

Temple of Stone

Leah Suslovich

The priestesses walked through the temple in single rank, knowing that one of them was to be selected for the sacrifice at noon. Their faces were tight and pale; fear flickered visibly in the eyes of some. Yet their steps never faltered, and the line moved smoothly on, past the still and silent Stone that lay on the altar in the center of the temple.

When the chosen sacrifice of the day passed, the Stone would glow briefly with a soft white light. Each girl — none of them older than sixteen — could not help but stare at the Stone out of the corner of her eye, like a bird unable to look away from a snake.

And each of them grappled with a choice. It was not an official choice, but it was a choice nonetheless — a way to avoid the deadly Stone. Every day, a few girls would take that choice and deliberately stumble, fall, interrupt the smooth walk of the priestesses. Punishment would be quick and harsh: fifty lashes, delivered in the small 'whipping room' at the far end of the temple. But there was also a reward: the knowledge that today, at least, they would not face possible death.

Most of the priestesses chose to take their chances with the Stone. Fifty lashes were not an easy thing to endure. There were a few who fell every day; they lived in unending pain, clinging grimly to life. Some of the priestesses never fell; they believed that the

Stone's choice was always right, and that the truly righteous must submit. Most of the girls, though, made a different choice every time they faced the Stone.

Only one of the priestesses did not fit into any of the three categories. She walked along calmly, at ease, without a trace of agony showing in her dark eyes. For Sarli had a secret: she *knew* whom the Stone would choose.

Before the Stone glowed, a split-second before the Chosen stepped up in front of it, it emitted a soft, bell-like tone. When Sarli was very young, she'd realized that no one but she could hear the sound, and had been quick to see the advantages of it. She had never fallen — not even once — since she began joining the ceremony at the age of five. As a result of her perfect record, she would soon become a high priestess, even though she was only fourteen. When she was a high priestess, there would be no more fear and no more risk. She would be one of the sacrificers, not one of the sacrificed.

In the Temple of the Snake-God, that was a good thing.

She became so involved in dreaming about her promotion that the bell-like sound of the Stone came as a shock, jerking her out of her reverie. And it was with even more shock and confusion that she saw that there were no priestesses in front of her, and that she

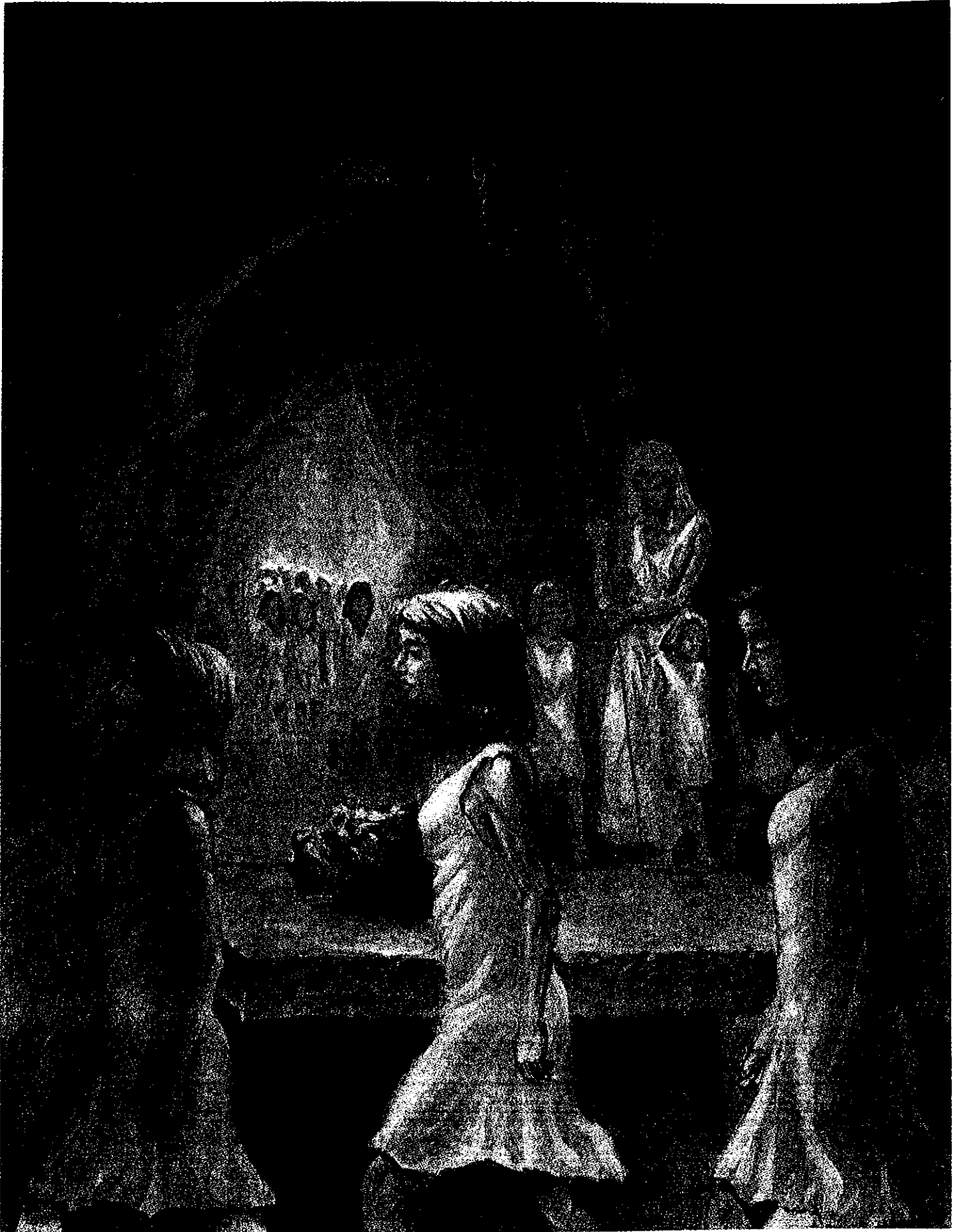
was about to walk, *herself*, in front of the Stone.

Her mind refused to function. But all the restless nights of fearing this, of planning what to do if it happened, came to her aid. Her feet stopped moving of their own volition; her body fell forward, her arms coming out to catch her. It was a clumsy fall, obviously planned. The other girls did it much more subtly. But she had managed it before the Stone could glow, marking her as victim.

Instantly, two high priestesses were by her side, jerking her roughly to her feet. Sarli let them, unable to think. The stone walls and ceiling of the temple whirled around her. She had seen the marks of the whip on some girls' backs, heard the hoarse screams echoing through the passageways, and she knew she couldn't bear it. Never in her life had she felt serious pain.

Her pride kept her lips pressed together, prevented her from useless pleading as the two high priestesses half-dragged her through the passageways. But when she saw the stark white slab that was the whipping table, her control deserted her and she began to struggle. The high priestesses, emotionless, forced her onto the table and strapped down her arms and legs. One of them selected a whip and stood over her, eyes cold and pitiless.

Sarli began to scream even before the



Artwork by Armand Cabrera

first lash fell.

Back aching from the scars of her punishment, face streaked with tears, Sarli stood beside the Stone in the silent interior of the Temple. Her hands were trembling, despite the dull grief of acceptance that had settled within her. She knew full well what would happen when she passed the Stone; and in the bell-like tone that had already sounded, she heard her fate.

It was night, and the sorcerous lights that illuminated the temple were dimmed. The lights marked night and day for the priestesses, and were the only way they had of marking time. The Temple of the Snake-God was underground, carved into a stony mountain, and the only access to the outside world was through the twisted, convoluted passageways that only the high priestesses dared travel. Getting lost in those passageways would mean a slow death of thirst, alone and lost in the darkness. The quick slash of the sacrifice knife would be easier.

Reluctantly, Sarli walked in front of the Stone; its answering glow confirmed her fears. She had noticed before that the Stone never relinquished its victims. There were many priestesses who had panicked right before they stepped in front of the Stone, and had fallen there as she had. But if the Stone had already sounded their death, there was no escape. The next time they passed the Stone, no matter how long it took them to tire of the pain and choose to take the risk, the Stone would glow for them.

And now there was no escape for Sarli, either.

She knew she couldn't face the lash again; surely she would go mad if she did. Her back was throbbing with pain, a constant reminder of what it meant to avoid the Stone. Yet the thought of herself bound on the killing altar, with the knife descending on her throat, was just as unbearable. And death in the passageways was a nightmare; better the killing altar than that.

She was trapped.

Despair welled up within her, yet a stubborn sense of self-preservation forced her to move away from the altar, before the Stone's light alerted somebody. If she was found here, alone, at night, when she should have been in her bed in the priestesses' quarters, a whipping would be the least she could expect. But she had to come here; she had to know for sure.

And now she did.

I was so close! A month more, even less than that, and she would have been a high priestess, free of the Stone's threat forever. But she would never become a high priestess now, not if she fell every day rather than undergo the Stone's choice.

Even being a high priestess did not really appeal to her; but it was the only future she had that was any future at all. She had been trapped all her life. The cage had just grown smaller.

Sarli took a deep breath, then lifted the sacrifice knife from the altar.

No godly fire struck her for that sacrilege; the walls of the temple did not shake or crumble, and the Stone did not flare up in outrage. Relieved, Sarli moved away from the Stone and began to walk across the stone floor, her blue tunic hanging to her knees and her bare feet making scarcely a sound. She had never been as devout as some of the other priestesses; now, under the threat of death, her faith had fallen from her completely. Yet it was still hard to do what she was about to do, to transgress so shockingly that no one else would even dream of it.

She came to a stop before the red curtain that covered the entrance to the inner sanctum. The holiest of holies, where the spirit of the Snake-God dwelt, where the corpses of the sacrificed were thrust every day. Not even the high priestesses entered here. But Sarli was desperate. It was the only place in the temple where she'd never been; the only place where there might be some slim chance of escape. Perhaps the only way out of the trap was in the deepest part of it. And if not ... well, she still had the sacrifice knife. It might be easier to use it on herself, if she had the courage.

Forcing her chaotic thoughts to be still, Sarli swept aside the curtain and stepped inside.

She was not in the inner sanctum yet; another red curtain hid it from her. But standing in the space between the two curtains was a high priestess in a white tunic, her eyes wide in shock as she stared at Sarli. Her mouth opened, and she drew in a deep breath, ready to scream and alert the temple to the desecrator.

Sarli's mind stopped functioning completely. She flung herself at the high priestess bodily, knocking her to the ground. The knife in her hand flashed, and then the high priestess

cried out, but too low for anyone to hear, and her cry ended in a gurgle.

Sarli crouched on the floor, breathing hard, staring in disbelief at the still face of the high priestess, at the bright red blood that covered her side and filled a spreading pool on the floor. The knife handle stuck out from the midst of all the blood; Sarli forced herself to grab it, to wrench it out of the high priestess's flesh. The blade was dripping blood.

She had murdered. She had killed one of her jailers, true, someone who had no doubt used the sacrifice knife many times; but that didn't matter. It was the blasphemy more than the death that horrified her. In the temple, priestesses died every day; but never a high priestess, and never like this.

The blood-soaked high priestess stirred suddenly, and her eyelids fluttered. Sarli backed away, her hand tightening on the knife hilt, and she had to control the urge to plunge it into the woman's neck and end it. The high priestess was no danger to her; she certainly wouldn't be able to manage a scream. Killing her might actually be an act of mercy, but Sarli thrust the thought away. She turned her back on the dying woman, jerked the red curtain aside, and stepped into the inner sanctum.

The roof ended abruptly; the walls of the inner sanctum rose higher and higher, endlessly. It seemed to Sarli that she could feel a waft of cold air from above, coming in from the outside world. The sanctum was in shambles; the walls were scored with deep, wide scratches, and the floor was covered with rubble. There was no light, except what came in from the now open curtain. It took a few moments before Sarli's eyes adjusted to the light; and then, to her horror, she saw a huge, sinuous shape creeping over the rubble toward her. Two beady red eyes focused on her, behind a mouth that gaped to reveal long fangs and a forked, flickering tongue.

The Snake-God!

With a whimper of horror, Sarli fell to her knees. She had been wrong, horribly wrong; now she would be punished for it, and the Snake-God would kill her Himself. She threw herself forward onto her face, not wanting to see the horrible God rearing above her, waiting for His fangs to strike.

"No!"

The cry, hoarse and weak, made Sarli

look up. It had come from behind her; she turned to see that the wounded high priestess had managed to drag herself to the open curtain. "Get away!" the high priestess gasped out. "Don't — let him —"

Sarli scrambled to her feet, running to the other side of the inner sanctum, stumbling over the rubble. The huge snake turned to follow her, scales slithering over the stones.

"It's the Snake-God!" Sarli screamed at the high priestess, her terror mounting.

With an obvious effort, the high priestess spoke again. "No. It's a — wyrm, a baby dragon. It —" She stopped, coughing blood.

Uncomprehending, Sarli looked from the giant snake to the high priestess and back to the snake. A baby dragon? Legends told of dragons who had lived long ago, slaughtering humanity by the hundreds and ravaging the earth. Then they had disappeared, leaving for nobody-knew-where, but leaving humanity behind to rebuild from the ruins. "A wyrm?" she whispered.

"One of them — didn't leave with the rest," the high priestess gasped. "It was too young. Wyrms can only become dragons after they have made their first kill; then they can grow their wings, breathe their fire. They can't be killed."

She had to stop, out of breath. But Sarli knew the rest. It made horrible

sense. "So you trapped it," she said, beginning to back away from the wyrm. "You brought it here, and made sure it would never reach maturity, never make its first kill. And the — the — sacrifices. You feed it —"

"We have to," the high priestess whispered. "Otherwise, it would grow desperate enough to break the wards that keep it here. It doesn't understand — as long as we keep it fed, it doesn't know it's caged —"

"No," Sarli said slowly. "It knows."

She could not have said how she knew; but it seemed to her that she could read the dragon's thoughts in its glowing red eyes, as though there was a link between them. The link of two trapped creatures?

"How long has it been here?" she demanded.

"Thousands of years."

Thousands ... Sarli's mind shrank, unable to comprehend it. To be trapped, caged, for thousands of years ...

"If it's released, it will be the end," the high priestess said urgently. "The end of civilization, of humanity ... it'll destroy us all. It must hate us ..."

"I don't blame it," Sarli spat. "I hate you."

"If it was not trapped, it would destroy all mankind ..."

"Oh, of course," Sarli said. "It's a small price to pay, killing girls every day — girls stolen from the surface —"

"Not stolen!" the high priestess said. "They're left on the mountainside for us. Unwanted female children, illegitimates, orphans ..."

The wyrm was too close. Sarli ran past it, as fast as she could, to the other end of the sanctum. Too slowly, the wyrm turned its head to follow her.

"You must leave," the high priestess begged. "If it kills you, it's all ruined."

Once again, something seemed to flash between the mind of the wyrm and the mind of the priestess. "I can't," Sarli said. "It'll follow me. It'll break the wards. It's too strong ..."

"Then you must kill yourself to prevent it!" the high priestess commanded. "Don't let it flee!"

Shaking her head desperately, Sarli moved farther from the wyrm. "No. There must be a way ..."

The high priestess tried to say something. Her face twisted in agony, and her head dropped to the ground.

The wyrm was growing angry; it hissed at her and plunged forward with sudden, surprising speed. Sarli darted out of the way, almost too late, dropping the knife. The wyrm followed, and Sarli ran. The sanctum was too small, she thought; she couldn't avoid the wyrm for long ...

The wyrm reared up and lunged at her, fangs snapping shut on nothing as Sarli threw herself out of the way. Faster than she would have believed possible,



she ran past the thick body. Not for the opening, because that would have been worse than useless; but for the sacrifice knife lying on the stone floor.

They can't be killed.

Sarli hoped that the high priestess had been wrong about that.

She rushed forward as the wyrm turned and stabbed at its side. The knife made not even a mark on its scaly hide. Desperate, Sarli stabbed again, with all her strength. Then she had to run out of the way as the wyrm reared above her.

I can't kill it. I can't escape.

Trapped again

And again it seemed to her that her mind could touch the wyrm's, that its emotions were her own, only deeper, faster, so much more intense that she couldn't even comprehend it. For thousands of years it had been trapped here, denied its natural freedom, not even understanding what that freedom was. It longed for something, and didn't know what it longed for, and had spent centuries in blind desperation and need for something it didn't comprehend. For it had never known what it was to be a dragon

The wyrm's thoughts, half-mad with desperation, melded with Sarli's own. She sensed awareness in the creature, acknowledgment that their minds were touching; and then it towered up above her and plunged down, fangs white and gleaming.

Shocked into motion, Sarli stumbled to the side; the wyrm thudded to the ground bare inches away. In a move born of desperation, she grabbed its scaly sides and heaved up. Then she was on its long back, clinging to it with one hand while she held the knife with the other.

If I can get to its eyes, and blind it, then maybe I can get away

She crawled up to its head, clinging to the thick hide desperately as the wyrm thrashed in frustration, looking for its prey. The wyrm was surprisingly easy to hold onto, its skin rough and covered with tough hairs. Sarli dragged herself onto its head, holding the knife ready to strike.

And still she could feel its thoughts, its pain and fury. The wyrm screamed silently, unbearably. Sarli raised the knife over one gleaming eye, knowing that the wyrm must be aware of her now — and hesitated, not wanting to strike, waiting one second too long. The wyrm plunged downward violently, and she tumbled off its head,

landing on the rubble far below. Her back exploded in pain.

The wyrm's fangs were right above her — and unbelievably, it, too, hesitated. But Sarli knew it would kill her, just as she would have tried to kill it. The wyrm's mouth opened wider, the fangs came closer — and Sarli threw her knife straight at one glowing eye.

The knife hit the eye point-first, and glanced off, flying across the sanctum. The wyrm was completely unharmed, but it drew back slightly, hissing; and Sarli scrambled out from under its fangs, looking around frantically for the knife.

It had fallen next to the high priestess; and even as Sarli headed for it, the woman raised her head weakly. Blood had stopped flowing from her wound; her lips moved soundlessly, and she stared at Sarli, eyes dark and deep.

Behind her, Sarli *felt* the wyrm's attention shift away from her, focusing on the wounded woman on the floor. It hissed again, and moved forward. Realization entered the high priestess's eyes, and with it fear; not for herself, for she would almost certainly die anyhow, but for what it would mean to humanity when the wyrm killed her.

Her eyes fell on the knife. With an obvious effort of will, she reached for it, grasped it, and turned its point toward herself.

Sarli stood watching, frozen. The wyrm was advancing swiftly, but the knife would reach its target first, and the prisoner would find only a carcass to feed its hunger, not a kill to set it free.

Something snapped in Sarli. Hardly knowing what she was doing, she threw herself forward, grabbing the knife and wrenching it from the high priestess's hand. The woman screamed in denial, and then the wyrm descended and her scream was cut short.

Sarli crouched on the stone floor, holding the knife, the high priestess's shriek ringing in her ears — and then she realized that it was not the woman's scream she was hearing, but a different sound, a roar. She looked up in disbelief as the wyrm reared higher over its kill, roaring in triumph as thousands of years of enforced immaturity were thrust off in seconds. Wings erupted from its body, as the roar erupted from its mouth; it became thicker, smoother, and scaly claws grew from the underside of its body. Then the transformation was complete, and a dragon reared

in the small sanctum, flames spurting from its mouth.

Sarli was caught up in it; linked to the dragon's mind, its wild exultation swept her own thoughts away. She didn't even look at the broken body on the ground; she ran to the dragon, and, since it was linked to her as well, it lowered itself and let her climb onto its back.

The dragon knew now; knew what had been stolen from it, and what freedom meant. Nobody could confine a dragon, not forever, and its time had come. In its freedom, Sarli's own seemed insignificant, though she knew it would matter to her when the dragon left. And it *would* leave; it would follow the other dragons, wherever they had gone. It knew its destination; but Sarli, despite the mind-link, could not even begin to comprehend it. The only thing she could grasp, dimly, was that even the world was not large enough to mean freedom to the dragons.

Then the powerful wings began to beat, and the dragon rose into the air, higher and higher, up past the high walls of its prison. There was no roof, as Sarli had guessed; they rose into the night, both of them seeing the world for the first time since infancy. The wind rushed past, and Sarli clung to the dragon's back as they rose yet higher, flying fast and steeply beneath the stars as the Temple of Stone disappeared behind them.

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LEAH SUSLOVICH was born in Brooklyn, New York, on July 5, 1977; she recently graduated from high school. Although she has published stories before, this is her first professional sale. Leah credits her cousin Elissa for pushing her to rewrite and submit this story and notes: "*Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine* was the first magazine I sent it to. Needless to say, when I got the acceptance letter I was ecstatic — and I still am!"

ARMAND CABRERA is a self-taught artist and says, "I've been at it for a million years" — really since 1980. He worked for several years in the computer game field, at Lucas Films on their *STAR WARS* games and at Electronic Arts as a computer artist.

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