pressed by the wind, Garland numbly rubbed a thin hand across his face. At any moment he expected it to crack and fly from him in shards to the dusty trail behind them. The jeep leaped wildly over a ridge and slammed down hard on its old springs. Next to him, Boresleeve the Peddler laughed with each tight jerk of a deep rut or dip. Garland gripped the rusted roll bar above him, his breathing strained in the frigid evening air. With each violent bounce the loose-jointed jeep seemed doomed to a quick and helpless destruction.

Boresleeve worked savagely at the wheel. Yanking first one way, then another, he directed the careening vehicle across boulder strewn hills towards a vast and thickly wooded peneplain.

An invisible, icy hand tugged at Garland’s yellow hair; holding it tightly above and behind his head, wrestling it to furious mats and tangles. He ground his teeth against the driver’s antics and did his best to adjust his green eyes to the cold sting of rushing air. He would have voiced his discomfort had he not been sure that his words would be lost in the roar of the engine, or be snatched by the wind. Besides, he detested shouting.

Boresleeve, sensing the other’s thoughts, only laughed harder. “Won’t be long,” he yelled between ruts and drove faster.

Slowly the hills blended, their swells lying lower and lower, as the jeep approached the rough plain. The ruts were not so deep; the boulders not so numerous. Before them lay the beginnings of the Blue Forest and its silence came upon them like the rush of a spring rain. It was no scraggly thrust of wintry fur, nor knotted pine; but an unrestrained unfolding of various varieties, glossed in a calm and shadow-stealing blue. So commanding upon their sight, it was, that they rode transfixed, imprisoned within its turquoise dream.

And so, when Garland first saw her, sitting cross-legged on a tall, slender jut of rock, he presumed it to be only another dark vision. Only when she raised both hands high above her, as if in offering to the sky, did his whole being become aware of her.

“There!” he shouted, stabbing a wild finger towards the figure they approached.

Standing up on the narrow board substituted for a brake pedal, Boresleeve stamped hard. The ancient vehicle nearly
nose-dived, then swapped ends three times, coming to an abrupt and startling halt amidst a haze of red dust and swirling evening colors.

Garland sat fused to his seat, his hands whitening upon the metal bar above him. The Peddler was already climbing from his place behind the wheel and in a moment stood grinning at his passenger in a most despicable manner.

"I knew we would see her!" said Boresleeve and his voice trembled with excitement. "It was the Nymph, Garland!" With that he whirled and dashed across the distance separating them from the broad shoulders of stone that stretched across the edge of the forest as far as the eye could see.

Garland collected himself at last. Leaping from the jeep, he sped after the eager Boresleeve. Scrub brush and an ample amount of thick vines slowed their progress, but at length they stood precariously upon the same expanse of rock which, only moments before, had been inhabited by the elusive creature. Below them the jeep seemed absurdly small; all but insignificant in the growing dark. The trees loomed upwards to them from the other side, their subtle forms appearing ever more mysterious bathed in rock shadow.

Breathing heavily, they stood examining the impenetrable folds of the forest. Boresleeve pointed to a ledge below them which, though frightfully distant to Garland, was attainable.

"What point in pursuing a shadow, Boresleeve? Doubtless the Nymph has fled into the wood and now observes our every move."

"You would be absolutely correct, except for the fact that two days ago I was able to follow her to a grotto, which is but a short way from here. I was collecting plants in the Forest, for they grow here most abundantly, and at once I heard a most strange and remarkable singing. The words were unknown to me, but the melody enslaved me and I sought its source. I came upon her bathing in a brilliant pool at the entrance of the grotto and the voice which issued from that lovely form was beyond description — priceless! Ah, pity me — in my trance I made some errant noise which informed her of my presence. She dived beneath the surface and I saw her no more. Lest I rout her from her home, I thought it better to withdraw and return later with a witness."

"Why did you not tell me all this before?" demanded Garland.

"You Seedeaters are leery folk. Had I added intrigue to curiosity, doubtless you would have stayed home. After dark I intend trapping her in her own cave. Nymphs must hide from the light of the moon, and she will be forced to tell me her secret. Each Nymph has one, as you are well aware."

Boresleeve took a step to continue downward, but Garland reached out and touched his shoulder lightly.

"Listen!" he urged, closing his eyes and straining at the darkness. "What makes that sound?"

The two remained motionless for some time. Garland turned, facing the direction from whence they came. Peering into the darkness he could make out a huge and clumsy conveyance bouncing along the dilapidated road, bearing darkly out of the east. He pointed.

"A bus!" breathed the Peddler. "Who; in all the wide realm of the West Land, is rich enough to operate a bus?"

The question was left to the uneasy wind that slipped across the tall boulder. The two began to scramble down its massive side towards the approaching rumble. The first stars of closing night appeared in the ashen glow of dusk.

With a heavy lurch, the bus ground to a desperate halt. Garland and Boresleeve stood before it gazing at the numerous designs upon its curious hide. Large green stars with black centers covered it entirely. Here and there a strange looking orb, each of a different hue, stared out bleakly from its black background. Protruding from the roof on a slender rod, emblazoned in a brilliant gold, a huge, crescent moon glistened starkly. Inside, a waning din of clangs and clatters served to mystify the nearby pair even more. Through small, oval windows, paned with real glass, the two beheld a vast array of pots and pans — some swaying unhindered, others banging noisily into those around them — suspended from the interior ceiling. There were dozens of them. Had they been in full sway, battling senselessly at one another, the noise would have been deafening.

Presently, the thin doors moved inward and onto the ground stepped a figure robed and hooded in colors exactly the same as those upon the bus. Miniature stars and bright planets seemed to move about upon it in clever disarray.

"I am Rotifera, of Carib," he said bowing low and doffing his hood. "I am called Halfmoon by most and I am seeking knowledge of the Blue Nymph that is said to habit these parts."

With a gnarled hand he stroked a greying beard. Upon his dimly visible face Garland could discern a glowing, crescent moon, etched in gold, high on his right cheekbone.

"I have been authorized," he explained, "to pay a handsome fee to anyone who might be of assistance..." his voice trailed off into the darkness.

"And who has authorized it?" inquired Boresleeve lowly and with a great deal of courage.

"Why... a High Chieftain of Carib, of course, who commands to know her... present whereabouts. I must say, people are awfully suspicious in these parts. What say you to a good drink and a warm fire before any further conversation? The chill has reminded me of my manners."

And so an odd dickering began, accompanied with an appropriate amount of spirits, which lasted until the final traces of false dawn had fled beyond the western horizon.

Her voice made the Blue Forest dance. From where they watched, the two could see little of her lithe form as it swam easily in a brilliant, azure pool set near the cave entrance. Grace was a small word for such movements. Mesmerized by the tones of her lilting voice, Garland stared absentmindedly towards the unsuspecting bathers. Music had never before been so enrapturing; a voice had never been so enthralling. Long strands of golden hair eddied lightly about her, seeming to have life of itself, as she turned and dived in the crystalline fissure. The moment was soft, soothing.

A sharp jab in his ribs brought him to his senses. Boresleeve motioned impatiently for him to initiate their scheme. As quietly as possible he began to work his way down from their vantage point towards the left of the cave's entrance. Boresleeve moved to the right. Over his shoulder Garland carried a light, strong net; in his left hand an ample amount of cord to bind the delicate wrists.

How he had been talked into all this still confused him. Boresleeve was a Peddler and had a slick tongue, but it was not his nature to be moved by mere words. He had been planting the late crop when Boresleeve made one of his infrequent visits. He had thought it was for the usual thing of peddling his rare plants. But then Boresleeve had related the strange sighting of a legendary Nymph of the Blue Forest. It had been Garland's childhood dream — in fact, it had been everyone's dream — to see
this beautiful creature and hear her wondrous voice. And now
to put a net over her head? It was most confusing.

What had begun as an innocent desire to see something
mysterious had abruptly changed to a serious game of people
snatching. After all, however different, the Nymph was still a
breathing being. Moreover, he had always mistrusted wizards
and this Halfmoon fellow seemed terribly wizardrous.
Boresleeve always talked of hard times and keeping seeds in
your pouch and such, but couldn’t people just listen to the
beautiful things around them? Instead, they caged them, or put
them in traveling shows. It was all too unfair.

Things usually happen hardest when you expect them least.
So, when Garland had at last decided to throw down his net
and go back the way he had come, she broke from the deepest
shadows and was almost upon him before he could blink.
Wrapped in the blanket of his own thoughts, he had never
realized that the singing had ended. She was fleeing the noise
which Boresleeve made at full speed. Seeing him, she
attempted to check her flight and fell headlong, quivering like a
wounded bird before the eager jaws of the hunter’s dog.

Garland stood immobilized. She was clad in a loose fitting
gown which was now torn and soiled. For a moment she lay
face down in the thick foliage and he dared not breathe,
thinking she had harmed herself. Her long, golden hair lay in
swirls about her and her skin was a pale, startling blue. Slowly
she picked herself up and Garland stared into the face of the
most exquisite creature he had ever seen. She sobbed and fell
again upon those delicate features.

“I... I won’t harm you... madam,” he stammered. He cast
his net softly to the ground and dropped the thinly wovend cord.
“I am sorry... we have frightened you so. It was foolish...
and unmanly.” Bending down to one knee, he lay a light hand
upon her shoulder. At first she tensed, then her body suddenly
relaxed and allowed his hand to remain. “Honestly, madam, I
only wished to hear the Nymph of the Blue Forest sing,” he
added, his voice low and gentle.

The sobbing stopped and again she raised her lovely face to
his. Garland smiled his best smile into those azure eyes and
offered a clean kerchief, kept hidden in a deep pocket.

“This kidnapping business is rather silly anyway,” he
continued rather matter-of-factly. “My curiosity has gotten the
best of me again. I am afraid.”

He helped her slowly to her feet. She was light and as airy
as early dew.

“I am called Garland, of the Thin Valley,” he said mildly.
“And your name, milady?”

For a moment she stood staring deeply into his eyes -- and
further. He felt as though it was the first moment, of the first
day, of the first spring ever seen upon the face of the world. He
felt as though time were flowing away; as though it licked about
him, but left him fresh, unmarked. He was gliding upon softly
rustling leaves that moved about him.

She bent down and picked a small flower growing at her
feet. It was a moment before Garland could realize that she
offered it to him.

But then a rush of approaching footsteps broke the spell.
Boresleeve cursed loudly and demanded that Garland answer.
She was gone in an instant. In her place -- only the flush of the
low wind. Garland listened weakly to the oaths of the
approaching conspirator. In his hand he held a tiny flower and
in his heart he wished, more than anything, that she would sing
for him.

Halfmoon stood before a roaring fire, his dusky face looking
even darker and more intense in its flickering throes. He did
not seem at all pleased with the outcome of the day’s events.
Garland had agreed to accompany Boresleeve back to this
unnerving fellow only on the condition that they would leave for
the Valley immediately afterward.

“She was within grasp, eh?” he asked and his voice held
something other than curiosity and concern. “You will, at least,
stay for some strong drink. Possibly we may... reconcile
ourselvess. The road is lonely and the night is young yet!”

Boresleeve eagerly nodded. Though Garland drank rarely,
and wished himself far away, he finally agreed. A quick quaff of
wine to break the chill and they would be done with this
bewildering character.

They moved inside the bus. Behind the wheel lay a small
space covered with rugs and huge pillows. Garland and
Boresleeve seated themselves upon this while their dark host
opened one of the many cabinets lining the walls and withdrew
a small, red flask. He obtained tiny cups from another cabinet
and joined them on the low divan. He did not face them
directly, but sat to their left staring up at the numerous pots
and pans hanging from the ceiling. The Peddler chewed upon a
slender, brownish root taken from his huge belt-pouch. Garland
sat munching a small amount of seeds which he carried in a
small vest pocket. They sipped in silence upon a strong,
pungent liquid.

“Do you gentlemen enjoy good music?” asked Halfmoon, his
voice an almost inaudible whisper.

“Oh, course!” returned Boresleeve enthusiastically. Garland
detected a certain nervousness in his companion’s words.

“And you, Seed eater? Do you share your friend’s love for
rhythm?”

Halfmoon turned towards him and for the first time Garland
saw the wild, left eye swim crazily outward as Halfmoon’s lips
thinned into a wide grin.

“I... yes. Good music is fine,” he answered weakly, chilled
to the bone.

“Then I will play for you,” he said with a wider grin which
exposed his teeth. He rose and moved to the farthest cabinet.
Garland shivered visibly. The man’s teeth had been filed!

In each hand Halfmoon held a long, golden spoon. Making a
low bow he came up with the spoons held above his head in
outstretched arms.

“I call it ‘The Symphony of the Gods.’ Tonight, I dedicate
my performance to Boresleeve, the honorable Peddler.” He
made another bow and then, on straightening, began a slow roll
upon the nearest and deepest of the hanging pots. Both
Garland and Boresleeve had finished their drink and sat staring
at this spectacle. Boresleeve seemed pleased. The golden
spoons were a blur of motion as Halfmoon sprang from pot, to
pot, to pot in a bizarre cacophony of sounds.

The lamps inside the bus seemed to dim and flicker.
Garland’s very surroundings seemed to begin to oscillate as he
watched the wild-faced figure leap from place to place,
drumming hard upon the now reeling pots and pans. Garland
shook his head, not trusting his vision. The entire bus appeared
to him as if it were swaying back and forth. His mind became
gulped with a howl of blatant sound; his eyes witnessed a
world of swinging shadows and whirling motions. The small
cup fell from his hands, its clatter drowned in the sea of sound
about it. Garland tried to tear his fuddled eyes from the
seething picture before him, but it was useless. He seemed
frozen in this instant of confusion; paralyzed in this moment of
madness. Then, upon his slight brains, a low, rhythmic chant
began:
We are the dull Gods
We are the hungry Gods
We are the slayers of hollow wind
The eaters of soft, blue trees!

Over and over the dim chant repeated in Garland’s head. In his fading vision, Garland saw the outstretched arms of the wizard, Halfmoon, and heard him shout: “The Gods! We are the Gods! I am God!” And then he slipped from the bus on a thin wisp of ebon fog and blended into the darkness.

Garland awoke from a blue dream and faced a grinning nightmare. Above him, from where he lay on the low couch, Halfmoon stood poised, a golden dagger in his hand.

“Think much before you move, my sleepy friend,” he said, his voice a vicious snarl. “You are bound both hand and foot and I’ll have your throat cut in a flash if you cause me trouble.”

Garland wished he had never awakened. Which was better—blending dreams or living nightmares? Boresleeve was gone. The pots and pans had been taken down and lay scattered about the floor in mean order.

It was raining, the sky wore ashen grey at mid morning.

“Direct me to her lair, Eater of Seeds, or I’ll soon make short work of your thin hide!” cried the impassioned figure looming above him. The wild eye worked excitedly outward like a bowled fish attempting escape.

“Tell me or I’ll split your heart!” he spit savagely. Dropping swiftly to one knee he pressed the dagger against Garland’s chest just above his pounding heart, a hand about his throat.

“First... you must... make for the... Thin Valley...” Garland answered, barely choking out the words.

“Lying will only delay your end, not avert it!” assured the raving Halfmoon.

“Lying will only delay your end, not avert it!” assured the raving Halfmoon.

“Make... for the Valley...” repeated Garland even less, audibly. Halfmoon leaped away, leaving him to catch at air. He...
jumped behind the wheel and the bus roared away.

The road to the Valley wound about intermittent trees and boulders and was filled with ugly holes that made the bus sag and sigh. A particularly rough bounce loosened the dagger from the muttering Halfmoon's belt and it clattered to the floor, unnoticed in the bus's roar. Halfmoon pushed the bus harder than it had ever known. Up towards the waiting hills they sped, leaving a long trail of muddy ruts. With each bend or turn the small, golden dagger slid further back along the floor and closer to the trembling captive. Oblivious to anything but his own dark thoughts, Halfmoon slammed the bus even harder up the steepening hills. Garland could only watch helplessly as the weapon approached him.

Garland finally had it! With a determined effort which surprised him, Garland held the icy dagger in his tightly bound hands and sawed at those upon his feet. The bus streaked along a narrow ridge. On his left a sheer wall rose to dizzying heights; to the right the road fell away to a slowly sloping greyness dotted with massive trees and rocks.

The bus took a hard bounce, shoving Garland flatly against the wall. The door of the cabinet nearest him sprang wildly open and its contents emptied suddenly around him. One alone caught his eye: a Peddler's pouch, complete with belt!

Garland's feet were free. Cautiously he began to creep towards his foe as quietly as possible. Then, with a leap, he stood directly behind him, the dagger held low, tip touching the madman's neck.

"Stop this thing, or I lop off your head!" he shouted, trying hard to make his soft voice sound harsh and powerful.

For a moment the startled Halfmoon said nothing. Then he began a rolling, raucous laugh that filled the entire bus and doubled back upon itself like crazed wind in a sorcerer's bottle.

"Lop it off then, Seeedeater, and we go to the bottom of this mud-stained gorge. Or stay awhile, as I believe you will, and we will soon be feasting with our friend, the Nymph! Or should I say feasting of her?" He laughed again loudly, maniacally.

Garland stood pickled. What to do? The madman was right. Either way seemed utterly hopeless and -- his decision was made for him. For there, in the middle of the mud painted road, as if from nowhere, the Nymph of the Blue Forest stood, her face calm and passive.

Halfmoon saw her in the next instant and from his throat came a most unexpected scream.

"NO!" he shrieked, jerking the wheel at the last second with all his unreasoning strength.

Down they went with an incredible roar from the doomed bus. Smashing a tree, the bus lost all its ancient glass with a terrible crash. It flipped to one side and continued for many yards in an awful roll, finally coming to rest on its battered top, caught by a tall and massive tree. The last tinkles of sharded glass; the almost human groan of the bus as it set itself upon the stolid trunk -- then silence.

Garland's hands were still tied, but he was able to crawl shakily from the wreckage. Outside, near where the bus had at last foundered, the rain beat upon a dead, but still angry face. Halfmoon's good eye surveyed the ashen sky; the other eye, the wild one, had frozen to its farthest reach and seemed to stare directly, wickedly at Garland even in death.

From somewhere above him there began a soft, but lovely song. Garland began to make his way up the scarred hill through scattered pots and pans and his mind filled with other thoughts than wild eyes and grey rain.