

## INTRODUCTION

More than a century ago Albert Kremnitz, a German philosopher no longer widely read, wrote that "the Industrial Revolution, The Age of Materialism, will almost certainly drive people back to mysticism rather than away from it. In the beginning, of course, popular taste will seem to move in quite the opposite direction, toward the mundane and the banal, toward the frenetic pursuit of possessions, toward a contempt for all that is lyrical in man. The first stage will see no attempt to justify this distaste for the mystic and the unexplained. Although this stage will be prolonged for many years, and how many years no one can even hazard a guess, it will gradually give way to another stage in which the course of mankind will find itself troubled by what it has cast aside.

"During this stage there will be many explanations as to why the mystic nature of man no longer has any value in an ever changing world, yet none of these 'explanations' will remove the sense of unease, the nagging realization, the painful awareness that man, for all his material progress, remains bound to all that is barbaric in his past. The fourth stage will see a great reversal of the first stage, and as never before man will plunge with enthusiasm into an attempt to understand, and to participate in, the 'dark' energies of his nature.

"If compelled to predict the time when this fourth stage would come about I would set the date at midpoint in the twentieth century, at which time the Industrial Revolution will itself be undergoing the transition to which all revolutions, indeed all things, are subject."

Kremnitz goes on to describe this "new Age of Heroes." He states that since the modern hero will have been dwarfed by his environment, the popular demand for larger-than-life heroes will have to be satisfied by the recreation of mythological supermen, or, as he predicted with amazing insight, the invention of heroes so magnificent, so fantastically endowed with super-powers, that they exist only in the fantasy projections of man. Such a superhero is Kothar—Barbarian Swordsman.

From the world beyond, or past, recorded time Kothar comes. From out of the deepest, most violent recesses of mankind's dark, collective memory, Kothar the gigantic barbarian strides, the enchanted sword Frostfire glittering in his mighty hand. Lusty, hot-blooded, masterful, unafraid of things real or unreal, Kothar dominates the misty, bloody world created for him, and for us, by the distinguished American writer Gardner F. Fox, and though Kothar's world existed in another age, another dimension, it comes vividly to life. Mapped, charted, chronicled, with history, language, literature, and conventions of its own, the world of the godlike barbarian mercenary becomes as real, and in some strange way perhaps more real than the world we live in. So skilled a writer is Gardner Fox, so cunningly does he spin this epic tale, that we come to accept the world of Kothar almost without realizing that we have done so.

Because Kothar is so real his age becomes real. Having accepted Kothar himself, we find it no effort to accept the other fantastic persons and creatures which inhabit his world. Everything falls into place, so well has Gardner Fox succeeded in convincing us that in order to participate in Kothar's adventures we must suspend disbelief. And after reading the first few pages of this savage tale that is what we do, and gladly. We come to know the sorcerers, dragons, eloquent wraiths, witches—all the strange beings who move through the pages of Kothar: Barbarian Swordsman. Because we have suspended disbelief, have postponed judgment, we are untroubled by logic; indeed the story itself has its own peculiar logic which seems to explain any misgivings we might have. Yes, we tell ourselves, why should Kothar, his friends or his enemies, behave in any other fashion?

Why should we be inclined to disbelieve when there is even a detailed map of Kothar's world to help us to completely understand it? When we are informed that as a boy Kothar was cast up on the shores of GrondelBay we have simply to look for it on the map, and we find it. Of course, we exclaim, there is it on the map! And there, too, are all the kingdoms and territories, all the sinister and forbidden places, all the sources of danger and delight. As moderns grown tired of introspective heroes we find it refreshing to "identify" with the unthinking responses of the barbarian swordsman. Using his simple intelligence as an uncomplicated guide to action, Kothar follows his emotions wherever they lead him, confident of his ability to deal with any threat which may come his way.

Kothar is in the line of all mankind's heroes. He is kin to the knights of Camelot and the famous marshals of our own Wild West. He is the loner, the soldier of fortune, the paid but heroic mercenary—but with an important difference. Kothar is not only larger than life; he is not bound by the logic of life. Kothar exists in mankind's dreams and, therefore, he transcends reality. As Albert Kremnitz so correctly pointed out, we in the mid-twentieth century have need of heroes so different from ourselves that we cannot return to even the mightiest heroes of the past; we must invent heroes so all-powerful that they can have no connection with mankind as we know it because in our history there was never a hero so marvelous that he was not inevitably brought to ruin by sickness, betrayal or death. As Albert Kremnitz has stated on another occasion, "Ordinary men must, whether aware of it or not, seek to destroy their heroes, no matter how much they admire them, since the very existence of heroes is an affront to their own mode of life. The man of the future, since he will have a greater need of heroes, may realize that his heroes must live in order that he, himself, may survive."

Kothar—Barbarian Swordsman is an epic hero for any age, but it would appear that our age needs him more than any other.

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The Universe is old. Old!

For ten billion years the stars of this, our galaxy, hurtled outward across the gulfs of space. For another billion years they hung suspended at the apex of their expansion.

During the past three billion years, now that the universe is contracting instead of expanding, those stars, dim and faint with age, have been collapsing in upon themselves, rushing headlong back to their beginnings and their ultimate destruction.

In time, there will be no Time.

Ages ago, as the legends say, the race of Man knew those stars and all their planets, named and visited them, and left on those planetary surfaces vast cities, great monuments to mankind's own greatness. Once, uncounted millennia before, an empire of Man was spread throughout the universe. This empire died more than a billion years ago, after which man himself sank into a state of barbarism.

Here and there on a planet man has occupied can be seen a bit of stonework which he left behind him as a reminder of past glory, or a few rocks of what had been a mighty megopolis, even some chunks of marble as a memento of forgotten art masterpieces. The rust and erosion of eon upon eon has bitten deep into mankind's creations.

Today, wherever man can be found on the planets of the dying star-suns, the very shapes of the continents on which he lives bear little resemblance to those he knew two billion years before. The oceans cover his cities, the desert sands his tombs and temples, while the fierce north wind ruffles

vegetation that earlier man had never seen.

Today, man is a barbarian in a barbaric world. Man has reverted back to the childhood of his earliest years. He has forgotten his heritage, he has made new gods to replace the old. Man has outlived his glory.

And yet—to some men and women who live in the sunset years of the race has been given a power unknown to those men of an earlier age, yet a power famed and feared in the legendry of his people. For there are wizards and warlocks, sorcerers and witches in these days, and their spells and incantations are known to work malignant miracles.

There are also warriors, fighting men whose swords earn them fame and fortune, men inured to hardship and a way of life totally alien to the men of an earlier day. One such warrior was Kothar, cast up by the sea in the northlands of his world, a sellsword and a mercenary, a wench after the women of his day, a freebooter and a thief, at times, whose sword Frostfire was a magic sword.

This is his saga...

From a fragment of—  
THE LORD HISTORIES OF  
SATORAM MANDAMOR

THE SWORD OF THE SORCERER

Chapter One

The blood lay red upon his dented mail shirt and spotted his yellow hair in ghastly fashion. It ran wetly, redly, from the worn sleeve of his leather hacqueton to drop upon his big hand and ooze across the pommel of his shattered sword. It stained his fur kilt and riding boots and dripped steadily with every step he took.

Kothar staggered from the field of battle where men lay staring sightlessly up at the darkening sky, rigid now in death, and where other men were gasping out their lives. He alone of the loyal Foreign Guard was still alive, he alone still held a sword in his hand, though it was a broken one. And behind him, men were coming fast to finish off the youthful guards commander.

He was a big, brawny youth. His shock of yellow hair framed a face burned brown by desert suns and polar winds. Under his smooth hide giant muscles rippled, and normally he walked with the springy gait of a man whose body was in perfect fighting trim. A broad leather belt fitted his lean waist, from which hung an empty scabbard. Now that belt was red with blood.

Kothar was a barbarian out of the northern world of Cumberia. He was a sellsword, a mercenary whose life was given over to the god of war, that he might have food for his belly and a pillow at times for his head. There was no fear in him as he jogged along, he was afraid of no living man—or woman, for that matter— though he did admit to a kind of queasiness when magic, witches and warlocks were involved.

And a witch had given Lord Markoth the victory this day.

Rage was a rumble in his thickly thewed throat. Red Lori, the witch! Aie, she was lovely, with her long red hair and slanted green eyes, her body all white flesh and perfumed skin. Kothar had never seen a woman who made him know he was a man as Red Lori did, with her slim white legs and swinging hips.

But she was a witch!

Gossip said she would be queen in Commoral when Elfa died. Her sorceries had given Markoth the victory this day and as a reward she would ascend the throne.

He toyed with the idea of walking into the royal palace in some sort of disguise and throwing Red Lori over a broad shoulder and making off with her. His large white teeth showed themselves as his lips drew back in an amused grin. Hai, but that would put a bee in her thick red hair!

Suddenly he staggered, recovering his balance with an effort. His wounds had become an agony, of a sudden.

In his eyes, sky reeled dizzily with ground, and death swooped low above the corpses cluttering the wide Plain of Dead Trees, reaching out invisible talons to sink them in his flesh. His throat was dry—gods of Thuum!—what he would give for one lone sip of water!—and the pain of his wounds made him shudder, every now and again.

He was angling his feeble steps toward a corner of the forest, the great dark weald that stretched from Phalkarr as far as distant Abathor, for in between those boles and beneath those low hanging branches was his only hope of hiding. The mercenaries of Lord Markoth should have spotted him by this time, they should have raised the howl of pursuit. No doubt they were running for hounds to follow the trail of his riding boots. He tried to stop the flow of blood, for the drops were arrows beckoning all to follow, but the task was too great for his reddened hands and fingers.

He leaned against a tree, breathing deeply.

I must run like the wounded deer from the hunters, or else I too shall be stretched out flat upon the ground, my wrists and ankles fettered, and I shall be flayed, as is the custom of the Lord Markoth with his enemies.

The thought was a goad in his ribs, urging him forward. A red handprint, the spill of bloody drops, were the signposts which would show the way. Ah, well, it could not be helped. He was wounded. He had fought hard and long this day to bring victory to the cause of Queen Elfa, and where men fought so desperately, men knew the bite of steel.

The agony of his flesh, the uneasiness in him at the thought of torture, drove him staggering through the underbrush, ducking to avoid a leafy branch, reeling aside from a thick tree-trunk directly in his path. In the distance he heard a voice cry out halloo. They had found his red blood trail!

They were coming fast, fresh with renewed vigor, unwounded and eager to win the silver deniers Lord Markoth would pay for his body so his skinners could flay the skin from it. He could imagine their hard faces and their bulging muscles as they loped along the trail of blood-drops from his body.

Kothar ran on and on.

Above his yellow poll the trees made a green canopy that hid everything from his eyes but a patch of white cloud and a bit of blue sky. Would that the leaves might also hide his tracks! He blundered on, head down and gasping, blind to everything but the pain and the voices growing louder and more confident behind him.

He ran for a long time; there was still strength left in his big, muscular body with the broken sword gripped in his fingers. He would sell his life as dearly as possible; these men of the southlands would never forget his dying battle. Aie! He would make the name of Kothar long remembered in this kingdom of Commoral.

Finally he slid to a halt and leaned a bloody hand against a tree bole. He shook his head like an animal brought to bay. His glaring eyes peered around him in the dense forest at a spray of red and white flowers hanging from a gigantic rock like a colored waterfall.

Kothar blinked in disbelief.

Was he delirious with loss of blood and the pain of his wounds—or was that an iron door behind those vine-flowers? He licked his lips with a swollen tongue, aware that hope was surging up into his huge chest. An iron door in solid rock? It could not be. It was a mere trick of his failing senses, of his blurring eyes with the blood dripping into them from a scalp wound.

And yet—

Kothar straightened his body slowly, daring to hope. There was a door there, rusted and disused for centuries, perhaps—but still a door. The youthful giant pushed away from the tree. Yes, the fading sunlight made it dimly visible; it was almost unseeable behind its vine and flower curtain, but it was there.

"Thanks to Dwallka," he gasped, and ran.

His arm in its leather hacqueton and mailed sleeve brushed the flower vines away. He could see the ancient metal door more clearly now and could read the forgotten sigils on its rusted surface. He could not understand them; they were written in a language dead for more than a hundred centuries, but his barbarian senses were aware of awesome magic in their twistings.

Kothar shook his wide shoulders. He did not care for magic, but he cared even less for the baying hounds and the huntsmen loping along his bloody backtrail. He lurched forward, a quivering hand stretched out to touch the rusted metal and seek across it for a ring or handle to open that ancient adit. The vines and flowers closed in behind him, leaving him in a cool, faintly hushed sanctuary.

What was this door? Where did it lead?

No matter what! No matter where!

Anywhere was better than out here with the mercenaries and their yapping dogs following his footprints. His huge brown hand caught hold of an iron bolt, slid it back with a wrench of muscles so painful as to make him groan. It had been long years since anyone had walked this way. Unused metal screeched in protest to his tug, but the bolt yielded and the door swung inward onto blackness.

Kothar stumbled into that welcoming dark.

The sole of his war-boot touched a hard dirt floor. It was cool in the gloom, and his eyes could see nothing at all. He stood swaying like a giant tree about to topple, his fingers losing their grip on his broken sword.

Slowly the darkness died away before a pallid green radiance that seemed to fill the chamber. The light came from nowhere and everywhere. It did not ease the chill bite of the air, it was like the coldness of the

grave, that air. It made Kothar shiver, accustomed as he was to the snow-cold of the northern wastes.

An angry growl rose into his throat.

He found himself staring at a flat slab of stone that rested on marble amphoras. It was a crypt, this place in hollow rock. And that dead thing wrapped in funereal garments, brown with age, was what lay buried in it. He had blundered into a tomb.

His lips twisted in a grin. Let the dead shelter him who sought life in this sanctuary. He was about to turn and close the iron door when the hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

The withered brown body on the slab—he could make out bits of whitened bone and grisly fragments of flesh and hair protruding from the rotted cloth—was moving. It sighed, as if it breathed immeasurable distances away. Its chest lifted and fell in a slow pulsing.

Dwallka of the War Hammer! What was this thing? The corpse turned its head so that it could look at Kothar out of its empty eye-sockets. The barbarian felt the touch of eyes, even though there were no eyes to see or be seen. He stiffened, his flesh crawled, his long fingers took a firmer grip on his sword-haft.

Even as he stared, the lich sat up.

"You came at last, Kothar. I had almost given up hope for you."

The young giant opened his mouth to speak, and could not. The cadaver swung what was left of its legs over the side of the stone slab and stepped down onto the hard dirt floor. A peculiar sound rose upward from the bones of its throat.

A lassitude came upon Kothar. He began to sway back and forth, as if tired in every muscle. Hai! He was weak, too. So weak he could not stand up. The lich was doing this to him in some hellish manner he did not understand.

It was too much to stand up. He could not do it. He fell forward slowly, his legs did not bend, he simply toppled downward like a tree cut off at its roots.

Kothar lay frozen motionless on the dirt. He was alive and possessed of all his senses but that of movement. He could not so much as flick a finger. His cheek was pressed to the ground, he could feel a pebble pressing into his temple. He could hear the savage thumping of his heart, and he was aware that the corpse was moving.

This was worse than anything the Lord Markoth might do to him! Flaying knives he could understand. He had lost to the king of Commoral, and he was paying the penalty for failure. This made sense to his barbarian mind.

But this was foul. Unclean! The tomb had opened for him who was alive, and now it sought to drag him down into the coldness, into the utter absence of all life.

Kothar fought, as much as he could fight it. His spirit, his savage soul, writhed and tugged to force his huge muscles to obey the dictates of his brain. They would not. He must lie here and—what?

The dead thing was approaching him with a dry rustle of brown winding-sheets. It walked as if its weight

were that of the fabled Jugnoth, with heavy thumpings of the ground. It breathed with a harsh wheezing and a vast rush of air like the huge bellows which had hung before the forge at Grondel when Kothar had been a boy.

The giant lay waiting for the eldritch being to clasp him and drag his limp body toward the slab. If he was going to die here in this tomb, he wanted to bellow out his defiance, but he could make no more than a croaking noise.

Behind him, metal rasped and the iron door swung inward again. Kothar felt the fresh forest air drift past his body.

There was a silence.

The dead thing stared at the mercenaries crowding the doorway, and the soldiers of the Lord Markoth, after one horrified glance at the inert Kothar, stared back at the standing mummy.

"Great Eldrak," a man breathed.

A hollow voice murmured, "Call not on Eldrak of the Seven Hells. He listens not to carrion such as you. He is my friend, as are all the ancient gods." There was an illusion of vast distance behind the voice of the cadaver that stood on rotting feet and showing the whiteness of bones protruding through its burial garments.

A mercenary screamed and would have run except that the dead thing held him as he held the giant Kothar flat upon the ground. Terrifying laughter lifted into its throat as it began to glow with inner green fire.

The eerie radiance became brighter, and as it pulsed throughout the ancient grave, Kothar felt energy flow into his body. His wounds closed over, his blood caked and hardened, and anger rose into his brain like a madness. He stirred, he moved his hand, he rose upward.

On his feet he looked at the dead thing without fear, though with revulsion. It gleamed with verdant brightness, illuming the death chamber and the mercenaries in their mail shirts and metal helmets, with swords naked in their hands.

"Slay them," said the lich, and Kothar leaped.

His broken sword was still sharp. It could cleave through flesh and mail and leather, it could slay. The mercenaries tried to fight, but it was as if they moved in sleep, slowly and without a sense of danger. Their faces showed green from the pulsing dead thing, and their eyes bulged with the horror in their brains.

The shattered steel drove deep, again and again.

When he was finished, seven men lay dead between the iron door and the forest. Kothar stood panting over them, staring down at his red blade.

The forest was quiet; not even a jay chattered from its leafy deeps. The Cumberian drew a deep breath. It was as if the green pulsations had reached out and touched all life within the wood, and as it had touched, it had slain.

"Let drop the sword, Kothar," said the hollow voice.

He did as it commanded, without thought. He turned and stared back into the dark tomb and saw the dead thing standing in the darkness, rotted and ugly in its cerements. The green brilliance was fading slowly. It was just a corpse, a corpse that walked and spoke and seemed to be alive.

"Who are you?" Kothar growled.

"My name was Afgorkon, long and long ago."

Kothar scowled. Afgorkon? Surely he had heard Queen Elfa speak of Afgorkon who had been a mighty magician fifty thousand years ago. He tried to think, but could not, being held in thrall by the black, empty eyeholes of the dead thing standing before him, bent and brown and old.

If it could have smiled, the lich might have quirked its lips.

"In the days when this land was known as Yarth, I was a sorcerer renowned from frozen Thuum in the north to tropical Azynyssa at the equator. My spells could level a city or raise up a tempest on the sea. Even now, after five hundred centuries of sleep, I still come to the call of witch and warlock, to teach the ancient mysteries or to help a suppliant in trouble. Such a suppliant is the Lady Elfa."

"The queen?"

"Queen or witch-woman, what's the difference? Yes, it is Elfa whose call I heard, whose call roused up this rottedness which is all that is left of the man I once was. She has need of a champion, has queen Elfa—and you are the only man of the Foreign Guard left alive. You must go to her, there is a way to reverse what has happened, to snatch victory from defeat. I have shown her the way."

Kothar grumbled, "What is that way?"

"Only the sword Frostfire can do what must be done."

"Frostfire?"

"Frostfire was forged in the primal ooze by the devils summoned up by me five hundred centuries before. It was wrought of a metal fallen from the skies, it was dipped in the molten middle of the world, it was cooled in the snows on a mountain so high nothing but a sylph—a winged spirit of the air—could take it there. It can pierce any armor, any helm. It can be carried only by a man who has no other wealth."

Kothar scowled. "I'm a mercenary. I sell my sword for gold and silver. Someday I shall be rich. What then?"

The lich chuckled. "For the past five years you have been selling yourself as a soldier. Are you rich?"

"I own nothing but the mail I wear, this broken sword, and my boots. But somewhere I shall find a treasure.

"Nothing man can own is like the sword Frostfire. Alone, it makes a man a giant among other men. But enough of this! Will you accept the sword and the task its ownership imposes—to help queen Elfa?"

Kothar grinned wryly, "And after I have helped queen Elfa, what of the sword?"



"It shall be your fee."

The young barbarian nodded, "It shall be my fee."

The lich turned and moved with those strangely thumping footsteps across the tomb. Its rotted hands moved and its withered tongue clacked, and sounds issued from the throat that was little more than bones. The words it spoke reverberated throughout the cairn, they brought down tiny showers of dirt from the root-pierced ceiling, they made the death-slab shake.

Yet they also opened an invisible door and caused a pallid glimmer by which Kothar could see, past the burial garments which still encased Afgorkon, an opening door and a chamber where lay a sword in a scabbard chained to a great leather belt on top of two chests heavy with jewels and golden coins of a kind no man had looked upon for half a million years.

"Stand," growled Afgorkon, and Kothar went rigid.

The lich stepped into that dim light and lifted up the scabbard and the sword Frostfire with its thick leather belt and carried them on the bones and dried flesh of its hands out into the dimmer light of the tomb, and placed them in the outstretched palms of the Cumberian.

The sword made a solid weight in his hands; its length was of bluish steel, and it had a golden cross-hilt. Witch-blade it might be, yet it had weight and substance, and its hilt made of silvery gold contained an angry red jewel set in its pommel. His big hand went around the haft and drew the shining blade partially from the scabbard. There were rune words there, words in a language so old no man could know their meaning. The edges looked biting sharp, boned to the keenness of a razor.

His hand clanged the blade back into its scabbard.

Afgorkon watched him with empty eye sockets. "The words say, 'I was made before the world was born, for the mage Afgorkon.' Aie, the sword was mine, for I was a warrior as well as a magician in that long-ago time. Though it was made by magic, there is no magic in it, or at least I do not think so, though magic can enter it and be retained by it, as no ordinary steel will do."

The barbarian asked, "How can you part with it?"

A dry chuckle resounded in the crypt. "I have other weapons now that I am dead to this world. Where I exist, the blade Frostfire cannot, and so—I give it to you who are without wealth. See it slays those who need slaying, boy of the sea."

Kothar froze, still with his hand on the swordhilt. "What know you of the sea that flung me as a babe on the shore at Grondel bay?"

"I know what the dead know."

"My real family? Where was I born?"

"It is not for me to tell. You must live your life as the gods have decreed. That which you will do, your deeds and misdeeds, are written in the scrolls of the gods in the imperishable script of Rath. No living man can read them. Only the gods whom men worship, and the dead, can scan those lines."

"You are dead," Kothar pointed out.

"True. But were I to sin in this regard, the gods might give me life and I who have been dead fifty thousand of your years do not desire to live again, other than as now —fleeting, for moments out of Time." The dry chuckle was soft with distance. "I am content in the place where I am. Very content, Kothar the sellsword. But now, go. The queen is waiting."

A rotted hand lifted, pointing. The iron door gaped.

Kothar moved out into the air that was fragrant with the vine-flowers. Yet the voice of Afgorkon followed him.

"Go to the hut of the witch Fristhia. There shall you find the queen."

The iron door slammed shut behind him.

The rusted bolt clicked into place.

## Chapter Two

A grey wolf sat on its haunches, tongue lolling.

Kothar half drew his sword, but the gaunt animal at the edge of the weald did not move and when Kothar put the sword back in its scabbard and buckled the great belt at his lean middle, the wolf rose to its feet and trotted off along a narrow forest trail. It halted and turned its head and its glowing feral eyes seemed to call to the big barbarian.

The wolf would be his guide to the queen.

He walked through the stillness of the forest, pausing only once to glance back at the dead mercenaries piled here and there outside the iron door. Men would come and carry them off, but no one but himself would ever explain how they had come to find death here in this ancient weald.

They went for more than two hours through the woods, until the wolf came to a forest glade where stood a little hut roofed with sod, a single window open to the room inside. The wolf sat back and howled once, piercingly, then slunk away into the underbrush, leaving Kothar alone.

The young mercenary walked to the door of the hut and lifted his knuckles to knock, but another hand was before his; the door swung open and an old hag stood staring up at him. Her ugly face was hairy, and her nose was long and pointed, but the blue eyes in her ancient face were bright and gleeful as they searched his height and his youthful strength, and they lingered long upon the sword he carried at his side.

"Kothar," she said softly, and stepped back.

He walked into the hut, finding it clean and neat and oddly fragrant because of the dried herbs that swung from little cordings at the ceiling beams. A fire burned on a round stone in its middle as a thin grey smoke rose up to pass through a hole in the sod roof.

He swayed with weariness and the witch looked at him and smiled and gestured toward a pile of fur robes which formed a bed along one wall. She said softly, "You are tired, exhausted from the fighting and your wounds which Afgorkon healed. But now Afgorkon can do no more and you must sleep."

He did not dispute With her. He was so weary he had seemed to stumble after the wolf in a walking slumber, so that he thought at times he was dreaming all that had happened to him. The furs beckoned him; they were soft and would warm his body, and when he closed his eyelids as he lay upon them he would dream.

Kothar fell on his back across the robes and his eyelids seemed so heavy it was painful to hold them open. Yet he must remain awake for just a little while.

"Elfa?" he asked. "What of Elfa the queen?"

The hag laughed brightly. "She shall come, young man. Sleep now, sleep." Her blue eyes flirted with him, making him think of Elfa who was queen in Commoral, for Elfa had witch-eyes such as this, that flirted with him from time to time, and in his own way, Kothar understood that he had been half in love with her.

He closed his eyes and slept.

He dreamed, as he knew he would. He dreamed of the single room of this witch-hut with the sod roof and of the fire on the round stone and of the smoke and of the hag who went and breathed in the smoke and waved at it with her hands until the smoke clung to her like a grey garment made of spiderwebs, hiding her shape and the shapeless garments which she wore. As the grey smoke touched her garments they fell away, and the hag was no longer the hag but queen Elfa herself, naked in the grey smoke that hid her fair white flesh.

She turned and saw him staring, in his dream, and she smiled with her red, red lips and she lifted up her arms and turned, letting him see how fair was her body through the veil of smoke. All the while she sang a strange little song the like of which the barbarian had never heard.

And now—

The hag was gone. It was Elfa who stepped from the grey smoke, Elfa in a scarlet kirtle trimmed in miniver fur and thick with golden threadings. There were tiny red slippers on her feet and great ruby rings on her white fingers. Her heavy golden hair was done up in a caul of red garnets on a golden chain. This was the queen of Commoral.

She came and stood beside him where he dreamed. He looked up at her, and she bent and kissed his lips with her red, red mouth, and there was a perfume and a fragrance about her which was very pleasant to young Kothar. She slipped onto the fur robes with him and took him in her soft arms and let him pillow his head so that he forgot she was Queen Elfa, she was just a beautiful woman with golden hair. His heavily muscled arm hooked her middle, yanked her down on top of him in his dream and he held her banded to his body.

Delighted laughter woke him.

His dream had become reality. He held Elfa in his arms, and he was kissing her and she struggled against his strength, laughing softly, for a woman likes to be thought desirable, even a queen. For an instant longer he held her, relishing the feel of her soft body before he reluctantly let her go.

"You're a brute," she smiled, sliding away from him.

His giant chest lifted and fell, but he did not speak. Her wise green eyes studied his huge body as she

replaced a few tresses in her disarranged hair with white, ringed fingers.

"Afgorkon must have put a fire in your blood," she murmured, glancing at him sideways. Her red lips quivered with laughter. "He has told me you can save my throne for me. He did not tell me you would all but rape me at the same time."

His barbaric blood was in a ferment. Elfa was a tease-body, as was Red Lori. Were all women? Kothar was a simple person, essentially. If a woman pleased him, he took her to bed with him. If she did not, he ignored her.

"What do you want with me?" he grumbled.

Her thin eyebrows lifted. "Oh, you're angry. I didn't mean to make you angry. I imagine you're full of life, since you escaped from the plain of Dead Trees. I'll have to excuse you, I suppose."

"Afgorkon said I was to help you."

"And you want to know how."

He swung his legs off the cot. "The sooner the better," he muttered. He walked like a stalking cat across the room, lifted the sword Frostfire and buckled its broad belt about his lean middle. In the eyes of the woman still sitting on the cot, he was a pagan soldier, a mercenary who took her gold. And yet, there was something more in this youthful giant, Elfa thought, head cocked sideways to study him.

If she were younger—

She shook herself. It did no good to dream.

"You must free my wizard, Kazazael," she said suddenly, rising to pace back and forth in the little hut.

Kothar snorted, "Little good he did you! Him and his magic spells that didn't work! Where's he now?"

Her laughter tinkled out. Her fate was in the hands of a barbarian youth, a boy only lately come to manhood. Afgorkon had said this was so, and she believed the lich. Yet there was a bitterness in her mirth that rang loudly in the hut. So much at stake, so much to rest on the swordhand of one young man!

"You must go to Windmere Wood, where Kazazael hangs suspended in the air between earth and sky—flayed of his skin by orders of King Markoth. His screams of agony—for Kazazael cannot know the mercy of death— can be heard for miles around. You must free him, restore his health to him."

Kothar stared. "Dwallka! It's no easy task you set me."

Elfa smiled up at him. "You can name your own reward, if you succeed. Would you like to be a duke in Commoral? A prince?"

The Cumberian scowled. It was a heady bribe she offered, if bribe were needed to win his swordarm.

"I shall make you a prince," she said softly.

"If I succeed," he growled.

Her golden head nodded gently. "If you win back for me my queenship. A principedom as a reward. Isn't it enough?"

He grinned, "It's too much."

"And yet—perhaps not enough. There are grave dangers in Commoral, these days. Red Lori is no sorceress to hang a necromancer in the sky without safeguards against his freedom. Should you fail, you yourself may be flayed and hung there with Kazazael for all eternity. Markoth has a strong ally in Red Lori. Her enchantments put Kazazael where he is this day, after the flaying knives were done with him. She will have put up barriers past which no ordinary man could step."

He was no ordinary man, but she would not tell him that. As captain of her Foreign Guard, he had been brusque, caring nothing that one or two men under his command could boast of royal blood in their veins. With a heavy hand, he had transformed her mercenaries into a real fighting force. For a while this day, it had been nip and tuck between herself and Lord Markoth, thanks to the Foreign Guard and to the zeal of its muscular young commander.

With his fists, he had trained his men. With his skill at weapon-play, he had taught them to fight almost as well as himself. No other man could do that; this young barbarian was a born fighting man. He went straight for his objective, swinging his sword; the man who got in his way, died.

She hoped he could do the same for Kazazael.

His hard blue eyes were studying her. He rasped, "How do I find Kazazael? I've never heard of this Windmere Wood! And if Red Lori has put up safeguards against anyone helping him—surely she'll make it next to impossible to locate him?"

"There is a horse knows the way," she said softly and turning, went to a little door set in the wall of the hut and pushed open that door with her hand. By bending, Kothar could see into a small stable attached to the hut.

A big grey warhorse with red velvet reins and red velvet fittings on the high-peaked saddle on its back, stood patiently, waiting for a rider. There was silver on its ring-bits and the nails which fastened the leather saddle were of silver also, so that Kothar thought he had never seen so handsome an animal, nor such horse trappings.

"I bought him for my husband, the king," the queen was saying as the barbarian stared, "but now he shall belong to him who is my champion." Elf a smiled and the witch-lights danced in her blue eyes. "I had him from the wizard Kazazael. There may be magic in his hide."

Kothar grunted. He stepped past the queen and into the stable, lifting the red velvet reins, slipping a black leather boot into the wooden stirrup and lifting upward into the kak. He had to bend a little, for the stable roof was not very high.

"Give him his head, Kothar," the queen called from the hut doorway, as he paced the beast out into the morning sunlight where the sparrows and the jays were already clattering. He dropped the reins so they lay limp over the saddle pommel and he made no more effort to guide Greyling but sat with the small of his back to the high cantle and let the animal go where it would.

If he were a horse with any magic in him, he would find the wizard. The big grey was trotting now

toward a break in the woods around the hut, and when Kothar looked closely he could make out a path between the trees that led away to the southward.

He turned to see Queen Elfa standing before the open stable door, regal in her red gown, her golden hair piled high on her head and hung with garnets. She lifted a ringed hand, waved it. Her smile was radiant with promise.

It was cool in the forest, and a little cold wind was sighing here and there through the leaves and over the rocks that peeped out from the gnarled tree-roots where they broke the ground. Sunlight came but seldom into this forest world where everything was green or brown, but when it did, it came in golden sheets with tiny dust motes dancing in its radiance.

After a time, Kothar grew hungry. He looked behind him but there was no sack or purse tied to the saddle which might hold cheese and bread, not any shield either, he noticed, and he told himself glumly that being champion to a queen might not be all he thought it. The hours went by and he grew more hungry so that he began shifting in the saddle with his annoyance like a black cloud on his face.

It was then that he heard the screaming.

### Chapter Three

He hung high in the sky, a red thing that screamed and screamed in his agony, legs and arms moving wildly as if he swam there between the clouds. Kothar felt the golden hairs at the base of his neck stand up in horror. The chilling winds that swept the treetops here in Windmere Wood must be like salt poured over the skinless body of the wizard Kazazael. Twice the barbarian tried to call up to him but his tongue clove to the dry roof of his mouth and he had to swallow three times before he could make his voice work. His eyes were fastened on the thing which had been a man that was like a puppet now, pulled this way and that by the winds, hung there in the sky by the magic of his enemy, Red Lori. He could not pull away his gaze, and sweat ran from his forehead down his cheeks.

A cramp came into his middle out of sympathy for the red thing that howled in pain up above. Kothar made a fist of his right hand and hammered the saddle pommel with it.

"Kazazael!" he shouted at last. "Can you hear me?" The wizard was screaming so loudly, the wind was blowing so strongly, that no ears could have heard his words. Cupping his hands to his lips, the thickly thewed mercenary bellowed again and again, until his ears rang with the sound of his own voice.

"Kazazael! Kazazael! Kazazael!" he roared.

The screaming stopped. A hoarse throat cried back at him. "Who calls the name of Kazazael the accursed?"

"Kothar of Cumberia, the sellsword. I've come to help you."

"No man can help me now!"

Kazazael began screaming once more.

Kothar scratched his golden head. He must find some way to help the man, Queen Elfa had commanded him to do so, saying that she could never defeat Lord Markoth unless Kazazael were free to help her with his necromancies. Yet if Kazazael did not know the way to his own release, how was he to

accomplish it? He bit his lower lip with his strong white teeth, thinking hard.

"Kazazael—will anything stop the pain?" he cried, unable to listen further to that awful screaming.

"Only one thing."

"And what will that thing be?"

"The cloak of the sea serpent Iormungar."

"How do I find the cloak?"

The red thing which had been Kazazael shouted down at him, but there was hopelessness in his tones, and a resignation to defeat which Kothar did not like. A man must make a fight of it, he thought, even though there is nothing left to him but black despair. Still, he listened to the instructions Kazazael gave to him, and he put them deep in his mind so he would not forget.

Then he turned Greyling on the forest path and sent him galloping away from the screaming until it faded out. Still he held the grey horse to its mad pace, as if the pounding of its hoofbeats would blot from his memory the sight of the thing in the sky.

He was still hungry, though he felt a touch of guilt about it. Kazazael was suffering far worse than hunger pangs. He tightened his belt two notches and reflected that the sword Frostfire and the warhorse Greyling were all very well, and he was proud of them, being a soldier, but if he might have a bowl of seafood stew or a thick slash of deer meat, he could appreciate the tools of his trade more properly.

The sky was darkening; night was coming on. He had fought hard, he had been through experiences which would test the nerves of any warlock who dealt with daemons, and tiredness was in his bones. Greyling was tiring too, he had run a long way, so Kothar reined him in and let him walk and blow.

The stars in the night sky were close together and very thick in the blackness. The big barbarian blinked at them in his weariness.

He wanted to slip from the saddle and remove his blanket, wrap himself in its length as well as he could, and sleep. Yet the thought of the red thing screaming in the sky drove him onward, with Greyling stumbling now in his own weariness. The forest world was long since behind them, they were moving across a great meadowland, and faintly from afar his nostrils caught the scent of salt air.

Salt air would mean the sea and the craggy rocks where the waves rolled in and broke apart in a spray of spume and water. Kothar straightened in the saddle. He had always loved the sea—he was spawn of the ocean, having come to Cumberia long ago in a boat as a lost, lonely child—and the smell of its fragrance was a stimulant to him. He reached down and with a big hand, patted the muscular neck of the grey warhorse.

"A little further only, Greyling."

Then they would rest. His body must have sleep to dare the sea beast Iormungar in its lair and take from it the white wool cloak that had been woven by enchanted mermaids long ago, deep in some blue ocean grotto. Ah, but first let his eyes drink their fill of the restless sea lifting up its swells to batter at the coastline rocks as it had done since the beginnings of Time.

The horse came to a little headland and Kothar reined him up on the rim of the black sea rocks so that he and the horse stood silhouetted against the stars. There was soft loam and grass underhoof, for the meadow grew right up to the edge of the sea stones, and he could make out gorse and heather swaying in the wind.

Standing in the saddle, the mercenary searched the headland for some place of shelter where he might make a fire and warm his body. He saw only a fallen tree a hundred yards away and he sighed. He would make do with what he had, like any other warrior in the field.

Within moments after he lay on his side with his spine to the fallen tree trunk, with his head resting on a mattock of soft grass, he was asleep. Greyling, freed of bridle and reins and saddle, browsed on the sweet grasses, and from time to time lifted his great head and stared out over the dark waters of the ocean.

In the light of early morning, Kothar woke to the pains of an empty belly. He lay a while with his eyes closed, dreaming of the dishes he had eaten in the past until the pounding of the sea waves roused him to a realization that food, for a man who knew the shoreline, lay not far away.

With the tip of his sword he dug up clams from the shingle and caught half a dozen crabs. With flint and the Steel of Frostfire he made a flame of driftwood breakings and cooked his crabs while he wolfed down the raw clams. In a little while he was rid of his hunger and he stretched in the sunlight and watched the black rocks appear on the ocean floor as the tide ran out away from the land. His hand loosed Frostfire in its scabbard. Beyond the line of black rocks, according to the wizard Kazazael, was the lair of the sea serpent Iormungar.

He waited patiently as the tide ebbed away. Then he set his feet along the coarse detritus of the shore and outward toward the rocks. His leather boots slipped a little on the rocks, they were still wet and hung with seaweeds, but he was used to the sea and he ran lightly across a line of spray-wet rocks until he stood on the very last rock of all and stared downward into a large hole where the water foamed and gurgled as it came and went.

He must go down into that hole, if he was to find the cloak. Kothar grimaced, being without appetite for a swim in these cold waters. Even as he wondered how he was going to get back up out of the hole, he stepped off the rock and plunged into the freezing waters like a stone.

Coldness caught at him, ate through his boots and mail shirt and leather hacqueton under it, stabbed his legs and arms and middle. He went down slowly through the black waters, for the to-and-fro rush of the sea buoyed him up even as he fell, so that he landed on a stone ledge that formed the outer lip of a vast sea cavern that stretched away behind him into darkness. A radiance came from the rocks and gave off a bluish light.

There was fresh air here, and no water except a few drops that had come into this place with him as he had ridden the submerged waterfall to the cavern edge. He wondered who had found this waterfall—it was invisible from the shore and had it not been for Kazazael, he would have passed it by without a glance. From the falling waters he turned his gaze to the smooth stone walls and floor of the bluish cavern.

This place was like no sea cavern he had ever seen. He saw now that the blue light came from glistening streakings on the wet walls of the cavern, as if some playful giant had dipped his fingers in blue fire and drawn their tips across those stone barriers.



Kothar began walking forward lightly, treading as might a panther on the prowl, pulling his swordbelt around in front of him so the golden hilt of Frostfire was in finger reach. His massive shoulders moved in a shrugging motion; the air of the cavern was foul and fetid; a rank stench seemed to move with the wind currents. Kothar liked the free, clean air of beach and forest; not for him this dank noxiousness.

He was annoyed, too, by an odd sound as he moved lightly across the great submarine den. At first he thought the sucking sound might be the sea itself, filling and emptying some stone cavity or other. But this he was inclined to discount, now.

The noise was too steady, and it was growing louder.

He walked on hard gravel that ground underfoot like pebbles. He glanced down, seeing a white scattering of thousands of tiny shells. No, these were not shells. They were—bones! Human bones!

Kothar shook himself,, anger at his confrontation with the unknown rumbling in his thick throat. He did not like the unknown, it made him uneasy. Give him a foe with a face to battle and a weapon to match, and Kothar was at ease with the world. These powdered bones were no part of any foe he could discover.

The bones cracked underfoot as he walked on into the next cavern, a great dark chamber filled with that same blue radiance. Squinting into the blackness, he made out big oaken chests bound with iron. Kothar grinned, showing even white teeth.

What was it Afgorkon had said? He who carries Frostfire must own nothing else? By Dwallka! These wooden boxes had the look of treasure chests.

He moved toward them, peered through the dim blue light at them. No doubt about it. He lifted a dagger from his belt, pried at a rusted lock. A bulge of forearm muscles, a bending steel blade and—*spaaang!* The lock to the first chest came loose.

Kothar gripped the chest lid and heaved.

"By Elwys' golden breasts!" he panted.

He stared at jewels as big as hen's eggs—diamonds, rubies, sapphires, emeralds—at ropes of golden links—at pearls the size of small clams—at the loot of uncounted centuries. His eyes grew big. His huge hands reached out—

There it was again—that noise!

Kothar turned his head.

"Gods of Thuum!"

A huge worm—white as a bleached sea shell, huge as Gargantos, as noisome as a marsh at low tide—slithered down the far wall. Its head reared up, questing, and Kothar saw its pink nostrils flare as it smelled him out. Its other end was lost in the shadows high atop the cavern ceiling, but what the barbarian saw was enough to make his heart thud in dismay.

As the slug moved, it left glowing blue shine behind it. This then, was what kept the cavern eternally lighted for any rash human who might choose to come wandering here. Kothar nodded grimly and drew

his blade.

He advanced cautiously. The memory of those human bones was in his brain; he knew the worm was no mean antagonist. Other men had died within sight of that great treasure. Kothar resolved he would live to carry it away.

The worm was close now, towering above his head, and Kothar was a tall man. Its maw was opening and closing as if it tasted the human flesh awaiting its appetite. Its maw was dripping slime in great drops onto the floor as the slug undulated closer.

Kothar leaped, sword high to slash.

In midleap a drop of that slime from the slug's mouth splashed on his left shoulder. Agony burned through the big barbarian. A lesser man would have screamed and staggered back, to fall victim to the gaping maw. Not Kothar. He leaped forward, dodging another glob of slime.

Frostfire flashed in the blue light.

The great steel blade sank deep into blubbery white hide. With a savage curse on his lips, Kothar pulled it free, struck again. A gaping wound showed in the writhing, twisting worm. The head was moving to left and right, the maw was opening and closing, the giant slug was making a mewling sound. It was hurt, badly hurt. Faster it moved, as if to overwhelm this rash enemy with its sheer bulk.

Kothar never ceased to strike, slashing again and again at that great hulk, widening the slit in its side. The blue length of Frostfire was slimed now with ichor, it stank as the worm stank, and made the young giant snort his disgust. Yet always that blade moved, and as it moved, it cut deep into and through the worm meat.

With a soft plop the rest of the great worm fell from the wall. Instantly it began to twist and flop about, seeking to catch this rash intruder in its domain and slay him. Twice the huge length of the creature brushed Kothar, twice it almost ran over him, nearly pinning him beneath that soft weight from which there would be no escape, not even for his mighty muscles.

Once the barbarian had to put a hand on that blubbery mass and vault over it to land catlike on his sandaled feet, whirling and slashing again and again with Frostfire, always at that same gaping wound.

Now the blade had cut the worm almost in half. The rear length of the creature was barely moving. The head was lower, now, inches above the ground. The worm was in its death throes, cut almost in twain. What remained was still dangerous, however. The tiny worm-brain did not yet know its body was dying. It would be some time before that fact registered on what served it as a mind; until then, Kothar must go on striking with the blue steel blade.

Then the worm-head touched the floor and the entire body became quiescent, except for a few twitches here and there. Kothar staggered back, his face wet with sweat. He drew a massively muscled forearm across his brow, grinning coldly.

"Damned shibboleth," he grumbled, letting Frostfire sink until its stained point touched the bone-strewn floor.

He turned away, toward the chests.

"Dwallka—*no!*" he bellowed, leaping.

The chests were disappearing, fading into thin mists into which he plunged his hands, letting Frostfire clang on the cavern floor. His fingers stabbed here and there, reaching for a huge emerald, a giant fire-pearl. His hands closed on empty air.

The treasure had existed only in the worm-brain! Just as a scavenger beetle dangled a bit of food before its prey to lure it nearer, so the worm created the treasure chest out of sheer mind-imagery, to attack humans for its food. Kothar rasped curses in high Cumberian and Low Solesian.

A moment later, laughter rumbled from his deep chest. He could appreciate the grim humor of the jest. Well, he still had Frostfire, and that sword was worth a dozen such treasure chests.

He walked on; now, after wiping clean the blade, he carried the great sword naked in his hand, for his was the quick suspicion of the barbarian mind that saw danger in the rush of wind or the faint glint of light on metal. Yet there was no wind, no glimmer of light other than the blue slime-radiance.

Through small chambers and large he stalked, and now he noticed that he moved downward, as though to the bottom of the sea. The walls were wetly dripping, the air was humid, moist. Kothar found it difficult to breathe.

He rounded a corner of rock, stood on the stone rim of a vast pool of water. Above him, an eerie light shone, revealing a great cave that stretched away into utter darkness.

This was the cavern of the cloak. It had to be. It was all jagged rock and faint grey light and it was vast, a deep sea cavern unknown to any creatures but the magicians who saw it in the flickering flames of their ensorcelled fires, and to the sea beast, Iormungar, whose lair it was. Kothar studied the great cavern from the smooth platform that jutted out over its dark, placid waters.

The rocky walls of the cavern were faintly luminescent, giving off a greyish glow. In that light, Kothar saw a white something high above his head, fluttering faintly in the wind currents eddying throughout the cave. It was a grotesque caricature of a human being with arms and legs and head. It gave off a blue sheen as it rippled and danced like a frightened ghost.

Yes, this was the cloak the mermaids had woven.

Kothar looked at the walls of the cavern. They were craggy and afforded him handholds. He could mount up the wall close to the cloak. Ah, but when he was up there, how was he to reach it? It hung suspended in space, fully five feet or more from the closest wall.

Frostfire might be the answer.

He stripped off his mail shirt and leather hacqueton, his boots and scabbard belt. Naked but for a cotton cloth about his loins and his fur kilt and with Frostfire gripped between his teeth, he began the slow ascent of those slimy, slippery-wet walls.

Twice his powerful hands slipped on the grey-green rocks, twice he almost fell to the jagged rocks and dark waters below. Only his giant sinews kept him on the wall, clinging like a limpet. His breath burned his throat, and there was the stink of something alien in his nostrils.

Yet always he went upwards, his eyes fastened on the white cloak flapping as if alive where there was

no wind. Soon, now. Soon! His fingers gripped, his toes found holds, he hoisted his giant body closer to the cloak.

Where a tongue of stone thrust from the wall, he set his hand. He would have to hang there a moment, poised above the rocks, for only from such a handhold could he reach out with Frostfire and catch that white thing.

Kothar drew a deep breath. The fingers of his left hand stretched out and closed on the rock-tongue. He let his toes slip from the slimed stone wall and hung in midair. His fingers did not have a firm hold; there was wetness under them, a slippery wetness that prevented his fingertips from gripping. A slight mistake in his balance and those fingers would slide off, and he would plummet down onto the jagged rocks below.

He risked a glance at the granite fangs waiting like the mouth of Iormungar to crush his flesh to pulp. His heart hammered inside his rib cage. They were sharp, those rocks, as if burnished by the waters flowing in and out among them.

Kothar drew a deep breath.

Gingerly he stretched out his swordarm and saw the point of Frostfire touch the cloak as it swayed to unseen forces. He put strain on his rolling muscles, seeking to inch closer. Again he sent out Frostfire.

This time the steel point clung to the cloak.

Kothar drew the sword and cloak toward him. He could not shift the cloak to his person, his left hand was clinging to the rock tongue, his right held the sword.

Far below his feet dangling in midair, he heard a gurgling, sucking sound, as if the cavern waters were running out. He heeded not the sound, all his attention was focused on the cloak that clung so precariously to the steel blade. One slight breeze and the cloak would fall.

A monstrous bellow shook the air.

A civilized man would have frozen motionless before that terrifying roar, or be startled into a fatal slip and plummet onto the jagged stones below. Kothar was a barbarian, his nerves were as solid as the rock to which he clung.

Even as his ears told him he faced danger, he was stabbing his toes toward the wall. His foot slipped, then fastened. The young giant let go his handhold, he threw his body sideways. His hip slammed into the wet rock even as his freed left hand caught hold of a stone ledge.

"Dwallka!" he breathed, muscles going rigid.

Inches from his leg, a scaled snout snapped shut.

Kothar shuddered, goggling down at the monster rising steadily up out of the waters boiling far below him. The barbarian had never imagined anything so huge. Its body was fully as large as half a dozen ships, the kind that ply the waters of the Inland Sea between Azynyssa and the southern kingdoms of Sybaria and Malakor. Its scales were a bluish-grey and glistened as if polished with oil.

Atop that immense body, half-hidden like an iceberg beneath the cavern waters, was a thick, supple

neck, longer than five tall men standing one above the other. On that neck was a head framed in scales, with three bulging red eyes glaring hate and hunger up at Kothar.

Thick serpents seemed to hang from the head, twisting and turning, hissing with gaping jaws like Iormungar himself, seeking to find and pierce the skin of this rash manthing with their own fangs. The trio of scarlet eyes, the living serpents that were a part of the titanic sea beast, made Kothar press back against the slimy stone wall.

"Dwallka—hear me," he growled. "A gold coin for your nearest temple if you get me out of this."

Aie! This was the father of all dragons!

Against him, Kothar was no more than a midget. The huge head was lowering, preparing to strike a second time. More than half its bulk was still hidden by the boiling waters, but its scaled neck could reach to the narrow ledge where Kothar had braced his heels.

Kothar grinned mirthlessly, sensing his doom.

His right hand still held Frostfire, with the white cloak caught upon its point. The youthful giant knew he could never descend that slime-wet wall with Iormungar yawning his maw to engulf him. One false move, even if the sea-beast only brushed him with his snout, and he would fall to be impaled on the sharp rocks.

Even as he waited to feel Iormungar's fangs close upon his flesh, Kothar studied the waters bubbling and frothing about the monster's hidden body. Kothar was as much at home in water as any fish. If he leaped for the sea waters lapping the stone ledge far below, the beast could pick him out of it as he might pick any other fish.

He felt the sweat wet upon his face. He was not afraid, inside he was raging mad at the thought that he had come so far only to fail.

"A golden coin, Dwallka," he reminded his god.

As if Dwallka of the War Hammer put the thought in his head, Kothar gripped the haft of Frostfire and stared hard through the murky gloom of the cavern at the three red eyes of Iormungar.

His hand moved the sword, the cloak fluttered free.

And Kothar leaped.

The great sword held rigid, he dropped full upon the uplifted snout of Iormungar. The cloak had fallen where he had aimed it, full across those three scarlet eyes, like a blindfold.

The mercenary could see those glittering rednesses through the thin cloth of the cloak, like coals visible through sea mist. Bracing his feet, Kothar stabbed sharply at the nearest eye.

Iormungar bellowed, head rearing upward.

The young giant tottered, striving desperately to maintain his balance. His footholds on the huge head were giving way beneath him, but even while he lurched wildly he drove Frostfire deep into a second scarlet orb.

The sea beast screamed and shook its massive head.

Kothar went flying.

So instinctive were his reflexes, so much the barbarian was this golden-haired young giant—that even as he felt his perch go out from under him, he slashed sideways with his blade. Deep into that third red eye he drove his edge, saw the cloak fouled by the blood running from it.

Then he was dropping like a stone, hitting the scaled sea beast and bouncing off, to splash deep into the cavern waters. Downward into cold black depths he plunged, sensing the flailing bulk of the monster beside him.

Blinded, Iormungar was still dangerous. His fangs could still bite deep, his head would be questing for this man who had taken away his sight. Bellowing roars shook the cavern walls. Even beneath the surface Kothar could feel their vibrations.

He swam upward. His head popped into view as the sea beast was crashing its scaled head into a rock wall. The gigantic body was thrashing about; a hip hit Kothar and bounced him sideways. And where the head had struck the wall, there was a crack running through the rock.

Overhead, the ceiling was reacting to the body heaving madly in its pain throes. Clumps of dirt and chunks of rock fell into the water. A jagged stone hit Kothar on his shoulder as he tried to make his way to the rim that ran about part of the cave.

Something reared high above the barbarian and slapped downward, hitting the water flatly. Thunder rolled in the closed chamber as the monstrous tail struck inches from the Cumberian. Had it landed on him, it would have crushed his head and shoulders to red pulp.

Kothar knew the serpent was hunting for him. Its snout was dipping downward, its nostrils flared as it sought out the man-scent. The salt water hid his smell, for Iormungar was searching blindly, helplessly, while its frightful bulk threshed and twisted.

The mercenary kept his left hand on the scales that rubbed his flesh raw, feeling his way across that body and through the water until he was behind the sea beast. More and more rocks and dirt were raining down from the cavern roof. Glancing up, Kothar saw that soon, unless Iormungar stopped his floppings, he would bring the entire cavern down upon him.

There was no feeling in the scales upon which Kothar half stood, staring at the collapsing cave. The beast would not know where the man was, if he made no sound.

He let the scaled body sweep him toward the rock rim. He poised an instant, then leaped. His bare feet hit wet stone and slid.

Kothar went down on all fours to keep from sliding back into the waters. A dozen yards away, the limply wet cloak was draped across the very edge of the stone platform. He would have to get the cloak, right from under the fangs of Iormungar.

He ran like a deer for the cloak. His hand stabbed downward, tangled his fingers in it, yanked it up. The cracks in the cavern walls were widening, whole chunks of the stone ceiling were crashing onto the rock platform and into the green spray of the frothing cavern waters.

Iormungar roared and snapped.

Kothar saw that maw opening for him and dove. His shoulder hit the platform and he rolled just as part of the rock rim broke off where the sea beast bit into it.

The entire cavern was falling in now.

Kothar ran as he had never run, angling his body at the stone archway. Behind him the sea beast would have smelled him out, would be darting its head straight at him.

There was no time to turn and fight. If he paused to swing Frostfire, the ceiling would come down and crush him. Time was an eternity of flying feet and a great sword flashing in the air in his right hand.

A fetid stench touched his nostrils. He felt hot breath searing his back. Kothar left the stone floor in a savage leap. Only his rolling muscles could have carried him across that last twenty feet of space and through the archway before those fangs closed down upon his flesh.

He went through the arch, turning slightly and seeing the great mouth stretched wide to swallow him. His spine hit the floor beyond the archway just as Iormungar's snout closed on empty air and rammed into the arch itself.

Stone cracked. The cavern rumbled.

Kothar was too mesmerized by the catastrophe before his eyes to move. He lay and watched the roof fall; he saw the walls cave in upon the bellowing beast that thrashed madly in its death agonies. Even Iormungar could not withstand those uncountable tons of rock and stone thudding down upon him.

The powdered dust from those rocks choked the barbarian. With a snarl, he got to his feet, brushing the stuff from his lips. He could see a long, forked tongue emerge from between huge white fangs and slither across the stone. It quivered a moment, then lay still.

Kothar let the breath out of his lungs, snatched up his mail shirt, his hacqueton and his boots. "Thanks, Dwallka," he grinned. "I'll buy a woman from your temple in Shrillickar, first chance I get—along with that gold coin I still owe you!"

He turned and ran for the outer world.

#### Chapter Four

Once again he stood before the flayed wizard.

Standing on widespread feet he lifted the cloak and held it high for the red thing that had been a man to see. The cloak quivered in his grasp as if it were alive.

"Kazazael!" Kothar roared. "I have the cloak!\*"

His hand held the living stuff, not letting it get away. Above him, swaying in the wind currents, Kazazael stared down with glassy, disbelieving eyes. Three times he blinked those eyes into which his agonized sweat dripped, before understanding touched his mind.

"The cloak!" he screeched in hoarse tones. "Filatha maganow! Akk sognath temetto!"

As Kothar stared, the cloak tore itself from his clasp and soared upward toward the flayed wizard. It hovered above him a moment, then settled down about him. There was a blurring in the air; an instant later, Kazazael had his skin back.

The wizard descended slowly to the ground as if a demon hand were lowering him. His face was hard, it might have been carved from wood, and Kothar scowled blackly when he saw his wild expression.

"Now let Red Lori beware," the sorcerer snarled. "I wear the cloak of Iormungar and so I am protected against her enchantments. Now my ensorcelments shall bring doom to her—and to King Markoth!"

His newly fleshed arms rose high. Sounds thundered from his throat. Overhead the sky darkened. Kothar could see stars through this unnatural blackness. The words seemed to shape themselves in the air, in letters of red flame.

Instantly, a wind rose. It blew about Kothar, flapping his fur kilt, whipping his legs. The barbarian snarled, putting a hand on Frostfire's hilt; he did not hold with magic, he would rather put his trust in the blued steel blade at his side. But Kazazael was a friend, and he had promised Elfa the queen to do what he could to help.

The wind grew stronger. Kothar felt his body raised into the air. His feet sought to find solid ground under him, but he could not. The wind was carrying him skyward, along with the grinning wizard.

"Let Red Lori try her tricks. My magic will fend them off." His eyes glared balefully under his shaggy brows as Kazazael glanced at Kothar. "I'll need you, mercenary. My magicks must be very strong to fight and defeat those of the witch. They, will take all my concentration, all my powers. During that time I shall be helpless against non-magic—like soldiers."

Kothar grinned. Soldiers he could deal with. Apparently he was going to like what Kazazael had planned for him. Gods! He was in a mood to do a little slaying, after all this sorcery he'd been encountering. Give him honest steel and honest human-flesh to fight, and he was happy.

Far below, the countryside went by as the whirlwind carried him and the magician on their headlong course.

Kothar could make out the edge of the sea and the great escarpment beneath which the sea beast Iormungar had guarded the cavern of the cloak. He saw the distant battlefield from which he had stumbled, and the dead bodies still lying there.

The wind blew faster, faster.

In the distance, Kothar saw a high black tower rising from a rocky island in the sea. This was the home of Kazazael, from which he sent out his enchantments. Rumor said the tower was protected by the demons Bathophet and Asumu, who served Kazazael.

Downward they dropped. The stone walls of the tower parted and through this opening Kazazael and Kothar were blown. The barbarian felt his senses spin dizzily, then a stone floor was underfoot and he was rumbling words in his throat, words that were half curses, half prayers to all the gods he knew.

Kazazael sprang to a brilliant red pentagram which was inscribed with ancient sigils in solid gold, in bright silver and in bits of oricalc. Inside the scarlet star, the sorcerer lifted high his arms.



"In the sacred names of Eudor and Dakkag, I entreat protection from the demons who serve Red Lori! Throw about my tower, about my person and that of the mercenary warrior Kothar—the protection we shall need!"

A great calm fell upon the island.

For the first time since he had gone into battle on the plain of dead trees, Kothar felt at ease with his world. His stomach rumbled, telling him he needed food. His empty belly seemed to be rubbing against his spine and the mere thought of a steak cooked over red coals and served with its juices dripping, made his senses reel. Ah, and with that a beaker of cold midlands ale.

As if Kazazael understood his wants, he growled, "Go below. My maidservants will attend to you. Leave me to work out the spells that will defeat Red Lori."

Kothar was glad to abandon the wild-eyed wizard. He thrust open a wooden door and went down stone steps to the floor below. The smells of cooking food came to his nostrils.

A hand lifting a leather curtain permitted him to see into a large hall that held a huge trestle table and a dozen highbacked wooden chairs. In the shadows were four girls who came forward at sight of him.

Kothar grinned, knowing how to deal with pretty maidservants when he required food. He kissed one, pinched the plump buttock of another, stroked a third on her smooth bare side, and winked at the fourth.

"Fetch meat, pretty ones. Meat and cheese, good barley bread and ale. I'm starving to death—but you can bring back my strength."

They ran to serve him, carrying heaping platters of smoking meats, sharp cheeses, bread steaming from the baking ovens, and ale so cold the leather jack that held it was coated with drops of water. Kothar was a giant in stature, and he boasted a giant's appetite. He grinned when he saw those wooden platters, and hooked a chair toward the table with a toe.

He ate until the platters were almost empty. With bread he scooped tasty gravies off a dish spiced with a wedge of cheese on the bread, and swallowed beakers of cold ale at a gulp. When he was done, he leaned his head back against his chairback and wiped his lips with a hairy, bronzed forearm.

"Come, now, you girls," he called, beckoning the giggling maids closer. "You've served me well, and it's only right I serve you four the same."

Kothar had appetites for other things than food, and they were just as vast as the needs of his belly. His huge right hand was drawing a willing brunette toward his knee when his keen ears heard the pound of heavy footsteps trampling across the island stones.

The big barbarian growled deep in his throat. Instead of the brunette, his hand sought out Frostfire, dragging it from its scabbard. Kazazael had said he was weak against hired soldiers while working on the spells that would defeat Red Lori. He, Kothar, was not weak against fighting men.

His laughter rumbled as he brushed past the girl, clapping her behind with a big hand. He stalked like a hungry panther across the great hall and out into the chamber where the oaken, iron-barred tower door was hung. With his free left hand, he threw open that door.

A dozen men in mail shirts and metal caps and with the viper device of King Markoth sewn onto their cloaks were moving across the rocky shingle toward the tower. Kothar grinned. Red Lori would have sent them by a trick of magic, knowing Kazazael's weakness.

Men like these had chased him from the Plain of Dead Trees. Men like these had hunted him down like a dog. His long brown fingers twisted about the swordshaft they held. It was time to pay back the indignities he had suffered.

It was not the custom of Kothar to wait for battle. With a bull bellow, he leaped from the doorway, blade swinging through the air, straight for the mercenaries. One man went down and then a second, blood gouting from their wounds, before the others could react.

The ten soldiers who were left fanned out into a big circle. They would close that circle slowly, with Kothar in its center. The barbarian would be forced to fight in front and in back and at both sides, all at the same time. It was a clever plan. Against any other man, it might have succeeded.

Kothar laughed, head flung back, long tawny hair blowing in the wind. They were going to make a battle of it! Praise to Dwallka of the War Hammer! He was in the mood for a good fight.

He leaped sideways, sword flashing in the sunlight. The blued blade clove through neckmeat, a man screamed as he felt the steel bite deep. At the same instant, Kothar gripped a second man and flung him sideways, bowling over the two men nearest him.

Before the death circle could form again, the barbarian was blooding his blade in the three men closest to him. They dropped, the red gash of their wounds spurting blood. Kothar never stopped, he was a tiger on the prowl among a herd of lambs. His sword was his talon, cutting, stabbing, slashing.

As well try to hold the wind as hold the Cumberian when the blood lust bubbled in his veins. The mercenaries of King Markoth shouted to one another but the answering cries were gurgles drowned in bloody throats. Frostfire drank at blood, its keen edges starved for the red liquid which was the food of life to it.

Eight men down in minutes, only four mercenaries left. They stared in dismay at their dead and dying companions; they turned to run.

Kothar howled his glee, going after them in great leaps that carried him across ten feet of island rock at a bound. His sword rose and fell, once it thrust forward, again it slashed sideways into human flesh. The last man he caught thigh-deep in cold sea water and made his head fly through the air to splash in the ocean as Frostfire cut through his neck.

The big barbarian felt let down. The fight had lasted only a little while, scarcely long enough for him to work up a good sweat. The water at his legs was cold, so he trudged upward across the shingle, hoping Red Lori would send more men to kill.

The thought of the four maidservants made him walk a little faster. After a fight, there was nothing like soft lips and smooth flesh in his arms to make him forget the berserk rage in which he battled. There were four wenches waiting to make him happy.

"Not yet, barbarian!"

This was the voice of Kazazael drifting through the air about him. Kothar grumbled—the brunette was a

shapely siren—but a promise to help Queen Elfa, was a promise he meant to keep.

"What now, wizard?" he growled.

The bodiless voice said, "As I am weak against non-magic-things—so also is Red Lori. Go to her, sellsword! Slay her with the blade Frostfire!"

A black cloud came down from the sky and caught Kothar in its mists. Instantly the barbarian was swept up off the island of the thaumaturgic tower and whirled across the sky like a golden slash of lightning in a summer rainstorm.

His booted feet landed solidly on stone.

Kothar shook himself, growling curses at all magicians who treated human beings like dogs to be picked up by the scruff of the neck and hurled where the sorcerer wanted them to go. His eyes took in the long corridor, flanked on one side by a windowed wall and on the other by a rounded length of black obsidian.

He knew where he was, high in the tower that belonged to the witch, Red Lori. Behind that obsidian wall she worked her necromancies. This walking space between her thaumaturgic chamber and the windowed wall overlooking the city of Commoral was narrow, made only for two men to walk abreast; or, as some men whispered in the taverns, for the thing that was Red Lori's familiar to stalk down its prey. And that prey was anyone rash enough to come uninvited to the doors beyond which Red Lori wrought her wizardries.

Kothar let anger rumble from his throat and tightened his grip on Frostfire. He was no prey to anyone. Let him who thought so, be rash enough to attack and—

"Queen Elfa," he breathed.

She came striding forward, head lowered, the sunlight streaming through the windows striking red fire from the garnets in her golden hair. Her stride never faltered as her champion cried her name. She came on steadily, staring at the ground before her, nearer and nearer.

The instincts of a barbarian are akin to those of an animal. Kothar stepped to one side and lifted Frostfire. This was not Elfa of the flirting eyes.

As a matter of fact, because she walked with head down, he could not see the eyes of this simulacra of the queen at all. The skin prickled along his spine as the woman came close enough to touch with his long sword.

"Look at me, Elfa," he rasped.

Her head came up just as she flung herself at him with a scream of utter hate. Where laughing blue eyes should be, was only black emptiness. This was no woman. This was the witch's familiar, Slothann. Her claws were out, raised to scratch. Where those poisoned claws fell, death would come hastening.

Kothar moved like a striking panther. His bulging thigh muscles worked as he leaped to one side and away from the screeching woman-shape, and while he dove, he drove the flat of his blade against the familiar.

Blue steel hit her body, sparked like lightning.

Slothann screamed shrilly in pain at the touch of bare steel to her body. The outlines of her woman-shape shimmered, blurred. Instead of the queen—a great black leopard crouched before Kothar, feral green eyes staring at him, long furry body tensed to leap.

"Damned harpy," snarled Kothar.

He did not wait to see the cat come through the air at him. He had hunted leopards in the rain forests of Azynyssa when he served in the guard of King Thyddeus. He knew those cats never stood for a fight, but liked to pounce from ambush. The barbarian slashed out with Frostfire. The familiar dodged the blow and sought to strike back with a claws-bared paw. Kothar cursed and swung his blue blade in a return sweep.

The keen edge bit into fur and flesh, lopped off the huge paw. Once again lightnings sparked and flashed, as if the magic in the blade warred with the evil in the cat.

The familiar shrieked in agony.

Slothann was merely a black cat, now, that ran on three legs, trailing blood. Kothar watched it scamper out of sight among the shadows. He grinned, chuckling.

There were no soldiers in this edifice. No honest mercenary would serve within a mile of Red Lori. Every man and woman in Commoral feared her and her black arts. They had to obey her enchantments, as witness the dozen men she had hurled onto Kazazael's island, but they had no love for her and unless she commanded them by her spells, they gave her a wide berth.

Kothar began his walk along the obsidian wall.

Somewhere here, there was a door.

Halfway around the black stone pile, he came upon it. It was fashioned of bronze carved in a thousand representations of the evil demon, Omorphon. Omorphon was a serpent-god out of the ancient legends of the planet Yarth. It was said that Omorphon had come to the call of the first wizards from the gulfs of demoniac space, that it brought with it dark, wicked powers by which those early necromancers worked their evil. Kothar sensed the evil in that door, realized it was protecting Red Lori in some unimaginable way.

Ordinarily, the barbarian would have hurled his muscular bulk at that bronze slab to bring it crashing open. But the very barbarism that would have made him do that made him cautious, as a wolf is cautious about a trap where the man-smell lingers.

Kothar studied the carvings. There might be a clue in, the bronze bas-relief, some little hint as to how the door might be opened safely. His hard eyes saw the intricate serpent coils form subtle patterns. They seemed to blur, to offer anyone rash enough to touch its surface a chasm waiting to catch his body, to let him fall endlessly throughout eternity in some special hell known only to Omorphon.

Only Red Lori could pass that doorway unharmed, he decided grimly. Or her familiar, Slothann.

Kothar grinned mirthlessly. Slothann had run away from his sword, but she had left something of herself behind. The barbarian moved along the hall corridor until he came to the black paw he had severed. With

the paw, he might be able to open that devil's gateway.

Furry paw in hand, Kothar braced himself for instant action. He raised the paw—hurled it. And then he leaped.

As the fur touched the bronze door, the metal seemed to melt. Kothar had a flashing glimpse of an abyss opening under him as he dove forward. Had he not thrown the paw, he would be tumbling through that abyss right now, hopelessly lost from the sight of men forever.

Instead, there was something buoying him up and over that awful chasm. The black magic still in the severed paw? Kothar did not know. He did not care.

For now he was inside the chamber and the bronze' door was firming back into shape behind him. His great body was poised on booted toes, ready to leap to left or right or straight ahead. Frostfire was in his hand, quivering to strike. His eyes stabbed across the room.

The chamber was empty.

He could see the phials and alembics containing the magic brews and potions of the witch, the jars and cannisters holding the dried herbs and powders necessary to her magicks. Against the wall, velvet draperies embroidered by golden threadings contained the formulae for her black arts. Overhead a domed ceiling flashed sigils in silver, sigils that moved oddly back and forth as he stared up at them.

But of Red Lori, there was no sign.

Had she made herself invisible, knowing Kazazael might send Kothar to hunt her down and destroy her? The barbarian moved his blade here and there in the empty space closest to him.

Foot by foot, he advanced into the chamber, sword out and always sliding back and forth before him. Magic was being done in here. He could feel it by the raised hairs at the back of his head, by the smell in his nostrils that was not the clean smell of forest or seashore but of something musty and incredibly evil.

Kothar leaped back.

To his right, where his sword had passed through the air, stood a black cauldron. A pale green steam rose from its bubbling contents. It seemed almost as if his sword had painted a black kettle upon tripod legs above a little fire.

His nose wrinkled. Ptahhhh! He could smell that noxious concoction now. It stank like the fabled pits of Achollos, where the dead and rotting bodies of sinning sorcerers are said to lie unburied, waiting for the demons to come and reanimate them as their playthings. Through the verdant steam from the cauldron, he made more passes with his swordblade.

And now—

Faintly he could see other things in this conjure chamber. What had seemed empty space was filled with rune-encrusted onyx tablets, necromantic screens of chalcydony carved in the hundred faces of dread Omorphon, witch-drums made from human skin, and with smoking braziers.

Kothar grunted. He could see Red Lori too, now.

She was all white flesh and creamy skin, clad only in a red velvet panel before her loins and a similar panel behind her. Her arms were lifted high, making her full breasts quiver, her red hair waving where there was no breeze as she stood between seven athanors fueled by demon fires. Her sole garment was held to her loins by golden links shaped in the forbidden words of Belthamquar, father of demons.

Red Lori was a witch, but by Dwallka! She was a woman, as well. Kothar stared, tightening his grip on Frostfire to strengthen his will. Kazazael had sent him to kill her. He could not do so.

His eyes drank in her beauty. It seemed to Kothar that the red velvet that hid her body contained other words from the forbidden almanac that was attributed to Belthamquar himself, dictated eons before to a mage as great as Afgorkon. Those evil symbols protected her, they hid her body from human eyes. They also furnished the eldritch energies by which she worked her necromancies.

Slay her, man of Cumberia!

This was the voice of Kazazael whispering to his mind. Kothar growled low in his throat. Against that voice he was powerless. He must obey it.

Slowly he moved forward.

Red Lori was unsuspecting, her mind was too deeply sunk in the incantations with which she battled Kazazael to react to the sight or sound of the big barbarian. He strode forward, reaching out his left hand to catch hold of the woman.

Thunder exploded around him. He stood there with his shoulders bowed as sound swept like a maddened wind around his body, buffeting him, lashing out in frightening explosions that racked every bone in his body.

"Back—stay back, barbarian!" the sound commanded.

Kothar shook himself, lunged forward. It would take more than a noise to keep him from the witch. He staggered through waves of vibrating air that hit him with the fury of ten thousand whips. Dimly he sensed this was the demon Belthamquar defending his priestess. Belthamquar, who permitted an extension of his diabolism to seep through into this world of Kothar, was determined to keep his own.

The big youth slashed at the sound as if it were human. He heard the whistle of the steel, felt the hilt quiver in his huge hand. His dazed eyes caught glimpses of another world, an evil megacosm where gods and daemons lived, where wickedness was a way of life, where the humans trapped in that cosmos were tormented beyond endurance every moment of their lives.

Something caught at Kothar, sought to drag him from the chamber and toward that lethal land of Belthamquar, to imprison him in its deepest hell for this sacrilege he was working upon the priestess of the demon-god. Kothar fought back, he used Frostfire in sweeping slashes, listening to agonized screeches from that distant land—as if in some psychic manner, his blade could cut across the chasms of space and eons of Time to injure the hobgobs who served the father of demons.

The sound was a painful shrillness in his ears as the giant staggered sideways, struck with his sword again and yet again. The muscles of his mighty arm bunched and bulged to his movements, he was an animal battling with Belthamquar for something more precious than life itself.

Sweat ran down his face and chest, it trickled along his thickly thewed legs. "By Dwallka—no!" he

roared, swinging the great sword. The pain throbbed in his chest and in his ears, then ran along every nerve-end. He fought to stay here, in this world he knew, panting and sweating, until the pain abated slightly.

Unseen hands fell away.

He swayed there, staring at his stained blade that ran with something not unlike blood, but a whitish blood that might have dripped from cacodaemons. As its droplets hit the floor, they turned to a sickly green mist that rose upward like the smoke from an ensorcelled fire and faded into nothingness.

Beyond the green mist, he saw Red Lori.

Still she stood with her bare arms raised, still her voice cried out in ringing tones the enchanted evokements of her spells. With those invocations she fought Kazazael, by their dread power she sought to penetrate his diabolic defenses. Kothar saw the muscles strutted in her shapely legs, in her bared belly, and sensed the deepness of her concentration. She did not even know that he was here.

He leaped like a panther for his prey.

With a hand he caught her arm, whirled her. He lifted Frostfire to strike her sweat-wet temple with its jeweled hilt, reversing the blade. Red Lori swayed, her blued eyelids still shut against reality. Her full red lips were slightly parted, her thin nostrils quivered against this desecration.

Her eyelids lifted.

Fury blazed out at him from her green eyes. A rage so intense it was almost palpable beat at him, like the wings of some invisible bird. Kothar growled and lowered his head, tightening his finger-grip.

"Girl—come on," he snarled.

"Get away—fool! Go back to your forests—and live! Stay here—and die!" She screeched at him like any fishwife, maddened by her interrupted incantations. Her hands rose up, beat against his face and throat and shoulders.

"Belthamquar—aid me!" she screamed.

The smooth flesh under his handgrip changed to slimy, squishy rottedness. Kothar gaped and almost released her. This was not Red Lori he had hold of, it was some boggart from beyond, all fetid flesh and slimy skin that writhed and jiggled in his palm.

Retching against the fetid stink, he came close to letting her go. Only the realization that it was the demon-god helping her kept his fingers where they were. And now his own barbaric anger surged to life. He shook the girl-demon, rattled her teeth with the fury of his jerkings.

She wailed, and instantly she was Red Lori again.

But now she was a different Lori, she was a woman whose body was an irresistibly fleshy temptation to a man. Her smile was lewd, her green eyes flared with promises of erotic delights no man born of woman had ever known. Against his chest she thrust her breasts, her hips, her bare arms closed about his neck and her lips widened for his kiss.

Kothar drew her against him. Aie! This was witchery he could understand. Yet in some dim corner of his mind he heard the voice of Kazazael.

No, Kothar—*no! Beware the daughter of Hastarth!*

Hastarth was the she-demon who brought madness with her illicit caresses, with her succubus-like visits in the dead of night, to tempt men's minds and bodies to her worship. In her temples, men and women adored her by offering up money with their bodies to casual passersby.

Kothar was a barbarian, with the impulses of a savage on whose bronzed hide the niceties of civilization were no more lasting than the effect of a sunburn. His mightily thewed arms crushed Red Lori to him, his lips fastened to her mouth in a kiss.

Aie! Fool that he was!

A lassitude came upon Kothar, a sweet lethargy in which his muscles became as water. As a fever sapped strength, so too did this embrace of the witch-woman. He rumbled anger deep in his chest as he loosed his arms and gripped Red Lori by her long red hair. Desperately he sought to tug her lips from his, but she knew the secrets of Hastarth, she clung to him as any limpet. And his muscles were weak. Weak!

Visions came to him like phantasms out of nightmare. He saw himself in a garden filled with lovely, fragrant flowers, and with even more lovely women who ran to do his bidding, who slipped beside him where he lay on his flower-bed to teach him the forbidden caresses of the Orient, of Johunga and Callath.

Kothar stood enthralled, staring upon unendurable pleasure even as the lips of Red Lori drained him of his life forces. His great body shook to the delights his bemused eyes were seeing, offering no more struggle to the sorceress. His hands still tangled their fingers in her hair but now they caressed, they stroked.

A city man would have succumbed. His spirit was not the restless savage thing that lay inside the yellow-poll'd barbarian. Inside Kothar, something—his soul, his *arete*—shrank back from such a life of ease and comfort. A little of this loveplay in a garden—yes! But a life devoted to his own sensual pleasures—no!

There was more to life than beautiful women.

Even as he lazed with female flesh on his flower bed, he wanted the clash of arms, the fierce shouts of men fighting to kill that they might stay alive. From somewhere deep inside him, the Cumberian summoned up that *arete*, strengthened it with his iron will.

Sensing his opposition, Red Lori writhed closer.

The very slight shifting of her smoothly skinned body woke the barbarian nature of this man she kissed. Kothar growled, his hands dropped to her hips where the golden chains encircled them. Those chains—each link carved in a representation of Balthamquar's demon-words—stung his palms like fire.

The pain sent new energy flooding his giant form.

His fingers closed on those golden links, his mind told him he must suffer, he must endure this agony, because by it alone could he break free of this terrible thralldom. His fingers tightened, tightened.



Red Lori cried out in the pain of that finger grip.

And Kothar pushed her backward.

With the flat of his big hand he caught her cheek, drove her sideways and away from him. The witch-woman screeched curses, she sought to break free entirely, but his stabbing hand was like lightning. It caught her wrist, held her.

Now Kothar could see the great chamber in which he stood as if a veil had been riven from his eyes. Awful forces warred here, along with him and the redheaded sorceress. Demons bit and scratched and battled, rolling upon the ground or standing upright. Behind them, like glimpses of hellfires, he could see the worlds out of which they had come at the summons of Red Lori and of Kazazael.

Bloody rains fell in the room, splashing and bubbling all around the barbarian. Fire rose upward from the ensorcelled floor, red tongues lapping at the demons who writhed and cursed and twisted in that magic conflagration. The blood-rain met the fire, sought to extinguish it, but the rains were feeble, the flames were strong.

Kothar sensed that by distracting Red Lori, he himself had weakened those rains, enabled Kazazael to make strong the hellflames. The demons summoned up by the wizard did not suffer from the red tongues, they only ate at the servitors of Balthamquar.

Red Lori fought him, but his strength was back in his body and he held her as though she were a child. Her bare heels pummeled his booted ankles, her fingers showed their scarlet nails as she tried to scratch him and could not. She wept, she begged, she sought to bite his wrists with her sharp white teeth.

The barbarian laughed. "Look, Lori! Watch Kazazael hurl your friends back to the hells out of which you drew them!"

"May Belthamquar—father of demons!—sink his red-hot teeth in your soul, Kothar! May he torture you to the end of Time with his terrible powers! I curse you! Curse you!"

The forces struggling in the chamber—spirit-forces that the Cumberian could see but not quite feel—swayed like smoke in the wind, all around them. Evil beat out in waves of horror, causing Kothar to grind his molars against the chill of superstitious fear rippling like ice-water down his spine.

He stood like a tree, gripping the sorceress and holding her still, while the struggle went on. Slowly, slowly, the forces of the wizard won out. The fires grew larger, brighter. The demons of Balthamquar began to shrivel, weakened by their struggle with the servitors of Eudor and Dakkag, on whom Kazazael called.

Red Lori sobbed, sensing defeat.

The Cumberian said gruffly, "Somebody must lose in a struggle for a kingdom, Lori. You're a beautiful woman but you're not queen material. Let Elfa have Commoral, she was born to it. You have your kingdoms—in those demon worlds."

She screamed curses at his golden head.

In a little while, they stood alone in the room. The demons were gone, together with the blood rains and the hell fires. There was a smell of fire, steam and wizardry in the chamber, where the scarlet pentagram

was losing its outline, running as if wet across the floor to merge with and sink into the rugs and carpets thrown here and there.

"Come," said Kothar.

Red Lori would have scratched him but his hand caught her a backhanded blow under her chin and she sank senseless in his hands. Grunting, the barbarian stooped, threw her over a shoulder and turned to leave.

The bronze doors were gone, drawn back into that realm where Belthamquar reigned. Kothar walked with firm strides along the corridor and down the narrow stone stair. As he went, he sensed a differentness about this black edifice. It blurred in his eyes; beneath his boots, it seemed less substantial.

Only when he reached the cobblestoned street and turned to stare back the way he had come did he realize that the tower was fading into nothingness, that the only reality that existed were the ruins of what had been a wizard's habitation long and long ago.

As Red Lori was finished, so was the dwelling her magicks had raised up to house her and the equipment with which she worked her spells. With her dwelling gone, so was her sorcery. Red Lori was no more than a woman, now, whose body made a pleasant weight on Kothar's shoulder.

He angled his steps toward the palace, which Kazazael would have possessed with his incantations by this time, and where Queen Elfa would be waiting. There was a sense of accomplishment in the big barbarian, but it was mingled with sympathy and something of sorrow for the girl who lay unconscious on his shoulder.

## Chapter Five

Queen Elfa sat upon the golden throne of Commoral and watched Kothar move toward her along the aisle left free by her ladies and her courtiers. It was five days since Kazazael had defeated Red Lori and had taken over the palace, putting the Lord Markoth in wizard chains none but Kazazael could unlock.

As he advanced up the aisle, Kothar studied the golden cage that hung from the rafters, high above. The Lord Markoth crouched inside that cage, a prisoner, banished to this vantage point where he might see the throne he hungered for occupied by his wife, the rightful queen of Commoral.

Beside that cage was another, formed of silver bars on which thaumaturgic signs and symbols were graven. In that cage was Red Lori, silent, staring with her wide green eyes at the woman who sat where she, Lori, had fought to sit. When she saw Kothar walking below her, the witch-woman put her lovely face closer to the bars.

"Welcome, Prince Kothar," smiled Elfa, holding her ringed hand out for him to kiss. "It is to you we owe our throne, it is to you we intend to show our gratitude. Prince I declare you, prince of Commoral, entitled to the baronies of Davron and Larkshire, to the dukedoms of Arkyll and Hammet, to their rents and entrails as long as your line endures."

Kothar was uneasy. Prince? Duke? Baron? These were words. His mind could not envision the wealth, the power which was to be his. And there was one more thing that troubled his thoughts.

"My thanks, highness," he growled, uncomfortable before the eyes of the lords and ladies of the kingdom. He wore white velvet and gold garments, with a matching cloak dangling from his massive

shoulders. The gleeful eyes of Queen Elfa flirting with him did not add to his comfort.

Elfa was talking. Kothar roused himself from his broodings to pay attention. There was laughter in the soft voice of the queen, gentle mirth as if she teased a child she loved.

"Of course, you will have to make a sacrifice to gain all this wealth and these honors. I have created you captain-general of my armies, as well, your grace. And I am having medals struck to be hung in clusters on your big chest."

The lords and ladies murmured approval of their queen and her decisions. Kothar merely wished he were somewhere else.

"Aren't you curious as to this sacrifice, Kothar?"

"Your will is my will, your majesty," he muttered.

"Oh, how sweet we have become since we were named a prince! Where is the rude, unmannerly boy I met in that hut?"

She might have added, "... and who sought to rape me!" Kothar realized, flushing. He shifted from one foot to the other and scowled at the floor.

"Frostfire!" Elfa laughed.

The Cumberian lighted his head at that. "What about Frostfire?" he rumbled. Here it was, the thing that had troubled him. He had not forgotten the words of Afgorkon. He must possess no wealth if he would own the sword.

"You have to give the sword back," Elfa said sweetly. "It was in the terms of—your bargain. I see you have bought yourself a new scabbard, too—all red velvet and gold filigree work, very handsome—in which to keep your blade. A shame, all those deniers wasted."

"I keep the sword," the barbarian rumbled, putting a huge hand to its jeweled hilt. His chin lifted defiantly, even as Elfa let her soft laughter trail out across the audience hall.

"What? Keep Frostfire? And give up a principedom?"

"Frostfire is mine. It stays with me."

"What about your baronies and dukedoms, lord prince?"

"I give them back to you, Elfa."

Her ringed hands clapped her pleasure as her blue eyes touched the counselors and courtiers who flanked the throne. They looked a little sick, Kothar thought.

Elfa cried, "I knew it! I knew it! I have won my bet with my followers, Kothar. They claimed no man was fool enough to trade a principedom for a length of steel. I told them it all depended on the viewpoint, and that in your eyes, Frostfire was worth more than my entire kingdom. Am I right?"

Kothar nodded grimly, "You are; it is. I keep the blade."

From high above the hall, where a silver cage swung on silver chains, a sweet voice called. "You keep more than the sword, barbarian! You keep my hate, my enmity."

Red Lori knelt in her cage, staring down at the giant youth. "My vengeance on your head, Cumberian. They can keep my body here—but my spirit can roam the world. It shall roam the world—after you. I will haunt you, Kothar—haunt you with the hate of a woman who might have been a queen and will not, thanks to you."

Kothar shivered. The green eyes glaring down at him seemed to fill the room. As in a dream, he heard her words. "No matter where you go, what you do, I shall be with you, guiding your feet in the wrong direction for ease, stirring up trouble where you rest your golden head. You shall pay, barbarian—you shall pay!"

Red Lori drew back into the depths of her silver cage and crouched down, faintly breathing. She was quiet now, but her words lingered in the air.

Elfa said, "She shall be punished, Kothar."

"No—let her alone," the barbarian rumbled. "If someone took Frostfire from me, I'd feel as she feels. Let her have the pleasure of her vengeance—it if makes her happy."

Red Lori was silent in her cage.

Queen Elfa sighed, "Be it so. I hope you'll not regret your mercy. Apparently your heart's as big as your body, which is large indeed."

An hour later, Kothar the barbarian rode out of the city gate on his warhorse, Greyling. His heavily muscled body wore his dented mailed shirt, the leather hacqueton beneath it, his fur kilt and the fur-flapped war-boots on his feet. A worn cloak stirred to the breezes on his back.

Yet—

Frostfire made a firm weight in its battered scabbard, hanging from his broad leather belt. From time to time as the city of Commoral grew small with distance behind him, his hand touched the jeweled hilt as if to reassure himself of its presence.

Ahead of him lay his world, waiting to be adventured. With him, trailing his every step, were the green eyes of Red Lori. Angry. Vengeful. Hating.

Kothar wondered when she would demand her revenge.

## THE TREASURE IN THE LABYRINTH

### Chapter One

The tavern was alive with smoke and the smell of spilled wine. Torches flaring on the stone walls showed a naked woman dancing on a tabletop where platters of meat and cheese had been pushed together with leather mugs to give her wine-wet feet the room she needed. Her long black hair flew like whips as she strutted and posed for the greedy eyes feasting on her pallid flesh.

In the corner of the room, a huge man with golden hair caught in a bun at the nape of his neck in the manner of the barbarians from the northern wastes, sat hunched above a jack of cheap midlands ale. His face was burned bronze from the touch of sun and sea-wind, his brawny shoulders and thickly thewed arms rose upward out of a leather jerkin stained and spotted from long use. His only evidence of wealth was the massive longsword hanging from a broad leather belt, in a dented scabbard.

There was a red jewel set into the pommel of the sword that glittered like frozen blood in the scarlet flares of the wall torches. Angrily, the jewel glittered, as if it reflected the mood of its giant owner.

A woman tiptoed across the tavern rushes, bent to plant her red mouth close to the ear of the barbarian. Her laughing words roused the man from his broodings.

"And how would I pay you, girl?" he growled in his throat, lifting a limp purse from his belt and tossing it on the tabletop. "It's flatter than my belly, which rubs against my backbone. So be off to find a richer customer for your embraces."

The woman cajoled the big youth, sliding a smooth palm down his bared right arm. "For such a one as you, I would offer my pallet freely—but even Elorna needs to eat."

Kothar only grunted, staring down into the leather jack that held one last swallow of cold ale. He had been putting off the drinking of that ale, relishing its taste, wishing he might have a wedge of sharp cheese to go along with it, or a slice of steaming meat from the platters the serving wenches were carrying past his nose.

He thought he heard soft laughter, and looked around for Elorna, but she had given him up as a bad risk and was even now sliding her rump down on the lap of a plump carrier. Kothar turned back to his lonely table, but still that eerie laughter persisted.

"I haven't drunk enough ale to float a beetle in my belly, let alone addle my wits," he snarled and reached for the tankard to finish off the last inch of ale in its bottom.

The face was there in the ale, looking out of the tankard at him. It was a beautiful face, that of Red Lori herself, the sorceress of Commoral who hung in a silver cage in the palace of Queen Elfa. Visions of her face had come to him in his campfires beyond the borders of Commoral, when he had ridden out of that country and onto the flatlands that mark the southern reaches of Zoradar.

He had sought employment from Prince Zopar of Zoradar, offering for sale his skill at swordplay and his experience as captain of the Foreign Legion, but Zopar was at peace with his neighbors and in no need of a sell-sword. With a few coins clanking in his purse he had walked Greyling into this town of Azdor, half starving, his throat parched for ale or wine.

Since ale was cheaper than red Thosian, he had settled for a single jack. His belly rumbled, his middle ached with the need for food. Now Red Lori was here to torment him again as she had done ever since he had ridden Greyling out of Commoral City.

Can you hear me, barbarian? I hate you!

Kothar shrugged his muscular arms. He was too hungry to care about Red Lori. She was in a silver cage, well cared for and fussed over; her body was there for Elfa the queen to gloat upon, and the queen wanted her alive and well to suffer the indignities which she heaped upon her from time to time. He even felt a little sorry for her.

As if she sensed his thoughts, her mood changed. Kothar read understanding and an odd kind of sympathy in her green eyes.

Elfa has me. I have you. But the queen lets me eat. What good is a starving enemy to one who has the upper hand, as Elfa has over me? And as I have over you, sell-sword!

Would you eat, Kothar?

The face tossed laughter out of the bottom of the tankard at his gloomy features. To his amazement, those ripe red lips were blowing him a kiss! Kothar opened his eyes wide.

You are like a pet, barbarian. Or a slave. And even a pet or a slave must have a full belly to feel the pangs of ownership.

And so. . . .

A male voice drowned out the words of the sorceress. Kothar felt irritation of sorts. He had been alone so much in these last few weeks that even the face of his enemy was preferable to his own company. So he was turning to glare at the man who had spoken when the man clapped his shoulder.

"Ey? What do you say to that, warrior?"

"I say, to the outer darkness with you!"

The man chuckled. He was a merchant, overly plump of figure and wearing a rich fur mantle over a brocaded houppelande. There were jeweled rings on his fingers, a gold chain about his throat, a leather belt about his middle the buckle of which was fashioned from Phalkaran silver.

"Wench! Wench!" he bawled, lifting an arm and crooking a fat finger. "Over here with that tray."

A redheaded girl came running with a wooden platter on which were heaped slices of meat steaming sweetly from the tavern ovens, bunches of fruit, and several triangles of cheese. Kothar eyed the food with wolfish eyes.

"Eat, eat," grinned the merchant, pulling back a chair. "Wench, bring more ale for my friend, and a flagon of chilled Thosian."

Kothar put out his hands, filling them with bread and meat, clapping the hot lamb between the slices of barley bread. He ate without thought, relishing only the taste of food to his tongue and the happiness it brought to his belly. He finished off the platter while the merchant eyed him in amusement.

"My name is Mental Abanon," said the plump mercer as the barbarian used his worn jerkin sleeve to wipe grease from his mouth.

Kothar was in a more pleasant frame of mind. He reached for his refilled tankard and swallowed half the cold ale before he replied.

"So?" he asked. "What's your name to me?"

"I come to offer you employment."

The Cumberian thought about Red Lori. She had promised him he would eat, that she would see to it he would stay alive to be her plaything. Maybe a spell of hers had sent the merchant.

"My sword is always for sale," he growled.

"Excellent. I felt we could do business when I saw you sitting here staring into your mug. I watched your eyes move from the ale to the plates of food the girls were carrying to other tables."

"I was hungry," Kothar admitted.

And now he was full. Thanks to Red Lori? What did it matter who was his host or hostess? The meat and the fruit and the bread lay solid in his belly and he was at peace with his world.

The merchant hitched his elbows onto the table, leaning across its wooden top with confident ease. Greed made his blue eyes shine as he licked his thick lips with a wine-reddened tongue.

"There is a treasure to be had, not far from Azdor," he murmured softly. "No man knows what the treasure is, except that it must be very valuable because it is hidden inside a labyrinth."

A treasure? The Cumberian nodded and swung Frostfire around between his thickly thewed thighs. His poor purse could do with a bit of treasure. Even if he could not enjoy wealth and possess his sword at the same time, maybe with the help of Red Lori, he could scrape together enough gold coins to keep himself in food for a few weeks.

"Jewels," guessed Kothar. "And fine gold coins."

The merchant waved a perfumed hand. "More than that, surely! I myself own black pearls from Isthapan and red rubies from Mongroliia. My strongroom floor creaks under the weight of six chests filled with the golden coinage of Zoradar.

"No, no. Ulnar Themaquol would never have built a labyrinth to hide a treasure unless that treasure were the greatest in the world."

"How did you discover it?"

"Oh, Ulnar Themaquol boasts of his treasure whenever he shows himself outside his maze, and the castle that guards it. He is a great wizard, this Ulnar Themaquol. His necromancies let him look into other worlds than ours, you know.

"I have the feeling that in one of the demon worlds with which he is in cantraipsal contact, he saw a treasure and brought it to the center of the labyrinth, which he constructed especially to contain it and hide it from people like—ah, from thieves."

Kothar grinned, showing strong white teeth. "From thieves like us, you mean. Why not speak out, merchant? Admit the truth. Your soul suffers agonies because you can't own his treasure, as my belly suffered a while back because there was no food in it."

Menthal Abanon seemed to relax. His thick lips widened into a smile. His ringed hand tossed back a flap of his miniker fur pelisse that had slipped from place.

"We'll get along, Kothar. We're men of the world and we know what tail makes it wag, hey?"

His hand went into a velvet almoner fat with silver deniers. A handful of coins he drew out and placed in a heap on the wooden tabletop. "A man needs money to care for such a fine horse as yours, so take this as an indication of my good faith. Such a sum will let you live at ease for a few days, at least, while you consider coming into my service."

The barbarian eyed the coins. "What about the treasure in the labyrinth of Ulnar Themaquol?"

"Do you dare go into that maze?" questioned the merchant eagerly. "I—I must warn you, nobody's ever come out of it. And no man knows what takes place inside its walls, or where the brave men go who risk its intricacies."

Kothar waved a hand. He was a barbarian, he thought little of taking risks when something was worth the danger. Such a treasure as Mental Abanon spoke of, was worth any hazard.

The fact that he would become a thief if he stole the treasure troubled him not at all. If rich men owned rare treasures, they should protect them. Evidently Ulnar Themaquol protected his wealth with supreme skill, because many men had died in its quest.

"I dare," he rumbled. His big hand half lifted the blued-steel blade of Frostfire from the worn scabbard. "I dare anything, with such a sword."

He saw greed in the eyes of the merchant as he looked at the weapon. His chuckle was cold, deadly, and made Mental Abanon shiver.

"Feast not those pig eyes of yours on this sword, man," Kothar snarled. "Unless you'd feel the sharpness of its edge on your soft throat. Frostfire was forged to be used by a man—not a fat sapling."

The merchant flapped his perfumed hands in the smokey air, protesting he but admired the weapon. "Besides, I'm more interested in what lies deep in the maze than I am in what hangs from your belt. Come with me. I'll show you where Ulnar Themaquol lives."

The Cumberian quaffed the last of his ale, scooped the silver deniers into his purse, and rose to his feet. He towered above the merchant, as the scarewood tree rises above the lowly breech. His shoulders dwarfed those of the smaller man. Admiring eyes touched his great frame as he strode behind the mercer and between the tables.

Elnora came with a rush of slipped feet to catch his jerkin in a hand. "I saw him give you silver," she whispered. "Stay and learn the softness of my cot."

"Later, later," Kothar grinned, clasping her on the rump. "I'll be hungrier then than I am now."

The two small moons of Yarth were overhead, hurtling across the night sky in their eternal race against the coming day as the tavern door closed behind the two men.

Kothar stared up at them, breathing deep of the chill air. It was fresh outside the tavern, for the wind was moving from the forested slopes of the Ebon Hills, carrying the scent of pine and fir.

Greyling tossed his head, ring-bits jingling, as his master passed a hand across his neck. Unstrapping the reins from the tie-iron on the cobblestoned street, Kothar slid a booted foot into the stirrup and swung



into his high-peaked saddle.

Menthal Abanon was stepping into a gilded litter supported by four dusky Lobans from the desert world of Oasia. Slavery was not unknown in the land of Zoradar. Kothar did not hold with slavery, he felt everyone should be his own man, but he believed that a slave should earn his release. No man would keep *him* slave!

Greyling paced along the cobblestoned streets between small houses tilting their timbered bulks outward over the narrow walkways. Behind their windows, candle-flames fluttered and flared. It was near the middling hour of the night and the good burghers of Azdor were readying themselves for bed.

For close to a full hour, the Lobans walked at a steady pace. The town gates were far behind them, the last few candle gleams were flickering out. On either side of the dirt road, tall poplons grew, half obscuring the few stars with their leafy upper branches.

Now the Cumberian could make out a dark bulkiness up ahead, on the left-hand side of the road. Crenelated towers, thin spires, blunt merlons were spaced atop that castle wall like the gaping teeth of some monstrous demon. Here and there in keep and tower, he made out the red flare of a burning torch.

The dwelling of Ulnar Themaquol was built upon solid rock. Spreading outward from that twisted heap of stone was a walled close with a flat roof that gave the appearance of extending inward under the huge stone supporting the small mansion.

"It does not look so dreadful," Kothar grumbled.

The voice of Menthal Abanon answered from behind the brocade drapes of his litter. "No man knows how dreadful is that labyrinth, except Ulnar Themaquol himself. That it is dreadful, the unknown fate of all who have gone through its door, and the dire warnings of the wizard himself, give testimony."

The barbarian hunched his shoulders against the cold night air. The wine and the ale he had drunk were still warm in his belly, but he seemed to see the face of Red Lori floating in the air before him, and his ears heard her laughter as from a great distance.

"I'd best be at it," he muttered, swinging down from Greyling. To the merchant he added, "I'll leave my horse here. If I come not back by dawn—take him to your stables. Keep him for me."

"And if you never come back?"

"He is yours—if you can keep him!\*"

Kothar turned and studied the simple oaken door that was the only barrier to the labyrinth. An iron latch kept it shut. All a man had to do to enter was lift the latch and step through. The Cumberian hitched Frostfire closer to his right hand and moved forward in his pantherlike tread.

The latch-iron was cold to his fingers, but it lifted easily. His hand shoved back the wooden door. He stepped forward into a brick-walled chamber, small and windowless, in which a blue lamp burned on the small table which was its only piece of furniture.

Kothar swung about to face the street. Menthal Abanon was holding up a brocade curtain so he could watch his partner vanish into the walled maze. There was a frightened expectancy on the plump face that made the barbarian growl in his throat. Had he delivered himself into some kind of trap?

It was easy enough to step back out of that trap. His big hand held the door open. One pace of his booted feet, and he would be breathing the chill night air instead of the faintly musty odor of this entranceway to the unknown.

"By Dwallka, no man names me coward," he rasped to his thoughts. He slammed shut the door, blotting out the sight of the litter with its fat owner and its four slaves.

Across the brick floor was another door, a door fashioned of rare woods inlaid to form a pattern. Kothar grunted, studying the sigils shaped from teak and ebony. It was an incantation in three dimensions, he realized, but in the words of a dead and forgotten language.

The Cumberian pushed the door open.

## Chapter Two

He was staring down a long corridor of smooth metal, where the floor was tinted pale blue, the walls a faint ivory, and the ceiling pastel blue. The ceiling glowed, casting out a bluish light and illuminating the entire corridor. He walked forward, ready for the slightest breath of danger, huge hand resting lightly on Frostfire's hilt.

The corridor rounded into a shorter tunnel. This gave way, after twenty feet, into a forking of the walk. Kothar chose the left tunnel and strode along it, impatient for some activity.

A large room opened to his stare.

Eerie laughter filled that room. Was that Red Lori mocking him? Or Ulnar Themaquol? To Dwallka with them both! Laughter was only sound, it could not harm him.

He strode into those torrents of mirth with Frostfire half out of its scabbard. Added to the laughter, the lights began to dim. It grew dark slowly, so that it was not until he was at the far door of the chamber that it became as black as the fabled world of Cereeth.

His hand drew out his sword.

Before his eyes the door shimmered, grew red, then white, then a rich purple. All he could see through that shimmering was a darkness shot with streamers of light. The door melted away in the shimmering, and a cold wind came out and blew about the barbarian.

He discovered now that the wind was wrapping itself about his legs and middle, his chest and arms. It was blowing back into the eerily lighted blackness and it blew him along with it.

This was no ordinary wind; it was a gale out of some demon world, and the barbarian refused to struggle against its tug and so waste his strength. He let the stiff breeze waft him through the shimmer and into a velvet blackness where colored ribbons blew to give his eyes a chance to see the manner of his doom.

Outward from between one red streamer and two pale golden ribbons came a human skeleton, bones clicking, jaws clacking. Its long sepulchral arms reached out for Kothar, touched, tightened as it sought to drag him into its icy embrace. The barbarian saw long, glittering teeth in those parting jaws as the skeleton reached to catch his throat between its fangs.

Kothar roared thickly and brought his massively muscled forearm around, slamming it against that grinning skull. From the neck bones he drove it, through the air in a long arc, so that it hit the wall and shattered. Still the skeleton fought to catch his thickly thewed throat with its claw-like phalanges.

His barbarian instincts—trained on the clean, snow-swept wastes of the northern world—were clamoring for flight. Run from this necromantic abomination! Flee from this feat of dark wizardry!

Yet his brain told him there was no going back. The wind that roamed the doorway into this labyrinthine tunnel would never permit him to return. It was win out over this shibboleth—or perish!

The Cumberian scorned to use his sword. Frostfire was made for better foes than this gibbering ghoul! Instead his hands swept inward, outward, slapping those bones with the impact of twin hammers.

He crushed ribs, he separated hipbone from lumbar vertebrae. In a swirling nausea, he battered femurs and crushed ulnars, with his every muscle bulging.

When the skeleton lay shattered at his feet, Kothar drew a deep breath and moved between the fluttering ribbons of spectral light. Their touch was cold, but they did not harm him; perhaps with the death of the skeleton, he told himself, the streamers had lost their powers.

He moved on down the corridor until he came to a wall dividing it. He moved right, knowing one choice was much the same as another. He had no hope of solving this maze, he must go on and on until—

A man stood at the far end of the passageway, a man clad in armor of a kind Kothar had never seen. Bronze strips girded his chest and middle, a bronze helmet with a red crest towered above his hard face. A short sword hanging at his side and a long, rectangular shield weighting down his left arm told Kothar he was a soldier trained to kill. The man was eyeing him warily, turning slightly away from another division of the tunnelway.

Kothar grinned, "Friend, if you seek the treasure,  
choose one path. I'll take the other. No need for us to fight."

The soldier sneered, "I am Honorius, centurion of the Avalonian Ninth Legion. I have never met defeat in battle. The only defeat I've ever known is in this damned trap!" His right hand slammed the metal butt of his swordhilt against the wall so that echoes from the blow ran up and down the covert-way.

His eyes stared at Kothar from under the rim of his helmet. They were mad eyes, the barbarian thought. He would have to kill this soldier of the Legion. He said gruffly, "How long have you been here?"

"A year. Two years. How do you know time in this place?"

"Where did you find food?"

"Nowhere. Something about the place keeps me alive and well. As it will keep you, should you kill me. But you won't." The shield with the lightning-bolt etched hi gilded metal on its face came up to confront the barbarian. "Come, then. I'll make it a swift death."

The short sword flickered behind the shield like a tongue about to dart at the Cumberian. The man was a veteran, there was evidence of his skill at weaponplay in his manner of using shield and sword together while he advanced.

Kothar shrugged. Skeleton or man, what was the difference? He must destroy each threat to gain the middle of the maze, where the treasure lay.

Frostfire rang on metal as Kothar flailed at the shield. The man behind the targe grunted and fell back a step in testimony to the strength of that blow. The shortsword stabbed.

Kothar leaped sideways, grinning coldly.

Aie! This would be a duel, down here in this nightmare-haunted labyrinth, between this soldier and himself.

He parried the stabbing sword, drove forward with Frostfire a deadly finger out before him, seeking a weakness in the defense he faced.

Steel rang on steel as the legionary parried.

Slowly they settled into their pattern of attack and parry, parry to riposte and counterattack. Both men were quick on their feet, each was master of the blade he held. The veteran centurion carried a shield and Kothar did not, but after a time the soldier learned his targe was a weight he must bear, a heaviness that made him sweat with effort, while Kothar was a hunting leopard with only his sword to slow his movements.

Frostfire blazed in the eerie light as the Cumberian swept it sideways and around the shield. Its tip scratched human flesh and the centurion cursed.

Now he held the shield lower, his shield-arm bloodied. His eyes that glared from under his bronze helmet were glittering in mingled rage and madness, but there was no hint of surrender in their black orbs.

"I don't seek your death," Kothar rasped.

"Only one of us can win that treasure,"\* panted the soldier. "I mean to be that man."

The barbarian shrugged his massive shoulders. He had killed all his life, both animals and men, and the centurion was just another foe to him. He would have spared his life—he admired bravery in anyone—but the veteran scorned his mercy.

They circled, swords clashing. Kothar knew the shield was slipping lower, lower, as his opponent lost blood. He could keep him fighting until he became so weak the shield would be no protection, but this was not the way of the barbarian.

He moved forward, his eyes seeking out the weakness in the man before him. He saw feet that shuffled where they had danced, fingers that had loosed their grip on the shortsword. He studied the drops of sweat that beaded the tanned, hard face in front of him.

When the centurion stumbled, Kothar knew he had his man. There was a small puddle of sweat on the floor where the soldier fought. A quick attack, a shift of foot-position on that sweat-slick floor and—

Kothar leaped with a savage bellow.

Frostfire circled like blue fire in the air above his head. The legionary gave ground as his targe came up

to protect his head. His right heel hit a pool of sweat. He reeled backward, shield rising to help maintain his balance, thus exposing his torso to the full length of Frostfire.

Kothar drove his sword forward.

Impaled by that blue steel while still struggling to stay on his feet, the centurion screamed, muscles going lax. He staggered back, his helmet hit the corridor wall with a metallic clang. Then he slid downward, his legs unable to hold him up.

He lay dying as the barbarian yanked his sword free.

His eyes were sane again. Kothar saw. His lips quivered into a smile. "I—I thank you, man. I have been here —too long—..."

The soldier died, propped against the wall. And as he died, Kothar cried out, for his very flesh was dissolving, fading away before his eyes as if the man were eons old and now his body was freed of the spell which held him prisoner. Gone was the flesh, only the bones remained, with the armor and the sword rapidly rusting.

The Cumberian shuddered.

How long had the legionary been in this place?

Would he himself go on like that, never dying yet dead to the outer world? Rage made a hot tidal wave in his throat. No! By Dwallka of the War Hammer! He would win the center of the labyrinth and put his hands on the treasure it hid.

A thought touched his head. In his boyhood years, he had learned the art of tracking in the forests of the northlands. He would use that art now, to help and guide him.

Kothar knelt down, studied the floor. A faint dust lay upon the tiles, a dust that showed where the centurion had walked this way along the right-hand tunnel. He himself must go to the left, then. Quite obviously the right-hand tunnel went nowhere near the treasure chamber.

He stepped forward confidently.

For a hundred feet he walked, until he came to a fork in the tunnel. Which way, now? His knowledge of tracking could not work where there were no tracks, no evidence that a man had ever come this way before. Kothar snarled in his throat. If he could not use his tracking prowess, what of his deep-grained barbarian instincts? His homing ability to tell direction, so much a part of any Cumberian who hunted in a vast wilderness where there were no signposts, might aid him here.

He threw back his head, heavy blond hair moving gently as he turned his quivering nostrils to left and right. The middle of a maze is in its geographical center. Where was he now, in relation to that point?

Mentally he retraced his steps. Always since entering this ensorcelled enclosure, he had been veering to his left. Then he should go to his right, which should lead him deeper inside the labyrinth.

He stalked on, eyes turning and suspecting attack at any moment. In this mood, he came to a round chamber with a floor of white sand and for a roof a vast golden dome high above the sandy floor.

Kothar halted. His barbarian soul suspected danger, but he could see no threat. Shifting his wide shoulders, he thrust away his premonitions and stepped out upon the sand.

He went five paces before the storm struck.

### Chapter Three

Up from the base on which they rested rose the sands in tiny little dustdevils, whipping about the bare, bronzed legs of the Cumberian above his fur-framed war boots. The tiny white grains stabbed like the stingers of ten thousand bees.

No enemy this, against which he could use Frostfire!

Kothar roared his fury, bent his back, and lifted his heavily muscled forearm before his eyes to protect them from the swirling sands. The dustdevils were bigger now, joining together to form larger cones of rotating madness like whitened whirlpools. Into that cyclone, Kothar plunged.

He wanted to scream out his agony. His bare skin, where unprotected by jerkin and boot, felt burned and blistered. However, he was used to the whipping, slashing snows of his northern home, and this sand spray was not so different as to be completely unendurable. He grunted, ground his teeth together, and ploughed on.

Above him the golden dome was becoming red-hot to add an intolerable heat to the savage sandstorm. Kothar drove on and on, a moving mote in a seemingly endless eruption of searing heat and stinging sands. Only his giant body could have endured such punishment. Only a barbarian used to the cruel storms of the northern wastes could have withstood that awesome blast.

Yet stand he did, and his legs churned in the stabbing agony of the biting grains, until—

The roaring in his ears died away.

The heat was gone from his head and back. Drenched in sweat, Kothar swayed drunkenly as he realized he stood on the far edge of the sand pit, that his weight, coming off the sand itself, had served to shut off the mechanism that worked it. He let the sweat drip down, breathing heavily.

"Gods of Thuum! I couldn't have taken much more *of that*," he growled. He stared down at himself. Grains of white sand still clung to his fur pelisse and leather jerkin, but to his surprise, his skin showed no effects from the whipping, stabbing sands.

Like a dog shedding water, Kothar shook himself.

The maze corridor yawned before him, invitingly. What other dangers did it hide? What other inventions of a fiendish mind lurked to entrap him? No matter what they were, he must go forward!

Kothar showed his strong white teeth in a mirthless grin. Nothing could tempt him to go back into that sand storm, assuming that he could. He turned his broad back to the hellpit and strode forward.

Where the tunnel ended, three corridor mouths began. By the process of sheer reasoning, he should go down the middle way. But he mistrusted the magician who had fashioned this maze. It would be like Ulnar Themaquol to make of that middle lane a death trap ending in a blind alley. The right-hand passageway appeared to twist away from the maze center, as did the left.

"Dwallka, guide me," the barbarian muttered.

His hand touched his swordhilt, tightened about it. "Which way, Frostfire? Left or right? Or is it to be the one between?"

He drew the blade, held it out before him. Afgorkon had said there was no magic in the blade, but he had not been sure. It was possible that this length of blued steel had absorbed magic in its past, in the time that Kothar had carried it, as a sponge absorbs water.

As a sponge drips out that water when squeezed, perhaps Frostfire would give him some signal when put in contact with magical forces. Kothar grunted. The only way to find out was by doing.

With the blade before him, he stepped into the left-hand alley. He walked for ten feet, but there was no reaction from the blue steel. Kothar retraced his steps and moved into the center way. There was still no sign from Frostfire.

Glumly, the barbarian decided his plan was nonsense.

And yet, there was one tunnel left to test.

Ten feet inside the right-hand way, Frostfire began to glow. Kothar stared down at his blade, a big grin plastered on his mouth. This then, must be the way into the » heart of the labyrinth.

He walked on and on.

Suddenly, he heard a scream, a wail of utter horror and despair. It came from up ahead, and it was the voice of a woman crying out her fright.

Kothar began to run.

He realized with each pounding footfall that he might be racing to his doom. The cry might be a lure to bring him into the clutches of some unimaginable monster against which even his gigantic sinews and his sword might prove no match. Yet he knew also he wanted something at which to strike, some foe against whom he could pit those muscles and his steel.

He wanted no inanimate sand pit. He wanted flesh to bloody, meat to slash. His teeth grated together in the fury of his mood.

Full tilt he ran into the huge chamber that opened before the maze corridor. Like a giant cat, he stopped his forward progress to stare upward into vast shadows, into a blackness cobwebbed with glittering strands of sticky stuff running from one end of the chamber to the other, from the tall ceiling even to the rocky floor.

A woman hung in those strands, fifteen feet above his head. She was screaming, head thrown back so that her long brown hairs were caught and held by the gluey substance, as were her bare arms and legs. She wore what once had been a simple peasant dress, but it was now shredded so that her creamy skin gleamed through its rents.

Above her, moving leisurely across its webs, came a gigantic arthropod. It was no spider, though it was of the arachnid family; it possessed eight legs, a bristle-haired bulbous body, three glaring white eyes,

and twin antennae that twitched and quivered as it neared its helpless prey.

The woman was screaming with mindless terror. She had not seen Kothar, but the hesitant advance of the giant arachnid told her something new had come upon this stage that was to be her death trap.

Her mouth closed. Instead of screaming, she sobbed as she ran her stare across the vast chamber. Her brown eyes widened at sight of the giant Kothar.

"Go on, flee from here," she cried. "He won't harm you while I am here to—to eat. But beware the webs—they swoop down like living things at anything that moves."

Her voice rose to a shriek. "Behind you!"

Kothar whirled, sword up, as alert to danger as only a barbarian or an animal can react. Frostfire was above his head, ready to strike as he saw the glittering web sweeping toward him through the air like a sticky net.

The blade swung. Its keen edge bit into the web.

And the web parted.

The woman cried, "The sword should be caught in it; its juices are so sticky and so strong they can hold anything!"

Kothar boomed laughter. The monster on the eight spindly legs appeared to quiver as its web was cut, almost as though a part of its own body were being slashed.

The Cumberian lay about him with his steel, cutting and slitting the web until it hung in thin shreds. From time to time he glanced above him where the archnid huddled, clinging to the sticky strands and emitting faint squeaks of pain.

"Run," cried the girl, "run! It's too late to save me!"

"By Dwallka! Do you think I'm an ingrate? You warned me of the web—I'll do what I can to save you." He chuckled grimly, his big hand working on the haft of Frostfire. "If the treasure is all it's supposed to be, there's plenty for all of us!"

The creature on the web was running swiftly toward Kothar, now. Its great mandibles clicked madly as though it savored the taste of the meat it was soon to dine on. The barbarian crouched, never taking his eyes off the oncoming monstrosity.

"The web to your left!" the girl screamed.

Kothar snarled, whirling to slash the sticky stuff as it swept toward him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the arachnid hasten its pace, huge stinger poised to stab. The Cumberian sensed that once the stinger drove into his flesh, its poison would paralyse him into a complete helplessness.

The arachnid raced closer.

Its stinger rose—stabbed forward!



Kothar dropped flat. His blade darted upward, full into the soft underbelly of the monster. He turned the blade savagely a moment before yanking it free.

One of the creature's legs hit him a glancing blow, sent him rolling over and over along the floor. Webs rushed upon him from above. One strand caught a mighty leg, another his left arm. He was swung upward, stretched as if on a torture rack as the two webs fought for possession of his body.

The Cumberian bellowed out his agony.

He swung five feet above the floor, being pulled apart by those sticky strands. He could feel his arm being twisted from its socket, his leg turned out of his hip. Desperately he swung about, knowing the arachnid was moving sluggishly toward him.

The creature was dying, but it was not yet dead. Its stinger was a slender lance filled with enough poison to render him helpless. He dared not let that lancet break his skin!

Kothar swung his blade. Its tip could just reach the strands that held his leg. Some of the web parted before the steel, but not enough to free him. He hung there, swaying back and forth, wrenched apart as the dying monster dragged itself closer.

The thin stinger lifted.

Kothar gripped Frostfire in his fist. He must time his blow to the precise moment when that lancet stabbed at him. He would have only one opportunity to slash it.

The arachnid towered over him. Its eyes were filled with blood from the gaping wound in its underside, but the stabbing part of it was clean and white. It came downward, blurring with its speed.

Kothar swung his sword.

At the same instant, the web that held his left arm gave a tug, enough to throw his aim off. Frostfire slammed into the stinger with its side, not its biting edge. The fury of his barbarian muscles whipped the lancet to one side, drove it into the sticky webbing.

Kothar could not defend himself, now. He hung parallel to the floor in webs too taut to allow him to swing Frostfire at the arachnid. He swore between teeth clamped tight, and went on struggling. His muscles swelled and throbbed with the savagery of his battle, but it was a losing one.

And yet—

The webs were shaking wildly. Could even his giant frame cause such a tossing? Kothar fought on, striving to arch his huge body, to free his leg, his arm. It seemed his leg was slipping just a little, with the gluey web sliding ever so slightly.

The girl cried, "Its stinger is caught! Look!"

The Cumberian stared to one side of him. Frostfire had hit the stinger, had driven it into the strands that clung to his leg. The arachnid was trying to free itself, was bucking and twisting its huge head as its own sticky mucilage clung voraciously to the lancet.

"It's one part that is not impervious to the webbings," sobbed the girl, spreadeagled on another section of

the webbing. "It is caught fast. Now, now free yourself."

But Kothar was already slashing at the webbing that held both his leg and the arachnid's stinger. The sword clove apart the sticky strands that left some of their grey matter on the blade. Panting, calling upon his northland gods, the Cumberian fought the web as he might a living enemy.

He was helped by the desperate arachnid shaking its monstrous head in its own attempts to get loose so it might kill its killer.

Kothar won the struggle.. The webs parted, both his feet hit the ground, and now he could turn Frostfire on the strands that gripped his left arm. In a few moments he was free; some dripping strands were still fastened to his flesh, but he could move about; he was no longer a prisoner of the webbings.

He ran for the arachnid.

The blade flashed, dug deep into the thorax.

The archnid died in convulsions, still caught by its stinger to its own webbings. The barbarian wasted no more time on it, after a hard look to make sure the head was almost severed from its body. He turned and ran for the webbing where the girl hung, legs and arms flung wide.

His sword cut enough of the webbings so her weight dragged the rest of the strands downward where he could reach them. Then she flung herself against him, head bowed, face pressed into his leather jerkin.

Kothar let her sob out her relief, an arm about her soft middle. He could understand and sympathize with her reactions. He himself knew something of this fierce delight at being alive and free.

Free? Well, hardly.

"What are you—a girl—doing in this rat's nest?"

Between tears and laughter, she looked up at him. She was a pretty thing, with smooth white skin the color of ivory, and big brown eyes, with a full mouth ripe for kisses. Her loose brown hair hung down her back and across her forehead, so she had to put her hands up to free her face.

"I am handmaiden to the wizard Pthoomol, who built this maze," she replied. "I helped fashion it, as a matter of fact, while under his spell."

Kothar blinked. "The wizard Pthoomol? But I thought Ulnar Themaquol had made it to house a treasure."

"No, it was not made by Ulnar Themaquol, though it was made for him." Her large brown eyes appealed to him. "You must ask me no more questions. When he condemned me to the maze, Pthoomol removed a little of the sorceries with which he held me subject to his will—but not all. I cannot tell you any more."

She reached out and caught his big hand in her small fingers. "What I can do for you, I shall. I can lead you through the maze to the middle chamber—where the treasure is."

Kothar followed where she led, scowling blackly. "If you knew the maze so well, why were you caught in the webs?"

She laughed delightedly, turning her pretty face over a shoulder to flirt with him. "Because—while I know each turn and twist in the labyrinth—I am as helpless as anyone else in avoiding its dangers. I was halfway into the lair of the webbing beast before I realized I'd taken a wrong turn. The strands caught me."

Her bare shoulders shrugged. "I hung there a long time, watching the creature devour its other victims—before it turned\* to me. There are not so many searchers in the maze, any longer. Once there were a great many. Now—few Come to try their luck and skill."

Brown eyes regarded his huge frame admiringly. "You may succeed where the others have failed. None has come in here as big and as strong as you, nor as brave. It was a courageous thing you did to linger to save me, when you might have gone on. I appreciate what you've done. I'll try and repay you."

She smiled sadly. "We could live here forever, you and I. No one ever dies of old age or of lack of food within these walls. The magic of Pthoomol is very strong. I have prepared a little chamber with furniture, with some simple wines and edibles—for the taste values, not to stay alive—where we could be very happy."

Kothar thought of the outside world, of its dangers and its problems. He was no mole, to bury himself in this underground installation for the rest of his life. He hungered for the wind off the Salt Sea, for the chill blasts that roamed the forest world of Cumberia, for the sight of stars glittering with pale blue fire in the night skies above Grondel fjord.

Slowly he shook his head. "No, it cannot be. I am sorry, but I cannot stay here." His face brightened. "But you can come with me. I'll steal a horse so you can ride with me and Greyling—"

Her soft fingers touched his lips, silencing them. A sad smile distorted her own mouth. "It's impossible. I cannot leave the maze. If I do—I'll die."

They stood close together, brown eyes pleading up at blue eyes. Miramel took one forward step that brought her up against the barbarian. Her bare arms went about his neck and she kissed him hungrily, as if he were the lost love of her life come back to her.

Gently, she drew away. A film of tears blurred her vision so that her hand reached blindly for his hand. Almost angrily, she brushed at her wet cheeks.

"What is to be, must be," she murmured brokenly, and tugged at him. "Come! Stop teasing a poor, lonely girl. You want to find the middle of the maze? I shall show it to you."

He ran with her along the tunnelways. He turned where her hand and whispered word guided him. He caught glimpses of deadly traps in certain sections of the labyrinth, a flashing of razor-sharp swords swinging pendulum-like from a ceiling, a great man all made of metal standing motionless waiting for victims to walk toward its huge axe, a blackness shot with red lights that seemed the more dangerous because of the threat its blackness hid.

Miramel knew the ways to escape these traps.

"Sometimes, Pthoomol would condemn a favorite wench to spend three days in these tunnels before he gave them to Ulnar Themaquol. At the end of the three days, when the poor girl was thoroughly broken in spirit, he would send me in after her, to fetch her out."

"Did Pthoomol put the treasure in the maze?"

Miramel hesitated. "You might say so—in a sense."

"You're damned mysterious!" he grumbled.

"Only because the spell is still on me," she exclaimed, staring upward as if begging him for understanding. "I would tell you all—but I've been forbidden to do so. You'll have to trust me."

They ran for what seemed hours to the big barbarian, before Miramel drew back against a wall and pointed ahead of her. "You go straight ahead," she breathed.

"The maze center lies at the end of this passageway, just around the bend."

Kothar looked down at the girl. "This is no trick, is it?" he asked. For a moment as he looked at her, her brown hair changed to flaming red and her features formed into those of Red Lori.

His hand stabbed out, caught her arm. Red Lori was gone, only the frightened face of Miramel remained. Slowly, seeing the pain in her eyes, he let his fingers relax.

As if to make amends for his suspicion, he let his palm rest on her head a moment, stroking her long brown hair. "Wait for me. There will be more than enough treasure for you, believe me. I'm no miser, I'll share it with you."

Her smile was sad. "Neither you nor I can use the treasure hidden in the maze, Kothar. But you must find this out for yourself."

The barbarian stared down at her a long moment. Mystery piled upon mystery! Was anything sane and normal in this cabalistic catacomb? Her face was innocent of guile, but then, she was under an enchantment.

Kothar kissed her cheek, drew Frostfire.

He walked down the tunnel, his great bulk dwarfing its dimensions. The answer to all the mysteries lay before him. In moments, he would know the truth.

#### Chapter Four

His booted feet stilled on the edge of a large, square room. At first he thought the room was empty, for there were no chests of golden coins, no caskets of rare and priceless gems, nothing at all but the floor and the four walls and the high ceiling, and—

It crouched in the corner, sniffing.

Kothar felt the hairs rise up on the nape of his neck. Was this the treasure for which men fought and died inside the labyrinth? Was this hairy man-thing any kind of treasure—even to Ulnar Themaquol? He could not believe it.

The thing lay in a ball of reddish fur in a far corner of the room. It sniffled and gurgled, it bleated. Of all the traps through which he had passed, this one—if it were a trap, that is, in a kind of cosmic joke—seemed least dangerous.

Disbelieving what his eyes told him, he scanned the room again. Still he saw no chests, no piles of jewels or bars of gold, no suggestion of wizard-hidden wealth, only the reddish creature mumbling to itself. Kothar rasped soft curses as he moved across the room with his lionlike tread.

Suddenly, as if aware of Kothar for the first time, the ball of reddish fur uncoiled itself. A horned head rose up, the body straightened, two hairy legs bent, and one thing stood up.

"By Dwallka!" the Cumberian breathed, awestruck.

The man-body was covered by reddish hair, it was even larger and fully as muscular as himself, with the head of a bull tipped by wide, flaring white horns. The bull-eyes were red, mean. The muscles of chest and arms and legs—

Kothar grunted. The legs were the legs of an animal, ending in split hooves. He could see them fully, now that the monster was no longer huddled in a ball. His hand lifted Frostfire, held the blade at the ready as the bull-man lowered its horned head. Out from behind its hips lashed a thin, hairless tail.

The bull-man bellowed.

Sound was an ache in his ears from that thunderous roar. Kothar supposed it was meant to frighten him, to freeze him motionless for the few seconds the bull-man needed to reach him. Because as that cry left its throbbing throat, the being charged, head down and horns poised to gore.

Kothar swung his sword.

The beast-man lifted a huge hand, closed a leathery palm about the blade and tore it from Kothar's grip. The blued steel flew across the room, clanged against a wall. Kothar snarled, felt something touch his thigh.

Too late, he moved. The sharp horn about to dig itself into the thick sinews of his mighty thigh only grazed him, scratching a bloody furrow in its wake. Kothar was leaping sideways, his fist balled into a fleshy sledgehammer.

And striking!

His knuckles knew the thud of contact, his eyes saw the bull-head whipped sideways and away from him. Kothar sought to follow up that first blow with a second, but the bull-thing turned on its hooves and lashed out with a fist.

Kothar saw the fist, and ducked. He did not see the tail that wrapped itself about his ankles and tugged. The barbarian went backward, silent even in his surprise. No need to waste breath on a cry, he had no ally in this maze, it was his own strong body and great rolling muscles pitted against the human bull. And he needed all the air his lungs would hold.

Catlike, he turned in midair, landing on the balls of his booted feet. The bull-man was charging, head down and hooves beating out a tattoo on the floor. Kothar crouched, hands outward.

He slid sideways out of the horn-path, fingers reaching to grip the furry hips of the beast. Upward he surged, lifting the creature off its hooves. With a grunt of straining muscles, the Cumberian raised him high above his head and flung him. An instant before his body left his hands, Kothar felt the slither of that

hairless tail across his middle.

This time, the tail had no time to tighten. It flailed the air as the furry creature flew through it, upside down. The bull-man hit the wall and slid down it, momentarily dazed.

Kothar leaped, leaving his booted feet and diving a yard above the floor. His hand shot out, closed on Frostfire as his bending legs took the shock of his landing. Blade naked in a fist, he turned snarling toward the slowly recovering beast-man.

"Let's see you tear my sword away this time, you necromantic nightmare!" he roared.

Bull-man and giant barbarian came for each other. Forgotten was the treasure and the fact that Miramel knelt on the very edge of the chamber, staring at this battle of Titans, gnawing on her knuckles. For the barbarian, all that existed was this fearsome foe as strong as he was himself.

Frostfire made a blue blur in the air as Kothar swung it.

The bull-man shrieked as he dodged. For while he avoided that slashing sweep of steel with his head, his tail was not so dexterous. The keen edge severed it, it fell to twist and writhe about on the floor.

Before Kothar could recover his balance from the blow that was meant to decapitate the monster, the furry creature leaped. Its fists thudded together into the northern giant's thick chest. As Kothar staggered, the beast-man hit his swordarm with a horn.

The ivory did not cut the flesh, but it numbed the great bicept muscle. The blade fell from his paralyzed fingers, clattering on the floor. Kothar shook himself,

seeing the man-bull coming for him with his head sideways, one horn curved to gore.

Kothar leaped, but not before the horn drove deep into his thigh. Blood spurted as flesh ripped. Pain lanced from his torn thigh into his groin. He bellowed as if he were a bull himself. His great hands locked together and drove downward into the red-furred bullneck at his thigh-level.

His balled hands felt bone and flesh crack beneath the blow. The bull-man staggered, flailed the air with its arms, and went to its knees.

The broad back was before him, invitingly. Kothar fell upon it, locking his legs about the monster's chest. His hands fell to those twin horns even as the monster came to its hooved feet.

The beast lifted its head, sending out its trumpeting challenge while Kothar tightened his great fingers around its horns. The bull-thing raced on pounding hooves for the nearest wall, intending to scrape the barbarian off so it could horn him a second time.

Through a red haze of pain, the Cumberian twisted the horns until his arms quivered and his muscles leaped in massive bulges. Slowly, slowly, that great head was turning. Unable to stop its gallop, the monster thudded into the wall, ramming it with its own shoulder and its rider's one good leg.

Teeth grated as Kothar exerted his gigantic strength against the brute force of the bull-man, gnashing his molars together as if the sound would add to his power. The head was halfway around, now; the monster glared over its shoulder as it stumbled about the room on weakening legs.

On the rim of the chamber, Miramel stared with disbelieving eyes. No man could kill red-furred Minokar! The wizard Pthoomol himself had created the bull-man out of—

"Aiieeee!" she screamed.

The horned head with its open, slavering jaws and rolling, agonized eyes from which blood slowly dripped, was facing Kothar now. The barbarian was shivering in the strain of his awesome task. A single inch more, and his foe would die.

craaaaack!

The neck snapped, the bull-man fell.

Kothar leaped free, half falling as pain lanced up his torn thigh when his full weight came down on his left foot. He was wet with sweat, his lungs were bellows breathing in air. His golden hair had come loose of its fastening and hung to his shoulders. He was primordial man, standing above the beast which would have slain him.

For long minutes he sobbed in near exhaustion, but with the recuperative powers of a wild thing, he felt his strength slowly seeping back into his aching body. The pain in his ripped thigh was frightful, but he was used to enduring pain.

He bent and was about to tear a strip of cloth from his kilt when a voice said, "There is no need for that, Kothar. I will cure you in return for what you have done for me."

A tall man stood in an open section of the wall, clad in purple vestments heavily braided with gold symbols. A carefully trimmed spade beard showed below a saturnine face, handsome despite the wickedly glowing eyes and the triumphant smile on thin, curving lips.

The Cumberian straightened, every sense alert. His eyes touched fallen Frostfire on the other side of the room. The man laughed softly.

"There is no need for bared steel between us," he murmured, and throwing back a flap of his cape, he disclosed a number of purple bags hanging from a chain of golden links about his middle.

His slender white hand went into a bag, lifted out a pinch of yellow powder. His fingers tossed it through the air at the barbarian.

"Let powder heal, let flesh be weal," he murmured.

There was no more pain. Wonderingly, Kothar stared down at his left thigh, at the blood gouting from his wound. Before his eyes, that wound was closing over, the blood was drying, flaking, turning into brownish powder that was slowly falling from his body. In a moment, there was no mark to show that he had ever known the bite of the ivory horn.

The man said, "Look you, Kothar."

The delicate hand gestured at the corpse of Minokar.

Kothar swallowed hard. The red fur was fading, the very shape of the bull-thing was changing! The horns were gone, the bull snout was receding, the legs were reforming themselves. Where hooves had

been, were now pale white feet.

"Gods," the barbarian breathed.

"Not gods," demurred the tall man in the purple robes. "Just magical enchantments losing their powers."

Kothar sidled past the dead body which was becoming something else. Frostfire lay there at the base of the wall. His palm itched to hold that sword against this living nightmare. He bent and picked it up, held it in his hand, aware that the man was smiling at him.

"If the sword contents you, then hold it," the man said softly. "I am too happy to deny any other man his own kind of pleasure. As you may have guessed—"

"I am Ulnar Themaquol. Yes, yes—the necromancer supposed to have built this magic maze in which to hide a treasure. Well, the labyrinth holds a treasure, true enough—the one thing dearest to me in all the universes known to my wizardries."

The bull man was gone.

A naked girl lay on the cold tiles, pink of skin with long black hair forming a glossy waterfall down her back. She was moaning, stirring, her fingers quivering with returning life.

The mage dropped to a knee, lifting off his cabal-sigiled cloak and spreading it about her nudity. There was a tenderness in his action that made Kothar wonder. As if he sensed those thoughts, Ulnar Themaquol lifted his handsome head.

"She is my beloved, barbarian, the Lady Rosannia. Long ago, the sorcerer Pthoomol and I quarreled. When he sought to cast his spells upon my person, I broke them with my necromantic wisdom. To protect myself and mine—and my Rosannia, here—from Pthoomol, I cast a conjuration from runestones taken from the ocean bed of the great Salt Sea, out of the ruins of a dead magician's castle.

"Pthoomol died from those conjurations—but before he did, he dealt me a blow that came near to killing me with grief and loneliness.

"This labyrinth which Pthoomol had used to protect his gold and jewels, he now used—to hide my beloved. Her fair body he changed into that of a Minokar, a furred bull-beast that tried to slay every living thing it saw. On girl and maze he laid a spell I have never been able to overcome.

"That spell required a man to enter the maze, to find his way to this inner chamber—and slay the Minokar. Until now, no man has ever been able to do that. Only one man before you ever penetrated to this hidden heart of the maze. Him the Minokar slew."

"Ulnar," said the girl, widening her eyes.

He kissed her soft hands, then helped her to her feet, his arm holding the cloak about her body. She lifted a hand, put back her ebony hair, stared at Kothar with a happy smile.

"You slew me, you freed me. My eternal thanks," she whispered.

Ulnar Themaquol chuckled. "I am afraid, my darling, your eternal thanks are not enough. Our barbaric friend appreciates gold and jewels more than he does the babbled murmurings of a girl, no matter how



beautiful."

The wizard gestured. Kothar stared as a small casket came floating through the hidden doorway out of which the mage himself had stepped.

"The casket and the jewels in it are real, not formed by the necromantic arts, barbarian. You can spend them in any tavern from here to tropical Oasia. Take it."

The Cumberian sheathed his sword, caught the casket. It felt reassuringly heavy, but Kothar, took the hinged lid in a big hand and raised it. His eyes widened at sight of the green and red and white gems that filled the coffer to overflowing. Gods! Such a fortune could make him a baron in the lands where the robber lords reigned.

He said slowly, "You are a great wizard, Ulnar Themaquol. There is a spell on my sword, Frostfire. I will give back the jewels in exchange for a counter-spell to remove it."

Ulnar Themaquol smiled happily. "I shall be glad to remove it. And keep the gems. Just tell me the name of the mage who placed it there, and let me touch the blade."

He removed his arm from about the Lady Rosannia and stretched both palms out toward the hilt, even as Kothar rumbled, "It was the lich of Afgorkon who put the spell on it. He—"

Kothar halted as the magician drew back, a look of utter horror on his face. "Afgorkon? Afgorkon? Speak not his name, man—he is the greatest necromancer Yarth has ever known! None but he can remove his curse. All but he would be blasted into the seven hells of Eboron were he to attempt it!"

The magician paused, breathing hard. He licked his lips, his eyes sliding about the room. "It may be that I have incurred his anger by giving you that casket. But no—I would sense his rage if he were angry. His spell will prevent you from keeping those jewels, barbarian. How it will come about, I do not know. But you will never keep that fortune."

Kothar sighed. He put his big hand on Frostfire. Sword or jewels, for him there was no choice. Somewhere, somehow, he might lift the enchantment on the blade. Until then, he would rather have the sword.

"Here, take it," he growled, holding out the coffer.

"Not I," murmured Ulnar Themaquol, shaking his head, putting his arm about the waist of the woman he loved. "I leave it to you, it may be the will of Afgorkon that you keep it—for a little while. In any event, his spell will prevent you from holding it very long."

The sorcerer and the Lady Rosannia turned toward the section of the wall through which he had stepped. An instant later, they were gone. The wall smoothed over, and Kothar stood alone.

"Pssst—Kothar!"

Miramel stood in the doorway on the other side of the room, gesturing at him. Her fear of the maze-heart was written on her pretty features, and her stare went from wall to ceiling to floor as if expecting more dread visitants to appear.

The barbarian walked toward her, the coffer clamped under a muscular arm. "You shall take half the

treasure," he grinned. "I can't keep it, and it irks me to see Mental Abanon get it all."

"No, no—what need have I of jewels in such a place?" her hand indicated the labyrinth all about her. Her smile was wistful. "If I could, I would wish for a man—or even a number of men—to keep me company in here through the ages until the labyrinth becomes as dust." She sighed. "It is very lonely for a girl without a man."

The Cumberian grinned, "I'll do what I can. Right now, all I want is to shake this maze dust from my boots."

Her warm little hand caught his fingers. "Come, I will show you the way. The sooner you step into the outer world, the sooner you can send a man in here to me."

Her bare feet seemed to race along the maze corridors. Her long brown hair floated behind her on the wind. Within seconds, it seemed to the bemused barbarian, he was once more at the gateway to the outer world.

"Farewell," Miramel whispered, and flung her arms about him. Her lips, as she kissed him, were soft and sweet.

Then her palm pushed him into the darkness of early morning. He could see Greyling at a little distance, cropping grass. The stars were lower in the sky, and to the west, a faint tint of crimson was coating the distant spires and rooftops of Azdor town.

"Remember—bring me a man," Miramel called.

Then he was alone. Kothar gathered up the reins, raised his huge body to the highpeaked saddle. A touch of his toes at the ribs sent Greyling into a canter. Kothar let the cool morning wind brush against his cheeks, as if it might wipe away the last trace of the magic with which he had come in contact this night.

Elnora was waiting at the tavern door when he reined in the grey warhorse. She saw the coffer and her eyes went wide. She whirled and called, "He's back, he's back —and he has one of the treasure chests with him."

There was a rush from inside the tavern, led by the merchant, Mental Abanon. With him were three burly men in armor and leather, but without their helmets. Kothar wondered if they were to stand bodyguard for the plump man, if they had been hired to kill Kothar so Mental Abanon might have all the treasure for himself.

In a moment they were about him like hounds yapping at a great stag. Kothar boomed out his laughter, hooked Elnora with an arm at her soft middle, and walked with her through the wooden doorway. A few torches still glowed, lighting the wooden tables and chairs, the sleepy ostler behind the scot counter, the walls hung with rare furs from Mongolia and the Haunted Lands.

Kothar plunked the coffer down on a table, bellowed for cold ale in a leathern jack. Elnora he pulled onto his knee, and with the greedy faces of Mental Abanon and his three guards staring, he threw back the lid.

Green fire, red fire, white fire! Flames trapped inside great jewels the least of which was worth a small kingdom. There was a hushed, awed silence in which the sobbing breath of the plump man could be heard.

"If this is just a part of the treasure," the merchant panted, "What must the rest be like? I shall be richer than fabled King Midor of Sybaros!"

"This is all of it," Kothar said, reaching for his tankard.

"All?" gasped Mental Abanon, eyes bulging. "But—"

Kothar told them the story between gulps of midlands ale and kisses from the wine-sweet lips of Elorna. He was vaguely aware that glances passed between Mental Abanon and his three warriors, but he was too preoccupied to pay them any heed. It was enough for his barbaric body to be here with a woman on his lap and chilled ale for his lips.

When he was done, Mental Abanon murmured, "So then! There was no treasure—just a bull-beast that changed into a pretty girl. What a story!"

Kothar found himself surprised at the passive acceptance of his tale by Mental Abanon. He had expected the merchant to call him a liar. He watched carefully as the plump man lifted a massive diamond and held it to the torchlight flaring on the wall.

"A perfect gem. Absolutely flawless! It is worth ten thousand times ten deniers." His soft voice was almost hypnotic as he stretched out pudgy fingers toward a great emerald. "And this gem—priceless! Never have I seen its like. These two alone would make what you have done profitable."

"We share and share alike," growled Kothar.

"Of course, of course," nodded the merchant agreeably.

A hand set a refilled jack before the barbarian. He reached for it without taking his eyes from the mercer, raised it to his lips, quaffed half the ale in one long gulp. He set the tankard down.

"Now to divide our prize," he grunted. He put his hand on a ruby, lifting it from the pile of jewels within the casket. As he did so, a lethargy came upon him, his head nodded and the red gem slipped from his grasp.

"I must be more exhausted than I thought," he muttered. His head felt so heavy, he laid it on the tabletop, half in and half out of a puddle of spilled wine.

In a moment, he was asleep.

Mental Abanon got to his feet, breathing a relieved sigh. "He will be like that for hours. Elorna, you stay with him. Tavern keeper! Shut and bolt your doors after we depart. Fail me not! Let the barbarian sleep off the drug we placed in his ale tankard. I have no stomach to taste that sword of his! When he wakes, tell him I have gone into the maze. I'll check his story, of no treasure for myself."

The merchant counted out two diamonds and slid them across the tabletop at Elorna, who snatched them up and fitted them in a small velvet purse that hung between her breasts on a bronze chain.

One emerald each, Mental Abanon gave his guards. Then he caught up the coffer and holding it against his side, walked from the tavern toward his litter.

Kothar slept on, dreaming of his boyhood and of the small boat in which he had sailed the near reaches of the Salt Sea where it beat against the rocky walls of Grondel fjord. He woke to the taste of its spray on his lips, and found his yellow head wet with a dousing of water from the hand of the ostler.

"It's near my time to open, barbarian," the tavern keeper complained. "You've slept the time-candle around. Best be off with you."

The Cumberian was instantly awake and in full possession of his every faculty, like an animal. His big hand darted out, caught the thonged shirt of the ostler.

"Where are they? The others? Mental Abanon and his guards? The girl, Elorna?"

"Elorna has left town," squeaked the terrified tavern keeper, shivering. "She says her two jewels will let her live like a great lady in Clonmall to the east."

Kothar growled, "And the merchant? His guards?"

"They went to the maze of Ulnar Themaquol."

The barbarian brooded. He would go back into the maze, he would search out and kill Mental Abanon despite his three soldiers, and retake the coffer of jewels. It was his courage, his muscles, that had won them. The merchant had forfeited his claim to the casket by his treachery.

With a heavy hand, he thrust the ostler out of his way. Rage was a wildness inside his huge body, rage cleared his mind and flesh of the last dregs of the drug he had taken in the ale. On thickly thewed legs he walked from the tavern to his grey warhorse.

The iron hooves of Greyling pounded a tattoo on the cobbled streets of the little hamlet as Kothar galloped between the houses leaning over the narrow road. The smell of cooking meats was in the air, the sun was lowering to westward. It was late afternoon; soon, it would be dusk.

Before the sun dipped from sight, Kothar was reining in the big grey horse, staring. "By Dwallka! What happened to it?"

The castle and the great, walled maze were mere shards of blackened stone and marble, as if blasted by Time itself. The walls were jagged, black teeth thrusting up against a darkening sky. Where the labyrinthine traps had been, little flowers blew in the evening winds.

An old man was seated on a stone to one side of the road, munching on a loaf of bread and a wedge of cheese. He looked up at the muscular young giant, his rheumy eyes blinking.

"The maze be gone," the old man mumbled, nodding his head. "Of a sudden it were there, and next it were gone. Nothing remains but what you see. Seen it with my own eyes. Seen it disappear like water in dry sand."

"Magic," Kothar muttered.

"Aye. Magic. It had served its purpose, the treasure that was in the maze be no longer there, and the spell upon it be lifted."

Kothar thought a moment, nodding. "Saw you anything of four men, one a fat mercer, the others all

warriors?"

"I did. Went into the maze a little after daybreak, carrying some kind of small chest. They'm were talkin' of the rest of the treasure them might find. Fools, all on 'em. The treasure be no more."

Vanished also was his casket of jewels, Kothar told himself. Ah, well. He had known it would happen, one way or another. He sighed and stared at the bread and cheese the old man was eating.

The ancient one held up his loaf and wedge of cheese. "Care you to dine wi' me? I have plenty more in my knapsack, and my appetite be nothing like it were, years back."

"My thanks, old one, I'll gladly share your meal."

The barbarian swung down from his saddle, thinking of Miramel inside the maze. Did she have her men to keep her happy now? Did the labyrinth exist in some different time zone? Were Mental Abanon and his men trapped forever in its corridors? He would never learn the answers to his thoughts, he decided, but he did not care.

It was enough for him that he could feed his belly with barley bread and goat's milk cheese. There was always a distant horizon to ride over in his eternal search to escape Red Lori's hate and to learn a way to amass some gold for his flattened purse.

## THE WOMAN IN THE WITCH-WOOD

### Chapter One

The stone tower was dark and gaunt in the rays of the setting sun. Through the gaps which had been arrow slits long ago, red fire seemed to dance as if it were a living thing behind the dark, forbidding stones. Kothar the barbarian reined in his grey warhorse and sat a moment, staring. There was an evil aura about the stone tower that seemed almost tangible.

Uneasiness touched him between his wide mailed shoulders so that he reached to shift Frostfire at his side, bringing it closer to his hand. The countryside around him was unfamiliar. He had chosen a wrong turn in the road on his way to the land of the robber barons, where he hoped to find employment under the banner of one lord-baron or another, but the day had been so filled with sunlight and the air with the scents of grapes on their vines that he had let the grey wander as it would.

Now the sun was dying in the west, and he did not like the look of the forest about him. Its underbrush seemed to stir as if alive, twigs appeared to writhe and ripple in some fey manner, and where the topmost branches swept the sky, an alien darkness lurked.

Kothar reached into his leather pouch for one of the parchment maps he carried on his travels. From Azdor, he had ridden Greyling across the flatlands of Zoradar, through the hill pass at Maalbek, and down the gorge of an old riverbed intending to come into the lands of the robber barons. A lucky toss with the dice in some border tavern, and an occasional deed for a man or woman willing to pay for his skill in weaponry, had put food in him and in his warhorse.

Sometimes he saw the face of Red Lori in his lonely campfires, sometimes he even dreamed of her, wrapped in his saddle blanket against the chill winds of some hilly slope or out of a forest glade. Yet her memory was slowly fading; she was becoming nothing but a pretty face as his great horse carried him eastward.

In one castle or another of those feudal overlords, he hoped to find employment for his blade. They were always warring, those barons, one with another, or perhaps with some small kingdom nearby, or even when they staged raids on the caravans making their way from city marketplaces to the unknown regions east of the Sisyphian Hills. They could use a man skilled in weaponplay and in the command of warriors.

His fingers spread out the map, studying its marks and sigils with furrowed brows. Odd! This forest where he rode was not delineated here. There was only a vast grey nothingness where this rutted road should have been a thin ink line, and as for the tower—why, surely old Gwalith in the marketplace stall in Exekonn where he scratched maps for any land in all the world should have known about it!

Wryly his lip twisted in a grin as he folded the parchment and slipped it back into his almoner. There would be poor forage in these woods. Sticks for a fire, maybe. Yet no food worthy of the name.

"Well, we've had lean bellies before," he told the horse. His mailed toe nudged the big grey to a walk. Perhaps with luck he would come upon a charcoal burner's hut where one of his five silver deniers might buy a loaf of bread and a wedge of cheese.

As he rode, swaying gracefully in the saddle, his eyes turned at their corners every so often to study the dark stone tower. The redness in it was not unlike some queer hobgoblin dancing widdershins about a demon flame. Surely the redness was not the result of the setting sun sinking beyond its merlons. The redness moved and leaped and danced. It seemed almost to call out to him.

Ah, and then—

The voice was sweet as the silver bells of Clonmall, pealing out above the jagged rocks where the sea lapped in eternal rhythms. It sang a song the barbarian had never heard, yet there was a response to those words in his flesh and in his bones. His breath hushed in his throat, and he tightened the reins to slow the hooves of the war-horse. With the small of his back against the high cantle of his saddle he sat like a man bemused.

As the Sirens might have sung to Ulysses, or the maidens of the Rhine, the Lorelei, to weary travelers, so that voice called out to the Cumberian. When it was done, he roused himself with an effort. His eyelids were heavy and sleep was a soft warmth wrapping his tired muscles in its clasp.

He drew his sword half out of the scabbard and clanged it back inside. The metallic echoes stirred his blood to wakefulness. The great grey horse shook its head, making its white mane fly.

"Ho, Greyling! Now I know why old Gwalith knew nothing of this place. It's haunted by ghouls and goblins."

He was about to urge the warhorse into a canter when a different kind of enchantment caught him in its spell. He paused, sniffing the air. Surely that was the smell of roasting hare, slow-turned over a bed of coals. Hare and newly baked bread, yes. His empty belly sang its own song to his senses.

Kothar grinned and rubbed a palm over his thick yellow hair. What a siren voice might not do, a food scent might. Aie, a weak thing was a man with an empty stomach. It would do no harm to walk the horse toward the tower, to see for himself whether a hare roasted on a spit.

Some poacher or outlaw, mayhap, was crouched over that fire. The barbarian feared no man alive. His

sword Frostfire had taken him in and out of dangerous places in the past. It would do so again if there was danger in the stone pile.

"Come, Greyling. There may be oats or at the least, a little hay for the munching. Lift your hoofs and be careful where you step."

As if the beast understood him, it tossed its head to make the ringbits jingle and moved daintily between the berrybushes and the hazel growths. Kothar sat straighter in the high-peaked saddle, standing at times in the stirrups to help his keen eyes search out the ruin.

It was then that he saw the woman.

She was bent above the flames, clad all in black that clung to her supple figure and revealed her hips and the high mounds of her breasts. She did not look at him, all her attention was on the hares she was turning above the fire with the end of a forked stick. She had long white hair that fell down her back and merged with the color of her simple gown, like flecks of seaspray across dark shore rocks.

Kothar let the warhorse walk to the edge of the stonework where once had been a wall, and waited, shifting restlessly in the saddle. Twice he almost came down out of the kak but something restrained him.

At last he said, "Mother, I ask your pardon."

The woman turned her face and now the Cumberian saw that she was young and fair and that her hair was not white but so pale a yellow it was almost platinum. Her eyes were purple, slanted and with long silvery lashes. Her face was white, her lips the color of new blood.

"Mother?" she wondered, and laughed.

Her wise eyes assessed his giant frame with eager interest. She saw his deep chest framed in a thonged leather jerkin and mail shirt, his hugely muscled, sun-bronzed arms bare below the short sleeves of his loose bliaut. A fur pelisse framed yard-wide shoulders, held by a silver clasp below his throat. A magnificent sword hung in a worn scabbard at his left side, a dagger to the right of his broad leather belt. His thighs were naked between the edge of his homespun kilt and his war-boots trimmed in miniker fur.

Her eyes told him she found him attractive as a man to her womanhood. Her breasts rose a moment as she sighed, and he read her honest opinion of him deep in her slanted purple eyes.

Kothar flushed, for he was young and the woman very beautiful. He looked at the hares on the spit, at the black stones of the tower, at the sky that was now dark with a few stars shining in it. Very gently he lifted out of the saddle and put his feet upon the ground.

"I would buy a hare from you, and a little of the bread I see baking on the flat stones," he growled. He took two silver pieces from his almoner and held them out.

She rose to her feet. She was neither tall nor short, but the top of her pale hair came to his heart and her body was slimly rounded. A golden chain belted her waist and from the hem of her black gown, little slippers peeped.

"I have no need of silver. You are welcome to the hare—in return for a favor."

"And what favor would that be?"

"You must listen to a story."

Kothar grinned and nodded. Her eyes were brilliant; little devil flames danced deep inside them, but they did not frighten him. No woman ever born could frighten Kothar of Cumberia. And if she were in trouble, if she needed his sword to set matters right for her, then perhaps his service with the robber barons could wait a day or two, or even three.

She sensed his agreement and clapped her hands, then waved him to a flat stone. Without glancing at him again, she drew off the hares and placed them on wooden platters with bread and a little cheese and a handful of berries for their sweetening. She moved gracefully and lightly on her feet, like a forest dryad, and when she brought her own platter she sat beside him so closely that the warmth of a soft shoulder pressed his arm.

They ate, sometimes staring at the flames, sometimes at one another. Kothar would have lost himself in her purple eyes, sensing no evil in them, but she only smiled and shook her head and made him understand that all she thought of was the telling of her tale.

When the platters were clean, when she had brought a skin of properly chilled wine from the old well and filled two leather jacks with the rich liquor, she looked at him. Her pale hands clasped a goblet until her knuckles showed whitely as she began to speak.

"My name is Alaine. Once this tower was mine and all the land around it, as far as the towns of Murrd and Kolaine, for I was the lady of Shallone, a countess in my own right. Until a time when a lord stronger than I came to Shallone and drove me from my inheritance."

A twig crackled with blue flame as the fire ate into it. The woman called Alaine turned her head to stare at it. "He used weaponplay and witchcraft to dethrone me. His soldiers slew my guards and with the incantations of which he is a master, he imprisoned me here in these woods."

The barbarian rumbled, "There are no bars around the wood. I came riding its roads only this afternoon. I saw no iron nor even a wooden fence."

Her smile was gentle. "The fence is a magic one. Were I to cross the barrier my Lord Gorfroi has drawn, I would be destroyed as the flame of a candle is destroyed when someone blows it out."

Kothar nodded. He had come in contact with wizards and witches. Few men made war from Makkadania in the north to Mantaigne in the south without paying for the sorcery that would insure a victory.

"So I remain in this ruin day and night," went on the woman, "with a little food to last me and a few string traps in the underbrush to catch the hares that feed me with their meat. Sometimes a woman comes who knew me in the old days and brings me flour or a bit of mutton. I live. No more."

She looked at the barbarian who shifted uncomfortably beneath that purple stare. "I would help you, if I could. But I'm only one man."

Alaine smiled. "My lord Gorfroi has discharged his warriors and his captains, since he no longer needs them, having other—helpers. He lives alone in the castle which once was mine. A brave man might enter that castle and kill him and—bring to me my lock of hair which Gorfroi took from me."



"A lock of your hair?"

Alaine smiled and placed pale hands to her thick white hair, lifting up its heaviness so that it seemed a helmet above her lovely face. She smiled on the Cumberian with her slanted purple eyes as she shifted that hair about, giving herself a less regal, an almost wanton look. He thought her lips were very red where she touched them with her tongue, like blood.

"He took a single strand of my hair and placed it in a golden casket marked with the sigil of Belthamquar, who as you know is king of the daemons. Until that hair is destroyed, I am his prisoner in this witch wood."

Kothar drew a deep breath.

The Lady Alaine moved closer to him, touching his arm with her soft fingers. She was perfumed—where in these woods did she acquire those scents of Araby?—and very seductive. The young barbarian leaned closer, as if to touch her lips with his own. She breathed upon his mouth as her hand tightened on his arm.

Kothar was helpless to resist the magic of the fair shoulders her black gown revealed, the curving red lips, the firmly rounded body beneath the thin cotehardie which was her garment.

His tongue stumbled in its speech.

"He keeps no men-at-arms, you say? And lives alone in your castle? These helpers! What are they?"

"Daemons," she said simply, shrugging.

Alaine reached out to touch the hilt of his sword. "If my touch could give your blade the strength to slay those familiars, I would. Yet I know no magic, except that which calls from a woman to a handsome man."

Her eyes slid sideways at him, promising him love if he should be her champion. "Love can do much, Kothar of Cumberia." It did not puzzle him that she knew his name, so lost was he in her beauty.

He sighed, "I travel to seek service with the baron lords, but I travel the road to Murrd. In Murrd I'll ask the way to the castle of Shallone."

She stood up and moved back and forth before the flames. "I would not send you to your death. I asked you to listen, not—to act. I would not be the death of any man."

She was no witchwoman, yet she wove a magical spell about his senses, blended of the sight of her slim ankles under the swaying gown and of the roundness of her hips and the silvery laughter that came from her soft lips. She clasped her hands and flirted with him over them, eyes brightly gleeful.

"And yet—and yet, were you to win past Gorfroi and take back my lock of hair, I would be the lady of Shallone again. Then I would need a strong man to be my lord, a man—such as yourself."

She spread her pale hands. "I can offer no gold or silver, nor anything but my love. And my promise that if you free me, you shall win my hand."

Alaine pointed at him, frowning prettily. "But no unnecessary risks, do you understand? If Gorfroi or his daemons are too deadly, let them be and ride away to forget me."

It would not be easy to forget such a woman. The Cumberian was quite sure he could not do it. And besides, the coins in his purse were few. His sword had been a long time without employment. He owned enough for a meal and a night's lodging at an inn, and not much else.

She came three steps nearer, then four, and reached out her soft mouth for his kissing. He held her and his brain was bemused by the joy of their caress. After a moment she drew away and walked into the shadows.

"I sleep here, barbarian. You shall slumber there, on the flat rock with your cloak beneath you and your saddle for a pillow. In the morning, I shall cook again for you."

She danced deeper into the darkness of what seemed to have been the entrance to a crypt at one time long ago. The Cumberian stood watching her until the weariness came through his pleasure and into his muscles. He sighed. First he must rub down the warhorse, and see that it was fed a little of the hay he could see beyond the woodpile.

After that, he would sleep.

Aie, and perhaps dream of the Lady of Shallone.

And as he slept he did indeed dream of the Lady Alaine. She came out of the vault where she slept and walked with gracefully flowing strides to his great long-sword in its worn, blow-dented scabbard. Around its hilt she put her hands and drew it forth. When Kothar would have protested—no hands touched Frostfire other than his own—his muscles were frozen and his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth.

He watched her fingernail scrape blue fire along the shining length of the blade and write with runelike, mystic characters there upon the steel. As she did this, she chanted oddly in an unknown tongue.

As he watched in his dream, the black dress and white hair of the Lady Alaine blurred, to be replaced by the shape and face of Red Lori. Yes, it was the sorceress scratching fiery letters along the length of Frostfire, Red Lori who sang that weird song.

Did she want to keep him safe for her own vengeance? In her mind, she considered him her property, hers to do with as she would. To Red Lori, he was no more than a slave on whose ultimate punishment she had not as yet decided.

Suddenly her beautiful face lifted as she laid her stare on the sleeping yet wakeful barbarian. Her red lips parted and her mocking laughter stirred the hairs on the nape of his neck. When her laughter stilled, only a taunting smile remained as she bent once again to touch the blue-steel blade and whisper incantations over it.

When she was done, the longsword was bathed with flames. Deep in his mind, Kothar knew that the Lady Alaine—or was she Red Lori?—practiced great enchantments on its length. For good, for evil, he did not know.

Yet he did know that by morning, he would forget his dream. It would be as if it never had been.

The night wore on.

## Chapter Two

In the dawn mists there was a little cheese melted over a bit of bread from the night meal and a sip of wine to allay his hunger. Alaine walked with him to the road and watched as he mounted into the high-peaked saddle. She put out her hands to seize his fingers.

"Be careful, Kothar! Gorfroi is a dangerous man."

He let the grey horse go as it would for a little way, while he swiveled about to stare back along the dirt road at the woman with silver hair waiting there so quietly. When a bend in the road hid her, he turned his face toward Murrd.

There was a queer emptiness in his middle. He supposed it was the pain of parting which caused it. Later, as the sun rose higher into the sky and the forest road wound in and out between oaks and towering chestnut trees, he admitted to himself it might be hunger. Yet if that were so, on what food had the Lady Alaine fed him?

He would have turned aside to find a farm and hot sausages and biscuits, but in the distance he could see, the forest road edging into a wider thoroughfare and the spires and rooftops of a town. This would be Murrd, and there must be inns and taverns.

The hoofs of the grey warhorse beat a thunder on the hardpacked dirt of the town road. Kothar galloped past a cart carrying produce to market and sent a glance at the pinched, frightened face of the driver. A little past the wagon he saw three women walking with shoulders bowed under heavy firewood. They did not look up except for one, the youngest, who showed terror in her wide eyes before she closed them.

They are frightened, all these people.

They fear something. Baron Gorfroi? It might be, since the Lady Alaine lost her castle and her towns, that Gorfroi had proved a cruel master.

He cantered into Murrd sometime past the noon hour, and found the streets almost empty of life. A boy ran up as he swung the grey into the courtyard of a large inn— there was a wooden sign in the shape of a tankard hanging on rusty chains at the roadside gate—and came down out of the saddle.

Without speaking, the boy turned to lead the big grey warhorse toward a stable. Kothar noticed for the first time that the lad shivered every now and so often, though the day was warm and the sun hot upon his shoulders.

In the tavern common room, he had to pound with a fist upon the keg counter before a pretty maidservant came running from the cellar. She curtsied after a moment, staring at him with wide green eyes in which that same terror was deeply mirrored.

"There be so few travelers," she whispered, to excuse herself.

"No wonder, if everyone acts the way the few people I've met have acted," he snorted. "What's everybody so frightened about?"

She shivered as the boy had, looking to left and right before touching fingertip to lip and leaning close. "It be the castle and what lives in the castle now."

"Only the baron Gorfroi lives there," he pointed out.

She tried to smile. The barbarian thought she should smile a lot for it gave her gamin face a rare prettiness. Her hair was long and black and a spray of freckles lay across her nose. Her mouth was red, but the fear in her turned her cheeks to a waxen pallor.

To calm her, he suggested she fill a tankard with brew and bring him a wedge of cheese. When that was before him and he was eating, he realized how hungry he was, almost as if Alaine had fed him nothing last night and this morning. During this time he continued a conversation with the girl, who was not reluctant to wag her tongue.

"Ever since the Lady Alaine left, there's been ill times on the land," she said, leaning closer. "*Shewas* bad enough—but the baron!"

Kothar was surprised. "The Lady Alaine—bad?"

The girl sniffed. "A witch, she was. Aie, a witch-woman. Full of spells and all that. But at least she left the villagers alone and never once bothered the farmers around the countryside."

The barbarian smiled. "Then how do you know she was a witch?"

"She cast spells. She admitted it, even bragged about it when some of us took extra days to pay our rents and land fees. Threatened to curdle cows milk or ruin our ale. Though she never did, I must admit."

The cheese was gone. He said he might do with some roast meat and bread and when this was set before him he ate like a famished man. The girl Mellicent stared at him with her great green eyes, rounded hip propped against a nearby tabletop. He squirmed under her steady gaze but ate on, steadily and purposefully, using his dagger to cut his meat.

When nothing remained but the pitcher of beer, he poured that into a leathern jack and sipped it. "And now? This Baron Gorfroi: what manner of man is he?"

She said simply, "I daren't tell. He'd come for me if I did and I don't want to be took."

"Come for you? In what way?"

"He'd send something for me. Seen it come for Giraldus, I did. A black, squidgilly thing in the dark of the night that poured itself in the window of his downstairs room—Geraldus used to be a scribe before he was took— and carried him off in its arms. If it had arms, that is."

"You only dreamed."

Her eyes were frightened. "I've had dreams. This was no dream. Kept my lips closed about it, though. Until now."

"Then why tell me?"

"You aren't one of the villagers, nor come you from a farm. The mark of the baron bean't on your skin." She rolled up her left sleeve. On her white forearm, an inch below the elbow, was a black mark. "Baron done this, after he drove out the Lady Alaine. One night it wasn't there, come morning and it was. All us

folks got them, as far away as Kolaine."

He examined the mark, which looked like a black crescent. A birthmark, in all probability—yet Mellicent seemed to speak the truth. The Cumberian scowled.

"Thing itches, it do," the girl offered. "When it itches real bad and begins to hurt, one goes to the castle."

"Have you ever gone to the castle?"

She shook her head, eyes wide. "Not yet. Some night I will."

"What happens at the castle?"

"No one knows. No one ever comes back."\*

There was despair beneath the fear, he saw. "Why don't you leave Murrd, you and all the others?"

She tapped the mark. "Can't. It won't let us. It keeps us here, like we were branded property."

When the villagers sought to flee, the brand burned so badly that there was no relief until they returned to their homes. As she spoke, Kothar studied the crescent mark; it would be easy enough to duplicate. If he were in the employ of the Lady Alaine, it might be time now to earn his keep.

He would sleep first. He was unexpectedly tired, as though the afflictions of the villagers in Murrd created a lassitude in his own muscular body. His hand lifted the leather jack, he drained the ale, he stood up. He understood she would not be averse to making his stay in Murrd more enjoyable, but he was more concerned with sleep at the moment than with seduction.

He hefted his leather carrying-sack to a shoulder and followed her handsome legs to the narrow wooden stair. There was gloom in the hang of her head with its loose black hair that told him the girl was anxious for him not to leave her. She felt safe with him. It was this, rather than her desire for lovemaking that had made her flirt with him, he decided.

His arm banded her slim middle, hugging her against him as he kissed her. "Later," he promised. "I have things to do this night."

She smiled tremulously, nodding, then slipped past him and ran up the wooden treads. There was a quality of breathlessness about her, a sense of intimacy which he understood to be a reaching out for companionship. Mellicent was lonely in Murrd; he was as a breath of life to her spirits. The barbarian was a contact with the outside world, and there was a fresh new strength in him which made her feel strong in turn.

The room to which she showed him was small, with a bay window thrusting out above the street. Its leaded panes permitted him to see north to the edge of the forest and south along the road he had come between the rolling hills and farmsteads. In the distance to the west he made out a black bulk against the afternoon sky. The girl stepped to his elbow, close enough so he felt her warm breath on his cheek.

"The castle," Mellicent whispered, shivering.

"Where the baron lives? Where the people go—and never come back?" She sidled close, her hand cool where it pressed his arm. She nodded vigorously, long black hair swirling.

His eyes touched the winding road, seeing a great oak tree towering upward and gorse bushes and clumps of hazel bordering the narrow footway. He could not see all that path, but he saw enough of it to know it in the dark. In the castle was Gorfroi, the baron who possessed the strand of silver hair that gave him an eldritch power over the Lady Alaine.

Mellicent lingered at the door, resting herself against its post as if to call attention to her curves. She let her lips smile, but her eyes were shy. Against hope, she wished that he would keep her with him. She did not want to spend the night alone, dreading the summons to the castle. The barbarian looked at her with pity in his eyes. If it were not for the fact that he expected trouble in this inn room, he would have bid her stay, and welcome. She stared deep into his eyes, read his admiration for her pert features, flushed, bit her lip, and slipped out into the hall to close the door gently behind her.

A moment Kothar waited, until he heard the brush of her poulaines moving toward the stair. Then he turned to his traveling sack and slung it up and over an ironbound chest. Fumbling inside it, he drew out a slender needle. He had often patched his torn garments or his quilted hacqueton rent in battle. This night he would use the needle on a different sort of material: his own skin.

For an hour he sat by the edge of the bed, dipping the needle point into black inkgall which he kept with him in a little vial, tightly stoppered, and driving that point into his skin. It was a tedious work, and painful, yet when he was done a black crescent showed on his arm as it had on that of Mellicent.

He put away the needle and the inkgall, then threw himself upon the bed. He was fully dressed in belted jerkin, hose and boots and his longsword rested in its scabbard close to his hand on the covers. His shirt of interwoven chain mail still lay in his carryall, for mail would not help against sorcery.

Sleep did not come at once. He lay staring up at the tester with its tied curtains, telling himself he was a fool to be here at all when he could be galloping out of Murr into the world where people did not wear black crescents which gave warlocks command over their bodies. With Greyling and his sword Frostfire, he could be earning good golden besants from the robber barons. Instead he was risking his life against the dark powers of wizardry.

### Chapter Three

A musty smell brought him out of his deep slumber. It was everywhere in the little solar room, as if mummies held high revel on its sanded floor. The odor of cerements and mummifying liquids, of grave mold and rotting flesh, made a noisome stench in the air.

Kothar came up on an elbow, his skin crawling.

Through the leaded panes of the window, moonlight was a silver mist that showed the lavabo on its wooden stand all white and glazed. The solid dark weight of the familiar furniture, the chest and aumbry, the chair and the prie-dieu stood out against the wainscot paneling behind them. His carrying sack and his long woolen military cloak lay over the ironbound chest.

His fingers tightened on the braided hilt of his long-sword. The familiar grip was reassuring. His nostrils told him death walked close by this room. Against death even Frostfire was of no use, yet its great weight and solidity was like a friend.

"Who comes in the night?" he breathed.

He was alert as any animal to spring left or right. Now to his ears came the soft slush-slush of soft leather or long-dry skin rubbing over wood. There was a—something—in the hallway outside his door. The latch lifted.

The hairs on the nape of his neck rose up.

A black silhouette was all he saw at first, bent over and in the vague shape of a man wearing tight garments. Then a candle flickered in its wooden sconce beyond his door and now he made out winding sheet, cere-cloth, and the mummified body of what had been a man, long and long ago. It held a basin and a brush in its mummified hands.

The cadaver shuffled into the room. A breeze swept the passageway, made its white seculchrata flutter like pennons in the wind. The odor was stifling in the little room, and the barbarian gagged.

Dead hands fumbled with brush and bowl as the lich neared the bed, dipping in the brush-hairs and bringing them out dripping black liquid. Kothar sensed that this liquid would burn deep into his flesh once it touched him. Just so had the people of this village been branded as they slept.

As it would have marked his flesh with the black crescent, had he not been awake and waiting. Slowly he slipped to one side of the coverlets, bringing his sword out of the scabbard without sound. His foot fumbled for the floor, he was off the bed and rising with the long steel blade in his hand.

The cloth-wrapped hands came away from the brush and the bowl and left them hanging in midair. The lich hurled itself upon him, snarling. Its forearm slammed into his neck where his undertunic and his leather jerkin did not cover him. The Cumberian was flung backward over the ironbound chest where his carrying sack lay with his cloak.

The thing came for him, diving. He rolled away, felt it crash into the chest, then slither sideways and grope for him. The mummy garments touched him, making his flesh crawl. They seemed empty, save for blue flames in the eye-holes. The dead hands inside the cerements tightened on his arm.

The thing was intensely strong. Kothar was a brawny young giant, and his mighty shoulders were heavy with muscles. Those thick muscles developed from boyhood in the arts of war bunched and quivered as he fought that grip, but vainly.

The thing drew him toward the brush and bowl. There it would hold him and splash a crescent of that black fluid across his flesh and he would be one more of the branded prisoners of baron Gorfroi.

He made no sound, though his lips writhed back to show his teeth. The sweat stood in beads on his forehead and his eyes flamed almost as hotly as did the empty sockets behind the burial garments of this lich which held him. His feet pushed at the thin layer of sand on the solar floor to try and slow his progress.

Then out of his deepest memory came the recollection of that dream in which the Lady Alaine had written runes in blue fire along the length of his longsword. Magic! Aie, but for good or bad? It made no matter.

He lifted the sword, thrust clumsily at the thing that held him. It was little more than a push, yet the dead one gave, and its fingers loosed a very little. Kothar jerked free, whipped up Frostfire in a length of glittering steel.

High above his head he held the sword.

The silence in the little town was intense. Everyone was asleep in the tavern, sharing a drugged and uncanny slumber, helpless to fight the will of the warlock in the castle. Lips twisted in disgust, the mercenary slashed downward with the edge of the blade, saw it slide through cloth and—utter emptiness. At the same moment, a tingle of magical forces unleashed from the blade ran up his swordarm and into his shoulder.

A wail lifted from those burial garments as they were halved and fluttered to the sanded floor. The brush and bowl fell, the bowl rolling on edge and spilling its black contents into the thirsty sand that sucked at that moisture until it was no more.

The barbarian growled in his throat, an uncivilized sound, a throwback to the days of his distant ancestors in the presence of that which could not be understood. It was the challenge of the barbarian and the warrior to the unknown and terrifying.

Kothar stood panting above the heap of burial garments crumpled on the floor beside the brush. The grave garments musty with age and interment were sickening to see and more sickening to smell. The barbarian felt the sweat dripping from his forehead and lifted an arm to draw the sleeve of his woolen undertunic across his face.

That was when he heard the cry. It was muted, half-smothered, coming from behind him. He wheeled toward the window, leaped catlike through the moonlight to crouch, peering down into the silent street, his sword still naked in his hand. A sign creaked lazily on rusting chains. There was no one on the cobblestones.

Ah, but wait! Beyond the sign, where a street shrine made an angle with a building wall, he saw the movement of a shadow. It was black and quivering at first, and then it went away as a man stepped into the moonbeams. He was a tall man, and strong, to judge by the width of his shoulders. He began to walk dazedly and with feet that were unsure of where they stepped, like one under a thaumaturgic spell.

Kothar nodded. So! The castle called and one of the villagers responded. Perhaps he himself would have responded to that eldritch summons one night—if the black liquid in the bowl had touched his skin. Shivering, he turned his head. The rotting cere-cloth still lay in a pitiful huddle beside the brush. The bowl was on edge against the chest where it had rolled, and the sands were stained with an ebon dampness. No threat waited for him there.

His eyes went downward.

The man was at the far end of the street, walking more strongly, though as clumsily as ever. The Cumberian drew air into his lungs, and reached for his scabbard on the bed. Softly he eased his blade into its sheath and buckled the great leather belt about his middle. It was now or not at all. He must go after that villager and take his place. With the palm of a hand he thrust open the leaded window.

The night air was cool on his face as he leaned out to grip the casing and use it to pivot his body outward. Slowly he eased himself over the sill, let his muscular hands take his weight. He dropped to the cobbles, his boots of soft Norgundian leather making only a faint slapping sound as they landed. ,

He was up and running, bent over, gripping his scabbard with his left hand, regretful that he had not kept on the mail shirt, cursing the streak of romanticism in his nature that made him champion the weak and helpless, like the Lady Alaine and pretty Mellicent. They were no concern of his; at best, what he did



here was only a gamble. He should be galloping for the domains of the robber barons, where money would be easy to win for such a warrior as himself.

Instead he hurtled through the shafts of moonlight along the trail of a sacrifice to sorcery. Far ahead he could make out the man lurching past a berry bush. Beyond him was the great black oak. Kothar sprinted faster, like a wolf on the scent of prey.

He caught the man in the shadows of the oaken branches, swung him about. "Look I'll help..." His voice broke, for the man had no pupils to his eyes. Or perhaps they were retracted back inside his skull, for all Kothar could see was the glistening whiteness of his eyeballs. Moonlight shone upon them and they glittered with pallid fire. Too, his lips were twisted in a grotesque leer.

"Get away. None can help Bouchard, the son of Piers the chandler. It is my time to go to the castle. Stay back."

The man turned. The barbarian acted without thought. He drove his fist into the side of the man's head. The man stumbled but recovered; he swung about, snarling as might a wounded cat. His arms lifted, fingers spread to grasp and rend.

Kothar ducked. No use hitting him any more, he was under the grip or spell of wizardry. Yet he must do something, if he would save him from the brand of the wizard. He drew the long dagger hanging at the side of his sword-belt. There was a ball pommel at the end of its hilt.

Up under the chin of the young villager he drove that metal ball, rocking him back on his heels. In that moment of his dazedness, the Cumberian leaped, caught his arms, wrestled him toward the bole of the great black oak. From his middle he yanked free the belt the man wore, used it and the torn cloth of his sherte to make a tie-rope. Swiftly, expertly, with the practice of years in taking war prisoners for ransom, he bound him to the bole.

The man howled like a trapped wolf, ululating screams that woke echoes in the gorges beyond the path. A froth ran out upon his lips as if he had gone mad. Kothar was certain there would be candles lighted in the village, windows thrown open, curious calls ringing in the night. There was only silence; apparently the villagers had learned not to interfere when the castle called its quarry.

In a few moments, the task was done. The man lay in a circle of leather and torn clothing, his back to the tree bole, his head hanging from exhaustion. He could stir neither arm nor leg, and the breath whistled faintly in his throat. Bouchard would not follow him, this night.

The barbarian saw where the brand lay black against the skin of the man's forearm. Just so would the undead thing have branded him, if he had let it have its way. He rolled up the sleeve of his jerkin as the sleeve of Bouchard's bbliaut was drawn back to show the crescent. Then, stumbling and staggering as the youth had stumbled, he went on up the narrow pathway toward the castle.

It was not a large castle, he noted as he drew closer. The moat was narrow, the water in it was at such a low ebb he could make out objects half buried in the silt on its bottom. There was a wooden bridge lowered over the moat and beyond it a rusted portcullis raised to permit entrance to the keep.

A round stone keep, a bailey beyond it that he could see was bare and empty in the bright moonlight, and low stone walls: this was what he saw first as he came along the dusty road. The donjon tower was to the left, rising perhaps fifteen feet above the wallwalk. Joined with it was the two-storey building enclosing what had been the chapel, and a kitchen. The great hall was to the right.

His boots echoed with hollow thumpings on the bridge planks. Something stirred in the darkness near the metal grille and moved out into the moonlight. The barbarian grunted. It was another lich in winding sheets. It came toward him, caught his arm and studied the black crescent; then moved back into the shadows near the winch.

He was a little surprised that no more care than this was taken to guard the castle. Then he reflected that so many villagers had come here, all of them with the genuine black marks on their flesh, that the lich who guarded the portcullis gave it only a casual glance. The fact that Kothar was here at all was proof enough that the black mark was genuine.

He moved on into the bailey, past an overturned cart that had long ago held produce from a farm. He was surprised at the decay he saw, at the lack of evidence of habitation. Once this must have been a busy place, now it was a tomb for—what?

He went on, turning toward the great hall for only there, behind its high windows, was there any light. A green radiance flared and flickered, and he wondered if it had been set ablaze in this world.

He stepped through the doorway.

His dusty boots carried him forward onto a floor made of green jade tilework that appeared to glow with inner fire, giving the great hall its verdant brightness. By its eldritch light he saw walls hung with faded banners captured in battle by arms long since gone to rust. Beyond the glowing tilework was the stone stair to an upper chamber. To reach it he must cross over the green jade floor.

His boots rang out with hollow echoes in the hall. The warlock baron should have struck by now! He moved onto the jade floor, took two steps and—

The walls, dusty drapes, and ancient banners shimmered in the pallid moonlight filtering through the high windows. They seemed to draw back away from the jade tiles which flared anew with misty green flames; Kothar stared at magical brass sigils inlaid within the jade as they writhed and twisted and all but came alive in some strange ensorcelment.

A wind howled far off, wailing.

He was no longer in the great hall, but somewhere out in space and time, alone in grayness that pressed close about him. Sweat stained his jerkin, but his hand about the braided hilt of Frostfire was dry and firm. A slowly gathering anger was building in his middle.

Something stirred in the grayness far away, something that was coming nearer with each thumping of the heart. Kothar felt his blood run more quickly as he saw the thing of nightmare and of horror striding along in this world where he could see no ground below. The thing was gigantic, a beast-man with eyes that bulged in a scaled face and white fangs jutting from lips—each taller than a man.

A cockscomb of wattled flesh flared upright from its reptilian head, pulsing as the monster came walking. From its gross chin narrow tendrils hung like purple pendants, shaking to its stride. Its chest was massive, its arms thick and long and heavily scaled, and its fleshy middle hung in giant folds from the gnarled and twisted body.

Kothar growled, lifting his sword.

The beast-man roared and sprang.

Its clawed hands reached out to grasp, to bring the Cumberian upward into the open mouth and sharp teeth waiting for his blood and bones. A lesser man would have quailed and shrieked and run amuck across the jade platform. The barbarian swung Frostfire and brought its keen edge down across a taloned hand.

The being shrieked as that cold steel sliced into its flesh, as it cut through bone and sinew, slicing off two fingers and part of a third. Kothar realized that this must be the manner in which Baron Gorfroi fed the daemons who served him in the castle. Bring a man or a woman to the jade tilework, and when he stood upon this green platform, send him into this world where only grayness and this awesome beast-man dwelt, to be devoured.

He felt the tingle that ran down into his arm when his sword met that beast flesh, the same tingle he had felt when he stabbed into the lich in the solar above the inn common room. The glamor in the sword had enabled it to cleave into those dry cerements just as it slashed open this nightmare being in the grey mists. An ordinary sword would never have penetrated that purple flesh; only a blade filled with magic could do that task.

The monster drove an arm above the jade circlet, to sweep him off his feet and knock him into the grayness where only the beast-thing could live. The barbarian leaped high as he could, as if to evade a battering ram in siege warfare. His blade drove downward. Again it drew blood, an ichorous, bubbling substance that welled black in the grey mists.

The thing bellowed, its wrist hanging by threads of sinew to its arm. Blue fire leaped along title length of Frostfire, evidence that wizardry had met with wizardry in this nether world. The Cumberian crouched, staring upward at the gigantic daemon.

"Ifn thagn Gorfroi!" the daemon screeched.

A foot lifted—a scaley, taloned paw five times bigger than the Cumberian—and kicked at the edge of the jade tilework. Upward tilted the green platform, higher at one end than the other, and now Kothar could no longer keep his balance but rolled and rolled, over and over to the rim from which he would drop into the grey mist, to be caught and swallowed.

He came to rest at the edge of the castle floor. The walls were firm about him, their hangings still as dusty. His longsword was in his hand, and he was growling deep in his throat, still half-mad with the urge to sell his life as dearly as possible.

"So then," he said, getting to his feet. "The daemon could not harm me on the platform, nor could he tip me off into the grey fog, though he came near to doing it."

On his feet once again, he moved across the green jade tilework to the stone staircase. Up it he mounted slowly, brushing the chamber behind him with narrowed eyes, seeing no threat now but only rusting weapons and war pennons long since faded by the passing years.

He faced forward and came to the top of the stair and found himself looking into a chamber almost as large as the great hall out of which he had come. Its walls were of stone, wetly dripping for some reason he did not know, and no moonlight came through its recessed windows. There was a smell of salt in the air, as of the sea where it lapped against the fjords of distant Grondel Bay.

And in the floor of the room was set a white alabaster circle, a great flat disc inlaid with silver runes, much like that green jade platform off which he had rolled. From wall to wall the alabaster ran, so that he could not reach the black wood door at the opposite end of the chamber unless he stepped upon it.

Beyond the black door he might find the Baron Gorfroi. Or at least, the silver hair in the golden casket which gave Gorfroi power over the Lady Alaine. Treading like a wary panther, he moved out onto the alabaster, his sword ready for what might come against him.

He was halfway across when he sensed that the walls were changing, glowing bluish green. They looked like sea-water fashioned into a gigantic tidal wave. There was a sense of rising upward, as though the alabaster were soaring—

—into a pale yellow sky far above his head! Kothar brought his eyes away from those clouds to stare at a vast ocean lapping at the edges of the alabaster platform. And off near the horizon he saw little dots that jumped and leaped upon the waves like faery lights.

The dots grew larger; he could see that they were sorcerers and wizards in long black cloaks and pointed caps, with surfaces emblazoned with secret formulae for wickedness and all manner of corrupt spells. They ran lightly on the sea, chanting their cantraips as they came.

Their laughter was harsh and discordant, though obviously gleeful. Here was a human come to feed their bellies. Here was food from the world they had deserted to live in Daemonia and to work their spells in immortal psychomachy. He would fall victim to him who ran the fastest across these waves, crying out the spells that made him light as air.

A tall lamia in a cloak so darkly purple it seemed black was the first to come at him. The warlock could not put flesh upon the alabaster because its silver runes were inlaid in a pattern of high sorcery, and so it leaped upward, reaching down to clasp and lift this helpless man-thing off the alabaster that it might rend and eat him.

"Steel cannot harm me, by the powers of the god Astrol," it cackled as it jumped.

"This steel can," snarled the barbarian, and swung his longsword. It cleaved the air like a bright sunbeam. It drove into the cloaked wizard and clefted him from head to foot, and as it did Kothar felt his arm tingle, though not so strongly as it had at the inn solar or on the jade tilework.

The lamia screamed once as that magical blade went into and through his body, a high-pitched cry of horror and despair and disbelief. Then his body fell apart and a thick black substance rained down upon the alabaster and its silver runes. As that fetid gristle touched the circle it hissed, became as purple liquid and ran off into the sea.

The barbarian had no time to gaze at the purple waters. The other lamia were upon him, leaping high and screeching, clawing down with long arms to tear him from the surface of the alabaster platform and fly off with him to the black towers and the scarlet domums where they practiced their ancient wizardry.

He drove the keen edge of his longsword this way and that into demon flesh, cutting, slicing. Parts of the screaming sorcerers rained upon the platform and disappeared. Others ran off across the waves brandishing handless wrists or footless legs, or cured themselves of deep but not fatal wounds by crying out their eldritch spells.

At each slash and cut of the blade, Kothar felt less and less of the tingle that told of its magical prowess.

By standing here and stabbing into these warlocks, he was using up the sorceries which the Lady Alaine—or had it been Red Lori?—had put into it. A coldness settled in his middle at the thought that he might run out of that magic before coming face to face with Baron Gorfroi.

He never knew how long he stood upon the circle in that nameless sea, battling the wizards of Daemonia. His thickly thewed legs were quivering and his giant muscles ached with tiredness when he let the point of his blade drop at last, as the last cloaked lamia drew back and away from him, hissing in his dry and wattled throat.

"Sota afraila Gorfroi!" he screamed.

Then all the necromancers turned and fled away, but now they went more slowly, for the haste that had brought them toward their meal of human flesh was only an empty failure in their middles. The Cumberian shuddered, seeing their inhuman forms, hearing their screamed curses in that unknown tongue.

The sea was going too, fading out before his eyes to form the wet, dripping walls of this second chamber in the castle of the Baron Gorfroi. He waited, still leaning on his blade, for those walls to turn solid. He was tired, he ached with overmuch fighting, he hungered to rest, but there was no rest for him.

The black door beckoned.

With Frostfire in his right hand, its magic all but gone, Kothar put his left hand to the iron latch-handle of the black door and lifted it, pushing inward. He did not know what he might see before him; he was prepared for anything.

And yet—

He stood paralyzed with surprise.

A red mist floated about the chamber, hiding walls and furniture and every other thing but its own swirling crimson fogs. Dimly as he strained his eyes, he thought to make out vast gulfs of interstellar space, deep abysses of awesome wonder between the stars and the many planets of the universe. Here and there between the flecks of brightness that were the stars, he seemed to see dark, flapping shapes of things no man should gaze upon.

His skin crawled and his throat tightened as if he might retch. No mere mortal might traverse this barrier to the other side of this third chamber. The barbarian strained his eyes but nowhere could he see a stair or doorway that might lead on to where the Baron Gorfroi waited. Even the last remaining bits of glamour in his sword would not avail him here.

Far below his feet there was only nothingness through which the red mists swirled. No floor. He stood on the doorsill and peered out into realms of galactic space so infinite that his brain reeled before its magnitude.

"Rash mortal," said a voice.

A face swam in the crimson fog, a face of infinite evil, bearded and with thick red lips, with bright black eyes, heavy-lidded and scornful. It was an intelligent face, one born to command not only the services of mere hirelings and servants but also the demons and warlocks of all time and all space. Intuitively, Kothar knew he stared at Baron Gorfroi.

"What do you here?" asked the face.

"I come for the hair of the Lady Alaine," Kothar snarled.

The heavy eyelids lifted, the black eyes stared hard at his muscular figure and the great sword he bore between his fingers. "You are a fool. Go hence quickly, while you can. Thus far you have been fortunate. Your good luck cannot continue."

"The hair," Kothar rasped.

Gorfroi laughed thickly. "By which you mean the white body of the lovely Alaine and her inheritance, this castle of Shallone and all the lands and towns about it.

So-ha! I strike truth, to judge by your face. Pah! You are only a mercenary, a sellsword. If it be wealth you hunger for—feast your greeds right here!"

The red mists were gone, and the barbarian stared before him at an ebony marble floor that stretched backward into infinity, into emptiness. Yet piled on all those interminable, unguessable miles of marble flooring lay the treasures of a million worlds.

Here were great chains of gold and mounds of red rubies and white diamonds, sculptures wrought by the finest artistic hands on a million planets, in forms and figures to make the breath catch in the throat, to cause the heart to pound in admiration, to evoke a cry of delight from the tongue. Chests and coffers held coins of gold and silver and other metals Kothar had never seen. There were so many of them, they ran back into infinity. And with them were vials and beakers and retorts, each filled with a liquid more pleasing to the sight than the last.

"The elixirs of immortality, of invulnerability, of eternal youth, of beauty, of wisdom, of happiness. They are the dreams of mankind reduced to a chemical formula, translated into a fluid which, once quaffed, can bring any happiness the mind of man can conjure up."

Kothar shivered, his every muscle tensed to leap, to drink those necromantic fluids and stuff his belt pouch full with jewels and gold until the almoner should almost burst its seams. His hand loosed the hilt of the longsword and he heard its clang as it struck the marble floor.

A blue flame, leaped where sword and marble met, leaped high and blindingly before the dazed sellsword. Dumbly he stared into a room that was carpetless and barren of anything but a single highbacked chair where a man sat sleeping. Gone were the golden chains, the jewels, the elixirs and the chests.

The man opened his eyes and looked at the Cumberian. He laughed bitterly and stood erect, swaying a little, putting a hand to his forehead.

"I came close to succeeding, mercenary. A moment more and had you not dropped the sword—curse Alaine for her trick of filling it with magic!—I would have had you. Your own self would have been your downfall.

"Aye, aye—your very nature would have succeeded where ghouls and demons out of the nethermost hells of Daemonia could not. You would have run to the jewels to scoop them up and cram them into your ahnoner—and at first touch they would have blasted you to dust."

There was a little silence in the room. Kothar bent, lifting the sword Frostfire, seeing the baron Gorfroi fumbling behind him for the sword that hung over the cathedra where he had been sitting. With that blade in his hand, he turned once more to the barbarian.

"Long have I sat here in this ancient castle, stripping it bit by bit of all its treasures, paying them over to the wizards and warlocks of the interstellar and intergalactic abysses, that they might teach me their spells and cantrips.

"In a little while I would have been the greatest magician on Yarth! Then nothing could harm me. I have sat here without stirring for these many months. I have studied and learned, and my brain teems with sorceries with which to turn you into a mouse—to drive you mad with unguessable horrors—to hurl you screaming forever around the galaxy, carried along on wings of light, an eerie mote destined to ride all space and time without dying until your very soul cries out for the rest and surcease of the grave.

"But—you have angered my teachers!

"They blame me for what you have done to them. You cut a hand off Ophorion, and several fingers. He will be in great pain until they grow back. And in Daemonia itself, that world the warlocks built with their incantations,

you killed many of the foremost lamia. Their dead souls scream out for vengeance—on you, on me!" The baron Gorfroi paused, raising his sword. "I could blast you, as I say—but my teachers will not permit it. They say I tried to trick them, that I allowed you into the castle and upon the jade and alabaster platforms to weaken their magic and increase my own. Who knows? Perhaps I might have done some such thing, were my studies in necromancy complete. But they are not. I am not yet empowered to use magic without the help of my demon friends, and so—I must meet you in a trial by combat."

Kothar nodded. A trial by combat was a part of his world, an accepted tenet of its laws. In the past, he had served Queen Elfa of Commoral as her champion, and had fought a number of battles in her name. The right went with the might of the victory sword in his world. Though a claimant should be correct in his claim, if he could not win the trial by combat, he must fail. It was the common belief that justice always triumphed.

That it did not, he did not need to be told. He swung up Frostfire, remembering those fights when his heart and mind told him he should lose, that the claimant had a better right than did lovely Elfa, but his fighting arm was too much to overcome. The right was his, here: he fought for Alaine and justice, to put down the threat of a wicked sorcerer named Gorfroi. But would right win out where it had so often failed in the past?

Gorfroi came to meet him, great sword swinging. The steel blades clanged and parted to meet again in metallic fury. Back and forth went the blades in a deadly shuttlecock of edge and point. The barbarian had long ago learned the use of his sword as shield and now he plied his knowledge as he had for most of his life, fending off the bull-like onslaughts of the baron, turning the forte and foible of his blade with clever parryings of his own.

The clangor of that meeting steel filled the bare room, building a hard cacophony in the ears. Gorfroi was a huge fleshy man, who would tire easily. Kothar fought with a cool detachment that bespoke a man who made his livelihood with this weapon. His swordarm, for all its past use in Daemonia, seemed almost as fresh as ever.

Slowly and grudgingly, Gorfroi gave ground. Back he stepped, past the cathedra where he had sat so

long, until the cloth of his tabard was pressed to the paneled wall. Here he made his last stand. The awareness of his doom stared out at the Cumberian from his black eyes even as it whistled in the breath he drew into his laboring lungs.

He lashed out with his blade, was parried. He thrust and was turned aside. He gripped his hilt in both hands now, for one was not enough to hold the weight of the blade and hilt and pommel, and he beat back death until he began to welcome it.

"Now damnation to all demons," he cursed, and leaped to strike his last blow at Kothar. That too, the mercenary turned aside, even as he slid to the attack and drove the point of his blade deep into the chest of the baron.

Gorfroi stood impaled a moment, mouth twisted and eyes bulging outward, before the barbarian yanked free his steel so that the baron might fall facedown upon the floor and lie inert in death. For a little time he stared at the dead nobleman, panting in his weariness.

Then with fresh strength he went past the warlock and stepped into a small room where a few cloaks and garments hung on pegs, where a counter was fastened to a wall on which rested a golden casket.

Kothar put his hands to the heavy lid and lifted it. The interior of the coffer was lined in blue velvet on which rested a single, solitary lock of silvery hair. This was the grail of all his dreams.

He carried the casket out of the castle into the early morning—the lich who customarily guarded the barbican lay in a pile of grave-cloths near the winch, now that Baron Gorfroi was dead—and out across the drawbridge. When he came to the great oak, Bouchard was trying to free himself, sane and clear-eyed.

"The mark is gone," he said as the barbarian cut his bonds with his dagger. "Something happened in the castle last night. I heard screams and outcries, I saw terrible lights flickering and glaring, and caught glimpses of red mists as if the castle burned."

His eyes touched the golden casket. "What have you there?"

"A bit of hair on which has been laid a spell, no more. So the mark is gone, is it? Good."

Bouchard grinned, "I think you did this, I think you took my place and fought with demons. I won't ask what happened. I'm just grateful you came here."

The villagers grew grateful, too. They laughed and wept and the girl Mellicent ran to hug him in front of everybody and the linkboy who had stabled Greyling last night brought him out all curried and would take no money for the work. The men and women showed their arms bare of any black mark, and they would have pressed money on him, but he would have none of it.

He went to his room, to gather up his carrying-sack and his cloak. Mellicent followed him, stood in the doorway with a hip leaning against the jamb. Her face was oddly troubled, the barbarian saw.

Twice she opened her lips to speak, until finally she muttered, "Don't trust the Lady Alaine, barbarian. She be a witch, herself. She may try to pull some trick on you."

Kothar grinned, hooked her slim middle with an arm and kissed her. "I'll be back, never fear. When I come, we'll celebrate the downfall of the Baron Gorfroi."



"I'll be waiting," she promised.

With the coffer holding the silver hair from the head of the Lady Alaine resting on the high pommel of his great saddle, Kothar walked Greyling out of Murrd and toward the forest road which would bring him to the abbey ruins.

#### Chapter Four

She was waiting between the black stones of the dry well and what had been a chapel wall, long ago. Her hands were clasped just under her breasts and her purple eyes appeared to burn. The wind caught her silvery hair and blew it as it blew the silver mane of the grey warhorse. She cried out softly at sight of him and ran to meet him.

"You killed Gorfroi!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands. "I felt him die this morning just as the sun was rising."

"I have you to thank, and the magic you put into my sword," Kothar told her, swinging down out of the high-peaked saddle. He lifted the golden casket and set it in her hands.

Alaine carried the coffer to a flat stone and putting it down, raised the heavy golden lid so she might peer in at the silver hair that lay upon the dark blue velvet. She sighed, she laughed, she reached down and drew forth the hair, turning to smile at the sellsword.

"By burning this, I am free," she caroled.

"I should have thought that when the baron died, you would be free," Kothar said. "His lich died, the black mark on the villagers faded out."

"Ah, but this enchantment was on the hair," she explained, crossing swiftly past the broken chapel wall to where a fire burned redly in a circle of stones. She bent and dropped the hair into the flames. "And so the hair must be burned to drive away the spell."

He watched the fire catch the hair and burn it, twisting as flame ran all along its length so that it fell a thin black thread of char into the glowing wood and was no more.

Alaine lifted her white arms and whirled, the black skirt of her gown flying outward. Her laughter rang wild and merry, but Kothar thought there was a hardness in it. She turned then and looked at him, and her purple eyes were oddly malicious.

"My warlike barbarian with his great sword!" she laughed. "You want to claim your reward. I promised you my love, did I not? My love you shall have—aye, and the free run of my castle of Shallone!"

Her hand lifted and her white forefinger pointed. "By hair of head and nail of toe, by human love and human woe, by spell and cantraip I declare: be dog you look, be dog you are."

The Cumberian tried to cry out, and only barked. His body was shortening around him, his two legs became four and there was thick grey hair all over his body. His jaws had elongated, his tongue enlarged, and his ears were atop his head. The lady Alaine appeared three times as tall as before.

"Good dog," said the witchwoman, laughing.

Kothar sat back on his haunches and looked at her. His garments and his sword lay on the ground beside him. His mouth opened and his tongue ran out as if he laughed. Alaine eyed him dubiously. He ought to be barking wildly and running around the old ruin, mad with hate, mad with despair.

Of course, he could not harm her. The spell that had altered his physical body took care of that, but just the same, the Lady Alaine was oddly disturbed. The dog did not act as it should act. It was as if it—waited.

Her shoulders shrugged. The barbarian posed no threat. He could not speak, he could tell no one how she had rewarded him. He could only follow and obey her commands.

She crossed to the grey warhorse and placing a slippered foot in the wooden stirrup, rose into the kak with graceful ease. She sat sideways in the saddle as befitted a noble lady, and lifted the heavy leather reins. Greyling walked as she urged it, along the forest path.

Alaine chirrped, and the dog came to its feet and trotted slowly after her. Was it her imagination, or were his eyes so sad they seemed to weep as they looked upon her loveliness? No matter! Alaine shook out her silvery hair and let the breeze blow it here and there across her face and shoulders.

They were almost at the edge of the forest when the witchwoman stiffened and lifted her arms as if to ward away a blow. She turned her head to the left and to the right, and now the dog saw the little black flames that ran all over her body, eating it away.

She screamed in her agony of understanding. "You tricked me! It was not my hair you gave me—but that of... that of..."

Greyling reared in animal terror, though he could not feel those black fires which ate the woman on his back, but only sensed them. Swiftly shrank the witchwoman, swiftly she withered and was consumed there in the saddle, until an errant breeze came and blew away the powder which remained.

Kothar stood on his two legs, once again. He stared at the black powder and he sighed. From his almoner he would take out the silver hair that had been from the head of the Lady Alaine and he would give it to the wind.

At the last he had taken the advice of Mellicent to beware, and had pulled a hair from the silvery mane of Greyling, that was as soft and smooth as that of any woman, and placed it in the coffer. It had been his own spell against witchcraft.

He was no richer, but he was alive, and service with the robber barons was waiting for him. One thing troubled him. Just as the Lady Alaine had touched the unseen barrier that hemmed her in, the barbarian would have sworn his oath on the war-hammer of Dwallka himself—that it had not been the Lady Alaine but the sorceress Red Lori riding upon Greyling! Had the sorceress sent out her spirit to inhabit the flesh of the Lady of Shallone? If she had been able to pass the unseen barrier raised by Baron Gorfroi—would Red Lori have gone on living as the Lady Alaine, safe from discovery inside her body?

The Cumberian shivered. He would have been only a dog, unable to speak, unable to tell of the dual personality within the shape of the Lady Alaine. Red Lori would have had her vengeance, she would have been able to mistreat him as much as she wanted, as her dog.

"By Dwallka!" he growled, the sweat beading his forehead.

Impatiently he brushed the wetness away with his wrist. Mellicent was waiting in Murrd for him to return. With the pretty maidservant he would forget about magic and wizards and sorceresses who stole female bodies to their use.

He hoped she kept her promises better than the Lady Alaine.