

# THE BLUE LAMP

by Robert Zoltan

*'Tis hard to lose a tattooed man,  
Six and one-half feet tall, I'd say,  
In shades of cobalt and cyan  
Within a sunless, cloudless day.  
But if into a shop you stray,  
Where statues and a cat you see,  
Beware then, lest you too fall prey  
To idol curiosity.*

— From “The Recollections and Admonitions  
of Dareon Vin”

“Have you ever seen their like, my blue-painted Indari friend? Ever, in all the wide world of Plemora?”

The Indari warrior known as Blue admitted to the strange shopkeeper that he had not.

“Behold the exquisite detail, almost more real than real!” said the vendor, referring to the small silver statues, which sat on tiers of shelves surrounding Blue. Each was about six inches tall and bathed in the glow of a curious blue-shaded lamp that rested on a pedestal in the room’s center.

Blue looked closely at the statue of a Khulanese dancer. The detail in her expression and the delicate features of her face as she stared with wide eyes was astonishing. The artistry and the wide range of people represented around Blue were equally impressive. Here was a merchant from Merth, a traveler from Zemba, a farmer from Amaranth; every race and occupation in Plemora seemed to be represented. Oddly, the statues all seemed to strike a similar pose. The people were staring forward with a look of wonder, curiosity, puzzlement, and in a few, almost suspicion.

Blue nodded. “But why not show the farmer farming, or the dancer dancing?”

The fat shopkeeper held up his pudgy hands, smiled, and looked at Blue through odd square-framed blue lenses. “Who can know the mind of an artist? Perhaps he seeks to capture people with their souls bared, which happens not through the busy movement of the body, but through the light of the eyes while fascinated like a child.” The shopkeeper’s eyes took on that wondrous look as he spoke.

Blue examined the proprietor’s features. He was no olive-skinned Amerin like the majority of people in the city of Merth, including Blue’s former comrade, Dareon Vin, on whom Blue had just walked out. Dareon’s self-indulgent, narcissistic tendencies had finally become too much even for the forbearant Indari. Blue had exited their apartment amid of one of Dareon’s bombastic poetic rhapsodies, and wandered the merchant section of town while he decided whether to ever return. Chance had brought him to this strange shop on a dead end street, passing the time in idle curiosity over a curiosity of idols.

Blue found the shopkeeper as peculiar as his statues. The man’s exotic accent seemed Eastern or Southern; but his features were softer than those of the desert people of Archea, his skin much lighter than black-skinned Zembians, and though he did vaguely resemble the people of Khulan, his accent and inflection were wrong. And even

if his hair had been black, and his skin copper with blue tattooed designs, his features and body type were the furthest thing from Blue's own people that the Indari could imagine. Blue had no specific interest in the man's origin, but its mystery aroused in him a sense of danger.

"Who is the artist?" asked Blue, hoping it would give him some clue as to the shopkeeper's ethnicity.

"Ah, but that is a secret, my friend. I can only assure you that I, Ravel Nebelnezar, am the only one in the world who can offer these unsurpassed works of art to the general public."

"You're not originally from Merth," said Blue.

"Who is?" said the shopkeeper.

"I can't place your accent."

"I am something of a nomad, due to my trade. The artist travels with me and thus, we have fine representations of the splendid folk of all the regions and cities we have seen."

Blue glanced around again. "I see no Indari represented."

The shopkeeper's eyes lit up. "Indeed not. And that is why I am overjoyed that you have graced my shop with your exemplary form."

"What do you mean?" asked Blue. The comment and the man himself made Blue uncomfortable. But surely the shopkeeper was no threat. Blue could draw his sword and cut the man down before he started the next sales pitch. Was it the statues that unsettled him? Or was it the ghostly light from the blue-shaded lamp?

"I mean that I hope you will consider posing for a statue yourself. An Indari warrior would make my Plemora collection almost complete."

Blue grunted. "Such a thing would not interest me. Why do you light the statues with this blue-shaded lamp?"

The shopkeeper looked as if he had never thought of this. He frowned and turned to the lamp. "You find the blue light unappealing?"

"It casts a rather unsettling pall upon the room. But I am no artist, nor a buyer of art."

"No, no! Your opinion is of great import to me. You are obviously a man of keen perception. And it is my desire to always please my customers. If you would not mind being of assistance, I will remove the blue shade, and tell me then, honestly, my friend, what effect you think it has."

Blue shrugged impatiently. "Very well." He was losing interest in the shop and wished to depart.

The shopkeeper reached over and lifted the blue shade that covered the lamp like a dome.

"Behold the naked light of the lamp," said the shopkeeper.

Blue stared at the pure white light. He noticed for the first time that, within the crystal globe on the metal stand, colored lights like tiny fireflies danced around the brighter light in the center. It was like a vast star with smaller stars orbiting. He felt himself unable to look away. As the shop around him faded, his instincts kicked in and he grasped for the handle of his sword. But it was too late.

Dareon Vin, the five-and-a-half-foot tall master swordsman and self-proclaimed poet, with an ego twice his height, strolled at midday down Curiosity Lane, one of the spokes that ran off the wheel of Merchant's Circle in the city of Merth. His manner was

insouciant, but his fox's eyes scanned his surroundings, looking for any detail that might reveal some clue as to the whereabouts of Blue, his companion in profitable and sometimes not so profitable undertakings.

His barbarian friend had walked out, leaving the distinct impression that he might not return. It was almost beyond Dareon's ability to believe that someone would purposefully forgo basking in his presence on a regular basis, so he concluded that something was amiss.

Blue being gone for one day bothered Dareon not a jot; he figured Blue had spent the night with some lady (or less than lady). Two days gone was a curiosity; perhaps the woman he'd seduced (or the one that seduced him) was more charming than usual, or, the only women Blue was seeing were imaginary ones brought on by drunken dreams as he slept off a two-day bender. But after three days, Dareon was concerned.

Was the Indari lying dead in a pool of his own blood from some street brawl turned deadly? It would take more than one assailant to bring down the iron-hewed warrior, yet it could happen.

After several inquiries and a few coins changing hands, Dareon had deduced that the last place Blue had been seen was near the Merchant Circle in the Copper District, a bazaar of indoor shops and outdoor stalls selling strange trinkets, antiques and curios. Fortunately for Dareon, a tall blue-tattooed Indari warrior was a noticeable thing, even in the most crowded and diverse city in Western Plemora. A vendor had seen just such a man heading down Curiosity Lane. Dareon had pursued the lead.

As Dareon made his way down the street, he made further inquiries, but to no avail. The farther he walked down Curiosity Lane, the more curious and obscure became the merchandise. Whether by unerring instinct or invisible urging by his metaphysical mistress, Lady Luck, he continued until he came to a cul-de-sac and a shop he had never seen called, *Ravel's Exquisite Emporium*.

His curiosity was piqued by two thick wooden poles on either side of the door, carved and brightly painted with leering faces of strange beings, stacked one atop the other. Dareon had no idea from what culture they had sprung, and had never seen their like. He made a cursory inspection of the two outdoor table displays of merchandise. They were interesting, but not extraordinary. The inside of the shop was another matter.

A large irregularly shaped room was filled with a dizzying number of exotic objects, and like the wooden icons, the origin of many was a mystery. Ornate lamps, colorful banners, and parchments with strange symbols hung from the ceiling. Shelves of charms, statues, trinkets, puzzle boxes, ritualistic devices, and objects of unknown purpose filled the shelves that lined the walls. Statuary of wood, brass, copper, ivory, marble, and other substances that depicted gods, demigods and other supernatural beings (some of which Dareon could not identify) crowded the shop. The smells of cedar and spices were pervasive.

Dareon wove through the maze of merchandise, drawn for some reason to the center of the shop, and came to a railing looking over a lower level, from which emanated a blue glow. A spiral staircase led down to a round room lit from the center by a blue-shaded lamp, and filled with small silver statues that sat atop terraced shelves along the wall. A velvet rope cordoned off the stairs at the top.

Dareon looked around for a sign of the proprietor, but he seemed to be the only person in the shop. He listened, but heard only the tinkle of chimes and the ticking of time devices.

He unhooked the rope, and trod the stairs quietly as a cat. Halfway down, he had to tread *over* one: a shorthaired golden cat with a black face, and eyes that shone as blue as the lamp below.

“Hello, puss. Nice puss,” whispered Dareon. “Are you the proprietor or the mere guardian of the place?”

A bold voice came from above that almost made Dareon leap off the stairs.

“Zazar is the guardian of the place, though I assure you there is nothing ‘mere’ about him.”

Dareon looked up to see a round well-fed man leaning over the rail, a man Dareon would have cast in a play as the exotic curio shop owner. Even the wardrobe was perfect, from the pointed slippers up to the odd cap that squared at the top and, perhaps the best touch of all, strange square blue-tinted glasses that bridged his small pudgy nose.

Dareon grinned. “Forgive me for—”

“There is nothing to forgive, my friend,” said the proprietor, holding up his hand. “You have proved yourself a man of incredible perception, undoubtable taste, admirable curiosity, and unstoppable determination. These are qualities to be praised, not rebuked. You perceived the objects of highest value and greatest quality, and were drawn to them like a moth to the flame.”

Dareon glanced down at the small statues, then back up at the proprietor who was now making his way down the stairs with a small bowl in his hand.

“I am Ravel Nebelnezar, the proud owner of this shop, at your service.” The man bowed. Dareon gave him a polite nod.

“Let us not tarry on the stairs,” said Ravel. “Wonders of artistic wizardry await below.” He waved Dareon forward.

“After you, my good man,” said Dareon, stepping aside.

“Ah, most kind,” said Ravel, who proceeded down the stairs with Dareon close behind.

At the bottom of the stairs Ravel held out the bowl to Dareon. “Would you care for a fig, fresh off a caravan from Khulan?”

“Thank you,” said Dareon. He took one of the figs and then pointed to one of the statues behind Ravel. “That one is most remarkable!”

As Ravel turned to look, Dareon deftly replaced the fig in the bowl and pretended to chew as Ravel spoke.

“Ah, yes, you mean the priest of Zell. A tall imposing figure and a fine representation of his order. Behold the detail in the gaunt cheeks, and the long, bristling eyebrows.”

Dareon nodded abstractedly. But then, when he actually looked closely at the statue, he was indeed amazed at the subtlety and amount of detail.

“Extraordinary,” said Dareon, peering closely.

“Have you ever seen their like, my lean perceptive friend? Ever, in all the wide world of Plemora?”

“Indeed not,” said Dareon. “In fact, I have noticed several objects in this shop that lie outside the realm of my considerable worldly experience.” He now perused the statues

with real interest, but at the same time, his mind was working on how to find out if Blue had in fact been in the shop without asking the proprietor directly. Shop owners have many reasons for withholding information from strangers, especially about their customers. And if the Indari were the victim of foul play, and this man somehow involved...

Dareon peered closely at several of the statues, admiring their precise detail and uncanny presence. They possessed an almost living character. He saw peoples from Corandor, Skar, Zemba, Mandagor, almost every region of Plemora represented in various dress, ages, and body types. One race that seemed absent was the Indari people, and Dareon saw his chance to broach the subject of Blue without giving away his purpose.

"I don't see—" Dareon stopped. His eyes fell upon a statue off to his right. It depicted a longhaired man reaching for the sword hanging at his side. He moved closer and saw the designs upon the statue's body, representing the tattoos of an Indari warrior. But he would not even have needed to see those, for the man's features were captured in unbelievable accuracy. There was no doubt in Dareon's mind. It was a statue of Blue.

"You don't see what?" asked Ravel.

"I don't see how the artist is able to capture such detail. Even the tattoos on this Indari warrior are authentically depicted. And the facial expression? Fantastic! I would think the artist would have to use a live model to capture such realism."

"Ah, but that is a trade secret, my friend," said Ravel with a sly wink.

Dareon gave a conspiratorial smile and winked back. "How long have you had this Indari warrior?"

"He is my latest acquisition," said Ravel, setting the bowl of figs down on one of the shelves to gingerly pick up the statue and display it for Dareon's perusal. "New, very new. In fact, only yesterday he joined the esteemed ranks you see around you."

"And the cost?" asked Dareon.

"I would usually be loathe to let such a new piece go for anything but an exorbitant price, but for you, a person of such perception and taste, I would consider handing over this exquisite find for a mere—"

The price was exorbitant, although probably worth it. But Dareon wasn't here to buy anything except information, and he had a strong feeling the proprietor wouldn't sell. He had an even stronger feeling that this fat man was behind his companion's disappearance, or knew something of it.

"Hmm," said Dareon. "A fair offer." As he pretended to mull it over, he noticed as if for the first time the strange lighting choice for the room. He directed his attention to the lamp.

"How much for this wonderful blue lamp?" asked Dareon.

The proprietor stared at Dareon for a moment, as if in thought. "Ah, the lamp," he said, as he set the statue of Blue back in its place. "The lamp is very special, and holds many wonders. You are interested in purchasing it?"

"Indeed," said Dareon, narrowing his eyes to try to peer through the blue screen covering the lamp. He saw a bright central glow in the center and, surrounding it, tiny secondary lights that moved about like fireflies, or, like moths too close to a flame.

"The lamp itself is not, in fact, blue," said Ravel. "The blue shade is there to actually lessen the beauty of the illumination, which is almost too dazzling to behold in its naked

form. Before you would think of purchasing, surely you would wish to first observe its true radiance. Do you wish to see?"

Eagerness in the man's tone gave Dareon pause. Or was it in his eyes, seen through those odd blue lenses? Then Dareon noticed the color similarity between the lampshade and the man's glasses.

"Indeed, I would very much like to see," said Dareon.

Ravel reached over to lift the screen from around the lamp.

"But first, my kindly proprietor," said Dareon, who had drawn his rapier, and was touching its point to the man's side. "You will hand over those curious blue lenses. Then you shall lift the screen, and I shall observe through your lenses, and you shall behold with your naked eye."

Dareon noticed that the man's sudden alarm was not from his rapier as much as from his request. Ravel did not turn toward him, but Dareon could sense his fear.

"But, whatever is the meaning of this, sir?" stuttered Ravel. "You wish to rob me of my glasses?"

"Not at all," said Dareon. "As soon as we gaze at the wonder of your lamp, you shall replace the screen, and I shall give you back your lenses. It's as simple as that."

Ravel moved to lift the screen.

"Ah-ah!" said Dareon, as he jabbed his point through the merchant's vest, pricking the skin. Ravel winced in pain. "Do as I say or I'll run you through like a frog on a spit."

"Very well, very well," said Ravel, drawing his hands back from the lampshade. "Please, do not harm me. I will give you the glasses if you wish. I do not understand the request, but..." Ravel reached up toward his face.

Dareon was startled by the sound of the cat hissing on the stairs behind him. With surprising quickness, Ravel knocked Dareon's blade aside and leapt away to put the center table between them.

"Zazar! Attend!" cried Ravel.

Dareon moved around the table toward Ravel, and then stopped and turned as he saw something leap down from the stairs above.

It was the cat. But the cat was now as tall as a man, and held in its right manlike paw a deadly looking blade.

Dareon gaped. "Hello, puss. Nice puss," he said, as he leveled his rapier at the beast.

"Destroy him!" yelled Ravel.

Blue stood in a wide expanse of tall cerulean grass. Several people were in the field, some quite distant, the nearest about one hundred yards away. They seemed to be walking about aimlessly.

Above him was a featureless sky, devoid even of a sun, yet light shone down evenly from all directions and tinted everything in shades of blue. No wind stirred the grass. No birds flew in sight, and no insects could be seen or heard. The entire world seemed to be only ground and grass and sky.

He turned around, and was startled by the sight of a fabulous palace that rose up from a single hill about half a mile away. It was strangely shaped, with a bulbous dome in the center and several flatter sections on the periphery. In fact, it resembled a giant flower. Surrounding the hill were dark trees, which grew more sparsely as the distance from the hill increased until they disappeared and left only the endless grass.

Was he dead? Was this the afterlife? Blue tried to understand how he had gotten here. The last thing he could remember was becoming irritated by Dareon and walking out of their house. But then, where had he gone? On that point, his mind was blank.

Blue felt drawn to the palace, but decided to first seek answers from one of the people inhabiting the field. He approached the nearest one, which, strangely enough, was an old Zembian tribesman. The black-skinned man looked up at Blue, unalarmed. In fact, he did not seem very interested. The man simply walked back and forth, staring down at the grass or glancing up at the perfect sky.

“Greetings,” said Blue in the Amerin tongue, the most common language of Plemora.

The man looked at him as if he did not comprehend. Blue tried again. The man mumbled some words in an unknown dialect, and continued pacing back and forth.

Blue headed for the next nearest person, several hundred feet away. As he drew near, he saw it was a woman, probably from Khulan, judging by her dress and her light brown skin.

“Excuse me, madam,” said Blue.

The woman looked up with mild surprise, as if she had been lost in her thoughts. Blue was about to speak again when he was struck by a feeling of familiarity. Her appearance was that of a dancer. She wore a metal circlet around her wavy black hair, ornamentation, and several thin layers of silk upon her lithe form.

“Your pardon,” said Blue. “You seem familiar to me.”

The woman narrowed her eyes at him and took a step backward.

“Do not be alarmed,” said Blue. “I mean you no harm. I simply wanted to ask you, strange as it may sound, if you know where we are.”

The woman’s expression relaxed. “Ah,” she said. “You are new to this place.”

“Yes.”

“You are an Indari, are you not?” asked the woman as her gaze flitted over his tattooed muscular form.

“I am. And you are Khulanese? A dancer, perhaps?”

“Yes,” she said, and smiled. “But no longer. There is nowhere to dance, no music to dance to, and no one to dance for. Now I only stand or walk or sit down or lie down, though there is no need to sleep.”

“No need to sleep?” asked Blue.

“I have been here for weeks, perhaps months—it is impossible to tell with no sun—and have grown neither weary nor hungry.”

“Are we in some kind of limbo?” asked Blue.

“I am a dancer, not a philosopher,” said the woman, and she stared again at his fine form with curiosity. “I have never seen one of the Indari before.”

Suddenly, her expression triggered Blue’s memory.

“I know where I saw you!” said Blue.

“You do?” asked the woman.

“I have seen your perfect likeness on a small silver statue in an emporium in Merth.” Blue’s brows furrowed in concentration. “The emporium of Ravel Nebelnezar at the end of Curiosity Lane.”

Then he remembered all: the blue lamp, the uncovering of the shade, and then...

“On a statue?” asked the woman. “How strange. I never posed for a statue. But the name is familiar to me. Yes! Ravel Nebelnezar. He was a merchant in Khulan who had an extraordinary lamp he wished to show me.”

“He removed the blue shade and you suddenly found yourself here.”

“Yes!” The woman was now alive with energy and emotion. “But how? Why?”

“That I do not know,” said Blue. “It may have something to do with those statues.” He growled under his breath. “Perhaps there is one with my likeness now sitting on that bastard’s shelf.”

Then Blue realized that would at least provide some clue for Dareon if Dareon were looking for him, which was, admittedly, highly unlikely. Why, even now, the selfish little rogue was probably fondling some barely-of-age strumpet (or two), composing some silly poem, or drinking himself senseless in some tavern, without even a thought to Blue’s whereabouts or wellbeing.

Dareon parried another lighting thrust by Zazar, saving his own life by a hair’s breadth as the cat’s blade flashed by his neck. Going on the offensive was out of the question. Before he had a chance to launch any counterattacks, the cat would strike again, keeping him constantly off-balance with its superior speed and agility. Dareon deemed himself probably the best swordsman in Merth, and definitely the quickest. But that was taking into account only human competitors. The cat had the ferocity of a feline predator combined with a fencing technique as fine as any Dareon had ever seen. The closest match to Zazar that he had fought among humans was his comrade Blue. That had ended in a draw. And the cat was faster.

Ravel Nebelnezar had leapt up to the safety of the stairs, and stood watching in silent expectation. No doubt he believed it was simply a matter of time before Zazar dispatched Dareon, and Dareon knew he would have been correct. So, while fending off Zazar’s savage attacks, Dareon’s eyes flitted about for some solution, and his mind worked furiously.

Escape was impossible. The cat was too fast for him to flee up the stairs, which were also blocked by Ravel. Dareon wished he knew a spell that could summon an equally large dog swordsman to engage the puss, or had on his belt a potent tube of powdered catnip with which to blast him. But the only items in the room were the statues, and the table, and the shaded lamp, and a bowl of figs. He eliminated all but the lamp as useless.

Just then, one of Zazar’s thrusts sliced through Dareon’s shirt and grazed his ribs. Dareon grunted and skipped back around the table, but the cat was immediately upon him. He was beginning to tire. Zazar’s attacks were as vigorous as when they’d begun, which seemed an hour ago, but was in reality only a few minutes. He knew he wouldn’t last much longer, so he had no choice.

Dareon didn’t know what the sight of the unshaded lamp would do to him, but he could only hope that it would have the same effect on Zazar. In fact, he was about to bet his life on it.

“My name is Malika,” said the Khulanese dancer.

“I am called Blue.”

“Is that not a strange name for an Indari?” said Malika.

“A nickname, given to me by...a friend. Have you gone to the palace?”



“No. I have watched many wander there, and have spoken with some who returned. They said they were not permitted to enter.”

“Not permitted? By whom?” asked Blue.

“There are said to be guardians and obstacles.”

“And some have not returned?”

“None who have reached the dome have returned.”

“Does anyone know who dwells there?” asked Blue.

“None that I have spoken with,” said Malika.

Blue gazed out across the grasslands, away from the palace. “Have you explored the land beyond?” he asked, nodding toward the blue horizon.

“I once walked until I was so far from the palace that it was no longer in sight. The grassland continued for some time. Then it stopped abruptly and there was nothing.”

“Nothing?” asked Blue.

“Only a blue-gray featureless expanse, devoid of life, movement, sound, or smell.”

“Odd,” said Blue.

“Perhaps it is, as you said, some kind of limbo.”

“And this, some kind of strange oasis,” said Blue. “It seems the only place I will find answers is in that palace.”

“I will go with you,” said Malika.

Blue shook his head. “Better stay here.”

“I have some stake in this too,” she said, with some fire in her voice. “I am not afraid.” She drew a small curved knife that was hidden in her belt.

Blue raised an eyebrow. “You aren’t, are you? Well, I can’t stop you from coming. But do as I tell you or we could both end up dead.”

“Could we? In this place? At times, I have thought it would be better.”

Blue frowned. “Perhaps. But for now, we stay alive. Yes?”

The woman nodded.

“Good. Can you keep up?”

“Of course. I am a dancer.”

“Then, let’s go,” said Blue, and he took off at a fast trot with Malika a few steps behind.

As they came closer to the palace, the trees rose up in increasing number and large moths with beautiful multicolored wings flitted about.

“Moths,” said Blue, slowing to a quick walking stride. Malika jogged to keep up with his long legs.

“Yes,” said Malika. “They seem to be the only living creatures here except for the people.”

“Plains of grass. A few trees. Moths. A palace. I see no sense in it.”

“Nor I,” said Malika.

They worked their way up the hill until they came to the small plateau at the top and approached one of the petal-like outer structures. It was composed of violet-blue material, with no sign of seams or creases or gaps, as if it were carved from one titanic piece of rock.

“It is hard to believe human hands made this,” said Malika.

Blue drew his longsword. They approached an arch in the middle of one of the outer structures, and paused at the threshold. A straight rounded tunnel went forward with light somehow filtering in, as if the stone were semi-transparent from the inside.

“Better draw that little knife of yours,” said Blue.

They walked through the entrance and down the tunnel, which ended in another archway about fifty yards ahead. They came to the arch and passed through, and were surprised to find themselves back outside at exactly the point they had entered.

“By Inda!” said Blue.

“The work of a sorcerer!” said Malika, fingering an amulet hanging from her neck.

“We’re obviously not welcome,” said Blue.

“As many have not been. Let us leave this place,” said Malika.

“Go if you want. I don’t give up that easily,” said Blue, and he headed back into the passage. Malika followed.

Again, they saw an archway straight ahead. Blue’s sharp senses confirmed something he had suspected earlier.

“Come on, girl!” said Blue, as he turned around and sprinted back for the archway through which they had just entered. He burst through the opening and found himself in a large empty asymmetrical chamber. A few seconds later, Malika was at his side.

“A clever idea. But how did it work?” asked Malika, breathlessly.

“When we first walked down the passage, I thought I sensed a subtle movement, but I wasn’t sure what it meant. The entire passage was turning a half-circle so that we ended up back where we began.”

“I wonder if this is just a test of our intelligence,” said Malika.

Blue stepped in front of Malika, and held her back with his arm as two shapes emerged and split off from the wall. Their forms were indefinite and unstable. Quickly they formed into the crude shapes of men.

“They have no faces!” said Malika.

Swords sprouted up from the hands of the blue men as they advanced.

“Stay behind me,” said Blue.

As the warriors drew near, Blue rushed at them with his blade. Before the first warrior could react, Blue struck him down with a slash, shearing through his upper torso. The blue man fell and seemed to die as a man would die, but there was no trace of blood or organs.

The other warrior swung at Blue. He parried and struck off the thing’s featureless head. It collapsed in a heap. Moments later, both bodies melted into the floor and disappeared.

“What were they?” asked Malika.

Blue noted his unstained blade. “Whatever they were, they weren’t very effective guards. Maybe we *are* being tested.”

In the wall ahead were three doors, and a word inscribed on each door. The word on the left door said, “Pleasure.” The center door said, “Freedom.” The third door said, “Danger.”

“Damn these games!” said Blue.

“Someone *is* testing us,” said Malika.

“More like toying with us.”

“Well, it seems there are only two appealing choices,” said Malika. “Who would

willingly choose danger?”

“I might,” said Blue.

“But freedom is what we’re after, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but what is this door offering? Freedom from what?”

“I see your point. The meaning is not obvious,” said Malika.

“And, pleasure is all well and good, but where will that get us?”

“It could mean the pleasure of being sent home,” said Malika.

“Or the pleasure felt by something waiting inside when it kills us. My instinct tells me to choose danger, because that’s what we’re facing to reach the dome.”

“What’s to stop us from opening all three?” asked Malika.

Blue glanced at her. “Something will, no doubt. But it’s a good point.”

“I think we should try pleasure first. Despite what you said, it seems the most harmless.”

Blue grunted. “You open the pleasure door, and I’ll open the danger door at the same time.”

“Very well,” said Malika. She moved to the left door, drew her curved knife, and grasped the handle. Blue moved to the door on the right and did the same. He nodded to her and they pulled the doors open.

Inside, Blue saw a very short hallway with another door. Inscribed on the wall above were the words, “Enter and close the door behind you.”

Blue snorted. “So that’s it.” He told Malika what he saw, and she saw the same through her door.

“No doubt when we enter and shut the door, it will lock,” said Blue, “and we’ll have no choice but to face our fate.”

Malika narrowed her eyes. “This is the cruelty of a sick childish mind.”

“I’m tired of these games, but I’m not going back to wander around in a field of grass forever. I’m going through the danger door. You can try to go back if you wish.”

Malika shook her head.

Blue motioned her in. He followed after and shut the door behind him. It locked as he had guessed. Then he raised his sword, pulled open the next door, and stepped back.

Before them was another hallway with stairs at the end leading up. They moved down the passage and up the stairs, which led to an alcove with another arched doorway. Blue led the way as they went through. They had reached the dome.

“Your choice was correct,” said Malika.

“It got us here. Whether or not that was the right choice, we’ll soon see.”

The dome was two hundred feet wide, and its walls curved outward and rose over a hundred feet before curving slightly inward and opening up to the sky. The space was empty except for a large throne in the middle set atop a circular dais surrounded by steps.

On the throne sat a tall woman with large velvety wings like those of a moth, covered in fantastic patterns of brilliant hue. The blue light did not seem to affect the color of her appearance. As they came closer, they saw she was naked, and her skin was a lustrous gold. Feathery antennae rose from amidst her sparkling golden curly hair. She looked at them with her large solid green eyes, unblinking, and her small mouth was expressionless.

“Who are you?” asked Blue.

“The fighter and the dancer,” said the moth-woman in a high-piping voice, ignoring

his question. “Fighter, fight! Dancer, dance!”

Malika screamed.

Blue turned. The dancer was leaping through the air. Wherever she landed, a blue snake erupted from the floor nearby and struck at her feet, forcing her into a wild caper.

Blue tried to slash at the snakes when they appeared, but they sprang up on the other side of Malika so that he was unable to strike without hitting her. Then he heard a sound behind him and spun around.

This time, four featureless warriors materialized, sprouting up from the stone like flowers. They assailed Blue with swords and spears. He charged at the nearest and cut it down. Then he was harried from all sides, and leapt about like a cat to protect his flank, parrying thrusts and slashes of their weapons. They kept him off-balance, but he was able to avoid their attacks until, finally, he thrust one of them through. With a burst of savage rage, he pressed his attack, and seconds later all of the warriors had fallen, their bodies melting back into the floor.

Blue turned to see Malika still dancing to avoid the snakes. He was about to grab her up in his arms and flee the palace. Then he realized that all of the exits had vanished.

A sound brought him round again. A lone blue warrior rose up from the floor, but this one grew until it was twenty feet tall with a giant axe in its hands. It strode forward, raised the axe, and swung down toward Blue. He dove to the side to avoid the strike, and rolled back up to his feet. The axe buried itself in the floor. As the giant warrior pulled it free, Blue jumped forward and hewed its wrist with his longsword, half-severing it. The creature let go of the axe handle and stumbled back. Blue swung his sword behind his back with two hands, and hurled it overhead in a spinning arc of steel that caught the giant full in the stomach. It fell backward and crashed to the floor, and shattered like glass.

Blue drew his hunting knife, pivoted, and whipped it with all his strength at the moth-woman on the throne. The blade flashed across the room and stopped in mid-air, two feet away from her. A smile appeared on the moth-woman’s face. Then the knife vanished and appeared back in the Indari’s hand.

“Throw harder, barbarian,” she said.

“Why are you doing this? We only came here for answers!” shouted Blue. Movement toward his right caught his eye and he turned to see the pieces of the giant coalesce into eight more warriors of normal size. They marched forward with swords raised.

Blue snarled and backed away. Then suddenly, he stopped, took a deep breath, exhaled, and stood upright. He sheathed his knife and turned to the moth-woman.

“I’ll no longer fight for your amusement. It’s obvious you can kill us any time you want. Go on, then.” He mouthed a quick prayer to his god Inda, then stood tall with his hands at his sides, and stared straight ahead with a calm expression on his tattooed face.

The eight warriors surrounded him. They drew back their swords. Blue stood still, unblinking. They thrust their swords at him. Suddenly, they were gone.

Blue breathed a sigh of relief, and turned to the moth-woman on the throne.

“They were only illusions?” he asked.

“They were as solid as you,” she said, smiling. “Or perhaps I should say, you are no more solid than they.”

Malika appeared at Blue’s side, trying to catch her breath. She clasped his arm.

“Are you unhurt?” he asked.

She nodded.

“What are you saying? We’re not really here?” Blue asked the moth-woman.

“The essence of what you are is here,” she said. “Your physical existence is back in your world in the form of a statue.”

“Why did you attack us?” asked Blue.

“I sought only to amuse myself, to pass the endless time in this prison.”

“Prison?” said Malika. “Is this not your palace?”

“All that you see, the palace, the trees and grass and moths, I created these things to have a semblance of life in this dimension. The merchant sorcerer, Ravel Nebelnezar, that thief and kidnapper and worse, trapped me in a magical crystal with a powerful spell, and stole me from my world. I am Thara Jin Tual, and in my dimension, I am a queen, worshipped as a goddess. My life essence is so compelling and potent that mortals from your world who behold it are drawn to its power, and your souls are pulled into the world of the crystal, leaving your physical essence behind.

“And Nebelnezar then sells these statues for profit,” said Blue.

“I care not of that,” said Thara Jin Tual. “I only care to be free, to wreak my vengeance on Ravel Nebelnezar, and return home.”

“Why did you let us in and not others?” asked Malika.

“You passed certain tests, proving you would be amusing. You, Indari, are most unique. A wild animal at heart, yet you possessed the insight to perceive the truth of the situation, and face it without fear.”

“I was afraid,” said Blue.

“Not lack of fear, then, but courage; something far greater. And even among your people, I see that you are special. The symbols on your body tell a grand tale.”

“You understand the symbols?” asked Blue, stepping forward.

“You do not?” asked Thara Jin Tual.

“Like all Indari at the edge of adulthood, I ate the Mara root and walked into the wild, returning after the visions ceased. I drew the things I had seen in my vision quest, and the elders painted the secret story of my life upon my skin. But none can interpret it by sight alone. It is said the wisdom of our body can read the symbols and guide us on the correct path. Will you tell me what they mean?”

Thara Jin Tual was silent for a moment. Then she smiled. “It is not my place to tell you these things. I will only say that you will become a great adventurer.”

Blue frowned. “I have no desire for fame.”

Thara Jin Tual laughed, and it was like the piping of musical instruments.

“Trrrrrrllleee! Trrrrrrllllllaaa! Those who are truly great seldom gain fame.”

“Will you tell me nothing else?” asked Blue.

“Only one other thing. Your fate is intertwined with that of the man called Dareon Vin.”

Blue snorted. “I’m done with him. It is folly to bind my fate with someone who cares little for anything but himself.”

“Is that so?” said Thara Jin Tual. She stared into the air above them. “I can see him, even now, in the room of the lamp, in the shop of Ravel Nebelnezar. Your friend Dareon fights for his very life in order to save you.”

Dareon could think of no other way to defeat the cat. But he had to remove the shade without breaking the lamp, for he still did not know what had happened to Blue. If the lamp were broken, Blue might be lost forever.

Zazar made another slash. Instead of parrying, Dareon ducked and rolled across the floor to his right, sprang up, and jabbed the blue shade through with his rapier. Zazar pounced over the edge of the table at Dareon with his sword raised to strike. Dareon had only an instant to make one quick movement. As Zazar's blade whipped down in a silver arc toward his head, it took all of Dareon's courage and will not to parry or dodge. Instead, he closed his eyes and flipped the shade off the lamp, tossing his rapier away in the act.

Dareon gritted his teeth, waiting to feel the bite of Zazar's blade. But it never came. He opened his eyes. The cat was gone.

"No! Zazar!" cried Ravel.

With a triumphant sense of relief, Dareon drew his dagger, careful to keep his eyes averted from the lamp, and bounded up the stairs after the fleeing proprietor. Before Ravel reached the top, Dareon's dagger was set across his fat jowls.

"Now, my good shopkeep, I will take those glasses, if you don't mind." Dareon reached up to Ravel's face and the merchant grabbed his arm to resist.

"No!" whimpered Ravel.

Dareon increased the pressure of the dagger. "I'll slit your throat like a pig if you don't stop squirming." Ravel ceased his struggle. Dareon removed the glasses and placed them carefully on his face. He grimaced and turned his head down to look at the lamp below. All he saw was a crystal sphere with a bright light in the center and many smaller lights hovering around it.

"Come, now. Down the stairs," said Dareon.

He forced Ravel before him, and could tell by the way Ravel walked and gripped the rail that the man had his eyes shut. When they reached the bottom, Dareon moved him to the edge of the table in front of the lamp.

"What happened to my friend, the Indari?" asked Dareon.

"I know nothing about your friend," said Ravel. "Release me. I have gold, if that is what you wish."

"Oh, I'm sure you do—gold from selling these statues. And how exactly are they made?" Dareon noticed a statue of Zazar next to the lamp, posed in a leap with sword raised above his head.

"So, they're turned into statues. Is that it?" asked Dareon. "How do I turn the Indari back?"

"There is no way. He is gone, like the others," said Ravel. "There is nothing you can do. Therefore, be wise and leave here with a bagful of gold. Only release me, and I will fetch it, and forget that you ever came to the shop."

"I wouldn't sell my friend for ten bags of gold, even if I trusted you. No doubt you have other 'amenities' like Zazar waiting for me in your shop. Now. How do I bring my friend back?"

"You cannot, I tell you. You cannot! He is gone!"

"Very well, then. You'll share his fate," said Dareon. He reached over Ravel's head with his free hand and began to force the merchant's eyelids open.

"No! No!" cried Ravel, clutching Dareon's hand. Dareon wondered what terrified the

shopkeeper so that he would rather have his throat slit than gaze into the lamp, and Dareon's anger and malice swelled, thinking to what horrible fate Ravel had consigned Blue.

"By all the worlds, no!" screamed Ravel, becoming hysterical. "I will be trapped with her! She will torment me forever!"

Despite Ravel's desperate resistance, Dareon finally managed to pry the man's eyelids open. With a last desperate scream, Ravel kicked outward and knocked the lamp off the table. It tumbled over and crashed on the floor with an explosive shattering sound.

Numerous motes of light shot out in all directions toward the statues and up out of the room. Wherever a light touched a statue on the shelf, a person appeared. In seconds, the room was filled with people from various races and all corners of the world. They looked around, perplexed, as if woken from a deep sleep.

Ravel screamed and broke loose from Dareon's grasp. He let the shopkeeper go when he saw Blue standing across the room. Dareon waved and gave the Indari a relieved grin, then raised an inquisitive brow when he noticed a beautiful Khulanese dancer hugging Blue's arm. Blue glanced quickly at Malika, then smiled at Dareon and shrugged.

Ravel was halfway up the stairs. The man was in a panic, and Dareon guessed that the merchant feared the wrath of the people he had imprisoned in the lamp. But that was not what he feared.

As Dareon watched, the bright central light of the lamp rose upward and grew in size and intensity until it suddenly burst outward in a shower of luminance, momentarily blinding him and everyone in the room. When his vision cleared, he was astounded to see a tall, beautiful, golden-skinned woman with large crystal green eyes hovering in the middle of the room on gigantic multicolored wings resembling those of a moth.

Ravel had almost reached the top of the stairs. He turned as the moth-woman flew toward him, and he screamed in utter horror. His struggles were those of a madman, yet she somehow took him effortlessly in her arms, as if he were an infant. Then she wrapped her large wings around herself and the shopkeeper, and, in a flash of rainbow light and a last reverberating scream from Ravel, vanished from the world of Plemora.

In several homes in Merth, and in other cities throughout Plemora, small silver statues that had been purchased to decorate homes vanished, and in their place people appeared who had been missing for weeks, months and even years. The buyers of the statues were no less amazed than the former victims of Ravel Nebelnezar, some of whom had to travel far to return home or, lacking the means, made a new home in the country in which they found themselves.

Ravel Nebelnezar and Thara Jin Tual were gone, presumably back to the moth-queen's dimension, where she would reclaim her place as ruling goddess, and the unscrupulous merchant sorcerer would suffer for his abduction of her in imaginatively horrific ways.

Dareon and Blue's bond of friendship was strengthened considerably. Blue's firm belief about Dareon's narcissism was cast slightly in doubt, not to mention the fact that he owed Dareon his life (Dareon owed him the same at least once, but who was counting?). Dareon, aware that he could be exasperating, did his best to tone down his own more abrasive behaviors, at least for a time.

As for Zazar, he had reappeared in the shop along with the other victims of the lamp, but, inexplicably, as a normal cat. Dareon could not account for this. Perhaps a domestic cat was Zazar's true form. Dareon tried talking to him, even using the words, "Zazar, attend!" but received only a meow, and strange looks from Blue and Malika, who had yet to hear Dareon's tale.

Malika decided to stay in Merth for a time, and promised to meet Blue for a drink the next evening.

"Do you have a place to stay?" asked Dareon.

"Thank you. I can take care of myself," said Malika. "Until tonight then, Blue. Dareon."

Dareon could have sworn she added his name as an afterthought, and with a tone that hinted at suspicion, and even possibly dislike! He was deeply wounded. Well, not really.

"She said she can take care of herself," said Blue. "She can."

They walked several paces behind her as they headed back toward their apartment. Zazar was nestled comfortably in Blue's muscular arms.

"Why don't we keep him?" asked Blue. He stroked Zazar, and the cat purred and dug his claws lovingly into the Indari's tattooed skin.

"Are you kidding?" asked Dareon. "With our lifestyle?"

"True," said Blue. "We do tend to go off on unexpected adventures. But surely we should take him in at least until we find him another home."

Dareon failed to answer, mesmerized by the movement of Malika's hips. Blue elbowed him.

Dareon snorted. "I almost get killed saving your life and you get the girl. What do I get?"

"Here," said Blue, handing Zazar over to Dareon. "But, beware. He has some formidable claws."

Dareon grimaced as he reluctantly took the cat. "It's not his claws I'm worried about."