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BRAK THE BARBARIAN

THE SORCERESS

WHEN THE IDOLS WALKED

*To the grandest literary sorcerer of them all—
L. Sprague de Camp*

Author's Preface

About a week ago, one of the guests at my daughter's wedding reception asked me a question I didn't expect. "What's happened to Brak?"

I was taken aback, but pleasantly so. So much attention has focused on the *Kent Family Chronicles* in the past few years that sometimes I almost forget that an earlier series of mine (and one of my favorites) attracted an audience no less loyal than that of the Kents.

Hence my pleasure when I heard the question. The audience is still there, it seems.

The gentleman who asked the question holds a doctorate in psychology—another nice proof of the wide appeal of fantasy literature in general, and sword and sorcery in particular. When I was reading fantasy works in my teens, it was assumed that only slightly daffy kids were interested in that kind of writing. Today only the uninformed offer such opinions.

It was in the role of dedicated Conan fan that I wrote the first Brak tale, *Devils in the Walls*. In spirit, anyway, the story was a Howard pastiche, and I have acknowledged the fact more than once. Still, as literary characters often do, Brak soon took on a distinctive life of his own. Sometimes the changes in his personality, story to story and book to book, surprised even me.

I put together this first collection of Brak tales in the late 1960's. Since its initial publication in 1968, it has never been out of print; well, not for more than a few weeks, anyway. I'm pleased that this Tower edition will maintain the continuity.

With a little luck, one of these days I may find time to add some new pieces to the canon. I hope the gentleman who asked the question would enjoy that. I know I would.

John Jakes

October 10, 1980

Chapter I

The Twins

Was it morning? Evening? An hour since the windstorm began, or an eternity? The big barbarian had no way of telling.

He stumbled on, his body angled forward against the wind's force. His path was erratic. He lurched to the left, then the other way. A low outcrop raked his ankle, gashing open the tough, weathered skin. Blood leaked as he lost his balance and fell.

He landed heavily, panting. Slowly he raised his head. He sucked the gusty air, spat as particles of grit collected inside his mouth. No matter which way he looked the plateau was the same: a crumpled, barren gray only slightly darker than the sky.

Anger glared in his eyes. He wanted to strike the wind and kill it. On hands and knees, he resembled some primitive animal snarling at a hostile world.

But after a moment the cursing stopped. He wiped his thickly muscled wrist over his mouth. The long yellow braid of hair snapped in the wind as he struggled to his feet.

Some of the fuming hate drained from him. He lurched to a large rock, sat down and took stock.

At the last inn, in the pleasant savannahs leagues to the north of this blasted hell of a place called Logol, the old toothless men at the inn fire had warned him. In his impatience to continue his journey he'd refused to pay much heed. Now bits of the warnings returned.

The Logol plateau and the desert that lay somewhere south of it were never crossed by prudent men in this particular season. The big barbarian squinted. Was this fierce wind that roiled and clouded the air the same vicious wind of Logol of which the old ones had talked? What was its name?

The Skulwind. Skulwind of Logol.

It slew the unwary, they said. It had been known to strip the flesh from a man's face. The big barbarian had laughed at that.

On reflection now, he recalled that the toothless fathers had specifically told him that the Skulwind blew on Logol's desert. That lay beyond the barrier plateau. Still, this wind was bad enough. He'd never live to wrestle the Skulwind unless he found a route off this high and rocky waste.

And that would never happen while he sat and let the sudden warm drowsiness swallow him.

He pushed to his feet. The wind tugged the lion hide garment he wore around his middle, setting the tufted tail to dancing. His broadsword, hung from his waist, slapped his powerful thigh through a rip in the raggy cloak he'd purchased at the inn with his last dinshas. He had tied scraps of the cloak around his feet a day or two ago, because the ground cut even his toughened soles. Now he wrapped one of his feet differently, so that the rag would soak up the oozing blood. Then he bowed his head and started tramping.

The brief rest had left him feeling a little better, but it hadn't changed the grimness of the situation. He knew he was hopelessly lost. There was not a coin left in his pouch, nor a gobbet of food either. Over his shoulder a half full wineskin hung by a strap, sloshing. Wine and a sword were poor resources for survival up here, he thought. Perhaps his pony had been lucky that first day on the plateau. The animal slipped into a narrow crevice and twisted its forelegs. He had no choice but to hold its muzzle with one hand and slay it with the other. Perhaps it would turn out that the pony had met the better death.

He cursed himself for letting the situation get the best of him. Didn't he spring from the tough warrior

people of the wild steppes, the wild lands of the north? He was Brak, and he had come far on his march to the south. He mustn't lose hope now. He must keep on. He knew that if he stopped again, the warm lassitude would settle and he would never stir.

The wind blared and mocked. He picked the easiest path around tumbled boulders, making slow progress. An hour went by. The wind song was louder, ululating strangely. Around him the rocks grew less distinct. The dust-blown sky turned from dirty gray to a shade of near black. Before long the night would be on him—

All at once he planted his feet wide and listened. Really listened.

Intermixed with the wind's mournful bellow he thought he heard sharp, high notes.

He pounded a horny palm against one ear. Grains of dust trickled out against his hand but he was not moved to smile. He strained to catch the piercing notes. They seemed to hide within the wind's very sound.

He stepped forward without thinking. His knee cracked off a branch of one scrawny bush, the only vegetation that lived on the plateau. Kicking the branch away, he turned his head left by accident. The piercing notes blended together into one.

Brak sucked in his breath. "Either my mind's cracked or someone else is lost up here too. And yelling."

Brak began to run. His raggy cloak stood out from his shoulders like ripped wings and the yellow braid flew above it. His ears detected a second voice mingled with the first. It had a deeper timbre. A man? He was certain of that and of something else too.

The two crying out were crying for their lives.

Big hands thrust aside the ripped cloak at his middle. He freed the broadsword as he pounded heavy-footed against the wind, up a slight rocky rise toward a row of pillar-like stones which hid the view beyond. The yells came from the other side of the stones. He heard a new sound that made his backbone crawl.

Something flapped, heavy, leather-like. From the other side of the pillar stones an apparition suddenly shot into the sky. For an instant Brak broke stride.

Higher the bird wheeled, and higher. It climbed in a savage, wing-flapping spiral. Its eyes were yellow in the murk. Its beak was long as a man's leg. Brak judged the thing to be four or five times his size, wingtip to flicking wingtip.

On each feathered leg the bird had but a single curved talon. From its open beak a three-forked white tongue snapped out. The starkly ribbed wings churned. The thing reached the peak of its spiral and dived, the forked tongue shooting in and out.

Then the bird-thing vanished. The man yelled again, feebly. The barbarian raced for the rocks. He emerged at one side of a little depression. Opposite, a cluster of thicker pillar-stones towered to three times his height. The tops of several appeared to have sheared off. The bird-thing's immensity darkened the depression, so that for a moment Brak could make out only a few details.

A slender man who somehow glittered with dull points of light was vainly trying to fend off the bird with a branch torn from a dry shrub. The man moved with a strange exaggerated slowness, as though totally exhausted. The bird-thing's right talon hissed down. By luck the glittering man moved aside. The talon speared past his foot, embedded in the loose shale at the bottom of the depression. Out from the beak

lashed the white tongue, moist, shining. One of the forks touched the man's cheek. With a howl he fell away, huddling on the ground beside a woman. She was as slender as her companion, and her body too danced with tiny yellow and red and purple firepoints.

Brak slid down the depression's side, broadsword iron bared. The bird-thing jerked and flapped its huge wings. Its talon was caught in the earth. An odor not unlike spices mingled with the smell of rot blew into Brak's nose. The bird-thing freed its talon. It took a hopping step toward the cowering pair. The man waved the branch. Brak reached the bottom of the natural cup, headed up the other slope with his broadsword aimed for the monster's puffy chest. Now he saw other details: half the carcass of a pony, bloodied beneath fallen rock; a tumble of interwoven branches, the remains of an immense nest. The stomach-turning smell drifted from what was left of three huge purple-shelled eggs.

Rockslide, he thought at once. Loosed from the sheer face above the depression's far side. Pony and eggs caught beneath it, and the wing-devil angry and ready to kill—

The giant bird pecked at the two on the ground. They rolled aside, the man pushing the woman, and again it seemed they moved with maddening slowness. The stink of the crushed eggs made Brak's mouth fill with sour saliva as he ducked in under the left wing.

Flapping, the wing cracked him on the back of the head. His aim went bad. The tip of the broadsword skated across the leathery under-chest, which was harder than it looked. The sword left hardly a mark.

The bird-thing squawked, swung its head down and around. Yellow eyes regarded Brak, who by then was moving again, hurling himself out from beneath the wings. The bird lifted those wings, flapped them down.

In the dust and fierce wind Brak's footing was uncertain. He stumbled, fought for balance. Over he went on his back. The left wing hit and pinned his lower body. The beak opened. The head dipped. The wet white tongue snapped out—

Held flat from his waist down by the vibrating tip of the muscular wing, Brak locked both hands on his broadsword hilt. He skewered up and out, straight into the open beak. The white tongue split in half.

Black iridescent ichor squirted. The bird's eyes burned a hotter yellow. Its wings beat frantically. That gave Brak the instant he needed to roll free.

Now he backed away, crouched, waiting. The bird moved clumsily. A hop. Another. The dripping beak reached for him. Brak jumped to the right. His chest was already hurting from the strain of the struggle. He hacked over and down.

The beak cracked. The bird shrieked in terrible torment, lifted its right claw, darted it forward. Brak wasn't quick enough. The curved talon opened a wound in the side of his chest.

Pain dazzled behind his eyes. Once more he retreated, seeking firm ground. The shale betrayed him again. He broke his fall with one elbow at the last instant. The bird-thing swiped at him with its talon. Brak hitched out of the way. The talon tore a hole in the earth where he'd been.

Lying on his side, Brak struck the bird-thing's leg, struck again. Gristle parted. Ichor glistened between stringy fibers. The monster's weight collapsed its leg.

Brak scrambled up, panting. The beak probed for his eyes. He jumped in the air. The beak shot between his legs. He came down astride it, the gray world tilting, whirling—

One hand grasping the hard beak, he used the other to drive the broadsword into the bird's left eye.

Sticky drops splashed Brak's face as the giant bird gave a hideous caw of rage and one violent convulsion. Brak sailed off, striking his head on a rock as he landed.

He cursed aloud. Everything tilted again. The grayness streaked with colors. Grit filled his eyes. Was that wind or the death yell of the bird?

He clung to the shale with both hands as the world revolved. Then he let himself drift away into a kind of doze. He knew that blood smeared his left side, staining the lion hide. The earth reverberated with a sudden tremor.

With effort he opened his eyes. He sat up. His back ached from neck to buttocks. But the bird-thing was dead, collapsed into a pile that looked like a cast off horse harness. Both his eyes had turned opaque. From the left one Brak's hilt stuck up, outlined against the blowing sky like a stark cross.

His vision still couldn't clear. He made his way uncertainly to the dead monster, fisted his hands in the short feathers that covered the leathery hide, climbed up and worked the broadsword free. Over the top of the dead thing's head he saw the man and woman, risen to their feet and shining in the dull light.

Like enchanted things they radiated multicolored brilliance. Brak wiped his eyes and clambered down. For an eerie moment he'd imagined himself in the presence of two of the unfamiliar gods that inhabited these so-called civilized countries.

But then he realized the man and woman shone because their dusty traveling clothes—the man's boots, doublet, cloak lining; the woman's pantaloons, jacket, cape lining too—were crusted with hundreds of tiny gems. Whoever they were, they wore treasure on their backs. Arms around one another's waists, they watched him.

Brak's broadsword hung from his right hand, dripping the iridescent ichor, as he shambled to them and stopped.

“Our—our undying thanks,” the woman said in a sweet but unsteady voice. She was not a woman at all, he saw. Rather, a young, slim girl not far out of maidenhood.

Her unusually pale face was oval, finely made, aloof in spite of its coating of dirt. Her hair was black. In the gloom her eyes were the color of pearls.

Brak wiped his sword on his raggy cloak, forced a smile to his aching face. “Even met this way, it's good to find another human in this forsaken place. Did you lose your way?”

“We did,” said the man. “And you?”

“Aye, days ago. I've been—” All at once the big barbarian stopped.

The young man—for he was that, looking approximately the same age as his companion—frowned a sharp frown.

“Is something amiss?”

Brak glanced at the girl's face, then to the man's. It too was oval, with a patrician nose. The cheeks were sunken, the lips pale. But somehow in that face Brak saw signs of greater health in a time long past. The young man's eyes were like two pearls.

“You look the same,” Brak said. “Twin-born.”

The girl managed a tinkling laugh. “You're an outlander, aren't you? Don't they have twin-born in the north?”

“Yes. It took me by surprise, is all.”

Brak surveyed the sky. He had no reason for doing that, except for vague uneasiness about the mirror-perfection of the two faces. As he swung around to survey the ruins of the monster bird's nest, he took a secret glance at them again. For some strange reason his palms prickled.

In truth he had never seen two human beings matched so perfectly. Like his sister, the black-haired young man was pale, and could only be called beautiful. Brak was not accustomed to that sort of look in a man.

The barbarian wondered whether he felt self-conscious because of their jeweled clothes. Those, and their manner, bespoke royalty. He had always been uncomfortable with such.

“Perhaps we'd better find a place to settle for the night.”

“Are you feeling well enough?” the girl asked.

“Yes,” was his reply, though in truth his head buzzed and he was chilled all at once. He hadn't eaten in two days, and hunger gnawed his belly suddenly.

He resisted a mounting dizziness, and added, “Let's make shelter and a fire somewhere a safe distance from all this. That bird might have a mate.”

The young man gave Brak an odd stare. “As you say, outlander. You lead. We will follow. Due to the long time we have been wandering lost up here, my sister and I are very weak. We cannot travel fast.”

That was a decided understatement, Brak discovered as he started away from the depression behind. The twins, the hundreds of jewels on their clothing ticking and tinkling against each other, never stumbled. They were merely infernally slow, almost like infants whose limbs lacked strength. The young man kept his arm clutched round his sister's waist.

Side by side, they made slow progress. Brak was feeling worse by the moment. Time and again he turned back to wait. The twins came on, leaning into the wind, like—no, not infants, he decided. More like the elderly, sapped of strength. He wondered if they were afflicted with some dire malady.

Night dropped on the plateau. Making headway became harder. Finally Brak called a halt at a place between two outcrops. It offered only minimum shelter from the gritty wind. He was about to ask the young man to help him gather firewood when the twins sat down, backs to the rock. They regarded him with those pearl eyes. They appeared utterly weary.

Resigned and fighting the pain and dizziness, he retied the scrap of cloak he'd bound around his ribs to stanch the blood and went reeling back into the open.

Twice he had to hang onto rocks for support until his weakness passed. Eventually he returned to the sheltered place with an armload of branches ripped from the stunted bushes of the plateau. He gathered a second load, flung it on the first, squatted down. The twins had not moved.

Brak's scalp crawled. Would he have two corpses on his hands by dawn? Two beautiful ivory statues, dead in the wilderness in winding sheets encrusted with a fortune?

He unslung the wineskin, dropped it beside his foot. He took a hunk of flint from his empty pouch, struck

sparks. The wood, dry, burned easily. The smoke had a sweetish smell. It drifted between the barbarian and the twins, making the scene all the more unreal. Full night had come, but the wind still howled as strongly as ever.

Up in the dark there was a sudden flapping. Brak clutched his broadsword. The wings beat on through the night and were gone. He breathed out, leaned back against a rock.

“I have no food,” he told them.

The girl's eyelids moved. “We're not hungry.”

He poked the half full skin. “I do have this. Cheap wine, but it'll warm you.”

“No,” said the young man. An afterthought: “Thank you.”

“Uh.”

Brak's sound was noncommittal. He unstopped the skin, tilted it, drank a mouthful. Warmth spread in his belly. But almost at once the dizziness worsened.

No wonder, pouring wine down his gullet into an empty belly! But what difference did it make? He'd had the feeling ever since the battle with the bird-thing that he was going to black out. Why not make it a halfway pleasant experience?

Across the flames the beautiful girl and boy watched him. They sat with legs stretched out in front of them. The young man's left hand twined with the girl's right. Innocent, yet it disturbed the barbarian somehow. Their bodies glared and flashed in the firelight.

“I don't know your names,” he said, glugging down more wine.

The young man's lids flickered. “What is yours?”

That annoyed him, but he licked the corner of his lips and replied, “I'm called Brak. As your sister guessed, I come from the north. The steppes.”

“Are you a mercenary soldier?” the girl asked.

“Only when I must be, to earn a few dinshas.”

He told a little of his journeys since leaving his homeland. Told of how he was bound to seek his fortune in the warm climes of Khurdisan far southward; of the beginnings of his wanderings when his own people cast him out for mocking their gods. But of his encounter with Septegundus, minister of the evil god Yob-Haggoth, and of Septegundus's vengeful vow to stop him from reaching his goal, however, he said nothing.

When he was finished, the young man finally said, “My name is Ky. Do you know of the kingdom of Jovis?”

“Easterly, isn't it? Toward the Mountains of Smoke?”

“That is true.” Ky's voice unnerved Brak. When the barbarian watched the sparking fire, he couldn't tell whether it was sister or brother speaking. Ky continued, “In Jovis I would be called Prince Ky or, today, Lord Ky. My sister Kya—”

“Ky,” Brak interrupted without thought. “Kya. Twin names too?”

The girl's pearl eyes were huge and staring. "We are the same flesh. We were cast out together."

Brak spilled some of the wine down his chest. "Cast out, you say?"

"By our uncle, who usurped the throne which rightfully should have been ours to share together." Strangely, there was no anger in Ky's voice as he told this. His speech was singsong. "When Kya and I came of age, our uncle conspired against us. He seduced the loyalty of the priests with dinshas and promises of power. He turned the military against us. We were exiled from Jovis and have been wandering since."

"We have no place to go," Kya added. "No home anywhere."

Brak squinted his eyes against the smoke, his yellow braid hanging across his shoulder and a bleary expression of suspicion beginning to smear his features. The girl went on almost mechanically.

"We travel from land to land, city to city, existing as best we can. These"—with a slow hand she plucked at the jewels on her bodice—"we sell as it becomes necessary. For food. For lodging. Like you, we were traveling to the warmer south when we became lost up here. Our horse somehow caused the rocks to start falling. They fell onto that nest, shattering the eggs. The bird came back—"

Her voice trailed off. Its singsong faded into a sigh that blended with the wind.

"This region—" Brak began. Another gulp of wine. His stomach bloomed with heat. He felt almost human, even though overwhelming weariness was setting in. "This region's called Logol. Very"—a pause, to prepare to say the word clearly; he knew he was getting drunk—"dangerous for travelers this time of year. Didn't anyone warn you? At an inn? A caravanserai?"

Ky stared at the night with pearl eyes. "No."

"How—long've you been wandering up here?"

"Days. Weeks. We don't know," Kya replied.

"Gods! You must be as starved as I am." He thrust the skin across the fire. "Have a little of this, at least. It shows signs of being cold again tonight."

Beautiful and pale, Kya looked into Brak's eyes. Her smile was fey and sad.

"No."

Ky too refused. Brak grumbled, drunk now, or sick, or both. It was an affront to have generosity thus rebuffed. He tilted the wineskin and drained it to the bottom, making a long, noisy affair of it, as if to punish them for their stubbornness.

He flung the skin aside. Night pushed at the firelit circle. The wind had a frigid bite, blowing noisily as ever.

Brak wiped his mouth with his hand. He felt unhappy. Uneasy. Perhaps it was because he'd expected so much, had felt so elated discovering others lost up here. To have them turn out to be such a curious pair was disheartening.

And it was not simply that they were of a station far above his. He'd met lords before, and gotten along in their company. This pale pair frankly alarmed him.

Nothing in their manner was threatening. Just the opposite. The very absence of emotion, coupled with

the unreal perfection of their features, made him wonder about the thoughts hidden behind their shining eyes. The singsong recitation of their exiling had sounded too pat, too rehearsed.

Clumsily he took up the wineskin. Empty. He cursed. He was letting shadows and pain delude him. Ky and Kya were starved. Frightened too, probably. He had no real reason to suspect them of anything. He flung the skin away, hunched down on his side, tugged his raggy cloak up tight around him.

“The storm will stop.” His voice was barely a growl. “Tomorrow. The day after. But it will. Then we’ll find our way down. I know we can.”

In the silence after the sound of his voice died away, one of the twins said, “Yes. We thank you.”

With the popping flames between, he couldn't see which. One had spoken. And he couldn't stay awake. Immense fatigue muffled him. The flames dimmed and presently vanished altogether.

Chill wind slipped across his exposed cheek. He tried to open his eyes. In the darkness there was singing.

The music was strange, wordless, high and minor and eerie. It drew closer, then receded. In it could be heard two voices. But they blended as one.

The tune rose, fell, murmured with a sad, mysterious quality that penetrated his dulled mind and made him groan. The song seemed to wail and echo like a weird hymn out of the far reaches of the sky.

Brak rolled over, blinked. He saw only a vague blur of orange. The remains of the fire. The music continued.

He pushed a hand against the ground, tried to lift his body. With a drunken gasp he fell down again, flopped over on his back and snored. The music twined on through the dark dreams—

In one of those dreams something touched his throat.

Something crept on the flesh of his neck like the legs of an insect. Touching. Exploring.

A hand.

A hand cupping itself around the muscled column of his neck.

A hand stroking—

Out of the nightmare he lunged awake, giving a shout, fighting off the confines of the bundled-up cloak. Gray light smote his eyes.

He shuddered with the vividness of the dream. Even in this waking moment he could still feel the obscene touch of that hand on his throat.

He wiped his mouth, sucked his lungs full of cold air, shuddered as the effect of the nightmare dwindled.

Was it just that? Just nightmare, nothing more? The touch had seemed inhumanly real—

With another blink he discovered that full dawn had arrived. The wind had dropped off. The air was somewhat clearer. He could see a league or more.

He turned to look at the twins across the black coals of the dead fire. The two slept with hands twined. They had not changed position. Rubies and emeralds all over their bodies twinkled in the growing light.

Innocence. Sleeping innocence. He'd only dreamed the touching hand. But as Brak watched the twins in the morning gray, his spine crawled again with inexplicable foreboding.

Chapter II

Caravan Into Darkness

The sun appeared, a dim burnished disc behind a haze. When the twins roused, Brak suggested that the three of them immediately begin searching for a way off the plateau. Ky said that this was agreeable. His polite, lifeless voice continued to disturb the big barbarian, as did the beautiful girl's intense stare.

Brak hitched his broadsword in place. As he retied the rusty cloak scrap around his ribs he noticed Kya watching him again. The moment he looked at her, she glanced away.

Coming from another kind of woman, such attention would have stirred the big barbarian's blood. But even granting that Kya was beautifully formed, Brak still found something unpleasant in those faintly slanted pearl eyes.

Of his dream of singing and the hand he said nothing.

They set out with Brak leading the way. Visibility was better this morning. The wind, light and gusty, was no longer a physical force to be fought. From the sun's position Brak could estimate where the south lay, and they worked in that direction.

His ribs itched. But other than that, he felt tolerably well, though hunger was beginning to devil him in earnest. By the time the dim sun stood directly overhead in the murk, his belly hurt.

How the royal twins survived with not so much as a bleat about food or drink he had no idea. Perhaps those from palaces were taught to accept hardship without complaint. For his own part, he grumbled and cursed the unlucky gods every tenth step.

Progress was slow. Ky and Kya labored along like aged invalids, saying hardly a word between them. Brak stopped often to let them catch up. When the sun began to drop, he was growing short-tempered. He swore at them, then was instantly angry with himself. The brother and sister apologized for the feeble pace.

"Sit and rest a moment," Brak said, avoiding their eyes. "I'll range ahead a little. The land seems to be taking a downward slope."

He left them and ran, dodging and jumping through the rocks. The exertion made his ribs ache but he welcomed the relief of motion and action. There was something faintly foul about the limpid twins. He banged his shins repeatedly and scuffed his knuckles bloody crawling to the top of a cone-shaped rock, but grunted, pleased, when he stood up. What he saw gave him the first sign of hope.

Perhaps two leagues distant, the plateau ended in a discernible rim. Beyond, sweeping in dun colored dunes from horizon to horizon, lay the Desert of Logol.

Equally as forbidding as the plateau in its own way, the waste was still a welcome sight. Perhaps the three of them could find an oasis. A brackish pool. Palm fruit. Brak whooped and clambered down again.

Ky and Kya greeted the news with polite interest. Brak gave up worrying about their curious behavior, leading the way to the plateau rim where they camped for the night. He built another fire and settled down to sleep as best he could. This time he kept the cold iron of his broadsword near his belly. As he dozed off, he wondered how such a weakling pair could have journeyed through lands inhabited by all

sorts of robbing ruffians and not have had the gems on their clothing stripped away. The puzzle was soon submerged in his heavy sleep. No singing and no dreams of ghostly hands troubled him.

In the morning they made their way down from the plateau. It took half the day. The wind began to rise again. The clouds thickened. The sun, no more than a yellow-gray smear all morning, disappeared. The dunes of Logol stretched in front of them, empty and stark.

They labored on. Presently Brak halted. He lifted his head, turned an ear to the wind.

“Did you hear?”

Ky lidded his eyes a moment. “I heard nothing.”

“I swore there were bells far off.”

But the sound was not repeated. They started forward again, lurching up the side of a sizable dune. The sand was fine and yellowish. Brak's foot sank to the ankle at each step. He reached the top, turned to wait for the twins. Down the wind drifted a ringing.

He spun, his yellow braid whipping out from his shoulders. Perhaps a half a league distant, limned against the dull sky, a long train of men, plus dromedaries and horses or mules, moved south. The backs of the animals bulked with big bales. Again a bell clanked.

“A caravan!” Brak cried. “By the gods, we've come across someone fool enough to cross this waste in the wrong season.” He cupped his hands round his mouth and let out a bellow. He repeated this cry three, four, five times.

The wind keened. Brak craned forward. Suddenly, at the head of the caravan, men clustered together. One pointed. Brak pulled his broadsword, wigwagged it high over his head and hallooed again.

In a moment, a dromedary broke from the caravan and came racing toward the dune where the barbarian stood.

The rider seemed to be an expert, swaying and bounding as he clung to the saddle. The dromedary clipped off the distance with long stilt-legged strides.

Brak whirled around, startled to find the twins right behind him. Ky and Kya watched the rider approach. Their faces were expressionless. Brak slapped Ky's shoulder. “Men! Food! It's worth a smile at least!”

Slowly Ky stepped back, almost as if Brak's touch had insulted him. He did smile then, lazily.

“Yes, barbarian. That's indeed a welcome sight.”

Kya's pearl eyes never left the approaching rider. “Unbelievably so,” she breathed.

In another moment the dromedary arrived at the base of the dune. The rider sat surveying the three suspiciously. Brak didn't particularly care for the man's looks. He was large, on the heavy side, wearing a lightly padded coat decorated with cheap-colored embroidery. Once the gaudy threads might have formed a design; now most of them were torn or raveled. The man wore sturdy boots and a flat fur cap. A northerner, Brak guessed, from the Ice-marches or elsewhere. The man had a hooked nose, skin weather-burned a dark brown, and a fierce red beard. Red hair curled uncut around his ears.

The man snicked his crescent sword from its scabbard. “Who be you there?” He had a deep, raspy voice.

“Travelers who became lost back on the plateau,” Brak replied. “We met by accident.”

“Those two with you are gentlefolk,” the man said. “But you're not.” The burly man spat into the sand.

Brak's gut muscles tightened up. He had learned to expect this kind of treatment by now. It happened too often to fight over. Even so, he had difficulty reining his temper when it did. With effort, he controlled his voice.

“My name is Brak. This is Lord Ky and Lady Kya from Jovis in the east. Where is your caravan heading?”

“To the south. To Samerind. And it isn't my caravan. It belongs to old Hadrios.”

“Are you the caravan scout, then?”

“Use your eyes. Do I look like one of the lads who shovels up dung behind the mules?” With a flourish he ruffed up the tip of his red beard. “My name is Gorzhov, outlander. With due respect to my position, you will address me as Captain.”

Brak bristled. “Captain of what? Not much, to judge from that coat.”

Kya unexpectedly touched Brak's arm. Her fingers were cool. “Don't anger him.”

Gorzhov glared. “The lady has more sense than you, outlander. It's you three who need my master's help and not the other way around.”

Swallowing his rage, the barbarian nodded. “Aye. We need food, and drink, and a place to rest.”

Captain Gorzhov chuckled. He eyed the twins. “That can be had. Let's arrange a suitable price. For a start, shall we say four of the largest stones the fine folk are wearing?”

Brak's mouth went hard. “We'll negotiate with your master, no one else. *Captain.*”

“Oh, aye? What if I ride back and tell my master that you're robbers? Tell him that we should pass on quickly and leave you?” Gorzhov's fingers flexed ever so slightly on the curved sword hilt. His eyes seemed to hope there would be trouble.

“Why, then, Captain,” Brak murmured, “I'd be forced to put this iron in your back before your beast took two lopes. We're starved. These people are exhausted. I won't bargain with a thief.”

Gorzhov drew back his crescent sword. “Watch your insolent tongue!”

Ky uttered a protest Brak didn't hear. The big barbarian started down the dune side, ready to fight, driven to quick temper by his own tiredness and the scout's slurs. Captain Gorzhov's teeth glared in his red beard. He kicked a boot over his dromedary's back, as the beast knelt, ready to drop to the ground and fight. A signal trumpet bleated from the caravan.

Brak halted. Gorzhov swung his head. Halloos back there. Men waving.

“Your master tugs your chain,” Brak said. “Captain.”

Gorzhov hesitated. Hate clouded his eyes a moment. He said carefully, “Very well, outlander. Follow me and settle with Hadrios. We will settle another time.” And he cracked the flat of his crescent blade on the dromedary's flank.

The beast straightened its legs, Gorzhov rose up with it, and man and animal headed back over the dunes. Brak and the twins started after on foot.

Ky and Kya walked more rapidly than at any time since Brak had met them. Over his shoulder he noticed them whispering together, even smiling. Of course they had a right to be pleased. But having met a greedy scoundrel like Captain Gorzhov, the barbarian expected the worst when he encountered the scout's master.

As they approached the caravan Brak counted at least twenty-five dromedaries and fully as many pack mules. Each animal bore a minimum of two chests or bales, and some three or four. At the end of the caravan, about a dozen raggedly dressed older boys clustered together to watch the arrival. With them, Brak saw, was a man in a long gray robe, and what appeared to be a white-haired crone wearing a collection of bright-colored rags.

But it was toward the caravan's head that Captain Gorzhov led them. The scout dismounted near a bearded man and a woman walking out to meet the trio. Gorzhov bent quickly to speak to the white-beard. Brak decided that he might or might not mention the way Gorzhov had already tried to extract payment for help. It all depended on the behavior of the caravan's master.

White-beard came forward. His right pantaloon leg, fashioned of once-beautiful aquamarine silk that was now patched and frayed, ended near the knee. The old man stumped along on a thick peg of wood. Most all his clothing had seen better times. He was old, as his graying beard attested, but his skin was dark and smooth. He had a hook of a nose, and his eyes were pale and keen. He did not seem unfriendly.

“Welcome to the three of you. My scout tells me you are lost.”

Brak gave a nod. He indicated the dark smudge of the plateau in the distance. “I came across this lord and lady by chance. My name is Brak, and they are Ky and Kya of Jovis in the east.” He said no more about the background of the twins, preferring them to tell their story if they wished. He mentioned that he was traveling south to Khurdisan, and concluded by saying, “If you can feed us and let us sleep peacefully for a night, we'll thank you.”

“And why not?” the old man answered “There's cursed little companionship on Logol as it is.” He eyed the horizon uneasily. “Though we'll have the Skulwind for a visitor any day now.” Recovering himself, the old man slapped his palms against the threadbare bosom of his long coat. “Forgive me. I fail in the amenities. I am Hadrios, trader of the city of Samerind in southern Kopt. Sometimes called Hadrios the Star-Tracker, because I've followed stars across wastes like this all my life. You have met my scout—”

“Your captain,” Brak said with mockery that made Gorzhov redden.

“—this is my daughter, Helane.”

The wench standing beside the trader gave a nod and a pleasant smile. Brak smiled in return, for she was a strapping, well-formed girl with tawny hair and gray eyes. She wore a tight jacket, a colorful skirt and desert boots. Bangles jingled on her arms. Unadorned by the kind of paint Brak had seen on the faces of women in cities, Helane's mouth was full and red and pleasant.

“It's nearly dark, father,” the girl said. “Can't we camp early and build our cookfire? The boys can raise the extra pavilion for the visitors.”

“That would be most welcome, my lady,” said Ky. “My sister is weary indeed.”

"I don't need a tent," Brak said. "Just meat and wine."

"So I would have guessed, outlander," Hadrios answered, with an appraising glance. He surveyed the sky, sniffed the wind, licked his sere old lips. "A bad season for passage of Logol, as you may know. We make all the haste we can. But—" Thinking it over, he finally nodded. "I imagine we can spare the extra hour today." He clapped his hands. "Civix, you lice-ridden cur! Bed the beasts and put up the spare pavilion. We camp here!"

Actually it was none too soon. By the time the animals had been picketed and a striped tent—like its owner's garments, much patched—had been raised, the darkness of Logol was on them. The night out here was all enfolding, cool and empty and whispering with the voice of wind across dunes.

Civix, the head of the caravan boys, was no boy, but a ferret-eyed little whelp of a man with dirty ankles. He smelled vile. He directed the rest of the boys by means of cuffs, kicks and screeched obscenities. A cookfire was started, a pot hung up, wine passed round. Before long Brak was squatted cross-legged, ripping into a savory joint pulled dripping from the kettle.

He grunted and smacked his lips. Across the fire, Helane glanced up. Brak grinned but kept right on gobbling, at the same time letting his eye wander down the curve of her bosom. She did not look away. She smiled in lusty good humor.

At the entrance to their pavilion near the fire, Ky and Kya sat side by side on small stools. They picked at the meat chunks served to them on the only plates which Hadrios the Star-Tracker could provide, thin sheets of ivory hastily unpacked from a bale. Brak continued to munch and grunt. He felt much better.

Hadrios was off in the darkness somewhere, attending to a sick mule that brayed in pain. Now and then Helane drew a dripping joint from the pot, walked nearer the fire. Captain Gorzhov caught her bare leg above her boot, ran his hand higher and started to say something. Helane smacked his cheek with the joint, leaving a smear of grease.

"Not tonight, Captain," she said, "nor any other night. I've told you before. I'd as lief kiss a turtle as a braggart who invents titles for himself."

Gorzhov jumped up, flushed. Brak watched with amusement. Gorzhov was on the point of calling her a name when he spied Hadrios stumping back to the fire on his peg leg. The Captain picked up his wine cup and, with a glare at Brak, stalked off in the dark to sulk.

Hadrios scooped meat from the pot and sat down beside the big barbarian. The old man's joints popped as he arranged himself.

"The afflicted mule died. That's the third we've lost. That cur Civix hasn't tended them well since Anaximander was taken. Our journey's cursed. And we've yet to cross the worst of Logol! Yet to hear the Skulwind howl and prow!"

"If I can ask," Brak said around a mouthful, "why do you travel this time of year?"

"To get those bales of gold and gems and spices and ivory and jeweled mirrors and combs to Samerind, why else! In short, to recoup my losses! Caravans are risky business. Last year the gods smiled. This year they frowned. My fortunes took a sharp reverse. I lost two caravans in a row. The first time the master whom I had the misfortune to hire was a thief. He sold off all the goods in another city and fled, never returning to Samerind at all. The second caravan was"—Hadrios's pale eyes drifted past the fire to the windy dark—"was taken by the men we ourselves may face one day soon."

“He means,” said Helane softly, “the horsemen of Quran.”

When Brak said he was unfamiliar with the name, Hadrios snorted. “Brigands, that's all they are. Quran squats in the middle of this damned waste, a city-kingdom of desert robbers older than time or sin. You've never seen a man of Quran? You'd know if you had. When the boys come of age, one eye is gouged out and replaced with a ruby. The ritual makes them prideful and savage. The Red King—Ibrahim, he's called—and his woman Queen Shar are reputed to be fierce fighters. And just like all their people, they're wondrously strong. Living on Logol makes it so.”

From the pavilion entrance Kya said, “Stronger than ordinary men, do you mean to say?”

Hadrios swung round. “Not supernaturally so, my lady. Just extremely tough and powerful because of the challenge of living off the desert.”

Ky patted his lips with a fold of his cape. Brak noticed that the young lord had hardly touched the food. The pearl eyes had an odd, musing shine.

“My sister admires strength, Master Hadrios. And I also. We envy the outlander's powerful body and the life it holds.”

To this curious remark Brak made embarrassed, grumbling reply. He disliked the whole discussion somehow. Ky returned to picking at his food but Kya's gaze lingered a while longer on the barbarian. Hadrios helped himself to more wine, then fell to grumbling.

“We may very well encounter the riders of Quran, and the—the one who rides with them.”

Struck by the catch in the old man's voice, Brak asked, “Who is that?”

“A huge, dumb giant. Some say he was a man once but was enchanted and given abnormal strength. Others say he's still just a man but of remarkable power. Instead of one ruby eye”—Hadrios poked his face twice—“two. A legend? Who knows? Some whose caravans have been plundered by the Quran claim the giant led the horsemen. Pray we don't meet Stoneyes.”

“A peculiar name,” remarked Brak.

“Let him remain that and no more!” Hadrios gestured. “I've gambled everything on this caravan, outlander. I've gone all the way to Timbello, in the west, to personally gather the merchandise. I spent nearly my last dinsha on the contents of those bales and chests. And I have flown in the face of prudence by taking a caravan across Logol in this dark season. I had no choice. It was this or ruin. Ruin—” His words became a vague, unhappy mutter.

Turning from the depressing forecast of what lay ahead on Logol, Brak said at length, “I had planned to make my way south alone. But perhaps I could travel with you to Samerind.”

The old man glanced up, blinked muzzily. “What?”

“A splendid idea,” Helane said. “We could use an extra sword arm, father.”

“What”—Hadrios hiccoughed, lowered his voice—“what of the fine folk?”

Brak said under his breath, “I doubt that Ky would be of much help in a battle.”

Hadrios didn't hear, standing now and moving toward the pavilion. “How far will you go with us?”

Ky smiled with utter charm. “Why, master, to your city of Samerind, if we may.”

“I’m not averse, mind you. But can you earn your keep?”

An embarrassing silence. Clearly Ky and Kya, two people of quality, did not know how to deal with such a question. Reluctantly, Brak felt compelled to say, “Will my services provide for all of us?”

Hadrios pivoted on his peg leg. His pale eyes were shrewd. “Why, perhaps so, outlander, perhaps so. You heard me mention one Anaximander? My master of caravan boys. Dead eight days ago—another curse on this journey! The waterplague took him. You saw that ferret Civix who’s now in charge. Shiftless. Untrustworthy. I’d prefer to give you the responsibility. If you’ll take charge of the boys till we reach Samerind, I’ll gladly carry the lord and lady with no complaint.”

For a moment Brak hesitated, recalling what Hadrios had predicted about the terrors that might lie ahead. He looked up, found Helane watching him, her tawny hair blowing in the night breeze. Her mouth looked sweet and fair—

Well, why not? Wouldn’t it be safer crossing Logol in company with other swords? Brak bobbed his head. “A bargain.”

Hadrios chortled. “Let’s break the news to Civix at once. I can’t wait to see his face when he learns he’ll no longer earn extra money for doing nothing!”

Near a smaller campfire at the rear of the caravan, hard by the picketed animals, a dozen grimy faces turned up in the flame-glare as Civix heard Hadrios’s announcement. Civix gave his reaction by spitting on the ground at Brak’s feet.

“Take the job away from me and give it to an outlander? Be damned, one leg!”

“Have a care how you speak,” Hadrios warned, “or I’ll turn you out into Logol alone.”

“That would be preferable to taking orders from a northern thick-head.”

A slow, angering smile spread on Brak’s mouth. “Shall we have a little test to see who gives orders and who takes? With swords, Civix? Or bare hands? Your choice.”

Civix spat again. “I wouldn’t dirty myself.” He turned away.

The other caravan boys were not quite so vocal. Most of them eyed Brak’s huge frame with an uneasy respect.

“Well,” Hadrios sighed as he and Brak turned away. “That’s done. With a little cunning and a few blows I’m sure you can bring them into line. Most of them aren’t bad, even though I did scrape them from the Timbello gutters. But Civix—well, you saw.” The old man plucked Brak’s arm. “Come this way and meet the last two members of the company. Both tend to be solitary by nature, most often taking their food by themselves. One is my own relative. The other is a fr—”

Brak never heard the rest, twisting around as sandals slapped the sand behind his back. Something bright flashed. Hadrios yelled. The knife in Civix’s hand slashed at Brak’s chest.

The barbarian rolled his shoulder under, lunged forward. The knife skimmed past his neck. He brought his body up beneath Civix’s, lifted, flung his attacker off like a sack. Civix hit the ground spitting and swearing. Brak dropped on him with both knees.

He pinned Civix’s right wrist to the earth, snatched up the knife with his other hand and drove it down toward Civix’s chest. The little man squealed and shut his eyes. Instantly Brak deflected his aim with a

wrench of his wrist. The blade chunked into the ground between two fingers of Civix's pinned hand.

Wind hissed in the silence. Civix breathed heavily under Brak's knee. His stare mixed fear and hate. All at once the caravan boys laughed. The tension broke.

Brak got up slowly. His eyes were baleful. "Remember, Civix, the first time you're tempted to disobey an order. Come at me the second time from behind—I'll leave you dead."

Hadrios harrumphed his approval as they moved toward another small fire burning out beyond the last of the stamping mules. The fire glowed in the center of a ring of stacked bales and chests, illuminating the person who sat there. It was the crone, lank-haired, without teeth, shivering and shuddering. She wore the collection of colored scraps Brak had seen from afar. With a start the barbarian saw that her eyes were rolled up in her head, leaving only the moist whites showing.

Hadrios acted flustered, whispering, "She is my father's sister. There is no one to care for her in Samerind, so I fetch her with me. On occasion it can be helpful to have the services of a seeress."

"She has magical powers?"

"Some skill at prophesying, yes. And notice that little tan bag in amidst the rags? Her private cache of philtres that cloud the mind. More than once they've come in handy to quell the rage of a drunken caravan boy." Hadrios seemed unusually concerned about the old woman, glancing nervously around the area of piled chests and bales. At last he gave up, turned to the crone.

"Mother Mil? Can you hear me? It's Hadrios speaking."

Bubbles of spit popped on the old woman's hairy upper lip. Head thrown back, hands locked white and tight together in her lap, she shivered and muttered. Brak's palms began to itch as he understood a little of what she was saying.

"We go to the dark. We ride to the dark. A stranger leads us to the dark—"

Hadrios scowled. Brak started violently as a man stepped from between the piled bales.

Slender, of middle years, with a balding high forehead, the man wore a gray cowl and robe. A girdle of beads circled his waist. From this girdle hung a pitted gray stone cross with arms of equal length.

"Friar Pol," said Hadrios.

"I was walking a little in the desert," explained the Friar. "I didn't think it would hurt. Mother Mil has been speaking from sleep perhaps an hour now." He stared at Brak. This precipitated a quick introduction and explanation from Hadrios.

"Friar Pol is returning from Timbello to Samerind. He is a member of the Nestorian order. Personally I don't hold with their teachings of a single Nameless God at all. But I didn't think it would hurt to have a spiritual person with us on this trip. Besides, he's paying for his keep."

"Ever the practical man." Friar Pol said, smiling rather wryly.

Brak said nothing. He had encountered the priests of the order founded by the ecstatic goatherd Nestoriamus before. He was well aware of the supposed symbolism of the stone cross which the holy man carried. The presence of a man of the friar's persuasion always made Brak ill at ease, so he was thankful when Hadrios turned their attention to the old woman.

“What has she been saying, Pol?”

“I make no sense of it.” The Nestorian glanced at Brak. “Or couldn't until now.”

Through spittle, Mother Mil moaned, *“Into the dark. All, all together into the awful dark. Led there. Taken there. A stranger leads us. A stranger takes us.”*

Round-eyed, Hadrios turned to Brak. The barbarian scowled. Hadrios bent forward.

“Mother Mil? Who is the stranger?”

“Someone”—the crone shuddered—“newly come. A savage man. His presence brings the evil down. He takes us into the darkness.”

“We mustn't put too much faith in an old woman's—” Friar Pol began.

Head back, Mother Mil shrieked, *“He brings the evil down!”*

“What evil?” Hadrios exclaimed, upset. “Who is he?” He seized his aunt's shoulder. “Mother Mil, you must tell me!”

With another moan the old woman crumpled like a boneless thing.

The Friar studied Brak with a curious, penetrating gaze. Hadrios seemed flustered, as if not wanting to embarrass Brak by pointing out that the prophecy must certainly concern him. Yet the words of the old seeress had left the caravan master shaken. Brak felt it was time to leave. He grunted a curt word and moved into the darkness.

He turned once for a last glimpse of Mother Mil hunched over unconscious. One sleeping hand clutched the little tan bag of mind-clouding philtres. *He brings the evil down—*

With long strides Brak swung past the fire where the caravan boys were laughing and arguing over beer. Again there were respectful stares as Brak passed. Of Civix the barbarian saw no sign.

Helane fetched Brak a blanket. He took it out to the sand near the dromedaries, having lost his taste for being near human beings tonight. All the talk about the predators of Quran, plus the quick-won enmity of Civix and Captain Gorzhov and the mad maunderings of an old witch—well, it was far too much in one day for a man of Brak's plain turn of mind.

But as he rolled into the blanket under the chill sky, Mother Mil's voice kept rattling through his mind.

He brings the evil down. *He brings the evil down.*

Sleep seemed all too short. He awoke suddenly to a commotion in the camp. Men running, shouting; the dromedaries stirred, rising up on their stilty legs to peel back their lips and snort in fright. Overhead the sky was briefly clear of cloud. The stars burned far and sharp in the deep of night.

Something echoed in Brak's mind. Something he had heard just before waking. A shadow-man raced past with a torch streaming out. Brak fought free of the blanket tangled round his feet.

Across the waste under the stars the scream his dozing mind had heard rang loud again.

It was a raw, uneven cry, full of bubbles and gasps. A scream of vile pain and suffering.

The big barbarian's mind edged with fear as he joined the running shadows. As sure as he knew the

shape of his hand, he knew the scream had come from Mother Mil.

Chapter III

Into The Valley of the Hell-Pits

Brak ran with the dawn wind splashing his face. Shadows and voices kept pace with him. In the east the dunes were edged a sickly salmon color.

The big barbarian passed the mules, frantically braying and snapping at their picket ropes. Ahead, flame flickered between the stacked bales and chests that formed Mother Mil's hideaway. A thicker shadow appeared there suddenly. Brak kept running, saw the shadow become a man thrusting a sweet-smoking torch high. A red beard gleamed.

"I heard her scream," shouted Gorzhov, evidently the first to arrive. "But I can't find her."

Off to the right, Hadrios interrupted his quieting of the animals to cry, "She can't have gone far, Gorzhov. She's too feeble."

Brak realized someone had caught up with him. Helane.

Her gray tawny eyes were stark with terror as Captain Gorzhov bounded out of sight again behind the mound of trade goods. Within another moment Brak and the long-limbed trader's daughter reached the warren of bales.

Caravan boys, sleepy and frightened, scrambled from all directions. Brak blundered into Friar Pol coming out of the dark. Enraged, he shoved the Nestorian aside. At that instant they all heard Gorzhov's hoarse, horrified voice.

"Here, Hadrios. Bless the gods—hurry! All speed!"

Brak led Helane down a sandy slope toward the Captain. He was kneeling beside a stunted, scrubby bush. Its bare branches clacked in the breeze, a dry relic of life amid the waste. Brak's eyes detected something stringy and raggy draped over the branches. But it seemed to have—to have human form, with arms and legs that flapped, and white hair.

Bile rose in Brak's throat. Helane stopped, hands pressing her mouth. One of the caravan boys turned aside and emptied his belly noisily.

The stricken Gorzhov stumbled to his feet. Sparks streamed from his torch. Hadrios pushed up beside Brak, seized his arm. Tears ran from the corners of his eyes.

"In the name of all sanity, what vileness—*such a thing cannot be.*"

Friar Pol passed his stone cross through the air. He too looked on the point of illness. "Look away, Hadrios."

But none who had come this far could. Rustling, flapping, Mother Mil's body was stretched over the stunted branches like a piece of cloth. Her face, her scrawny bosom, her midsection, her legs had been hideously compacted, as though a great weight had pressed the life juices from her. There could be no blood in such a disfigured body. No blood and no bone. Brak dug his thick nails into his own palms and wondered whether he was mad.

"A knife." Hadrios gasped it in a voice like rattling husks. "Someone—a knife."

Helane tried to hold him back. "Father, look away from her. Don't torment—"

"A knife!"

One of the caravan boys spun a bright dagger through the air. Hadrios caught it. Gorzhov backed up, swallowing hard. Hadrios dropped to one knee. He lifted what had been Mother Mil's right hand but now was a reedy, rustling thing no thicker than Brak's own thumb.

Carefully Hadrios ran the edge of his dagger across the remains of Mother Mil's palm. It made a dry, scraping sound. Brak saw the edges of the cut pucker.

A tiny pink drop oozed forth. One drop, no more.

Hadrios dropped the dagger. Helane leaned on Brak's arm. Friar Pol was sweating and fingering his cross. Even Civix looked cowed.

Hadrios shuddered once. Then he bent to examine the flapping thing on the bush again. After a moment he raised his head, motioned.

"Any with the stomach, come here and see a strange thing."

Brak and the Friar took up the invitation. Hadrios's shaking finger pointed to the papery-dry flesh of Mother Mil's right shoulder.

"See? Three marks," breathed the old man.

Three tiny black prick-points, close together, formed the corners of an invisible triangle on what had been Mother Mil's living flesh.

Friar Pol wiped his mouth. "Some animal—"

"No animal," Hadrios whispered. "No animal that haunts Logol could have sucked bone and blood from her living body." His face was unhealthy in the breaking daylight. "Some thing, some devil roaming this damned, haunted, cursed waste crept in and slew her and left its sign. And she predicted it. She said only last night—"

An involuntary glance at Brak. Hateful, then quickly hidden. With a wracking sob, Hadrios turned away and let the pain of his agony come forth in anguished crying.

Brak held Helane awkwardly. *He brings the evil down*. Mother Mil had meant Brak himself. And the evil had come quickly. But from where? Wind sighing across the salmon-tinted emptiness of Logol gave no answer.

Presently Hadrios got control of himself. He apologized for his emotional outburst, and let Helane lead him away. Brak conferred uneasily with Friar Pol. Together they decided that, rather than try to move the strangely marked corpse, they would await Hadrios's decision on what to do with it. Brak ordered Civix and two of the boys to stand guard. There were resentful glares from Civix, but no retort.

Before moving away—and gladly—Brak noticed one other odd thing. Mother Mil's little tan philtre bag was gone.

He walked back up toward the restless dromedaries, but he heard no sound except one in his mind: the rustling click-clack of that bloodless body on the branches. He knew with certainty that he would hear the sound until the hour of his dying.

Shortly after sunup, Brak and Gorzhov piled straw over the horror on the bush. As Hadrios watched with spent, bleak eyes and the Nestorian priest gestured with his stone cross and mumbled half-aloud, the Captain tossed on a torch.

The smell that rose with the fire was abominable. It made Hadrios sick all over again. Another two hours passed before the caravan could move out. By that time, the sunlight had faded behind thick clouds rolling out of the south. Men and animals labored through the wind while the day grew darker and darker.

By dint of his brawn and his sword, Brak kept the caravan boys in line and made them perform their jobs with reasonable alacrity. Only Civix shirked, malingered, was slow to obey orders. Brak recognized the obvious hate in the ferret-man's eyes. But he didn't provoke him because he knew that if he did, there would be a fight, and then he would have to kill Civix outright.

A day passed. Another. The desert was unchanging, gray-covered, endless. Now and again the wind rose to sharp gusts, a foretaste of the Skulwind to come.

Brak mastered the riding of a dromedary without much trouble. He found that he enjoyed the lurching, rolling motion of the high perch. Ky and Kya traveled heavily muffled and sat in the doorway of their pavilion in the evenings, saying little. The barbarian noticed that they seemed a bit plumper and healthier since their return to a degree of civilization. One time he caught Kya watching him with a strange little smile. Though he didn't feel like it, he smiled in return. Spots of color brightened her lovely cheeks.

A third and fourth day went by. The caravan toiled ahead. Near evening, Friar Pol rode a bell-jingling mule to the head of the caravan where Brak bobbed along on his dromedary. Captain Gorzhov, hunting a campsite, was a spot on the horizon a league ahead.

Brak looked down at the Nestorian. "From having met members of your order in the past, Friar, I would guess that you're an educated man."

"So it's said," returned Pol, rather ruefully.

"What killed the crone? No one talks of it. It's as if they're afraid."

Pol's eyes turned unhappy. "Perhaps they are. Perhaps silence is wisdom."

"But some terrible thing got at her. Perhaps there are more of them lurking—"

"Beasts of the waste?" A gray arm gestured at the desert. "I think not."

"Then what was it?"

"You have an unusual interest in something so bizarre. I thought outlanders were simple men."

"Aye. That's so. But it's simple wisdom to learn about a possible enemy. Well?"

Friar Pol coughed into one hand. "I—do not speculate on the cause."

"Your eyes say otherwise."

Stung, Pol glanced up. Brak towered over him, a huge, mighty-thewed figure jogging on the dromedary. The Friar's suspicion and even outright fear showed plainly on his face. He hid his emotions with effort.

"Private speculation is one thing, barbarian. Voicing it is another. I'm not sure whether all the ears are friendly in this conglomeration of pilgrims. Until I know for certain, I intend to keep my thought to myself.

Especially since your manner makes it clear that you believe men of my persuasion are contemptible.”

Brak scowled. “Priest, you’re hiding the real reason you won’t speak out. Tell me—”

But the Nestorian was already riding away, his mule’s bell clanking.

That night, long after the camp had quieted, Brak was wakened by the music.

He rolled over in his blanket. The night smelled of the dromedaries picketed nearby. He listened, and then his lips peeled back from his teeth.

Two voices, far away. The song without words rose and fell, a sadly joyous minor strain. It raised the hackles on his neck. He had heard such singing before.

Carefully he clambered out of the blanket. A dromedary, kneeling and asleep, blew air from its lips. Brak crept through the shadows. The music receded. On the other side of the camp, Civix and some of his mates shouted, dicing beside a fire. Brak’s hands chilled as the desert music curled inside his mind, rising up, falling, rising again—

Ky and Kya wandering out there at night? *Singing?*

Madness! And yet—

Brak padded out into the sand. He searched for the better part of an hour, but found no one. Every time he seemed to draw near the singing’s source, it shifted to another quarter. Finally, dismayed, he tramped back to the camp.

Everyone else was sleeping now, including the caravan boys. He must have been the only one to hear the eldritch melody.

As he lay down again he wondered. What sort of star-crazed lunatics could these twins be, indulging themselves in midnight rambles and weird vocalizing? Brak tugged the blanket up around his cheeks. The animal smell roundabout was yeasty, familiar, comforting. But the voices sang on, even twining through his restless dreaming.

“Barbarian?”

The big man whirled, his braid leaping out in the wan starlight.

A few clouds scudded. Today had seen the best weather since Brak had joined the caravan, but Hadrios predicted a change tomorrow. Unable to sit tamely at the evening fire with the others—and with Helane nowhere to be seen—Brak had wandered a short distance from camp, to be startled by the sweet, sudden voice.

A figure glided to him. It glowed with radiant shafts of light, amber and pale blue.

“My lady.” Brak saluted with the wine cup he was carrying. “I didn’t see you standing there.”

Kya moved closer. She smelled of a clove scent. Her cheeks were full and white in the starshine.

“Is there some special reason you’re not with the others?”

“No, none.” The tinkle of the gems on her clothing and the shine of her pearl eyes unnerved him. He tried not to show it. “I just wanted a little time to myself.”

“Would you share it with me, then?”

She stood quite close now, her wet lips slightly parted. He tried to read her eyes. They were opaque as the pearls of which they reminded him.

Kya's hand tickled along his bare forearm. The insinuating touch was pleasing in a way. Yet there was a strange, tired monotony in her voice.

“Walk with me a little way out into the desert, won't you? The stars silver the sand so. It's lovely beyond belief. Two people could become lost in that light. Lost.” *Touch* went her hand. “Lost.”

He forced coarseness into his voice. “I prefer getting lost in a wine keg. My cup's empty.”

And he stalked back to the camp.

Later, at the campfire, he puzzled at his own behavior.

Why did Kya disturb him in an unpleasant way? She was young, desirable.

Was it the subtle boredom in her voice and manner? He didn't know. But he preferred Hadrios's daughter, and was delighted to see her return to the fire. He slapped her rump, she slapped his face in return, and they both fell to laughing. He helped her to fresh wine. Before too long, he managed to forget Kya almost completely.

The weather worsened. The sky was dark lead, and the wind picked up. They toiled on for two, three, four more days. The waste grew more formidable, the dunes higher and steeper.

Brak saw Ky and Civix spending much of their free time together. The two whispered and walked at the camp's edge in the evening. He wondered whether the men had developed some sort of unwholesome friendship.

No longer did Civix glare angrily during the day. In fact, he grew lifeless and lethargic, slow to obey orders. He looked even more undernourished than usual. Brak watched him secretly one afternoon, but could find no evidence that Civix was helping himself to extra rations of mind-dulling wine.

Next noon, Gorzhov rode in with grim news.

“I saw the hell-pit smoke half a day ahead.”

Hadrios traced a sign against evil eye. “We'll pass round them by the north route. Find us a suitable camp site, Captain. But not too near, not too near.”

Riding alongside the caravan master, Brak watched Gorzhov race off again. Man and dromedary dwindled rapidly, struggling at last to the top of a high, faraway rise. Brak thought he saw puffy columns of yellow smoke drifting up behind that curve of dune. He turned to Hadrios with a question and noticed that the old man had a fixed, frightened stare.

“Are these pits so terrible?” Brak wanted to know.

“Don't scoff till you see them, outlander. The blasphemous elder gods infested them with life that lusts after the unwary. The part of the journey already finished was the light part. Now we come to this evil region. And Quran beyond.”

Hadrios hesitated a moment. Worry softened his strong face. His beard flew crazily in the wind. “Brak?”

“Yes?”

“Mother Mil's killing still hangs like a stone round my neck. I was a bad nephew to the old creature. I gave her precious little attention these past few years. But something slew her. Something uncommon and sinful. Pray the gods we left it behind.”

“If I knew the proper gods, Hadrios, I would.”

The old man saw that Brak was sincere, and it seemed to comfort him a little. Brak said nothing about his conviction that Friar Pol knew something of the nature of the horror that had killed the crone.

At midafternoon the first dromedaries toiled over the highest rise. Brak sat still as the caravan went by him, so wonderstruck by the sight below that he hardly paid attention to those passing: Civix on foot, whipping a recalcitrant mule with a light wand, then Ky and Kya muffled to their eyes against the rising wind, two statue-figures on the high backs of their beasts. Kya's pearl eyes lingered on Brak's blocky face as she rode across the top of the dune.

Captain Gorzhov was leading them to a valley. A haze darker than the sky itself hung over it, lending it a misty and forbidding quality. The valley stretched a good four or five leagues to either hand, effectively blocking a straight-ahead route. Its floor bubbled with natural pits of varying size, some quite large.

In the pits a turgid yellow-tinged liquid roiled. The pits gave off those puffy towers of smoke Brak had glimpsed earlier. The smell of the pits was abysmal; almost like the odor of burned flesh. And now and again—there! Brak's sharp eye caught the movement.

Up from the yellow slime curled a multi-stranded tentacle.

Bilious belly-white, the thing waved gently, seekingly in the air. Then it withdrew under the bubbles. In other pits, other tentacles probed upward from time to time. Some had several branches. Brak asked Captain Gorzhov about the nature of the life under the surface of the slime-pools.

Gorzhov spat and clicked his teeth in a rigid smile. “No one that I know has ever seen more than those delightful arms. Only a thick-wit would want to.” He rode on.

Campfire that evening was a dismal affair. The wind had fallen and every now and then, a puckering pop drifted to the ears of those gathered at the night meal. Gorzhov had selected a spot a good half a league from the pits. Most of them were mercifully hidden behind a natural barrier of tumbled rocks. But the pit smell could neither be hidden nor forgotten. And the tops of the concealing rocks shone a dusty yellow, another constant reminder.

Brak finished only part of his food. He tossed the gnawed joint back in the common pot. Friar Pol looked at him with revulsion but said nothing. Brak wiped his hands on his lion hide, searched for Helane. Gone on some private errand.

Turning his head again, his gaze met that of Kya. She was seated outside her pavilion. Brak's belly wrenched hard.

With a faint, slow smile the beautiful girl motioned to him. He had no choice. He went.

Kya's cheeks were round and pink. The strain of the journey, evident in the haggard faces of everyone else, seemed to have affected her not a whit. As the barbarian walked to her in long, loping strides, he noticed Gorzhov and Civix exchanging snickers on the other side of the fire. Brak was a bit surprised. He had thought Civix's new friend was Ky. Tonight Civix looked more tired and laconic than ever.

“Lady, good evening,” Brak said with an awkward bob of his head.

“Are you less interested in wine kegs tonight, Brak?”

Confused, he blinked. “What?” Sudden memory of the other evening. “Oh. My lady, I—”

“No matter. The past's both forgotten and forgiven. But I wondered whether tonight—”

A pause. Her moist, sweet lips peeled back ever so little from long, perfect teeth. The tip of her tongue caressing her underlip. In the way she sat, torso thrust slightly forward to accent her figure, there was unmistakable invitation.

“—tonight would you walk with me near the pits? I have a desire to see a sight so unusual at closer range. But I hesitate to go alone.”

He cursed himself in silence. Something about her sibilant monotone turned his reaction to suspicious and sour.

In the silence she sensed his unease. Above the dazzle of her jeweled clothing, pearl eyes reflected the campfire like suns.

“Barbarian—”

“My lady?”

Now Kya's voice had an edge that cut softly. “What do you see that makes you turn away?” Another pause. “Are you afraid to tell me?”

“Lady, I would be pleased to go with you, but—”

Helane's tawny hair glimmered. She was standing where Gorzhov and Civix had been a moment ago. They were gone. Quickly Brak finished.

“I promised the daughter of Hadrios that I would walk with her a while.”

“You're lying,” Kya smiled. The pearl eyes loomed. “Now tell me. *What do you think you see?*”

The challenge was implacable. She was stronger than she looked. But she was also a woman, and he would not be ordered about by one of her sex.

“Good evening, lady,” he said curtly, and left.

Hadrios watched with a boiled and questioning eye as Brak made directly for Helane. The barbarian took the girl's elbow, thrust her gently into the blackness away from the firelight.

“To get away from her, I said you and I would look at the pits. Save me from a liar.”

He stood close to Helane just then. Some of her tawny hair, windblown, danced across his face. She studied him for a long moment.

“The twins frighten you, don't they?” she asked.

He shook his head, but he was lying when he did it. He said, “It's only that I understand little of royalty. I have a feeling they think on every word they say. I do not.” He forced a grin. “To my regret, many times.”

“Very well, Brak.” She caught his hand, started toward the yellow tinged rocks. “I’ll redeem your poor prevaricating soul. Father has seen the pits but I never have.”

As they walked, Brak wondered whether she saw through his false bravado and lame explanation. He suspected she did. He was grateful for her tact.

The pits plip-popped. The yellow light brightened. Brak’s broadsword beat on his thigh with the motion of his walking, a steady slap of sound. He thought he heard an animal scurrying on the right, half spun, half drew the iron. Then he clanked it back when the sound was not repeated.

Helane’s laugh was gentle. “It’s not only royalty you don’t trust. You’re wary of everyone in the caravan.”

“Girl, that’s not tr—”

“But it is. It shows in your face. The caravan boys see it, and they fear you for it. But now I’ve discovered the one thing you do trust.” She touched the hilt of the blade.

“Um.” A curt nod. “I learned that in the north.”

“Exiled, you told Father. For mocking warlike gods. And where are you going?”

“South. Khurdisan.” The old magic sang along the wind and rang like holy bells. *Khurdisan the Golden*. His voice rumbled on as they approached the rocks. “A huge kingdom, they say. A land shaped like a sickle moon, long enough to reach from the Mountains of Smoke in the east to the Pillars of Ebon in the west. And rich! In the cities, gold clings to the buildings in little thin layers you can scrape off, so.” He showed her with a twisting motion of his horn-nailed thumb. “The idols are gold too, the shaman told me. And it’s never cold there.”

Helane’s hair blew behind her like a banner. Something made her link her arm with Brak’s. Her breast was a warm, soft push against his naked muscle. His blood heated unbidden. He thought with guilt of Rhea the queen whom he had loved above all.

“I know Khurdisan is warm, Brak. Four winters ago, my father and I traveled there.”

“Traveled—?” Stunned, he turned. “You reached Khurdisan?”

“Aye. And came back.”

“Then you must tell me about it. Everything.”

He pulled her pell mell past the rocks, only stopping short as they emerged beside the yellow-glowing pits. Slowly writhing, a sickly white tentacle sensed their presence and stretched toward them. But they were safe by distance. Brak flung a stone.

The tentacle snapped around the stone and whipped it out of sight beneath the surface.

The smell, the unnatural glaring light, the white things weaving in the air all across the valley could not bother him now. He sat Helane down on a rock, crouched at her feet, begged her to tell him of what she’d seen in the hot southern lands.

“Very well,” she smiled. “Though this isn’t a very appropriate setting.”

Almost like a child, he pressed a palm to his forehead. “Make me see it.”

So she began to talk of fountains and golden plazas, and women with pale gold skins. Brak was like a

drunkard, each word intoxicating. He only half heard a rattle-clack of pebbles rolling loose up among the boulders. The sound was similar to the one that had made him start as they walked here. He dismissed it, listening to Helane. When she screamed low, it was too late.

He stumbled to his feet, snaked his hand for his broadsword. The rocks at the edge of his vision reminded him that he and the girl had wandered out of sight of the caravan.

“Outlander,” said Captain Gorzhov by way of greeting as he stepped from the shadows of a rock.

The Captain's teeth were fiercely white in his red beard. “We have a score to tally at last.” Gorzhov held his crescent sword in his right hand, something else in his left.

“And the Captain has help with the tallying,” said a labored voice.

Out from the rocks lurched Civix, his dagger a curved sliver of light. He moved and spoke slowly, as though dazed. “The Captain and I agreed that two doing the settling would make the little game come out the way we wanted.”

Immobile, Helane watched with terrified eyes. Brak crouched, slid his broadsword the rest of the way out. He backed up one step. Two. Helane cried a quick warning. Brak jumped forward as something wavy-white snatched at his ankle from the nearest pit.

Gorzhov and Civix walked toward him. The Captain's gait was steady. Civix stumbled, blinking in his slowness. They had Brak flanked.

Gorzhov tossed up the object in his free hand, caught it.

It was a small tan pouch.

“Being the first to reach Mother Mil had its advantages,” he chuckled.

“You robbed her?” Brak's voice turned ugly. “Plucked and plundered a dead woman?”

“Does this strutting lout from the steppes deserve an answer, Civix?” Gorzhov snorted.

Flick-flack, Civix twisted his silvery dagger. His cheeks looked hollow, as though he were starving. But his speech was thick, clogged. “Aye—aye, Captain, he does. The kind we planned.”

“Watch him close, then.”

Gorzhov tucked the bag between his teeth, swiftly employed his free hand to draw something from inside it. Before Brak was half ready to take advantage of the Captain's momentarily awkward position, Gorzhov thrust the bag away inside his light padded coat. He was on guard again, sword up. In his other hand he held a small yellowed ivory phial.

“One of Mother Mil's special preparations,” he grinned, making the ivory phial wiggle between the balls of his thumb and thick forefinger.

“Mind-clouding dust. When I fight, you see, I prepare well ahead of time. My plan hatched the day we met. In essence, it's always been simple—to repay you for the way you dealt with me that day.”

“So you slew Mother Mil—”

“No!” Gorzhov's answer was quick, rasping. For an instant his eyes reflected a dumb terror. “That I did not do. But I won't deny I took advantage of the situation. Filched the bag and sat by to spring my trap.

Tonight seemed the proper moment. The daughter of Master Hadrios will forgive me, but some things can't be borne. What's between the outlander and me is a matter of blood honor."

In other circumstances Brak might have laughed at the pomposity of those words. But Gorzhov didn't consider them pompous at all. There was gritty hatred in the clench of his teeth. He believed he had been wronged, and there was but one remedy. Murder.

"Honor, you say?" Brak whispered the words, maneuvering for time. He shifted his weight for better footing. "You certainly display it in plenty, Captain. By stalking in the dark. By looting corpses. By every kind of coward's trick—"

Gorzhov lunged forward. "Arrogant son of a slut!"

"Ca-ca-captain!" Civix let out the feeble cry as Helane scooped up a stone and flung it hard.

Captain Gorzhov staggered as the rock broke the skin of his forehead. Red drops splattered down both sides of his nose. Despite his lethargy, Civix managed to reach Helane's side, fist his hand, and strike her. The blow did not look like a hard one, but it caught her unaware and she went down. Brak was moving then. Mouth open, he growled.

He thrust his broadsword out ahead. Gorzhov squeezed the little phial. The thin ivory shell went *craack* . A trickle of dust trailed out, glowing with a faint green nimbus. Brak loped one stride nearer Gorzhov—

The Captain whipped the broken phial from left to right. It spewed the green dust. The dust showered into Brak's eyes. He took one more lunging step—

Then, as if some supernatural hand had seized his middle and squeezed, he went rigid.

He threw his head back. He was blind.

He yelled. Helane moaned somewhere. Captain Gorzhov laughed.

"Now, beast!" he exclaimed. "Now you'll behave for us, won't you? We don't want to gut you just yet. We want you to show us what kind of animal you really are."

Brak's mind seethed with colors. The inside of his mouth was fiery hot. His body began to shake uncontrollably under the sudden effect of the enchanted dust. Without wanting to, he tossed his head back and screamed wildly. Foam bubbled at the corners of his mouth.

He knew that succumbing to the power of the dust would render him an easy target for them to strike whenever they wished. But he couldn't help himself. He yelled again.

Captain Gorzhov roared. Civix's feebler laughter joined in. Brak's body wrenched and writhed like a possessed thing. All his will, all the reason and rage left in one tiny corner of his mind couldn't stop another awful yell.

He screamed from the belly, howling and howling, still blind. Captain Gorzhov's voice rose in thunder-peals of mirth.

They'll kill you, the sane corner of Brak's mind fought to tell him. *Kill you—*

He knew. Could do nothing. Another convulsion shook him. He bayed like a beast.

Chapter IV Demon's Mark?

Yellow light from the pits simmered against his eyelids. Brak managed to get one eye open, then the other.

The valley tilted lazily. His vision was pulled violently out of focus by a convulsion. Each spasm induced by the green dust affected all of him at once—made muscles under his skin leap; made his eyes blue; made a sickening vertigo churn his middle. And made him howl. The yellow light grew brighter. He was moving. He heard Captain Gorzhov's taunting laugh, the higher-pitched, stammering sound of Civix enjoying the torment. The first convulsion waned. A new one struck—

Equilibrium lost, Brak felt himself falling forward out of control. He bayed from a raw throat.

Time seemed to suspend as he fell. Yellow radiance drifted up at his face.

The pit!—you're tumbling!

He struck hard on his chest. His head hung over the pit's rim. His broadsword was gone; somehow he sensed his twitching hand empty. Right under his eyes, the turgid surface of the pool fattened into an obscene bubble that broke with a wet plipping sound.

The stink of the pit was vile. The smell intensified the moment the bubble disappeared. Brak's scream turned to a retch.

Haze. He couldn't see clearly. He didn't know whether it was because the mind-clouding dust was still making his eyes blur, or whether it was the result of lying so close to the surface of the pool where the mist hung thickest. Everything looked distorted, moving with a limpid motion. Another spasm wracked him, wrenched him over on his side, flung him on his back with legs thrashing.

The stink worsened. *Plip-plop-plip*, the pool gave off its foulness. Brak tried to brace his hands at his sides. The fingers wriggled like the legs of insects. He screamed without wanting to.

A flickering thought: *Helane. Had she escaped?*

He hoped so. There'd be none for him. He fought, but the struggle was only in his mind. His body wouldn't obey. The faraway stars shone with tails of fire and sparks. No, that fiery mist came from his own blurred sight—

He had to get up. Had to pull himself away from the pit's rim. *Plip-plop-plip*. The pool sounds came more frequently. Abruptly there was a new one. An oozing splash, as though something disturbed the pool's surface—

Up across his shoulder and around his neck twined something damp and reeking.

He yelled. This time of his own volition, in surprise and terror. A writhing white strand crossed his eyes, twisting against the night sky. The tentacle dropped, flopped across his mouth and nose. Five or six branches of the same tentacle constricted on his neck.

Instantly there was exquisite pain.

Brak's mind signaled to his body in automatic desperation: *hand, tear it away—!* All at once he was able to flex his fingers.

But the pain was worsening, as though thousands of tiny hot hooks dug into his skin and tugged. The tentacle on his face pressed tight, flattening against his cheek, his nose. The pain centered there. The tentacle was *stripping his flesh away—*

In the distance, Captain Gorzhov whooped with delight. Suddenly Brak's eyes focused. He saw grayness close against his nose.

The tentacle tightened on his throat. He lifted his hands. They came up like weights. Too long! Too slow! *Plip-plop-plip*, the yellow pit bubbled all the faster.

The barbarian's hands were rocks he strained to lift. His face was livid with hurt. Another scream rose in his throat. He choked it back.

Just then, some primitive sense told him that the pain had saved him, had somehow nullified the effects of the mind-clouding philtre.

Time began to run again, perilous fast. Brak's aching hands came the rest of the way to his throat and tore, tore, tore with brutal ferocity—

The tentacles were pulpy, gelatinous. They writhed and tightened the moment his horny nails dug into them. Brak slipped his fingers between his cheek and the white strand, flung it off. Pain was bright fire in his face as the tentacle released.

But he had a chance now. His body no longer shook so hard. Instead of screaming, he growled and grunted, sound of his own making; hate-sounds.

Hands under another branch of the tentacle on his throat. Tug, tear—his back muscles strained with the effort.

One strand loose—

Then the other—

The stench from the pool gagged him. He raked his nails over the next strand of the pit-thing. With a murderous violence he ripped the strand off, flung it so hard it flopped end-over into the pool.

Yellow-shiny bubbles burst. The haze roiled faster. The big barbarian bent up from the waist, tucked his right leg under, pushed. He tore at the last tentacles as he came upright, rising to his feet through wave after wave of pain.

One more tentacle to loose—

Gone.

He was erect and dizzy. The last white strand slid off his shoulder, leaving a track of bloody little indentations. The big barbarian weaved back and forth. Blood seeped from dozens of tiny wounds where the tentacles had gripped.

He searched the area for Gorzhov and Civix, discovered that they were further away from him than they had been a short time ago. The two stood close, swords glinted back the yellow pit light.

Gorzhov seemed to be urging Civix to join him in a concerted attack. Evidently the pair had retreated to safe spots to watch the pit-thing do their work for them. The Captain was plainly dismayed by the sight of the big barbarian standing wide-legged, head down, eyes glaring out from under his thick brows.

Brak leaned down for his broadsword. Believing he'd won his escape from the pit, he was unwary. The tentacle-thing shot up between his legs from behind with astonishing speed. Its branches slithered up his chest, whipped round and round his neck—

The violence of the constrictions pulled him off balance. His left heel slid to the pit's rim. A massive lunge forward held him balanced against the tugging power of the tentacle for one desperate moment. He brought his broadsword up, twisted, hacked over and down with both hands locked to the hilt.

Iron sliced through the tentacle's main branch. Released, Brak pitched forward. The arms of the white thing let go of his neck. He grabbed them, threw them onto the shale where the whole severed many-branched monstrosity gave off a high-pitched, almost enraged whistle.

Slowly, slowly, the branches of the tentacle fell to the earth. The angry whistling stopped. With a last *plip-plop*, the main tentacle from which the branched one had been cut slid away beneath the surface of the pool.

Once more the big barbarian shook himself. This time, he edged a careful distance from the pit. His eyes focused on Gorzhov and Civix up by the rocks. He suppressed the pain by remembering what they had done to him. He stared a moment longer, a savage, gory figure with bedraggled braid and lion-tail hanging down behind.

Then he charged them.

At the first step he knew how severely the battle with the pit-thing had taxed him. The effects of the mind-dust were gone, but his head still buzzed and his legs wobbled. He reached Helane, paused only long enough to see that although she lay awkwardly crumpled, her breast moved with life. Then he ran on.

Captain Gorzhov instantly showed himself the most dangerous of adversaries: the kind wanting all the advantages on his side before he struck. Now, with the big barbarian lumbering toward him through the shifting haze, there was quick fear on Gorzhov's bearded face. He swung around, pushed past Civix and bolted. A shadow melting through the blacker shadow round the tumbled boulders, Gorzhov was soon gone. Civix bleated in alarm, realizing what had happened. He tried to run. But he looked like a man wallowing in mud. His speed was negligible, and he lacked a sense of direction. His ferret eyes were curiously glazed.

The barbarian ran hard, sucking in wind, trying not to let his eyes blur. A good distance still separated him from the blundering Civix. What was wrong with the wretch? Brak wondered, his hunger for revenge already waning.

He had no belly for killing a man who moved as Civix did, with snail's slowness, cheeks all a-glisten with sweat. Civix's mouth worked ferociously, as though he labored for air—

The fool was blundering straight to the edge of another pit! A wavery white fork slid up from below to writhe in the air, waiting—

None too sure of foot himself, Brak failed to spy a rock in his path. He whacked his left leg hard, spun aside. He toppled, dropped his broadsword, thrust out hands to cushion the fall, hit the earth hard. Pieces of shale gashed his palms. He lost track of Civix a moment, looked again, shouted in disbelief—

Swift and seething-black, a cloudiness separated itself from the rocks and boiled through the air toward Civix.

Brak's temples ached. His eyes watered. He tried to stand. His left hand betrayed him, slipping. He fell again, onto his left side. For one instant he had a distorted view of Civix teetering at the pit's edge as the stygian cloudiness enfolded him.

Civix screamed in unbearable torment. The opaque blackness rolled away as quickly as it had come and, in an eyeblink, again became a part of the darkness surrounding the rocks.

Brak swiped at his mouth.

No sign of Civix. The dark thing had taken him at the pit's rim and he was gone—

Brak's neck itched. He sensed evil hovering. Whatever the dark formlessness had been, one thing was certain.

It lived.

The big barbarian felt baffled and deeply frightened. What could possibly have snatched Civix away from—?

He saw it then. Something ruffled and wrinkled. It lay in the shale where the man had been standing when the cloud caught him.

Slowly Brak walked forward. The bile of fear rose in his mouth.

He dropped to his knees, laid his broadsword aside. He put out his hands to touch the—remains, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He turned to stare at the rocks where the cloud had vanished.

Civix was a boneless rag, of no more substance than the torn robe containing his decimated corpse. Something had sucked out his bone and his blood and left a bag of crinkled skin no thicker than Brak's own wrist. The man's head was folded down onto his shoulder like an empty sack. The barbarian swallowed, touched the dead cheek. It had a brittle, papery feel. He picked up Civix's arm. Lacking stiffness, the arm hung from his hand like an empty sleeve.

That was all Brak could bear. He turned away and emptied his stomach.

Finally, after resting on a rock and holding his head till the dizziness passed, he was able to walk back to the ruin that had been his enemy.

He reached down again with both hands. Just as he was about to touch the corpse, he pulled his hands back a second time and growled low.

On Civix's ankle, wrinkled and grimy, three tiny black prick-marks stood out stark. The three formed the points of an invisible triangle. It was the same deathmark he had seen on Mother Mil.

Instantly Brak's weary mind tumbled with unanswerable questions. What was the cloud-black thing that had killed Civix? Some kind of demon or evil essence? For no reason Brak saw a face like a medallion in his mind.

Ky, pearl-eyed, head together with Civix in whispering colloquy.

That made no sense! A nobleman of Jovis connected with this vileness? The two had been unlikely companions recently. But how could that possibly explain Civix's awful lethargy, the lethargy which had left him behind to die victim of—*something*—while Captain Gorzhov, unwilling to face Brak, escaped?

Countless tiny wounds from the white tentacles had leached Brak's blood until he was near to fainting. A great dry nausea filled his belly. He lumbered to his feet, seemed to clench his whole body. With one swift motion he scooped up the flapping remains and flung them into the nearest pit.

The corpse spread on the bubbling surface like a huge doll cut of cloth. Then a tentacle curled up and

over the flattened head, dragged it under. The rest soon disappeared too.

A bloody disastrous night. Brak limped back toward Helane, who still lay unconscious.

Well, he thought, at least now we know one thing for certain. If Logol is haunted by demon-animals unknown to any who travel these wastes, then—the demon is following us.

Sickened and afraid, he was tempted to run away. After a moment the desire passed.

He had cast his lot with Hadrios the Star-Tracker. No matter how he might want to, he could not abandon the old man and the others in the caravan now. As he passed the rocks from which the cloud-blackness had come he turned his head away sharply. His face was wet with sweat.

Helane did not seem badly hurt. Brak maneuvered her onto his shoulder, went back to retrieve his broadsword and then started up toward the rocks with labored step.

A bubble went plip-plop. The haze drifted. Somewhere ahead men were hallooing, rushing out from the caravan with torches. Brak stumbled on.

Chapter V River Sinister

“Fifty strokes.”

The hooking nose of old Hadrios stood out sharp against the flat gray sky as he spoke. His lips pressed tight together. Then:

“And well laid on.”

Nervously the caravan boy named Kes uncoiled the long whip in the sand. A few of the other boys stood about, none looking cheerful. Some had chosen not to witness the punishing, which was taking place at a discreet distance from the morning campfire.

The wind lifted particles of sand against Brak's face. In the distance, one of the mules brayed. The only other person present was Friar Pol. He faced the man to be punished but did not look at him.

The Nestorian fingered his little stone cross. His lips moved. Talking to his Nameless God, Brak supposed, uncomfortably.

“Will you give me the count, master?” Kes asked.

“I will,” Hadrios replied. “Begin.”

Craaack. The whip left a red line on Captain Gorzhov's naked back.

The scout lay on his belly in the sand. His wrists and ankles were fastened to tent pegs by ropes. His head was turned to the left. Shivering and itching inside a borrowed cloak, the big barbarian could not see the Captain's eyes. But he saw Gorzhov's neck muscles tighten and cord as the lash was pulled back for the second stroke.

“One,” Hadrios said. His eyes were without pity.

Kes laid on the next stroke.

“Two.”

Brak didn't enjoy watching. He would have been just as happy if matters had been settled another way. But Hadrios had taken affairs into his own hands. Friar Pol clutched his cross to the bosom of his gray robe, raised closed eyes to a sky already filling with darker clouds.

Brak's hide itched from the unguents and dressings that had been applied to his wounds the night before. He eyed the sky as the sound of the whip quickened. If the Skulwind did not blow today, it would soon.

Brak had no solid evidence for that belief. But it was still a firm conviction. If the worst could happen to this caravan it would.

Craack.

“Fourteen.”

It went on and on, giving Brak no satisfaction, only a leaden certainty that there would be more trouble as a result of it. Gorzhov was a devious man. He had apparently chosen to return to camp the preceding evening as if nothing had happened, gambling that Brak would never leave the area of the hell-pits alive. It had turned out otherwise.

The whip sang and popped.

“Twenty-four.”

At the count of forty-one, Captain Gorzhov groaned aloud. Hadrios held up a hand.

“Enough.”

Breath hissed out Gorzhov's teeth. Hadrios said, “Hear and heed me, Captain. If I am called upon to punish you for a similar offense again, I'll give you death, not the lash.”

The bearded scout groaned to signify he'd heard. His back glistened with red criss-crossings but none was particularly deep. Despite Hadrios's instruction, the boy Kes had not lashed with all-out ferocity. He realized that Captain Gorzhov would still be with the caravan after his punishment. Obviously Kes feared the scout's long memory.

Hadrios caught up the hem of his robe and turned away. “Cut him loose,” he said as he left.

Kes fumbled for his dagger. Brak stepped forward. “I'll do it.”

Kes and the other boys departed. Alone with Gorzhov, Brak kneeled down beside the big man and began to saw through the rope binding his left wrist.

Gorzhov's eyes seemed tiny and dull. Whether the man was chastened or merely hiding his hatred, Brak couldn't be sure. He suspected the latter.

The rope strands parted. Brak stared straight at the Captain.

“This was none of my doing,” he said.

“What makes you think that lessens the pain one whit?” Gorzhov said, without emotion.

“But I want you to know. When I tally scores, as I think you called it last night, it's not from behind an ambush. Nor with another man holding a whip for me. Hadrios learned what happened from another.”

“From Helane?”

“What difference does it make?”

Captain Gorzhov didn't reply. His tongue licked at a cracked upper lip.

“Civix—” he began.

Brak's eyes shifted to the blowing horizon. “Gone. He ran away.” It was the same lie he'd told Hadrios and the others.

All night long he'd lain awake in his blanket, staring into the starless murk and debating his own wisdom or lack of it.

Tell Hadrios the demon-animal—*or whatever it was*—had struck again? What good would it do? Perhaps he'd reveal the truth to the old caravan master in a day or so, if he could first sort out answers to some of the questions in his own mind. Yet even if Hadrios knew, what defense could he, or any of them, mount?

At any rate, Brak was still convinced that for the time being it was better that he alone carried the secret.

But he had definitely decided to approach Friar Pol again at an opportune moment. He was sure that the Friar knew or suspected the nature of the demon. He didn't look forward to the encounter with the priest. It was necessary, though.

Brak hacked the last rope. Gorzhov wobbled up, massaging his wrist. His red beard looked dusty in places, sticky with sweat in others.

“Do you really mean to tell me, outlander, that you didn't enjoy the whipping?”

A slow nod from Brak. Captain Grozhov blew a bubble of spit on the sand.

“That much for your lying. You relished it. I'll remember.” And he limped off.

The big barbarian turned to watch him go. Past the place where the caravan boys were scurrying to ready the beasts for the day's march, the striped pavilion occupied by Ky and Kya bulked at the top of a low dune. Someone watched from there: a twinkle, a blaze of jewels; nothing else could be seen. Standing just inside the pavilion's entrance, the watcher slowly lowered the hanging door and hid the muted glow of the gems.

Which twin it had been, Brak had no idea. But he was positive the eyes had been watching him.

The caravan made slow progress again that day.

They circled wide around the hell-pit region and left it behind at noon. As the sun began to drop, a dromedary foundered in the deepening sand. Leg broken, the beast had to be slain.

In the process of getting the chests unstrapped from the carcass and transferred to another animal, one of the caravan boys let a line slip. The chest tumbled, hit the sand hard enough to rip the leather fastenings at one corner. Uncut gems spilled out, a little river of dull, fist-size stones of amber and green.

Brak cuffed the boy who'd made the mistake. He badgered at the others in a hoarse, angry voice. Hadrios rode back to the cause of the commotion. Dismounting, he stumped toward the boys who were hastily scooping up gems and sand. The old man vented his wrath in a stream of oaths.

The delay cost them the better part of what would have been their afternoon rest. Hadrios ordered an extra march. It was well into the hours of darkness before they stopped.

The caravan boys grew quarrelsome at their fire that night. Brak had to separate two who had daggers at each other's ribs. An uneasy mood was settling over everyone, Brak realized as he wrapped himself in his blanket.

No stars were visible in the sky. The wind whined. He dreamed sodden dreams of Civix's limp and boneless body hanging over his palm. In and out through the dream wove that strange, mournful singing he had heard before—

Waking suddenly in the stillness to hear a mule stamp nearby, he listened.

The singing was not in his dreams. It curled across the windy desert, audible even above the gusty wind.

Brak flung off his blanket and moved out into the sand, walking wide of the picketed mules and the caravan boys bundled in the lice-ridden coverlets. One of the boys—Kes, he thought—was whimpering in his sleep.

He prowled up near the ashes of the main campfire. His skin crawled from a tension he did not fully understand as he slipped near the striped pavilion belonging to Ky and Kya.

The pavilion's door hanging flapped noisily. Brak crouched down, one side of his face suddenly washed with orange light as the wind brightened the last of the embers. Then the light waned. He crept forward.

Five steps from the pavilion.

Now four.

A thick lump of shadow nearby gave off a raspy snoring sound. Old Hadrios. He was not resting easily.

The door hanging jumped and snapped like a demon with a sinister life all its own. Out in the desert the voices intertwined, rising and falling, but less audible than they had been a few moments ago.

Three steps—

Two—

At one side of the pavilion entrance, Brak hunched in the dark.

The wind guttered low. He leaned closer. He gnawed at his underlip, scowling.

No sound of breathing in there. Not one rustle of movement. Either the twins slept still as the dead, or they had gone from the pavilion, and were the ones sing—

A footstep behind him.

Brak's jaw clenched. He thought immediately of Gorzhov.

The scuffing sound was not repeated. But he knew the watcher was still behind him, and very close. He thought he detected light, rapid breathing. He bunched his muscles—

Up and pivoting in a single, savage motion, he snaked his broadsword free. Reflection from the coals made it shimmer like a firebolt. A tall black shape towered on the far side of the embers.

“Speak!” Brak demanded. “Who goes?”

Was that a relieved sigh? “Only I, outlander. Pol.”

The barbarian moved quickly away from the pavilion where the door hanging still snapped, twisted high above the pavilion's roofline by the capricious wind. The singing wailed gently, murmured far away.

Brak circled the fire and drew close to the Nestorian. A rattle of beads as the priest dropped the stone cross which he'd been holding when he came on Brak skulking there. Wind brightened the embers again. Highlights gleamed: the pitted stone surface of the cross; Pol's sunken eyes, circled by shadows of fatigue.

"Did something trouble your sleep?" the Friar asked.

"Why, yes." A pause. "The singing."

"Singing?" It was said too quickly.

"You hear as I do clearly, priest."

"Perhaps I do. Perhaps I don't. Perhaps it's better for all of us if no one admits to hearing it."

Brak's laugh was curt. "Then others have?"

"Hadrios Star-Tracker. His daughter."

"Did they ask you what it was?"

"Yes."

"And what did you answer?"

Silence.

"Doesn't your Nameless God give you the wisdom to tell them the source? The singing's been with us since we set out, hasn't it?"

The Friar scuffed a sandal. "Let us drop the matter."

"No!" Brak growled, gliding forward. He was taller than the priest, formidable. The wind lifted his long yellow braid and made it dance. "We both know something's bedeviling this caravan. Something foul and evil. I think you know the source, though I am beginning to have my suspicions." He hesitated, then decided on a thrust. "Unless my ears trick me, there's no one sleeping in yonder pavilion."

The Friar turned. Faint firelight made his balding forehead gleam. He stared at the pavilion for some moments. The door hanging snapped.

"They aren't there?" he said at last, sounding genuinely shaken.

"So I believe."

A guarded tone: "What significance do you attach to it?"

"Enough of the games, priest! You're the man of learning. You tell *me* of the significance."

"Mother Mil's death was days ago. Since then we haven't been molested. A little singing in the night—it may be nothing more than the trick of the wind—why stir up matters?"

"But—"

“Listen to me, barbarian! I want to reach Samerind as much as anyone. I have been assigned to serve there. There are many unknown things in the world. Fearful things, as I've learned since taking the orders a twelve-month ago. It's better not to stir them. As long as they let us be.”

“Ignore evil? You don't talk like the cross-bearers I've encountered before.”

“I told you!” Pol replied with sibilant harshness. “I am a new priest.”

“With too little faith in your Nameless God?”

Friar Pol's right hand came up across his left shoulder as if to strike. Ashamed of his words, Brak didn't move.

At last, with a strangled syllable of shame, Pol lowered his hand.

Brak grumbled a lame apology.

“No need for that,” Pol sighed. “What you said is true. Until the last twelve-month, I was a scholar. A tutor with a handsome annual income. But there was an emptiness in my life, a constant wearying inner turmoil, so I sought out some Nestorians, in order to learn what it was they taught. My attitude was like yours—unspoken mockery. Somehow their faith made the mockery melt away. I took the orders, only to discover that there was no inner peace as I had hoped. Rather, I found myself in direct battle, direct confrontation with the awful gods that fight for supremacy unseen by most mortals.”

Brak listened in silence. He well knew the name of one of the gods to whom Pol referred. The Friar concluded:

“I know there is evil stalking us. I do have a suspicion as to its nature. But as you said, I have neither faith in my own strength nor—may I be cursed for saying it—nor in strength of the one whose power I preach. I am afraid, Brak. Does that amuse you and make you feel superior?”

Brak shook his head. “I am too.” His face stood out in bleak silhouette against the first light on the horizon. “There's been another killing by the demon.”

Pol clutched the stone cross. “Another—!”

“Civix. No one else knows it, and I've chosen to conceal it.”

Quickly he explained about the death of the caravan boy, finishing, “Therefore what you said is not true, Friar. The demon has not left us alone. And if Civix has died, who's next? I still feel that to tell Hadrios serves no purpose. At least not until the nature of the demon is known to someone who can suggest steps to take against it. So tell me your thought. Did I use the wrong word? Perhaps it's not one demon—” Brak was almost afraid to glance at the pavilion. “But more than one?”

Friar Pol swallowed. *Now*, Brak thought, *at last I've jarred him into revealing the hidden truth*.

A rustle of blankets. A noisy, phlegmy cough. “Anyone there? Who—Brak!”

Old Hadrios climbed stiffly to his feet, teetered awkwardly a moment on his wood leg. Then the caravan master rubbed his eyes, squinted at the horizon. He licked his lips and spat.

“Wind stronger than ever. We need to hasten. If the Skulwind catches us trying to ford the river—”

“What river?” Brak said.

“You'll discover that,” Hadrios answered grumpily, “before the day is out. Merely another of the thrice-cursed obstacles standing between us and Samerind. Smartly now, outlander! I want the animals moving in half an hour.”

Swiftly Brak turned to the Friar. “I want to hear, Friar. Everything.”

The Friar looked sick with fear. “Very well. If we have a moment when we camp tonight—”

“Brak!” snapped Hadrios. “See to the boys! We'll have no delays this morning!”

Angered and frustrated, Brak had no choice but to stalk back toward the rear of the caravan. He passed Helane. She greeted him with a wan smile. She too looked exhausted.

The barbarian could understand Hadrios's impatience. The skies showed every sign of being dark all day long. And what was that about some river to be crossed? What could be so difficult about it? He resigned himself to waiting till nightfall to resume his discussion with the Friar.

With much shouting and cursing, Brak stirred the caravan boys to action. He had no time to keep the twins' pavilion under observation. By the time he mounted his own dromedary, the striped tent was struck and folded away. He saw Ky and Kya, muffled to the eyes in protective cowls, mounting their kneeling beasts. If the twins had been wandering in the desert, they had managed to slip back into camp unseen.

The caravan straggled out in a long line leading south. Brak stayed at the rear of the line while three of the boys, including the one called Kes, harried two reluctant mules with staffs. When the mules finally got going, he headed his beast off at an oblique through the sand. He took a shortcut to the front of the caravan, which was wending to the left to circle a particularly high dune.

As he rode he scrutinized the surrounding waste. The skies were still nearly black. Ghosts of sand whirled across the dune-tops. Watching such, Brak suddenly spied what appeared to be a half buried stone monolith in the distance.

Isolated and stark, the squat stone sent terror through him. He rode close enough to be absolutely sure—

Yes.

Its base sand-hidden, the monolith was still recognizable as an idol to Yob-Haggoth.

All the bitterly remembered details were there. The squat semihuman form with brutal stone fists resting on its crossed stone thighs. The sinister mouth turned downward as though to curse all of humankind. The idol's wrathful blind eyes were watching the passing caravan.

The big barbarian had first encountered the fearsome god in the Ice-marches. There, another Nestorian named Jerome had told him the tale of the endless titanic struggle waged by the two great god-forces that ruled above all other gods.

Like a blight upon man's hope, Yob-Haggoth the Dark One stood for incarnate evil and commanded all the world's dark arts of sorcery. The Nestorians, disciples of the visionary goatherd Nestoriamus who had first professed the doctrine of the opposing force, Pol's Nameless God, fought a continual war with Yob-Haggoth's secret followers.

In the Ice-marches too the barbarian had come into direct confrontation with Yob-Haggoth's Amyr of Evil upon Earth, the sorcerer Septegundus. When Brak balked the sorcerer's evil schemes that time, Septegundus promised to follow him forever, and bar his path to Khurdisan.

The road is long to Khurdisan, the wizard had said. I will be there.

These past weeks it had seemed to Brak that he had temporarily eluded the vengeance of the sorcerer whose lidless eyes were pupils of monstrous size, and whose skin crawled—*alive*—with a living mosaic of tiny, damned human beings in postures of agony. Now the image of Yob-Haggoth jogged old and alarming memories back into being. It served as a stark reminder that—as Jerome the Nestorian had first told him—Yob-Haggoth's influence was everywhere, and had been since time forgot. The battle would never come to an end.

The dromedary continued on. The idol vanished behind. But Brak couldn't put it from his mind.

The caravan labored on across dunes of ever increasing size. From beneath the sand of some of these dunes, thrusts of slate stood out.

Soon Brak realized that the character of the Logol waste was changing again. Sand eddied between hillocks of rock but did not cover their tops. The caravan moved through gullies where, eons ago, water might have run. Sere shrubs clacked in the whipping wind.

Brak rode with a scrap of cloak tied across his face. He was aware of the hillocks rising, like soldier-rows ahead. But he did not really see them. He saw the idol of Yob-Haggoth.

Last night the eerie singing in the night had come from the section of the desert where the idol stood in evil silence.

The noon stop was brief. Hadrios ordered it so. Brak gulped a drink of wine, scooped a few mouthfuls of thick porridge from the pot. He searched for Pol, but the Friar had sought what scant privacy was available. The priest was praying among the animals snuffling at feedbags.

Head bowed and on his knees, Pol fingered his stone cross. Kes and a few of the caravan boys were snickering loudly at the sight. Impatient to speak with the priest, Brak was still reluctant to disturb him. He did not believe in the Nameless God. But he had seen certain inexplicable evidences of the god's power. With a north-born wariness of forces unknown and therefore potentially dangerous, he curbed his impatience. Tonight at the fire, he'd learn what the Nestorian knew.

With a glare that silenced the jeers of the caravan boys he returned to the front of the caravan to remount. He caught sight of Ky assisting his sister onto her kneeling beast. The wind had unwound the muffling cloth the young nobleman wore around his lower face.

For a moment Ky's features stood out sharply: pearl eyes lustrous and opaque; face chubby with the beginnings of a second chin under the jaw; cheeks spotted with patches of pink, almost like an infant's; lips startling red.

The young lord looked almost obscenely healthy. How had he managed to put on all that tender fat at Hadrios's cook pot? Brak couldn't remember seeing either of the twins do more than pick at the fare Helane prepared.

Luminous as suns, Ky's eyes met Brak's face. The young lord reached out one gemmed gauntlet, touched his sister's shoulder. She turned.

Slowly, tauntingly—or was that imagination?—Kya drew the veils from her face. Brak shuddered.

Her cheeks were as plump. And her lips were even redder than her brother's.

Up came Kya's right glove, a mocking little salute. Brak bobbed his head and pivoted away. He climbed

up, dug his knees into his dromedary. With a snort the beast unfolded its legs and raised him into the wind.

Brak signaled the beast forward. He was afraid to look back at those fat white faces—

Fat from bone? Fat from blood?

The thought screamed unbidden into his mind.

Well, he thought as he jogged through the near-blinding clouds of sand, you've finally faced the truth that you've stalked and circled round for all these days. There was a certain perverse relief in at last admitting the names of the suspected enemies.

But how could two outwardly normal human beings cause a man's blood and bone to drain away? Sorcery? Wizards such as Septegundus, equipped with powerful thaumaturgical skills, might make it happen. Were the twins of that breed? There was no way of telling.

The time for hesitation had passed. Helane might be struck next, or Friar Pol, or any of them. Tonight, regardless of what Pol told him, he would speak to Hadrios. Defenses must be planned, before another victim fell.

Had Ky and Kya been to the idol of Yob-Haggoth last night? Singing there? Worshipping there? Brak clasped his hand and rode faster.

An hour before breaking noon camp, Captain Gorzhov returned to the caravan to find the big barbarian.

The scout's flat fur cap was tugged down over his ears as far as it would go. His beard was matted with the sand that blew in howling clouds down the rocky gully through which the caravan was struggling. Brak believed the Skulwind had struck at last. Had they not been traversing an area of rocky hills, the wind might have shredded flesh away.

"Hadrios wants you forward," Gorzhov shouted.

Brak suspected a trap. "For what reason?"

Gorzhov flung out a hand to point. The caravan master waved from the top of the highest hillock ahead. He and his dromedary made a stark silhouette against the backdrop of racing black clouds.

"Ask him yourself," the Captain cried, and rode on by.

Brak hurried ahead. The gully opened onto a relatively flat area. The dromedary crossed this swiftly, but had difficulty ascending the steep hill on whose summit Hadrios waited. The poor beast skidded and lurched. Its head bobbed forward and back as it tried to shift its weight. The higher the animal climbed, the louder grew the sound of rushing water.

Finally the dromedary gained the top. Brak slid off, patted the beast to a kneeling position. Hadrios looked tense and grumpy. At the bottom of the hill a swift, wide river ran from southeast to northwest. The water was a clear, frigid green. It showed white foam and angry wavelets on its surface.

Helane was down on the bank. She walked to and fro studying the river. Hadrios hailed her. She climbed back to them, giving Brak a nervous, almost hesitant glance. She pushed tawny windblown hair back, saying:

"It's not yet at full flood. But the wind is making it run faster."

“We'll cross before we camp,” Hadrios announced.

Brak frowned. “Is there any other way to reach the river than over these hills?”

“None unless we go upriver five or six leagues. We've no time.”

“It might be less difficult in the long run.”

“We'll cross *here*, outlander. Your job is to carry out my orders, not question them.”

Color rushed to Brak's face. “When the orders make no sense—”

“Pfagh!” Hadrios snarled back. “I can't expect an outlander to appreciate the subtleties, can I? This river's crawling with dangerous life!”

“I see nothing but water. And I'm not your bondsman, to be sneered at like—”

“Stop!”

Helane's cry brought them both up short. The girl looked genuinely worried: “Father—Brak—we mustn't fall to quarrelling. It will be hard enough making the ford. By the time the beasts get up this hill they'll already be spent. We'll all have to work together if we're to cross at all.” Silence between the men. The river crashed and roared. Hadrios pinched his hook of a nose. He rubbed his eyes, glanced at the barbarian in a rather shamefaced way.

“My tongue is as tired as the rest of me, Brak. I'm sorry.”

“And I.” Brak crouched down, eyed the foaming water. “This life in the river you mentioned—what is it? I still see nothing.”

“Creatures that hide beneath the surface till they strike,” Hadrios said in a hollow voice. “Creatures of good size, with a taste for warm blood. They can walk on the bottom with many legs, or swim if need be. We'll be safe so long as none of the animals gash themselves accidentally on those sharp rocks on the shore. Blood in the water brings the creatures upstream to the source. They have snouts so long.” The old man spaced his hands wide in the air. “Both to scent the blood and attack the wounded one.”

“It might be wiser,” said Helane gently, “if we rested tonight. Then in the morning—”

“No!” Hadrios was staring across the river at the ragged ridgeline running parallel to the shore. “There'll be no rest for anyone till this damned place is behind us. Once we cross, there are no more natural barriers. We have a clear dash to Samerind.”

Brak still wanted to argue. He didn't. He caught Helane's eye. She recognized his anger, and her glance thanked him for his silence.

Sometimes civilized men could be fools and more than fools, Brak thought as he left his dromedary and scrambled back down the hill on foot. The wealth in the caravan meant more to Hadrios than life itself. What sort of life was that? Brak suddenly looked forward to the day when he could leave this ragtag band in good conscience, and strike out once more on his own.

The wind beat in his face. He found Gorzhov where the gully widened into the sandy area. He reported what Hadrios had told him. Gorzhov already knew. “The damned old lunatic. He'll kill us all.”

The caravan boys were fearful of the crossing. Brak had to work as one of them, tug on ropes and push sweating balky animals from behind to get the beasts moving up the slate hillside. It was an hour before

the first animals reached the near shore and plunged into the curling, rushing stream. Brak was already exhausted.

The caravan boy guiding the first dromedary through the water was quickly up to his neck. He beat his reluctant animal with a stick, screaming curses.

All at once Ky appeared at Brak's elbow. Pearl eyes shone above his face cloth.

“Outlander?”

“What is it?”

“My sister and I do not care for water. We would prefer—”

“No one rides over,” Brak yelled, tugging on a mule rope and dodging flying hooves. “No one.”

Ky's pearl eyes glittered. With anger, or worse? Brak had no time to worry. He batted the mule's ear. “Damned rock-headed son of the pit! *Move!*”

Ten animals were in the water now. The first was half way across. The air ripped with screaming.

Brak spun, let loose of the mule's rope. It was Helane who had cried out. In an instant he saw the reason.

On the ridgeline across the river, some two dozen riders had appeared. Pennons whipped as they turned down the hillside toward the water. A blur of white face, a smear of red where an eye would be—

Hadrios cried, “*Quran!*”

The riders wore hip-high black boots, padded black coats and heavy black gauntlets. Red plumes bobbed from the points of their tight black helms. Brak saw lances, spears, curved swords—and a glitter of ruby above the nose in every face.

The freed mule ran bucking up the river bank. Unable to get around a large rock extending into the water, the mule crashed into it. Treasure chests lashed to the animal's back split their wood sides. Wafery slabs of ivory cascaded into the water. Soon the cold green surface was littered with them.

In the middle of the river, the caravan boys guiding the first animals began to gesticulate and wail with fear. One of the horsemen on the far bank unlimbered a curved bow. He fitted an arrow, let fly. The shaft sped straight into the neck of the mule that had bolted.

The animal toppled into the water. Its neck streamed red rivulets that eddied and widened in the current.

“*Quran!*” Hadrios kept crying.

But no one in the caravan had to be told that. The predators of the Logol waste had found them.

Chapter VI

When The River Ran Red

The ponies of the attackers slid on the slope above the river's far bank. Hooves struck sparks. But no rider went down, so wiry-strong and surefooted were the mounts they rode. Six or eight of the horsemen nocked arrows, aimed and shot them even though their mounts pitched under them.

Most of the arrows hissed wide. One struck a caravan boy in midstream. He tumbled under the foaming green water. Two arrows took the dromedary the boy had been beating. The beast faltered. Great black

blood-pools darkened the river around it. All at once it gave up struggling. The current caught it, bore it away.

On the bank, Hadrios frantically wigwagged his arms. "Come back to the bank! Find shelter—!"

The wind lashed Brak's face. An arrow skated past. On the opposite shore the horsemen of Quran yelled insults. Brak hurried toward Hadrios. Nearby, Ky and Kya stood huddled together, hands twined. Wind tore at Kya's veil, whipped it away. Her face shone.

Name of the gods, he thought. She looks excited. She's *enjoying* this.

A little curling smile made Kya's lovely face bestial. Helane yelled to gain Brak's attention. She was pointing. He swung around and swore.

The first two Quran riders had reached the far bank and reined in, awaiting orders.

Down from the flint slope behind them clattered a cadaverous man with long curling mustaches and triple plumes instead of one. Two of the plumes were scarlet, the other white. He cried orders Brak couldn't hear above the wind. But his gauntlet pointing left and right along the river made his plan clear. He was ordering dispersal into a line.

The riders quickly formed up abreast. The jewels in their fierce windburned faces flashed. One man raised his bow. The rider with three plumes barked harshly.

Behind Brak, who stood in the curling water just off the bank, Hadrios was still shouting, "Take cover among the rocks!"

The riders of Quran jingled the bells on their reins. Their leather-padded ponies snorted. Suddenly a primeval fury was on the big barbarian. He wanted to sell his life as dearly as he could. He cupped his hand round his mouth and called, "We'll be picked to death one by one up there, Hadrios. Send the boys to me. We'll fight them in the water."

"The water's too deep. Blood in the river will bring the creatures—"

How soon? Brak had no time to ponder. Hooves splashed on the opposite side. With ululating yells, the horsemen of Quran charged into the stream.

A long time ago, on the high steppes, Brak had learned an excellent fighting strategy. He tried it again now, leaping into the water and running ahead with all the strength of his huge thews. He brandished his broadsword above his head and yelled with rage.

The riders slowed.

Up to his chest he went, flourishing his sword. "Send me the boys, Hadrios! Get me Gorzhov too."

The riders came on again, erupting water around them. Their horses sought bottom, lost it, swam. Hadrios leaped to the nearest caravan boy, pulled his dagger for him, shoving him into the green water. Then the old man himself jumped into the stream, dagger drawn.

Captain Gorzhov appeared from somewhere. He drew his curved blade, sloshed out into the river.

While Ky and Kya smiled. Pearl eyes glowing. With pleasure.

"Eeeee!" wailed the riders of Quran. The first one swam his horse near Brak, leaned out of the saddle to lop at the barbarian's head.

Brak's long legs still touched bottom. He danced aside, though slowly because of the water's dragging effect. The Quran's sword sliced greenish foam a hand's width from his shoulder.

The barbarian seized the man's sword arm with his free hand, tugged. Gold metalwork among rotten teeth glittered as the man shouted. He tumbled off his horse. Before he struck water, Brak gashed his neck with the broadsword. Blood rippled out in circles that the current quickly tore apart.

Howling, barking, more brute than man, Brak dodged away as another rider swam his mount in from the left. Down came the glistening head of the rider's lance. Brak sucked in air, ducked underwater.

The lance head skated along Brak's calf as he straightened below the surface, swimming. He hamstringed the rider's mount with quick strokes. Horseblood leaked in soft dark clouds. In another instant the rider was off.

Brak was surprised at the clearness of the green water. He saw the rider's head strike the surface, come under, cheeks puffing fishily. Blood trailing from his gashed calf, Brak glided beneath the rider, sneaked his blade under the man's padded coat. The rider tried to bring his sword around. The water slowed him. Brak's killing iron ripped him groin to belly.

The water grew murky with blood. Brak reached, clawed a hand at the dead man's face. Flesh tore. He shot to the surface and into the air, hands high: in one, a sword with pink-tinged water draining off it; in the other, a ruby.

Brak shrieked like a berserker, flourishing his prize. Somewhere nearby, Captain Gorzhov shouted approval.

A Quran horseman bearing down on old Hadrios was dragged from his saddle by two of the caravan boys. They carved up the man's face with quick twists of their little knives. Bloody and sodden, they grinned at each other, then at Brak. He yelled, "*Behind—!*"

A Quran drove the point of his sword into the base of one boy's neck. The other boy—Kes, it was—knifed the rider's horse. Brak plunged toward them, half walking, half swimming.

All around, horsemen milled, trying to cut at the darting foe in the water. Brak counted at least three more Quran dead. Nearer in to shore, Gorzhov dueled a pair of unhorsed attackers, whick-whacking back and forth at them with great relish. Blood smeared his red beard. Perhaps, in the right circumstances, the Captain was not such a coward after all—

Kes the caravan boy dodged as the rider above him sliced at his head. Kes thrust up under the man's elbow, pierced him at the heart with the dagger. Brak let out a yell of approval. The flat of a curved sword smote him hard on the temple.

He sank, sucking water and spitting it out as he fought into the air again. *Whick*, the curved blade sliced past the top of his head. A horse bit at Brak's arm, tearing the flesh. Brak dove between the horse's kicking legs, came up on the side opposite. The rider was looking the other way.

The big barbarian tapped the point of his broadsword on the man's helm. The man twisted in his saddle. His one good eye flew wide. Desperately he tried to bring his sword hand over in time to parry the stroke that Brak rammed upward—

The Quran's blade nicked Brak's ear. The barbarian's broadsword caught the rider at the side of the neck. Brak leaped high, both hands along the hilt. He rammed the sword deep, then cut sideways.

The Quran's head sailed from his neck like some ghoulish toy. Brak swam under the horse, found the

head in the water, impaled it on his blade. Up he lunged, into the air.

He raised the streaming head. The mouth was open and rigid in death-rigor. The good eye still glared. The two red and one white plumes on the helmet drooped.

There still was a red rage in Brak, making him shake the grisly symbol over his head like a flag. One of the remaining Quran spied it, signaled to the others. A caravan boy tried to dart in to stab the nearest rider. The rider jerked his horse's rein, kicked him into a swim, driving him toward the far bank.

Soon the remaining riders—Brak counted eleven left—were making trails of foam as they retreated.

Brak backed up till the water only reached his chest. He still held the head aloft. The black mustaches dripped water onto his face.

Stumbling up on the shore, the big barbarian made sure the riders across the river were all watching. With a shake of his sword he sent the head of the Quran leader into the river. Watching it bob away on the fast current, he grinned a wolf's grin. Helane, huddled by a dromedary, gazed at him with something close to revulsion.

Hadrios and the caravan boys clustered round the barbarian, slapping him, cheering him, laughing.

“Splendidly done!” the old man cried. “Splendid! As bold a fight as I was capable of in my youth.”

The dark and slanted eyes of Kes the caravan boy shone. “Only a man god-born fights so.”

“We turned them, didn't we?” panted Captain Gorzhov. He wiped his cheeks, then squeezed his beard to wring water from it. Quickly a sly expression returned. With his sword he pointed across the stream. “But I fear we paid a price. You worst of all, outlander.”

On the far bank, the first of the survivors struggled up the slate hillside. Two bedraggled Quran remained on the bank. One pointed his lance out across the water. The lance quivered, as if the hand that held it shook with fury. The point aimed unmistakably at Brak. Then the riders spurred after the others.

“They—” Hadrios was wheezing. His eyes ran with the rheum of exhaustion. “They marked you.”

A cold shiver chased down Brak's spine. “They'll be a while returning for more.”

“I hope it will be long enough.” He eyed the pitch-colored sky. “We're losing the light.”

Brak sucked great cool gulps of air. “Do—do we still cross now?”

Hadrios hitched himself to the water on his peg leg, squinted. “I see no sign of the snouted things, though the gods will attest there are carcasses enough to fetch them.”

“Most carried downriver by now,” Gorzhov reminded him.

“Aye.” Hadrios plucked his beard. “Perhaps luck is still with us. But if we delay, and the creatures come upriver in response to the blood, they'll block our crossing all night and into the day tomorrow. Once near to humans, they sense or scent them somehow. They swim in circles for endless hours.”

Hadrios cast a nervous eye over the company. The caravan boys were bedraggled. Helane looked more terrified than ever. Friar Pol stroked a mule's flank nervously. Ky and Kya huddled together, their jeweled clothing still perfectly dry.

Brak studied the twins' faces covertly. Had he merely imagined their expressions of obscene pleasure

during the battle? He saw no sign of that unnatural lust now—

Wait. There was a sign after all. Ky and Kya's hands, locked together, were white, stark white. They held each other tightly in—what kind of vile ecstasy?

Hadrios's beard danced in the wind. “Are you willing to attempt a crossing, Brak?”

A raw grin of contempt marred the barbarian's mouth. “No orders now, Star-Tracker? You're asking my help instead?”

Hadrios looked chagrined. “See your boys' faces, Brak. They'll no longer follow me.”

The barbarian discovered that he did indeed have a most worshipful pack of ruffians clustered around him. Kes and the others looked as though they had witnessed the birth of a god. He wiped his nose. How little they knew!

“Very well,” he growled. “If the lads vote aye, we'll go.”

“Best we do, Brak,” said Kes. “Notice the water. Bigger caps, rougher waves. The wind's up.”

Brak rubbed a knuckle against his teeth. His slashed calf hurt unmercifully. But the wound was not deep, and the blood had clotted. He eyed the rushing river, wondering what sign a man looked for to warn of the arrival of the snouted things of which Hadrios had spoken. They came upriver. That meant they were extremely strong.

The big barbarian's eyes glittered like little chips of rock as he thought and thought, weighed and weighed. On the opposite shore, the last rider of Quran had long ago disappeared over the ridgeline. The water curled and raced. He remembered the shaking lance that dipped and pointed at him.

They marked you.

Well, so had others, including the sorcerer Septegundus. Despite the circumstances, Brak felt no gloom. The successful battle had left him exhilarated for the first time in days. Conscious of every one watching him, he finally spoke.

“We cross.”

The caravan boys cheered. Not very wisely, Brak thought. But it pleased him.

“Helane!” garrumphed Hadrios. “Rip up your petticoat. Give the outlander something to tie that leg. No point in pouring more blood in the river to fetch the things.”

“How can we know when they're coming?” Brak wanted to know.

“Can't,” Hadrios snapped. “They're too swift, walking or swimming beneath the water.”

On this hardly cheering note conversation ended. The wind had indeed picked up again. By the time Brak reorganized the caravan boys and got them started across once more with the animals, the water crested higher than ever.

The animals were balky. The mules kicked. The dromedaries skinned their lips back and dropped their heads back to their shoulders to nip the boys prodding them with sticks. It was growing dark. The ridgeline on the stream's southern side could hardly be seen against the blowing clouds.

On the bank from which they crossed, Brak stood in water to his waist, feet braced on the bottom. He

slapped the animals as they lurched by, and called encouragement to the boys. In midstream Hadrios clung to Helane with one hand, used the other to flog a reluctant dromedary with a wand. All at once the old man lost his balance.

Hadrios splashed forward on his face. He came up with a sputter. Flailing, he accidentally goaded the dromedary too hard. It bolted. Straps holding the bales onto its back parted with a snap.

Helane pulled her father back in time. A bale roared into the water where the old man had been a moment before. The current caught the bale, rushed it away downstream. It struck a mule. The mule brayed, bit the arm of the nearest boy. All at once, there was a pandemonium of thrashing animals, cursing boys, waving hands in the middle of the river.

With a growl Brak started out to help. He was conscious of the powerful tug of the current. It plucked at his body like a hand. Suddenly he noticed what he had previously overlooked: Ky had nearly reached the opposite bank.

The young lord was picking his way along delicately, the hem of his jeweled cloak held high. A little to the left of the tangle in midstream, Brak saw Kya then. He grunted in surprise. Somehow, she had wheedled Kes into carrying her across.

The boy wasn't having an easy time with the girl in his arms. Kya's face was bent close to the curve of the boy's neck, as though she sought protection from the spatter of the swift water. Brak was inclined to forget about her, press on to where Hadrios was vainly trying to soothe the frightened dromedary. All at once, though, Brak's belly wrenched with alarm.

Kya turned her face toward him, dreamily, drowsily. Her pearl eyes were huge, looking almost protuberant in the bad light. On her face, her mouth, a strange, tormented smile—

The young girl was *shuddering*. Actually shivering in Kes's arms as the caravan boy, unaware, fought to stay afloat.

The girl's eyes brimmed with a mindless joy. Her arms wrapped Kes's neck all the tighter. Shuddering, she turned her face to the boy's ear. She bent her head toward his throat almost—Brak's flesh crawled—*almost as though she could not control herself.*

None save Brak saw it happening. The rest were occupied by the growing confusion at mid river. Brak started toward Kes and his burden, fighting the current. A terrible panic raged through him.

He knew at last.

Without knowing *what* the jewel-robed girl was, he saw the shaking lust of her mouth and knew.

All at once her shoulders and then her body seemed to fade, shred apart. Brak dashed water from his eyes. His throat contracted to form a warning cry.

Were the flying spume of the river and the lowering light deceiving him?

Or was Kya turning to ebony smoke while he watched?

He fought ahead, thinking, *Demon. Demon wanting blood.*

She could not control herself. He had seen the signs when she stood with her twin on the bank.

Kya's plump face was already half hidden by smoke. The caravan boy sensed danger. His eyes flashed

white. The smoke half concealed the quick bend of Kya's head, the glisten of her teeth as she bit down on the boy's neck.

"Kes!"

Brak's bellow boomed. He had no idea whether any in the shouting, writhing mass of bodies and animals downstream heard. He plunged ahead like a madman, toward the smoke.

He heard a whimper, abruptly cut off. He knew Kes would make no other sound.

Brak's head throbbed. The river roared. He fought his way six more steps through the water, six more, nearly up to his neck now.

He reached out, plunged his hand into the smoke. Felt rather than saw a slender arm, pulled with all his strength.

Kya's face loomed out of the smoke, startled, then hateful. The smoke shredded away behind her. Brak pulled her toward him, flung her into the water.

Awful details struck his mind like hammerblows: her swollen, furious pearl eyes; her mouth open like a fanged beast's; blood on her teeth and her lips—

She struck the water, slashing at it to keep from going under. Brak's horror was turning to rage. He caught at Kes as the caravan boy sank. Brak's hand was slippery. It slid off Kes's neck. He lost him to the current, but not before he felt a wide flap of skin against his fingers—

Kes drifted away on his back, whirled in a circle. His head came round past Brak and the big barbarian saw the deep wound in the side of Kes's throat. Then the body was gone.

Brak thought, *She was feeding on him—*

Quaking fear turned to hatred. Brak rubbed water from his eyes. The smoke had scudded away. Kya was swimming feebly. He dove full length, caught her arm as he hit face first, held that thin wrist again as he righted himself.

He jerked her up face to face. His vicious grip held her hand up between them.

"What kind of thing are you to—?"

He couldn't go on. In the water he saw his own current-torn reflection. And the reflection of his hand. But the hand gripped—*nothing*. She cast no reflection at all.

Aghast, he raised his head, just as she leaped at him, biting at his face.

Brak slid aside, lost his footing in the water. Kya's reddened teeth clashed together. Brak reached for his broadsword, his face awful.

Kya saw his fury and suddenly changed tactic. She glided away toward the far bank.

"Here!" Brak's hands flew for her shoulders. *"Stand still!* Let me see what kind of pit-spawn we've been harboring—"

She hissed and snapped at him. He seized and held her. She struggled, twisted, kicked beneath the water. To Brak it seemed as if he'd been pursuing her for hours, though in truth it had been a matter of heartbeats of time since he first pulled her away from Kes. His strength was running out.

In trying to restrain her, his hand caught in her collar. Kya's lunge made fabric shred.

Gems fell into the water and disappeared. Brak saw her long, graceful throat. A little token hung in the hollow just above her breasts. A little token on a thong—

Against the whiteness of her bosom, a tiny stone image of Yob-Haggoth leered.

“His creature!” Brak yelled. He knew the demons now, both of them, and knew he must kill them, her first. “Yob-Haggoth's creature! That's why—*come back here!*”

Slippery and swift, she maneuvered away. He twisted fingers in her wet black hair and tugged. Instantly he realized his error.

She turned in the water with frightening speed, seized hold of the forearm stretching toward her hair. Her nails dug. Her eyes were huge.

He tried to disentangle his fingers. Her grip was enough to hold him an instant. In that instant she bent, opened her mouth and bit.

Brak arched backwards, convulsed by pain almost beyond enduring. His hand tore from her hair. He spun into the water, swallowed a mouthful, dropped below the surface. His broadsword slipped loose, sank away to the bottom.

When he came up he was dazed. Darkness had nearly closed in. He saw animals crossing, heard voices shouting. Of Kya there was no sign.

“Hadrios?” Enraged at getting no reply, he bellowed, “Old one?*Answer!*”

“Where in damnation have you got to, outlander?” Hadrios cried back from somewhere downstream.

“Find the young nobleman! Find Ky and chain him! ‘Ware how you do it!”

“What kind of nonsense are you shrieking at me, Brak? What makes you—?”

“Be silent and listen to me! The demons—”

From behind, teeth closed on his neck.

Brak's mind burst with the dazzling colors of pain. He hurled himself forward into the water, kicked over onto his back. The sharp teeth came loose. The agony was hideous.

He felt her touch him, kicked frantically to escape. Already his mind was dull, his muscles less responsive. The pain hit him in waves, peaking and peaking like the windblown water—

Up into the air again, gasping, blinking. He didn't see her. Where—?

A splash and crash, as of someone running in the shallower water.

“Brak? Where are you? Call out.”

“Here.” He recognized the reedy voice. “Here, this way, Friar.”

A flicker at Brak's left. He spun, saw Kya darting at him, her lips a dark red smear. He fended her, held her at arm's length.

She was no match for his burly strength, or would not have been except that her mouth, twice, had

brought him agony of a degree he'd never known before. But he managed to thrust her back. Friar Pol floundered toward them.

Kya turned to see the priest. Her hair dripped water down over her naked throat, down over the little image of Yob-Haggoth.

Friar Pol seemed to be muttering in some alien tongue. Gods! What a time to chant to his Nameless God!

The Friar plucked at the waist of his robe. He raised the little stone cross to chest height, thrust it at Kya—

Wet, it slipped from his grasp. He caught it, came forward again. Another sudden splashing. Kya struck off for the south shore, half swimming, half running.

Pol turned aside to pursue her, the cross of Nestoriamus clutched in one hand. Brak lifted his arm, the bitten one, examined it. A sick horror.

There, not deep, not even piercing the skin, but clearly there—in the last light of the cloudblownd evening—three tiny prick marks stood out. They formed the points of the invisible triangle.

Halloos and alarms rang up and down the river. Captain Gorzhov bellowed. Hadrios bellowed. Helane called for quiet so they could tell who was where. Mules brayed. Brak started to call out, all at once felt too weak. The winding had come off his wounded calf. He was bleeding heavily.

He thrashed toward the nearest voice. His neck and arm throbbed suddenly. Nausea made him sway. He tried to stand, lost his footing, struck the water—

To be caught by the current and whirled.

He tried to swim. He was all at once too weak. He bumped an animal's hide, heard a voice exclaim his name, saw Helane as through a watery lens as the current dragged him under.

Her hand leaped out to catch his long yellow braid. She missed. The current tumbled him over and over. Once, looking up, he saw his own leg fanning out the black cloudiness of blood.

Strength was gone. He turned and twisted at the current's whim. Something long and snoutlike skated by. Something else bumped his cheek, rasped off.

He tried to rouse himself. Just enough light leaked from the sky to show him the long, misshapen outlines of a school of fish-things suddenly surrounding him.

The creatures appeared from all directions. The little segmented legs along their sides moved in unison. They sensed his blood and converged.

Chapter VII

"They Are Monsters Old As Time..."

A long tubular snout slid across the big barbarian's chest. The snout, flattened, formed a kind of oversized sucker that fastened to the skin of his belly. Brak could see little as the water carried him along. But he felt the pain, sudden and awful.

Another sucker-mouth plopped against the small of his back. The pain doubled.

He tore at the thing attached to his ribs. Its body, nearly as long as his arm, was slippery. His fingers

tangled in the creature's little segmented legs. The legs wiggled furiously. Brak lost his hold when the creature gave a muscular flip.

The pain kept mounting. He got both hands round the slimy body of the creature at last, tore it away from his ribs. Little bloodclouds drifted after it through the water.

Another of the creatures—how many were there? Twelve? Twice that?—darted toward his face. Its eyes were milky discs that glowed with a distinct light in the darkness of the water. The big barbarian batted at the thing with one fist. The creature swam past his head, powerful tailfin flicking, tiny segmented legs thrashing. The legs were webbed, which helped account for its speed.

Brak's head broke the surface. He swallowed air, tried to orient himself in the dark. He thought he saw a torch burning on the bank upstream. The wind drove foam and water in his eyes as he sank.

Had someone halloosed? He didn't know, suddenly had no thought for anything except the agony on his back. A second creature had fastened there alongside the first. He balled his body as best he could, and sank on down.

The other creatures circled round and round his head. Brak clubbed at them. But the water robbed his blows of strength. The backs of his legs scraped rocky bottom.

He fought the pain, straightened himself so that his back crashed against the stones. Squashed, the creatures writhed and slapped him with their tailfins.

One came loose. Brak reached around behind, seized the other, tore—

If he could have shrieked underwater, he would have.

The creature ripped free. Another rushed at his face. Its milky eyes loomed like exploding suns. Brak scrabbled on the bottom, tried to outmaneuver it. The thing's sucker mouth touched his cheek. The contact felt slimy even in the water.

Fingers raking the river bottom, Brak got hold of a sharp stone. He swung it up and over with as much force as the water allowed. The stone pierced the creature's shimmering eye. Inky fluid swirled. The creature flopped off.

Another one caught hold of his thigh and fastened. Brak's lungs were hot with pain. He tore at the thing on his leg as he shot to the surface again, swallowed night air. He was dizzy, confused. The river rushed him onward with every second—

Once more he tore a river-thing from his skin. Another was already working at his shoulder. The dizziness worsened. The stream made a sound like thunder. Every so often the roar faded to an eerie ringing—

If he lost consciousness, he would drown or be devoured. Or both.

The realization stirred his lagging strength. He gnawed the inside of his mouth till he tasted blood. The sting helped rouse him a little. *Wrench*, the thing came free of his shoulder, just as another plastered its flattened snout to his ribs where the first had tried to eat.

Brak's hands didn't seem to function properly. The creature's little webbed legs eluded his grasp. Bursts of color exploded silently in his head. A swimming creature's two milky eyes became four, became eight, overlapping, swallowing him—

His toe raked rock. He fell forward through the water, ripping the creature off his belly. He drove his mighty body unmercifully until his knees were gouged by sharp stones. *The bottom sloped upward—!*

In a moment he was breathing in the chill darkness. As he crawled up the rocky bank he dragged two of the creatures with him. They hung squirming from his legs while their snouts puffed in and out, sucking skin away—

All at once Brak's strength gave out altogether. He surrendered to the hurt and dizziness.

He'd crawled only a short distance. His legs were still in shallow water. He raised his head with a cry of spent rage. Overhead he saw miniature lights. He stared at them dumbly for a moment.

Stars trying to shine through the windblown murk of Logol. Then his surroundings made more sense.

The current had carried him straight onto a narrow, shaly spit of land projecting into the river. Along the bank floated an amber ball of light.

Someone carrying a lantern? Brak's eyes barely focused. Yes. Coming near.

Hope, then. A red sliver of hope that pushed the horror back a little in his mind. The pain struck him again. Two river creatures had been joined by a third in the shallow wall. All three were attacking his legs.

He heard the clatter of sandals behind the bobbing ball of looming light. A spearhead flashed. He swung up from the waist, seized a big rock, pounded it down on the nearest river-thing.

The creature burst like a poison-filled sac. The shallows swirled with black fluid. Where the flattened snout had gripped his skin, the flesh was pink, shredded, stringy.

The barbarian raised the rock over his head, screamed his wild steppe scream of hunter's rage, smashed the river-things—

Smashed them. Smashed them. *Smashed them. Smashed them—*

A hand on his shoulder. "Crawl up the bank out of the water! I have a spear."

The light ball wobbled as the man who carried the lantern hastily set it down. The man jabbed into the shallows, speared the river-thing still clinging to the barbarian's leg. Inky black spilled again. Brak tore at the snout, flung the creature away. Then, using his last reserves of strength, he began to drag his huge exhausted body higher on the shore.

Rocks raked his flanks. He couldn't seem to pull his feet out of the shallows. A last creature slithered toward them just beneath the surface. Cheeks flushed with fear, Friar Pol nevertheless waded out, raised the spear and thrust it down to kill the creature. Brak dragged himself the last agonizing distance to dry ground.

A creature darted at Pol's ankles. The priest hopped back to shore and stood panting. The hem of his gray gown dripped. He examined the spear in his own hand, as if rather surprised to find it there. Down the bank somewhere, Helane was calling out as she ran to them. The barbarian tried to rise, fell back, cracked his head. The Nestorian picked up the lantern.

"There—" Brak could barely utter the words. "—There's no lack of courage in you, holy man."

Friar Pol wiped his mouth. "When the enemy is small." He glanced nervously in the dark. Another lantern

jogged in the night wind, seeming to float along as it approached.

“Friar—” Brak strained to make himself heard. “I know the demons. Are the—?”

“Gone. Both succeeded in crossing the river and escaped into the desert. The corpse of the boy Kes was washed up on shore just before I heard your outcry. One of them must have killed him.”

“Aye.” Brak's words were faint. His eyes were dimming. “Kya. Kya did.”

“Would we had caught them and slain them!” The Nestorian kneeled quickly beside the barbarian, his face tormented. “Now you know what I feared and hadn't the courage to speak about. I tried to catch her out there in the water, just after she attacked you. In truth I didn't know whether she was the one, or her brother. It was too dark. But it makes little difference. They are equally powerful. Equally evil—” His voice shook.

“Friar? Is he alive?”

That was Helane. She had nearly reached them now. Distantly Brak heard Hadrios and Captain Gorzhov arguing.

“Alive,” the Nestorian called back. “Bring cloths. He has many wounds.”

Brak's head rang with weird sounds. Darkness was very close. The Friar started to rise. Brak caught hold of his robe.

“What are they?”

Pol stared toward what must be the southern darkness. “They are monsters old as time. A type of were-creature of which I read in old scrolls and documents long before I abandoned the scholar's life.”

“Say—nothing—” Brak gasped. “Nothing—to the rest until—we talk again—”

The Nestorian shook his head in deep sadness. “Poor fools. They have all been speculating. Frightened talk. They consider the twins to be insane, no more. Kes was killed trying to steal gems from the girl's clothing, they tell one another. When the night ends, when the shock passes, their fear has made them invent explanations. They'll remember the three marks. Ask more questions. I must have answers—”

White like suet in the flickering of the lantern, Friar Pol's face was turned to Brak as if seeking help there. Suddenly the face constricted. It slid away down a long, stygian tunnel, shrinking and shrinking and shrinking until it winked out of sight. Brak's pain was over.

Something like three hours later, Brak fought unsteadily back up through succeeding lighter layers of gray. He awoke and immediately tried to stand. He tumbled forward, only saved himself from a nasty smash by thrusting out his hands and taking the brunt on his palms. The second time he went more carefully.

When he had maneuvered to a sitting position, one of the caravan boys passed him a skin of wine. He drank gratefully. The sour stuff scalded his throat but it warmed his belly. The buzzing in his head grew less annoying. He hurt all over.

His wounds had been bound up with hanks of cloth smelling of unguent. He handed the wineskin back to the boy. Then he asked, “What became of Kes?”

The lad looked as though he wanted to cry. He signed against evil eye and answered.

“We put him back in the river. He had no family anywhere, and the ground is too rocky for burial.” There was a terrified glint in the grime-ringed eyes.

A small fire was burning not far up the shore. The flames stood out nearly horizontal in the wind. Brak cleared his eyes with a series of furious blinks. Yes, he was right. The gray of false dawn was slitting the horizon. The boy still watched him. “Master Brak?”

“Aye.”

“The lord and lady who ran away south—they killed my friend Kes.”

“It appears so.”

“Were they brigands or crazy people? Or were they something worse?”

Brak studied the pinched face, the young eyes that were too wise. “What makes you ask such a question?”

“A feeling. The old woman—Mother Mil—she had no blood or bone when she died. And the lord and lady wouldn't have run away if Kes had tried to rob them, as some are saying happened. That wouldn't make sense.”

Brak felt dismal. Just as Pol had predicted, the realization of truth was swift to arrive. But he only grunted. “Perhaps so.”

He searched the bank, saw dromedaries and mules clustered perhaps a half a league upstream. Shadowy figures glided in and out among the beasts.

“Are the others up there?”

The boy glanced that way, nodded. “They're seeing to the beasts and broken chests. Hadrios is wild with anger. We lost three or four animals.”

There was a small sound. Brak turned, started. All this time Friar Pol had been sitting on a stone directly behind him.

“Join the rest,” Brak ordered the boy. With a nervous glance at the two, he obeyed, running off.

“Now, Friar,” the barbarian said. “You knew when Mother Mil died that something unnatural plagued this caravan. Before the rest come, you owe the truth to me.”

“As well as courage to the one I serve,” said Pol with bitterness. He seemed to have aged during the night. “It's true I tried to pretend the threat didn't exist, even though my duty to my order demanded that I recognize the twins for what they were.” His lips twisted. “You probably find me a lamentable spectacle. I tried to evade the issue. Compromise with the forces of dark. I stand before my god humiliated and—”

The barbarian's contemptuous spitting brought Pol's head up suddenly. “Pity those people yonder instead of continually pitying yourself!”

“But I am a coward who—”

“Who acted bravely enough in my behalf tonight.”

“River demons are one thing, Brak. Demons such as Ky and Kya—”

"Enough!"

The roar made the priest start. Baleful-eyed, Brak repeated, "The truth."

Friar Pol sighed, blinked watering eyes and began.

"I did become suspicious when I observed the manner in which Mother Mil died. When you told me of Civix, I was certain. Lord Ky and his sister are Blood-eaters."

"I do not know what you mean," Brak said. But the words made his palms crawl as though they had touched filth.

Pol's sunken eyes gleamed. "They are ageless things, Brak. *Things*. Not human beings, although once they were such. But that was years—or more likely—centuries ago. As I told you, my studies before I entered the order acquainted me with the legends about them. They never grow old. At least they remain ageless and youthful in their appearance."

"What kind of sorcery can make that so?" Brak demanded.

"The power," said Pol, "of Yob-Haggoth."

The wind screamed low against the noise of the rushing river. The barbarian remembered the little stone pendant on Kya's throat. He remarked on it to the Friar, who nodded in reply.

"They are special servants of the Dark One. In return for total obedience, the god has made them immortal. But no sane man can think it a boon. Blood-eaters are condemned to live on one nourishment alone. The blood—the very marrow of human beings."

Blood-eaters. How it crawled in his mind, an obscene whispering. He asked, "How many of them roam the world?"

"Not many. Or so the scrolls tell. How many such special disciples are needed to show the Yob-Haggoth's dominion? Living forever, each one is equal to a host of ordinary men."

Brak reached absently to his shoulder, squeezed dank water from the braid that hung down beside his arm. "In the river I came across Kya with her teeth on the throat of the boy Kes. I seized her to pull her off. I saw my own hand mirrored in the river but not hers."

"Yes." Pol nodded. "'Tis one of the few ways they can be detected. The Blood-eaters cannot be seen in any reflective surface, be it a pool of water or a hand glass. And, if they so choose, they can strike their victims not in their human shape but as stygian clouds."

"The way Civix was attacked!" Brak remembered. "There was cloudy darkness around Kya in the river too. Do they mark their victims?"

"Aye. By the three tiny black pricks we saw on Mother Mil."

The barbarian rubbed his forearm, pushing at the down of yellow matted hair. Finally he found the tiny indentations Kya had made. She had not pierced the skin because he broke away too soon. But the faint signs remained.

He showed Pol his arm. "She left them on me."

"And on your neck as well. I see the marks quite plainly."

“What makes the marks, priest? Their teeth?”

“Two are left by teeth, the third by the tongue. Through three apertures the demons suck out human blood and the very stiffness of bone itself, leaving their prey like rags behind them.”

Another shudder stirred along Brak's spine. In his travels he had seen, and fought, a strange and bewildering array of devilish beasts and men. But he had never encountered any quite like the plump, rosy-faced twins and their ghastly ability to draw out human life by the touch of their mouths. He tried to concentrate on what the Friar was saying.

“—or, in other cases, should they choose, the Blood-eater can take its victim's lifestuff slowly, over a period of days. In this case the victim becomes progressively weaker and, from the time of the demon's first touch, is virtually transformed into a living slave. The Blood-eater's will becomes his will also, until he dies.”

“And that is also what happened to Civix,” Brak said softly. He went on to recall aloud the way in which the former head of the caravan boys had moved with peculiar lethargy just before he fell prey to the shimmering blackness that killed him. “I saw him associating frequently with Ky during the days preceding his death. I wondered then at the odd association.”

“Master and slave,” Pol replied. “Alas, I failed to notice.”

“But—but why would anyone put himself in thrall to a demon?”

A sad smile from the Nestorian. “Haven't you found it true that evil seems forever more skilled in presenting itself attractively?” A glum nod from the barbarian, at which the priest continued, “Tis the same with the demon and victim relationship. The Blood-eater offers his victim the promise of eternal life. A promise, I might add, which can never be fulfilled. So far as I have learned from studying, only the Blood-eater may partake directly of the vile benefits of a pact with the god Yob-Haggoth. Thus what the demon offers his victim is a lie to begin. But the victim never knows, and allows the demons to take a bit of his lifestuff, and then a bit more. There are degrees here as well. In the initial stages, the victim may break the dire alliance by will alone. Usually this is when the blandishments of the demon prove most effective. A certain point is reached—the victim is possessed until death. His lust for blood becomes nearly as insatiable as that of his master. So he, in his turn, begins to seek out victims, and may partake of their blood and bone too, enjoying the unholy pleasure until the Blood-eater wearies of the cruel game.”

Brak's mouth curled. “Game, you say?”

“Tis nothing else. A means by which the demon enlists willing fools as servitors. These seek their own victims, and from one half-living slave, the Blood-eater effortlessly acquires half a dozen new victims and more, which he may devour at his pleasure.”

“The demon can offer no everlasting life to those slowly drained?”

“None. Their unholy lusts lead them to their destruction.”

“Filthy wickedness.”

“Aye,” said Pol in a low voice. “Aye.”

Anger began to stir Brak anew. “This is a terrible truth to bear alone, priest. I ask you again. Why did you keep your suspicions to yourself?”

“Many reasons,” was the gloomy reply. “First, I had no notion that you would appreciate something as

complex as the nature of the god Yob-Haggoth—”

“I have come closer to him than you, I'll wager!” Brak retorted.

“That may be so. I plead guilty to crediting you with scant brains. But it really comes down to something else. My own feeble faith, of which I've spoken. There are not many things which the Blood-eaters fear, Brak, but those few all pertain to my order.” His slender fingers brushed across the stone cross hanging at his waist. “It is said that the demons fear the talisman of the Nameless God indeed. It's also said that the only way in which they can be slain is to have some material such as wood, which has been suitably blessed, driven into their bodies.”

“Blessed how?”

Fingers fumbling with the stone token. The pocked surface reflecting the fire. “By the touch of this, presumably. The cross supposedly imparts the power of the Nameless God to the killing instrument.”

“You sound so uncertain, priest?”

Pol looked miserable. “Those things have only been told to me. I have never tested them.”

At last Brak understood. He said with as much kindness as he could find in himself, “I have met those who believe in the magic of the Nameless God's symbol. Such a token may or may not have been responsible for saving my life when first I encountered Yob-Haggoth's minist—authority. I have never been certain, though frankly, I tend to doubt it. Nevertheless, your hesitation comes clear to me finally. What could hurt your faith more—a faith you've already said to be weak—than to test the talisman's magic and have it proved false?” Brak took a long, deep breath. “Admit it, priest. Isn't that really why you feared to tell anyone about your suspicions?”

Surprisingly Friar Pol did not grow angry. There was a sad, exhausted joy in his eyes as he exhaled long and loudly. “I have misjudged you grievously, barbarian.”

“How so?”

“Your speech may not be the most polished. But you see past subterfuge to the essentials. Of course you're right. I knew that if I told Hadrios I feared the caravan was plagued by Blood-eaters, it would devolve upon me to use this”—the cross touched again—“to defend us. And if it failed—*if it failed*—”

The priest's hands closed suddenly on the token.

The wind danced and howled along the shore. Light brightened the heavens now. But it was sullen and dusty. If anything, the force of the wind was increasing. Brak knew with a dismal certainty that the season of the Skulwind was upon them in full, to add to their already considerable troubles.

Pol stared at his hands. Brak said, “Still, Hadrios Star-Tracker must be told.”

Like an admission of defeat: “I know.”

“And soon. I will do it if you want.”

The big barbarian took the priest's silence to mean assent.

Shortly thereafter, Brak hobbled to the morning campfire. He drew Hadrios, Helane, and Captain Gorzhov aside, ignoring their questions about the state of his health.

“There are matters more important. An explanation of the deaths that have deviled us, the latest being

Kes and—nearly mine. The Friar has put words to what both he and I have suspected. The lord and lady were not natural creatures, but demons. It's not necessary for the caravan boys to know this, but you must. We have to take steps to defend ourselves.”

And, with uneasy eye on the southern horizon, he told them of the Blood-eaters. At the end, it was Hadrios who vented his feelings first, in typical fashion.

“Abomination of abominations! I knew this caravan was thrice-damned. Gods! At such times I wish I were a religious man.”

“Frankly,” said Captain Gorzhov with a crude shrug, “I disbelieve it all.”

“You were with Civix,” Brak reminded him pointedly. “You saw him staggering, as though he were sleeping on his feet.”

Gorzhov's cheeks turned nearly as scarlet as his beard. For an instant his eyes simmered with rage. He was, no doubt, remembering the humiliation of the lash. He chose to stifle the anger for the moment, replying, “Tis just a lot of superstitious talk, nothing more. Civix acted like any man who's tilted the wine pot a little too high.”

“You wouldn't scoff so, Captain,” Brak said, emphasizing the final word, “had you seen Civix dead. I saw him. After you ran away.”

The silence was heavy as thunder.

Helane pushed back a lock of her tawny hair. The bangles on her arm jingled. Her gray eyes were wary. “What defense do we have against such creatures?”

“Precious little,” Brak replied. “Except our own alertness. That's why I decided you must know.”

“But you're right,” Hadrios said as he scratched his beard. “We cannot tell the boys. We'll make no progress at all if they bolt us, as they surely will should this tale, truth or not, spread further. We'll keep it to ourselves, keep our eyes sharp and our swords handy. The best defense—”

“Defense!” Gorzhov scoffed. “God's bowels, why? The lord and lady have gone! Discovered, they chose to flee.”

Helane looked at him. “Yes, Captain. But how far?”

Gorzhov's eyes grew round. Some of his customary confidence disappeared.

During the conversation Friar Pol had remained quiet at the edge of the group. Now he chose to step forward.

“The young lady touches on an important point. Namely, the insatiable hunger of the Blood-eaters. That hunger is never slaked for long. Witness Mother Mil's death, followed soon after by those of Civix and Kes.” The Friar glanced at the blowing heavens. “I fear the twins have marked us as the Quran marked Brak. There are no others nearby in the waste of Logol to give them the ghastly nourishment they need. We are the only ones. They—” His voice faltered. “They will know this.

“They believe they possess greater power than we do. They will not run far. I'm certain they are out there in the desert. Waiting. Watching.”

On that forbidding note, the little meeting ended, and the day began.

Before the caravan moved out, Brak remembered to retrieve his broadsword from the river.

He chose a mule with care, inspecting the animal all over to make certain it had no open wounds. Then, armed with a staff that had a hook on the end, he mounted. He pulled his feet up so that they wouldn't dangle in the water. He went *tsk* to the mule to start it forward.

The beast shied from the river at first. Not far out, milky eyes gleamed just beneath the surface. The river-creatures still hovered, awaiting a new meal. Finally the barbarian got the animal going.

As the water grew deeper, he jabbed the hook staff at the hovering creatures. The thrust drove them back for a moment. By repeating this procedure he reached the point where he thought he'd lost his sword.

After much struggling and stabbing of the water, he hooked the hilt and managed to pull the weapon up. He urged the mule back to shore at a fast clip. He let out a long breath when the animal's hooves finally click-clacked on shaly ground.

The caravan labored up over the ridgeline and then southward, traveling along a series of sand-choked watercourses similar to the ones through which they had approached the river. Soon the Logol desert stretched out ahead once more, dune after rolling dune. The dust-laden wind howled. Even the driest, most stunted shrubs vanished. Brak and the others were forced to ride muffled to their eyes.

Much was clear to him now. He understood why he had not died on the day he discovered the twins on the plateau. They truly must have been lost, too weakened from a lack of sustaining blood to kill him while he slept that night. He recalled the hand he imagined caressing his throat. Not imagination after all!

He remembered too how the twins had looked successively plumper and healthier after each death in the caravan. Closing his eyes in the blowing dust, he could see the vile pink spots in their cheeks, the moist tint of their lips, the lusty glow of their soft skin. He laughed contemptuously at himself when he recalled wondering how Ky and Kya had kept from being robbed of the gems they wore on their clothing.

Perchance some had tried to tear away a handful of those stones. He could well imagine the outcome—the robber became the victim, flapping in death like a scrap of cloth.

Blood-eaters.

He doubted very seriously whether they had ever had a claim on the throne in the land of Jovis. That was probably just one more convenient lie. But one fact was inescapable. He had come square against the infernal power of Yob-Haggoth once more.

The caravan made only a few leagues that day, for the Skulwind blew in earnest, and afternoon turned nearly black as night. Brak and old Hadrios tried to get drunk at the campfire that evening. For perhaps an hour they generated a false heartiness. It vanished the instant Helane raised her hand.

Friar Pol bent his head. Despite the Skulwind, they all heard it. The priest whispered, "Mercy."

Somewhere in the desert, the twins were singing.

Chapter VIII

The Swordsmen of Ibrahim

Two days seemed two lifetimes. The sand-laden wind screamed at the ears, bit the nose, tore at the face. Even the heads of the dromedaries and mules had to be wrapped in rags, little more than their fevered eyes showing. Morning till evening, the days seemed changeless. Faint light, as though fog sat over

everything, lent people and beasts the look of wraiths.

At one point when Brak was struggling ahead along the foundering line, he came upon Friar Pol trying to prod his reluctant mule. The barbarian made his weary dromedary kneel, jumped down into the sand that nearly reached his knees, put his shoulder behind the mule's rump.

The animal continued to sit squarely on its backside with its hind legs folded under. The Nestorian also put both his shoulders against the animal's flank. The mule turned and bit the Friar's arm with yellow teeth.

Brak leaped back, seized the stick the Friar had been using and began to beat the animal savagely. In a moment he stopped, ashamed.

"Take my beast," he shouted over the wind. "I'll wait till this one decides to move."

In other circumstances, he realized the scene might have had comic overtones: a holy man and a barbarian attempting to budge a flop-eared beast of burden. Here, in the endless gray with the sand scourging the skin like little daggers, it was the kind of maddening annoyance to make a man lose all reason.

Friar Pol's face-winding had slipped. On his sunken cheeks a few tiny pinpoints of blood gleamed. The Skulwind was living up to its name.

"We can't keep going in this," Pol cried as he struggled to the kneeling dromedary. "Yesterday we hardly made a league. Today we'll be lucky to do half that. And old Hadrios is faltering."

The big barbarian scowled. "What do you mean?"

"This morning, as he tried to mount his beast, I saw him stagger as though faint. We must seek shelter! I don't care how desperate the old man is to reach Samerind. Nothing can live in this storm!"

"Nothing," returned Brak somberly, "except those who never die."

Sorry he said it, Brak met Pol's terrified glance only an instant. Then he turned back to the reluctant mule. The Friar managed to get the dromedary underway. Brak wrapped his arm round the mule's head, rubbed its long ears and tried talking to it. Before long, the poor beast nipped at his hand in a playful way. It rose to its feet and brayed. Brak didn't have the heart to put his weight on the mule's back. He held its picket rope and walked ahead.

But each step in the mounding sand was a labor that sapped his strength.

What the Nestorian had said about Hadrios disturbed him. When the caravan stopped for the night, he sought out Helane.

Girl and barbarian crouched in the lee of a pole-and-blanket shelter which had been erected beside a tall dune. The structure threatened to pitch over at any moment. Nearby, the caravan boys were fighting to raise the striped pavilion. It kept collapsing under the drive of the wind. The curses of the boys were foul.

"The Nestorian told me your father faltered this morning," Brak said.

Helane nodded. She looked dirty and tired as she leaned her head wearily against his arm. "He refuses to admit that age has robbed him of his old vigor. I'm worried for him, Brak. No treasure is worth his death."

“He'll never agree, girl.”

“No, he wouldn't. That's the trouble.”

“Where is he now?”

She pointed to the blanket shelter. “I put him in there. He didn't want to sleep but I forced several drinks of wine on him and he finally dropped off.”

Brak chewed his gritty underlip. “For his safety as well as ours we need more permanent shelter till this storm wanes. We lost three beasts today. Dead with burst hearts.”

The girl's gray eyes filled with misery. “Then we must do as you say. And soon.”

Glad of her agreement, Brak struggled away through the murk to find Captain Gorzhov. The redbearded man was watching the caravan boys wrestle with the striped pavilion. But he was offering no assistance.

Brak broached the subject matter-of-factly. “On the morrow, Captain, we'll stop where we can find protection. Do you know of any?”

Gorzhov spat sand off his tongue. “Am I following your orders now? I was under the impression that Hadrios was still in charge.”

Brak fought to control his temper. “Hadrios lies close to sickness. His daughter has agreed that we must seek a place to wait out the storm or none of us will see Samerind. You're the scout. Presumably you've traveled this route before. Where can we stop?”

The Captain's eyes glared above the muffling cloth that covered his mouth and blurred his voice. “A day's march. But we'll have to deviate from our route to reach the place. In the old days—a hundred-year ago and more—Logol was a powerful kingdom. She exacted tribute from all who crossed the waste. Forts were built for the patrols that kept watch on the caravans. We are reasonably near to one, I think. Provided the sand hasn't buried it. Otherwise—” A shrug at the near-darkness. “There's nothing.”

“Then at the first light, strike for that place.”

Captain Gorzhov slapped sand from his padded coat. “I'll ask the wench. If she says yes, then we will.”

The seething anger boiled inside the barbarian. He took a step. Gorzhov's gloved hand dropped to the hilt of his curved sword. For a moment the men faced one another, their rage a naked thing.

Finally Brak saw the futility of it. It was this damned Skulwind rubbing brains and nerves raw. It turned the slightest remark into a provocation. He made contemptuous sounds in his throat and stalked off. But as he did, he reminded himself that one time, soon or late, he would have to settle affairs with the self-styled Captain.

At their pitiful morning fire, Hadrios was up, though he appeared wan and moved slowly. When Helane told him of her decision, his face contorted with anger.

“Travel off our route? No! We haven't time, no provisions to last.”

“I have already ordered Gorzhov to search for the fort. He's gone.”

“You had no authority without consulting me—”

“Be silent!” she exclaimed, cheeks red with wrath. “We'll all die out here if we go on as we have. You're

exhausted. I won't see you kill yourself and us too!"

About to retort, the old man thought better of it. He scratched his beard, muttered something, and sat down grumbling at the fire complaining to himself. But he did not protest aloud again, bending over the bowl of gruel which one of the caravan boys ladled from the hanging pot.

Brak dipped his fingers into his own bowl, tasted, spat out the mouthful. More sand than food. Though his stomach growled with hunger, he couldn't swallow the stuff.

Nor could Hadrios. The old man set his bowl aside. Brak saw that his hand was shaking as though struck by palsy. Hadrios the Star-Tracker looked smaller, less imposing than he ever had before.

By midday Gorzhov returned. He had located the ruins of the fort. By hard marching they reached it just after nightfall, straggling in through the stone arch from which the gate had rotted long ago.

Once past the thick outer wall, Brak managed to breathe again. Though fallen in many places, the wall still offered protection from the incessant wind.

The fort compound had been quite large, he discovered as lanterns were lit. He and the others poked around in the excavated foundations of what must have been three good-sized buildings. Two of these cellars, open at ground level now that the rest of the structure had decayed, were filled with sand. The third, at the inner corner of two walls, showed little sign that the Logol waste had made inroads. Brak leaped down into it. He landed noisily among rotted planks.

"There's wood down here for a fire," he called, wigwagging the lantern in his hand. "We can make our cookfire here and—"

He stopped. A cracked human skull regarded him from the litter.

The skull terrified him somehow. He stamped on it. The skull crumbled to white dust.

With a shudder the barbarian left the lantern and climbed out of the cellar, finding hand and foot holds in the cracked stones of the foundation.

A better fire than they had enjoyed in days warmed them, caravan boys and all, as they huddled together in the cellar that night. Hadrios took a little wine and immediately fell into a wheezing, restless sleep. Helane knelt near him. She watched him with huge gray eyes. Captain Gorzhov sat in a corner and drank.

Brak posted a caravan boy on a bit of the rotted watch-platform which sagged over their heads at the top of the wall. A different boy took up the guard every second hour. Toward morning, with the fire going out, Brak managed to doze off. He was wakened by a low, sharp whistle.

He raised his head. Up above, the boy on guard was waving.

The big barbarian scrambled across the cellar floor. He began to climb up the stone block wall. In the dark Helane whispered, "What's wrong?"

"No telling. The boy wants me on the platform."

His tremendous weight made the sagging wood stair groan and shake. Finally he reached the parapet. Helane had followed. They pressed close to the crumbled battlement. Brak rubbed his sleep-clogged eyes.

It was nearly morning. The waste of Logol had lightened sufficiently so that a few nearby dunes were discernible. The caravan boy pointed.

Looking sharp, Brak detected movement. A rider on a pony?

Yes.

And another behind.

Soon a whole file of them became visible, passing in a depression between the dunes. Helane caught her breath.

Without thinking, Brak clapped a big hand across her mouth. He pressed her head tight against his brawny chest, held her until she realized the need for silence. And he kept watching.

In the feeble light with the sand blowing, details were difficult to pick out. But at last he was sure. The phantasmal riders passing perhaps a league and a half out from the fort wore plumed helmets.

The caravan boy's teeth chattered. At last he managed to whisper, "Quran?"

"Quran." Brak said no more.

The riders jogged out of sight. The barbarian had no doubts about whom they were hunting. Perhaps in the storm they had missed seeing the loom of the fort. But it didn't ease the strain one whit to know that the ruby-eyed warriors were out and moving across Logol.

Like statues, the big barbarian and Helane and the boy watched for nearly half an hour, till they were sure the Quran had gone.

"At least luck was with us this time," sighed Helane as they climbed down the shaking stair.

"But next time?" Brak shook his head. "We don't know how many bands of riders are moving out there. More than one, I'd wager."

They rested all day in the fort. The storm continued to seethe and scream. That night, as they were starting to eat at the fire down in the cellar, the singing began again.

Friar Pol had been discoursing on some dull aspect of his days as a scholar. At the first notes, the little clay bowl from which he'd been eating slipped from his hand and shattered.

Captain Gorzhov stirred in the corner for the first time in some while. He lurched to a sitting position, gave a loud belch. Brak's palms crawled. Despite the wind, noise, the weird melody was clear and distinct. Two voices, wailing—

Lying on a pallet of blankets, Hadrios raised on his elbow. He looked flushed. "Cursed. I knew we were cursed the day we set out for Timbello."

Helane pressed him back down. "It may be just a trick of the wind, Father."

Captain Gorzhov said a filthy word. He tried to rise, flopped. He tossed the wineskin over his forearm, drained it.

Brak could smell him. The Captain reeked with the sweet stink of too much wine. Gorzhov finally gained his feet, dropped the skin, swaggered forward.

“Why do we hide from them? A fop-faced boy. A simpering girl—I don't believe those tales—”

In a surprisingly strong voice Friar Pol said, “Sit down, you sotted fool.”

“Sotted?” Gorzhov spat to show his contempt. “Might be. But that's a better state than being all trembly with terror. Better than burrowing down here like vermin afraid of the light. Hell's eyes!” He snicked his curved sword out clumsily. The flat of the blade flashed in the firelight. “I'm not frightened of them. Nor of those damned ruby-eyed sons of sluts parading back and forth on their ponies. You're frightened of them, though, all of you.”

A scathing glance at the group. Till now, Brak had felt sorry for the man's drunken bravado. But a little flame of anger licked inside his mind when Gorzhov included him in the glance of condemnation.

“All right, lords and ladies,” the scout exclaimed. “Stay here! Captain Gorzhov will go out and stop that damned singing this minute.”

Lurching to the girl, he touched her chin and grinned in a foolish, almost cross-eyed way. Brak's anger abated again. The man was out of his senses.

“Tell me, bird,” Gorzhov roared to Helane. “Who's brave among us now?”

“In the name of gods,” Helane said wearily, “this is no time to try and prove you're a man.”

“But I am!” Gorzhov cried, spit-bubbles breaking on his lips. “The rest of these—” Once more his eyes slid to Brak's face. “Scared dung-beetles. I'm going out to them.”

Sword bared, Gorzhov started for the cellar wall.

“Captain Gorzhov! Stand, you stupid drunkard. *Stand!*”

Old Hadrios was on his feet. He thrust off his daughter's hand as he took a lurching step on his peg leg. His pale eyes were feverishly bright.

“I am the one who gives orders, Captain. My order is that you will not leave this place. Just because wine has addled your head and you think your fool's talk may impress my daughter, I'll not see you throw your life away and endanger the rest of us.” Hadrios's chest heaved. “Stand, Captain.”

“You sick man! You'll not tell me to play coward!” There was a humiliated redness in Gorzhov's cheeks above his beard. The old man had touched a raw place with his remark about the purpose behind the Captain's boasts. Helane watched the scout with a kind of sad, sorrowing contempt.

Gorzhov kicked at the foundation stones as if trying to find a foothold. He turned his back on Hadrios. The old man moved swiftly.

“Stand, Captain!” Hadrios cried. Gorzhov ignored him.

The old man moved swiftly, snatching up his whip from his pallet.

“Father—” Helane screamed. She reached out to prevent the blow. Panting with effort, Hadrios was too fast for her. He slipped around the fire and cracked the lash. It caught Gorzhov around the head, dragged him over in a heap.

“Damn you, damn you!” Gorzhov yelled, floundering. Hadrios leaped closer. The whip went *crack* three times.

There were bloody weals on Gorzhov's cheeks and neck by the time the Friar and Brak wrested the whip's butt away. On one knee, Gorzhov wiped his face. He examined the red smear on his filthy fingers. There was a sullen, furious glitter in his eyes.

Hadrios breathed heavily. He mumbled in wordless anger as Helane tugged him back to the other side of the fire. Brak studied Gorzhov and perceived again what he had seen before.

Captain Gorzhov could show courage when fighting with others at his side. But when he stood alone, his courage waned away, and there was only cowardice.

“Obey him, Captain,” Brak said in a low voice. “We've trouble enough without making our own.”

For a long moment the Captain eyed the tall, wide-shouldered man with the braid and the lion tail dangling at his back. Then, wiping his cheek a second time, he slunk back to his corner. Presently he rolled over, face to the foundation wall, and began to snore.

All at once Brak realized that the singing had stopped. A small blessing. He left Helane tending to her father, who seemed to be having trouble breathing. He went up to the watch platform and stood with the boy on guard. He stared into the blowing murk wondering and wondering whether any of them would see the end of this nightmare pilgrimage.

Sometime after the middle of the night, a husky, bubbling cry wakened the big barbarian.

He rolled over. At the last instant he remembered that he was still on the watch platform. He caught himself before he fell off.

The cry was repeated. It came from the cellar.

Brak untangled himself from the blanket, stumbled to the stairs as someone below fanned the fire alight. The caravan boy had fallen asleep standing at the parapet. There were more pressing matters.

The cry came again, thin, rattling. Brak heard Helane's terrified voice, too.

Down into the cellar he went. Friar Pol was blowing on the fire. On his pallet, Hadrios thrashed in a convulsion. Helane watched him helplessly. Tears ran down through the dirt on her cheeks.

“He overtaxed himself when he took the whip to Gorzhov. I knew he—oh gods, I knew he'd come to disaster on this journey. He's too old for such a strain, too old—”

Even as the big barbarian watched, Hadrios's weather-browned face acquired a yellow cast. He rolled from side to side on his pallet and moaned. A spasm wrenched his body. Helane cried out as her father went limp.

The old man's breathing slowed to a thin, whistling thread of sound. Someone tugged Brak's arm. He whirled to look into Friar Pol's gloomy eyes. The Nestorian mouthed words silently: “Captain—Gorzhov—is gone.”

Brak went to search. It was true. The Captain had vanished from the cellar, and one of the mules was missing. Its picket rope had been hacked in half.

The barbarian followed a dim track of hooves to the fort's entrance. The track led into the waste. With a furious curse, he turned back. They had seen the last of the man on whom they all relied.

Brak waited about an hour until Hadrios's breathing regularized a little and it appeared that the seizure

would not claim his life. Then he told Helane the dire news. She slumped against him, sobbing uncontrollably.

Another day passed with the storm still at full fury. On the evening of the following day, it seemed to Brak that the wind had slacked a bit. Visibility across the waste was slightly improved. He believed they might be able to resume their journey in the morning.

They discussed this at the fire after dark had settled. Hadrios was awake now. He looked wan and spoke with great effort. "It—is wisdom to make all the haste we can. A week's march will bring us to Samerind."

"But are you sure you're well enough to travel?" Helane asked.

"Of—course—"

A wracking fit of coughing. Hadrios did not try to lie again, saying instead, "There are physicians in Samerind, and none here. What makes the most sense? To wait, or to press forward?"

"He's right," Brak agreed. "Last night we saw no horsemen, and heard none of the damnable singing. An hour ago I caught sight of a star or two behind the clouds up on the platform. If the Skulwind drops, we should make the dash south."

"Without guidance?" Helane countered. "We no longer have a scout to seek out—"

"Wrong, my lady."

Brak spun. Up there on the top of one cellar wall, Captain Gorzhov glowered down at them.

The scout was filthy. Sweat had dried the dirt on his face into a kind of yellow mask. He looked as though he had lost weight. He climbed down to them, moving slowly, tiredly. One of the big man's knee joints popped as he bent beside the fire.

Gorzhov did not so much as glance at any of them. He concentrated on warming his hands at the fire. Finally he said, "Curse me freely. I admit now that it was a fool's errand. I saw no one. And all I have to show for my pains is a wolf's hunger."

"Give him some food, girl," Brak ordered. "A little wine too."

"I was drunk when I rode out," Gorzhov admitted. "And when sobriety returned, I was totally lost. It's taken me this long to find my way back." He spoke each word with a leaden slowness, as though his brains were addled by fatigue. "If you care to mock me for my stupidity, do so and have done. I want to sleep."

"There'll be no mockery, Captain," Brak said. "We leave at dawn. Master Hadrios is ailing, so we must rely on you. We welcome you back. Take some of the wine and food and sleep the night through, and tomorrow lead us to Samerind."

Captain Gorzhov gave Brak an obliquely grateful look. "Aye," he whispered. His eyes were dull in the dustmask of his face. Even his beard had acquired a yellow tinge. He put out a shaking hand to clutch the wineskin the Friar held to him. "Aye."

Drinking, Gorzhov stared into the flames. Brak didn't like the flat, almost whipped look in those eyes. He wondered at its cause. For a moment he'd been ready to believe that some hope had returned to the little company. But Gorzhov's strange, sorrowing expression took it away again and left Brak with a crawling

sense of uneasiness that lasted all through the night.

For the first hours next day they made swift progress, even with Hadrios tied to a litter slung between two mules. Then just before noon, the sun's disc shaded off into a blur. The clouds thickened. Within minutes the source of light disappeared altogether.

The Skulwind intensified. As it did, Brak's hope dwindled even further. The break in the storm had been only temporary. Shortly the caravan was foundering again.

Captain Gorzhov disappeared for an hour. He returned to issue new orders.

“Bear to the right. The dunes are higher. They'll offer more protection.”

So the caravan labored that way as the afternoon began. Once more Gorzhov rode out. He came back and instructed them to alter direction a second time. One more change of course in midafternoon made Brak more than a little suspicious. But he kept his thoughts to himself.

Hadrios was sleeping, completely covered by a blanket. They really had no choice but to rely on Gorzhov's guidance.

“We should be camping soon,” Helane said as Brak's dromedary plodded beside hers.

“Has the Captain said anything about it?”

“No.”

Brak grunted. Up ahead, he could barely discern the Captain riding at the head of the line.

A moment later Helane swung toward him again. “Brak?”

“Yes?”

“May I be cursed for saying this but—I wonder whether Gorzhov is lost.”

Suspicion curled inside Brak again. He was careful. “Why do you say so, girl?”

“We've changed route direction too many times in just a few hours. Perhaps he doesn't know where we are and is afraid to admit it. I've never seen a man look as shaken as he did last night. Being lost himself those two nights might have jarred his mind to the point where he's incapable of leading us.”

“If he can't, no one else can. We're obliged to trust him until your father recovers.”

“But I'm fearful that—”

“*Quiet!*” The big barbarian's hand closed tightly on hers.

He swung his head one way, then the other.

Drum-a-drumm. Drum-a-drumm.

So distantly he could barely perceive it, the sound reached him through the wind's blare. It vanished one moment, returning the next.

Drum-a-drumm. Drum-a-drumm.

Brak tore at his cloak, freed the hilt of his broadsword. *Drum-a-drumm* . Louder!

He released Helane's hand. He kicked his dromedary to a halt, clambered off. He crouched and dug his hands deep into the sand.

Drum-a-drumm.

His fingers tingled with a faint vibration.

“Brak—what—?”

“Horsemen.” His eyes were ugly as he searched the blowing murk. “I can't see them yet. But they're all around us. We may be encircled.”

Drum-a-drumm.

Without laying eyes on the mounted men, he knew the host was huge. A small party would not have raised the soft thudding thunder he heard with his ears and felt with his sand-buried hands. He saw no sign of them. The dunes and the sky blended together in a gray shimmering.

Was that a flash of a metal weapon off there at the crest of a dune to the left? He couldn't be certain. But he was positive that a trap was closing. Suspicion ripened again, popped like a festered wound, poured its angry poison out.

“Gorzhov! *Captain Gorzhov!*”

“Gods,” Helane cried, “you don't believe that he—”

“That he knows exactly where we are heading? Has all along, and has led us to the Quran on purpose?” The muffling-cloths whipped away from Brak's face. His teeth were a white slash in the gloom. “Before those horsemen strike, I mean to make him answer that.”

And the big barbarian went charging up toward the head of the caravan where Captain Gorzhov's dromedary pranced.

The broadsword in Brak's hand weighed heavy as doom. Rage wiped away reason, brought bestial fury. The wind screamed. The sand bit at his eyes. From the left, from the right, from behind, from ahead, he heard the sound of a great host circling.

Drum-a-drumm.

Chapter IX Blade and Mirror

Captain Gorzhov saw the barbarian coming. He pulled his curved blade in a slow, almost clumsy way. Then he slid off his dromedary and bawled something into the wind that Brak could not understand.

Immediately though, Brak guessed the meaning. The encircling Quran were turning inward.

The drumming grew louder as the pace of the hoofbeats slowed. Otherwise, the Quran were tightening their ring with care.

As Brak approached, Gorzhov unfastened loops that hooked around bone buttons to close his padded coat. The coat dropped to the sand, its ragged embroidery fluttering. Gorzhov's eyes were like sullen firelit metal.

Brak ran to within ten paces of the scout. Then he halted. Gorzhov used his free hand to scale away his

flat fur cap. His shoulders under his coarse shirt looked bony. His belly fat hung on him like a flaccid pouch.

“No reason to hide your treachery any longer, eh, Captain?” Brak roared.

Gorzhov wiped his lips. “None.” The word was slurred.

“And you've been a long time hatching it, I'll wager.”

Gorzhov blinked rapidly. “Aye. Ever since that old jar of slops Hadrios humbled me with the whip.”

As Brak had thought Gorzhov hadn't been chastened. He had merely been biding time. From a corner of an eye the barbarian watched the flying sand-clouds. *Drum-a-drumm. Drum-a-drumm.* He thought he spied lances bobbing, and the heads of ponies. But with the sand blowing, the Quran would not be visible until they were practically on the camp. Somewhere behind him, Brak heard Hadrios and Helane and the caravan boys. They had been drawn by the confrontation. He signed them away without turning to look at them. His eyes held Gorzhov's as he growled, “You went out that night, from the fortress, to find the Quran?”

“No, not in the beginning. I came across one of their patrols by chance.” He held up fingers. “There were this many and more bands of them moving on the desert that night. Perhaps”—a sly smile—“perhaps I hoped I'd encounter them. I did. We got on famously too. They're not all that ferocious. Except concerning you. The leader you slew at the river—the one with three plumes—was the cousin and the only living relative of Lord Ibrahim himself. Ibrahim's out there now. He's brought his giant Stoneyes with him.”

Brak's spine crawled at the thought of the Red King's legendary warrior whose eyes held rubies and who fought with infernal strength.

The barbarian peered into the murk again. *Drum-a-drumm.* They were much closer, their mounts coming almost at a walk.

“What bargain did you strike for leading us to ambush?” Brak demanded.

“That's between the Quran and myself.”

“And what if Hadrios hadn't fallen ill so that you could take charge of the caravan? What would you have done then?”

“He did fall ill. Why discuss it?”

“I'm going to kill you, Captain. Unless, of course, you run yelping for your friends.”

Was that a flicker of fear in Gorzhov's eyes? If so, he quickly hid it.

“They would protect me, outlander. But you and I have waited overlong for this.”

“You'll fight me in the open? Fairly, sword to sword?” Head back, Brak laughed. “Not like you, Captain.”

Gorzhov's cheeks mottled. He shrieked a filthy word and loped at Brak, hacking the air with his curved sword. His strides, though long, seemed labored.

The big barbarian thrust up his broadsword to clang Gorzhov's blow off and away. He was surprised by the impact. He had forgotten how powerful the scout was.

The red-bearded man wheeled, struck crosswise at Brak's belly. The edge of his blade sliced Brak's forearm. Blood leaked from a long cut.

Gorzhov tried to press his advantage, lunging with left boot forward. He lost his equilibrium, toppled off balance. His neck was a clear target.

Brak hacked downward. Falling, Gorzhov sensed the attack from the side and parried violently. Iron hit iron. Sparks showered up to be instantly snuffed by the wind.

Gorzhov sprawled on his chest. Brak jumped after him. A ruse! Gorzhov was turning over, leaping up. The curved weapon flickered toward his throat.

Back went the big barbarian, feet churning in treacherous sand. He missed his footing. His heels flew out from under him. He dropped on his buttocks, jarred into dizziness.

Gorzhov's teeth blazed in his beard. Desperately Brak tried to slide aside. The scout was coming down on top of him. The point of his blade aimed at Brak's eyes—

The barbarian put every bit of strength into a twist and roll that carried him from under Gorzhov's crushing weight. The curved blade slashed Brak's ear bloody, then slid off into the sand.

The Captain snuffled like a mastodon as he got up. He seemed slow, his reflexes bad. Brak was already on his feet again, legs braced, crouching.

Blinking, Gorzhov struck for Brak's groin. The big barbarian's reach was longer. He drove in above the Captain's outstretched arm. He wrenched his wrist and opened the Captain's throat.

With a whistling cry, Gorzhov rocked on his feet. Brak jumped away. He sopped blood from his ear with his hand as Gorzhov's eyes dulled.

A strong man dying was never a pleasant sight. But this was worse. *Drum-a-drumm. Drum-a-drumm.* Brak could not take his horror-struck gaze from the Captain's slashed neck—

Where redness should have gushed, only a thin trickle leaked. A drop fell, drying instantly in the sand.

A caravan boy applauded Brak in hysterical glee. Out there in the blowing sand, men's torsos and ponies' heads were visible now. The boy darted to the corpse to snatch a souvenir. With open hand Brak struck the boy's face, knocked him over.

“Stay away from him! This spoil is mine!” The god-sent words helped him cover his choking horror.

Arm around his daughter, Hadrios edged nearer Friar Pol. Brak made sure his burly body was between the watchers and the corpse. In the storm a dromedary went berserk. It loped away with its bell clanking and its bales splitting to spill jewels. The ring of men had closed. One black-gloved Quran thrust a spear into the dromedary's bowels as it passed. The beast dropped, kicking. Ponies shied away from it.

All this Brak perceived only dimly. He knelt and stared with clenched teeth at the second mouth in Gorzhov's neck.

Mouth—that—didn't—bleed.

Gorzhov had seemed oddly slow in the fight. The barbarian lifted the Captain's bare right arm. Little red hairs rippled in the wind. Nothing.

He lifted the left one—

Making a raw, wordless sound, Brak stood and kicked sand until it covered Captain Gorzhov's carcass from waist upward. That didn't really help. In his imagination, seared there, he saw the three tiny black prick marks deep under the matting of red hair on Gorzhov's left arm.

If Gorzhov had stolen out and met the Quran, he had met Ky and Kya as well. For a moment screaming fear ruled his mind.

Quickly he started back toward Hadrios and the others. But before he got far, there was a cry.

“Pay heed. I, Ibrahim, speak to you. All of you left alive.”

With the others, the big barbarian turned. Helane covered her face.

Two riders had moved out from the line that completely circled the remains of the caravan. One was a tall, robust man with a strikingly long jaw, a bold nose, and a gem in his left eyesocket. He wore black boots, coat, gauntlets, helm—black everywhere, except for his four plumes. All were bright red.

The man was armed with a light sword that was still sheathed. He sat his pony easily, secure with the force that accompanied him—two hundred Quran at least. The second rider was partially hidden behind him.

The Red King played with his reins. They were studded with little hemispheres of onyx. His voice was low, steady.

“Where is my loyal friend, the scout?”

“Dead, lord,” Brak yelled. “Dead from the same sword I mean to use on you and your butchering—”

The bellowing threats went on. Brak was moving forward with swift strides, reason overridden by anger. Ibrahim of Quran recognized potential danger though he was still many paces away. He shied his horse. Out from behind him rode a man a third again as tall as Brak or the Red King.

The man looked immensely strong. He had a huge big-eared head. His pate had been shaved bare and shining. The man rode expertly, planting his mount in front of that of his lord and lowering his lance.

The man wore black boots, loose trousers of shiny black hide, and a hide fighting harness over his chest. In his head were two ruby eyes.

Stoneyes.

Brak's belly knotted. He did not understand how the giant could see him, but Brak was sure the giant did. When Brak tried an oblique left step, Stoneyes adjusted his pony's position to account for it. He waited, a living shield.

Brak lost some of his momentum. His run became a walk. The giant's pendulous lips curled up in delight. *How could the killer-warrior possibly see?*

Testing, Brak lifted his broadsword higher. Helane screamed as Stoneyes sailed his lance.

The barbarian leaped aside. The lance buried where he'd been. Stoneyes had his own broadsword out in an instant. There was laughter along the line of mounted men.

“His devotion to myself and my lady, Queen Shar, is nearly as great as his strength,” Ibrahim called. “I'd have him test you, except that you are plainly the one that I seek. You have the outlander's look, slayer of my good young cousin Efrim.” Ibrahim smiled a thin smile. “Of course when your scout offered a

splendid prize in the form of your caravan's treasure, that whetted my taste for the hunt even more.”

Huge, faceted, the ruby eyes of the giant turned toward Brak. *No man can see that way!* Brak thought. But was Stoneyes born of woman or a wizard's formulary? Who knew?

“Hear my words, the rest of you!” Ibrahim gestured to those huddled behind Brak. “There will be no blood-letting here. I'll even save the outlander, until we return to the Jewel City. But when my men ride among you, be peaceable and meek. This storm makes tempers wroth and—”

Up he rose in his saddle, suddenly noticing Brak's rush back toward Hadrios.

“Stop, you long-haired savage!”

But Brak had already reached the tiny band. Face flushed, eyes angry, he pleaded with them.

“Better we die fighting than be carried off to be locked up and disposed of cruelly whenever they please.”

Helane's face lighted with a desperation that matched Brak's. “He's right, father. I'll join him if no one else will. I know where there's a blade light enough for my hand—” Before Hadrios could prevent her, Helane whirled and darted back toward the stamping animals.

The old man eyed Brak ruefully. Then he looked along the line of mounted riders. They were tall men, and dark. They looked healthy and vigorous in their black padded coats. They would be formidable foes, even in small groups.

The glance of the old caravan master jumped from bow to tautened bow, from lance to upheld lance. Finally he said, “My daughter is either far wiser or far more witless than I. There's no chance of winning—”

“What chance do we have if we're taken?” Brak growled. “Do you prefer chains to death? I don't.”

Trying to decide, Hadrios looked to Pol. “Madness. We're cursed. What do you say, Nestorian?”

Friar Pol's eyes watered. He lifted the small stone cross. “I—I will fight rather than let them take this and mock it.” The priest's face shone with sweat. All at once Brak admired him.

Hadrios eyed Lord Ibrahim and Stoneyes obliquely. “Look at them grinning,” he seethed. “Jackals! All right, barbarian. If we must go down in our blood, let's not do it whimpering.”

A thin but strangely joyous smile curved Brak's mouth. He clapped Hadrios on the shoulder, turned in time to see Lord Ibrahim walking his pony in nearer. The bald giant Stoneyes rode close at his side.

The Quran were alert to their lord's safety. Black bows tautened a little more all around the circle.

“Savage,” Ibrahim cried at Brak with some petulance, “Come here! I'm not accustomed to having my orders ignored. What were you and the others whispering about?”

“Be damned to you and your—” Brak began. Terrible and high, the scream keened in the wind.

Brak whipped round. A nervous archer let his arrow fly. It struck and killed a mule. Hadrios clutched Pol's arm, would have fallen had the Nestorian not caught him and held him up.

The bile of panic rose in Brak's throat.

Bedraggled in their jeweled apparel, the twins held Helane between them.

The girl struggled. But Ky had an arm bent around her throat, and a little dagger pressed to her bosom. Helane felt the knife, struggled less.

Brak's head pounded with confusion and terror. He looked wildly to Friar Pol. The Nestorian was stumbling forward, lifting his stone cross out toward the twins, who evidently had crept silently into the camp from the rear.

Kya's pink mouth pursed in alarm. She pointed. Ky's pearl eyes narrowed. He dug the knife point deeper into Helane's breast. Friar Pol's forearms shook as he gripped the stone cross with both hands, raised it over his head, advanced with an unsteady step toward them.

“Who are those two?” Lord Ibrahim demanded. “Speak your names! Tell me what—”

“No!”

Brak's howl drowned the rest. The big barbarian crossed the distance in one, two, three leaps. Kya retreated, spitting filthy words. She tugged her brother's arm, urged him to strike Helane. She loathed the stone cross, that much was clear.

With a brutal sweep of his hand the barbarian knocked the cross from the Friar's hand. As it hit the sand, Pol shrieked.

“Blasphemer!”

“Fear puts faith back in your bowels, eh, priest? Keep on and they'll kill her!”

“The Blood-eaters tremble before the cr—”

“And you'll have the girl's blood on your hands!”

In sullen fright, Pol picked up the cross and held it against his belly. An insulting little smile curved Kya's mouth. A smile of triumph.

Brak knew he had saved the unholy pair. But he had done it out of necessity. Helane was too close to the dagger's tip.

She was near to fainting, he saw. She knew the nature of the plump white hands that held her, and her mind hid from it. Abruptly, her body sagged.

“Lord Ibrahim of the Quran,” Kya cried, “if that is indeed your name—”

“Aye,” the Red King bawled back. “And yours? Quickly, if you please. My temper's growing short.”

“I am Lord Ky of Jovis,” responded Kya's twin. “We address you as royalty to royalty, and beg you not to listen to the bleatings of these brutes you've taken prisoner.”

Unable to bear more, Brak yelled, “Listen to him at your peril, lord. He and his sister aren't exiles, as they'll be claiming any moment—”

“Exiles from Jovis,” Ky interrupted. “My sister and I are friendless, preyed upon by these—”

“They're *Blood-eaters! Demons*. They suck out blood and life from—”

Displeasure growing on Ibrahim's face brought a sudden roar from Stoneyes. "Silence, outlander!" The giant's voice was deep. It had a strange, rattling quality. "When high blood speaks to high blood, commoners keep peace."

"High blood—?" Brak's laughter was macabre. But clearly, Ibrahim did not regard matters as a joke:

"The ear of Quran is yours, Lord Ky. Speak, please, and ignore the wild man's rantings."

Fool, Brak thought with fury. Incredible fool.

But Ibrahim the Red King looked proud and almost pompous now. He sat very tall and straight and aloof so that all—especially the twins—would recognize his importance. Ky thrust Helane aside like a meal sack. Hadrios's daughter rolled onto the sand, moaning softly, her eyes nearly closed.

Ky touched his sister's elbow. Together they began to walk wide around Brak and the others, on a path that would soon bring them near Ibrahim's horse. As they walked, Ky spoke smoothly.

"Lord, we appreciate your tolerance. I can only say that we would expect such treatment from a man of your station. We beg leave to tell you the story of our maltreatment."

"First," countered Ibrahim, "tell me from whence you came."

A supple gesture of Ky's hand. Brak glared, unable to choke back memories of the lives and the blood that made that hand so soft and round. "The desert, Lord Ibrahim. We have been hiding there. We traveled for a time with the caravan master and his savage companion. But the entire company treated us ill."

Hadrios waved a fist. "Another falsehood. Heed what the outlander says, king. These two are some kind of hellspawn."

Lord Ibrahim did not even deign to look in the old man's direction. He gave all his attention to Ky, who continued swiftly, persuasively.

"When the ill treatment became more than we could bear, we fled into the desert. But we could not find our own way in these unfamiliar parts. So we could not travel far from these people, much as we detested them and their constant attempts to plunder what little treasure we managed to bring away when we were driven from Jovis." A fat hand touched the gem-clothing. "We hid, therefore. We followed them secretly, hoping the storm would die. Finally their scout—the man who lies dead yonder—grew unwary. He rode too far from the caravan. Using certain philtres I carry as a protective measure, I seized and drugged him. When he awoke, we discovered that he was willing to help us. I swore him to secrecy, and he promised to lead the caravan to you, Lord. He suspected you were in the vicinity, you see. He told us you had a grudge against yellow hair."

Ibrahim eyed Brak. "A grudge is for small men. Hate is for kings."

Kya's smile was sweet and charming. "Well put, Lord."

"The lying slut!" Brak howled, unable to believe that Ibrahim could possibly be persuaded by the fabrication. "Listen to my tale too! Let me describe how this pair of monsters—"

A sick uncertainty quenched his speech in mid-sentence. He exchanged hopeless glances with Hadrios and Pol. It could not be happening and yet it was: Ky wheedling and posturing in his determined effort to show himself as royal as Ibrahim. If Ibrahim only knew how the two must be mocking him in silence!

But the Red King seemed pleased, flattered, attentive to their tale. He leaned forward across the neck of his black pony with the red jewel in his left eye shining. He had paid no attention whatever to Brak's outcry.

"As I was saying," Ky continued, "the scout believed you were nearby."

"Quite so," said Ibrahim. "He came to one of my lieutenants secretly, at night. We arranged this little surprise rendezvous with—" A wave of contempt at Hadrios. "Them."

"The scout took his action on our behalf, Lord. Though as I have freely admitted, he was drugged into cooperating. We knew that if we could only find your excellence, you would treat my sister and me in a manner equal to that with which you'd treat your own queen."

"We are not wrong, are we, Lord?" asked Kya.

"God's name, no." Ibrahim scowled. "But one thing puzzles me."

Wariness in the pearl eyes. Ky said, "And that is?"

"Why you came just now by stealth, and took the wench, and held her prisoner with a knife."

Quickly Ky answered, "Because, Lord, we were not certain of your reception—at least not until we had the chance to explain our plight. We hid out there in the desert as you arrived. Upon learning who we were, your men passed us through your lines. We took the girl to insure that we would have time for explanations. You cannot imagine the indignities that filthy old man—that witless outlander—heaped upon us before we fled from them—"

Now there was a truly raging madness in the big barbarian. A lord famed for his war craft was being gulled and swindled. Brak's eyes were huge and he was breathing in a kind of a hiss.

Impossible? he thought then. *You're the fool to call this anything but natural.*

To his dismay and pain, Brak had long ago learned that the people in the so-called civilized kingdoms behave more insanely, more incomprehensibly, than the wildest hunter of the steppes. He saw the proof again in the way this Red King let himself be flattered and teased and manipulated. Kya's smile and tone pandered to Ibrahim's vanity, and he responded.

Ky was just finishing.

"We were afraid these callous people would tear us apart in their rage before we had our chance to explain. So we chose the opportune moment to seize the girl and hold her."

"Liars!" Brak countered. "Those two pit-things never put the scout under drugs. They put him in their power by starting to suck out his very life with their mouths!"

Kya's laugh was a bell in the wind. "What utter nonsense."

"King," Brak persisted, "I swear they're not what they seem. You must listen—"

"Listen to the slayer of my blood kin Efrim? You're a madman." Ibrahim's good eye blazed.

"Then—" Brak struggled for words. "Listen to this priest!" He thrust Pol forward. "Holy—and learned too. He'll tell you."

"The barbarian speaks the truth," Pol said. "Serving the Dark One, the god Yob-Haggoth, the man and

woman who presume upon your royal courtesy are in reality—”

“Stop your tongue!” Ibrahim raged. “I’ll no more listen to you than I will that ox with the yellow braid. I know your kind, priest, and your milksop deity. We worship stronger gods in Logol, and spit on the utterings of false prophets like you.”

For a moment no one moved. The angry words faded. Brak’s mind was a turmoil. Which way to turn now?

Ky and Kya advanced to Ibrahim’s horse in a leisurely way. Suddenly all reason drained from Brak, and with one terrible yell, he bolted.

The giant Stoneyes lifted his sword. But Brak was heading the other way. He caught a mule by its tether-rope, smashed the bale on its back with his fist. Blood ran down to his wrist as gems tumbled.

He ran to the next animal, tore a bale open, dodged away from ivory plaques dropping by the dozen. A third bale, shredded apart with great rips of his mighty hands, disgorged what he sought: the jeweled combs and mirrors.

Holding one mirror high, Brak dashed back toward the Red King. His hands were bloody, but his face was ugly with laughter. Ky and Kya were backing away, touching one another for protection.

Brak fainted left. Stoneyes raised his sword, guided his pony that way. Brak hurled himself in the other direction.

“Get down, king!” He seized Ibrahim’s boot. “Get down and look at your royal petitioners in the glass! They make no reflection because demons make no reflection—!”

“Restrain him!” Ibrahim shouted, beating at Brak’s head with his fist. The king’s pony reared. Stoneyes rode in close, snatched Brak’s long braid and tugged hard. Brak yelled, falling off balance.

As he fell, the glass sailed past his eyes. He saw his own distorted face. The left horsehoof of Ibrahim’s horse smashed the glass.

All around, Quran dismounted and leaped on Brak to beat him. He fought, outnumbered, and quickly sank back to his knees. Darkness swirled.

And then, in one hideous moment of insight, he understood the reason for the dissembling of the twins.

The men of Quran were strong. Hadrios had said that. The Blood-eaters were hungry for the blood and bone and life of Quran City itself. And they meant to have it.

Butt ends of lances pounded the back of his head, drove him face first into the sand. *Fool!* he cried to the Red King. But it was a cry that never left his throat.

Dwindling, ringing, the warning submerged into a dark that engulfed him completely.

Chapter X

Evil Stalks, Evil Smiles

In the gray and windy evening, Brak leaned his elbow on the sill of an unbarred window and, sullen-eyed, listened to the bells and watched the torches glimmering in Quran.

High walls of clay block completely surrounded the Jewel City, which Hadrios estimated to be inhabited by some twenty to thirty thousand souls. The big barbarian remembered those walls from yesterday’s

twilight.

He had wakened to find himself hanging head and legs down. He was lashed across a dappled Quran pony with his belly where the saddle would have been.

The procession wended across a plaza of hard black tile inset with an occasional piece of brilliant red. He remembered riders of Quran pressing close on their horses. The riders noted he was awake at last, then made obscene jokes about the kind of death that awaited him, and Hadrios, and the Nestorian, and—worst—Helane.

Blood ran down his face. It splashed on the tiles just a short distance below his hanging head. And he heard the bells for the first time.

They were red bells, he discovered later. Some tinting compound had been blended with the hot metal before forging. All the high towers in Quran—and there were many, surprisingly graceful and intricate despite being constructed of clay—were laced with belfries at their tops. The bells pealed in the desert twilight. Thus he came to the Jewel City, in chains.

Because of the walls and the way the towers were set so close together, the Skulwind blew less fiercely here in the city's heart. But its whine was still present in the big, sour cell to which he had been led.

Two smoky torches provided the cell's only light. Watching from the window now, the big barbarian still felt the sting of windblown sand against his face. Now and then clouds of it appeared, whirling in the air above the oval plaza directly below. The plaza was a long way down there. The tower face was sheer. The cell needed no bars.

In the twilight Brak's face was ugly. His eyes were red with weariness. His cheeks had a sunken shadowed look. The cell smelled of human waste and the mold of the straw strewn about. Bodies gave off a stench too. Hadrios's breath was unspeakably bad. Brak had smelled it all day.

The caravan master lay like a doll half unstuffed, his wood leg dangling down over the edge of a clay bench built out from the wall. Hadrios's eyes were wet with the rheum of illness. Helane was on her knees beside her father. She was trying to force a ladle of the evening's gruel to the old man's lips. He brushed it away. Bells chimed across the plaza.

“Outlander?” Hadrios wheezed.

Brak looked past Friar Pol, who had come up beside him and stood looking out. “Aye?”

“What—of the boys? Some of the boys were”—a rattling cough—“alive when—”

“Aye,” Brak repeated. Helane's father could not see the forlorn way in which she looked at the barbarian. A dozen times already this first day of imprisonment, Hadrios the Star-Tracker had asked the same question.

Brak answered as he had done before: “We have not seen the boys since the rest of us were locked in this cell last night. Perhaps—” He nearly faltered over the lie. “Perhaps the king, Ibrahim, decided he didn't hate them so much as he hates us. He probably set them free.”

Hadrios lay back regarding the ceiling. “I—hope so.” Each word was a labor. “Gutter boys, all of them. But—the ones who survived—good lads, even—even if you—did have to—frighten them—into bravery—”

On the point of exhaustion, Helane gave up the hopeless chore of trying to feed the old man and laid the

ladle back alongside the gruel bucket. Brak's nose wrinkled. The stuff stank. He had been unable to eat a single mouthful.

Helene walked to the window, scuffing her feet. Her skirt was ragged at the hem, and she had discarded most of her arm bangles. They had been bent by the manhandling Quran riders. They had treated her body as though it were one more treasure-bale to be pawed and examined.

Brak watched the torchlight illuminate strands of her hair. He licked at his lips. Those torches were an oversight on the part of the guards who maintained the high dungeon. He meant to take advantage of the oversight at the proper moment.

A shadow flickered on the cell floor. A tanned forehead appeared at the cell door spyhole. First a ruby gleamed. Then it was replaced by a sharp brown eye. After a moment the guard passed on. A trace of torchsmoke curled into the cell from the corridor.

"What's that sound?" Helene wanted to know.

"Drumming," said Friar Pol. "It started a moment ago."

"Shouting too." Brak pointed. "The streets are getting crowded."

It was so. Torches streamed along the various thoroughfares that led to the oval plaza below the prison tower. All at once, from one side of the plaza, half a dozen dwarfs waving bladders and carrying tiny drums pranced into sight. Their shadows streaked the black and red tiles. Several turned handsprings.

People began to arrive from the side streets. Quran soldiers with lowered lances barred their passage into the plaza proper.

Friar Pol's stubbled face grew even grayer. "May the Nameless God protect us! They're *celebrating*."

Scowling, Brak nodded. "'Tis the very aspect of a carnival, isn't it?"

He thought briefly of the caravan boys. Dead by now, surely. Had they fed the pair whose ghastly appetites were the result of a pact with Yob-Haggoth?

The floor of the plaza began to swim and shimmer with thousands of tiny, darting white lights. The lights grew more brilliant by the moment. Logol's gray dusk was gone. Full night had fallen. The mirror-reflections danced on the tower walls and swooped back and forth across the plaza tiles.

"They're coming in their robes of lights," Brak breathed. "The celebration's *for them*."

Hate seethed in his words. More and more of the red bells began to peal. Helene rubbed tiredly at her cheek. "How can the Red King be taken in by such deceit?"

Brak's big-muscled shoulder lifted in a shrug. "Why should he not be? They speak in a courtly way. They seem to be exactly what they say they are. Besides, the tale of Blood-eaters is so terrible it defies belief unless a man's seen the demons at work."

Ugly memories fled in his mind. They were quickly suppressed; that way lay madness. Their predicament was terrible. But that of Quran the Jewel was worse. The barbarian knew with a gut certainty that Ky and Kya wanted nothing less than the blood and sinew of the strapping men and robust women of this isolated kingdom.

Friar Pol roused as though from a reverie to add, "The Red King's bound to welcome two people who

deliver a rich caravan into his hands. The Quran are predators, and predators are as a rule practical people. Gems and combs and ivory in the hand outweigh a few wild tales told by prisoners.”

As the bells clanged, the light-points in the plaza darted over the tiles, scaled and leaped on the walls of the surrounding buildings. From the street along which the procession was approaching marched a line of extremely tall one-eyed men in ankle-length robes. They carried tall staffs. At the tip of each staff was a little statue of an imp-like god. The god was deceptively folded together, hands and knees at chest, so that it resembled an unborn baby. But its countenance was sly and fierce.

There were forty or fifty of the priests, pole and image. The Nestorian began to mumble. He fingered his stone cross. He looked faint, perspiring suddenly. The gods of Quran passed on.

Behind the priests came one-eyed bagpipers who skirled a wild, wailing war-melody. More torchbearers spilled into the plaza next, followed by drummers. Still the lightpoints flashed, their source still hidden. But they were blinding-bright. Canopy bearers came into view followed by two open litters. On one, Brak recognized Lord Ibrahim. Beside him was a woman.

Shar the queen was splendidly gowned. A large-boned woman, she was at least lovely. A waterfall of black hair caught the shifting little lights.

On the far side of the royal pair walked Stoneyes. His blade-shaved skull glistened with oil. His left hand rested on his sword hilt. Torchflare made the jewels in his face sparkle. How he walked unerringly, never faltering, never stumbling, Brak did not know. But watching the uncanny feat unnerved him. He noticed that the giant stuck quite close to his master and mistress. It was apparent that he bore them a great loyalty.

In a burst of light, the litters bearing Ky and Kya appeared.

Behind the barring lances at the side streets, the men and women of Quran cheered and waved their torches. The jeweled clothing which the twins wore radiated all the many light-sources and cast each one back a hundredfold.

Amidst the glare and glitter, Kya raised her hand, waved to the crowds. Then she looked up in the direction of the prison tower. She smiled. The tolling bells shook the very floor of the cell. Brak's belly hurt with anger and fear.

“They'll gull the Red King with smiling,” the big barbarian growled. “And when he's drunk or sleeping, bite his neck and begin their slaughter.”

“Call the guard again,” Helane pleaded. “Make him listen.”

He shook his head. “How many times have we tried it already, both the Friar and I? And with what result?”

She started to protest, recognized his pessimism, lapsed into silence. Friar Pol kissed his stone cross as the last of the procession disappeared from the plaza. His voice was filled with a quiet horror.

“It is the world's way. Evil creeps behind a civilizing smile. And most prefer to see only the smile.”

“Ibrahim, you roaring, screaming, obscenity of an ass!” Brak howled, beating his fist on the cell wall. The knuckle-skin split and bled.

His outcry wakened Hadrios, and caused corridor guards to rush to the peepholes and yell for quiet. Brak eyed the ruby flashing in the opening. Bleak hate tightened his jaw-muscles. But what good did it

do? What good? Penned here, their story of the Blood-eaters ridiculed, they were helpless. Quran would laugh and dance and drink and whore all night, then waken to find Ky and Kya feasting off the bone-marrow of its king and queen.

Brak fell to pacing. Friar Pol curled up in a corner and appeared to doze. Helane sank down beside her father and stroked his hand. That hand, resting on his belly, shook violently every moment or so. Hadrios's eyes were still slitted, but whether he slept or not, Brak couldn't say. The caravan master's breathing sounded like pebbles shaken on the head of a drum.

Outside, the bells rang unceasingly and the tumult of the night grew louder. Brak paced.

To one side of the cell.

Back.

To one side.

Back.

His yellow braid and the tail of the lion-hide swung in rhythm.

To one side.

Back.

He felt maddened, swallowed by a killing fury that grew more ravenous every instant.

He glanced through the cell window now and again. Crowds reeled through the oval plaza, packed the side streets. The whole city flashed and flared with light. "Halfwits!" he screamed at them. "Gulled, all of you! Gulled!"

But of course none heard him.

Wakening from her own half-sleep, Helane asked him to be quiet. He lay down in a corner, cramped and cold and hating the offal-smell of the straw. Head cocked down onto his chest, he watched one of the wall torches smoldering. He imagined how it would be to thrust that fire into the face of a ruby-eyed guard. His face was horrible to behold. At last he fell asleep to troubled dreams—

He awoke suddenly to a rush of men around him. Shadows of cloaks and plumed helmets flitted on the walls. Hadrios cried out, "No! Let me go instead! I'm done with life—"

"Why would the lord and lady of Jovis want an old wornout cod like you for a slave?" said the leader of the half-dozen men crowding the cell. "It's this one they've requested, and this one they'll have—"

"Don't, don't." Hidden by the crowding men, Hadrios begged. "Don't take my one girl—"

"Shut up, you bag of stinking gas." A leg lashed out. A boot struck flesh. Hadrios whimpered. And suddenly, above the cluster of moving shadow in the cell's center, Helane was lifted into sight.

She was fighting them. She hacked and tore at them with her nails. It took three of the Quran to carry her to the corridor.

Brak was full awake now. Ky and Kya had asked for her. But slavery was only the pretext, the smile on the face of the demons—

How much they must hate us for knowing their secret, Brak thought, the instant he gave a maniacal yell and leaped.

A sword whipped from a scabbard. The Quran thrust it at Brak. He turned sideways. The man ran past, off balance.

Brak took the man's forearm, clenched his fingers round it, broke it. The bone made two popping sounds. The man fainted.

The barbarian kicked through the suddenly confused mass of men. He tore one of the torches from the wall and swung it like a spark-tailed flail.

Men converged. Brak smelled charred skin, heard a howl. More men rushed in from the corridor. They bore him down by sheer numbers. Helane shrieked in the distance.

Torchlight cast wildly shifting shadows as Brak bit, gouged at eyes with his thumbs, kicked groins. Then he was on his knees. A Quran leaped on his back. A boot crashed to the side of his head.

Hadrios was sobbing, wanting to know what had happened to his daughter. A black gauntlet reached for Brak's hair. "I'll tear his obscene nose off and stuff it—"

"Hold!" The sharp command restrained the other Quran. "Lord Ibrahim's strict order. He must be kept alive and—*aieeee!*"

The speaker had let his pointing hand dangle too near the bloodied barbarian. Brak caught the gloved hand in his fingers and squeezed with the red rage running in him like a spring river. Finger-bones cracked, went limp.

The commander kicked Brak's head, drove him to the floor. From then on Brak made few sounds, only grunting twice as they beat him.

They struck him again and again. Mercifully, he blacked out.

He thought at first that he had gone blind. Then his eyes adjusted.

Scarlet reflections skated over the cell ceiling. The light came through the window from the plaza below. Otherwise the cell was dark. A single bell chimed on the far side of the city.

Friar Pol bent over the big barbarian, asked whether he could stand. Hadrios was crying somewhere in the darkness. Brak nearly felt like doing the same.

The Quran had not only taken Helane but Brak's only weapons. The torches were gone from the sockets in the walls.

A day went by. Another. The revelry in the streets did not seem to slacken.

One guard taking his turn at duty outside the cell proved more talkative than the rest. From him Brak wheedled the information that Lord Ibrahim had declared a week-long feast holiday. The holiday was meant to honor Ky and Kya, as well as celebrate the acquisition of the treasure from the caravan. At this Hadrios began to pound his fists on his chest and mutter like a child.

"Can't stand the thought of the wealth he went all the way to Timbello to get falling into our hands, eh?" laughed the guard. He was a coarse, blue-chinned fellow with a small ruby in the puckered socket of his left eye.

The guard set down the evening meal pot. Outside in the open doorway three other men of Quran watched warily. All three had swords drawn. Two bore torches to illumine the cell.

“It's not the treasure-bales he cares about,” Brak snarled back. “They took his daughter.”

“Took her?” The guard apparently hadn't heard this. “Where?”

Brak spat. “To hell, presumably. The fine royal twins said they wanted her for a slave. What they really wanted—”

He let the words trail off. The guard neither understood nor cared to. In fact, a little hint of envy lit the man's good eye:

“Ah,” he said, “then she must have been fetched to the next tower.”

Caution, caution! Brak fought to keep his voice level. “In the next tower?”

“The tallest one, right yonder. But of course, you can't see from that window, can you? 'Tis the tower where the Lord and Lady have their apartments, and the visitors from Jovis too. Don't fret for the wench. I imagine she's having a splendid time. From the first night of the feast, the visitors have hosted a continuous revel in their chambers. Many of the most noted men of the Jewel City are attending. Their women too. Sometimes,” he gossiped on, “I am told the brazier smoke is so thick, one can't tell who's which. Literally hundreds have joined the merrymaking.” All at once he recalled where he was and added with some bitterness, “Of course I only hear of it from my friends who stand watch on the other side of the footbridge that leads to the royal tower. My rank doesn't yet entitle me to service there.”

Thinking about it made him more quarrelsome. He walked over and gouged his knee in Hadrios' ribs.

The old man didn't move. He was stretched rigid on the clay bed. His beard was filthy. His eyes glared at nothing. His face was locked in lines of unmerciful suffering. The guard spat in his face.

“Don't have a thought for your wench. She's better off than you. She—” The guard flushed when Hadrios failed to react. He cuffed the old man's cheek.

“Do you hear me?”

"Let him alone."

The quiet, steady voice belonged to Pol. He had hardly any spare flesh on him now, and his cheeks were sunken deep. A little astonished, Brak watched the Nestorian walk forward and gently but firmly thrust the guard aside. Then he stepped between Hadrios and the other man.

“He's ill,” Pol said. “You've tormented him enough.”

The guard made a move toward the Friar. Brak shifted his footing ever so slightly. The other guards shifted then too, readying swords. From the corner of an eye the first guard noticed Brak's eagerness.

“Lice,” the guard muttered, wheeling. “Lice, all of you. Lord Ibrahim will dispose of you properly.”

The torchlight dimmed. The door closed loudly. In the dark Brak crouched down, thinking. *Royal tower. Footbridge.*

A reedy voice in the stillness: “Outlander?”

Unmoving, Brak said, “Aye, Star-Tracker?”

“I dream fitful dreams but I—I know they have taken the girl.”

“Yes. To be a slave of Ky and Kya, they said. Delivered to the Blood-eaters is the truth.”

“You must not—!” Pol began. Brak whispered back that he was sure old Hadrios already knew. So he did, struggling up on one elbow, his white beard a silver glare in the windowshine.

“If—you can escape from this place, outlander, find—find my girl.”

The barbarian could not hide his bitterness. “And rescue her like some shining prince?”

“No. Kill her.”

“What?”

“Kill her! Kill her. So she won't suffer more.” The old voice broke with emotion. “Pledge that to me, outlander, so I can rest easier. Swear you'll do it. Swear!”

After a long moment, Brak said in a somber voice, “I swear.”

Hadrios sighed and lapsed into silence.

Reflecting, Brak didn't know whether he had made a true vow to the old caravaner, or had lied in the hope that somehow they could all escape this nightmare, Helane included.

He still ached from the beating of two nights ago. But now a consuming itch of curiosity tormented him much more than the pain. The royal tower was near. There was a footbridge connecting it with the prison building. He really doubted their chances for escape. But vengeance might be another matter. He dwelled on the idea with such morbid glee that he almost failed to hear the door open.

“On your feet, you slime. On your feet for the king!”

Blinking, Brak reeled up into the torchlight. Several armed men preceded the royal visitor into the cell, including Stoneeyes. The giant remained close to the king's side after both got through the door.

Brak shivered a little. The giant's strength was even more evident at close range. Muscles like ropes stood out on his thick upper arms. He wore the black leather chest harness as before. And though the giant's head seemed to move hardly at all on his thick neck, Brak had the eerie feeling that the blind giant saw—saw—every movement in every part of the cell.

The barbarian noticed another odd thing. Men with high-pitched voices were gathered outside in the corridor, fussing, clucking, their shadows jiggling across the wall. Brak smelled a sweet scent.

Ibrahim peeled off one gauntlet, flexed his fingers. “You have been disruptive, barbarian. I had a report on it.” The king did not look particularly angry. In fact his skin seemed rather wan, as though he had over-extended himself at the revels. He wore black silk, with a high collar. A ruby the size of a fist hung on his bosom by a chain. His demeanor was that of one utterly exhausted.

“They took the old man's daughter,” Brak returned. “To the Blood-eaters. It is the truth, lord! If you would only listen to the priest, he—”

The sentence ended. Brak's mouth hung open. Ibrahim reacted instantly.

“Ill-bred scum! Why are you staring?”

"They have you."

Ibrahim's curving nose shone with sudden sweat. "When you address me, look me in the eye, barbarian."

But Brak could not obey. His gaze was held by the high black collar of Ibrahim's doublet. That collar that had shifted ever so slightly a moment ago, revealed three tiny black marks forming a triangle.

The Red King inclined his head. His collar fell back in place, hiding the marks. Slowly Brak raised his glance, his expression a mixture of pity and fury.

"Do they know, king? Do your people know the sweet twins have taken you?"

Ibrahim's ungloved hand clenched. "Say no more."

"But you bear the marks. You must tell them, king. You must tell the men and women of Qura who have gone to the revels of the twins that their king has become the pimp of their souls."

The guards reacted with growls. Ibrahim was faster, his ruby eye blazing like a sun as he slapped his ungloved hand to Brak's throat, constricted it like a claw. His face came quite close to the big barbarian's. There was a fetid odor to his breath. In the Red King's good eye Brak saw a dullness—the first stages of the lethargy, the slavery.

"I should kill you for what you said, outlander."

"Try it. I'm faster than you now, king. They've taken your guts—see?" With a slash of his hand, Brak knocked Ibrahim's fingers loose.

Stoneyes made a deep, rumbling sound, jumped at Brak with sword drawn. Nimble, Brak leaped away. Stoneyes slid a sandalled foot in his direction. Ibrahim, recovering his composure, barred the giant behind an outflung arm.

"No, warrior. Madness has unhinged his tongue. There's small pleasure in slaying a lunatic."

At these words from the Red King, the guards stopped whispering. Ibrahim forced his voice.

"I'll argue with you no more, outlander. Although your mind's weakened, your body is still strong. Thus you will serve the purpose I came to announce."

The Red King wiped a trickle of spit from the corner of his mouth. *The Blood-eaters had him. They would soon have the whole city.*

"Death would be too easy a punishment for killing my kinsman Efrim. Therefore, when you were chosen by my guests, I agreed. You can repent your errors in a lifetime of slavery. In the service of the royal twins."

"It's not for a slave they want me!" Brak exclaimed. "It's for a victim—like you!"

Ibrahim sniffed, retreated a step, shook his head. "Unhinged," he said again. "Now pay attention. My guests asked that you appear more suitably prepared than the wench was when she went to them. Therefore my eunuchs"—a glove lifted toward the giggling shadows in the hall—"shall dress you. You should make an amusing sight when they're done, and I look forward to it. The free, bold spirit drowned in perfume and smothered in peacock's pantaloons. I commend you to the slave's life, slayer of my kinsman. You'll hate that, I think. In a twelve-month—even perhaps sooner—you'll be madder than you are now."

Laughing, he turned and tramped out.

Stunned, Brak was unable to move for a moment. Then he grew conscious of men around him.

Men? They were more like sexless, puffy-cheeked boys in pastel robes. Some held torches.

One eunuch reached for the lion-hide around Brak's middle. The creature's ruby eye winked as he tittered, "Have done with that filthy garment, outlander." A tug. "Have done, have done, you scamp!"

"Have done, have done!" others squealed, attacking Brak from all sides.

The big barbarian caught the nearest one beneath the jaw, pulled the shaved melon of a head under his armpit and squeezed. The eunuch shrieked. His jawbone popped.

Brak spun. The others scattered, fell back. A gemmed hilt flashed. Brak leaped for it, pulled it out. He hoped the eunuch's ornamental sword was more than a toy.

It was, but only slightly. The eunuchs scattered to all sides of the cell. One dropped his torch as he picked up the skirts of his gown. The straw began to burn. Hadrios cried out.

"Trouble in there," a voice boomed in the corridor.

"Shall we summon the Lord's bodyguard back? They're only to the footbridge."

"No, we can handle it. Nivex, Cadmon—follow me!"

The straw shot up fire-tongues from the floor of the cell. The first of three corridor guards rushed through the door. A eunuch trying to flee stumbled into him. Cursing, the guard lifted the eunuch's head with his knee, kicked the wailing man aside. The other two guards crowded in. One was the blue-chinned soldier to whom Brak had spoken earlier.

Curved swords flashed back the light of the burning straw. "In a line three across," the guard in charge whispered. "But be careful. Lord Ibrahim will have our privates if we kill him."

"The hell!" blue chin spat. "We'll say it was an accident."

The eunuchs crushed together in one corner, bleating and hugging one another. The eyes of the guards—three eyes dark and moist, three red-facets—shone brightly as the men lined shoulder to shoulder. They slid their feet forward, inched toward the barbarian who stood with the tiny ornamental blade looking dwarfed in his fist.

Brak sensed Pol nearby. The clamor of Hadrios made it difficult for him to concentrate. Sweat ran down his chest.

Slide, the boots of the guards rasped closer. *Slide*.

Two more paces and they'd be on him. He watched the bent leg of the blue-chinned guard, saw it tense—

Scooping the point of the blade under some of the burning straw, Brak flung fire.

The guard in the middle yelled and dropped his curved sword. Brak ran barefoot through the blazing straw. The heat tortured his soles a moment. Then he was through. He leaned down to grab the fallen sword. The blue-chinned guard attacked.

Blue chin thrust out his sword arm to full length. Brak ducked, used his shoulder to pitch blue chin over even as he parried the blade of the third guard.

Parry—*clang*. Parry—*clang*. There was cursing—the sudden sound of men struggling behind Brak.

The noise made the third guard miss his aim. His blade slid by. Brak buried his weapon halfway to its hilt in the man's stomach. Then he yanked it free and swung around.

“Pol!”

The Nestorian was down, mortally hit.

The priest's gray habit was blood-blackened. The guard Brak had pitched over had done it. Brak caught blue-chin and threw him down. He stepped on the floundering guard's neck and held it while he cut it open.

Pol's thin fingers lifted something rough and pressed it against Brak's palm.

“More men—coming,” the priest gasped. “Run. Run and carry out your pledge to the old man if you can do no more before—”

All at once Pol went rigid. He struggled to clasp his hands together on his chest. He saw some horror far beyond Brak or this place and exclaimed, “Forgive me in my unbelief, oh my go—”

He rose up in convulsion. He fell back. His head struck the stone with a thud. His fingers relaxed.

Brak shivered in terror. What he held was the stone cross of Nestoriamus.

The barbarian thrust the talisman down against his belly under folds of the lion-hide. Torches were bobbing somewhere down the corridor. Hadrios pleaded to know what had happened. Brak felt doomed, as all of Quran was doomed.

But he had made a pledge. He would spend his last blood trying to carry it out. If the mad gods would only let him live just a little longer, he could die bringing vengeance.

Head down, yellow braid flying and curved sword wet and red, he ran from the gory cell. He turned right, away from the torches coming in pursuit. He plunged into the long, still passage that led to the royal tower.

Chapter XI Demon's Chamber

As Brak ran, the accumulated fatigue of the past days took a toll. The places on his body where swords or blows had struck began to ache in concert. He was filled with a sudden nausea. The floor of the dim corridor tilted slowly one way, then the other.

The shouts of the pursuing guards were closer now. Boots stamped; the men were running hard. He skidded against the wall, pausing a moment to gasp air and orient himself.

Ahead the passage was lighter. It sloped downward slightly. He saw the reason for the light, even as he sensed that the air here circulated more freely and smelled fresher.

A face, hardly more than a white blur, turned upward to him from the bottom of the sloping passage. A Quran, heavy and wide, stood on guard with a spear before a vertical lattice blocking the end of the corridor. Through breaks in the lattice Brak glimpsed another tower where many tiny lamps shone in

small windows.

The royal tower. The footbridge.

He forced himself ahead, driving his huge body by will alone. He cared nothing for saving the men and womenfolk of this piratical desert kingdom. Indeed, they should have been his mortal enemies. Yet on a scale and weighed against the infernal twins, the Quran came off the lesser enemy. It was the twins he wanted destroyed or balked. For Helane's sake, and to slake his hunger for vengeance. Lord Ibrahim was poisoned with the taint. But he still had one hope left.

The pursuers cried out to the lone guard at the lattice gate.

“Stop him, Alphonder.”

“Hold him with your spear, we're coming!”

“Tis the barbarian from the dungeons!”

But gross Alphonder knew all too well who was charging him with sword raised. There could not be more than one demoniac-looking warrior with flying braid in all of Quran. Alphonder the fat planted his boots, held his spear firmly with both hands and sweated.

Brak loped to the left of the corridor as he reached the bottom. Alphonder shifted that way too. Instantly Brak changed direction, hurled to the right, past the surprised guard. He reached the winch-wheel in the wall. The guard's good eye watered in fear as he turned and rammed his spear at Brak's ribs.

The barbarian pivoted, wrenched his head out of the way. The spear head hissed by his neck, gouged a chunk from the clay wall. Alphonder's mouth gaped in horror. He was bent forward awkwardly, both hands still on the spear shaft. Brak struck for Alphonder's gut.

The barbarian didn't care for the weight or balance of the curved sword in his hand. But it did a satisfactory job of killing. Alphonder howled and crumpled, his belly bleeding.

Brak jumped to the rope-wound winch-wheel. He turned it one turn. Up went the lattice. Gusting wind struck his face.

The footbridge to the royal tower was a precarious structure of planks and ropes. It swayed erratically in the night wind. Brak gave the wheel another turn.

The pursuing guards had nearly reached the bottom of the sloping passage. A spear made a flickering shadow on the wall near Brak's face. He spun the wheel and ducked.

The spear sailed through the space where his head had been. Dipping in the darkness over the footbridge, it tumbled to the streets far below.

One more turn. Then a quick lash to hold the rope fast. Brak dodged beneath the half-raised lattice and onto the bridge.

Wind nearly pitched him off. Dizzy, he saw a flash of fire down there, as at the bottom of a chasm. Another interminable festival procession. The wind ripped apart the wail of pipes and the chiming of the red bells.

He clung to the ropes that formed the rails of the swaying bridge. The planks sagged suddenly behind him as the guards came. He crept ahead as fast as he could.

Brak was a quarter of the way across.

Then half.

At the other end of the bridge there was another lattice. It was raised. A youthful guard dozed on a stool, a wine jar between his knees.

“Ho, wake there, Palliat!”

“Your sword, your sword, you sod—!”

But the sleeping guard roused slowly, rubbing his eyes and yawning.

The big barbarian didn't look down. The height terrified him, and vertigo threatened to topple him at every step. The guard at the tower end of the bridge stumbled to his feet. The wine jar shattered.

A spear was flung from behind. It hissed past Brak's shoulder as he reached the three-quarter mark of the perilous crossing.

Two strides. Two more. He lunged off the footbridge, pivoted, clasped both hands around the sword hilt. In the center of the bridge, the guards began shrieking and pawing at one another.

Flash, the curved blade hit one of the four thick ropes that fastened the footbridge to the wall. All of Brak's suffering and humiliation during the past days went into the avenging stroke. *Flash*. The heavy strand parted. The footbridge lurched.

The guards shrilled like women. Brak hacked at the other support rope on the same side.

The first guard nearly made it to the end. He reached out toward Brak with spread fingers. “Show mercy, prisoner, *show mercy and we'll spare—*”

“Ask your imp god for mercy,” Brak screamed, and slashed the second rope through.

The footbridge tilted, spilling the guards into the darkness. Screams trailed away to blend with the music of pipes below. Suddenly the torchlight down there seemed to scatter. Confused voices raised an outcry. The pipes skirled no more.

Panting, Brak turned. He hulked just under the lattice. The guard who had been dozing seemed frozen, unable to grasp his sword hilt with his shaking hand. His teeth clicked. One step, and Brak seized the guard's stool.

He brained the wretch, kicked him into the shadows. Then he stepped into the shadows near the wall himself. He narrowed his eyes to watch and listen.

The royal tower, at least on this level, was quiet. A long, opulent corridor ran into the distance. Its walls were decorated with red, white and gold stylized mosaics depicting Quran horsemen in battle formation on the desert. A few torches hung in brackets spaced far apart.

In the extreme distance, a door opened. Lamplight glowed briefly. The door closed. A dim figure crossed the corridor nearer to where Brak was hiding. A silver tray flashed dully.

Then, as a subtle undertone, he heard the laughter.

There were many voices, high-pitched, almost hysterical. And there was eerie singing in a minor key when the laughter subsided. The music threaded in and out of the sounds of merrymaking and made the

barbarian's belly tighten.

He was hearing the revels of the twins. Not on this level, perhaps, but not far away.

Before many minutes passed, he knew, men from the prison tower would reach this place by some other route. Alarms would be raised. He wiped his eyes, tightened his sword hand at a footfall.

Just a short distance down the passage, a figure appeared from a dark stairwell. He spied a stout woman, splendidly gowned with ruffs of white fur at her wrists. Of middle year, the woman carried a steaming vessel of silver. She turned right, walking away from Brak down the corridor. He stole after her.

Quiet as he was, the barbarian still made a slight sound as he crept up behind her. The woman half turned. She glimpsed Brak's elongated shadow on the wall, started to scream. He leaped, sword falling as he used one hand to catch her head, the other to stopper her mouth. The silver ewer crashed. Boiling water splashed his legs, bringing new pain.

The big barbarian crowded the woman tight against one of the mosaics. Row on row, tiled horsemen of Quran rode into the distance, their ruby eyes staring blindly at the tiled dunes while Brak wrestled the woman to a standstill.

The woman's eyes were immense above his clasping hand. He held her to the wall with his hip, changed hands so he could cover her mouth with his left. His sword made a little whicking sound as he drew it off the floor.

Far away a woman laughed hysterically. Male voices joined in. The damnable eerie singing threaded in and out, in and out—

The stout woman's breath was warm against Brak's palm. He slid the top of the sword to her cheek, laid the flat against a hairy mole alongside her nose.

"That's iron to kill you, woman," he breathed. "I don't want to take your life. But I will if you so much as peep when I take my hand away."

"Ummm. Ahhh, ahhh." Her mutterings were as wild as her eyes.

"Do you want to die, woman?" The sounds against his hand said no. So did her dark, staring pupils.

Carefully he lifted his fingers. The woman's lips pressed tightly together.

"Now answer," Brak said. "And in a voice only I can hear. You are a slave woman?"

"N-n-no. Freeborn. I—serve the royal household of my own will."

"Quibbling. You know the tower well. Including the Queen's quarters?"

"Wh—what about them?"

"Take me there. Your life's forfeit otherwise if you try to trick me."

It did not take the woman long to think this over. The barbarian's maniacal look cowed her. She soon nodded her head.

"I was on my way to an apartment near the Lady Shar's with water for a bath when you—" A swallow. "The Queen's quarters lie one floor above. We must take the stairs. But there are spearmen on duty at her door."

“Those I’ll worry about when we meet them. Now, woman, I’ll let you loose. I’ll only hold your arm lightly in case you run. Should you try, or yell, I’ll cut your neck from behind.”

He hoped he sounded suitably ferocious. He wasn’t certain that he could carry out the threat. The poor old creature didn’t know that, though. She made haste to assure him she would cause no trouble.

They started across the corridor. Brak pulled her back suddenly. They retreated into the shadows as a group of laughing men and women left an apartment at the corridor’s end. The party vanished down another stairs.

Brak hurried the servant woman through the feeble patch of torchlight and into the protection of the blackness round the stair opening. They climbed stone stairs.

“Are”—the woman seemed afraid to speak—“are you the wild man of the dungeons?”

“Oh, so they talk about me in this fine place, do they?” There was no humor in Brak’s voice.

“They have, yes. I recognized you by the descriptions. The gods have mercy, sir—you’re not going to kill Lady Shar?”

“On the contrary, woman. I seek her help.”

“In a strange way.”

“The only way,” he growled. “They’d kill me before I reached her otherwise. No more talk.”

In silence the two prowled to the top of the staircase. Brak discovered a corridor similar to the one below, but even more richly furnished. The walls were decorated with scarlet threaded tapestries that depicted different views of the small red imp-god which Quran evidently worshipped. To the right, the corridor ended after a few paces at high, ornate doors. Beneath flickering lamps above the lintel, two heavysset Quran were on post, at attention.

The men glimpsed the old servant woman, and Brak too. They dropped their spears to attacking position. One guard barked, “Into the light with you! Who is it?”

Brak jogged the old woman’s arm. “Irenzia of the household, masters. With—with—”

She could say no more. She began to blubber tears fully.

The barbarian thrust her under the nearest torch. The guards reacted instantly, lunging forward. One spied the sword Brak held at the woman’s throat and checked the other. Brak snarled, “You recognize me, masters? The wild man from the dungeons. I want to see the Queen.”

Confusion played on the men’s faces. One whispered, “Strike him while I sound the gong.”

“But he’ll kill the old sow, and she’s a favorite of the Q—”

“I seek the Queen,” Brak repeated. This was the desperate moment, the turning point. If they chose to strike him and raise halloos, he was done.

It was a time for desperate gambling. “I escaped from the prison tower and came here on a matter of highest urgency. Go in and tell the Queen that. She’s in there, I can see from your faces. Tell her”—he debated an instant more, then took the risk—“I will leave my sword behind at the door. But I must speak with her. If she refuses”—a muscle in his cheek writhed like a little snake—“the servant woman dies.”

The two guards debated silently. The moments ticked on.

“Go on!” Brak yelled at them. “Do you want this woman's blood on you?”

Finally a guard sidled to the door. “Watch him,” he whispered to his companion. “I won't be responsible for the death of the woman who suckled the Lord and Lady from infancy.” The door closed with a click.

Brak was aware of sounds in the silence: the oil lamps bubbling; the distant laughter and eerie singing; the heavy breathing of the remaining guard who watched him with moist, nervous eyes.

Finally the doors opened. The guard who had gone inside appeared. Through the opening Brak glimpsed dim chambers, soft transparent hangings. He heard the murmur of a fountain. The guard looked astonished:

“Queen Shar will receive you.”

Brak took a long breath. He would have only a short time. As soon as the huge doors closed, the guards would be away to fetch help.

“Stand back,” he said. “Far back. One to either side. I will drop the sword and release the woman as I pass by.”

They obeyed, if hesitantly. Brak walked to the doors, took his hand from the old servant woman. She fell in a heap, shaking and sobbing. He bent, laid the sword on the black and red tiles. Then he strode into the chambers of Queen Shar.

The doors closed. Boots hammered out there, running.

“In here,” said a low, sweet voice from his left.

The antechamber was dusky, with just a scattering of lamps. The hangings from the ceilings swirled gently as Brak passed. He stepped across a litter of pillows, passed through a wide door and came face to face with the Queen of the Quran.

“There is much blood on you,” she said matter-of-factly. “I gather you got it escaping from the prison tower.”

All he could do was nod. His eyes, busy searching the lamplit chambers.

Lady Shar stood near an immense bed with iridescent silver hangings between the corner posts. The hangings concealed the bed itself on all sides. A pair of lamps gave off wan blue light. There seemed to be no one lurking.

Brak turned his attention to the woman who stood before him, beautiful, composed and seemingly unafraid. She wore a gown of scarlet that reached high above her fine bosom. Her shimmering black hair was unbound. Nearly as tall as Brak himself, she possessed a calm authority that automatically made him think the word queen.

“How was the escape accomplished, if I may ask?” Queen Shar said. Her eyes were dark and inquiring, though not particularly unfriendly. Her cheeks looked pink with health.

“In time, my lady, you will hear all that. I must speak quickly of other matters because guards will come soon.”

“That's true. I am in very little danger. And I'm a strong woman.”

The barbarian bowed his head to acknowledge it. "What I must tell you concerns your royal guests, my lady."

"The twins?" A black eyebrow arched. "I heard the stories from the dungeons. I heard that you are convinced those two are some kind of demons." A smile began.

"Queen, it's true! That pair—they're servants of the god Yob-Haggoth!" And in quick, rude phrases, he told her what he knew, concluding: "They will kill the men and women of Quran one by one. They must be stopped or your city will be destroyed."

Queen Shar never so much as blinked. Her face remained in repose as she said, "Why do you choose to tell this strange tale?"

"There's no other with the power to take action, lady."

"And you would do this for the Quran? For the people who prisoned you and may well kill you?"

"At least, my lady"—his mouth turned ugly—"you of the Quran are human. They are not. And there is a girl—daughter of the master of the caravan—whom they took."

Queen Shar nodded slowly. "Yes, I believe I know of that."

"The King, Lord Ibrahim—" Somehow Brak's speech faltered.

Another cool, steady glance. "Yes?"

"He—has their mark on him. I saw it tonight."

She drew in a deep breath. "If you are lying to me—"

"Queen, I saw it with my own eye! Right here." He rubbed his throat.

The woman turned, paced away. She brushed at one of the ceiling hangings and sent it dancing.

"If I grant the possibility of what you tell me—that our royal visitors represent some supernatural threat—then I can believe all else. For the past days, the twins have held an almost continuous revel in their suite. Many of the city's foremost men and women have gone to join the celebrating, my husband included. I did not go because I frankly have no taste for that sort—drinking and lechery. Ibrahim does. But then, Ibrahim's a man."

"Where are these people who have gone to the twins?" Brak wanted to know. "Have you seen them since?"

The queen frowned. "No. In truth, I haven't."

"You haven't because the twins have taken them!"

She made a doubtful move. "I assumed they had slunk off to their homes, ashamed of their behavior. This endless celebrating was really the king's notion, you see. He was overjoyed with the riches of your caravan. So the entertainment provided by the twins offered him a pretext for having a good time."

Brak was dismally aware of how fast the time must be speeding. When would the guards arrive? More important, when would this tall, regal woman show him whether she believed? His stomach hurt. He was convinced the wild scheme had failed. Abruptly he wished he had sought the twins directly, and died fulfilling the pledge to Hadrios. He said, "To Ky and Kya, my lady, a celebration would be no pretext,

but a shining chance to find new victims.”

“Including Lord Ibrahim?”

“How long has it been since you've seen him?” Brak countered.

She mused. “A day. No, two. Still, I cannot bring myself to think that he—”

“All I ask, my lady, is that you take soldiers and go to the suite of the twins. See for yourself. If what I've told you proves false, my life is forfeit. But it won't be.”

She smiled. “You're very sure.” An odd smile, that disturbed him somehow.

In his tiredness, he simply said, “Yes.”

Blue lamplight shifted and shimmered. Queen Shar touched a long finger to her chin and gazed at Brak. A frown laid tiny wrinkles into her smooth forehead. He swallowed hard, bathed in sudden feverish heat that quickly changed to a chill. At last she spoke.

“What you tell me is a lunatic's story. Coming as it does from a man of your wild mien—a captive who, I suppose, has slaughtered good Quran tonight—I should not countenance it a moment. I should instead have you beheaded the instant soldiers arrive. But I have responsibilities. My husband Ibrahim contents himself with raiding the caravans. The welfare of the Jewel City remains in my hands. Man and woman—that is usually the balance, with all of the responsibility falling on the latter.” Her tone sharpened. “Make no mistake. I do not think well of you. You slew my husband's kinsman Efrim. By rights you're my enemy. Neither do I believe your rantings. They insult my king and my guests. But there is one thing I am not—or hope I am not—and that is heedless of the welfare of those I rule. For their sakes—for their sakes alone—have I subjected myself to this incredible interview.” Her smile was suddenly iced with malice. “What will happen to you is already foreknown. Beheading or worse, depending on how many of my men you've slain—”

“Beheading is preferable to being sent to the twins.”

“Be silent and let me finish!” She was in command now, no longer a soft female but a haughty noblewoman demanding respect, even veneration. “We will take the soldiers to the suite occupied by the twins. When your accusations prove false, I will have done my duty. I repeat—I do not believe what you say. But I will look into it because I must. And then I will take my revenge on you.”

Silence. The queen smiled her chilling smile.

“Do I make you angry, outlander?”

“No,” he said. “The opposite. I'm grateful to you.”

A contemptuous shrug. She turned away. “You will wait until I fetch my robe.”

“Gladly.”

Brak wondered how much longer he could stand upright. But he couldn't succumb to the night's pain and weariness yet. Out of chaos and fear, he'd wrested a victory. What did it matter if she condemned him as a lunatic? What did any of her threats matter? He had swallowed his rage and accepted them all, just to have her willing to summon armed men, go to the suite where the twins held their damnable revels and confront her husband.

She would see. Then Brak would find a weapon to destroy the twins and—he allowed himself a soaring hope. Even Helane might be pulled back from disaster now. The hope almost made him shout aloud.

“My robe is just here, within the bed,” said Shar, Queen of the Quran. With one swift hand she seized silver hangings. The rings jangled as she swept the hangings back.

Brak thought his brain would crack. *Who was laughing? Who was shrieking?*

Queen Shar.

She was shrieking like a carrion-crow, shrieking and pointing at him as though he were some dumb beast.

“You—you—pitiable—unlettered—fool!” She laughed and wept and held her thighs.

On the shadowy bed lay a naked and nubile slave girl. Her throat was a red ruin. Squatting above her like some filthy toad, grinning an obscene grin, pink-cheeked, pink-lipped, a smear of red on one impossibly swollen cheek—

Ky.

His pearl eyes flashed. Queen Shar's laughter peaked. “You—you—disturbed us—at—at a most—inopportune time—but—the game—the game Ky suggested—has been delicious—”

Ky giggled, licked at his bloodied lips. “Show him, queen. *Show him.*”

“Yes, yes, I must let him see—”

Breathing hard, she put both hands to the throat of her gown. She opened it to her breasts. In delirium and rage, Brak saw the marks on her breasts. Three tiny pricks of black in a triangle.

Ky and Queen Shar laughed till tears came. The dead slave girl rolled off the bed with a thump.

Cheap bangles on her arm tinkled faintly. Brak went completely mad.

He ran at Ky, locked hands on the demon's throat. Ky's flesh was suety with new fat, new blood-rich fat. Queen Shar scratched at Brak's neck. She clawed him and screamed abominable epithets as Ky writhed, trying to free himself. When he could not, he caught Brak's forearm and bent his head.

Too late, Brak tried to jump back. *Too late—*

Ky's teeth sank into the barbarian's muscle. Sank deep, bringing excruciating pain.

Something blurred at the corner of Brak's vision. He lashed out with his free hand, caught Queen Shar's wrist. She gasped, dropped the dagger she had been plunging toward his spine.

Somehow Brak got hold of the knife. He twisted it round while Ky snuffled and bit his arm again. A storm of pain tormented his mind. He could not last long now. He was too weak. But he must live long enough to turn the knife—*so—*turn it further—*so—*to plunge it with all his failing strength into Ky's gem-glittering chest—*SO—*

Ky raised his head. His pearl eyes were huge. Brak's hand shook on the knife hilt. He roared like a gored animal, pulled the knife out—

There was no blood on it.

He rammed the blade into Ky's chest again, pulled it out. *No blood.*

He struck thrice more. Ky began to giggle.

The demon shook with convulsive giggling. The pink fat of his blood-gorged face wiggled and jiggled obscenely.

Brak threw the dagger away. He bayed his fear and frustration in a wild howl.

“I claim you, barbarian,” Ky tittered. “I claim you our prey, our finest feast.”

Teeth clenched on Brak's forearm again. Blood weltered around Ky's lips. Brak knew the madness of ultimate defeat.

Pain flung him into an echoing haze where Ky laughed and Queen Shar laughed and there was the sound of blood rushing and bubbling, rushing and bubbling louder until—

Brak passed into sudden darkness.

Chapter XII

The Revels of the Damned

“Stand up. Stand up, I say. Damn! He weighs like a millstone!”

The darkness murmured. The murmur grew louder. Hands supported him, pushed him. His legs felt unsteady. There was sickening emptiness in his belly.

He tried to open his eyes to see the source of the murmuring. He realized that he was being held up and dragged along by other people. He sensed bodies close by, inhaled a sweetish pitchy smell—

“Release him, guards.”

That was a woman. Her suggestion was greeted with derisive cries from other unseen men and women.

“It's the outlander!”

“The one the Queen summoned!”

“Let him go the rest of the way alone, soldiers. We'll make him welcome!”

The hands were gone. He opened his eyes.

At first Brak thought he was staring at some collection of ghouls who had gathered round to escort him into the pit. Memory churned back, just as his legs betrayed him.

He started to pitch forward. There was applause, cheering. Hands seized his arms, his legs. Soft, fleshy fingers pinched his throat. He turned his head, spitting-angry—

Faces. Many faces. Women and men. All the men had a jewel in one eye. Both the men and women looked disheveled. Almost all had torn their garments. There on a curving breast—there on a muscular arm—there on a rouged cheek, he saw the marks in the smoke.

Three black marks in a triangle. The marks were on every one of the men and women of Quran who pressed close to him and passed him along to the front of the crowd like some piece of property.

Painted lips leered. Flushed, swollen cheeks shook with mirth. Brak was whirled and shoved and poked

and scratched, unable to summon the strength to fight off the cloying hands. There seemed to be hundreds of people packed together in a vast, smoky chamber where sullen torches winked. Goblets of wine traveled from hand to hand. A lyre twanged wildly. Murmuring and murmuring, the crowd reached into many other rooms that were equally dim, equally aswamp with motion. The crowd around him opened ahead, closed behind. He was being rushed forward to some unknown destination. And all the people were marked.

Even Queen Shar, he remembered. He knew utter despair then.

“To the center!” someone cried. “To the center so we can all see him!”

“Look at him!”

“Such strength! A feast indeed.”

“But who gets the feast?”

“Yes, who gets the feast?”

Others took up the cry as Brak was spun and finally thrown forward, free of the crowd. Black and red tiles rushed up. He shot his hands out, tried to break his fall. The crowd pressed in, yelling.

"Who gets the feast? Who gets the feast?"

Brak struck the floor. He lay panting and blinking. Then came the ultimate horror. He was to be the feast.

Growling, he weaved to his feet. He lunged at a grinning Quran with a huge ruby in his head. The man flicked the point of a sword at Brak's chin, drove him back.

“’Tis unseemly for the feast to run away from the table, outlander,” the man cried. More howls of macabre laughter. Brak ran the other way.

Swords met him, ringed him, sent him retreating to the center of the circle. There were hundreds of them, men and women, bloat-faced, pink-lipped, clothing torn orgiastically—and he knew at last the nature of this dim, smoke-haunted place. He was in the apartments of Ky and Kya.

The barbarian dug his nails into his palms to keep himself from shrieking in panic. The revelers surrounding him all bore the marks. Then where were the victims who had made their cheeks fat and their mouths plump and red?

Gradually then he became aware of other sounds. He searched for the source. Details were indistinct in the poor light afforded by the few torches on the walls, and brazier smoke clouded the air even more. At last, through a momentary gap in the crowd, he saw the cause of the sobbing and the laughter.

Half a dozen men of Quran were harrying the body of a slave girl. They stripped the last of her garments as another cry came. A Quran bit her forearm. The crowd shifted again. The awful sight was hidden.

His ears began to detect other moans or screams in other parts of the suite. In the Jewel City, some had been elected victims while others, at least for a time, enjoyed the profane pleasures of blood-eating. These latter were the kind gathered around Brak in a huge circle. Some of the men had drawn their swords lest he attack them. All had faces already gorged by unholy feasting.

“Tell us, lord! Tell us, lady!” they cried. *"Who gets the feast?"*

They chanted it to someone behind him. He turned, and then his eyes blinded with hate. On the high dais

behind the circle sat his three chief tormentors.

Ky occupied a curved chair. His twin reclined on a couch next to the chair. She was drinking from a goblet. Some of what she drank dribbled across her lips and down the goblet's side. It was too red for wine.

With a sly glance at the barbarian, Kya sat up. Her black hair swirled round her head like wind-tossed branches. She passed the goblet to Queen Shar, who sat in a second curved chair on the other side of the couch. The Queen's eyes were merry. She toasted him with the goblet, then drank.

"Who gets the feast, lord? Who gets the feast, lady? Who? Who?"

"There will be ample for all," said Ky with a gesture of benediction. "Wait but a moment more."

There was a sudden commotion back in the darkness. A man screamed hoarsely. Some sort of minor struggle was taking place. He couldn't see the cause.

Brak felt cold, dull-headed. He felt the oppressive sense of death very near. He hoped that when the time came, he could take some of these living ghouls with him; these damned fools of Quran who, enjoying their perverted pleasure for an hour, would fall prey to Ky and Kya at the last. He was certain the twins would emerge from this nightmare as the sole survivors. If he could only find a way to slay them—!

Then he remembered plunging the knife into Ky in Queen Shar's chamber. Defeat overwhelmed him.

How to kill an immortal demon? There was no way.

"Open a path!" Lady Shar exclaimed. "They're trying to get through with another guest from the dungeon."

Just as Brak turned to look at the roiling crowd, his eye was caught by something hanging dry and husk-like from a sword impaled in the wall.

The thing was vaguely human in shape. It twisted slowly in the smoke. All at once a flattened face became visible—Ibrahim the Red King.

Drained and stuck through with a sword, the king's remains flapped gently back and forth. Queen Shar, whose gown was open to her waist to bare the triangular mark she carried, noticed Brak's horror-struck expression. She turned to eye the bloodless body of her husband. All at once she smiled and gave a little shrug. She drank again from the goblet.

A tangle of robes and white beard came sailing past Brak's feet. *"Hadrios!"*

Making frightened sounds, the old caravan master struggled to rise. Brak assisted him. Hadrios's cheeks looked parchment pale. His eyes were huge and glassy, as if he were unable to comprehend the meaning of the madness he saw. Better that way, Brak thought suddenly. Better he sink into insanity than suffer through to the end.

More noise in the crowd. Someone else was hurled forward. Brak saw rubies flash, heard curses and sounds of fierce struggle. The new arrival was not going gently to his fate. Before Brak could see more, Hadrios clutched his arm. There were tears on his cheeks.

"The gods have damned me forever, Brak. Now I know it for certain."

"What's the use of cursing?" Brak whispered back. "We need to save what little strength we have for—"

"They have taken Helane!" Hadrios howled, pointing. Numbed, Brak followed the old man's pointing finger. All at once he saw her in the crowd.

Helane's lovely face was gaunt now, and too red in the cheeks. Her tawny hair hung in tangles around her shoulders. She regarded Brak and the old man as if they were strangers. Beside her, a wide-shouldered Quran teased her body with his gauntlet.

Sounds of fighting distracted the big barbarian's dazed attention again. He looked past Hadrios who was weeping into his hands, saw a shaved pate bob and disappear near the edge of the circle. Curved swords glittered. Soldiers swore. All at once the crowd heaved apart in terror. A giant figure lunged through.

Stoneyes!

The giant had an iron ring round his neck. A long chain hung from the ring. His lunge had torn the other end of the chain out of the hand of one of the beleaguered soldiers.

The giant's black leather chest harness was cut in several places. His huge torso was slashed and bleeding. Evidently the guards who had brought the giant here like a chained beast had been forced to use their swords to keep him under control. One angry guard who was limping stole up behind the giant and gashed his back with his blade.

The giant bellowed. The guard tried to dart back. Stoneyes caught him. Before any could prevent it, he wrapped the chain around the man's neck and tugged it with both hands.

The guard's mouth dropped open. His eyes bulged. Stoneyes released him. The dead man fell with blood spilling from his mouth. The crowd went wild. Men and women thrust past Stoneyes to fall upon the corpse. Mercifully, those who feasted hid their victim with their bodies. Brak heard snuffling, the gnashing of teeth.

Bleeding heavily, Stoneyes staggered to the center of the circle of watchers. He towered over all of them. His hands clenched to fists, unclenched, clenched again. Sweat mingled with blood in little rivulets on his chest. He lowered his head, swinging it one way, then the other. He saw or sensed Brak and the old man, and rumbled, "Evil portents, these. Caught and flung in with enemies—"

"We're victims, giant," Brak said. "All three victims."

"Not I." Stoneyes flung his head back. "Not I! Lord Ibrahim will undo the mistake."

"Look if you can up there." Brak touched the giant's incredibly strong arm, turned him ever so slightly. "See the thing stuck with a sword like a goat's bladder? That is Lord Ibrahim."

The wail from Stoneyes was mournful, like a child's. The crowd laughed and pressed forward another step.

Stoneyes bleated like a baby. "This is an accursed dream. That is not the king. That is not my lord."

It was a pitiable sight, but the giant's misery made a wild scheme surface in Brak's near-exhausted brain. Could he make use of the sorrow of Stoneyes? Not for escape—that was a hope long gone—but for destruction of this evil hall and its inhabitants?

He watched Stoneyes shaking his head and muttering to himself. Suddenly Brak felt a cruel new strength flood through him. He had seen before that the giant was almost fanatically loyal to his king. And to his queen.

Kya rose gracefully from her couch, held her hands aloft. She inclined her head toward the trio of prisoners at the center of the human circle.

“Now,” she smiled, “with the full blessing of Yob-Haggoth—the feast may begin.”

“Blessed is Yob-Haggoth,” Ky cried, flinging up his arms.

“There is no other god!” Queen Shar exclaimed.

And they roared: *"Blessed is Yob-Haggoth! There is no other god!"*

The din beat against Brak's ears like doom. The crowd began to edge forward from all sides. The barbarian watched Ky and Kya a moment longer. In their pearl eyes he saw their abiding hatred of him. Of all those in the damned caravan, he had come closest to balking them. They wanted his blood now. They wanted his bone. Their faces shone with the lust.

Ky seized his sister and embraced her as the crowd thundered, *"There is no other god!"*

A slim wench of Quran darted from the rim of the circle. She held a blazing oil lamp. Brak yelled, thrust his shoulder against Hadrios. But the old man was clumsy with grief. As he turned a tearful face to the barbarian, he caught the droplets of burning oil flung from the lamp full in his eyes.

He howled. More of the oil struck his beard, started it smoking. The crowd laughed, applauded.

The girl, slender of body but with cheeks swollen like little melons, bared her bosom to display the three black marks. She invoked the name of Yob-Haggoth in an ululating wail.

From somewhere, coals out of a brazier rained onto Brak's shoulder. He jumped, teeth clenched. The crowd howled with glee, shifting forward. The ring was closing—

Another Quran dashed out. His curving blade opened a new wound in the giant's arm. Stoneyes pivoted, shot out his hands to seize his tormentor, but the culprit had already hopped back out of the way.

Stoneyes took a lurching step. The crowd hooted. Brak glimpsed Helane again. Her face was expressionless. How far had she fallen under the spell of the insane revelry? She seemed to care nothing for her father's plight. She didn't even seem to notice.

A second swordsman raced from the mob, slashed the giant's leg and dashed on before the huge man could turn and catch him. Abruptly Hadrios gripped Brak's shoulder in warning.

The barbarian whirled, dropped to one knee. A Quran with upraised blade had come sneaking up behind. He looked at Brak's face. He looked at the bestial eyes under the thick yellow brows. He saw animal rage in every line of Brak's crouched body, and retreated.

“Are you afraid of them?” That was Kya, calling to the mob from the dais. “Can just three terrify you so? You, who have the immortal power of Yob-Haggoth to strengthen you?”

“Show them you're not afraid!” Ky exhorted. “They are the *feast!*”

“The feast, the feast!” The crowd chanted it mindlessly, starting to move forward like a single entity. Brak knew the end was coming.

He slipped up behind Stoneyes. “Tis your king and queen who bring us to this,” he whispered.

“Not true.” Stoneyes shook his head as he rumbled it. “The king is dead.”

“But the queen is alive, and her soul belongs to them. Belongs to the demons.”

The giant hesitated. “Queen Shar will not let it happen. I have served long and faithfully. I have protected my lady and the king with my life.”

“That makes no difference.” Brak was aware of the encircling faces coming closer.

“She will save—”

“Then ask her for mercy!”

“I know she will not let—”

“If you know, giant, ask her!”

Tormented, Stoneyes reared up. The chamber shook with his roar.

“My lady?”

“I am here, giant.”

“Spare my life. Spare the life of one who has had no other duty or joy but to protect you.”

Murmuring and murmuring, the crowd slipped nearer. Queen Shar ran a hand through her wildly tangled hair. She stared at the slab-shouldered giant a long and terrible instant. Brak held his breath. This was his final gamble. If it failed—

For a moment the Queen's eyes seemed to blur, her mouth to soften, as though she remembered the meaning of what the giant had said. Kya looked at her brother in alarm. He glided to the other curved chair. His obscenely white hand slid down to rest on the Queen's triple mark.

The Queen closed her eyes. The murmuring stopped.

Up came the Queen's right hand. “I took the king's blood and I'll take yours too. This for your mercy.” She made a filthy gesture.

Ky patted his palms together in mock applause. Stoneyes remained unmoving for one moment more. A rumble of approval grew in the crowd, like a storm nearing—

Then the giant went berserk.

Stoneyes charged straight into the crowd. His two hands caught two heads, clumped them together. Bone cracked. The roar changed to screaming. The crowd surged back.

Two men of Quran stayed to attack the giant with swords. He seized one's arm, snapped it like stickwood. He snatched the other's sword away, flourished it, whipped it around in a silvery arc. A head rolled. Another. Stoneyes ran at the crowd, wielding his sword and using his neck-chain like a flail.

The crowd split in panic. Anything caught by the giant's blade or chain perished, for these were still human beings, not yet imbued with the awful immortality of the Blood-eaters.

Now, thought Brak joyfully as confusion spread and his mind reddened. *Now comes the hour of killing.*

He left Hadrios to charge the crowd himself. He booted the nearest armed Quran in the middle, caught hold of the falling man's head, ruined his face by bringing his knee up beneath it. The man's sword slipped

from his hand. Brak retrieved it. A burst of new energy surged through him. *Let me live awhile longer,* he prayed to the unknown gods as he wielded the sword right and left. *Let me live long enough to topple this damned house of sin.*

There was more yelling throughout the hall as Stoneyes rampaged, and a confused clatter of running feet. A blood-gorged woman of Quran leaped at Brak to slit his back with a tiny knife. He lopped off her hand at the wrist.

She didn't fall. She jumped at him again, clenched her teeth on his back. He tore her off, and in doing so backed directly into another glittering nest of Quran swords.

The big barbarian slipped in blood, fought from one knee, goring a belly there, opening an arm there. The jewel-eyed swordsmen pressed in—

With an exploding *whoosh*, a tapestry at one side of the chamber caught fire. More screaming. Stoneyes was limned scarlet by the hellglare.

The chain dangled over his shoulder now. He had his red blade in one hand, a torch ripped out of the wall in the other. He fired a second hanging, a third. Columns of flame ate to the roof.

Brak pitched a new attacker over his shoulder, struggled to his feet. "Let the giant go!" Kya cried somewhere. "In the name of Yob-Haggoth—let him go! The outlander is the one we want!"

Another puffing explosion. The giant had reached another of the interconnecting rooms, set its hangings afire. The hall in which Brak fought had become noon-bright.

Hacking and parrying, the barbarian found himself suddenly next to old Hadrios again. Somehow the caravan master had come by a blade. He was fighting, though feebly.

Most of those who feared the giant's attack had fled. The rest—still a considerable number—had returned to ring the barbarian. Brak disposed of two more of them, giving one a split throat, the other an opened groin. Only two more swordsmen were within striking distance. The others had retreated to the re-formed circle. Brak's vision was foggy. He wiped blood from a forehead wound. Back to back, he and Hadrios awaited the next onslaught.

The crowd didn't move. Brak began to shudder uncontrollably. A burned hanging fell, raining fire on the floor. Everything went scarlet. He fell.

Strength rushed away like water through a broken floodgate. His sword clattered from his limp hand. He had taken more wounds than he realized. He lay on his belly, Hadrios standing beside him.

Ky and Kya stepped down from the dais. They were smiling.

The gems on their clothing reflected the spreading fire, strewed scarlet stars on walls and ceiling. Their eyes loomed like silver suns in a red firmament. Their expressions were beatific as they stretched out their hands toward Brak where he lay.

"We shall take him," said Kya.

"Yob-Haggoth shall take him," said Ky. His teeth, pink now, glared. They were just a dozen steps away. They moved very slowly. They almost appeared to float.

And he had no weapon to use against them.

Chapter XIII

The Stake and the Fire

Surely it was delirium, in these last chaotic moments before the end. Surely it was delirium raising specters that hovered where Ky and Kya walked with hands reaching out.

Brak stared in numb horror past a shuddering Hadrios. The old man had fallen. He was digging at the lacquered tiles with his fingernails. But his body would not move. Paralyzed with terror, he lay clawing and whimpering. Once more he tried to drag himself away from the jeweled figures gliding toward him. Once more he failed. Beyond him, Brak saw the specters—

Mother Mil.

Civix.

Captain Gorzhov.

Friar Pol.

He saw the wraiths clearly, even though the smoke in the chamber grew thicker by the moment. He saw them even though they were transparent; behind Friar Pol's head, flames belched and ate the murals on the walls. Flames curled the paint and made it bubble; hundreds of Quran horsemen blistered and shredded and fell in burning droplets.

All the tapestries were afire. The conflagration had spread to all the adjoining chambers. Most of the revelers had fled. What few remained to watch the final blood-taking had fear-tainted eyes now. They glanced to the flames as often as they looked at the slowly advancing twins. In the murk and glare Brak thought he saw Helane, her expression one of uncertainty, as though she still did not know where her loyalty lay in this last hour. Then the smoke hid her.

The specters swirled. Brak knew they were only in his fevered mind. He scrubbed at his eyes with one bleeding knuckle. When he looked again, they were gone. Suddenly a windblown black cloud screamed round his feet.

The chamber and its burning ruin fell away. Through ebony billows, Ky and Kya floated near. Their blood-fattened faces were lit with ecstasy. Behind them, Brak saw blind carved eyes, a downturned mouth with all the world's cruelty in its brutal curve. Yob-Haggoth watched his children.

And smiled.

Brak shrieked in mortal terror. The smoke roiled across his eyes. He was in the burning chamber again, struggling to stand and meet his death on his feet.

He glanced down at his own gory hands. Like heavy things they hung at the end of his reddened arms. Strong once, those hands. But not strong now. Not strong enough to destroy the Blood-eaters—

The twins sensed his thoughts somehow. Kya laughed. The sound was like high tinkling bells. Then she began to sing.

Her brother joined her. Their voices blended in an eerie hymn of victory. Brak weaved back and forth, nauseatingly dizzy.

Run! his brain told him. Seize them! Tear them with your hands!

He knew it was useless.

Four pearl eyes grew larger. The singing pealed and peaked. The twins were only half a dozen paces away. Kya was curling her fingers gently, curling and curling them to beckon him, to invite him. Her tongue teased her lips in vile invitation. The singing twined inside his mind and suddenly he understood its wordless call:

Come and surrender life. *Come and surrender life.*

They were only five steps away.

He would not die like this! He hated them. He hated them for what they had done, for what they represented, hated them beyond all hating—*KILL THEM!*

But there was no way.

Four steps.

Ky took his sister's hand. They floated like phantoms, their feet surrounded by black smoke. The same kind of smoke he had seen at the infested river. The bodies of the twins vanished in the rising clouds. Legs gone. Waists gone. Torsos going, vanishing—

With a beast's cry the barbarian struck at the smoke with his fist. He lost balance, toppled across Hadrios. The old man moaned. Brak climbed to hands and knees. The smoke swirled near his outstretched legs. He braced himself for the touch of it, the abysmal pain that would signal the beginning of death—

And in that moment, he found himself staring at something strange. It had been jarred from the folds of his blood-streaked lion pelt when he fell. A curious thing, it was. Curious little artifact of stone—

And then he remembered what Pol had said beside the river. The twins were upon him now, all save their shining faces lost in the thick black smoke. The smoke licked his legs. He reached down and seized the wood leg of Hadrios at the place where it fitted into a kind of wood cup at the stump.

Both hands on the wood, Brak broke the leg.

Hadrios arched his back and screamed like a damned soul. The smoke ate upward to Brak's waist. The wood must be blessed, Pol said. Brak plunged the sharp shaft down till it touched the cross of Nestoriamus. Then he drove the stake into the smoke with all the force left in his body.

He felt the stake impact against something solid, penetrate. All at once pearl eyes rushed at him. Ky's head emerged from the smoke, convulsed with hate. His features seemed to be freezing—*hardening.*

A white puff of smoke issued from the enraged, wide-open mouth. Ky's head flew apart like a smashed statue.

The smoke boiled furiously. Brak was on his feet now. He raised the stake high over his head. Strange greenish-white lightnings played across his face, his naked bleeding torso. He looked like some avenging god.

He thought he heard thunder. With a flash and a roar the smoke began to rush away. He stretched out one swift, cruel hand, gripped something soft-wiggling, drew it back.

He held a living woman now. She writhed and spit in his face. She bent her head to bite his hand. He arched the stake higher and the green-white lightnings flashed and thunder boomed. Brak shrieked, "*Demon!*" and struck.

He pulled the splintered wood from Kya's throat an instant later. On the end of the stake was smeared an ichor that smelled of putrefaction. Kya reeled back. Her hair was turning white. Her cheeks were freezing into hardness. That curious puff of whitish smoke squirted from her mouth—

In her eyes Brak saw suffering. The eyes bleached out as he watched, and hardened. He laughed the laugh of a savage tearing a kill apart, and Kya's head sundered into a thousand chalky fragments.

The smoke howled like a whirlwind. It swept up into a funnel cloud. The cloud spun faster and faster, turning in upon itself, growing smaller—

Until nothing remained but an ashy pall.

The ashes drifted down white and soft. They powdered Brak's dirty yellow hair and the upturned face of old Hadrios. They fell on the lacquered tiles like eldritch snow. Brak looked at the stake in his hand.

It shone with that black pus. It smelled of perdition. He flung it into the creeping fire. It vanished with a thunderclap.

Scurry-and-whisper. Scurry-and-whisper. The last of the revellers were running.

Overhead, a beam gave and came crashing down. Brak managed to thrust Hadrios aside in time. The beam scattered bits of burning wood over Brak's back, but he was almost beyond pain now.

There was a curious, almost childish brightness in the eyes of old Hadrios. Brak knelt down. He laid a hand on the caravan master's shoulder.

“They're gone, old man.”

“Gone?” Hadrios did not understand. “Gone?” Was he insane?

“Destroyed,” said the barbarian, ducking his head so that sparks and coals from another tumbling beam would not strike his eyes. He wanted to make Hadrios understand. But he was too sick and weary. He fell into a kind of torpor, crouching there.

Down came a whole section of wall. It spilled burning scraps of tapestry across Brak's feet. He tottered to his feet. All at once Hadrios began thrashing and wailing.

“We'll burn, outlander. We'll burn!”

Burn they would, unless they moved very fast. “Up, old man.” Brak dragged the caravan master to his feet, supported him and limped toward the only door still free of fire.

Through the steamy grayness and drifting sparks he saw a face. A girl. Unmoving, as though she slept on her feet.

“Helane!” Brak limped toward her. He had no idea where he found the strength, but somehow he did. He caught her arm. She protested.

“The lord—the lady—”

“You no longer serve them if you ever did at all.” He managed to lift her, flop her across his shoulder. “They're dead and damned.”

They fought their way through blazing halls to a stair, and thence downward through creeping smoke. On a floor above them, walls crashed and collapsed. Even the stair itself grew shuddery. Finally, a flight

above the street, Brak thrust Helane through a narrow window and jumped after her dragging Hadrios.

The old man gave a bleat of pain as he landed on the snapped shaft of his peg leg. Brak hauled him up and seized the girl's hand. She pushed hair from her face. There seemed to be a little gleam of sanity in her eyes all at once.

Half the towers in this part of the Jewel City were alight, burning in their upper stories. The red bells pealed against the noise of gongs beating and voices crying out. Men and women swept past them carrying hastily prepared bundles of personal things. No one stopped the barbarian and his companions as they weaved their way across the great oval plaza.

The three soon became part of a rushing human river. Behind, the royal tower's top half tilted and fell. It burst on surrounding lower buildings and set them ablaze. The bells rang madly. Against his face Brak felt the sudden gritty gust of the Skulwind. Still blowing strongly enough to fan flames.

In the center of the fleeing mob the old man leaned on Brak's shoulder and hopped along on his one good leg. Helane clutched at the barbarian's other arm. They fought and cursed and kicked when people pressed too closely.

The crowd funneled through a narrow street toward a high gate. High house walls on either side shone like sheets of red silk as the fire gained strength behind them. A plumed helm went bobbing past. Another. The men of Quran were just as eager to escape as the women.

One of the running men chanced to glance at Brak. He recognized the barbarian. There was sudden consternation in the man's good eye. Then the man stumbled and fell. The crowd trampled him.

Hundreds, thousands were fleeing. There was wailing from high windows.

"Is it true? Is the Red King perished?"

"Stoneyes torched the city—"

"Queen Shar is gone—"

"The little red god punishes us all—"

"The visitors with whom the king had traffic brought this wrath upon us!"

Helane's tawny hair streamed. Brak did not dare look at her face, concentrating on the gate ahead. Was she sane again? *Was she sane?*

The mob poured through the gate into the waste of Logol and rampaged away in all directions. Brak, Hadrios and Helane went straight ahead. The Skulwind scourged Brak's eyes. His gashed ankles and legs foundered in sand. How far did they walk? A league? A thousand? He never knew afterward.

Hadrios kept wanting to stop. Brak pressed for putting more distance behind them. They passed sad clumps of men and women of Quran. The survivors hardly gave them a glance. Their faces were turned toward the brilliant light behind.

At last, on a dune top where the wind whistled and bit, Brak fell on all fours.

"No more," he wanted to say. No sound came out.

He did manage to turn his head just a little. He saw turbulent clouds and pillars of fire against the sky as the Jewel City burned in the breath of the Skulwind. A last bell tower collapsed with a faraway crash and

clang. Cool fingers crept round his hand.

Helane's fingers. He felt life in them. He sobbed once and lay still.

In the east along the rolling horizon of dunes, slits in the morning clouds revealed a cold greenish light. The Skulwind murmured on his eardrums. A few particles of sand grated against his cheek. He listened to the wind a moment. Then, with great effort, he rolled his head and squinted.

Hadrios was seated in the sand with his chin in his palms. Seldom had the barbarian seen a more abject study in misery. The old man's filthy white beard flapped like a rag. Out past the old man, an awful pall of smoke smeared its way upward. The Jewel City itself could not be seen because of the intervening dunes. But the towering smoke told the tale of destruction.

The way the smoke diffused high in the sky told another. The wind had dropped a little. But the slits in the eastern clouds were closing. Clouds gathered above dunes visible to the south.

Brak turned his head again. Muscles in his neck ached. He saw a blackish clump crawling over a dune not far away. He rubbed his eyes. The clump became a band of men and women with bundles of belongings. Here and there on isolated dunes there were similar groups gathered. The last watchers. The last mourners for the demons who had left the earth in that ascending smoke.

“Father?”

The voice was almost a mockery of its once-husky sweetness. The barbarian turned his head again. He saw Helane.

Her eyes were ugly, haunted by memory. She squatted on her haunches, her skirt rent in half a dozen places. She looked filthy and frightened. But she was alive.

The girl plucked the old man's sleeve. “Father? Brak is waking.”

Hadrios looked at her with lackluster eyes. “What good will it do us?”

Then the big barbarian knew that despite the agony of his dirt-crusting wounds and the storm of pain in his flesh he yet had a distance to go.

It took him many moments simply to thrust his hands under his chest and push upward. He drew in lungfuls of air. The sand-laden air tasted sweet as life.

His thoughts operated slowly, turgidly. He needed a sword. He'd lost his long ago. In the prison tower of the Quran, he thought. There was a need to find another, if—if—

If what?

He remembered Khurdisan, and pushed harder. He rose to all fours. Hadrios watched, lips slack.

The little token of Friar Pol—what had become of that? What did the final moments in the demon's nest prove about the power of the Nestorian's Nameless God? Brak hadn't the wits to untangle all the ramifications. Besides, they frightened him. He preferred to deal with more practical matters. Such as staying alive in this waste without food, without water.

At last he stood up. His long yellow braid snapped in the rising wind. All the green had drained from the sky. The clouds were closing. The pillar of smoke from Quran shredded more rapidly now. Brak felt the Skulwind's bite as he tottered toward the old man and his daughter.

Helane gained her feet. She tried to smile. Then she brushed at her hair, the eternal feminine gesture.

Saying nothing, Brak touched the point of her chin. Tilted her head. Exposed her throat. Saw with sick despair three tiny black pricks forming a triangle.

“Who marked you, girl? Ky? His sister?”

“Neither.” Her speech faltered. “One—one of the courtiers, I think. I can't remember.”

“Can't or won't?”

“A little of both. Gods, a little of both.” Sobbing, she crushed against him.

She pressed her body tightly to his, as if to steal the faint animal warmth of his skin. He ran an awkward hand through her hair. The girl's tears streaked his chest. They were warm. They made his skin itch.

He fingered the three marks. Not quite so deep as those he had observed on other victims of the twins. Perhaps a kiss from one of the sycophants of the demon pair was a kiss less lethal.

Helane saw Brak's bleak gaze and understood his worry.

“I think my own thoughts now, Brak. I'm free of—them. I almost wasn't, but—but you came to their rooms in time. Look.”

She raised her right hand. One dented bangle still ringed her wrist. The back of her hand was cut in several places. She picked at one cut. Brak watched a little drop ooze forth. The drop was brilliant red.

Satisfied, he nodded.

He was drained of life in a different way. But there were leagues yet to travel. His weariness didn't matter. This girl could not find her way alone. Nor could the old caravan master, who had begun mumbling to himself again. Across a dune southward, a last band of refugees from the Jewel City was toiling into the distance. Behind them a rampart of gray cloud built and built, darkening the sky.

He wanted to abandon these two. He was weary of the pretenses and petty vices of civilized men. Weary of the way their paths always led, it seemed, to slaughter. He reflected a little on what Friar Pol had told him about the gods struggling for supremacy. And as he held Helane tightly to soothe a fresh burst of crying, he wondered sadly whether, having had a taste of the knowledge of the world and its warring deities, he could ever escape the struggle. Would he be free in Khurdisan? Would the end of the journey be as shining as he dreamed? He hoped so. That hope stirred him enough to get his ruined body moving again.

“Old man?”

Spittle beaded on Hadrios's lips. “Ah?”

“How far do you judge it to Samerind?”

Hadrios waved at the graying horizon. “Leagues.”

“Tell me in days, not leagues!”

The force of Brak's voice shocked the old man out of his despondency. “Why, I'd say about three to four. In that time we could reach the outlying caravan routes from the Mountains of Smoke. It would be another day or two to the city.” He shook his head. “We cannot make it.”

“We will,” Brak insisted.

“No, no.” Hadrios rocked back and forth. “No, it’s much too far.”

Brak pulled the old man to his feet. *“We will!”*

Hadrios wailed and nearly pitched over. He had trouble standing, now that nothing remained of his wood leg except a few sharp splinters near the knee. Brak bunched his shoulder under the old man’s arm to prop him, adding, “We’ll reach the caravan routes if I have to haul you by the beard. We went into hell and came out again. We can go the rest of the way.”

Helane looked frightened again. “Brak, he’s weak. He may die if we try to travel across—”

“He’ll die for certain lying here moon-blubbering!” Brak yelled. “Which will it be?”

She searched the barbarian’s face. Finally she spoke.

“Samerind.”

“Aye. Let’s waste no more time.”

“Brak—” Her hand touched his arm. There was a strange forlorn light in her eyes. “What after Samerind?”

The barbarian saw again how beautiful she could be, once this terrible passage was done. He struggled with the temptation but finally put it aside, telling her gently, “Why, the same road I was following when we met.”

“Khurdisan?”

“I’d die here myself if I didn’t have that before me.”

She said no more. He averted his head. She was ashamed of her tears. But they were tears of a different kind than she had cried earlier. They were tears of life.

The big barbarian glanced uneasily at the sky. The wind was growing stronger. How would they live through it? He thought of Khurdisan, a gold crescent of a land, and that helped thrust aside stained images that troubled his mind: the stone scowl of Yob-Haggoth; the promise of the wizard Septegundus to bar his path at every opportunity. He concentrated on imagining the glow of a mellow southern sun flashing from turrets and spires of gold leaf. Shining. Shining off there beyond the pall of cloud.

That was all he had between life and death, really. Perhaps it was too little for some men. But it would serve him.

To signal their departure, he growled deep in his throat.

They stumbled down the side of the dune. Laboring up the next dune took an eternity. When they reached the top, Brak halted suddenly.

There, hollow-cheeked, stood half a dozen men and women of Quran. Their finery was black with soot. One of the warriors had a great pus-dripping wound in his face. Someone had torn the ruby from its socket.

The man recognized the big barbarian. He spat out an epithet, reached toward the scabbard at his waist. A woman beside him caught his hand.

“Leave off! He slew the demons.”

The Quran warrior closed his hand on only empty air. He started. He had lost his sword and forgotten his scabbard was empty. Supporting Hadrios between them, Brak and Helane moved on.

The big barbarian looked back once. The survivors continued to watch from the dune. The warrior with the empty eye and scabbard signed against the evil eye. Then, dragging bundles of belongings, the survivors moved on.

The figures of the barbarian, the girl and the old man dwindled in the south, blending and disappearing into the wall of gray cloud where the Skulwind blew. On the waste of Logol the smoke and the wind filled the silence.

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