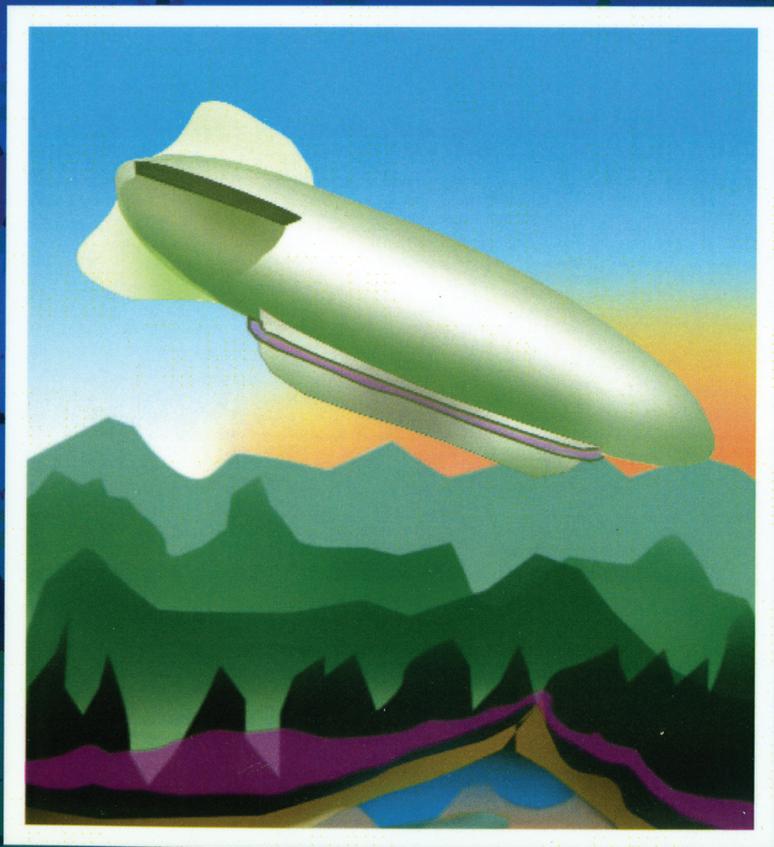


The
Quest for the
Talisman



Michael A. Faris

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Second Edition

Junction City, Oregon

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—Dedication—

This book is for my friends and family

Michael has written two other books

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Chapter One

Kev drove the last staple into the wire mesh that surrounded the wooden box. They had been working all morning on their project and were trying to finish before it got too hot. He handed the hammer to Yesac.

“That should do it,” he said. “...oughta hold maybe ten or twelve birds... and produce eight or ten eggs per day.”

Yesac stood up from where he had been holding the wire in place.

“When will the birds be here?”

“I thought by now,” said Kev, “but Marga isn’t as quick as she is kind.”

Yesac chuckled. He had known Marga since she was a little girl. She was the daughter of the Royal Naturalist. Though her father’s rank was not very high, it did have certain advantages. Marga had

access to all of the tools and libraries and to the Royal Museum. She also got to meet some very famous explorers, and had even been on a few nature trips with her father.

Marga seemed not so bright to some people. But those people didn't know the way she seemed to understand animals and instinctively knew how to survive in the wild. She had trouble learning in school, and had eventually been allowed to stay at home, because her teachers could not teach her the basic skills that other kids learned. But Marga was quick to understand the ways of Nature. She listened carefully when her father talked about a new specimen for the museum, and assisted him in the lab when he would graft a tree, or pollinate a flower, or identify some unknown bug for the University.

Marga had incubated some eggs given to her by a Royal Huntsman that found them in the forest. She had raised a small flock of beautiful birds, and had more than enough to give to her friends. When Kev saw them he was fascinated and Marga had quickly offered a few birds to him.

Yesac motioned for Kev to follow him into the house.

"Let's have some refreshment. I have some cold brew made from last fall's whistleberries. It should cool you down and give you a better outlook on the day."

"Well let's get looking out!" exclaimed Kev.

They walked through the kitchen and down the steps to Yesac's cellar. There the air was cool and scented with the good smell of crushed whistleberries. Yesac uncorked a cold bottle that had been on ice, and poured them each a tall mug. The red liquid was sparkly and a white frothy head bubbled on each. As the foam settled, Kev put his ear to the glass and listened.

"I can never get over this," he said. "It does sound just like little whistles going off as the bubbles pop." He put his ear even closer.

Just then a loud rapping noise came from the house above.

"That's Marga," said Yesac. He ran up the stairs. Kev took a long

drink from the brew, and closed his eyes.

Kev and Yesac had been friends for a long time. They had gone to the Royal Academy together and served in the King's Guard together. They had come to trust each other in any situation. Yesac had been with Kev and four other crewmen when their airship crashed at sea and they had spent eight days floating in the ocean until they were rescued. They were very fortunate to be alive.

"...and that boy does know what to do with whistleberries," remarked Kev as he drained the glass. The foam was running down his chin. He smiled to himself. He wiped his beard on his sleeve and poured another.

Just then Yesac came down the steps. Kev looked up expecting to see Marga, but Yesac was alone. He had a funny look on his face.

"Where's Marga?" he asked.

"It was a message from King Herb. I'm to see the King immediately. He says to come alone." Yesac looked at Kev in wonderment.

"Maybe he wants some of this whistleberry brew," grinned Kev.

A loud knock again came from above. They both turned to the stairway and looked up.

"Hey Yesac and Kev! Come out here and help me!" It was Marga.

"Hey! I got your birds and they need to be put in their cage right now!"

The two men ran up the stairs and out to meet Marga. She was holding a large sack which she cradled in her arms very carefully. Her eyes were wide and she was very concerned. "I got your birds!" she repeated. "I got your birds and they need their cage right now!" She was breathing hard, though it was more from excitement than exertion.

Kev reached out for the sack.

"Let me see."

Marga carefully opened the top so Yesac and Kev could look.

There were four beautiful blue and white birds at the bottom. They were a bit frightened, but none the worse for wear. They all stood for a moment looking into the sack.

“The cage is around here,” said Yesac, and took Marga’s hand. They all walked around to the other side of the house where the newly constructed birdcage was standing.

Marga’s eyes widened. She looked all inside the cage, and at the door and at the roosts. She nodded her approval.

“Nice.” She said. “I think it will do just perfectly.”

—«O»—



Chapter Two

Yesac climbed onto his two-wheeled mover. He wound the flywheel up and pressed the start. He shot out of the driveway and down the road toward the King's Castle. He was on the King's Highway in less than minute. He would arrive in two more.

The King saw to it that the land was kept clean and the roads in good repair, and it was a pleasure to ride down this road. There were no billboards visible from the King's Highway. All one could see were fields and flowers and trees. Today there was no traffic at all and Yesac let the mover fly. The afternoon was already beginning to radiate heat from the pavement. He was looking forward to the cool hallways of King Herb's palace.

As he approached the palace, he disengaged the power from the mover. It was against the King's wishes for there to be noise at the palace in the afternoons. As he coasted into the gates of the courtyard he was greeted by a guard who waved him on in. Yesac was recognised almost everywhere in the kingdom, because he was once a member of the Royal Guard, (and somewhat of a celebrity due to his shipwreck).

He stopped the mover and handed it to another guard.

"The King is waiting for you, sir."

Yesac hurried through the courtyard, past the fountains and

pools, up two flights of steps and down a long hallway to the King's Royal Study.

King Herb was standing at the window with his back to the door. He was a tall man with close-cropped white hair. His view was across the Valley of Peace. He stood motionless, apparently deep in thought as Yesac entered.

Yesac was unsure of himself, not knowing if he should speak. Surely Herb had heard the guard announce him. He stood quietly waiting for the King. He looked around the study at the familiar walls, the books and maps. He had sat around this big red table with the King and his advisors on more than one occasion, discussing world trade matters, the economy and even wars. This room had listened to a lot of problems and had been the place where important decisions were made.

The old King turned from the window, and faced Yesac. He still seemed to still be lost in thought, and didn't immediately focus on Yesac. There were deep lines in the King's face, and he wore a grave look of concern. His eyes slowly came to rest on his visitor's face, and then his face gradually became a glowing smile as he recognised his former officer. He was transformed into a different man altogether as he moved forward and grasped Yesac's hand.

"Yesac, Yesac my friend! I'm so glad you came!" said the King. "I have something very important to talk to you about."

Yesac was a little embarrassed by the King's suggestion that he might not come when called. He could not imagine not responding to the King. He had always been ready to die for this man, always eager to please, always looked to him for infallible judgement in all matters. He studied the King's clean-shaven face.

"King Herb. Sir, I..." Yesac began. He went down upon his right knee and bowed his head.

"Up, up my dear boy," said the king. He gently pulled Yesac's hand upward and motioned to a chair. "We shan't waste time on formalities and proper etiquette. We are friends. I have much to discuss with you." The King sat in a chair opposite the stunned Yesac.

“I want you to find something for me. It is an heirloom that belonged to my father many years ago. It came to his father by means of a gift from a man who claimed to have journeyed from a star. He was done a great service by my great grandfather who was paid handsomely, and then given this gift as a token of his appreciation. I do not know what became of the star traveler. But the gift was kept in my family until it was lost many years ago in an airship-wreck. I am still not sure why it was on the airship. Perhaps it was because it was being moved to a safer place than this palace. At the time, we were at war, and a treasure as valuable as this was not safe anywhere.”

“This treasure is called the Dooda. It is a most wondrous thing. It shines and glows with many pictures for some. It is always beautiful and spellbinding. All who view it see different things. Some believe it is magic. It has belonged to many powerful rulers over time.

“I cannot personally attest to its power, for I have never seen it. My father told me of its existence just before he passed on. He claimed that it would rightfully belong to me when I inherited the kingdom, if I could recover it.”

Yesac listened intently to the King’s story. He was fascinated. He could not believe that the King wanted him to search for it. The King had moved closer and was looking directly into Yesac’s eyes, as if trying to tell if the young man believed what he had said.

“Why don’t you send out the Royal Guard to retrieve it?” asked Yesac.

“Because the real power cannot be realized if the holder of the Dooda is known. Besides, I cannot be sure there is not talk in my cabinet of officers. There are so many young ones and they listen to so many political ideas. I am sure that something of this sort is best kept a secret.”

Yesac’s eyes locked onto the King’s. He was turning everything over in his mind. He believed that King Herb thought it was true. However, his experience had found most “magic” to be clever slight of hand, or some scientific illusion. He had never once come across any “real magic.” Still he had great faith in the King and knew he

would be obliged to do what he could to help him.

“If I can find this Dooda...” began Yesac.

“Then you’ll do it?” Interrupted the King.

He was still amazed at the King’s reluctance to order him to do anything. Ever since that airship wreck a few years ago, the King had treated him as a friend more than a subordinate. He had apparently earned the King’s respect by surviving the crash and then actually “sailing” a wrecked airship into the shipping lanes of the Royal Air Corps. They were picked up along with their cargo a short time later. The mission that he and Kev had flown was called a success. But Yesac still didn’t feel like a hero. He would have tried to save his men and the King’s cargo under any circumstances. Now he was simply being asked to follow another order for his King. Of course he would do it.

“Sir I am honored,” Yesac said. “I stand ready to follow your orders. Just tell me what you would have me do.”

The king was pleased. He sat back in his chair and admired Yesac for a moment. He had the look of a proud father. “I knew you would!” said he. “I knew I could count on you, my friend.” Then he just sat there grinning at Yesac for a while.

Yesac began to fidget, feeling a bit uncomfortable under the King’s stare. He watched as his face slowly changed back to the more worried, concerned look from awhile earlier. His gaze returned to the window.

King Herb told Yesac that a great storm was forecast by the Dooda at the time it belonged to his grandfather, though they couldn’t tell exactly when it would occur. It so happened the Dooda was lost as a result of the storm. Herb’s father had said it was probably completely unavoidable, a matter of fate.

But that was not all the Dooda foretold. The Dooda had shown his grandfather a picture of two airship-wrecked soldiers, sailing on the ocean in a crippled airship. Then the image clearly showed one of the soldiers standing on a mountain holding what appeared to be the Dooda itself.

The King said he did not believe the legend of the Dooda until a merchant told him of an enchanted medallion that a Qari tribe in Acirfa claimed to have lost recently. Only now did it seem to make any sense.

“The purpose of this mission has got to be kept a secret!” said the King with an emphatic slap of his hand against the polished wood of the red table. “you cannot even tell your crew until you are well under way.”

“My crew?” asked Yesac.

King Herb turned back to face Yesac. “You will need a crew for the airship of course.”

“Airship?”

“Of course.”

“But if this is supposed to be a secret...”

“You are going on a special trading expedition for the King,” said the King. “We send out diplomatic trade expeditions often. No one will suspect your real purpose. Only you will know the real mission.”

They talked for several more hours. King Herb told Yesac more of the Dooda legend, and all he could provide for clues to its whereabouts. There would be an airship made ready for him, as well as supplies. He would require the services of an interpreter and a ship’s clerk, which the King named, and a few others, which Yesac would select. Yesac would contact them all personally, not risking any other form of communication, so as not to disclose any details about the trip to anyone prematurely.

Yesac left the company of the King just at dusk and arrived home to find a note pinned to the kitchen door:

“There’s enough feed in the bird’s cage until tommorrow...check the water in the morning.

Marga and Kev”

Apparently they had settled the birds in. He smiled as he read the note. He was sure the birds had received the very best of care from the best of hands. No need to disturb them tonight.

He sat down in his favorite chair and contemplated. There was so little time to get together...who? And what? For what?

After so many missions for the King he felt sure that he should have a better idea of how to proceed. Always there had been other experienced officers to confide in, to ask for help when he was unclear on how to prepare for a mission. But this was different. He had to solve this one mostly by himself.

The airship would require only three people to safely operate, and a relief crew of two or three, depending on shifts. They would be traveling for three to five days at a stretch. The length of the voyage will be uncertain...maybe a few weeks and perhaps much longer.

It would seem that they should be ready to travel very light and live by whatever means they can devise, off the land or off the people. They should be able to communicate with anyone they encounter, and able to understand the way of the lands they enter. Yesac closed his eyes and laid his head back.

—«O»—



Chapter Three

He awoke to a loud crowing. At first he wasn't sure of where he was, or what the noise was all about, but he quickly remembered the events of the day before. He blinked his eyes and the rooster let out another long call. The sun was just beginning to show the first rays of pink in the east.

He knew that time was short and there was much to be done before the sun set. He quickly shed his clothes and climbed into the shower.

“Only a few more of these before I leave,” he thought. “This is one pleasure that's hard to beat.” But he didn't linger in the warm spray. Instead, he dried quickly and dressed.

Yesac packed a lunch and walked outside. The sun was beginning to show above the mountains. He donned his eye protectors and straddled the mover. He wound the flywheel. He pressed start and shot out onto the road. This trip was going to be about half a day each way.

He was going in search of Harby, an old buddy who was about as loyal as they come. He thought back to the days at the Royal Academy at the dormitory. Harby had lived across the hall. He kept his nose in his books all the time. He could follow every instruction to the letter. He said very little. He absorbed everything.

Harby was the the kind of guy that was your friend unconditionally. Once he decided you and he were buddies, nothing could change that. He was always on your side. He was one of those people that was just like family right from the start. He just kind of fell into stride like he'd been your brother all along, always known and trusted you. They had been good friends ever since.

All young people were required to attend the Royal Academy. From the time they were young, they all looked forward to the experience. It was four years of active duty in service to the King, and then there were additional programs available in which you could obtain a degree or learn a trade, among other things. Harby had earned his degree in Astronomy and Navigation. Harby had graduated, signed up in the Royal Reserve Corps, and then gone home to help his father operate their family trading business.

His reserve agreement made him liable for additional service to the King. This meant special missions as well, not that Harby wouldn't drop everything and come anyway. He was a good choice for part of the recovery team. Yesac hoped that he would find all was well with Harby.

The sun was now well above the mountains. The mover was humming along down the highway. Yesac could see heat ripples already beginning to form just above the pavement near the horizon. He hoped he would arrive before it got too hot. This time of year it always got too warm just before mid-day, and stayed that way for several hours.

He rode for about an hour and stopped for a flywheel charge at a rest area. There was always a cold spring of clear fresh water at the flywheel stations on this part of the King's highway. The power for the recharge came from the big waterwheels driven by the water from the spring. It would take about three and a half charges to travel all the way to the edge of the Great Forest where Harby lived.

Two and a half hours later, Yesac reached the crest of the last hill and disengaged the flywheel on the mover. He coasted down the long driveway and up into the yard and under the shade of the trees that surrounded Harby's cabin. He climbed off and leaned the

mover against a tree. He walked up the steps to the front door and knocked.

In a few seconds, the sound of feet moving across a hardwood floor could be heard. Then the door opened and there stood Harby, his long red beard nearly down to his chest. A big grin formed as he recognized Yesac.

“Well I don’t believe it! Yes’ old buddy!”

He stepped forward and the two men embraced and patted each other on the back, laughing and hollering with delight.

“Too long. Much too long.” said Yesac.

“Well we should spend more time together,” grinned Harby.

“Well we’re about to. That’s why I’m here,” said Yesac, his smile dissolving to a more somber look.

Harby’s grin never changed as he motioned him in.

“Come sit down and let’s have a bottle of ale and talk about it. I’m at your disposal.”

They went inside and through to Harby’s study. There stood a large telescope. The walls were covered with navigational charts. There were several globes and airship models, and some other curious instruments that Yesac didn’t recognize. Yesac sat in one of two large leather chairs.

Harby slipped behind a wall into a closet. Bottles clinked and a door slammed. There was more rattling around followed by a kind of scraping, a couple of hard raps and a shuffling noise. A second later he appeared with a tray containing bread, cheese, a couple of frosty bottles of ale, and two mugs, also frosted. He sat down in the other chair and set the tray before Yesac.

“The bread’s fresh this morning, and the ale is my own,” Harby said proudly as he poured. “Let’s see if it compares to your whistleberry.”

Yesac grinned again. He nodded, touched his mug to his host’s and then took several long swallows. Then he swished a mouthful back and forth, swallowed and sucked air in through his teeth, as

if he was savoring the bouquet of a fine wine. Then he sat back and closed his eyes and didn't speak for a moment. Harby sat there patiently waiting for a verdict.

Finally Yesac opened one eye. He still grinned. "It's about as good as any I've ever tasted," he said.

Harby was pleased. He took a long drink of his as well. He smacked his tongue against his lip, sat forward and looked Yesac directly in the eye.

"O.K. tell me what brings you."

Yesac's grin lessened somewhat. He looked down at his mug and began to play with the rings of condensation that it made on the table. He appeared to be trying to figure out a way to begin.

Harby studied his friend, but otherwise waited for him to begin.

"It is a mission for King Herb," he said finally. "But I cannot tell you everything until we are under way. We leave next week and we could be gone for up to a year. I need you to be Navigator." He looked up and into Harby's face.

"I will be ready," said Harby, pouring more ale. "Just tell all that you can so that I may prepare."

—«O»—

Yesac reached home just as the sun was disappearing. He parked the mover and walked around to the birds. They were settling onto their roosts for the night. All seemed well with them. There was no sign that Marga or Kev had been there today. He refilled their feeders and checked the water. He wondered what he would do with them while he was gone.

He went inside to finish planning for the trip. Tomorrow he would be busy rounding up the last of his special crew. Then he would be busy outfitting the airship with the things they would need. Shortly afterward they would be leaving. He sat at his desk until late into the night, making lists and writing down things to do.

—«O»—

Dandy was waiting for Yesac down at the Royal Airshipyard. He

was standing at the dock, looking alternately at his pocketwatch and then up and down the street, looking worried.

He was a small neat man. There wasn't a wrinkle in his shirt, nor a scuff upon his shoes. He was clean shaven and looked as if his very purpose in life was to appear immaculate. He was considered by many of his fellow soldiers to be the fussiest clerk in the kingdom. That was his job for many years in the Royal Forces. He was in charge of inventory for the King.

His responsibilities were to see to it that all the supplies for the entire Royal Academy were accounted for. He was very efficient, but very fussy. Everything had to be "just so" for him to feel like he was doing his job. But it was also well known that he was not entirely happy with complete order either. He always felt more purposeful when he had a mess to be straightened out, a system to be organized, or new supplies to be inventoried.

He looked preturbed as Yesac approached. Yesac held out his hand as he reached him.

"Hello Dandy," he said with a warm smile.

Dandy looked him up and down and said, "You're late."

He looked at Yesac's hand as if it offended him, and declined to shake it. He looked back at Yesac's face, and then down him and up him again. He seemed to be waiting for Yesac's excuse.

Yesac dropped his hand and his smile and said, "I'm sorry, my friend. I have too many things to do in one day. But now I will have more help."

Dandy looked at him questioningly. "How is that?"

Yesac smiled again. "We are going on a mission for King Herb."

"We?" said Dandy. He was losing his preturbed look.

Yesac motioned for him to walk with him down the sidewalk. The two men started toward the far end of the airship dock together.

"Dandy, I need you to help us outfit a small airship for a special mission. I have a list here that you must procure for us by the end of the week. We leave early the following week."

Dandy stopped, took the paper from Yesac, and then opened it, not saying anything. They stood together on the sidewalk while he looked over the list. When he finished, he began to move again, and Yesac walked alongside him.

“This is enough stuff to last many months,” said Dandy. “Where are we going?”

His manner was changing. Yesac could see that Dandy’s mind was already organizing the things on the list. He was a good choice for the job. In a few more days he would have all the necessities stowed and accounted for, and be fussing about the flightdeck, double and triple checking everything.

“I can’t tell you until we are underway,” said Yesac. “But it will be a long voyage, and it could be dangerous.”

Dandy nodded. “Understood. I will have the ship ready by Saturday. I myself will be ready to leave the day after, or any time you say.”

He held out his hand to Yesac. Yesac looked at it, and then back to Dandy’s face. He began to grin again and grasped the hand.

“It will be an honor to fly with you, sir,” said Dandy.

“...and for me with you, sir,” smiled Yesac. “I will meet you at the airship on Saturday with the rest of the crew and we will make the last of our preparations.”

—«O»—

Yesac waited in the office while a runner left to find Jin. He sat in a chair and looked at the painting above the reception desk. It was titled “words”. It was a series of bubbles with faces inside some of them. Each face seemed to have a different expression on it. Some of the bubbles with faces were touching each other and the faces inside these bubbles were smiling. They were mostly white bubbles, except for the ones with faces, which were in colors. Yesac was imagining being inside one of these bubbles. He closed his eyes.

The spell was broken by the sound of the door opening. He opened his eyes and stood up quickly. There stood a young woman

dressed in a blue jumpsuit, her hair tied back. She held a notebook and a writing implement.

“I am Jin,” she said. “You wanted to see me?”

Yesac suddenly felt awkward.

“Uh, yes,I..,” He looked around and then back to Jin. He had not expected to see such an attractive woman. He seemed unable to speak. He stood there obviously surprised.

Jin was a most accomplished language and communications authority according to the King. She spent much time reading manuscripts from other lands, and speaking with visitors. She had often been called to translate for King Herb. Her abilities were legendary. But Yesac had not heard that she was so beautiful.

She seemed confident and poised... and businesslike at the moment.

“..and you are?” she said, offering her hand, and tilting her head to one side and giving her ear.

“Yesa..” He cleared his throat. “Excuse me. I am Yesac,” he said finally, and reached for her hand.

“Glad to meet you, Yesac,” she smiled. “How can I help you?”

You can come with me in my airship for a year,” he began. “Uh by the King’s ord..., uh, request. I mean my request, I mean..”

“The King has given you a mission,” she said, as if she understood perfectly. “..and he has requested my help as well.” It was not a question but more like a statement. She was skilled all right.

—«O»—

When Yesac rode into his driveway this time, he saw Kev’s mover parked at the side of the house. He was probably around back with the birds. He got off his own mover and parked it alongside Kev’s. He hurried around back to find him.

Marga and Kev were both there, doing something inside the cage. Yesac strode up and put his hands on the wire cage and peered in.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

They both turned to Yesac, looking suprised.

“Where have you been for two days?” asked Kev.

“Yeah, where?” followed Marga.

Yesac looked from one to the other. Finally he said, “I’m glad you are both here. We’ve got some important stuff to talk about. If you’re finished, let’s go in.

Without a word, they closed the door of the cage and followed him up the steps and into the house. They went into the living room where Yesac fell into his big chair. Marga sat in the chair opposite and Kev sprawled onto the long couch. Yesac put his feet up on the table and scratched his beard. Still no one spoke.

At last Yesac said, “I’ve been to see the King. He wants me to do something for him, and I want you to help me.” He was looking from one to the other as he spoke.

“The last couple of days I have been talking to the rest of the crew, and getting things in order for a voyage. I need you both to go along. First, because I may need your skills, and secondly, because I trust you both. The only thing is that I can’t tell you what it is all about until we are under way, and that will be in a few days.”

Kev and Marga were still silent. They looked at one another and then back at Yesac, waiting for him to continue.

“I can tell you that we will be officially on a diplomatic trading expedition for King Herb. We will have an airship and a crew of six including the three of us. We may be gone for up to a year. What do you say?”

Kev sat up and placed his elbows on his knees, folded his hands, and looked at the floor as if he was thinking about it. Marga just blinked, looking kind of stunned. Yesac took his feet off the table and leaned forward. He reached out and put a hand on Kev’s shoulder.

“Well? Do you want to think on it? He looked at Marga. She blinked again. He looked back at Kev. “Kev?”

Yesac stood up and paced around with his hands clenched behind

his back. He shook his head and said, "I'd hoped you guys would be with me on this. If I can't depend on you two, then I won't have a chance." He stopped pacing and held his hands out to them. Marga was the first to speak.

What about our birds? What will I tell my father?" she asked.

"Why did you wait so long to tell us?" asked Kev. "...And you still aren't telling us everything." He looked hurt.

"The King will provide a caretaker for our houses...and the birds," he added. He turned to Kev. "I didn't tell you first because I wanted to think about it before I dragged you into this. You don't have to go if you don't want to."

Marga stood up and walked to the window. She looked out across the road into the distance. Then she turned and faced Yesac.

"I'll go," she said finally. Then she grinned, and then she laughed out loud and then she hugged Yesac. "I'll go. You bet I'll go!"

They both turned to Kev. He looked up at them and then kind of half laughed.

"...You guys expect me to stay here while you have all the fun?" He stood up and embraced them both. "You aren't going without me! Just give me time to say goodbye to my folks and I'm ready."

Yesac felt warm and safe here in his living room with his two friends. He knew it might be a long time before he felt this secure again.

—«O»—

They stood on the dock and marveled. She was long and tall and three colors of green. Her decks were of polished blond wood. Her trim was a fancier red and brown wood, edged with brass. The Royal Flag hung from a pole directly beneath. Her name was inlaid on both sides of her in white. "Judy."

At her stern was a pair of large brass fans. There were two decks visible, one above the other. Above that was the gas envelope that was most of the ship. She was tied to the dock, and there was a gangplank that led up from the dock into her lower hold. There were

men wheeling supplies up the plank. Dandy was standing at the bottom, clipboard in hand, and shouting something at one of the workers.

“This isn’t right!” he was shouting. “I ordered large and these are medium!”

The dockworker stood there looking annoyed.

“Hey I didn’t fill the order! I just drive the wheelbarrow!” yelled the dockman. “Do you want these or not?”

Kev tapped Yesac, trying to ignore the dispute on the dock. “Can we go aboard?”

“Sure we can,” grinned Yesac. The five walked down to where Dandy was arguing with the dockman.

“Take ‘em back!” he shouted. “I have to have larges, not mediums!”

The worker shrugged and turned the wheelbarrow around and headed back down the sidewalk. Dandy was fuming.

He turned and spotted Yesac, and his attitude quickly changed. He regained his composure and stepped forward.

“Sir, we are almost ready.” He looked at the others.

Yesac introduced them. “Dandy, meet Jin, Marga, Harby and Kev. This is the ship’s clerk, Dandy.” They shook hands all around.

“Allow me to give you a tour of the most magnificent Judy,” said Dandy with a smile, and he began to walk up the plank. The others followed him into the cargo hold. It was filled with boxes, crates, bundles and bags. A narrow path led through the center to a ladder at the stern. Dandy stepped aside and allowed Jin to climb first, followed by Marga and then Harby, Kev and Yesac. He quickly followed up to the top deck, and closed the hatch.

They were standing between two large driveshafts. The deck encircled the airship. From here one could proceed forward to either side. There was a door in the center that led into the cabin. The large green envelope that was most of the airship bulged out on all sides above. There were green-painted cables and pipes nearly everywhere. The deck itself was polished until everything reflected in it’s surface.

“This is the back door,” Dandy pointed. He began moving around the deck on the starboard side, past a row of tiny windows. The deck was narrower here. “These windows are for half the Crew’s Quarters. There are two more on the other side. Beyond that is the Cook’s Mess, followed by the Navigator’s Quarters and forward is the Helm.” He led them past another door and around to the Navigation Room.

They all crowded into the small quarters. There was a large table in the center, with seats all around. They had to squeeze into the seats in order to all fit into the tiny room. There was a door that lead forward to the Helm. Dandy pointed to a hatch directly above. “That leads to the Engine Room. There are two opposing flywheels inside the envelope. The solar drives will help to maintain inertia, once we get out into full sunlight. The Judy can go for about two days in overcast conditions before we have to recharge.”

He slipped out of his seat and through the door onto the deck of the Helm. There was more standing room here. The room was surrounded by transparent walls. There were two windows in the floor as well, allowing the pilot to see below. A large steering wheel was in the center, and a compass ball was suspended above. There were levers and buttons on one side of the wheel, and dials and indicators on a panel on the other.

As soon as everyone was inside, Dandy went through a brief explanation of the ship’s controls. “Everything can be controlled from here. “These two levers control the drive fans. This one controls altitude.”

Yesac stood before the wheel and looked out. From this position he could see everywhere but aft. He put his hands on the controls, and smiled at the others. It was a magnificent feeling. He could imagine the Judy cruising among the clouds, floating high above the world.

“How does it control the altitude?” asked Marga. She seemed a little skeptical.

Kev stepped in to answer. “We use water as a ballast,” he began.

When we need to go up, we simply dump some water. When we need to go down, we vent some of the gas.”

Marga looked doubtful. She looked at the others as if to see if they believed it. “What about when the gas is gone?” she asked.

This time Harby had the answer. “We”ll manufacture the gas to replenish our supply by mixing two chemicals. The process is automatic, but it takes a while to happen. That’s why we need to use the water. Otherwise it would take all day to climb to cruising altitude.”

Marga still seemed uncomfortable. But if the others were willing to go along with the idea, then she would too. She leaned over and peered through one of the floor windows, but she held fast to one of the rails, as if she might slip and fall.

“Do you want to see inside the quarters?” asked Dandy.

They all indicated they did, and followed Dandy aft. He led them back through Navigation and through the Cook’s Mess to a narrow hallway. There were four doorways, two on each side.

“I thought that Jin and Marga could share one forward room, Kev and Yesac could bunk in the other forward room, and Harby and I could each take the two smaller rooms aft,” said Dandy. They all seemed in agreement, and began to check out their respective quarters.

In a few minutes, they all gathered in the Cook’s Mess.

“When do we leave?” asked Jin. The others all looked to Yesac. They were all pretty eager. The spirit of adventure was burning in them all. Yesac was just as excited.

“The day after tommorow before the first light of dawn.”