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The Age of Ruin by John Faucette.

Chapter One

Help me. Help me. Jahalazar, came the soft voice. Like silken feathers it eased its way into my brain, rousing me from the depths of sleep.

I, Jahalazar of the purple locks, sprang awake, a sinewy arm reaching for Chernac, the Throwing Sword, as I rolled from the bed to alight upon shoeless feet crouched. I raised the steel length of the Throwing Sword before me. Its blade shimmered in the darkness. My toes dug into the turf of the carpet. I stood ready to strike as my purple eyes swept the chamber dimly lit by the rising of the rust-red sun. They rested fleetingly upon the outlines of furniture and statues. They searched out the shadows and reassured me that I was alone. Everything in the chamber was as it should be. No unknown shapes were visible. My ears, usually flat against my broad skull, were' spread wide, gathering in every sound of the premorning night. Again, I heard nothing out of place, nor was anyone yet stirring. The house of Clan Chevy was still asleep. Not even the cooking women had risen to start the breakfast fires.

Silently, I padded across to the open frame of the window and stepped out upon the stonework of the balcony to look about at the village-town-city of the Desridif, people of the Bomb Valley. A chilly breeze greeted my naked flesh. My purple eyes sought out the buildings and streets. In the distance rose the dark towers of the houses of Clans Dodge, Oldsmobile, and Caddy. They were great shards of man placed stone knifing into the sky. They, too, looked still asleep, though I knew that somewhere within them sentries stood watch, ready to give the alarm if

the houses of the clans were attacked by man, beast, or insect. The pre-morning night air was silent except for the restless snort of a greathorse or the far-off moanings of a solc pack anticipating the warm blood of any careless Desridif that might cross their path. The huge, razor-clawed, foot long fanged, chitin armored insects would make a quick meal of any such. Except for a few pieces of Utter the breeze carried along, the wide streets leading onto the Central Square were empty like the square itself. No one and nothing moved. The night was without menace.

I relaxed my grip upon the ruby jeweled hilt of Chernac, the Throwing Sword; the watchhounds were quiet, slumbering undisturbed. The slightest sound of danger and they would have been barking and snarling with a ferocity no man could match. There was nothing that could have aroused me. After some moments more of motionless watching and listening, I shook my mane of purple hair and padded back to the bed. One last time I listened to the night sounds. As I lay down I knew the girl's call had not come from outside. It had come from within. Then I shrugged, pushing the thought away, and put Chernac, the Throwing Sword, upon the table next to the bed.

But no sooner was I between the states of wakefulness and sleep than the voice came again.

Help us, Jahalazar, your people are dying.

Ten razor-clawed legs slashed the side of Nimziaut, the greathorse, as the foot long needle teeth of the solc started to close upon me. Suddenly I was awake, alert to the danger upon me. Nimziaut screamed, going to his knees, his blood splattering hotly on the rock strewn ground. Desperately, I snatched at Chernac, the Throwing Sword, but I knew it was too late. Dripping blood, the foot long needle teeth began to come together about my head. The hot breath of the solc washed over me. I nearly threw up from the stench. Burning saliva seared my skin. Chernac had cleared the scabbard, and I thrust upward, knowing how futile it was against this two-brained monstrosity. But if I had to die, I would die like a warrior of Clan Chevy, inflicting as much damage upon my enemy as possible.

Thud. Thud. Thunk.

The solc roared and jerked around, foot long needle teeth biting savagely at the three 4 foot shafts protruding from its armored rear sections. Up to their multicolored feathers were they embedded. Even had

I not known that only one man was capable of such power, I would have recognized the colors as those of the Chieftain of Clan Chevy. The dull brown chitin glowed a lazy red beneath the sullen glare of the rust-red sun as the twenty foot length of the solc sank to the ground—poisoned. Even though the incredibly lethal poison of the Desridif was coursing through its bloodstream in triple dosage, it did not die immediately. It swung around its massive head, regarded me balefully with its multifaceted eyes. It tried to struggle back to its feet. Slowly its movements subsided until it lay still. Then the antennae drooped. The eyes dulled as life fled. A few last twitches and the solc was dead.

I sheathed the Throwing Sword and climbed from the back of Nimziaut, my greathorse, whose coal-black hide was run red with its own blood. It lay on its side in a pool of blood. I patted the hide. Even upon its side, it towered over me by some inches.

Tin sorry, Nimziant," I whispered. The greathorse sounded a call of pain and hope as it twisted its head around and caught sight of me. It flipped its tail happily. I avoided the eyes as I walked to stand by the grand animal's head. Chernac, the Throwing Sword, sprang into my hand, almost without having been touched. A lump filled my throat as I contemplated the brightly shimmering length of blade. But a whinny of pain from the dying creature that had always been friend and companion decided me. A deft cut, and Nimziaut, companion of many a solc hunt, breathed no more. My vision blurred, but I quickly blinked the moisture away. A warrior of the Desridif does not cry.

With the blood of my greathorse staining the sword still in my hand, I turned and my purple eyes locked with the golden ones of Weruthan, a Chieftain of the Desridif, Lord of the Bomb Valley, who rode the broad beam of the back of his snow-white greathorse, Rosaut. I clutched my left fist to my chest in salute. His huge body was framed against the billowing gray war cloak as he sat so regally in his saddle. Upon his chest, the fierce fighting eagle of Clan Chevy, worked in gold upon the silvery armor, stared disapprovingly at me. The diamond worked hilt of Modor, the Death Sword, twinkled magnificently. Patches of golden hair could be seen jutting from the edges of his winged helmet. The helm was thrown back, and the rust-red sun shone redly from it.

The huge creature he rode whined; Nimziaut had been the mare's colt. The massive steel shod hooves pawed the ground. Only barely could

Weruthan control the greathorse. He slid from the jade and silver decorated solc hide saddle, sword, bow, and quiver of four foot poisoned arrows making a minor clamor. He patted the snow-white flank of the beast. She moved to the side of her colt and nudged the unmoving body. Her broad tongue licked Nimziaut's face. The body of the mare's colt was still. Finally, she raised her great head and let out a bellow that echoed from the sides of the hills surrounding the rim of Bomb Valley.

Nimziaut, son of Tarzaut and Rosaut, fighting stallion, was dead, and his mother's wail filled the air.

Weruthan's golden skin flamed with anger as he walked toward me. There was a network of taut muscles behind his jaw as he clenched his teeth. I knew that if he said one word, he would kill me where I stood. He kept his fist from his sword as if the temptation to use it might be too powerful. I knew that Modor, the Death Sword, would fit joyfully into his hand. His thick wrists were hidden by broad bracelets of steel that rasped against his thighs as he walked. The leather strap of the arrow quiver crossed his chest. Golden eyes locked momentarily with purple. He stopped a few steps away. But I could not return the stare—I was ashamed of my stupidity and carelessness. I, not Nimziaut, should be dead there in a pool of hardening blood. I cast my eyes and head downward. We stood thus for long moments.

Then he came forward and placed a powerful hand upon my shoulder. It would have rocked a lesser man. Though I have not his weight nor height, I am somewhat stronger—and very much quicker. Indeed, I am stronger and faster than any warrior or hunter of Bomb Valley. But never would I wish to meet Weruthan in battle, for his wisdom and skill far outweigh my advantage of strength and speed. I wanted to hug him and sob out my misery, beg for his forgiveness. Neither of us spoke. He had raised and trained Nimziaut, giving him to me in my sixteenth year. Only he and I had the beast allowed near. But it is not the way of a warrior of the Desridif to cry or beg. We stood together, silent, yet sharing our grief.

"So that is why you were so careless," Weruthan thought aloud as I watched the great expanse of his broad back and shoulders concealed by the war cloak. I sat behind him on the highly polished, jade and metal studded solc hide saddle. Since there were no reins or stirrups for me, I held on to the saddle and gripped Rosaut's sides with my legs. I sat well back from him, for danger could come at any moment and both of us

would need to nock our four-foot arrows and wield the huge solc bows. Between my leather covered thighs Rosaut's enormous muscles moved rhythmically, while across them lay the long, man tall bow. It took an awesome amount of strength to pull it wide, and my arms were corded and knotted with muscle and my fingertips were thick with calluses and scar tissue from the long years of practice and hunt with the powerful solc bow.

A quiver of four foot arrows was at my back. It was so designed that I could take an arrow from it with the utmost speed and ease. My steel sword slapped gently against the smoothly moving side of Rosaut. Lil Chernac, the Slitting Knife, was at my right hip. My black tunic, overlaid by thigh length chain mail, was drab beside the cloak, armor, and jeweled weaponry of my Chieftain. Then I noticed the path through the rocks that Rosaut was taking.

"You have changed direction," I pointed out. I looked to the hills and sun to get our bearing. Rosaut was no longer headed for Bomb Valley. We were traveling away from our home, into the land of the solcs. Weruthan remained silent, guiding the greathorse onward, away from the land of the Desridif. For the rest of the day we rode up into the hills. We camped that night in a place where we could look down upon the inset bowl of Bomb Valley and the towers of the houses of the various clans. Though we talked some over the venison that was our dinner, Weruthan said nothing of where we were going or why.

Four days' riding through solc infested hills brought us to land that as far as I could see was no different from any other that surrounded the huge bowl of Bomb Valley, except for the huge numbers of solcs. They were everywhere, roaming in twos or threes or whole packs.

The sun burned a lackluster ruby red as it sat pierced by the hills on the far horizon. Evening was coming, and already we could feel a chill in the air. The wind whistled and gusted about us. In the distance, solcs howled. Ordinarily we would have stopped, started a fire, and begun cooking our dinner by now. But this time, despite the oncoming night, we continued to ride on.

Something moved on one side. Stones made noise as something dislodged them. But Rosaut had already sounded warning, so we were ready. We sighted down our shafts, and two bowstrings twanged as one and two 4 foot arrows caught the solc at rear and front. Both arrows

buried themselves to their stabilizing feathers. The twenty foot creature, both brains hit, died instantly in a crash of legs and body segments. It screamed as the massive head swung about mindlessly. We watched it die. The gigantic carcass twitched violently for some minutes, finally it was still. In answer to its dying screams a chorus of howls filled the last light of the setting sun. We searched the shadows and the rocks, waiting to see if any others would attack us.

"We are almost there," said Weruthan, his golden eyes roving restlessly about. His helm was up; yet his voice was strangely muffled. I didn't know where or what "there" was. Nor did I have time to wonder, for I, too, had to keep up a wary vigilance. The hills were unusually full of solcs. In fact, packs were quite common, whereas near Bomb Valley they were a rarity, easily avoided with a minimum of caution. We kept our arrows nocked, Weruthan guiding the well trained greathorse with his knees. But the solcs wisely stayed their attack, and we moved on.

At last, we rounded several rock formations and came upon a small clearing. Weruthan commanded the great-horse to stop as I caught sight of the shape within the clearing. I slid from the greathorse's back and walked forward till I was almost upon the thing. In the last leavings of the ruby sun, I looked at the wreck of the metal thing. It lay silent and forlorn. A strange feeling of sadness came over me as I examined it in more detail. It was as big as a greathorse, only of metal. Once its lines had been clean and straight; now it was twisted and blackened with fire and half overgrown with hacniu, the seldom seen black and white leafed maneating plants. The vines stirred with me as they sensed my presence. I leaned forward to see within, but the interior was too dark for me to make out anything. I edged nearer. Something compelled me to go forward.

"Do not go too close," Weruthan cautioned from not too far behind. He had dismounted and stood a few yards back.

I nodded, but he went on, "You have seen very few hacniu at work. It is almost as if they can think. When they first came, we were careless. Many a warrior of the Desridif did they feed on before we learned that it is sometimes more prudent to run." I turned to look at my Chieftain, who stood like a golden statue, bow ready. The feathered ends of his arrows stuck from under his cloak on one side where it was pulled back. The ruby sun set off the polished surface of his metal breast armor and the golden fighting eagle of Clan Chevy and the leather strap of his quiver upon his

chest.

"Have not the hacniu always been here?" I asked of him as he stood watching me. Suddenly a solc screamed with rage in the near night. Stones rolled down a rock formation as Rosaut bellowed warning. Conversation forgotten, we whirled and pulled our strings taut. The dislodged rocks came to rest, and we listened in the silence. Our eyes, gold and purple, squinted in the dim light, trying to pick out the solcs that we knew were stalking us.

Then the solc pack came out of the hills, spitting and screaming, all stealth forgotten. Foot long stark white teeth, needle sharp, flashed. Searing saliva dripped onto rock. The bowstrings twanged, and two arrows flitted away at their targets. We removed another arrow each from our quivers and notched and loosed them in less than a second. Solcs jumped and flipped in the shadows as the poisoned shafts struck home. We fired without pause, shooting at everything that moved. Everywhere in front of us solcs were falling, to lie twitching, shaking their massive heads as the life within them fled.

Rosaut neighed and reared behind us, and steel shod hooves crushed and cracked chitin armor. We whirled, and our arrows shot through the dim light to send more solcs thrashing and spinning. But the greathorse mare needed not our help. She was in battle rage, killing solcs with each fall of her great steel shod hooves, avenging her dead colt with every blow. We turned back to face those in front, but they had given up and were slinking away into the night. Darkness was all about us. The sun was gone.

We moved away from the wreckage and the hacniu, away from the scene of our battle with the solc pack. We built a fire and roasted a leg of one of the solcs Rosaut's hooves had finished. We ate quickly, not trusting the fire to keep the solcs away and wishing to be prepared if they should attack.

We had finished our meal of solc leg and washed our hands with water from the saddle flasks of the greathorse. I watched the fire play off the metal and jewels of Weruthan's breastplate and sword belt. Modor, the Death Sword, stood between his mighty legs, buried a third length in the dirt there, ready for instant use. The diamonds in the hilt burned with red, blue, and white brilliance. Weruthan's hair and eyes shone gold in the red glow of the fire. I waited for his explanation of why he had brought me here so far from Bomb Valley. Why had he endangered our lives to show

me a burned out hulk of metal? I stared for a long time at the twinkling jewels in Modor's hilt, waiting for an explanation. The mighty Chieftain seemed to be thinking, to be remembering something. But finally, he spoke.

"Jahalazar, you asked if the hacniu had not always been here. The answer is, no. They came with that thing, the shell of which I showed you today. You tell me that at night you are troubled by a woman's voice that calls for aid."

I nodded and waited, silent. Why *had* Weruthan brought me all the way out here in the wilderness? What did a twisted wreck have to do with me and the mysterious calls for aid that I heard in my sleep? About us, in the darkness, we could hear the scurry of solcs. Was the Chieftain of Clan Chevy mad? To come this far into solc land merely to look upon a useless wreck was worse than folly.

"It also brought you." Absorbed as I was in trying to decide his sanity, the words caught me by surprise, and it took some moments for them to penetrate. At first I knew not what to say. Then I started to protest, but Weruthan cut me off.

"It came from over that way, out of the land that no man of Bomb Valley has ever visited, flying low, being pursued by other flying machines." I tried to visualize that great blackened hulk flying, but I could not. It had no wings. And how could a thing of metal fly? I started to say so, but the look on Weruthan's face stopped me. A mighty golden hand pointed off to the right, directly away from Bomb Valley.

"It was in my younger days, when I heeded no warnings and ventured far from the comfort and safety of Bomb Valley. I came here often in those days when I tired of the company of men. Then the solcs were not as numerous nor as cunning, although they were still quite deadly. Alone, I would wander for days through these hills, hunting and killing solcs and anything else that dared stand against me, until I was sated. On one of those wanderings I saw the machines, two chasing the one, the one trying desperately to get away. Then the other machines shot lightning—"

"Shot lightning!" I echoed incredulously. If it were not for the wreck in the clearing and the danger of our position, I would have thought him playing an immense joke on me. Still, Weruthan rarely joked. And never had I known him to lie.

He shrugged his huge shoulders. "I did not understand either. I, too, doubted my sanity. But the machine of your parents—"

"My parents!" I exploded. This had to be a joke of Weruthan's.

He calmed me with a shake of his head. He sighed as if at last getting rid of a heavy burden. He must have anticipated my question, for he answered it. "They adopted you. Surely you've noticed that you are the only one with purple hair and eyes?"

I had. "But there are so many unique differences. Orabi of Clan Caddy has four arms, Zorge has a tail like a tree monki, and you..." I let the words die. I did not look at my Chieftain.

"And I have three eyes," Weruthan said, a gold haired hand going to the inset closed eye above his two normal ones. Then he continued as if I had not interrupted him. "I was nearby when the machine fell from the sky, burning and sparking. The other two circled, watching it bum, and then they vanished in the direction from which they had come. Petrified with fear, I had watched, and then I started to spur Danaut, Rosaut's sire, but I heard a woman's screams. They were so horrible, so filled with pain and despair, that I could not leave. I advanced to the machine, Modor naked in my hand, sweat bathing my limbs.

"The flames were intense, caused by something in the machine. I saw the woman. She had tried to crawl from the wreckage, but had only got part of the way out. Her body was half-burnt away; her face and arms were as yet untouched. She was beautiful even as she died, purple hair aglow from the burning machine, her eyes afire from the rust red of the sun—and the pain. White crystals hung at her throat, more beautiful than any diamonds I've seen. Bracelets of the same beautiful crystals were about her wrists. She wore the shreds of a simple purple orchid dress. Even as she died, she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

"But then I saw where her outstretched arms pointed. You lay, a small baby wrapped in white blankets, screaming as hard as you could, a few yards away. With her last strength she must have thrown you there. She looked at me with purple eyes. 'My son. Save my son, Jahalazar,' she said. Then she died..." Weruthan was again silent. There were wet furrows through the dirt on his cheeks even though he was a Chieftain of the Desridif. I waited in like silence until he continued.

"And so I took you to Bomb Valley. The childless couple Beno and Sityu of Clan Chevy adopted you. Somehow we kept your origin secret from you lest you feel unhappy here or you leave before you were prepared. We thought it was the right thing. You are prepared, and you did appear happy."

I stood up before the fire, before my Chieftain. I knew what I had to do. "I was happy, Weruthan." I was to have married Selea next week. "Selea!" I whispered, picking up Chernac, the Throwing Sword, from the dirt as if with it I could end my troubles.

"You can still marry Selea," Weruthan said softly. But he knew it was not true. His voice could not hide his real thought.

"No. How can I when the murderer of my mother walks this Earth? How can I when any night some woman with a voice like the softest breeze can awaken me? I lost my greathorse because the voice would not let me sleep or have peace of mind during the daylight hours. I am a danger to man and beast, to friend and self, as long as that beautiful voice haunts my dreams.

"Jahalazar, help me,' she calls now nightly. 'Your people are dying.' My people are dying. What people? Where? How? Who is she that calls? I must have the answers, Weruthan. Until then. I cannot marry Selea. Until I avenge my mother, I cannot live in peace."

There was silence. Weruthan stood. We looked at each other. We knew what must come.

"Goodbye, Weruthan. Thank you for saving me." He pulled Modor from the dirt. We stood together. I had known him all my life. It was he who had taught me to use sword and bow and bare hands until I was one of the best warriors of the Desridif. Now I knew why he had expended so much effort on me. Even then he must have known I would one day ride out from Bomb Valley to hunt the killer of my mother. He had prepared me as best he could.

"You must come back to Bomb Valley. You should have supplies and a greathorse, spare weapons..."

I clasped my Chieftain. Now, too, there were streaks in the dirt on my face—even though I, too, was of the Desridif. "I could not bear to say

goodbye to Selea of the red hair and red lips," I whispered. Weruthan and Selea, Beno and Sityu; friends, love, and family—in one night I had lost all. "Tell her I shall always love her, but if I am not back within a full circle of seasons, to bear someone else's children. I..." I paused. It was not easy to say, but I said it. "I shall not be back."

"She will wait," Weruthan said. "I know her. Be you gone a thousand years, she will wait."

My purple mane shook as I flung away a tear. I did not want to say it; yet since I loved her, I forced myself to. "One year. That is all. After that I shall not be coming back."

"Take Rosaut," he said, nodding toward the greathorse standing guard against the solc packs about us. The massive head swung around as the mighty beast caught her name. "She is old. Her reflexes are not what they once were, but she is the smartest of the greathorses. She will fight or die for you."

"No, you—"

"Take her! I, Weruthan, Chieftain of Clan Chevy of the Desridif, a Lord of the Bomb Valley, command you I"

I saluted him.

We rose early the next morning and ate the remains of the previous night's dinner. I saddled up Rosaut, and for the last time Weruthan and I said goodbye. I mounted Rosaut, and we set out across the Earth.

The rust-red sun was not fully over the low hills before I guided Rosaut out of the night's camp. The chill of the night was still in the air. Behind, Weruthan, quiver on his back, Modor, the Death Sword, at his side, and bow in his left hand, waved. Smoke curled from our breakfast fire at his feet. The morning sun rays glinted off his helm, causing me to squint as I looked back at him. I waved once and then forgot about him. True, he had a long way to go through hostile territory on foot, but there was no worry for him. I would have worried about another, but the golden haired man was too smart and skilled for any solc pack. With Modor, the Death Sword, and a full quiver he was not likely to wind up as anyone's meal. He would be at Bomb Valley in less than two weeks, alive and well, telling embroidered tales over mugs of ale of his trek home. So I hoped.

With each week's passing, the solc packs grew in number and boldness until it seemed that the land swarmed with them. They seemed to have absolutely no fear of man or greathorse. Time and again Rosaut and I made our stand, our backs to some clump of rocks unscalable by the solcs, while I shot arrows into their hides and Rosaut dashed them with her hooves. Half a dozen times I emptied my quiver of arrows and had to use lance and Chernac, the Throwing Sword, to keep the snapping jaws from my limbs. And each succeeding battle became more desperate. But onward we journeyed, leaving a trail of dead and wounded solcs—and some sound ones who had learned to respect man and greathorse—to mark our passing.

But the needle toothed solcs were not our only worry.

There were other large insects and animals, not as numerous, but certainly just as dangerous. And so, after a month's travel, the poison pot dangling from the hook on the jade and silver solc hide saddle was empty. Only that fast acting, fantastically lethal poison had made us more than a match for the solcs.

I tossed the tin poison pot away with a curse and climbed onto Rosaut's back, my quiver full of arrows, the last ones that would bear poison. When they were gone our plight would be desperate. The solcs pressed too close about us. Their numbers were such that they were quickly eating themselves out of food supplies. And it would be sure suicide to stop and attempt to make a new supply of the deadly green paste. I knew the solcs' fantastic numbers could not be maintained for long, but the knowledge was no comfort to Rosaut or myself. As I searched for the best route I patted the huge beast's flanks. That was a mistake. She snorted angrily, for her flanks and legs were one mass of half-healed solc claw wounds. I spoke softly to her, soothing her. I could not afford to alienate her. I knew that she had not forgotten my role in the death of her colt. She calmed down, although a few tosses of her mane let me know that she still thought little of my careless act.

I surveyed the surrounding gullies and rock formations, so similar to, yet so different from, those about the lush green of Bomb Valley. I sat thinking. It was useless to attempt to continue in my chosen line of travel. If the solcs got any thicker, Rosaut would be using them for a rug. And the greathorse and myself were nearing the end of our endurance.

She sounded warning—something coming from the left. From the

sound reaching my less keen ears, I judged many solcs coming fast. I didn't bother to look back. I spurred the greathorse. She bolted forward. I pulled the bow wide, in case a solc should come within range. Then, behind, I heard the roar of a thousand solcs. Unable to believe my ears, I turned in the saddle—and nearly fell off! It was impossible. Solcs were pouring out of the hills, covering the rocks and gullies like a living carpet, howling and spitting as they scurried on their twenty razor clawed feet. They spurted ahead as they caught sight of us.

A cry rose ahead. I jerked around as Rosaut sidestepped a rearing solc. The razor claws cut at empty air. The solc howled its disappointment. My bowstring twanged, and the solc flipped, biting at the arrow whose coated tip was taking its life. Its body segments formed a circle of beads as the solc coiled around in an effort to get at the arrow shaft. Four arrows in as many heartbeats put down as many of the vicious monsters, but a dozen more broke from the surrounding hills, coming to join the tidal wave of solcs racing up behind me and the greathorse and also cut us off. Those ahead darted out from the rock formations and turned to meet us. They waited for us, needle fangs ready, razor claws snapping shut with audible clicks. Searing saliva dripped from their jaws as they opened wide their foot long tooth lined mouths.

But Rosaut gathered her mighty legs beneath her and desperately hurtled her vast tonnage over the snapping jaws and flashing razor edges of the claws. For a bare moment it seemed we would make it, but the greathorse came down in a cloud of legs, dust, and flying stone. A foreleg buckled, and she started down. She tried to regain stride, but the solcs were there, teeth flashing, giving her no chance. She threw herself to one side, avoiding needle teeth, and we crashed to the ground. I jumped clear and rolled one way while Rosaut rolled the other, crushing three solcs who had been too eager. White flesh oozed from the cracked shells of their bodies. I had lost my solc bow somewhere in the fall.

Two solcs scabbled after me as I came to my feet with Chernac ready. The Throwing Sword shimmered momentarily as it caught the sunlight, staying for a second the solcs' attack. Rosaut, veteran of a thousand solc hunts, had also fought her way to her feet, although blood poured from a half dozen wounds. She reared as the solcs rushed her, raising her front hooves high. The solcs tried for her belly, only to find their chitin armor pulped by the descending massive hooves. She sensed one foe behind her and bucked, kicking its eyes out. But I was too hard pressed myself to

follow closely the greathorse's battle. I was having difficulties of my own.

Chernac weaved and blocked, being useless for offensive purposes against the twenty razor clawed legs, needle filled mouths, and double brains of the creatures who had me at bay. When I had a chance I would go for the eyes, but that wasn't often. The two solcs were too much for me with only the Throwing Sword to defend myself. Only the fact that the two kept getting in each other's way, each trying to keep the other from having me, permitted me to live that long. I twisted and jumped and darted from side to side trying to evade the claws and teeth, but I knew I couldn't keep it up long. Already I was tiring.

Chain mail links broke and flew whenever I was too slow. Razor claws would slice flesh as if it were nothing. Blood began to soak the tunic, robbing me further of speed and strength. It seemed as if it had been hours since I had rolled clear of the greathorse, but in fact, it was mere seconds. I was moving and reacting faster than any man possibly could. Just as I thought that I could not last out an entire minute, I slipped on a loose stone, falling to one knee. One solc scabbled forward, jaws opening wide over me. Desperately I thrust upward with Chernac, fending off the monster. But the other wasn't idle. It came in for the easy meal.

Suddenly something drew their attention. It was the battle cry of a greathorse. They whirled as Rosaut dashed toward me, steel shod hooves glinting brightly with red sunlight. The two solcs broke and scrambled away, howling. She chased them a few steps and then spun back toward me. I recovered my bow and bounded into the saddle. Fear gave me muscles unlike any I'd ever had before. Before I was settled in the saddle or my feet were in the stirrups, the greathorse was moving. Stones flew and clattered as the greathorse's hooves struck the ground, thrusting her enormous mass forward. There was no need to spur or whip her on. I clung to the saddle as the ground rushed by blindingly. Like the wind, Rosaut flew before the thousand solcs scant yards behind. They howled and roared and spat their anger.

The hills broke away into flat, rolling grass plains. Rosaut shot ahead as she reached this ground, which was her best running surface. Her hooves thundered upon the earth. With every stride she drew away from the solcs. Never as a colt had she run so fast. Her mighty muscles rippled beneath me. The wind beat about us. Then, for a second, the greathorse faltered as brown spots began to appear upon the horizon. But the dots became an

ocean of small four legged, brown furred animals. It was clearly evident that they were not solcs. They were three or four feet tall, with short, stiff, always moving tails and little wet noses. Dust rose from their many tiny hooves as the creatures milled nervously about. Then I saw that not all of that ocean of flesh was four legged. Mounted men rode about the edges of the far huge herd.

As I drew near, I could make out that there were several hundred of the drab gray robed and hooded riders riding about the herd, which now began to break and run as the sight, smell, and sound of charging solcs permeated the air. There were so many of the little creatures that they set the earth to shaking. The ground began to tremble beneath the crash and thunder of the millions of hooves. The bleating, terrified screams of the fleeing things filled the air. The riders wheeled about their mounts to face the source of trouble. A few bows were pulled wide. I could feel the eyes of the wielders upon me and the solcs behind.

I pushed the greathorse on to even greater speed, for out of the hills to left and right, not from just behind us, there came a torrent of solcs, a full ten thousand two brained beasts. Where Rosaut got the additional energy, I don't know, but she responded valiantly and surged forward with a burst of speed. With great, powerful strides the greathorse carried me toward the herd and riders.

At first, I could not decide what was wrong with the riders I was approaching, other than that they had blue skins. Perfectly round eyes stared unblinkingly at me. Then, with a shock, I realized that I was much closer than I had thought and that the blue skinned men were all less than three feet tall and the herd animals even smaller. Bows and swords were likewise small. So, too, were the mounts of the little blue people scaled down. Men, mounts, and herd were like dolls.

The herd was in full flight now. Great clouds of dust arose to mark their movement. The animals covered the plains; as far as numbers were concerned, the solcs were insignificant. The solcs roared as one as they sensed, saw, and smelled food. Rosaut was running less hard now, but still we swept down like the wind upon the little riders, some of whom were stringing bow and leveling poison tipped lances. More came from among the running animals to increase their numbers to nearly three hundred. Here and there a useless sword blade flashed brightly.

Their mounts weren't horses but, I noticed, surprised, dogs with

saddles. And now out of the stampeding brown furred animals there came hundreds more of the dogs without riders or saddles. They were all brutes with sleek, rippling muscles and powerful jaws. Long black nails came from their paws. Their thick coats were brown, black, white, or a mixture of any of the three colors, and many of them bore the scars of what I recognized as solc inflicted wounds. They formed up in a ragged line ahead of their mounted masters. We were almost on top of them.

I tried to halt Rosaut, who snorted and shook her head furiously; the idea of fighting alongside three foot men and dogs against ten thousand hungry solcs did not appeal to the old greathorse. She fought the reins and ignored the spurs. I commanded her to stop, but she shook her massive head and continued on. The lane of lances and nocked arrows parted, and Rosaut plunged through, a blur of legs and flashing hooves. I pulled hard on the reins, fighting the mighty beast in a battle of wills and strength. I managed to stop her a short distance behind the skirmish line of the dog riders. The muscles of my arms, toughened through years of firing arrows from my solc bow, had won. Reluctantly Rosaut obeyed my commands and turned back toward the line of dog mounts. She refused to move again until I applied the spurs once more.

As she trotted forward, sides heaving lustily, I got a chance to study the riders better. Their skin was a pale blue, now covered with sweat and dirt. The features were human, although none had eyebrows. The noses and skulls were thin, the chins weak. The faces seemed perpetually without expression. One turned his dog aside and moved to meet me as I came up. Despite the hood I could see his face clearly. The eyes were almost ovals and were lidless. The skin, even with the thin layer of sweat, was dry and wrinkled; it looked like old parchment that would fall apart at the slightest touch. The gray robe and hood that covered torso, legs, and head was of thin plain cloth. A woven belt held the robe tight and carried knife and sword. The dog rider was so small that I could have used his sword for a knife. A small, almost ridiculous bow lay across his lap. The saddle was of thin plain leather. Nowhere about his person or that of the others or the dogs was there a sign of decoration or ornamentation.

Seated upon Rosaut I towered above the little rider and his saddled dog. They were pitifully small beside us. It seemed folly for these little people to stand against even a hundred solcs. The rider held up a hand in a sign of peace. He started to speak, but another called and he swung back to survey the oncoming horde of solcs. As he turned his head the hood

pulled away from his skull, revealing gills. He looked back at me.

"Fight solcs?" the thin, high pitched voice asked, and without awaiting an answer, the little rider rode back to the lines of men and dogs. There were three lines, the first composed only of dogs, the second composed of dogs and lancers, and the third composed of the archers. Both arrows and lance tips were coated with poison.

The solcs were almost upon them when the leader cried out. Arrows darkened the sky, to fall like rain among the solcs. Scores went down. It was a miracle of strength that the little fighters could get their arrows to even penetrate the tough chitin armor, though I saw that most of the solcs going down were the victims of eye wounds. Hundreds more piled up on those twisting on the ground in the crush. But the rest simply climbed over their fellows and kept coming. They sprang at the lines of men and dogs. The dogs of the first line jumped to do battle, their thick fur, fast reflexes, and just as savage teeth enabling them to take toll of some of those who had penetrated the hail of poisoned arrows. But it was too few dogs against too many solcs. The first line of dogs was swamped. The solcs passed over them almost without breaking stride. The second line, riders and dog mounts, was engulfed, and still without hesitation, the solcs came on. Men and dogs were lost without a trace.

Rosaut needed no orders—she wheeled and raced after the small fleeing animals that the riders and their dogs had sought to protect. Behind, I could hear a few screams as the third line of archers was overrun.

"Go, Rosaut!" I cried, and the greathorse's hooves beat upon the earth like thunder as she pulled away from the solcs. The greathorse's battle cry sang out as we approached the rear of the fleeing herd. Even above their own hoof-beats and panting lungs and the clamor of the solcs, they heard it and, frightened, parted. Into their midst plunged Rosaut, stepping on them, crushing spines and skulls, knocking them aside when they were unwilling or unable to move aside. Then the solcs fell upon the rear of the herd and began the slaughter.

Night found us miles away from the scene of slaughter. Killing one of the creatures that milled about wearily, I lit a fire and roasted it. With Rosaut and the fire as guards, I went to sleep. At first I slept soundly, but then the voice came.

Help me. Jahalazar, help....

I sprang awake, the memory of that soft, sweet voice echoing through my skull. Silent since I had left Weruthan, the voice started again. But I pushed all thought of that from my mind, for what had awakened me was that Rosaut had sounded alarm. Not solcs, the greathorse signaled. As I searched the dark and the animals about us I groped for Chernac, the Throwing Sword, and found it. I had put it beside me, bare and ready, when I lay down. My hand upon the hilt, I lay still, awaiting developments, my ears standing forth as I listened.

"Your animal has warned you," came a high pitched voice. I located the spot whence the voice had come. I moved away from my sleeping spot into the shadows away from the feebly burning fire. "We come in peace, but if you wish a fight, I warn you that you are surrounded." The voice tried to sound stern and gruff. I chuckled loudly.

"My horse has warned me that there are two of you—together." The two hooded figures stepped out of the milling animals, which had yet to settle down from the day's events. Nor did the sound of full bellied solcs playing lazily in the distance help. A dozen shaggy haired dogs came at the sides of the two fish people, sniffing everything in the camp warily. I built up the fire, which had died down during my short sleep. I put an armful of dead grass that I had collected on it. There was no wood or anything to make the blaze last. The round eyes stared back at me across the flames. The pupils were gray.

"Well, fishermen?" I asked. Both started as one. They looked at me with obvious awe.

"You—you know of us?" the foremost asked in reply. They wore swords and knives at their belts and carried bows and quivers across their backs. Neither had made a motion toward any of their weapons. Their dogs settled down about me, content to sit and watch me and the flames. The greathorse had moved close. She eyed the dogs impassively, almost unconcernedly, but I knew she was ready to aid me if need arose. Both fishermen were of the same height and build, and I could tell neither apart.

"I know you have gills. Or at least, I saw one of you yesterday who had them. I had no time to verify if all had them, since the rest of your people went down before ten thousand solcs."

"Ten thousand?" they echoed, incredulity straining their voices, simultaneously, "We knew the solc packs were becoming worse—but ten

thousand?" one of them asked. He shivered. "Never again will we be able to bring our herds from the higher grasslands to Sea City."

I grunted, not really caring. Now that I knew there was no danger my mind kept going back to the voice I had heard just before I was awakened. Then I thought, *Perhaps they have information.*

"I am Jahalazar, late of Clan Chevy of the Desridif of Bomb Valley. I seek my people." I indicated my purple eyes and hair. "And the slayers of my mother. Know you of either? Or of machines that fly through the air without wings?"

The two little men nodded. The one who seemed the leader of the two spoke. "I am Gut Eatin. He is Wei Don. I am boss of this bangop herd, although that may not be true much longer when it is learned that I lost half my boys. A lot of women are widows this night; I shall be lucky if they don't flay me alive.

"Two hundred men gone. We fish people are small. Too many of us try to make up for it by being foolish and reckless. But enough of my troubles. You seek the slayers of your mother. Also, you want to find your people. You speak of machines that fly through the air. You speak of a Bomb Valley; never have I heard of it. The solc packs in that direction are impenetrable to us. You are the first to come this way.

"I know not who slew your mother nor of people with purple hair and eyes. But then, there are many things upon this planet that I do not know about. Many things have changed since the Age of Ruin. My people are an example. Once we lived in the sea, with fins and gills. Now..."

I moved restlessly in the light of the fire. I have never had the patience to listen to speeches. The little fishman had said a good deal but without managing to say anything of importance. He continued, "But I wander. Of flying machines, I do know. It is recorded and mentioned that not long ago, approximately twenty sets of seasons ago, three such wonders were sighted."

I moved forward across the fire, my shadow covering the two fishmen. The dogs raised their heads, and low growls came from deep within their throats. Rosaut pawed the ground in warning.

"Their direction. Was it straight from the solc hills?" I asked. The

animals quieted.

"I do not know. I myself did not see them. It is said that they were silent and attracted no one who did not happen to be looking at the sky. But the Rock can tell you—and of other things you wish to know."

"Rock?" I asked.

Both heads nodded eagerly. The leader spoke again. "Many things have happened since the mysterious Age of Ruin. The Rock is one of them. It is no different from the rest of its kind, except that it can communicate with a select few among my people. It knows of things that happen far beyond this isolated land of ours. Lately, it has reported that a great battle is brewing at the end of the world. The destiny of this planet is somehow involved."

The fishman paused and peered up at me. He placed a blue hand on his chin. "Strange, but I think you are connected with it. Anyway, I think it would be wise for you to visit the Rock. A knowledge of the dangers that might lie ahead could prove invaluable."

"This Rock," I said. "How far is it?"

"Sea City is two hundred miles." Gut Eatin's small blue finger pointed. I noticed for the first time the thin, filmy vestigial webs between the fingers. "If you push your mount, you should be there within a day."

Chapter Two

THUS IT WAS that I turned aside from my chosen path and pushed the weary greathorse day and night. Our progress was extremely slow until we left the bangop herd and could travel at a faster pace. The country was gentle and peaceful. Hills, covered with grass, rolled lazily this way and that. Soon farms and ranches began to dot the land. Their deceptive size made them appear to be set farther back from the road than they actually were. Watchdogs barked in the night as we passed.

On the morning of the second day the tall, thin towers of Sea City rose in the distance, dull red in the morning sun. Light sparkled and cascaded from the painted rooftops. A brisk, cool wind, laden with the tang of sea salt, blew inland, and a few birds, scrawny and unkempt, wheeled and cawed about overhead. As I had noticed on the persons of the fishmen,

there were no decorations or ornaments of any kind visible on the buildings. Everything was painted varying shades of red.

The combination of day and civilization brought people onto the road. They carried bundles or pushed wagons piled high with food. Many were shepherding small herds of bangop. The small fish people regarded me with open curiosity and suspicion. Some of the little children, nearly lost in their oversized robes, squealed and hid or clutched tight their elders in fright as they caught sight of the immense greathorse and myself. Though many of the adults carried swords, knives, or bows, none made a hostile move or remark. Unmolested, Rosaut and I rode through them to the big city.

There were numerous small towns and villages about Sea City, but all taken together were insignificant against it. For as far as the eye could see, the towers and rooftops stretched away to right and left. It was like a thick forest but composed of red painted houses. There was nothing even in Bomb Valley to compare. The houses were small in comparison with the houses of the clans, but there were so many that one soon forgot their lack of size. High clay walls ringed the huge city, with but a few wooden gates at strategic spots to allow entrance and exit.

Fishmen, garbed in black hoods and robes and armed with pikes, bows, swords, and knives, looked down upon me from their stations as I rode up. They had quickly clustered around atop the gate. As I watched, still more black robed fishmen joined those atop the wall. Small round metal shields, unadorned except for oil to keep them from rusting, shimmered redly in the cherry rays of the morning sun as the owners studied me impassively.

The greathorse was foamed, its tongue lolling as its sides heaved, trying to get enough air into its lungs. Its head hung in a droop, and there were bags beneath the bloodshot eyes. Even a greathorse eventually tires. And she was more than tired. I had pushed her hard the last few weeks, and she had lost much blood from the solc wounds. Nor was my own condition much better. So I looked upon Sea City as a chance to rest and repair my weapons and mount. It was a welcome sight.

A hundred bow strings pulled taut and the gate swung shut as I approached it. I heard the sound of a wooden bar being dropped into place. A hundred arrow points took sight at my breast. Had my chain mail been intact and had I worn a helmet like Weruthan, I could have laughed at the puny weapons wielded by the tiny arms. But as it was, I was

practically naked. The ground was hard and level about me. Rosaut pawed nervously as the smell of danger brought her out of her lethargy. The sparse crowds of fish people who had been leisurely making for the gate and had been stopped by the closing of it scurried away, leaving me and the greathorse alone beneath the clay walls, easy targets for the arrows. I resisted the urge to turn and run from the arrows. I doubted if the greathorse, in her present condition, had the reflexes or speed to take us out of range fast enough. We remained, returning the stares of the bow wielders.

Then tiny feet rang upon wooden boards. The fishmen upon the wall made room, and a red robed, weaponless fishman appeared. He peered down at me and then signaled to the bowmen. They relaxed their strings, although their arrows remained nocked. The one in red robes made another signal, and I heard the wooden cross bar being removed. On well oiled hinges the gate swung back open. Fish people began coming out as if nothing had happened, and those who had run away were now coming back.

The red robed fishman leaned over the wall and cupped his hands. "The Rock bids you welcome, Jahalazar," came his high pitched voice. "Please enter Sea City. No harm shall come to you." I prodded the uneasy greathorse through. Although the fishmen's bow strings were no longer taut, the weapons were still centered on us. And since I could see that the arrow tips were coated with poison, I knew that one wound, no matter how slight, would kill. I had to duck to avoid the low entranceway. My back itched as we passed into Sea City.

Red robe hurried down the rickety wooden steps and ran over toward us. Except for the vivid color of his robe, I could see no difference between this fishman and any of the others I had seen.

"This way, Jahalazar." The little man set off, his small legs moving back and forth furiously. I followed, wondering how he had known my name. The streets were small and narrow, the little blue fish people having to move into doorways or alleys to let the broad beamed greathorse pass. The tiny buildings rose up into the morning sky about us. Rosaut looked about nervously as her steel shod hooves rang upon the cobbled stones. Close quarters were no good for her land of fighting, and like all greathorses, she loved open spaces where there was room to run if need arose. Here and there a little child in miniature robe would run into the street, only to have

a frantic parent rush after and pull it from the path of the greathorse.

In addition to the large numbers of fish people there was also a large number of dogs. Underfoot the shaggy haired dogs moved about without a thought for the massive hooves of Rosaut. One or two would snap or growl at the greathorse, but Rosaut ignored them. Crowds stared silently from windows and balconies as we rode past. Their faces were, like those of all the fishpeople I had seen, without expression. Their big round eyes followed us as if we were a common sight.

The city was huge; yet it was jammed with fish people. I judged that more than four millions must be concentrated within its walls. And still we saw no decoration or ornament. There were shops and stores everywhere. Stands piled high with food and meat were in front, and the inhabitants were buying steadily. It was unusual to see a city so fully awake so early in the morning. There was a stink about the city, a sort of decaying fish smell that caused me to wrinkle my nose and Rosaut to snort in annoyance. But eventually the streets widened, and we came near the sea. I could smell the fresh, tangy, salty smell of it. I breathed deeply, savoring every breath of it. It was a welcome relief after the smells of the crowded interior.

High stone walls, manned by black robed bowmen and swordsmen, kept me from seeing the sea itself as my guide took us along in the shadow of the houses across from the wall. Everywhere were scurrying fish soldiers. Behind the wall were enormous catapults capable of hurling boulders. I was startled to find that even as I rode behind my guide, they were in use. Every few seconds there would be a *swoosh* and a boulder would hurtle away over the wall, out of sight.

Fishmen would then swarm forward and pull or wind the long slinging arm back into its original position while another group rolled and pulled another boulder, possibly weighing several hundred pounds, into place. Then all would scurry back except one. That one would cut the restraining cord, flinching at the *whoosh* as the payload rocketed away. Then the entire procedure would begin again. I noticed that the only ones near this section of the city wore black robes.

"Hey," I called after my guide. The little fishman turned and came hurrying back. He wrung his hands and glanced anxiously toward the sea wall.

"We cannot stay here," his high pitched voice said as one of his tiny blue hands reached up for the harness of Rosaut—as if he could force the greathorse to move. He jumped back as Rosaut snapped at his fingers. She snorted and pawed the ground with a steel shod hoof, tossing her white mane in anger. For once, I saw a sign of emotion from a fishman as fear momentarily filled the small blue face. I calmed Rosaut.

"What is happening?" I asked, indicating the high, thick wall sealing us off from the sea. I could see that the wall had been patched countless times, that here and there lay the bodies of black robed fishmen, their bodies pierced by large arrows.

The little man, still back where he had jumped some yards away from the flashing teeth of Rosaut, yelled back shakily, "Zharks. Sea raiders are attacking." Suddenly there was a crash behind. We and the greathorse turned our heads quickly. Fishmen screamed and died as an entire section of the seawall tumbled in with a rumble, crushing or dashing them to their deaths. Thick smoke quickly hid the scene. About the city, which had not seemed to be taking the Zhark attack too seriously, people began shouting and running. The streets began clearing with astonishing rapidity. Horns started screeching, setting my teeth to grinding. Rosaut reared. I calmed the greathorse, patting a broad flank.

"Come. Come," the little fishman said, and began leading the way between houses. Behind, there came another crash as of metal against stone and the sound of splashing water.

"Quick!" screamed the guide. "Into a building at once or we are lost!" He ran for the nearest of the towered buildings. I tried to turn Rosaut, but the street was too narrow. Instead, I made for the biggest building in sight, which had double doors and could accommodate Rosaut. The guide turned to wait for us and rushed back into the street when he saw us making for another building. His little legs flew as he chased after the greathorse.

I ducked my head as Rosaut hit the double doors with a crash, sending them splintering and flying from their hinges. We burst into the lobby, sending fish people screaming. Some shouted and milled about underfoot. Everyone was trying to use the only staircase to the upper levels.

The wooden floor was bare of covering. The lighting was bad and made the building appear gloomy. Old and rickety scaled down furniture was

placed throughout the lobby. The guide came to Rosaut's side and cupped his hands.

"We must go up," he yelled above the din. "The Diss!" There was terror in the saucer eyes at the words. I whipped out Chernac, the length of polished steel shimmering in the dim of the building's interior. The lobby was emptying quickly, the mass of fish people somehow going up the narrow winding stairs. It was obvious that fear drove them.

"I won't abandon my horse!" I said. Greathorse and rider fight best as a team. The guide hopped up and down on a foot in agitation. Annoyance and terror fought to control his features. The lobby of the building was now deserted except for us. A red sleeve pointed hurriedly, frantically at the huge solc bow hung across my wide back.

"Only that can save her from the Diss. Shoot from the tower."

There was a clangor of sound from the street. I turned in the saddle in time to see a file of rubber suited, shield and spear carrying fishmen trotting by past the wreckage of the doors.

"The Diss!" the little man moaned. At last, fear had come to dominate him. He turned and scrambled up the stairs. I slid from Rosaut's back, taking the quiver of four foot arrows with me. Up the dark, musty, fish smelling stairs I padded, five tiny steps at a time. Flickering torches lit the way. In no time I caught up with the fish people.

I pushed my way through the frightened body of them to the daylight of the tower. I was surprised to find a score of fishmen with their puny bows already at work. My guide yelled out something, and they parted and let me and the solc bow to the front.

The waterfront was spread out before me. Ahead was an intact section of the wall, and to the left was the breach. There, a copper sided boat had dropped a ramp and was putting ashore a shield to shield phalanx of rubber suited, glass face plated beings almost as tall as myself. Inside the glass face plates, flat black and white skinned, blunt nosed heads moved. Whenever one opened a mouth wide, I was chilled to see rows of white, sharpened teeth that slanted inward. Large, dead gills showed on the necks just below the chinless heads.

"The Zharks," the guide, who had come to stand at my side, whispered.

Wielding spears, long swords, pikes, and maces, the Zharks were fighting their way down the ramp. Thousands of tiny fish soldiers were trying to stop them. Like their enemy, every fish soldier in sight wore the rubbery suit with glass or plastic faceplates. Arrows from the towers of the buildings along the waterfront rained down about the Zharks, most bouncing from their shields and face plates. Occasionally one would find a spot in the rubber suiting and a Zhark would go down. But for every Zhark downed, ten of the fish soldiers died.

Clustered about the ramp, trying to hold the enemy back, the thousands of rubber suited fishmen fought in a hail of arrows from the shielded upper decks of the copper sided boat and a deluge of sea water from high power hoses in the sides of the boat. Both fishmen and Zharks slipped in the unsound footing. A score of Zharks went down from a deadly hail of arrows. Some fishmen in a building much closer to the wall breach than the one the guide and

I were on could get more power behind their arrows. The short shafts were effective. The Zharks could not raise their red and silver shields without exposing their lower bodies to the arrows and swords of those at street level.

A Zhark on the upper deck of the ship pointed to the tower whence the arrows had come. The Zhark bowmen raised their bows and began to pick off the fishmen there. The larger and stronger Zhark muscles and bows returned the fire with overwhelming accuracy. The shafts streaked through the air, and the fishmen fell, their bodies pierced completely. The ones who fell were rubber suited soldiers of the fish people. But as soon as one fell in that raking fire of arrows, a gray robed citizen fishman would dart forward from the shelter of the tower, grab up bow and arrows and continue the fight while others would drag the wounded away. Now most of the rubber suited were down. Not as effective as their soldier brothers, the citizens on the tower were effective enough. The Zharks upon the ramp fell without letup.

There was activity along the upper deck of the ship. Zharks darted about; then one of the power hoses began raising its muzzle.

"The Diss!" the little guide barely whispered. Puzzled, I watched the powerful stream of sea water rise up toward the offending tower. The citizen bowmen held their ground, shooting until the last second. Then they started running for the roof entrance to the building. But there were

too many for one door. Only half were through when the spray of sea water hit the tower, cascading over and drenching everything and everyone. To my horror, whenever the sea water touched any of the unsuited citizen bowmen, brown spots appeared on robe and skin. Before my eyes fish-men *dissolved* into squirming masses of wriggling brown spots that fell out of sight to the tower floor below the waist high protecting stone slabs. Then the hose nozzle began to swing in our direction. A brown specked arch of water, glistening redly in the rust red of the sun, climbed toward us.

The fish people about me stood their ground, pouring their arrows into the struggling mass of Zharks and fishman soldiers.

I, who had been standing in astonished fascination, notched an arrow, pulled the great solc bowstring back past my ear, and let fly. The arrow, designed to pierce a half inch of steel-like chitin armor, struck the nozzle, doing no damage. The stream of sea water with its barely visible little brown specks struck the base of our building and splashed fiercely.

Still the fishermen about me stood their ground, worked their bows.

The ranks of the Zharks were definitely thinned, although the field of battle was littered with fishermen dead. I sighted on the shielded upper deck of the boat. From the corner of an eye I watched the water stream, getting a good idea of the wind direction and strength. The arrow shot away, flew straight, and shattered the face plate of the Zhark. It fell, the arrow half out of the back of its head. Another pointed at us, and a score of arrows swept our position. One snicked by my ear, while a half dozen citizen bowmen fell and were replaced.

Now there was an uneasy movement upon the tower about me, for the spray was climbing higher. It now splashed and lashed the side of the building. I thought of Rosaut below and loosed another four foot arrow. Two Zharks went down on the shielded deck, such was the power of the solc bow. Anxiously I looked down, but the powered stream of water was advancing no more. It had reached the maximum of its range just three yards below the tower floor. But about us, shafts darted or splintered. Often, a fishman would scream and fall. But always another would take his place.

The fighting on the ramp was bitter, the bigger, more powerful Zharks cutting down the smaller, weaker fishermen in great numbers. But

reinforcements kept arriving from other sections of the wall while the Zhark numbers kept decreasing. At last, the Zharks began losing ground. The fish soldiers crowded close, forcing them back.

I now noticed for the first time, beyond the ship and wall, the rest of the Zhark fleet, some ten boats, three of which were sinking while the rest were under heavy bombardment from the catapults elsewhere along the wall.

The boats were large, each capable of holding at least five hundred Zharks. There were three decks, all with bowmen. Zhark officers, ringed by rows of Zhark bowmen and sailors, occupied the topmost High sides, made of copper plates, were broken only by the upright ramps that could land battering rams or Zharks in phalanxes twenty Zharks wide. The decks were almost hidden behind broad but thin copper slats a foot wide. Even as I watched, a rock as big as two Zharks rang off a copper slat and crashed down upon and amidst the Zharks fighting upon the ramp.

The ramp split, throwing some fishmen and the first two ranks of the Zhark phalanx into the gap between ship and wall. Several had twisted and turned and grabbed an edge of the damaged ramp. Their comrades ignored them, withdrawing under the now withering arrow fire of the fishman archers. One by one, arrows found their way to the massive backs. One by one, the helpless Zharks fell out of sight into the unseen ocean.

While watching, I had been shooting arrows into the massed ranks of the retreating Zharks. But I now spotted a rubber suited Zhark on the bowmen and officers' deck. The rest of the Zharks wore black rubber suits, but this one wore chalk white with various designs and symbols painted upon its chest. The nonbowmen upon the topmost deck stood around him, listening or passing on orders.

I took aim, my purple eyes marking the path the shaft would have to follow. I compensated for wind and distance. The bow twanged, and the arrow knifed through the air, snaked through two slats, and took the Zhark captain in the chest. He staggered, hands going to the few inches still protruding. Those Zharks about him were too paralyzed to do anything. A cheer went up from the fish-men.

Now there was a riot of action upon the upper deck. The officers ran about, pointing at our position. The Zhark bowmen turned their full fire upon the tower. Their arrows snicked and whistled through the air. I could

see Zharks coming from other parts of the ship and taking up bows. The air became filled with wooden missiles. Fishmen fell about me, their frail bodies pierced through. One arrow splintered on an intact section of my tattered chain mail. Arrows broke and bounced on the stone blocks before us. We huddled behind the stones, death raining down all about us.

The boat, its broken ramp being pulled up, was moving away from the wall, going out to join the others, which had been unable to come in and give support. Columns of water straddled it as the fishmen's catapults tried to zero in. The arrows from the upper decks began to fall short, but a Zhark went down, a solc arrow through his chest. Another boulder struck the ship but rolled down the copper slats to the water without doing any damage. The fishmen had ceased firing, the ship long out of their range. I picked off six more Zharks before the copper armored boat was out of range of even the man tall solc bow.

The fishmen below, in their rubber suits but now with their helmets off, cheered and clapped each other on the back as they stood or walked in the brown slush on the ground.

When my guide led me down, the inside of the building lobby was drenched. Water dripped everywhere. The walls and floor were covered with small writhing brown spots that died as one watched.

The Diss," the guide whispered. They live only for a very short time in air." He pointed. "I'm sorry." We had halted at the bottom of the steps to the lobby. I followed his gaze, not knowing at first what he meant. But then I saw. There, where I had left Rosaut, the greathorse of Weruthan, was a huge mound of writhing brown spots. They glistened with the look of ripeness. In the midst of them was Rosaut's solc saddle, brown spots crawling over its wet, glistening smoothness. A few feet away from the main mass, there glinted the wet surface of a steel hoof shoe. I wiped a tear from my eyes. I had come to love that stubborn but valiant old greathorse. Never again would a solc feel her wrath.

Forgive me, Weruthan.

We left the building and passed along the river front, finally going on through the streets to the part of the city that curved away from the sea. We walked several miles through the dark, narrow streets, each seemingly the same as the other with the same fish people and their children and dogs. Occasionally there was a hill to break the monotony of sameness. But

at last the houses and buildings fell away, opening onto a large square filled with fish people of all colors of robes. In the center of the square there rose a majestic many storied building. Balconies and parapets climbed the face. Unlike most of the other buildings of the city, this had large, spacious windows, and from them red robed fishmen were chanting to those below in the square. The chanting voices rose up to me as the crowds joined in with those above.

They give thanks to the Rock for the victory over the Zharks," my guide explained while leading me toward the building that dominated the square.

More red robed fishmen, armed with swords, stood guard on the balconies and towers and at the entrances. Two guarding the entrance we were approaching parted to admit us without a word. There were no questions or searching.

Following my red robed guide to the dark hole that served as entrance, I ducked and entered behind him. It took some moments for my eyes to get accustomed to the gloom. The little guide waited patiently, then signaled me to follow. The building was quite large by fish people standards. I counted some four hundred footsteps before we came to a lighted chamber. At the end of the chamber two more red robed, sword carrying fishmen guarded a staircase leading down. They moved aside as we drew near, and I followed my now hurrying guide down the steps. I counted two hundred tiny steps spiraling steeply downward before we stepped into a large cavern lighted by burning torches placed at intervals in holders along the walls. To this artificial light was added a soft, eerie glow from the rocks themselves. Something flapped in the roof of the cavern. My hand went to Chernac as I tried to pierce the darkness above.

"A bat. Quite harmless," the guide said. His high pitched voice echoed hollowly. My hand relaxed somewhat on the hilt of Chernac. The solc bow and near empty quiver hung across my back. Except for Chernac, the Throwing Sword, and Lil Chernac, the Slitting Knife, I was unarmed. Always had I relied upon the quick reflexes of a greathorse beneath me and the taut pull of a solc bow with a poisoned arrows

Warily I watched the unlit depths of the cavern roof. But finally, after assuring myself that no danger menaced me from above, my attention came back to that portion before me, which was well lit. The other *half* of the cavern was carpeted with blue and gold rugs. Richly polished furniture

was placed about it, and in seven thickly padded chairs, seven aged fishmen, their wrinkled skins falling in folds beneath the overlarge hoods that almost completely hid their faces in shadows, watched me. They moved not. They spoke not. They seemed to breathe not. Only their eyes revealed that the owners were alive as they sat about a broad table with a glass tank within which was a brown mass. The *table stood* between them and myself. My guide diffidently motioned me forward, and as I advanced he followed meekly. I came to stand almost up to the table. It was wonderfully polished, reflecting the light of the burning torches perfectly. The reflections of seven hooded heads stared back at me.

Then something moved in the tank upon the table. My skin goose bumped as a mass of writhing brown spots crawled across the tank's bottom until they found themselves stopped by the glass side. The brown spots tried to crawl up the obstruction but could not. They sought ways around it, but that also proved useless. They settled down and became still.

The center one of the seven ancient fishmen spoke. His voice was a barely audible whisper. His mouth was mere flaps of loose skin about toothless gums. I leaned forward to hear him clearly.

"Many strange things have come about since the mysterious Age of Ruin, Jahalazar... of Bomb Valley. The Diss... are but one... of them. I... I hope you are not too alarmed at their presence. We spend much of *our time trying to find a way to destroy them. They are* sea water inhabitants. But also, they are quite primitive. They are still evolving. If they should evolve to become freshwater adaptable or even land rovers..." The dry voice died away, but what he had left unsaid was more frightening than what he had said.

I shuddered, unable to take my eyes from the mass of brown spots that sat facing—watching me. I could sense its awareness. I moved to the left—and the mass followed! My hand tightened upon Chernac. What in the hell was it that I faced? Were they joking? One did not study, one killed it as quickly as possible, any way possible. This was evil itself.

Then the one spoke again. "The guide could have taken you by another route, but then you would not have been prepared for the Zharks. I'm sorry about your greathorse. I'm afraid that in our preoccupation with you, we forgot about your animal." The old fishman confirmed that which had festered in my mind all the way to this place. I had been deliberately

taken along the waterfront even though they had expected the Zhark raid.

"But what about me? I might have been killed," I said, my hand loosening Chernac in the scabbard. The thought of men or fishermen playing with my life *was not something I* liked. Nor were these Diss, against which a good blade of steel was useless. *My anger* rose. The audacity of them to play with me and then allow me to come into their presence with my weapons! I could slay them all before the guards behind them could move. I could not die and let my mother's murderer live free! Who were they to gamble with my life? I could feel my anger rising with each heartbeat.

One of the fishermen raised a withered old hand. "There was no danger. The Rock said you would live."

"The Rock!" I demanded.

Yes, I, the Rock.

I swung around, but there was no one and nothing. And suddenly I knew that, like the voice that called to me in the night, this was inside my head. I searched the cavern for the source.

I am sorry. But I required time and proximity for attuning myself to you. Please enter.

Dark blue curtains at the back of the cavern swung back, revealing a smaller chamber. Within, in the light of two torches, two red robed fishermen knelt on the dirt floor before a blue veined piece of gray rock about the size of a newborn greathorse colt.

Twenty seasons ago there did pass in the direction and again from the direction of the solc hills, flying machines. Follow the sun, Jahalazar, in its setting to world's end, and there you will find a battle upon whose outcome depends the fate of this ravaged Earth. There you shall find the slayer of your mother.

"Who are you? How do you know this?" I asked. I had walked around the table and the seven seated old ones to enter the chamber and stand before the thing from which the thoughts came.

I am the Rock. As to how I know things, well, there are many

mysterious things from the Age of Ruin. The Zharks are one. The fish people are another. Bomb Valley is yet another. And I am still another.

But enough of this. There is much for us to do. The road is long. The hazards are many. I have spent too much time in this isolated land; the fish people are frail. Desert, mountains, solc infested hills, and Diss and Zhark dominated sea hem them in.

I look forward to our coming journey.

"Journey?" I asked, looking at the Rock, which must weigh some good part of a hundred pounds. "I am without mount. There are mountains," I tried to reason.

Enough, Jahalazar. Take your sword and strike there where you see the mark of many another sword.

I looked closely at the Rock. On one side there was the lighter shade of chipped away stone.

Strike off that edge there. The edge was about the size of a large thumb.

"But..." I had drawn Chernac, but I hesitated. What would cutting a piece of stone accomplish?

My identity will remain a part of the lesser and of the whole. The lesser will fade in time into nothing, but when it is gone I will not miss it. In the meantime, it will permit me to see the wonders of this world and to go with and aid you in the coming battle. You face an array of forces that brought the Age of Ruin the first time. Unless they are beaten, there shall be no Age the next time.

I have no way to force you to take me. I did not think you would think a few ounces of rock a threat or a burden to yourself.

I apologize, if I am wrong.

Chernac flicked through the dim light of the cave. The stone chip fell to the dirt. I picked it up and examined it.

Come-come Jahalazar-Jahalazar. There-there is-is a-a world-world

to-to be-be seen-seen and-and a-a battle-battle to-to win-win.

With the voices echoing in my skull, I allowed the fishermen to lead me out.

I stayed in Sea City for two days while I rested and the Rock undertook the completion of preparations for our departure.

One and a half hundred black robed and hooded fish soldiers and three red robed Priests of the Rock, as I had come to learn they were called, accompanied me. The outriders moved back and forth on their loping, shaggy haired mounts, while the main body moved their dogs at a fast walk. Since the fish people had no mounts for one of my size, I walked.

The day was well advanced, the sun high in the sky. The lead rider halted his dog and whistled. Ahead, after two weeks' riding and marching, the mountains loomed up over us. But the eyes of the fish soldiers were elsewhere. Bows were strung and arrows readied. All eyes scanned the red sky, squinting against the sullen glare of the rust-red sun.

"What is it?" I asked of Scrutous, the priest who rode next to me and who had originally come and met me at the gate of Sea City. Off to the right a wild herd of large, clumsy looking animals grazed, unafraid of the host of tiny fish soldiers and dogs moving past.

"They are kows. Harmless," Scrutous said, seeing the direction of my gaze. "There is the enemy." I looked along the thin arm into the sky. Overhead five flat bodied, green feathered birds flew, their incredible wingspan still as they glided in the air currents. Everyone had stopped. The dogs waited silently, nervously. I could see that they, like greathorses, preferred to be able to run.

The birds wheeled overhead in a giant circle in majestic silence. As I watched, the circle got smaller as the birds spiraled in toward the center. As one they made a sharp turn, allowing me to see their broad, flat backs. I could see five or six small round white balls attached there on each of the birds.

"The kows are their natural food, but they will attack anything, especially if it moves. I think they've spotted us.

The lead rider whistled. A hundred and fifty metal shields were

arranged so they could be used when needed. The leader squeaked out orders, and a group of fishermen quickly converged on me and the three Priests of the Rock and placed their shields over us. Through a crack I watched the birds, which were now climbing high into the sky until they were but specks.

The rest of the fishermen stood ready, their shields dangling by a cord at their mounts sides from a projection on the saddles.

The flat birds circled around the unmoving host of men, looking. We were the center of their circle. Then one by one they folded their wings and started falling. After falling a few feet, they again began using their wings. With each beat of those mighty wings they seemed to jump ahead. They gathered speed, growing rapidly, plummeting downward with shocking rapidity.

The leader squeaked orders. Bows twanged in harmony. Halfway down the small white balls shot off the parent birds and began furiously flapping their little wings. They sighted down their needle sharp beaks and dived. The wings folded back. The little birds began to revolve. They became blurs. The five flat backed birds were in the midst of pulling out of their dives when the shower of arrows reached them. Three were hit and fluttered, wounded and dying, downward. The speeding blurs were unaffected, the arrows glancing from their spinning forms.

"Shields!" screamed the lead rider, putting his own over his head. The shields, except those already up over the Priests and me, came up.

Thud. Thud. Thudthud thudthud. Thud. A fishman's dog shrieked and fell, blood gushing from a hole in its back.

Thud. Thud. Thunk. Thudthud. Blindly the white birds flung themselves mindlessly into the metal shields.

At last quiet came. **It** stretched, broken only by the wounded dog's whimpering. A dog howled, bounded to one of the still flapping larger birds that had fluttered to the ground, and tore it to shreds. The fish soldiers scanned the sky. The two remaining birds were speeding away with almost frantic haste. The signal was given, and the shields were lowered. Fishmen dismounted and walked to the felled dog.

I walked over in time to see one of the soldiers pour a thick clear liquid

from a flask over the still breathing dog and into the open wound, which had ceased to bleed. The dog whimpered pitifully as one of the soldiers drew a knife. He cut its throat with a deft motion. He held the dog until its convulsions were over. Another struck a match and put it to the liquid saturated fur of the dead animal. It burst into flame, and wood and grass were gathered and piled upon the burning carcass. The fish-men remounted, and the host began to move. Behind, a column of black smoke curled into the sky.

After some minutes' ride, Scrutous turned to me and remarked as I walked beside his dog, "It is the only way to kill bullet birds once they have found their hosts. They imbed themselves permanently with stickers hidden within folds of their skin. They release their eggs into the still living host's bloodstream. Two weeks later, there are nearly two hundred fly sized of the carrier birds. Of course, most die, but some survive, and they in turn mate and produce in a lifetime a few hundred bullet birds, which they carry until they mature, and then the mother birds find possible hosts and dive on them, releasing their offspring to begin the cycle again.

"But during the two week interval they are completely helpless. Only because of that can we keep them in control. Sometime during the two week period one of our rangers will most likely happen upon the dying animal and destroy it.

"There are many strange things in the world since—"

"—the Age of Ruin," I said, a smile upon my lips. "The bullet birds are but one of them." Scrutous remained silent for some time after.

At last we reached the mountains, and I left my escort at the foot of the base of one huge mountain whose white capped top was lost in the white clouds. Actually, it was the smallest in the range. I waved to the fishmen and began walking. I carried a bow; a quiver of newly made arrows; Chernac, the Throwing Sword; and Lil Chernac, the Slitting Knife. I had mended my clothes, and the Priests had seen to the repair of my chain mail. At my neck, in a leather sack, hung the chip of the Rock. It had been silent since that day in the cavern beneath Sea City. Now, as I trudged up the rocky ground, I began to wonder if I had not imagined it. But I had inquired about Rock's long periods of silence, and the Priests had informed me that the Rock meditated a great deal.

The Rock was working on many of the problems of the fish people, and indeed, mine was not the only piece of the Rock journeying this day. There was a chip in a bottle at sea. Several were fastened to far flying birds and others to animals that had, come from over the mountains. I was not the Rock's only interest.

The ground grew steeper and more rugged. Occasional trees were replaced by moss and fern and midget grass clumps. But soon even those disappeared as I climbed higher. Soon I could see in the distance Sea City and the sea beyond. On the tiny plain below, I could make out the returning escort, now but a small bunch of slowly moving specks on the valley floor.

The land became bleak, the cliffs sheer. By nail and rope and courage I climbed on. The air became frigid as the warmth dropped away, even though the sun shone more brightly here than it ever had on the valley floor. I shivered during the day as I climbed. I shivered at night when I slept. The cold was numbing. It stiffened one's fingers and made the toes insensitive so that one had to go slowly and deliberately or fall.

On the ninth day of the ascent, as I was climbing onto a ledge, I felt something watching me. I pulled myself up onto the ledge and eased Chernac's hilt from the cord I had wound around it to keep it from coming from its sheath and falling back the way I had come. (I had already lost Lil Chernac in that manner, and I could ill afford to lose the Throwing Sword.) The sense of a watching presence was overpowering. I removed and notched an arrow. My meager supplies swung in a bundle near the middle of my back next to the quiver. It was nearing evening. The sun, long since set in the valley, still shone dark redly here. I had planned to spend the night on this ledge. I looked up quickly. The next was too far up for me to attempt in the remaining light. Whatever was watching me would have to share the ledge with me.

There was a scurry ahead where the ledge developed into a cleft several men wide. There was a bend a few yards in, around which I could not see. The sound had not come from there. In a crouch I moved forward, away from the drop at my back. Gravel crunched underfoot, and again something moved in the darkness. I pulled the bow string back past my ear as my purple eyes tried to peer around the bend in the cleft. It was so dark there that I could see nothing. I waited. During my climb I had learned not to take chances. The inhabitants of the mountain were not to

be taken lightly.

Again I heard the sound of movement. The wind began to pick up, blowing my hair, howling in and out of crevices. I kept the bow string taut even after my arms began to ache. Minutes turned into an hour. Snowflakes drifted down from somewhere. Still I crouched, bow aimed at the cleft. The sun was almost gone. The wind howled at my back. The cold robbed my body of feeling, but with the patience of a good hunter, I waited and watched, bow string to my ear.

Two hours passed. The sun was gone. The wind whistled about me, cold, cutting and bitter. A faint light was visible from the twelve multihued moons. Still something watched me from the cleft—something that I knew wanted to dine upon me. I began to wonder if I could release the string if I had to. Should I continue to wait, or should I take my chances in a place where I could not see with Something I knew nothing about?

Three hours passed. Check, fastest of the moons, set. Soon two more of the twelve moons would follow, and it would be dark enough for whatever was in the cleft to come out. Then it would make almost no difference whether I stayed or moved forward. If there had been wood, I could have made a fire, but there was none. The moons slid below the horizon. Only a dim glow lit the ledge. From the cleft, two burning green eyes slowly came from ' where I judged the bend to be. They were about waist high—now eye level, since I crouched, bow drawn back.

The eyes moved smoothly forward, then separated some two feet and slowly drew back to the normal distance. Hairs bristled upon my neck. Small bumps rode my spine. Not once did the eyes of the thing blink, and I could hear no sound of footsteps. I forced my frozen fingers to relax. The arrow snicked away. There was a scream and before I could draw Chernac the two eyes had come at me, and something slimy and shapeless drove me back to the ledge's rim. But instinct and a dozen years hunting the lightning quick solcs saved me. Even as I was being borne back, Chernac was rasping from its place in the quarter sheath at my left hip. As my head and upper shoulders hung over into nothing the steel sword was cutting and slashing.

Something plopped itself onto my belly, but the chain mail rebuffed it. It groped its way to the flailing sword arm. Something cold and warm touched the bare hand and attached itself. I screamed. The hand began to

go beyond numbness. It was as if the Me were being drained out of it. I fought desperately, hacking at whatever it was that pinned me. Something hot began to pour onto my lower body, scalding me. The hold upon my sword hand began to relax. Feeling began to return to the hand. The weight on me increased. I could not move. Exhaustion and pain made me *dizzy*. I could not keep my eyes open. With my head dangling over nothing, I lost consciousness.

The sun rose early upon me, revealing to my eyes the thing that had come upon me in the night. I held my throbbing, burning hand to my side. My clothes, where the blood had spilt from the gaping wounds I had torn in the boneless creature, were eaten away. The skin beneath was red and peeling.

The creature was gray hided. I prodded it with a foot. The foot sank in. The thing was resilient, with no tendency to resist. It was a lump of flesh with two dead green eyes attached to the end of snakelike stalks. A huge, bulbous head was the only rigid part of the creature. It moved on four sucker tipped legs, each twice as thick as mine. Only the keen edge of the steel sword had saved me. Doubtless the skin, so vulnerable to that hard metal edge, was impossible to damage otherwise. The arrow was barely visible in its chest or what would correspond to that part in other animals. It seemed to have had little effect.

There are many strange things from the Age of Ruin.

My good hand went to the leather bag at my neck. "So, you're back."

I have been here all along. All this is new to me. I have been assimilating it and passing it on to my greater self, who is in turn passing it to the Rock Priests. See to your hand. I believe cleansing and a dressing of lichen will do. This is certainly not the last hostile being we shall meet. Best remove your arrow. You may need it and both hands before we are off this mountain.

Of course, the Rock was right. Higher and higher I climbed. And the higher I went, the more vicious and deadly the animals that stalked me. Once I mentioned my thoughts to the Rock. "One would think the top of a mountain would be lifeless. Instead, it teems with life."

I had found out that although the Rock was cognizant of everything I did, it didn't have time for what it called "idle chatter." So I was surprised

when it answered. *You stand too far away most of your life. You look at a mountain, and all you see is stone and snow. But there are moss, lichen, grass, ferns, and shrubs. Upon those there feed small insects and animals, and upon them in turn feed larger ones, until we reach the large carnivores. Then, too, many forage in the lowlands, returning to the safety of the mountain when it becomes necessary.*

"And birds," said I, hand going unconsciously to the ripped mail on my right shoulder where a giant bird had tried to grab hold and carry me off.

Silence. Pay attention. We are probably being stalked. There is much of the world to yet be seen. Guard yourself.

Onward toward the summit I climbed and fought. My food finally gave out, and I went on without eating. At first not even the gnawing hunger in my stomach could force me to eat the things that lived and hunted in the high passes and ledges of the mountain. Melted snow was my food.

At last the Rock and I reached the top. The world was spread out below us but lost beneath layers of cloud. It was difficult to breathe. My lungs hurt with every breath, and my heart beat furiously, so I wasted no time starting down. I tried to conserve my strength, no longer remarking idly to the Rock. Weaker I became as the days went past. The flesh melted, wasted away from my frame. Chernac dragged at my side, sometimes tripping me.

At last I knew I must eat, and so I became the hunter. But I was too high; nothing truly edible could be found. I broke my fast with a small, hard scaled creature that fed upon the mossy rocks and moved too slowly to escape my darting hand. There was nothing with which to make a fire, so I ate the inner flesh, raw and cold, blanking my mind to the taste. Even then I had trouble getting it down, and I threw it up some minutes later. I forced myself on, knowing I had to get out of the hostile mountains before I became too weak to protect myself.

In spite of my growing weakness and despite halts while I hunted and ate more edible things, I accomplished the descent in a third of the time of the ascent. Halfway down, the low clouds parted, and I looked upon a vast, endless desert.

Finally, torn and tattered, bearded and grimy, the scars of a dozen desperate battles upon my body and mind, and weary from sleepless

nights spent watching and listening in the dark, I came down out of the mountains and stepped upon the desert.

The sun's warmth was a welcome relief after the cold of the mountain passes. A small trickle of water from melting snow came, too, out of the mountains. I washed and shaved and rested. The next morning I was ready for the desert. With a flask of water and the remains of a snake I had trapped and cooked, I set out across the burning sands.

Chapter Three

AT FIRST food and water were difficult to find, and yet my experiences in the mountains had taught me that no land, no matter how barren and devoid of life it appears, is hopeless.

"If there are water and life in the mountains, then here, too, there must be water and life," I said to the Rock, who in turn, as usual, said nothing. There were snakes and rats, but they were scarce and difficult to catch.

There were green and brown colored, hard skinned plants, protected by thorns, needles, and sharp edges, scattered throughout the desert. They were anything but appetizing. On impulse I cut one open and found that inside was liquid to quench my thirst and pulp to fill my belly.

"There is life!" I cried. In addition, small animals, insects, and lizards abounded.

"There is life!" I repeated, watching a little furry skinned thing scuttle over a sand dune. I ate, and gradually my muscles swelled to normal size. My speed picked up. The days became weeks, and onward I marched, at peace with the once hostile desert.

Each day was the same as the previous. The rust-red sun beat down fiercely, while about me to the hazy horizons was sand, always the same tiresome color, with an occasional thick skinned plant upon which I quenched my thirst and abated my hunger. Up and down sand dunes I trudged, until I thought the monotony would drive me insane.

But on the second day of the sixth week I crested a sand dune—and stopped. Below, in a shallow bowl formed by the sand, a mass of writhing brown spots moved. Within the thing the individual cells swirled and swam and wiggled energetically.

"Diss!" I whispered involuntarily, remembering the horror within the tank in the cavern of the Rock, the mass that had moved when I had. And even as I whispered the name, a man sized mass of Diss detached itself from the main cluster and began snaking its way up the sand toward me.

Then the Rock, silent since the mountains, spoke. *Land adapted Diss. We have always feared this. My greater self in Sea City and I knew it was a possibility. But this is beyond even our extrapolations. See how they work as a unit.*

The mass of Diss crawling up the sand was changing. Projections began to emerge from it. My eyes widened in disbelief—it was changing into a man! Arms with fingerless hands formed, and legs with large flat feet at the end became recognizable. A blob of brown spots surged upward, and there was a head. The mass of writhing brown cells scrambled up the sand dune, coming up for me as I stood watching it with terrified fascination.

There are many things from the Age of Ruin. The Diss are but one of them. Move, Jahalazar, or we shall not see the others. I moved just as the Diss-thing lunged forward. It missed me by scant inches.

I tried to race around the shallow bowl, but my boots kept sinking into the soft sand, slowing me down considerably. I glanced over a shoulder. Behind, the Diss had climbed from the sand depression and was scrabbling after. If I had thought to leave it quickly behind, I was wrong. The Diss man-shape was clumsy, but it could cover ground at a respectable rate with unnaturally long legged strides.

I raced ahead and changed direction while it was out of sight, hoping to lose it; yet when I peered over a dune to see if it was still following me, it was, as surely as a bloodhound. I could and did outdistance it, for it still could not walk with the speed of a man. I trotted most of the day, stopping only to eat and drink. I changed direction several times in a further attempt to lose it, but when I awoke from a doze that afternoon I could see it hobbling toward me on the horizon—or nearer.

The desert still stretched far ahead as I moved into the seventh week of my desert march and the fifth day of my flight from the Diss creature, which tracked me with inhuman determination. Nothing I did proved of any use. Also I was nervous now, watching every hill and depression, for that morning I had almost walked unawares into another bowl of writhing, glistening Diss. My eyes had been half-closed from lack of sleep,

and only the sudden color change had saved me. Nor dared I now lay down to sleep or rest, for here and there on the desert I saw small thumbnail sized Diss masses squirming and wiggling through the burning sands. There weren't many, but they were enough to make me put aside any notions of sleep I had thought about. An hour ago I had found one crawling up the ankle of my boot. That unpleasant discovery had shaken my nerves. I knocked it clear with a stick, but the feeling that they were crawling onto me was thereafter impossible to resist.

And so, as I walked, I had the persistent feeling that a mass of Diss was riding the back of my tunic. Already I had taken it off twice and looked but had found nothing.

Suddenly, ahead, there rose a column of smoke, thick, black, slowly spreading. I looked back. My glistening companion of the last few days was not visible. Wearily, I looked back to the smoke. My mind was fogged with lack of sleep. I stood gazing at the rising black column for long seconds.

There lies help, thought the Rock.

Too weary to say anything, I picked up my feet and began moving toward the spot.

Since I was watching the ground for Diss, I was almost upon the spider before I saw it. In one motion the bow was in position, an arrow being fitted into place. My mind was miraculously clear as I sighted down the length of wooden shaft. Ten black, stiff haired legs supported a fat, shiny body at my height. Eyes stared steadily at me as I prepared to release the arrow.

Wait! It was not the Rock that spoke in my head. I pulled the string back, taking sight at the left eye. *Is this the hope of Earth? A man who lets outer appearance overrule his judgment? Shall the Diss inherit the Earth? Or the Age of Ruin continue for yet more centuries?*

Again it was not the Rock who spoke within my brain. A hot wind blew some of the black smoke in my direction. I coughed. The smoke stung my eyes, almost blinding me. The odor made my stomach convulse. I looked in the shallow depression it was coming from. A mass of Diss burned reluctantly within. Beyond the depression was the mouth of a huge tunnel. Within were the dim shapes of other giant spiders. I lowered the bow and

wiped the tears from my eyes as I moved back from the burning mass.

Good, purple haired one. I am Sewt. The Rock has told us of your coming. We came quickly but were forced to slow down. The Diss in this area are extremely active. We hat a number of fallows. But we shall take a different route since our destination is different.

The spider lowered itself. *Climb aboard. The desert stretches for another two thousand miles of your measurement.* With an escort of six other spiders my new mount set out across the desert.

We usually travel in tunnels, but the Diss have changed that. In the dark underground we have no way of avoiding them until too late. This is also faster. Time is of the essence. The battle must begin soon at world's end.

I looked back, my eyes sweeping the horizon.

Don't worry, the spider thought, picturing in my mind three more spiders by the burning Diss. My fellows will remove the Diss mass that has followed you.

Ceaselessly, the spiders raced across the burning sands, their spindly legs eating up the miles. I ate and slept upon the smooth black back. Without stopping except to eat, the spiders raced on. A week went by, and still the spiders never stopped to sleep or rest. How they could continue for days without sleep puzzled me. I asked but received no answer. Too busy were the spiders. They lost three of their number to the Diss.

We had covered nearly half the two thousand miles when the spider band suddenly swung right, rousing me fro the mindless stupor I had fallen into since there had been nothing to do except watch the unchanging desert move past.

There is a man who seeks your presence, thought the Rock as the spiders crested a sand dune and we came upon the partially uncovered remains of a strange building. In the sand before a silently closing door, there crawled a shrunken, shriveled old man whose frail limbs were encased in an outsized suit of silver material that reflected the red sunlight so perfectly that one's eyes hurt to look at it.

The old man lifted a skin and bones claw to me as I jumped from Sewt's

back and rushed to him. He tried to speak as I cradled him in my arms, but the years rested so heavily upon him that nothing resembling speech could come forth.

Concentrate, Jahalazar. Together we shall speak with his mind, thought the Rock.

No sooner had we made contact than the word-thoughts came in a rush. *Vish monitor everything. You must carry word to Earth Defense Unit 33 that EDU 19 is operative. The defense screen is again intact.* That was all I got before the old one died in my arms.

But the Rock had got far more. It spoke as I buried the silver suited corpse. *He was the sole survivor, kept in suspended animation, of the original staff, most of which were killed during the first—* There was a whisper of sound behind me as I finished pushing the sand over the body. I whirled in time to see the damaged building slip below the sands. Soon there was nothing but a large depression surrounded by huge sand dunes. As I watched, wind and gravity erased the sand dunes until there was nothing to mark the existence of Earth Defense Unit 19.

We saw but a minor portion of the entire installation, added the Rock.

On the sixth day after finding the old man, as the setting maroon sun shone into our eyes, low mountains crept into view on the horizon. The area about and ahead appeared free of Diss, and the spiders, though weary and near exhaustion, picked up speed. There was no sound but the whisper of the wind. The Rock maintained its silence.

The long, spindly legs ate up the miles, and so it was that when the sun was again nearly set, we reached the base of the mountain range. But the spiders neither halted nor slowed. Up the side we went, the spiders walking up sheer cliffs with me stuck by my clothes, with a substance secreted by the spiders, to Sewt's shining back. Because this mountain was a baby compared with the one I had climbed after leaving Sea City, and because the speed of the spiders was far beyond mine, we crossed the mountain in a single night. But neither size nor speed were enough to get us through unharmed. Two of the spiders died in the mountains, felled by the creatures there.

Out of the mountains, the two remaining spiders and their passengers at last came. Warily Sewt dropped to the grass of the immense rolling

plains. The other spider secreted a vile yellow liquid and covered me with it. The substance gluing me to Sewt's back ceased to hold me, and I slid to the ground. Sewt rose, and both spiders stared at me. I could feel their thoughts.

No farther can we go. There are things here hostile to our kind. And we would only draw attention to you. You still have many thousands of miles to journey. Good luck.

The Earth, already so ranged and hurt, depends upon you.

They dipped legs in salute and turned and began crawling back up the mountain.

"Good luck to you," I said, and waved the solc bow. The way they struggled to get their tired bodies back up the slopes, I knew they would need plenty of luck. Finally they disappeared from sight, and I turned and began crossing the endless grassy plains before me.

On the second day I began to notice deep ruts in the soft ground. The grass within the ruts was crushed utterly flat. The ruts, wider than a hundred men shoulder to shoulder, stretched out of sight to the left and the right.

There are many strange things since the Age of Ruin. I believe we are about to see another one.

I nodded in agreement and looked at the rolling grassy hills going on forever ahead of me. My hand rested on Chernac's hilt. The feel of it helped a little. The Rock was right. I was about to see another of the strange things from the Age of Ruin. With apprehension, I continued walking toward the far horizon.

That night I camped and dined on a small, hopping white furred creature that I roasted over a small fire. After dinner I lay on my back and watched the stars for a while before falling asleep.

Suddenly, during the night I jumped awake, hand going for Chernac, the Throwing Sword. My eyes searched the plain about me, but what had awakened me was not near. Against the night sky, lit only by a few of the twelve moons, I saw flashes like lightning. And indeed, in the distance I heard the continuous roar of thunder. Again and again, there came clap

after awesome clap of thunder. But except for the flashes of light against the clouds above the horizon, there was no true lightning.

For an hour I sat and watched that strange display, then, toward dawn, it died down. Somehow, despite my excitement and wonder, I dropped into a fitful sleep. I knew I would need my sleep. Tomorrow might bring new wonders—and dangers.

I slept late to make up for the sleep I'd lost during the night. It was midmorning when I heard the clank and roar of something coming toward me. I came fully awake in less than a heartbeat, sheathing Chernac and gathering up bow and arrows. The creature hove into view over the crest of a distant grassy slope as I slipped the quiver onto my back. It roared down, to be lost in a trough until it again clanked and roared and rattled its way into sight. Sunlight from the rust-red sun glinted off the dusty sides, showing up the dents and scratches there. A tall, thin stick whipped back and forth crazily from the top. The clanking monster came straight at me, short, hollow sticks pointing toward me.

As it drew nearer, I could see that a little green and white design was painted upon the front. A small green and white flag flapped from a short stick next to the driver, a man whose leather encased head was visible against the outline of a metal disk behind him.

A dozen of the hollow sticks swung around to cover me as the gigantic machine clanked ponderously nearer. Small wheels turned metal belts that moved the thing along. There were a hundred such, each belt moving independently of the others, each coming up when the ground moved up, each dropping down when the ground dropped away, so that all were at all times continuously churning the grass flat. Now I noticed that a few were broken, the bare iron wheels slicing into the tender earth as they turned.

The machine rattled to a stop, roared mightily once, and died. Silence descended, and I examined the metal monster more closely. On the right side was a gaping hole surrounded by torn, jagged metal. A small column of white smoke was issuing from the hole. As I watched, men, dressed in leather jackets and black uniforms, jumped out of the wounded machine. I counted ten in all. They moved .to the hole, one aiming a red metal cylinder that shot a white spray into the machine. The smoke quickly died away, and the men groped inside the machine and removed the bodies of three more men. All were covered with blood, and two were badly burned. Their clothes still smoldered in spots. After a few seconds' examination

several men moved to the other side of the machine and removed a half dozen shovels hanging there on brackets. They gave them out and walked a few feet from the machine and started digging.

A tall, gray haired man, with more gold metal on his leather jacket than the others, began walking toward me. I waited; the solc bow was in my left hand, an arrow in my right. I could put the two together and loose the arrow in less than the blink of an eye. I had nothing to fear from this man. He came to a halt a few yards away, dug his fingers into his gray hair, and scratched. Almost as tall as I, he was lean and stringy but without the look of silent, quick, deadly power that comes from a Lifetime of hunting solcs. In a way he was quite handsome. I recognized him as the man whose head had been sticking from the top of the machine. The leather cap was tucked into the belt at his waist.

"Rus-L Jha, Kiptin, armored scout *Mic-mic* ..." he hesitated, but then continued, "Sixth Land Fleet, Shodrin Federation Land Navy." His voice was so friendly that I could not help but smile. Here, I knew, was a friend.

"Jahalazar, warrior of the Desridif, Clan Chevy of the Bomb Valley!" I said.

Rus-L grinned in turn. He extended a hand and stepped closer. "Never heard of Bomb Valley. But I'm short six men and you don't look like a Mesna man. I can use a number six turret gunner." He pointed to a large metal ball alongside the main structure of the machine. From a round black hole there stuck one of the hollow metal sticks. I was undecided. I had no idea what a turret, a number six, or a gunner was. And Rus-L's accent was not easy to understand.

He seemed to sense my indecision. "The men'll teach you what there is to know. There's nothing anyway but aiming the barrel and pulling the trigger. I don't usually take on strangers, especially purple haired strangers, but the Sixth was caught in a trap. I think we're the only unit that got away. There's a long way to fight our way home. I'll need every turret."

"Which way is home?" I asked.

Rus-L turned and nodded in the general direction from which the machine had come. "Twenty five hundred miles straight ahead. Of course, we'll have to swing around, turn the flank of the Mesna armada..."

The decision was easy. Our directions were one. "I would be glad to go with you," I said.

We walked back to the squat, yet towering machine. The men had already buried their comrades and were waiting.

"Jo-E, get a jacket and uniform for our number six turret man here." Jo-E started for the tank, but one of the others stopped him.

"Wait a minute. What's this? A guy with purple hair—and eyes! He ain't human. Strange things come over those mountains. He might creep up on us in the night and eat us or something. He ain't comin' with us." The man's hand crept toward the black metal object in a leather sheath at his hip. Rus-L laid a hand on his arm.

"There are many strange things since the Age of Ruin. Purple hair and eyes are the least of them. He carries bow, arrows, and sword, so he's no special talents, or he would not need them. I assign you to keep an eye on him. That way he won't sneak up and devour us when he's out of number six."

Dressed in my new jacket and uniform and leather boots, I was being shown around by one of the crew while Rus-L directed his men in fixing the machine.

"This," said the short, chubby man named Kar-L, pointing to the machine, "is *Mic-mic*. She's an armored scout, which means she's a few miles an hour slower than a regular scout and carries a half inch extra of useless steel plating. She carries sixteen men, a main battery of one heavy gun." He indicated the squat sphere on the second level. "And two not so heavy." He indicated the two turrets on the first level, below and outside the first turret. "On the sides we have turrets five and six. Actually heavy machine guns, good only against personnel and scouts. Number four is in the rear. We call it the 'stinger.' It's a bit heavier than five and six but nothing to brag about."

We moved on to number five. "Number six's the same—except for being on the other side. So I'll teach you to work number five while they're repairing number six."

The lesson was easy, and Rus-L and the crew quickly repaired the damage to the machine. It wasn't long before we were ready to get

underway.

I crouched in the small space of number six turret, my body crammed into the padded cutaway chair. I had had to yield Chernac and the solc bow with its quiver, and although I had been issued a long, well sharpened knife, I felt naked and helpless. Neither it nor the deadly mechanism before me gave me the sense of security that comes from the wielding of a good bow or sword.

I grasped the handle and laid a finger lightly over the trigger of number six. My mind ran over the firing procedure. The thumb sized shells were automatically fed into the gun. All I had to do was sight along the barrel, judge the distance, and predict the point the enemy would be at when the shell got there. There was a sight, but it had been damaged and was of no use.

There came a blare of noise that caused me to jump. Thick black smoke spurted out of a pipe just to the rear of my position. Stifling fumes filled the turret until, with a jerk, armored scout *Mic-mic* got underway, gently jolting and throwing me about.

Mic-mic raced along the mountain range for a day, then turned away, roaring straight across the sloping grassy plains.

Because we were alone and might be forced to fight without warning, all the gunners had to sleep and eat at their posts. Nevertheless, in the few days after joining the *Mic-mic* I got to know the names and stations of my companions. Rus-L was, of course, the kiptin and could always be found near the observation hatch. Jork was the second officer and was always near Rus-L, ready to pass on or carry out his orders. He was a nervous man; yet the men spoke well of him. Zafer, a short, jolly man, was the driver. He was relieved when necessary by Cee-ta-y, who also doubled as assistant engineer. A tall, hawk nosed man named Aro was the engineer. The *Mic-mic's* engines were his special children. According to the men, the engines would do anything for him. The five remaining turrets were manned by Sa-M, Kar-L, Jo-E, Smark, and Ha-L.

Because of the danger of eminent sudden contact with enemy forces, every so often, Rus-L would halt the craft, loll the motors, and listen. At other times he would pick the highest hill in sight and use the "scope" to search the vicinity. It was during one of the listening halts that we heard the thunder of big guns. I, with a couple of the other gunners, had been

sitting alongside the main structure taking advantage of the break to eat and talk. The engines dead, the men silent, the noise came loud and clear. Somewhere near, a battle was in progress.

"Sounds like a couple of Economy class cruisers," one of the gunners whispered. Rus-L jerked around and motioned for silence. We all listened intently for a long time.

"And one of our cruisers, either Pint or Quart class. Battle stations!" Rus-L shouted. The men dived for their turrets and stations. I was the last to buckle in. The angry motors started up suddenly. Rus-L's voice rang out above the noise. "Full ahead. Left twenty!" He shouted overloudly to the driver below him within the craft's bowels so that all the gunners could hear him. It made compensation for sudden turns much easier.

"Full ahead. Left twenty," the driver acknowledged after the left side treads had ceased churning for a few seconds and the *Mic-mic* adopted the new course.

"Scope down," Rus-L ordered his second in command. The whiplashing stick collapsed. Both men put on their helmets, dust smeared, dark brown steel. Hatches and porthole covers clanged shut. Only small horizontal slits permitted vision. The *Mic-mic* was ready, for action.

"Mesna scouts. Coming up fast right side. Turret six, fire at will." My sweaty hands closed over the handle of number six. I looked along the muzzle as the turret swung around. Nothing was visible but grass. Suddenly two vehicles, much smaller than the *Mic-mic*, came roaring over a hill, guns flashing. They bore red and blue designs upon their hulls. I sighted and pulled the huge, cold metal trigger. The gun thundered and boomed in my ears, bucked in my hands. The Mesna scouts came on—unharmd. I had missed.

"Too high. Lower your muzzle, number six!" I lowered. The trigger was still pulled back. A furrow appeared between *Mic-mic* and the scouts. Something rang off the *Mic-mic's* hull. There was a *karoommm!* just behind the turret. Dirt and grass peppered the hull. The *Mic-mic* jolted violently, banging my head. I knew it was number one opening up, for gunsmoke filled my nostrils and stung my eyes. Even as I watched, the lead Mesna scout jumped, flinging debris and bodies about it. Then it settled sluggishly back to the ground and belched flames.

Now the *Mic-mic* rocked and bucked. Every weapon that could be brought to bear was firing. The second scout screeched to a halt, tortured metal screaming. Its guns rained a hail of fire at the *Mic-mic*. It whined and sang off the hull and turrets. Then the enemy scout reversed its treads and started to move away, picking up speed as it did so.

"Hard left!" Rus-L shouted. The *Mic-mic* spun around. There was a *karoommm!* and the ground where we had been heaved. When the dust settled, a large hole was left. Now I could see holes appearing in the hull of the scout. A tattoo of holes ran along the side. Even above the thundering guns, I heard screams. The scout danced to one side, a score of treads missing. It lurched to a stop. Smoke began to pour from the vision slots. Then came a muffled *boom* and flames engulfed it.

Rus-L corrected the course. Again the Shodrin armored scout was approaching the sound of the big guns.

"You're learning, turret six. Next time, you'll lock on the first time." I nodded, forgetting that Rus-L could not see me. The countryside raced by the barrel of number six. The sound of battle got louder. Then, slowly, on the horizon there began to appear, level by level, a weirdly painted something, studded with turrets and blazing guns.

I could hardly believe my eyes. Now I knew what had made those tremendous ruts and crushed the grass utterly flat. The metal craft we were pulling up on was as big as a five story house and as broad as fifty men and longer than twenty *Mic-mics*. Thousands of breads clanked, moving it at a good pace. The main battery consisted of huge turrets, each mounting three barrels, each barrel bigger than a man's body. There were three such turrets—the biggest on the main deck, another on the deck above, and still another on the one above that. The three guns of each of those mammoth turrets could move independently of the others. A "stinger" turret, bigger than the scouts we had destroyed, rode at the rear. At least thirty lesser turrets were placed about the rest of the craft. Bits of colored cloth, which I recognized as flags and pennants, flapped and waved from the top levels. Right in the middle of the thing were two huge funnels sticking proudly into the sky. At the moment they were spewing forth thick clouds of black smoke that sank along the ground behind the thundering monster. In front, I could see two more craft just as massive.

"Economy class, all right," I heard Jork, the second officer, say. No longer overawed by the massive metal giants, I now noticed a dozen or so

smaller craft clustered around the larger. All were bigger than the *Mic-mic*, although none approached the massiveness of the Mesna Economy class cruisers with their red and blue flags waving so majestically in the wind.

"Looks like the *Du-du*, Pint class cruiser."

"It is. I see her name. They've got her. There she goes!" There was agony in the voice. I couldn't see, the *Mic-mic's* body being between the *Du-du* and myself. But I heard a stupendous explosion.

"Got the magazines. Hard left! Emergency speed! Here comes a slew of destroyers!" The *Mic-mic* spun away from the Mesna cruisers. Into my vision there came a tower of flame and smoke. It had to be the *Du-du*, for she lay on her side, rent almost in half. The Mesna tanks were pouring salvo after salvo into the hulk with its uselessly spinning treads. I could make out hundreds of men dressed like myself scrambling from the wreckage and going down, the ground about them churning furiously. They had no chance in that hail of metal. One of the men within the *Mic-mic* swore.

Kaaroommm. Karoommm. Karoommm. I could feel the ground all about us heaving. Holes twice the size of the *Mic-mic* appeared about us. Grass and dirt poured over the lurching craft.

"Hard right. Zig left! Zag right!" Rus-L shouted. The *Mic-mic* lurched and jolted crazily. Death rained about us. The ground became pockmarked with smoking craters. The craft dipped and treads spun as we teetered on the rim of a crater, but then the spinning treads dug in and we shot ahead. Heavy caliber bullets whined and sang off the rounded turrets and sides.

The *Mic-mic* roared up a slope and then came bouncing and jolting down. Suddenly, before my eyes a Mesna scout appeared. It came straight at the *Mic-mic*, guns spitting furiously. The *Mic-mic's* forward guns opened up. If Rus-L had given orders, they had been lost in the noise of battle. I saw the main gun of the scout spit flame and smoke just before the craft went up in a ball of red-black flames. Then something struck the other side of the *Mic-mic*. It spun around. Smoke and flying dirt converged on us. Vaguely, I was conscious of a man's screaming somewhere in the *Mic-mic*. Course corrected, she dashed from the smoke and ruin into the open. The destroyers had gained. Shot and shell

peppered *Mic-mic*,

The other three forward guns had opened up again. Belatedly I saw the second scout coming up to engage and slow us down. The two craft fired at each other as they converged at full speed. The scout's one big gun spat continuously. Most of the shots were wide, but one hit just ahead of me. There was an explosion that rattled my teeth. Smoke, thick and acrid, made me cough and blinded me. For a moment there was a wave of intense heat; then there was the stench of burning flesh. A dying man wailed.

The scout crossed over our path, pouring fire into the *Mic-mic*. I and number three, the only one of the forward guns that could be brought to bear, since number one was out, raked the scout, tearing out chunks. Metal flew and dropped. I could see the holes dotting and redotting the scout's unarmored hull. The two machines swept past.

"Stinger. Get him!" I heard Rus-L call in the lull. The stinger, already firing continuously, didn't speed up or slow down its rate of fire. But I heard a muffled *boom* from behind.

"Good shooting, Smark!" Rus-L called. Toward open country, streaming smoke and flame, carrying dead and wounded, the *Mic-mic* raced. Behind us two destroyers recoiled under the firing of their big guns. But the *Mic-mic* was out of range and the gap was opening. The scouts were falling back into their protective ring about the heavy tanks.

"Report, turret one." There was nothing.

"Turret two, okay."

"Turret three, okay."

"Stinger, okay."

There was silence for number five.

I answered: "Number six, okay." Then Rus-L's voice came again above the roar of the engines and the clank of the steel threads.

"Jahalazar, the driver's dead. So's the sec, the engineer, and Cee-ta-y. Come up here and take a look around. Sa-M and Kar-L, clear that

wreckage from the deck. Stinger, watch out for scouts or fast stuff." I unbuckled myself, opened the hatch, and unfolded my body from the chair. I crawled out, head first. Wind whipped about me, drying the sweat on my face. My hair and clothes flapped in the breeze as I stood there crouched in the wind for a moment trying to see forward where the smoke and flames raged. I banged the turret's hatch shut and climbed the ladder to the top, climbed over, lifted the observation hatch, and dropped in. Behind, the destroyers were still maintaining their positions. They had ceased fire, being content to follow. Ahead, only open country was visible.

"All clear except for the destroyers astern," I yelled below.

"Good. Come down and give me a hand." Sa-M and Kar-L had left their turrets and were on deck. As I ducked below, they started throwing wreckage over the side. The smoke had died down. I dropped through to the craft's interior, which was brightly lit by sunlight streaming through a huge hole in the tank's superstructure. Where number five turret should have been, there was only a section of missing deck plates.

Zafer, the driver, was on the floor, a scrap of steel through the back of his head. The sec was propped against a bulkhead, a blood soaked hand clutched against his belly. As I looked he keeled over, hand still clutching his belly. There was a body at the rear, but it was so badly mangled that I couldn't tell whether it was Aro or Cee-ta-y. Rus-L was at the controls, squinting through the little driver's slot.

"Throw 'em overboard. They were good boys, but we can't stop to bury them. They'll understand." I hesitated.

"Hurry, man. It'll lighten us, give us a little more speed. We've got to get away from those guys before they decide to launch the fast stuff. We're in no shape to fight anything." I picked up the driver and carried him to the hole in *Mic-mic's* side. "Sa-M and Kar-L, give Jahalazar a hand here." The two turned from what they were doing and came to the hole. I handed the driver's body out to them, and they threw it overboard. It hit the ground and was immediately whipped out of sight. The same happened to the other bodies. I came back to stand behind Rus-L.

"Get back up on top. The stinger's too low. Won't be able to see anything until it's up on him." I scrambled back up the well and put my head out. Everything ahead was still clear. The two men had returned to tossing wreckage and debris overboard. The two destroyers had unslung

cranes at their rear and were unloading something from the holds. Now other, smaller cranes were suspending the unloaded things over their sides. The small green and black camouflage painted things touched ground. The ropes were removed and the little craft shot ahead, picking up speed still. I shouted down what I had seen.

Rus-L acknowledged with a nod. "Stinger. Get ready, Jahalazar, get that Remy-baby behind you." I looked around and found it. Rus-L told me how to operate it. It was a compact, large caliber, rapid fire weapon. "They'll stay behind where only the stinger can get at them. We could swing to bring the other guns into play, but that would give the destroyers time to get in range."

Sa-M and Kar-L came back on deck with their own Remy-babies. Kar-L climbed through the wound in *Mic-mic's* side and took station there, shielding Rus-L's back. Sa-M took position behind stinger, between the turret and the superstructure. I braced myself in the observation hatch, using the steel hatch for protection, not knowing what to expect.

In double file the squat little gnats, as Rus-L called them, came up. I counted twelve. They were big enough to carry a man, a powerful engine, one light gun, and two fixed mounted rifles. They scooted forward on four tiny wheels. As I watched, one simply disappeared, leaving nothing but a cloud of dispersing metal fragments.

"Score one for stinger," Sa-M yelled. The gnats got into V-formation behind *Mic-mic*. They tightened formation. The stinger scored several near misses. Sa-M, Kar-L and I opened fire with our Remy-babies. I watched a row of holes tattoo themselves across the cockpit of one gnat. The gnat wavered and left the formation, running uncommanded from the scene of battle. Another simply began slowing down. It was left behind by the others. The gnats crept up on us. Suddenly their guns fired as one. The rear of the *Mic-mic* erupted. The stinger, in several sections, flipped skyward.

Kar-L and I shot up two more gnats before the pieces of the stinger turret rained to the ground amidst the remaining gnats. They swerved, trying to avoid the wreckage, and several crashed. Slowly Sa-M's body, mashed to a pulp, slid over the side. The deck was red with blood, the air thick with smoke. *Mic-mic's* crew now numbered three.

The two Remy-babies of Kar-L and myself tore into a gnat. It blew up.

Four to go.

A gun fired. A shell raced along the *Mic-mic's* deck, hit the projections of the remains of turret five, and exploded. Kar-L's body caught the blast. He was flung back onto his kiptin, whose back he had been protecting. Specks of metal stung my face and hands. A dozen treads rattled from their wheels. I looked down into the machine's interior. Rus-L came out of his seat, grabbed Kar-L's Remy-baby, and took up his former crewman's position. The *Mic-mic* plunged on, unguided. A short burst from Rus-L's weapon, and it was three to go.

A shell burst to the right. Bullets whistled about the *Mic-mic*. I, used to the weapon now, caught one gnat across the ill-protected cockpit. Two to go.

They dropped back, trying to shell from a distance. But they were not designed for accurate long range shooting. A dozen complete misses and they began to move back into position. Weaving and dodging, they closed in. But Rus-L and I caught one. Our guns locked on it. We riddled it with holes. At last it began to burn, although it continued to race behind the *Mic-mic*, picking up speed. Then there was a *boom* and it was gone. Nothing left but a ball of angry flame and black smoke and metal fragments. One to go.

The last gnat pulled back, slowed to a stop. I watched it prow small as it waited for the destroyers still racing after the *Mic-mic* to catch up with it.

We took stock of our losses. The news was grim. Only Rus-L and myself were left. Still, we continued. After a couple of hours the rear destroyer dropped out of sight, leaving only one to chase the battered, tattered, undermanned hulk of the armored scout. With half our treads gone, it was no hard task for the slower Mesna destroyer to remain in sight.

Night came. Through the moonlit night the *Mic-mic* roared.

"You learn fast," Rus-L said as I sat in the driver's seat, feet on the pedals, hands on the levers and wheel. There was tremendous power in my hands, but given a choice, I would have chosen a greathorse. Rus-L stood in the breach in the hull, a cup of kaffy in his begrimed hands. He was watching the countryside speed by. The interior lights were off so as not to give away our position to the destroyer.

"Look!" I shouted. I swerved the *Mic-mic*. She keeled, almost rolling onto her side, but she righted and moved on. Rus-L looked out of the breach at the dimly glowing white globe off to the right. It was moving in the opposite direction at a speed half the *Mic-mic's*. It stood twice as tall as the armored scout. Suddenly the globe changed course and started for us. We had passed it, but it had now fallen in behind and was following, although it was rapidly dropping behind.

"Surely, you've see the globes before," Rus-L said, smiling.

"I've seen many things since I first started this trip—but never that," I said. Rus-L sipped his kaffy. About us the *Mic-mic's* motors were a soothing drone as we raced on in the night.

"Well, Jahalazar of Bomb Valley, we call them globes. What they are or why they are, we don't know. But we do know that if one touches you, you are absorbed into it and it's goodbye. What happens to anyone caught is a damn good question. Nobody's ever come back to tell us. The smallest globes are a man's height in diameter. The largest are about the size of a destroyer. They move very slowly, but patience is their main virtue. They are the reason why our civilization is mobile. Our cities, our factories, everything is mobile. Otherwise, the globes would eat well. As I said, we don't know what they are. They eat every living thing but plants. They never appear to grow noticeably after a 'meal,' nor do they diminish in size after going without for a long time."

"So why do you and the Mesna fight?" I asked. "How can you have time to fight when you have an enemy like that!"

Rus-L laughed. "You must *not* be human. When a man hears the beat of drums, the thunder of guns, sees the flags waving and the medal bedecked uniforms, he needs no reason. Perhaps Shodrin and Mesna were even once one, but they are separate now. Both control vast oil and mineral fields far apart. No love is lost. We fight because we fight."

I shrugged and answered, "Well, you are lucky you only have globes and not Diss. Then you *would* have no time for fighting," I said.

"Diss?" Rus-L asked. I explained the Diss to him. When I had finished, he threw his cup of kaffy out of the breach where he stood. He turned back to me. "That's no story to tell a man when he's eat—" There was a *boom* outside the craft. A shell whistled by and crashed and exploded

harmlessly. The bullets didn't miss.

Rus-L spun around, holes across his chest and back. Already I had snatched up my Remy-baby. I dragged Rus-L

I from the breach and opened up. The gnat, guns flashing whitely in the night, was running straight at the *Mic-mic's* side. Bullets whined and ricocheted in the interior. Glass shattered and tinkled. I emptied the gun's magazine into the gnat, which passed across the scout's rear. I climbed up to the observation deck, flipped up the hatch, and peered after the gnat. It was running off in the distance, burning brightly.

None to go.

Rus-L lay bleeding on the floor. "Jahalazar," he whispered. I knelt by him. He pointed to a locker. "Paint and stencils there. Twelve gnats. Six scouts. It was a good mission." Then he died.

Early the next morning I stopped *Mic-mic* and buried Kiptin Rus-L Jha of the Shodrin Federation Land Navy. I found the painted outlines outside the observation hatch. Carefully, I added to the rows of gnats and scouts and two armored scouts, six scouts and twelve gnats. By the time I was finished, the remaining destroyer had drawn into range. Its guns belched flame and smoke. The first salvo was wide. The second short.

I gunned *Mic-mic*. But the last gnat had hit something with its bullets, for the scout responded sluggishly. Throughout the remainder of the day I could put no distance between the scout and the destroyer. That night I tried to lose it but found that at frequent intervals, the destroyer would stop and loll its engines. They followed me at night by ear.

For five days the chase continued until one day dawn broke to find the country becoming more rugged, and the scout labored and coughed more frequently. The destroyer had gained during the past days until it could practically drop its shells on me. Salvoes forced me to zig and zag, which forced my speed in relation to the destroyer down still more. An hour later I noticed that the sky had grown very dark. Ahead, I could see that it was one unbroken black mass.

The *Mic-mic* labored up one last hill, and I saw an endless stretch of crusted ground. Volcanoes shot huge fountains of molten lava into the sky. The earth trembled and shook. Rifts opened and closed in the earth.

Rumblings filled the air.

A salvo straddled the scout. The destroyer came relentlessly on for the kill. I shrugged. The scout's motor roared. Into the wasteland of angry volcanoes plunged the still undefeated armored scout.

For two days, the armored craft was splattered by molten lava, pelted by high flung rocks, and bounced about in violent earthquakes. On the third day, it began to fall apart. Treads broke. The engines coughed and sputtered continually. The destroyer had long ago given up the chase, but I could no longer steer the machine. It refused to answer its controls. But I stayed with it, for I knew there had to be an end to this hellish land and the machine was carrying in the direction I wished to be going and at a far faster speed than I could manage afoot.

But at last we came upon a great rift in the ground, hundreds of feet across. I tried to stop the craft, but to that command it also refused to answer. Toward the rift, the scout lumbered. I moved to the rear lockers, removed Chernac, the Throwing Sword, and the solc bow, along with its quiver of arrows. I threw a few cans of food into a sack and moved to the breach.

I took one last look around and then moved out onto the deck. The rift was yards away. I dropped over the side to the ground. The craft limped by, barely at a crawl. It reached the rift and started over.

For a long moment, it teetered on the edge, its treads turning slowly. Then, majestically, Shodrin armored scout *Mic-mic* tumbled out of sight.

Chapter Four

IT TOOK nearly an entire day to find a place where I could cross the rift. Even then, I had to take a chance and jump across. I thought I could make it easily. I was wrong. The week spent crouching within the narrow confines of turret number six had stiffened me. I took a running start and sprang across. To my surprise I found myself falling short. I stretched forward and caught the edge, which broke away beneath my fingers. I clawed for purchase, and my fingertips found more secure rock. Slowly I pulled myself to safety. I lay on the ledge for long minutes, getting my breath and confidence back. Finally I roused myself and continued my journey.

At night the sky was lit up brightly with shades of red, orange, and yellow as the angry volcanoes spewed forth their products. Many times it was light enough and safer for me to travel at night. The lava flows changed regularly and without warning, and so it was wise not to stay in any one spot too long.

But eventually the volcanoes became fewer and not so active. And after a couple days' walking, I did not have to detour so often to avoid showers of boiling steam or the rivers of flowing, redly glowing lava. I sustained myself in that truly barren land with the supplies I had taken from the *Mic-mic*.

On the sixth day of my march the land became flatter. The dark clouds overhead began to give way to stretches of dark red or maroon sky. No longer did I cough or become dizzy from the noxious fumes spewing forth into the air. No longer did I stagger drunkenly, my lungs crying for air in the places where the fumes clung to the ground. Here and there blue grass patches began to show.

As I passed the last volcano, sitting so majestically and awesomely on my right, the ground rumbled under me. The land shook. The sparse trees that began to dot the landscape trembled. A fountain of red liquid rock, white steam, and black smoke blasted forth from it. I broke into a run and quickly left it behind. It was as if the land of volcanoes had said goodbye or had tried one last time to kill me.

The country I now entered was rugged, but compared with that which I had just left, it was paradise. Small birds wheeled about in vast numbers overhead, their cries carrying clearly to me. No longer was the air filled with the growls and rumblings of erupting volcanoes. No longer was the sky obscured by dark clouds of smoke or vast billows of steam. This land was rocky, with hills, gullies, and canyons. Runty trees and tiny blue grass grew wherever they could find bare ground.

But even that passed after a few days' marching. The grass turned from blue to green. The trees were no longer the stunted pygmies of the land behind as they stretched forth to the sun from the fertile ground. Animals roamed, hunting and killing freely. Unfortunately, they also hunted me. But the solc bow was as deadly as ever. I had lost none of my former skill.

The plains gave way to thick, dark foreboding forests where unseen things tried to stalk me, but again Chernac and the solc bow bested. Once,

as I walked through the ill lit depths, a pack of damp furred, sharp toothed animals half my size tried to bring me down. But a dozen arrows and the slashing of the shimmering length of Chernac and they fell away. I retrieved the precious arrows and continued on. Another time I blundered into a tree trunk and found the arm of my Shodrin leather jacket held tight. In the dim light I could see the tree trunk start to ooze along the leather. I tried to pull away, but the sleeve was held fast. The tree oozed faster along the leather. I slipped out of the jacket, making sure that none of my body touched the trunk, and the short purple hairs of my neck stiffened as I watched the tree trunk slowly and steadily absorb the jacket until nothing was left of it. After that I took great care in where I walked and what I touched. I trusted nothing there, using the last of the tins from the *Mic-mic* to feed me.

At last, though, I stepped from the dark depths of the forest to look down upon a low, dark land full of shadows and hills. In the distance I could see the tall, dazzling towers of a black walled defensive keep. Pennons and ribbons stirred listlessly in the wet, chilly wind. The cold and dampness seeped through into my bones as I watched. I shivered. As I started down for the dark, somber quiet country, I wished I had still the leather jacket. Winter was coming on.

Soon I was fully within that new country, and gusty winds whipped about me. The land was strangely quiet—death quiet. About me, things scurried and crawled. But always, when I looked, I could see nothing. And there was the weird feeling that something watched me always. I decided to go around the towered stronghold with its walls of black stone, for something about that dark place disturbed me. The sooner I was out of this land, the sooner my nerves would calm down.

I thought I had swung wide enough to go around it unmolested, but as I neared the black stone walls and dazzling towers, I realized the immense size of the place. Thousands of people could live easily within. Surely, I realized somewhat belatedly, the land about it for some distance would be inhabited. The chances of my slipping by unseen would be very small. I should have undertaken a wider detour. As that thought occurred, something cried within the forlorn castle, the sound carrying across the miles to me. It was an indescribable cry of agony. My hand grasped the solc bow tighter for reassurance. The Rock, silent so long, spoke. *Make haste, Jahalazar. Evil walks this land.*

Unconsciously I had already quickened my pace; I had reached the same conclusion already. Now I broke into a trot as the wind picked up and beat about me.

The sky darkened, although the rust-red sun still shone as before. No clouds littered the sky. It was as if something were absorbing the lightrays before they reached the ground. Suddenly the wind died—died so swiftly that it was like a gunshot. Leaves dropped fluttering to the ground. I stopped. Nothing moved. Nothing could be heard except my own breathing. Trees and rocks and shadows surrounded me. I had the feeling I was in a trap. Then a man broke from nowhere to my left. I whirled, arrow nocked, bow string taut. Wide eyed, yet unseeing, the red haired man, dressed in what had once been rich clothes, moved across my path. In two outstretched hands he carried a fist-sized, double pointed yellow seed. He was middle aged and had been quite handsome, although his face was dirt smeared, his hair mussed, his beard in need of shaving, and his features locked in a blank stare. Before me he squatted and laid the seed down. Then he plunged his fingers into the hard dirt and stone. Filled with dirt, his hands came out. The nails and fingers were broken and bleeding. The jagged edges of a white bone jutted through bloody skin. The man put the seed in the hole and covered it up. When he was finished he stood up and went back the way he had come. I watched him disappear between two rock formations. He had said not one word, made not one sound.

Intrigued and frightened, I hurried on, bow and arrow ready. Only a clink of metal on stone gave them away.

They must have known I was coming, for they lay in wait. From a high rock ledge a man in black leather sprang. Had it not been for the betraying clink I would have had no warning of his attack. A four foot arrow transfixed his breast in midair. The impact of the arrow halted his fall momentarily, such was the power of the solc bow. I took another arrow from the quiver as I dodged the falling body. Something crunched gravel behind. I whirled, bow ready, to find that a dozen arrows had their points at my heart. Swarthy faced, squat bodied men looked down their shafts at me. Like the one I had killed, they wore black leather tunics, pants, and gloves.

"Drop it, mutie, or die," came an emotionless voice from behind and above me, I was surrounded. I turned cautiously and saw upon the rocks above, a thin, black bearded man dressed in black robes, with a twinkling

silver star pendant on a steel chain about his neck. His hands were hidden within the folds of the huge drooping sleeves; half his face, by the high stiff collar. The eyes were dark hollows, the cheeks sunken pits. Two men flanked him, cowls hiding their faces almost completely. As it did the others, black leather covered their bodies and hands. Short naked swords shimmered in their hands. There was a stealthy movement in back of me. The men behind were moving in on me. For a moment I was tempted to submit peacefully.

But I was not one to be taken by men with looks like theirs—and I remembered the cry of agony I had heard coming from the dark castle. I knew my life would not be long or pain free. I put my trust in my solc hunt trained and conditioned muscles and reflexes. I raised the bow and sighted. The solc bow string twanged. Without waiting to see the arrow pierce the breast of the black robed man, I sprang aside, whipping out the Throwing Sword, rolled, and came up ready to cut my way free. But the men had not loosed their arrows as I had been sure they would they stood silent, their dozen bows aimed at my chest. Someone laughed. I turned. The black robed man, still flanked by his black leather garbed guards, laughed. In his hand he held the four foot arrow. The hand was long and bony, the skin dead white. He laughed again, showing white fangs.

"Dare you, mutant, to stand against men?" Then suddenly in his hand the arrow glowed brightly and vanished. He signaled to his men. I realized it was futile to resist. Later, when no dozen bows were zeroed in on my chest, I would escape.

They disarmed me and tied me to a long pole. Dangling like a captured beast, I was carried between two men to the distant dark towers. A horn sounded as we drew near, and massive gates creaked open. Through them into a deserted courtyard we passed. The men saluted those within, dressed like themselves. Behind, the gates creaked shut with a finality that was depressing. A brooding silence closed over the group. Across the yard to a towered building they carried me, and again massive gates creaked open as several of those who had captured me unlocked the door and applied their backs to it. They carried me in and trod down the long, dark, musty corridor with feeble torches lighting the way. We walked for nearly a minute before we came to a halt before another door. The robed leader unbolted it. It opened, and through it they carried me of the purple hair. Here, too, torches burned.

Something tugged at my mind. I could feel fingers of thought searching through the drawers and compartments of my mind. Old thoughts and dead, emotions and fears, were uncovered and studied. I struggled against it. One of the men carrying me began to whimper. Someone whacked him with the flat of a blade, and he quieted. The rest peered frightenedly about in the dark but followed the black robed man, afraid to go on, but too afraid to turn back. The tugging died away as we turned into a long corridor lined with barred cages. Within them I could make out dim shapes. Once something reached out. One of the men screamed before his throat was no longer capable of permitting him to. Onward the procession continued.

We halted before one of the cages, and the leader moved to it. The interior was in total darkness, so that no idea could be gathered of what was within.

"Leave my underlings alone or taste the whip." There was a squeal of terror from the cage and the leader moved on, his underlings following. At last, we came to another door. The robed man opened it, and bright light spilled into the corridor. The men behind edged forward—reluctantly. They entered with their burden and clustered about the doorway, declining to move without orders. I squinted against the light that poured from the long white tubes in the ceiling. I marveled, for the light they gave off was like that of the sun itself. When I could see, I found myself in a huge white walled chamber. In the middle of the white tiled floor stood long, wide tables covered with weird, gleaming equipment. I could put no name to most of it. Panels with lights and knobs were here and there in the chamber. About the wall, stood glass cages on metal wheeled dollies, in all sizes from small ones a foot on each side to others capable of holding a full grown solc. Many held horrors, but one caught my attention immediately.

In that particular glass cage a small lump of brown spots moved slowly to follow the now advancing group. I shuddered involuntarily as I recognized the Diss. Nor were my captors pleased at the attention the brown mass gave us. Then another cage caught my eye; it was half-filled with water and green plants. On the bottom, from among a group of vines, a fish body with a man's head looked out at us. The eyes were blue and regarded us sadly as we passed. In another cage a green leafy plant was in the midst of feeding on a man's body. We stopped before this. I struggled. This was a place of horror.

The robed man turned and laughed. "Don't worry, Purple Hair. You shall have a cage all your own. We must study you before Tezzalir has her *fun*." He laughed again. The men stood about uneasily, peering constantly over their shoulders. They jumped as a small clothlike creature flapped against the glass of its tank. A dozen randomly placed eyes regarded us. A dozen randomly placed mouths appeared. A dozen tongues licked the upper lips. A dozen eyes blinked and continued to stare from the brown, half inch thick thing. The men moved back.

"Put him there," the leader said. He pointed to an empty glass cage toward the far end of the room. The two men with the pole looked uneasily about at their fellows, who nudged them on. Then the two began edging down toward the cage while the rest remained in their places. As the two carrying me moved down the aisle, things clawed, banged or sucked at the walls of their tanks. Sweat broke out upon my bearers.

One tank inhabitant called to the two men, "I love you. Please kiss me." Both turned and looked at a man sized creature with disc suckers for skin. "Give me a hug, delicious," it called to me. Now they were past the majority of cages, and they hurried forward to the designated place, climbed on a set of ladders, and lowered me into my tank. One let go of his end, and I fell to the floor. By the time I could get up, the metal lid had closed, the men screwing it down. I pushed at the lid, but it was dogged right. With numbed hands I worked at my bonds. I tugged and bit at them furiously with my teeth. I was determined not to stay in this room of horror. Finally, I ripped my bonds loose, bent over, and tore the strands on my feet clear. But by then the room was empty except for the black robed man who stood watching me.

"Do you speak, mutant?" Rage boiled within me. To be caged like an animal! I growled and hit the glass partition imprisoning me with the side of a balled fist. The glass rang with a metallic sound. Amazed, I struck it again. "It's metal," I said incredulously to myself. The robed man nodded. "The Age of Ruin brought many things. And you do speak." He stepped closer, studying me. "My name is Alonzir, the Wizard of Koutyir. You are now in the fortress-city of Koutyir."

"Why was I brought here? I intended no harm. I am—" I stopped. Behind the wizard, opposite the door I had been brought through, a great metal door banged open. Guards in black leather marched in, flanking a dark haired woman of regal appearance. A great velvetish emerald green

cloak billowed behind her beautiful, flawless form. Diamond, ruby, emerald, jade, opal, sapphire crusted her gold gilded breastplates and belt. Huge bracelets and armbands, black metal studded with silver and gold, adorned her arms and wrists. She wore a short leathern skirt, silver studded in geometric designs. At her small waist hung a wicked two foot polished steel blade. Her skin was creamy white, her face beautiful in a harsh, cold way. Painted eyebrows arced

I like the wings of an eagle. Her black mane fell in long tresses upon the emerald cloak. She came to stand by the one who called himself Alonzir, her blue painted lips with a slight smile upon them. Alonzir turned slightly and gave a bow that was just as slight. She looked at me and the smile deepened.

"I had heard, Alonzir, that you had captured another specimen. This is the best we've had for many a year. It wears clothes, and look at those muscles. We must match it against something, Alonzir." She moved past Alonzir, closer to the tank. "Why, it's quite handsome, Alonzir. The purple hair and eyes are quite striking."

"Get no ideas, Tezzalir," Alonzir said, stepping to her side. "I've heard of some of your pastimes. But even you must draw the line at mutants. Who knows? Perhaps, when he has his arms around you, he is cousin to that." Alonzir lifted a large sleeve toward the sucker skinned man. "Or perhaps, that I" Tezzalir turned. On the other side of the chamber another man shape regarded them. It was normal until it snaked out a three foot tongue at them. The tongue, like the skin of the other man shaped creature, was sucker covered.

"I'm no mutant to be caged. Let me free!" I roared.

Tezzalir turned back. "How wonderful, Alonzir. It speaks, and with a baritone." She squeezed her lips together and kissed in my direction. "Hello, handsome."

"I call him Purple Hair," said Alonzir.

"My name is Jahalazar. I'm a warrior of the Desridif, Clan Chevy of the Bomb Valley! I demand that you release me."

Tezzalir laughed. "Really, Alonzir, you have outdone yourself. A mutant that demands. Test it at once and bring it to the throneroom. My guests

are in need of entertainment." With that, she drew her cloak around herself and started out. She paused, looked over her shoulder, and formed her blue painted lips in a pucker again. "See you later, Jahalazar, baby." With her guards she left.

"Well," said Alonzir, crossing his arms after the door had closed, "you seem to have made an impression on our Tezzalir—but then, she will lie with anything, as my spies have told me. But that's not your concern—for the moment. I must test you, my purple mutant. Perhaps you are not what you seem." He reached inside his cloak and extracted the arrow I had seen glow and disappear. He noted the expression on my face. "Trade secret, I'm afraid. We wizards would otherwise be at the mercy of the Tezzalirs of Wang, which is the name of the land you dared set foot on."

"I had to. I'm... You've heard of the Diss! The wizard nodded. "Of course. Once, they infested this land, but I and my brother wizards destroyed them."

My eyes widened. "You destroyed them?" Alonzir had turned away, was walking to the center of the chamber where the tables of equipment stood. He worked, setting up several huge wheeled panels. He ignored my questions, seeming to have turned deaf. An hour later, he wheeled the panels he had assembled over to my tank, placing one in front and one in back so that I was between the two.

"Don't be alarmed. They're perfectly harmless," he said, stepping back. In his hand he held a small black rectangular box. He pressed a stud in its side. From my position the panels merely glowed. Alonzir walked around, studying first the back one, then the front. I was perplexed as the robed wizard kept nodding. At last he pulled aside the panels and began taking them apart.

He came back to me. "You'll be glad to know you passed with honors. Except for the purple hair and eyes, you seem quite human—both inside and out. Oh, there's an enlargement of certain areas of your brain. A high heartbeat. Body temperature is a few degrees above normal, but I suppose living in the wilderness you have had to develop faster than normal reflexes, and I suppose that would also account for the noted differences. And then, too, there is the man tall bow with the four foot arrows. A few years with that would put muscles on even me. And the scars about your body. Yes, I would definitely say, induced quick reflexes and physical changes due to extremely hostile environment."

"Which means?" asked I.

"Why, it means that you are structurally human. A little abnormal, to be sure, but the normal man has always been a myth, even before the Age of Ruin. But unfortunately, there are the hair and eyes. Now that might change things. Purple hair? Purple eyes?" Alonzir asked himself. "Tell me, Jahalazar, are all your people like you, or are you unique?"

I told him what I knew of my origin and also of my mission.

"And so you were journeying to find this people of yours?" mused Alonzir. "Well, too bad. Under different circumstances I might accompany you. There are many strange things from the Age of Ruin that I have yet to collect. And then, too, a high technology civilization that we of Wang know nothing about. But back to the purple eyes and hair. Let's see. There is black, brown, gray. Even blue eyes and blue hair. More a bluish-black, that is, but still blue. Yellow, gold, and all the shades of that. There is also white. We have pink eyes in the case of albinos. Orange and red hair are quite common—though there are no such eye colors. There is even platinum or silver hair, but I'm afraid, Jahalazar of Bomb Valley, there is no purple.

"I must rule you—mutant." Without another word, Alonzir turned and walked from the chamber. I called after him, but the black metal door swung shut, closing me in alone with the other things from the Age of Ruin. Several of the other inhabitants called or screamed at me. Continually, as I looked about the lab at the things within the glass tanks, my spine crawled with bumps.

The hours passed slowly—much too slowly within the chamber. I was afraid to sleep for fear that one of my fellow prisoners might somehow get free and come upon me while I lay helpless and devour me. I could not let that happen. There was my mother to be avenged, my people who needed my help, and there was Selea. Above all, there was Selea. But eventually, as the hours dragged by unceasingly, my body began to succumb. I had tried my muscles against the transparent metal and found it unbreakable. So, secure in the knowledge that my fellow inmates could not break out of their tanks nor into mine, I settled down to the floor in the middle of the glass cage and fell asleep.

I must have slept for some time, for when I awoke I felt more refreshed than I had since I had left the inset bowl of Bomb Valley. While I slept

someone had somehow managed to put a tray of food along with a tin cup of water into the tank. I cursed my weariness; they must have raised the lid to my cage and lowered the food within. I had missed a chance to escape. There was also a large tin bucket, put within for an obvious reason.

The meal consisted of scraps of meat, which I stuffed down, being aware for the first time of my overwhelming hunger; not so choice slices of vegetables and fruits, which I ate with equal speed; and a bowl of water. As I finished the last scraps Alonzir entered, his black robed form followed by eight anxious to be gone guards dragging a wheeled cage of iron bars.

"So, you're awake at last," Alonzir said as he drew near. "You've been asleep more than a full day. I gather the environment without is not conducive to restful nights; one must always be vigilant, ever watchful for dangers that give no warning. But good that you are awake. Tezzalir is impatient. Guards! The guards, slab muscled brutes, carried their swords ready for instant use. Their unease was obvious. Their uniform was leather pants and tunic, sword-belt, boots, and gloves, all drab black. They wheeled the iron barred cage into position before me. I stretched as I stood up, my body coming alive. If I but had Chernac!

They removed the lid to my cage and stood back as I climbed out. Alonzir stood to one side, a long, fine boned hand caressing the silver star pendant about his neck on the steel chain. A ring of steel blades made sure I did nothing I was not supposed to.

"Don't worry. You shall have a chance to fight for your life—perhaps even your freedom—if I know our Tezzalir," Alonzir said as I stood at bay against the blades. For me, a fighting man of Bomb Valley, to be so helpless galled me. He motioned me toward the cage. The guards moved back as I moved forward and stepped into its confines. The door closed with a hurried *bang*, and swords poked through the bars as one of the guards feverishly snapped the massive iron lock.

They wheeled me through the great metal door into a long, wide corridor lit by torches. Confidence came back to the guards as the door clanged shut behind them on the room of horrors. They banged their blades against the bars and shouted insults. Several pricked me with their points as I stood in the middle of the moving cage glaring in rage at them. Their play began to get more dangerous. In the narrow confines, I twisted and turned, the naked blades missing me by only scant inches. But then

one was careless; he thrust too far. I grabbed" his wrist, pulled him up to his shoulder against the bars, and broke his arm with a chop Weruthan had taught me. The man's sword clattered to the cage's floor as the man himself howled and jerked himself from my grasp. Alonzir chuckled as I gathered up the weapon.

"Maybe you fools have learned your lesson," he said. Then to me, he said, "Don't worry, Jahalazar, they won't harm you. Tezzalir has marked you. If they harm you without good reason, she will see that their futures are short—but quite unpleasant." We rolled on in silence, except for the one with the broken arm. His whimpering accompanied us. His fellows took no heed.

The corridor became a chamber, in the middle of which was a huge, dazzling circle of stone the same size as the hole in the ceiling. The cage was rolled onto the circle of stone, and at point of seven swords, I surrendered my captured weapon. The door was unlocked, and I was herded forth. Alonzir pointed a long, thin hand at where I was to stand. A steel shackle within the circle of stone was fastened about my left ankle. They rolled the cage away to leave me alone within the circle of dazzling stone. Alonzir stood just without, fingering his silver star pendant.

"Good luck," he said, and then I was moving upward, the circle of stone rising smoothly, carrying me toward the hole in the chamber's ceiling. A wave of panic hit me. I crouched and tugged at the steel shackle about my ankle. I took off my boot and tried to slip my foot free, but there was not enough room. So smoothly did the stone rise that had my eyes been covered I would not have known that it was moving. Gently, yet unceasingly, it bore me upward. Again my muscles corded and knotted as I strained at the steel, and again it was in vain. I looked up. The rising column of stone was almost within reach of the ceiling. I gave one last frenzied wrench at the shackle. It was embedded solidly in the stone. It would take more than bare hands to get it loose. Light blazed down on me, and I took my boot in my right hand and stood up as my head came level with the ceiling-floor. The heel of that Shodrin leather army boot was weapon enough.

And it was thus, armed with a boot, a snarl of rage upon my face, my body tensed for action and dressed in the rags of a Shodrin uniform, that I rose into the fantastic throneroom of Tezzalir—Queen of Koutyir, castle-fortress of the nation of Wang,

A ripple of laughter rose from the rows of the audience. The roof, gold and white, arched far above, while from it hung great chandeliers of twinkling, glittering diamonds, turning slowly overhead, their brilliance all but blinding me. When I could see clearly again, the circle of stone had come flush with the floor of the inset bowl I was in without a hint of a crack to show that there was other than solid floor. I could not help but note the similarity with the inset bowl of Bomb Valley. Murals covered the four walls, depicting scenes of men battling men, beasts battling beasts, men battling beasts, and men and women in lewd acts. Great tapestries hung at rare intervals, picturing various beautiful women seated in golden thrones, their heads surrounded by silver sunbursts.

In contrast to the grim, sober guards in their black uniforms and the drab green simply clothed servants, the people seated high above the bowl I was in were gaudily, outrageously clothed. Colors banded and bombarded the senses. Jewels overwhelmed with their beauty. Long, ornate, and quite useless swords hung at the sides of the men in gold and silver worked scabbards. The men were equally bedecked with jewelry, from earrings to hair pieces. Magnificent cloaks, heavy with precious metals and jewels, hampered their movements. The men were all handsome; the women, beautiful. They wore gowns puffed out with petticoats or metal frames. They wore necklaces and bracelets of splendor beyond description. But even among that array of beautiful people, one stood out.

Seated on a gold throne atop a set of broad black marble steps, flanked by dark, sinister guards, her face framed within a silver sunburst upon the wall behind, there sat, without jewel or clothing except for a drape of wispy scarlet material between her thighs, Queen Tezzalir. What clothes did for other women, the lack of them did for her. There was no self-consciousness about her. Her face was harshly beautiful, and the black painted eyebrows, arced like the wings of an eagle, stood out clearly against the cream white of her skin. Her lips were bare of artificial color, accentuating the nakedness of her body as did the lack of jewels or ornaments upon her person.

She raised a hand, and the court quieted. She leaned forward, the taut-nippled breasts, without the slightest sag or droop, maintained their shape. She placed a small hand on her chin. Her eyes narrowed as she gazed down at me. A look of unchained lust played upon her regal features. There was an almost imperceptible nod of her head, and a dozen

guards dropped into the bowl, which I guessed from the murals about the room was an arena. The swarthy skinned guards closed in on me, and shackled as I was, I could do little.

One sought to grab me from behind, but I whirled and laid open his skull with the boot heel. Automatically, as Weruthan had hammered into me, I turned to take care of my blind spot. Two had chosen to rush in. I put one down with a kick to the groin and the other with the hardworking boot heel. Again I whirled, this time barely in time, but as I stiff-fingered the guard there, an arm clamped itself around my neck and suddenly I was overwhelmed.

The boot was wrenched from my hand, and my clothes were torn from my body. The guards departed via ropes, carrying their dead, leaving me naked before the court, still shackled. The court clapped and booed the exit of the guards.

Then something clattered into the bowl and slid down the dazzling stone side. I strained at the shackle, for it was Chernac, the Throwing Sword, which had slid to a stop before me. I stretched forward as far as I could, but still I could not reach it. It was less than a foot from my fingertips, but that made no difference—I could not get the sword. Laughter rose from the audience as they enjoyed my plight.

A grating sound came from behind me. I twisted and saw a section of the bowl's side slide back, revealing a tall woman in golden robes. She stepped forth, her bearing every bit as regal as that of Tezzalir and those about the bowl. Her silver mane had been tamed by silver and diamond combs that sparkled blindingly in the light of the great chandeliers. Coal-black eyes stared out at me. She walked further into the bowl, her body moving sinuously beneath the golden robe, and came toward me.

I had regained my feet. She stepped within touching distance of me and wet her cherry painted lips. I started to speak, but a slight movement of her beautiful head silenced me. Slowly she undid the fastenings of her robe, let it slide down her arms and fall to the floor. She stood as naked as I but for a large ruby in her navel. She rivaled Tezzalir in beauty of face and body.

The great hall was in utter silence. The laughs and mutterings had all died away. Suddenly I sensed a movement above, and I beheld the black robed figure of the wizard Alonzir looking down upon us. A long, thin

hand clutched the silver star pendant dangling from the chain about his neck as from dark hollows his eyes watched us. The woman held out her arms and stepped forward. There was an intake of breath by the watching audience. An air of expectancy filled the hall, and I remembered that this was an arena—and death is the main attraction in an arena. I had moved back as far as my shackle would allow before her advance. I noticed that she kept her fists closed. The lure of her naked body was almost overpowering, but as she brought her arms near me, intending to slip them about me, my own darted out. I grasped her arms and twisted them, forcing her hands open. My body froze with chill and shock, for she was cousin to the two creatures within Alonzir's lab. The sucker discs on her palms and the insides of her fingers opened and closed hungrily. I started as something crept along her shoulders.

I pushed her away roughly. She fell to the stone floor, part of her back visible. Her back, like the palms of her hands, was covered with suckers. But more horrifying was the fact that the suckers were moving, were redistributing themselves about her body until the deceptive perfection of it was gone. She leaped to her feet, spat, and started forward, intending to wrap her now sucker covered arms about my naked form.

I was ready to hit her, but something whistled past my ear, and the creature's sucker covered breasts shook convulsively as the arrow hit her in the belly. She made no sound as she flopped backward, writhing about the imbedded shaft. She clutched the arrow and tried to pull it free, but each time she pulled, the pain forced her to stop. Her blood poured out over her belly and thighs. Soon her movements stopped, and some minutes later she was dead. A feeling of sadness came over me. She had been so beautiful, and she had not wanted to die. Now the beauty of body and face was marred by the suckers, and she was dead. In the meantime, Alonzir had moved to Tezzalir's side. Like Death, he stood watching.

Suddenly, the shackle about my ankle loosened and fell away. How, I don't know. Tezzalir had moved back upon her throne. She raised a leg, and a guard hurriedly placed several pillows beneath it. She had not taken her eyes from me. Her breasts heaved as she inhaled deeply. I picked up Chernac, the Throwing Sword. Comfort I found in its cold hilt. If need be, I could cut down Tezzalir as she sat almost naked upon her throne or Alonzir as he stood at her side. With the Throwing Sword in my hand I could take at least one of them with me. She motioned, and again I heard a grating sound. I whirled, Chernac ready.

Out of another opening in the bowl's side, a long, low mound of motley red flesh came. There were no features but its quivering jelliness. It seemed to be in agony, and its thrashings propelled it. But it was natural, for the thing made straight to the body of the woman-thing I had killed and settled over it. There occurred some minutes of exceedingly agonized agitation. Then it moved on, and of the woman-thing, there was no sign. It had absorbed her completely.

I moved back, for its agonized thrashings were taking it in my direction. Too late, I realized I had let it corner me. I struck with Chernac, but the blade passed through with only a minimum of resistance. The cut flesh quickly fused itself. The creature thrashed its shapeless mass closer.

I thrust with Chernac up to the hilt, but when I pulled it forth, the wound closed itself. Behind me the sheer wall of the bowl crowded me. The court leaned closer, peering over the rim with intentness. Desperate, I swung with all my might, sending a good sized section of the creeping thing flying. It hit a few feet away with a *splat* and instantly turned a dark red, almost purple. I saw my only salvation. Madly, I began hacking and cutting, sending pieces of the thing flying all over until, at last, I stood amid a mess of dark red flesh. Here and there a bit quivered with a spark of life, but soon it was all still, all dead. I turned to look at Tezzalir, but she was looking elsewhere.

A door at the far end had burst open, and a blood splattered warrior with silver helm and sword came rushing in, his blue cloak in tatters behind him. He stopped at his end of the bowl and started to speak, but Tezzalir held up a hand and motioned to her guards. But it was Alonzir who moved first and took from within his robes a rope and tossed it down to me and held it while I climbed up with Chernac in my teeth.

When I was within earshot, he spoke. "Lucky you are, for this interruption. Our Tezzalir had even better entertainment planned. But there is always tomorrow." I had barely climbed out before a great stone slab inlaid with black and white squares of marble began sliding across the top of the bowl. Within seconds the arena was gone from sight, hidden by the slab, which now formed the floor.

The wounded man walked across the slab floor to the throne. He saluted. His uniform was dusty, his face dirty. He spoke rapidly. "Your Majesty, Seventh Shemgol Cavalry raided Adelphir and Monir. Burned them to the ground.

General Cadinir has cut them off, but he thinks they'll swing this way, try to turn his flank and fight their way back to Shemgol. Znos-Bor leads the mutant horde."

Tezzalir's eyes widened at the mention of the name, and she looked from the officer to her court. "Well, dogs, what do you wait for?" she asked, her cold eyes coming to rest on them. The men jumped to their feet, creating a commotion as too long swords and too heavy cloaks got in their way, and made for the great doors, their women scurrying after as best they could in their elegant but impractical gowns. "And bring me the head of Znos-Bor! I have planned something interesting for that mutant captain," she called.

She watched impassively as the last woman followed her escort out, and then she swung around on me. "Take a bath and get some clothes on. Only I, Tezzalir, Queen of Koutyir, am allowed naked within this throneroom!" I started to answer, but already her attention had wandered elsewhere. Several guards with rank markings had come to stand near her, and she was issuing orders.

Alonzir touched me on the shoulder and when he had my attention motioned me to follow him. As I left the throne-room I turned back for one last look at the harshly beautiful Queen of Koutyir. Tezzalir still sat upon her throne, her head framed within the silver sunburst on the wall behind, still naked but for the wisp of scarlet cloth between her thighs.

Alonzir led me through the great doors through which the men and women had so hurriedly departed only seconds ago. Four black leather clad guards accompanied us. I could have cut them all down with the Throwing Sword and made my break, had not the area outside been full of men changing into battle gear or saying goodbye to their women.

There was a corridor alongside the throneroom entrance, and Alonzir turned into it. At the end of the corridor was a door and behind that, stone steps leading downward. We descended and walked another, but very short, corridor to another door. Alonzir did something, and I could hear the bolt being drawn on the inside.

"My quarters," he said as we entered.

As I soaped myself beneath the ice cold water issuing from the ceiling of Alonzir's bathroom, the black robed wizard stood near, watching as he

absently played with the silver star pendant about his neck. I had been intrigued by what had happened in the throneroom.

He explained, "Shemgol is a nation of mutants, as Wang is a nation of men. Once our ancestors, rather than kill the deviated beings that sprang from within themselves, had them taken far from here to the land of Shemgol, a place of horrors, where it was thought those twisted beings could live in peace. In time, though, we no longer tolerated our mutant offspring. They were killed at birth, unless of amusement or entertainment value. And of course, in time this new intolerance of the mutants was extended to those still alive in Shemgol. Because they were less than men, we men raided, killed, and tortured with a zeal and without conscience. They were such pitiful creatures and so pathetically helpless that it seemed right to destroy them. They were sport for us, and we butchered them quite without mercy. Naturally, the mutants did not take it for long without fighting.

"The first times they tried to do battle, the fields were red with mutant blood. Ted Het was their first leader. He had six arms and eight legs and fought, so they say, with three broadswords at once. It was he who fashioned the red and white flag of the mutants and who forged the mutants into a nation capable of making war. It was he who aroused them with the battle cry. 'Have we, too, not the right to live!' Ted Het was caught in the first battle and burned alive, his charred carcass, still smoking, hung from a high platform as a warning to all mutants who might dare to stand against men.

"Five times we crushed them utterly. Not a creature of their forces escaped. But always they came back, for they, with their warped genes and sex organs, breed like flies. But after the fifth time they avoided direct confrontations where our training and discipline gave us the advantage. Now they raid and bum, plunder and kill. Wang forces attempting to invade Shemgol are cut to pieces by incessant ambushes, forays, and traps. And now they have Znos-Bor, who can outthink any three Wang generals alive. Many a general has been broken because Znos made him look like an utter fool."

"You don't seem to hate the mutants," I said, for the wizard had spoken matter of factly.

Alonzir shrugged. "Their end is near. We have bred our own dragon mounts. The mobility of our forces is now equal to theirs. We have learned

to deal with their raids, ambushes, and guerrilla tactics. And now we have trapped the greatest of their warriors and their best fighting force behind our lines. Znos-Bor is desperate indeed if he has had to penetrate this deep into Wang territory. Just think, three thousand miles from the Shemgol border and the entire might of Wang closing in on him. I'm afraid Znos-Bor and his Seventh Cavalry will never see Shemgol again.

"No, I don't hate the Shemgol mutants—why waste emotion on something that no longer matters?"

I dried myself and walked past him into the living chambers. A green garbed slave girl stood ready with my clothes. They were purple. "Tezzalir chose them," Alonzir explained. "She thought they would go well with your hair and eyes and brows." The pants and tunic were skin tight, my muscular form showing to advantage. The boots were tough but light. "Plastic," explained Alonzir. I buckled on the sword belt and looked around for Chernac. I cursed myself for having laid it down. "I'm afraid I had to remove it," the wizard said. "Since you have been put in my charge I must see that you do no harm. And it makes no difference to your appearance. Tezzalir has chosen well. You cut quite a dashing figure."

I was then led by the guards to one of the towers and placed in a room with a commanding view of the fortress-city and the woods and rock formations around it. Alonzir accompanied me.

"Since Tezzalir has chosen you and likes her... men... in excellent condition, you have been brought here. You outdoor types never could stand the damp, cold dungeons. There's a sundeck here where you can tan yourself and plenty of room for exercise. Enjoy yourself. And don't waste time trying to escape. It's quite impossible. Until Tezzalir has tired of you, you shall be guarded like a prized and very valuable steer. She will no doubt be sending for you soon." He winked at me.

The time passed quickly, for each day Alonzir came to see me and kept me informed of events. I had noticed activity about the castle, and I saw that more and more men kept leaving until only women could be seen below. Alonzir explained that Znos-Bor and his Seventh Cavalry of Shemgol were being driven deeper into Wang territory. Unless he slipped through the net that was closing about his force, the end was in sight. And to thwart the desperate attempts the mutant was making to get free, every man of Wang who could be spared was being called. The men of Wang were determined to get Znos-Bor.

The wizard also questioned me quite extensively about what I had seen on my journey. I even showed him the Rock, which amazed him no end. We became friends and talked a good deal. He told me of his work, of reconstructing the knowledge of the Ancients. He had found marvelous things, he said, and weapons that could destroy all of Shemgol in one day. When I asked why he didn't use them, he told me he and the other wizards of Wang refrained.

"The Age of Ruin is a mystery to us. How it came about, we don't know. Some think it might have been a war between groups of the Ancients. So we don't use our knowledge for destruction—except against the Diss." He could see me shudder at the mention of them. "Yes, they frighten me, also. From what you have told me, there is every indication that they are evolving upward. The thought of an intelligent, mobile parasitic creature less than the size of a matchhead is... more than frightening."

And another time he rushed to me with his idea. "You know my radiation globes you saw upon the plains of the land navies? I believe that with the strange power sources of the past that I have rediscovered, I can put a globe of selective radiation about the Earth, killing all the Diss."

And at another time he came and discussed my mission with me. "You know, Jahalazar, the more I talk with you, the less and less I believe you're a mutant. There's..." But he never finished, for he was called away to confer with Tezzalir. The wizards had their methods of communication, and they were needed in the fight against the mutant Znos-Bor, who had made several more desperate attempts to puncture the Wang net. We had talked quite a bit about Znos-Bor, whom Alonzir described as being so ugly as to make you vomit, yet a great fighter and leader. The Wang forces, in order to stop his violent attempts to break through, had created holes in other sections and had called for reinforcements. The wizards were needed to help the newly arriving Wang forces locate and seal the holes in case Znos-Bor should double back.

During the second week of my stay, a guard, one of the remaining few within the fortress-city, came with word that Tezzalir wanted to see me in her chambers. I had seen her occasionally below in the courtyard of her palace. Always, as I had seen her in the throneroom, she had worn nothing or else so little that it made no difference. The frosty bite of winter seemed not to bother her.

Six guards escorted me to her room. I entered and closed the huge,

ornate wooden door behind me. Drapes of sheer material, of so many different colors and shades that it took some effort to tear my eyes from their study, hung everywhere. A door opened into another room. I crossed to it and went through to the next room. It was richly decorated with tapestries, statues, rugs, and pictures. A pan of flames took the coming winter chill from the air. On one wall hung a collection of polished weapons. My eyes lingered long on one shiny blade. My hand itched.

I turned to Tezzalir, who sat regally upon a couch mounted on a small platform. To my utter amazement, she was covered by a long black cloak. Only her face and black mane were visible. The flying eagle brows glared at me. She got up and walked toward me. As she did, I noticed something wrong with her walk. It was too smooth—too liquid. A shudder went up my spine. I remembered such a walk. I backed away from the haughty face of Tezzalir.

She halted. "It is a good thing we decided to penetrate this place despite the trouble. You have given Alonzir too many ideas." The voice was not Tezzalir's.

On impulse I reached forward and whipped the cloak from her. I jumped back, throwing the cloak from me in horror. Beneath the head, where breasts, hips, shapely flesh should have been, there wriggled the brownish mass of Diss. Tezzalir's head laughed. Inside the mouth, Diss could be seen squirming.

The thing raised an arm. A ball of Diss formed within the Diss hand. It came forward. I ducked. The ball of Diss hit the wall behind. I kicked the pan of flames over. The Diss backed away, another ball of brown spots beginning to form in its hand.

I leaped to the wall with its collection of weapons and snatched the polished blade I had seen there. I whirled and shot toward the door. Instinct told me it was time to duck. The flung mass of Diss hit near the door with a *splat*. I forced myself through the doorway, catching a glimpse of the Diss on the wall squirming hurriedly toward me.

I bounded across the room of drapes, grabbed a doorknob, and threw open a door with a bang. The guards were nowhere in sight. I ran off down the hall, blade ready, although I knew that it would be useless against that which I feared most. I heard a scream off to my right. Suddenly a woman came running out of a room, screaming, shrieking frantically. As she ran,

she kept looking with horror at her arm. Below the elbow were Diss. In the second that I watched, the Diss ate her arm away, going out of sight at her shoulder beneath the gown wore.

I dodged her and continued on.

"Diss! Diss! Diss have invaded the castle," I shouted. A black clothed guard emerged from a room ahead. His glove was off, and Diss wriggled where human flesh should have been. A ball formed in the hand. I backed off. A door opened behind me. I whirled. A woman's nude body crawled into the hall, the hands and legs driving blindly, for the head was nothing but a mass of Diss eating its way downward. I turned back to the guard-thing and sidestepped its glistening brown missile. I fainted one way, and it moved to block me. I darted past it on the other side. My legs carried me faster than they should have been able to.

I reached the stairs and leaped down them, six and seven great stairs at a time, fear giving me tremendous abilities. I jumped the last ten, rolled, and jumped up. I saw the doors leading out to the courtyard, but as I watched, four man sized brown shapes began rushing toward me upon their rubbery legs. No escape that way. I turned toward the throneroom, but a chorus of screams made me change my mind. I moved toward the corridor beside it, which I knew led to Alonzir's chambers below. I hit the door at the end with my shoulder. It crashed open, and I hurled myself down the stone steps. Behind, something splattered on the closing door. Seconds later the door crashed open again.

"Alonzir! Alonzir!" I shouted as I ran the short hall to the door to his chambers. "Diss! Diss!" I hit the door and banged desperately with hand and sword hilt upon it. Behind, I could hear the Diss, or thought I could, wriggling their way down the steps. I heard the bolt being drawn, and then I was staring into the bewildered face of the wizard. His eyes opened in horror as he looked over my shoulder. I brushed past him,

"They've taken over upstairs. Tezzalir summoned me, but they must have got to her before I arrived. She, the guards, everyone is Diss!" The words came in a rush, without thought. Alonzir closed the door and bolted it. Then he looked at the crack between bottom and floor. He looked at me and shrugged.

"Come. I must activate the defense globes and warn my fellow wizards." We moved through his chambers quickly, stopping only when I saw

Chernac and my solc bow with its quiver of arrows. I gathered them up, and we descended to a lab, a different one than the one I had been taken when first brought here. There was smoke as we entered. "My equipment! My transmitters!" Alonzir said in shocked disbelief. But it was true. His equipment and transmitters were covered with crisped Diss. The mass had died, but Alonzir's equipment was burned out. "How?" the wizard asked. I pointed upward to an air grill from which a foot long worm mass of Diss was easing itself. Before our eyes the foot long length became two feet long, then three.

"Come," said Alonzir, moving back to the door. I followed him out. We walked through a maze of chambers and rooms until we came to a blank wall. Alonzir said a few words, and a section of the wall slid noiselessly aside. We entered the dark tunnel and preceded upward.

We came out in the shadow of the palace's gates. Shapeless forms moved about the courtyard. The gates were half-open. We ran for them. Something hit behind us with a *splat*. I outdistanced the wizard to the gates and ducked through. The way was clear. I turned and waited for Alonzir to come through.

"Jahalazar!" the wizard cried, staggering through and coming toward me. There were Diss on his black robe. I could see them wriggling their way through the tiny holes in the porous material. I backed away. Alonzir nodded, looking down at his garment. "You're right, they have me. Beware my fellows. Feeling runs against you mutants. Strike for Shemgol, Jahalazar. It lies in the path of your intended destination. I wish I could go with you. There are so many things from the Age of Ruin that I have yet to see." The wizard began to bend, to hunch over.

"Goodbye, Alonzir," I whispered, and started to move away, but he called me back. I hesitated. I could see brown forms making their clumsy way from the palace's gates. But Alonzir and I had become friends in the short time we had known each other. I moved closer to the wizard. I would not let him die alone. He seemed no longer able to speak. He was on his knees, and his body was folding in upon itself; yet with sheer willpower he held himself upright. His long, fine boned hands grasped the star pendant about his neck on his steel chain.

"En... er... gy neu... tra..." He could say no more. I knew his lungs were gone. Sheer willpower moved his hands. The chain was almost over his head when he halted. His eyes pleaded with me. The wizard whimpered

soundlessly and held out the pendant to me.

The hands that, held it were Diss. I broke and ran. Madness gripped my brain, so that I plunged away from the city- fortress of Koutyir with all the speed my body possessed. I could hear the Diss men-shapes crashing through the trees and underbrush behind me, but I quickly left them back. But I did not slow down or stop even after I knew there was little chance of their overtaking me. I continued running.

I ran until I was exhausted, until I could breathe no more—and still I ran. I wheeled and gasped, and cramps doubled me over, but still I ran. I ran into trees and rocks, tripped over stones and roots, but images of Tezzalir and Alonzir drove me on. Every shadow, every sound, every movement about me was suspect. I ran without eating, drinking, or stopping for the most basic needs. My tongue swelled within my mouth, threatening to strangle me. Blisters formed on my feet and broke. My heels were rubbed raw, and I could feel the blood lubricating the insides of my boots. Onward I ran, without sleep, without direction except to put as much distance between myself and what I had seen as possible. I was a terrified creature that ran from something it couldn't face.

But no man can run forever, no matter what the reason, no matter the horror that drives him. Some ten or eleven hours later my body reached the limit of its endurance. I staggered to the edge of a clearing and collapsed.

It was morning when they dragged me to my feet.

Chapter Five

A HALF DOZEN vicious slaps shocked me awake. Still groggy, I started to struggle but then almost fainted as my arms, held by two men behind my back, were shoved upward. But I didn't faint, and the pain cleared my mind. I saw I was surrounded by black clad guards and their more flamboyantly dressed superiors. Dragon mounts, slightly smaller than greathorses, waited quietly in the clearing. They were green hided creatures with large splayed feet. Their perennially bloodshot eyes gave them a fierce look that their huge jaws and glistening fangs did not alleviate. They were built low to the ground and continually flung about their long spiked tails.

The noble who had slapped me with his leather riding gloves was

dressed in red tights, a dark blue tunic, and a cloak, with a jeweled sword belt at his waist. He wore a skull helmet, pulled low, with a white plume. He grabbed a fistful of my hair and shook my head violently. His face was a mask of hate and disgust until a knife gleamed in his other hand. Then a warped look of pleasure took over. The blade came to rest inches from my eyes. The well sharpened edge gleamed brightly in the sunlight.

"Speak, mutant! Where is Znos-Bor?" he snarled at me. The grip on my arms tightened as the two men holding me forced me to wait for the knife. I clenched my teeth against the pain as they pushed my arms farther up my back, making sure I could do nothing.

"Diss... Diss," I managed to get out.

The man jerked my head back with his handful of my purple hair so that the sun shone fully into my face. I squinted against the glare. "Our wizards are taking care of the Diss," he said. "We want Znos-Bor. You scum broke through our lines last night. But you won't get far. Already we're sealing off this entire area. Znos-Bor will find Shemgol way barred by every fighting man of Wang. So speak, dog! Where is Znos-Bor?" He jerked my head again. I could see the knife inching forward out of the sun's glare. "Where is Znos-Bor—or I will cut off your nose, ears, and lips and hang them up for all mutant dogs to see.

"Where is Znos-Bor?" the man yelled with hatred.

"I... don't... know," I said, struggling.. The knife descended, and I screamed as it began to cut flesh.

Suddenly something *snicked* across the clearing, and the noble stiffened. The knife fell from his fingers. Now the air was filled with snicks, and the men of Wang screamed and fell.

"You want Znos-Bor? Come and take him!" came a gruff voice. The startled noble's eyes widened in horror as he clutched at me to keep from falling. A curse formed on his lips, but before he could mutter it, he was dead, a feathered arrow sticking from his back. He fell at my feet.

"Seventh Cavalry—forward!" the gruff voice thundered, and suddenly the clearing was filled with charging dragon mounts and clanging swords. At the head of the charging horde rode a small, twisted, bent man with a hideous face.

He was not even four feet tall. One eye was near his hairline and the other was halfway down his cheek. His mouth ran from one ear to his chin, and his head was set at an odd angle on his neck. His ears were big and perfectly round, and they stuck out at right angles to his skull. His nose was set in on his face and pushed to one side. Long, dark, shaggy hair streamed in the wind as he beat his mount forward.

His left arm was bent and deformed so that all he could use it for was to grasp the dragon's reins. The other arm was nearly normal, except that it was twice the length of the other. Chain mail covered his ragged clothes from neck to ankle. He was slightly hunchbacked and completely bowlegged—so bowlegged, in fact, that he looked much shorter than he actually was.

He was like a child in the saddle of his dragon mount, but I knew without a doubt that it was Znos-Bor, Captain, Seventh Cavalry of Shemgol! A bloody sword in his serviceable hand waved his followers forward.

Behind him rode an assortment of monsters and nightmares that Alonzir, if he Had lived, would have been glad to collect. At Znos's right there rode a green skinned man with eyestalks, and at his left there screamed a sword wielding man with the beak of a bird and feathers where hair should have been. There were others just as strange, but they were lost as the mutants of Shemgol rode down the surprised smaller force of the men of Wang.

Coming to my senses, I leaped upward while thrusting downward with my arms. Surprise and the years of practice with the man tall solc bow once again came to my aid. I burst the grips, spun—or tried to spin around, but my legs' sore muscles, my blisters, and my raw heels turned it into a hobble. Pain crippled me momentarily. Both men drew their swords and would have cut me down had not a dragon mount trampled one and Znos-Bor debrained the other with a stroke of his sword. About me there were screams and groans. Men and mutants died as the intensity of the battle heightened. The smaller Wang force was being annihilated but was giving a good account of itself. I could see "that the twisted, bent, deformed bodies and deviated nervous systems of the mutants made them, force for force, no match for the men in hand to hand combat. But the mutants also depended upon bows and seemed to have mastered the weapon completely. Their advantage of surprise and a furious, irresistible

charge gone, the mutants were falling back and bringing their stringed weapons into play. The remaining man formed a circle inside their terrified mounts and were fighting desperately, but the mutant archers were picking them off, cutting them down whenever a head or a shoulder or a back came into view too long.

The mount of Znos-Bor came back, its horribly disfigured rider leading a riderless dragon.

"Hurry," the little mutant said, indicating the creature with his deformed head. He glanced skyward, and I followed his gaze. High above, a set of wings flapped. But something about them struck me as odd. I narrowed my eyes and saw that a man's body hung from the wings. "Our scout. It was he who lead us onto this group," Znos said, noticing my attention. His voice was firm and deep, the only truly normal thing about him. "But come, he reports Wang forces behind and on both flanks riding to cut us off from Shemgol." I put a foot into the stirrup and climbed into the plain leather saddle after gathering up Chernac, solc bow, and arrows that I found nearby. The dragon moved smoothly like a cat as I forced it to follow the mount of Znos-Bor.

The fighting was nearly over, most of the men of Wang were down, and Znos gave an order and the mutant horde charged the few men alive and butchered them. The mutants trampled and ground their fallen enemies with a vengeance. Their exulted yells filled the air until Znos barked for silence and gave orders to check to see if any of the men of Wang still lived.

"I don't want those behind to know just how few of us are left," he explained.

The men of Wang were all dead. Znos-Bor formed his ranks and led us from the clearing, the mutant banners of Shemgol, red and white, fluttering in the morning sun. It was the first sight I had of the flag Ted Het of the six arms and eight legs had designed. It was simple—merely a long rectangle divided into two triangles, one red, the other white. Yet the bearers held it high with pride. There was another flag, which bore a sword being held high by a seven fingered hand. I learned later that it was the insignia of the Seventh Cavalry.

We picked up speed at once. We traveled fast, the birdman overhead guiding us from making contact with superior Wang forces, though

several times he led us onto smaller ones, which we ambushed or simply crushed with our superior numbers. Several times we ourselves were ambushed by small bands that the scout had missed and we rode right through, taking our losses stolidly, for we had not the time to ride around or engage in a prolonged fight.

We were running before the main bulk of the Wang force, which had been drawn out of position and put into their present poor one by the attempt to trap Znos-Bor's Seventh Cavalry. Now only small token forces and emergency ones of old, wounded, and sick remained between us and the Wang. border, where the regular border forces were still positioned.

It was a race. We mutants had to reach the border and fight our way through or be caught and overwhelmed by the vastly superior forces racing up behind. Nor would it do to cut our time too fine, for then we would be caught between the two forces, with no time to fight our way through one, no time to run before the other. But Znos-Bor was a good commander. Shrunken and misshapen his body might be, scarred and ugly his face might be, but nothing was wrong with his brain. He got the maximum from his collection of odd troops. And a collection it was. There was Lump, a quivering mass of glistening pink flesh out of which there just happened to be growing two arms, two legs, a head, all in the proper places; Bones, a man possessing two skeletons, one a few inches to the right of the other; Tree, who never ate but simply unfolded his yards of rolled flesh and drank up sunlight; Light, who glowed brightly at night and hence had to be covered up from head to toe so as not to give away our position; Stinky, who never stank but always smelled of beautiful flowers; and so many others.

I, indeed, felt almost strange in that company, for though my hair and eyes marked me mutant, I was closer to man than I was to the creatures about me.

We rode throughout the long days and nights, catching our sleep in the saddles, avoiding the occasional castle fortresses that dotted the land, fighting only when forced to, and raiding outlying farms for food when our supplies ran low. The fierce dragon mounts ate up the miles with their long legged strides. In a column of twos we rode through the Wang countryside.

I rode at Znos's side, for the little captain took delight in seeing me nock and loose arrows with such ease and fluidity, in seeing me ride full

tilt into a clump of ambushing Wang and cut them down with several well placed strokes. His own body was so bent, twisted, and deformed, his coordination so amiss at times, that I pitied him and could understand his delight and envy. His deformed left hand made it impossible for him to use a bow, and his double length right lacked the strength needed to make him even passable as a swordsman. But he lacked not for courage, riding into dangerous spots even though he knew he had not the ability himself to protect himself or inflict damage. I found beneath the ruined exterior a great and magnificent man. So we rode and fought side by side and in time became good friends.

He learned that I could lead men and made me an officer.

Soon after that he appointed me second in command after he lost the regular to a Wang sniper. At times when we stopped to rest the dragons, we would talk; I of Bomb Valley and Selea, of home and friends, but the little mutant never spoke of home or family. Gradually, as we talked, the circumstance of his being so far from Shemgol came to light.

Znos and the Seventh Cavalry had ridden into a trap, and the only way to avoid total defeat had been to ride deeper into Wang territory. To take a battle force into the heart of the enemy land, with no evident way out, seemed suicidal. It was a measure of his ability to command and the devotion he commanded from his troops that he had chosen such a course. Other men or mutants would have chosen to stand and die rather than take such a slim, hopeless chance, but Znos had seen that it was the only hope. His judgment was vindicated when he finally managed to slip through the encircling Wang forces and make his dash for the border. Three thousand miles, he was, into Wang territory, with the might of the entire nation trying to overtake him; yet his men, to a creature, worshiped him.

So did I.

But he was not a perfect commander, for the Seventh Cavalry had originally numbered in its ranks some two thousand mutants—now a bare four hundred were left. And more would fall before the borders of Shemgol were crossed—if they were reached. Our dragons were tiring rapidly and the Wang forces behind were creeping up on us a little more each day, our flying scout and lookout informed us.

Once Znos saved my life. During a rest break I wandered from camp,

and I had come across a strange looking yellow plant with big, yellow, double pointed seeds such as I had seen a man carrying when I first entered Wang from the land of volcanoes. As I watched its spinning yellow leaves, a queer feeling came over me, and I found myself compelled to go closer, even though I did not like the looks of the thing. The tree seemed to undulate unnaturally as I approached. But Znos tripped me, and the queer compulsion vanished. The little mutant, always anxious to be near me, had followed me. He explained that I had almost been taken over by a hypnorree. The movements of the leaves hypnotized the looker, and the tree's primitive brain forced the enslaved to carry its yellow seeds far from the parent and bury them. Once domination was established it could never be broken. If the tree was killed, the enslaved became a brainless moron.

At last, after many weeks of fighting, we broke from the dark land with its trees and rocks and emerged into more open land. Ahead, we could see the border, marked by the winding Foltis River. The border forces had been alerted by the wizards' transmitters, and before us the men of Wang had concentrated their forces. Znos stood up in the saddle on his twisted little legs and surveyed the host.

"Well, Jahalazar, it all comes down to one battle. Not that it matters, of course. The Seventh Cavalry is gone. Its heart and strength lie on Wang soil, dead. Whether we win or lose makes no difference. The pride of Shemgol is no more. And it is only a matter of time before the Wang undertake an invasion."

I surveyed the host with him, saying nothing. There were some one thousand Wang border cavalry arrayed against us, mounts fresh, swords sharp, the men well rested. We now numbered a bare two hundred. Our own mounts were near point of collapse, a third of the mutants wounded, and our entire force was bone weary from exhaustion. Our one consolation was that we were five or six hours ahead of the Wang forces behind. We had but one obstacle to freedom—a formidable obstacle.

"Fear not, Jahalazar," Znos said, with a chuckle from his hideous lips. "Tis not the first time the Seventh has been caught on the wrong side of the river. Notice that we approach from a valley. The slopes protect our flanks. Our foes can do naught but assault us from the front or ride off and let us across the river." I could not see why. I said so. He laughed and pointed to the birdman. Then he began shouting orders. The men dismounted and

made their creatures lie on the ground, and then the riders themselves formed two ragged lines, a hundred mutants apiece. We notched our bows and waited, the mutants in the front line kneeling, their mounts affording protection.

The banners of Shemgol fluttered in the quiet. Then the Wang host began to move. I stood at Znos's side, towering over his dwarfs body. He called up to me as we watched over the mounts.

"I myself would have led my men to intercept the Seventh rather than get caught with the river at my back—but who am I to lay down Wang strategy? It is certain they shall win this war eventually. Here they come!"

The men beat their dragons to a gallop. From our place at the top of the valley we looked down upon them. I pulled my solc bow wide. I relaxed my fingers, and a Wang officer clutched his breast and fell. The others of the mutants held their fire. Only I and the solc bow were yet in range. Closer swept the Wang dragons, the riders grim, determined. Swords flashed and shimmered redly in the sun. I loosed another arrow, and yet another nobleman clutched his breast and was lost beneath the dragon's feet. Closer still thundered the thousand men and their dragons. Then Znos's voice sang out. "Arrows loose!" There was a sigh there atop the valley, then quiet as arrows were removed from quivers and notched. Men screamed, dragons flopped to a stop, and men died as the rain of wooden shafts fell to earth amid the men of Wang.

"Arrows loose!" shouted Znos, and again there was a sigh there atop the valley. We reloaded in time to witness with full attention the second showering of wooden shafts. The Wang dragons and their riders fell in clumps and groups, the dragons bellowing in rage and pain, the men screaming and crying as they died. The charge faltered momentarily as the men saw so many of their comrades go down, but then some officer waved 'his sword, and the men rallied. These were men. Not their destiny to be beaten by misshapen mutants. They beat their dragons on over the bodies of their dead, and the men of Wang thundered up the slopes at us, a mighty force coming to avenge the sullied honor of the nation of Wang, which we had so impudently invaded. In massed phalanxes, they pounded up at us.

We lowered our bows. No arcs this time. We watched them come. Dragon to dragon, shoulder to shoulder, a solid front of swords, bows, and lances they presented. War gear threw sunlight as they beat their dragons

to full speed. They were almost upon us when they loosed their own arrows. Not as capable with bow on a charging dragon as the mutants of Shemgol, their fire was not as devastating as that of us who were dismounted. Some twenty mutants fell as that mighty mass of mobile mounts and riders bore down upon us.

"Shoot!" screamed Znos, rushing to the front of the line and drawing sword. Mere feet separated us. Men and mutants looked into the others' faces. The men of Wang charged. At pointblank range we loosed our arrows. The entire front rank of Wang dragons went down, either rider or dragon or both with an arrow. The second rank stumbled and tripped and piled up against the first, so fast were they traveling. The third, with no place to go, turned back. The charge was broken. Out of the tangled slaughter, man and dragons tried to regain their feet or crawl back to their lines.

"Fire at will," ordered Znos, and we dueled for five minutes with the remnants of the first and second ranks, until the few survivors spurred their mounts back down the valley.

Znos moved back next to me, calling out orders for the care of the wounded. He sheathed his unbloodied sword.

"So you see how it is done. I, myself, would never launch a frontal attack against a position such as ours, defended by bowmen. We may be pitiful swordsmen, but we can shoot arrows with the best anywhere!" By God, he was right.

The men of Wang hurriedly re-formed their ranks and began approaching us again. The second charge was almost a reenactment of the first. The Wane cavalry galloped up toward our position, and we poured volley after volley into their ranks until they broke. It was plain that they could not penetrate the murderous fire of the mutants. Still, all they had to do was hold us until the forces chasing us came up and hit us from behind.

When they gathered at the river, only seven hundred were left. Then they formed again into ranks—and rode off! I stood amazed. The men of Wang were running from the field of battle, leaving us free to cross into Shemgol. Znos clapped the back of my thigh, the mouth on the side of his face forming into a grin.

"Come. Let's meet our brothers." He pointed. I followed his double length arm, and across the river I could see now a cloud of dust moving rapidly. Only a great host at full gallop could make such a cloud, for the dragons' feet tended to leave even the most powdery dust lying. We watched the dust for several minutes as the wounded were aided. Then, over a hill crest, flags fluttering, swords gleaming, dragons snorting and panting, there rode some two thousand mutants.

"The First Cavalry," Znos pointed out for my benefit. He waved to the birdman above, who broke away and flew off. "We have *our* ways of communication. During the night I signaled for aid. We lost our telepaths early, so I had to send our feathered friend. We've worked this particular trick several times before. The First and Fifth Cavalry ride up and down the border, keeping the Wang border forces from massing against us. Then when we draw near one rides to help us across while the other keeps the Wang forces off balance by threatening to cross. They knew about what we planned, but there was nothing they could do but what they did."

From up and down the riverbanks came more forces, the border troops of Wang assigned to keep the First Cavalry under surveillance. The First Cavalry advanced into the water and split into two groups, leaving a protected lane for us. The wounded were helped onto their dragons, and then we mounted up and the remnants of the Seventh Cavalry of Shemgol, banners raised high even in defeat, splashed across the river into Shemgol, land of the mutants.

Chapter Six

SHEMGOL was not a big land, but every foot of it was twenty times more deadly than that of Wang. The Seventh was being reorganized and remanned, and Znos had some time on his hands. He offered to accompany me across Shemgol. After some argument, I allowed him. So on our dragon mounts, we set out.

The land was fierce and wild and deadly. It was easy to see that only an overwhelming expedition could conquer the land. Otherwise mutant and nature would whittle away any such force, until there was nothing left. This land was mutant—man was unwelcome. Never would the Wang take Shemgol unless they were willing to die and die and still keep on dying. The unwary had no chance.

On our journey Znos saved my life at least a double score times. But not

even his knowledge was complete—a half dozen times he, too, almost lost his life. But we rode on, sometimes pausing to fight back to back or side to side or dragon to dragon, sometimes skulking lest we disturb things that our bows and swords would have no effect on. We rode as quickly as we could without inviting disaster due to excessive haste.

At last, after many weeks of wearying travel, we came within a day's ride of Shemgol's frontiers, beyond which the land was tortured and ruined even more badly than that of Shemgol. I could not believe it, even though Znos told me it was so.

We camped that last night in Shemgol some fifty miles from the border forts patrolling that wild land and ate rations from our saddlebags. It hadn't been anywhere near night when we'd stopped to camp, but we had found that too many hunters did not wait for the full fall of night before stirring. So Znos and I talked awhile before deciding to sleep. It was a peaceful clearing filled with sweet smelling, gray colored roses. I had first watch, and as I sat listening to the things and the shadows without our camp, a strange lethargy came upon me...

The Lion banner of the Empire waved in the breeze above the ranks, held high by a stiff lipped youth who was probably facing his first battle. The horses moved nervously; already the smell of blood filled the air. I looked about at my family as we sat before the Army of the Empire. At my right, seated upon the snow-white stallion Red Fang, in an ebony hued saddle, was my scarlet haired Warrior Queen Selea, resplendent in burnished silver armor off which the swollen yellow sun's rays glinted. Her horse, too, bore burnished silver armor from which the sun's rays glinted. On my left, Prince Kest, my son, hefted his battle sword in a mailed fist. Thunder Kill pawed the ground beneath him, anxious to be at the enemy.

Prince Kest removed his helm and shook his red mane. His chin was cleft, and his eyes and nose were like an eagle's. Our gazes met, and we grinned. Then I looked beyond him to where his sister, Princess Anna, sat impatiently upon her golden stallion, visor back, gauntleted hand over her eyes, seeking out weaknesses in the Invader ranks. Like her mother and brother, she had red hair, and after her mother, she was beautiful. She was not big, even for a woman, but she was fury itself in battle, swinging a light sword better than any man.

There was a stir among the armored Dragoon Knights, drawn up behind the solid mass of the Invader infantry, which was made up mostly

of Fins, Koy, and Tinsi. Among the light cavalry on the wings the banners of the Lord-Leaders Hoe, Amon, Rab, and Zart could be seen. It was an awesome display of might. The ground sloped down gently before us, giving us the slight advantage of height. We could look down upon the ranks of the enemy and observe his maneuvers, but he could only guess at ours.

The infantry started into motion, pikes and lances coming level, the cavalry keeping pace on the wings and the Dragoon Knights in all their armored glory lumbering behind, their overweighted horses capable, when the time came, of no more than a gallop. Prince Kest gave a grunt of satisfaction. The Invaders were coming to do battle. Nothing suited him more. We donned our helmets. Behind us the bowmen of Auxa notched their bows. My family and I rode to join our mounted knights behind the bowmen, j Before the bowmen stood our thin line of Hyp infantry, few in numbers but the finest ever born. Our wings were held by Bolk cavalry, the fiercest that ever lived. Behind the Hyp infantry and Auxan bowmen were the lords and nobles of the Empire and the Black Knights of Nott. Duke Cul of Wesington gave a roar, and among the men of the Empire it carried. They took it up.

Upon the field of battle, the Invaders halted. Our cries must have amazed them. Or perhaps they saw their doom. They were overwhelming in their numbers, overpowering in their weight. We were too few to think of standing against j them. We were down in everything but courage.

Then the massive might of the Invaders moved again.

The approaching infantry broke into a trot, their leather throwing sunlight as if it were armor. A forest of steel pikes and blades shimmered before us. Behind the ranks and ranks of infantry, there came at last the Invaders' archers, tall, thin men with long arms and keen eyes. They would pour a rain of arrows into the men of the Empire while they themselves remained safe behind their infantry.

"Their archers are too far back," observed Princess Anna, still scanning the enemy ranks. "Ours shall come into play long before theirs." Indeed, it was so.

The bowmen of Auxa cut the Invader infantry to shreds. They tried to charge our few thin lines of Hyp infantry but died against their pikes, swords, and short lances. The Invader infantry fell back. Our ranks

opened. My battle sword gleamed in my hand.

"Forward, Empire!" The Black Knights of the Empire thundered forward, horses' hooves crashing in unison. Ribbons fluttered from our leveled lances. Lines straight, black plumes streaming, we gathered speed toward the Invader bowmen, protected now only by a disorganized and shattered infantry.

Arrows darkened the sky as wave after wave were sent aloft. They fell into our ranks, splintering from steel armor or glancing from curved helms. Here and there, the Knights of the Empire fell, but others filled their places. We galloped on, the bowmen of the Invaders at our mercy.

But suddenly their ranks parted—or were split and burst if they were too slow in moving aside—and the stupendous mass of the Dragoon Knights came lumbering through, great lances leveled. I shouted to my trumpeter, who rode at my side. The bugle sounded, and the Knights of the

Empire swung their armored steeds around as one. Like frightened children we ran before the lumbering invincible Dragoon Knights!

Our infantry and bowmen parted to let us through, and then they closed ranks. The Dragoons, victory within their grasp, came hurtling onward, their exultant yells filling the air even above the crash and thunder of the hooves of their mounts.

Behind our lines, the Black Knights, without a faltering step, split, Prince Kest and Princess Anna leading half, my Warrior Queen and I leading the other half. We raced in our different directions toward the flanks.

The Hyp infantry planted their pikes in the ground, faces determined. They had never broken before an enemy.

The bowmen of Auxa notched their special steel tipped arrows. Their sinews strained as they pulled their great bows with all their might.

The invincible Dragoon Knights swept down, eager for the slaughter. Suddenly gouges appeared in their ranks. Horses and knights went down, armor pierced by the long, steel tipped arrows. More and more crashed and crumbled or fell in tangled heaps. The first wave, the second, the

third, all went down beneath the Auxan arrows. The Dragoon Knights sensed the trap. They were the heart of the Invaders' force. They must not be destroyed. Horns sounded the withdrawal, but the lumbering mounts and their overweighted riders had not the training of the Black Knights of the Empire. They could not turn as one. They could not stop as one. They only spread confusion into their charging ranks. Their ordered ranks became a seething confusion, into which the bowmen of Auxa poured their deadly hail.

We were at the infantry flanks now, where foot soldiers and cavalry meet. The men parted, and our awesome momentum carried us out onto the battlefield like thunderbolts. We hit the confused mass of Invader knights from both sides like the curving horns of a bull. Lances knocked Invaders from their mounts, swords stove in Dragoon helms and heads, and arrows rained upon and into the midst of the milling Invaders. The foe's heavier armor was no help. We could move freely, and the Invaders were packed so tightly that they could do little more than wait for their turn to die.

When we rode back, the Invader knights littered the field. But a handful had escaped. I saw Prince Kest, his helm battered and bent. He waved his sword, and I knew there was a grin beneath his visor. Behind came Princess

Anna. Blood seeped from her armor. Her golden stallion limped. She raised her blade in salute and then fell away from her mount. Her squires hurried forward and carried her away.

Selea, her red mane flaming in the sun, rode to me. "Today they tasted Empire steel!"

I raised my visor, letting the cool breeze blow across my face. Blood dripped from my sword. I removed the helmet, leaned across the space between her horse and mine, and kissed her. Our sweat mingled.

A squire came running. "Princess Anna is okay!"

We donned our helmets. Our ranks were re-formed. The Invader forces were withdrawing in disorder. They could have stood and tried to hold their position. It would have offered some hope. Now they were nothing but a mob. Bowmen, cavalry, infantry, and knights were but one rabble.

"Come, Father," shouted Prince Kest, sitting tall and proud in his saddle. "Let's ride them down!"

"Aye!" I shouted in turn. "For Empire!" And we thundered after the fleeing Invaders.

My sword stove in the chest of a cavalryman, his light armor offering no resistance to my great battle sword. A head went rolling, an arm went flying, a bowman screamed as I spitted him, an Invader noble reeled as my battle sword rang off his helm. I cut a swath of death through the fleeing enemy. At my side Selea cut and hacked just as mightily. A Tinsi infantry sergeant tried to slip his short sword into a chink of her armor. I stove his skull in two. A bowman took aim at my chest, but a Black Knight threw himself in front. The arrow, poorly shot, splintered from his breastplates. We cut the archer down together.

Then a cry went up. "Jahalazar! Jahalazar!" The sky echoed and reechoed with that name. The fighting stopped as everyone looked into the sky.

"Jahalazar! It is I, the Rock."

"Kill the dogs!" I shouted, and the battle resumed. Two Invaders tried to drag me from my horse, but Selea cut them down from behind.

"What was that voice?" she shouted. I parried a thrust and sheared off an Invader arm. The dust filled my nostrils. My head swam. Somewhere someone was calling me. The image of Selea, my Warrior Queen, fighting at my side, shimmered, became hazy.

She became a woman in a purple-orchid dress screaming with pain as flames ate her body.

She became a red haired girl, not as beautiful as my Warrior Queen but somehow more appealing.

She became a Diss creature that grew and grew until it covered the world.

Then I saw a three eyed, golden haired man riding a huge horse—a greathorse. He was unaware of the solc stalking him. The greathorse gave no warning.

"The King is down!" came the cry. I looked about. Selea and a handful of Black Knights had surrounded me. My fall gave the Invaders new courage. They reversed their direction and came *back*. They tried to break through to me, but Selea and the Black Knights stood firm until more of the men of Empire could fight through to us.

The man on the greathorse rode on. A gray war cloak billowed behind.

Gloved hands lifted me. I could see Selea, visor up, walking beside me, sword still gripped tightly in her hand as they carried me back to our lines. I saw men begin to stop and pause, to look at me.

"Let me up!" I cried.

"Let the King Up," Selea said. I stood, arms about the shoulders supporting me.

"Ride the Invaders into the seal" I cried. They shouted and moved on. The King lived! But things became hazy again. Selea came near, concern on her beautiful face. "But a scratch," I assured her. But the sky split open.

"No. You're dying, Jahalazar."

"Who's Jahalazar?" I cried to the blue skies.

"You!"

"Not I. I'm King of the Empire. I have but a scratch."

I could see the man. He was beneath the ledge where the solc lay hidden.

"You're dying. *Dying.*"

Look out, fool. Can't you see the solc above?

Prince Kest came into sight. "Father!" he cried, and swung from his saddle. Princess Anna, her side bandaged heavily, was being helped to come and meet me.

I saw the other Selea. She was asleep, and something was moving at the windowsill near her head. *Wake up!* I screamed.

Soldiers were gathering around.

The solc edged forward, saliva seared the stone. Still neither man nor horse sensed it.

My tent with the royal emblem of the Empire came into sight

The sleeping girl slept on, and the thing at the window squirmed over the sill onto the bed.

They laid me upon the couch and began stripping the armor.

The solc began its leap, the needle fangs flashed whitely.

The Diss creature wriggled across the sheet to the red haired girl's head. *Wake up!* I screamed.

Look out! The solc's massive jaws began to close upon the man.

A mist came over my eyes.

"Die!" said the voice above. Die! The word beat at me. Became a chant. Die. Die. Die.

"The King is dying!"

"No," cried Selea, and flung herself at my side.

Prince Kest took up my sword from where I had let it fall. "With my father's sword I will avenge his death!"

"I'm not dying," I said, but it was a whisper. None heard but myself.

I could concentrate better now. "Look out!" I shouted to Weruthan.

"Wake up!" I screamed to Selea as the Diss nearly touched her tiny ear.

Within the tent I died and my Warrior Queen wept

"Wake up!" I shrieked as the Diss began eating Selea's ear. "*Wake up!*"

And I awoke. My eyes wouldn't focus. I was groggy and my mind seemed far away. I started to close my eyes again.

Jahalazar!

I looked down at the body of my father.

"He was a great man," Anna said.

... *Jahalazar!*... *Jahalazar!* beat the voice.

I groaned and sat up. I could see Znos-Bor sleeping before me, a smile upon the twisted lips of his mouth as it stretched from ear to chin, contentment upon his hideous little face.

Pick him up. Pick him up, the voice commanded. I wanted to sleep, but the voice pounded on. *Pick him up*. I knew I had to obey it—else I would not be able to go back to being Prince Kest, Prince of the Empire. I picked up the small creature and carried him to where the mounts stood. Somehow I threw him over the back of one dragon. Wearily, with that voice inside my head pounding at me, giving me no rest, I led the dragons away.

Some minutes later, my head began to clear, but the memories of being King of the Empire burned clear in my mind. Anna and Prince Kest, Selea, my Warrior Queen, they had lived—within my mind. Only with a conscious effort did I continue forward. I wanted so much to see the proud, high towers of the Palace of the Empire and to see my children grow and be with my fighting men and the generals. But I walked on, the Rock whispering within my skull, prodding me onward, tears staining my cheeks. Goodbye, Prince Kest. Take care of your mother, guard the Empire well... I loved you, Selea, my Warrior Queen. Maybe someday we shall meet in the palace of the gods... Princess Anna, marry well...

Znos slid from the dragon. The fall jolted him awake. He looked about wildly, climbed to his feet, and started back to the place with the gray roses. I jumped after him, managed to grab him and hold on. He became a screaming, wild animal. I could not subdue him. He bit and clawed, screamed and kicked.

At last I tied him to his dragon mount, and we continued on. All the day he kept screaming and crying, great sobs shaking his dwarfs body. I listened to his babblings the whole day. Toward afternoon, he became more sensible and began pleading with. me.

"I've got to get back to Ava! Jahalazar. Let me go... My sons, you should have seen them, tall, straight, strong, with muscles like you, Jahalazar. They were men... *men*, not mutants, not twisted and bent...

"I was tall and handsome, a warlord... a mighty fighter. Women sighed with lust instead of cringing...

"Let me go, Jahalazar!"

Toward evening he became quiet. His wrists were raw and bloody from his struggles. He refused to sleep. Throughout the night I listened to his whimpering, his pleadings. When I awoke the next morning, he was dead. I buried Captain Znos-Bor, Seventh Cavalry of Shemgol.

At last the border forts came into view. A tall mutant loped across a dead glade. He wore chain mail and discolored leather. A great sword hung at his side and in his left hand he carried a bow fully as long as my own solc bow. He was normal except for his ears, which were those of a wolf. His name was Shoor, and he led me into one of the stone forts.

Several of the mutants tried to dissuade me. Shemgol was a harsh, deadly land—but Paradise compared with that beyond the border. But I was adamant, and so they poured into me all their knowledge of the dangers I might encounter.

Among the information was the story of a gray rose, a flower whose perfume caused such wondrous dreams and hallucinations that the dreamer preferred his dreamworld to the real one. And since so many mutants were deformed and their world so ugly, it was a special menace to them. It is their only chance, their one taste of happiness. To such mutants it was easier to die than to reject or lose that dreamworld.

So I knew what had killed Znos-Bor. The dwarf with the twisted limbs and the hideous face had found a world where he was handsome and strong, a place where beautiful women didn't cringe or look upon him with disgust. He had found all that in a place called Ava. I left the fort as soon as possible, riding out into the wasted land, leaving behind me the memory of my friend Znos-Bor, Captain, Seventh Cavalry of Shemgol.

My God, I prayed, I hope he has found his Ava.

Chapter Seven

THE BORDER GUARDS had not lied. It was a miserable land. Where Wang was somber and gloomy and Shemgol dark and hostile, this land was indescribable. The sun shone, but its rays never touched anything here. The wind blew, but nothing waved, fluttered, or was swept before it. The air was dead, full of odors that filled one's nostrils and threatened to choke one to death with their foulness. Things wiggled and crawled, slinked and snaked, scurried and scuttled, ran and bored, things that threatened to blast one's sanity. There were plants that flew and animals that grew roots. There was water that lapped and laughed and splashed when nothing disturbed it. There was dirt that wormed its way through other dirt and tried to run up one's boots. There were larger animals, with fang and claw, sting and suckers.

I'd taken Znos's dragon along as a spare animal. It was the first to go, being swallowed up by a patch of ground that had seemed no different from any other about. My own mount soon followed, furnishing a meal for a black clump of tentacles covered with voracious little mouths. On foot, the environment became even more hostile. My progress was slow, for it seemed I must fight some creatures at every turn. I spent the nights, not sleeping, but searching the darkness about my fire, imagining all the different things that might be creeping up on me. Chernac, the Throwing Sword, was forever in my hand. The days became weeks and the weeks a month. Still there was no end to this devastated region.

One morning I awoke from a fitful sleep to find a green mass growing on my arm. The individual cells appeared unpleasantly like Diss. Were there Diss mutations? I tried to scrape the slowly growing mass off, but it clung and grew. Finally, I thrust my arm into my campfire. The arm was in agony for days but when the burns healed, there was no sign of the green mass.

I was well into the second month of my march when I discovered I was being watched by more than animals. The ground was bare and rock strewn, and I could hear the crunch of covered feet. In the perpetual night, I could see little. They were about me, moving stealthily, thinking themselves unheard, but over the months since I had left Bomb Valley my senses had sharpened. So as the man sought to come up behind me and split my skull, I whirled and Chernac's shimmering length cleaved the air.

The man screamed, his huge white eyes opened in surprise. A roar went up about me. I moved back to a rock, sheathing Chernac. The solc bow

was in my hands, an arrow pulled past my ear before a thought had time to form. I caught one in the belly, another in the chest, and a third dead on the heart. A fourth took an arrow in the shoulder but ignored it.

They were ragged, with but primitive sandals for footwear. Their skins were covered with growths that stirred with life as their owners moved. Half-blind from the eternal darkness, the men had huge, round eyes.

I threw down the bow and drew Chernac and Lil Chernac II, the knife Znos had given to me to replace the original. I cut one down with a sword stroke, parried a stone ax with the knife, backhanded another across the gut with Chernac, and stove in the side of the ax wielder as he drew back for another stroke. A man with trailing growths threw himself through the air like a spear. Chernac met him halfway. A stone rolled from above. I dodged, running another of the men through. A body hurtled past from above and hit with a thump. It didn't move.

I parried another ax, threw a man from me who had caught my arm and was trying to gnaw it off. One crawled up in the dark and grabbed a leg. Chernac snapped his backbone, but the thing's teeth had sunk into my leg. I tried to kick the body away. The teeth held tight. My knife hand was gripped. Teeth tore at my fingers. I felled two with my sword and tried to free my left hand, but the things were all over me. Then, too, my sword arm was held tight. I kicked and struggled and threw a half dozen from me. I freed my left hand and crushed a skull with my bare fist. The teeth sunk into my leg hampered me. They swarmed back. I stumbled and went down. Teeth closed about my throat. I smashed the head and struggled against the press of bodies.

I did not intend to be anyone's meal. I chopped across the windpipe of one, my hand squishing through a patch of jellylike growth. I was sitting up, fighting desperately. I had come so far, the thought of dying with the end of my journey surely not too far away gave my already more than averagely strong arms even more strength.

Suddenly, there was a howl. The creatures about me broke and scattered. Three men in silver suits stood regarding me, silver tubes in their hands pointed at me. I pried the dead man's teeth loose from my leg as they approached. The foremost helped me up. A young man's face regarded me from the glass facepiece of his helmet. He motioned me to follow him and set off. The other two followed me, their silver tubes still centered on me. We hadn't traveled far before a multilegged worm

scuttled out of the darkness at us. My three guides swiveled as one, and lightning, not crooked and jagged as seen during a storm, but straight as an arrow's flight, leaped from their three tubes. When I could see clearly again, there was nothing but burning flesh to mark the spot where the scuttling worm had ' been.

We continued our march until we came to a large rock formation. We passed between two boulders and came upon a cave entrance. The tunnel was dark until we turned a corner and I could make out the faint gleam of a polished silver door. It slid aside as we approached and revealed a plain metal walled chamber. The door slid back into place after us. The room turned red. My skin tingled. Suddenly the light returned to normal.

"First stage decontamination complete," grated a voice. Another door on the far side slid open. Again we walked through. "Please remove all clothing," the voice commanded. The three silver suited men put their tubes in clips at their waists and began running their hands over certain areas of the suits. The silver curled away. Underneath they wore tight fitting rubberlike garments, which they also removed. I removed my clothing which was quite begrimed and a pleasure to get out of. Again red light bathed the chamber for several moments.'

"Second stage decontamination complete."

I looked about for the source of the voice; all I could see were blank walls. Then I noticed the faces of my three rescuers. They were strikingly similar. Not identical, but quite similar.

The one who appeared to be the leader, since he always walked ahead of the other two, smiled. "You see the resemblance. A matter of inbreeding. There were not many of us left after the Vish bombardment. You will find us all—the men, I mean—disgustingly curly haired, handsome, and lean."

But my mind had caught a couple of words. "Vish bombardment?" I asked.

The leader clasped my shoulder. "Maxie Baby will answer all your questions. Right now you've got stage three decontamination to worry about." At his last sentence another door opened and we walked naked through into the next chamber, which was filled With white, sterile looking machines. The leader pointed to a row of high metal tables. With the others I lay upon the white metal top of one. There came a hum, and a

rectangular hood, the inside of which was filled with strange gleaming instruments, began descending from the ceiling. I started to roll from the table but found myself pinned.

"Do not be afraid," said the cold, lifeless voice from nowhere and everywhere. I could feel a lethargy coming over me. I fought it. There was a strange odor in the air. I was being drugged. I lost consciousness.

I was awake! Like a light such as I had seen in Alonzir's labs, I came to consciousness. My body vibrated with aliveness. The aches and pains that had become my constant companions were gone. For the first time in 'months I felt truly rested. I could tackle a solc barehanded! I sat up abruptly, startling the group of men standing near.

"The subject, named Jahalazar, is awake and functioning. Greetings, Jahalazar. I am known as 'Maxie Baby' by my immature charges. My official designation is Y-18-H, Master Computer Defense System Planet Earth, Chief Computer Earth Defense Unit 33. Will you please bring our guest to the Main Computer Terminal? We have plans to discuss concerning the fate of this planet." The voice died into silence, and one of the men with the same curly hair, handsome face, and lean body of the others came forward with outstretched arms. Upon them were purple leather pants and tunic. They molded themselves to my body. Then a gold chain mail shirt to midhigh length went over the tunic.

They requested me to sit and fitted my feet into socks and black knee length leather boots. A flashing silver belt was brought in—Chernac, the Throwing Sword, polished to a blinding brightness, was in the quarter scabbard of gleaming steel. My hands trembled as I buckled the length of steel around my waist. And last, a great purple cloak was fastened to my shoulders.

A panel slide aside, and I found myself looking into a mirror. I saw a warrior, a man who dwarfed those about him, dressed in a war cloak with a great silver sword at his side. His face was handsome, yet hard and determined. Lanes of experience and wisdom were about the eyes. The waist was small, the shoulders broad, the rock solid muscles ill concealed by the clothes.

I turned from the mirror and looked at the weak men about me. "Take me to Maxie Baby," I commanded.

A tall, thin man was standing before the panels of softly winking lights. He turned as I entered the room.

"I had not heard that he was a mutant," the man commented. The winking lights increased.

"Never forget, Zoan, that all men are mutant to the original life spore that begat all creatures upon this Earth."

I walked before the center panels of the computer, ignoring Zoan.

"Best you leave, Zoan." The silver suited man departed, leaving me alone with Maxie Baby. "I trust you feel well. You were suffering from malnutrition; lack of sleep; burns; various internal parasites and hostile bacteria; and external bites, scratches, and punctures. All have been taken care of. While you were asleep I probed your mind. I thank you for the message from EDU 19. The new defense sphere can be put up about the Earth at your command."

"Defense sphere?" I asked. The lights twinkled in agitated patterns.

"You lack essential data. Stand by for essential data."

"Long ago men discovered interstellar travel. The race sprang outward, spreading madly. When you consider the billions of years of the universe's existence, the trillions of planets capable of producing life, the nearly infinite number of living things, then it is obvious that it is only a matter of time before the probability approaches unity that you meet an inimical but more advanced race. Such happened to man. They met the Vish, a race beyond comprehension by man. Every intelligent creature must be slave to the

Vish, must work toward the Vish goal, which only the Vish know.

"So they stumbled upon poor man and gave him an ultimatum: Work for Vish or have your most sacred planet destroyed. And man, of course, said, 'Go to hell!' The fleets of man surrounded the planet, but the fleets were destroyed in a single night. The Vish could have destroyed the planet" as they had said, but they had a better idea. They would break the spirit of man forever... would bombard the Earth until it was a radioactive hell from which civilization would not arise in a hundred thousand years. It would be a perpetual monument for all to see, a reminder of what

disobedience to the Vish means.

"And it worked. For five hundred years no man of the colonies revolted. Then there were a rash of them. But they failed. They were halfhearted, doomed to failure from traitors. The memory of Earth's ruin was a stone that dragged even the bravest down."

So at last I knew how the Age of Ruin had come about "And what does this have to do with me?" I asked.

"It was my task to defend this planet, but I could not against the superior technology of the Vish. So I protected my units and gathered information. I have had nearly a thousand years to work upon that data. I am ninety-nine point eight percent certain that I can put an invincible shield about the Earth."

"Even though the Vish have had a thousand years to advance?"

"Yes. I have not been idle."

"Then why not do so?" I asked. The computer's innards whirred.

"To what purpose? The Vish would solve it, given time. The war must be offensive. I am programmed for defense. I can protect the planet—nothing more. You must take the fight to the Vish I" Marie Baby all but shouted the last.

"What of the people here, your charges?"

They have been sheltered too long. They are descendants of the original personnel. The surface is totally hostile to them. They lack the necessary ability, guts, and determination. I'm afraid the fault is mine. I am programmed for the defense of a planet—not the care or breeding of the human species."

"But there are others," I said. "The men of Wang, the Shodrin..."

"There are, but none has come to me. You are the first to dare travel and face the horrors of the Age of Ruin. And I cannot send units out. The Vish outposts above would have detected them."

"Where do my people fit in?"

"Your people, the highest civilization to rise out of the ashes of the Age of Ruin, are traitors. They are in league with the Vish!" I stood stunned. Could it be true? Were my people helping those who had done this to the planet?

"No!" I said. Chernac, the Throwing Sword, leaped into my hand. "You lie! You lie!" I took a step toward the computer banks. "You lie!" Surely my mother could not have been a traitor.

"If I lie, then prove me wrong. I will give you an air sled and directions to Casadar, where your people dwell. The sled uses a minimal amount of energy. It will most likely be taken for a Casadar machine. You will go to Casadar and prove me wrong?"

I nodded. "Yes. I will go and prove you wrong. Where is my bow?"

The lights blinked as a block. "You have no further need of it. Aim your sword at the target to your left and press the two jewels upon the hilt twice." I turned. A sheet of metal with cross marks hung by two poles from the ceiling. I did as he said, and thunder sprang from Chernac's length. When I could see, the sheet of metal was gone. "It would be advisable to close your eyes in the future," the machine informed me. "One of my charges will guide you to Exit Seven. There you will find an air sled and some supplies. You still have some distance to travel."

My people, traitors. The thought kept running through the inner channels of my mind. I had to prove the computer wrong.

The sled was a small one-seater affair, painted a dull red. There was not enough room for me to wear Chernac, the Throwing Sword, so I put it across my lap.

The country sped by as I skimmed the ground on a blast of air. Miles of hostile country that it would have taken months to cross, I passed through in hours. No longer did I have to make time-consuming detours or pit my muscles against the things that inhabited this wasted land.

And eventually the darkness began to lift, the land flattened out and became green with rolling hills, and high snow topped distant mountains. Majestic clouds soared overhead. An endless variety of colorful flowers began to spring up. Gaily feathered birds began to sing. Everywhere about me was beauty. Somehow I knew that this must be the way the Earth had

been before the Vish bombardment.

Something caught my eye above. At first I thought it a bird, but as it circled and then began its dive, I knew what it was. I had seen its shape before, but this was shiny and whole, not blackened and gutted the way the one Weruthan had shown me had been. Sunlight glinted off glass as the flying machine hurtled down.

It was like a great flying monster, swooping down for the kill. Instinct made me twist the ground sled's stick. The abrupt swerve caught me unprepared, thrusting me to one side of the compartment. Lightning flashed from the craft and stabbed the ground where I had been. The machine straightened out. Again I jerked the stick over, and again I was forced into a corner by the violent movement. From a corner of my eyes I saw the flash. I felt a huge fist lift me and the sled up. Smoke and flame were everywhere. As I crawled from the burning sled, the flying machine whistled by overhead and began to turn.

I raised Chernac and pressed the hilt. The shaft of lightning stabbed from its length, caught the craft at its rear. There was a muffled explosion, and the machine dropped straight to the ground. It didn't bum or smoke except where the shaft of lightning had hit.

I approached cautiously, but there was no need. The two purple haired men within were dead. I went back to the sled and managed to retrieve some of my supplies. I continued on foot. My eyes searched the skies.

I had been walking for a week when from the range of mountains to my left I saw something approaching on foot. I stopped and waited for some minutes before I realized that it was a Diss creature approaching! I continued walking, the hairs at the back of my neck bristling. It had increased its speed. I broke into a run, and it dropped to all fours and galloped to intercept me. I stopped and drew Chernac. My fingers rested on the studs. I waited for it to come closer, but it stopped and stood up like a man.

"I come in peace, Jahalazar." Of course, it was not the first time I had heard Diss speak, but I was surprised nonetheless.

"How do you know my name? And do the Diss know the meaning of peace?" I shouted.

"I learned it from my brothers who journeyed to Wang. You see, we who are most advanced are to a certain degree telepathic. As for peace, yes, we know peace. We must know peace. I won't waste words, Jahalazar. We're sure you remember or will remember Alonzir's scheme to put a globe of selective radiation about the Earth, killing we Diss. We ask that you give us a chance. Allow Diss and Man to live in peace upon this planet, which is our home also."

I raised Chernac until the point was centered on the Diss creature's chest.

"I remember the way Alonzir died. Man and Diss," I said, "can never share this Earth!" Suddenly the Diss raised an arm and made a throwing motion. I pressed the studs. The Diss creature stiffened and crumbled into a pile of crisped, dead cells. I jumped back as the Diss's hand fell to the ground before me. Again I pressed the studs. Only a blackened hole remained when I could see. As I stood staring at it, I felt a crawling sensation on the hand holding Chernac. The hand had been extended as I aimed the Throwing Sword and I thought a bug must have alighted on it. I went to brush it, but my eyes widened in horror. Three brownish spots wriggled there!

I was petrified. At any moment I expected my hand to become Diss, then the arm, and so on until all but my clothing was Diss. I stared in horror for long minutes until I noticed that they were merely squirming through the hairs on the back of my hand. Gathering motion, I scraped the brown specks off, moved back, and pressed Chernac's studs. I walked away from the blackened hole and resumed my march. All the day and night I pondered the fact that I was Dissproof!

I had not walked long the next day before there appeared on the horizon, soaring, majestic towers. They were purple. I felt something within my chest as I looked at them. I knew my quest was over. I settled my sword belt—my problems were far from over.

Chapter Eight

A FLYING MACHINE was on the ground before the city. A man stood between the machine and myself, his hands half raised, his palms forward to show he was weaponless. Then he came forward to meet me.

"Greetings, Jahalazar. I am Quinz. Your sister, Combazar, sent me to

meet you." He extended a hand, which I shook. We walked together to the machine. As we did so, Quinz spoke.

"This is Casadar, the only city of our people, the Larana.

We are true breeding mutants, capable of survival upon this ruined Earth. Some call us *homo superior* because of the civilization we have built in a very short time. But it matters not, since man and Larana are mutants, since all things are mutant to the original life spore or the thing which preceded it on the scale of evolution. We are faster, more intelligent, somewhat telepathic, and Dissproof, that special trait being linked to the genes of hair color.

"We reached a high civilization in a relatively short period of time—a hundred years—and learned that the condition of the Earth was not natural, but the result of the Vish bombardment. Since then, we Larana have been torn into two groups. One was for open war against the Vish; the other, for doing nothing. Keep still and the Vish won't notice us. Hold back science and research. Do nothing to attract the Vish. Unfortunately, most of the people accepted the idea. The very Earth about us was a constant reminder of Vish brutality. It is not too hard to understand their reasoning."

We climbed into the flying machine, and it lifted off.

"But then there came a great man to lead the Opposition. He said it was our duty as *homo superior* to avenge Man and the Earth. He said that if we were superior, then let not our superiority rest in the fact that we make better cowards than our predecessors. But that man was killed, his wife and son forced to flee for their lives. That man, Praxazar, was your father."

We were over the towers of the cities now, and I could see purple haired people standing and waving and cheering our craft. We hovered as an area was cleared for our landing. It took a while, for the cheering throngs were packed too rightly.

"In your mother's flight she had to leave her older child, your sister, Combazar. She ascended in time to the leadership of the Opposition. But we were weak and hunted and killed. Then she began to receive thoughts from someone we thought dead. She summoned you, and your journey began.

"The word spread: The son of Praxazar returns to avenge his mother's death and to lead us.' But, of course, it changed nothing. One man with half a planet to cross, an environment as hostile as any conceivable, was nothing to worry about. One man and a handful could do nothing to the party in power.

"But your sister followed your progress, and as you surmounted each obstacle you became a hero to the people.

And as you encountered the different civilizations upon your return, the men and mutants of Bomb Valley, the men of Shodrin and Wang, the mutants of Shemgol, they came to realize that despite the Vish bombardment, despite the Age of Ruin, Man still survives.

"You brought home clearly that Man is yet unconquered! He may be bent and twisted as was Znos-Bor or fighting foolishly among himself as was Kiptin Rus-L of the *Mic-mic*, but his spirit is untouched. It became clear that unless the Vish strike again, Man will regain his former greatness. Someday he will once again stand against the Vish.

"And so the thoughts and attitudes began to change. Who are we to say we are better than Man if we hide here in our city afraid to arouse the Vish? If we are to call ourselves even men, then we must fight! No matter what the outcome, we must fight!"

The craft was dropping down now into the cleared space among the throngs waiting for us.

"So the Opposition won. The old government is under arrest, not for their beliefs, but for the things they did while in power."

I interrupted. "Maxie Baby said you were traitors—in league with the Vish."

"If one kills those who wish to fight the enemy, then the killers must be considered to be in league with the enemy—traitors to Man. Simple computer logic." He nodded to the people whose heads we were just above. "You have been chosen to lead us in the war against the Vish, to avenge Man and the Earth and the rest of the creatures upon it.

"You have shown us, too, that we shall not be fighting alone, but alongside the other creatures of this Earth. It is not only our Earth, but

theirs also.

"Welcome home, Jahalazar."

We dropped down to the roof.

They led me down the corridor to the Council Room, where my sister and the leaders of the Opposition had gathered. My journey was over, but something nagged at my mind. There was something I had forgotten. Then a man came running from a side hall ahead and darted across into another. My escorts started.

"Duaza has escaped!" Instantly a half dozen men took off after the man we had seen. I looked questioningly to Quinz.

"Duaza was the former head of the party in power. It was he who killed your mother and fa—" I was off, my wilderness trained muscles allowing me to overtake the others as they turned the corner. I thrust them aside and pulled away as if they were children. I could see Duaza's back in the distance. He pulled open a door and slipped through. I drew Chernac as I ran.

I thudded against one door as I pulled the other open. I slipped through the crack. At the far end, before an open door, stood Duaza, a grin upon his evil face. I started forward. I wanted my hands around his throat.

"Hold, Jahalazar, or I go through this door and you shall never find me."

I raised Chernac. "I'll burn you down before you can step through it!" I warned. He laughed.

"Press your studs, Jahalazar. You are no longer among barbarians. I designed this room long ago. No energy weapon can be fired within it." I pressed the studs. No shaft of lightning leaped out. Behind me the door opened and the others came in. "I wanted to see you face to face in the moment of your defeat, Jahalazar. No, don't come closer. I want you to know your doom. Behind me is a corridor which leads to a hidden air machine, which will take me to a secret lab where I have equipment that will enable me to contact the Vish. You fools talk of fighting them. Now we shall see!" I moved forward.

"Fool!" said Duaza. "Like your mother—" I sprang forward, every muscle propelling me. He turned and went into the hall behind. "Goodbye, fools!" he called as the sliding door started to close upon his retreating back. Too far. Too far.

I couldn't get there in time. The door was closing. The Vish would be warned! But most of all I remembered Weruthan telling me of a girl dying in a burning wreck. I had to kill him! I stopped and drew back my sword arm. I screamed with pain as I brought my arm forward. Faster than an arrow, faster even than the eye could follow, the sword flashed through the air and through the narrowing crack of the closing door.

When we opened the door some minutes later, we found Duaza dead, his body transfixed with the steel length of Chernac, the Throwing Sword.

The rust-red sun shone upon me as the breeze whipped my hair. Below me, the country raced by. I could see the solc packs, looking for any careless Desridif that might cross their paths. I come in low and land. On foot I slip toward the lone figure that stands upon the rim of Bomb Valley, her little hand shading her eyes as they search the horizon. The red hair and lips are the same as I remembered them. There are no more Diss. We put up the globe of selective radiation that Alonzir talked of. To other planets of Man, which still live beneath the yoke of the Vish, we have sent word: The Earth survives. Man is unbroken. Though the Vish bomb the Earth a thousand times, Man will not be conquered!

The years will be long and hard. I will need someone to stand by me in the battles and years to come. So I have come back even though more than a year has passed since I rode away. But she still wears the dress of a maiden.

"Selea!" I whisper. She turns slowly. Her eyes widen in disbelief.

"Jahalazar!" she cries, and throws herself into my arms.

Our children will live to see the Earth restored, the Age of Ruin forgotten.