

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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# THE QUEST

BY KIT REED

THE FIRST thing anyone in the city knew of them was their laughter. Joking and crowing, they marched through dead-still, nearly-deserted streets, loud and happy, dirty and profane. Their voices were big; they pointed to thin-faced city people who shrank in doorways and they guffawed as shop-owners blenched and slammed their doors. Clashing shining weapons, they sang to wake the dead and the sound of them echoed in streets which lay between grey buildings. It swelled and burst into the square where Dario hid, waiting for them.

Dario knew them; he had come to his city as he had to many others to see the strangers, to feel for a few minutes the force of their harsh vitality. He had been warned against the strangers; he watched for them in hiding.

There were seven. Wiry Anter and fat Grimm strode in front, singing a star-song too raw for city people's ears. William, bronzed and strong-

looking but slender as a straw, walked beside thick-necked Danton. Bold Charles, a short, strong man whose monkey face was heroically ugly, walked alone. Dario liked him best. He was quieter than the rest, but when he spoke they stopped to listen and then did as he said. Dario had seen that in the last city. Alaric and Daniel were the tallest and Grimm was strongest and Anter fought best, but all of them, including William and thick-necked Danton had listened to Charles and had done as he said.

When he walked alone in a new city there was strength and importance in him. He had the lonely look of a leader.

The strangers wore wide-topped boots and heavy trousers. Their tunics were of a light-weight shimmering stuff that caught the sunlight and threw it in the faces of the watching city people. They wore scarves, beads, greenish trinkets of a precious metal—baubles they had picked up in other cities—at their necks and on their

arms. Their hair, unlike that of any city man Dario had ever seen, was long and straight and knotted at the backs of their heads. As they reached the center of the square, the sun shafted down into the space at the center of four great buildings and caught the brilliance in their faces. Silent Charles, moved by the sunlight and his strength, threw back his head and laughed aloud.

The seven glinted brightly.

Dario had never seen anything so magnificent.

The sunlight faded and the square darkened. They were gone. Breathless, Dario skittered across the square and threw himself into the doorway of a potion shop just before the door swung shut. He pushed his way between plush chairs where grey people sat with needles in their arms and flasks of life fluid hung by their elbows and tugged at the shop owner's sleeve.

"The strangers—" he said in a respectful whisper, "where are they going now?"

"Out to the battle." Distaste curled and covered fear in the man's face. "Who cares?"

"Don't you care?" Dario knew what the answer would be.

"Why should I? They fight our battles for us, but that's no reason we should care for them." Displeased with the conversation, the shopowner moved away. His customers stirred, disturbed by unaccustomed voices. "We pay them well, don't we?" He fixed a needle in the arm of a customer who sank back into waiting plush arms with a blissful smile.

"I don't think they care about the pay," Dario murmured, half to himself.

Stories of the strangers stirred Dario more than any chronicle of the city. He knew that the strangers and a handful of others like them did the fighting for the cities because they didn't seem to care about being hurt,

because they didn't fear talking about death.

(The social theorists explained it: "This carelessness, this refusal to seek a happier way is an imbalance in personality. There will always be a few men who refuse to think about the safer way. It is to the advantage of society to use them to defend any necessary causes, to fight any battles that may be needed.")

Men's longing for comfort and a happier way had banished wars centuries before. Spirit had died with the last conflict. Now citizens lived for themselves and their comfort was confined in shimmering tubes and flasks of life fluid.

("Society uses these warriors," the theorists said. "It is the best way for the common good. The imbalance of a few benefits the many.")

As a small child, Dario had run in the streets to catch a glimpse of the strangers, ripping away from his mother's hands because he knew she would be too frightened to follow him into the street. Later, he had read everything that had ever been written about them.

He was sixteen now, and he wanted to join them.

"What do you mean, asking so many questions about the strangers?" The shopkeeper stood behind Dario. He looked tall and suspicious. "Kid your age shouldn't be out at all."

"I—I'm older than I look." Dario began to back toward the door. "You—er—don't happen to know where the strangers are going after battle, do you?"

"Grangeport, maybe. If they don't all get killed." The shopkeeper moved toward Dario. "Are you traveling without a pass card, kid?"

"Ah—me?" Dario ducked under an apparatus which fed life fluid into a customer's veins through a thin transparent tube.

The shopkeeper lunged for him.

"G'bye!" Dario said, louder than

he'd ever spoken in his life, and ducked out the door.

Startled by the noise, the customers started to their feet, crashing bottles and shining tubes to the floor. The shopkeeper fell against the door in a pile of apparatus and shimmering, snaky pipes.

Frightened by the sound of his own voice, Dario ran. He crossed the city conveyer belt and ducked out into the street. Panting at the sudden rush of air in his lungs, he slowed down after his first dash, jogging a few feet before he collapsed on a curbstone. He held his elbows against his ribs and stared up the street that led to Grangeport. If he followed the strangers long enough, they would notice him—few people walked out in the open these days. Few left their homes for any reason, whether they lived in hives along the inter-city roadways or in the grim grey monoliths of the city.

None of the books told a man how he could join. If he could get the strangers to notice him, Dario thought, it might be all that was needed. Perhaps silent Charles would see him concealed in the corner of a square just before the next battle. Perhaps Danton or fat Grimm would fall and Dario could rush to take his place. Perhaps Charles would be wounded and left where Dario could find him and help him get well. Perhaps asking would be all it would take.

"You'll have to prove yourself if you want to join the strangers."

Dario jumped. He had never heard a city person talk so loud before. In the weeks since he had left his own city he had passed only a few in the streets; they had hustled by, grey-faced, without speaking, scuttling into doorways to ride on conveyer belts that girdled the inner cities.

"I said you'll have to prove yourself." A rotund shy-looking man smiled tentatively and sat down next

to Dario, stretching his short legs into the street and looking thoughtfully at his toes.

"You knew where I was going." Dario answered him naturally. The man was too gentle-looking to frighten him.

"I ought to, son. I've looked down many a road in just that way." Humming ruefully, the newcomer settled himself on the curb. "I once thought I would join them."

"Wouldn't they let you?"

The little man poked in the pockets of his grey tunic and came up with a sweet bar. He offered some to Dario. "My name is Andrew Warden," he said as Dario took it and ate. "We'd better get moving if you're going to follow the strangers to the next town."

Dario was glad to have company. Andrew didn't talk much as they followed the straight road out of the city, but he hummed to himself and Dario recognized snatches of a song he had heard when he was a child, about a boy who left the cities to seek his fortune. Dario went in silence. It was better not to travel and if you had to it was better not to be heard at all. There were no police now, but people in the cities and along the roadways were suspicious, and Dario had heard tales of city people venturing out in packs to snatch travelers and take them indoors to the better, more comfortable life.

On their way to Grangeport, Dario and Andrew passed a battlefield; a man lay on it, arms crossed on his chest, weapons laid around him. Near him, a blackened mound smoked. Charred bones stuck out from it at crazy angles. The enemy. As they drew abreast of the battlefield, Dario looked with detachment at the sleeping stranger. The sunlight seemed to have faded from his tunic; it was dirtied by brown smears and more brown stuff lay around him in pools. It was thick-necked Danton.

"Now there are six," Dario murmured to himself.

"That is death, Dario. Are you sure you want to join the strangers?" Andrew looked almost as if he wanted to cry.

Dario spoke a little scornfully. "Is that why they turned you down? Were you afraid of dying?" He quickened his step. "There are six now. They may need me." He turned to Andrew. "You don't have to come with me, you know."

Andrew's face was sad but he managed a smile at Dario's impatience. "Let me come, Dario. I may be able to do something for you."

"Let's go, then. Oh, Andrew, maybe they'll take me in." Dario skipped for a step or two and then settled down to walking.

They went for several days before they reached Grangeport. In gullies at the side of the road they slept and talked. Dario told Andrew how he had sneaked away from home to follow the strangers after they had done battle for his home city. Hidden, he had watched them rescue the daughter of the mayor from another band. He had seen the mayor and a delegation walk across a field—in the open, despite the fear they felt in the open sunlight—to pay tribute. He had thought of his home and the school where everything was soft and comfortable and no one asked a boy to do anything that might be hard for him and he had left his hiding-place to follow the strangers without giving another thought to his mother or his teacher or the uniform attractiveness of his home.

Andrew talked about the strangers, telling new stories about the bravery of Alaric and Daniel and the wisdom of Charles. He never talked about the time when he had hoped to join them, but he told Dario that he had vowed to live outside, traveling in the open and on his own, exposing himself to difficult and uncomfortable things.

He had made the vow even after he had known he could never join the strangers.

"It's more like living, my boy." Andrew's eyes got wide. "You know—I've gotten more—life—out of falling and hurting myself or being tired or taking food from a field and eating it without any sort of covering than I ever got from the weekly flask of life fluid."

"I—I wasn't going to tell you, but I stopped going in for life fluid after the third city I visited. I haven't had any since." Dario dropped his head, almost shameful.

"It's the only way to learn joy, my boy."

"What?"

"We'd better get moving." Smoothing his tunic over his round belly, Andrew got to his feet and started walking. "There's a food field up the road a bit, and we want to get there in time for supper."

On the far side of Grangeport, close enough to the strangers to see the intricate windings of their knots of hair, Dario watched a battle for the first time. Andrew showed him how to hide in bushes at the edge of the battlefield, and the two lay in silence while the strangers fought the champions of another city.

"The strangers always win," Dario whispered, eyes shining. He didn't flinch when he saw Charles leap on the neck of a champion and inflict death.

"Shhhhh, my boy." Andrew touched his arm. "It's not time for them to see you."

"When the first champion fell, the battle was over. Roaring curses, the champions took a final few vicious swipes at Charles and his men, then ran for the edge of the field.

Howling in exuberance, Charles and wiry Anter and fat Grimm chased them to the road. When one of the champions fell they kicked him and stamped on his body. When Dario

thought the fallen man must be already dead the strangers stood back and let him run for the city.

"Why didn't they kill him?" Flushed with excitement, Dario was making passes with his walking stick, fainting and thrusting until the bushes in which he was hidden began to shake.

"Shhhhh, my boy." Andrew put a gentle hand on his wrists and stopped his arms from waving. "If they killed all the champions, there would be no one left to fight, and they would die or grow grey like the people in the cities."

Dario took his breath in softly, but it caught in his throat and swelled there as he thought of the gallantry of the strangers. "Ohhhhh..."

Led by Charles, the strangers stood in the center of the battle-field, burning the body of the dead champion. Anter and fat Grimm stood side by side, arms about each other's shoulders. Alaric and young Daniel stood together, clashing their weapons together in a proud melody. Holding the dead Danton's boots was William, who stood quietly until the flames were highest and then threw them in. The smoke rose and curled and blackened their faces. Locked together over the fire, the strangers sang. When the flames died they broke and bounded over the field like young animals and threw themselves in the water that ran by the battlefield's edge, splashing and singing until their bodies and hearts were clean.

Dario strained against the hand Andrew kept on his arm. "Can't I go to them now and tell them I want to join?"

"Not yet, boy. If they saw you now they wouldn't stop to question you. They'd kill you." Andrew kept a gentle, persistent hand on Dario's shoulder. "They'll camp here tonight. Then we can go to them."

When the flames of the funeral pyre died, the strangers went from

the field into Grangeport. At dusk they came back with heavy sacks swinging from their shoulders. William had a woman's scarf about his neck.

"Andrew, I'm going now," Dario whispered. The strangers had opened their sacks and spread food and gems and clothing haphazardly on the ground. Dario saw Charles pick up two purple flasks—life fluid—and hurl them against a tree. He wanted to join him.

"Not yet, boy, not yet. Please!" Andrew pulled at his sleeve. "Wait until they've eaten."

"But why, Andrew?"

"Because I know them and I say so."

"All right, Andrew."

When Dario and Andrew wormed their way from beneath the bushes, it was after dark. As soon as they were free of the shrubbery, Andrew stood upright and began to talk in a slow, easy monotone that Dario imagined might be used to ease a jumpy animal.

"Charles, it's Andrew. You know me. You haven't forgotten so soon, I'm sure you haven't forgotten Andrew. I'm coming to you with a friend. I think he wants to—well, we met after the last city and we're going into Grangeport and my friend here didn't like it inside the cities, and he said so, and he tells me one day he saw you and wanted..." Andrew was still walking but suddenly his feet didn't touch the ground.

Fat Grimm had stepped from nowhere and grabbed him by the shoulders and lifted him off his feet. Wiry Anter held Dario.

"I thought," Andrew said with some dignity, "if I warned you of our coming you might not jump us like this—or shoot us before you saw who we were."

"Come to the fire," Grimm said. He stepped over piles of gems and goods which still lay on the ground and put Andrew down in front of Charles, the

leader. Still holding Dario, Anter moved up beside him.

"You," Charles said quietly. Dario couldn't read his expression.

"You haven't forgotten me." Andrew's voice was low. He stood toe to toe with the hawk, Charles, in a quiet dignity more palpable than his flapping tunic or his rotund flesh.

"Sit down, Andrew." Charles turned to Dario and his face was bright. "You wanted to see us?"

"Yes, I've—I've always wanted to... I—"

"Slowly. Drop his arms, Anter." Charles stepped back to look at the boy, eyes alight. "We wondered when you were going to come to us. When William saw you hiding in those bushes today, we knew this must be the time. You want to join us?"

"If I can't I'll follow you everywhere. I'll never go back to the cities. I'll..."

"Do you think you will be worthy?"

"I pray so."

Charles walked closer to the boy. Anter had moved away to talk with the other men who sat around the fire some distance from Andrew, who bowed his head in silence. The fire was low. In the distance the shell of Grangeport glowed greyly. The sky was deep and soft except where it touched the city. "Tell me why you left the city."

Dario was direct. "Because nobody in the city lives any more."

"How did you find out?"

"I saw a friend of mine lose a race." Still tense, Dario talked fast, leaning forward slightly. "It must have been some sort of mistake. I didn't think they let things like that happen in the cities, but I raced with my friend and my friend lost the race."

"Were there many others who raced?"

"About 70."

"Did they lose?" Charles looked amused.

"No, they all won." Dario stared at

the ground for a minute, remembering. "His name was Richard. We were talking about the race afterward and he said he'd lost. I told him he couldn't have. I told him nobody in the cities ever failed at anything, because nobody ever thought of failing. He looked at me strangely and he went away. I don't think he could stand losing. He threw himself out of a window." He jammed his thumbs in his belt and straightened.

"Mother told me he'd just gone out to fly, because he thought he could fly, and anything you think you can do in the cities, you can do. I looked out and he was spread on the street. Nobody wanted to go out to take care of him, because it seemed like a discomfort to go outside. He stayed there for the longest time..."

"And then you knew?" Intent, Charles stepped closer to the boy.

"I knew everything doesn't always come out all right."

"Good."

"The next week I skipped my go with the life fluid. It was funny when I did. Part of the time I thought I wanted to throw myself out a window after Richard. I kept thinking about it—everything's not always coming out all right, even when you say it will—and wishing it would all end. But the other times, when I got a look outside or sat and thought, or just felt things, I was—well, Andrew says he feels more alive stubbing his toe or being hungry or even being unhappy than he ever did when he was on the life fluid. I guess that's what I'm trying to say. It's better to be alive outside, even when things don't come out all right."

Charles' face had darkened at the mention of Andrew, and he asked the next question almost automatically. "You saw us and decided to come outside?"

"You looked so alive. Everybody who lived near us said they hated you because you were loud and wild and



foolish enough to take the harder way. I guess they couldn't understand why anybody would choose to live outside where you could get hungry or sunburned or hurt, where you could be uncomfortable. And I think they guessed..."

"Guessed?"

Dario looked as proud as a prophet who has come up with a new truth. "...that you don't always succeed outside. I think they guessed that you could lose a battle or be killed. It's been years since anybody failed at anything in the cities—or knew they did, anyway."

"Anything else?"

"I think you made them feel that they *had* failed."

"You're a good boy, Dario." Charles moved forward and put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Now?"

"Now I want to join you."

"We'll talk about that tomorrow. Anter, get this boy something to eat. He can't have had much if he was hiding in the bushes all day." Charles turned from Dario and strode over to Andrew. He spoke to him in a low voice. Andrew, without rising, said something quiet and insistent. Charles nodded. He threw himself down by the fire, looking up only when fat Grimm aimed a heavy-toed kick at Andrew.

"Leave him alone."

"But you said yourself he could be dangerous," Grimm said peevishly.

"Leave him alone. He's tired and he can't hurt you or me." Charles looked at Andrew gravely. "You know he's never hurt anybody."

"But he almost..."

Charles started to get to his feet. "I said leave him alone." Sulkily, Grimm edged over to the fire and sat down.

By the dying fire, Dario ate. He dropped a smoking piece of game to touch William's elbow. "How about Andrew? Can't he have something too?" William hesitated, then glanced

at Charles, who nodded. Breaking off a piece of heavy bread, William put it on a square of paper with the cooked carcass of an animal Dario had never seen.

"Take this to your friend," he said to Dario. "You can sleep over there, next to him. But be ready to move fast in the morning."

Andrew smiled as Dario dropped the food in his lap and he waited for the boy to be seated before he began eating.

"You'll stay with me, Andrew?"

"Of course, boy. It is a lonely thing to want to join the strangers."

"Lonely?" Dario saw Charles and William and Anter, Alaric and Daniel and fat Grimm sitting around the fire, talking and eating in close comradeship.

"You'll see. Rest now, boy. You'll need it."

Dario had never seen Andrew look so sad.

The sunlight was bright. Dario jumped awake, moving so fast he almost burned himself on the row of blades that hung above his body, glowing with heat. Eyes wide, he settled back and lay perfectly still, not flinching as the blades dropped closer and closer to his body. He was silent as the points seared through his clothing and touched his skin. He winced at the hot pain but he did not move when, suddenly, the blades were taken away. The ordeal had begun.

Charles stood over him, magnificently ugly in sunlight that bounced off the shimmering stuff of his tunic and made sharp shadows on his face.

"You want to be one of us?"

"Yes, yes!" Dario said.

"There will be trials."

"I'm ready," Dario said.

Nearby Andrew watched, eyes heavy with pain.

"Come on," fat Grimm growled, poking his toe at Dario. "It's time we got moving."

"Let him go to the brook first,"

Charles said. "We're in no hurry."

Dario watched and then he ate. Leaving the gems and goods the Grangeport people had gathered to pay them strewn in the field, the warriors started off. Wiry Anter and fat Grimm led. Next came William, in the spot he had once shared with Danton. Charles walked alone, followed by Alaric and Daniel. At first Dario tried to walk close to the strangers, in a spot just behind Alaric and Daniel, but fat Grimm dropped out of line to give him a cuff.

"You keep your place," he growled.

Dario dropped several paces behind, where gentle Andrew was waiting. He walked in the wake of the strangers, awash in the sound of their laughter and their curs. and his head sang.

"I passed the first test," he whispered to Andrew.

"There will be more," Andrew said.

"I can pass them too."

Andrew looked at him almost covertly. "You may, my boy. You may."

"I will," Dario said.

"You will have to learn many things."

"Like what?" Dario skipped a step, happy in the sunlight.

"There will be battles—everything won't always come out all right."

"I knew that before I started."

"You'll be hurt."

"I was hurt this morning," Dario said with some pride.

"You'll have to learn to kill."

"I've seen the strangers kill. I've watched battles."

"It's..." Andrew sighed and walked a little faster. He punched a fist at his own round belly.

"It's what?" Startled, Dario looked at him.

"We'd better hurry, boy, if we're going to keep up with your long-legged friends."

It was glorious to follow the strangers through Grangeport. Dario grinned at the few grey-faced city

people who poked their heads out of doors to see the strangers who had defended their city only the day before. They watched with a strange mixture of respect and scorn, licking thin lips to hide the fear that came with watching.

When they reached the far side of Grangeport, the strangers stopped and sat on a wall within full view of the city, talking and laughing, kicking off wide-topped boots to wiggle their feet in the sunshine.

"Dario."

The boy ran to Charles. "Yes?"

"This message. Deliver it. I want it to go to Avin Winter in Grangeport. I want it to go to no one else. He cuts his hair close and remains inside, but he is one of us."

"Wh...where will I find him?"

Dario took the envelope, trying to keep Charles from seeing that his hand was shaking. "There are millions of people in the city. How will I know him?"

"You will know him."

"There are hundreds of cubicles in the city—all alike."

"Find him." Charles turned from Dario to talk to William. "You miss Danton, don't you?"

"Yes," the young man said sadly. "He was one of the finest." William, who had seemed to Dario the gentlest of them all, let his face go hard. "If I catch Jock Bainter who killed him, I will open his guts and strew them from Grangeport to the next city. I'll pull out his eyes and bounce them against his bare body. I'll powder the bones of his feet and feed them to him, and I'll..."

Dario fled.

He felt almost at home in the city, scuttling along grey streets until he came to a potion shop. He ducked inside the outer door, dodging the inner folding doors that led to the shop itself, and moved into the outside corridor that connected every building in the city. He walked for several paces

before he realized the conveyer belt was already carrying him at a gentle speed. Avin Winter. He had to find Avin Winter in a city full of strangers.

*He is one of us*, Charles had said. If that meant anything, Avin Winter probably lived near the outside of one of the buildings, where he could see the street and the sunlight, where he didn't have to live in soft, polychromed air if he didn't want to. He might even live in one of the monoliths at the edge of the city, where he could look out and see the battles, where he could hear occasional laughter and watch the strangers go by.

Dario knew better than to ask for the man but he stopped in a potion shop, hoping he might catch one man off guard, one person who might know Avin Winter and tell him where to find him before he realized the boy was alone and without a pass and that his eyes were bright and that he smelled of the outside.

"Avin Winter? On the Cannsport side—say, you got a pass card, kid?"

Dario ducked and ran. If there were a chase it wouldn't last long. Chasing could be uncomfortable, especially if you were used to winning every race you ran and you were running after somebody who wasn't.

He stopped at several potion shops along the Cannsport road, getting just a little more information from each shop-owner. The conveyer belt outside was almost deserted. Few people went outside any more, even for life fluid. It could be delivered at your door by the same conveyer belt once or even twice a week, if you needed it. Going outside could be uncomfortable.

In the last potion shop he asked at, Dario found himself trapped in a morass of shining bottles and transparent tubes, backed against the door by a shop-owner who poised a needle above him and talked threateningly.

"I'll speak for the boy," someone

said in a quiet voice.

"Yessir." The shopkeeper moved back in deference.

"Come along, youngster." It was Avin Winter.

In Winter's cubicles Dario sat, feeling almost as if he had never left home. Each city-dweller's cubicles were the best in the city. Nobody could live happily without having the best. In Winter's cubicles, however, there was a difference. As Dario watched, the man strode across the floor and flung open a series of vents. In the sunlight, he looked a great deal like thick-necked Danton. He read the message Dario had brought, almost ignoring the boy.

"If I catch Jock Bainter who killed him, I will open his guts and strew them from Grangeport to..." Winter shook himself. "That's behind me." He smiled. "You don't understand, do you? Perhaps once you've passed the next ordeal, they'll tell you about Avin, brother of Danton, who survived the trials and lived with them and fought with them and then left them. It's too much for you to understand."

"Yessir," Dario said, wondering if the strangers would wait for him at the edge of the city.

"Well." Winter put a hand on Dario's shoulder. "You have succeeded in the second trial. You have delivered the message to a man you never saw in a city you did not know. Go back to the strangers, boy, and tell them I blessed you." He drew back. His face was grave. "If ever you leave them, come to me. There is more, you know."

"I could never leave them—they're all I've ever wanted to be."

"Tell them I blessed you."

Dario ran almost all the way to the edge of the city, even though he knew the conveyer belt was moving and he didn't have to. Exhausted, he threw himself down on the conveyer belt and let it carry him for a few squares.

Panting, he pressed his face against its rubbery surface and threw his arms wide. He was only half-surprised when he felt soft hands moving over his hair, smoothing the tensed muscles in his shoulders.

"I'm Maeve," the girl said when he looked up. She wore the filmy grey draperies all the women wore, and she touched him with the sureness of his mother, gentling him.

"I'm Dario," he said simply and turned to rest his head on her lap.

As she stroked his head and ran light fingers over his face, she hummed an easy song to him. Once or twice Dario started to get up but her arms were close and clinging as the vines which grew on the inner city walls, and she bent each time to kiss him.

"Would you like to know me better?" Her voice was as soft as a whisper, as light as dry dust.

"Maeve..." Sleepily Dario reached up to kiss her and saw the hypodermic and the tube and the purple flask of life fluid. He pushed her backward, off the conveyer belt, and the purple fluid splattered and ran in the gutters as Dario scrambled to his feet and hurled himself toward the edge of the city. He leaped out of double doors to the fresh air and cobbled street, never stopping until he had passed the last hill that hid him from the strangers.

Charles greeted him with pride. Andrew, sitting off by himself as the men talked and smoked, jumped to his feet and rushed toward the boy, beaming.

"You took less time than anyone ever did," Andrew said.

"From here on it should be easy." Dario stood stiffly, shoulders thrown back, in front of his friend.

"Dario, Dario." Andrew sighed.

"You may carry my water-case," fat Grimm told him somewhat ill-temperedly.

They set out for the next city.

That night, Dario wrestled with Grimm. The others sat around the campfire and laughed. The boy held his own for a few seconds and then was thrown, again and again. Charles stopped the match when Dario, covered with grass-stains and giddy with fighting, charged at Grimm for the twentieth time.

"Good," Charles said.

Dario accepted the meat William threw to him and went to the place outside the circle, where Andrew sat.

"Charles is pleased with you," the little man said, drawing his knees up under his chin.

"I could have kept going, but he stopped me." Slowly, Dario dropped into the grass.

"And you might have beaten him," Andrew said quietly.

"But he's so big..."

"I did."

Dario looked at the little man incredulously. There must be strength in those short limbs. "You passed that test?"

"And all the others—but the last one." Hugging his knees, Andrew stared at the ground.

"All but the last? Why not the last?"

"I think you've done well so far, boy. Now tell me what happened to you in the city."

When the fire had almost died, Charles and the others called Dario to sing and dance for them. He sang them a song he had learned in the city, one that every mother knew, about the young lad who left the cities to seek his fortune. The meaning had gone from it centuries before when the last sane men had vowed never to leave the cities, but still every mother sang it, and every boy repeated it:

*He left his mother, he left his kin  
He left the city and comforts therein*

*To wander far and to wander wide  
His fortune to seek o'er the country-  
side...*

When he finished the last verse, the men were humming. The last smoke curled up from the fire. The moon rose. Looking up from the glowing wood, Dario watched William; he was almost crying. The others were quiet, humming, perhaps remembering.

Cursing, fat Grimm jumped to his feet and bellowed a parody Dario had never heard before. By the time he reached the last verse, the others were shouting it too:

*I'd leave my wench and I'd leave my  
gin*

*I'd leave my home and the troubles  
therein*

*I'd sell my soul just to wander wide  
To fight and to kill o'er the country-  
side...*

They laughed and they swore and they wrestled at the dead fire's edge. Bewildered, Dario edged away to the spot where his tunic was thrown and curled up on it and went to sleep.

"Andrew." They were walking again. The strangers were pushing ahead to a new battle in another city. Dario had dropped back to walk with Andrew. "Andrew, do you have to hurt to live?"

"You mean to live outside?"

"Yes." Dario was thoughtful. "Last night I think they wanted me to hurt Grimm. I know I'd fight and kill with the rest of them if they let me join the strangers, but I wonder if the strangers want to hurt each other." He walked a little faster. "Do you have to hurt to live outside, like they do?"

"You'll have to decide that for yourself," Andrew said quietly.

"Why are you coming along with

me? You know they hate you."

Andrew laughed ruefully. "I think I began watching you even before they did. I knew you were a good boy and that you wanted to join them." He looked at him seriously. "You never would have gotten to them alone."

"What makes you think so?"

"If you had come up to them by yourself, or if you had followed them and they had discovered you, they would have killed you."

They hated Andrew, Dario thought a little resentfully. They might even have been friendlier to him if it hadn't been for Andrew.

Sensing Dario's mood, Andrew went on. "Every once in a while, they send someone out from the cities, usually a man, usually somebody young. He is to get rid of the strangers or the champions—any of the warriors that go from city to city, doing fierce things nobody else wants to do—because as long as the people in the city can see and hear the strangers, they will never be completely sure they are happy. Can you understand that, my boy? I think not." Andrew paused to shake dirt from his sandal. "But you will understand this. Those people they sent out are to kill or corrupt the strangers, and the strangers will kill any man who is suspect before he has a chance. Naturally, anyone who comes from the cities is suspect."

"But they didn't kill you?"

"They knew me. One of their number first brought me to them. After—the trials—they still knew me. I came to you and brought you to them because I didn't want you to die. I'm staying with you to be sure you don't die. It is the pattern."

"And after the ordeals are over?"

"My place will not be with you. I will go away. It is the pattern."

"What pattern?"

A rock whizzed past Andrew's head, almost grazing him. Dario jumped. Ahead of them, standing

spraddle-legged in the middle of the road, fat Grimm was laughing.

In the next city, Dario fought his first battle. William and Anter stood on either side of him, cursing and swinging their weapons, shouting with wild verve, ready to drive off the champions.

Massed at the opposite end of the field were eight men clad in brilliant scarlet. They wore thongs laced about their feet and legs. Their heads were shaved. At a sign too quick for Dario to see, they lunged toward the strangers.

The fight was full of blood and noise and brightness. Dario was sure he killed one man, sliding the point of his weapon into the red folds of the garment the champion wore. Then something sharp clipped him on the side of the head. (Out of the tail of his eye he saw only fat Grimm who hesitated for a minute and then plunged past as Dario fell.)

Dario came to in a ditch at the side of the field. Andrew was throwing muddy water in his face.

"They've won now," Andrew whispered. "There will be a little more fighting, but your men have won. If you want to be one of them go out there and finish the battle."

"I—I was hit in the head."

"Yes. One of those red men was heading in to kill you, but I got you out of the way."

Painfully, Dario turned his head. "Without a weapon? He might have gotten you..."

"I had to get you out of the way or you would never have finished the battle. They have never initiated anyone who didn't finish the first battle." Andrew shook him. "Get up now, and be with them when they end the fighting."

"Thank you," Dario murmured, almost to himself, as he eased out of the ditch and ran back onto the field.

After the fight there was pyre and after the pyre there was food, cooked

on a separate fire by William and Daniel, who had gone into the city to claim the strangers' payment. After the meal, for Dario, there was fasting.

Charles took Dario to a high, bare hill on the far side of the field, where there were no shrubs and many rocks and where no grass grew.

"You fought well," Charles said, throwing two sticks on the ground.

"I was away from it for a while," Dario said haltingly.

"I knew that. Grimm hit you."

"Why?"

"Never mind. That is between Grimm and myself—and Andrew. The main thing is that you came back and finished the fight." Moving easily, Charles swept over the top of the small hill with his foot, kicking away pieces of grass, pushing rocks over any spot that looked soft. He dropped his water-case on the rocks and turned to Dario.

"You will stay here for three days. Twice William will bring you fresh water—no food. After the watch you will be ready for the final trial. Can you keep the watch or do you want to go back into the city?"

"I can try."

"You may sit at certain intervals. The men will take turns watching you and will signal when you will be permitted to sit. The rest of the time, you will stand or kneel. I'll come for you in three days." Slapping Dario's shoulder, Charles said something under his breath and turned to go.

"What?"

Lowering at Dario, he growled the phrase again. "I said I like your looks." His craggy face knotted in a scowl. "The sticks are for you to chew. They help."

"It is a lonely thing to want to be one of the strangers." Dario remembered Andrew's words as he sat and paced and stood and knelt and sat and paced and waited. In the first night he drank his water all at once, and by the time the sun was high again, he

rasped and choked and tried to spit. He took the second canteen of water, which William brought, more slowly.

In the three days and nights he spent, Dario told his life to himself over and over again. He thought of Andrew and wondered why Andrew, who had passed all the trials—but one—had never told him what had happened at the end. He thought of Avin Winters. Why had he left the strangers? Then he thought of the warriors as he had first seen them, marching in profane brilliance and in triumph through the streets of a drab city that could only hate them and stand aside as they passed and look after them in awe. He thought of silent Charles and the men who followed him and he stopped wondering about Andrew and about Avin Winters and about the strangers' corruption of the old folk song he had heard over and over again.

He blinked under hot sun and reeled in darkness as champions in flaming tunics marched around and around at the backs of his eyes and flinched and almost cried aloud inside his head as he slipped the weapon's point between red-clad ribs and felt it sink in, killing, over and over. He thought down blue-grey avenues of silence and sleep and managed to shake himself out of heavy, bolt-upright slumber before his feet began to betray him and he started dropping to the ground. He hardly noticed William, who came to him on the morning of the last day with a gurgling canteen and, seeing him dense and groggy, sloshed some water in his face, looking quickly over his shoulder to be sure none of the watchers saw the boy brighten and wake under the impact of the water. Mumbling the mother's song, he paced the last few circles, going around and around at the edge of the hillside in a sudden spiral that took him in smaller and smaller pools of rock and pebbles until finally he

stood still at the very center of the very top of the hill, almost ready to drop from weariness or weep from hunger, and looked up and saw Charles who spun before his eyes almost majestically and said, "Welcome. Rest and then the last trial."

The watch was over.

Dario slept for 24 hours. Sun was blazing above him when he stretched, rolled over in the heavy grass and woke. Fat Grimm sat beside him; the others were gone.

"About time," Grimm snorted.

Dizzy, Dario got to his feet and went to plunge his head in the brook. When the water cleared and he saw his reflection, he grinned. Soon his hair would be long enough to tie in a knot at the back of his head. He looked forward to the wide-topped boots and the heavy trousers. He tore into the bread and meat Grimm handed him and when he finished it began to look around the field.

"Where are they?"

"At camp. Did you think we lived in trees?" Grimm took swipes at the grass with his weapon and then plunged it into the dirt.

"What am I supposed to do now?"

"Go to camp. That's where the last test is. They're getting things ready."

"And you?"

"I'm supposed to watch you. Let's get going."

As they moved off the field onto the roadway, Dario saw Andrew come out of a clump of bushes, stretching himself. He waved and started walking, keeping several yards behind Dario and Grimm.

"Can't Andrew walk with us?" Uncomfortable with the fat man, Dario looked back at his friend.

"Forget him." Grimm shoved him along. He looked back at Andrew and spat. "You're going to have plenty of other things to worry about when we get to camp."

"Oh?" Dario tried not to sound interested.

Grimm stretched his mouth in an ugly, square grin. "Now's when the fun begins." Dario moved a few paces away from the heavy, sweating man. He smelled.

"You want to be one of us, sonny? You got to learn to kill."

"I killed. That champion—the one back in the field."

"That's not real killing. You were fighting to save your own sweet skin. It's more than that. It's everything those worms back in the cities hate—and a lot more. Your pulling friend back there thought he could take it," (he spat in the road again) "—but he couldn't. You got to be wild to be a real one of us." Grimm's eyes were wide. Dario could see the whites all the way around the centers of them.

"Is that why Avin Winter left?"

"That fool. He thought he knew a better way than being one of us." Grimm spat again and moisture caught in the bristles of his big square chin. "But he just ended up going back to the cities like a dumb kid trying to find his way back into his little crib."

"What about Andrew?"

Grimm curled his stiff brows down in a tremendous frown. "I wanted to do it for the little worm, when he got to the last minute of the last trial and quit, but Avin Winter said no. Avin Winter said no." He began mincing down the road to the beat of it. "Avin Winter said no, Avin Winter said no..."

Dario was frightened. "If I—pass this last trial? What will happen then?"

Grimm remembered himself and began to cover the road in long, businesslike strides. "Then is the ceremony. The wine and the fire and the mixing of the bloods and all the rest of it, and then you get your part—" He pointed to a bangle that hung from his heavy wrist. It looked like bone. "And then Charles comes to you and says..." He paused. "Quit

asking questions, kid. Let's get going."

Dario and Grimm traveled for the rest of the day and night in silence.

They arrived at the camp at dawn. Footsore, Andrew limped behind them and threw himself on the ground at the edge of the camp circle as Grimm brought Dario in. Charles came from a long, low wooden building and greeted them. He took Dario inside the hall, where floors were covered with rich materials pilfered from cities and walls were hung with emblems taken from dead champions. Gems and gimcracks thrown carelessly into the folds on the floor rolled underfoot. At the center of the hall was a table set with seven places—at each there was a heavily crested cup.

"Eat now." Charles sat Dario at the end of the long table. "The last trial will be this evening." He said it almost sadly, and then he left Dario to eat alone in the echoing hall.

Dario ate in silence, trying not to look at the rafters where battle trophies hung, trying not to feel lonely and lost as his cup and plate made a solitary sound on the heavy table. When he finished Daniel came to him and took him to a small cabin—there were seven around the camp circle.

"You're to sleep here before the last trial. They'll call you just before sunset," Daniel said, and he went.

Danton's cabin—empty since the thick-necked stranger had been killed—might be Dario's soon. He made an almost proprietary tour of it, pausing to finger a woman's scarf hung by the single window, and then dropped on a pile of rough cushions in a corner and slept.

William brought him wine and a strong broth at sunset. He crouched in one corner of the cabin while Dario drank.

"Is it time now?"

"Time for the last trial. This is the hardest of all," William said slowly. He looked sharply out the door and



almost whispered: "Perhaps you are still a man even if you don't make this one."

"I'll make it."

"You'll make it if you have the—fierce—thing it takes to be one of us." Embarrassed, William forged out the door. "Come on," he muttered.

"You're ready for the last trial?" Charles stood before Dario. The sunset threw crazy shadows on his face.

"Yes."

They stood before a high log fence.

"Before you go into the stockade, you have to know the nature of the test and you have to accept it fully."

"I accept." Dario drew himself up.

"Wait until you know what will be asked of you."

"Yes."

"To be one of us," Charles said almost formally, "you must be able to kill at all costs. In killing you deny everything they live for in the cities.

"Your last trial will be a fight to the death. Do you accept?"

"I accept."

"Here is your weapon."

The high, pointed logs of the stockade cast dense shadows in the square where Dario found himself. In one corner of the square, he sensed someone breathing.

"I'm ready." His voice was not very strong. "Come. Come on."

He heard the clatter of a weapon as someone dropped it to the ground. A figure moved out of the shadows and came toward him, head down. If this enemy chose to drop his weapon, the trial would be easy! Dario drew his striking arm above his head. It was almost dark. The figure came closer. Straining at the darkness, Dario caught at the shape of it. His breath throbbed inside him and he let it out in a shout.

"Andrew!"

"Perhaps I may be of some use to someone after all." Head bowed, the gentle man stood before him. "You can be a stranger now, Dario. Do it

quickly, please."

Dario began to feel the strain in his arm, still upraised, ready to bring down the weapon. "You knew about this. You brought me here even though you knew."

"The brother of Charles knew what would happen when he brought me. It's part of the pattern, Dario. Now let's get it over."

"But you didn't kill him. That's why they wouldn't have you. You wouldn't kill him." Dario lowered his arm.

"No, I didn't kill the brother of Charles," Andrew said sadly. "And Avin Winter wouldn't let fat Grimm kill him, but when they dragged me out of the stockade and threw me down the hill, Charles went into the stockade and Charles killed him. It is part of the pattern, Dario."

"I can't, Andrew. I don't care what happens— I can't."

"If you want to be one of them you'll have to. Charles didn't kill because he wanted to. But he had the—fierceness—and he had to defend it for all of them, and he killed for that. He and Avin fought over that. And Charles hasn't laughed much since. His brother expected it. It was part of the pattern."

"Then I don't want to be one of them. We have to get out of here, Andrew." Dario shoved his weapon through his belt and prowled the fence of the stockade, looking for some way out. Outside, he could hear Grimm leading the men in the ballad travesty. He could smell meat cooking on the fire.

"They're getting the feast ready, Dario." Andrew bowed his head again. "Can't you get it done?"

"I'm not going to do it. They can kill me if they want to, but I'm not going to do it." Suddenly Dario grabbed at Andrew's shoulder. The gate opened for a second and one of the strangers moved inside.

"Grimm?" Dario grasped his weap-

on. "I'll get you, Grimm. I'd like to."

"Dario. Come here." It was Charles.

Holding his breath, the boy went toward him. Andrew moved beside him, confident now.

"You aren't going to kill him, are you?" Charles sounded sad.

"No. If that's what you came in here to do, kill me instead." Dario stuck his chin out. "Go ahead."

"You won't be one of us." Charles' words were almost a sigh. "I suspected. You are a good boy." He pulled Dario to the door of the stockade and pushed him outside. He looked at Andrew for a moment in sad understanding and stepped aside so the gentle man could leave the stockade. "You couldn't kill either, could you?"

Andrew stood for a moment. "No," he said quietly. "And it has always been hard for you. Goodbye, Charles."

Brusquely the leader turned to Dario. "Go to the city, boy. Look for Avin Winter."

Followed by Andrew, Dario ran. When the men at the fireside saw them leave the shadow of the stockade and bolt for the road, they got to their feet to run after them but Charles raised his hand and, grum-

bling, they threw themselves down again by the fire.

In the morning Dario and Andrew killed and cooked a small beast and ate it.

"Where are you going now, Andrew?"

"Back to the city where I first met you. There will be others who will want to meet the strangers."

"But you may not be as lucky next time. Next time someone could kill you."

"I know." Andrew smiled. "If people want to leave the cities I must do everything I can to help them, even if they want to run with the strangers."

"But do you have to do it that way?"

"It's part of the pattern. Goodbye, Dario. If you can, find Avin Winter."

"Goodbye, Andrew."

The boy watched Andrew start off down the road. He scaled a stone across its hard surface and did a small dance on it. He felt strong and he felt happy. The whole day seemed to sing. Humming, he turned his back on the road and started across the fields in search of his fortune.

# Among Our Contributors

## **FORREST J. ACKERMAN —**

should need no introduction to anyone interested in Science Fiction, identified with the field, as he has been, for so many years.

## **POUL ANDERSON —**

guest of honor at the recent Detroit World Science Fiction Convention and author of several SF novels, has been making an enviable name for himself, in recent years, in both this and the Mystery field. His *PERISH BY THE SWORD*, winner of Macmillan's "Cock Robin" Award, has been widely praised.

## **BELLE C. DIETZ —**

active in New York fandom, one of the founders of the Lunarians, is President of the Eastern Science Fiction Association.

## **LESTER DEL REY —**

active in the field, professionally, for the past twenty years, is the author of *ROCKETS THROUGH SPACE*, *ROBOTS AND CHANGELINGS*, *NERVES*, etc. etc.

## **GEORGE FIELDING ELIOT —**

prominent military analyst and historian, makes his first appearance (we believe) in this field with the present story.

## **JOHN MAGNUS —**

fanzine editor and active with the Washington Science Fiction Association.

## **KIT REED —**

New Haven newspaper woman, in her mid twenties, who has just become a mother, has attracted wide attention in the field for the sensitivity of her stories.

## **HANS STEFAN SANTESSON —**

former Editor (1945-'52) of the *Unicorn Mystery Book Club*, Editor of both *F.U.* and *The Saint Mystery Magazine* since the Spring of 1956, and Vice Chairman of the Hydra Club has been a SF reader since the Thirties.

## **BURNETT R. TOSKEY —**

associated with *Cry of the Nameless*. Need we say more.

## **AIDAN VAN ALM —**

is a distinguished social scientist, interested in group relations.

## **TED E. WHITE —**

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