

*Barbara Hambly*

Further Adventures

# Windrose Chronicles

## Plus-One

*A Novelette of 14,000 wds*



# **PLUS-ONE**

by

**Barbara Hambly**

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# PLUS-ONE

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“Who’s that?” Antryg Windrose nodded toward the Hotel Della Robbia’s all-you-can-stand-to-eat pasta-bar, which was barely visible amid a feeding-frenzy of college students who seemed to think that Velveeta Alfredo actually constituted food.

“Who’s what?” Joanna Sheraton craned her neck and stood on tip-toe. All very well for Antryg to ask the question: in addition to being the Archmage of the Council of Wizards (in another universe, he would hasten to explain) he was six feet three inches tall and could look over the heads of most crowds. “I assume the question is rhetorical? There’s people here from all over the western half of the United States.” At not-quite five feet and limited to the perceptions available in America in the mid-1980s, she didn’t feel qualified to give an opinion.

Then she caught a glimpse through the jostling backs of the some five hundred would-be successors to Bruce Lee gathered in the Venezia Room and said, “You’re right—” though Antryg had expressed no opinion to be right about.

She knew what he meant.

The man had no business there.

“He could have just wandered in from the Casino...” But it wasn’t that and she knew it.

Something about the man at the pasta-bar lifted the hair on the nape of her neck.

And she had no idea what.

She made a move in the direction of the buffet, and Antryg laid a hand, very gently, on her shoulder: *Don’t*. Behind the thick-lensed spectacles, a shadow crossed those daft gray eyes that told her that whatever bothered her about the freeloader, it bothered him a great deal more. So she headed laterally in the direction of Sensei McKie, a Shotokan instructor from San Bernardino, California who for all his tough-guy swagger had an appetite for gossip that Joanna hadn’t encountered since Middle School.

Antryg moseyed after her, but she noticed he kept his eye on the interloper – whoever the hell he was.

And there wasn't, she reflected, anything visibly amiss about the man.

Obviously he didn't belong in a roomful of participants in the Western Regional All-Schools Martial Arts Tournament. Even shlubby out-of-shape senseis like Gordy Sumter – bawling unsolicited opinions about Madonna's breasts to a couple of the local Las Vegas Tae Kwan Do boys – still moved and stood like someone who could take out an enemy if he really had to. Mr. Freeloader, though taller than average, had the pear-shaped softness of a sedentary businessman, and wore a metallic-gray suit and narrow, pale-blue tie, at odds with the student jeans, parachute pants, and sweats that surrounded him.

"Who's that guy?" she asked McKie, when she came up to him. "He looks familiar and I can't place him, but I don't think he's in karate..."

McKie followed her nod, shook his head dismissively, then did a very slight double-take and looked again. A frown pulled the long, tufted red eyebrows together. Something bothered him, too. But he said, "He looks like he's just out for free food. We got plenty here."

"There is nothing in this room," replied Joanna loftily, "that qualifies as *food*," and that got her a white, wicked grin.

"I'll keep an eye on him."

She turned around in time to see Antryg drifting toward the end of the buffet, where Mr. Freeloader stood chowing down his plateful of penne and bow-tie pasta with three assorted glops of varying colors, and – cautiously, for reasons she couldn't quite explain – she moved to follow.

But the next time she looked, the man was gone.

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"Did he leave?" She rejoined Antryg beside the ballroom's main door.

He shook his head. Generally her housemate's amiable other-worldliness was no different than thousands of burned-out over-age hippies in Southern California – even with a relatively respectable cotton button-up shirt instead of his usual flaking rock-band t-shirt, he wore several strings of brightly-colored beads and a pair of rhinestone earrings that would have embarrassed Zsa Zsa Gabor. When he would explain, earnestly, that he was a wizard in another universe, hiding out from the infuriated Council of Wizards with a price on his head, people would nod and agree, "Yeah, man, whatever..." and that was acceptable by all concerned.

But sometimes his daft gray eyes would change, and he would, actually, look like a wizard.

Those times made Joanna shiver.

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Nothing further was said – or seen – of The Man Who Wasn't There that evening.

It was possible, Joanna knew, that whoever he was, he'd been able to slip away in the crowd, and somehow get through the knot of old-line senseis and sifus, college instructors, rowdy sparring-team hot-dogs and totally intimidated yellow-belt newbies in the doorway... but even thrusting and wriggling it would have taken him some time. The mob around the buffet was such that she couldn't imagine how he'd have gotten to the door without being noticed, once Antryg started after him... and some of the older senseis would absolutely have noticed someone in the room who didn't belong there.

But scanning the room from the doorway, she had been certain that the gunmetal-gray suit, the tall, slightly podgy form, were absent.

And on reflection, she could form no recollection of the man's face.

All the following day was spent at the University of Las Vegas gym. Both Joanna and Antryg, as newcomers to the art of aikido, entered the tournament in the most basic *randori* competitions, as well as for kata, Joanna with a bo and Antryg with a bokken. Antryg, however, had been asked – in preference to students many years senior to himself – to assist Shimada Sensei in a fairly dangerous self-defense demonstration involving swords, ropes, and split-second timing, and Joanna was interested to note that none of the senior students questioned the selection. Though Antryg was very much a novice in the specific techniques of aikido and iaido, he moved differently, and had a different understanding of timing, than those for whom the art was only an art. It was as if they understood instinctively that sometime, somewhere, under circumstances that could only be guessed at, Antryg had used edged steel with his own life and the lives of others at stake: not once, but many times.

In the same way that the Viet Nam vets in the dojo treated this slightly loopy stranger as one of themselves, the sempai – and the sensei even up to Shimada himself – accepted that of everyone in the dojo, he was the man most to be trusted with a live blade.

This being the case, Joanna made herself useful when she wasn't in one of the competition rings – and she was put out fairly early – organizing seeding charts, taking down signs and pulling up floor-tape as the innumerable low-level rings finished up and were consolidated. After the evening Finals – punctuated by demonstrations of everything from Shimada Sensei's scary ropes-and-knives tricks to Sensei McKie breaking bricks to

Sensei Ueda from Phoenix doing his samurai-sword-and-watermelon demonstration (you could smell the split watermelon in the top row of the bleachers) – there was the obligatory mass dinner at Pancho’s on the Strip, followed by a mass retreat to the hotel, and parties in everybody’s rooms.

“Just so everybody will feel their very best for the drive home tomorrow,” remarked Joanna, as she and Antryg – sweaty and rumped and extremely tired – carried their gi bags back through the lobby of the Della Robbia to the elevators (mobbed, of course). There was a bank of slot machines in the lobby and a whole room full of them immediately through a pair of ornate bronze doors, through which Antryg gazed in fascination. On the other side of the lobby, a wedding-party posed on a crimson-carpeted stairway worthy of a Busby Berkeley musical: a dozen bridesmaids in a cutsey rainbow of satin and tulle, groomsmen in black tuxes with matchy-poo satin rainbow cummerbunds, bow-ties, and shoes... “They must have got white ones and dyed them,” marveled Joanna, who couldn’t imagine where anyone would have acquired purple patent-leather men’s pumps with tigerskin uppers.

“Is that something men aren’t supposed to do?” inquired Antryg, a little wistfully.

“Yes.” They passed through another doorway and into the vast, tepid darkness of the courtyard. “It’s not.” Gaudy neon illuminated more wedding-guests, and the sparkling, unnaturally aqua water of not one but three swimming-pools. A whole chain of “lanai suites” had been taken by relatives of the happy couple and like blazing stage-settings, buffets could be seen in each one, dominated by sculpted ice swans and dolphins and aswarm with men in tuxes and women in designer gowns not created for human bodies. On the other side of the courtyard, Sensei McKie had also taken a lanai suite and its deck likewise spilled party-guests – far more informally attired – into the greater courtyard.

Party small-talk and the friendly green scent of burning cannabis illuminated the dark air.

“I wonder if magic could be used to affect slot-machines?” said Antryg. “It doesn’t work in this universe, of course, but theoretically, magic affects random events at a molecular level. Now that the tournament is over, might we stay an extra day and—”

“Antryg,” said Joanna patiently, “one of two things would happen. You’d lose a hundred dollars’ worth of nickels learning that finite quantities of magic do not exist in this universe – something we both know already – and I wouldn’t get the programming done for Wondersystems’ billing department by Thursday, *or* you’d establish that finite quantities of magic *do* exist in this



universe and get both your kneecaps broken by the crime syndicate that runs this hotel.”

“Could I purchase a slot-machine and take it home to experiment on?”

Antryg’s workroom back in Los Angeles already housed four dismantled computers, a gutted pinball machine, two pachincos and the dismembered corpse of an arcade Defenders game, all in the name of experimentation with random events.

“Only if you disable the sound-card.”

“It shouldn’t...” Antryg froze mid-stride, turned his head sharply toward one of the lighted wedding-buffets.

And Joanna saw him. The Man Who Wasn’t There, plump and unobtrusive in his gray suit, loading up his crystal plate with poached salmon and mini-quiches.

“I’ll meet you at the party.” Antryg thrust his gi-bag into her hands and darted, gawky and incongruous, into the well-dressed crowd.

*Well, hell,* reflected Joanna. *If the Father of the Bride has no problem with a guy in a gray Sears business-suit among all that Armani and Donna Karan, he’s probably not going to notice Antryg’s jeans and earrings either.*

Only a few of the senseis had taken the exclusive (and costly) lanai suites. The students who’d participated in the Western Regional All-Schools etc. were bunked twelve to a room on the higher floors of the hotel, or in the two long wings that flanked the parking-lot, a football-field of sun-attracting asphalt which had, over the hot late-May weekend, acquired the universal appellation The Anvil of God. Even at this hour, Joanna guessed as she crossed it, heading back to their room at the far end of the eastern wing, the ground temperature still had to be over a hundred; she could feel it through the soles of her flip-flops. In combination with the black velvet of the sky, bleached even of stars by ambient light, and with the klieg-light brilliance of the parking-lot lights on their high poles, the heat was eerily incongruous.

It may only have been that incongruity, combined with a rather surreal day and the empty stillness of the lot itself. The Della Robbia was a new hotel on the farthest outskirts of town. Empty desert stretched beyond the parking lot’s edge.

Enough to give anyone the willies.

Later, Joanna tried to tell herself that was all it was.

She glanced over her shoulder, once, and then again a few steps further.

Tried to identify what it was that she’d heard.

The parking-lot was lit like a movie-set, there wasn’t a single possibility of a shadow anywhere, or of anything moving among the scattered cars.

*It’s behind you.*

She moved out into the center of an aisle, stopped – though everything in her screamed *Run you idiot!* – turned and looked. Scanned the cars, the empty spaces, the flat cindery-gray acres of asphalt, her heart hammering with sudden, terrified conviction.

*It's there.*

Only it wasn't.

Only it was.

It had taken everything in her to stop, turn around, and look, and now it took everything she had to turn her back on the there's-nothing-here-dear and head for the distant end of the long hotel wing. It was behind her and it was closing the distance and she thought she heard it growl – *If I break into a run will it chase me, like a dog?*

Panic. Terror.

*What happens if it catches me?*

In her bones she knew.

*What the hell do I do?*

She had her room-key in hand when she reached the open concrete stairs and she mounted them fast, and there wasn't anything there and somehow she knew it didn't come up after her...

*Is it waiting at the bottom of the stairs?*

She made it into the room and locked the door, shaking all over, barely able to breathe.

She was still sitting on the bed, telling herself there was nothing in the parking lot, three hours later when Antryg returned.

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"Could they be connected?" she asked the next morning in the coffee-shop.

Most of the tournament contestants had departed. It was a long way back to anywhere from Vegas. Finals, jobs, classes, deadlines had to be dealt with Monday. Only the fact that Joanna could crawl out of bed anytime she pleased tomorrow morning no matter how late they pulled into Granada Hills tonight accounted for the leisurely breakfast.

Daylight made the invisible monster in the parking lot considerably less terrifying, but in her months of dealing with Antryg, she had at least learned not to say, *There must be a reasonable explanation...*

Antryg drizzled cream in his coffee, studied the patterns of the white coiling into the black. "I certainly hope there aren't *two* open portals letting trans-dimensional beings through in the vicinity of this hotel. Can I get you

some syrup?” he added, rising, and, when she shook her head, headed off in the direction of the breakfast buffet.

Though by the time he’d come in last night Joanna had almost talked herself out of the *Yes, there is something in the parking-lot* position, he had gone downstairs and walked the entire monstrous acreage of asphalt, with periodic halts to test wind-direction and draw arcane diagrams in mini-bar sugar and salt on the pavement. He had sensed nothing. Nor, he’d informed her after he was done, had he tracked down The Man Who Wasn’t There, though he’d had some excellent wedding-cake and a long and interesting conversation with the bride’s grandfather about the black market in Seoul during the Korean War.

*And if there IS something in the parking-lot*, thought Joanna, *who do we tell?*

*Do I just waltz up to that woman over there – ADMINISTRATION was written all over her black-red-and-golden blazer suit – and say, Hey, there may be a rift in the Void between universes in your hotel and abominations are coming through... Have you had any unexplained murders around here lately?*

Her gaze followed Antryg, tall and thin in his tattered sweatshirt, as he chatted with the omelet chef: *He probably would*, she reflected. *He probably will.*

*Was it like this for him growing up?* She raked her curly blonde hair up into a banana-clip, considered the preposterous profile, the beaky nose and the tousle of graying brown hair. The voice like brown velvet, that you’d trust to the end of the universe. *A peasant’s child in some village in the back of nowhere, in that world on the other side of the Void... Harvesting wheat and cutting wood, aware of things other people couldn’t see, unable to speak to anyone because no one would believe?*

*Of course he’d give his soul to the first person who understood – to the first wizard who told him, What you feel is the truth...*

*Leading him into a labyrinth of magic and power, betrayal and lies...*

“Excuse me.”

It was the woman in the black-gold-and-crimson hotel uniform.

She held out a well-manicured hand. “My name is Delia Bannister. I’m the catering director for the hotel.”

*Shit, they found out about the men’s sparring team bringing their own beer into the rooms.*

Joanna said, “Uh—”

“May I have a few minutes of your time? And please,” Ms. Bannister added with a smile, “allow the hotel to comp your breakfast.”

“Be my guest,” said Joanna. “Except that we’re actually your guests.” She moved over as Antryg returned with his breakfast of choice: oatmeal, two eggs over easy on top, and syrup all over that, a combination Joanna found revolting. “Ms. Bannister, this is my partner Antryg Windrose. I’m Joanna Sheraton. Antryg, Ms. Bannister works for the hotel.”

“Very pleased to meet you.” Ms. Bannister, Joanna guessed, was in her mid-thirties, five or six years older than herself, and had all the professional ease and polish that Joanna had always wished for. Her dark hair was close-cropped without looking mannish or weird, something no white woman Joanna had ever met could accomplish; nails polished without in any way calling attention to themselves; chaste expensive gold jewelry and never at a loss for words. “I wanted to ask you about the gentleman you tried to speak to, Friday night at the Martial Artists’ reception buffet and then again last night at the Park wedding. The gentleman in the gray suit. Do you know him?”

Behind his thick spectacle-lenses Antryg’s eyes widened. Joanna said, “No. But we knew he wasn’t part of the martial arts group...”

“Do *you* know him?” Antryg asked.

Ms. Bannister looked aside. Asking herself how to answer that question.

Then she took a deep breath, and with the air of a swimmer plunging into a pool she knows is freezing cold, said, “Since 1982 I’ve seen him maybe two dozen times. Always in crowds at banquets and buffets. He’ll come, he’ll eat, he won’t speak to anyone and when I try to get near him he just... disappears. He’ll slip away into the crowd and when I look for him he isn’t in the room. After the first three or four times – after I realized it was the same man – I’d ask people, and nobody ever remembers even seeing him. It’s why I... It’s why I’m troubling you about it this morning.” Her worried brown gaze traveled from Joanna’s eyes to Antryg’s.

“You’re the only people I’ve ever seen at one of these events who seems to be able to see him.”

Antryg tilted his head a little to one side. “What does he look like?”

“You’ve seen him. He’s a little shorter than yourself. Overweight. He always wears that same gray suit and light-blue tie, black shoes...”

“What does his face look like?”

She was silent again, for longer, this time. Antryg watched her. For someone who was almost a non-stop talker, reflected Joanna, the man had a surprising gift for silence. For an unsurpriseable calm that wouldn’t react to any statement, no matter how absurd or horrific or emotional.

Ms. Bannister finally said, “I don’t think he has one.”

Antryg said, quietly, “No. He probably doesn’t.”

All the professional poise was gone, though she was still a woman who'd know the right thing to say if you'd hit her with a brick. But suddenly there was something in her of a small girl speaking to her grandmother: "Is it a haunt?"

"Not in the sense that you mean. It isn't a ghost – that is, it isn't the spirit of a dead person. It's quite alive. It's a haunt in that it's attached itself to this place. It's what's called a Plus-One."

Joanna noticed he didn't specify *who* called such things a Plus-One, nor, she observed, did Ms. Bannister ask.

"Some people call them Burglars but that isn't really fair, since the only thing they take is food, and they generally go to great lengths to stay out of everyone's way. They cause people to see them as their viewers expect to see them – that is, as another human or whatever the dominant species of that world is—"

"You mean it's from outer space?" She didn't look like she believed that, but Antryg went blithely on:

"Sometimes they are. Mostly they're from other universes – other dimensions, I think people say here. They'll stay close to wherever they came through the Void, wherever they can find shelter and a steady supply of food, sometimes for decades... for centuries, depending on the species. They're quite harmless," he added earnestly. "Unless you back them into a corner, or cause them to feel threatened—"

"And how was I causing it to feel threatened," asked Joanna, "minding my own business walking across the parking-lot?"

Ms. Bannister looked at her sharply. "The back parking-lot?"

Joanna nodded. Knowing by the sound of her voice that this woman had seen or heard or felt something there, too.

But their breakfast companion turned back to Antryg, and said, "About eighteen months ago it started killing."

Antryg said, "Ah."

Joanna said, "Shit."

In the momentary silence the tinny hoop-la of mechanical horns and buzzers playing the Marine Corps Hymn signaled that some blue-haired retiree in the casino next door had scored a jackpot. Like every Vegas hotel, the Della Robbia lacked anything resembling a window in any of its public areas, including the coffee-shop: the light here was brighter than the amber glow that suffused the lobby and ballrooms, but the combination of gold-foil and crimson wallpaper, of black leather and pseudo-Renaissance carving on the furniture, was the same, and somehow made the idea of a trans-dimensional abomination hiding out in its banquet-rooms more believable. It

was as if, Joanna reflected, the whole hotel was a sort of stage-set, an enclaved universe attached to the real world only by its palatial front doors.

She remembered the terrible sense of watching malice she'd felt, the scritch-whisper on the asphalt that might or might not have been claws.

"Since Thanksgiving of 1986 there have been eleven unsolved deaths either in this hotel or in its grounds." Ms. Bannister picked up the coffee-cup the waiter had brought her some minutes ago, tasted it and evidently found it cold. She put it down, her lips pursed tight. "The first one was... brutal, but it didn't surprise me."

Then she was silent again, like one who seeks to explain an alien concept to strangers. "Hotels are... anonymous," she said at last. "That's why people come to stay in them."

*"What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas."* Joanna quoted the old saw.

No windows, no clocks, no accountability.

An enclaved universe where you could do what you pleased, because it didn't matter.

"Pretty much." Ms. Bannister's voice was completely neutral. "The management of the Palermo Group – that's our parent organization – has made it clear that it isn't our business what our guests do here, and whatever we find in guest-rooms the following morning is to be cleared away without comment. This man – he was the head of a major talent agency in Los Angeles – would bring children here. Generally with their mothers. Or someone who claimed to be their mother."

"Ah."

And Joanna said again, "Shit."

"My boss then – the Entertainment Director – told me that all that would happen if I reported my suspicion would be that neither the child nor the mother nor anyone on the hotel staff would corroborate my story, the Las Vegas police would not investigate, and I'd lose my job." She raised her eyes to them. "I'm not proud of my acquiescence. When you have two children yourself, you do what you have to do."

"That must have been a hard choice," said Joanna, and the woman shook her head slightly.

"The worst of it is knowing that even if it's not him, it's someone else, in some other Imperial Suite in some other hotel, all over town. And I'm also not proud of how... how *pleased* I was, when he was found, horribly mutilated, in the Sky Imperial Penthouse... which is on a security floor, by the way. The cameras in the halls showed nothing."

"No," agreed Antryg absently. "No, they wouldn't."

Ms. Bannister regarded him for a moment, her eyebrows drawn slightly

together, as if taking in anew the gaudy archaic love-beads, the gray that streaked his mop of mouse-brown curls, the shattered crookedness of his long fingers where they cradled his coffee-cup. She asked quietly, "Who are you? I mean, *what* are you? Are you paranormal investigators?"

Joanna said, "More or less," and kicked Antryg under the table before he could explain about being the Archmage of the Council of Wizards. "It's a long story."

"Who were the others?" asked Antryg. "The other victims. And when did it stop killing people who deserved it?"

"This past December. How did you—?"

"I don't think you'd have come to us," he said, "if it was just a case of the guilty coming by their desserts."

Surprisingly, she grinned, and shook her head again. "I like to think I would have." Her smile faded. "For one thing, the Las Vegas police have been watching this place for months now and investigating every member of the staff, which isn't fair – particularly to those who don't have green cards. And the Palermo Group is conducting investigations of its own, which could be worse if they decide they know who's doing this and can't prove it."

Joanna said, "Oh, boy."

"One of their..." She searched for a term. "...*business associates* was the second victim. It happened shortly after he'd ordered Security to deal with a card-counter in the casino, a kid who should have known better than to try a stunt like that. Fortunately both the young man and his girlfriend were still in the hospital the night Mr. Pacinotti fell off the balcony of the Da Vinci Suite. Again, nothing on the security cameras in the hall. That was in May of '87. The third and fourth victims – there were two of them – were Air Force captains from Nellis, who threw a bachelor-party here for one of their fellow officers. I don't know what happened at the party, though I know they had a stripper in and I know that unlike a lot of girls, she didn't come with a 'boyfriend' to watch her back. These men were the only two who stayed on another night after the party. One was found in the swimming-pool at four in the morning, the other – mutilated – was at the far edge of the parking-lot. I think the police investigated the girl but she was provably elsewhere."

"And possibly in no shape for shoving anyone in a swimming-pool," said Joanna, a hot prickle of wrath sweeping over her.

"No." Ms. Bannister looked down into the depths of her cold coffee. "By the state of the suite's furniture, I don't think she would have been." The young waiter came and re-filled all their cups.

"I like to think I'd have gone to someone," the Banquet Director went on after a time, "—if I'd known who I could go to – if for no other reason,

because from the start I felt, even though the men who were killed had done terrible things... or I suspected they'd done terrible things... I was afraid..."

She frowned, searching again for the right words. "It was vigilante justice," she said at last. "I grew up in Mississippi. People taking the law into their own hands makes me... nervous. And even if you agree with their cause, you never know where that's going to go next."

Antryg warmed his crooked fingers over the steam of his coffee-cup. The Council of Wizards, Joanna knew, had condemned him for precisely that reason: because he had used his considerable powers in a cause which he had considered just, unleashing havoc and death in all directions. But all he said was, "And where *did* it go next?"

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Ms. Bannister thought that question over on the way up the private elevator – set apart from the others and operated with a security key – to what Joanna privately thought of as the Conspicuous Consumption Suite. "I'm not sure whether that fifth death counts as a vigilante killing or the... the awful random thing that this has become," she said, as the glass cylinder ascended past the twelve floors of the open atrium and into the blaze of the morning sky above. "I suppose that depends on how you feel about dogs."

"The incidents that I think of as vigilante deaths – the first four killings – were all men who had stayed at least one night here in the hotel, immediately prior to their deaths. Mr. Kleb had also stayed here before, several times."

The elevator stopped. Joanna, who had resolutely turned her back on the glass walls and the endless vista of desert scrubland, new housing-developments, and, away to the north, the raw gray rampart of hotels and casinos that made up the Strip, stepped quickly back into what she thought of as terra firma, even though it was twenty stories above the parking-lots and pools. Antryg stared out, fascinated, his hands pressed against the thick plexiglass that even now was beginning to heat; then looked down at the glittering glass roof of that twelve-story atrium, far below.

An airplane floated by, silent as a kite. Away to the south, Highway 15 disappeared in a landscape of gray and buff.

"Mr. Kleb was part of an organization called the Great Basin War-Dogs Association," Ms. Bannister went on as she led them down the hall. "They call themselves a breeder's association, but they really come here to fight their dogs. Every Veteran's Day weekend, half that parking-lot is cordoned off for their tents and motorhomes. The kennel-tents go all the way out into the desert. They bring in a generator and run air-conditioning for the dogs; some



of the men go out into the desert with shotguns and semi-autos, and shoot up the ravines.”

The regimented walls-and-doors décor on the lower floors, though still lush gold-foil-and-crimson, had been upgraded here; the corridor was broader and sported little conversation circles of elaborately carved furniture. Miniature groves of ficus and schefflera stood beneath domed skylights like enormous jewels. White marble fountains gurgled softly, eerie in the emptiness of the hallways. Around a corner of artfully manufactured architecture, a gilded door reminiscent of an Italian cathedral was graced by a small sign: *Sky Imperial Suite*.

“I don’t know what these men do in their personal lives besides torment animals, but a couple of years ago, one of Kleb’s dogs lost the will to fight for some reason, and Kleb just took it out to the desert and left it. Is that justification for killing a man, the way rape would be, or what the Security staff did to that poor card-counter and his girlfriend?” She stepped back as she opened the door, to let them pass before her into the suite.

“It sounds like a halfway point,” remarked Joanna. “Sort of a maybe-maybe-not. Jesus Christ,” she added, looking around her as her feet sank into the thick, white, pristine carpeting of the suite’s vestibule. “How much do you get a night for this place? You could bring a telescope up here and do night-sky astronomy.”

“Three thousand dollars a night.” Ms. Bannister gave a crooked smile. “And astronomy is probably the last thing that’s on their minds when they come here.”

A good three-quarters of the suite – the enormous master bedroom, the sitting area, and the black-and-gold tiled hot tub – were roofed over with glass. *I bet two thousand of that three thousand a night goes for air conditioning.* The view was stunning, the town itself like a virulent cancer within the gray-brown waste of the desert, the cocoa-colored rim of the Spring Mountains, of the canyons to the north, the blue jewel of Lake Meade to the east. By night it must have been jawdropping. The kitchen was larger than some apartments Joanna had lived in. A projection-screen TV filled the wall opposite the foot of the gold-curtained bed; another one occupied significant real estate in the sitting area. Oil paintings “in the Renaissance style” bedecked the walls.

Three gilded slot machines – their sides sculpted in foliage and putti – occupied an architectural niche. Antryg promptly put a quarter in each and just as promptly lost his 75¢.

“You thought something else was going to happen?” inquired Joanna.

“The soul of man perishes without hope,” Antryg explained.

Joanna rolled her eyes.

“Where was he found?”

“In the sitting area,” said Ms. Bannister. “He was in his pajamas. The police report said he was probably killed around three in the morning. His bed had been slept in, they said – I didn’t come up here until the next day, and by that time they’d already stripped out the carpet and some of the furniture.” She stayed by the door, watching as Antryg moved around the walls, his crooked fingers spread wide as he passed his hands an inch or so from the lurid wallpaper. In a quieter voice she went on, “They said it almost looked like a shark attack. That was the first story,” she added. “The Palermo Group must have paid off the coroner’s department, and I know they have their own clean-up agency...”

Antryg moved across the floor on his knees, stopping now and then to run his hands along just above the rug; then he sat back, produced a loop of string from his pocket, and made a cat’s cradle, carefully observing the center of the web as he changed its pattern with the movement of his fingers.

“What did they tell the newspapers?” asked Joanna.

“Heart-attack. That’s what was on the death-certificate.” She added, as Antryg uncoiled his tall height and ambled into the bedroom, “Do you need to check in the hall? Though they played the camera tapes a hundred times, and can’t find any way they could have been tampered with.”

“Are these suites soundproofed?” Joanna looked around her, wondering if the “mothers” of those would-be child actors watched TV here in the sitting area while the children were with Mr. Big-Shot Agent in the bedroom. Or did he send them out into the hall with a magazine?

“Absolutely. You could shoot off a cannon in here and the people in the Sky Celestial Suite wouldn’t hear a thing.”

Antryg appeared in the bedroom door, a frown between his brows. “A fighting-dog *lost its will to fight?*”

Delia Bannister nodded. “That’s what Mr. Kleb said. Troy Durango – the sous-chef at the Palazzo Borgia—” She named the penthouse restaurant that shared the hotel’s top floor with the two *luxe* suites, “—found the dog when he was hiking in the desert; the poor thing had been torn almost to pieces by coyotes. He brought it back and got it to a vet, and I phoned Mr. Kleb. That’s when Kleb told me he’d turned the dog loose himself. *The damn dog got religion*, is what he said. *He won’t fight, so he’s no damn use to me.*”

Antryg leaned one shoulder on the door-jamb, arms folded and head cocked a little to the side. “Was this the November before last?” he asked. “Just before the first murder?”

She looked startled at the question, but said, “Yes. Then Kleb was found

dead in his room, from what looked like a fall against the corner of a dresser, the next time he stayed here at the hotel.”

Antryg was silent for a few minutes, thinking about that. Then he asked, “Can we see the dog?”

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Troy Durango – sous-chef for the Palazzo Borgia – lived in a shabby single-wide on unincorporated – and “unimproved” – property out in the desert, about ten minutes’ drive from the Della Robbia. Ms. Bannister phoned ahead, so Durango was waiting by the gate in the low chain-link fence that surrounded his dusty acre of bull-thorns, aloe, tomato-plants and scrubby grass when Joanna turned her blue Mustang off Walker Road. He held out his hand as they got out of the car, a sandy, quiet man whose arms were a scratch-pad of crude tattoos: “Ms. Sheraton; Mr. Windrose. Ms. Bannister said you-all wanted to have a look at Ravage. Can I get you a Coke?”

A golden retriever had bounded up to greet them in a flurry of ecstasy the moment Joanna got out of the car. The shorter of Durango’s two dogs – a massive Presa Canario with cropped ears and a muzzle criss-crossed with scars – hung back behind its master’s legs and regarded the visitors with worried eyes.

Once they’d taken lawn-chairs under the back-yard awning, the former fighter-dog evinced a puppy-like eagerness for affection, rolling at Antryg’s feet and panting with delight as the Joanna rubbed his belly. “He’s a damn good dog,” said Durango, grinning affectionately down at his pet. “Kind of a pussy... when the wind gets up and my Mama’s Pekingese gets out – my Mama lives just up the road – she’ll come over here and get in under the fence and boss him around something pitiful. Once he’d got out of the vet’s I was a little worried, havin’ him around Buddy—” He thumped the retriever affectionately on its side. “But they’re like brothers. My sister’s kids love him, but when they’re over here I watch him like a hawk, even though I know to the marrow of my bones he’d no more harm them than my wife’s parakeets would. Hell, they got more to fear of bein’ bit from that mean little bitch of Mama’s than from Ravage here. But Ann – my wife – says it’s like when a man’s got a record. It follows him. And you can’t take chances if there’s kids involved, no matter what you think you know about him.”

Ravage shoved his nose against Joanna’s foot and licked her instep, then sighed happily when she scratched his scarred, enormous head.

“And you can see by the scars,” added Durango, “that he was a fighter. And it wasn’t havin’ him fixed that changed him, by the way. He was like this

before that. I think that's why the coyotes tore him up so bad."

"Maybe he did get religion," Joanna said. "Saw the light."

The chef shook his head. "Animals is born in the light," he said. "They grow up seein' it. Whatever happened to him, it's like it rewound him back to what he'd have been, if he'd been allowed to grow up normally."

"Not exactly." Antryg put a gentle hand under Ravage's chin, raised the dog's head so that for a moment he could look into its eyes. The big dog met his gaze steadily for a moment, then ducked its glance away, as a dog will before its alpha, and with a soft whine licked his hand. The wizard stroked its scarred and bitten ears reassuringly, and made kissing noises. To Durango he said, "He's had something taken away from him, the anger that every creature needs—" Antryg's eyes moved from the dog's, to meet those of the man, "—to keep himself alive in the jungle."

The chef looked aside, as if averting his eyes from his own jungle days. Ravage heaved himself up, and put a paw on his master's knee, as if making sure he was all right; Durango draped an arm around him and thumped his side as he'd thumped Buddy's. Joanna had the feeling the big dog would have climbed in his lap if the lawn-chair would have borne the double weight.

"For the rest of his life he'll need to be looked after," Antryg went on, "because in certain ways he can't look after himself. As long as he lives, he will have to depend on the kindness of humankind."

"That is one harsh fate," said Durango softly, "to lay on some innocent soul." He tightened his grip on Ravage in a rough hug. "But don't you worry, *miho*. Ann and Buddy and me'll have your back."

Ravage licked his face with a tongue the size of a washcloth.

The chef's bright blue-green gaze returned to Antryg: "Ms. Bannister said you two was paranormal investigators. This have anything to do with that haunt the maids have seen on the twelfth floor?"

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The Medici Suite was the largest of the twelfth-floor "high-roller" suites, and was notable – Troy Durango told them – for having a sort of mini-casino of its own: two private blackjack tables and a roulette wheel, for large parties. It also had its own kitchen – "They'll usually hire a chef from the hotel, and *man* some of those suits are lousy tippers!" – and its own garden, nearly three-quarters of an acre of landscaped Mediterranean acanthus and salvia culminating in a rock-bound swimming-pool that overlooked the desert to the south.

"Place been closed for almost a year because of the fire," said the chef.

“But three of the maids say they’ve seen a ghost there, a man in a gray suit. One of ‘em said he said Hi to her in Spanish.”

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The fire, Delia Bannister said when they got back to the hotel, had been the result of an electrical short, as far as anyone knew. It had broken out simultaneously in the kitchen, the suite parlor, and the mini-casino – the Urbino Room, it was called – and hadn’t done much damage. “The hotel engineers couldn’t find the short, or any faults in the wiring,” she said, handing Joanna a cup of coffee – china, and monogrammed – from the tray her assistant had brought to her office. “We’ve had two teams of specialists in as well. If the suite were rented more often it would be higher priority, but it’s an awkward size and doesn’t get much use, so the repair and remodeling hasn’t been done yet. You think it was this – this *Plus-One* – that caused the fires?”

“I think it’s likely.” Joanna glanced at Antryg, who was sitting with his feet on Ms. Bannister’s desk, making an origami cootie-catcher out of a hotel brochure. “Fires are a fairly common poltergeist manifestation. *Can* a Plus-One manipulate electricity?” She nudged Antryg’s jeans-clad knee.

“Some of them certainly can.” Carefully, he opened and shut the jaws of the little paper trap in a sequence of counting, and studied the visible inner facets so revealed. Then he glanced up, as if recalling where he was: “It depends on where this particular visitor comes from, and what he did back home. If he was a wizard we’re probably all right, because magic doesn’t exist in this world—”

Ms. Bannister threw a startled glance first at him, then at Joanna.

“If he was an electrician, we might be in trouble.”

“Would you like to see the suite?” asked Ms. Bannister.

“We will tonight,” said Antryg. “And we’d appreciate it, if you could arrange to have the twelfth floor – or at least that half of the twelfth floor – cleared. Do you use fog-machines in any of your theater shows? Excellent! We’ll need four of those, protective cover-alls, and the biggest flash-lights you’ve got... You wouldn’t happen to have any gas-masks, would you?”

“Gas-masks...?”

“Army surplus.” Joanna reached for the city directory she’d spotted on a corner of the office credenza. “And we’ll need battery back-ups for the fog-machines, if our friend can mess with the wiring.”

“Good point,” agreed Antryg. “You wouldn’t happen to have access to a plan of the suite, would you, Delia? Splendid! And a list of what the workmen

left up there? Oh, well. I'd rather take our friend by surprise," he added, to the Banquet Director's repeated offer of a reconnaissance mission. "And in any case, we've got a good deal of shopping to do this afternoon. Has the rat problem in this hotel increased or diminished since November of 1986?"

Ms. Bannister started visibly: "Why do you ask?"

"Why do *you* ask?"

"I didn't think..." She frowned, clearly troubled by the possible scope of the problem. "I didn't think this had anything to do with... with the killings. Or with the fire, for that matter. But yes. The rats have become..." She shook her head. "When you're in the hotel business, you get to know rats. How they behave, and what you can expect to be able to do about them... which isn't much. But the rats here, it's like they've become both bolder and stupider. You'll see them, pretty much every time you go down to the basement, or just walking across the floor of the parking garage. We've had exterminators in and they got *hundreds* of them. Those that are left, it seems like they just wander into the traps."

Antryg beamed like a jack-o-lantern. "One less thing to worry about," he said. "What about cockroaches?"

She stared at him. "They've just about completely disappeared. How did you—?"

Antryg folded up his cootie-catcher and stuck it in a pocket. "Because it's my job," he explained, and got to his feet. "We should be back this evening —"

"It's four-thirty now." Joanna checked her watch. There were, of course, no windows in Ms. Bannister's office, though there was a clock on her desk. *Time Doesn't Exist in Las Vegas* was a dictum that evidently did not extend to the hotel staff in pursuit of their duties. "If you have to leave before we get back—"

"I'll be here," said Ms. Bannister. "I've already called my night-sitter to pick up my kids, and made arrangements for the hotel to comp your dinner. Whatever this thing is, if you can destroy it, or... or send it back to wherever it came from..."

"I'm not certain we can do that." Antryg turned back on his way to the door. "Because right now the greater part of it came from *here*. But I do hope to have a chat with it, and find out whether we're dealing with one creature or two. I really hope it's two," he added, as Joanna collected her car-keys and sunglasses. "And that one of them is still sane."

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When they returned to the Della Robbia at eight, the Strip was already clothed in neon and beginning to choke up with traffic. Slabs of light-bulbs transformed the darkness at street-level to daylight levels of brilliance; marquees blazed with the names of acts like LIDO DE PARIS and HOORAY FOR HOLLYWOOD. (“Is Wayne Newton *still* around?” “Who’s Wayne Newton?”) In between shopping for things like hydrochloric acid, silver nitrate and kosher salt, Joanna had had time to read the typed list of the deaths in the hotel since last November: a forty-year-old buyer for Macy’s, in Vegas on her honeymoon, fell from one of the hotel balconies into the rear parking lot; a young man in town for a car show was found, shockingly mutilated, in the empty rangeland about a hundred yards beyond the edge of the same lot. One of the maids, an illegal, found dead in the bath-tub of a room on the seventh floor, evidently having fallen backwards and hit her head on the tap.

People who hadn’t done evil in the hotel, whatever else they might have gotten up to in their lives at home... “But all six of them couldn’t be evil,” said Joanna, as she parked as close to the stairway to their room as she possibly could. “Not evil enough to kill over.”

“People can do a surprising amount of damage without being evil.” Antryg gathered up an assortment of plastic sacks from Eagle Surplus and Home Depot, and cast a swift, watchful glance at the parking lot around them. Under floods of electric glare it still, to Joanna’s eye, had a horrible creepiness, like the surface of another planet. “They may even be under the impression that they’re doing good. And the problem – as Ms. Bannister and the Council of Wizards have both pointed out to me – is one of judgment and degree: in whose opinion is it evil to abandon a dog in the desert? Or beat up a young man for trying to cheat the casino out of a few thousand dollars? Or strike her children or cheat on his wife or do whatever these other people might have done... if anything. If the killer isn’t simply striking at random, triggered by the color of their hair or the phase of the moon or its own hunger for the smell of fear.”

“So what is going on?” The lights that illuminated the stairway were out. Joanna felt her skin crawl as they ascended – very quickly – to the long breezeway that she obscurely felt was safer than the parking lot itself. Though, in fact, at least two of the deaths had resulted from falls from breezeways higher than this one...

“I don’t know. To find out, we’ll have to draw our friend to us. And with the whole hotel to hide in, the only way we can do that is to frighten him into attacking.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that. We can’t just set up a dessert bar?”

“Too late.” Antryg unlocked the door of room 219, signed Joanna to stay back for a moment—

*Crap, what makes me think I’d be safe IN the room?*

—and gathered his sword from where it stood by his side of the bed. They headed along the breezeway toward the hotel offices. “We didn’t buy ice cream.”

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Ms. Bannister had four fog machines, four backup batteries, two major-league sodium flashlights and two protective coveralls waiting for them on a utility dolly. She had changed into a coverall herself, ready to rumble, though her eyes widened when she saw the long katana in Antryg’s hand. “It’s best you stay down here,” said Antryg, as he slid into the slightly rubberized suit and slung the gas-mask around his neck, where he could get to it in a hurry.

“You may need help.” The Banquet Director glanced at Joanna: five-foot-nothing and, despite her curvaceous figure, barely a hundred pounds.

Joanna wanted to stamp her foot and tell her *I am, too, a grown-up! I’ve slain monsters!*

“In case something goes wrong,” said Antryg gently, “I don’t want it to know who you are.”

They ascended the service elevator in silence.

As they reached the twelfth floor, Joanna said, “Is there really a portal through the Void up here?”

Antryg replied immediately, “No. I’d sense it – and after nearly six years there would be at least three or four abominations at large, and that’s something even the Palermo Group couldn’t possibly keep quiet.”

“I wouldn’t put it past them to try. And the thing that’s murdering people doesn’t count as an abomination?”

“It might.” Antryg led the way, pushing the dolly before him, down the hall toward the double doors of the Medici Suite. “It’s one reason I need to have a few words with our visitor... Plug that in, will you, my dear?” He unloaded a backup battery and, while Joanna was setting it up, manhandled one of the fog-machines from the cart. When Joanna had it connected he switched it on, unwrapped one of the blocks of dry ice and dropped it in. “With luck,” he said, “that’ll show up anything coming down the hall at us. Quickly,” he added, and opened the double doors to the suite. “Before it figures out what these things are.”

They set up one in the parlor area of the suite – the floorspace of that single room was almost as large as the first house Joanna remembered as a



child – another in the Urbino Room, and the third outside in the desert garden, as far from the sliding doors of the parlor as the extension cords would reach. “You’re my backup,” said Antryg, as the whitish-gray mists spread out over the floor of the suite and billowed softly around their feet. “If you see anything coming at me, hit it with a spray of HCl. It has to materialize before it can hurt either of us, and as I suspect its material flesh is drawn from vaporized cockroaches – don’t look like that, my dear, it’s a perfectly straightforward combination of hydrocarbons and oxygen – it’s going to be sensitive when it recombines.”

“Yuck.”

“I’m not asking you to touch it.”

“You better not be.” She pulled her gas-mask on, pushed it up on her head, fair hair hanging out around it in an unruly ruffle. Her heart was pounding as she remembered the thing in the parking lot; the descriptions of some of the bodies that had been found. *Like a shark attack*, the police report had said of the talent agent. The Air Force captain found dead in the parking lot had been attributed to a puma. *How do I get myself into situations like this?*

Silly question. *If you didn’t hang around with Gandalf over there you’d be fine.* She watched Antryg as he waded through the softly roiling smoke, periodically dropping a red-and-yellow yo-yo to the length of its string and flicking it back to hand, studying the movement of the wooden disks...

“Here,” he said softly. He stood in the sitting area, a few yards back from the glass garden doors. With a few deft moves he executed a complicated Texas Star, and observed the back-and-forth movement of the yo-yo, spinning on its shortened string. Then he whipped it back to his hand, missed his grip, and knocked himself smartly in the forehead. “Ow! You never can tell how the gravity anomalies are going to fluctuate around these things.”

“Gravity anomaly, hunh?”

“Of course.” He wound up the string indignantly, and fished in his jeans pockets through the slits in the cover-all. Beyond the doors, the lights from the suite turned the artificial fog to a shifting sea of milk, disappearing into the darkness.

“I thought you said there wasn’t a portal here.”

“There isn’t.” Antryg knelt with the bottle of silver nitrate in his hand. “But this is where our friend came through, on a ley-line between Gaos Peak north of town, and Marble Spring.” With a watercolor brush – one of their stops had been an art supply store – he began to paint a circle on the bare subfloor where the carpets had been ripped out. As usual – Joanna had seen him perform similar tasks a hundred times – the seven-foot circle was perfect.

“I suspect a Gate can be opened in certain conditions – at the correct phase of the moon, or with certain stars in certain positions—”

He emptied a handful of kosher salt into his palm, and began to trace the silver line with an outer ring of salt...

The lights went out.

Both had switched their flashlights on upon entering the suite, but the shock of the darkness falling was disorienting, terrifying. Joanna swung around, the beam of her light skimming across the fog. She smelled it before she saw it, a rank foetor like dirty dishcloths; jerked her gas-mask down as Antryg rose, whipped sword from scabbard in a fluid whisper of silver—

“There!”

She hit the sprayer nozzle and the mist of acid smoked out, intersected with the whirling disturbance in the ground-fog. Terror smote her, like a screaming inside her skull: terror, disorientation, sick shock as if something were screaming at her in unleashed animal rage. The mist beside her – horrifyingly close – erupted into a maelstrom of turbulence fifteen feet across and she swept the whole area with the acid, even as pain lanced through her arm. She fell back, saw her sleeve ripped and blood welling underneath; sprayed again because she didn’t know what else to do.

Movement beside her and Antryg strode in, like a monster himself in his gas-mask, katana blade hissing in the jerking light. He cut twice, grabbed Joanna’s arm and dragged her back through the door into the Urbino Room. Jerked the door shut – Joanna grabbed one of the metal curtain-rods that had been left stacked in a corner and slid it through the immense, gilded handles. The doors jerked once under slamming weight, and Antryg shouted,

“We’re here to help you!”

Movement again in the mists beside her. Joanna whirled, brought the spray-nozzle up, and Antryg slapped it underneath with his open hand, forcing it up.

In the flashlight glare the man in the gray suit stood before them.

“We’re here to help you,” said Antryg again, and pushed up his gas-mask, straightened his glasses without letting go of his sword. “And we need your help.”

He stood for a moment, facing the man in the gray suit. In the room’s silence the hum of the fog-machine sounded as loud as a freight-train. Then, carefully, Antryg sheathed his sword and handed it to Joanna, and took his eyes from the man long enough to shine his flashlight on the shallow, bloody slashes on her arm.

“Are you all right?” He was already digging in his pocket for a bandana to use as a field-dressing.

She nodded, and pushed up her gas-mask. At the same moment the man stepped forward: “How bad is it?” he asked anxiously. Joanna found she could see his face quite easily, only since he looked exactly like Dr. McClaren, who’d taught her English 101 class at Long Beach City College, she assumed this was a disguise. “My poor girl, I’m so sorry—”

Even his voice was Dr. McClaren’s.

The ebb of adrenalin, and the shock of the pain in her arm, made her dizzy: *You are NOT going to faint now! That thing is still out there...*

Antryg pressed the bandanna in place and dug a roll of electrician’s tape from his pocket with his free hand and handed it to Dr. McClaren: “Rip off three pieces of that for me, would you? Long pieces...”

“I’m all right.” Joanna tried to breathe deeply, leaning against Antryg’s shoulder. The pain was astonishing.

“Please forgive me—”

“Who are you hiding from?” asked Antryg. “The Church, the Wizards, or the Law?”

“The law.” Dr. McClaren’s shoulders slumped, defeated. “Originally. And now... I meant it for the best.”

Antryg sighed. “We all do.”

With horrible violence, something crashed against the doors. Joanna shrank back as a storm of noise broke outside, chattering, barking, roaring. Antryg darted lightly forward, caught up another couple of curtain-rods and shot them through the door-handles – Joanna didn’t see how he could get anywhere near the doors in the face of that hammering mad hatred. The Plus-One caught her shoulders and drew her back to the far end of the room, and looking over her shoulder at him, she could see the terror in his face. “I’m sorry,” he whispered again. “I’m so sorry...”

“We’re not here to hurt you,” said Joanna. “I swear it—”

“I know. It—It doesn’t matter.”

As abruptly as it had begun, the onslaught stopped.

Antryg stood before the doors, an odd, angular figure in the flashlight glare. Elsewhere in the hotel, dimmed by the intervening walls, alarms honked and trumpeted, and Joanna noticed that the lights on the fog-machine’s battery backup had come on. *Power outage...*

“Will it attack again?” she asked, and the Plus-One looked a little surprised.

“Of course. It... It doesn’t give up. Ever.”

“What is it?” Antryg retreated soundlessly to join them, never taking his eyes from the doors.

“A wyrth, they’re called in the Old Books,” said Dr. McClaren. “Or

what's left of the Old Books. Or a wyrthwight, or a kamynmeld."

"Ah." His voice was barely a whisper. "And you've grown it into a kill-wight."

The Plus-One nodded wretchedly. "My master taught me a little about summoning them, before the Chancellor's Guard got him. He had one that he'd grown into a defender, but it wasn't strong enough to protect him..."

"And are you hiding here from the Chancellor's Guard?"

"No." Infinite sadness: for that lost master, the vanished, half-trained child he had been. "No, I'm afraid all that happened when I was very small. For the past seventy seasons all I've been is a thief."

"If you're mageborn you must have been quite good at it."

"Oh, I was. Much too good, in fact."

"I thought as much. Someone deduced that you were putting your old master's teachings to improper use?"

"They suspected it. They put Bloodsniffers out for me. They'd have known, if they'd caught me. My master warned me about crossing through the Void, but he'd also taught me how to open a portal, when the stars were right. They were closing in, I—I couldn't see what else to do."

Outside the doors, Joanna heard something moving; a soft scraping, and something that sounded like the thick intake of breath.

"It's odd." Dr. McClaren sat on the edge of one of the several tables that had been moved against the wall, covered with tarps, baccarat or roulette tables, or banco: high-roller games. "All those years, when I was stealing things just to stay alive, I got very good at observing people. Figuring out their weaknesses, extrapolating when they'd be at home and when they'd be gone, timing when servants would be in which parts of the house... I could look at a man and know whether he'd put his money in a strongbox or bury it under the floor under his bed. All that attention to them, and I never knew them at all. They were... They were fruit-trees to be harvested."

"Then when I came here..."

"Can you go out of the building?" asked Antryg.

"In the night-time. And even then, the radiation absorbed by the ground itself is very disorienting." The Plus-One grimaced. "I didn't dare risk not being able to find my way back to the Place."

And Joanna knew – with that curious instinct she'd observed in herself before, when the old Spell of Tongues Antryg had once laid on her was in effect – that the visitor meant, The Place where the Gate through the Void had opened. As if the universe, once flawed on the energy-line between a local mountain and a local underground spring, would always have the potential of being ruptured there again, when the stars were right or the moon was in the

seventh house or whatever the necessary conditions were.

“But I didn’t need to go anywhere, you see. There was always food here – always a place for me to sleep. And always people. When I’m lonely, I’ll go down into the gaming-rooms, or the restaurant, and just listen to their talk. Not for any reason, not wanting anything from them except company. I’ll watch them playing games, or having dinner with those they care for, or falling in love... Or thinking they’re falling in love just because they’re young or happy or with a beautiful Other. And it’s nice.”

“Except,” said Antryg softly, “when it isn’t.”

“*What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas,*” agreed Joanna. “People come here to do things they wouldn’t do at home.”

Outside the door, that terrible sense of movement again: soundless, soft, and huge.

Dr. McClaren whispered again, “I meant it for the best.” There was agony in his voice.

“As I recall,” said Antryg, “it doesn’t take much magic to call a kamynmeld into being. You probably could do it on a short, strong ley like this, particularly in a full moon – if you could find something immediately for it to meld with.”

For a few moments the Plus-One made no reply. Only sat, head bowed, face taut with grief. “I knew he came back at the same time every year,” he said at last. “The man who... who did things to children. I knew he would be coming back soon, with women who would sell him their children. I hated him for what he did and for what I knew he was going to do again. And then there were the beasts, out in tents in the parking lot. I could feel their fury, their insane lust to kill, even from in here. I opened the Gate just enough to use the magic of the Void to summon a kamynmeld, then went out immediately and put it on two or three of the beasts in succession, so it could drink their heart-flames, the red cores of their spirits. And when he came – fourteen nights, fifteen nights later – the kill-wight was grown and ready. No one can say he didn’t deserve what he got.”

“No.” In the harsh reflection of the flashlight glare, Antryg’s eyes had a terrible darkness of their own.

“But because so much of the kill-wight came from this world – the fury of the beasts, and the physical flesh of the insects in the building – I couldn’t send it away. It dematerialized after it killed, but I could feel its presence. Then later, a man came who did evil things, terrible things – not just to the young man he ordered to be beaten up, by guards who beat and raped the young man’s ladyfriend as well... I knew the wight was still here, you see. I knew if I put a mark on this evil man, it would come for him. And it did.”

“And you also marked the two warriors who were killed next?”

McClaren nodded. “When it appeared, it was different. I had felt this – sensed it. It needed the mark to materialize, and I’d tried to imprison it in one of the underground rooms of this building, but magic doesn’t work here. And there were little beasts, all through the building but mostly in the underground portions, clever and savage and very, very strong. It was devouring them, all those hundreds of nights...”

“But you marked the warriors anyway.”

His gaze met Antryg’s, his eyes for a moment not human at all, though he wept. “I saw what they did to her. To the dancer—”

Antryg whispered, “I know.”

“Then the men came back, who made the beasts fight. Who tortured them – hurt them...” His voice stammered over the words, speaking faster and faster as if he had to get them out quickly, before he thought too much about what he’d started. “The wight materialized on its own. Killed on its own, without a mark to command it. I was... I was shocked, I was horrified, but there wasn’t anyone I could ask. I was only a dozen seasons old when my master was taken away; they burned his books, and growing up I didn’t dare even whisper where I’d come from or seek for anyone who had the Old Learning. And I didn’t want to. And since I knew that there was no magic in this world, I knew that anyone who would come looking for me had to be sent by the Chancellery Council...”

The crash of weight against the doors made them all jerk around. Joanna brought up her spray-gun, her hands shaking now so badly she was almost glad that the thing was big, *I can hardly miss it...*

*It’ll hardly notice.*

There was no barking, no chattering, no roar. Only steady, crushing weight, thrown against the door again and again, til she heard the wood around the hinges crack. There was no way out of the gambling-room and if there had been, she suspected it would only be onto the overgrown terrace-garden. She didn’t doubt, now, why Mr. Pacinotti had gone over the eighteenth-floor balcony.

Antryg stepped toward the door, slid his sword from its sheathe.

The pounding stopped.

*It’s listening...*

“Who sent you?” Dr. McClaren whispered. “I’ll go – I’ll accept whatever punishment they decree, even death... even slow calcification. I deserve it. After the dog-man, it just... just killed. It’s killed six people, innocent people. Women... a child, one of them...”

Joanna had read about twelve-year-old Selina Castro. The police report

had been that her father had bludgeoned her to death and then thrown himself from the balcony. It didn't take much to guess what had actually happened.

"I thought I was acting for the best and I can't stop it. I can't make it go away. I tried to stop it the last time – the last two times. But I never know where it's going to strike, or why. It's just a mass of... of rage, of hunger, of a need to tear something..."

"That is the problem with kill-wights," agreed Antryg, never taking his eyes from the door. "They absorb things. And once you create them, you have to lock them up very, very tight, to keep them from eating things they shouldn't."

"I didn't know! I didn't know, and the deaths of those poor people are my fault. The way that poor girl screamed for her father to save her – the way the chambermaid's beloved wept over her body when they found her, only because she'd tried to come into these rooms. The wight believes it's protecting me – the girl tried to come up here, too..."

"Was that why it came after me?"

Dr. McClaren shook his head wearily. "It could have been. But the last two people it killed never came up here, nor looked at me, or anything. It just... needs to kill. I would..." His voice sank; he swallowed hard. "I've thought of killing myself," he whispered. "Only I feared that so doing would simply release it from this place, this building. Would it? If you were to take me... to take me back..."

"Oh, we're not here to take you back." Antryg moved backwards, sword still ready, until he stood close to them at the far end of the room once more. For a time there was only silence, save for the churning hum of the fog-machine. Even the far-off bleat of the hotel's alarm system had died: Joanna wondered whether the management had simply turned it off, or whether a Fire Department Investigation Crew was going to come walking into the thing in the other room. Even if they succeeded in getting the elevators working again, she thought, there was no way they'd make it up here in time to keep herself and Antryg from being killed, if the thing broke through the doors...

Or materialized in the room with them.

Softly, Antryg said, "When we take our vows to the Council of Wizards, we're required to put a death-curse on ourselves, if we ever use the powers of magic in the affairs of humankind, either for ill *or for what we conceive of to be good*." He reversed the katana in his hand, slid it into its scabbard; unzipped the front of his coverall and pulled down the neck of his t-shirt. Joanna saw no mark on his pectoral, but in the cold actinic glare of the flashlight she saw the Plus-One's eyes widen, and the frightened brown glance dart to Antryg's face.

Whatever was there, he saw it. And he saw it for what it was.

“Will you put the mark on yourself,” said Antryg, “to draw your kill-wight?”

Dr. McClaren made a small noise in his throat, like the whining of a child too terrified to scream. Joanna recalled what the typed report had said about some of those kills. *Personally, I’d scream... and then burst into tears and do anything – ANYTHING – not to die that way...*

*Including going off the parapet if I can make it that far...*

The thought horrified her – and the thought that she knew she meant it.

“We’ll protect you when it comes for you,” Antryg continued. “We have to make it materialize, if we’re to have any chance of destroying it—”

“It can’t be destroyed! It takes magic to destroy one—”

“Yes, it can.” The wizard’s velvet voice was briskly soothing. “Yes, it can... I’d have you mark Joanna here as bait but that really doesn’t seem fair —”

“Don’t make jokes!” Terror made her almost sick.

“No, you’re right.” The visitor pressed his hands to his face for a moment, trembling. Even in the glare of the flashlight, he’d gone ghastly pale. “It is for me to do...”

“Quickly, then. Now!” From his pocket Antryg produced a small, irregular flake of obsidian – an ancient Indian arrowhead, in fact, Joanna had been with him when he’d bought it – and pressed it into Dr. McClaren’s hand. At the same instant the clammy ground-fog that filled the big room knee-deep swirled and churned, as if a single twelve-foot paw had struck down in its midst, and the chattering, howling bark of the kill-wight struck like a hammer.

McClaren stared at the billowing fog as it sucked up into a column, outlining for a moment a hideous shape, burning eyes, the musty stink of insectile flesh. “Do it!” Antryg yelled, sword snaking forth again as he waded through the mists. He slashed, and something brown and totally foul splattered. McClaren’s shaking fingers fumbled, and he dropped the arrowhead as he fell back against the wall, his hands before his face.

Joanna swore mightily, let off a spray-blast of HCl in the direction of the heaving mists and then dropped to her knees, groped beneath the fog... drywall screws, cigarette butts, crumbles of carpet-padding. Antryg cut at it again and evidently, though still mostly invisible, it was material enough to knock him sprawling against the corner of one of those shrouded tables. The sword spun from his hand; fog billowed above him. Joanna sprang to her feet, let off another blast of acid even as Antryg rolled, grabbed the sword, cut at the thing as it turned toward Joanna—

“Get the goddam arrowhead!” he roared.



Joanna dived for the place – or what she thought had been the place, with fog and darkness and the jarring swing of the flashlight beams it was hard to tell. McClaren was curled in a fetal position against the wall, hiding his face from the battle; Antryg dodged, sidestepped, cut and leaped back. Joanna's small hands swept across the filthy sub-floor beneath the fog – *Find it, find it, FIND IT...* A splinter ran into her palm, as painful as the agony of her cut arm. A crash behind her, as Antryg fell or was struck down again, *DON'T TURN TO LOOK...*

The razor edge of the arrowhead cut her finger; she snatched it up, almost fell as she ran to McClaren...

*He's got to do it. If I do it it'll come for me...*

*IT'S COMING FOR YOU ANYWAY YOU IDIOT...*

But she put it into the terrified thief's hands. "Do it!" she yelled.

With a scream of pain McClaren slashed the palm of his hand, daubed up the blood on his fingers – dropping the arrowhead again, but Joanna figured it didn't matter at that point – smeared a mark, like the crude shape of a stick-figure man, on his chest.

*And I hope you got it right, pal.*

Fog bellied up around them, the stink of it horrible: glaring eyes in the blackness, a dim sense of spikes and teeth and thorns. She fired a blast of HCL at it and sprang back – *So much for it going after him...*

Spectacles and sword-blade flashed, and she stumbled behind Antryg, dizzy with shock.

*He's covering me. That's what's slowing him down.*

*Dammit, go after that guy! He's the one with the mark!*

*He started all this...*

Antryg fell, bleeding. Joanna blasted again with the HCL (*How much is left in the tank?*) and the wizard turned, sword upraised.

The thing – Joanna could see it clearly now, though she could never afterwards accurately describe it: insect, dog, rat, and something perversely human as well – whirled in a maelstrom of fog, fell upon McClaren. The Plus-One screamed, buried his face in his arms. "Forgive me!"

The wight twisted, reared back. Flung its flat, triangular head up and down, antennae thrashing. The clawed hands flailed, then began to rip at its own flesh. Antryg grabbed Joanna, dragged her back to the farthest corner of the room between two covered tables, pulled her down under them.

The creature wrenched out its own guts, and with a shriek – dog, rat, a thousandfold horror of blind rage and savagery – twisted off its own head.

The stench was apocalyptic.

The silence, like the end of time.

Sobbing broke it. McClaren, huddled in his corner, head buried in his arms, waiting to die.

Joanna staggered to her feet, ran across the spew-boltered horror of the room to his side. “You’re all right,” she said, and he twisted on the floor and clutched her like a drowning man, weeping as if his heart would break. “You’re all right. It killed itself – didn’t it, Antryg?”

“Quite thoroughly.” He limped to her side, flicked his sword in a long blood-shake and sheathed it, wiped blood from the side of his face. “It’s all right,” he added, kneeling beside her to lay one big, crooked hand on the Plus-One’s heaving shoulder. “You did well, and bravely; I doubt we could have destroyed it. It had to destroy itself – and it would only do so, to protect you... from itself.”

But the Plus-One could do nothing for a time but sob, shattered and trembling, in Joanna’s arms.

Quietly, she asked, “Did you know that would happen?”

“Well,” said Antryg, “I certainly hoped it would happen – particularly once the thing materialized here in the room. We’d probably better get going,” he added, looking around him as the lights suddenly came on again. The cheerful glare revealed the carcass of the kill-wight, already dissolving into a thin, brownish slime that covered walls, floor, sections of the ceiling and – revoltingly – the clothing and hair of the three people kneeling in the corner.

“Ewww—”

“It’s quite clean.” Antryg wiped some of it from his cheek. “It’s been materialized and dematerialized so often there can’t possibly be any viable bacteria in it—”

He made a move to lick his slime-coated fingers in demonstration, and Joanna grabbed his wrist.

“That,” she warned, “is a dealbreaker, and I will never kiss you again.”

His smile was wry and he wiped his fingers on her cheek – making her jerk back with a squeak of protest, in spite of the fact that her face was covered with the same smelly brown film.

“I almost get you killed,” he said softly, “and the dealbreaker is a little slime?”

Joanna said, “Yes. And if the lights are on, that means they’ve got the elevators working. Let’s get out of here – I do *not* want to have to explain all this.”

Together, they helped Dr. McClaren to his feet.

“I’m desperately curious to hear how Delia accounts for it, though,” Antryg said. “Possibly it’s best not to know. Don’t forget to switch off the fog machines on our way out.”

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They reassembled – after an *extremely* thorough shower and a soak in the hotel’s steam-room – in the Piazza coffee-shop, where Ms. Bannister said she would meet them after sorting out the representatives of the Clark County Fire Department and the Palermo Group. It was, by this time, four in the morning, but the lobby was just as lively with returning party-goers as if it had been eight at night, and the casino rattled and clamored on undaunted. According to the waiter, despite repeated warnings from the Fire Inspectors that the hotel might be aflame above their heads, most of the white-haired ladies and graying gents in cowboy boots who had come by the bus-load to play the slot-machines had remained seated at their chosen machines, patiently staking them out by the glare of emergency lamps until power was restored. Ms. Bannister had ordered the coffee-shop to send in coffee, drinks, and cookies on the house.

*I hope they pay her what she’s worth...*

This breakfast was also on the house. Joanna got poached salmon and asparagus; Antryg, his usual revolting concoction of oatmeal, eggs, and syrup. (“Well, it’s marginally better than dematerialized cockroach molecules, but only marginally.”) Dr. McClaren ordered a hot fudge sundae and french fries – “Do you know, it’s the first time I’ve ever had a sit-down meal here?”

Joanna could not help wondering what he looked like to the waiter. Not like Dr. McClaren, she was willing to bet.

“What happens now?” asked the Plus-One, a little shyly. “Do I go back... with you? I will,” he added. “I never thought I’d say it – all those years, living in the Undercity, creeping out at night to steal... But I understand that the wrong I did here is... different. I cost eleven people their lives, six of them as innocent and undeserving as my mother and sisters were, when they died in the Plague. What I did... It’s odd.” He shook his head. No brown slime streaked him now – Joanna found she couldn’t remember whether any had, even during the fight.

*Pretty damn good illusion...*

“I always scorned the Chancellery for outlawing the use of the Ancient Ways. Now I think of some of my colleagues in the Thieves’ Guild, or some of my neighbors in the Undercity – I think of the kind of havoc they could wreak if they had been mageborn, and had a little teaching... and I understand.”

He glanced from Joanna to Antryg. “I’m not excusing myself, or trying to get you to put in a good word with the Chancellery. I do understand.”

Antryg scooped a spoonful of whip-cream from the sundae, and dropped it into his coffee. From the direction of the casino, the wild cacophony of flashing lights and the Marine Corps Hymn signaled that someone's machine had paid off. A few moments later a gang of drunk, ecstatic refugees from some small Ohio town reeled into the coffee-shop, handing out money to every waiter and busboy in sight and yelling for Dom Perignon and nachos. Victory at its sweetest.

"When I used my power for reasons that I thought were good," said Antryg slowly, "killing far more than eleven innocent people in the process, the Council of Wizards condemned me to imprisonment in a place where I could work no magic; where I would be fed and sheltered, but kept from doing harm. You showed willingness to die – and die frightfully – in expiation of what you had done, if there can be any expiation for causing the deaths of the innocent. If such a place can be found for you, would you be willing to remain there? Delia!" he added, beaming, and held out his hand as the Banquet Director – back in her well-pressed pantsuit and not a hair out of place – crossed to their booth. "Permit me to introduce you to your Plus-One..."

She halted in her tracks, blinking. "*Pastor Seville?*" For one instant her expression was shocked disbelief; then she shook her head a little, said, "Or do you just look like our old minister from Church? You have to," she added, holding out her hand to him. "Aunt Lacey wrote me he'd passed, about ten years ago, back in Jackson. How do you do? I'm Delia Bannister..." Her glance went to Antryg. "I take it everything has been straightened out?"

"It has," said Antryg. "Our friend here was not the killer; in fact he was instrumental in destroying it. It will not return."

Joanna saw McClaren – or Pastor Seville – glance questioningly at Antryg, then hesitantly take Ms. Bannister's hand.

"You're sure about that?"

"I am."

"If you have any questions," said Joanna, "here's my card. I'm not carrying any for the investigation side of our business, but the phone number is the same. We guarantee our work."

"And that – stuff – on the walls of the Urbino Room..."

"Ectoplasmic residue," said Joanna. "You don't want to know."

"A mild solution of vinegar and boric acid should take care of the smell," added Antryg, with his slightly maniac smile. "The question now is, do you have any objection, *per se*, to your hotel remaining haunted? Prior to the appearance of the kill-wight, all you were out was a little food from the hotel banquets, and you never mentioned any of the hotel staff quitting because

they were troubled by your guest.”

“Oh, no,” said Ms. Bannister at once. “I didn’t even know the maids had seen him, until Troy Durango told me this evening when he came on-shift. Certainly there was never any trouble with the machines in the casino—”

Dr. McClaren shook his head. “It would take magic to affect them,” he said. “And in fact, where would I spend the money? What would I spend it on?”

“Well, that’s really all the Palermo Group is interested in.” She paused, studying the face that looked so familiar. “Are you human?”

“Not... Not as such,” replied the Plus-One. “I don’t look anything like you people. But I think I’m a lot more human than I was when I came here all those hundreds of nights ago.”

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As they drove south on the I-15 Tuesday morning – Joanna had spent three hours in the Las Vegas Hospital emergency room getting her gashed arm stitched up, then the rest of Monday either sleeping or on the phone rearranging deadlines with Wondersystems – Joanna said quietly, “About that death-curse—” Gray-white miles of sand and scrub flashed by; trailers parked alone at the end of long pale traces of worn earth; gutted brick single-room sheds with rusted gas-pumps decaying to oblivion. Black specks of buzzards, circling in an aching blue sky. “Is it real?”

Antryg’s voice was very quiet. “Oh, yes.” He propped his sunglasses more firmly onto the end of his long nose. “It’s part of the Council vows, before they’ll give you training in how to use your powers. I’ve never heard the means by which it’s fulfilled, and if it’s written anywhere, it would be in the library of the Citadel. If I tried to go there it would be fulfilled pretty quickly.”

He spoke matter-of-factly, long legs propped up before him and his feet on the Mustang’s dashboard. He’d eventually won \$10 on the slot machines and had blown the whole of it on a pair of green plastic earrings shaped like flying saucers. Above the collar of his gaudy Hawaiian shirt, three very light gashes marked the left side of his neck, where the kill-wight’s claws had nearly opened the carotid artery, and most of that arm was purple-black with bruises.

Joanna’s own arm hurt so fiercely it was hard to drive, and she knew from the shower and the steam-room they were both covered with bruises.

“Wouldn’t Sunday night have been a good time for it to cash in, if it was going to?”

“You’d think,” he agreed.

Road noise: the hum of the tires. Trucks passing like towers.

“There are few things in the world more dangerous,” said Antryg, “than a dog-wizard with good intentions.”

“Dangerous to who?” returned Joanna. “If you’d been hiding in that hotel, and saw Mr. Hollywood Agent diddling kids, or the Pride of the Skies gang-raping some poor stripper who was just trying to make a living, what would you have done? You know they’d never have been arrested. Never been brought to trial.”

“I’d have done the same. I’d like to think with my training – both from the Council of Wizards, and from the most dangerous dog-wizard of all time – I’d have been better able to safeguard the kill-wight. But with no magic in this world – certainly none that works on slot-machines – it’s difficult to predict or control what forces one lets loose: where they’ll go, or what the results will be. That’s why the death-curse. And that’s why the Council wants to kill me. But I’d have done the same.”

She reached across, and put her hand on his knee.

“And that’s why I love you.”

## About the Author

Since her first published fantasy in 1982 - *The Time of the Dark* - Barbara Hambly has touched most of the bases in genre fiction. She has written mysteries, horror, mainstream historicals, graphic novels, sword-and-sorcery fantasy, romances, and Saturday Morning Cartoons. Born and raised in Southern California, she attended the University of California, Riverside, and spent one year at the University of Bordeaux, France. She married science fiction author George Alec Effinger, and lived part-time in New Orleans for a number of years. In her work as a novelist, she currently concentrates on horror (the Don Simon Ysidro vampire series) and historical whodunnits, the well-reviewed Benjamin January novels, though she has also written another historical whodunnit series under the name of Barbara Hamilton.

Professor Hambly also teaches History part-time, paints, dances, and trains in martial arts. Follow her on Facebook, and on her blog at [livejournal.com](http://livejournal.com).

Now a widow, she shares a house in Los Angeles with several small carnivores.

She very much hopes you will enjoy these stories.

# **The Further Adventures**

**by Barbara Hambly**

The concept of “happily ever after” has always fascinated me.

Just exactly what happens after, “happily ever after”?

The hero/heroine gets the person of his/her dreams, and rides off into the sunset with their loved one perched on the back of the horse hanging onto saddlebags stuffed with gold. (It’s a very strong horse.)

So what happens then? Where do they live? Who does the cooking?

This was one of the reasons I started writing *The Further Adventures*.

The other was that so many of the people who loved the various fantasy series that I wrote for Del Rey in the 1980s and ‘90s, really liked the characters. I liked those characters too, and I missed writing about them.

Thus, in 2009 I opened a corner of my website and started selling stories about what happened to these characters after the closing credits rolled on the last novel of each series.

The *Darwath* series centers on the Keep of Dare, where the survivors of humankind attempt to re-build their world in the face of an ice age winter, after the destruction of civilization by the Dark Ones. Ingold the Wizard is assisted by two stray Southern Californians, Gil Patterson - a historian who is now part of the Keep Guards - and Rudy Solis, in training to be a mage.

The *Unschool* Wizard stories involve the former mighty-thewed barbarian mercenary Sun Wolf, who finds himself unexpectedly endowed with wizardly powers. Because the evil Wizard King sought out and killed every trained wizard a hundred years ago, Sun Wolf has no teacher to instruct him in his powers. With his former second-in-command, the warrior woman Starhawk, he must seek one - and hope whatever wizard he finds isn’t evil, too.

In the *Winterlands* tales, scholarly dragonslayer John Aversin and his mageborn partner Jenny Waynest do their best to protect the people of their remote villages from whatever threats come along: dragons, bandits, fae spirits, and occasionally the misguided forces of the distant King.

Antryg Windrose is the archmage of the Council of Wizards in his own dimension, exiled for misbehavior - meddling in the affairs of the non-mageborn - to Los Angeles in the 1980s (that’s when the novels were written). He lives with a young computer programmer, Joanna Sheraton, and



keeps a wary eye on the Void between Universes, to defend this world from whatever might come through.

Though out of print, all four of these series are available digitally on-line.

To these have been added short stories about the characters from the Benjamin January historical mystery series, set in New Orleans before the Civil War. As a free man of color, Benjamin has to solve crimes while constantly watching his own back lest he be kidnapped and sold as a slave. New Orleans in the 1830s was that kind of town. In the novels he is assisted by his schoolmistress wife Rose, and his good-for-nothing white buddy Hannibal; two of the four Further Adventures concerning January are in fact about what Rose does while Benjamin is out of town.

I have always been an enthusiastic fan of the Sherlock Holmes stories of Arthur Conan Doyle. Over the years I have been asked to contribute stories to various Sherlock Holmes anthologies, and when the character went into Public Domain, I added these four stories to my collection.

*Quest For Glory* is a stand-alone, a short piece I wrote for the program book at a science fiction convention at which I was Guest of Honor.

*Sunrise on Running Water* is tenuously connected to the Don Simon Ysidro vampire series, in that Don Simon makes a brief cameo appearance. After seeing the movie *Titanic* - and reflecting that the doomed ship departed from Ireland after sunset and sank just as dawn was breaking...and that vampires lose their powers over running water - I just *had* to write it. It's the only story that's more about the idea than about the characters.

The Further Adventures are follow-ons to the main novels of their respective series. They can be read on their own, but the Big Stuff got done in the novels: who these people are, how they met, what the major underlying problems are in their various worlds. I suppose they're a tribute to the fact that for me - and, it seems, for a lot of fans - these characters are real, and I at least care about what happens to them, and what they do when they're not saving the world. They're smaller issues, not world-shakers: puzzle-stories and capers.

Life goes on.

Love goes on.

Everyone continues to have Further Adventures for the rest of their lives.

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Novels in the Antryg Windrose Series (out of print but commercially available digitally)

The Silent Tower  
The Silicon Mage  
Dog-Wizard