously, "Ordinary physics, at any rate. I'm afraid my researches have been too empirical to qualify as proper science. But the underlying laws are physical, not magic."

The mica showed the dim interior of a great hall, the sort of place that Howard had imagined the Strange Mansion might be. A troupe of acrobats capered on the rush-strewn flagstones, executing remarkable jumps and all the time juggling lighted torches.

Gorgeous men and women watched from tables around the margins of the hall, and over the balcony railings peered children and soberly-dressed servants. At the center of the high table was a grave, bearded man wearing a crown. He held a crystal staff in which violet sparks danced.

Beside the king, occasionally rubbing its scaly head on the back of his carved throne, was a dragon the size of a rhinoceros. It didn't look exactly unfriendly, but its eyes had the trick of constantly scanning in every direction.

"I...," said Howard. "Wally, this is wonderful, just completely amazing, but I don't understand what you want me for. You've already succeeded!"

The image shifted again. Instead of answering, Wally gazed with rapt attention at the new scene. A spring shot from a wooded hillside to splash over rocks into a pool twenty feet below. Butterflies hovered in the flowery glade; in the surrounding forest were vine-woven bowers.

"Wally built the window on his own," Genie said in a low voice. "What Robert is interested in is opening a portal into... here."

She nodded toward the mica. A couple, hand in hand, walked toward the pool. The man knelt, dipped a silver goblet into the limpid water, and offered it to the lovely woman at his side. She sipped, then returned the cup for him to drink in turn.

Wally shuddered as though he'd been dropped into the pool. He tapped his keyboard several times at random, blurring the image into a curtain of electronic snow.

He turned to Howard and said, speaking very quickly to focus his mind somewhere other than where it wanted to go, "Mr Strange felt that if we could see the other place, we could enter it. A person could enter it. He's correct—I sent a rabbit through the portal last week—but I don't think anyone will be willing to go when they realize how dangerous it is. That's why I need you to help me write the advertisement for the volunteer, Mr Jones."

This was going to work better if the little guy was relaxed... which probably wouldn't happen as long as Genie Strange was in the same room, *that* was obvious, but Howard at least had to try to calm him down.

"Howard, Wally," Howard said, patting Wally on the shoulder. "Please call me Howard. Now, what's dangerous about the trip? Do you wind up wearing a fly's head if things go wrong?"

"No, it wasn't that, Mister—ah, Howard," Wally said, pursing his lips. "The problem occurred later."

He adjusted the values on his display again, bringing the image of the royal entertainment back onto the mica. A young girl danced on the back of a horse which curvetted slowly, its hooves striking occasional sparks from the flagstones. It was pretty ordinary-looking except for the straight horn in the center of its forehead.

Seeing that Wally wasn't going to say more, Howard raised an eyebrow to Genie. She shrugged and said, "I didn't see it myself—Robert won't let me in here while the tests are going on. But all that really happened is that the rabbit hopped out, perfectly all right, and a lizard ate it. The same thing could have happened anywhere."

"The lizard stared at the poor rabbit and drew it straight into its jaws, step by step," Wally said without looking at the others. "It knew it was doomed but it went anyway. I've never in my life seen anything so horrible."

*Then you don't watch the TV news a lot,* Howard thought. Aloud he said, "It was a basilisk, you mean? Not just a lizard?"

"It was a lizard," Wally insisted stubbornly. "But it wasn't a lizard from, well, this world. It was horrible, and there are any number of other horrible things over there. It's really too dangerous to send somebody into that world, but that's the only way we can get... things."

"Well, an assault rifle ought to take care of any basilisks that come by," Howard said reasonably. "Or dragons either, which is more to the point. Basilisks aren't supposed to be big enough to eat people."

He sighed. "I hate to say this, Wally, but science always seems to win out over romance. I *really* hate to say it."

"But that's just what I mean, Howard," Wally said despairingly. "I had a leash on the bunny so I could pull it back, but it didn't pass through the portal. The leash was still lying on the floor when the bunny disappeared. The volunteer won't be able to take a gun or even clothes, and I really don't believe he'll be able to bring the scepter back for Mr Strange."

"Robert thinks that purple scepter gives the fairy king his power," Genie said, her hands clasped behind her back as if to underscore the restraint in her voice. "Robert wants someone to go through Wally's portal and steal the scepter."

With absolutely no feeling she added, "Robert sacrificed a black hen the night Wally sent the rabbit through. He did it over the drain there--"

She nodded toward the bare concrete.

"--but you can still smell the blood caught in the pipe. Can't you?"

"Now, Iphigenia," Wally said, blushing again. "Your father has his ways, but he's been very generous with me."

Howard's nose wrinkled. He'd noticed a faint musty odor, but the room was so ripe with the smells of electronics working--ozone, hot insulation, and flux--that he hadn't given any thought to it. He still wasn't sure that what he smelled was rotting blood rather than mildew or wet wool, but now that Genie'd spoken he wouldn't be able to get other notion out of his mind.

"Wally, you're a genius!" the girl said so forcefully as to sound hostile. "You could go anywhere and find somebody to fund your work! I only wish you had."

Wally turned and looked her in the face for the first time. "Thank you for saying that, Iphigenia," he said, "but it isn't true. I went many places after I first saw what the mica could do, and they all sent me away. Your father thinks I'm a magician and he's wrong; but he doesn't call me crazy or a charlatan."

A door--the door that the light had led Howard to--opened. Robert Strange, identifiable from the rare photos that appeared in news features but much craggier and *harsher* in person, stepped through. He wore a long-sleeved black robe embroidered with symbols Howard didn't recognize, and through the sash at his waist he'd thrust a curved dagger of Arab style. Hilt and scabbard both were silver but decorated with runes filled with black niello.

"Who are you?" Strange demanded, his eyes fixed on Howard. His voice was like scales scraping on stone, and his black pupils had a reptilian glitter.

The news photographs hadn't shown the long scar down Strange's left cheekbone. There were many ways he could've been cut, but only one reason Howard could imagine that a man with Strange's money wouldn't have had the scar removed by plastic surgery: pride. It was a schlaeger scar, a vestige of the stylized duels with heavy sabers that still went on secretly at the old German universities. The purpose of a schlaeger bout wasn't to defeat one's foe but rather to get the scar as proof of courage and disregard for the laws which banned the practice.

Mind you, Howard was pretty sure that Strange's opponent had left his share of blood on the hall's floor as well.

"He's a--" said Genie before either Howard or Wally could speak.

"Iphigenia, go to your quarters at once," Strange said in the same rustling tone as before. He didn't speak loudly, but his voice cut through the buzz of electronics as surely as a mower would the flowery meadow that Howard thought of when entering the room. "You disturb Master Pople. I've warned you about this."

"But there's nobody else to *talk* to!" Genie said. Though she complained, she walked quickly toward the door of her suite.

Strange returned his attention to Howard. "I said," he repeated, "Who are you?"

"Mr Strange, I asked M--that is, Howard to help me--" Wally said.

"I'm the volunteer you requested for your experiment, sir," Howard said without the least suggestion of a quaver in his voice. "Wally here--Mr Pople--noted that the agent won't be able to carry a gun into the other realm, so my skill with a rapier is crucial."

"You know how to use a sword?" Strange snapped.

"Yes sir," Howard said, standing very straight and keeping his eyes on the tycoon's, hoping that would make him look open and honest. Even though Howard was telling the truth about the fencing, Strange's whole tone and manner made it seem that everything he was being told was a lie.

Besides considering that Strange might have him shot as a spy, there was the possibility that the Wizard of Fast Food would demand Howard duel him to prove his skill. Beating Strange would be dangerous--rich men were self-willed and explosive if they didn't get what they wanted. Losing to Strange might be even worse, especially since Howard didn't imagine he'd have buttons on his swords any more than the folk on the other side of the mica window did.

"Since I'm an employee of Strangeco," Howard continued, visualizing the Thief of Baghdad dancing over palace walls while monsters snarled beneath, "my devotion to you is already assured."

"You work for me?" Strange said. Then, as if he could remember each of the thirty thousand Strangeco employees world-wide, he said, "What's your name?"

The door swung *almost* shut behind Genie. "Howard Albing Jones, sir," Howard said.

"Assistant Marketing Associate in the home office," Strange said. *My God, maybe he did know all thirty thousand!* "Devoted, are you? Pull the other leg, boy! But that doesn't matter if you've got the guts for the work."

"Yes sir, I do," Howard said. He cleared his throat and went on, "I think I could honestly say I've been training all my life for this opportunity."

"You practice the Art also, Jones?" Strange demanded, the hectoring doubt back in his voice.

"The Black Arts, I mean. That's what they call it, the pigmies who adepts like me crush under our heels!"

"Ah, I can't claim to be an adept, sir," Howard said. He couldn't *honestly* claim to be anything but a guy who occasionally watched horror movies. As far as that went, he knew more about being a vampire than being a magician.

"No?" said Strange. "Well, I am, Jones. That's how I built Strangeco from a corner hotdog stand into what it is now. And by His Infernal Majesty! that's how I'll rule the world when I have the staff of power for myself. Nothing will stop me, Jones. Nothing!"

"Mr Strange, I'm your man!" Howard said. He spoke enthusiastically despite his concern that Strange might reply something along the lines of, "Fine, I'll take your kidneys now to feed my pet ferrets."

"If you serve me well, you won't regret it," Strange said. Unspoken but much louder in Howard's mind was the corollary: *But if you fail, I won't leave enough of you to bury!*

"Master Popple, can you be ready to proceed in two hours?" Strange asked. When he talked to Wally, there was a respect in his tone that certainly hadn't been present when he spoke to Howard or Genie.

"Well, I suppose..." Wally said. He frowned in concentration, then shrugged and said, "I don't see why not, if Howard is willing. I suppose we could start right now, Mr Strange."

"It'll take me the two hours to make my own preparations," Strange said with a curt shake of his head. "I respect your art, Master Popple, but I won't depend on it alone."

As he strode toward the door, Strange added without turning his head, "I'll have a black ewe sent over. And if that's not enough--we'll see!"

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"Now hold your arms out from your shoulders, please, Howard," Wally said as he changed values on his display. Howard obeyed the way he would if a barber told him to tilt his head.

Waiting as the little man made adjustments gave Howard enough time to look over the room. Much of the racked equipment meant nothing to him, but his eyes kept coming back to a black cabinet that looked like a refrigerator-sized tube mating with a round sofa.

"Wally?" he said, his arms still out. "What's that in the northeast corner? Is it an air conditioner?"

"Oh, that's the computer that does the modulations," Wally said. "You can put your arms down now if you like. I used a Sun workstation to control the window, but the portal requires greatly more capacity. I'd thought we'd just couple a network of calculation servers to the workstation, but Mr Strange provided a Cray instead to simplify the setup for the corrections."

"Oh," said Howard, wondering what a supercomputer cost. Pocket change to the Wizard of Fast Food, he supposed.

"Now if you'll turn counterclockwise, please..." Wally said. "About fifteen degrees."

Howard wore a cotton caftan that came from Genie's suite. She'd brought it in when Howard protested at standing buck naked in the middle of the floor with security cameras watching. Howard was willing to accept that the clothes wouldn't go through the portal with him, but waiting while Pete and his partner chuckled about his masculine endowments was a different matter.

Not that there was anything wrong with his masculine endowments.

Genie didn't stay, but Howard knew she was keeping abreast of what went on through the part-open door. He wasn't sure whether he was glad of that or not.

The mica window looked onto the glade where Howard would enter the other world if everything went right. Occasionally a small animal appeared briefly--once Howard saw what looked very much like a pink bass swimming through the air--but Wally had chosen the site because it was isolated. There was only so much you could get from leaves quivering, even if they did seem to be solid gold.

The carpets, layered like roof shingles over the concrete, weren't the neutrally exotic designs Howard had expected. Some had stylized camels and birds, sure; but one had tanks, jets, and bright explosions, while peacock-winged devils capered as they tortured people against the black background of the newer-looking rugs.

Around where Howard stood was a six-pointed star drawn in lime like the markings of a football field. Howard would've expected a pentacle, but he didn't doubt Strange knew what he was doing.

All Howard himself was sure of was that he was taking a chance at adventure when it appeared. If that was a bad idea, then he hoped he wouldn't have long to regret his decision.

It might be a very bad idea.

"There," said Wally. "There's nothing more I can do until we actually begin building the charge. Then I may have to--"

Robert Strange entered through a pedestrian door set in one of the six vehicle doors along the outside wall. The black sheep he led looked puzzled, a feeling which Howard himself echoed.

"You're ready, Master Popple?" he asked.

"*Ey-eh-he-e*," said the sheep. Strange jerked the leash viciously. The cord looked like silver, but it was functional enough to choke the sheep to silence when Strange lifted his arm.

"Yes, Mr Strange," Wally said. "I'm a little worried about Howard's mass, though. Eighty-seven kilos may be too much."

"Too much?" snapped Strange. "If you needed more transformers, you should have said so!"

"Too much for the fabric of the universe, Mr Strange," said Wally, as mild as ever but completely undaunted at the anger of a man who scared the living crap out of Howard Jones. "I really don't want to go to more than thirty kilowatts."

Strange sniffed. "The subject's ready?" he said. "You, Jones; you're ready?"

"*Ey-eh-he?*" the sheep repeated, rolling its eyes. Her eyes, Howard assumed, since Strange said he was fetching a ewe. The tycoon's daggerhilt winked in the bright laboratory lighting.

"Yes, sir!" Howard said.

Strange grimaced, then bent and tied the leash around a ring set in the drain. He turned his head to Howard and said, "You know what you're going to do?"

"Sir, I'm going to enter the other land," Howard said. "I'll take the scepter from the king of that land and return here to you with it."

As a statement of intent it was concise and accurate. As a plan of action it lacked detail, but there wasn't enough information on this side of the portal to form a real plan. Howard was uneasily aware that his foray, even if he wound up in a dragon's gullet, would provide information so that the next agent could do better.

"All right," Strange said. "Give me a moment and then proceed."

There were drapes bunched among the wall hangings. As Strange spoke, he drew them along a track in the ceiling to separate his corner of the room from Howard and Wally. The ewe bleated again.

"You may begin, Master Popple," Strange called, his voice muffled by the thick fabric. He broke into a musical chant. The sounds from his throat weren't words, or at least words in English.

"You're ready, Howard?" Wally said.

Howard nodded. His throat was dry and he didn't want to embarrass himself by having his voice crack in the middle of a simple word like, "Yes."

Wally rotated a switch, cutting the ceiling lights to red beads among the dimming ghosts of the fluorescent fixtures. The sheet of mica, bright with the daylight of another world, shone like a lantern beside the little man as he typed commands.

There was a reptilian viciousness to Strange's voice, and the sheep was managing to whimper like a frightened baby. The hair on Howard's arms and the back of his neck began to rise. For a moment he thought that was his reaction to the sounds coming from beyond the drapes, but as the fluorescents cooled to absolute black Howard saw a faint violet aura clinging to three racks of equipment.

Wally was generating very high frequency current at a considerable voltage. Howard decided he didn't want to think about *how* high the voltage was.

Wally muttered as he worked. Though Howard could see his lips move, the words weren't audible over the hum of five transformers along the outside wall. The opening between Genie's door and the jamb was faintly visible.

The air spluttered. Howard felt a directionless pull, unpleasant without being really painful. Violet light flickered through the mica, a momentary pulse from the world across the barrier.

Strange shouted a final word. The sheep bleated on a rising note ending in so awful a gurgle that Howard pressed his hands to his ears before he remembered that moving might affect Wally's calculations. The ewe's hooves rattled on the concrete; the curtain billowed as the animal thrashed.

Howard would've covered his ears even if he had thought about Wally. The sound was *horrible*.

Wally typed, his eyes on the computer display. He'd sucked his lower lip between his teeth to chew as he concentrated. The transformers hummed louder but didn't change tone.

Howard felt the indescribable pull again. In the other world the violet haze formed again, this time in the shape of a human being.

A blue flash and a *BANG!* like a cannon shot engulfed the lab, stunning Howard into a wordless shout. He clapped his hands, a reflex to prove that he was still alive.

The air stank of burning tar. Dirty red flames licked from one of the transformers on the outside



wall. Howard drew in a deep breath of relief. He immediately regretted it when acrid smoke brought on a fit of coughing.

Strange snatched open the curtains, his face a mask of cold fury. The ewe lay over the drain, her legs splayed like those of a squashed insect. Her eyes still had a puzzled look, but they were already beginning to glaze.

Wally changed values at his keyboard with a resigned expression. Howard looked for a fire extinguisher. He didn't see one, but he walked past Wally and turned the main lights back on. The transformer was smoldering itself out, though an occasional sizzle made Howard thankful that the floor was covered with non-conductive wool.

"What went wrong?" Strange said. "I know that the transformer failed; *why* did it fail?"

"The load was too great," Wally said simply. "We very nearly succeeded. If we replace the transformer--"

"We'll double the capacity," Strange said. "We'll make another attempt tonight, at midnight this time. I never thought you were careful enough with your timing, Master Pople."

"Sir, I don't think it would be safe to increase output beyond--" Wally said.

"We'll double it!" Strange said, his tone a rasp like steel grating on rib bones. "If we don't need the extra wattage, then we won't use it, but we'll use as much as it requires!"

He looked disgustedly at the dagger in his hand, then wiped the blade on the curtain and sheathed the weapon. He strode past Howard and Wally to the hall door; Howard watched him with a fixed smile, uncomfortably aware that instinct tensed him to run in case Strange leaped for his throat.

The Thief of Baghdad might've had a better idea. On the other hand, Howard didn't remember the Thief of Baghdad facing anything quite like Robert Strange.

Strange thumped the hall door closed; it was too heavy to bang. At the sound, Genie's door opened a little wider and the slim girl returned. She grimaced when she saw the ewe. It'd voided its bowels when it died, so that odor mingled with the fresh blood and burned insulation.

"Are you all right, Wally?" she asked. "And you, Howard. I'm not used to there being anybody but Wally here."

"I'm sorry you had to see that, Iphigenia," Wally said with a perturbed glance toward the ewe. "You really shouldn't have come in until the crew has cleaned things up."

"Wally, I've lived with Robert for fifteen years," Genie said bluntly. "There've been worse things than the occasional dead animal. I was worried about you and Howard."

"It just tickled a little," Howard said. If he let himself think about events in the right way, he was pretty sure he could make the last ten minutes or so sound more heroic than they'd seemed while they were happening.

"There wasn't any risk, Iphigenia," Wally said. At first he didn't look directly at her, but then he raised his eyes with an effort of will. "Ah--I really appreciate your concern, but right now I have something important to discuss with Mr--with Howard, that is. Can you, I mean would you...?"

"All right, Wally," the girl said, sounding puzzled and a little hurt. She nodded to Howard and walked to her room with swift, clean strides. This time the door shut firmly.

One of the vehicular doors in the outside wall started up with a rumble of heavy gears. A team of swarthy men, beardless but heavily mustached, stood beside a flatbed truck. They entered, paying no attention to Howard and Wally. One lifted the sheep over his shoulder and walked back to the truck with it; his three fellows started disconnecting the wrecked transformer. They talked among themselves in guttural singsongs.

"Will you come here please, Howard?" Wally said, showing no more interest in the workmen than they did in him. He adjusted the mica screen to show the spring again. "I, ah, have a favor to ask you."

A couple--not the same ones as before--sat on the pool's mossy coping, interlacing the fingers of one hand as they passed a cup back and forth with the other. Wally tightened the focus so that their mutually loving expressions were unmistakable.

"Yes, Wally?" Howard prodded.

"The water of this spring appears to have certain properties," Wally said. He looked fixedly at Howard to avoid watching the couple who'd begun to fondle one another. The statuesque blonde lay back on the sward and tugged her partner over her without bothering to walk to the privacy of the nearby bowers. "You'll have noticed that."

"I sure notice something," Howard said. He wasn't sure how he felt about the show: it was real people, not actors. Well, actors were real people too but they knew they were going to be watched.

The workmen hoisted the transformer by hand instead of bringing in a derrick for the job. It must weigh close to half a ton. They walked out and slid it onto the truck bed, forcing a squeal from the springs.

Wally grimaced and blurred the image to bright sparkles within the mica sheet. "If I succeed in opening the portal to the other world, Howard," he said, "you'll have a very difficult job to gain the king's scepter. I don't believe in magic, not here or there either one, but the animal guarding the king appears formidable."

"The dragon," Howard said. "Yeah, it does."

If Howard let himself consider the details of how he was going to get the scepter, it'd scare the spit out of him. By limiting his thoughts to vague swoops across the hall on a handy rope, followed by a mighty leap from a balcony-level window, he was managing to keep his aplomb.

"And of course we're not sure it'll be possible to bring inanimate objects through the portal in this direction, since we can't do it while going the other way," Wally continued with a solemn nod. He started to refocus on the spring, then snatched his hand back from the keyboard with a blush.

"I understand all the difficulties and dangers you'll face, Howard," Wally said. He stared in the direction of Genie's closed door; he looked as if he was about to cry. "Regardless, I'd like you to do me a favor if you can. I'd like you to bring me a phial of water from the spring we just looked at. I... I'd be very grateful."

*You poor little guy!* Howard thought. Aloud he said, "Ah, Wally? I'll do what I can--"

Which might not be a heck of a lot. *If* Howard arrived, he'd be bare-assed naked and in the middle of a bunch of guys with swords they knew how to use. Not to mention the occasional dragon.

--but you know, it isn't that hard to, ah, meet girls." He paused to choose the next words carefully. "Lots of times just being around one for a while is enough to, you know, bring the two of you together. If you play your cards right."

The truck drove off with a snort of diesel exhaust as the garage door began to rumble down. The corpses of the sheep and transformer lay together in the bed of the vehicle.

"I've never played cards at all, Howard," the little man said with a sad smile. "I guess this is hard for a handsome young man like you to understand, but...."

He turned his head away and wiped his eyes fiercely.

"Hey, that's all right, Wally," Howard said, patting him on the back. "Sure, I'll take care of that if there's, you know, any way to do it. No problem."

Compared to the rest of the assignment, that was the gospel truth.

"Thank you, Howard," Wally said through a racking snuffle. "I'm, well, I'm lucky to have met a real hero like you in my time of need."

Only faintly audible through the heavy doors, another big truck was pulling up outside. A relay clicked and the machinery began to rumble again.

"I feel sure we're going to succeed," Wally added. "If we have to double the field strength, well, that's just what we're going to do. No matter what!"

Wally sounded a lot more cheerful when he made that promise than Howard was to hear it.

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With the six new transformers in place, the line almost filled the outside wall. On that side only the curtained-off corner--they were already drawn--didn't have machinery squatting on it. Howard could still smell burned insulation. He'd never thought he'd be thankful for a stink like that, but it covered other possible reminders of the afternoon's experiment.

Wally looked at Howard and tried to force a grin. His expression would've been more appropriate for somebody being raped by a Christmas tree.

"Hey, buck up, buddy," Howard said. "We're going to be fine!"

Funny, but telling the lie made Howard feel that the words might possibly be true. Logically he knew a lot better.

The door hidden behind the curtain opened. Howard heard a *clink* over the hum of machinery as something hard brushed against the raised lintel. He wondered what animal Strange was bringing in to sacrifice this time. Howard had expected a heifer or maybe an elephant, but Strange would've had to raise the vehicular door to bring in animals that big.

Strange stuck his head out between two curtain panels. "Are you ready to proceed, Master Pople?" he asked. He held the curtains together so that all Howard could see was the throat of his garments. He seemed to be wearing the same silver-marked black satin as in the afternoon.

"I believe--" Wally said. He caught Howard's terse nod and continued, "Yes, we're ready, Mr

Strange. It'll take ninety seconds from whenever we start to build the field."

"Start now, then," Strange said curtly. He drew the curtains tight behind him and began to chant. His words had considerable musical power despite being complete gibberish. That was also true of opera, of course, so far as Howard was concerned.

Wally tried to smile again, then busied himself with his keyboard. The mica window looked onto the glade, empty save for trees and the flitting passage of a bird whose plumage was as purely blue as the summer sky. Howard watched the scientist, and he watched images on the mica; but more compelling than those, he listened through the curtains at his back to the sound of Robert Strange's voice chanting.

Howard felt the hairs lift from his body. Where those of his chest touched the loose caftan they tickled like the feeling at the back of a dry throat that you can't seem to swallow away. Violet haze blurred the air beyond the mica.

Genie Strange screamed.

Howard turned. The door to Genie's room was closed--closed and latched. The drapes around Strange and his activities bulged outward.

Genie hopped through and fell, dragging a section of the velvet down. The scarf used to gag her had slipped out of her mouth; it was the only garment she was wearing. Her wrists and ankles were tied together behind her back, but she'd managed to undo the cord that'd bound her to the drain.

Robert Strange, his face as hard and contorted as that of a marble demon, stepped out behind her. He grabbed a handful of Genie's black hair with his free hand.

"Hey!" Howard said. There was a bank of equipment between him and the Stranges. As gracefully as if he'd been practicing all his life, Howard took two running steps, planted his right palm on the rack, and leaped over with his legs swung off to his left side. Even the Thief of Baghdad would be impressed--

Until the caftan's billowing hem caught the chassis full of plug-in circuits on top of the rack. As Howard's legs straightened, the tightening cloth spilled him like a lassoed steer. Strange looked at him without expression.

Howard sprang up. The torn caftan, bunched now around his ankles, tripped him again.

Strange lifted Genie's head, avoiding her attempts to bite him. He poised the curved dagger in his right hand over her throat. Howard grabbed the sides of the rug on which he'd fallen and jerked with all his strength, snatching Strange's feet out from under him.

"You...!" shouted Strange as he toppled backward. Genie'd tossed her short hair free of his grip, but he didn't lose the dagger in his other hand. It was underneath when the Wizard of Fast Food hit the concrete.

The chassis that Howard'd dragged to the floor with him was popping and spluttering, but he wasn't prepared for the flash of violet light that filled the interior of the lab. It was so intense that Howard only vaguely noticed the accompanying thunderclap. He heard Wally cry out and turned.

Wally wasn't there. His clothing, from brown shoes to the pair of reading glasses he wore tilted up on his forehead, lay in the middle of the hexagram. The hundred and twenty-three pounds of Wally Pople had vanished.

Except for an image in the mica window.

Howard lifted Genie before he remembered that her stepfather and the dagger might be of more immediate concern. He looked back.

He'd been right the first time. Strange's face was turned toward Howard. He looked absolutely furious. He'd managed to thrash into a prone position while dying, but the silver hilt projecting from the middle of his back showed that dying was certainly what he'd done.

The transformer on the far left of the line shorted out. The one next to it went a heartbeat later, and when the third failed it showered the room with blobs of flaming tar. One of them slapped the mica window, and shattered it like a bomb.

"Can you please untie me, Howard?" asked the girl in his arms. "Though the way things are starting to happen in here, maybe that could wait till we're outside."

"Right!" said Howard. "Right!"

He paused to shrug off what was left of the caftan; it had started to burn as well. Somehow he couldn't get concerned about what the guards thought of him now.

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Because he and Genie were going to be gone for at least three weeks and a fourth besides if the Chinese authorities agreed to open Tibet to Strangeco--which they would, Howard Jones wasn't called

the Swashbuckler of Fast Food for nothing--Howard stopped by the mansion's former garage for a moment. He liked to, well, keep an eye on how things were going.

He'd had the big room cleaned and nearly emptied immediately after the wedding, but he still smelled the bitterness of burned insulation. He supposed it was mostly in his mind by now.

Genie'd wanted to tear the garage down completely since it held nothing but bad memories for her, but she'd agreed to let Howard keep the room so long as he'd had the door into her old suite welded shut. She wasn't the sort of girl to object to the whim of the man who'd saved her life; besides, she loved her husband.

Howard went to the skeletal apparatus on the one rack remaining in the room. Three hair-fine filaments were still attached to the top edge of a piece of mica no bigger than a quarter.

Howard bent to peer into it. If you looked carefully at the right times, you could see images in the mica.

The focus wandered. Howard hadn't tried to adjust the apparatus himself or let anybody else take a look at it. Mostly all there was to see was snow, but this time he was in luck.

The peephole looked out at the spring where couples used to cavort. Wally was there with his entourage, checking the generating turbine he'd built to power the first electric lights in his new home. If Howard understood the preparations he'd seen going on in the royal palace last week, telephones were about to follow.

When Wally turned with a satisfied expression, Howard waved. He knew the little fellow couldn't see him, but it made Howard feel he was sort of keeping in touch. Wally walked out of the image area surrounded by courtiers.

Howard checked his watch and sighed; he needed to get moving. He'd promised the company fencing team that he and Genie would at least drop in on their match with Princeton. After Howard instituted morning unity-building fencing exercises throughout Strangeoco, a number of the employees had become fencing enthusiasts.

Howard took a last look at the pool in the other world. He'd never seen Wally take a sip of the water, and it didn't seem likely that he ever would.

After all, a powerful wizard like Master Pople had to beat off beautiful women with a stick.