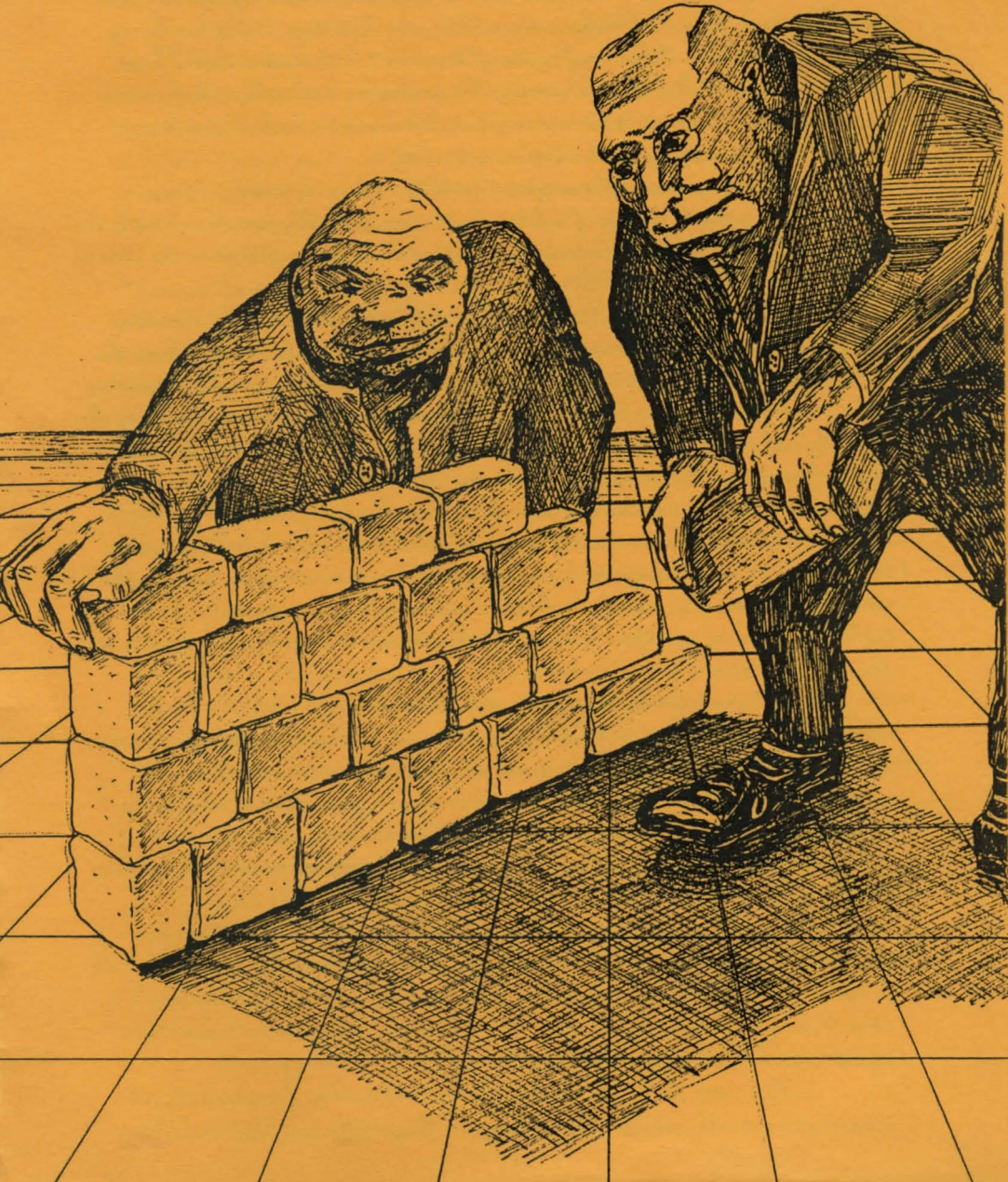


MURDAC



My Darling Jocasta

How I miss you! It must be more than thirty years since we spent more than a couple of days apart. I woke up this morning longing to see you again, though it's less than a week since we said our farewells. The flight was relatively uneventful; a little bumpy and I confess that I had to seek solace from a teeny glass of whisky. I do hope you'll forgive me.

I hope you'll find it in your heart to forgive me something else too. The tale that I was flying to Kashmir was a little — in these days I dare hardly say white — a little lie. I flew to Murdae. I know that both the fact that I have deceived you and that I have returned to the land of my birth will strike horror in your veins, but I beg you to understand that I had to come back. I just have to find out the truth about Murdae before it's too late.

Duessa met me at the airport. I still don't know how she got there, although, for a fragile woman of indeterminate years, probably more than ninety, she is amazingly agile. I hired a car and together we drove to her cottage on the edge of the forest of Murdae for my first visit since childhood.

It was exactly as I remembered it: dark, mysterious, broody, even more isolated now that I'm old enough to appreciate it. We passed a few people on the road, drab, grey people who turned their eyes away yet still, from inside, watched us.

Duessa, on the other hand, always uses her eyes to look one straight in the eye. My father, rest his soul, used to say she could read the runes at the back of one's brain on the blackest of nights, that she knew secrets that nobody else in the village did — like what it meant if you saw a rabbit hiccupping the night of the full moon. My mother told me that the reason he only lived to be 101 (when his father had reached 112) was because he had tripped over Duessa's cat when drunk. "She's a woman to be wary of," she had told me, "especially if you want to come home without growing an extra ear on the way. She can turn milk sour just by scratching the end of her nose."

This woman whom I'd grown up to think of as a witch lit the log fire while I perched on the edge of her rickety bed. Flakes of snow began to scour the window, like ice-cold eyes come to see who had dared step foot in Duessa's cottage. It was full of strange and interesting objects: glass apparatus billowing noxious vapours; a stuffed platypus; icosahedral prisms; many other curios. A cockroach would have scurried between my toes had I not been warming them above the now blazing fire.

Duessa was muttering incoherently to herself, busily looking for something. The only sign of her immense age, I observed, was this tendency to talk to one as if she was talking to herself: "This one looks brighter than the last," is what I thought I heard her mumble. "It is time that the quest were done. The wizard needs help. But as for the manticores..."

These were the fragments that I heard, my darling Jocasta, as the old woman returned with a teapot. I'm telling you this exactly as it happened, like a

story, for even though this is only the beginning, and even though it is happening to me, I don't really want to believe it.

"So you think I'm a witch?" she said. It wasn't a question, just something she said to the fire, to the teapot, perhaps to me. Just as I was wondering what to say in reply, and whether or not it was safe to accept what I thought was her gestured offer of a cuppa, she flooded the hearth with the contents of the pot and gazed at them raptly.

"If you want to find out the secrets of Murdae —" she began, gazing at the tea leaves swarming in the hearth, giving them a loose-toothed smile, as if she'd said something and seen something that pleased her after all these years. She began to utter instructions, which I repeat here in case anything should happen to me. If it should, I want you to ask Jonathan to continue the quest. He's a good lad, despite the clothes he wears, with an adventurous soul and a warm, brave heart. I hope he's enjoying England.

"You go down a certain path at midnight on Halloween," she said. "You go down it until you come to a clearing. You draw a pentacle, and stand within it. You shout *PANGORY PANJHRODULAM* —" She repeated these words thrice, as if they had some powerful significance. I repeated them to her, struggling to get the same intonation, images coming into my mind that getting it wrong might mean death by rotting in some gloomy dungeon for ten thousand aeons, tormented by creatures from the lower planes. "It be fearful," she went on, her rasping, ancient voice only just audible above the crackling fire. "Ye certainly tremble. The trees move around you. You see a path that stretches for miles. You take it, and the trees link arms behind you. There be hours of tireless trudging until you come across a beautifully laid-out garden and a small stone hut."

For some reason, mention of that hut made me sit up straight, cold sweat drenching my brow. Duessa continued to ignore me, dipping a skeletal finger into the tea leaves. She shoved some into the corner of her dribbling mouth.

"Ogres," Duessa added, her voice fading, drifting up the chimney like a spirit leaving a dying man. "And the cannibals," she mumbled. "And the Old Man of the Sea..." I hoped that she was just falling asleep, for there was one last thing I wanted her to do.

She was. With that Duessa began to snore, her near-transparent, bony skull resting on her flat, heaving chest.

She's been asleep for over an hour, my darling Jocasta, while I've been composing this letter to you. I'm leaving now to explore Murdae in the way she described. I shall leave a note beside Duessa, asking her to post this letter to you. I hope you'll find it in your heart to forgive me for misleading you about my destination.

Give my love to Jonathan. And don't worry. We'll be together again soon. My fondest Love and Deep Affection.

Your Ever-Loving Husband,

George

