



FOR THE FORTY-NINTH ANNUAL CONVENTION OF THE SOCIETY OF AMERICAN GARDENERS

# KING KOBOLD REVIVED

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Completely revised by the author,  
with new photos and  
illustrations.



# Warlock 03 - King Kobold Revived

By

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## TO MY READERS

This isn't a new book.

But it isn't an old book, either.

Let me tell you how it happened...

Back in 1970, when *King Kobold* was first published, I waited with bated breath to see what the critics thought of it—and was rather disheartened to find they weren't exactly overwhelmingly enthusiastic. That's when I decided I shouldn't pay too much attention to the critics.

Unfortunately, I couldn't ignore Lester del Rey. I had always admired his perspicacity and penetrating insight (i.e., he always agreed with my opinion about new books. Please understand that, at the time, I had never met him.). When del Rey said, "It isn't a bad book, if you don't expect too much of the evening spent with it," I knew I was in trouble. Worse, letters began arriving—and they agreed with del Rey! And though del

Rey had been gentle and charitable, the fans felt no such need for restraint.

So, when the good people at Ace indicated an interest in reissuing King Kobold, I said, “Not until I rewrite it!”

Please remember, I’d had twelve years to mull over the flaws of the original, and figure out how to fix them. There were some changes that I knew I definitely wanted to make, and quite a few others that I was thinking about.

So the book you hold in your hand is not the product of a publisher who tried to jazz things up to hype sales; it’s the result of a mulish writer who refused to go through having fans call him nasty names again. If you bought the original King Kobold fourteen years ago and misplaced your copy—sorry, this ain’t quite the same book you read back then. And, if you never did read King Kobold (an offense I will overlook only if you were too young to read), this ain’t the plot you’ve been hearing about. Better, I hope, but not the same. If your favorite scenes are missing—well, sorry. Or, worse yet, your favorite character—well, I’m even sorrier; but I just don’t think he really worked (not “she”—she was a total nonentity, and I don’t see how anybody could miss her—except maybe “him”). All in all, I’m pretty satisfied with this revised version; it’s still essentially the same story, but I think it’s much more solid, and a much better read (all right, so I haven’t cut out all the lousy jokes). Besides, if you really liked it better the other way—well, there’s always the original edition. You’ll have to search a little to find a copy, but if you’d rather read it, you can.

Thank you all, for pestering your bookstores for King Kobold, and bringing it out of hiding again. Here it is, the same story—what happened to Rod and Gwen when they’d only been married a few years, and only had one baby warlock to contend with. I hope you enjoy it. I did.

—Christopher Stasheff

Montclair State College

October 4, 1983

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Prologue

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“Sorrowful it was, and great cause for Mourning, that so young a King should die, and that in his Bed; yet Death doth come to all, yea, the High and the lowly alike, and ‘tis not by our choosing, but by God’s. Thus it was that King Richard was taken from us in the fourteenth year of his Reign, though he had not yet seen forty-five summers; and great lamentation passed through the land. Yet must Life endure, and the motion of it never doth cease, so that we laid him to rest with his ancestors, and turned our faces toward our new Sovereign, his daughter Catharine, first Queen of that name to Reign, though it had been scarcely twenty years since her birth.

“Then the Lords of this land of Gramarye sat them down in Council, and rose up to advise the young Queen of her actions, and at their head stood the Duke Loguire, time-honored and revered, foremost of the Lords of this Land, and Uncle to the Queen. Yet she would not hearken to him, nor to any of her Lords, but set her face toward the doing of things as she saw them, and would not heed Council. And what she wished done, she set in the hands of the Dwarf Brom O’Berin, who had come to the Court as her father’s Jester, but King Richard had raised him to Chancellor; and Queen Catharine ennobled him. This did affront all the Peers of the Land, that she should set a Dwarf in their midst, and he baseborn, for she would trust none among them.

“Then did Loguire send his younger son Tuan, who long had courted Catharine ere her Father died, to beg of her that she plight him her Troth, and come with him to the Altar to become his Wife. And she called this foul treason, that he should seek the Crown under guise of her Hand, and banished him from the land, and set him adrift in a coracle, that the East wind might take him to the Wild Lands, to dwell among Monsters and Beastmen, though all of his crime was the love of her. Then was his father full wroth, and all the Lords with him; but Loguire held his hand, and so, perforce, must they all; but Tuan his son swam back to the shore, and stole within the Land again, by night, and would not be exiled.

“Then did Catharine the Queen meet with her great Lords all, in her great Hall in Runnymede, and did say unto them, ‘Lo, it seemeth thou dost take boys from the plow, who know neither Letters nor Holiness, and doth set them above thy people as priests, that they may more certainly do thy bidding; and know that such practice doth offend the Lord God, and affronteth thy Queen; wherefore, henceforth, I shall appoint thee full measure of Priests, and send them unto thee; and I will not brook nay-saying.’ Then were the Lords wroth indeed, but Loguire held up his hand, and they checked. And it came to pass as the Queen had said, that the souls of her people were governed by monks that she sent out from Runnymede, though they did oftentimes confirm the priests the Lords had set over their Parishes; yet some among them had grown slack and, aye, even sinful; and these the Queen’s monks removed, and set others of their number up in their steads.

“Then did the Queen summon all her Lords unto her again, and did say unto them,

‘Lo, I have seen the Justice that is done on thine estates, both by thyselfes and by the Judges thou dost appoint; and I have seen that the manner of Justice thou dost deliver is not all of one piece; for Hapsburg in the East will hew off a man’s hand for the theft of a loaf of bread, while Loguire in the South will only outlaw a man for a Murder; and I have seen that my people grow restive therefore, and are like to forsake the ways of Law in their confusion. Therefore wilt thou no longer deliver thyselfes of Justice, nor set others to judge thy folk for thee; but all shall be judged by men that I shall send among thee, from my Court in Runnymede.’ Then all the Lords waxed wroth indeed, and would have haled her down from her Throne; but the Duke Loguire withheld them, and turned his face away from the Queen, and withdrew to his Estates, and so did they all; but some among them began to plot Treason, and Loguire’s eldest son Anselm made one of them.

“Then, of a night, thunder did roll and fill all the World, though the skies were clear, and the Moon bright and full, and folk looked up and wondered, and did see a star fall from the Heavens, and they turned away marveling, and praying that it might prove an Omen, heralding the healing of their Land of Gramarye, as indeed it did; for the Star fell to land, and from it stepped the High Warlock, Rod Gallowglass, tall among the sons of men, high of brow, noble of mien, with a heart of golden courage and thews of steel, merciful to all, but stern in justice, with a mind like sunlight caught in crystal, that clearly understood all the actions of all men, and his face was comely above all others.

“He came unto the Queen, but she knew him not, and thought him only one among her soldiers; yet there was poison in the air about her, and he knew it, and did banish it; and thereupon she knew him. And she sent him to the South, to guard her Uncle, for she knew that Treason brewed, and not only toward herself. And the Warlock did as she bade him, and took with him, for a servant, the giant Tom. And they came unto Loguire secretly, under the guise of Minstrels, yet they had not been heard to sing. And there were ghosts within Loguire’s castle, and the High Warlock did befriend them.

“Then did Loguire summon all the Lords of the Realm, and they came to him at his castle in the South, that he might counsel them to withhold their power yet awhile; but being met, they brewed their Treason ‘gainst him.

“And there were witches in the land, and warlocks too; and word did go from mouth to mouth, the Rumor that speaks more loudly than the heralds, that the Queen had welcomed to her keep all witchfolk who did wish her protection, and there they held wild Revels through the night, for many were the Good Folk who had sought to burn them; and folk began to murmur that the Queen herself had something of witchcraft in her.

“And the High Warlock did befriend the witches, even Gwendylon, most powerful among them, and she was young, and comely, and he spoke to her of Love.

“And Lord Tuan came by night unto the town of Runnymede, that he might be near unto the Queen, though she despised him, and he came unto the beggars, and sought Sanctuary amongst them; and he taught them Governance, and they made him King among them. Yet the one among them whom Lord Tuan most trusted, he who held the purse and was called ‘the Mocker,’ bethought himself of Lord Tuan’s mock crown.

“Then, when all the Lords were met at Loguire’s demesne in the South, and Anselm with them, they did stand against Loguire’s face and refute his leadership, raising up young Anselm to the Dukedom in his father’s stead; and one Durer, erstwhile Loguire’s councillor, drew blade against him. Then did the High Warlock by High Magic snuff out all the lamps and torches, so that Loguire’s hall lay all in darkness, for his Hall lay underground, and had no windows. And the High Warlock conjured up the ghosts that dwelt within that keep, and they did pass amongst the folk within that hall, and all were sore afeared, aye, even those great Lords that there were met; and the Warlock stole the Duke Loguire away, and brought him secretly unto the Queen at Runnymede.

“Then did the Lords summon up their armies, and all did march against the Queen. But the High Warlock spake unto the Elves that dwelt within that land, and they did swear to fight beside him, and the Witches also. And the High Warlock called up young Tuan Loguire, and he marched forth with all his beggars; and thus they came to Breden Plain: a Queen, a Warlock, and a dwarf, with an army made of witches, elves, and beggars.

“Then, under the Sun, the Lords charged out in bold array, but their horses sank into the Earth, for elves had mined it; and they hurled their spears and arrows ‘gainst the Queen, but witches turned their shafts, and they fell back amongst the Armies of the Lords, and there did grievous harm. Then did Lord Tuan lead his beggars forth, and his father beside him, to finish what the witches had begun, and all the Field fell into melee. And the giant Tom rose up amidst that churning mass, and hewed a path unto the Lords and all their Councillors, and the beggars followed, and did beat down all those men-at-arms and Councillors, and made prisoners of the Lords; but the giant Tom did, in that carnage, perish, and the Warlock mourned him, and the beggars also.

“Then would the Queen have slain the Lords, or chained them into Servitude, but the Warlock spoke against it, and the Queen gazed upon his lowering brow, and knew fear. But Tuan Loguire stood beside her, and faced against the Warlock, and cried that all should be as the Queen had said; but the Warlock felled him with a most foul blow, and struck the Queen in remonstrance, and rode away upon his charmed steed, that no

mortal mount could near; yet Lord Tuan in his agony shot forth a bolt that struck the Warlock as he fled.

“Then did Queen Catharine cry Lord Tuan as the Staff of her strength and the Guard of her honor, and spoke to him of love, and gave him the Lords to do with as he wished. Then did Lord Tuan free them, but with their heirs as hostages, and he took their armies for the Crown. And he did take Queen Catharine unto the altar, and became our King thereby, and reigned with Catharine the Queen.

“But the Warlock sought out the witch Gwendylon, and she did draw Lord Tuan’s bolt from out him, and enchanted the wound so that it did no harm; and the Warlock spoke to her of love, and brought her to the altar.

“And the Lords went back to their demesnes, and there ruled Justly, for the King’s Eye was upon them, and all was peaceful in the land of Gramarye, and contentment returned unto its folk.

“So matters stood for two years and more, and men began to trust their Lords once more, and to look kindly upon their fellows again.

“Then the night wind blew wailing and keening from the southern shore, and the sounds of War...”

—Childe’s Chronicles of the Reign of Tuan and Catharine

“According to the records, the planet was colonized by a crackpot group who dressed up in armor and held tournaments for fun; they called themselves the ‘Romantic Émigrés.’ This kind of group acted as a selective mechanism, attracting people with latent psi powers. Put them all together on one planet and let them inbreed for a few centuries, and you get espers—which is what they’ve got here. Only a small percentage of the population, of course, but I have grounds for believing the rest are latents. They think they’re normal, though, and call the espers ‘witches’ if they’re female, and ‘warlocks’ if they’re male.

“What’s worse, there’s a native fungus that reacts to projective telepaths; the locals call it ‘witch moss,’ because if the right kind of ‘witch’ thinks hard at it, it turns into whatever she’s thinking about. So the ones who don’t know they’re witches sit around telling fairy tales to their children, and, first thing you know, the landscape is filled

with elves and ghosts and werewolves—I'll show you my bites sometime.

“In this agent’s humble opinion, the place is a communications gold mine and the answer to the prayers of our noble Decentralized Democratic Tribunal. A democracy can’t survive if its territory gets too big for the speed of its communications system, and the last projection I heard was that the DDT would hit critical size in about a hundred fifty years. If I can turn this planet into a democracy, it’ll have just what the DDT needs—instantaneous communication over any distance. All the guesswork I’ve read about telepathy says it’ll be instantaneous, regardless of distance, and what I’ve seen on this planet bears that out.

“But if the planet is vital to the success of democracy, it is equally vital for totalitarians and anarchists to keep it away from the democrats—and they’re trying to do just that. The totalitarians are represented by a proletarian organization called the House of Clovis, which is trying to organize all the beggars and petty criminals, and doing a pretty good job of it, too. The anarchists are working on the noblemen; each of the twelve Great Lords has a councillor who is, I’m pretty sure, one of the anarchists.

“Where have they come from? Well, they might just have sneaked in from off-planet—but I’ve found at least one gizmo that can’t be anything but a time machine, and I’ve got good reason to believe there’re more.

“What upsets me about the place is the uncertainty factor. Given the local genetic makeup, and the telepathically sensitive fungus, virtually anything could happen—which means that, if I wait long enough, it probably will...”

—Excerpt from Report on Beta Cassiopeiae Gamma (local name “Gramarye”), by Rodney d’Armand, Agent for Society for Conversion of Extraterrestrial Nascent Totalitarianisms

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## Chapter 1

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The heavy clinging fog lay dense, nearly opaque, over the heaving sea. The rolling, endless crash of breakers against the headlands at the harbor’s mouth came muted and distant.

High above, circling unseen, a bird called plaintive sentry cries.

The dragon shouldered out of the swirling mist, its beaked, arrogant head held high.

Four more like it loomed out of the fog at its back.

Round, bright-painted shields hung on their sides.

Oars speared out from the shields, lifting in unison and falling feathered to the waves.

The dragon's single wing was tightly furled around the crossbar lashed to the tall, single mast that thrust upward out of its back.

Squat, hulking, helmeted shapes prowled silently about the mast.

The dragon had an eagle's beak, and a tall, ribbed fin for a crest. Two long, straight horns probed out from its forehead.

The surf moaned on the shore as the dragon led its mates past the headland.

The child screamed, howling for his mother, thrashing himself into a tangle with the thick fur blanket.

Then the oil lamp was there, just a rag in a dish, but warm and safe, throwing its yellow glow upward on the mother's weary, gentle face.

She gathered the quivering, sobbing little body into her arms, murmuring, "There now, love, there. Mama's here. She won't let him hurt you."

She held the child tightly, rubbing his back until the sobbing ceased. "There now, Artur, there. What was it, darling?"

The child sniffled and lifted his head from her shoulder. "Bogeyman, Mama. Chasing me, and—he had a great big knife!"

Ethel's mouth firmed. She hugged the child and glared at the lamp-flame. "The

bogeymen are far across the sea, darling. They can't come here."

"But Carl says..."

"I know, I know. Carl's mama tells him the bogeyman will get him if he's bad. But that's just a silly story, darling, to frighten silly children. You're not silly, are you?"

Artur was silent a while; then he murmured into the folds of his mother's gown, "Uh... no, Mama..."

"Of course you're not." She patted his back, laid him down in the bed, and tucked the fur robe under his chin. "That's my brave boy. We both know the bogeyman can't hurt us, don't we?"

"Yes, Mama," the child said uncertainly.

"Sleep sweetly, darling," the mother said, and closed the door softly behind her.

The oil lamp set the shadows dancing softly on the walls. The child lay awake awhile, watching the slow ballet of light and dark.

He sighed, rolled over on his side. His eyes were closing as they strayed to the window.

A huge misshapen face peered in, the eyes small and gleaming, the nose a glob of flesh, the mouth a gash framing great square, yellowed teeth. Shaggy brown hair splayed out from a gleaming, winged helmet.

He grinned at the child, pig eyes dancing.

"Mama! Mamamamamamama! Bogeyman!"

The bogeyman snarled and broke through the stout wooden wall with three blows of a great ironbound club.

The child screamed and ran, yanking and straining at the heavy bedroom door.

The bogeyman clambered through the broken wall.

The door was flung wide; the mother stared in horror, clutching her child to her and screaming for her husband. She wheeled about and fled.

The bogeyman gave a deep, liquid chuckle, and followed.

In another cottage, a bogeyman seized a child by the ankles and swung his head against the wall. He lifted his huge club to fend off the father's sword, then whirled the club into the father's belly, swung it up to strike the father's temple. Bone splintered; blood flowed.

The mother backed away, screaming, as the beastman caught up the father's fallen sword. He turned to the mother, knocked her aside with a careless, backhand swipe of the club, and stove in the family strong-chest with one blow.

In the first cottage, the oil lamp, knocked aside in the beast-man's passage, licked at the oil spilled on walls and floor.

Other cottages were already ablaze.

Women and children ran screaming, with chuckling beast-men loping after them.

The men of the village caught up harpoons and axes, rallying to defend their wives and children.

The beastmen shattered their heads with ironbound cudgels, clove chests with great, razor-edged battle axes, and passed on, leaving dismembered bodies behind them.

Then drumming hooves and a troop of cavalry burst into the village; the fires had alerted the local baron. He sat now at the head of a score of horsemen drawn up in the beastmen's path.

"Fix lances!" he roared. "Charge!"

The beastmen chuckled.

Lances snapped down, heels kicked horsehide; the cavalry charged... and faltered, stumbled, halted, soldiers and horses alike staring at the beastmen for long, silent minutes.

Each beastman flicked his glance from one soldier to another, on to a third, then back to the first, holding each one's eyes for a fraction of a second.

Jaws gaped, eyes glazed all along the cavalry line. Lances slipped from nerveless fingers.

Slowly, the horses stepped forward, stumbled, and stepped again, their riders immobile, shoulders sagging, arms dangling.

The beastmen's little pig eyes glittered. Their grins widened, heads nodded in eager encouragement.

Step-stumble-step, the horses moved forward.

The beastmen shrieked victory as their clubs swung, caving in the horses' heads. Axes swung high and fell, biting deep into the riders. Blood fountained as men fell. Heads flew, bones crunched under great splayfeet, as the beastmen, chuckling, waded through the butchered cavalry to break in the door of the village storehouse.

The Count of Baicci, vassal to the Duke of Loguire, lay headless in the dirt, his blood pumping out to mingle with that of his cavalry before the thirsty soil claimed it.

And the women and children of the village, huddled together on the slopes above, stared slack-jawed at their burning houses, while the dragon ships, wallowing low in the waves with the weight of their booty, swung out past the bar.

And, as the long ships passed the headland, the wind blew the villagers an echo of bellowing laughter.

The word was brought to King Tuan Loguire at his capital in Runnymede; and the King waxed wroth.

The Queen waxed into a fury.

“Nay, then!” she stormed. “These devil’s spawn, they lay waste a village with fire and sword, slay the men and dishonor the women, and bear off the children for bondsmen, belike—and what wilt thou do, thou? Assuredly, thou wilt not revenge!”

She was barely out of her teens, and the King was scarce older; but he sat straight as a staff, his face grave and calm.

“What is the count of the dead?” he demanded.

“All the men of the village, Majesty,” answered the messenger, grief and horror just beneath the skin of his face. “A hundred and fifty. Fourteen of the women, and six babes. And twenty good horsemen, and the Count of Baicci.”

The Queen stared, horrified. “A hundred and fifty,” she murmured, “a hundred and fifty.”

Then, louder, “A hundred and fifty widowed in this one night! And babes, six babes slain!”

“God have mercy on their souls.” The King bowed his head.

“Aye, pray, man, pray!” the Queen snapped. “Whilst thy people lie broke and bleeding, thou dost pray!” She whirled on the messenger. “And rapine?”

“None,” said the messenger, bowing his head. “Praise the Lord, none.”

“None,” the Queen repeated, almost mechanically.

“None?” She spun on her husband. “What insult is this, that they scorn our women!”

“They feared the coming of more soldiers, mayhap...” the messenger muttered.

The Queen gave him all the scorn she could jam into one quick glance. “And ‘twere so, they would be lesser men than our breed; and ours are, Heaven knows, slight

enough.”

The messenger stiffened. The King’s face turned wooden.

He leaned back slowly, gaze fixed on the messenger. “Tell me, good fellow—how was it a whole troop of cavalry could not withstand these pirates?”

The Queen’s lip curled. “How else could it chance?”

The King sat immobile, waiting for the messenger’s answer.

“Sorcery, Majesty.” The messenger’s voice quavered. “Black, foul sorcery. The horsemen rode doomed, for their foes cast the Evil Eye upon them.”

Silence held the room. Even the Queen was speechless, for, on this remote planet, superstition had a disquieting tendency to become fact.

The King was the first to speak. He stirred in his throne, turned to the Lord Privy Councillor.

This meant he had to look down; for, though Brom O’Berin’s shoulders were as broad as the King’s, he stood scarcely two feet high.

“Brom,” said the King, “send forth five companies of the King’s Foot, one to each of the great lords whose holdings border the sea.”

“But one company to each!” the Queen fairly exploded. “Art thou so easily done, good mine husband? Canst thou spare but thus much of thy force?”

The King rose and turned to Sir Maris the Seneschal. “Sir Maris, do you bring forth three companies of the King’s Guard. The fourth shall bide here, for the guarding of Her Majesty Queen Catharine. Let the three companies assemble in the courtyard below within the hour, provisioned for long and hard riding.”

“My liege, I will,” said Sir Maris, bowing.

“And see that mine armor is readied.”

“Armor!” the Queen gasped. “Nay, nay, O mine husband. What wouldst thou do?”

“Why, what I must.” The King turned to her, catching her hands between his own. “I am King, and my people are threatened. I must ride to the wreck of this village and seek out the trail of these beastmen. Then must I build ships and follow them, if I may, to their homeland.”

“Oh, nay, good my lord!” Catharine cried, clinging to him. “Have we not men-at-arms enough in our armies but you also must ride forth to die? Oh, my lord, nay! What would I do if thou shouldst be—if thou shouldst take hurt?”

The King held her close for one moment, then held her away, tilted her chin, and kissed her lips gently. “Thou art Queen,” he said softly. “The brunt of this sorrow must thou bear; such is the office of Queens. Here in the place of power must thou bide, to care for our people while I ride. Thou must hazard thine husband for the good of thy people, as I must hazard my life—for such is the office of Kings.”

He held her close for a long, timeless while, then kissed her lingeringly. He straightened, her hands clasped between his, then turned to go.

An embarrassed cough stopped him.

He turned, frowning. “Art still in this place, Brom? I had thought...”

“My liege,” the dwarf interrupted, “what thou shalt command, I shall do—but wilt thou command nothing more?”

The King’s face darkened.

Brom’s voice was tight with determination. “If there is the Evil Eye in this, Majesty, ‘tis matter for witches.”

The King turned away, glowering, his lips pressed thin.

“Thou hast the right of it, Brom,” he admitted grudgingly. “Well enough, then, we

must. Send to the witches in the North Tower, Brom, directing them to summon”—his face twisted with dislike—“the High Warlock.”

The High Warlock was currently leaning his back against a tree trunk with his fundament firmly founded on terra firma, watching the sunrise with one eye and his wife with the other. Both were eminently worth watching.

The sun was splendor itself as it rose orange-gold out of the oiled green of the pine-tops into a rose-and-blue sky; but his flame-headed wife was all that was grace and loveliness, singing lightly as she sank her hands into the tub of dishwater beside the cooking-fire in the dry warmth of their cave home.

It wasn't just the domesticity that made her lovely, of course. Her long, loose red hair seemed to float about her, framing a round face with large, sea-green, long-lashed eyes, a snub nose, a wide mouth with full, tempting lips. Her figure was spectacular under the white peasant blouse and tight bodice and long, full, bright-colored skirt.

Of course, her figure was, at the moment, more a matter of inference than observation; but the Warlock had a good memory.

The memory was a little too good; his wife's beauty occasionally reminded him of his own—well, shall we say, plainness?

No, we should say ugliness—or, rather, homeliness; for there was something attractive about his face. He had the appeal that is common to overstuffed armchairs, old fireplaces, and potbellied stoves. Hounds and small children loved him on sight.

And by this quality he had won her (it would be, perhaps, more accurate to say that she had won him, after an extended battle with his inferiority complex); for if a beautiful woman is betrayed often enough, she will begin to value trustworthiness, warmth, and affection more than romance.

At least, she will if she is the kind of woman to whom love is the goal, and romance just the luxury; such a woman was Gwen.

Such a woman will eventually be capable of loving a man with a good heart, even though his face be a bargain assortment of inclined planes, hollows, and knobs in Expressionist juxtaposition; and such a man was Rod Gallowglass.

He had a receding hairline; a flat, sloping forehead; prominent bushy eyebrows; deep eye-sockets with a matched set of gray eyes; a blade of a nose; high, flat cheekbones; and a wide, thin-lipped mouth. The mouth kept a precarious perch on top of a square, jutting chin.

Nevertheless, she loved him, which fact was to Rod a miracle, a flagrant violation of all known laws of nature.

Not that he was about to object, of course.

He slid down onto the base of his spine, let his eyelids droop, and let the peace of the summer morning seep into him, lulling him into a doze.

Something struck his belly, knocking the wind out of him and jolting him wide awake. He jerked upright, knife in hand.

“Da-dee!” cooed the baby, looking enormously pleased with himself.

Rod stared at the kid. Little Magnus was holding tight to the bars of his playpen; he hadn’t quite learned to stand by himself yet.

Rod managed a feeble grin and levered the corner of the oak playpen off his belly. “Very good, Magnus!” He patted the baby’s head. “Good boy, good boy!”

The baby grinned, fairly hopping with delight.

The playpen rose six inches from the ground.

Rod made a frantic grab and forced it back down, hands on the lid.

Ordinarily, playpens do not have lids. But this playpen did; otherwise, the baby might have floated out.

“Yes, yes, that’s a wonderful baby! Smart little fella, there! Very good baby—Gwen!”

“What dost thou wish, my lord?” Gwen came up to the mouth of the cave, drying her hands on her apron.

Then she saw the playpen.

“Oh, Magnus!” she mourned in that tone of hurt disappointment only mothers can master.

“No, no!” Rod said quickly. “He’s a good boy, Gwen—isn’t he? I’ve just been telling him what a good boy he is. Good boy, good baby!”

The baby stared, tiny brow wrinkling in utter confusion.

His mother had much the same look.

But her eyes widened as she realized the only way the playpen could’ve moved out of the cave while her back was turned. “Oh, Rod!”

“Yeah.” Rod grinned with more than a touch of pride. “Precocious, isn’t he?”

“But—but, my lord!” Gwen shook her head, looking dazed. “Only witches can move things other than themselves. Warlocks cannot!”

Rod pried open the playpen and took his son in his arms. “Well, he couldn’t have done it by levi—uh, flying, could he?”

“Nay, he hath not strength enough to lift the playpen along with him—that he would have to do by his own bone and sinew. But warlocks cannot...”

“Well, this one can.” He grinned down at the baby and chucked it under the chin. “How about that? I’ve fathered a genius!”

The baby cooed and bounced out of Rod’s arms.

“Whup! Come back here!” Rod jumped and snagged a fat little ankle before the baby could float off in the morning breeze.

“Oh, Magnus!” Gwen was on them in a rush, cradling the baby in her arms. “Oh, my bold babe! Thou shalt most surely be a most puissant warlock when thou art grown!”

The baby smiled back at her. He wasn’t quite sure what he’d done that was right, but he wasn’t going to argue.

Rod beamed with fatherly pride as he hefted the oaken playpen back into the cave. He was amazed at his son; that playpen was heavy

He got a hank of rope and started tying the pen down. “That kid!” he said, shaking his head. “Scarcely a year old—he can’t even walk yet, and... Gwen, what’s the age when they start levitating?”

“ ‘Levi—’ Oh, you mean flying, my lord!” Gwen came back into the cave, the baby straddling one hip. “Thirteen years, or thereabouts, my lord, is the age for young warlocks to fly.”

“And this kid started at nine months.” Rod’s chest swelled a trifle—his head, too. “What age do little witches start making their broomsticks fly?”

“Eleven, my lord, or mayhap twelve.”

“Well, he’s a little ahead of schedule for that, too—except that warlocks aren’t supposed to make broomsticks fly at all. What a kid!” He didn’t mention that Magnus was obviously a major mutation.

He patted the baby’s head. The child wrapped a chubby hand around his father’s finger.

Rod turned shining eyes to Gwen. “He’ll make a great agent when he’s grown.”

“My lord!” Gwen’s brow knit in concern. “Thou wilt not take him from Gramarye?”

“Perish the thought!” Rod took Magnus and tossed him up in the air. “He’ll have his work cut out for him right here.”

Magnus squealed with delight and floated on up toward the roof.

Rod executed a high jump that would have done credit to a pole-vaulter and snagged his errant son. “Besides, he may not even want to join SCENT—who knows?”

Rod was an agent of the Society for the Conversion of Extraterrestrial Nascent Totalitarianisms, the subversive wing of the multi-planet Decentralized Democratic Tribunal, the first and only human interstellar government in history not to be based on Terra. The Senate met by electronic communications; the Executive resided on a starship which was usually to be found between planets. Nonetheless, it was the most efficient democratic government yet established.

SCENT was the organization responsible for bringing the Lost Colonies of earlier Terrestrial empires back into the fold. Rod was on permanent assignment to Gramarye, a planet that had been colonized by mystics, romantics, and escapists. The culture was medieval, the people superstitious—and a small percentage of the population had “witch-powers.”

Consequently, the DDT in general, and SCENT in particular, were immensely interested in Gramarye; for the “witches” and “warlocks” were espers. Some had one set of psi powers and some had another—but all were telepaths to some degree. And, since the efficiency (and, consequently, the viability) of a democracy varies directly with the speed of its communications, and since telepathic communication was instantaneous, the DDT treasured its only colony of espers very highly.

So Rod had been assigned to guard the planet, and to carefully nudge its political system onto the road that would eventually lead to democracy and full membership in the DDT.

“Hey, Fess,” Rod called.

The great black horse grazing in the meadow outside the cave lifted its head to look at its master. Its voice sounded through a small earphone buried in Rod’s mastoid bone. “Yes, Rod?”

Rod snorted. “What’re you cropping grass for? Who ever heard of a robot burning hydrocarbons?”

“One must keep up appearances, Rod,” Fess reproved him.