

**THE PATHS OF THE
PERAMBULATOR**
A SPELLSINGER ADVENTURE
ALAN DEAN FOSTER
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



The Paths of the Perambulator

Alan Dean Foster



Here's one for Alex Berman and
Sid, who had confidence and who print 'em pretty.



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FOR ONCE ALL SEEMED right with the world, even if the world in question happened to be the one which he had been unwillingly transported, Jon-Tom reflected with a resigned sigh. It was a perfect, gorgeous autumn morning. Bright sunshine warmed his face, his stomach was giving him no trouble, and there was a delicious bite to the air.

Not only did all seem right with the world, he was also feeling especially good about himself. His studies had progressed to the point where even the wizard Clothahump was willing to concede, albeit reluctantly, that with continued practice and attention to detail Jon-Tom might actually be worthy of the sobriquet of Spellsinger. The wizard had been in a particularly good mood lately. Some of that could be attributed to the fact that his apprentice, the owl Sorbl, had sworn off liquor after coming out of a three-day drunk. While he was lying unconscious on the floor of a tavern, the owl's drinking buddies had amused themselves by pulling out most of his tail feathers. The result left the apprentice sufficiently mortified to embark on a return to the long-forgotten state known as sobriety, of which he had not been an inhabitant for some time.

Even the wizard's bowels were behaving, for which Jon-Tom was equally grateful. There is no more pitiful sight than a turtle with the trots.

There was only one problem. His fine morning mood notwithstanding, Jon-Tom couldn't shake a vague feeling of unease. It wasn't anything specific, nothing he could put a claw on, but it had been nagging at him most of the morning. It was unconscionable for something so intangible to spoil his mood.

Nothing like a good breakfast to banish lingering sensations of discontent, he mused as he bent over his tray. But though the annelids were fresh and the dried anemone crunchy and well seasoned, the food failed to alleviate his discomfort.

He turned toward the single window that let light into the cave, his eyestalks twisting for a better view. Beyond and below, the waves smashed energetically against the sheer granite cliff. The damp air of his cavern was perfumed with the sharp smell of salt and seawater. Dried algae and kelp decorated the floor and walls.

Both suns were already high in the sky. The largest gleamed deep purple through the clouds, while its smaller companion shed its normal pale green light on the coastline. The purple clouds reflected his mood but were not responsible for it.

Turning away from the feeding tray, he used a lesser claw to wipe edible tidbits into his mouth. The tension caused his eyestalks to clench, and he made a deliberate effort to relax.

Nerves, he told himself firmly. Nothing but nerves. Except that he had no reason to be nervous. All was right with the world, what was there to be nervous about? He sighed deeply, shook himself, and preened his eyestalks. Nothing helped. Something, somewhere, was seriously wrong.

A hiss behind him made him shift from contemplation of his continued unease to the passageway that led out of his cave. The hiss was followed by a rasping noise and a formal greeting. Moving lithely on six chitinous legs, Clothahump shuffled into the chamber. As befitted his age, his shell was twice the diameter of Jon-Tom's, though Jon-Tom was more intimidated by the wizard's intellect than by his size.

His mentor's eyes bobbed and danced on the ends of foot-long stalks that, like Jon-Tom's, were a pale turquoise blue. Upon entering sideways, the wizard assumed a stance next to the window where he could inhale the full rush of salt-stained air. Settling his legs beneath him, he gestured with his

primary claw.

~~“A question for you, my boy. How are you feeling this morning? Anything troubling you? Headache, nausea perhaps?”~~

“Nothing.” Jon-Tom’s eyestalks dipped and bobbed eloquently. “I feel great. It’s a beautiful day. He hesitated. “Except...”

“Except what?” the wizard prompted him.

“Nothing, really. It’s only that since I woke up this morning, well—it’s hard to define. I don’t feel a hundred percent, and I should. There’s something, a funny feeling of—I don’t know. I just don’t feel *right*.”

“You feel that something is not as it should be, but you are unable to define what it is?”

“Yes, exactly! You’ve been feeling the same thing?”

“Yes, indeed. I believe it woke me up.”

Jon-Tom nodded excitedly. “Me too. But I can’t pin it down.”

“Really? I should think you would have been able to by this time.”

Before Jon-Tom could respond, a three-foot-long centipede wandered into the chamber. It peered mournfully up at Clothahump before glancing over at Jon-Tom. He recognized the famulus immediately.

“Sorbl. You’ve been drinking again. I thought you’d sworn off the stuff.”

“Sorry.” The centipede staggered toward the depression in the middle of the chamber. “But when I got a look at myself in the mirror this morning, well, you can imagine.”

“I can? Imagine what?”

The centipede returned its sorrowful stare to its master. “Hasn’t he figured it out yet?”

“Figured what out yet?”

“You don’t notice anything unusual?” the famulus asked in disbelief.

“Unusual? No, I don’t...” And then it hit him as sharply as if he’d stuck his finger in an electrical socket. That was his problem: he wasn’t noticing. Noticing, for example, what was wrong with the wizard’s assistant. Sorbl was an owl, approximately three feet in height, with wings to match and vast yellow eyes, usually bloodshot. What he was *not* was a three-foot-long centipede.

“Holy shit, Sorbl—what happened to you?”

The centipede gaped at him. “What happened to *me*? How about what’s happened to you? Clothahump haven’t you taken a look at yourself yet this morning?”

Not possessing the right equipment for frowning, Jon-Tom settled for clicking his lesser claws several times to indicate the extent of his confusion. Then he took the time to inspect himself.

Nothing out of the ordinary. Everything was in its proper place. His six legs were folded neatly beneath him, his primary and lesser claws held out in front. His eyestalks enabled him to study every part of his body. Oh, his palps were still a mite grungy from breakfast, and his shell could use some cleaning, but other than that, everything appeared to be in good working order.

“You still don’t know what’s wrong, do you?” Clothahump sounded more curious than accusatory.

“No, I don’t.” Jon-Tom was growing irritated by the repeated question. “I don’t know what happened to transform Sorbl, but I can’t be expected to...”

Transform. The word meant something important in the context of this morning’s unease. Change. Alter. Different.

Something went click inside his head. It was as if his eyes were lenses in a camera belonging to another individual entirely and that individual had just released the shutter.

He took another look at himself; a good look, a long look. Then he started to tremble, which is n

easy to do when one is mounted on six legs and is sitting down besides. The internal vibrations were impressive. Nausea? Clothahump had inquired about it upon entering. He was in the process of having his question fulfilled.

Wishing for a sudden onset of blindness, Jon-Tom stared around the chamber. Sorbl was not all that had been transformed. For openers, the wizard Clothahump did not live in a rocky, moisture-drenched cave that looked out over an ocean. He lived in a giant oak tree whose interior had been dimensionally enlarged by one of the sorcerer's spells. The oak grew in the middle of a forest called the Bellwood not by the shore of some unknown sea that foamed red instead of white against the rocks.

There was also the matter of the sun's absence and its replacement by two unhealthy-looking orbs of green and purple. Clothahump himself was a turtle many hundreds of years old, not an arthropod of unknown origin. For that matter, he himself, Jon-Tom, née Jonathan Thomas Meriweather, was a young man six feet two inches tall, a bit on the slim side, with shoulder-length brown hair and a thoughtful expression. He looked weakly down at himself for a second time. Nothing had changed since this revelation had struck him.

He was still a giant blue crab.

"You would think, my boy," declared Clothahump in that sometimes maddeningly condescending tone of his, "that you would have noticed the change before this, but I suppose readjustment takes more time when it occurs immediately upon awakening."

"Readjustment?" He was very near panicking. "What the hell's going on? What's happened to you? What happened to Sorbl? What..." He started to gesture with a claw, and as soon as he saw it hovering in front of him, he quickly drew it back against his body as if the very movement might make it disappear. "What's happened to *everything*?"

"Well, my boy." The wizard spoke while nonchalantly preening one eyestalk with his secondary claw, acting as though it were a task he performed regularly every morning. "It would appear that you are confronted by a problem of grave dimensions."

"Oh, no," Jon-Tom moaned. At least, he thought he moaned. It emerged as a kind of sibilant hiss. "Why must it always be a problem of grave dimensions? Can't we ever be confronted by a problem of lighthearted dimensions? A problem of mild dimensions? A problem requiring only simple straightforward solutions?"

"You are becoming hysterical, my boy."

"I am not becoming hysterical," Jon-Tom snapped. "Sarcastic and mad and maybe a little crazy, but not hysterical."

At that moment the enormous blue crab, which had been listening patiently to him, vanished. So did the algae- and kelp-strewn wall of the cave, and the roar of the ocean outside, and the thick tangy odor of salt spray. The purple and green light that had illuminated the chamber was replaced with a warm, indistinct transparency. Clothahump the wizard, the real Clothahump, was sitting facing him on a stool not six feet away and regarding his young guest calmly.

Behind the wizard was the soft blond-brown wood that formed the interior walls of the great tree. The cave, too, had gone, to be replaced by the familiar surroundings of his own room. There was his bed, there his desk and chair, over in the corner the simple washbasin and spigots. Rising on shaky legs, he crossed to the basin, turned the cold water tap on full, and splashed it freely over his face and arms. As he dried himself he felt with relief the soft smooth skin that covered his arms. The hard chitinous shell was gone. He touched his head, felt the recently washed shoulder-length hair.

I am me again, he thought with exquisite relief.

The world was normal once more. Or was it? What of the problem the wizard had alluded to? Jon-

Tom knew that the turtle did not refer to such matters lightly, and he'd already been subjected to an intimate illustration of the seriousness of the problem.

Well, no matter. They would handle it, as they had handled such matters before. Clothahump would know how to cope, what to do. Oh, he would moan and groan and gripe about the loss of his precious time, but he would take care of things, and Jon-Tom, as always, would learn from the experience. Surely any sorcerer who could conceive a strategy for defeating the Plated Folk at the Jo-Troom Games and who could provide hot and cold running water in the heart of an oak tree could cope with the small matter of waking up in another world in the body of a giant blue crab?

Only—what if it happened again?

With some amazement he saw that his hands were trembling.

“Hey,” he said, trying to sound cool and failing because his voice was also shaking, “look at my hands. How about that? Maybe I am a little hysterical.”

Clothahump responded with a disapproving clucking sound, though his expression was full of sympathy. “Delayed reaction.” He reached into one of the drawers built into his plastron, spent a moment searching, and removed a small foil packet. He tossed the contents into the air while reciting a spell new to Jon-Tom.

“Suffer the shakes to cease and desist,
Soothe the disquiet and stir.
The neural pathways now should consist
Of quiet not unlike a cat’s purr
Tallium, condralium
Come forth endorphins and valium!”

Immediately a feeling of great contentment and well-being spread through Jon-Tom’s entire body. The relief was so sudden and complete that he didn’t mind the fact he could no longer stand erect. Sorbl caught him just in time, helped him over to his bed.

“I may have overdone it a bit,” Clothahump muttered.

“No, no, I feel fine,” Jon-Tom assured him. “Just—fi-ine.”

The wizard was nodding to himself. “Definitely overdid it. You are enjoying yourself too much.” And he made some signs in the air while Jon-Tom struggled to protest.

His head cleared and his hands remained steady. He tried not to show his disappointment.

“Uh, what was that stuff, sir?”

The turtle wagged a warning finger at him. “This is no time for pharmacological experimentation, my boy. You are not mature enough to utilize such spells in proper moderation. Your head needs to be clear, and what brain you have to be functioning optimally. Or have you forgotten already what I just told you?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Unable to conceal his boredom, he sat up on the bed, put his hands on his knees. “Another serious problem. Big deal.”

Clothahump eyed him carefully. “I definitely should have used a less powerful spell. Well, and the remaining aftereffects will wear off quickly enough.”

“Too bad,” Jon-Tom muttered. “Look, I’ve heard it all before, sir. But I just can’t get excited anymore. Especially since you’re obviously capable of handling this particular problem.”

“Is that so?” Clothahump peered at him through six-sided glasses. “What makes you think I will be able to handle it?”

“You already have.” Jon-Tom blandly waved a hand at his room. “You put everything right again. ~~mean, I’m myself again, and you’re you, and the world is what it ought to be. Everything is as should be.~~”

“Indeed that is so,” the wizard conceded, “except that I am distressed to admit that none of it was my doing.”

Jon-Tom blinked at him. “You mean you didn’t bring things back to normal?”

“Absolutely not, my boy, any more than I bent them askew in the first place.”

“Then,” Jon-Tom said, much more slowly, “it could happen again? I could turn back into a giant blue crab?”

“Oh, yes, most certainly. At any moment. And myself also, just as Sorbl could turn back into the crawling thing he was, and this comfortable tree back into a damp cave, and—”

“All right, all right.” The thought of returning to that skittering crablike shape, smelling alienness and sea-stink, was enough to shock Jon-Tom out of his boredom. “But I don’t understand. Things like that don’t just ‘happen.’”

“Ah, but we have indisputable evidence that it did, my boy. Furthermore, should it happen again, the effects could be quite different.”

“What do you mean ‘different’?” Jon-Tom asked uneasily, inspecting his room as though signs and portents of any impending change might be lying there on his chair or hanging from his clothes rack next to his extra shirt.

“I mean that next time the world might become less recognizable still. At any moment, without warning of any kind.”

Jon-Tom considered this. “It wasn’t an illusion, then? I actually changed. You and Sorbl actually changed.”

“Quite so. The entire world was transformed. You did not imagine that you were a large blue crab. You *became* a large blue crab.”

“I wasn’t sure. I thought that maybe—” He broke off.

“Maybe what, my boy?”

Jon-Tom found it difficult to meet the wizard’s gaze. “That you were playing some kind of elaborate joke. You’re always testing me.”

“A not unreasonable assumption on your part, save for the fact that I never engage in anything as juvenile as practical jokes. This was no test. I wish it were so.”

Jon-Tom nodded thoughtfully, then reached for the duar, which was hanging by its shoulder strap from one of his bed’s corner posts. He slipped the strap over his shoulder, cradled the instrument against his ribs.

Now it was the wizard’s turn to look discomforted. “What are you going to do with that, my boy? While Jon-Tom’s control over his spellsinging had improved dramatically under the turtle’s tutelage, it was still far from precise. His ability to evoke marvelous things with his music was still matched only by his inability to control them.

“I’m just holding it,” Jon-Tom replied irritably. Did Clothahump still regard him as nothing more than an amateur? “Do you think that after all my practicing I still don’t know what I’m doing?”

“I could not have put it better myself.”

Jon-Tom was ready with a sharp retort, but he never voiced it. He was too busy staring at the little finger of his left hand. It had grown six inches and turned into a bobbing, weaving worm. It curled back over his palm and glared up at him out of tiny glittering gold eyes.

As quickly as it had appeared, it vanished. He wiggled the small finger again, swallowed.

“Yes, I saw it,” said Clothahump in response to Jon-Tom’s unasked question. “The changes vary in degree. Not all need be as drastic and complete as the one we awoke to. The whole world and everything in it can change, or only a small part can shift. One finger, for example. Our reactions to such changes depend on what we happen to be doing at the time the change occurs. We were fortunate that we were engaged in nothing more complex than eating breakfast when the first perturbation struck. The damage, not to mention the psychic shock, would have been much more severe had, for example, you been spellcasting or sitting on the john.”

“I get the idea,” Jon-Tom shook his head. “I’ve been exposed to a lot of magic since you brought me here, but I’ve never heard of anything half so powerful as this.”

“It has nothing to do with magic,” said the wizard firmly. “What has happened, what is happening is the result of natural law.”

“Whatever.” Jon-Tom waved the comment off and took a second to make sure the object doing the waving was a normal five-fingered hand. “You call it natural law, I call it magic, somebody else calls it physics. The result is the same. Structures and functions are being altered against the will of those involved.” He let the fingers of his right hand strum lightly over the duar’s strings. A mellow, soft tone filled the room. Fortunately that was all, but Clothahump checked the corners of the chamber just to be certain.

“Yes. And there is no way of predicting when the changes will occur or how severe will be the effects. But it must be stopped. If nothing is done, the changes will continue with greater and greater frequency. They will also become more extreme.”

“How could I turn into anything weirder than a giant blue crab?”

“Look at yourself and reconsider that question,” said the wizard dryly. “I would rather live as a blue crab than as a tall mammal devoid of pigment.”

Jon-Tom had become inured to comments about his species defects and continued to lightly strum the duar. “So who’s out to get us, then?”

“No one is out to get us.”

“There’s no vast evil behind what’s happening? That’s a switch.”

“Not on the part of the cause of the disturbances, no,” Clothahump told him. “It is a natural phenomenon, like an earthquake.”

Jon-Tom knew better where earthquakes were concerned but decided not to interrupt the wizard with a digression. “You say ‘it.’ Everything that’s happened has a single cause?” His little finger tried to turn back into the worm again, but a sharp glance seemed to put a halt to the incipient transformation.

“That is correct.” Clothahump began to pace the bedroom. “It is producing blurs, alterations, changes in the composition of existence by inducing shifts in the atomic substructure of matter. It does this by emitting destabilizing bursts of energy of unbelievable intensity. The degree of change in our universe experiences varies proportionately to the strength of each burst.”

“Our universe?” Jon-Tom swallowed.

Clothahump nodded somberly. “Did I not say it was a large problem? Fortunately such occurrences are as rare as they are serious. There are not that many perambulators around. And that, my boy, is the source of these unsettling alterations we are experiencing.” He squinted through his glasses. “You comprehend my meaning?”

“Oh, sure, absolutely. Uh, what’s a perambulator?”

“Well, it is one of two things. It is either a baby carriage or a perambulating prime. I believe we can safely exclude the first as the cause of what is happening. The other is difficult to define. It is reputed

to be a part organic, part inorganic, part orgasmic creature that's neither here nor there, only in this instance it's both here and there. It drifts around, cavorting between an infinite number of possible universes as well as the impossible ones, inducing changes wherever it goes."

"I see," murmured Jon-Tom as he frantically tried to sort some sense out of the bits and pieces of seemingly contradictory nonsense the wizard had been spouting.

"There aren't many of them," Clothahump continued. "Normally they pass through our universe so quickly that the few disruptions they cause occur without attracting attention. Although it has never been done, it is theoretically possible to capture a perambulator, to restrain it, and to hold it in one place. As you can imagine, this would be very unsettling to something that is used to traveling freely between entire universes. Our theoretically restrained perambulator would be likely to respond by throwing off more frequent bursts of perturbing energy. This is what I believe has happened."

"So what you're saying," Jon-Tom replied slowly, "is that we are in trouble because something that is capable of disturbing the entire fabric of existence is suffering the equivalent of an interdimensional attack of claustrophobia."

"Your analysis is unnecessarily verbose, as usual, but you are essentially correct."

"Wish I wasn't. How do you stop something like that?" He was aware that his skin had suddenly turned a delicate shade of puce. Clothahump had gone bright pink. It only lasted a moment, and then his normal healthy skin color returned. "I understand the need for urgency. The world's a tough enough place to try to make a go of it in without having to worry about its changing from day to day."

"The solution is simple, though accomplishing it may prove otherwise. We must find the place where the perambulator has been frozen in space-time and free it to go on its way."

Jon-Tom shook his head. "I still don't understand how something that's capable of traveling from one dimension or universe to another can be restrained. It's not like catching a butterfly."

Clothahump spread his hands. "I don't know how it can be done, either, my boy. But something has to be done it. Or someone."

The tall youth essayed a nervous grin. "Come on. Surely you don't think someone like you or me is capable of doing something like that?"

"Anyone is capable of anything," Clothahump informed him sternly. "There is nothing that can be imagined that cannot be done given enough time, devotion, intelligence, and blind luck."

"So somebody has to find this thing, cope with whatever has it trapped, and free it before we all go nuts. Swell." Again his fingers caressed the duar's strings. "So why can't somebody else do it for us? Why not send a whole coterie of wizards after this thing?"

"Because, as you well know," Clothahump said in his best lecturing tone, "I am the most powerful and important wizard there is, so it behooves me to act for the common good in instances where other wizards would have not the slightest inkling how to proceed."

Jon-Tom's expression turned sour. "Uh-huh. And, of course, I have to go along with you because I'm sharing your house and your food and you're the only chance I have of ever returning home."

"And because you have a good heart, value my counsel, and suffer from an irresistible urge to help others who are in trouble," the wizard added. "You also are an incorrigible show-off."

"Thanks, I think. Well, at least all we'll have to deal with are these damn changes. They're a little disconcerting, but it's not like they put us in any danger of bodily harm."

"That remains to be seen," said the wizard unencouragingly.

"Look, can't you manage without me? Just this one time? On your own?"

Clothahump steepled his fingers and looked blandly skyward. "If the perambulator is not freed and the world changes too many times, the local structure of matter could become permanently distorted."

We might lose a thing or two.”

“Like, for instance?”

“Like gravity.”

Jon-Tom took a deep breath. “Okay, I’ll come. You’ve made it pretty clear that there’s no place to hide from this thing.”

“No place at all, my boy, any more than there is a place where you can hide from my criticisms.”

“You sure you want me along, what with my inaccurate spellsinging and all?”

“Do not take my little jibes to heart. You have accomplished some wonders with that instrument and your voice and you may yet have the chance to do so again in the course of our journey. Besides, I’m getting on, and I need someone young and strong...”

“To help you over the rough spots, I know,” said Jon-Tom, having listened to the wizard’s laments many times before. “I said I’d come, didn’t I? Not that I have any choice. Not that any of us have any choice, I guess, with the stability of the world at stake. What’s this perambulator thing look like anyway?”

Clothahump shrugged. “No one knows. It is said that it can look like anything, or nothing. A tree, a stone, a wisp of air. You and I define what we see in terms of what we are familiar with. We compare new sights to the nature we know. The perambulator is not a freak of nature; it is a freak of supernature.

“It is said that in shape and composition, structure, and outline it is like many individuals I know. It is unstable. There are ancient lines that insist it is pleasant to look upon. Nor is its character malignant. It does not disturb from purpose or evil design. The perturbations are an unavoidable consequence of itself. It would be a very nice thing to encounter, I suspect, if it did not have this unfortunate habit of causing the universe in which it happens to be residing to go completely haywire.”

“And you’re sure that’s what we’re dealing with here?”

“Nothing else but a perambulator could perturb the world in such a fashion,” Clothahump assured him. The wizard had assumed the shape of an elderly moose with bright yellow wings. It needed the wings because he was sitting atop a hundred-foot-tall spruce. Jon-Tom looked at the dizzying drop beneath his own dangling, furry legs, and fought to hold on to the crown of his own tree. He saw no reason to disagree with the wizard’s assessment.

The perturbation lasted longer this time, almost three minutes, before the world snapped back to reality. Jon-Tom breathed a sigh of relief when it became clear that they had returned to the reality of Clothahump’s tree once again. Of course, in reality they had not moved, had never left it. Only reality had moved.

“You’re *sure* these are real changes we’re experiencing and not just some kind of clever magical delusions?”

“You would have found out had you fallen from that tree in which you had been squatting a moment ago,” Clothahump assured him. “You would have changed back, of course, except that you would not be lying spread all over this floor. You had been given wings, but could you have determined how to use them in the brief moment of falling?”

“I’m beginning to see why we have to find this perambulator and free it fast.” He walked over to the washbasin and poured himself a glass of water from the jug standing on the shelf nearby. Except that instead of water, the glass filled with an alarmingly noisy bright blue liquid that fizzed and bubbled. He had the distinct impression that his drink was angry at him.

The glass slipped from his fingers. As it tumbled, the fizzing reached epic proportions. He dove for the far side of his bed while Clothahump retreated inside his shell. Propelled by the explosive blue

fizz, the glass rocketed around the room, bouncing off suddenly rubbery walls and hunting furious for the creature that had dared try to drink it. It barely missed Jon-Tom's head as he scrambled beneath the bed.

Lacking either a butterfly net or a shotgun, they could only wait until the fizz lost its zip. This occurred at almost exactly the same moment when they slipped back to reality and the perturbation ceased. Occupied once more by ordinary water, the glass lost momentum in midair and shattered wetly against the footboard of the bed. Clothahump emerged from his shell while Jon-Tom warily crawled out from beneath the bed, keeping a watchful eye on the liquid debris lest the puddle try to bite him.

“Try the sink again, my boy. It should be all right now.”

Jon-Tom straightened. “Never mind. Suddenly I'm not thirsty anymore.”

“You're going to have to keep your nerves under control. We all are. Why, we haven't so much as begun, and things can only get worse before they get better.”

“That's what I enjoy about assisting you, Clothahump. You're always so reassuring about the outcome.”

“Tut, my boy,” the wizard chided him sternly, “you must remain calm in the face of chaos. If for no other reason than to maintain control over your spellcasting.”

“‘Keep control.’ ‘Stay calm’ Easy for you to say. You have some idea of what we're up against, and you're the world's greatest sorcerer. Of course, you can keep your reactions under control. You're sure of your abilities. I'm not. You know that you'll be okay.”

Clothahump's reply did nothing to boost Jon-Tom's confidence.

“Are you kidding, my boy? I'm scared shitless.”

JON-TOM HAD TO bend his head to avoid bumping it on the ceiling. Clothahump had proven himself an accommodating host where his ungainly young human guest was concerned, but such accommodations did not extend to altering the tree-home spell to provide the dimensionally expanded interior with higher ceilings and doorways. Such spells were time-consuming and expensive, the wizard had informed him, and one did not mess with the details unless something happened to go wrong with the plumbing.

So he was compelled to bend low whenever moving from room to room. It wasn't all bad, though. There were beneficial side effects. During the months of residing in the tree he'd become quite agile and he could now take a blow to the forehead without so much as wincing.

He thought he was intimately familiar with every chamber and cubbyhole the tree possessed, but the tunnel Clothahump was presently leading him down was new to him. Not only was its alien appearance, it seemed to be leading them downward.

Sorbl appeared, waiting for them. The famulus held a glowing bulb on the end of a stick. The light flickered unevenly, a clear sign that Sorbl had put the illumination spell on the bulb by himself.

"Here I am, Master."

"Drunk again," snapped the wizard accusingly. Sorbl drew himself up straight.

"No, Master. See, I am not swaying." Indeed, Sorbl looked rock-steady. "I see you and Jon-Tom clearly."

Jon-Tom looked at the famulus. Yes, the great yellow eyes were much less bloodshot than usual.

Clothahump nodded brusquely toward the glow bulb. "We won't be needing that."

"You are going down into the cellar, Master?"

"Cellar?" Jon-Tom let his gaze travel upward. "I didn't know the tree had a cellar. How come you never showed it to me before, sir?"

"It is not a place that is used for storage. It is a place used only for certain things. There was no reason to use it—until now."

The famulus extended the glow-bulb pole. "Here you are, Master. I'll be going now."

"Going? Going where? You're coming with me, Sorbl. How do you ever expect to learn anything you keep running off?"

"From books, Master."

"Books are not enough. One must also gain experience."

"But, Master, I don't *like* the cellar."

Clothahump looked disgusted and put his hands on his hips—well, on the sides of his shell, anyway. Being a member of the turtle persuasion, his hips were not visible.

"Sometimes I think you'll never progress beyond famulus. But I am bound by our contract to try to hammer some knowledge into you. Keep the light if it reassures you." He shook his head. "An owl that's afraid of the dark."

"I am not afraid of the dark, Master," Sorbl replied quickly, seeming to gather some of his self-respect around him. "I'm just afraid of what's down in the cellar."

"Wait a minute," said Jon-Tom, "is this something I ought to know about? What's this all about? What are you so frightened of, Sorbl?"

The owlet gazed up at him out of vast yellow eyes. "Nothing."

"Well, then," asked a thoroughly confused Jon-Tom, "what's there to be afraid of?"

"I told you," the famulus reiterated, "nothing."

"We're not making a connection here," said the exasperated Jon-Tom. He glanced at Clothahump

"What's he so scared of?"

"Nothing," the wizard informed him solemnly.

Jon-Tom nodded sardonically. "Right. I'm glad that's cleared up."

The wizard glared at his assistant. "Sorbl, you must stay with me. I may require your aid. We have to do this because it is the only way I can divine the location of the perambulator. That should be obvious to anyone." He eyed Jon-Tom expectantly. "Shouldn't it?"

"Absolutely," said Jon-Tom without hesitation, simultaneously wondering what he was concurring with.

"Furthermore," Clothahump went on, turning his attention back to Sorbl, "you will be accompanying me on the journey to come."

"Me?" Sorbl squeaked. "But I'm still just a famulus, a lowly apprentice. And besides, someone will have to stay to look after the tree, pay the bills, take out the—"

"The tree can look after itself. I'm ashamed of you, Sorbl." He gestured at Jon-Tom. "This lad is coming with me, so how can you think of staying behind?"

"It's easy if I put my mind to it."

"He comes from another world entirely and has no desire to apprentice in wizardly matters, yet by persevering he has developed into something not unlike a spellsinger. He should be an example to you. What happened to your ambition, your drive, your desire to experience and learn about the mysteries of the universe?"

"Can't I just stay and take care of the laundry?" Sorbl pleaded hopefully.

"You are my apprentice, not my housekeeper," Clothahump reminded him sternly. "If I'd wanted just a housekeeper, I would have contracted with someone far more comely and of the opposite sex. As my apprentice, you will follow and learn whether you like it or not. You signed the contract. At the time I thought you were doing so with half a brain. I did not realize you were in the afterthroes of drunken stupor, nor did I know that was your preferred state of consciousness. But a contract is a contract. I will make a wizard of you even if it kills both of us in the process."

"How about just one of us?" Sorbl muttered, but to himself.

"Besides," Clothahump continued in a more conciliatory tone, "on this particular journey you can be especially useful."

"I can? I mean, I can."

"Indeed. During the perturbation we experienced this morning, you displayed none of the panic one would have expected from one of your intellectual temperament."

"Perturbation? What's that?" Sorbl appeared genuinely bemused.

"Don't you remember?" Jon-Tom stared at the owl. "The change. The tree turned into a cave, the forest outside into an ocean. Clothahump and I became giant blue crabs and you turned into some kind of squiggly centipede thing."

"Oh, *that*." Sorbl looked relieved. "For a moment I thought I'd missed something. You mean you saw it too? That's a switch."

"Sorbl," Jon-Tom explained patiently, "the change was for real. The perturbation actually happened."

"No kidding?" He glanced from wizard to spellsinger. "Really?" Both man and turtle nodded somberly. "Well, so what? I mean, what's to get excited about?"

"You see?" Clothahump continued talking to Jon-Tom while examining his innocent-eyed famulus

the way he would a new metal or something interesting found beneath a stump. “We are witness to the single beneficial effect of the long-term consumption of alcohol. Sorbl was not fazed by the perturbation because he exists in a state of perpetual perturbation already—though perhaps perpetual inebriation would be more accurate.”

“I get it,” Jon-Tom said. “You mean that since he lives with the D.T.’s every day, the sudden transformation of the world around him isn’t any more upsetting than anything he experiences during his regular binges?”

“I do not have regular binges,” protested Sorbl indignantly. “Each one is the result of glorious spontaneity.”

“And that is why, my good famulus,” Clothahump informed him, “you will be of such help on this journey, for nothing that overtakes us will faze you, since you are used to such transformations. So that you may remain in this benign state I will even permit you to bring along a supply of liquor which I myself will allocate to you on a liberal daily basis. A cart runs best when properly lubricated and so, it would appear, does a certain famulus.”

Sorbl couldn’t believe what he was hearing. His beak all but fell to his foot feathers.

“I will come, Master—since I have no choice in the matter, anyway.” He hesitated. “Did you really mean it when you said I would be allowed to bring along, ah, liquid refreshment?”

Clothahump nodded. “Much as the idea distresses me, it is important that you remain in the state which you would like to become permanently accustomed. Your intake will be carefully moderated. You will be kept ‘happy’ but not unconscious.”

“No need to worry about that, Master!” The owl all but saluted. “I shall follow your instructions to the letter.”

“HmMMM. We’ll see. And now that we have settled the matter of who is going where, let us continue on our way downward. We have little time to waste. If the perambulator is not freed as soon as possible, the frequency of the resultant perturbations will increase and we run the risk of becoming encased in permanent change.”

“I know, Master,” murmured Sorbl as he led the way down, “but the *cellar*.”

Clothahump gave him a shove. “I said there was no other way. And pick up your feet or I’ll set fire to your feathers and use *you* for light.”

Sorbl’s pace increased markedly.

The tunnel walls were composed of nothing more elaborate than packed earth. There was nothing in the way of visible support: no wooden beams, no concrete pillars, no metal flanges or masonry. Only the damp, thick-smelling soil. It muddied his boots. Tiny crawling things retreated from the advancing light, burrowing hastily into walls or floor. Maybe they didn’t need the light, as Clothahump had insisted, but Jon-Tom was very glad of its presence nonetheless.

Perhaps the tunnel’s stability was maintained by another of Clothahump’s complex dimensional spells, or perhaps this was merely part and parcel of the tree-home spell itself. The notion of a tunnel with a cellar was even more outré than the reality of one that had been dimensionally expanded.

Sorbl was several paces ahead of them now, so he was able to lean forward and whisper to the wizard. “He can’t hear us, so maybe now you can tell me what there is to be afraid of down here?”

“Sorbl already informed you: nothing.”

“Look, sir, I don’t want to appear dense, but could you be a little more specific?”

“Specificity is the soul of every explanation, my boy. A question: What is the shortest distance between two points?”

“A straight line, of course. I mean, I’m prelaw, and math was never my best subject, but I know that

much.”

“Then you know nothing, or rather, you don’t know about nothing, which is, of course, the shortest distance between any two points.”

Jon-Tom frowned. He was growing more confused, not less. “Nothing is the shortest distance between two points?”

“Ah!” The wizard looked pleased. “Now you have it. Of course, the shortest distance between two points is nothing. Obviously, if there is nothing between two points, then they must coexist side by side.”

Jon-Tom considered this. “I’m not sure that makes sense.”

“Does the logic follow?”

“Semantically speaking, yes, but mathematically speaking...”

“Pay attention. If there is nothing between two points, then there is nothing preventing them from being tangent to one another, is there? If the only thing that lies between us and the location of the unperambulating perambulator is nothing, then we should be able to find it quite easily.”

“But there is something between the perambulator and us: a great deal of distance. You said so yourself.”

“That’s right, I did.”

“Then how the blazes do you expect to find it by going down into this cellar?” an exasperated Jon-Tom demanded to know.

“Because if we go into the cellar, we will find there is nothing there. And on the other side of the nothing lies the perambulator. And everything else that is. But our concern at the moment is with the perambulator only.”

“I see,” said Jon-Tom, deciding to give up and wait to see what might actually await them down in the cellar.

They walked for what seemed like another hour but in reality was only another few minutes before the tunnel bent sharply to the left. It opened onto a small domed chamber which, as nearly as Jon-Tom could calculate, lay directly beneath the center of the great oak tree in which the wizard made his home. The floor of packed earth was smooth and clean. Something froze for an instant, momentarily stunned by Sorbl’s light. Then it scurried across the floor to vanish in a small hole in the opposite wall.

Thick gnarled branches protruded from the ceiling, twisting and curling overhead. Though entirely natural, they gave the dome the appearance of a room with a latticework ceiling. Small fibers protruded from the larger wooden coils, probing the air in search of nutrients and moisture.

Roots, Jon-Tom mused. A root cellar. Of course. *I should have thought of that*, he told himself. He said as much to Clothahump.

The wizard had settled himself in the chamber’s single piece of furniture. The sturdy chair occupied the exact center of the room.

“A root cellar, yes, and a very particular one.” He searched the ceiling a moment before pointing. “Up there is the root of envy. Over there the root of inspiration.” He turned slightly in his chair. “And up in that corner, that slightly golden-hued wood? That’s the root of all evil.”

Jon-Tom stared. Was that particular branch composed of golden-hued wood or wood-hued gold? Clothahump noticed the intensity of his stare and smiled.

“Don’t let it affect you so. It’s not all it’s cracked up to be.” He turned back around to face the center of the room once more. “Sorbl, since we have the globe, put it here.”

The famulus approached, jammed the light-supporting pole into the earth, and retreated back

against a wall without Clothahump having to prompt him to do so. Jon-Tom moved to stand next to the apprentice. Clothahump crossed both arms over his plastron and closed his eyes, a sure sign that he was about to embark on a most powerful spell indeed. As further proof of the seriousness of his intentions, he muttered a few phrases, then removed his glasses and slipped them into their protective case in one of the uppermost drawers of his chest.

“What now?” Jon-Tom whispered to the owl. “What’s he going to call forth?”

Sorbl was standing as close to the wall as possible, heedless of dirtying his vest or feathers. He was staring wide-eyed at the wizard, who had entered into his preevoking trance.

“You already know. He’s going to call up nothing.”

“Oh, right, I forgot. Well, then, there’s ‘nothing’ to be afraid of, is there?” He meant it as a joke, but there was no suggestion of humor in the famulus’s reply.

“That’s right, that’s right! You *do* understand.”

Clothahump turned slowly to face them, his eyes still shut tight. From another drawer in his plastron he brought forth a small, tightly rolled scroll of paper. “Sorbl.”

“Y-yes, Master?” The famulus approached hesitantly.

“It is for you to read.” Jon-Tom noted with awe that the wizard’s voice had changed. It was slightly louder and a good deal more powerful, as though its owner had grown two hundred years younger in the space of a few moments of silent contemplation. There was much he wanted to know, but this was neither the time nor place to ask questions.

In any event, he suspected that Clothahump would soon show, if not describe, his intentions.

Sorbl carefully unrolled the top portion of the scroll, squinted at the lines thereon. “I don’t know if I can read it, Master. The print is very fine.”

“Of course you can read it,” Clothahump rumbled in his youthful voice. “Your other qualities require much work, but your natural vision is superior. Return to your wall if you wish, but when I raise my arm, you must begin.”

“As you say, Master.” Sorbl retreated until he stood very close to Jon-Tom once more. Man and owl waited to see what would happen next.

Clothahump slowly lifted both hands until his arms were pointing straight up into the dark air. To Jon-Tom’s amazement the arm continued to rise, pulling the wizard’s body with it until he was sitting in emptiness several inches above the seat of his chair. He drew his legs into his shell, pulled in his head until only the eyes were visible above the upper edge of his carapace. For protection? Jon-Tom wondered. His eyes darted around the chamber, found only dirt and emerging roots. There was nothing there to threaten them.

Exactly what the terrified Sorbl had been trying to tell him.

Clothahump began to speak, reciting in a peculiarly monotonous singsong. As he spoke, the blackness seemed to press tighter around them. It shoved and pushed and bullied the single light of the glow bulb until it was no more than a pinpoint of light struggling to hold back the encroaching darkness.

In that near total blackness sounds were amplified. Jon-Tom could hear the pounding of his own heart. His breathing grew shallow. The darkness that surrounded them was no normal dark. It did not have even the comfort of a moonless night about it, for there were no stars. It was a solid blackness, not merely an absence of light but a thing with weight and mass that pressed heavy on his throat and belly.

He found himself on the verge of panic, felt he was choking, suffocating, when a second light appeared and pushed aside the cloak of obsidian air just enough for him to breathe again. It came from

the scroll that Clothahump had handed to his famulus. As Sorbl read the minuscule print, hesitantly first, and then with increasing confidence, the light from the paper brightened.

“My friends,” the owl recited, “I come to you on this day seeking nothing but your votes. If elected I promise to serve long and faithfully. I will endeavor to be the best governor Cascery Province has ever had. I will cut taxes and increase public spending. I will increase aid to the aged and strengthen our defenses. I will... I will...”

A puzzled Jon-Tom listened to the familiar litany of endless promises as Sorbl read on. The words the owl was reciting were not the ones he'd expected to hear. It sounded like nothing more than your standard political campaign promises. The same old assertions, the same old claims, no different in this world than in his own. Just so much political hot air, amounting, as it always did, to a lot of...

Nothing.

Clothahump was calling it up, invoking it, bringing it to this place of power. He was seeking the nothing that lay between them and the perambulator, so that he could pinpoint its location. That was what was closing in around them, trying to snuff them out with the full force of its awesome nothingness. He could feel it, a dry, cottony taste in his mouth. It crawled over him like a living blanket, trying to plug up his nostrils and force its way down his throat. Only the feeble light of the glow bulb and the stronger one emanating from the scroll kept it at bay.

There was one other possibility: he still carried his duar. For a moment he thought to sing something bright and cheery. Common sense told him to hold his silence. If his spellsinging could have been of any use, the wizard would have mentioned it. If he launched into a song now, unbidden at what was obviously a crucial moment, the nothingness might overwhelm the wizard's spell. And nothing didn't kill him, Clothahump surely would. So he stood quietly and watched, and tried to learn.

How could there be nothing in the room when there was obviously something? There was Clothahump's chair, and the glow bulb on its staff, and the scroll, not to mention the three of them. Nothing troubled him for a few moments, until Sorbl's drone provided him with the answer.

It was a typical campaign speech, as boastful as any and stuffed to bursting with the usual lies and falsehoods. It was not merely nothing, it amounted to *less* than nothing, thereby canceling out those few somethings that occupied the cellar.

Not all the somethings, apparently. He stared hard into the darkness. There the glow bulb, the scroll, Sorbl and his scroll, in the center of the chamber the floating Clothahump and his earthbound chair—and suddenly, something more. Shapes. Formless, faint of silhouette and shifting of outline, but definitely there. Indistinct grayness swimming slowly through black jelly. They did not have color so much as they were slightly less black than their surroundings. Anthracite ghosts.

As he stared they became slightly less nebulous. Charcoal-gray heads held gray faces. Gray tongues expectantly licked black teeth. Nor were they silent, for they moaned softly, almost imperceptibly, to one another. Whether the sounds were the components of words or music or cries of pain, he couldn't tell. They were the nothings that inhabited the Darkness.

Sorbl's voice rose a little higher. He was straining to keep reading, from tension as well as fear, but he did not break. Clothahump continued his own recitation, his indecipherable words rising and falling in regular cadence.

The glow bulb brightened. Or perhaps the air around them merely became a little less stygian. The cellar had vanished. The roots, the moist dirt that had encased them so claustrophobically an instant before, was gone. He desperately wished for their return.

Because now they were surrounded by nothing.

They seemed to be drifting in a universe without boundaries, without definition. There was no war

earth walling them in, no sense of a great oak tree hugging the ground above. Nothing but distant, lonely stars that beckoned forlornly to him, and few enough they were. He wished for sight of a nebula or two, but no great splashes of red and purple greeted his searching eyes. This was a region from which even the dust fled.

Somehow he managed to speak and was startled by the soft sound of his own voice. "Where are we? What is this place?"

"I told you, it is nothing," Sorbl explained, interrupting his reading long enough to reply. "An instant, a passing thought, something imagined made real. We are beyond nothing now. This is the backside of chaos. Not a nice place to visit and you wouldn't want to live here." They were beginning to tilt, and he resumed his recitation quickly, reading twice as fast as before until they were facing upright again. Except that *upright* was only the vaguest of terms. You couldn't stand straight relative to nothing.

Suddenly the glow bulb was joined by something new. It drew Jon-Tom's attention immediately. In that place of floating nowhere it was vibrant with life and energy, spinning and twisting and changing with such dazzling speed, it made him blink as he tried to focus on it. With each blink it had assumed an entirely different appearance. It was alive, but not in the sense that he was. It lived but was not organic. Nor was it rock or metal. It was something else from somewhere else, and it obeyed no natural laws but its own.

He tried to define it, could not. It was a Klein bottle running the inside of a Mobius strip balanced on the head of a Schwarzschild Discontinuity. It danced and mutated, metamorphosed and slid from one unreality to another. It spun through nothingness at a billion miles a second and was brighter than a red giant. And there was something else, something he could not see that stayed in the background but very close by.

Something far more ordinary and yet touched by a tremendous energy and power.

It saw them.

Jon-Tom didn't know how it saw them or with what. He sensed only the presence of unseen eyes but he felt their touch as though he'd been struck by a pair of hammers.

The unseen observer let out an outraged howl. It must have done something, because the magnificent, indescribable, undefinable shape that was the perambulator suddenly twisted violently on itself. The chaos around them crystalized. There was an explosive shattering sound, which threatened to implode Jon-Tom's skull. His hands went to his outraged ears and his teeth ground against each other. Someone was pounding a crescendo on the kettledrum in which he'd suddenly taken up residence. He staggered and would have fallen except that there was nothing to fall onto.

Sorbl was picked up and thrown against a wall of emptiness. The scroll came apart in his wingtips, the fragments flying off in all directions. He tried desperately to hang on to a few scraps, to keep reading, but it was impossible. The nearest was a thousand parsecs away in seconds.

He hit the floor with a *whump*, landing hard on his tail feathers.

They were back.

Back in the cellar. Back among roots and dampness and dirt. Jon-Tom inhaled deeply, sucking in the thick humidity. It tasted of soil and water and living things. The cellar was rich with the perfume of life, the dirt of the wall he was clinging to, thick with the texture of reality.

In the center of the room the glow bulb was at full intensity. Clothahump was no longer floating inches above his chair but was seated firmly on the hard wood. He was holding tightly to the arm with both hands and breathing hard. When he was convinced it wasn't going to disappear on him, Jon-Tom let go of the wall and stumbled toward the wizard to see if he could be of any help. He was

sweating profusely in the heat of the cellar. Except that it wasn't hot. It was the same temperature that it had been when they'd arrived.

He was sweating from the cold, the cold of where they'd been. That's why it seemed hot to him now. He hadn't been aware of the cold at the time. You didn't feel hot and cold on the far side of nothing. You didn't feel anything at all.

He shivered.

"How are you doing, sir?"

The wizard glanced up at him, gathered himself, and let out a long sigh. Then he smiled reassuringly. "All right. Right as can be expected. I don't travel as well as I used to. Did you see it?"

"I saw something. I don't know what." He stared at the glow bulb sitting atop its staff, drinking in the pale, reassuring luminescence. Never had he been so grateful to be in a hole in the ground. "I think it might have been the perambulator."

"What else could it have been?" Clothahump's strength was returning and, with it, his enthusiasm. He pushed back the chair, stood next to the light, and stretched. "Consider yourself privileged, my boy. I don't believe anyone has seen a perambulator in living memory. They don't hang around long enough to be seen, and even when they do, you might not realize what it is you're looking at. I confess its appearance surprised me."

"The way it kept changing, you mean?"

"Oh, no. Change is the very soul of a perambulator. What I did not expect was for it to be so beautiful." He glanced past the tall young human. "Sorbl? You still with us?"

The famulus was standing and rubbing his backside. He grimaced at the wizard. "Unfortunately yes, Master."

"Good. Get your feathers in gear. We're going back upstairs."

"I lost the scroll, Master. It was torn from my feathers. There was nothing I could do."

"It matters not. I can replace it at any time. I have access to an endless supply. Now, quickly, I need for you to begin packing for our journey."

The famulus staggered toward the glow bulb and pulled the staff out of the ground. "You don't need to convince me, Master. Anything to get out of this place." He started for the tunnel that led upward.

Clothahump extended an arm. "A little support if you please, my boy. I am feeling a mite queasy."

"I'm not surprised. I don't feel too steady myself." He put his right arm around the back of the wizard's shell, steadying him as they followed in Sorbl's wake.

As soon as they were in the tunnel proper and climbing, Clothahump called a halt while he recovered his glasses from the uppermost drawer of his plastron. He studied the six-sided lenses against his arm's length. "Fogged up, my boy." He produced a cloth and began to clean them. "That was quite a transposition."

Jon-Tom found himself gazing worriedly back down the tunnel. Nothing was coming after them, nothing pursued them from the depths of the cellar. How could it? They had been alone down there. There had been nothing with them.

"I know where we must go now, my boy." The wizard tapped the side of his head. It made a loud clicking sound, shell on shell. "A long ways but not a difficult one."

I've heard that before, Jon-Tom muttered, but only to himself. What he said was, "Anyplace I know?"

"I think not. It lies far to the north, north of the Bellwoods, past Ospenspri and Kreshfarm-in-the-Keegs, farther north than you have ever been. Farther north than civilized people care to travel. We will have to hurry. In another month winter will be upon us, and travel in such country will become

impossible. We must free the perambulator before the snows begin. And there is a new problem.”

“Another one?”

“I fear it is so. I had thought the perambulator frozen by some freak of nature, trapped here by some crack or fallen into some hole in the interdimensional fabric of existence. Such is not the case.”

Jon-Tom felt the coldness returning. He remembered the pressure of those unseen eyes, heard again that singular wild howl.

“Its presence here isn’t an accident, then.”

“No, my boy,” the wizard said somberly. “It has been stopped here intentionally, deliberately, with purpose aforethought. It seems incredible, but the truth often is. I can scarce believe it myself.”

“I can’t believe it at all. From everything you’ve told me about it I don’t see how anyone could catch it, much less restrain it.”

“Nor do I, yet it is clear to me that this is what has happened. There is a formidable and sinister power at work here. I could not do such a thing. Something, someone, has caught the perambulator and is holding it prisoner in this time-space frame. If it is not freed, it could not only alter our world permanently, it could eventually destroy it in its attempts to get free.”

“Then whoever is restraining it could also be destroyed.”

“Just so,” agreed the wizard, nodding.

“That’s crazy,” Jon-Tom said firmly.

“Ah. Now you begin to have some understanding of what we are up against.”

Jon-Tom said nothing for the remainder of their climb back to the surface.

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG for him to finish packing. A very good friend of his had told him that he who travels light travels best, and Jon-Tom had adhered to that advice ever since. On this world speed was more important than comfort, flexibility a better companion than a spare pair of pants.

He found Sorbl in the wizard's study, packing vials and packets under Clothahump's supervision.

"I'm all set," he told his mentor.

"Good, my boy, good." He was showing mild frustration as he pawed through a cabinet. "Where did I put those measuring spoons? We will be ready to depart as soon as I'm finished here."

Jon-Tom leaned against the wall nearby. "I've been thinking about what you said yesterday as we were leaving the cellar. About what we're 'up against'? If I'm following what you said correctly, whoever or whatever has trapped the perambulator is not stable."

"You're almost right." He unearthed a set of tiny spoons bound together by a bright golden ring. He looked pleased with himself, and passed it to Sorbl. "Whoever it is, is not unstable; they are crackpot, crazy, nuts, bonkers, looney tunes, living in cloud-cuckoo land. Do I make myself clear or do you require further elaboration?"

"No, I think I get the point," Jon-Tom said dryly.

"It is important that you do. It is important that we all do. Because it is highly unlikely that we will be able to reason with this whatever-it-is. It is difficult to fight someone who may not even be conscious of the fact that they are engaged in a fight." He pulled a tall metal box from another drawer and opened the lid with unusual care. Straining, Jon-Tom could see that it was filled with padding.

Clothahump extracted a single small wooden box, opened it to inspect the contents, which consisted of one glass vial full of oily green fluid. Satisfied, he closed the box and secured the lid, handed it with both hands to Sorbl.

"Place this in the center of your backpack, and whatever you do, don't drop it."

Sorbl gingerly accepted the box, cradling it in both flexible wingtips. "What would happen if I do drop it, Master?"

Clothahump leaned toward his apprentice. "Something so horrible, so vile, so unimaginably awful that in more than two hundred years I have not acquired sufficient vocabulary to describe it."

"Oh." Sorbl turned to place the box in his open pack. "I will be very careful with it, Master."

Clothahump moved toward Jon-Tom and began selecting volumes from a long shelf of mini-books nearby. The much taller human spoke while watching Sorbl pack. "What's in the vial you gave Sorbl, sir? Some kind of acid or explosive?"

"Of course not," the wizard replied softly. "Do you think I'd be fool enough to travel with dangerous liquids? It's lime fizz."

Jon-Tom's brows drew together. "I guess I don't understand."

"You say that far too often, but your ignorance is mitigated by your honesty. Won't you ever learn that to handle magic effectively you must learn to manipulate people as well as formulae? Without anything to worry about Sorbl will find ways to overindulge himself in the liquor I am permitting him to bring along—would that his deviousness extended to his studies. This will give him something to worry about."

"I thought we had plenty to worry about already, but I see your point." He watched while the wizard thumbed through tome after tome, replacing the majority in their places on the shelf, setting the rare selection aside for packing.

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