

The Door at Alley's End

By M.C. Williams

Gaeton Korr stumbled into the black chasm of an alley; a dying man, dead already for all it mattered to him. All that he had hoped for, all that he had worked for, his every dream and aspiration, had turned to ash and ruin. He no longer smelled the rancid stench of refuse and human waste that surrounded him; no longer saw the ramshackle tenements around him; no longer heard the endless, frenzied cacophony of the City. Starvation, torment, and anguish--such were the only recompense for his endless years of struggle and pain, here in the mighty capital of Kendes. Here, in Kal'khemed--the City of Wonders; the City of Sorrows.

How marvelous the City had once seemed, a towering citadel of mankind's greatest achievements; a living, breathing synthesis of science, magic, and alchemy, forged in the heart of Kendes. One hundred years of progress and innovation had transmuted the ancient stone keeps and masonry walls of the old capital into a glorious, sprawling metropolis--black and beautiful like obsidian with towers reaching to the heavens, manufactories churning out a wealth of inventions, and machines the likes of which had never been seen before. A new age had dawned, and Gaeton had dared the arduous journey from the barren steppes of Carsovia to begin a new life in the fabled clockwork citadel of Kal'khemed.

But it was not to be.

The haunting reflection of the moon, Atracus, glimmered dolesomely in the alley's festering puddles of sewage and filth. Gaeton shivered at the sight of the shadowy moon, its scorched and lifeless face scarred by volcanic fires and lava flows like coursing veins of blood. Even now, at the end, he feared its fiery glow. Staggering onward without will or reason, he crept deeper into the alley. Noxious gray sludge seeped through the dingy rags covering his feet, but Gaeton felt nothing. His body had already gone numb. Under the harsh red light of Atracus, he saw the carcass of some destitute vagrant rotting in a garbage pile, forgotten and disregarded. A vagrant just like him. He pulled his tattered shirt closer to his blanched skin and staggered on. Death was a small mercy in the City of Sorrows.

Four years ago he had come to the City, full of hope and tireless ambition. As fate had it, jobs were scarce for an outlander, especially a Carsovian farm hand, and Gaeton moved from one labor barrack to another until finally landing an apprenticeship with a respectable gearmeister. Free from the grim prospects of industrial servitude, the promise of a better future at last seemed achievable. From the moment his master closed shop to its opening the following morning, Gaeton spent every waking hour exploring the wonders of Kal'khemed. Now, with time to spare and a scant but adequate allowance, the City revealed to him a world of splendors undreamed of in the land of his birth. The thundering resonance of machine-bred symphonies, the phantasmagoric plays of illusion theaters, and the sensual women of the amatoriums all offered themselves to him. But of all the pleasures in the City, it was the intoxicating ecstasy of velvet he desired the most--sweet liquid velvet! Like a vampire, the ensorcelled drug had drained him of life, of hope, of his very soul. And when his own pocket had become a bottomless pit of debt, he stole from his master; at first only a little, but the old gearmeister soon uncovered why his profits were strangely vanishing.

His legs at last betrayed him and Gaeton collapsed in the stagnant muck pooled in the alley's gutter. He would die here, he knew. There was no need to crawl any farther--no need to push on to the alley's end. Here, in the lowest cesspool of the City, beneath layers of long forsaken streets and abandoned slums, no one would find him. Not even the wicked men he owed would tread this deep into loathsome district of Nilholfa-Des. No one would find him here, in the rotting core of Kal'khemed. Death was his only solace now.

But Death, in her cruelty, seemed not to take notice of him. Time passed and Gaeton forced his eyes open. He watched the slow trickle of putrid water slither past his head to the storm drain not far away. A single tear joined the foul gutter wash.

"Oh gods, help me--"

Atracus, near full, bathed the alley in deep red hues, its mocking colors like the rays of a great anti-sun. Suddenly, another light pierced the crimson veil of night. A light, blue and cool, and vibrant with an energetic resonance, emanated from the farthest end of the alley. Needles prickled across his skin as he gazed at the strange point of light. It was hovering just above the ground. The point grew, becoming a straight vertical line; the line parted to create a

shimmering rectangle pouring streams of blazing white radiance across the stark alley walls.

Gaeton trembled with fright. What was this? Was it a dream? A delusion? Perhaps his body had finally succumbed to death and the fiery maw of Hasmadea had opened to devour his soul! Yet he could not be dead--the pain of flesh told him that much. If not a gateway to the netherworld, what then was this door, if even it was a door?

Finding a strength he had not known he possessed, Gaeton pushed his body off the pavement and started for the mysterious door at the end of the alley. Even as he began to move, he saw the portal change. The light dimmed and then brightened again, and the color changed from a burning blue glow to a brilliant gold. Shapes and shadows of shapes churned and swirled in the mystical gateway; the dark silhouette of a man became clear and distinct. Someone was coming through the portal! The alley offered little in the way of cover--just a few small piles of rubble and the garbage pile where the corpse of the vagrant lay. Gaeton crawled behind the heap, concealing himself as best he could without losing sight of the door.

A fleeting moment passed and the dark figure emerged from the otherworldly portal. Though he was too far away to perceive any details, Gaeton could see that the figure wore a heavy gray cloak, his face enshrouded by a hood. The stranger whispered in some harsh but unintelligible language while gesturing a series of curious signs with his hands. At once the door shrunk to a line, the line to a point, and finally vanished. With that the stranger began moving down the alley with remarkable speed and purpose, as though he had come on a singular mission. Perhaps he had. Gaeton lost sight of the stranger as he hurried past the junk pile where he crouched, keeping his eyes shut tight and his muscles clenched against the rush of blood surging through every fiber of his body. He dared not move for fear of being seen; the very presence of the stranger seemed to radiate an aura of menacing dread.

Gaeton imagined the stranger leaving the alley; after a few minutes more, he felt sure he was gone. Crawling out from behind the junk pile, he saw that the alley was empty and deserted once more. The cloaked stranger was gone, darkness had claimed the night again, and the only sound he heard was the omnipresent clamor of the City echoing in the distance. Had it all been just a

dream or some deranged hallucination brought on by a feverish mind? Delusion or not, Gaeton felt a will to live he had not felt since his first days in Kal'khemed. He had to know what it was he had seen. He had to know what secrets lay beyond the door at the alley's end!

With awe and trepidation, Gaeton approached the place he had seen the portal appear. It was difficult at first for him to make out anything at all; but, as his eyes readjusted to the deep crimson light of Atracus, he saw a black scorch mark on the pavement. There were other scorch marks, too--older ones, as though the door had appeared many times before. How the portal had appeared he could scarcely imagine, though he could only assume it was by some potent magic or scientific marvel. But where did the portal lead? And what business did the stranger have in Kal'khemed? Whatever the answer, Gaeton felt certain the stranger was not a native denizen of the City.

Gaeton returned to the alley every day and every night to see if the stranger returned. Now he had a purpose--a reason to go on living. He built the garbage pile higher; not so much to be noticeable, but just enough to ensure that his spying would remain undiscovered. For three days he waited until on the evening of the third day he saw the mysterious door reappear. Excitement seized Gaeton's heart; fear and dread as well. He watched as the door took shape, just as it had before, filling the dark alley with its pure blue light. Minutes seemed to pass like hours as he waited, watching and wondering, expecting to see a figure emerge from the portal. Soon the sound of footsteps splashing through the water of the alley brought with it the realization of his terrible mistake.

Gaeton froze as the gray-cloaked stranger made his way past the junk pile where Gaeton hid, not more than five paces away. By some luck or chance of fate, the stranger did not see him, but continued instead to the radiant blue door. Once there, the stranger held his hands toward the luminescent gateway, gesturing in secret signs and intoning eldritch words of commanding power. The bright blue color of the portal began to change and churn, becoming a brilliant, sparkling gold resembling a swirling sheet of molten glass. Without pause or hesitation, the stranger stepped through and the golden light melted around him. Moments later the door closed, vanishing to an infinitesimal point, and was gone.

Day after day Gaeton kept his vigilant watch of the deserted alley, waiting for the stranger's return. He knew he would return--the scorch marks on the

ground proved he had come and gone through that magical door many times before. It was only a matter of time. But, after a week had passed, Gaeton began to doubt his supposition. He could no longer afford to waste his days watching an empty alley for the return of the mysterious man. If he was going to make something of his life again, he knew he had to put the memory of the mystical visitation behind him. On the very night he considered ending his vigil, however, the alley again filled with the eerie blue light of the mysterious portal. The stranger had returned on the sixth night since his departure, and Gaeton could only watch and wonder as he left the alley and disappeared into the City once more.

It was an odd thing, he considered. The cloaked stranger terrified him--the black utterances of his frightful incantations, the hurried steps of his slouching gait, the chilling aura of his malignant presence--yet, Gaeton never felt as full of hope and burning aspiration as he did when he saw the door at the alley's end appear. He dared not follow the stranger, but he simply had to unravel the mystery of the door .

Weeks of patient observation turned into months; Gaeton never abandoned his nightly watch of the alley. He soon discovered a pattern to the stranger's comings and goings--three days he stayed in the City, and for five days remained wherever the door took him before his return on the sixth day. Always he came back to the City an hour after midnight, the portal appearing shortly before his emergence. On the nights of his routine departure the portal appeared of its own accord, regardless of the stranger's presence in the alley, always at seven minutes past midnight by the City's great clock tower. The stranger often arrived promptly after the portal's appearance, but sometimes he ran ten or even twenty minutes late--perhaps, Gaeton speculated, because the City's steamrail met with frequent delays in Nilholfa-Des. But the door always waited for its master's return, glowing a cool and shimmering blue until the stranger came and commanded it to open and letting him through when its color changed to that glassy, golden hue. Gaeton burned into memory every gesture made and every word spoken by the stranger when he commanded the door to open, although he comprehended none of it. He practiced the words and gestures of the stranger every day and every night, rehearsing them until he could mimick them with mechanical perfection. Then, on the sixth night of the third month since he first saw the stranger, Gaeton was ready to act.

Atracus had just emerged from a break in the soot-tarnished sky, rising just above the tops of the jagged spires of the City, the dark moon's crimson aura casting blood-red shadows down the length of the alley. Gaeton, hidden behind his nest of junk and loose metal, waited for the door's recurrent appearance. Would the stranger arrive on time this night, or would he be late? Even if the stranger was late, Gaeton could only pray he would have time enough to perform his secret rite. He could not guess what mysteries lay beyond the door; assuming he somehow made it through, he had nothing to light his way, nothing to guide him, and nothing with which to defend himself. He had only the rags he wore and the stale crumbs of bread lining his pockets. Yet, despite his fears, he possessed just enough courage to push himself to venture beyond the threshold of the great unknown.

Seven minutes past midnight streams of blue-white radiance filled the alley, vanquishing the volcanic light of Atracus that ebbed above. The door unfolded from its infinitesimal point, growing to fullness at the far end of the alley. Gaeton held his breath. A minute passed and the stranger had not yet entered the alley. Although he was running late, Gaeton knew the stranger could show up at any moment. No, he could not let such fears freeze him to inaction. After all, what did he have left to lose? Having pushed all concern from his mind, Gaeton abandoned his hiding place and hurried to the luminous blue portal at the end of the alley. He slowed his pace as he drew near, expecting the blazing door to be scorching hot, but the light felt cool and airy, tingling his skin and setting his hairs on end. Though bright, the light was not blinding; Gaeton peered into the hazy mist, straining to see whatever lay beyond the door. He saw only the impenetrable abyss of swirling blue vortex.

Gaeton swallowed, but the tension he felt ran far deeper than his throat. He extended his arms and, with his trembling hands outstretched to the effulgent light, made ready to throw open the gates of mystery. He imitated every motion of every gesture he had practiced and every syllable of every word flowed from his lips like the repetitions of a mimicry bird. When the last word was spoken, Gaeton saw a shift in the churning patterns of the portal's luminous blue mist. The swirling blue light melted to a gleaming golden maelstrom. The deep rumble of inaudible thunder permeated Gaeton's entire body and the air whistled past his ears as the portal opened to draw him in. For a moment, he resisted the draw--questions, fears, and doubts flooded his mind. But he could

not let his fears get the better of him. Surely, anywhere was better than here. Surely, no place in the world could be as vile and loathsome as Kal'khemed. With that thought, Gaeton closed his eyes and stepped into the golden maelstrom.

Blinding light filled Gaeton's vision and a flash of excruciating heat rippled across his skin. Absolute darkness followed, then a numbing cold, and he felt himself falling upward, downward, and in every direction, all at once. A sudden burst of motion wrenched his body at some impossible angle, propelling him with such incredible ferocity that his every bone, muscle, and ligament seemed to liquefy and turn to dust in an instant. Gaeton tried to scream, but here, in this void between places without time or dimension, not a sound slipped from his lips. Death should have silenced the searing pain, yet Gaeton lost neither consciousness nor sensation as his disintegrated particles spiraled into the very heart of the ineffable vortex. Eternity passed in what must have been seconds, and a distant white speck grew to an explosion of rushing light and color. Every atomized particle of his body seemed to spontaneously reintegrate all at once, and all in tact. His feet touched solid ground, but his muscles, shocked from the experience, could not support his weight. He dropped to his knees, his throat burning with the scream he was finally able to release. The horror of oblivion; the mind-rending pain; the soul-jarring reality of his corporeal disembodiment--the memory of it all had been burned into every fold and crevice of his brain. He could do little else but scream.

At last, Gaeton's scream abated and his body collapsed onto the black stone floor beneath him. There he lay, exhausted and unmoving as the minutes passed. Gradually his senses came to, and he opened his eyes to a harsh red light shining all around. Though his muscles ached and his body felt like a dead weight, Gaeton struggled to his feet. He staggered against a cold slab table and held himself steady, with every breath heaving hot dry air his lungs could barely keep in. The stench was awful--like burnt ash and sulfur mixed with some caustic odor he had never smelled before. Before him, in center the room, he saw the radiant portal-door, blazing with its swirls of gold fire. On a tall pedestal before the portal he saw a black, crystalline orb, inscribed with strange symbols and glyphs. And from the orb streamed tendrils of shimmering red energy, pouring into the gaping portal. The portal was still open--the stranger could still come through!

Gaeton backed away, fearing the stranger would appear at any moment. He searched for some means to shut down the portal, but he could scarcely fathom the assortment of strange devices arranged on the tables and workbenches around the room: machines of spinning rings and orbs, contraptions made of pipes and tubes, and things of crystal that glowed with shifting patterns of color, blinking lights, and interlocking cubes. He saw nothing he could recognize... Nothing at all. His only option was escape, but the room had two exits: a closed door on the far end of the chamber and an open archway leading to a balcony. Gaeton ran for the balcony.

The air became hotter and the stench of sulfur and noxious fumes grew stronger as he neared the balcony, so thick and vile that Gaeton doubled-over coughing even as he stumbled outside. Scarcely able to breathe, he made his way to the balcony railing, covering his face with the sleeve of his ragged shirt. As much as the dry burning air stung his eyes, Gaeton forced his eyelids open. But it was a mistake--a terrible mistake. Even as he drew in a gasp of hot, sulfurous air, his spine chilled at the profound and terrible sight before him. From the prodigious height of the balcony, Gaeton beheld mile upon mile of megalithic domes and high-vaulted arches, monstrous buildings of eroded metal and glassy stone, cylindrical towers thousands of feet high, and monumental obelisks reaching like claws into the choking black sky. The city dwarfed Kal'khemed, stretching back to the horizon upon which rose mountainous volcanoes, roaring and vomiting endless plumes of fire and cinder.

Overcome, Gaeton staggered back. His mind raced with so many sights and so many questions that he could scarcely manage to think. But think he did, and as the sheer horror of it all sank into the depths of his mind, he caught a glimmer of blue break through the crimson clouds above. Looking up, he saw an enormous moon--but it was not the black moon he was familiar with, but instead a blue-white jewel of sparkling seas, wispy clouds, and earthy browns and greens. As impossible as it seemed, as bizarre and irrational as the very prospect might have been, Gaeton realized that he no longer stood upon the world he had known all his life. No, the world of his birth was up there--in the sky above--a blue-white moon as seen from here. From Atracus. This was Atracus!

Gaeton's body trembled as he shrank away from the balcony and slid down against the corridor wall. Kal'khemed, he realized, was but a faint reflection

of the monstrous city outside. Yes, he thought, that was the answer. That was why the stranger was visiting. For decades, the lords of Atracus had worked to remake Kal'khemed in their own image; and, with every passing year, their influence grows greater and greater. Soon, their power would stretch across the entire globe, and that blue-white jewel above would one day become as black and wretched as this burned-out cinder of a world.

Gaeton buried his face in his hands, weeping for his world. No power in Kal'khemed could stop the onslaught of their insidious industry--no power in all of Kendes or the entire world he knew and loved. Who could stand against such a rising darkness? Who could overcome such masters of twisted science and sorcery?

Just then, the light from the other room seemed to flicker. Gaeton looked down the corridor to the room where the portal stood and saw the crystal orb blaze brighter and brighter, sending out piercing rays of golden light. He realized it was too late for him to return and warn his world; the stranger was coming through! A rush of sickening fear washed over him. He would never set foot on his world again, never see the rich blue sky or the foam of the sea or the great white peaks of his native Carsovia. He would die here, alone in this abominable wasteland of iron and industry, knowing the inexorable doom his world faced; a world ill-prepared and utterly powerless to stop the invasion. Trembling, Gaeton turned his gaze from the blazing portal-door and back to the aberrant sky. He saw his world for what he knew would be the last time and watched black clouds close over that glittering blue world which he, for the first time, discovered how much he loved.

No, he realized then; he was not powerless. Although the blow would be as an ant bite on a titan's toe, Gaeton knew he could nevertheless deliver a painful sting. While he could not stop them all, at least he could try to stop one.

All at once a singular goal consumed Gaeton's entire being: to destroy the crystal orb. He leapt from the floor and dashed down the corridor to the room that swimming with the golden light. The black orb, now levitating on its own power before the portal-door, blazed hot and red as unfathomable energies whipped from its center to sustain the gateway between worlds. The portal grew larger and larger, and Gaeton saw the dim shape of the stranger begin to emerge. He charged across the room, past tables of devices inconceivable, past the

shelves of eldritch tombs and every manner of sorcerous contrivance, to the one and only object in his sights. Unbearable heat washed over him as wakes of pure aetheric energy resonated from the orb's spinning poles. Surely to even touch such potent magic would spell instant death, but such a death seemed trivial knowing that, even at the end, his life again held purpose.

The stranger's outline became a silhouette, and his silhouette solidified as he stepped out of the portal. At a dead run, Gaeton struck his hand against the orb, knocking it toward the blazing portal. The pain never reached his brain--his bones and tissues were disintegrating faster than sensations could travel up the nerves of his arm. His eyes, even as they vaporized, saw the orb tumble into the open portal-door, passing through the dismayed stranger, and vanishing into the very vortex it sustained.

Gaeton never knew what such a paradox of time, space, and energy would unleash; he had only hoped to stop the stranger and put an end to his plans. He could never have guessed the self-sustaining dimensional singularity would implode upon itself, resulting in a catastrophic explosion of vast thermal energies hotter than the surface of the sun. The resulting crater, and four-mile blast zone of flattened buildings and fire-scorched towers, would later be attributed to an unfortunate industrial accident by the autocratic rulers of Atracus. Not even they could divine the true cause of the incident, for so ludicrous was the possibility that a pathetic barbarian from their primitive sister-world could have initiated a cascading dimensional implosion, the very notion was never considered. No one on Atracus or the world they conspired to invade would ever realize that the first shot of the War of Wars had been fired. The first shot in a war that, after years of bloody strife and struggle, would bring both worlds out of darkness and into the light of a dawning new eon.