Wake, and come to me...

"I am Karrakaz, the Soulless One, who sprang from the evil of your race. ... There is no escape from Karrakaz now...

"The steps beyond the altar lead upward and out into the world. But if you go, you are cursed, and carry a curse with you; there will be no happiness. The civilization which bred you is dead uncountable years.

"Your palaces are in ruins.

"The lizards sun themselves in the dried up fountains and the fallen courts.

"And you—I will show you to yourself. Recollect, you should have been powerful, a magician who ruled the elements, the stars, the seas, the deep fires of the earth. All things might have done your bidding. The power of flight was yours, the chameleon art, the art of invisibility—and beauty.

"Let me show you what you are."

The Birthgrave

TANITH LEE

DAW Books, Inc.

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, PUBLISHER

1633 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

PUBLISHED BY

THE NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY OF CANADA LIMITED

FIRST PRINTING, JUNE 1975

56789

DAW TRADEMARK XBGIsnUD PAT. OFF. MAKCA KBGI3TSADA. KECHO IN U.S.A.

PRINTED IN CANADA COVER PRINTED IN U.S.A.

INTRODUCTION

by Marion Zimmer Bradley

Don Wollheim wrote to tell me he had just bought a long novel by an unknown Englishwoman whose only previous books had been written for children. He asked me to read it and, if I felt it was something I could honestly praise, to write an introduction.

It arrived on a morning full of annoyances. I was still recup erating after a slipped disk, so that I walked with a sort of careful crouch and winced when I hefted the thick manuscript. Still, I'd promised Wollheim and he*is* my own publisher, so I surveyed the fat mass of copy paper without enthusiasm, cautiously lowered my aching back into a kitchen chair, and spread out the manuscript on the table.

So I turned the first page and found myself in the heart of an extinct volcano, in darkness, with a woman who did not know who she was, or where she was, or why. ...

And before long I forgot that I was reading this out of duty, or a promise to an editor, or anything else. I even forgot the kitchen chair and the bad back, although after a couple of hours (sleepwalking, still reading with the manuscript box under my arm, unable to set it aside even to hunt a really comfortable place) I*did* shift myself from kitchen table to living-room sofa. I had forgotten everything except the nameless woman and her mysterious quest.

I am a remarkably fast reader, but it was almost five hours later when I turned over the last page, read THE END, and surfaced with a start and a shudder.*Wow,* I thought,*Oft, wow!*

All I thought about the task of writing an introduction was that I'd have a chance to share with the other readers something of how I felt about this terrific new discovery.

It's a strange and rather disturbing book. It's filled with ad venture and beauty, rich alien names, half-sketched barbarian societies, ruined cities, decadence and wonder. A nameless woman, knowing only that she is under a curse, comes out of the heart of an extinct volcano. Everything is strange to her. Is she healer woman, witch, goddess, as the various peoples call her? Can she choose to be courtesan, warrior, queen? She goes from tribe to tribe, city to city, with the curse of her past following her wherever she goes. She can suffer pain—but she is deathless, except by her own will; she is drawn endlessly by the quest for her identity, her forgotten name, the mysterious Jade which—she believes—holds the key to her soul; and everywhere she is pursued by the image of the Knife of Easy Dying, which alone can kill her.

Comparisons are odious, yet as I read this I thought most often of the "Dying Earth" stories of Jack Vance, under whose spell I had fallen as a girl. THE BIRTHGRAVE has something of the same color and wonder; something, too, of the strange undertone of doom and sadness.

And there was something else.

Most women in science fiction write from a man's viewpoint. In most human societies, adventures have been structured for men. Women who wish to write of adventure have had to ac cept, willy-nilly, this limitation. There seems an unspoken assumption in science fiction that science fiction is usually read by men, or, if it is read by women, it is read by those women who are bored with feminine concerns and wish to escape into the world of fantasy where they can change their internal viewpoint and gender and share the adventurous world of men. Maybe this was true at one time. The women's liberationists would say that we women writers, too, had been brainwashed into accepting this pervasive social trend.

By and large, most of us have accepted the unspoken dictum that this is a man's world, and if we wish to compete in it, we shall do so as men. All of us, and I include myself, have written mostly of men's doings and concerns, and all too often from a man's point of view.

So maybe this is the book we've all been waiting for.

Here is a woman writer whose protagonist is a woman—yet from the very first she takes her destiny in her own hands, neither slave nor chattel. Her adventures are her own. She is not dragged into them by the men in her life, nor served up to the victor as a sexual reward after the battle. For the first time since C. L. Moore's warrior-woman, Jirel of Joiry, we see the woman adventurer in her own right.

But this book is not an enormous allegory of women's liberation, nor an elaborate piece of special pleading. It's just a big delightful*feast* of excitement and adventure.

It's a*long* book. You get involved, learn to know the people, get fully submerged in the colorful and fascinating world Tanith Lee presents. And I predict that when you, at last, satisfied but regretful, turn over the last page, you too will wish there were more.

As I found out when I read it through under what must be called acid-test conditions, it's what Don Wollheim calls "a good read." But it's more than that. It has something to say to every reader, man or woman, about the eternal questions of existence and identity. And, although as I said before, it is*not* a piece of propaganda from women's liberation, it may say more for all of us, women and men too, than the whole humorless crowd of Steinems, de Beauvoirs, Friedans, and all their weighty tomes.

Now get on with it. I won't keep you any longer from the excitement of sharing with me this rich new discovery—THE BIRTHGRAVE by Tanith Lee.

BOOK ONE

Part I:*Under the Volcano*

1

To wake, and not to know where, or who you are, not even to know what you are—whether a thing with legs and arms, or a beast, or a brain in the hull of a great fish—that is a strange awakening. But after a while, uncurling in the darkness, I began to discover myself, and I was a woman.

All around was blackness and no sound. With my hands I felt old crusts of rock. There was an ancient bitter smell without a name pressing into my nostrils. I crawled out of the recess I had been lying in, and found a sort of passage where I could stand upright. Oddly, I did not wonder if I was blind. It was cold and airless as I felt a way along the passage. My foot struck hard on an obstruction. I kneeled and felt it carefully. A step, followed by other steps, hewn out roughly from the inner rock, and not much trodden. I could remember abruptly other staircases, made of smooth veined white stuff, slippery almost as glass, deeply indented at their center from countless feet passing up and down.

I went cautiously up the steps, feeling always with my hands. I did not think to count them, but there were many, at least a hundred. And then a flat space without steps. Foolishly I had quickened my pace, thankful to be on level ground, but I was punished. Suddenly there was no more stone in front, only an unsensable void. I swayed like a dancer on the brink of the invisible drop, then flung backward and saved myself. A skitter of stones fell down into the blackness. I heard them falling for a long time, bouncing often against the walls.

I was terrified now. How could I go on without seeing? The next mistake might be fatal, and already, without even knowing who I was, I knew my life was important to me. I sensed, too, something fighting against me in the dark, a malignant, one-sided battle, and I feared it and was angry.

On hands and knees I went forward very slowly, away to the left of the drop. After a moment, my outstretched hand clawed at emptiness. I turned back, going to the right. A few seconds, and the third corner of the abyss was sucking at my grasp.

I was filled with fury. I screamed out a curse in the dark, and the sound echoed and echoed until I thought the rock would split in pieces.

Where now? Perhaps there was nowhere. I lay on the ledge and wept, and then curled again, like an animal or a fetus, and slept. That was the end of my first awakening.

The second time was better. The original sleep had been no normal sleeping; this was, and I woke with a different awareness of things.

I reasoned in the dark that if the staircase ended in nothing, then I would have to go back down the stairs to the passage, and retrace my steps until I found some other way. It occurred to me then, for the first time, that I was seeking the surface, with an instinctive knowledge of being underground.

Crawling back across the platform to the stairs, my hands and then my knees encountered a square dip in the rock. I searched it and discovered a seam. This must be a door. Even while I was trying to find some way to open it, it slipped suddenly inward. I found myself, still in absolute blackness, hanging over another unguessable void, my scrabbling fingertips clutching at one smooth edge of the door. There was no hope. My fingers lost their grip and I fell. I thought that was the end of it, but the drop was not very far. I hit the stone floor, and rolled, loose-limbed enough that I did myself no harm.

I turned around slowly, and now, unmistakably, there was the merest glimmer of light, far off, at the end of what seemed another long passageway. Drawn by that light, I set off quickly, almost running.

Now I could see the dim outline of the rock sides, and the little veins of glitter in them. The passage wound and wound, and the glow deepened and bloodied. Then abruptly I had turned a corner and threw up my hands to shield my eyes.

The light was as blinding as the darkness, but soon I could rub away the tears and look around me.

I was in a vast cavern, lit only at its center where a great, rough-hewn bowl, at least six feet in diameter, poured out a ceaseless storm of red and golden flame. Beyond the fire a flight of steps ran up to a narrow door high in the wall. Otherwise the cavern seemed featureless and empty.

Somehow the narrow door was important to me, and I knew I must reach it.

I started out across the floor, suddenly aware of how the cavern, stretching up endlessly into darkness, dwarfed me like an ant. I passed the flame-bowl, had my foot on the first stair. There was a groaning thunder behind me. I swung around and looked in astonishment. Countless little fires had cracked open the cavern floor, and were blazing there. At the next step, fresh flames burst through. Not stopping to see any more, I ran to the top of the stairs, as if speed could outwit the mechanism below. With my hand on the narrow door, I glanced back. The floor where I had walked was now a sea of savage gold, and the scarlet smoke clouded up and turned to purple in the high roof. I pushed the door and ran through when it opened, thrusting it shut behind me.

The room was full of light, though it seemed to have no source. In front of me was a long hanging curtain, and when I pulled it aside, a stone altar and another stone bowl, where something stirred and brooded at my presence. I could not see this thing, only sense it, and when it spoke, I did not hear the words except with the ears inside my head.

"And so you could not sleep forever. I knew that you must wake one day, for all the sleep I gave you. Wake, and come to me. Even the abyss could not take you, as I hoped. Well, then. I will tell you things. I am Karrakaz, the Soulless One, who sprang from the evil of your race, a world of years before your birth, and finally destroyed that race, and everyone of it, except yourself. And you escaped destruction because you were a little child, and had not yet properly learned the ways of evil. But now you have grown to womanhood in your sleep, and you will learn. Evil will come and you will welcome it. Remember, wherever you go, I will be near you. There is no escape from Karrakaz now. Look."

On the altar something flickered and glittered and took on substance. A knife, with a sharp bright blade.

"See how easy it would be to be rid of me. Pick up the knife. You have only to tell it where to strike, and it will obey you. Then you can sleep forever, without fear."

But I stood quite still and did not take it. A million pictures and memories were blazing through my mind, and my hands were icy with terror.

"You wish to go out, then? Easy. There is the way. The steps beyond the altar lead upward and out into the world. But if you go, you are cursed, and carry a curse with you; there will be no happiness. The civilization which bred you is dead uncountable years. Your palaces are in ruins. The lizards sun themselves in the dried-up fountains and the fallen courts. And you—I will show you to yourself. Recollect, you should have been powerful, a magician who ruled the elements, the stars, the seas, the deep fires of the earth. All things might have done your bidding. The power of flight was yours, the chameleon art, the art of invisibility—and beauty. Let me show you what you are."

The new thing in the air shone coldly clear, and in it I saw my reflection begin to form. A woman-shape, slender, small; long hair, very pale, and then the face—the hands of the reflection covered its face, and kept a little of its hideousness from me. But only a little. I knew. The face of a devil, a monster, a mindless thing, unbearable to look on.

I was crouching low against the floor, one arm over my head, my chin pressed down against my breasts, and, in the other hand, the knife from Karrakaz' altar.

But before I could speak the death words to the blade, a soft lamp filled my brain, cool and green, and very old.

"Yes," said the no-voice in my skull, "there is always that. If you can find it. Your soul-kin of green jade."

I jumped up and flung the knife through the image of the mirror so that it shattered. Beyond the door a massive explosion rocked the cavern, and the floor juddered under my feet. I started for the steps.

"Wait," it said, the he-she thing without a soul. "Remember you are cursed, and carry a curse with you. You have been asleep in the depths of a dead volcano. Leave it, and it will wake as you have woken. The red-hot lava will pour out through every passage and pursue you down the mountain. It will cover villages and towns, ruin crops, and burn to death everything living in its path."

But I scarcely heard. My instinct for freedom was too strong, too terrible. I rushed up the steps, up and up, away from the glowing room and the possession there, into cold darkness that soon lightened. As I paused a moment to rest, leaning against the mountain's gut, I looked up and saw stars and moonlight pouring in my eyes. Behind me the dark was reddening, and rocked with endless paroxysms of anger or pain. The stench of sulfur filled my belly and head and lungs and made me sick, but I toiled on, my hands like limpets on the stone. At last a ledge, and beyond the ledge the outer slopes of the volcano, running downward into dark valleys. Above, wide now from horizon to horizon, the brilliant sky.

I jumped from the ledge, and, as my feet touched soil, a demon belled in the earth. Sky and earth came toppling together and turned scarlet, and I fell, and continued to fall, down into the night.

2

I fell faster than I could have run, too stunned to be frightened yet. Then I was in a pit, and was stopped like a heart in death. I crawled out, gazed back. The clouds above the grumbling mountain were russet, and the first bright snakes of lava were sliding forth after me. A shower of boiling coals exploded outward, and fell all around me. Black-ash rain filled my eyes and mouth. I wrapped a corner of the dirty garment I wore over my mouth and nose, and fled again.

Down to the valleys. No longer dark. Lights were flying here and there and everywhere, and I could hear them screaming and shouting even over the noise the mountain made. There was no hope for them, for myself. Where would any of us hide from this burning demented hatred?

I was on a road, and scarcely noticed it. I bore away from the first village, ran across an orchard, where already the sparks of the volcano had started a fire. Vines were popping as they blazed. A flock of bleating, terrified sheep came plunging past and were gone.

I ran on. Where was my instinct taking me?

Something snapped with a clang; I stumbled and fell. A wicked little trap had bitten shut on the hem of my tunic, by some miracle missing my bare foot. I wrenched the tunic free, tearing it, and saw ahead the low glitter of water.

A palace pool, clotted with a cream of lilies and swans, dazzled behind my eyes, but the night was

crimson now, and the mountain thundered. I got up and ran toward the water. The vines whipped around me. Through a gate, across a furrowed field, smoking in places. All the while, the coals burst over me. A million little blisters were forming on my body, but I scarcely noticed them. Suddenly through a thicket, against the ghastly sky, a long lake stretching wide, its glass changing to red, steaming where the hot things fell in it and went out.

Stumbling to the edge, I found several moored boats, little fishing canoes. Why hadn't the fools in the villages run to these and saved themselves? I felt helpless anger at them, as I expertly pushed my boat out from the shore, using the long rough pole. I bore the guilt for everyone of them to die. And here was the means for them to live, ignored. Damn them, then, let them perish.

Deep on the heart of the lake, I watched through the night, the imperceptible dawn, while the fury of the mountain expended itself. Around me the water heaved and bubbled, the air was black, hot, and stifled with falling ashes. The sounds were of a great beast vomiting. I thought of the stone Karrakaz had used as its altar, consumed with all the rest, but I knew that that thing at least had survived. It would be always with me, an emblem of the waiting evil in my soul, a reminder of my hideousness, the curse upon me, and the easiness of death.

At last, a sort of twilight, green and lavender, with one last pulsing cloud above the volcano. I strained the boat across the water to the farthest shore, but even there the land was cinder-fields. In places the ground had cracked open, erupting stones.

I would have kept away from the cots and huts, but it was so difficult to tell now. Everything was down, trees smoldering in the path. A dead child lay on its face; dead birds had fallen from the air. I began to weep, running frantically in all directions to escape this evidence, but always seeing it. Had my sin come already? Even in my unconquerable desire to be free, had I begun to unlock darkness?

And now I seemed to be moving down a narrow alleyway between the ruined walls of little houses.

A corner, swerving sharply, and now an open place. There were about fifty or sixty people huddled together here, their backs to me, ragged and grimy as I was. The sight shocked me. I stopped. A little hot wind hissed through my hair.

And then they began to turn, singly, in groups, sensing me as a wild animal senses danger or food. Their cold reddened eyes fixed on my body, halted, and turned from my face. I wanted to put up my hands to hide my face, but they were wooden and nailed against my sides. A child began to cry somewhere in the throng. Men shouted and women muttered. Their hands were moving as mine could not, in some ancient ritual; against evil, I thought. Suddenly a new voice rang out, clear, but with a little crack in it.

"The Goddess! The She-One from the Mountain!" And all about me, as if at a signal, they were falling on their knees, entreating me for mercy, and pity, and succor, and all the things I could not give. Mixed in with their wailing was a cry about their sins, and the word Evess. It came to me abruptly that they were speaking in some language I had never heard, and yet I knew every syllable. Evess meant face, but not in the human sense. This was the face of holiness which to them could be both beautiful and ugly, equally terrible, and must never be looked on. Glancing behind them, I saw what they had been grouped around at the end of the open place: a rough-hewn stone, resembling a woman in a red robe with white clay hair. It held a mask against the Evess, which could not be seen, but the hair and stature of it were unmistakable. These people were big and large-boned, dark-skinned and black-haired. The image was not of them, but they and I knew it at once. It was myself.

So I stood facing myself across the humped hills of their bodies. I, who had brought the scarlet death of

the mountain, worshiped in fear as the ancient goddess some legend had implanted in their minds.

I ended the paralysis of my bewilderment by turning to walk away.

Softly, whispering their invocations, they followed me. What now? If I broke into a run to escape them, would they too run to keep up? My eyes grew strange, and everywhere I looked, I seemed to see the glitter of the Knife of Easy Dying. Die, and let them follow me into death if they would. But I was still too new to life to let it go. Finally, sick and weary and in pain, I sat down on the rubble of some wall. I sighed, and countless eyes lifted, hovered, and fell away.

A woman came crawling to my foot.

"Spare us who have seen, unwilling, the Evess of the Goddess."

"Let me alone," I said, but too faint for her to hear the words.

She took it as some kind of malediction; perhaps I had not even spoken in their tongue, but in my own, consciously forgotten, yet learned in my first years as a child, before the ending of my race. She began to wail, and beat her breasts, and rend her hair.

"Stop," I said.

She gazed at me blankly, her hands suspended in midair.

A callous hysteria overcame me, and I laughed weakly at her, at all of them, as I sat on the rubble.

They thought me a goddess. I was quite incomprehensible to them. No need then to explain, only do as I wanted. There would be no hindrance.

I got up, and every joint seemed ready to crack open.

An old long low building, upright, with several shallow steps, and an oblong doorway leading into cool dark. There was a smell there—cold yet close, not unpleasant, but alien. The smell of Human Life, and of something else too. I guessed soon enough when I saw the repeated image of the She-One. This was their temple, and the smell was holiness, fear and incense blended together by generations of unquiet belief.

They were hesitating below the steps, dark against the bronze and lilac sky. I held up my hand, my palm facing out toward them.

"No farther," I said. "Mine."

They seemed to understand. I went into the gloom alone. Beyond the altar, a screened door: the ultimate sanctuary. It was only a little cold stone room. Ash had collected on the floor, as it seemed to have collected everywhere. A priest's pallet lay in a corner. I stumbled to it and lay down.

Would they come now, dare the abuse of a deity, realizing I was not a legend, but something much worse? Would they creep through as I slept, slide by the carved screen, bury a knife or a fire-sharpened pole in my left breast, and so through into my heart? If I slept ... would they come then ... ? I slept.

A vast palace, with golden rooms and crystal rooms and rooms of fire, and great staircases leading up

and down. Like a mirage in a desert, surrounded by its fantasy of gardens. Half recalled, my home no longer standing now but hammered flat by time, by decay. What I had missed. The staircases wound up and up, and changed. Narrower, black now instead of white, black pillars and an oval doorway. Beyond it, a miasmic beauty, something flickering on a block of stone, out of a stone basin. The power of my race, the fount of knowledge and evil. Karrakaz, grown like a rare plant from the stagnant badness of generations of wicked and unthinking men and women. A flower created by poison, that had poisoned, in its turn, what had created it.

This was memory more than dream, but because it came as dream everything was nebulous, yet strangely intense, with an intensity only unreality could possess. An ornament, a flick of flame, sprang into blazing relief, and a man's face—father, brother, what kin I did not know—haunted the winds and turnings of the palace. Waking, I could not recall it—only narrow, high-set eyes, like chips of his dark soul, looking coldly at me.

An instant before I woke, I saw the Jade.

The evil one had told me, in the mountain, of this green smooth thing that held some link with my innermost being. I did not understand, only trembled to repossess it, stretching out my hands to it, entreating. But my fingers closed on nothing, and with a great wrenching, I was flung back out of sleep into the world of the broken village, the temple, and despair.

It was dawn, and very quiet. Night had come and gone without a knife or sharpened pole. I went to the screen and looked beyond it. The main body of the temple was quite empty of anything except its own blue dusts. But in the doorway, on the floor just inside the threshold—I went to it and found a glazed clay bowl of milk, fruit and cheese in a dish. A piece of cloth lay folded beside them, dark red as old blood.

I did not want to touch this garment, though I was not sure why, but I bent and lifted it, and found a long loose tunic in my hands, and under that, left behind on the floor, a painted and enameled mask. The white face stared up at me. The eye-holes were painted around thickly with black stuff, the mouth was scarlet. The curved open nostrils were rimmed with gold, and little golden drops hung in clusters at each side where ears might have been if the mask were a face.

So, their goddess must cover her deadly visage, the Evess so terrible to look on.

I took all the things into the priest's room, and began to eat. I had not been aware of hunger until this moment. I think perhaps I could have lived indefinitely without food, sustained by the same weird process which had kept me alive inside the mountain. Now this first meal was oddly unpleasant, and afterward several demons rose up in my abdomen and chest, and lashed at me with their red-hot irons.

I lay down in agony, and, as I lay there, I heard a chant begin outside. On and on it went. They called for their goddess as she writhed in the priest's room, and then was quiet in the lazy aftermath of pain. Eventually, I got up. Without thinking if it were right, I slipped off my garments, and put on the tunic they had left me, and then the mask, which was fixed by hooks behind the ears.

I went out slowly and looked at them.

A sea of people, crouching as before. On the lowest step a bowl of incense smoked over a brazier. Their terrible, almost unhuman faces lifted and fastened on mine, now free to their gaze.

"Goddess!"

"Goddess! Goddess!"

I felt their demand before they made it. I felt their grasping fingers on my soul.

Then a woman was coming up the steps, slowly, holding out the bundle in her arms.

"Take him. Oh, Great One, be merciful—save him—"

Over her head I saw the shadow of the volcano, the red dish cloud still throbbing there like a wound of fire in the sky.

The baby was almost dead, blue-faced, making little sick retching noises and trying to cry. All around the ruined village stretched and yawned. There was a distant smoke pall near the lake. They must be burning bodies there.

She thrust at me with her child, weeping.

I felt nothing.

"Save him," she whispered. "My son—"

In anger my hand went out to push her away. My palm slapped against the child, and at once it vomited, black vomit, ashes from the volcano, and its face turned pink, its eyes blazed open, and it began to scream and wail, not the feeble voice of the dying, but the healthy fury and terror of new life.

The woman gasped and almost fell down. Her eyes exploded tears. A man came running up, flung his arms around both of them. Their mouths chanted prayers to me, but every sense in them was fastened on their child, to see, to touch, to feel it live.

Like a tide they broke against me then, begging to be cured of their ills, their pains. Hundreds of men and women it seemed, pressing close. Their smell was of the earth, of the smoke, of sweat, of fear. I touched them, feeling nothing, no power go out of me, no ecstasy of giving, no joy in what I did that brought so much joy. They brought a blind man, who pulled my fingers to his eyes, and saw. They brought a girl, shrieking in agony with a pain in her side, and when my hand was laid against the pain, she was still and beautiful again with peace.

It ebbed at last. I showed them my palm, outward, my own demand for privacy, and they shrank away, their voices singing. Into the priest's room I went, and threw the screen close against the door, and here I screamed and beat my hands against the stone walls until they bled and every nail was broken. How like a prison the room seemed to me, and, even then, I did not realize why.

3

Three days I lay in the room, not eating what they left for me at the temple door, often sleeping, dreaming sometimes, my eyes wide white jewels behind the mask which I must never take from my face until the Jade lay cool between my fingers.

On the fourth day, there was a hum outside like bees. I went out then, and found a vast crowd of strangers eddying in the street. As I came there, there came also a concentration, and congealing. Soon it was no longer many, but one single thing which waited there for me. For miles around, from every ruined

village, farm, town, and steading, they had flocked to me, bringing their sores and burns, entreating my blessing. I, the Goddess of Death, who had justly sent the wrath of the volcano against them for their wickedness, would help them now to make better their lives, that they might serve my shrine.

I touched them and they healed. And then there were more, new faces and sores, and these I healed too.

When the streets were emptv, and the steps empty of all but their gifts, I went in and lay down to sleep again, until eventually the noise would call me up once more. It was like a poisonous wound, from which the pus must be eased, but in which the pus reformed, gradually, after each easing, until at last it must be eased again.

Then came a long time, five dawns, five twilights, when there was no sound. I lay still, listening, my eyes wide. I lay, like an insect in chrysalis, awaiting some wrenching calamity to break my cocoon, and turn me out, half-formed. I was still not a living creature. I was a sleeping silent thing, without substance or true life.

Then life came, but wrongly, not as I would have wanted if ever I had been allowed to plan.

There was a great crash of sound: something thrown aside at the temple door, the gifts of untouched food, perhaps. There were steps, brutal, tearing the quiet of the place. I heard and smelled unfear. No terror in this one who sought me, only a raw, uneasy anger.

"Come out, you she-beast!" a man's voice shouted.

It seemed to burst the temple walls, and break inside my head in brass pieces, that voice which had no fear, the first human voice that had no fear of me.

I got up, summoned irresistibly. I stood by the screen, and already my heart was moving, pounding as it had when I fled from the volcano, although now I ran toward the fire, and not away.

Then the great hand of the voice was on the screen, and the screen was thrown aside, little bits of the lattice snapping against the floor. He was ready to seize me next, fling me aside, my little bones snapping like the ivory. But he was still. No fear perhaps, but ingrained superstition. They had worshiped the She-One, each from birth, and now he seemed to see her here—red robe, white hair, like the red-hot, white-hot spew of the mountain, and the mask, so terrible because it said nothing but "*I* am here."

Under the deep tan of endless sun, his face paled slightly. His lips drew back from tiger-teeth, wolf-teeth, snarling white. He was so much larger than I, taller, great bones, a big spare frame, beautiful and alien in its masculinity. Yet our looks seemed level. Long curling black hair ran down from his head to his shoulders like the black wool of a ram.*He* wore no mask but his face shook me through and through in a way I could hardly bear, for this face, this seen face, was the face in my dream—long, male, with high-set, narrow, black-chip eyes.

He cleared his throat. His tongue darted on his lips to moisten them, and we stood, each one half in the other's power, and my sex stirred in me, and woman stirred in me, and an ancient humanity I had not known was mine.

And then he made himself move. His hand closed on my shoulder, hurting and immediate. In the other hand came a dull, sharp hunting knife.

"Well, bitch, and who are you?"

I said nothing. I looked at him, drinking him to quench the surge of life burning up in me, which was not quenched but only burned the brighter.

"You don't make me quake, bitch. Some healer-witch from a cave in the mountain, eh? Come to live off their charity because they're fools and afraid?" His hand reached into my hair and pulled it hard. "Hair of an old woman, but not the body of one. And your face, behind this mask—what?"

His dislike washed over me, his contempt curdled in the pit of my belly, and if this was all I was to have of him, then I made it welcome. But his fingers touched the hook of the mask, and I recalled my face—the face Karrakaz had given me. I pulled back. I put up my hand, palm flat against his chest.

"To see my face is death to you," I said.

His skin burned against my palm; I felt the heartbeat start up under my touch. He ripped my hand away from him, took a step back.

"Very well, healer-woman, hide your plain little looks. And stay here if you want. But no more food, and no more worship. If you want bread, you can work for it. Help us build their homes again, help us salvage what we can in the fields. Help their women give birth to replace what the mountain took from them. Otherwise, starve."

He turned to go.

I said: "You who were not here when the fire came, where were you then? On the far road, bandit, killing for gold and food. That then was your work. Out of the place that birthed you, without a care for it until the light of the red lava brought you back, hard with your guilt, and cruel with your shame."

I did not know how the words came, or why, till I had spoken, but he looked around at me again, and his face was white now, the rims of his eyes red, and his nostrils flared on anger and pain, and I knew I had read him accurately and to the last letter.

"So someone whispered to you of Darak, the gold-fisher. Don't mouth it at me and think you can scare me with it. I've told you what's for you, and there's the end of it."

He went from the temple with great strides, his hands clenched, and now I knew my prison very well.

Now I could go.

I was free. No more gifts to me of food, and no more entreaties.*He* had stopped all that. There was activity and work outside. Once there was screaming, and the noise of things falling just beyond the temple door—some women daring to go against his order.

I had not eaten now for nine days, and felt no hunger or any particular weakness.

I could steal out by night, to be sure no one would see me; I could run across the endless country to the sea, and let them forget their goddess, and let Darak forget her too.

But now that I could go, I would not go at all. I was chained by the roots of my senses like a bitch-dog to a post.

How well Karrakaz had trapped me here, and kept me from all knowledge of where I must walk, and what must be done to free myself. First by the need of these people, now by*my* need. And if all my powers were dead in me as Karrakaz had said, how had I healed? How? Or had they healed themselves by their own belief in me? It was their hands which had snatched mine. And I seemed to remember a book with an open page:

"Master," cried the woman, "heal me, for I am sick as you see." And he said: "Do you believe that I can do this thing?" And the woman wept and said: "Yes, if you will." "Then, as you believe, so be it," he said, and went away, not even touching her. And she was healed at once.

The tenth day. Outside: noise, hammering, shouting, sound of moving logs of wood, a work-gang singing. At midday a bell beating to summon who would to a communal meal. Darak and his men had organized things very well it seemed.

Then a great crunching of feet, laughter, voices. After that, quiet. A vast, warm noonday quiet, and a slow, still yellow heat.

I crossed the floor to the doorway of the temple, and stood there. The village was a different thing, caged in places by scaffolding, here and there rebuilt and half-patched with tiles. Far up the street a rough wooden shelter, a brass bell—pulled from some temple roof presumably—swinging a little on a pole outside. A cow wandered lazily in the sunshine. Otherwise, the place was empty. Darak had called them to some council then, on the low hill beyond the houses. Yes, that would be it. A little king on a little throne, lording it because his subjects were smaller even than his smallness.

My eyes slid to the volcano. Dark pinnacle, without a cloud. Asleep again, sated, terrible for all that. A black two edged sword waiting in the sky, to let fall its red blows on the back of the land, whenever its passion moved it. There then, is the king, Darak.

A darting movement, snake's-tongue flicker over rock.

A woman hurried across the open space before the temple, casting an indigo shadow. A man stirred uneasily in a doorway, holding a stave, looking up the road to where the people had followed Darak.

"Help us!" cried this woman. "Our three children are sick, and the doctor from Sirrain has said they'll die. I couldn't bring them—they screamed when I tried to move them."

I looked at her closely. She was no more than twenty years. Perhaps I was her age. But she looked old, her young face creased into lines, her hair faded by the sun.

"Quickly, Mara," the man hissed from across the street.

"Please," she said.

"Do you believe the goddess can cure your children without seeing them?"

"Yes—oh, yes—"

"Then believe I can, and they will be cured."

Her face changed, the lines smoothed out, ripples running from a pool.

There was noise from the hill.

"Mara!" the man cried. , She turned to run with him.

"Wait," I said. They stopped, nervous, anxious not to offend either Darak or myself. "Tell whom you wish," I said, "whoever invokes my name, believing in it, can cure or be cured of any sickness. There is no longer any need to come to me."

They made obeisance to me, blessing me, then ran like frightened mice.

Dust billowed down the street. The crowd was coming back, noisier than ever. There had been wine up on the hill. A small shrine there, perhaps, some old sacred meeting place Darak had thought would impress them.

There was a stone bench set at the top of the temple steps. I sat on it, waiting.

The cow ran down the street first in fright, lowing indignantly. Then came men, talking, impatient, grasping wineskins, followed by groups of women. Darak's people were easily spotted. They were better dressed than the villagers, and more gaudy. Leather boots with tattered silk tassels, silk shirts, scarlet and purple. Belts with iron studs, gold rings, fringes on the jackets—torn like the tassles, not so much from wear as from hard fighting. Mostly they were men, but five or six girls slithered by with them, dressed like them for the most part, but with several ounces more gold around their necks, fantastic earrings, and jet-black hair, roped through with ribbons and flowers. This seemed enough. I wanted to go in, almost drunk from the sight of them, but I waited for him as I had known I would. When he came he was thoughtful, discontented, sullen. Whatever he had sought on the hill had not come to him.

More quietly dressed than the others, the two girls, one on either side of him, made up for it. They were incongruous. Their hair was a kind of parody of a court woman's—elaborate, but too unruly to be kept in place. It stood up on their heads in hills, in plaited ropes, in twists and loops, transfixed by the blades of gold combs and jasper pins. The one nearest to me had wound pearls in and out like a pale snake trail. Strands had unfurled onto their shoulders where they tangled in the masses of goldwork. Their dresses were silk, one crimson, one black and yellow, and under the fringed and embroidered hems were the boots of bandit-bitches, covered with muck and filth and dust.

My eyes were moving away from them to Darak, impatient. No one had seen me yet as I sat in the shadow of the door-mouth. Then I saw what hung from the throat of that pearl-haired, crimson girl. A tiny green and cool shining thing on a gold ring and chain. Jade.

I got up before I could think, my hand went out, and I shouted at her.

The whole procession stopped, stumbled around, stared at me. I did not see their expressions, only sensed them, my eyes pinned to that green cool thing between her brown bitch's breasts.

There was silence, and then he said: "Bow to your goddess, people. Ask her to do a few tricks for you to earn her bread."

It was very still then. The hot raw day hung close. I did not look at his face, only at the face of the girl with the jade. She grinned, raised her eyebrows, one after the other, then spat on the ground before the steps. But her eyes were tight.

I went down the steps very slowly, and I was trembling. I stood a few feet from her, and pointed to the green thing without speaking.

She laughed, and spat again. Then looked at Darak.

"What is it you want, witch? You can't eat a green hard stone."

"Give it to me," I said to the bandit girl.

She made her fear into anger.

"Keep off. It isn't yours. It's mine. He gave it to me."

"Not yours. He stole it. Mine, now. Give it to me."

In spite of herself, the girl shrank away, back against his body.

"In our camp," Darak said softly, "if one of us wants something from another, we fight for it. For food, or gold, or a knife, or a woman. Or a man. Shullatt here fought for me. And I took her. You want the green stone, you can fight her too. Shullatt's not afraid."

Shullatt's eyes altered. Her courage was back. She was on her own ground again. Another moment and she would have me under her, her cat claws in my eyes, hammering my breasts with her hard elbows. I would rather fight a man than a woman. Another moment—I could not wait. My hand went out. The jade leaped into my fingers. I tugged and the chain broke.

Like cool water in my palm, the jade lay sleeping but alive.

Her moment was over, but still she moved. With my other hand I caught her hard and stinging across the whole face. Blood jetted from one nostril as she reeled backward. Darak might have steadied her. but did not bother. She went down by his feet and screamed curses at me without getting up.

Abruptly Darak smiled grimly, set the toe of his boot against the girl's side, and quite gently kicked her.

"Be quiet," he said. "You've lost the stone. She fought you for it, in her own way."

Someone began crying and shouting. Heads turned. I could not see who it was, but I heard the voice of the woman.

"She saved my children! The doctor from Sirrain told me they'd die—but they're alive! She made them live!"

Darak's face set hard and contemptuous. He too spat, and turned down the street to a side alley, pushing the crowd out of the way. His bandits shouldered after him, and the girls ran to keep up. The murmuring was growing all around. I went up the steps and into the temple before they could move about me and close me in.

I pulled the broken screen against the door opening, and lay on the pallet, on my side, my knees drawn up, my hands under my chin, and against my lips the green smooth thing that was made mine, and seemed like a beginning.

Night came and blackened the world, and red stars ripped their places in the sky. I would go tonight, out, across the wide lands. Nothing mattered but the green promise. Even Darak seemed nothing at that dark twilight. But then the need of food came, unexpectedly, and with it nausea at the thought of eating, and the shrinking from the inevitable pain that would come after, and torture and slow me, and keep me from going away. How long had it lasted before? An hour, or two perhaps? Not so bad. I could bear it because I must. But it was ten days now I had not eaten.

I went out onto the steps.

A few lights flickered in open windows, in ruins, in rebuilt rooms, many in the wooden shelter Darak had had put up for the homeless. Food smells from there, thick and musky. I went that way.

Inside the narrow door fires were burning in stone rings or in iron braziers, and yellow lamps swung overhead. A big carcass was turning on a rough spit, crackling and stinking. The villagers were crowded close as if they liked this nearness to one another. Darak was not there.

As I went in, the accustomed first silence slipped over them. They slid into the grooves of it with stealthy ease. I walked up the center aisle, between the fires and cook-pots. Every bit of food that I passed made me sick, but I found a caldron bubbling in a corner, and the smell of this did not repulse me so much.

"What is this?" I asked the girl bending over it, poised now, her mouth ajar at the sight of me.

"Broth," she stammered, "vegetables—"

"Will you give me some?"

She jumped around, beckoned, and a child came running up with a ladle and wooden bowl. Watched by the countless fixed eyes of the people in the shelter, and the swaying gold eyes of the lamps and candles, the girl began to fill the bowl with the ladle, once, twice—

"Enough," I said. I took it, and thanked her, and at that moment a big hand knocked the bowl from my grasp, and the girl shrieked.

"Did Darak not tell you to give no food to the witch, slut?" a voice growled, guttural and menacing.

The girl took a step back. But the bandit's interest was no longer centered on her.

"So, the immortal goddess, who sleeps for centuries under the mountain, still needs to fill her belly, eh? Darak told us you'd come here, and he said, when you came, to take you to him."

I looked at the bandit through the eye-holes of the mask.

A blank unimpressionable face. He knew their legend even, but had not been reared on it, as Darak had. I had no chance with this one.

I said: "If Darak Gold-Fisher has need of the help of the goddess, he has only to ask. I will come with you."

The bandit grunted and swung out, leaving me to follow.

"Forgive us," the girl whispered.

I touched her forehead with my finger, gently, as if in blessing, feeling nothing, while her face flooded with color and gratitude. Then I followed my captor.

He took me along the dark close alleys, telling me which path to follow now, and walking behind me. Here most of the buildings were flat. We passed a marketplace with broken sheep pens, and a burned tree like a huge stick of charcoal at the center. I began to hear music then, savage, bright music, instinctively tuneful and rhythmic, but with no pattern beyond an underlying beat of drums. There was a slope where a large house had stood, facing out over the lake, toward the mountain. Only one court remained, and here, in the hot early darkness, Darak's people were eating around their own fires, playing this hill music, chipping crudities into the stone walls.

The bandit pushed me through a low arch. Paving lay under my bare feet, still warm. Bones and apple cores were scattered about, with a dog or two nosing around them hopefully. A girl with ink hair was dancing, stamping her feet and turning in endless circles, the golden bracelets on her arms like the fire-rings of some blazing planet.

At the far end, seated on a striped rug, like the hill-king he was, Darak looked up. A few men sat around him, and there was a girl—suitably placed far down the low table. I recognized her, the other who had come from the hill with him, in black and yellow silk.

The bandit began to prod and push me with fervor now. We arrived at the table—an intriguing item, over-carved from some light wood, certainly stolen, obviously kept as a symbol of Darak's wealth, power, and good taste.

Darak smiled courteously.

"The goddess finally feels hungry," he remarked. "Sit here, then, and eat."

"I cannot eat in the sight of others," I said.

"Of course, your holy mask. Then take it off."

"No one must see my face. Do you not recall that, Darak?"

My voice, so cold and clear was the last of my strength. I was weakening now, frightened and angry and bewildered. The stench of food and drink came all around me, and there seemed no escape.

"We're not afraid, *goddess."* He stopped looking at me to peel a fruit. For all his lounging here, he was not a man who liked to be still. I wished him dead, but not hard enough. "Come, goddess. We can tell what you've got to hide. You're albino—white hair, white face. Eyes too—although the mask holes throw a good shadow over them there's no color. So. No more pretense. Sit and eat."

He gave a little nod of his head; I almost did not see. But the big brute behind me giggled like a child, and the finger tips brushed my hair, coming for the hooks of the mask.

No, by all of my lost soul. They should not have my shame as a present in their stinking den.

I ducked under his hand, spinning around. My foot, the long toes clenched inward like a fist, kicked up and jabbed home in his groin. No compunction. I had seen what these things, half animal, used their genitals for, beyond the true purpose, and I was arrogant still with a raw and uncompassionate

arrogance. He yelped and doubled and fell over, and I knew I had done enough to him.

I turned back to Darak, and he looked surprised.

"Well," he said, and stopped.

I grasped the second before it was too late, to throw him now while he was unbalanced in front of his horde.

"You are the leader of these people," I said to him, "and you have a right as such. I will show you what no other man may look on. Privately. Then you can judge for yourself."

I felt sick when I had said it, sick and sad, and ashamed already. But I knew what must be done.

After a moment he grinned.

"An honor, goddess, to be shown privately what no other may look on."

Some of them guffawed, and made their various absurd children's jokes about the sexual act.

One leaned to Darak and said urgently: "Let some of us come with you. Don't trust the bitch."

Darak rose and stretched. The big muscles cracked and slid under his bronze skin.

"The day Darak is afraid to go into the trees with a girl, you can get yourselves a new leader."

He came over to me, got my wrist, and took me out of the courtyard, taking great strides so that I stumbled and had to run to keep up. They laughed behind us, all except the man I had kicked, who was groaning and weeping on the ground.

We came into the terrible dead land near the lake. Great stretches of burned trees, brittle but still standing, where the night wind snapped twigs, and blew off a fine black powder in our faces. Only the water seemed clean. A moon was rising, red, and blurred at one edge as it melted into its wane.

In a way I was surprised he had not pushed me over and had me as soon as we came into the terrible trees. He was a hot hardness beside me, a little afraid without properly knowing it, sexually excited, I sensed. He still had my wrist, and now I pulled away.

"Is here far enough for the goddess?" he asked with stinging politeness. I wondered if he would ask next, equally biting and conscientious, should he spread his cloak for me?

"No," I said, "a little farther. There is a place for all things, and this is not that place."

I went on ahead now, toward the shore. I recalled the great sharp stones I had seen lying there.

My feet in the cinders, the water ahead of me, I said to him: "Look around us. Make sure there is no one here."

"You look, goddess," he said. "Your immortal eyes should be better than mine."

So I looked. Then I crouched down, beckoned him to do likewise, spreading my hand as if to steady

myself, and finding, without my eyes, a stone so perfect I might have planted it here purposely. My right hand was on the hook of the mask, and he watched, fascinated despite himself, the old rotten superstition overcoming him again. He was breathing fast, his eyes on mine, and my left hand jumped forward and the stone struck him on the forehead near the temple. It should have been a blow hard enough to kill, but perhaps I was off-balance myself, as I had made sure he should be; and besides, he knew in the last instant, and tried to throw himself aside, and he was very quick and strong. In any case, it was hard for me to kill Darak, and he meant more to me than my anger would let me know.

So the blow was a bad one. It stunned him and did not kill, and he fell sideways, and his lashes were very long on his high cheekbones, and I got up and ran from him, in every sense like a hunted cat, scrambling, into the dark.

But somehow the stone was still in my left hand. I could not seem to let go of it, and this slowed me. I was uncertain why I clung to it, but I think I knew he would come after me, and then I must defend myself again. And so it seems I slowed myself by holding it, so he could catch up to me, at the same instant ready to fight him when he did.

This double impulse clouded my mind, and worse, my hunger was on me like a beast. Weak-kneed and light-headed, I found at last I was stumbling along not far from the water's edge, making back toward the volcano. Once I realized this I checked, panting, turned to the side, and tried to scale the slope there. I should be well away from the village by now. But the cinders and loose topsoil and shale gave under my feet. I slipped and slithered, clawing with my free hand, making so much noise I did not hear the steps behind until it was almost too late. When I heard, I turned, and he was there.

"Come here, damn you!"

His voice slit the night wind. I lost my foothold, letting go the hard-won ground, and fell back, grazed and breathless, a few feet away from him. The bruise was rising like an angry star on his forehead, and his eyes were black with fury. He staggered on his feet, still concussed, but I had done him little damage all in all. He cursed me, some curse of his hill men I did not recognize except in essence, and then he came at me, and I was on my feet, the stone grasped in my left hand, the sharpest end toward him. He stopped still a moment, coughing a little from the run we had had through the cinder dust; then his hand, too, was no longer empty. It was a wicked-looking knife, thin but strong, with metal bits welded on and sticking out like thorns from the middle of the blade.

We moved around each other, both nervous, at a loss, each again half in the other's power. And then he recalled that he was Darak, and a man, and that I—mere woman—was something to be conquered and beaten down and back into my eternal submission, not worthy of his knife, and he swung at me with his other arm, and his empty hand struck me across ribs and belly, and that was that.

I lay under the reeling black sky that circled on its crow's wings closer and closer, the stone a million miles from my hands, and my hands a million miles from my brain.

I remembered enough to shut my eyes as he pulled the mask of the She-One from my face.

Time passed.

I opened my eyes at last, and I think I had lost hold of consciousness a few seconds, for he was sitting some way off, his back half-turned to me, and I had not heard him leave me, or felt him drop the mask onto my breasts.

He was breathing deeply. I could not see his face properly to read it. I turned my head toward the stone, and it lay so near to me now, I thought it must have moved itself. Then it changed, and was the knife that Karrakaz had shown me, the knife that would always be there for me, so I might end my life. And I knew I could tell it to strike into me, and it would; and death would be a comfort. But my lips were stiff and my mouth was full of dust. I could not call to it.

Then he said: "This village has always made me angry. I only remember the beatings I got here as a child, but I always come again to take the fresh blows on my back. So I came again and tried to help them, and they called to you and invoked your name. Let them go, then."

After that he was quiet for a little while. The wind stirred the lake softly, and the cinders with a sound of dry leaves.

"You," he said eventually. "I don't know what you are—a human perhaps, but not of this race. Not of man or woman. Not even of beast. Yes. A goddess, perhaps."

I put the hooks of the mask behind my ears. The jade I had hung around my neck lay in an icy drop over my heart. I got up and turned away, and began to walk toward the flatter land beside the lake, where I could climb free, and go where I wished.

When he called to me, I wanted to turn and would not, and when again he called, I did not want to, and I did.

He stood some yards from me, and said, "Leave the village. Come into the hills with us. I'd like to deprive them of you, the mewling fools. You can heal, I know it. Heal my people. I'll see you're fed, and clothed—better than that."

In his face there was a sort of fear, and it was his own fear that fascinated him. He wanted to explore it, not run from it. I saw the great strength in him then, a man who could look into himself, and look again and again.

And he had looked into my face—my hideousness.

And I loved him with my body, without much hope or much demand in me; and I despised him, and I knew that he would trap me, and there could be no true mating between us, of flesh, of thought, or of soul.

And I knew I would go with him.

Part II: The*Hill Camps*

1

On the second day into the hills, the mountain was a shadow, left behind. On the third, over many slopes, I could no longer look back and see it.

This was a strange open land, high up and near the sky. The hills rolled, dingy-brown, patched with purple gorse and blood-red flowers. Outcrops of rock showed like ancient bones pushed through the soil, and in the skull-holes of caves things stirred—bears, foxes—making their stores ready for the lean

months. It was late summer. Already the sap was burning out of the year.

Darak's band was not a large one—about twenty men. The main camp lay ahead in the hill's heart. A few village boys had run away with us, anxious to leave the fields for easy pickings on the wide road and cart-tracks south. The men rode shaggy hill ponies, small barrel-chested mounts, hung all over with tassels, bells, gold coins, and lucky charms. The women had a couple of mules between them, and some times rode pillion with their particular bandit. Darak rode a black horse, fine and hot-tempered, unsuitable for the climbing, that shied every time a bird rose from a thicket. He went on something different, I thought, when it was a matter of business.

As a woman, I should have walked. As a witch, I had my own mule, brought from some village stable. The red tunic of the goddess was gone, and the goddess' white mask. I wore dark stuff now, and a face covering—the shireen Darak had seen among women of the plains tribes, whose faces must be hidden from puberty. Across forehead and eyes the cloth was close fitting, with narrow eye-holes decorated by their own raised upper lids, which cast a shadow over the eyes themselves. From the cheeks, over the nose and mouth and chin, hung a loose veil of the same material. A woman in the village had stitched it for Darak.

When I had ridden out with them, the villagers had stood in the streets, among the rubble, staring at me, sullen, and afraid that going I took something from them. Darak grinned, riding his black devil horse. A few women plucked at me, crying. I hardly understood them, my ears closed to their village tongue. They were nothing to me, but what then was Darak's hill camp? There was a weight of iron in my belly, but it lifted as we left the lake and the volcano behind.

He had not spoken to me since the night on the cinder slope. All his words had come secondhand, from the mouths of others: "Darak says you are to have this," "Darak has told me to tell you."

At night, when he made camp, leather tents went up, painted with five or six colors. One of these was given to me, and here I could be as private as I wished. I ate a little when I must, and the pains grew easier, but never failed to come. The quietest of the bandit girls brought me the food and whatever other comforts Darak thought I might need. She said nothing, but her eyes darted, bright and black, like two agate wasps set in her head.

On the dawn of the fourth day, a man came with a snakebite, his arm swollen and black. He swaggered in through the tent flap, anxious to be cured without losing the arm, anxious, too, to show he set no store by me. If I did him good, that was an accident of his fortune. He was at pains to tell me what he had been at when the snake got him, which was squatting among the rocks relieving himself.

I touched the swollen flesh and looked in his face. He had no blind belief to take the healing from me, as they had in the village.

"I cannot help you," I said.

He was sweating, and in pain, but he glared at me and lifted his good hand as if to cuff me; then thought better of it.

"You're the healer. That's why Darak brought you. So heal me, you bitch."

A small door opened in my mind. I recalled something, but not much.

I drew his knife out of his belt, and he flinched nervously. I took it and dipped it in the flames of the little

brazier the girl brought me at night. I got his arm again.

"Hold still," I said, and made the quick incision before he could protest. He roared like a bull. "Now suck," I said, "suck and spit."

He sat with his mouth wide open, amazed at my abrupt movement and the order—crude in its basic simplicity.

"Do as I say," I added, "before the whole of your body swells up and blackens too."

That galvanized him into activity. Kneeling in my tent, he set to work with frantic, wide-eyed speed.

In the middle of this, Darak's hand pulled the tent-flap wide, and he looked in. He had avoided me till now, and today had been away early, hunting; what had brought him here, I did not know. He stared in amazement for a moment at the rhythmically swaying, sucking, spitting bandit before me, then laughed.

"Some new ritual to the goddess," he said, and went away.

The man cured himself, but it was mere luck.

The day after that, the hills were at their highest and most barren, the soil eroded, the bare rock flanks lying like great tortoises in the sun.

A group of tall trees, elegant and thin as some women can be, stood ahead of us. Foliage rested like black ribbon clouds on their tops, and at intervals in the upper branches. At sun set we began to climb toward these trees, up a flight of natural steps, the broad terraces of the hill. I knew from their urgings, jokes, and different manner all around, that we were almost in the camp now, but I could not tell where it might be. The horses' small sure feet beat under us like little clocks. Even Darak's horse was quieter, better and more stable, as it sensed its home. Overhead the red sky was purpling, and the stars were coming through. One fell, beyond the hills it seemed, into the plains there, with a train of golden fire. A bandit girl pointed to it, calling to us to look, but it was gone. I knew enough of their old beliefs—not only from their stories, but from the way they spoke of many things. Men who had not feared the She-One had been reared on other milk, and feared instead the earthshaking serpent, or the grave of murderers. There were terrors in all of them, how ever well they plastered them over with experience and boasting. The falling star had perhaps been, to the bandit girl, a god, visiting from his sky-house. To another of them it was a warrior's death as he fell in battle.

Already I knew them a little. A sort of kinship had linked me to them beyond what linked me to Darak, even though I was not of them, and their ways disgusted me. Even he, the one I followed here, was their clay, not mine.

A crack of thunder split the sky across. Darak's horse reared and plunged, its feet kicking loose stones downward to the lower slopes. A blazing dry wind tore by us and was gone, but away behind us the sky was suddenly scarlet and alive.

"Makkatt!" one of the men shouted. It was their name for the volcano.

We turned in our saddles on the uneasy horses, and stared back to the light in the sky.

One of the village boys, who had come with us, began to yell and weep. The nearest bandit struck him into silence.

It was very quick. The sky was red, then orange, then a filthy yellow, then bloodied and muddied back into darkness, leaving only the half-glow low on the horizon, which was the burning villages. The sound came late to us, rumbled deeply, and was gone.

I looked at Darak, and his face was hard and shut. But I knew behind his eyes, as behind mine, the thought of the village would not be still.

Their goddess abandoned them, and the wrath of the mountain came in her wake.

I remembered the altar of Evil, so far away reality had almost faded it. I remembered the voice in my skull:*You are cursed, and carry a curse with you; there will be no happiness.*

With a silence on us now, and the reddish lamp still alight behind us, we came up to the trees an hour later.

A rider near Darak made a sound in his throat like the barking of a hill-fox, twice, then again twice, and was answered from the trees. Three or four men untwisted themselves from the shadows, and ran up. I saw the glint of knives, but it was all formality. They must have been able to see us for hours.

A few moments in talk, gesticulations backward toward Makkatt, then we were going on, through the trees, among high jutting rocks. Three more halts and signalings with sentries—elaborate birdcalls and passwords—the gaudy toys of dangerous and well-organized men.

Then the ground seemed to open in front of us. I looked between the rock, and saw, carved through the hills, a long ravine. It was about four miles in length and perhaps a mile across, and overhung by the slopes on every side. Trees leaned over it, pines and staggering larches. Grass grew in the bowl, and pasture land where there would be brown cattle and wild little sheep. On the east side a waterfall smoked down, and there was other smoke also—and the glint of cluster upon cluster of cooking fires, outside and around the lanes of leather tents.

In the black of night, the downward track was hard and treacherous. Men cursed and horses stumbled, and little things ran away skittering, with bright eyes.

Nearer and nearer the fire blur, the smell of food and huddle and closeness. There seemed no way out now up the steep sides of the ravine.

The track widened out. We were on level ground.

Darak swung down from the horse, his men following his example. Boys came and took their mounts away to horse pens up against the escarpment, but Barak's horse was taken somewhere else. The place jumped in the firelight, unsteady and uncertain.

I sat still on the mule, waiting.

Darak turned abruptly and came back to me.

I looked down at his face but it was all one with the moving, twisting light. I could not be sure what his look or his eyes said to me.

"They'll put up your tent for you over there, near the waterfall. I'll send the girl to take care of your

wants—a sort of servant, but she won't say much about it. If you need any thing, get word to me. You're free to do as you like here."

"Oh, yes?" I said softly.

His narrow eyes narrowed further until they were glittering slits.

"Yes."

There was a silence between us, through the noise starting up all around. Then he said:

"I've work to do, things to get done. You understand."

He turned, and began to walk away. A tall slight woman with a cloud of black hair came out of the redness ahead of him. Rings gleamed on her hands and on his as they met. He kissed her in full view of me. There seemed no logical reason why he should not.

Then she led him into a tent with blue eye-shapes painted on it.

I slid down from the mule, and the uneasy stares of the bandits flickered, heads turned, as I went by them, into the dark, while behind us all, unseen, the burning in the sky went on and on.

2

So, I might do as I liked.

This glorious freedom the king had granted me was like a weight around my soul's neck. He had brought me here—curious about himself, not me—and now, losing interest, he handed me this strange manumission which meant nothing in physical terms, for I was their prisoner in all senses once I knew their stronghold, but meant at the same moment so much; because, by it, he had disowned me. What then had I expected?

The long sleeps came on me again, after that night of arrival. I lay still, as I had lain in the village temple, my eyes often open, in a kind of trance. I scared the girl who came with food and coals and fresh water. She ran out yelling that I was stiff, hard and icy as a block of stone, and did not breathe. Perhaps this was true, perhaps she imagined it, but none of the women would come in my tent after that. Not that I missed them, nor they me. They were a wild bitch race, on their own among women, as I suppose all breeds of women are. They fought for their men between themselves, but did not then ride to a fight along with these men. They dressed half the time as the men did, but cooked and darned and bore their babies as if they had no other function except to be female and subservient. They had their own mysteries, and something in me shrank from their bright golden stupidity, and the sedentary glamour of their lives.

The dreams came. The shining rooms, the courts with their elaborate paving and fountains, all empty now. In a vast hall, a statue of black marble, glossy like glass. A man dressed simply, with long hair and short beard. Not here that face which haunted me, which later I had met in Darak. This was another stranger.

Where was this place, the ruin of my home? I must find it. And here I sat in the bandit's tent.

There was in me then silent anger at myself. The piece of jade lay cool on my skin, but my life was in darkness.

So the days passed.

The camp ground was much as I had imagined, pasture dotted with cows, sheep, and goats, an orchard of fruit trees—the leftovers of some old farm, now in ruins, at the southern end of the ravine. There were vines, too, and some vegetable patches. This kind of husbandry was the women's task. The men hunted when they were not out on other errands, and brought back steaming bloody carcasses with drooping heads.

There were a lot of people in the ravine, and it was a hotbed of their jealousies and quarrels. Some of these came to me—requests for love-potions and death-wishes, which were not granted. As for their sick, when they thought I might help them, it seemed I could do it. Otherwise, I was powerless. This made me afraid. I was the outcast in their midst. They would turn on me at last and rend me as a pack of dogs rend the lame dog when it falls. I had my enemies already—the girl whose jade I took, the man I had kicked in the genitals, and many more now, angry I had not cast their spells for them. Darak ignored, or did not see, this situation. There was a war over the hills, beyond the plains and the mountain ring and the wide river, in the southern desert regions, whose ancient great cities still stood like monoliths. It was another world to the bandits, that land, but it provided bounty. A caravan was going south, packed with war gear, bronze and iron and some gold. Darak would take this, and then barter it, piece by piece, among the plains tribes for their own smaller battles. Or perhaps he would ride south himself (he had done it before), and come into the mountain towns, claiming to be a merchant, with goods and armor to sell them.

I knew little enough of his plans. I picked up some gossip as befitted my station as a woman. At night, when he lay in the blue tent, I eavesdropped by the fires; during the day, I listened here and there as I walked the length of the ravine and back again.

There was a place, high up, near the falling shaft of the waterfall, where I used to climb and sit for hours. Nourished by the water, which broke off in little streams and carved itself channels along the slope, the trees grew thick and dark green here. There was the sweet sharp smell of pine resin, and scents from the various flowers that pushed through the soil. They showed like white bells among the boulders, changing to reds and blues as they neared the stream. Some grew in the water itself, like filmy lavender bubbles, then hardened into purple on the far side where a little mound of stones stood leaning together. There was a slight fume of water over the spot from the falling spray. It was refreshing in the heat of the day. I used to sleep here sometimes, glad to have escaped the claustrophobia of my painted tent for a new and cleaner privacy, for no one ever seemed to come here. Lower down, where the fall had produced a round pool, the women came and filled their jars or bathed. I could see them clearly, small as dolls, and sometimes a snatch of voices blew up to me, the words always drowned by the roaring water. Below that place, I would look down again, and see the whole of the ravine, the tents, the animals and Darak's men, wrestling and firing arrows into a target, flaying dead animals for their leather. It looked innocent and homely enough from the slope, perhaps because I was no longer part of it. I could see Darak, tiny and breakable as an insect, go into the horse field and pick out his black, or its white mate, and ride them, wheeling and jumping, standing up on their backs, somersaulting and coming down with sure feet. Darak the gypsy and the showman, the boaster, who needed admiration like food, yet seemed to know his needs. I had seen him closer, as he rode in the horse field, his face laughing, open as a small boy's, but, as he came out afterward amid clapping and cheers, the inward-looking amusement of his eyes. He knew.

In the middle of the night, a woman screamed and screamed outside my tent.

I got up, drew open the flap. Two girls, one with a pitch brand that seared my eyes with its raucous light. Their faces were drawn and somehow angry. The third woman was in the arms of a big, dark-skinned man, one of Darak's "captains" I had long ago surmised. At the moment her body was arched and straining, her hands knotted into fists.

"What is the matter?" I asked them.

The girl who did not carry the torch stepped forward, and I saw her face clearly. She did not look in my eyes but at my neck, from which, she correctly guessed, hung the jade I had pulled from hers. Shullatt.

"Illka's in labor with Darak's child, and things aren't going well. We've come so you can cast your spells on her, and save her baby." She looked scornful, and her mouth opened to say more, but the screams began again.

The bandit holding on to the one they called Illka said furiously: "Keep still, you damned bucking mare."

"Bring her inside," I said.

He ducked under the tent flap and deposited the girl, still arched and wailing, on my bed of rugs.

I looked at her and her belly was almost flat.

"In labor?" I asked, "How long has she carried?"

"Five months," Shullatt snapped.

Illka was obviously in agony, almost unconscious, except when the pain brought its automatic responses.

"I tell her," the other woman said, "she's miscarrying, not bearing."

"Where is Darak?" Tasked.

"Away."

I was not certain why I asked. I felt obscurely that some of this pain should fall upon him, who had helped cause it. But had he been in the camp, the tent with its pattern of blue eyes would have had him, or perhaps another.

I leaned over Illka, and I could not see how to help her. Her eyes were wide now in pain and fear, but I was another shadow revolving around her agony, without a place in it. She had no faith in the witch.

"Have you no midwife?" I asked.

Shullatt sneered. "No."

"I cannot help this girl."

Shullatt fastened on my defeat with triumph.

"Can't help her? Why did Darak bring you here, then, to eat our meat and drink our drink and stroll

where you will in our home?"

Illka screamed.

I kneeled down beside her. Blood was running onto the floor. I did not know what to do. I put my hand on her forehead, and looked into her eyes. At first there was no response, but then, after a while, something stirred between us. I reached down into her eyes, into her mind, and closed a coolness on her brain.

"No more pain," I whispered.

Behind me, Shullatt snapped, "What?" craning nearer.

But the girl's face was relaxing, her body, arched for the new spasm, was leveling on the rugs. She smiled.

The other woman cried: "You've saved her!"

But this was not so; there was not enough belief in any of us to have saved her. I simply held her still and calm in some water of peace at the bottom of the soul, whispering to her of beautiful things. After a while, her eyes slipped gently shut. She turned stiff, and very cold.

I stood up. The man had gone out again. Birth and the complications of birth were not his province, and he wanted none of them. The two girls were still there, but it was Shullatt who moved and sparkled and was alive with venom. The other was quiet, awed by this soft, fearless death.

"You killed her," Shullatt said.

I stood and looked at her. There was no reason to answer.

"You*killed* her," she repeated. "You put a witch-sleep on her so she had no fight left! She couldn't feel the child tearing to get out—Darak's child. Illka you kill, and Darak's child you kill—why, witch-woman? What is it that makes you so jealous of the gifts he gives?"

Karrakaz moved in the gloomy tent. Evil would come to me and I would welcome it. What I had done to help the screaming girl and thought to be a blessing to her in the hopeless agony—was that only my self-deception? Would she have lived had I left her to struggle alone? I had my motives, as Shullatt instinctively guessed. Would I cut the forest of green trees down all around him, one by one, in insidious ways, until he had only the blunted faceless tree to cling to?

The black-haired girl in the tent of blue eyes, how easy it would be to be rid of her. Some drink, some balm, a perfume even. The knowledge of poisons and treachery waited in my brain.

"Take Illka away," I said to Shullatt and the other girl. "I have done my best for her, but your goddess of bearing did not want another child as yet for the bandit camp. When Darak returns, tell him. If you have a complaint against me, I will answer it to him, not to you. He is the chief here, and you are nothing."

The psychological ploy worked well enough. The thought of Man, the chief, herself, woman-who-was-nonentity, subdued her. She scowled. Her dark eyes blinked in the torch glare. The other one went to the door and called. Another woman came in, older, and with no expression on her face.

The three hoisted Illka's body between them. She had no value now; they could not expect a man to carry her. They went out.

Blood had soaked into the rugs. I picked them up and flung them outside, and saw, in the faint moonlight, women scurrying together from the tents, like little black rats in the shadows. Whispers: "Illka is dead!" Shullatt would explain that the witch had killed her.

It had come, then.

Darak did not come back for three days. Where he was I did not know, but I guessed there might be outposts of his kingdom, lower in the hills, nearer the roadways, and perhaps he had business there.

During this time no one came near me, except once. No food, drink, or coals for warmth—but this did not bother me much. When I went to the round pool to get water, the group of women there drew off and stared at me, hostile but afraid. They would have liked to stone me and cuff me away empty-handed. Soon they would get the courage to do it.

On the third day a man came, and said he was going to move my tent higher up, away from the others. He looked slightly embarrassed for this whole episode was the work of the women, and it came hard to be under their influence. Nevertheless, the men liked me not at all. They were glad things had come to a head and I was to be got out of the way.

He and two others moved the tent, and set it up beyond the horse pens on a raised barren rock. From here, the rest of the dwellings looked small and bright at night, pressed together like nervous fireflies.

Soon I left the tent, and went to live in that flower-place I had found, where none of them seemed to come, and where there was water in plenty. I found berries here too, across the streams, behind the stones that leaned on one another, and gnawed mouthfuls of the bittersweet grass, and this was enough for me.

It seems it should have been easy for me to escape from them. I could have gone by night, up the steep track which was the only safe way I knew from the ravine. Surely I could have got by the sentries; I had learned enough now to know how to be silent. But Darak would come back, and my trial lay with him, and that was the answer to my self-questioning.

And I saw him come back. One smudgy dawn, stars still vivid in the sky, a group of men came riding in, not from the track, but from some passage in the ravine side, at the southern end. They passed the ruined farm, the orchards, and were about a mile away from the tents, when men and women began to come out, and run across the pasture to them.

Darak stopped. He seemed to be listening to what they said. I thought I saw him laugh. Then he rode on, and they scattered away from him. He came quite fast into the camp, and I could tell he was angry, little stiff black ant, on a black ant pony. Not angry for me, of course. Angry that such trivia should interfere with his plans.

There was more conference then. He ate, sitting outside his own big tent, and while the women brought him food and beer in great earthenware jugs, the complaints against me came and went. The hysteria was out of all proportion to the event, but it is their nature to turn on the different one. They must all be sheep.

Finally he stood up, and hit some man across the face. This must have been an insult against Darak

himself. While the bandit sprawled, Darak turned, and began to walk toward my lonely pitched tent on the rock. I could almost have laughed then, seeing him go in, then come out again, and wave his arms furiously, and men go running in every direction across the ravine to search me out. But my heart began to drum, for he came toward the fall and began to climb the rocky slope as if he knew instinctively where I must be.

Watching him climb, so remote and far from me at first, but growing nearer, larger, more real and dominant, I felt as if I called him to me, and could not help myself. He paused at the pool below, looked around, then up. He did not see me. He frowned, and came on again.

I sat down by the leaning stones, and put one hand on them, for the cruel warmth of day was rising, and they were cool still, and hard and secure. I trembled, and my heartbeat stabbed in me, and I wished it were from fear.

I heard his footsteps on the stones, once through water. Twice he stopped, then moved on once more.

Then he had turned the path, and he stood in front of me, against the curdling sky of sunrise. He was dark against that light, but I could just make out his face.

He looked at me and said harshly: "Of course. Where else could you be?"

He moved along the edge of the little streams, but did not cross.

"You find comfort here, do you?" he said.

There was something in his voice and look that part of me cowered away from. I said nothing. I seemed to be drowning in his presence, but there was no help for it.

"They say"—he jerked his thumb toward the ravine—"you killed some girl because she had my child. Brought on a miscarriage with a potion, then drugged her and let her die."

There seemed no point in speaking, but obviously he expected an answer.

"No," I said.

"No," he repeated,*"of course* 'No.' Why should you do it? Shullatt speaks about you as if you were a woman, with a woman's emotions and spitefulness, but you're as cool as river clay. There may be wickedness in you, but not a thing as ordinary as jealousy. Besides, goddess, the gods accept only necessities. What they really want, they take without asking."

I felt the need to grasp at this sentence, cynical, yet deeper than he meant it to be. There was no time.

"Why I brought you here I don't fully understand. There's a sickness with the sheep and the cattle, and this apparently is your doing too. They'll not be happy till you're gone."

"Then I will go," I said.

"Oh, no, it's not so easy, goddess. You know our stronghold. When I say gone, I mean gone underground with an arrow through you, or your neck broken. Of course," he added, "if I cut off your tongue and fingers—"

"No!" a shrill voice shouted. "Kill her! Your men want her dead, too, Darak."

Beyond Darak stood a woman's silhouette that spoke with Shullatt's voice.

Darak half turned.

"Who asked you to follow me, Shullatt? I didn't."

"I knew she'd be here—the place with the Stones—and I knew you wouldn't do what we asked—kill and burn her, and rid us of the filthy curse she brought."

I stood up and blood tingled through me. I must die and burn, because this bitch demanded it. I crossed through the water, and she darted at me suddenly with a knife in her hand. It was*her* swift moment this time. The blade slit my shoulder, and blood spilled fast as wine into the stream, turning the lavender flowers purple, the red flowers scarlet. I got her throat in my hands, my knee against her side. Fool, she might have thrust me off a thousand ways, but she stabbed again, into my arm, and with the impetus of pain, I thrust her body one way, her head another, and snapped her neck.

It was too quick to think:*This is Death I am giving!* The impulse came from the depth of me, irresistible.

She lay in the flowers, and my blood dripped on her face.

"You never fight like a woman," I heard Darak say. "She'd have done well to remember that."

I felt sick, but I said: "She is taller than me, and weighs more, but fire is a great leveler. Take her body down a little way, then burn it. Show them what is left, and I will go my own way. Do not fear I will betray this place. I have nothing to gain in doing so."

"You," he said.

His hand came onto my shoulder. He turned me to face him, and his eyes looked in at mine through the mask-holes of the shireen.

"I can't see you," he said. "What are you feeling, now that you've killed? Nothing?"

His hand slipped downward from my shoulder onto my left breast, and the heart under it leaned and leaped as if it would burst free of me. to lie against his palm. Then his hand slid away. His face was tight and concentrated.

"Listen to me," he said. "I'll take her down to the pool. There's a place near there we use for it. I'll burn her. And show them. But you'll stay here. If they catch you on the track they'll pull you down like a wolf pack. Don't worry that they'll come for you here." He pointed toward the leaning stones across the stream. "That place," he said casually, "an altar of sacrifice—old as the ravine itself. I've heard them say some black god or other still broods here, but that's tales for children. Good luck for you, you picked this place. Or perhaps you heard them talking."

"Then I wait here. What then?"

"Tonight we ride south. You'll come with us."

"And you will let me free when we are away from here?"

He picked Shullatt up. Her disjointed head joggled over his shoulder. He grinned at me, a grin hard and white as the teeth it showed.

"No. I'll not let you free, goddess-woman who fights like a man."

He swung away, and down the path, and was gone.

I waited. The day was red as blood, or so it seemed to me as I lay in the flowers beside the streams, the scarlet bells brushing my eyelids. I was afraid now, aware that I had killed, and did not care much. He blunted all the edges of my guilt, but I felt guilt at lack of guilt. Karrakaz, and already evil was upon me. I thought,*Run down among the tents and they will kill you, and end all this.* The clouds above me formed the shape of the Knife of Easy Dying.

But I was alive as I waited for him.

I did not even smell the smoke, nor hear them come to see the burning thing, though they came. They came.

He touched my shoulder, and I started back across the sparkling darkness. I had slept, I thought, but he looked at me strangely. Had Darak, too, seen me stiff and still and unbreathing? It was cool, and twilight.

"Get up," he said, "and put these on."

A heap of clothes lay by me on the grass—man's clothes, but small enough that they would fit me.

I turned my back to strip—because it was before him I would be naked.

"Where did you find these things?"

"A boy's," he said.

The boots were hard on my thighs, the leather belt cut my waist. He must have been a small-footed boy, with a girl's waist too—the belt holes ran far around the band. Perhaps Darak had let women ride with him before. Still, there was no doubting this was a man's gear—the peculiar sheaths with their cargo of spiked knives, the groin-guard under the tunic flap.

"Roll back the shirt a minute," he said abruptly. "I brought a salve for the cuts Shullatt gave you."

"No need," I said.

Impatient at this presumed modesty, he came over and roughly pulled the shirt free of shoulder, upper arm, and breast. It was darkening; I could not see his face. But his breath was sucked in hard. He touched the mauve scars with nervous fingers, as if my flesh were too hot, and might burn him.

"You heal quickly," he said.

His fingers brushed the jade.

"When you're ready," he said, "we'll go down."

"Wait," I said. "How many men are with you? If they see me, they will know me."

"Most of these men come from another place. The ravine men that ride with us set no store by you or your spells. It was the women's doing, that anger, and they've had their sacrifice. They'll think it's Shullatt that's gone with me."

He turned, and I followed, across the icy water, through the flowers, on to a strange new turning, that wound away into the rock where there had seemed to be no opening.

Darkness, and water running on stone, then the starlight, heather tufted slopes, the stamp and whicker of ponies, and men waiting.

Darak turned me to my right. A man brought up a little black horse, which I mounted and could ride properly now without a clinging enclosing skirt. Darak was up and already riding down the hillside. I fell in with the others, feeling as anonymous as they. I pushed the hood of the cloak from my head and let the cool wind thrust back my hair. It did not matter now if they saw me.

I was adrift. The tide pulled me away. The need to think and decide seemed gone.

Through the dark movement of bodies, I saw Darak. I kept my eyes fixed on him. I was in his hands now, and whatever degradation, misery, or pleasure awaited me, must come from him. At that time, this seemed enough.

4

We rode through the night, moonless, from one black place to another. As the sky paled, the first bird and animal calls began, and invisible sentries passed us on. Low in the hills now, I could make out great sweeps of trees to the west. Beyond the last hills on the horizon there was nothing standing up but sky. Everything beyond was flat. The Plains?

We made toward the woodland, and it was not far. By daybreak we were in the trees, and in the new camp. A small river splashed through it over gray stones. The air was moist and green, but the smells of smoke and food, animals, leather tents, and man were familiar enough.

It had interested me that Darak had brought so few men from what I took to be his camp in the ravine. Now I began to realize that this warren, too, was his, and probably others. While he was away in different places, his "captains" kept the inhabitants in order. Odd Darak trusted to their loyalty, but perhaps he had good cause to, or had made provision against any sort of rebellion. There never seemed to be a question of leadership, or any dissent among them.

The riders around me dispersed, Darak being the first to go. He had got me out of danger, but that done, he abandoned me again. There would be new dangers now, but it did not matter much. I dismounted and left the horse to graze, glad to walk off the stiffness of riding. I felt easy and unhampered in the bandit boy's clothes. My legs were free, despite the chafing boots; the gaudy brown and yellow silk shirt with its slightly tarnished gold thread and tassels, the waist tunic which was no more than a leather flap hind and fore leaving the legs free, all the rest of the accouterments and ornaments seemed bright and fresh after the dark red and black in which men's various beliefs had shut me. Only the mask now, the shireen, was a closeness and a cloying, but there was no help for that.

I walked along the river bank to be away from the tents, and came to large dripping stones with a green fur of moss. I had stopped, listening to the water, when a piercing whistle sounded a few yards behind me.

"Imma!" someone called—it was an insulting pet name among the bandits, meaning "small one."

I turned. Three or four men had followed me, soft-footed as cats. Now they grinned curiously. Dangerous, but not unfriendly.

"Now what are*you?"* asked the biggest one, a black man with serpents embroidered on his tunic flaps, no doubt by some admiring female hand.

"Gleer says you're a boy, and Maggur says you're a girl," put in another who had gold earrings.

"And I think you're a bit of both," added the third and smallest.

The fourth one—I could see now there were four—picked his teeth idly, leaning on one of the big stones, and leaving the repartee to his friends.

It seemed an uneasy situation. Possibly they would want to find out what I was by personal investigation, and they were cold-eyed for all their dark grinning faces. They too did not like strangeness in their midst.

I knew what they respected, so I said: "Whatever I am, I came here with Darak."

Their faces altered slightly, less friendly, and less dangerous.

Then the handsome black giant swung slowly around on the pivot of his great legs, and cuffed the silent one with gentle amusement.

"No, Gleer, you're wrong. A girl's voice. And girl's breasts, too. Besides, Darak's never been a one for boys."

The gold-earringed man moved a hand up and down before his face. "Why that?"

It was an easy answer, for I wore the shireen of the Plains tribes.

"I am a tribal woman," I said. "I may only show my face to my lord. Or I die."

I had heard the wearers of the shireen were told this to help them keep their modesty.

The black one—Maggur—clucked sympathetically for all of us, and sat down on a boulder. The others joined him, except for Gleer, who slunk off noiselessly. I did not understand their interest, but there seemed to be something forming between us, and I did not move away.

"Tell us, girlie. Does Darak whisper in your ear at night about his plans?"

"No."

"Great pity."

Their shoulders twitched, but they stayed still. It was strange, very strange. I looked hard at them, and

they seemed to be waiting for something—some signal—that would come from me. I measured them, slowly: the big man; the one with gold earrings; the small one who had a lively, living look about him. Muscles flinched in their arms and legs. Their eyes went everywhere except to me, and abruptly I knew*I* had drawn them here, and*I* held them here, though why I was not sure.

"Well," I said.

Their eyes came back to me, three dogs waiting to obey.

I saw a bow slung over the goldearring's shoulder.

"How far can you shoot?" I asked him.

He unslung the bow, set an arrow to it, and selected a sapling far off down the river bank. The arrow leaped, flew, and struck home. He was called Giltt, the other one Kel.

It became a contest. Kel ran off and found a wooden target, and they played at it, doing well, or indifferently, and sometimes missing altogether, and cursing. One arrow caught a breeze, went deep into fern on the other bank.

"Let her go," Giltt said. It surpised me. Arrows were never loosed like that and left to lie.

They looked uneasy. I went across the water, stepping on the boulders in the stream, and snatched the arrow up. Between the green tattered feathers of fern I saw a little mound of stones leaning together. I turned back and stared at the three of them. They looked at me, paler, their eyes slightly fixed.

Another evil place, and I had come to it, and here I had got what I wanted without knowing, the royal bodyguard of a princess of a great house. I shivered. With both hands I snapped the arrow and threw it into the water where the current drew it slowly away.

I crossed, and walked toward the tents. They came behind me, Kel running, for he had paused to get the target from the tree.

The cook fires were alight. Meat sizzled, and a porridge I had seen before, made from nut kernels and honey. I stopped and ladled a little of the brown stuff into a bowl, and a man turned around on me from the hide he was flaying.

"Here you—keep your hands off—"

Maggur's great fist shot out like a black python. It was only a glancing blow, but the man went over and lay groaning.

I ate the porridge, standing, Maggur, Giltt and Kel standing around me, easier now that the thing was irrevocable, ignoring it, talking among themselves.

A woman came, and bent over her man, and looked scared at Maggur.

I would be safe now, and want for nothing.

The pains began in my belly.

Kel, the small one, had, of course, called me "Imma" first. Now they all called me Imma, but it had a new ring to it. It was a concession, and they knew it. I was their mistress. They would defend me, even against Darak himself, although they would never have admitted so much. As it was they swaggered behind me, and I did my best never to push them beyond their instincts. If other men asked them what they were doing with me like bees around a honey jar, they said I was Darak's woman, and something special besides, a healer and diviner, with holy blood—the Chief himself had told them to guard me. They had their own girls, it is true, who were jealous and curious, but Maggur took care of this, for no insult or trouble came near me from them. As for Darak, for the five days we were at the wood camp, he was busy with his captains in the great black tent, and I never saw him. A scrap of paper came with his scrawl on it, however. I was mildly surprised that he could write, but the words were uncouthly formed and misspelled in places. It said:*The goddess has taken—without asking.*

I felt there was an understanding between us, or rather that he understood more of me than I did myself. I was still afraid of what I had done.

But those days were full for the first time since I had come from the guts of the mountain. For I took my guard and made them teach me something of their skill with knives and bows, and on the backs of the wild brown horses they caught in the woods and then let go after an hour or so of bruising sport. This was a good time. I could push all doubt and alarm from my mind, and think only of my moving hands and feet, and if my eye could judge far enough. The three were very pleased with me, and proud. If they were in a woman's power—and they were, though it was too early yet for them to own it to themselves—best it should be a woman who could fight and leap and run as well as they.

I learned quickly, and I was sharp and good. The skills were there in me, in my dreams and recollections. Among the marble courts where the lizards lay now, women and men had not been separate races as they were in this world around me. Although I was far smaller and slighter even than little Kel, yet I could swing an iron long-knife as well as Maggur, and what he could break, I could bend. And I rode the wild horses long after Maggur, with his extra weight to hold him, was flung off. I was Darak then, and a crowd would come and cheer, and Maggur would walk by my side after it, grinning, and Kel would sing.

Strange, strange, they called me Imma for their peace of mind, and for that same peace, they thought of me as a prince and a man.

And then came the night of the fifth day, and I lay in my own tent—a piece of hide Maggur had constructed for me and heard an angry grunt and a shout of abuse outside. I opened the tent flap and saw Maggur and Darak glaring at each other in the starlight. I had not realized till now that Maggur and Kel and Giltt took turns to guard my sleeping place.

"Goddess, tell this oaf to get out of my way before I gut him like a fish," Darak snarled.

Maggur seemed to recollect himself. He stepped aside and grumbled something.

"Maggur thought you were the man who came earlier and tried to take his woman," I said, the lie sweet on my tongue, for I had seen how much Maggur was mine, and it was a safeness, for all my doubts.

Darak swore, and strode by the bandit, by me, into my tent.

I nodded to Maggur, and went in too, letting the flap fall shut.

There was room under the hide for me, but not much for Darak. He crouched down, and when I sat

facing him, he said: "The last time I did this, you used a rock on me."

My heart, which always roused like a dog when he was near me, began to throb harder. I remembered him lying in the cindery shale, his eyes shut and his face defenseless, and how I had run from him. So slowly.

"Tomorrow," he said, looking into my eyes, "we ride down to the River Road. That is the way the caravan goes to Ankurum."

"Ankurum?" I said. The name seemed at once alien and familiar.

"Across the Plains, in the Low of the Mountain Ring. A great trade center, one of many where the old cities beyond the Mountains and the Water shop for their war gear. I won't tell you all of it, but the caravan is mine. Or will be. You'll ride with us."

"Why? Your women were left at home I thought." "Women. You're a goddess, remember. I've heard what the black man has taught you in five days. The rest I'll teach you."

His eyes were glittering in the dark tent. There was hardly any light from the little brazier of smoky coals, yet I seemed to see him very clearly. Our eyes met hard and fastened together. The cool night was burning. The sound of insects in the grass sounded whirring and brittle in the fiery crystal silence.

"That's all." Darak said. His voice was soft and slightly slurred. He did not move.

I thought of the day he had come to the temple, the crashing screen, the day when I had taken Shullatt's jade. I thought of night among the burned woods by the lake, of the first night at the ravine when he had gone to the tall dark girl with her cloudy hair. I thought of dawn by the streams when he had said to me: "Besides, goddess, the gods accept only necessities. What they really want, they take without asking." And I had known inside me what he had said, and been unable to know it with my mind. Had all this been between us from the beginning, then, delay pointless and unnecessary? "No, Darak," I said, "that is not all." His teeth showed, not in a smile, and his hands caught my shoulders very hard, gathered the golden shirt in fistfuls, and ripped it open and away. He pulled me near him, and his mouth was on my breasts, but I said: "Do you have new clothes for me, Darak, if you tear all these?"

"Yes," he muttered. He touched the mask briefly. "I'll leave you that but nothing else."

He pulled the boots and leggings off, the tunic, the belt, all of it. The belt buckle clashed against the brazier. His own clothes went next with more noise. I thought Maggur might come running in anger, but soon everything was silent except for the insects and the sounds of our own breathing.

He was impatient, but I made him be still a little while. I wanted to touch his body—lean-muscled as a lion's, bronze and gold, the skin incredibly smooth over the hardness under it, except where fights had scarred it. Love of this body, which had made me so weak in everything before, had stiffened every part of me now, as it had stiffened him. My fingers brushed and cupped the burning phallus, and he pushed me back, his hands crueler and more sure than mine.

And then the breath went hissing out of him. His body grew cooler against me. I held him fast.

"No," I said. "Do you expect your goddesses to be made as other women?"

A sort of shudder went through him, and a kind of laugh.

"You have what's necessary for this at least," he said.

And there was no more talk.

The insects continued their noises in the dark as if they had never stopped, though we had stopped them for a while, and all things but ourselves.

"What are you?" he said suddenly.

He lay over me, his face against my hair.

"I have no more reason to know than you, Darak."

But when his voice went on, he had only heard me with his ears, not in his thoughts.

"Woman but not woman. Yet more woman than any other breed. And yet a different woman from women. Goddess yes, perhaps I believed it. And then, riding from Makkatt, I saw the red cloud on the mountain by night, and I came to ask you in the tent if you knew—and I saw Krill spitting the snake poison out, while you sat there so prim and stiff. And you were no goddess. And then Makkatt burst open again, and finished them. But you—" He stopped. It was so dark now, I felt him lift and lean over me but did not see. He touched my thighs, my belly, my breasts. "You've never done this before, and how I know it's a mystery for there was nothing a man had to break. Virgin, and yet knowing. What are you?" His hand slid across my throat, my hair to the rolled back folds of the mask.

"No," I said. "Darak, you took all else, but you said you would leave me that."

His hands left me, and his body left me. He stood a little way up in the low tent, and dressed.

"Darak," I said, but he did not answer me. He went out into the dark, and it might never have been, that first time.

5

I sensed Karrakaz near me in my sleep, and strove to wake, and could not. Through the oval door I looked at the flickering color in the stone basin of the altar, and it drew me, sucked me in—only the green coolness could save me and I did not know where it was. My hands went to the bandit jade around my neck, but in this place it was black and dull and useless as iron.

A great hand took my shoulder, and shook me out of the nightmare.

"Maggur," I whispered.

"Nearly dawn," he said. "Darak's men will be riding soon, to the River Road."

He didn't seem perturbed by my nakedness. He held out a piece of shimmery stuff—green and purple and red.

"I came earlier," he said, "after he went away." He grinned at the torn shirt. "I got a new one—off a woman, an Imma like you."

Darak had not come for me. Had he expected me to recall on my own, or had he wanted to leave me behind at last? I dressed, and Maggur dismantled the tent. Outside, a little way off, Giltt and Kel were waiting with ponies and my little black horse, all saddlebags packed and ready. They had arranged I should go to Darak with my own state it seemed.

I rode ahead, Maggur a pace behind me, the other two paired behind him.

I heard other harness jinking soon. A clearing, faintly greening in the first hint of day, spangled with dew. A few heads turned around to look at us.

"Darak's woman and her men," they said.

Maggur grinned.

Darak looked up from what he was doing, and nodded to me. That was all. A man came and handed me a long-knife, which I stuck through my belt. The other horses were being stripped of their bells and jingling medallions. Kel saw to ours, and Maggur put them away in one of the saddle pouches.

I could smell the dawn.

Darak was on his pony. He held up one arm, and the silence deepened.

"Now listen. We'll reach the ford at noon. The caravan will go by anything from an hour to three hours later, depending on the time they're making. The signal to take them is a wolfs howl. Don't move before it; when it comes, move fast. Remember the others across the water. Head runaways back toward them. Kill every man, starting with their guard, but not a scratch on the horses."

He turned the pony and began to ride off into the woods.

We followed.

There seemed nothing wrong in it then, that we should be riding to kill men, knowingly. They were hardened and unthinking, and I was so contemptuous of human life. And there was hurt and anger in me, too.

The sun came up, blotching the leaves acid green. We rode downward all the time, the trees thinning in places, leaving lower slopes visible that faded away into the flatter ground. The river seemed to move with us, sometimes on show, flaring with sunlight; always in our ears.

We reached the ford, crossing a little before noon.

The river bent like a bow in front of us, narrowing at a point to the left. Through the screens of foliage and thick fern, I made out the broad track—the route the caravans took, which led toward the great South Road. The track halted on the far bank, continued on the near bank. In between, stakes stood up in the shallow water, indicating, with blackened notches, how high the river would run in flood. It was about twenty feet across.

I had gathered from snatches of talk around the wood camp that this was to be a new place of attack. The merchants were accustomed to trouble farther out, where the track met the South Road. They would be fairly easy as yet, and surprise was a great thing. But they had a strong and vicious guard—Maggur

had told me as much.

"Those ones," Maggur said, "they train them in the northern towns from childhood. A man can boast forty scars on his body at fifteen years. Teach them to steal from street markets and beat 'em when they're caught. They bring them up on cruelty like a mean dog, and like mean dogs they grow. They bite, so watch their teeth, the ones in their belts, that is. And any blow, make sure you kill with it. Pain only makes 'em mad, they're so used to it—inspires them, you could say."

We settled down to wait. Bread and salt meat and beer in leather bottles went around, but Barak's men hardly made a sound. Even going off to urinate, they moved as stealthily as snakes. I began to see why most of them had been picked from the wood camp, where the bandits learned tree-craft as a matter of course, stalking deer or other prey.

It grew very hot. Sunlight boiled its green bubbles in the branches, and a bluish mist rose from the fallen leaves underfoot. The river was a cataract of polished opals.

Suddenly a woodhawk screeched. I glanced at Maggur. He nodded. It was a signal, and they were coming, the fat stupid merchant men, and their terrible outriding guard.

A rustle, crushing of ferns, tramp of horses hooves, big horses these, roll of wagon wheels through undergrowth.

The first two riders appeared. Guard. I felt Maggur tense a little, but he made no sound. They were black, too, but it was black cloth and hardened leather, not skin. Every inch of them was covered and armored, even their hands in black gauntlets, even their faces—like mine—masked. But these masks were different, for they were made in the likeness of black bone skulls, from which grew black, coarse plaited manes of horsehair. Their horses were enormous and black also. Cold ran down my spine, and my hand clenched on my long-knife. There was something about them—something. I felt the need to shiver, and spit the taste of their nearness out of my mouth.

They rode into the mid of the river, looked about them; then one shouted something in a high clear voice. At once others appeared, and then the swaying canopied wagons drawn by ponies. The procession began to cross the river.

A wolf howled nearby, hoarse and urgent.

I had a glimpse of the black skull faces turning in surprise, and then we had moved.

There was one sound and one movement only, or so it seemed in the first seconds. The merchants' cries of panic, neighing splashing horses, the shouts of Darak's men bursting free from tension at last, the rushing forward with no chance to draw aside and have no part in it, were all one imperative thing.

The iron long-knife was in my right hand. There was no time to think. "Make sure you kill," Maggur had said. The knife swung in an arc. The great black body toppled slowly over and away from me, not entirely black now, but red as well.

The horse under me was level and good. It danced forward and a black guard leaned down at me, and his own knife very long and hooked at the end—slashed out. I caught the hook on my own weapon, and pulled at him. It seemed easy. He too fell slowly, and the spiked knife in my other hand dug into him, twisted, and came free. Blood and other stuff splattered up to my elbow. I saw it, but it did not seem to be my arm on which it spilled.

There was a little lull around me then. On every side there was the mess and uncertainty of fighting. The horses were staggering in the stream, and merchants and boys were running into each other in the water, shrieking. It was almost comic, but there was too much terror for that. One man was wriggling and straining on the driver's box, trying to get his team around. I recalled that the merchants must be killed too. I rode at him, and the knife went in and out and he rolled sideways into the frothy pink water, his eyes full of reproach.

Maggur charged past, grinning, a black-maned mask in one hand, dripping knife in the other.

Across the river the others of Darak's ambush were milling in to close the gap.

I felt sick abruptly. Evil was on me and I knew it. A kind of scream came whirling up from my belly and out of my mouth. I clamped the horse between my thighs, and kicked the spurs into it. I lifted the long-knife in a double grasp, over my head, letting the other one go. I plunged back into the chaos, and my arms swung left and right, and the knife spun at the end of them like a wheel of silver pain. I do not know how many I killed, but I killed many. There was a ringing in my head, and an anger in me, and a blood-red roaring triumph. I did not see much of what I did until I was in the river, and flung backward from my little horse, which in its turn lolled forward and went under. The cold, the taste of blood and river bitterness brought me out of the death dream. I staggered to my feet, stumbling on stones and bodies under the froth. At that moment three of the skull guard came leaping in at me. The horses' bodies, on the great black stretch of that leap, seemed to stop still in the air. Their hooves were buzzing iron hammers falling on me. I struggled, and thought I was going down in quicksand; I could not seem to get my balance. They came like huge black birds, the water breaking like glass. One hoof struck me, a glancing blow—more like a quick hot hand, brushing back the hair from my neck. I fell again, and the hook-knives came flaring over me.

A man roared, and Maggur flung himself at them seemingly from out of nowhere. I glimpsed Giltt. Little Kel was there too, or his arrow. A guard jumped forward from his saddle, and fell near me, the flight just showing between his shoulder blades. But Maggur was spinning down also, out of sight, and the two remaining blacknesses had reached and caught my arms.

I was lifted up by them, carried backward between them very fast, across the river. I was aware that they would half stun me on the nearest tree, then finish me as slowly as they had time for. It pleased them to do this to me, perhaps because I had killed some friend of theirs—if such men had friends or lovers.

But then a shock went through them. I looked up and saw Darak behind us. Both his knives had gone, flung one into the back of each of my captors. They toppled and their grip was still tight on me. I thought I should be torn in two, but the grasp lessened at the last second, and I fell backward into the water with them.

Darak leaned over me and lifted me up.

"Both your knives are gone," I said. It had seemed foolish of him to let go both of them to save me.

"The fight's over," he said.

I stared around me, and it was true.

"Maggur," I said. "He came at them, and fell—"

Barak's hand came swift and fast across my face. I stumbled and he caught my belt to steady me.

"I came at them, too, bitch. Thank me for it."

"I thank you," I said.

I picked my way among the debris in the river, past him, back to the bank.

They cleared the bodies from the water and burned them, then organized the stuff in the wagons. I did not see any of this. Kel and I sat together in the shade, under a leather awning, where Maggur lay. Of the bandits only four were dead, but one of them was Giltt. My attackers had managed it as he ran at them, and I had not even seen them do it. Other wounds were few and not serious. Only Maggur had been badly hurt.

"There was a fourth one, Imma—he swung at Maggur from the back with an iron club they carry. I got him too, after."

I had wiped the blood away and cleaned the deep cut, and the skull seemed whole under my fingers, but Maggur did not wake up, and I could sense a sort of death on him.

We sat a long while, Kel and I. Then he said: "Imma, can't you ...?"

"What?"

"They said you're a healer."

A little bright shock went through my brain.

"You think I can save Maggur?" I asked softly.

"Of course."

There was no doubt in his face.

There was mist in the morning, and Darak came.

He glanced at Kel asleep, and Maggur sleeping too, healthily and deeply.

"Today we are merchants," he said. "We go on to the South Road, protected by our skull-guard, of course. The bandits are rife hereabouts they tell me."

His voice was light, his face cold.

Suddenly he said to me: "Is that brute your lover?"

"Kel?"

"No. The other one."

"No," I said. "Except he loves me a little."

Darak's mouth was set and sneering. "Of course, goddess."

He bowed to me.

There was no one near to see. Kel and Maggur slept. I struck Darak across his set sneering mouth.

"Take back your blow," I said. "I never deserved it of you."

He looked as if he would kill me, but he did not kill me. I had not hurt him, and no one had been near to see. Otherwise it would have been different.

Part III:*The High-Lord's Way*

1

The woods were gone, and the river which fed them was gone. The hills moved behind us in a slow procession, and before us lay the open plains. Yellow-brown as old parchment rolled the curve of their backs, farther off they melted into lavender and purple. The odd tree, leaning, its branches spreading low and still, the occasional rocky place, or little stretch of grassland sprung up by some muddy pool, stood out like isolated figures on a gameboard. It was to be like a game—hurrying from one watered square to another, across the parched listless land.

It was a merchant caravan again, now under Darak's leadership, and he was a merchant's son from Sigko, one of the northern towns, where these goods had come from. I had turned over the stuff myself—weapons and armor pieces, or raw metals in great bars. The bandits had picked a few items each, in payment for the battle in the ford. I took a long knife, larger than I was used to but with a weight I knew I could carry, given practice. It was fine workmanship, the great blade seared and inset with a silver leopard. The hilt was made from some white stone, highly polished but roughened a little around the grip so it would sit tight in the hand. The sheath and sling, which went across the breast and back to hang under the left arm, were crimson velvet over leather, the buckle and notches were gold.

When I chose this knife, no one stopped me, or laughed, even though Maggur was still in his shelter. Despite the ignominious ending of my fight, I had done some skillful damage, The talk was mainly of how I had yelled my battle cry and ridden straight in among the guard, the long-knife wheeling in all directions at once. This was not as they thought, and I would not discuss it. They were probably glad the mad woman was not a boaster too.

But I think none of them considered me a woman any longer. A few women still journeyed with them, as a comfort, but dressed more somberly now, as prostitutes, and the men spoke of them in front of me, quite freely—not as a taunt, or to brag, but as if they had forgotten my sex, and expected me to tell the next tale.

All their clothes were altered. Darak wore black, the rest of them somber blues and clerical greens, stripped from the bodies, or provided beforehand. The men who rode as the guard had put on their covering, but kept the skull masks off their faces as long as they could. Only I remained unchanged, colorful, an oddity.

We were on the plains two days when I went to Darak's tent. His captains would be there, I knew, but things were different now. No one would flinch when I came because I was female.

There was talk and laughter inside, and the clink of the bronze beer jug going around.

I lifted the flap and went in.

It was a big tent, the inside leather painted too, with red running deer, and high up a sunburst, which meant power. There were fine rugs on the floor, low chairs, and I recognized the carved table I had seen in the village. The five men glanced up, interested. Darak looked me hard in the face, then continued with what he had been saying. Ignoring that I had been ignored, I walked to a vacant chair—more stool than chair, but there was no help for that—and sat down.

They had taken their cue from Darak. They ignored me, and the talk went on—elaborate plans, which were really very simple in essence, of how they should get the stuff along the South Road, sell it in part before Ankurum, their goal, and what was to be done in Ankurum itself. It was a dangerous adventure. Their eyes were alight. The jug came around and I took it as it was bypassing me, and, easing it up under the folds of the shireen, drew a mouthful from one of the open tubes set in the sides. I did not want this drink, but that jug—one of their symbols—could not be let by so easily. I swallowed the viscous, bitter swill, wanting only to spit it out, then handed the jug on to the man it had been going to. There was a little silence. Then Darak stood up. He looked strange, nobler in the black full tunic, black leggings and boots.

"Drink, and get out," he said pleasantly to his captains.

The discussion was over. They had covered all points, but I guessed a meeting such as this would have gone on much longer normally. They would have perfected details, unnecessarily perhaps, told jokes and stories of other ventures, and drunk very deep.

Now the men got up. They went past me uneasily, once outside, laughed and blundered around in some horseplay or other.

"What does the goddess want?"

He was abrupt, uneasy as they.

"To hear your plans. I am tired of knowing only a moment or so before we move."

"It was a meeting beteen the chief and his people. Not for goddesses,"

I thought,*I can go now be free of him.* I must*go,* must*be free. Already there is blood on me, and will be more unless I go. And he does not want me.*

But I said lightly: "The gods must be everywhere, Darak. Next time you will not send them away when I come in."

He went to the tent flap, threw the lees of the beer across the grass. Coming in, he tied the flap shut, and began to strip ready to sleep. When he did this, it was somehow insulting. Every muscle flick, brazier gleam on his naked torso was a jeer at me. He began to pull off the high boots, slowly, with great care.

"I suppose you'll stay," he said.

They have such pride in their sex, these men and women, that there must always be dignity and battle in it. He expected me to untie the tent flap and march out, my back stiff with fury, but it was no matter to

me.

"I will stay," I said.

He stood up and moved quickly over to me. He seized my arm, and his fingers and thumb were like five iron talons in my flesh,

"Did you make the mountain burn?"

It astonished me, this superstition again, festering in him.

"No," I said.

But I was not sure. The curse had gone out with me from the volcano, so Karrakaz had promised me.

"The villages, all of them. That second time there would be nothing left," he said.

I touched his face with my free hand.

Quite calmly now, and with precision, he began to undress me. When everything lay on the floor, he went to the brazier and pulled down its lid. The light turned smoky and purple.

"Take off the mask," he said to me.

I felt utter panic then. Before I could move, he came at me, got my hands, and the mask, and wrenched it free. Air, cool and burning on my face. I screamed, again and again, struggling to get my hands free to cover myself, my eyes tight shut. His own hand came hard over my mouth and nostrils to stifle the screaming. I could not seem to breathe, and was losing consciousness, still struggling like a fish in its awful agony on a hook. All my being seemed to be struggle and terror, and behind my lids I saw that mirror under the volcano, and the devil-demon-beast that looked back at me from its burned-white eyes.

It was good for him, I suppose. He was conquering me in my fear, and his own fears, too. I felt him, but it was some thing done to me, disgusting in its remoteness.

I swam back to the tent from the darkness. I do not know how long it had lasted, but not long, I think. He lay by me, but he had put the shireen in my hand. I understood him, and what he had done, but it made no difference to me then. I held the shireen tight, but did not put it on. Tears ran down into my hair, but it seemed not to be I who wept them.

"No man and woman can lie together as we did," he said. "This"—he touched the shireen—"has a face of its own, staring at me. Go masked with others, not with me. I saw you before. You can't be secret from me; every beauty and ugliness and strangeness and difference of yours is mine by right if I have a right to your body." His hand slid between my thighs, but not to my sex. "You weren't afraid to let me find this in the dark—or rather to find the absence of it. A woman, but not human. Listen," he said, but no more after that. He leaned and kissed my mouth, which he had never done before. I opened my eyes. His face, so near mine, was gentle, almost tender. There was no repulsion in it.

Life leaped in me, for there was no repulsion in it.

I saw that he had set me free of something, with him at least, but chained me too, of course. It was a happiness for me, but a conquest for him—of both of us. But nothing mattered. I let the shireen drop

away, and put my arms around him instead.

2

Darak rode a little ahead of the caravan, and I, astride one of the smaller merchant horses, rode at his side from then on. Maggur and Kel came behind me, a handful of Darak's men behind him. At evening, when we halted, he would try my fighter's skill and my skill with the bow. But I was excellent with both; Maggur and the others had been good teachers.

"You have eyes like a hawk," Darak told me. With the bow I was better than he, but it did not seem to trouble him, surprisingly. He knew his hold on me, I imagine. At night we were lovers in the tent, and later, when the River Road, days away from the river, found the South Road, and the nightmares began, he was very good to me.

It was strange, the way we came to it. We had followed the track so long I was used to its roughness, and the undergrowth which strangled it in the woods, the drifts of loose soil blown across it on the plains. It was a dull hot day, the sky full of black hammerheads bringing the first of the autumn storms. We rode through a little scrubby tangle of bushes, over a small rise among rocks, and the track faded away like a snail's trail in front of us.

Beyond the rocks, the ground stretched open and flat, and on the horizon stood up two giant pillars, the same brownish color as the plains. Once they had been even taller, now the tops were split and crumbled away, but still towered over thirty feet above our heads. There was carving on them, some deep, some surface, most of which was weathered smooth. I had ridden ahead to them, and Darak had followed me, waving the others back, I suppose, for they did not come up for some time. My face, in its daytime mask, could have told him nothing, but perhaps he knew me enough now that he could sense my thoughts.

I got down and put my hands on the stone. Ancient, ancient, far-back greatness seemed to throb through the pillar I touched. I was cold and burning as I traced the figures of birds and lions, dragons and serpents. A hollow giddiness went through me. I shut my eyes, and under the lids the pillars stood whole, ten feet higher, with capitals of phoenixes and flames.

"What?" Darak asked me.

I had spoken, and did not know what I had said. I could not seem to take my hands from the tall stone. Between the two uprights a paved road stretched away, straight as an arrow shaft, and fifty feet across. The pillars were wide apart, but so huge they must be close together on their own scale, a different scale from anything else around them.

Suddenly the horse Darak was riding flung up on its hind legs, teeth like yellow marble glinting in the storm-light. It ran around on itself and tried to bolt. Darak got it in hand a few yards away, but the merchant horse which was mine was running too, straight off toward the rocks. I heard Darak swearing as he spurred after it.

The sky was indigo, choked and bruised with hate; the air seemed filled with the wings of beating blue eagles. Then the cloud split. There was a blind light, a cold heat—boiling and terrible. I felt myself thrown backward, turning in the air, blazing.

Rain fell on my face in icy needles, and far-off thunder curled and rolled. I felt someone's hands touching

every part of me, very carefully. My eyes cleared and I saw Darak.

"Are you hurt?" he said. "I can't find anything broken or burned."

Maggur spilled water on my wrists, but I sat up and pushed the bottle away.

Lightning had struck the pillars, but they had received no more damage than I.

I felt light-headed and dizzy, but that was all. I laughed a little. Darak got me around the waist and lifted me onto my horse, quiet now, and trembling. As I smoothed its ears and neck to comfort it, I was still laughing.

We rode back toward the pillars through the rain. As I passed between them I saw the inscription, carved deep into the paving. None of them would know it, for it was not their tongue.

KAR LFORN EZ LFORN KL JAVHOVOR

This way is the High-Lord's Way

I blinked the rain from my eyes and saw that the inscription was so weathered now, I could not read it at all.

The rain lasted two days, but seemed to do the land no good. It was sucked in and lost, or turned to mud which dried blackly. The road was untouched. Magnificent, it had kept itself countless centuries for the merchants who now used it. For me, it was peopled with ghosts, and the voices and the wills of ghosts.

That was the time of the dreams.

There had been a time before then, when my life had been half dream, when I had lain in the temple or by the water in the ravine. Now my life was awake, and my dreams were little things as I lay by Darak. Yet the road made it otherwise.

All those first two days of rain, riding with the road, there had been a feeling on me, like oppression before storm, though the storm was here. The third day we made our evening camp at the road's side by a shallow pool, with a little stream plunging into it, among the stunted stretching trees.

There are no particular laws in the dream places. I was a man, and that did not seem strange to me. I say a man, but not a man like any men I had met since I came from the mountain. I was a man of my own race, that special and arrogant people I did not remember, yet knew in myself.

Things were very different in the dream.

Great gardens, falling in terraces, dark green cypress, rose trees and lemon, behind, the huge mansion, built with an architecture I had seen before in sleep, very white and tall and soaring, its crown far up in the sky. Beyond the garden wall, the High-Lord's Way, winding on toward the cities of the Mountain Ring.

Walking down between the scented avenues of trees, and ahead the great oval pool set around with marble statues and steps. Fountains tumbled into the pool, and near them, among the marble blocks angularly carved to represent rocks, a girl was splashing water over her body. She was naked,

magnolia-colored against the jade-green water, and her hair streamed around her. The man I was walked to the water's edge and spoke to her. And it was the tongue in which the inscription on the road had been written.

"Di lath samor?"

I desired her, and she was afraid, and her fear was part of my desire. Now, she cowered away from me in the greenness. She was so much smaller than I, and human; lower, less, nothing. But very beautiful. I was aware her foot was chained under the water, and she could not get out. Her bathing actions also had been at my orders.

"Slen ez Kalled-a. Kar aslor tin ez."

She put her hand up to her face, and began to whimper. I stepped onto the water, which held me lightly. I walked across to her and then allowed myself to sink a little. She began to scream as I caressed her, pushing her sliding cool body back against the slippery silken marble where the water fell. The fountains filled her mouth. She struggled. I held her by her dripping hair, in and out of the fall. The dance of love and death had begun, and both would be fulfilled.

Darak shook me awake and held me quiet in the dark. "What were you dreaming?"

I stared into his face, in the gloom of the tent which I knew. But I could still smell the splashing water, the scents of the garden and the girl's wet body; the man's desire still spread between my thighs. But there was horror, too, waking and knowing.

"A man," I said, "here, in this place. Drink no water from the pool; one woman at least is rotten mud on the water's floor."

Darak shook me again, more gently.

"Wake up," he said.

"True," I said, "she was inferior, the lower race. It gave him pleasure, he who could walk on the pool's surface, to drown her, and take her as her lungs filled with water."

"You were talking in your sleep—another language."

"Not I," I said. "He spoke. He told her what he would do to her."

Darak's face, almost invisible in the dark, seemed troubled. He smoothed my hair, and stroked my body, trembling like the body of an animal in fear. But he did not know whether to believe me, or to assure me it was a nightmare and nothing more. I must not tell him another time—for I knew there would *be* other times—he was stronger and safer to me when he had no doubts that I was human and foolish, a woman who dreamed, and, waking in fright, turned to her man to comfort her. I curled against him to sleep, and there were no more dreams that night.

But more nights followed. For every sleep on that road there was one dream at least. I told Darak no more of them, and when he woke me, as he often had to, from something horrible, I would say I could not remember.

But I learned a lot from those bitter teachings.

How many thousands of years had passed since the ones who bred me had lived their lives in the world? And how far had they stretched their evil and corruption, and their careless cruelty to those who could not match them? In this land, yes, I knew they had been kings, and High-Lords, and empresses. But beyond the sea, too? And beyond other seas? Oh, they were dust now. Except for me. Often, often, I woke from those dreams of what they had done and been, and saw in the dark the knife Karrakaz had shown me, and it must be right to let evil out of the world. It seemed to me that I was not like them, and yet I knew I was. Only my environment and my lack of Power prevented me, and even so I had done well. I had killed without thought, and even Giltt, whom I had made mine, I had not considered for an instant, though he was dead because of me.

And they were beautiful, were they not, the men and women of my race? Golden and alabaster, their long hands alight with jewels, their eyes like green stars, masters of every element and magic the world held. Through flames and over waters they walked; they flew with the black wings of great birds, wheeling across the red skies with the moon a white bow beneath them; they vanished, and moved like ghosts. I remember she I once was, riding the back of a huge lion in some desert place, smiling and lovely as the orchids embroidered on her skirt. But she was evil, too.

After seven days of this, I was feverish and strange. We rode all day long, but at every stop I was impatient to move on. At night I would walk up and down the camp, putting off the moment of sleep. But sleep always came, and would not be resisted. I began to bleed, too, Which is natural enough with all creatures that carry a womb, yet it had not happened before with me, and it was painful and distressing. Besides, I feared this fertile womanhood. I knew none of the methods of contraception my race had clearly understood. As for the bandit women, what they did was quite absurd, and achieved nothing, except, I suppose, to keep some witch or other from starving. I did not want to conceive. Any child would have been a misfortune then, and Darak's seed—a bandit brat, tying me perhaps forever to a life that was not mine—was unthinkable. I did not know what to do. I simply willed myself into barrenness, wildly and hotly, whenever I thought of it.

It was on the ninth day that we came to the city.

"Is this Ankurum?" I asked Barak.

My eyes were swimming with the fever and the heat haze, and I seemed to see on the horizon white walls and towers, and vistas of many buildings behind them.

"No," he said, "we're days from Ankurum yet."

Maggur said: "That's a ruin, Imma. Only a ruin."

"Some of the Plains tribes call it Kee-ool," Darak said. "That means Evil One. They keep away from it, and from the road, or we'd have had company long ago. A place to suit you, goddess."

There was always a little poison ready in him when he was unsure of me, but I hardly heard what they said.

"We pass through it?" I asked.

"Yes. The road goes through."

"Then stop there, Darak."

He grinned without any good humor. "We have the time," he said.

It was late afternoon when we reached it. Perhaps we would have stopped here anyway, although some of the men muttered and grumbled. They took out their amulets, and kissed and shook mem, but they did not come to Darak asking to go on. Their leader did not fear Kee-ool, they thought, and would laugh at them. Though Darak was edgy, and did not like this place. Truly, there seemed to be something miasmic about it, apparent even to an unimaginative man.

On either side of the paved way, it stretched for miles toward the dim mauve shapes of what must be hills or low mountains. The buildings, or what remained of them, were very white, bleached like bones by the sun. They were like bones in other things, too, the way they stood, gaping, the rib cases and skulls of palaces, joints of pillars, leaning, fallen. There was no color except for the odd vine or weed with flowers that had struggled through to crawl in and out. The land in its eternal brownness, the sky soaking into carnal scarlet, were only a backdrop, something additional, as if the city had stood in space a long while before earth and air formed around it.

I was not sure why I needed to go into it. It was not here that I remembered from my brief childhood how many centuries ago.

I sat in my hard-won place in Darak's tent, while he and his captains drank around their calendar. It was a primitive colorful thing of carved and painted wood. On it, every season, month, and day had a symbol. Late summer was a golden frog, and now they were ringing the day which was an owl, for this was the time they had arranged with the Plains tribes for their first selling of weapons.

"Madness to let go fine stuff like this on those savages. They'll pick their teeth and cut up apples with it." The man spat. Arrogance here too, then, in the hierarchy of human standing. But I was hardly listening. They passed me the beer jug from time to time, and I occasionally drank to symbolize my involvement. I said nothing.

When the tent emptied, Darak stretched out on the rug bed, and looked at me.

"Well? When are you leaving to wander in Kee-ool?"

"When the moon is up," I said.

"Wake me," he said. "I'll sleep off this beer now, and come with you."

"I must go alone."

"Don't be a fool. Wild animals run loose in that place; men too, perhaps as nasty-minded as my own. I know you can fight, and you're no sniveling idiot of a woman, but remember the ford."

"I remember it," I said. "Sleep then. I will wake you."

He was already drowsy with the drink, he had taken such a lot of it, as he always did. Otherwise he would never have believed me. I went to sit by him, and watched him slip into sleep. He was a beautiful man to look at, even sleeping. He slept like an animal, lightly but serenely, his mouth firmly closed, his body twitching sometimes, and his hands and feet, like the paws of an animal, dreaming. I kissed his face, and left the tent. It was twilight, starlit and quiet, except where men were drinking and making a lot of noise at the fires. They were louder than usual as if to defeat the heavy silence of the place. Only the wind

made sounds, thin and rasping, as it piped through holes and empty rooms.

3

I left them behind me very soon. The firelight melted away, and the raucous singing that had started up. Only the wind now,*thilling* through stone,*sushing* through the dust. Darkening landscape, the whiteness a darker whiteness, picked out in starlight. I had an hour, perhaps, before the moon rose.

It was easy to walk down the endless straight streets. Only here and there was the drum of a fallen pillar which must be climbed over. A few little scatterings of small animal fright away from me, but there did not seem to be many living things in this dead city, after all. All around were the shells of palaces. It was a city of palaces, and their gardens and pools and groves and statues and places of pleasure. There could be no lesser building in such a hive of opulent contempt. I walked up cracked marble steps to a high platform where two or three pillars still stood, but nothing else. I looked back and saw the little gleam of the firelit camp, faint and far off—farther than it was, it seemed, as though a semi-transparent curtain shut the city away from it.

Ahead, beneath the platform, great terraces fell down to an oval space—some huge open theater. I walked down toward it, across narrower streets, then in at the vast arched doorway, carved with shapes of women and animals. Steps led upward to the terraces, other steps led downward. The wind brought me a faint odor from the descent that could not still be there—musky darkness, and fear. I went up instead, to the top tier. Marble seats, aisled, each with their columns and carvings. The staircases which ran down between them toward the oval floor were laid with colored stones, red and brown and green and gold. I stopped. Dimly, softly, I heard their voices around me. I turned, and they had come, but only as ghosts. Many men and women and their children, friends, and lovers. Their clothes were a ghostly pastel of scarlets and purples and white. Canopies dripped gold tassels, house banners floated. I looked toward the oval space—and the colors hardened around me, brighter and closer, and the sounds rose above the wind. Below, a green fire was opening like a flower. It shifted and spread itself around the arena, and took shape. A forest of flame, glittering and shimmering. Trees rose from it, with trunks of emerald, branches opening into fiery stars. Fountains burst out of the ground, and a white mist rippled like gauze, threading through everything. It was beautiful and incredible. A little applause stirred among the audience. It seemed I was one of them, aware of cool silk on my body, diamonds, a man's fingers caressing on my breast until I brushed them off, not wanting my attention diverted.

A girl rose out of the mist and flame. She was white-skinned with long black hair, but unreal, a two-dimensional creature, drawn around with a dark line. She moved her arms and head, dancing, and a snake came winding toward her, a cameo of cream and gold with a silver darting tongue. The snake, too, was unreal, and so was the golden-yellow man who followed it. The fire trees turned gradually to red, the mist to purple like a great storm cloud, the fountains ran like blood, and seemed to swell. The figures in the arena were growing in size, and changing as they entwined with each other. The snake coiled and twisted with a woman's head; the man moved languidly, the head of the snake replacing his own; the woman slithered between them, headless, the man's face growing under her breasts.

As the figures grew larger, the alterations became more complicated and bizarre. The purple cloud mist was pulsing from the oval space, filling the terraces with a heavy opiate smell, while the tableau rose up toward us, the things in it ten feet high or more. Delighted cries came from parts of the theater. The woman, serpent headed, bent backward, the man, his phallus replaced by the enormous thrashing tail of the serpent, leaned over her, inches from my face. My lover's hand was on me again, and I did not now push him away, but leaned nearer. ...

A loose stone went from under my feet, rattled, struck, and plunged into the arena. The theater was chill, and broken, and empty. The wind tore my hair, and I was dankly cold. The moon was lifting. The light seared my eyes clean of what I had been staring at.

But I was not alone. I sensed it, and looked across the theater. I was lucid then, not particularly feverish or dreaming. A street or so away stood a tall tower. What was left of it was little enough—one open side and the staircase winding round and round like a twisted spine. After I had seen these, I suppose the lucidity ran away out of me. Something drew me to the tower, strong and insistent.

I will fly there, I thought. I felt a swift splitting pain in my back. I say pain, but in a strange way it was pleasant. I have heard men, whose arms or legs were lost in some fight, swear that they still felt them there, tingling and twitching to be used. This is what the wings felt like as they grew from my shoulders, and put down their roots into the muscle and bone of my back, like limbs I had lost but were still there, tingling and twitching. I moved them, and this was strange. An extra pair of arms would have been more familiar. Even in my fever-dream, I was amused by my first efforts at flight. No baby bird was ever so clumsy. But it came to me in the end, and I lifted. Then I felt the power of them. Each strong beat seemed to come more from the pit of my belly than from my spine. I held my legs firm together, and arms crossed under my breasts, as I had seen *them* do in my other dreams. It was only a short way to the tower.

A stone altar stood there, and I knew it well enough. In the white bowl there was a flickering and a shadow. But I was not afraid.

"So Karrakaz Enorr," whispered the no-voice in my brain, and I knew which tongue it used, now that I had heard the dream ghosts speak it. "I am Karrakaz. The Soulless One. You do not think you know why you are here, but you are here because Karrakaz is here, and we are one thing, you and I. I have grown since the volcano. You have fed me well. I will destroy you, but first we shall be one thing. Let me give you Power to rule these Shlevakin. They are only little things and much beneath you. But how dangerous the little poison ants who will eat you alive. You will not find the Jade, so I will give you a little Power, Princess of the Lost, before your Darak turns from your cursed face, and the jackals tear you."

It seemed good to me. The word Karrakaz had used—"Shlevakin," the filthy dregs, the mud and excrement of an inferior people—so right to call them that, they were so far beneath me, what I was and what I might have been. But before I could stretch out my hand and say, "Give it to me," some elemental thing took hold of me, and shook me. I clung to the stone of the tower before I could be shaken down, and screamed furiously, "Let me alone!"

"Kill it," the no-voice said.

My hands found a huge loose tile, and I grasped it and thrust it out toward what seemed to be tormenting me.

There was a crash, loud as thunder, in my right ear. The tower disintegrated and I fell.

I seemed to fall, but not far. I opened my eyes, and was lying on the red and green stones of the theater steps. A hand got my arm, and pulled me up again almost immediately. It could be no other hand but Barak's.

His face was pale and angry in the moonlight.

"You woke and followed me," I said.

"And found you standing here like a block of stone with your eyes wide open. I shook you and you didn't wake up. If you have these fits, you're a fool to walk up so high."

It was Darak, then, who had kept me from the evil in the tower. Yet I could not have been in the tower after all. The wings were gone for sure.

"You're coming back now," Darak grumbled. "This place is as safe as the Pit of Death. A tile fell from nowhere just now and nearly brained both of us."

I could see where it had smashed. He had pushed me clear, and I was bruised to prove it. I felt weak and stupid and afraid. I was glad he dragged me away, across the ruined city, back to the camp.

The fires were still alight, but mostly men were asleep. A few sentries prowled.

Darak set me on the rug bed, and pulled off my boots.

"I imagine you still have your woman's trouble," he said to me. I nodded. "So I don't even get a reward."

He arranged us for sleep with an endearing selfishness, his head on my shoulder.

But I did not sleep. I lay, stiff and cold, waiting for the morning, waiting to be away, yet glad to be awake, for I feared the dreams the city would give me now.

It was near dawn. There is a different scent in the air at dawn; one could tell it blindfold. There came a faint drumming under me. I thought I imagined it, but it grew.

"Darak!" I hissed.

He woke and growled at me. But then the earth moved beneath us.

In another second we were flung apart and together. Weapons in the tent, chairs, the brazier, tilted over, and the poles went too, bringing the hide, down on top of us. Spilled coals licked at the rugs, and caught. In a moment the tent was blazing. It seemed incredibly difficult to get free now that there was no longer any obvious opening. The flames on our heels, we hacked and scrabbled a way out. The ground was still sliding sideways. Stones flew by, and bits of paving lifted and went down.

It settled as abruptly as it had begun.

I stood up. A pillar had fallen across the road, crushing three tents, and putting out a fire or two. The tents, for some reason, were empty.

"We have earthquakes in the hills, too," Darak said. "This wasn't so bad."

Maggur and Kel came running up, and another man who flung water on the burning hide.

I stared back over the city, and felt a pent-up anger and hatred swelling at me, for the moment impotent.

"Darak," I said, "we must ride now. Quickly."

He glanced at me, and nodded. "As you say."

But he made no great hurry about it, and the men, as always, took their cue from him. Even the nervous dallied. After all, they had spent a night here, and were still unharmed; a little more delay could make no difference.

Finally, the caravan moved, and the sun was up, burning a round white hole in the sky. The horses were restless, frightened by the quake, and still uneasy. Men ate as they rode, throwing back bones to lie among the bones of the city.

It took an hour to get through the length of it, and all that time I felt some menace on every side, and it seemed we were going so slowly. Overhead the light turned gradually yellow as a rotten peach. The horses tossed their heads, and drew back their lips silently.

Suddenly the threat was very close. I seized Barak's arm.

"Ride fast now, or we will die here!"

He did not take his orders from me, but this he took. He knew me now. He turned and gave the jackal's sharp bark which was their signal for danger and speed, then dug in his spurs, and struck my horse across the flank.

The horses needed little encouragement. They bolted, and the others behind bolted too. The wagons ground and roared after us.

And at that moment, the city rose against us. Or against me alone, perhaps.

They called it the "earthquake" afterward, but it was not. The earth drummed and rumbled, it is true, but nothing fell except the last wagons, because the paving heaved up and tilted them. At first there was stillness, and then a wind came screaming across the city toward us from both sides, and the wind never blew two ways at once that I had seen before. Stones whirled up from inside the city, pebbles and little chips, and then big blocks and gigantic tiles, and all of them were caught up in that wind, and hurled at us. The tops of the pillars seemed to fly off and fling themselves too, and huge pieces of roofs. The horses screamed and reared and plunged, the wagons leaped and went over. Metal chests of weapons crashed on the road, and knives and daggers fell out in a silvery rain. I bowed my head against my horse's neck. Behind me, Kel squealed as a missile struck straight through into his brain and killed him. The yellow light ran past us like water, and I thought I should be dead in an instant, but I did not understand death, only the pain, and so I thought of it with terror. Flying stuff nicked my face and hands with stinging chisels.

But we were on the outskirts of that place of bones, Kee-ool, the Evil One. Suddenly the ghastly hail dropped back. I heard the prolonged rattle of it as it settled. Our horses stopped still on their own, sweating. I turned and looked.

Behind us, the way was littered with bits of smashed stone. Two wagons were down, dead horses stretched out in front, and dead men and spilled knives scattered about them, like broken flowers on their graves.

Darak wiped the blood from his face.

"Gleer, Ellak, get your men and come back with me. Bring your horses."

"No," I said, "no, Darak."

He ignored me.

And the city ignored him. This, then, had been for me. Or perhaps it was over.

He and the scared looking men cut the dead horses free, got one of the wagons up, and bundled new horses into the shafts. New men got onto the box. The other wagon was completely wrecked, and so the stuff in it was unloaded into other wagons, and onto spare ponies and horses. Nothing was left at last, except the dead. I could see Kel, lying only a few yards behind, among the last columns. I did not dare go back to him. Maggur left me, and went to Kel, and picked him up. He carried him down to the wagon, and there he was burned with all the rest.

After that Maggur was very silent, and Darak, when he came back and mounted beside me, looked grim and angry. It had been a long and unpleasant task. The sun was high above the yellow cloud.

"There's a burnt offering for your fellow gods, goddess," he said, jerking his hand at the black smoke. *"Another* burnt offering. They'd like a libation, too, perhaps," and he spat, then rode away from me.

4

There were three days more before the day which was an owl, and I recall them very well: the cat, the dromedary, the ape. On the day of the cat, the blood stopped flowing from me, and the other symptoms of fever and weakness cleared with it. On that day, too, Darak had ridden on, ahead of the caravan and away from the road, with a few men. He was gone before I woke. I did not see him that day, nor at night. The day of the dromedary the caravan, too, wound off the road, the charge of Ellak now, and we made toward the distant mauvenesses I had seen on the eastern horizon since Kee-ool. To leave the road was a relief to me. The dreams stopped; but I had other nightmares now, things I could never properly remember when I woke in terror from them.

The evening of that day, Darak came back. He had been to light the beacon signal which would summon the tribal chieftains. He spent that night with his men, at some dice game, and later with one of the women. That night I dreamed too, in his tent, and I thought it was another of the old dreams, but it was not. I was beautiful then, my white hair roped around my head, and falling in five great plaits wound through with emeralds. I recollect this so clearly, but the rest not so well. I know they brought me Darak, and I had them flay him, and when I woke from this I was afraid and struggled to forget it.

The day of the ape, I did not attempt to ride with him. Maggur and I rode off alone into a few miles of thin wood land, where Maggur shot a deer, after crawling on his belly behind it for hours. I do not like the death of animals, and it sickened me then. But it was fresh meat for him and them; we were well received when we rode back in the dusk.

"Darak and I do not lie together now," I said to Maggur. "Find me a tent away from his place; he may want to take a woman there."

Maggur looked uneasy, but he found me one, and this was where I slept that night of the ape. There was the kind of misery on me that seemed only a numbness. I did not know what I would do, but it did not seem to matter. I slept deep, and did not recall my dreams when I woke.

The day of the owl, the caravan, at its slower pace, reached the beacon. Rocky hills rose ahead, and here there was one great rock, marooned like an island in the brown sea. On the crown of the rock the fire was smoldering up its thick red smoke. Around the base the tribal warriors and their chiefs waited. I

supposed all these here were friendly to one another, in an alliance against other tribal enemies. Mostly they were naked to the waist, their bodies hard and dry-brown. Red and blue tattoos encircled their arms and necks, but on the breast was the symbol of the tribe. I could pick out six different emblems: a wolf, a lion, a bear, a tree done in green, an arrow with a red tip; but the strangest was a round disc, like the moon in an ancient picture, with a five-pointed star fixed in its center. They wore dark clothes and hard leather boots, no jewels except perhaps in a metal armlet. Maggur had said they believed jewelry to be a hindrance in battle; an enemy might catch a man by it, or by the hair—and this they wore very short, or else bound in a club at the back. The chiefs were not so different from their men. They had their standard-bearer near them, a sash of scarlet cloth or green or blue at the waist, and one or two wore some plain ring or armband which was a mark of their little kingship. The chief of the star tribe wore a gold circlet around his head with a white glassy gem, probably quartz, set in it. He seemed to be overlord of them all, and rode forward on his big brown horse to salute Darak like a fellow prince.

They spoke the same language I had heard in the village and the hills, but with a different accent and many corrupted or abbreviated words.

It was very formal, this talk between two kings. It was difficult to see if Darak were amused at all, for his face was iron-hard. I was not standing near but some way off, by my horse, yet suddenly the star chieftain's eyes flicked around to me. He looked for a moment, then raised his right hand, incredibly saluting me too.

"Honor to you, warrior-woman," he called, and he was not using the same tongue now. This was something older and more complex. I saw Darak's head snap around to me. He would laugh at my embarrassment if I did not know how to reply, but I did. As with the villagers, I understood at once every pattern of the Plains speech, without thinking.

"And to you, my father," I said clearly.

The chief nodded. He looked back at Darak, who seemed surprised.

"I did not know Darak Gold-Fisher had a tribal woman in his guard, and a warrior too. We have not had such a one born into our krarls for many years."

I had realized they might think me one of their stock because I wore the shireen, and I wondered what they would make of my man's clothes and the knives I carried. Apparently they held women who fought in high esteem, and treated them as men, which was a unique honor in such a society. It would not even be essential for a woman warrior to go masked; that I did only increased their respect for me.

It was etiquette now that Darak and his men ride to their encampment or krarl, and feast with them. Only then could any business transaction take place. As the chief and Darak began the procession, two of the star warriors came riding toward me. They gave the salute the chief had given.

The elder said: "I am Asutoo, the chief's son. You will bring joy to us if you will ride by our side."

I could not refuse. Besides, there was bitter enjoyment in me that I was receiving as much attention, if not more, than Darak. Maggur looked anxious as I went away between them, but I was safe enough.

They were both light-haired, handsome, younger than Darak, solemn in a way only the young can be solemn, yet matured by the hard life of the plains, and the battles they had fought. They carried many scars. Asutoo spoke courteously to me as we went along, the other was silent. He was a younger brother, it seemed, and as such must keep quiet. Asutoo asked me my tribe, and how I had spent my life,

and what battles I had seen. I lied that my mother had left me for the hill wolves when I was born because I was sickly, as I knew that the tribes exposed their weaklings. Later, villagers had taken me in, and I grew miraculously stronger with the years, and finally adopted the shireen, and rode with Darak, not knowing which was my tribe.

"Men are foolish," Asutoo said gravely, "but the gods saved you, and gave you strength for your battles."

He had been speaking in the tribal tongue, and he did not seem amazed that an outsider knew it. No doubt the gods had given me that too. I asked him what the disc and star represented.

He touched the tattoo on his chest, and said: "The sky sign of the gods. Above we see the stars which are the silver chariots of the gods. Sometimes they ride to earth in them, and the ground burns black. The father of the father of my chief was visited by the gods. They wore silver and must not be touched. Since then we have borne their symbol, and the chief takes the Star-jewel on his forehead."

We reached the krarl in late afternoon light, where it lay, a safe three days' journey from the High-Lord's Way, the cursed road the tribes would not go near or travel, or even cross, except in the greatest extremity.

The camp was on lower ground, built around a large strip of water where gray-green trees grew. It was circled by a stockade of wooden poles, with men walking up and down, seven-foot spears in their hands. The six tribes had settled in one place. There were many hundreds of tents, all black; from a distance it looked as if an enormous flock of ravens had settled there. Goats and cows wandered freely, dropping haphazard dung. Some women, tiny as fleas, were washing clothes in the water. Most were cooking at a great ring of fires in the center of the krarl.

We went through the gate, which was iron, and obviously a separate thing from the poles. Children and goats stared at us. The caravan began to split up. Soon, only Darak and a captain or two remained with the chiefs, and I remained with them also, because of Asutoo. We toured the krarl and the large horse pens at the back. This was actually disguised business dealing, for a lot of Barak's sale here would be barter. We needed horses, particularly since Kee-ool, and these were very fine, all bronzes and chestnuts, and mostly unbroken. Darak grinned, and pointed out the largest of a bunch of females, and the worst tempered.

"That one is Sarroka-Devil Mare," the star chief said.

"She is bred virgin, and hates the feel of any male on her back, horse or man."

I knew Darak would not resist that. He must conquer any thing that opposed him. He dismounted, and the mare rolled her eyes and showed her teeth, sensing his intention.

The chief nodded. Two warriors ran around the pen, and opened a little gate into the fenced pasture behind. They called her name, and held out tidbits. It was easy enough to see they had been ready for Barak's interest. Sarroka would not take the stuff from their hands. They put it down for her, got the gate shut, and vaulted out.

"Take her now, Darak," the chief said. "You will never get near her once she's done eating."

Darak unlaced the black merchant's tunic, and hung it carefully on his saddle. His brown back rippled disdainful muscle. He went lightly over the fencing, and waited till the mare was finished and had lifted her head. He called her then, and she turned and snarled back her lips. Darak laughed softly, excited by the

challenge of her. She stamped and whinnied, then flung around and ran. Darak ran too, so fast he was beside her. As she turned the corner of the pasture field, slowing a little, he caught her by her brassy blowing mane, set the ball of his right foot against her, and swung the inner left leg over, using her flank as a pivot. It was a incredible trick, and very dangerous, but it got him on her back. Darak's men and even some of the warriors called out their applause, but the mare was mad. She threw herself up and sideways, bucked and kicked her heels, and screamed her furious fear. She could not shift him. He held her around the neck, constricting her great windpipe with his arm. It hampered her breathing, and tired her quicker. Round and round she ran, flagging, like a great bronze wheel running down.

Finally, she was still. Her head drooped and she streamed sweat. Darak slid from her easily. He led her back across the pasture and picked up a sweetmeat still lying in the grass. He held it to her, and she shook her head and would not accept it. Darak let fall the sweet, and climbed out. He, too, glistened sweat, his body metallic. He looked uniquely handsome and very angry, everything about him highlighted by the low sun.

"Well," he said, "I've saved your men some trouble."

"Sarroka must be yours," the chief said.

"My thanks, but I don't want her."

The chief shrugged.

I hated Darak. He had broken her for the sake of his vanity, and now, because she did not love him for it, he abandoned her. If he had let her alone, perhaps these warriors might have given her up and let her free again.

The sun sank, and the feast began.

We sat around the fire ring on hide cushions, the six chiefs and their sons, Darak and his captains, and I. Over our heads a canopy drooped its scarlet wings. Women in black robes and young boys served out food and drink. It is the tribal way to hem a boy in with mother and sisters till he is sick of them, and runs off to kill a plains wolf in winter, or catch a wild horse, or go to fight, if there is a war, and so prove himself a man. The women all wore the shireen, but the eyepieces were wider than mine, and often embroidered or beaded. They stared nervously at me, and slipped away to be replaced by others with the next course, all equally curious. The food was plentiful and smelled spicy, but the warriors did not touch the roast meat. The kill had been for Darak and his men only. I ate nothing except a bit of the formal bread they break before each meal, which must be taken if one is a friend. I drank a little of their wine, but that was all. They respected my frugality. Their warriors would fast, too, their chief said, before a battle. I was used to the pains and cramps that came, and they did not trouble me much.

The feast ended, but the drinking went on. They passed around cups of an alcohol made from goat's milk mixed with the bark of some tree. Darak did not take much of this, but the chiefs and their men drank deep.

The conversation began to move around to bargaining talk after that. I was not very interested in it, it was such a game, the chiefs and Darak beating each other back through impossible conditions to their very last defenses, which were, in fact, what they had intended to settle on all the time. In the end, it was mainly knives they wanted, and Darak achieved horses and a cloth their women made for which there was a demand in the towns. Some money passed hands also, and little bags of dull red counters that were, I think, chips of unpolished precious stones, possibly garnets.

I felt exhausted by this time. The fumes of the wine I had not even drunk had got into my head, my eyes smarted from the fire. Through the smoke I saw seven or eight girls come to dance for us. They wore white shireens, but although their faces were covered, their bodies were almost naked. A thin leather strap passed around their backs, under their arms, to fasten above their breasts with a gold buckle. From these straps hung tassels of white wool, which hid them occasionally but not often. There was a similar arrangement around their hips, and although the tassels were more numerous, and some of them red or blue, they were equally unsuccessful in the pursuit of modesty. Their bodies were lean and brown like their men's, but they were beautiful for all that.

The chief was courteously asking Darak to choose a woman, and, once Darak had chosen, the other bandits picked what they wanted. Perhaps I should not have been surprised when the chief leaned toward me.

"And you, also, warrior. Which girl for your sleeping place in the krarl?"

I had not realized this, too, was a custom among their woman fighters. After a second, I said to him in the tribal tongue, "You honor me, my father, but though I will fight as a man, I am still woman enough that I do not lie with women. Therefore only do I refuse your gracious gift."

He made a movement with his hand which meant, "That is fair," and he said, "Choose, then, a warrior for your pleasure. Such a woman as yourself is held highly in the krarls. No man but will be glad."

I saw Darak's face across the smoky glare break into a hard smile. He wanted me bewildered by the situation, stuttering my refusal which he would then have to smooth over with the chief, explaining my basic weak feminine nervousness.

What a stranger and an enemy I had in this man I seemed to love.

I bowed to the chief. I turned and put my hand on Asutoo's broad naked shoulder. I felt his flesh quicken under my fingers, and was thankful for it.

The chief grinned and nodded several times.

"A good choice. Had I been younger you might have put your hand on me."

"I would not dare to set my hope so high," I said.

The ritual was successfully completed.

I would not let myself look back at Darak's face.

The feast broke up soon after. Boys with torches came to show us our separate tents. I thought Darak started to move after me; I heard a little uneasy sound, and some of the warriors had got in his way. I did not look back as I walked with Asutoo behind the golden tongue of light.

The tent was small but adequate. We ducked inside. There were rugs on the floor, and a stand in which the boy stuck the torch, and then went out. I looked at Asutoo. His face was slightly flushed, his eyes bright. He was a little drunk, but not dangerously so, and he did not seem aggrieved.

"I hope I have not angered my brother by choosing him," I said.

"I was happy," Asutoo said. His color deepened further. "It seems strange to me my chief did not see you are a woman too."

"One thing, my brother," I said. "You know I will not uncover my face."

"I did not expect it. The whores will uncover for any man, but you are warrior and princess too."

He seemed to know me beyond his knowledge of me, even allowing for the formal courtesy of the tribal tongue.

We undressed, the torchlight glittering around us, and, for all his youth, he was well-formed, and economical in his movements. He dipped the torch into the sand pouch of the stand, and we lay down in the dark. I was very careful that he should not realize my physical differences. I was not this time defenseless with love, and vulnerable.

I was afraid I should make him Darak in my mind, but it would have been difficult, and I was glad of it. He was very different in every way—I had only to touch his clubbed hair, his skin; the smell and taste of him were unfamiliar. The act was pleasure, but there was no true possession. Darak took, but Asutoo borrowed—there is no other way to describe it. Beyond the pinnacle, on either side, hung an expectancy that never quite went out. We were too well-mannered with each other, that is all.

Dawn slid under the door in a white thread.

Outside I heard movement, horses, and shouting, and the sounds of departure to which I was so used. I dressed, leaned over Asutoo and gently touched his face. His eyes opened on me sleepily, and he smiled.

"They are leaving," I said. "I must go."

His face changed. He woke up fully, stretched himself, began to dress.

I was at the flap when he said, "Why do you ride with that man?"

There was something in his voice I had not heard there before.

"I am one of Darak's people," I said.

"No. You are of the tribes."

"I must go, Asutoo. There has been happiness between us, but the dawn parts day from night, and this is our parting, too."

He was silent, and I went out.

They were going earlier than expected. Men were bringing the horses due to Darak, and bales of colored cloth. Food was coming too, and the bandits were eating as they moved about. The chief looked indulgent at this breach of etiquette, for he was well satisfied. The knives and other weapons they had chosen lay in heaps, the warriors pawing among them anxiously. There would be a meeting later, and an official handing out.

Darak was on his horse. His head was thrown back as he poured some drink or other down his throat

from a clay bowl. Maggur came striding to me and grinned.

"That one is very angry," he remarked, not looking at Darak. "He would have stopped you last night, but these naked braves got in the way."

Darak had turned and seen me. He spat the last mouthful of drink onto the ground, and moved his horse around.

Maggur had found me my horse, and mounted his beside me. Most of the men were up now. It was time to be away. A sense of storm hung in the air.

"Our thanks for your hospitality," Darak said to the chief.

The chief nodded. I saw Asutoo walk forward, and stand a few feet from his father's side. He looked at Darak, and Darak pulled hard on his rein so that his horse jerked up its head, and kicked its front legs through a cook fire, showering Asutoo's feet with charcoal.

Asutoo did not move. He said: "Give me leave, my chief, to speak to our guest and brother before he goes from us."

The chief, frowning, made the gesture of consent.

But Asutoo did not speak at once.

"Well?" Darak said.

"My words are not for you only, Darak hill-rider. I speak to your warrior, the woman." Asutoo looked at me across the horses. "You know the little I have to offer you, but if you will be my wife, and live with my tribe, you shall have all the honor you merit. I will not stop you riding to battle; you shall ride before me. You shall not be as a woman in my tent, but as my brother. I will have other wives to tend me. I ask you because I know you are a woman too."

A pain went through me, sharp as a knife. There was a sudden longing in me to stay, to be his wife, and ride with him, and later perhaps to bear him children, and be a female only, and a slave as the others were. I knew he would love me, and leave me myself. He would let me search out my past and the Green Jade, once I had persuaded him. But somehow I could not speak.

There was a silence. I could not look at Darak's face, I knew the contempt that would be on it. In a moment he would say to me: "Well, then, take him, and my blessing on you both." But Darak did not speak either.

The chief said: "Such a woman would bring honor to us. One day, if it was her will, she might bear sons and make our tribe great. I will answer for my son Asutoo. He is a brave warrior, and has killed many of our enemies. One morning he will wake to be chief of the Star."

Darak wheeled his horse then. He rode back to me, and snatched the rein out of my hands.

"We are honored by your words, chief. But our laws are different ones. This woman is mine."

Asutoo's face whitened. His hands clenched.

I wanted only to break away, to say, "No, Darak, I am not anything of yours," and go to the white-faced boy. But I could not do it.

Darak did not glance at me. His arm went up to salute the tribes and their chieftains, and then he spun us around, his free hand still on my reins even before he had regained his. I had no free will left, he had stolen it, yet I had given it, too. It was so terrible to be in his power, doubly terrible because it delighted me. Anger and joy to have him drag me with him away from all safety and hope of freedom, and to have no say in it.

"Darak," I called, "let go of him, you will cut his mouth."

"Don't tell me, you damned bitch," he shouted back. The sky rushed in our faces. "I've handled horses for three years or more before you broke your egg."

But he was laughing. Both of us were laughing. I had forgotten Asutoo already, and the ruins of any hopes he might have had, and his shame.

Part IV:*Ankurum*

1

We did not return to the road, but moved parallel to it on a newer track. A little beyond Kee-ool it seemed the paving had broken up, and it was no longer fit to ride. An ignominious end for the master-built Way of Kings.

It seemed to be the finish of my troubles. No more dreams and no more strange happenings. Not even any longings beyond what I had. Only the dull hot ride, the jokes, the sense of comradeship, however absurd. And Darak. That was a good time for him too, I think. I do not know if he loved me or not, or how he could, but there was something between us then. I do not forget.

And then we reached Ankurum, the Red-Haired, her feet on the footstool of high rock hills, her back against the low mountains, and beyond her altogether, the sky-touching shapes of the Mountain Ring, faint and far off, their caps already creamed with snow. There is an old legend about Ankurum that the scarlet vine which grows all over her, and will never grow in another place, brings her prosperity.

For a day or so, before we even sighted her, we went through villages and towns that grew in size as we got nearer. A complex struggle of houses, inns, and markets wound up the rock hills to her gates. It should have been an inhospitable region, and barren as the plain, but somehow there were orchards and woods, and fields cut through by little streams. Perhaps they were right to worship the goddess of the vine.

Beyond the walls, the city rose up in banks and terraces, and twisting alleys, carved out of the hillside. The buildings were almost entirely of stone, a warm yellowish stone like the ramparts. Apart from the color of the vine, which ran wild everywhere, pictures had been painted on house and garden walls, and all over the fronts of inns and drinking houses. Signs swung, crimson, green, and yellow, the symbols of hammers and flagons and loaves. It was midday, everything wrapped in a brass stormlight.

"Impressed by all this opulence?" Darak asked.

I was looking around me, fascinated despite myself at this first contact with the massed bundle of humanity which is called a town. The pattern of it intrigued me, all of it winding upward to the great fortress-house of its warden, who held it in turn from his warden, the overlord of this region. There were laws in this place, and taxes taken regularly in money, not occasionally in sheep and goats. In most streets braziers stood, waiting to light up the dark, but in parts houses grew together overhead and shut out the sky. I noticed horse troughs, and drains to let rainwater away, and I noticed bad smells, too, and side alleys packed with hovels. Not all opulence, it seemed, but I let Darak tease me.

Not that he had been in Ankurum himself before, but he had been in other similar towns along the foot of the Ring. No doubt it was rare for him to visit the same town twice. They would always finally discover they had bought their goods from a thief.

I realized how dangerous this game was that he played when I found his name had abruptly changed from Darak to Darros a few moments after we were in the town. As Maggur told me later, Darak the bandit was too well-known. Darros, the merchant's son, however, was another proposition entirely. He was an impressive if eccentric figure, daring to bring his caravan through the hills and plains with their cordon of dangers; one who had the favor of his gods. True, merchants here would think him wild and crazy, jealous of his achievement. And then his men would turn out to be such unruly scoundrels, drinking and whoring from one bordello to another throughout their stay. Nevertheless, the cargo was the important thing. Yes, despite his youth and failings, they would find a place in their greedy hearts for Darros of Sigko.

There were not many people about, for this hour they kept sacred to their stomachs. Half the gaudy shops were closed, but the taverns were bursting, spilling raucous gobblers out among trestles at the roadside.

We found a hostelry with some trouble. The caravan was a large one and looked very imposing now, particularly with its black, skull-masked outriders, a fearful product of the trader towns in the north.

At first there was always some man with a hot face saying "No room. Ankurum's packed for the Games. Try farther up."

"What games are these?" someone called the first time.

"Are you barbarians or what? We've always had our Games. And now that the new stadium's built, men have come for miles. Are you barbarians, you northerners?"

A fight might have broken out over this, but Darak, Ellak, and Maggur got the others quiet, and we rode off without any blood or brains spilled to mark our passage.

We soon had it through our heads, in any case, that Ankurum was full, and why. In the wider streets there were even posters hammered up on doors or walls, mostly in pictures or symbols—garish wrestlers, shown blue and orange, and chariots carried along by mauve horses. It had clouded over by now and was raining, and their colors were running all down the gutters. It seemed late in the year for games to be held. Probably they had delayed for their new stadium,*The Gigantic and Unrivaled Sirkunix of Ankurum,* as their dripping artistry called it.

At last we found a place large enough, and nasty enough that it still had room to hold us. The big stone rooms thrummed with neglect and cold. The beds had not been aired in a million years. They lit fires for us, and brought out moth eaten sheets, and began a meal. There were only five or six others there, and I imagine they were residents, not guests. They were old and timid, and crept out of our way like small

frightened animals. Whenever I met one—on the stairs or in the dining hall—they slid aside in abject terror; from Darak or the others, they fled squealing down side passages, and all night long their doors might be heard nervously opening and banging shut, as they attempted to scurry to and from the latrines, without seeing any of us. I think they were my initial lesson in pity, but I laughed at them, too.

Those first three days were dismal, black and full of rain. Darak would go out early with Ellak, Gleer, and three or four others, plus about ten men dressed as skull-guards, and pack animals carrying examples of his goods. I was not allowed with him, for apparently the sight of a woman in a merchant's place of business was an unheard-of thing in the towns. I gathered they were dull times; endless bargaining and signing of papers. The plains' cloth went easily, but the weapons were harder. At night, when I saw him, Darak would growl angrily at the underhand dealing and cheating by which his agents tried to trick and trap him—they were robbers. It was amusing to listen to his arrogant and righteous fury, he, who had stolen the goods in the first place. But then, he was Darros now. Except once when he rode bare back a mad horse in the marketplace three streets away.

So I spent my days, locked in the dreary hostelry hall, crouched around the fire with the others as they played their endless dice games, or alone if they were at a brothel. The women they had brought with them sulked and ordered endless food, which put too much weight on them. They were as unused to this life of sitting as any of the men. There were a few of us about on the morning of the third day, and, as the hall was virtually ours, Maggur hung up a painted wooden target, and he and I and another man began to shoot against each other with our bows. My bow had taken the damp, and did not do well until I had waxed and resined it. By then there were more in the game, and they had split into teams. Maggur's team had called themselves the Rams, partly, I think, because three or four of them had just come in from a brothel. The other side retaliated with Dragons, and were a man short.

"Come and shoot for us, Imma," one of them called. "These bastards have an unfair advantage."

While the women lazily watched, plucking eyebrows because it was the fashion in Ankurum, and mouthing lumps of candied fruits and sugar-sweets, the Rams and Dragons did battle, occasionally degenerating into fights and wrestling matches on the floor. Maggur was the best of his side, and I the best of mine. In the end, I beat him.

"Dark was the day I taught*you,"* he said to me. "You're quicker even than Kel."

He looked around for Kel's grin when he said it, then checked as he remembered Kel was dead. There was an awkward silence between us which Darak luckily broke up, coming in early with a lot of noise and an incomprehensible group of people.

He strode at once to me and got my arm.

"Put that stuff away, and come upstairs."

A man near us laughed at his urgency, and Darak clouted him a casual blow across the back that sent him staggering.

He marched me out of the hall, and up to our long and icy room. I was surprised to find the people he had brought with him had scuttled after us.

"Wait," he said, and shut the door on them. He threw wood on the dying fire and straightened. He looked irritated and amused at once.

"A sale?" I asked.

"Not yet. Ankurum is worse than a tribal krarl for etiquette. The agent I've been dealing with is having what he's pleased to call a supper tonight. He wants me there, and I gather this is where I'll meet my customers. It means a few hours tedium, weak wine and nibbly tidbits on eggshell plates. I want you with me."

"Why? I thought the merchants of Ankurum swooned at the sight of a woman."

"Only in their weapon shops, it seems. There'll be expensive ladies present, and I haven't the time to get tangled with them if I'm to fish my merchants out of the pool. You're my shield against it."

I did not want to go, but I saw the logic of what he said. Coolly I asked him, "I am to go like this?"

"Outside: three dressmakers and a woman for your hair. At least you won't have to paint your face."

"You think the shireen will not excite comment?"

"Quite an amount, I hope. A beautiful tribal mistress is enough to daunt the most ardent whore. It should be interesting. Besides, you've the exquisite manners they adore, though where you got them—"

He opened the door again suddenly, and the women jumped. I could see he had been bullying them.

"In," he said, "and hurry. Do as I told you and she tells you. She has the last word on it. I want it done by sunset at the latest."

He strode out, and I saw the male equivalent of the female victims start frantically after him down the corridor to Ellak's room.

They had brought materials with them, Darak's choosing, and at first I had thought his gaudy bandit's tastes would have doomed me to freakishness. But he was a cunning man. He knew at least what not to wear in a merchant's circle, even if his soul cried out in deprivation. I could see he had even been afraid of his own judgment when he had picked out this stuff. Each cloth shown me was of a plain and muted color, and thereby he had erred the other way. But I found the beauty of the pile at last, a heavy silk, the luminous white of alabaster. There was measuring then, and a lot of fuss. Thankfully, what was elegant in Ankurum was also simple, a sleeveless dress dipped low at front and back, fitted to a little beneath the breasts, then falling in free folds to the feet. There were sandals for these, bleached leather with gold studs, and already one of the women was stitching at some thing, a new shireen, this time of black silk.

Between measurings, I bathed, sharing my bath with the numerous swimming beetles that lived in the sides of the tub.

By late afternoon I was dressed. They had been most industrious, and clever also, as the mirror they had brought showed me. The hairdresser, who had been preparing her perfumes and combs and heating her tongs intermittently in the fire for hours, flew at me in terror of Darak's ultimatum. She rubbed my hair through with a sweet scented oil, combed and brushed it down, then tonged every strand into cork screw curls. Most of these she piled on my head in loops and coils. What was left, hanging free down my back, twisted like contorted serpents. Most women, she informed me, would use false hair in such a style, but knowing she had no match for the milk-whiteness of mine, she had contrived it without. This was due probably to the thickness of my hair, but no doubt she had earned a little extra for her quickness.

Darak came in without a knock, and the women jumped up in a flurry. He inspected me, then grinned, and paid them rather generously and shoved them out. He shut the door and leaned on it, looking at me. He had acquired a tunic during the afternoon, black, ribbed with black velvet, again, very discreet, but he looked well in it. There were agate buckles on his new boots.

"You're beautiful," he said. He came and sniffed at my hair. "Beautiful," he said again. His hand slid across the skin of my neck and arm. "White on white. You were clever to choose that. Your smooth skin—it never browns or reddens. Or scars," he added. His fingers moved again. He remembered even now where Shullatt had stabbed me, though all trace was gone. Suddenly he stood back, his face a little stiff.

"I brought you this."

I took the piece of silk, opened it. I stared down into a cool green deep; eight oval eyes stared back at me. All of me reached toward it, but I wished, in that time of blindness, that he had not bought me jade to make me see. *They* had favored jade, and I had not worn what I took from Shullatt since we left Kee-ool.

"Don't you like it?" He was vulnerable with the giving.

"Yes," I said, "more than anything."

"I've heard you talk of jade in your sleep." He came close to me, and fastened it around my throat. So cool it was, eight eyes of water set in shores of gold.

"Darak," I said softly.

"Darros," he corrected me, "and don't forget." He kissed my throat. "Put on a ring or two, the gold ones, perhaps that gold bracelet Maggur stole for you from his woman in the wood camp."

I did as he said. It was not gaudy, but added a certain richness to the plain white of the dress. I put on too the black shireen, as beyond the narrow window the sun sank red on the roofs of Ankurum.

Maggur and Gleer and a few of the "guard" went with us, riding the pick of the horses. Ellak, Darak, and I rode in some carriage hired for the purpose, a stuffy rickety conveyance behind two fat ponies. Darak and Ellak fidgeted uneasily in the closed-up interior. Ellak also wore new black, and had trimmed his beard and eyebrows and presumably washed more strenuously than was his wont. He, too, looked handsome, amazingly.

The carriage jolted noisily.

"The rain's finished. We'll walk back," Darak vowed.

2

I suppose to men like Darak, uncertainty is life, and danger the wine of life. Then, caught up in it, infected by his excitement and coolness, I did not really understand the foolishness of what we did.

The agent's house was at the "garden" end of Ankurum, high up, with splendid views from every window, and terraced walks where little fountains tinkled, and tame, brightly colored birds strutted.

Alabaster lamps glowed in the portico, through which a steward ushered us. There were murals of naked dancing girls on the walls. I could see Ellak restraining ribaldries. Maggur and the others remained outside. It would be a dull evening for them unless they could start up a dice game or a fight with the other grooms and servants abandoned to nearby taverns.

Beyond the entrance hall, double doors led into a spacious room from which other spacious rooms led away. Here, among the hanging garlands of flowers, guests wandered, talking politely to each other, and elegantly sipping wine and picking bits from passing trays of savories and sweets.

Ellak regarded the scene uneasily. Darak looked arrogant with impatient irritation. A servant came to us.

"Darros of Sigko, sir?"

Darak nodded.

The servant, with a flourish or two, conducted us among the guests, most of whom turned to stare, around several ornamental indoor fountains, and up a flight of steps. Here our host, a bulbous shining man, greeted Darak with a cool warmth, and glanced in astonishment at me.

"You're most welcome, Darros, most welcome. I am so glad that you could come."

Darak's eyebrows twitched disdainfully as he smiled.

"My pleasure."

"And your companions..." The smallish eyes slid back to me. He was fascinated and repelled at once. If I were a tribal woman, I might so easily be uncouth. Plains warriors and their wives were not often seen in Ankurum, but when they came they were treated always as savages.

"This is my lady," Darak said. It was a socially acceptable term for mistress. Nevertheless the agent flinched.

"I am honored by your invitation," I said, and he relaxed at once.

"Can it be you come from the north too?" he inquired wonderingly, but his eyes were slipping happily to my breasts.

"Yes," I said, "despite my low birth among the tribes, my education has been entirely adequate."

Darak grinned quite openly. "I believe there are people here for me to meet," he said.

"Indeed. But first, the food. Then the entertainment."

Darak nodded. "Of course."

The agent's eyes rolled around to Ellak now, who had plucked three wine cups from a passing tray, and was draining them one after the other.

The meal was served quite soon, though not perhaps soon enough for Ellak, who fell upon it like a starving vulture. Other guests watched in alarm as he stuffed roast meat into his mouth and mopped up the gravy running into his beard with pieces of the fancy bread. Darak, irritated, and perhaps made a little

unsure of himself by the flimsy crystal quality of town manners, made no attempt to check him. He himself ate lightly, and I only picked at things as was usual with me, but Ellak burped his way through every course, with an appetite which would have done credit to all three. I had never noticed this particular appetite before among others who ate like wolves, but here it brought a hush on half the room.

The eating took place in a vast dining area, hung with clusters of candles. The couches were low and cushioned, the tables also low, and everything formed a rough semicircle around the sectioned marble floor. Here jugglers and dancers and acrobats performed to the beat of small drums, the hollow reed sound of pipes.

As the last dishes were removed, last finger bowls and napkins supplied and fresh trays of wine and sweets served, the innermost section of the marble floor sank inward and down. This sinking device must have been a new addition to the agent's house, and received some applause. Servants ran to the candle clusters, drew them down on their cords, and dowsed them. Slowly, the floor section began to rise again. The light was very dim, with a slight smoky redness and a smell of incense. The section leveled and I saw what lay on it. A naked woman, her white body painted all over with silver leaves, a net of scarlet jewels between her thighs. As she rose to her feet I saw how she had colored her face—white lips but scarlet glistening lids as if fresh blood had welled from them. But it was the snake which held me. A gasp went up all around. The guests were riveted. A few women squealed, but did not look away. It, too, was red and white, at least as wide as the woman's waist and twenty feet or more in length. A music began, slow and liquid, dripping from one cadence to another, wrapping itself as sinuously around the woman as did the snake. They were dancing together, winding and twisting about each other. She was one of those that are double jointed; it was no trouble for her to be a serpent too. Suddenly a man came leaping from some door in the far wall, out among the guests. He jumped into the center of the floor, turning somersaults, while the woman leaned before him wound around with the snake, waiting.

My blood ran like ice. I felt I was choking. The man's body was painted gold. Where had they got this ritual? Had they remembered it, unknowing? Did the corruption still live in them, the legacy of the lost demons who had bred me?

The dance went on, and they were together now, wrapped in a simulation of pleasure, the snake threading in and out between their bodies.

Then the section of the floor sank, the lights were rekindled. The guests stirred, waking, and began to applaud.

"Such artistry!"

"A triumph of beauty!"

The veneer of culture upon their sickly depravity.

I looked at Barak, but he and Ellak were laughing together slyly at it, aroused, but honestly so, not hiding any thing under a cloak of words.

The agent came toward us, receiving congratulations on every hand as he passed.

"Ah, Darros, there is a man I would like you to meet."

We got up, and followed him from the hot room onto a cool terrace looking out across the town. Little trees in pots swayed in the night breeze. The moon shone high. Already it was late, though lights still

burned in Ankurum.

The man was waiting for us, leaning casually on the balustrade. He wore a long robe, black, and without ornament. His hair seemed the only vanity, oiled and curled and very long, that, and the magnificent ruby on his left hand. It matched the glitter in his eyes. A hard, aging, calculating face. I did not trust him much, but neither did he sicken or amuse me.

"May I present to you Darros of Sigko, our famous merchant trader. Raspar of Ankurum." The agent fussily bowed himself away, apparently undisturbed at being a superfluity in his own house.

The man nodded to Darak and Ellak. He took my hand and kissed it with routine ceremony. He did not ask who I was, or seem particularly interested in me.

"Did you enjoy our friend's entertainment?" he inquired of Darak. "Quite ingenious I thought it, for all it was so slenderly composed. However. No doubt you would like to discuss business after such a long wait to do so."

"I should be glad to discuss business."

"That's good. I hear you have several wagon loads of metal and weapons, fine stuff from northern workshops. Possibly"—he smiled indulgently—"you are unaware of the extent of my concern in this matter. I am well-known in Ankurum, I assure you. I would naturally not expect you to believe me without some surety, but I can take all your merchandise off your hands at once, without the use of an intermediary."

"Indeed."

"Indeed. But before we go any further with this ... I have heard a good many tales about you. You are one of the few men to get a caravan from the north to Ankurum without losing half of it. Did you never encounter any trouble?"

"Trouble?"

"Bandits. I'm told they rule the hills. Not to mention the tribes of the plains."

Darak indicated me casually.

"You see I have my safeguard against that."

"Ah, yes."

"As for bandits," Darak said, "I know their minds well enough. And I have my guard."

"Then you enjoy dangerous work, Darros of Sigko?"

Darak said nothing. He looked Raspar of Ankurum between the eyes, and smiled his hard white smile. It was theatrical, but explicit nevertheless.

"I see you do. And they also tell me that you are a great handler of horses. I hear you mastered a wild unbroken one a day ago in the market."

"I was bred with horses," Darak said.

"Good. And were you bred with chariots too?"

The stiffness of suspense fell over all of us. This was so much more than idle talk.

Darak said levelly, "Why do you ask?"

"I'll be blunt," Raspar said, he who could never quite be that. "I've a mind to extend my business concerns to include the breeding of horses. I have my farm already, a few miles outside Ankurum, and from that farm I have got myself a team of three wild blacks. For the sake of my business name, I want some young man—some danger-loving young man who knows his horses as well as he knows his women—to race my team in the Sirkunix. And, naturally, win."

Darak laughed, short and sharp. It would have been a contemptuous gesture if his eyes had not shone so brightly. Yes, he could not resist. Already he was on the Straight. When he said, "I know chariots," I was not sure if it were true or not. Then he added: "Also I know a little of the race. Is it the one I hear most of that you want?"

"It is the one." Raspar smiled. "Of course, there are many other bouts, and many other races—horse alone, and horse and chariot too. But this one is the empress of the races, and also carries the largest prize." He glanced at Ellak, thoughtful. "Of course, you'll need to find an archer too. If they haven't told you, it will have to be a thin small man, a boy if you have one. Tidy enough to keep his feet, light enough that the horses hardly notice him there. Do you have such?"

Darak glanced at me.

"I have one."

In anger and bewilderment, I stared back at him. I too had heard a little of this race. Ankurum was full of it, and the men had brought it back to the hostelry. The Sagare they called it, and it was death. Six chariots or more, each with a team of three, each one with driver—and archer—whose mission was to disable the other chariots, while under a hail of arrows from his opponent's men. By the two laws of the Sagare you aimed neither at men nor horses, yet, so easy to misjudge—or judge right if it came to that. And beyond all this were the four obstacles of the course which represented the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water, each one passed through six times in the six laps of the race. Not many lived after the Sagare. And Darak held both of us so light he would throw both of us into it at the whim of this man, simply because he could not resist his own madness.

"No," I said. "Darros."

Raspar looked at me, lifted his hands, laughed.

"Forgive me. But a*woman?"*

"She can use a bow better than any man under me. And she has the weight, or lack of it."

"I will need, of course, proof of all this."

"You shall have it."

They were talking as if I had no part in it, I, who had the worst part, the victim of a town's ancient blood lusts, color for the sand of their arena.

"No," I said again. "Did you not hear me?"

"Your lady is perhaps wise," Raspar said. "Possibly she has heard every archer rides bare to the waist behind his shield."

This stupidity angered me even more. I said nothing.

"Well," Raspar said, "we can discuss it tomorrow. I will send a man for you in the morning. About the fifth hour after dawn? I'll show you my farm, Darros; it may interest you. And now I must be on my way." He bowed to me, nodded to Darak, and went off the terrace, across the candlelit room.

Darak turned to Ellak. "Go and get Maggur and the others out of the brothels. We'll be leaving soon."

Ellak grinned and went away.

Darak leaned back on the balustrade, began to pry a plant loose from the marble with his restless fingers.

"You realize," he said, after a moment, "this man will take all our goods, quickly, and for a high price, if we do what he wants."

"As his tame dogs would do it," I said.

"Worth it," Darak said. "We can't idle here forever, waiting for some northern messenger to come galloping with news of the ambush at the ford. It would take a while, but thwart Raspar and he might well block our sale long enough for that to happen. Besides, the prize is high. Three hundred gold ovals to the charioteer and two hundred to the archer."

"The archer should have twice that."

"The archer would be nothing without the man who holds the team."

"Find another," I said. "If you go to die, go alone. I am not a slave-wife to be burned on your pyre."

"I could have had Kel," he said.

I turned away, coldness running through me. After a second or so I felt his hand warm on my arm.

"Listen," he said. "I'll find another to do it. But you rode with me before, and fought. I would trust my back to you." I looked up at him and his face was tense. "I don't believe you can die," he said to me. He twisted the curls of my hair around his fingers as I stared at him. And after a time I seemed to stare through him, back to the volcano, back to Shullatt's knife, back to the lightning which struck me at the pillars and threw me, but did not even burn. Another time I might have shut my ears, but not this time. "We'll go now," he said.

He took my arm and led me across the room, the other rooms, across the vestibule, through the portico and the terraced gardens onto the street. I suppose that was the way we went. I did not see it.

3

The night was cool, not cold. Not many lights now, burning in window spaces. Braziers on street corners threw orange color in our faces. The moon too was orange, lower and less distinct.

Abruptly, the thought of the hostelry seemed unpleasant and oppressive.

"I do not want to go back to that room," I said to Darak.

He turned to Ellak, and the others on their horses, without any hesitation. A shut-in place was not a happy place for Darak in any case.

"Go back on your own. We're going another way."

They swung off at once, except for Maggur.

"Well, you great bull, what are you waiting for?"

"Bad to walk alone in a town by night," Maggur said. Earnestly he added: "There may be pickpockets and robbers about."

Darak looked quite blank.

"Ah, yes," he said. "A law-abiding man such as myself forgets these hazards."

Maggur grinned.

"Ride off, you fool," Darak said. "I can take care of anything we meet. Besides, there are the warden's soldiers prowling the streets every night to keep order. I can always call one of those." He slapped Maggur's horse on the rump, and it ran off, Maggur still grinning on its back.

So we walked.

It was a strange, quiet time between us. We did not speak for a long while, or even move close together. Yet he did not seem uneasy with me. Once, when two of the patrolling guards swung by, he put his arm around me. They scarcely glanced at us, two lovers coming home from a supper, perhaps.

There was a little river that ran through Ankurum, stone walled, but very shallow. Things floated on it which the townspeople had thrown in: broken clay bowls, fruit peel, a little white, drowned doll. We followed this river, a perilous enterprise, which meant clambering over walls, rustling across private gardens, and through wastelands sharp with stinging weeds. We were children then, muffling laughter, slipping by the dark windows. At last the river ran underground, its stone mouth narrowing among a group of trees, where flowers turned pale faces up to us from the rank grass.

"Soon be dawn," Darak said. He pushed me back against a trunk, lifted the veil of the shireen a little, and kissed me.

"Darak," I said. I leaned against him and shut my eyes. "Darak, I am afraid. Afraid of myself."

He held me away from him.

"We are all afraid of ourselves," he said. "Not all of us know it."

It did not seem surprising for him to understand such a thing, this bandit, who burned now only to risk his neck in the arena.

When we left that place there was the unmistakable dawn scent in the air.

We saw then what made free in the formal and civilized streets of Ankurum. Large frogs burped at us from every garden, some on the walls, staring with their jewels of eyes. On the paving, a colony of snails nibbled at grass between the flags. Two hill foxes, silvery in the dark, their tails stiff, their heads disdainful, padded by us on a main thoroughfare. A little ahead, one waited courteously for the other to relieve itself against an archway. Then both ran around a corner on their ticking paws.

I turned my head to look at a huge white star, amazed at its brilliance and size in the lightening sky. We were in an open place, the buildings around us not very high. I stopped.

"Look," I said.

We watched the star, which, even though we were still, continued to move. It slid slowly as a blazing tear over the roofs of Ankurum.

"Now what is*that?"* Darak said softly.

I thought of Asutoo, and his talk of gods who rode the sky in silver chariots, and came sometimes to earth. A sudden terror seized me that the thing would fall into this street, blazing bright, disgorging beautiful burning giants, whose look would melt flesh from bone.

But suddenly, as if it sensed scrutiny, the star speeded, vanished into cloud, and was gone.

We stood silent in the street. My body prickled. I felt abruptly that we were not alone. Very slowly, I turned, looking around me. There were shadows everywhere, yet none of them seemed filled. I shook the feeling from my shoulders.

"Darak," I said, "let that moving light be an omen. I will ride with you in the Sagare."

But if omen, then black omen. There was a sense of doom in me. I would go with him because I was compelled by fear. A dark thing in my mind uncoiled itself, length by length. It whispered, soft as the rustle of silk, that he would die in the Sirkunix at Ankurum, having tempted death too often.

4

The man came early from Raspar, and had to wait for us. We had woken late, still twined, in the hostelry bed. Our clothes, everything, lay on the floor. The white silk of the dress, born only yesterday, was crushed and rumpled, torn at the hem and knees from the places we had trampled through, stained brown and green by moss. The jades were still around my neck, and Darak, lying over me, had impressed their shapes into my throat.

When we were ready, Raspar's servant, a sallow fidgety young man, led us out to the stables. Darak, Ellak, Maggur, and I followed on our horses his fat reddish mare, and were conducted through the

winding streets of Ankurum, empty of foxes, out of the Ring Gate, and up into the higher hills.

It was a sharp blue morning, the air very pure and cold.

The mountains seemed closer and more distinct the farther one rose, gray, stippled with white and, lower down, heavy with pines. We passed a small stone temple with red pillars, set up to the goddess of the vine.

The farm was only an hour or so away from the town, but a rich one, producing wine and cheeses besides its prospective horses. It seemed Raspar liked to dip into every pie. The buildings, Ankurum stone, with russet roofs, all matted by the legendary vine, stood around a square court. Beyond were vineyards, and meadows of milk cows, an orchard or two, and past these, in the distance, the horse fields.

A brown-robed Raspar, courteous yet brisk, had wine brought to us, but did not waste time on formality. In an open carriage we trundled out across the fertile acres. He glanced at me and my male clothes quizzically once or twice, but said nothing. To Darak he chatted amiably about the land and its yield.

"The Warden himself will have nothing but my cheese on his table," he said. "A great honor." It was obvious that Raspar was not at all honored, simply amused at the boost it gave his produce.

The grape harvest had already begun. Women moved along the terraces, baskets on tilted hips. Ellak eyed them thoughtfully.

Poplars lined the avenue between the horse fields. Blacks, grays, chestnuts turned and galloped away from us, tossing their long heads. We passed among another group of buildings, stables and barns presumably. Beyond was a great open place, shaped in a huge oval, fenced around by a high hedge of stakes. At the center, another smaller oval, this time a raised platform of piled rock.

The carriage stopped.

"The practice track," Raspar announced smoothly.

We got out, and a man came toward us from one of the stone buildings. He was lean and tanned, sun-wrinkled around the eyes black and darting as a lizard's. He limped a little, his right side leaning curiously atwist, away from the arm that no longer hung on it. The left arm ended at the wrist. He was still some distance from us as Raspar murmured:

"This is Bellan. He has been my man since the chariots did for him in Coppain two years ago. Now he is my horsemaster. He has run many races like the Sagare, and won all of them."

Bellan reached us, bowed to Raspar, flicked his eyes over us. I had expected bitterness, hatred even. Surely there was hatred at least for Darak, straight and tall, the charioteer Bellan would never be again. But I sensed none of this. He smiled and nodded to Darak as Raspar brought them together. He seemed friendly, yet noncommittal. His voice was deep, oddly pleasing to the ear.

"If the gentleman is ready, I have a chariot for him."

A groom came around the buildings, leading a plain metal car with three chestnuts in the shafts.

"To cut your teeth on," Raspar remarked. "The blacks come later. Take one lap."

A gate section in the fence was pushed open, the chariot and team led through. The horses pawed the ground and shook their heads; for all they were not the wild black prides of Raspar, they were still racers, volatile and nervous. Darak studied them a moment, stripped his tunic, gave it to Ellak, then leaned on a carriage wheel while Maggur pulled off his boots.

Bellan gave a small approving grunt.

Darak went in at the gate and around to the horses. He fondled them a little, talking to them, then, apparently satisfied, he mounted the chariot. He unwound the plaited reins from the prow-boss, shook them out, flicked them, and the horses started forward. They were badly matched for a team, and moved unevenly; the chariot bumped, but Darak had their measure in that second. The right outsider he let alone, the left insider he pulled back hard, and the center horse he slapped lightly with the rein, making him start ahead. The chariot moved, slow at first, little more than a walk. I saw him shift, getting the balance of the car, his bare feet testing with their own senses. The unevenness flowed from the three chestnuts as they felt the guide of the reins, compelling or restraining. They settled, joined, and he began to give them their head. Halfway up the track the reins moved slack and tautened, and abruptly they were galloping. I saw Darak had indeed known chariots, though where or when I did not understand. They seemed one thing now, one flying thing, a unison of movement. Dust clouded up, acrid gold in the sun light. I glanced around. Ellak was grinning, Raspar stroking his chin, smiling slightly. Bellan, at the stake fence, was leaning forward. His eyes glittered, at the same moment almost unfocused. He was breathing fast, nostrils flared, his feet restless, the ruined left arm twitching. He, too, rode the chariot.

They took the turn, light and sweeping, a bright blur behind the rock platform, which represented the Skora of the Sirkunix. The second turn, and through the dust billows, the straining copper power held back. The chariot slowed and stopped. Darak looked at us.

"Good horses, Raspar, but ill matched."

"I know it. You've earned better."

The chestnuts, angry at this abrupt terminus of their flight, started forward again. Darak pulled them hard, and the groom ran in to release them and lead them away.

Darak came out of the enclosure, his brown body slightly whitened by the dust.

"Well, Bellan?" Raspar asked.

"Yes," Bellan said. He turned to Darak. "A man for chariots has a look to him, like the lion in the desert—well-hidden, but easy to spot when it moves. Have you never raced before?"

"Not in a stadium. There was a track at"—Darak hesitated, not wanting to name any place he had visited in the past—"at a town I stayed in. I had time on my hands."

"Yes," Bellan said, "a god's gift is on you and you play with it. You are a charioteer, but rusty. Like a good wheel, you will need much oiling before you are ready. But still, a good wheel. Now I will let you try my blacks, and see if they like you."

They had brought them already. They were amazing in the sun, unreal, three animals carved from a single jet, highly polished to a silver gleam, with rubies set in their nostrils. They stood quite still, but there was

nothing quiet in them. They were waiting, tensed and dangerous.

"Introduce our friend to them, Bellan," Raspar said.

"With your pardon, I'd rather he introduced himself."

Darak shrugged. He went forward, steady but not slow. A ripple ran through them. All three heads tossed almost simultaneously. Darak laughed softly. He was seduced already. He did not slip around to right or left, but walked on toward the middle of the three. The horse lip drew back, and the other two snarled also. Front hooves lifted a little way, unsure. Darak's hand slid, firm and caressing, across the satin muzzle. Stroking, he drew the dark head down, whispering. It was sensual, almost sexual, strangely beautiful. The horse nudged his shoulder. The other two on either side extended their faces to receive his attention.

Bellan chuckled.

"Very good, very good, my Darros."

"One brain in three bodies," Darak said. "Is that how they take the track?"

"Try them. They will go with you now. Twice only mind. We shall need them again, and they must not be tired. Besides, we have much to discuss together."

The groom put them between the shafts, arranged their harness. Darak was in the chariot, impatient to begin. The blacks quivered, vibrant. The groom ran out and shut the gate. The reins flickered and drew straight.

The first time had been flight, but this was fire. Black fire leaping through oil. The horses stretched forward straining to catch the very shadows they had cast behind them on the previous lap. Darak stretched forward also. Too fast now to see clearly, only the curve, the impetus, orgasmic, unstoppable, making the world a frozen thing, transfixed around this core of speed. I felt I must run with them, to be still was blasphemy.

"Enough! Stop, you Sigkoan dog!" Bellan roared out.

The chariot flared, simmered, slackened. The horses trotted back around the turn to us.

"Did I not say two times, no more?"

Darak grinned.

"They and I forgot."

"They and you must learn to remember." But Bellan too was smiling.

Darak bowed, left the chariot, and, taking the light rugs the groom had brought, slipped them over each horse himself. They nuzzled him.

Ellak seemed surprised. He had not heard his leader take smilingly the orders and insults of any man before. Perhaps he had been expecting a fight; he looked bewildered, but his attention was distracted by a pretty girl coming out with cooled wine for us.

"There is much you will need to learn," Bellan said, "and the black ones also. We must work on that. You know a little of the Sagare. By the gracious foresight of my master, you will know more of it very soon." He nodded at the track. "Earth, air, fire, and water. A race of joy and fear and hate. But before that. Your archer." He glanced at Maggur, at Ellak, who had drawn off a little with the wine girl. "These men will be too heavy. The team do not need to love the archer as they do the driver, but they must be able to suffer him."

Raspar said, "Darros has suggested his lady rides with him."

Bellan looked astonished.

"A woman? Graceful in bed perhaps, but in a chariot as clumsy as an ox."

"*I*am Darros' archer," I said.

Bellan looked at me, intense and interested for the first time.

"You? I thought you a tribal boy. I see you're not. I beg your pardon."

"Only women of the tribes wear the shireen," I said.

"Indeed?" Bellan was not concerned at this mistake. "Do you shoot?"

"I*am* Darros' archer."

He assessed me fairly now.

"Small. Good weight for it." He half turned and shouted for the groom who ran up at once. "Arrange the target. And get a bow and plain arrows."

I thought I was to be tried on firm ground, but this was not the case.

The horses were uncovered, Darak was in the chariot and I up behind him. Bellan limped after us.

"What do you think now, my three songs of night?" Bellan asked the team. He rubbed his face against their faces and they responded at once. Then he moved to the chariot's back. "Take off the boots. You must feel the life under you, the life of the chariot. Your feet must be like hands and heartbeat to hold you steady. I'll get you sandals; your soles will be too soft for this as yet."

"My feet are hard," I said. I stripped the boots. The day was warming and the metal layers of the floor were hot from the sun. I felt giddy with tension, the air around me fragile as cracked blue glass. They handed up to me the bow and long flighted arrows—I had not known what they meant when they called them "plain." I would learn later.

The groom came up and fixed a metal bar against the open chariot back, about level with my waist, then locked it into place.

Two men on ponies rode onto the track behind the chariot, facing me. Between them they carried, swinging on a cord, a large oval wooden target, marked with patches of dark blue, yellow, and red.

"When the chariot is at full stretch," Bellan said, "aim for the colors of the target. Blue is best, being hardest to see, red fair, and the bright yellow passable."

Bellan moved out of the enclosure. The gate shut.

A jolt. I took it. A second jolt and I was flung against the metal bar, almost winded. Damn Darak. I heard him laugh.

"Courage, Imma."

My feet balanced on the moving thudding floor, apart, over the backs of the wheels. I braced my body, taut against the metal, and waited. We were going fast now. The dusty ground whirled past, fizzing with speed. Behind, in front of me, the ponies galloped, the target swinging. I drew up the bow, steadied, aimed, fired. The arrow went wide. Hair blew forward around my face from speed. I would have to plait it or club it, like the warriors of a krarl. Again I aimed and fired. The arrow nicked the board and flopped in the dust. The chariot was still incredibly gaining. Another jolt that almost pitched me forward over the bar. I reeled back against the metal side, blinked my eyes clear of dust, took aim, and shot. The arrow lifted, came down, and caught red. I straightened, then relaxed my knees a little. I had more of the feel of the jouncing floor now. I leaned out over the bar and took three blues, one after the other. "Darak," I said, "three blues, one red." He did not hear me.

The ponies gained on us. I filled most of the reds, many blues. Ahead of us. I swung around and fired from the side. The rest of the reds. We passed. I took a yellow and two blues.

Bellan waved us down.

I left Barak with the horses and walked back to them. The target bristled like a porcupine. I had left five blues unscored. "I see you did not really bother to try for yellow," Bellan said. "This is very good. I have splendid archers among my horsemen here. They do this for sport. They score perhaps three or four blues, fifteen reds. You have twenty blues and all twenty-five reds." Raspar smiled.

"I will leave you in Bellan's charge," he said. "Perhaps you'll dine at my house this evening?"

5

So our days formed a new pattern, a strange pattern, one strand wildness, one strand business, and one strand elegance, and the three plaited together.

The wildness was the practice track. That first day with its horse sweat, metal sweat, pepper of dust, and back-breaking, bone-bruising exercise, was merely the prologue to skill, discomfort, and danger. Bellan was a hard exacting tutor. He would swear as vilely as a bandit when Darak failed to achieve his demands, and Darak would listen, without apparent anger or resentment, and then try the thing again, and get it right. Each night, as he lay on the hostelry bed, I would rub salve into the tear along his spine, where the three blacks, straining at either of his strong arms, had tried to rip his body in half. Bellan, stripped, bore, among many scars, one long hard whiteness along his spine, tough as leather. As for me, my right arm was raw from the weals the shield bracelets had made, holding that bronze monster across my body. Here I saw the disadvantage in my inability to scar—I could not form protective tissue. Each dawn my arm was healed, but by evening the skin was gnawed open again. Unlike my feet, the soles of which had been like iron since I woke under the mountain, my self-renewing flesh made me vulnerable as a baby. Bellan did not think any more of it than that I was a soft girl, for all my archer's skill. He told me to wind

linen bandages around the weal marks, and had leather rings set inside the metal bracelets. This helped, but it was still bad enough.

By the third day, when we thought ourselves masters of bow and chariot, Bellan began to wean us to the meat of the thing. I had not yet seen the stadium at Ankurum, or a design of the Straight, when prepared for the Sagare, but, by Raspar's grace, the practice track became a fair copy. We had Straight, turn, and Skora. Now we learned the pillars of Earth and Air. They were sheer treachery, and, more than the other two obstacles to come, we could only prove ourselves against them in the arena. Earth was an oak-wood wall on wheels, rolled in and fixed in the ground before the race. In the wall were four arches, each wide enough to take one chariot. There would always be six chariots at least competing to get through these four openings; we knew already that this year the Sagare had garnered seven contestants—besides ourselves. Air was represented by two pits, only five feet in diameter, it is true, but stretching down some ten yards. There was plenty of space between and to either side of them, so that a chariot ahead and on its own would manage well enough. But, given a bunch of them, some would be driven into the trap; a horse's legs would go in and snap; if the back wheels caught, the driver and archer would probably be thrown out despite the bar, down the shaft or under the hooves of the teams behind. Two days we spent on the wall of Earth, dodging two other practice chariots of Raspar's, held by Bellan's men. There were spills, but nothing bad. A man broke his leg, and one team, not ours, ran mad right through the wood—luckily flimsy stuff that did not do much harm. The two days after that we played the pits of Air, dug not so deep, and covered, fortunately, by a light mesh frame. Several times the blacks would have floundered into them, but by sunset of that second day, we had learned the trick of speed or dropping back that would take us clear or leave us last, to catch the others when the stretch was open again.

Water was next, and Raspar did not have the underground springs that bubbled beneath the Sirkunix; instead we learned our lesson hard under the torrents of gigantic tipped buckets swung by chains from above by Raspar's laughing, jibing servants. My bow and shafts hung wet and useless a hundred times before Darak had mastered it, and I had mastered the art of shield-covering them if he misjudged. And then came Fire.

It was the tenth day, and the Games had already begun at Ankurum. The Sirkunix was near enough the town walls, that in stillnesses during the day, the occasional roaring shout of loud anger or joy would soar up to the farm. It was the wrestling, beast fights, and acrobatics. The races would begin four days from now, and two days from that would be the crowning race, the empress, the Sagare. That tenth dawn, we knew we had six days left alone to prepare ourselves for victory or death.

And so, between those flaming poles, which were the symbols of the pillars in the arena, we rode well enough, because we must.

The farm villa was cool and white, a sparsely but tastefully furnished dwelling, which provided the elegance and business threads in the dangerous plait. Here, the transaction had long since been signed, witnessed, and almost forgotten, it was so light a thing now in this preparation for the race. Darak's goods were gone. In return he had a handsome price, a price, he assured me, beyond anything he could have hoped for otherwise, while working through an intermediary agent.

"Once we are the victors of the Sagare, we can ride back like kings," he said to me, but his eyes had the lost, bright, fevered look of Bellan's now. He was charioteer, mind, flesh, and soul; even asleep, I felt his body quiver, alive with the rush of the chariot. Rarely did he turn to me for love in the dark. He was exhausted; besides, Bellan had warned us both, frank and expressionless.

"If you have sense, you'll leave each other be in bed till this is over. A man drives from his head, his

hands, his feet, and his loins. As for your woman, if you should chance to get her pregnant now, you're lost. When do you bleed?" he added to me. "Not on the day of the race, I trust?" I told him I did not know. There seemed as yet to be no timing with me, as with other women. "I'll get you a draft," Bellan said. "It'll dry you till the race is over. Women—" He made a gesture of disgust. "If you were not the genius you are with a bow, I'd never have let you near this thing."

And so, on the tenth evening, the race six days away, we sat with Raspar, the dinner over. Candles flickered, licking light colors from the silver plates and onyx cups. Outside, crickets sounded in the warm dusk.

"You are what I guessed you to be," Raspar said to Darak. "You held them through the fire. Mark you, they have been trained to look flame in the eye since they were foaled. I have seen men ride into the Sagare with horses unbroken to fire, and I shall see it again. A fool's trick. It only ends one way." He refilled his own and Darak's cup. "I have entered your name already."

Darak nodded.

"You ride as Darros of Sigko, not as my man. Best this way. Ankurum knows and marvels at your feat in bringing in your caravan. You're a famous hero. There will be no mention of me, but I'll have my men moving through the stadium, ready to explain who owns the three fine blacks. That should do it." He smiled, his friendly, half-shuttered smile. "You said you would take scarlet as your color. That's very good. No Ankurum man has dared this race, and scarlet is Ankurum's device—from the vine. They'll shout for you for that. I believe the bills are already hammered up. And you'll win."

Darak grinned, tense, amused, defiant. Raspar glanced at me.

"I cannot see your lady's face under her shireen. Does she have any doubts?"

"Bellan is a brilliant man for chariots," I said, "but can we trust his judgment? Has he no longing to be in Darros' place?"

"You mean some slip of the tongue, lack of advice, through bitterness?" Raspar smiled again. "I see you understand a little of the human mind. Well, you've no need to fear. He will want Darros to take that race for a very fair reason. There is a man—Essandar of Coppain—who is entered for the Sagare. It was his chariot that tipped Bellan's into the Skora at the stadium there. It was not a Sagare, that one, a simpler race altogether, but still dangerous. The chariot axle gave from the impact, the horse inside left fell. Bellan was flung among the team behind. He hates Essandar, as well he might. I do not know all of it, but I gather it was less luck than a personal thing between them, over some girl."

It was late when we left the farm.

"From tomorrow on you'll stay here at night," Raspar said. "I know you like to keep one eye on your men, and, from what I've heard about them in the town, it's just as well. But give your Ellak charge. No more of this riding back and forth. You'll need cosseting after the day's work. I have a masseur coming, one for each of you, male and female. Besides, now that you have the mastery of the track, you'll be on show a little. Some of the Warden's ladies are coming to watch the famed and handsome Darros handle the team tomorrow, and they may well stay to eat with me. The rich idlers will want to come and judge your form so they can lay their bets."

As we rode back along the dark road to the Ring Gate, I said: "I told you. Raspar's tame dogs to do tricks for his customers and patrons."

Darak laughed.

It would not trouble him, gypsy, boaster, showman that he was. Let them all come and stare,

And they came.

If anything, it was worse than all the fire and pain, that anger which must be restrained. I, with the arrow poised, how dear to my soul it would have been not to loose at the three running targets, but at that crowd of fools by the fence.

The curl-haired women in their litters and carriages, shimmering in their snow-white frocks. I had chosen my dress well indeed, for the agent's supper. White was the most fashionable color among the nobility and the rich. Because, of course, white is so easily dirtied, and only the wealthy would do little enough that it could not be spoiled. With their white, they wore clusters of jewels of every color and in every setting, gold, silver, copper, and a metal they call alcum, a kind of dark gray stuff, that shines with an incredible blue light under the sun. The men were much the same, white tight trousers clinging as a second skin, with built-out shoulders and sleeves slashed red, orange, yellow.

The women, and some of the men also, cooed and sighed at Darak; called him over between runs. He had no time for the men, and showed it, yet despite their sulks, they could see he was a likely winner. They had spent time at the practice track attached to the Sirkunix itself, and apparently no one there came near the standard to which Bellan had got us. With the women, Darak was amenable. They gestured lightly at me with pale ringed hands, and laughed. Darak laughed with them.

Some men came after me to a corner field.

"Clos and I are agreed. We really must watch for you in the arena. You know the custom—bare to the waist. I beg you don't hold the shield too close, sweetheart."

I turned to Bellan, who was standing a little behind me, supervising the rub a groom was giving the blacks. He, I knew, had little time for these bystanders.

"Bellan," I said, "would it be an insult to my host Raspar to put my knife between the ribs of these two?"

I saw, from the tail of my eye, they backed off, laughing a little nervously.

"Yes," Bellan said. He grinned. "Alas."

"Then I must not do it," I said. Deliberately, I unlaced my shirt and pulled it back, leaving my breasts bare. The two men exclaimed, one flushed, embarrassed. I stood still a moment, while, flustered, they tried to call up something lecherously witty to say, then, unhurriedly, I laced the shirt again. "Now, gentlemen," I said, "I have fulfilled my duties to my host. Perhaps next time you come to watch, you would wear less jewelry. It tends to catch the sun and flash in the eyes of the horses. In my eyes, too, when I take aim. I might misfire."

I could tell they took my meaning. They turned and went off, one muttering, "Damned whoring tribal *bitch."*

Bellan chuckled. It was the first time he had come near to liking me.

"You've a word for yourself, I see," he said, "but careful. Not good to make an enemy before a race." The laugh went off his face. His left arm twitched.

Five days, four days. We were pummeled by the masseurs until our flesh rang. Dieted also—though for me, this had no use—lean foods, and little wine or beer. Even when the day was over, Darak would spend hours with the horses, talking to them, fondling them.

"You and they must be four parts of one whole," Bellan said. "And you," he said to me, "you are the black crow on the dead man's shoulder, jealous for what carries you." I was handling by then the things they called "spiced" arrows—no longer the "plain" ones I had had that first time. You took what you wanted into the arena, it seemed, arrows spiced with anything you fancied. The most used were corded—a tail of thin rope fixed on the flight; shot in between hub and rim, they would tangle the spokes and foul the wheels. The wheels were a popular target. Hollow arrows, filled with small iron balls, would be fired through, snap on the spokes, and spill their dangerous cargo under the hooves of anything coming after. Yet these had their disadvantages—one would meet one's own artillery coming back. There were many other devices, all clever, but the trouble was to make these arrows fly. Now, in addition to allowing for the movement of one's own chariot, and the movement of the other chariot, one must allow for altered weight, cords that might slew the shaft sideways, or tangle on the bosses of the vehicle one rode—a thousand precautions and difficulties, and more.

Three days, two days. Bellan looked slyly at me.

"With one plain arrow," he said, "and your sharp eye, you might try for the classic shot. Three times only is there a record of it in the Sagare."

I asked him what it was.

"To slice a man's reins in two. The leather flies wide. The control of his team goes from his grasp. He's finished. Try it."

Ten times around the turns I tried on one of the practice chariots behind us. But I could not make it happen. The reins flick, move, are never still. I was glad the elegant crowds had gone to the races at last, and were not there to see it.

One day more before that Day.

It had been almost easy till then to shut out fear. The grueling toil, the drum of advice always pounding in the ears, the cruel masseurs like two giant-people, the tiredness, the thick black swoon of sleep with dreams so deeply buried they were not recalled. But that day before the Day, they were easier with us. We rested late, and not till noon did we go out to the track to try the chariot that would carry us in the Sagare. Black metal, gleaming like the horses, set with red enamel suns and golden vine trails, a queen among chariots, and with the blacks between her scarlet shafts, that perfect unison only an artist of the stadium could have made. Bellan grinned at our praises. The chariot had come from Raspar's own workshops, after Bellan's design. In it, riding, fast, fast, we were one thing in all truth; even I, the sitting crow, was part of it. Bellan let us fly on the track, and did not call us back, allowing us for once the clear pure joy of it. But after that wine, the day turned bitter.

The blacks were sent to rest, and Darak and I lazed in the villa court among the lemon trees in pots, and the clambering vines. We played a dice game with Maggur, but were interrupted by Ellak.

Twelve of Barak's men had gone out into the town, started up a drunken brawl, half-killed a few brothel

guards, and were now in the Warden's prisons. Darak's face went white. He stood up, sending the dice crashing, and hit Ellak violently across the face.

"You brainless clod, can't you keep order half a day without me on your back!"

Ellak was used to obeying, but also used to Darak's justice within the bandit creed. He shook himself, and his hand almost involuntarily slid toward his knife. At once Darak was on him, and the first blow knocked Ellak back against the wall. The second blow would have knocked him clear through it had not Maggur got Darak's shoulders. Darak's anger settled in the instant. He shook Maggur off, turned away from both of them, and poured himself wine, his knuckles pale on the stem of the cup.

"Get out," he said.

They went.

He drained the cup, then slung it clattering across the court. His whole body twitched with tension. Looking at his face, always lean and hard, I saw abruptly how much thinner, how much harder it had become. Yes, he was gypsy and showman, but he would run to the horse, leap and ride. No time to doubt or hesitate. His training had been well enough for his skill and body, but what for his waiting, thinking mind?

"Darak," I said.

He turned and looked at me, his eyes black and bright, with nothing behind them but the burning tension.

I went in, and he followed me. In the apartments Raspar had granted us, I drew off his clothes and mine, soothed his taut body with my lips and tongue and fingers, roused him, and drew him into me, and when the fire had drained from him, he lay quiet and still against me.

"Bellan would be hard on you," he murmured.

"Bellan would know," I said.

Soon he slept, and I held him gently in sleep, but now my mind would not be still.

Death, death. Black death, scarlet death. Death red as the vine of Ankurum. Lying so quiet, I longed to scream aloud. In a half-dream I saw those phantoms of my lost race crowding in to seize me, and Darak's hands, holding me from the lip of the precipice, slipped suddenly from mine and I was gone. Yet it was he that fell. I saw him broken far below. Darak, you are man, human man, wicked but not evil; if I lose you in that place of fire tomorrow I shall slip back into the dark. Let me remember, when you fall, I must take the reins and wind them around my neck so that the running horses snap it. No healing for that wounding, surely.

6

The rest of that day before the Day was hazy; lamplight, a little more wine than usual, the expansive jokes and laughter, the early sleep we were sent to.

It was perhaps an hour before dawn that I woke. I was weeping, and did not quite know why, but it was Darak who had woken me. He was tossing, struggling, crying out in his sleep, and when I touched

him his skin was burning hot and running sweat.

"Darak," I said.

I held him and tried to bring him back gently, but it was no use; I shook him and he would not wake, so I slapped him across the face, once, twice, three times until his eyes came open and he stared at me. At first he did not even see the room or me, only the thing in his mind still; then his eyes cleared.

"Ah, god," he said. He sat up, then rose, flung open the window shutters, and stared out at the paling darkness. A fresh green smell blew upward from the farm, but the pores of his skin stiffened at the predawn chill.

"What, Darak?" I asked. "What?"

"The chariot and team," he said. "It and I and they: one thing. Hill country, riding fast, good riding. And then the villages and the lake, that old damned place of childhood. I saw the cloud on the mountain, scarlet. There was a woman up behind me—not you—a woman. 'The pillars of fire,' she said. And Makkatt split open. Red, red blood. Fire. Fire everywhere, the villages burning, the chariot burning, riding in the fire, and this woman behind me, cold as ice—"

He broke off. It was so still, only the slight rustle of the vine in a breeze, as it clung on the villa walls.

He was afraid, and he had kept it from himself. Now he knew. To know fear might well be death to this man on this Day. The old superstition and belief still rotten in him—oh, no, that woman was not I, yet also it was, for it was the She-One who rode behind him, with her white mask-face and scarlet robe, in the dreamland of terror.

Again the vine stirred and with it a memory, a thought.

I went to him and put my arm about him.

"Only a dream," I said. "Dreams mean nothing. I should know that. Today they will be offering in the temples of the gods of Ankurum, those seven that ride with us. To gods of light, gods of battle, gods of archers, gods of horses. But we are riding for Ankurum, not Sigko, wearing the color of the vine. The goddess knows it." He did not look at me. I said, "I am going to the temple of the vine-goddess to offer, and beg her protection for the honor of her red."

"Go if you want," he said. But he was leaning toward my thought. Superstition, which had harmed him, might heal its own wound.

"Come with me," I said.

There had been no bad weather for the Games. This was a last warm smiling time that came before the rains. But this day was best of all. The dawn was straining green and rose over the rocky hills and the farmlands, a hundred shades of pink on the mountain sides. Birds sang furiously, ripe apples had fallen on the road over orchard walls. The ground was drenched in dew. We wore plain dark clothes; my hair was free and hanging down my back. We did not yet have the splendor of the arena on us.

The temple was very quiet, shadows around it. We went between the lacquered pillars into the gloom beyond.

And there was such a sense of peace there, not like the village temple this, with its close and spicy smell. There was only oldness here, and quietness, and calm. A long dark aisle, three square stone columns on each side, holding the roof up, and at the end a little marble stand, veined red, where the image stood, in front, an altar draped with a green and scarlet cloth. Strange, should the altar not be bare so the blood of sacrifice could be easily cleaned away? And there should be a drain in the floor to catch it. The narrow door behind the altar opened, and a priest came out. I did not think he saw us, for he carried an iron bowl to the altar, set it there, filled it with oil and lit the flame.

Without turning he said, "Be welcome. May I help you?"

"Yes," I said, half-whispering in the silence, "we have come to offer to the goddess."

He turned and beckoned us forward. He had an old man's face, but composed, kind, and oddly knowing. He it was, I thought, who had steeped this place in its feelings of peace.

"The goddess," he said, smiling, "does not ask offerings."

I was amazed. I had seen the temples of Ankurum, with their oxen, sheep, goats, and doves held captive in the sacred pens, ready to be brought for sacrifice, and fill the temple treasury even while they appeased the god.

"What then—?" I began.

"Look in her face and ask her what you want," the priest said, "as you would ask a kind mother. If she can, she will grant what you ask."

Darak said coldly, "Your goddess is too gentle for us. We want her help in the Sirkunix because we wear her red."

The priest's smile did not change; his eyes darkened a little, that was all.

"If you pray for the death of another, she will not listen, it is true," he said, "but if you pray for your safety, that would be a different matter."

I nodded. The priest turned and gazed up at the image. Darak's eyes followed his, and mine also. She was like a little doll, white-robed, black-haired, the red vine around her brow. A little doll, and yet...

O gentle one, I whispered in my mind, *I am cursed and should not speak to you, but be good to me for my heart is open. If one of us must die, let it be me and not this man—not so much for his sake, as for mine. If you exist, then you know me and my trouble. Take pity on us both and save him; make him brave, as he is, give him the victory he wants, and if death, let it be quick and clean. For both.*

My eyes seemed to be on fire. I lowered them, and at that moment the priest spoke.

"She hears," he said.

Curious, it seemed he knew it for a fact. Then abruptly he reached up and plucked two red leaves from the goddess' chaplet, and I saw for the first time it was real, not a painted thing.

He turned and took my hand, and put the leaves into it.

"One for each," he said.

My fingers closed around them, cool and crisp on my palm. The priest nodded and went away again behind his narrow door.

I looked at Barak's face, and I saw all the darkness had gone out of it. So it had worked, then. Superstition against superstition; and yet I felt it too, the joy and release.

We went out and the day was warmer still. I put one vine leaf in his hand. He said nothing, but, as we walked back toward the farm, I knew he was eager, thinking of the chariot, the team, the roaring crowd, the rushing Straight, the glory, and the prize. I did not know what would come of it, but he was Darak again. And this, to him, was the Day of Victory.

He went first to the stables to make love to the black team, eager and restive under their grooming, as though they sensed this was the time. He came in late to eat, a sparse meal, bread, a slice or two of cold meat, wine and water in equal measure. Bellan hovered around us to keep appetites in check. I did not eat—I could not risk those pains coming to distract me—but I had taken what I needed the night before. Raspar had gone ahead of us to Ankurum. He would have his own fine seat, not far from the Warden's place. Grooms were running everywhere, and soon the chariot and team were gone too, to the Sirkunix stables for the traditional inspection. We—Bellan, Darak, Maggur, and I—rode after, with an escort of more grooms.

"Every charioteer needs his own army," Bellan remarked, "on this day of war."

His own horse, a sturdy bay, he guided only by his knees, the reins looped in the buckle of his belt; but it was his, and knew him.

There were men and women, farmworkers most of them, leaning over walls and fences to watch us ride by. They raised cheers, for now we were dressed for the arena, and there was no mistaking us, or our colors—black for the team, scarlet for the vine. Darak wore the skin-tight black leggings that ended, thong-tied, at the ankles, the black hide belt, with its red enamel clasp, from which swung thick strips of stiffened black hide to mid-thigh—a protection, but allowing free movement of the legs. For the moment he still wore knee-high black boots, red tassels set thickly around the calf. Above the waist theoretically he was bare except for the shield-cuirass, hardened black leather shaped to the body but covering only lower back, abdomen, and ribs, leaving the arms and shoulders free for the team. It was open at the sides, too, held by three straps of black leather with garnet buckles. On the cuirass, front and back, was the scarlet sun burst, which was repeated in turn on the thick black iron armlets which strengthened the charioteer's wrists. Across his shoulders, looped around his arms, was the blood-bright cloak, superfluous yet glamorous as the tasseled boots. I, the archer, was his echo, dressed the same, except that I had no protection above the waist save the scarlet cloak I wore around me now, and would slough in the stadium. Neither did I sport two armlets, only one to harden my left wrist. The right wrist would carry the black iron shield with its red sun burst, now across my saddle. My hair I wore plaited behind me and wound around itself, secured by scarlet thongs.

When we passed the little temple of the goddess of the vine, I turned to look my thanks. Darak did not turn, but I knew he carried the vine leaf under his left armlet as I did mine.

When we went through the Ring Gate and into Ankurum, the crowds were milling everywhere. They roared and shouted at us—praises, cheers, prayers: "I've put a tenth of my silver on you, northerner—get it for me, for the love of the gods!"

Women peered from windows and balconies in the "garden" quarter. Plump, pampered, pretty, they threw out flowers to Darak, yearning in their painted-ringed eyes. Indeed, he looked enough like one of their gods. Handsome, his body deep golden and hard as iron, his face arrogant and proud, and the eyes bright, fearless, self-amused. He could have his pick of them if he should win. But, if not, if not ... a pit, a heap of earth, no song, and no white Ankurum lady to share that bed with him.

7

Things crumble, civilizations fade; only their tokens are left behind them. Perhaps one day they will find the ruins of the Sirkunix at Ankurum, and say it was made by giants.

It was built partly from the same warm yellowish stone that was predominant in the town, but the greater area of it was hollowed out of the rock hills themselves. It was outside the original wall, but a new wall had been extended to wrap it around. From the outside its own walls reared up and up, crowned with round towers, like the ramparts of a fortress. At the town end were ten gates to admit men and women from the various hierarchies of society. At the wall end, the back door of the stadium, there were only five: the Gate of Iron—the wrestlers' and boxers' gate; the Gate of Alcum—the gate of the acrobats and dancers; the Gate of Bronze—the gate of duelers and fighters of beasts; the Gate of Silver—the racers' gate and the men with chariots; and the fifth, at the center of the rest, the Gate of Gold—through which passed the riders of the Sagare. Over that gate, high up, in carved letters that must have been stretched ten feet high or more, was an inscription, Ankurumite, yet with an odd spelling that reminded me of another tongue, close to me, but which I must forget:

MORTAL, NOW YOU ARE GOD

Beyond the Gate of Gold, we rode down a long ramp into red gloom, lit by torches in the stone walls. There was a smell of horses here, and something more besides, inexplicable yet intense. The ramp took a long while to travel, for it led under the high terraces of the stadium to the level of the arena floor.

At last we emerged in the vast under-rock cavern. To left and right, passages led away to baths, weapons halls, physicians' rooms, and the stables. Beyond these complexes lurked the other deeper caves—beast pits, and the death crematoria of those who died here without kin. At the cavern's far end, the long corridor, ten chariots wide, leading out into the open.

Most of the horses were done with their stables now. It was noon, and the Warden would be at his dinner, but in an hour the traditional procession of his gracious self, favored ladies, men of important houses, would amble through this place of strength and tautness, languidly sizing up the form for the last time before all final bets were taken.

The cavern was very wide and high, torches splashing yellow from the walls. There were ten divisions in all, horse high stone partitions, and inside each enough space for chariot, horses, and grooms to maneuver in comfort. Six of the chariots were in place, glittering metal and color, the horses being coaxed into the shafts. In the fifth stall, the three blacks waited, taking their final grooming patiently enough, while behind them the chariot was taking its own. The bodywork and wheels of every vehicle dripped oil, and oil ran in pools along the floor until it reached the drains. The aroma was mostly of oil, metal too, sweat of horses and men, leather, horse droppings, straw, stone, and the knife sharp, knife-bright smell of tension.

The blacks tossed their heads at Darak as he stroked and caressed them, polished ebony, their manes

and floating tails plaited so full of scarlet ribbons that they seemed to be on fire.

"You've watched the chariot and team?" Bellan asked his chief groom at once.

"Yes, sir. No one came near. There's been nothing of that sort I know of. Number seven—the Renshan—one of the grays lost a shoe, but it was all in the run of the thing, nothing tampered with I'd say."

The charioteers and their grooms were everywhere in the cavern, attending the teams, joking, drinking. "Barl," Bellan remarked. A man in yellow had sought the Altar of All Gods, in a recess, and was bowed before it.

"Barl of Andum," Ballan said. "A good driver, not a master. He'll take second if he keeps steady. Those grays of his have too much temperament."

The archers were there, too, slight young men, stripped off to the waist already, only keeping their colored cloaks for display. A group were talking together, friendly, it seemed, for men who would soon be at odds. Yet I could tell from their gestures—slightly feminine and spiteful—that this too was all part of the game. They had a feline look. Some of the faces were pretty as a girl's, and painted to make them more so. Many wore necklets and little earrings, and one had twisted his black club of hair through with pearls.

A rattle of wheels and the last of the chariots emerged from the side passages, three grays first, drawing their purple enameled chariot already, which was then backed into the second stall. Then a blue and gold car drawn by three satin bays. The driver took it into position—six—himself, a big dark-skinned man, hook-nosed, with a long grinning mouth. Eyes, bright and questing as those of an eagle, looked around him, and found what they sought, I felt Bellan stiffen, hard as rock. This, then, was Essandar of Coppain, the man who had sent Bellan into the Skora because of "some girl," as Raspar had said. Essandar's grin broadened. He nodded, and raised one hand in exaggerated salute.

It was a filthy mockery. Others sensed it, and stillness fell for an instant in the cavern. Then one of the archers laughed at something, the silence broke, and the incident was smothered. Essandar had dismounted and was seeing to harness. I turned and looked at Bellan and his face was white. I was so fired by fear, anticipation, dread, excitement, and sentiment, I felt his pain strike to the quick of me, but abruptly he strode off behind the chariot to check the turn of the oiled wheels.

The hour of waiting went fast, and besides that, the Warden came early. Surrounded by his red and white liveried guard, he emerged from the passages and stalked up and down the stalls, gentlemen and ladies trailing after. Their elegance and chat had no place here; even they seemed to know it and did not stay long. Even so, the Warden, portly, handsome, and much-ringed, had a gracious word for all. By the blacks he smiled and nodded.

"Raspar's brood. Very fine. And you are the young merchant-adventurer, are you not? Darros, is it? Well, well. Commend me to your groom. Fine work, all of it."

The ladies lingered a little longer, keeping nervously away from the "terrifying" horses.

"I shall not take my eyes from you, Darros; you are quite the most beautiful man in the Sirkunix. You should have a sculptor cast you in metal—just as you are now. Oh! How I wish they wouldn't shake their heads so! Such magnificent devils, I can scarcely stay near them any longer."

After they went, the tension grew taut as a bowstring. Only the wait now for them to gain their seats, place their bets, and then the stadium trumpets, the summons, the beginning. We were all mounted now. Still, poised for that sound. The horses felt it too, restless, nostrils flared. The last grooms scurried and withdrew. Bellan checked the chariot once more. His face was as pale and as set as any of the faces of the drivers and riders. He nodded at Darak, at me.

"No last questions? Good. Remember what I told you; build your speed, don't snatch it, give her the weight on the left when you pass the turns alone, right when in company. Yes," he said, soft, to the three blacks, "you will do well today. Now I have a son and daughter."

It came then. That crack of silver sound, terrible, wondrous, irresistible cry to the heart and the guts and the soul.

Every chariot started forward. I leaned back across the bar to Bellan as we started forward too.

"Bellan," I called.

He trotted to keep up and listen.

"If I can," I whispered, hoarse, my mouth full of fire, "that blue one—if I can, I will take him for you. Not clean, not the shaft. Somehow, as he served you."

He dropped back, and the chariots were moving fast, the quick parade trot.

Into the dark; vague torch shimmer, eight pieces of a single front moving forward. Then the dim glow—the ten openings ahead, all mouths of the Gate of Love where the marble god stood leaning out above us, over the Straight.

Like birth, moving toward the light.

Stronger, stronger, burning light, white, gold, blue—

We were out.

A roar, thunder, the sea, a great sound going up all around, because they saw us now, their gods, who had come to be beautiful for their ugliness, achieve the victories they would never know, and die for their sins. The light was all around now. Above, blue sky pressing on the tops of the stadium and their round towers. On every side the steep banks of terraces alive with house banners, and the colors of the chariots. The Straight, so wide, white as yet with its fresh sand, one great dancing hall for death and joy. At the core, the Skora, a platform of stone, ringed by its ten-foot pillars, each plated with gold, each alight at the top with a crest of flame. At the very center of it, the eight markers, one for each chariot, each with their six gigantic arrows—one for each lap—each flighted with the color of the chariot they represented. One arrow would be pulled down for every lap that chariot completed.

As yet, the obstacles of the course were not set up. First we must parade, and let them see us as we were—still, whole, and in our pride.

That thunder, that roar now resolved itself into individual shouts and yells, and over it, the voices of the Speakers who called out the charioteers' names and towns countlessly along the way, so all might hear.

Color white, team of matched chestnuts: Gillan of Soils.

Color purple, team of unmatched grays: Aldar of Neron.

Color yellow, team of matched grays: Barl of Andum.

Color black, team of matched dapples: Meddan of Sogotha

Color scarlet, team of matched blacks: Darros of Sigko.

Color blue, team of matched bays: Essandar of Coppain.

Color green, team (mixed) of two grays, one chestnut: Attos of Rens.

Color gray, team of unmatched bays: Valdur of Lascallum.

It was not quite a whole lap. We rounded the turn and came to that point above which the Warden's gallery is set. This is called the String, the Bowstring to give its full title, and here a rope was stretched across from Skora to terrace bank, and held taut by two pulleys. At the Warden's signal it would lift and the chariots would fly free like arrows down the Straight; until his signal, none might move.

Here we drew up, gave our salute to the Warden, and here, again, we waited. First, from a door in the side of the bank, the wall that was the Pillars of Earth was wheeled out ponderously. It took a team of twelve horses, harnessed two by two, to drag it into position across the Straight. It stood now just on the edge of the turn of the Skora directly in front of us—it would be the first obstacle we should meet. It looked as solid as an oaken cliff. Nothing could collide with it and remain in one piece. The gates were adequate to admit one chariot only, and, of course, there were only four of them. The crowd cheered as the great metal stays locked into place. The horses were released, led on, and harnessed to the stone blocks which covered the natural springs under the arena. This operation was partly obscured from us by the Pillars of Earth, and besides, it was a slow business. Voices yelled advice and complaints from the terraces because of the time it took. And then the blocks were free—and up, up, shot the cascading water which normally, prevented by the cover, ran down and away into its pits. There were four of these vast falls plunging up and back, with space enough between them, and a strong enough mesh over them, that if a chariot rode into them, it could not fall through. Nevertheless, the weight of that rushing water was terrifying. The twelve horses went on, this time to drag the blocks from the double Pillars of Air, five feet around, thirty feet down. We could not see this at all, for it was hidden completely by the Skora, but a cheer went up again, and the horses were led away. A team of men brought in the last of our enemies, and, turning around in the chariots, we saw them clearly, three vast pillars of wood, coated a foot thick or more with tar. They were locked into their places and the crowd held its breath. Out of the door in the bank, a young man came running. He was lean, brown, and on his head was a wig of long orange hair. In one hand he held up a flaming brand, and ran with it almost the whole length of the Straight until he came to the Pillars of Fire. Then, with a cry echoed and reechoed by the packed terraces, he struck one pillar after another. Up they went like yellow candles, spitting, stinking, and smoking, sparks flying between them in a net. The boy with the torch leaped sideways to the bank, where another door was opened for him, and vanished.

A trumpet sounded. The arena grooms ran out and stood waiting, one at the head, one at the rear of each chariot. The charioteers stripped their boots and cloaks and slung them down to the grooms; the archers did likewise. It was very quiet, but as I stripped my cloak a sound went up indeed—exclamations, some laughter, yells, and calls. Apparently not all Ankurum knew the scarlet chariot carried a female archer. The other archers along the line stared at me, one or two in open distaste. Essandar, sixth along and beside us, threw back his head and laughed ostentatiously.

I took my bow and slipped my shield onto my right arm, and a man's voice sailed clear down to me from the crowd.

"That's it—you guard those beauties well, girlie!"

This caused a riot of mirth. I turned to where the voice had come from and gave him the salute we had already accorded the Warden. They roared and clapped for that.

And then again the trumpet, and again the stillness. Great, great stillness.

The Warden rose, holding up the golden rod.

A moment—so hushed I heard a bird shrill high in the sky over the stadium.

Death? Now, death? Or what? Or*what?*

The golden light blistered in the air. Poised.

Then fell.

8

The String is a deceiver as it lifts between its pulleys—you feel you must wait for it, but there is no need. The moment it cleared a certain height, the three blacks, trained to it, dropped down their heads and started off, Darak and I bowed low behind them. This is such an obvious trick it is surprising not all the charioteers had learned it. Essandar knew, Barl the Andumite, number four the black Sogothan, and seven the Renshan green. So the five of us leaped ahead, and the unstoppable wheel had begun to turn. There is no time then to fear, for yourself, or another.

Wide white thunder underfoot, the terraces an abstract of color rushing by on either side.

I felt the first arrow before I heard it. The Sogothan archer on my right—pretty boy, a young lynx. Neck and neck, the blacks as yet not at full stretch. It was for our bodywork, to loosen the plates. I got it on my shield before it struck. The boy's face seemed startled at my quickness, a pale blur now, pulling behind.

Ahead, the gates were rushing near, those four open mouths. Essandar had drawn to the left, across the Renshan, in a spurt of speed, crowding to get the first gate, the best place because it was nearest the Skora. The Renshan, pulling hard away to avoid collision, reared toward us, his team plunging and out of control. Darak, swerving in his turn to avoid them, took us fast as a whiplash across the Andumite's path. Dust clouded. I could not see back. I tossed an arrow off my shield, and in my turn fired blind along the Straight behind us and struck nothing. No time for more. The gate. Our swerve had cost us a lead—gray Lascallum was on our backs to the left, the Renshan, recovered, thrusting behind, while the Andumite had swung sideways and was headed toward the second gate. Essandar, beyond the chaos, could pick his gate with ease.

Damn them. The Lascallumite, the Renshan, and now the Sogothan were all trying for the third gate, as we were. The Lascallum bays were in front beside us, the other two a fraction behind. The gray archer was poised to take the turn, his bow slack. I drew a corded arrow from the pouch in our chariot's side,

leaned over and down to them, and fired into their wheels. Light! The whirling scarlet serpent caught.

"Hold! Hold!" I heard Valdur scream, dragging on the bays' wide mouths. The wheel was fouled, tangled, and abruptly stopped, the other wheel, spinning furiously, dragged the chariot sideways. Spokes snapped. In a kind of slow motion, the chariot keeled, spun leftward, and pitched over. The Sogothan and the Renshan running behind, split to either side to avoid them, misjudging the gates, and pulled back to avoid collision. My back to Darak, my shield in front of me, I felt us take that terrible turn, free, between the oaken thews of the third opening, Barl of Andum a fraction ahead through the second, Essandar already beyond the first.

Three birds, free of earth to fly among water. Blue Coppain, yellow Andum, scarlet Sigko. Barl's team were running at full, very fast, close to Essandar now, but the grays were skittish, one could tell it. The blacks were going fast, but not yet at their limit. Darak was letting them out, bit by bit.

Through the gate behind rushed the Renshan and the Sogothan, and after them purple Neron—and last—white Soils. Lascallum was gone. I had heard the groan of the terraces, and now boys had pulled down the eighth marker with its gray-flighted arrows, and taken it away. Only seven now.

The water was a silver roar. Already the fume spat in our faces. The blacks lowered their heads in disgusted pride. We were a target now indeed, vulnerable; judging the water, with four behind us who did not need to think of it quite yet, only of us. A rain of arrows came flashing down from the Sogothan and the Renshan. Some struck the plates, and one loosened and dropped off, leaving the metal struts of the chariot bare. Already we were going between the water, on that second curving turn. It was a clean ride, perfectly judged. And now. The Renshan was first to follow—some distance behind. I fired high, very high, for it must go far. The arrow with its scarlet tail flew fast, and plumeted directly before the racing grays as they took the turn. Startled, unstable as I had assessed them, they flung up, prancing. The back wheels slid to the right, and they were all under the torrent of the third falling pillar. The horses neighed, floundered, and swung backward, forward, and then right around to threaten the Sogothan coming up behind. The black chariot swerved, and the black archer fired some shaft among the wheels that finished the green. I saw it jump and go over, the boy on the back scramble clear and race toward the safety of the Skora, across the track of the Neronian and Soilish teams.

But we were free again now, a chariot length behind Andum, both of us some way now behind Essandar. The boy archer in the back of the blue lounged, haughty, not bothering to aim at us. You could hear them from the terraces now, the frenzied shout, "Coppain! Coppain!" And under this the cry for Andum. There was another cry too, lower, less distinct—not for Sigko, but for a name: "Darros! Scarlet Darros!"

There was no bunching on this Straight; we took the gaping black nostrils of the Pillars of Air courteously, and swung around that first lap toward the fire.

Watch the Neronian. The speed was building there as it was with us, from slow, powerful engines. Already gaining on the Sogothan, who in turn gained on us. Acrid smoke was curdling around us. Difficult to see clearly. The horses coughed. Around the brink of the turn, and the three blazing torches flared at us. You may train a horse how you will, he will never like fire. Barl's grays tossed and teetered even in their speed, and the chariot dropped back a pace. Ahead, Essandar's bays were slowing slightly too. Yet the blacks gained. I heard Darak singing love words to them over the gush and crackle of the flames. Frightened droppings slid from the nervous grays in front. Barl glanced over his shoulder swiftly. He saw how it would be. We would have him cheek to jowl, the Sogothan, the Neronian too, perhaps, in a huddle beside us. In a frantic decision his long lash curled out over the grays, drawing blood. Startled out of terror, they leaped forward, to join Essandar in an impossible burst of speed. Through the blazing net

of sparks the blue and yellow tore, emerging neck and neck. Barl had snatched his speed. He could not keep it.

Into the black smoke. In the cover of it, inches from the pillars, the Sogothan came beside us. The archer, grinning, fired at Darak, breaking one of the few laws of the Sagare. I deflected the arrow, took a second in my left arm. This was the boy with the pearls. First flames licked at us. He was clinging now to the rattling chariot. Stench of tar, of smoldering horse-hair. I ignored the shaft buried in me. I drew three plain arrows and dipped their flights in the leaping tongues. Not scarlet flights now but yellow. The Sogothan had veered away to take the other side beyond the middle pillar. They emerged first, ahead of us, and I aimed all three burning shafts after them. Luck. One fell short. The other two struck home in the axle—that wooden axle which caught so beautifully. Now it was blazing. Under the Sogothan's bare feet the metal floor plates snapped open and flames licked through. Along the shafts it went, caught reins and harness. So quick; now they too wore the scarlet of the vine. I did not look at them again, but broke the arrow shaft, leaving only the head in my arm. Not so bad. I put it from my mind.

We were around the turn, nearing the Warden's gallery. The first lap was over.

I looked up at the Skora. Three markers were gone now, gray, green, and black; and of the blue, yellow, purple, white, and scarlet flights one lap gone also.

We had set the pattern for the race, we five. Bellan had said this would be so. Essandar the leader, Barl on his neck, not for long, but with a skillful archer who kept Essandar's disdainful youth at a distance. Darak third, the unpredictable third of any race—the one who may leap on to win, or drop back to nothing. Just behind us, Neron, gaining on us, and then Soils, who seemed to have no race at all left, and to be running just for the exercise. In this formation, then, we took the second and third laps. They are the dead laps of the race, and often the fourth, too. It is the first, the fifth, and the sixth generally which are the kingpins of the game.

But the fourth lap brought a fluke of chance that broke the pattern once and for all. They do not remove the chariot wrecks from the stadium, only the men, or what is left of them. Thus the wrecks become yet further obstacles. Lascallum had fallen at the third gate of the Pillars of Earth, blocking it; there were now only three openings instead of four, and theoretically only two, because the fourth and farthest out gave such a loss of speed that every chariot that could avoided it. Andum and Coppain were still together, nearing the first and second openings when a stray metal plate from the wreck jolted the blue, and Andum swerved across it. At the same instant the yellow archer got a corded flight into Essandar's wheel. Essandar, a master of his team, pulled them back and held them, and the chariot kept upright while the blue archer slashed the foul from the spokes with the tiny knife allowed in the arena. But it was a pause. Andum was through the Skora gate and ahead, and Essandar, starting up again, found we had joined him, Neron at back.

Darak, at this stage, would have given Essandar the first opening, but Essandar stared back at us, and there was a look in his face, not for us but for Bellan. He would shame the broken charioteer further if his trained pupils fell. So he swung back, ignoring the advantageous first opening, and headed straight toward the second, where we, with Neron a fraction after us, were headed. Darak hauled on the reins; the blacks, unused to this roughness and unable to check, leaped upward in the air. The car went with them, up, and then down, crashing hard on the Straight. I thought I had broken my back against the bar, and all the chariot was broken with me, but somehow we were whole, flung to the side by our own impetus, yet upright. Essandar was through the gate, but Neron, striving to avoid both of us, had gone at full reach into the Lascallum wreck. It was a double tangle of metal, the grays kicking feebly in death throes, both charioteer and archer flung out onto the sand, the driver dead, the boy shrilly screaming in agony. As Darak righted us, I fired a shaft into his brain—no more could be done for him.

Through the Skora opening now, and fast, unevenly fast, for our impetus had been smashed. Yet we were one of the few to be stopped still in the Sirkunix, and live. The crowd, which had yelled its fascinated horror at our leap, now roared and bawled for us.

Soils behind us. Ahead—greatly ahead—Essandar, and before him, Barl, running too fast to cling to his lead. Already he was slowing. Through the water, by the pits of air, between the flames—and it was the flames that ended him. His team hated the fire. Each time they passed they hated it the more, and now, his lash merciless over them, they ran mad, careened around, and bolted back the way they had come. I saw Essandar's whip rear out and slash them as they passed him—the crowd saw too, and growled. We were at the Pillars of Air when that fire-crazy team ran at us.

Darak pulled aside, the screaming horses fled past, their eyes rolling, and then the wheel tipped back from under us. We had caught in the pit, would be over in a moment. I leaped forward beside Darak, throwing the little weight I had off the sinking wheel, and in the same instant Darak's lash—for the first and last time—flared on the black satin backs. Again they leaped forward, almost as if in flight. The wheel ground free and we were out. I glimpsed Darak's face in that second—white, but whiter than that white, the teeth grinning. The crowd was howling for us, and behind, the Andumite team had slowed trembling in the middle of the Straight, facing the wrong way, and grooms had run out to hasten them from the track.

Only Essandar now; Soils was not in it. And the blacks had their speed again, that second speed that a charioteer can love out of his team in the white bloody dust. Through the fire, past the still burning wreck of Sogotha, and around, across the String, and our four scarlet arrows taken down, along with Essandar's blue. Two more laps. He was half a length ahead but he would not keep it. The dust, which slows every wheel, would slow his too, and we had time to take him.

We took him—Earth, Water, and Air, and we were near. At the turn, the fire ahead, we were one and one, the blue and the scarlet.

The fires dim near the end of the Sagare as the tar is burned out. But there is a lot of smoke, more than ever, thick and black as a cloak. Under that cloak, as Sogotha would have done, the blue archer tried for us. But eyes water from smoke—his aim was nothing.

And then I heard Essandar—clear, so clear: "Do as the bitch did—dip your arrow, boy, and hit one of the horses."

The archer laughed. It would be easy. The fire would burn straight down the shaft into the black hide, leaving no trace, only the flames. Had Darak heard? He seemed not to have done.

So fast now, and so dark. The speed incredible, everything a blur. But I ripped the shield off my arm, half my skin coming with it, and as I saw that bright orange dart go over us, I flung the shield and brought it and the arrow down, harmless, and in their path.

The shield jounced and broke under the horses' hooves, and slowed them as they avoided the Sogothan wreck. Now, on that fifth lap, we were ahead.

We broke from the smoke first, and the terraces pounded their hands and yelled. I saw the red flags waving—many more than at the start. Around, and near the String, wholly stretched now. But we must not go past that fire with them again.

Bellan, where do you sit? With your master Raspar, who is near the Warden? Give me your hate, Bellan. And I will do it. I must not hit the man, the horses, the archer—that is the law of the Sagare, though who would guess it? But the chariot, and the things of the chariot, are all mine.

Amusing—I noted dimly the Soilish car was so far behind, it was in front of us on the Straight.

I turned, and stared backward, leaning on the bar, the plain-flighted arrow already set.

One hope only. I am more than you.*Bellan, watch* —! I shot. The arrow ran up, silver against blue, dipped over, fell. I guided it more with the eyes than with the hands which had loosed it.

And it struck.

It*struck.*

A scream, a roar from the terraces, men and women leaping to their feet, howling their savage joy, for I had it—the classic shot of the Sagare—I had sliced Essandar's reins in two.

It is possible for a man to save himself when his reins snap, but not easy, and now impossible. He was moving too fast, leaning out across his team. The thrust, which had held him steady, now, pulled him forward. The one rein still wrapped around his fist dragged him up, over the boss, across the backs of his team, a tumbling, blue, shrieking thing, held a moment between the running horses, then down beneath their hooves, and after that, beneath the wheels of his own chariot.

The bays ran a while, then stopped, shivering, until the grooms came for them.

We rode that last sixth lap alone, fast for the joy of it, not because we must, and the crowd sang for us as we ran.

If there are gods of the Sagare, how they must laugh. Darros of Sigko, scarlet for Ankurum, the Victor. And his second, Gillan of Soils—second because there was no other left to ride for it.

9

MORTAL, NOW YOU ARE GOD

It is hard at first to believe you are not, after you are named Victor. They will not let you remember your clay. Naturally, it is the charioteer who is king, but I had leveled with Darak in my own way—with that last shot.

"Trust the bitch to undermine me," Darak remarked, grinning, to Maggur, when at last we were free of the cheers, ovations, thrusting crowds, golden wreaths, and had come away with our prize money. Much had happened since the end of the race, but it was cloudy and unreal. Now Darak was taking me to one of the physicians' rooms—taking, for I did not want to go. I imagined there might be others there—the remains of them, groaning and shrieking, but in fact it was very private. We were, after all, the Victors. One empty clean room, and one physician. He peered at my left arm. The skin was already almost closed around the broken-off shaft, but the head was in deep. He frowned over the fast healing wound, and sterilized his knife. Strange, I had scarcely been a woman in that race, and had not felt the pain. I sat and held my arm for him quite thoughtlessly, and the moment the knife slit open my flesh the agony struck through my whole body like a white-hot spear.

I opened my eyes again, and found he was done with me, having bandaged both left arm and right, where I had ripped the skin tearing off my shield. Darak and Maggur were gone.

"I sent them out," the physician said sternly. "They made more fuss than you, young woman. When it was bad, you, at least, had the good sense to faint and save me the trouble of holding you down." He was straightening his things and washing his hands. "There's your arrowhead. You could sell it for ten silver pieces. And your hair, an inch or so would fetch a good price. The classic shot." He grunted and did not look very approving. I suppose he had worse cases than I as a result of Ankurum's Games.

When he was gone, I lay still, in a kind of torpor, heavy, not sleepy, melancholy after the passion and fear. After a while I unclipped the left armlet, which was bothering me, and the little dry vine leaf fell onto the couch. I picked it up and at once it crumbled in my fingers. I had prayed to her in the manner of men, and she—had she heard? Was it she who had granted us the race, and granted me Barak's life? Yet I had killed Essandar. I had known he would die. What did she think of me now, that little doll-goddess in the hills?

I got up, wondering where Darak had gone, anxious to shake off the fastening depression that had fallen on me in the aftermath.

I pulled aside the curtain and went out into the corridor beyond. There was no one there. Everything was very quiet. I was suddenly, irrationally afraid. I did not even recall the way we had come. Then footsteps. I tensed. Around the left hand corner came a limping shadow, over its shoulder a fall of dark cloth.

"Here," Bellan said, "take this cloak and put it on. I rejoice you're not ashamed of your body, but it causes some interest too much,"

I took the cloak and wrapped myself in it. His face was dry and closed and very weary; he seemed to bear the look I felt beneath the shireen.

"A good race. And you won your shot. I knew you would. The practice track is one thing, the Straight another."

"Bellan," I said softly, "I am sorry I took your man. He was not mine to take."

Bellan shrugged awkwardly, for the shrug comes from the arms, and the hands too.

"I was glad to see him go—like that. Not even dead, I hear, but not much left. Even less—" He broke off. "For two years I have lived to see that man served as I was served by him, lived for it, lived because of it. And now"—he shook his head—"it's done."

He began to walk, and I followed him.

"The streets are packed," he said. "We'll get out as swift and quiet as we can. I sent your Darros on ahead. You'll have enough of the mob tonight—the Warden's feast for the Victors of the Games."

We went to Raspar's town house, which was small, and not even particularly elegant. I bathed, and lay quiet while the giant woman from the villa beat the bruises out of me. Then I slept. Waking, it was sunset, the brassy red splashed all across the white walls. I had not seen Darak since the physician had cut into my arm, and I did not see him now. Three strange women came and told me they would dress me for the Victor's feast. I felt so tired and dull and empty, and it seemed as if I were going backward in time to the

evening of the agent's supper, which had begun it all.

I must robe as a woman, it appeared, but in the chariot's colors. They had three dresses ready and wanted me in scarlet silk, but I took instead the black velvet—a new fashion, and beautifully draped. Besides, its long close sleeves would hide my bandages. They dressed my hair, curled and plaited it, and strung it through with bright red beads like drops of blood. The shireen they had brought was incredible—black silk, embroidered around the eyes with scarlet thread. They had been even quicker than those others with the white dress.

I sat for a while after they had gone, then left the room and went down the narrow stairs to the round hall. It was empty, except for Raspar, pouring himself a little wine at the porphyry table. He paused and bowed to me.

"Good evening. Pardon me, I have not yet congratulated you on the race. I hope the arrow wound is not bad?"

"Thank you, no."

"That's good. Essandar is dead; did they tell you?"

I said nothing. He, said, "Has Bellan informed you about the feast? Ah, well, you and Darros will ride in your chariot through the streets to the Warden's mansion, lit by torches. There you will eat and drink, and receive various quite superfluous honors, in company with the other victors, and show yourselves from time to time on the large balcony. The Warden's garden will be open to the people, and there will be free wine and meat. It will be noisy and probably tiresome. But there—" He came toward me, lifted my hand and kissed it as he had that first night. "Hard to believe this is the harlot-boy of the chariot—oh, forgive me, but how else can I express it? I know you are Darros' property, so I'll not press any flatteries on you. Besides, what would I do with a woman like you in my household?"

"I am not Darros' property," I said, "nor he mine."

"As well," Raspar said, "he has been with a lady since the race ended. Still, bad of me to try to tempt you that way. You must know him by now. The white bird calls, and he flies into her tree. But you are the nest, tribal princess. I think you know it."

His words seemed to make little sense. I was restless and uneasy. I crossed the room to one of its windows, and stared out, over the winding streets and leaning roofs, to the twilight.

At that moment Darak came into the house, Darak, Ellak, Maggur, Gleer, and a half dozen others. He was very bold now with his host, having won his race for him. I turned and looked at Darak. He, too, wore the chariot colors—scarlet, black, and gold. He looked a god still; he was not drained or staled. He strode to me at once.

"Did that sour-faced knife-monger get the arrowhead out?"

"Yes."

"Don't you want to know what I've been at?"

"Perhaps not."

"Well, then, with some silly bitch, but profitably so. Her husband has his racers, too, it seems, and there are other Games to come, in Soils and Lascallum. How do you like me as a charioteer?"

Was this some madness on him? Did he not recall what he was? And his men behind him, listening, hearing this threat of desertion—I glanced at them, but they grinned like stupid dogs. Perhaps this was some new game. His long black hair was a little shorter than I remembered. He sensed my eyes.

"They'll buy it," he said. "Oh, but it wasn't sold. A woman sent begging for a piece of it."

He took my hand, turned and saluted Raspar for the first time—yet it was the salute of the chariots.

"The torchbearers are at your gates, and the grooms have the chariot out."

Raspar raised the cup, and watched us go with slightly narrowed eyes, out into the falling night.

Ten torchbearers, their brands flaring dull gold, the chariot, drawn no longer by Raspar's blacks, but by three ebony plodders dressed up to look the same, and escorting black horses for Darak's men.

"Tonight," he said to me, "I'll get Ellak's brawling fools from the Warden's dungeons—as a Victor's boon."

We were in the chariot, but it no longer had the feel of life to it. Its soul was gone, or asleep. Slowly we wound down the streets to other broader streets, and there linked with other torches and colored lanterns, and the procession of Victors on their mounts. In this glimmering, limping way, we coiled like a serpent, upward toward the fortress-house of the Warden.

More and more people, milling into the open squares before the mansion, and into the gardens at its back.

The laughter and shouts went through my body and brain like knives. I heard them roar for Darak, and the cries, "The tribal-woman!"

It was empty. No longer was I a god in that place.

There were ten pillars at the Warden's portico, and ten more inside, all marble, gilded at the capitals and bases, and inlaid with blue mosaic. There was a great sense of bright light, smoke, movement, and twanging music from little harps. We reached an upper-story room, enormous, running the length of the whole mansion, open at two ends, where massive pillared balconies leaned out, one over the squares, the other over the gardens. The room was golden—all gold. There were frescoes and paintings on floor and ceiling, but I do not remember them; their figures seemed all mixed in with the people in the room. Beyond the balcony hung the dark blue night, split occasionally by pale blue lightning, and below, a sea of colored lamps, torches, and roasting fires.

There are many victors in the Games at Ankurum; boxers, acrobats, fighters, but the places at the high table, where the Warden sits, go to the winners of the horse races, the chariot races, and the Sagare. The plates are enamel and gold, the cups black jasper set with semiprecious stones. What you eat off is yours to keep, and women in transparent gauze come by from time to time and lay little trinkets at your elbow—gold knives and pins—all useless toys, but pretty enough.

Darak was seated at the Warden's right hand—the place of highest honor. By his side was a beautiful woman with pure golden hair that seemed natural though one could not be sure of such things in

Ankurum. On the Warden's left sat Gillan of Soils in his white, grinning to himself now and again, possibly at the irony of his position. I, as the archer who had taken the classic shot, sat beside Gillan, and Gillan was very wary of me, overgracious in a bluff, rough way, and silent for the rest of the while. Other charioteers and racers, and I suppose Gillan's archer, ranged down the table, interspersed with the beauties of the Warden's court. I do not remember any of them. To be courteous and appear to eat, while eating as little as possible, was preoccupation enough. I felt ill throughout the courses and was uncertain of the reason. The hall seemed burning and miasmic.

We sat along one side of the table only, and below us the other tables stretched out, noisier and less formal than ours. Barak's men, the few he had brought with him, were in among that throng, guzzling and gnawing. I hoped vaguely there would be no trouble, for the Warden's guard, as was usual enough at such a function, were arranged thickly around the walls, particularly at the Warden's back. I watched his fleshy ringed hands neatly skewering his food. The pains began in my stomach.

I must leave this place. The thought came sudden and ice cold. At once I saw the room as though it had been frozen, paler, almost transparent. I forgot the dictates of etiquette. I was about to get up and say—I was not certain, perhaps I would simply run down among the tables to the door. But the Warden's jeweled hand went up, a lordly flick, a horn sounded, and he rose. Comparative silence fell. He was about to toast the Victors. Impaled by the moment, I sat still and did not move. A sea of faces, nodding a little, touched gold by light, smiling, laughing, harmonious. The Warden lifting his silver cup again and again as the Speaker cried out the Victors' names and towns, and the horn echoed him, and the shouts and cheers. And then the trained voice with its slight overemphasis, "Victor of the Sagare: Darros of Sigko."

The great roar and clapping, the Warden bending smiling toward Darak. And then that fleshy hand, waving the sound gently down.

Still standing, the Warden lowered his cup to the table.

"Darros of Sigko," he repeated, his rich voice carrying. "We know him well, do we not? The courageous merchant who brought his caravan safe to Ankurum, a feat unparalled—and then rode to win the empress of our races, the Sagare." Cheers beat up like birds, and gently again he waved them down. Smiling still, he leaned out toward the tables now. "And one more thing our Darros had done. He has deceived us all." The silence grew closer. The Warden laughed a little. "The Victor of our Sagare is, in fact, nothing more than a thief, a murderer, and a bandit—Darak, the gold-fisher, the scum of the northern hills." He turned to Darak and nodded. "Your little game is over, *charioteer."*

The guards started forward from the walls behind us, ten men straight toward Darak. There was uproar below now, and some women were screaming. We had brought no weapons into the hall with us; it was not etiquette to do so. I could not seem to move. I saw Darak standing, leaning back against the table, grinning at the ten who had come to take him. I am not sure how I saw, for Gillan and the Warden were between us. I saw Darak's hand reach back onto the table and pick up one of those toy golden knives they had given us—useless, it would bend, not bite—yet one of the guard saw that movement. The iron guard-sword licked out and forward. I heard Darak gasp. His hands fell to his sides. He looked at the man, almost lazily, his mouth still curved, not knowing quite yet that he was dead. Two guards caught him between them as he fell, hoisted him, and began to carry him out. They had been very quick, no blood even spilled on this golden table. Two of them had my arms, had had them, I realized now, since the Warden first spoke his accusation. They were pulling me up and away with them. I think they had put something in my cup, in Darak's too; my legs were like heavy iron as they dragged me. And Darak's men had been so quickly subdued in the body of the hall. Yet they had not kept it so tidy there. Ellak and another man lay dead. One guard was dying, several bloody. Women's white faces stared at us as we

passed, like a funeral procession, following Darak's corpse.

His head hung back, the face very still, his mouth firmly closed, solemn now in death. His scarlet cloak trailed behind him.

Scarlet for the vine. Little doll-goddess, you took your offering after all, then—death for death, little goddess of the scarlet vine.

10

"Karrakaz!" I screamed down the black places of the mountain. "Karrakaz, et So! Et So-Sestorra!"

A hand clamped my mouth. I was shaken from one dark to another. Maggur's eyes, red-shot in the gloom.

"Ssh, Imma, who do you call out to?"

Strange, he did not know the old tongue, yet he seemed to know what I had said. I lay quiet on the rank filthy straw of the prison room.

"What time is it, Maggur? How long now?"

He shook his head. "Sun looks low from the grating. Near sunset."

There were other men in the stone chamber—all they had caught from the hostelry. Those that had been brought here before the feast of Victors, after their brothel brawl, we neither saw nor had any word of.

We had been here two days now, and to begin with they had laughed and jibed at the guard outside, throwing out bones at them from the door hole. They had told stories: "Yes, Slak's lot got away, took a few pieces of these pigs' hide with 'em, too." Now their spirit was burned out in the dank black hole, stinking with their own excrement and fear. We were all to be hanged—publicly. And we were to go to it three a day. You were not sure when they would come for you, or who they would pick. The first time the three had gone with a salute and a swagger. Men climbed up to the grating high in the wall and saw them dangle in the square. The second time it was less bold, that going out. That second day, too, there had been a fourth man strung up. They had hung Barak's dead body with the rest.

How the crowds had roared at it, in the square, loud as they had roared in the Sirkunix. Louder. Life loves to look on death.

A man at the window—I cannot remember who—spat out of the grating.

"On you, you sty of a stinking town."

Yet I had not been dreaming of Darak, but of the Mountain, and I had run toward the altar crying, "Here am I! Here am I! The Accursed One!"

I sat up. My hair was tangled with the straw, and the red beads still hung in it.

"How long, Maggur?" I whispered. "Will they leave me until last, Maggur, because I took the classic shot?"

But it would come. The reins around my throat, the running horses. I would hear the crowd yell as they broke my neck.

Maggur put his great arm around me, and I leaned on him in the darkness.

The next day, the footsteps came at noon.

Door rasping, spill of ocher torchlight from the night-dark passages outside. Six guards, with drawn swords, and two jailers.

"Out. You, you, and the black one."

Two of the men rose—one of them was Gleer. Maggur got up more slowly, his hand lingering on my arm. Gleer began to whistle, a brothel song; the other man made a little lunge at the guard that brought all their swords up in a knot, and laughed at them.

"Come on, you, the black one. You won't be losing your girlfriend yet awhile, she's coming too."

I took Maggur's hand and let him draw me up. The four of us walked toward the door. I do not think I was afraid. There must be substance to breed fear, and I was hollow. The door clanged shut behind, and we were herded through the pitch-black tunnels of that foul warren, guided by the jailers' murky brands. After a time there were stairs, and at the top a corridor stretching to left and right. Two of the guard suddenly swung me aside from the rest, pulling me right while Maggur and the others were marched left. Maggur halted at once, ignoring the prodding swords, the cuffs and curses. He was a giant of a man. Here, in this narrow place, he could throw two or three of them off his back like a wild dog, shake them and throw them, until they had hacked him to pieces. I shook my head at him. I knew what he thought, what I thought too, that I was to pleasure some of the guards before they took me out. It was nothing. Only one more thing to accomplish before death. He seemed to sense my lack of concern. He let them turn him around, and was led away, into the darkness behind the worm-tail of receding torchlight.

We had not far to go. There was a big wooden door, studded with metal. The guards rapped on it, a voice barked inside, and they opened it and thrust me through. The door shut, the guards on the other side of it. I was in a square stone room, not lit by brands but three oval lamps. Skins hung on the walls, and swords and shields. There was an oak table, and facing me across it, from his huge wooden chair, a big man dressed as an officer. He looked impatient, callous, disinterested. The iron armlets shone dully on his wrists. It did not seem he had any use for the woman in me. He picked up a roll of rough reed paper and tossed it across the table toward me.

"Can you read?"

"Yes," I said.

I picked up the roll, and read. My eyes were blurred and would not focus properly, and the light hurt them. I could not seem to concentrate on the ornately written words; the curlicues uncoiled and snapped back again like snakes in pain.

"I do not understand," I said at last.

"I thought you said you could read. I reckoned that was a wild boast for a snot-nosed bandit mare. Well. You're to go free of here. By order of the Warden. To the protection of some stinking tribal savage

who says you're of his krarl."

"Who?" I asked. "None knows my krarl."

"Who cares, girl? Not I."

He gave another bark and the door opened again. A guard stood there, and with him a lean brown figure, naked to the waist. The hair, caught back in its club, took pale color from the lamps. On the breast was the tattoo of a moon circle, and, within it, a five-pointed star.

The officer looked him up and down, and then, with a contemptuous grunt, picked up the roll and threw it to him. Asutoo caught it.

"Out," the officer said.

I went toward Asutoo very slowly. His face was difficult to see in the doorway where shadows clustered. He did not touch me, only nodded, and I walked in front of him, behind the guard, toward the prison's door, so strangely open for me.

It was a dark noon, and the rain fell heavily. I must have heard it through the grating of the cell, but I suppose it had meant nothing to me then. Three of the bronzy plains horses were tethered to a post by the low doorway from which we had emerged. A guard on duty huddled in his cloak. We were in the back alleys of Ankurum, hovels and stench, worse, much worse, in the gray rain. Asutoo gave me a black cloak and indicated I should put it on, and mount the nearest horse. When this was done, he himself mounted. He rode a little ahead of me, leading the third horse, which bore a pack on its back.

I think I had no thoughts or even any wonder in me as we rode through the gray rain and the hovels of Ankurum.

Very few people were about. A scattering of curious stares at the tribal man and his woman, that was all. Eventually there was a wall and a gate, and, riding out of it, we were among the hills, a wild part, growing tall trees. Into these trees we went, and a small river ran by, frothing in the rain, over gray stones.

I reined in my horse and stared down, and saw Kel's arrow go floating along the water after I had snapped the shaft. They would have hanged Maggur already. His neck so strong—would the cord break it? Or would his be the slow choking death...?

Asutoo had stopped a little way ahead. I looked at him and he spoke to me for the first time.

"Do you need to rest here, my brother? There is a place farther up—a cave ledge that will shelter us from the sky's weeping."

"Asutoo," I said, "why am I free?"

"I asked for you," he said.

"Your word would be dust to them," I said, realizing dimly that we spoke in the tribal tongue.

"The merchant-lord, Raspar," he said. "I begged your life from him."

A flickering light moved behind my eyes, in my brain.

"Asutoo, my brother, why do we ride here, and not back to the krarl of the Star?"

He stared at me across the rain, his blue eyes very wide, water drops caught on the lashes. I rode forward a little way, until I was near to him, near enough to touch.

"Asutoo, my brother, why do we not ride to your chiefs krarl?"

"I am an Outcast," he said.

"Why, Asutoo?"

"My brother, it is between me and my chief." He glanced away abruptly, indicating the pack horse. "I have your man's clothes there and your knives and bow. Do not fear dishonor to be with me. Many warriors will join my spear. What I have done is between my chief's law and my own."

"Asutoo," I said, "forgive my doubts. You are my brother, and I will ride with you to the cave. I am very tired."

So we rode, up the hillside through the trees.

Long, but not low or dark, the cave stretched to its own mossy backbone. Asutoo had built a fire a little way in from the entrance, and crouched there, feeding the orange tongues, while I shed the filthy black velvet, and drew on the clothes I had worn as a bandit woman. There was a difference—the shirt was black, not multicolored, and Asutoo had not brought me any of my jewelry, not the gold rings or beads, or even the precious jades. But he had brought my knives and bow, and that one long-knife I had had from the caravan. I drew it from its crimson velvet sheath, and turned the blade so that the silver leopard leaped in the firelight.

"This is good, Asutoo," I said. I sat across the fire from him and he would not meet my gaze. He looked instead at the silver leopard as I turned it, glittering, on the blade. The white light flicked and dimmed, flicked and dimmed. After a while I said softly, "Asutoo," and he glanced up, almost sleepily, into my eyes, and I held him. "Now tell me, Asutoo my brother, why you are Outcast?"

It was strange. His face was peaceful and expressionless, but his look was full of a fixed terror. He could not get out of my grip. My eyes were white serpents, already numbing him with their poison.

"I have betrayed the hearth-guest of my chief. I have eaten the bread of friendship with him, but still given him into the hands of his enemies. The krarl priests will set me a penance for it, but they will understand the need."

"What need, Asutoo, my brother?"

"No man may take a warrior-woman and use her as a woman unless she allows it. Darak took her without honor, and she went gladly. He would have drained her warrior blood and shown her no courtesy. I, Asutoo, the chiefs son, would have let her ride before me to the battle, not dragged her by the reins of the horse. And he put her into a woman's dress, like any girl of the tents, the white dress—even the one who rode in his chariot. He made of her the shield, that was the spear. It must not be, I walked after in the shadows, and the silver one passed in the sky, the Star chariot. It was my sign."

"What then did you do, Asutoo, my brother?"

"I found the merchant Raspar before the Great Race of archers. It was hard, but I made him know who Darak was, and he remembered no other had brought a caravan safe to Ankurum. They had some of Darak's men in the Warden's dungeon, and took two and burned them with fire until they told the truth. Raspar said the race must pass first; they could take Darak at the feast, unarmed. I asked the warrior woman be spared. He said at first it could not be done, but afterward he sent me word it could, and there was writing from the Warden—"

He stopped speaking, staring into my eyes.

I was cold, so cold, but I smiled at him, although he could not see it behind the shireen. Within the icy shell a scarlet bird tapped its beak to be free. Raspar would have kept me for himself, perhaps, had I wanted to stay with him, but Raspar had wanted his good name most of all. Well, he had recovered the price of the weapons of the north.

I stood up. Asutoo stood up. We faced each other quite still and quiet, as I turned the blade in my hand.

"Asutoo, my brother," I said at last, "it is fitting I should give you my thanks."

The shell burst, and it filled me, flowing warm and bright from my guts into my lungs, heart, and brain; and from my brain into my arm, my hand, my knife. I stabbed forward, and down into the groin, twisted and withdrew. I, who remembered how to kill cleanly, had taken the privilege of my kind, and forgotten it. He bowed forward, groaning over the agony, trying to hold the blood inside himself with his hands. I leaned against the wall and watched him die. It took a little while.

Then I turned and went from the cave, down the slope, and found the hobbled horses gnawing at the rain-wet grass. The downpour had eased. I wiped my knife on the moss and resheathed it. I mounted, and, with the slightest pressure of my knees, I directed the horse upward, toward the mountains.

Near the crest of that place, I turned suddenly, and looked back at the dark mouth of the cave, and it seemed there was a waterfall plunging down from it, not white, but red. The scarlet bird in me was beating now to be free. It burst from my mouth in long bloody streamers of sound, and the horse, terrified, bolted under me, upward, upward, until it seemed we had left the ground, and flew in the face of the bright red sky.

BOOK TWO

Part I:*Across the Ring*

1

One by one the red flowers dropped from my hands, down the dark shaft of the tomb. At the bottom, the dead one lay.

"Weep," said the voices around me. "If you would only weep, he would be whole."

But I could not weep, although my throat and eyes scorched with the unshed tears. And he was changing now; it was too late. Into green hard stuff he was changed, into a man's figure of jade.

"Karrakaz," I said into the dark. "I am here, Karrakaz."

But Karrakaz did not come. Somewhere in the deep of me, gorged on the blood of Shullatt, of the villages, of the merchants at the ford, of Essandar and the others in the Sirkunix, but best of all, bloated with the blood of Asutoo, the ancient Demon of Evil and Hate lay sleeping.

"We are one thing, you and I," it had said to me in Kee-ool.

"So Karrakaz enorr," I whispered. "I am Karrakaz."

I was not certain how I had come there, that high-up echoing place. I remembered the plains horse running in terror under me, but then probably I had fallen or been thrown. I was very close to the sky; I sensed this more than knew, for I lay in a black hole in the rock. I say a hole—it was a cave, I suppose, yet the darkness was so thick it pressed closer than any stone. No light. Yet behind my eyes, light: pale and green and red. I do not know how long I had been in the cave, perhaps as much as fifteen days. It was very cold, and I was not really at any time properly conscious. Dreams, hallucinations, and the dark reality were all mingled and lost in each other. I cannot really say what I felt. I can only recall that recurring fantasy that if only I could weep, Darak would be restored to me, and each time, somehow, the blazing tears would not burst forth, and he was turned to jade.

Voices, new voices. Not the voices in my mind, but things separate and alien. A deep voice, urging and impatient, a higher, lighter voice, shrill with echoes, hanging back a little, but not much. Then other sounds, unmistakable and intense in the dark. And then a little silence. Suddenly the girl whispered, frightened,

"Gar,*Gar!* Look!"

Gar grunted something.

"No, an animal. Over there."

There was a small altercation between them, then Gar getting up, a big, shaggy, strong-smelling man. His blackness, blacker than the black around me, fell over my eyes.

"Sibbos!" he muttered—some deity's name, used as an oath. "It's a boy—no, a woman—a masked woman."

The girl was scrambling up beside him, pulling down her skirts as she came.

"She's dead."

"No, she's not, you blind bitch. I'll take off this mask—" His great hand came reaching for the shireen, and, in an instant, my own flared up and struck his away. He cursed, and jumped back, startled, while the girl shrieked.

"Alive, all right," he muttered. "Who are you, then?"

"No one," I said.

"Simple," the man observed. He turned. The girl caught his arm.

"You can't leave her here."

"Why not?"

They argued as the man strode down the length of the cave, whistling, the girl hanging on his arm. And then, abruptly, he cursed again, strode back, and picked me up. He slung me across his shoulder, and, in so doing, whether from anger or clumsiness I was unsure, he cracked my head against an overhang. A pain like an adder lanced through my temple, and I was thrown back into the dark.

I thought I was in the ravine camp. There was smoke and muddy light, what seemed a huddle of tents around me. Meat was roasting, dogs were running about yelping at kicks, as though being kicked still surprised them. Something creaked continuously overhead, a yellow arc against the darkness.

"Shall I fetch her some meat?" a voice asked.

"That one couldn't eat meat in her state; broth or porridge." This was an old voice, and soon an old woman was bending over me. It was easy to classify her as old, her face was wrinkled, and wrinkled again upon its own wrinkles like sand after the path of the sea. Her skin was yellow but her teeth amazingly white and sharp, like the teeth of a small fierce animal. Her eyes, too, were very bright, and when she moved, she was like a snake, sinuous and strong. She bent over me, but I had shut my eyes.

"What about the mask?" the girl was asking. "Shouldn't you take it off?"

"That's the shireen," the old woman said. "This one's a Plains woman. They think if they go bare-faced with any but their own men, they'll die."

The girl laughed scornfully.

"Laugh away. You've never had such a belief drummed into your head since childhood. Have you never seen a cursed man? No, I daresay you haven't. Well, a healer puts a curse on him and says: 'In ten days' time you'll drop down dead.' And the man goes away and thinks himself into it, and on the tenth day he does just what she says. It's all what you believe, girl. And if this one thinks she'll die if she's unmasked, we'd best leave her as she is."

Through the slits of my eyes I looked at her, this cunning one, who knew so much. I could tell from the slight unconscious stress in her voice when she spoke the word "healer" that she was one. And now, as she got up and moved about, I began to see where I was, and it was her place, not a tent, but a wagon. The flaps were wide open, and outside, under the vaulted ceiling of a black eave, the cook-fires were burning, the meat roasting, and the kicked dogs running. In here a lamp swung above me, and beads and dried skins, and the skulls and bones of small animals hung and rustled on the canvas walls and from the wooden struts. I lay among rugs. The girl was crouched at the brazier where something—not food—bubbled in an iron pot. The old woman had taken her seat in a wooden chair, a black, long-eyed cat across her knees.

"I see you're awake," she said then. The cat stirred, twitching the velvet points of its slightly tufted ears. "Are you hungry?"

"As you said," I answered, "broth or porridge. None of the tribes eat meat."

"True enough," the old woman said. She ignored the fact that I had been listening so much longer than she had thought—or perhaps she had known anyway. She made a sign to the girl, who glared in my direction and jumped out of the wagon, making it rock.

"How did I get here?" I asked, not so much wanting to find out as to divert the old woman's attention, which seemed very piercing, the bright eyes delving like knives, quite impartial and, at the same time, quite merciless.

"Gar went threading with some girl in the upper caves. They found you and brought you here. Where you came from before that is your own trouble; I don't know it."

"I am a fighter from the tribes," I said. "My man was killed in a street fight in Ankurum. I think I rode into the hills, but I was stunned and remember little. I suppose my horse threw me."

Her old face told me nothing. She stroked the cat.

"Ankurum? You're many miles from Ankurum now. Nearer Sogotha. And higher than the hills. These are the mountains—the Ring."

"Whose camp is this?" I asked.

"Oh, not anyone's in particular. Though ask another and he might say we were Geret's people. A merchant camp. This is a caravan bound for the old cities beyond the Ring and the Water. We travel in a pack because of thieves. Not many in the mountains, but a few, and, with the winter coming on them, they like to be well provided for."

"Do you carry weapons for the city wars?"

"Some. Mostly foodstuffs. It's poor husbandry across the Water. A bad barren land."

Irony, bitter as herbs, tasted in my mouth. Another caravan; this time, a true image. And I in the wagon of the healer, I, who had been healer of sorts. And they went in fear of thieves.

The girl brought a sticky porridge then, but I could not eat it. The old woman made me a drink, bitter as the irony in my mouth, and I slept.

I did not remember my dreams now. In the mornings I was heavy from the bitter drink, and at first everything was blurred and uncertain. We were on the mountain pass, it seemed, going over the Ring, but it was colder now, and there was a four-day-old rainstorm beating outside the string of caves in which they had taken shelter. You could hear the storm, but it did not sound like a natural thing, more like some huge animal howling and scrabbling to get in at us.

Fresh icy water ran in the big cave, and the fires were always going, acrid and spitting.

The second day, a man with a fur-edged robe, and a couple of henchmen behind him, came to the wagon mouth.

"Uasti," he called out in a deep important voice.

It was the healer-woman's name clearly, for she left her iron pot and opened the flap wider.

"What?"

" 'What?' Is this the way to speak to me?"

"How else, Geret wagon master, if I want to know what you come seeking?"

I could see Geret was discomfited. He was used to having his way with people, a bully and organizer, perhaps quite intelligent in his limited fashion. He had the slightly bulbous eyes that seemed so common to his type, thin curled hair, and very red full lips. Now he gave a little laugh.

"I defer to your age, Uasti. An old woman's privilege to be rude."

"Quite right," Uasti said. "And now?"

"And now, this girl I hear you've taken in—some Plains savage—"

I had been sitting among the rugs, half asleep, aimless and detached, but the bee's sting reached me. I got up, and there was strength in my legs for the first time since I had run from my butchery.

"Very savage," I said, leaning out over him, one hand on the nearest wagon strut, the other taking him lightly by the fur collar. "Have you heard of the warrior-women of the tribes? I am one, Geret of the wagons."

Geret looked alarmed. He made a few brief noises, and I wondered why the two behind him did not come forward and detach my grasp. I glanced at them, and one was openly smirking. It appeared Geret was not a popular man. Yet it took Uasti to laugh.

"Let go of him, girl, before he wets his fine leggings."

I let go. Geret flushed and pulled his robe straight.

"I had come," he snapped, a little throatily, "to say she might stay with us, provided she worked for her food and comfort. Now, I think otherwise."

"Oh, yes?" Uasti said. "And where will she go? We're high in the Ring, Geret, and the snow is only a wish or so away. Does not the oldest law of the traveling people say, 'Take in the stranger lest he die'?"

"Die? This one?" Geret looked skeptical. "She got up here by her own wits, let her use them and get down again. I'll have none of the tribes in my place."

"*Your* place? I must remember to tell Oroll and the other merchants what you say. And don't look angry at me, Geret. Remember there'll be illness and trouble enough coming for you to thank me when I cure it. Now, no more about She-in-my-wagon. I'll take care of her and no bother to you. She eats hardly at all, so that needn't lose you any sleep."

Geret, furious, began to say something else.

"No," Uasti cut in, sharp as a knife, "just you remember who *I* am, before who you are. You'll be glad you did what I said if a fever comes on you, and I have to tend it."

The menace in her words was unmistakable, and I saw for the first time, clearly, what power the healer had in her own community if she was good at her trade, and made them recollect it.

"Be damned!" Geret snapped, turned and made off.

The two henchmen offered brief respectful salutes to Uasti, and trudged after, grinning behind the wagon leader's back.

2

So now I was Uasti's. Her property, for I had my life at her demand. Yet it seemed she wanted nothing. It seemed so.

She let me wander where I wished, through the big cave into smaller caves, to be alone in the dank darkness. I was used to the hostility of these wagon riders. It was a familiar thing. Soon, if nothing happened, they would accept me, perhaps, in their own way. For now, they were a little afraid, and that was enough. When I went back to the wagon, she made no comment on arrival or absence. She would stroke the black cat, and offer me food, which I might accept or refuse as I liked. The girl chivied her, it is true, hating me for many varied reasons. Uasti would glance at me to see if it bothered me, and then tell her to go, or to be quiet, or to think of other things. The girl, in awe of the healer-woman, obeyed sullenly, but one evening, when Uasti was gone to see to some sick child, the girl came in and found me on my own. I had been mixing together some herbs which the old woman had asked me to do. This was a new thing, to set me tasks, but I could hardly refuse. I was going at it aimlessly, a pinch of this, a pinch of that, green and brown and gray stuff, when the girl came through the flap and ran straight at me.

"You! Who told you to meddle with that?" she screeched. This was her office, clearly, and she did not like to be usurped. Something occurred to me then, but I had no time to think of it at that moment. All the herbs went scattering, and she was tearing at my hair and beating at my chest, and trying to claw with her nails, but they were short and did not do much damage. She was bigger than I, but I was very strong and she had not reckoned on that. I got her hands and then her body and opened the flap and flung her out. It was not far, and I aimed her toward some rugs heaped up to dry by a fire, but I expect her bones rattled at the impact. She began to shriek and wail, and many women and a few men came up.

It seemed we were for the old trouble, when a cool amused voice, crackling as snakeskin through dry reeds, called out.

"What's this, then? Rape—or has a wolf got into my wagon?"

A silence fell, and the crowd parted and let Uasti through. No one spoke or tried to stop her until she came to the rugs, and then the girl reached up and touched her wrist.

"Healer! She was mixing up the herbs—the Givers of Life—I saw her."

"And so? I told her to do it."

"Told her—! But that was*my* work!" the girl wailed, her face blank and pale.

"Well, it's your work no longer, hussy. You can bring the food and water from here on, and no more."

"Healer!" screamed the girl, grabbing at hand and sleeve now.

Uasti picked her off.

"If I decide otherwise, I'll tell you," Uasti said. "Until then, you are cook-girl."

The girl curled over on herself and began to sob.

I was very angry with Uasti, for now I saw what was in her mind—to deprive one in need, and give to one who had no wish for it. She came into the wagon, dropped her bag of potions, and sat in the wooden chair.

I sat by the flap, and said to her, "Why do that? She had served you many years, and was apprentice to your trade."

"Why? Because she's a fool and a sniveler. Years, you say, since twelve, five years in all, and she has learned little enough. She's no instinct for it. And the Touch isn't in her fingers. I'd thought there was nothing better."

"Until now," I said.

Uasti moved her hands noncommittally. "It remains to be seen."

The black cat rubbed by me on its way to take possession of her knees.

"Cat likes you," Uasti said. "She never liked that other one."

"Uasti," I said,*"I* am not a healer."

"Not a healer? Oh, yes. And a stone is not a stone, and the sea is made of black beer, and men run backward."

"Uasti, I am not a healer."

"You're a strange one," she said. "You've more power in your eyes than in your fingers, and more power in your fingers than I in mine, and you let it lie."

"I have no power."

"But you've healed before. Yes, I know it. I can*smell* it on you."

"I did not heal. It was their belief I could, not I that healed them."

I said this before I could keep the words back, and Uasti smiled a little, glad I had committed myself. I became very angry then, and all the hurt and fear and bewilderment crowded in on me. Who knew better than I that in showing another his or her fears, one finds one's own? Yet I could not help it. It was dark in the wagon, the flaps down, only Uasti's bright eyes and the bright eyes of the cat gleaming at me, two above two.

"Uasti, healer-woman," I said, and my voice was a pale iron shaft through that dark, "I come from earth guts, and I have lived with men in the stamp they have given me which was not of my choosing. I have

been goddess and healer and bandit and warrior, and archer too, and beloved, and for all this I have suffered, and the men and women who set me in the mold of my suffering have suffered also because of me. I will not run between the shafts anymore. I must be my own and no other's. I must find my soul-kin before I corrupt myself with the black impulse which is in me. Do you understand, Uasti of the wagon people?"

The two pairs of ice-bright beads stared back, a creature without form, seeing, waiting.

"Look, Uasti," I said, and I dragged the brazier near me, and poked it into life, then pulled the shireen away from my face.

By the flicker of the coals, I saw Uasti's old woman's face draw in on itself, the lines suddenly harder etched. The cat bristled and rose, spitting, its ears flat to its head.

"Yes, Uasti," I said, "now you see."

And I put on the mask again, and sat looking at her.

She did not move for a moment, then she quieted the cat, and her own face was expressionless.

"Indeed I see. More than you think, you who are of the Lost Ones."

I cringed at that name, but she lifted her hand.

"Come here, lostling." And I went to her, and kneeled before her, because there was nothing else I could do, while the cat jumped from her lap and ran somewhere in the wagon to shelter from me.

"Yes," Uasti said, "I know a little. It's legend now, but legend is the smoke from the fire, and the wood that the fire consumes is the substance. When I was a little thing, many, many years ago, and they saw I had the healing touch, my village sent me to live with a wild race in the hills, and there I learned my trade. They were a strange people, wanderers, they went from place to place, but they believed they had the eye of a god, a great god, greater than any other, and, wherever they went, they carried a box of yellow metal, and in the box was a book. It was written in a strange tongue, and some of the old ones said they could read it, but I am not so sure of that. They'd chew a herb they grew in little pitchers of earth, and lie in dark places, and have dreams about the Book. But they knew the legends of the old lost race without the trances. There was an inscription on the cover of that Book. The cover was gold, and the joints were gold, and the inscription was all I ever saw. They never let a woman look inside it." Uasti lifted aside the rugs, picked up the iron which was used to stir the brazier, and sprinkled something from an open vessel on the bare floor. With the hot metal she traced out the words:

BETHEZ TE-AM

And then she glanced at me.

"Well, lostling?"

Those words, so close to me in the green dust she had sprinkled, not spoken because of their power—how new and alien they seemed, for I sensed no evil in them, only a great sorrowing.

"Herein the truth," I said.

"They called it the Book of the True Word," Uasti said. "Their god had dictated it, but the legends knew better, and the healers knew better too. So I learned."

3

I thought that I had been one with Darak, in my fashion, forgetting oneness does not come from the body alone. Now I became one with the strange old woman of the wagon people—by an almost imperceptible process that sprang from understanding.

The day after we had spoken together in the wagon, the storm lifted and the camp pressed on. It was late in the year for traveling, the snow very close, brooding behind whitish gray skies adrift with cloud clots. A boy drove our wagon, and the little shaggy horses which pulled it. Uasti often got out to walk, and I walked with her. She was very brisk and strong, and the cold slid off her like water off a turtle's shell. I did not see the girl who had been her apprentice, except when she brought Uasti's food. Then she did not look at me, but only at Uasti, pleadingly, like a dog.

But all these things were little things beside the oneness.

In fact, she had not told me so much, but she had*known,* and that had been a wonderful release for me. The legends they had told her, the strange wild men and women of that savage tribe where she had learned her healing arts, were many-colored and many-faceted, and, as with any legend, one must read between the words, being skeptical but not too much so, sifting and rejecting and searching. There had been a race—the Lost, the Book of the tribe called them, a great race, skilled in the Power, healers and magicians of genius. But evil had possessed them and eaten them and spewed them up again in a new form. Then they ruled with hate, malice, and corruption. In the end a disease had come, nameless yet terrible, and they had died in droves, in the very acts of pleasure that had damned them. Some were buried in the magnificent mausoleums of their ancestors, others, having none left to bury them, rotted in their palaces, and became at last white bones among the white bones of their cities, and even the bones perished. And so they were no more. But the Book, or so the priests said, had persisted in its cry that the old race were not made up of evil and hatred only. Their symbol had been the phoenix, the fire-bird rising from its own ashes. There would be a second coming—and gods and goddesses would walk the earth again.

I do not know if Uasti believed me to be one of that second coming. Certainly there was little enough goddess in me. She never asked me where I came from or what I knew, and I never told her more than I had that day when I pulled the shireen from my face. Yet there was this sharing. She began to teach me her arts, very simple and humble in their way, and I found a response in me. I wanted—needed to know.

The wagoners were beginning to accept me. When I went among them with Uasti they scarcely noticed now, and once or twice, when I walked on my own away from the wagons, at night, when they were in the shelter of some cave or other, people would come and ask me to tell Uasti this or that. And once I found a lost girl-child in some cave alley, crying, and when I led her back to the firelight, she came very trustingly and put her hand in mine. I am not a one for children, there is not enough human woman in me for that, but a child's trust is a remarkable compliment, and it touched me.

That night I wept for Darak, silently, in the wagon, and, although I was silent, I knew Uasti heard my grief, but she did not come to question or comfort, knowing, wise one, there was nothing she could do.

The next day it was better.

Oh, yes, he will always be there in me, I have good reason to remember, but, like the old wound, it throbs only at certain seasons, and then one is well used to it.

The eighth day after I had come to them, the snow began to fall all around us, thick and white.

The pass was narrow, the crags going up on every side and away into their own gray distances. The snow would choke the way eventually, bring down boulders and avalanches of loose stuff and torn-up pines. There were also the wolves who came out at us soon as the whiteness was down. They were not very big, whitish in color, but with flaming eyes. They harried us like an army hidden in among the rocks. The children and the sick or weakly were shut firmly in the wagons, as were the stores of food. Riders went on the outside of the caravan, holding burning tar-torches with which they thrust at the wolves. But the horses did not like our new companions, and it was a weary, noisy, irritable time.

For all the caravan was officially led by the most important merchants traveling with it—Oroll, Geret, and two or three others—it lacked organization, and there were constant disputes between the "leaders." I had been wondering how they would get across the Ring at all with the snow coming so fast, for it could only be the first snow of many. Uasti told me there was a tunnel soon, through the mountain rock itself, a sheltered black passageway hewn out long ago. She did not say the human slaves of the Old Race had made it, but I thought it was so. Now an argument broke out among the wagons as to whether we should make on toward this place or hole up in some cave until the brief thaw that generally comes after this first snowfall. Geret and another were for waiting, Oroll and the rest were for pressing on. Fairly soon the caravan had split into factions. There were fights, and bleeding noses and broken knuckles for Uasti to heal. Finally, in the refuge of a cave, the snow piled high outside, fires blazing at the cave-mouth to keep the howling wolves away, they came to Uasti, and demanded she read the auguries.

With men it is always this way, they will ignore their gods until they are in trouble or need, and then they will turn to them with sudden fervor and belief. The god of the wagoners was a small, white image, rough-hewn and only a foot or so in height. They carried it in the spice wagon and so it came out reeking of herbs, cinnamon, musk, and pepper, and was dumped by sneezing porters in the back of the cave. They called it Sibbos, and it was a man-god, and they had a special red and yellow robe that they brought out for it now, and put on it, together with necklets and rings and colored beads. It had an expressionless, unpainted face, and there was no special aura to it, for it was not worshiped often enough to have taken on any personality of its own, as do the vast statues of the temple gods, who are feared and called to every day of the year.

I had been learning Uasti's medicine for some days now; not so much the binding of wounds and setting of limbs, but those other arts which are deeper and more profound.

Now, after Geret and his men had gone, she turned to me and said, "I'm old for this work. You shall do it."

I did not want any part of their religion, and I told her so. I had thought she understood my needs and antipathies.

"Yes," she said, "but I understand too that in your way you must get power over others. That's your heritage, and you can't shy away from it forever. Here is power in a small way, and you must take it, and learn to control both others and yourself."

Then she took out a black robe with long sleeves, and a black belt to pull it in at the waist, and made me put them on. They were her things, but she was a slim, small woman, and they fitted me well, too well, perhaps. I stood silent then, while she told me what I must do, a strange figure, white hands and feet and

hair, black mask-face, and black body. She put the necessary things into my fingers, opened the flap, and told me to go.

I went out from among the wagons into the round belly vault of the cave. Red firelight and smoke hung across it like shifting veils of gauze, and through the veils I saw them all, hushed and waiting, the pale, intent faces turning abruptly now to the god and his priest.

When they saw it was the tribal woman and not the healer, a little gasp and mutter went up, but they had awed themselves too much before the expedient god to make a scene now in front of him.

It seemed I had enacted this role so often, the sea of staring faces fixed on me—in the village, in the ravine camp, at Ankurum when the Sirkunix roared, and later at the Victors' feast. But this time there was a difference. In the village I had not wanted to have power over them, or thought I had not; in the hills the faces had been hostile. Now there was that look of waiting, and submission—not the frenzy of the stadium, but the quiet sleep-trance of belief. Something stirred in me at it, as I realized I had them in my palm. I stood very still in my white and black, holding the copper things in my hands, and then I began to walk between them toward the god. And I laughed at the god as I went toward him.*You—what are you?* And he had no answer for me, for here it was the priest who was the power, not the god, poor empty stone.

I set down the copper implements before him with a slight clatter. Into the round cup on its three-legged stand I poured incense dust, and lit it by thrusting a taper into the fire already burning there in its brazier. The smoke went up, blue and cloying. I raised my arms as if in prayer and heard the mutter of response behind me. Then I scattered the dried grains, red and brown and black, and studied the patterns they formed on the stone ledge before Sibbos. This is not such a mystic thing. You see what it is sensible to see, or else you interpret what you see so that the meaning comes out as you want it. I could make out a winding shape, red among black, a black shape rather like a dog, and an arched shape, also black. So I turned to them and called out,

"A track, a wolf, and an arch-mouth. Sibbos tells you to go on, over the track toward the mountain tunnel, not fearing the wolves or the snow."

Uasti had told me this was best—the thaw was not always kind or punctual, and Geret's plan might be more dangerous in the long run than pressing on. But, if it had been the other way, I might well have said the wolf barred the track from us, indicating we should stay in the shelter of the cave—the arch-mouth I could see.

Next Oroll, Geret, and some others came up, and I gave them each one of the little closed copper vessels. Geret looked uneasily at me, but he took the thing and said nothing, yet his eyes flickered a lot. I lifted up the bowl of incense by the tongs, and tipped out the contents at their feet. Then I touched each vessel, one by one. And each man opened and drew out what was inside. Each item is very tiny, but a symbol, and it is the order in which they are discovered which is supposed to convey a meaning. First was the red clay disc which is the sun, and after that, the black wood oblong which means bad luck. After these, the white bead which is snow, the green bead which is warm weather, the yellow oval of good fortune, and the blue circle which has another circle cut away from the inside of it, and means the god's pleasure.

There are twenty or so of these vessels, all in all, and everyone must be brought by the healer, and given out at random—the god guiding her hand, naturally. Still, it would be easy to mark the vessels so that one could identify which was which—a tiny scratch mark to the copper, discernible by the sensitive hand—yet there was no need. You could twist the meaning any way you chose. Today, it was this:

Sibbos told us that to wait for the thaw—the sun—would be bad luck since there would be heavy snow and not good weather. Good fortune came by placing ourselves trustingly in the hands of Sibbos and going on toward the tunnel. It would have been equally simple to say—wait for the thaw, it is bad luck to go across the snow. Good weather is coming and good fortune, and the god smiles on us.

Nevertheless, the healer's interpretation is final.

Oroll and the men who wanted to move on grunted and nodded. The Others looked sullen. Only Geret spoke up.

"I defy the reading. Uasti should have done it. This man girl isn't a true diviner. I don't trust her judgment."

There was a tense quiet in the cave. The fires crackled.

"Do you argue with your god, Geret?" I asked.

"With you I argue."

The time had come for me to finish his troublemaking. I looked at him, and his eyes could not slither from the grasp of mine. It was very quick, and I knew I had him.

"Then, Geret," I said, "you anger Sibbos. Put down his vessel before he burns your hand in his fury."

Almost at once Geret yelled, and dropped the little copper pot. His palm was red and blistering, A cry of amazement went up, a few screams, and much jostling as those farthest from us tried to discover what had happened. I dipped my fingers in the water cup and flung a few drops in Geret's face. He came awake at once and clutched his hand. Oroll nodded to me.

"Truly, Uasti has chosen well. You've the true knowledge of the god. Foolish for anyone to question it."

He moved aside to let me pass. I went by, down between the people, who moved apart for me, and back to the wagon.

I set the things in their places. Uasti was sitting very still in her chair, her eyes glittering slightly in the gloom.

"It is done," I said.

She did not answer. Then I saw the strange, blood-red necklace around her throat. The horror I felt is quite inexpressible. I wanted to shriek and shriek, but somehow I kept it down, like vomit. I thought for a moment a wild animal had got in, but no animal was so neat in what it did. There was a great deal of blood, I was already covered in it, having come in among it without thinking. And then the screaming started, and I thought at first it was me. But it was another. The girl who had been Uasti's was running up between the wagon-lanes, yelling and weeping and tearing her hair. In a moment men and women were running to her, running back with her toward the wagon. They wrenched open the flaps, and light speared at us, Uasti and I.

"Her! Her!" the girl wailed, hysterical with malice and fury, and terror at what she had done. "Look at her, covered with the old one's blood! Vampire!"

Her frenzy caught at them like flame in dry grass. It was the women who came at me. I was pulled down from the wagon, onto my face, then rolled onto my back. There was the sensation of many hands holding me helpless, fingers in my hair and clothes, straining and biting into my flesh, the great mist of faces, bestial and intent. I was choked and blinded by panic and shock, and I knew it would be now, after all, that I should die. Those hands hitting at me, all one bruising blow falling again and again. Blood salt in my mouth from a loosened tooth. It scarcely seemed to matter what damage they did if I was to die anyway—I only wanted to lose consciousness and feel no more of it.

But I could not quite let go. Beyond the blur of pain, I heard a dim bellowing of men's angry voices, then the high calls of women, and suddenly my attackers were being pulled off me and slung aside. Strong, rough, but helpful hands had me now. I was being lifted away—I glimpsed faces, and one face in particular, the full red-lipped face of Geret—and found, surprised, it was his men, not Droll's, who had rescued me.

This was his wagon, richly hung and rather cluttered. Two lamps overhead—greenish gold between my slitted lids, already puffy and closing. The shireen had saved me a little, but not much. Cautiously I probed at the tooth, which wobbled unpleasantly. Yet I knew enough now to realize that if I left it alone, it would have grown back into its socket by morning. As for my body, the robe was stripped away in great rents and holes, one breast and most of my legs bare. The flesh was streaked with blood and purple with bruises, and my head ached from the handfuls of hair they had wrenched out.

Beyond the wagon, I could still hear shouts and screaming, but it grew quieter gradually.

I lay and waited for Geret.

When he came in, through the flap I glimpsed for a moment the circle of his men guarding the wagon.

"Well," he said, and chuckled. "Not a pretty sight, not pretty at all. They've made a bad mess of you, warrior woman. What would your tribe say now, eh? The warrior who couldn't even hold off a pack of girls."

I did not bother to answer; besides, it would have hurt too much.

He got the lamps down on their chains, and lowered the wicks. The light became very dull and murky, but I could still see enough to know when he hoisted up his robe and lowered his leggings, and came at me with his enraged manhood wagging. He ripped off the last of the robe, but did not touch the shireen. He had no interest in faces, that one. Neither did he have time to notice anything else.

When he was finished, he rolled aside and lay on his back.

"You there," he said, "tribal mare. Have the sense to see Geret has broken you at last. I know you're not strong enough to turn on me, but in case you think you are, there are twenty men outside, and I've only to call."

I wondered how true that was, remembering the first day, and how the henchmen had grinned at his discomfort. But perhaps he had picked his guard better this time.

"I will not hurt you," I managed to say.

He cursed.

"You know they'll kill you for murdering the old bitch? Not a nice killing either. The women have a very high regard for their healer. I might be able to save your skin—what they've left you of it. But I ask myself if I should. I don't know how you managed that trick with the copper, but I don't take kindly to it."

I was drowsy. I had learned to take my safety where I found it, and I knew now what must be done. Uasti had taught me something more than the arts of eye and hand, which had already been in me, though without discipline. And I did not grieve for Uasti, for she was not one to pity or be sad over, even in murder and death. Her face had been calm and silent above the slashed throat.

And her vengeance was coming.

4

I woke early, sensing day without any smell or sight to indicate it, holed up as we were. Geret was snoring on his back, and oblivious, as I examined myself. I was healed. Only the very deepest scratches and cuts had left a faint mauve scar, but that would be gone before the day was over. The tooth was whole in my mouth. Even the soreness in my hair had vanished, and the hair-growth seemed unimpaired.

I took Geret's jug of icy water, and sponged myself, careless of the puddles which formed on his rugs. I took one of his pig's-bristle brushes, with which he scraped his thin curls, and brushed my own hair into silk. Next, I rummaged in his clothes chest, and found a green cloak with fastenings down the front of it, and holes for the arms to come through. It was very voluminous on me but not too long, for he was a short, squat man, this leader of the wagons.

Ready now, I went up to him and kicked him in the side.

He gave a grunting snort and woke up. His eyes fixed on me at once, bleary, angry, bulbous eyes.

"It's you, is it? What do you want, then?"

"Get up," I said. "Go and tell the people of the wagons that Sibbos demands justice for the crime against the healer."

He gave an unbelieving laugh, turned over, and prepared to sleep again. I got the water jug, and tipped what was left of the icy stuff over his head and face. He came up at once, spluttering water and fury. Another moment and he was on his feet, reeling at me, swearing, his hands ready to beat me into pulp. But he was looking in my face. I felt my eyes widen to absorb him and his petty little consciousness, and all at once he was stopped, his mouth slack, his eyes fixed, his hands still raised to begin the beating.

"Now, Geret," I said, "it is time you knew I am under the protection of Sibbos. You have wronged me, and must be punished for it. Oh, Sibbos!" I cried out. "Punish this man." I waited a moment, and Geret began to whimper. I said, "The god has set light to the soles of your feet, Geret. They are burning."

Almost at once his face contorted with agony. He yelped and screamed, hopping up and down, and clutching at his feet in vain attempts to beat out the nonexistent flames.

I watched him, and then I said, "I have Interceded for you with the god, and he has put out the fire."

With little cries of distress, Geret sank down on the wet rugs.

"Now there is only coolness, and no pain," I said to him, and he began to sob with relief. "But next time," I added, "the punishment will be greater and more lasting. My guardian, Sibbos, is angry with you. You must do what I say in the future and offer me no violence. Now wake, and do not forget."

Then I went to him and slapped him across the face. The trance dropped from his eyes, but he remembered, and there was a look of utter terror there instead.

"You will obey me now, Geret," I told him. "Yes, tribal woman. Yes."

"Not tribal woman. Now I am Uasti, your healer. Go and tell the wagon people that Sibbos is angry and demands judgment. Tell them it will be a trial by fire." He got up and pulled his robe together, and lurched out. It seemed so easy then, I was suddenly afraid I had forgotten some vital part, and the plan would not work. But it would.

I had taken her name already, and that would hold them to me by her bond. After a time, they would ignore the differences between us, and I would have been healer always. As for the trial by fire, they would love such a show. They would long to see the miscreant writhing in agony, and so they would hold off from tearing me limb from limb, because that would spoil the entertainment. Geret was away a long while, and the noises outside were confused. Finally, five of his men came, and motioned me to come out. I walked among them from the shelter of the wagons.

The crowd was there, as before, yet very different. They jostled, hating me. A few women spat curses, but, as I had judged, they did not attack me.

We got to the back of the cave, where the god still stood in his red and yellow, and his jewels. Geret stood there, too, sallow and nervous. When I came up to him, he nodded.

"I told them."

"Good," I said. "Now have them bring out Uasti's body in her wooden chair, and place it before the god."

Geret did as I said, and a great muttering went up. The women had already washed the body and bound its neck, and dressed it in black garments and all its trinkets and beads, and then stuck black round discs over the lids to keep them closed. All this was their tradition, done out of fear. They feared the spirits of the dead, particularly of the murdered dead. Now four of Geret's men went and got the corpse, and they were uneasy going, pale-faced coming back.

The crowd hushed and drew away, and much female weeping and imprecation broke out.

Uasti was very stiff, but it gave her a certain dreadful majesty. I did not like what they had done to her face, for they paint their dead like dolls—white, with red lips and cheeks, and scarlet nails. Yet it was only revulsion at their ways which stirred in me, not anything else. This was not Uasti, only the dry stalk, broken off. The men set her down and drew back, and she sat there, staring with her black disc eyes.

I stepped forward and held up my hand, and growling broke out.

"Tell them to let me speak," I said to Geret, and he shouted at them, and when the noise went on, his men—distributed strategically around the cavern, I saw—prodded and pushed them into silence.

"You think me guilty," I shouted at them then, "but I am innocent of this beast's act. You see I have no

fear of the dead one, nor of the god. Yesterday the women tore my flesh. Many, I expect, remember what they did." At once shrill cries of malicious agreement. "Look, then," I said, and pulled open the fastenings of the robe and dropped it, and stood there naked and healed. The susurration of surprise went up. I had been badly marked but there was not a scratch on me.

Then a girl had forced her way to the front, ducked between Geret's guards and was yelling, "You did it with your witchcraft, evil one! Don't think to confuse us, standing there naked and shameless in your wickedness."

It was Uasti's girl, and at once the crowd began to bay behind her voice. Geret shouted again, without my prompting this time, the guards hustled, and quiet came once more.

"No," I said, "the god has taken your marks from me to show you my innocence. But I will give you further proof." The stir of anticipation. "Get them to bring an unlit torch," I said to Geret, "and a stand for it."

A man went and got one from a stack nearby, while another hurried away for the stand. The tension in the cave mounted, and the delay while things were fetched increased it. My nakedness confused them also; they themselves would have been ashamed to be stripped before so many, and were even a little embarrassed to look at me.

When the torch was set up on the spike of the stand, I dipped a taper in the altar brazier and set it alight. My hands were trembling as I turned my back on them, and confronted Sibbos as if to pray. Could I do this thing? Well, too late now if I could not. I stared at the bright blue jewel on his breast until my eyes unfocused, and slowly, slowly, an avenue in my brain came open, and I walked down it. Now I seemed two people as I turned back to them. First myself, heavy as a sleeper, conscious of my body only as one is conscious in a half-dream, without any control over it at all; and the second—an entity, cold as an ice-crystal in the top of my skull, who controlled my body perfectly, as the first "I" could not.

I turned myself to face them, and, as I did so, I placed one of my hands on the hand of Uasti.

"I am guiltless of your murder, dead one," I called out, yet not I but the other "I," a voice that I did not feel vibrate in my throat. "If this is as I have said, let the fire not burn me."

I heard them hold their breath, the single held breath of the crowd, all one.

Then I leaned myself forward across the torch, and the flame lapped my shoulders, breasts, and bellv. I did not feel the flame at all; even had it burned me, I should have felt nothing, but the yellow luminance slid like water on my skin, and left no mark. Cries and shouts went up from the crowd. I stood myself straight, and drew the torch off its spike in my numb hands, and stroked it up and down me. It glowed on my flesh, but without smoke. The noise had fallen off again. It was totally silent as I made the torch go back into its position on the spike, turned to the god and the blue jewel, and let go the trance that was on me. It was a strange coming-together of the two parts of me—swift and shocking in the return as the going-out had been slow and dreamlike. Sound, sight, smell, touch seemed overbearingly acute, almost agonizing, but I had no time to be discomfited. My body was whole and I had proved myself, and now came the next move.

"A trick!"

Uasti's girl had run forward, nearer to the back of the cave where the god stood. Furiously she screamed, spitting white flecks in her terrified anger.

"Can't you see it's a trick! Don't let the murderess escape her punishment!"

The vague murmurs rumbled again, but I called, "No trick at all," and I stooped down to the green cloak, and ripped a piece out of it, stood, and dropped it on the torch. At once the material caught and flared up, turning black in a moment. The crowd pressed closer now, but their intensity was a different thing. I began to hear the words.

"She's innocent. The spirit of Uasti protects her."

"Wait," I shouted, and they stopped like horses who feel the reins suddenly pulled hard in their mouths. "All is not done. The god is angry at the death of the healer. Someone here is a murderer. If not I, then who?" It was the moment of attack and not defense, and I took a fierce joy in it, I who had been the quarry until now. "You!" I pointed at a plump woman near the front. "Was it you?" and she shrank away, pale with shock. "Or you?" and I turned on a skinny, narrow-skulled man in the center, whose mouth dropped open, showing the dismal stares of a few, coyly distributed gray teeth. "Tell your men to bring those two here," I hissed at Geret, and in a moment the stupefied man and whimpering woman were dragged struggling to the god.

I went to the woman first, and, as I possessed her terrified eyes, I said, "Have no fear. If you are innocent, Sibbos will protect you. Touch Uasti's hand and she will protect you too."

The woman—calmed, sure of her innocence, and under my will now—touched the dead paw, and then meekly let me lead her to the torch.

"If she is guiltless," I cried out, "the fire will be cool and pleasant to her as water."

I guided her arm, so that her hand went into the flame up to the wrist, and she gasped at it, like a child who has just seen a sea, or a sunset, or a mountain for the first time—knowing, yet delighted and amazed. The voice rose up hysterically. I drew out her plump unmarked hand, and dabbed a few drops from the copper water cup across her brow. She woke dazed and smiling. The man was next, but it was the same. The crowd was in ferment now, bubbling and chattering. I stared down at them, and motioned with one hand.

"Not I, not these," I called out. "Who, then?"

I saw that the girl who had been Uasti's was at the very front, where she had pushed her way, yet she was moving now trying to get back. Panic was beginning to distort her face. Abruptly, she saw me turned to her, and she stopped quite still. I began to walk toward her, and another of the quietnesses dropped around us. I went very slowly, yet in a straight line, not looking to either side, only at her. The closer I got, the more she shrank away, but she could not seem to move. In any case, the crowd would not have let her.

When I was a foot or so away, I said, "You, too, must prove your innocence before Uasti and the god," and many willing hands pushed her forward into mine.

It was cruelly easy, she had no strength left. I did not have to do anything to her, her own guilt and the natural fire would be enough. Yet I was not prepared for what happened—a phenomenon close to the one I had conjured, yet in reverse.

I pulled her to Uasti's corpse and said, "Touch her hand, and, if you are innocent, she will protect you,

and the fire will not burn," and then she began to struggle and weep.

"I am afraid, I am afraid."

"Why?"

"She is dead—a dead thing! I can't bear to touch the dead!"

At once the great mob voice rose in the hall.

"The trial! The trial! The trial!"

I wrenched the wailing girl's right hand and forced it down onto Uasti's. And then the thing happened. The girl gave a terrible shriek, animal, mindless, which cut the chant like a sword. She flung backward on her heels and fell down before the wooden chair, and her right palm was turned upwards so all could see the blackened flesh, seared to the bone.

Now the noise came loud and total, the triumph and fury and hate. Before any could stop them—and who indeed tried?—the women had the body of the girl, and had borne it away to savage it like wolves, as they would have savaged me. Yet the girl was dead, had died the moment she touched Uasti's hand.

Sick at last, I picked up the green robe and drew it on. What power the girl had possessed after all, inside herself, and had never found the key to it, only the razor edge of it which destroyed her.

5

There was to be no thaw that winter. Uasti's good sense, if not the auguries, had been true.

The line of wagons, guarded by the red moving hedge of the torches, toiled upward over narrow Ring Pass, to the accompaniment of the howling blizzard winds of the east, and their whirling white frenzy of new snow. At least we were free of the wolves now, for they do not like the east winds, though they have their voice.

I rode in Uasti's wagon, among her things, which I knew very well at last, and considered mine. The boy drove the shaggy horses for me, as for her, and a different girl, quiet as a mouse, brought me the food I asked for, and came with me to carry my healer's stuff when I went among the sick. There was not much they needed. They were, on the whole, a healthy crew. One broken limb I set, and took away the pain; a few fevers that were over and done in a day or so; a birth, easy and uncomplicated, with a mother who knew very well what she was at. That time, it was the healer who learned, but the knowledge might well prove useful later. And they called me Uasti.

The strangest thing of all was what happened with the black, tuft-eared cat. For two days after Uasti's death, I could not find her, and where she went I do not know, for we were traveling by then. But on the third day, early in the morning, I woke and found her seated on my belly, washing herself, and going up and down with my breathing. I fed her and did not expect anything from her, but she would follow me about the wagon and the camp, when we made one, and sit on my knees purring. She, too, it seemed, had let me replace Uasti. I loved her beauty, and was glad of her, and the bond did not impose a conscious tie on me.

Geret was my other concern. He went in fear of me, a fear so deep now, he would never lose it. This

suited me, but I did not want him to seem so suspiciously afraid of me before the wagoners, only to respect my position as healer, as they would think fitting.

At our next camp—under an overhang, a poorly protected spot, but caves were rare now—I went to his wagon. He was drinking after the evening meal with a few of the other merchants, but when he saw me, he hurried them out, and sat waiting nervously.

"Geret." I said, sitting opposite to him in my healer's black, the new robe the women had made me. "You have done very well. Sibbos extends his favor to you and though we have had our differences before, I am well pleased. I have heard them say that in a day or so—perhaps the day after tomorrow—we will reach the tunnel through the Ring. I have heard too that this is in its way as dangerous a journey as through the snow. It is time the wagons had a true leader, not a group of men arguing, who all claim the title from time to time. It seems to me that you are the strongest and best organized, therefore it should he you."

I could see he was pleased. To have complete and acknowledged control of the wagons, to be factual instead of titular head, would carry many advantages. It would also end the bickering, and the mishaps and trouble that bickering always causes.

"Yes." he said. "yes. Uasti. But how can I*do* it? One day they call for me. the next for Oroll or another. I have my men but so have Oroll and the rest."

"I will do it for you." I said. "I have the ear of Sibbos, and it is the god's mind that I speak."

He looked crafty suddenly, knowing, amused, and not at all in awe.

"But," I said, "remember, if you are the temporal power, I am the spiritual. The fire of the god be upon you if you disobey me once you lead."

His face drained yellowish.

"Yes, healer," he said quickly, "I'll remember, I swear it".

In a way. this should have been more difficult than it was. However, there were certain things in favor of Geret. He was not a particularlv strong character for all his pomposity, yet he had cunning. Oroll, who should have carried more weight of authority, was too indecisive when it came to the point of action. Geret, on the other hand would act, even if wrongly. The wagoners were split into six sections, the people and servants of Geret's caravan, and the people and servants of the other five. Originally each group owed allegiance to its own merchant-lord, but, as there were substantially more men and women in Geret's portion than in any other of the single units, their voice tended to be loudest. In addition to this Geret's henchmen wore his own blue and brown uniform. All the merchants had a guard, but Geret's, dressed up for the occasion, tended to act in a more soldierly fashion, given this psychological impetus. The last factor in Geret's favor was his cargo—wheat and corn and the ready-made flour. It was his work to provide bread for the journey, and, while they could have lived on their stores of salt meat, dry cheese, and fruits, the warm fresh bread was a comfort to them. This seemed perhaps the best explanation as to why the whole caravan had styled itself "Geret's people" from time to time. But, like the god, they had only turned to him when they were hungry.

In the matter of the god, I had already altered their habits. His power was important to me for it was the cloak of mine. Therefore I offered a prayer to him, morning and evening, and they had fallen into the way of praying with me. When I helped the sick, I invoked his name. When we made camp, the robed statue

was set up in shelter, and I would give him thanks for our safety. No one was commanded to these worshipings, but most came. So belief had become an ever present thing, more important than before. Now it was very useful to me, for it was through Sibbos that I made Geret leader.

When I went to pray before him, the morning after I had visited Geret's wagon, I stood rather longer than usual, then turned and looked back at the crowd. It was one of the endless iron-gray days, bitterly cold, and they were huddled close.

"I must read the auguries," I said to them, "for there is danger."

I cast out the grains and stood over them for a long time, as if I saw something, then turned again and said: "There is an animal walking on six legs, but the head is severed, and I cannot find it in the pattern. Before the animal is a pit, into which it will fall, because it has no head to guide it." They murmured, and I spread out my hands and cried: "It is the wagon people. Six parts without a leader."

They broke into shouts and yells then of alarm and surprise, calling out the names of their own particular merchant lord.

I held up my hand for silence, and when I had it, I said, "We must choose one leader for us all. It must be done. This is Sibbos' warning. Let us pray to him to direct us."

Then I began the prayer which I had used to him before, in the mornings and evenings.

"Great god, guide us through the dark places, and let no harm come to us. Protect us from danger and distress. Let us judge well in what we do. Give us our bread and our drink, our quiet and our rest. And when we call upon you, do not turn aside from us."

It was a simple thing, but their minds were open and naive. The phrase, "give us our bread," so innocently placed in the prayer, unconsciously recalled Geret, the wheat merchant. When it was finished, I looked at them and asked: "Who will you elect for your leader?"

I had told Geret that when I said this, some of his men and women must shout his name. This they did, and, all at once, the whole crowd had caught up the cry. They swirled around and made for his wagon, and soon Geret came out in apparent amazement, and reluctantly agreed to become their master.

As for Oroll and the others, they grumbled a little, but agreed at last that the leadership was nothing in point of fact, and might be useful as a spur and comfort. As I had guessed, Oroll was too indecisive, and the others followed him and accepted the situation.

Things were easy after that. Geret was their lord, but I ruled Geret. For once I felt the strength of command, and freedom, and a sense of identity. I had pored long hours over the old yellow maps of the land we were going to, beyond the Ring and the Water. And now, when I dreamed, I sensed ahead of me the green cool beckoning of the Jade. Incredibly, it seemed, I had guided myself, without knowing, toward my goal. Not once had I deviated, only slowed myself in my time with the village, with Darak, and now with the wagons. Never had the awareness of an imminent fulfillment been so intense. I would wake, burning with joy, trembling and alight with expectation. Soon, soon.

On the second day from Geret's election, we came to a high place, a treacherous climb among the white-crusted rocks, to a black round hole: the Tunnel through the Ring.

Part II:*The Water*

1

It was a black journey, and lasted ten days.

The Tunnel was perhaps some twenty-five feet wide and about twenty feet high, though in places it varied, the walls and ceiling drawing out or in. At all times there was space enough to get through, and at intervals we found wide cave rooms where we could halt and make a camp. The worst of it was the dripping damp, the hollow soundlessness which would pick up a thought and seem to speak it at you, and the darkness that fluttered at the torches like gigantic bats. And there was, too, the nameless fear.

Many of the children fell sick in the Tunnel, but the fear was always the cause of it. The adults, too, became prey to sudden aches and faintings—which they put down to bad air creeping through from other parts of the mountains. Fear was a natural thing; I had expected it—the unconscious terror of the miles of mountain rock balanced over our heads, the primeval terror of dark underground, common to all creatures who are mortal and bury their dead in the earth. Yet this fear was more than these things. I knew, long before I found the key to it. The ghost of the Lost was very strong in this place.

I began to dream of them again, yet the dreams did not appall me as they had. My edge was blunted. I had glimpses of the building of this place—the human overseers, turned against their own people through fear of the Higher Race. I saw the sweating gangs heaving at stone, their flesh dead white as the flesh of slugs from years underground. The whips flicked and cracked. Men fell dead. When*they* came, they were beautiful in the horror and degradation. They had had greater plans for this tunnel than there had been time to achieve—pillars, carving, frescoes. It should not have been a mere worm's hole through rock, this passage, but yet another of their unsurpassable works of art built by the toil and misery of underlings. Later, I found the scratch marks on the wall—faded, unreadable to any except eyes as accurate as mine. These were not in the Old Tongue, but an ancient form of the language I had heard in the village, the hills, Ankurum, and among the wagons. And they were all curses—curses against the Great Ones—the curses of men.

Once, at one of the five camps we made, I found a back cave, very wet, hung with stalactites like stiff curtain fringes of glass. There was a black pool, and, at the bottom, bones gleamed dully. Just at the lip of the pool, this one had chipped in the ancient slang of humanity:

Sickness, the serpent, is coming to bite you, Death, the old dark man, is coming to carry you off, Rest uneasy, you stinking carrion, on your gold beds.

Near the end of the Tunnel, the passage was less finished, and more treacherous. There were narrow bridges over black nothingness, where the wagons were partly unloaded to lighten them, and men and horses walked singly. And there were places where the roof dropped low enough to scrape the canvas wagon tops. But soon the air picked up the curious sweetness of above-earth air, and sharp fresh breezes blew down into our faces.

The tenth day we broke free of the tunnel-womb, and came out onto the rocky plateau that stretches for miles above the great expanse of river they call the Water.

It was late afternoon, the time when spirits usually begin to flag, but they rose high today when we reached freedom. Children and dogs ran round and round in frenzied games; there was a great sighing

and relaxing, and looking up at the sky.

It seemed a curious thing, for we had found the Tunnel in the snow drifts, but now, on much lower ground, there was only the bare rock. Behind, the mountains towered, white to their middles, but here, a little warmer and beneath the snow line, we had only the fierce wild winds of the south to trouble us. They were dry and harsh, like the land they came from. We could catch a glimpse of it, that land, faintly, through a haze of distance—a dim smoky outline of flatnesses, all one desert emptiness it seemed from the plateau. Yet there must be life, or why had we come?

The river was another matter. It was many, many miles across, almost like a small tideless sea, a brilliant blue that would have nothing to do with the dull sky. There was apparently some deposit in the clay at the bottom that turned it this color, yet it seemed shocking in its intensity—a wide aquamarine ribbon, running from west to east as far as the eye could see, and onward almost to the horizon—a painted slash across the featureless gray-brown landscape.

Three or four streams forked down from the rocks, turning into falls to jump the gaps—these glass-clear and quite safe to drink from, as the river was not. A mile or so from the plateau a camp was made for the night at one of the many glittering pools these streams formed on their glittering progress to the Water.

Like dogs with the scent of the quarry in their nostrils, they were up early, and away again at dawn, winding down the track to the river. We got to it by midday, and uneasy silence fell on the wagon people.

There was the barren shore, where nothing seemed to grow except little clumps of a black sticky grass. Rocks, skinned and bruised by the rasping winds, stood up like thin deformed giant women in the attitudes of their bitterness and insanity. The air, sucking through holes in these rocks, made noises like girls crying or animals shrieking in pain. Before us, the blue beautiful poison of the Water, now the only thing we could see ahead of us to the horizon. It seemed a lost land, no place for us to be waiting in, for this is what we had to do. Today, or tomorrow, the boats would come from that seemingly empty other side, and take us and our wares across. Geret had said there were settlements and steadings on the other bank, and, farther south, the first of the great cities. But he was vague. None of them seemed to have accumulated much information about this place, as if it had hypnotized them, or drugged them, or as if they simply did not want to recall.

The wait went on, and a camp was made. The fires crackled redly in the gathering dusk, and it was very quiet—no bird song or animal cry, only the frightful noises in the rocks, the slight sluggish movement of the river.

I lay in the wagon, unsleeping. The cat crouched in a corner, wide awake, muscles tensed, her coat slightly bristled. I smoothed her and kissed her cat eyes shut and she slept, but twitched in her sleep uneasily, reminding me of Darak. Later Geret came, rather drunk, swinging in with little ceremony.

"Pardon me, Uasti," he said, brash with the beer, "but it's an ill place here. Most of us seek company for the nights by the water."

"Go, Geret. Go and seek company."

He sat down and offered me the leather beer-skin.

"No? Now, Uasti, we should be friends, you and I. I helped you with the women when they wanted to kill you, and you helped me later to get what I wanted. I do very well now—better food, and a proper council where I have the say of things. There was a little girl I fancied, you know—her brothers were

funny about it, but they're friendly enough now, and so's she."

"Then why not go to her tonight, Geret?"

"Tiresome," he said, "always the same one. A man likes variety." He slipped one hot hand onto my shoulder. "Come, healer, you're young and smooth under that robe—I know, I've seen you. And not a virgin, either, I remember. Oh, I was rough before, but I'll behave myself now."

"I do not want you," I said. "If I had wanted you, I would have made you welcome long ago."

He gave a little grunt of disbelief, and began to explore my body with his sweating hands. I thrust him off, and, surprised at my strength, he was still a moment.

"Have you forgotten so soon, Geret," I whispered to him, looking in his eyes, "what I can do to you?"

He shrank back at once, groping for the leather bottle.

"Go," I said. "There are plenty to help you. Out there."

He lumbered from the wagon, and I saw him swaying through the dark, cursing.

I, too, left the wagon then, for it seemed full of the smell of him and the beer. The night was cold, yet oddly close. The wind gushed and quieted alternately.

I had begun to feel at last the rope that tied me to the wagons, and I yearned to go free. I wanted my aloneness, it was a longing in me.

I walked along the pebbled shore, and left the camp behind. Below, the water lay like ink, and I could smell its sweet and deadly smell. I recalled my race who had walked upon water, and wondered if I could cross, as they had crossed, to the far side which seemed, particularly now in the dark, to call me.

A cold white light struck suddenly over me, making me start and look back. The white moon had crested the mountains behind me. Its markings were oddly accentuated by the dusty air so that it resembled a bleached skull. The light lay in a sheet of silver glass across the water, and all at once it seemed a path, a safe way for me to cross by. My hands clenched, my body tensed with expectancy and the sense of Power. I stretched out one foot to begin my journey—

A shrill cry behind me, then other voices. I made out the call.

"Uasti! Healer! Healer!"

I turned, angry, sparks of fury burning under my skin, making every hair on me stand on end like the hair of the cat. A man came running along the bank, and I did not even walk toward him. As soon as he was near enough, he began to shout the story—his child, a baby of two or three years, had crawled away from its mother and drunk the blue water. The man tugged at my hand, and I knew I could save his child if only I hurried back with him, and I could not seem to do it.

"I am with the god here," I said to him, "and you have interrupted us."

He stammered, nonplussed and at a loss, and suddenly the glass light on the water seemed to crack, and I knew what he was asking, and turned and ran with him.

The child was screaming and kicking, the mother in a frenzy of terror. I turned her out, and made the child vomit copiously with one of Uasti's medicines, then poured cup after cup of clean water down its throat, together with various herbs and powders. Pain had made it obedient, but once it was relieved it became fractions and sleppy. I thought I had saved its life, so soothed it and let it sleep. I was very weary by then, and went away to sleep myself. In the hour before dawn the man came and woke me—the child's body had turned blue. I went with him but I could not even wake it, and soon it died.

"The poison of the river was too strong." I said to them.

The man nodded dully, but the woman said. "No. You weren't quick enough. He said you wouldn't come with him at first, when he ran to you."

"Hush," the man said, "it was only a moment, and she"—he dropped his voice—"was with the god!"

"What do I care for the god." the woman suddenly screamed, catching up her dead child. "What god is he that takes away my son and leaves me nothing!"

I should have felt pity, but I felt only contempt. I knew had it been a girl she would have mourned less, and it angered me. I turned from them without a word and went away.

I lay down to sleep again, stiffly, not caring what story the woman would spread about me, only wanting to be free of them all, and across the blue water.

2

There was a high wind at daybreak, full of dust. The girl came as usual, bringing food. I fed the cat, the flaps of the wagon down against the grit-laden day.

Perhaps an hour later I heard the single shout, followed by others, and the noise of feet on the pebble-beach; they had sighted the boats from across the Water. I picked up the bundle I had made of my stuff, and called the cat to follow me. She jumped down and stalked after me to the brink.

The wind had a color now—grayish yellow like the land. The dust whirled and flared around me, making it difficult to see very much, but I was glad of the shireen for it protected me completely. The others had wound cloths about their mouths, and pulled the hoods low over their eyes. I could just make out the faint, far-off shapes on the dust-smudged blueness, and wondered how the men had seen anything. Then I heard the low-pitched, nasal moaning of a horn. This had been their warning, though I had not heard it in the wagon.

It was almost an hour's watch, there on the shore, while they struggled toward us over the grit-pocked river. At last they beached on the rotten soil a little way down from us, five long unpainted vessels, certainly more than the "boats" Geret's people had called them. They were low, but raised at bow and stern into a curving swoop, roughly carved like the tail of a big fish. Each possessed a solitary sail, but these were stripped from the masts, and the single banks of oars had been in action. Now the oars lifted, were heaved upright, and men came jumping among the pebbles. They were very dark—darker than any people I had been among so far, for though there had seemed a predominance of black hair in each place I had gone through, there had been fair skins and light eyes, and, among the tribes, brown and blond hair too. The newcomers had an olive tan—almost a gray tan, as though like the wind they had picked up the color of the land. Their eyes were black—the true black, where it is impossible to tell iris from pupil. And

their hair, lopped very short, often shaved totally to leave a shadowy stubble on their heads, had a bluish sheen to it I had never seen before. The other thing about them, perhaps the strangest, was the black, coarse clothing they wore, unrelieved by any ornament. Even among the tribes there had been a glint of color or metal here and there, and apparel had shown the individuality of its wearer. These men carried nothing, apart from short knives in their belts, and what they wore had a distinct sameness—almost like a uniform, though it was not. They did not even carry protection against the dust.

A tall shaved-head came and spoke to Geret, Oroll. and the rest waiting behind. The grim face gave nothing away. Already the rowers and the wagonmen were unloading and stacking stuff into the ships.

Finally Geret turned around and came along the beach, looking fairly satisfied. As he got near me, he glanced up, and his face turned sour.

"I should get under cover, healer. These storms can last two or three days."

"No need," I said. "We shall be going across soon, will we not?"

His bulging eyes bulged more.

"You want to cross, too, do you? It's not usual. We leave the women behind. With a guard, of course. Old Uasti never came with us."

"I shall be crossing," I said.

He heard the finality in my voice, and argued no more, though I saw he did not like it.

When the things were stowed and tied down, about half of the wagon men clambered aboard the five vessels, and squatted among the coils of ropes near the stern. When I got into the fifth ship, they glanced at me uncertainly, and began to mutter a little. It came to me then that when they reached the steadings across the Water, their buyers might feast them, and provide other entertainments also. Judging by the miserable expressions of the men left behind, and the even more miserable and frustrated looks of the women, this was so. Naturally, the guests would not want their woman healer along. It did not trouble me. I felt a compulsion to cross, an almost desperate desire to reach the land beyond the river, and if they did not like it, they might choke on it.

I had taken the cat into the ship with me, but she struggled and cried, and abruptly, just as the rowers were climbing in and getting their oars ready, she scratched me, and leaped over the side onto the pebbles. There she stood quite still, staring in my face with her silver eyes, her fur on end. I felt a sense of anger and loss, and it made me aware, for the first time, that I knew I would not be coming back across the Water.

The crossing took nearly two days, during which the storm raged around us, angrily and without relief. The journey was monotonous—the endless creaking of oars and timbers, the*slupp-slupp* of the viscous water, the whistling harshness of the wind. At the midpoint of the river, when no land was visible before or behind through dust and distance, we passed by a stone block sticking some ten feet out of the blueness. It was featureless, except for the smudgy carving of the elements.

"What is that?" I asked a wagoner near to me.

He shook his head. "They call it only the Stone, healer," he mumbled, embarrassed by my presence.

Once or twice the dark crew began a deep groaning chant-song as they strained at the oars. They spoke a different language from the wagon people, but the chant was different again, and it seemed to make no sense. I guessed it was the slurred and abbreviated version of something older.

There was no stop when night fell; the dark men rowed on. Their strength and endurance seemed strange, oddly sinister, for I was beginning to notice how blank and empty each of their faces was. They appeared almost in a trance, mindless, but I supposed their hard life had made them this way.

Late into the second day the wind dropped, and sullen clouded skies appeared. We saw the rocky rim of land we were making toward, and, in an hour, reached it. If anything, it seemed at first glance flatter and more barren than the other side beneath the Ring. A squat stone tower stood up, but that was all. Yet, once the ships were beached, we were led through a cave-mouth and down an underground slope, and emerged, minutes later, incredibly, among trees.

They were thin, these trees, bent over, with twisted trunks that reminded me of the tortured rock shapes we had left behind. Black-green foliage stood high in the branches, stiff, as if carved. Beyond the trees the steading of the Dark People shambled away, enclosed on three sides by rock walls, but open to the east, where there was still a bright blue piece of the river to be seen, winding into the distance. Between the rock walls ran the thread of a stream, and on the banks of this were small patches of vegetables and grain, nourished by the water. The rest of the place was barren, except for the weird trees which stood up, here and there, among the mud brick houses, almost like gigantic birds of prey, waiting.

Roughly in the center of the steading stood a large building, reinforced by rough blocks set in the original mud. The roof was thatched with a stringy brown material, and just under the roof were a few hacked-out slits meant for windows. Stone uprights and lintel framed the door, and toward this went Geret, Oroll, and the dark man they had spoken with earlier.

It was not a long wait. We sat in the shelter of the trees by the unloaded goods, and three women brought us clay bowls full of water or a thick yellowish milk. These women, the only ones in evidence, were thin and scrawny, dressed in black coarse cloth like their men, their hair twisted up in knots on the top of their heads, and they, too, were sullen and silent. I did not see any children, or even any dogs or goats, the usual flotsam of such a place. It was very quiet except for an occasional snake-dry rustle from the leaves. After a time, Geret and the others emerged from the large building with another dark man, very tall, and with a collar of white stones around his neck. This apparently was their king or chief. He extended his hands and spoke gutturally to us. "You are very welcome. Tonight we will feast." The wagon men looked pleased. I wondered what there could be here in this unlovely spot to make them glad to stay another second in it. Geret came over to me.

"You won't want to come to their feast," he said. "Not fit for a woman. They're pigs, these ones, but—" He tailed off and grinned. "See the old woman over there? Go with her and she'll find you a place for the night. I'll come for you to morrow, about sunset. We sail back then for the other shore." I turned and saw the old woman, incredibly wizened, toothless, and bent almost double. Fierce black eyes glared at me from the alligator flesh. Her topknot was gray.

I left Geret without a word, and, as I went toward her, she—also without a word—turned and went on ahead of me. We walked across the stream by a rough-built bridge of wood and stone, among the predatory trees, up a slope, and in at a cave opening in one of the rock walls. Again a brief passage in darkness, then a flat plateau, quite barren, covered by a huddle of mud huts. I saw several women here, and a few children; apparently they lived separately from the men.

I was taken into a vacant hut and left there, except that, from time to time, a woman or a child would

come to the entrance and peer in at me.

I stayed in the hut until a murky sunset closed in on the day. I had not been sure what to do—I felt that if I moved out of the hut and began to go back through the rock passage, the women might run at me and stop me. I did not, in fact, intend to go anywhere near the stone-and-mud hall, but to walk out of this dismal oasis, and begin a crossing of the unwelcoming land, as I felt I must. I was full of expectancy, and a slight fear, I did not know quite what the irresistible pull was, but I reasoned it must be the Jade, or some place of the Jade.

And then sunset. I had heard the women about until then; now a close silence fell. I went to the hut door and looked out. Stippled red light fell in squares across the plateau. Each hut had a rough reed screen pulled over the entrance, and there were no lights. Nothing stirred. I left my hut, and crossed between the others, and no one came out, or even looked from the blind window spaces. I found the rock opening and went in, emerging slowly in the other part of the settlement. Down the slope, among the trees, across the bridge. It seemed silent here, too, very silent, and then, when I was on the other side of the stream, I began to hear the sound—a faint droning, almost like bees, a whisper-growl deep in the core of the stone-and-mud building, its door closed now with a leather curtain, under which seeped a faint orange glow.

I did not know what drew me to the curtain—only curiosity, perhaps—perhaps other things. But I went to it, half expecting to find a guard or lookout posted there, and when I found no one, I pulled the curtain an inch or so aside, and looked in.

It was a long low hall, fire pits at the far end where meat had hung—bones now. Smoke curdled up among the rough hacked rafters, leather flaps covered the windows. The light was murky and uncertain, and the men, who lay around the sides of the hall on skins and pelts stretched over the packed-earth floor, were indistinct, slightly moving shadows. There seemed to be a mist in the hall, more than the smoke. I could not tell wagoner from steader, but here and there, one of the Dark People crouched, boys or very young men, used, it seemed, as in the tribes, to wait on their elders. Their eyes were bright black lines in the shadow-blurred faces; their teeth showed pointed and white as the teeth of animals.

All this I saw very quickly, but then my eyes were drawn to the center of the hall, and I made out the three girls. It was the first time I had seen beauty in these dark ones. I realized now that it came early and died early, killed by the rotten living and the cruel work. They were not more than thirteen, but physically fully mature, lithe, sinuous, the full, girl-perfect breasts trembling at each flex and tremor of their limbs. Unlike the rest of their people, they wore ornaments, many-colored beads dripping down their smoky bodies, and little chips of crystal wound in their blue-black hair; otherwise they were naked. This was beautiful, but it was not all I saw. It seemed I was looking into my past, or my future, or at a painted picture, which forever changed itself, and yet retained its basic elements. In the center of them, its scales and protruding black eyes glinting in the firelight, squatted a gigantic lizard. I think I had not seen it sooner because my eyes had passed over and discarded it, unbelieving. It was the size of a large dog, of a wolf even, some sort of mutation of its kind. It had its own jeweled loveliness as the flames made glass-gleams on its armor, but its cold eyes swiveled from one dancing girl to another, and I saw then clearly the manner of their dance, sensual and inviting, and that their gestures were directed at it. Suddenly one girl slid down to her knees, then leaned backward over her own calves and feet until her hair lashed on the floor. Her thighs wide open before the lizard, she began to croon and stroke herself. It got up onto its feet, lurched toward her, and, as it came, its phallus—gigantic yet oddly human—slid from the scaled sheath. I thought the girl would shriek with pain as it pierced her, but she only moaned and sank farther backward over herself. The other girls settled around the lizard, caressing it, as the unnatural act of copulation began.

My head swam. A fire-storm of colored lights misted across my eyes and was gone. I noticed the thick, bittersweet scent in the hall for the first time. A drug. Yes, I could make out now bluish fumes that rose from the fires; but it was more than this—the unwholesome magic lay in their cups and on their food as well. I stepped back, and let the leather flap fall into place. Cool darkness and silence all around. Yet I was excited, sleepy—I had breathed the essence of their black feast. I walked back across the oasis, my limbs like lead, and pale hands reached for me, and there was the old and ancient laughter of the dead who had not died, but lived on in the corruption of all who had come later.

I began to run, along by the narrow stream, to a place where the water widened and became a pool into which a needle-bright, needle-sharp fountain jetted from a single vast rock spire. It was dark now, and the moon was in the sky. I realized I had left the rock enclosure behind, and was out on the flat empty land. Trees still stood sentinel, but ahead there seemed nothing but that cheerless, moon-bleached desert. And then—a swift silver glitter along the side of the rock before me. With the glitter, a shifting dark, and the faint hushed sounds of animals and men moving carefully.

I saw their way past before they did, a twist in a track that led under the needle-spray and by the pool. I leaned back into the shadow of one of the skeletal trees and watched them come, about forty men, each dressed entirely in black, riding black horses with muffled hooves. The moon was in cloud a moment, and when it slipped clear, I was shocked and, the drug on me, I almost cried out, for of their heads and the heads of their horses nothing seemed left but a black mane and a burnished silver skull.

It took me a moment to become rational, then I saw the masks for what they were, and knew at last what had been the model for the skull-guard of the north.

Perhaps it was logical that I should at once assume they had come to the steading—there was nowhere else, surely, they could be heading for in this waste? Yet it was more than that. I knew they had come for the wagoners, to take them—where I did not know, or why. And abruptly I was angry and afraid. I was their healer, had made myself Uasti. A responsibility for their despised lives clutched suddenly at my being.

The skulled ones had paused a moment at the pool; some of the skull-masked horses were drinking there. I slid back across the shadow, from tree to tree. It took longer than I recalled, grim and real now. At last the hall, no color left under the leather curtain. I ran to it, past it, and into the dark. There was a little spark of light at the far end, where the roasting fires had been. I stumbled against a man: he moved, but did not seem to notice me. There were sounds and little sobs. The sexual climax of the feast had come with the dark, and no doubt more of the beauty of the Dark People was being crumpled all around me. I picked a way toward the light, and found a long cloth curtain had shielded the last fire. Beyond the curtain the light was scarlet, and here the giant lizard stared at me from the length of its iron chain. Near the fettering post sat three of the dark men and the one who seemed to be their chief and wore the collar of white stones. They had been quite still, and turned to look at me without expression. I knew their language was different, but I had heard little of it, and was still unsure. I emptied my mind and managed to find words.

"Men are coming, men with skull-masks. Against you."

For a moment I thought they would not speak, then the chief said, "Not against us, woman. Against your kind. It was arranged."

There was no further need of words, after all. I swung and pulled a long thin tree branch from the fire, blazing only at one end. I thrust it at them, and they jumped up and backward, a little emotion in their faces now. The lizard's eyes swiveled nervously, blinking. I turned and ran back into the hall, ripping

down the curtain as I passed.

"Wake!" I screamed at them. "Wake—an enemy is coming!"

It was the most ancient of cries; the flamelight crackled and lit up patches of the hall with red, yet nothing stirred. Men lay slumped, sleeping it seemed. Yet the branch glared on their open eyes. They smiled drowsily at my shouted words.

No use here. I ran to the leather door curtain, went out, and let it fall behind me. I stood still in the moon-obscured blackness, staring out at blackness, holding up the burning tree's-finger. Soon they came, not so quiet now. Thud of horse hooves, harness sound. My brand, not the moon, bit silver out of their dark shape. Now they were only fifteen feet away from me.

I did not know why, but I called out to them in the Old Tongue of the Lost, the single word:

"Trorr!"

And they halted as I commanded, and stayed still. Then a man at their head—their captain, I thought—detached himself and rode a little nearer to me. On his right arm a thick bracelet of twisted black and gold metals in the shape of knotted snakes. Through the skull-holes of his mask I could see no eyes, for they were covered by black glass.

"Who are you?" he demanded in a deep, cold voice. It was not the Old Tongue he used but something as close to it as I had heard in the living world.

"I am Uasti," I said, speaking in the strange mid-language he had uttered, "and you come to carry away the people in my care."

When I spoke the name I had taken, a little rustle of movement went over them, but quieted quickly.

"Stand aside," the skull captain said. He dismounted and came toward me with a slow menacing stride, hands resting loosely on the ten bright-hilted knives at his hips.

I stayed quite still until he was very close, then I dropped to my knees before the door, in an attitude of supplication, still holding the blazing branch in my right hand.

"Lord," I began, "I beseech you..." and caught at his belt.

He swore at me, cuffed me aside, and strode forward to the curtain. Yet, as I fell, the knife I had put my hand on dragged from its sheath.

I stood up. He was reaching for the leather.

"No farther," I said.

He took no notice, and I threw the knife into his back, neatly, so that the blade pierced straight through the heart. He uttered a brief, surprised curse, and dropped on his face, his head going under the curtain hem so that only his trunk and limbs remained outside.

Confused yells, followed by sudden activity. Spears flew toward me. I dropped down, and they clattered harmlessly on the stone blocks of the hall, one only finding a mark in the hardened mud. But

they were off their horses now, men with drawn, ice-pale swords, running at me, howling their anger.

Incongruously, it occurred to me that this was more than mere aggression—it was emotion. Their captain must have been popular among them.

I was confused. It seemed I was with Darak. I flung the blazing branch in the faces of the two men who reached me first, and, as they reeled and spat with pain, grabbed both the swords from their hands. One blade cut my palm almost to the bone as I took it, and the blood made it slippery and difficult to wield.

Still, I gave them some trouble.

The worst thing was my woman's dress—I had almost for gotten it, and so it hampered me with surprise as well as cloth. In the end, tangled in it, covered in their blood and mine, the skull-men closed on me, and I took my death wound.

I scarcely felt the pain, only a great numbness. The light and blackness ran together. The moon floated like a bulbous, pallid growth on the face of the sky, then darkened, and went out.

Part III:*The Dark City*

1

*So*I did not see them take the wagoners. For some days I did not see anything at all, except things in a fever dream, best forgotten.

I suppose it was two or three days I lay dead, if it can be called death when all the time the death wound is healing itself. I woke finally in great pain and very weak, in a place of oppressive darkness. I thought for a while I had returned beneath the Mountain, and must start again. Then the raw stench of bruised earth penetrated to me, and I understood. I was in the ground where the Dark People had buried me. Not so strange—like many primitive groups, they feared the hauntings of the unpropitiated dead. There were even a few dried-up fruits and a clay bowl of milk set down beside me, and they had left me my clothes and the shireen, and put a black cloth over my face. Luckily the soil was so dry and scattery it had not put much weight on me and left me air to breathe, and it was a shallow grave, for they had little time for me despite their spiritual fears. Nevertheless it took me a long time to tear and scrabble my way free, and, in my sickness, I knew all manner of terrors—that I would truly die, that I would never reach the surface, that perhaps I was dead after all, and this some sort of morbid fantasy. But in the end the ground gave way above and around me, falling onto me, into my mouth and eyes, and I crawled upward into the cleanness of a gray day. I fell on the earth weeping, and could not move again until the sun was a low purple on the horizon.

Then I sat and looked around me. I was some way from the steading; I could just make out the rock walls, the trees, and a drift of cook smoke going up beyond. Near, there was something more interesting—a patch of yellowish grassland, where three or four scraggy, bony horses were nibbling frustratedly.

In the lavender twilight I dragged myself toward this place, and reached the fence and gate just as a young boy was coming to bring the animals into the steading. He took one white-faced look at me, then turned and flew away, shrieking in fear. Small wonder—I had been a corpse, and behind me now gaped the uprooted grave; I was gray with dust and dirt, my hands covered in blood from my torn nails, my hair

matted, stuck with clay, white and terrifying as the quills of some strange beast: a ghost, an undead. The horses, too, shied away from me, but I got one by its straggling rough mane. The effort it took me to swing onto its back drained the last of my strength. I leaned forward across its neck, kicked its sides lightly, and it started forward at a frightened gallop.

I did not think they would follow.

There was a road—paved stone, the blocks irregular now, pushed up in places, sunken in others.

The first part of the ride had passed in a sick dream. Now it was moonlight—dark, the black and white world of the desert night.

I was a long way from the steading, and wondered why the horse had taken itself in this direction. It occurred to me later that probably the steaders would ride this way from time to time, and the horse, responding to the familiar kick, had started off to it accordingly. There seemed no point in altering its course.

I straightened, and looked around and ahead of me.

Desolation.

A flat landscape, occasional stark rock stacks, short and squat and crumbling. And the ancient road, so like the Lforn Kl Javhovor I had traveled with Darak. Ahead, the desert and the road repeated themselves across the land, tireless and monotonous. The moon burned white holes through my eyes.

I thought then I did not know why I let the horse take me along that ancient Road, but I think, perhaps, I did. Toward dawn, I began to feel the pull. A fish, dragged shoreward in the cruel net, cannot have felt more helpless. Yet I had no fish's terror. I was glad to be drawn, to be pulled; excited, elated, joyous. A new strength ran into me, hardened and warmed me. I sat very straight, and slapped the horse with the flat of my hand. It had been trotting for some time, now it ran forward again, very fast and sure on the rotten paving.

Overhead, the sky was melting into grayness, the stars dissolving like salt cast on water. In the east, almost at my back, golden cracks were splintering the cloud.

I did not see it for a long while, the light behind me. the sky indigo ahead. But then the sun broke free and struck on it, and, I saw very well what I was hurrying to. About two miles away, the ground began to rise upward, and the paved road became a wide causeway, some fifty feet above the surrounding barrenness. A mile beyond that, two great pillars stood up on either side, made of dark stone, and the paving seemed reinforced and level. Beyond those, about five miles from me, the monotonous land had erupted into a great cliff, flat-topped and black as blindness. On the cliff's summit stood the City.

It too was black, but the gleaming black of basalt and marble. The rearing spires and many-terraced roofs caught the sun like mirrors.

I held the horse still, and stared at it, breathing quickly. How old was the City? Old enough. It had stood in*their* time; they, the Old Ones, had been the builders of it, through the medium of their human slaves. There was no repulsion in me, no fear. Only the need to be there among the glittering darknesses.

The horse leaped under my hands and feet, and rushed forward toward the causeway.

I had no thought I would see them on the road, but I had forgotten that many chained men move more slowly than a single rider, however hard they are flogged.

It had been a fast ride—the paving even underfoot. Between the dark pillars, very tall, crowned with the carvings of flames and phoenixes picked out in gold. The light was full and harshly bright now. Abruptly I saw the crawling shape ahead, a mile away, the black riders and the stumbling men, linked together by dull metal. The captive wagoners and the band that had come for them, the men with swords who had stabbed me in the heart, which to them meant death.

I kicked the horse, and it ran forward again. Its pace tended to slacken whenever I ignored it. The air sang, and the shapes of the desert rushed by. The unpleasant procession in front drew nearer and nearer.

Three black soldiers, riding at the back, heard me first. They turned swiftly, and the sun ignited whitely on their silver skull-masks. One let out a startled cry. They floundered their horses around in confusion, drawing their swords. But it was an impotent gesture. Had they not killed me once before? The halting rhythm of the march broke up entirely. The captives' gray faces turning, men grunting in despair, surprise, pain. The useless flick of the whips even now. Then twenty of the black soldiers riding back to confront me, one of them seeming to be their new captain, the thick armlet of twisted black and golden metals on his right arm now.

I reined the horse in, and sat looking at them. They were faceless, yet so was I. Thirty men in all, and I was not afraid. I felt only contempt. They and I knew how little was the damage they could do me.

The silence lasted a long while. Then one of them broke out breathlessly: "She was dead—Mazlek killed her. I saw the blade go in through her left breast—she fell."

"Yes," another added urgently. "Mazlek, then my own blade. I put it in her belly. She was lying in her own blood. She didn't move. Still lying there at dawn when we took them out of the hall. She was*dead."*

"Be silent!" the new captain roared. His voice was iron, but he was afraid like all the rest. "You were mistaken."

"They were not mistaken," I said to him quite softly. "Your men killed me, and the steaders buried me. But now I am here, and I am whole, and I am alive. These people you have in chains are mine. Where are you taking them?"

"To the citadel," their captain said, "to serve as soldiers in the war, under the Javhovor of Ezlann, the great city ahead of you. This is no business of yours."

At their use of the ancient tongue, the ancient title, I was filled with fury. I knew they were not of the Old Race, though they strove so hard to emulate them.

"Who is this*man* that dares to carry the name of High Lord? Are you his?"

An incredible sensation of Power came with the anger. I felt them shrivel before it.

"We are soldiers of the High Commander of the Javhovor," the captain said hoarsely. "You see our strength. Turn back and we will not harm you."

"Harm?" I said. "Will you kill me again?"

There was a new silence. The dry desert wind hissed by.

"Let go these men you have taken," I said, "or I will kill them, one by one, before you. They are mine. Either Death or I will have them, not you or your lord."

"If you're their witch, you seem to care little enough for them. Better a chance of life in the war than death, here and now."

"They mean nothing to me," I said, "but they are mine. Either Death or I will have them." And it was true. I felt no compulsion, only great anger and great Power.

The captain cleared his throat. With a mailed fist he struck the dagger hilt in his belt.

"The woman is mad," he said. "She has no weapon. Let the desert deal with her. Turn!" he shouted. The men wheeled. And waited, their backs to me, uneasy. "On!" the captain called. Dust clouded up under the metal-shod hooves, the dragging feet and chains.

A white heat rose from my belly and filled my brain. I felt my skull would split open if I could not let it free. A blinding white pain gushed from my eyes. My hands clenched into knots of agony and fury. I stretched them above my head, I rose in the stirrups, my whole body arched and straining as I screamed after them the single word.

A jagged sheet of numbed color flared on the causeway. Horses shrilled and reared. The ground rumbled and shook. Thunder and cold heat eclipsed the world.

Only my horse stayed still, a rock beneath me. The pain had gone out of me, leaving me weak, trembling and sick. I straightened myself with an effort, and opened my eyes, which instantly ran water and would not focus. The black soldiers and their horses were in chaos, men thrown, animal bodies lurching and kicking. The wagon men had toppled in neat rows among their chains. Their skin seemed drained of all color, and a sort of silver deposit, fine as dawn frost, lay over them and the ground about them. They were all quite dead.

I was near to vomiting, giddy and ill. It took me a while to notice that the black men had fallen on their knees on the causeway, dragging off their skull-masks to reveal arrogant, well-set features and silver-pale hair. The captain approached me very slowly, a handsome man, his face, like the rest, cruel and cold, but now stripped naked like the rest.

"Forgive us," he said, kneeling in the dust before me. "We have waited long for you. So long, we have grown unthinking." And then he spoke my name, the healer's name I thought at first, and then I knew the difference, for he repeated it over and over, a sibilant hissing word, the "U" softened now to the "O" sound of the Old Tongue. "Forgive us, Uastis. goddess, Great One, forgive us, who have erred, Uastis, goddess. ..."

2

It is difficult now to explain that I felt at that time no anguish or remorse of any kind at what I had done. There can be no atonement made now in words. Yet the murder had brought its own punishment. As if in the throes of some violent illness, I swung in my saddle, sick, half-blind, half-deaf, shaking uncontrollably, my body running, my clothes and hair dank with icy sweat. But still the sense of Power; no defeat. This was only a temporary disorder. The black soldiers flanked me, once more masked. The dead wagoners

they had left for whatever predatory life might exist in this barren place.

The wind whistled.

We did not ascend the farthest stretch of the causeway which led upward to the burning black gates of Ezlann, the Dark One. Instead there was a rock shelf, wide enough to take five men riding abreast, which ran away around the body of the cliff. Finally, a gaping arch-mouth, dim greenish torchlight in the walls, a ramp sloping down, then upward. In places there were iron gates with a mechanism that responded to certain pressures from the armlet of twisted metals. All this I saw, but did not question until much later. The last gate was not iron but water, a curtain of it, but they could control that too, it seemed, for great slabs closed over above our heads, and shut it off until we were through.

I sensed we were now in the City, yet still underground. Black man-hewn passages, half-lit. Then a new light, cold and gray, under the open sky. We emerged into a circular courtyard ringed by a black wall and black gleaming columns. One break in the wall, a meandering white stone avenue, flanked by towering dark green cedar trees; beyond, on either side, the bluish vistas of gardens. We rode between the cedars, where black marble statues stood, men and women, entwined with animals and birds, light sliding and oozing on their frozen flesh. And then, the last turn, and ahead, the palace of the Javhovor's High Commander. It was built like one single tower, stretching up and up, narrowing by design and also with perspective, ten stories high. Steps led to it, white, veined with black and scarlet. In the first section stood a succession of vast rounded archways filled with doors that seemed to be made of many-colored crystal. The pattern of those doors was repeated in the subsequent sections of the tower, this time as long windows. Fires seemed to come and go in the rainbow-shot glass—violet and emerald, mauve, rose, lavender, and gold. Shining drops of color spilled over the steps, and on our bodies.

All this I saw in confusion then. This new landscape seemed surreal. Now my escort was at a loss, torn between their military duty to their commander, and their new, spiritual duty toward me. Their captain and three others conducted me inside. I do not remember much of this. There was great beauty all around me, but I needed every atom of my strength to hold myself on my feet and could spare none to observe. I think I fell into a dull sleep-trance, and only woke when I heard the irritated, derisive voice strike into their reverence and my silence like a knife.

"So this is the goddess, is it? This scarecrow from some steader's field? Have you lost your wits, Sronn?"

I began to see a little, and my eyes focused unwillinaly on the man who had spoken to them. Electric fear sprang from my skull into my spine. It seemed I knew him, knew him very well.

"Vazkor, High Commander, the True Word spoke of the coming of the goddess," the captain said, his head bowed before the man who was his lord, second only to the Lord of Ezlann.

"I know it. Uastis. Does this*woman* —I call her a woman for want of a description vile enough to suit her looks—seem to you the reincarnated spirit of the Ancient Ones?"

"She killed, Vazkor, High Commander. I have told you."

"Yes. You have indeed told me."

Cruelly, my eyes were clear now, I saw him well. A tall, large-boned, elegant frame on which his dark masculinity hung vital and animal and sure. He, too, was masked, a golden mask shaped like the head of a wolf, red glass in the narrow eye-pieces. The silver hair of the wolf mane lay sparsely over his own,

which reached almost to his waist, and was the intense blue-black of the Dark People. The skin of his hands seemed the gray-olive tan of theirs, yet their shape was very different. Three black rings glowed on the thin, iron strong fingers. He wore a long black velvet tunic that reached to mid-calf, but was slit open at the hip on each side, reminding me of the leather bandit flaps. Black trousers of fine shimmering cloth, and boots of purple leather with countless winking buckles of gold. Around his neck hung the chain—eleven smooth rings of hollowed green jade, with golden links.

He had stood quite still since coming into the room. Now he put one hand on his captain's shoulder, light, and very deadly.

"Sronn, you know how urgent is the levy of forced troops in the Javhovor's latest campaign. Can it be you have failed me, and used this poor rat's tail as an excuse?"

The sickness the use of the Power had left was fading quickly now.

"It is as he tells you," I said.

The golden wolfs head jerked in my direction. In the gesture there was so much surprised disdain, I almost laughed at it.

"Be silent, desert bitch. You are nothing here."

I knew his contempt—the contempt of the High One for the mere human. But it was he who was vulnerable. Two lances of pain stabbed behind my eyes. Around his neck the jade chain burst from its links, cracked, and fell in pieces on the marble floor. The soldiers went on their knees at once. But he was not so swift. He came toward me very slowly, and his voice was soft and dry.

"You do not know me, I see, or you wouldn't try your witch-tricks on me."

I was not afraid. I felt it would be easy to match him, secure in my newfound hubris.

A look from me, he stopped. Quickly the strong hands reached up to draw off the wolf mask. They believed too, it seemed, in the power of the unshielded eyes. And then, the mask was gone, and I saw his face.

"Darak," I said.

My knees gave way at once, as if my body had been chopped in half. Ridiculously, I, to whom the soldiers kneeled, now kneeled involuntarily before this man I had meant to silence forever. But I could not touch him; he, as I, was already dead, already reborn. I had seen the Warden's men at Ankurum carry him from the feast hall, had seen his body hoisted on the gallows, swinging and empty. Yet here, as at the first, stood Darak, defying others' belief in my divinity, yet Darak, a little older, finer drawn, a prince sprung from the crysalis of the bandit. Yet, now that I kneeled before him, I saw this was not quite Darak. And there was no recognition in his face, no knowledge, fascination, fear, scorn, love, or hate.

And suddenly my sense of strength left me. I began to weep. The soldiers looked up, startled, horrified. He they called Vazkor, who was Darak. turned from me in disgust.

"Could you do no better than that, Sronn?"

I leaned forward over myself, uncaring, my misery endless and unfathomable. I knew no longer what I

must do. My hand found a piece of the broken jade, and I clutched it to me.

I heard an order called out, and was slightly aware of other men running in to seize the skull-soldiers I had ridden with. Then silence.

I sensed, at last, that he was sitting, half watching me, in one of the great ebony chairs. I could not understand why he had not already had me taken out; he did not believe in my immortality. Perhaps he had some crueler and more exquisite sport in store for me.

Finally he said, "They will be killed, the men who brought you. A pity. We shall need every man we possess for our war. Still, in a skirmish with the uncivilized Shlevakin from beyond Aluthmis, who can tell what will happen. The steaders' hovels will be burned down, naturally. Not a trace of your coming will remain. And now, Uastis, get up. This room is architecturally designed to please the eye, and your present position mars it for me."

I seemed to have no choice. I rose slowly and stood, but could not look at him.

"I recall some human man to you, do I?" he asked me. "You must forget that, Uastis Reincarnate. You and I are not of that breed. Under the earth to grow, then from the sleep to the life. To rule. It is the heritage of the children of The Lost. Come here."

Again I seemed to have no choice. I went to him. From inside the hem of the long tunic he drew a fine-bladed dagger. With it he scratched the surface of his right hand. A trickle of blood welled out, then stood like a red jewel on the instantly closing skin. A second more and the faint scar vanished, seeming to dissolve back into him.

"It is not hard, Uastis," he said to me, "to recognize a sister."

Life, circling endlessly on itself like a dark bird, carried me back to my core, without mercy.

It seems it should have been joy I felt to have found this "brother" in the world of humans. But I felt no joy. I felt nothing, only an overbearing sorrow and bewilderment I could not analyze or explain to myself. That I had found Darak again seemed least strange of all. I could not tell if it frightened or pleased me. Each time I thought of how he, Vazkor, High Commander of Ezlann, the Dark City, had drawn the golden wolf mask from his face, I could only cry, as I had not cried at Barak's death.

I was ill when I came to Ezlann, and half mad. My escort had been too awed to see it. But he saw, and he sent me away to a suite of apartments which at the time meant nothing to me, only a black quiet place in which to weep. Ten days, perhaps. I remember there was a woman like a dark moth. She wore black and a black silk mask, not like the shireen. The mouth was covered over without an opening. I recollect I could not think how she would be able to eat, and being human, I thought she would starve. It became an obsession. I dreamed of her wasted body, hands clutching at food, holding it whimpering to the shuttered mouth, feebly, and without hope. Only later did I learn the customs of the Great Cities of the south.

A twilight era began, in which I rose and walked about the several oval rooms. I was not sure how many rooms there were, sometimes three, sometimes seven. Sometimes it seemed they were endless and without number. I bathed many times each day in the sunken bath of black marble, which seemed like a sleepy tomb, and was oddly pleasant to me. I looked often from the two long windows with which each of the rooms was graced. I could not understand the view—pale glow, soft white mists, dim golden columns, very thin and tall, and clusters of green foliage that shed a constant and unchanging veridian light into the rooms. There were no sunsets and no dawns. There was no time at all.

It was a long while later that I began to see my apartments for what they were.

There were four rooms in all, each oval, and each similar to the one preceding and the one following. They were built in a circular chain about an inner space onto which the tall windows looked, and one could therefore pass from the first room to the second, from the second to the third, from the third to the fourth, and from the fourth back into the original and first. Each was hung and ornamented in costly black materials. Black smooth onyx things stood ready to be caressed, carvings of animals and swans. A black and muted silver mosaic on the floor, black gauze draperies. On the ebony tables, the sudden white luminance of huge alabaster lamps, which the woman lit sometimes, randomly, from tapers. Beyond my windows, a petrified garden of carved green jade, glowing and misty from unimaginable sources. How the rooms were ventilated, I do not know. There was no access to the open except the single door through which the woman came. I examined it in her absence and found it to be locked. There were two small grooves on the surface; I touched them but there was no response. I was shut, like a rare insect, into a beautiful prison, and left there to be observed, perhaps passionlessly dissected at my keeper's will.

A new obsession grew on me—that there was some hidden means for watching me. I questioned the woman, and found she would not answer. In frustrated anger I struck her across the face. It might have been a doll I struck.

The day after that—I say a day, I mean one of those unknown units that followed sleep—she brought me undergarments, a long dress of black silk with tight waist and sleeves, a girdle of golden links each shaped like a three-winged leaf, and a golden mask with the face of a cat. She set them down on my bed and left me at once.

When she was gone, I examined these things, mostly the mask. It was very beautiful and lifelike. Around the wide rimmed eyes were set translucent green gems, and there were no glass eye-pieces to hide the human organs behind them. The pointed ears were hung with swinging, clashing earrings of golden drops and discs, each with a nugget of emerald burning dependent at the center. From the crown of the mask hung long tails of stiff gold threads, plaited to resemble hair.

There was no mirror in the apartments, which had pleased me, I, who never dared look in one. Now, almost hypnotized by these strange clothes, I longed for the means to see myself dressed in this way. Yet I did not dress. I stood, naked as I had been since waking here, afraid of a possession overcoming me.

I walked to the door and tried it for the thousandth time. It did not yield.

I went to bathe.

I lay a long while in the scented water, then rose at last, and found the woman had come back. She dried me, then held out the black silk dress. It seemed very natural then that I should put it on, and the golden belt also. Now the mask was in her hands. I took it, and at once she hid her eyes in her palms and turned away.

I tore the hated shireen from my face, and put on the mask of the cat.

Incredible, it was beaten so thin and fine it rested on my face lighter than a shadow. The golden plaits swung into my hair. A new strength flowed into me. At once I felt as I had done on the causeway, when I had said to Vazkor's men, "Will you kill me again?"

I caught the woman's shoulder so hard she cried out at the pain.

"Take me through the door."

Somehow she squirmed from my grasp, and ran away from me, but I caught her at the door as she opened it with a sideways pressure of her smallest fingers in the two grooves I had noted earlier. The door swung open. I seized her arm and went through to the other side, pulling her with me as my captive.

3

Beyond the rooms, a dark corridor, shimmering like glass, glass globe-lamps set in the walls.

I pushed her down it, walking a little behind her now, an edge of her sleeve in my fingers. At the end of the corridor a single arch filled by a gold-worked curtain. We went through into another black room, this time very vast, echoing, and oddly chill with size. Enormous basalt columns reared toward the ceiling. It was utterly dark, only one tiny glowing point of light elusive between the pillars, some way ahead.

Suddenly my hand was seized and pulled from the woman. A shadow slid closer to me, and turned me toward itself, even as she fled from me, swift as the moth she resembled.

"So, you're ready now," Vazkor said.

His voice, the voice of Darak, had grown strange to me in the time I had not been with him. I could not see his face, yet I could feel the pressure of his hand on mine.

"Come with me," he said.

I could not bear the touch of his familiar-unfamiliar hand. I drew mine away.

"Where is this place? And what is it?"

"Come with me, and I can show you."

He walked away from me, expecting me to follow, but it was hard to do it in the blackness, now that I did not have his hand to guide me. I had felt sure enough before I found him here. Now I was not so sure. There was a fierce terror in me that his being would absorb mine; I had known this fear with Darak but neither so intensely nor in a manner so self understood.

We stood in an aisle, slightly sloping upward. Down the aisle, onto our closed faces of wolf and cat, the dull light filtered. There was a tall veiled shape—a statue of gold, glittering faintly under its covering. Before it, the block of an altar from which rose a great basalt cup. In the cup, a flickering, ever-changing light.

How well-known to me.

Here was Karrakaz. So near. Yet I heard no voice, felt no sensation.

"Here then," I whispered.

"An ancient altar," he said. "I have kept the flame burning for them, as it burns in all the great temples of the Cities."

He went close to it. I followed him. I stared in at the twisting, phosphorescent flame. Did he have no sense of Evil near him?

"Look up," he said.

I drew my eyes away, looked instead at the statue, and saw a metal woman in a black dress and the golden mask of a cat.

"You understand nothing," he said. I thought I heard a slight contemptuous pleasure in his voice. "I must teach you about yourself. Goddess."

So he taught me—their customs, their beliefs, their dark dreamings, and his own ambition which was to be mine as well. And he taught me how he would use me as the instrument of his power, like an ax, to hew out the way for him. Yet he taught me also, without intending it, that he feared me and my sudden coming, that he feared I should in the end be more than he was. And he taught me to fear him, too.

The City of Ezlann was old, as were all the Cities beyond the Water—which they called Aluthmis, after the Aluthmin, a blue stone mined thousands of years before their birth. And the mining of the stone, the building of the Cities had been in the time of the Great Ones. Now humans, who would not admit their humanity, lived there like the rats who invade foresaken houses. Yet not quite like that. How they came into possession of these places I did not know, nor were there records to tell me—only their legend. The legend said they carried the seed of the Great Ones, a mixed stock, part-god, part-human. They had rebuilt the cities exactly as they had been in the earlier time. They had learned the mechanisms of the Cities (although without properly understanding them, I guessed). And now they spoke a corruption of the Old Tongue, acted out the court etiquette of the dead, dabbled dangerously in the mental exercises and magic arts the Lost had mastered, and went to ridiculous lengths to hide from each other their humanness.

The Old Ones had often gone masked, so all now went masked; yet a hierarchy persisted, human in origin, for in a city of the Lost all were equal in their magnificence. Here the lower orders wore plain masks of silk or satin, the higher officials and soldiery wore masks of beaten bronze. Higher than these came the silver masks, and lastly the golden masks of the elite—the commanders and lords and princesses. In the masks were eye-pieces, usually covered by colored glass, openings at the nostrils, but no further opening for the mouth. They knew that the Great Ones had had few bodily wants, and now to eat was a hidden, furtive thing, never carried out or referred to in public. The need of food had joined the shameful ranks of urination and defecation, for the Lost had required none of these processes to sustain life. The sexual organs, however, were shown openly in certain modes of dress, and the sexual arts the Lost had perfected were striven for with aggression. Not many possessed Power; being human, it cost them most of a lifetime's labor even to scratch the surface of understanding. Their magicians were old and dry, and, for the most part, fools. Vazkor, who possessed Power as his right, had concealed it, knowing the danger of their jealousy. He would not tell me how he had come among them, but knowing the strange yet inevitable paths I had taken to reach superiority in a human community, I was not surprised at what he had done, only curious.

Outside the Cities of the south crouched the steadings and villages of the Dark People. I learned of their position now, and this much, at least, was as it had been before. They were the slaves of the community, the human workers, allowed to live out their rotten, hopeless lives by the courtesy of the City soldiery. They farmed the unwilling land, and sent a tithe of seven-eighths of their yield to the City stores; they were recruited without warning as soldiers and builders. By the laws of their "superiors" they were not permitted any color or ornamentation of dress, except for their chiefs, who might wear a collar of stones

to denote rank. Neither were they allowed any religious or secular ceremony, except for a death. This last was probably granted because of the terrified outcry that might have arisen had it been denied; even the soldiers were less horrible than angry ghosts perhaps. It seemed strange, even then, that a people should agree to such enslavement perpetual, and without any reward or relief. Yet the City legend stated that the Dark Ones were the children of the most ancient slave-race, those who had suffered beneath the yoke of the Lost. They had been born to suffer, the Cities said, and perhaps had been made to believe it.

Knowledge of the Cities led me to their war. I had known little before, and yet the whisper had always been about me on the far side of the mountains. Barak's "caravan" had gone to Ankurum because the Cities indirectly bought their war gear there, and in the other towns along the Ring—I saw now why. Not only would few of the unhuman humans consent to demean themselves by work as smiths, but this dead land had very little left to give. If it was farmed out, it was mined out also. The Old Race had been merciless in their demands on it, and now it was spent.

I read a great deal about the war, but I did not fully comprehend. There were, it seemed, three alliances, each between a group of Cities, Ezlann and five others here in what was termed the White Desert, six farther south in the Purple Valley, and a collection of ten—remote, mysterious—at Sea's Edge. Each group was theoretically in arms against the other two, Ezlann and hers against Purple Valley and Sea's Edge, Sea's Edge and Purple Valley against each other, and so on. Superficially the war was to gain possession of extra territory, and yet ... It seemed a game, a game similar to the one Vazkor had taught me, a complex and sophisticated vicious test of wills, set on a red and black checkered board with pieces of ivory and transparent quartz. Its name was Castles, and it could be played only with a kind of cool hatred. Battles in the war were scarce, neatly fought on the no-man's land between alliance and alliance, that area they called the War March. They seemed to be conducted with more attention to martial etiquette than a desire to win. Besides, there had been no battles for five years or more. I did not understand, but yet, it seemed, I did. Had the Old Race fought, or made a pretense of fighting, among themselves, to spice their boredom on that peak of total supremacy they had achieved? No memory moved in me at the thought. In fact, all my memories that had woken with me under the mountain seemed to be fading day by day. I could scarcely remember now the fiery rooms, the statues, the lake of swans and endless marble stairways, only remember that I had remembered. ...

Everything I learned in great detail, for like all people unsure of themselves, the citizens were very exact in writing down every nuance and petty rule of their culture.

I knew the contempt Vazkor felt for them. A special look possessed his face when he spoke of them to me, a controlled yet acid disgust, a detestation no less corrosive because he gave it no true expression.

And then, the final legend—a belief that sustained them, yet must have been a constant terror too—that certain of the Lost lay sleeping, yet alive, and would one day wake. This they called "Reincarnation," although it was not really so, as it was their own bodies to which they returned. Nevertheless, their waking would be fresh, their bodies strange to them, a reincarnation of sorts. It was for these gods that the dark flame was kept burning in the stone bowls, the flame of Evil, which to the Cities was only a Watchfire. Each City had its own special deity. Here in Ezlann her name was Uastis.

When at last I finished reading the highly ornamented books, I sat silent at the great window of the tower palace. I could not see out through the rainbow crystal, the lamp flickered on its colors; outside, the moonlight made a white prison of the panes.

For three days I had done little but read and absorb the sentiments of this place. Even my recreation—the extraordinary gardens, the game of Castles—had been part of my education. Now, abruptly and for the first time, I was aware that these incredible things were real, and true. Even the

expected goddess had come.

Vazkor stood across the long room, dark and motionless at the hollow oval of the fireplace, where small pale flames still twitched their tails.

"So now you understand a little," he said to me.

"A little. But what is it*you* want, Vazkor?"

He shrugged.

"You can't confine a thinking brain, goddess. How do I know? I know only what I want at the present, and you will help me to it. When I have what I want now, I shall want other things of which I have no awareness at this moment."

"And at this moment, it is the place of Javhovor in Ezlann?"

"Ezlann, and then her sisters in the south."

"And the Javhovor's war will then be yours. Where does the war fit into your plans?"

"When I have Ezlann and her five allies, I shall take Purple Valley and Sea's Edge in battle. You have seen, no doubt, how little our militarism means in terms of conquest. When I am finally and fully in the lists, there will be many changes made."

"And I," I said, "I am the symbol of your right to rule."

A muscle flinched slightly in his jaw. This direct reference to my own Power made him uneasy.

"It is to your advantage," he said.

"Yes."

I rose and crossed to the fireplace. But I did not stand near to him, I was afraid of nearness, and the sense of intimacy and longing in me because he was Darak, undead.

"Surely," I said, "I will be an inconvenience to you when you have all that you want—at*this* moment. I recollect your soldiers who died because they must not speak that they had seen Uastis."

"I know you cannot be killed," he said, his narrow eyes very cold and empty.

"A living death can be as effective. Some underground room, an airless place where I would be always as near to death as was possible."

He smiled.

"You forget, goddess. We are brother and sister, you and I. When this is finished, we will have another duty to our ancestors, besides the duty of Rule. How else does Power return and spread except through new life? We will make children together, and our Race will be reborn."

I stared at him. He seemed emotionless, yet very certain. If a man had spoken in this way to me at that

moment, in that time of my own hubris, I might have killed him, but I did not dare to set my own fledgling Power against the mature capabilities of Vazkor.

"I am I," I said to him, "so enorr so. A woman, perhaps, but not a vessel of your pride."

He smiled again, not very much. He was indifferent to my individuality. It had no place in his scheme of things. I was abruptly afraid, the familiar terror of being caught in an other's will, having no person but the person they countenanced, existing because of them, dead at their death, as I had felt I should be at Barak's ending, without fully realizing it.

I turned away and went from the room, and he did not try to stop me.

It was easy for me to find the black, chill hall of the statue. It was a model in miniature of the great Temple of the City of Ezlann. I had learned that all high officials and lords possessed their own private replica.

Having entered, I was not sure why I had come. I walked into the darkness, and soon could see quite well the pillars, the ornate ironwork, the veiled giant woman of gold.

Before her, on the altar, the flame stirred in its stone bowl.

Going forward, I waited for fear to come, but fear did not come at all. Had the years of nonrealization emptied the power of Karrakaz from the flame? Even as I thought it, a little movement came in the back of my brain, a little whisper.

"I am here."

Yet still, there was no terror. I went close to the stone bowl and looked down into it, at the white light. Yes, I could sense Karrakaz, and yet a Karrakaz quite changed. I did not feel a terrible power come from the bowl, only a tremor of presence. I, now, it seemed, was the more powerful. This being could not ever match me.

"Karrakaz," I said aloud.

The flame flattened and twisted on itself.

Suddenly I was happy, and unafraid. I was invincible. If this thing could not awe me, what was he, Vazkor, brother who-feared-me? Involuntarily my hands went to the cat mask, but I checked. I had not yet broken the curse; the face of ugliness was still on me, and until I found the Jade and abruptly I knew that my new power was as strong as the Jade, that I had no need of the Jade, that I could defeat everything that troubled me, bit by bit, and by my own will alone. I*knew.* Elation. For the first time, the sense of being.

Strange, that when we feel we understand all things, we understand nothing. Strange, that when we feel we understand nothing, we have begun, at last, to understand.

4

He came to me in the morning, after my one and only meal of the day, which did not consist of food but of a drink, very like wine in its taste. It contained all the nourishment my body required, and was the first

wholly digestible substance I had consumed. No longer the torturing pains in my stomach which had followed every morsel of food until now.

Vazkor looked at me through the wolf's red glass glare, and said, 'Tomorrow. The Festival of the Golden Eye. The whole City will fill the Temple of Uastis. That is the day their goddess will wake. I hope you understand."

"You will make it your business to see that I do," I said.

He came toward the ebony table, picked up the slender silver beaker, and turned it by its polished stem.

"I have not yet seen your face," he said.

"No," I said, "nor is there any need you should."

"There is a need," he said.

He drew off the wolf's head, put it on the table, and stood looking at me, waiting.

I recalled Darak, who twice had dragged the mask from me and left me burned and naked. Yet I had no terror now. Yes, let him see what Karrakaz had done to me, and be afraid of it. I lifted the mask from me, and held it loosely in one hand. I looked at him, level, and it did not distress but pleased me when his eyes widened, his face whitened. I smiled at him.

"Now you have seen," I said. "Remember it."

He turned away and I laughed gently, and covered myself again, laughing.

I had been in Ezlann seventeen days, and had seen only the gardens and the tower palace, nothing more. No window gave access. Each was a view in itself, a jewel, an art-form; what need, then, for it to show anything beyond its own beauty? Yet now I was to see the City, walk in it, and finally possess it.

The Festival of the Golden Eye fell at the same time each year, in the long month they called White Mistress, because soon the snow would come to cover the wilderness of the desert with a new and cleaner death. The festival would last three days, days of entertainment, music, pleasure and, never to be forgotten, worship of the Lost, and of their representative Uastis.

All through the day there had been much happening in Ezlann—so he told me. But, now that the sun was setting, they were moving toward the great Temple, and we must move with them. Vazkor had told me all I must do, and I felt no apprehension, only a slight amusement and languor, which I did not yet realize were false. High Commander as he was, he would ride behind ten of his own soldiery, flanked on either side by five, and followed by twenty maidens, and, walking, a final cavalcade of thirty captains. At the portico of the Temple he would wait on the arrival of the Javhovor and his own personal guard. The soldiers would remain with him, the maidens would withdraw inside the building. I, following the maidens, would slip away from them, once inside, into a passage he had told me of, and there one would meet me—a priest, but Vazkor's. It was quite simple, and I was not troubled.

Dressed like the other maidens in black robes, which left bare the breasts and arms, wearing like them a silver mask shaped like a flower—oval at the center with stiff petals framing the face, and a full wig of silver hair hanging behind—I followed Vazkor, among the sounds of harness, marching feet, the rhythmic chant sung by the women, along the dark corridors, out into the City.

Each City had its own color, and because Ezlann was built entirely of black stone, they had taken it as their tradition to use black furniture and to wear black clothes. Now the world which was Ezlann seemed strange and very lovely. The sun was down, and the sky flooded by a deep gray-pink gloaming against which the endless pinnacled silhouettes of the City rose back, in a detail fine and sharp as a thorn. Ahead, humped like the back of an animal asleep, a tall hill, and on the hill the Temple, row upon row of circular terraces set one on the other, growing smaller as they reached higher, until they gained the climax of an open dome where a watch light glittered like a cool green eye. Toward the Temple wound the endless separate processions, all black, yet spangled with the soft stars of their lamps and tapers and torches. All through the upward streets of Ezlann the dark slow crowds, like black, lamp-sparkling water flowing the wrong way, curved and trickled back to their source.

Stars pierced the sky as we walked. I sang the chant with the maidens around me, a chant to Uastis to whom "the brave and the fair come to bring homage."

We reached the Temple hill, and the crowds lining the streets eased and were gone. Marble flagstones, and then the vast building, so huge now that we were close to it, the portico above its forty shallow steps like the great open mouth of some monster.

The maidens slid aside. A smaller archway, dim light, the rustling of our robes. To the left a passageway opened, its walls painted with lotuses and vines. Swiftly I turned into it. The women went by me, unseeing, drugged by the strange plant wine of the south, and by their chanting and belief.

It grew darker the farther into the passage I went, until a small light appeared ahead of me. As I came nearer, the light resolved itself into a lamp held firmly in a plump black gloved hand. The priest wore black holy robes stitched with silver. Somehow, from the size and set of his silver mask, I was able to tell that his face was fattish, a little too small for his body, and narrow at the forehead—not the head of a clever man.

He bowed.

"Goddess."

A smooth oily voice. Did he believe what he spoke? I sensed that he did not, and yet that he was convincing himself that he did—a curious paradox I had no time to think of.

"Take me there," I said.

He turned at once and moved off, through the warren of dark corridors beneath the Temple of Uastis.

The statue in the Temple is more than a giant, it is a colossus. Her head touches the roof beams, the fingernails of her smallest fingers are the size of a man's skull. At her festivals she is unveiled, and stands in all her beauty, lit by lamps burning on chains from the roof, which light only her and not the places below. She is naked gold to her lips, her sex and thighs and legs covered with a golden drapery of skirt held by a wide belt of gold studded with green stones and jade. Around her neck is a golden collar hung with droplets of jade which depend onto her breasts. These jades are each larger than a woman's body. Her hair is made of gold wire plaits and silver wool, and her head is the head of the cat.

In the little dim-lit room, two priestesses with silver flower faces covered my neck, shoulders, arms and breasts, my stomach and back, my hands and feet with a scented yellow cream. When the cream dried, it hardened on my flesh like a new skin of burnished gold. Around my hips to my ankles they draped the

stiff golden skirt. The golden belt was fastened at my hips, the golden collar was fastened at my throat, and the jades rang cold on my breasts. They turned aside as I put off the silver mask and put on the cat's face Vazkor had sent me. I wondered who had made this mask, and if they too had died, knowing too much. The priestesses combed out my long hair and added nothing. White is sister to silver.

Then, having prepared me themselves, they fell on their faces, and whimpered in apparent terror of my god-head.

The priest returned, and led me through another corridor, to a small black stone door. A secret lock, geared to his touch alone. The door rasped open. Stooping at the low lintel, I went through. The door shut.

Steps. Many, many steps. My bare feet stirred a faint brushing echo. A platform and another door. Outside, the narrow ledge and the drop of over a hundred feet to the Temple floor.

Who, looking up, would see the tiny blemish in the goddess' belly, just above the knot of her skirt? A tiny oval scar on her immortal frame, which was the door.

Outside, the dim roar and breathing sound of worship. I had only to wait for the single cry, the cry of the chief priest—"Come forth!" Each festival the cry came, a matter of ceremony only, but on this day the entreaty would be answered. Abruptly, my skin turned icy, my knees shook. I imagined stepping out onto the narrow ledge, losing consciousness, falling, regaining my senses in time to experience the impact of the stone flags. It was pitch-dark in the belly of Uastis. Trembling, I sheltered against the metal wall, afraid to hear the cry at any second. No need for fear. I would not go out. Yes, and then Vazkor would punish me—some slow death which was not death—a constant agony, endless torture. And yet I was more powerful than he. Karrakaz had slunk down before me. I straightened a little, but I longed for him to come, fling open the door, and carry me back down the steps in his arms. To be safe and to be his, my love whom I could not help but love, because I had loved him before our meeting. Weak with this longing and with the selfanger which accompanied it, I leaned against the door. And the cry came.

"Come forth!"

It belled and echoed, even here, the great voice in the silence of religion beyond the door.

On impulse, because it had been planned, not thinking, I thrust at the metal—first left, then right—and the ancient spring responded. The door raised slowly up, and the Temple lay yawning before me, black, glittering with a million small lights like the eyes of waiting animals.

I stepped out onto the ledge, not so narrow as it seemed, amid the lamp-glare that surrounded the goddess. One great rushing sigh of shock rose like the thrust of the sea below me. I could not see their faces, only knew that every face was lifted to me. The door slid down again behind me; no way back. Yet, it was unreal to me now.

After a while the chief priest's voice called up to me. I could not see him, yet the voice was shaken, and not quite in control.

"Who is this, that dares answer our prayer, which may be answered only by the goddess?"

"I am the goddess," I said. The clear words dropped down among them like glass beads into a pool. "I am Uastis Reincarnate. I am the True Coming, the Risen One, She you have waited for."

Below, the Temple seemed to swing back and forth like a great ship at sea. A small white fleck, the flame in the altar bowl, pulled at my eyes. Numbly, with my right sole, I sought the grooves of the ledge, and found them at last. My toes exerted their light pressure, straining the tendons of my foot. A faint hoarse hum of ancient machinery stirring, rusty from aeons of disuse, misuse. The ledge jolted only a little. It began to move, slowly, down the length of the goddess' skirt, toward the floor.

Shouts and exclamations, a few women screaming. Perhaps the priests knew of this thing, but not the people of the City. Perhaps not even the priests, only Vazkor and his. The sensation was of levitation, so smooth was the passage now. The great lamps grew dimmer behind me. The blackness of the Temple swallowed me up.

Blind, I stared at them through the holes of the mask. I could not see a single face, only the little taper lights and the dark. Despite the sense of many people, I felt quite alone.

And then the man came toward me. Gradually his dark robes grew evident, the golden lion mask with its golden crest—the chief priest. A few feet from me, I checked him.

"No closer," I said.

He seemed tall now, certain. He spoke, and I heard an anger in his voice.

"We must know if this is true holiness before us."

"Must the goddess prove herself?"

He stood straight, and folded his arms—a gesture of total and insolent challenge.

I looked at him and knew his mortality. I felt the burning contempt brim my eyes like tears. I pointed at him, and contempt ran down my finger and leaped from the gilded tip in a thin white ray. It caught him in the chest, but his whole body blazed whitely for a second, lighting up the Temple. He fell backward without a sound. In its bowl the flame, which to me was Karrakaz, leaped and cowered.

The Temple groaned and mumbled, I heard them kneeling, groveling, heavy robes scraping, jewelry ringing on the stone floor.

I saw better now. I made out the line of thirty priests prostrate before me on the stairway, whispering their prayers, the people, the lords and their women bowed over as if sick. On the raised places, on golden chairs, I saw the high ones under the purple canopy of the Javhovor, each and every person in an attitude of terrified submission. Except for one.

Near to the back of the great hall, one masked face raised, one body straight. Yes, but he would submit, he would not dare to let them see, as yet, he had no fear of the goddess. Now he kneeled, now his head dropped forward. Vazkor offered me his empty homage.

5

A new prison. The Temple, like every other place, was proved to be a trap. Thirty days passed, and I remember little of them; they might have been only one long day, each was so like the rest.

Every morning early, I would rise, and the women would come to bathe and dress me. They would not

always gild my skin, except on every fourth day when I must stand in the Temple. I would wear a robe of pleated black linen, tight at sleeves and waist, arranged at the skirt in many complicated folds. Great collars of gold, golden bracelets, finger and toe rings and girdles were fastened around my body like armor, or chains. Only the golden cat mask pleased me still, for it seemed more my face than my own.

In my basalt cage, I would sit on a high-backed chair, and men and women would come in to me, and throw themselves down. Their clothes were very rich, and their jewelry crashed against the marble. Only the gold or silver ones gained access to their goddess. Here was I again in the village Temple, or among the bandit tents. They begged me for health, for the love of others, for power, both temporal and of the spirit. Sickness I could remove with a touch, but emotional command over their fellows I would not give them. That was my right, not theirs. To their cries for honor and position I referred them to the Javhovor. On the days when I stood in the Temple, thousands came and bowed down before me. Women screamed and wept. Yet I was impotent, I waited in the shadow of a man they had forgotten. In those days of acting like a mindless machine, I grew very like one. I scarcely seemed to think at all, or to feel.

The fat priest Oparr, who had led me to the statue, was my principal attendant, and I supposed, Vazkor's spy. He ushered in my visitors, and stood behind my chair while they groveled. He now had become my chief priest, in the wake of the votary I had killed, but he was Vazkor's man. Vazkor had raised Oparr from obscure nothingness (this much was evident), planted him like a rank weed in the Temple garden, and watered where he could his growth there. Now the weed was the tree-pillar of Vazkor's house. What other men he had set in high places, I did not yet know, but I guessed there would be many, all with a taste for command and for the good things it brought, very loyal to the man who had given them so much, and too stupid to see even further profit in overthrowing their benefactor. Clever Vazkor; yet he had gambled with me.

The City had been in tumult at my rising, yet I did not see it. The other five allied Cities of the White Desert were looking frenziedly to their own altars.

My place in the Temple was very quiet. The windows stared out upon courtyards and great leafless trees. On the thirtieth day of my god-head and imprisonment, snow fell and turned the black stones white. It was the first winter I had seen—I recalled no cold time from my lost childhood. Worse than in the mountains, this snow. It fell without a sound, and now the desert would be white indeed.

"The Javhovor is coming," Oparr said, standing fat before me. "The Javhovor asks that the goddess will grant him a little time in her holy presence."

"Where is Vazkor?" I asked at once.

"Vazkor, High Commander, will naturally attend his lord, the Javhovor."

"When?"

"The time it will take the Javhovor's ring bird to fly back to the palace."

I had not seen Vazkor all this time. I did not know what he desired me to do or say to his overlord, this man he intended to replace. I gave Oparr one of my golden rings to put on the leg of the carrier bird, accepted in exchange the gold ring of the Javhovor, set with an onyx and carved with the crest of the phoenix.

It did not take long. I suppose they came through the snow, but the way was cleared for them. I am not certain what I expected, but I think I was looking for a Raspar of Ankurum, even another Geret perhaps.

The Javhovor entered, attended by three men only, and one of these was Vazkor. The Javhovor was tall, straightly and slimly built. The golden phoenix mask he drew off at once, presumably out of respect for me. His face was delicately shaped, chiseled too fine perhaps, extraordinarily beautiful, and yet not feminine in the least, and he was very young, not more than sixteen years of age.

Despite his youth he was poised, quiet and elegant in his movements. He bowed to me deeply, but did not fall down as the others had. His skin was pale and clear, the eyes an intense black-blue. In the lamplight of the room his long hair shone golden as the mask he had removed from it.

"I am your servant, goddess," he said gravely, and I sensed a spark of polite defiance in him for the one who had come so abruptly from nowhere.

"What does the lord desire of Uastis?" I inquired. It was the usual manner of asking those who came to me.

'To pay my respects. To see the goddess for myself. To question her, if she permits. I am very curious; I hope the goddess will not be angry."

"Curiosity," I said, "does not generally move the anger of the gods."

He smiled, courteous and unruffled. Half turning, he spoke to his three companions. "You may leave us."

"My lord," the tall man with the wolf's mask said, "it is unfitting you should have no guard."

"Vazkor, Vazkor, I am not afraid. The goddess is my guard against all harm."

They left him, Vazkor also, and then Oparr, sliding his smooth unctuous passage out of the room. We were alone, the Javhovor of Ezlann and I.

There was a single bench against one wall. Now he carried it forward and sat on it. His slenderness had misled me, I had not thought him particularly strong, yet the bench was marble, and a big cumbersome thing. He sat easily, looking into my mask face, because of the bench, a little lower than I.

"May I ask what I want?"

"You may ask," I said.

"And the answers are at the goddess' discretion? I understand well. Where did you come from, goddess?"

It was hard to make an assessment. Vazkor had sent me no warning. I had not expected to meet such courteous probing.

"From the Old Race," I said.

"But the Old Race is gone, goddess. They say you slept, then woke."

"Yes," I said, "beneath a far mountain."

"And now you have come to Ezlann. Why?"

"Ezlann is my City. She has worshiped me since before my waking."

"How did the goddess come to Ezlann?"

"I came here," I said. "That is enough."

"And how did the goddess enter the Temple, learn of the hidden door and the secret machinery?"

"I entered," I said, "and I learned. That is enough."

"There is a legend already," he said, "that Uastis in the form of the golden phoenix flew through the stone wall of her Temple, and burned herself in the watchfire at the altar, and rose again. They say she has lived among many peoples and been their god, that she has died and returned to life, that the look of her face is so terrible it will turn to stone any man that sees it, that her body is filled with a serpent, and her brain is hewn from jade."

"Some things are hidden," I said.

"Once," he said softly, not looking at me, "an assassin was sent to kill my High Commander, Vazkor. He has enemies, goddess, and these things happen. Usually men die. I have heard what happened—Vazkor's guard ran in and found the man had stabbed him several times in the chest and throat, yet it was the murderer who was dead. Vazkor had snapped his neck in the very act of killing. They assumed Vazkor would perish from his wounds, but he did not. You have seen as much. And this I know"—he looked at me and smiled "because I, too, must have spies, goddess."

I was not sure what I should do. I said nothing. After a moment the Javhovor rose.

"Power," he said. "I know you could blast me where I stand, as you did the priest. But you are not an angry goddess. There is another part to the legend. Have you heard it?"

My only strength was in silence, so I waited.

"The legend states that the goddess will take as husband the High-Lord of her City. A parable of unity between religion and the state. Already the people of Ezlann are calling for it."

Yes, he was very dangerous, perhaps more dangerous than Vazkor, for his weapon was honesty. I wondered what Vazkor would want from me in this situation, and wondered also what I would want.

"You," I said, "are mortal."

"Of course," he said, "very mortal. The assassin who puts a knife in*my* heart need fear nothing further from me."

"I do not know what to say to you," I said. "I must have time to seek an answer within myself."

He bowed, and smiled again, without warmth.

"There are prayers daily in your Temple for our union. Such a passion for tidiness."

He put on the phoenix mask, and turned towards the doors. As he drew near, they were whisked open

by his servants outside, who must have been listening all the time, surely, to be able to judge his exit so perfectly.

Soon Oparr returned.

"Did you hear what was said?" I asked him.

"I? But, goddess, I was not present."

"Naturally," I said, "there is some spy-hole that looks into this room."

He was silent, and the gloved hands twitched uneasily in the folds of his robe.

"Listen, Oparr," I said. "You are Vazkor's man, but I am loyal to him also—you have seen as much. We must work together, we three, or your master's schemes will come to nothing. The interview I have just had might have gone better if you had warned me beforehand what the Javhovor would say. Now, get word to Vazkor, and ask him what I must answer, and what I must do."

Oparr stood quiet a moment, then he bowed low, murmured "Goddess," and went out.

Part of me had hoped that Vazkor would come himself, but he did not come. It would, after all, have been a foolish thing to do. Instead, Oparr slunk in to me at midnight, as the women were preparing my bed for sleep.

"Well?" I asked him.

"Yes, goddess," he said.

"Yes? What do you mean?"

"To all that has been asked, the answer must be 'yes—' "

I had guessed as much, but it infuriated me. As ever, I was bought and sold. Using all the force of my hate, I struck Oparr across the head and neck. He staggered and fell down. For a while he lay on the floor, groaning at the pain and the injustice.

"Get out, or I shall kill you," I said, and he ran.

The women cowered away from me in fright. Hate stabbed from my eyes at a tall black vase, which shattered instantly.

"Go!" I shouted at the women, who thankfully fled.

I lay in the cool dark. I thought,*I will leave. By night, I will run away into the desert.*

I dreamed of it, the horse flying under me through the moon-drained spaces. But another horse came after me, black, and more powerful than mine. And Vazkor caught my reins, and halted me, and I knew that I was glad that I had not escaped from him. So it was.

My answer went to the Javhovor, together with a golden seal ring. There was, apparently, great rejoicing in the City. Five days passed, days of supposed purification for my bride groom. On the sixth, the

women brought me my bridal gown—black velvet, so thickly embroidered with a phoenix of gold thread that it stood stiff as armor on my body. It was a strange business. At the appointed time I entered the vast hall of the Temple, girls going before me, strewing the torn off petals of forced winter roses, white as the snow. I sat on a tall throne, and Oparr, larger and more impressive in his ceremonial regalia, led the chants to my greatness. At last, the formal question—would I take a man as my husband? And the formal reply, yes, it should be the High-Lord I would have.

The elegant, beautiful boy who was to be my spouse came forward, faceless, dressed in black and gold. It seemed quite wrong this sham should involve him. He was at once too innocent and too aware to have been drawn in. Yet he kneeled before me, and spoke in a clear cool voice all the praises and promises which must be spoken. After which I raised him, and stood with him hand in hand, and it seemed curious to find him altogether so much bigger than I for all his slimness; for he seemed so young to me I had half expected to stand hand in hand with a precocious child. More chanting, and then together we left my prison of darkness for, I imagined, another, different prison.

Through the snow-filled, crowded, noisy streets we rode, standing, still hand-clasped, in a large golden chariot, drawn by a team of six black mares. Behind and before us, marching guards, maidens singing and casting colored petals on the snow. It was bitterly cold and took a long while. Occasionally, from our closeness in the chariot, I would feel my companion shiver, a little helpless spasm, that eluded even his poised control. His hand was light on mine, the spare, long fingered hand of a poet or musician.

We reached the palace, another of the huge, many-tiered black towers of Ezlann. Inside, mosaic floors, golden lamp clusters, a drifting warmth from the hot pipes which lay behind the walls and under the paving.

For an hour more we sat on our thrones, while the aristocratic multitude filed past, laying priceless trinkets at our feet.

It was dusk, and lamps blazed. We were alone together in a circular room with twenty narrow windows that looked out over Ezlann. The Javhovor removed his mask, which he did not seem to like wearing, and spoke to me for the first time that day, except for his appeal at my feet in the Temple, which was not for me at all.

"Well, then, it's over, goddess. At last. I've allotted you ten women, I hope they will be enough; if not, you have only to tell me. They'll come when you press that carved flower there. They'll see to whatever refreshment you require, prepare your bedchamber, and attend you at all times. The palace is yours to walk where you want. Naturally, you will wish to preside in the Temple from time to time. I'll arrange a suitable escort whenever you need it."

He was very courteous, as ever, but his voice was a little too cool now, perhaps.

"And my wifely duties?" I inquired.

"None," he said. "You are my goddess before my wife, and I remember it. I am honored."

"And you," I said, "are my husband. Am I not even expected to honor your bed?"

"That least of all," he said.

I felt the slightest twinge of disappointment, and it surprised me.

"You will not, then, command me to lie with you," I said, "but I imagine I might command you."

"You can command me only so far, goddess. There are some things even you have no power to command."

I had expected him to be embarrassed, but he was not, only reluctant to explain he did not want me, that the thought of me made him sick—She whose face turns men to stone, She who kills with one look. And I was Vazkor's, he had virtually told me he knew as much.

"You underestimate my powers," I said to him. "However, I understand your reluctance. A peaceful night to you, my husband."

He bowed to me and went out. I pressed the carved flower, and soon the women came and took me to my new apartments, which were gold and green and white, not the black of Ezlann. In a metal box lay his marriage gift to me, a great collar-necklace of twisted gold and silver, set with jades in the shapes of lions.

It troubled me, he troubled me, but I put him from my mind, and slept.

6

There were many processions in which we rode hand in hand, for it was traditional. There were many entertainments at which we sat, and he would courteously ask me what I would have the dancers or the players or the jugglers or the magicians do. I had been afraid of these entertainments once, expecting the corruption to be strongest here, but I saw only beautiful things—a woman changed into a single jewel, two albino lions on whose backs two albino youths made strange knots of their bodies. There was music too, sinuous and softly thrilling, languid melodies coaxed from the round bellies of stringed instruments, and the bowls or silver horns.

Yet I was more aware of him than of the things I saw. In public we sat close enough, but in the palace we were separate. A word was not exchanged between us except those formal words when we must speak for his people. The vast library of the palace, filled with beautiful books, painted and bound in gold and jewels—I would often find him there, but when I came he would go away. I had thought at first he had never been with a woman, and perhaps feared me because of that, but I learned later, as one always can from the gossips of any establishment, that two or three of the small, beautiful, deerlike palace maidens had shared his pleasure at one time or another.

I had never really been lonely before, there had been no time or person to induce such a feeling of emptiness. In my dreams I would long for Vazkor, and the body and the power of Vazkor, long to hurt him, punish and destroy him, long to use him as a man would use a woman—to humiliate him, and finally become his slave. But awake, I would think of my husband the Javhovor, whose name I did not know. I would think of him beside me in the chariot, the slight abrupt shudders of cold that had run over his body, and yearn to warm him with my own, to stroke his hair and smooth cheeks, and walk with him in the palace, and talk to him, and have him sing to me as he did with his doe-eyed girls.

And I was afraid. Vazkor, like a black shadow of death, reached out to seize and replace his overlord.

Some days after the marriage, when I had ridden to the Temple so they could fall on their noses before me, I sought out Oparr.

"Give this letter to Vazkor," I said.

But there was never a written answer. Perhaps Vazkor mistrusted me even further now, for I had written: "Do you know the Javhovor understands your Power? Do you realize he guesses your ambition? And he is not a fool."

Oparr came to me a few days afterward, and, when we were alone, he said softly to me, "The answer is, goddess, that some men, seeing death in front of them, walk toward it instead of running away. One who waits on death is easy to be rid of."

That dusk I went to him in the library. He rose at once, bowed, and turned to go.

"My lord," I said. It was the first time I had addressed him as an equal let alone a superior in rank. He stopped, looking at me curiously.

"I am your servant, goddess," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"You are in danger," I said, my lips feeling stiff and cold behind the mask. "You must realize it ... your spies ... I do not know if I can help you—I do not think I can—but surely you can help yourself, now, before it is too late."

"Would you have me execute all my captains?" he said to me immediately. "A little impracticable."

"Not attack, but defense," I said.

He came across the room, and looked at me, smiling a little.

"You cannot understand, goddess," he said. "I have lived with an awareness of death since I was three years of age. These things are not so important for a mortal, goddess."

Involuntarily, I put up my hand and touched his face. So soft the skin over the fine bones. He flinched away; then, correcting the gesture, he took my hand a moment, then let it go.

"I will send someone to light the lamps," he said, "so you will be able to read here."

I might have kept him there, looked in his eyes and paralyzed his will to be away from me, but I could not do it.

Like a silly, love-sick girl, I watched him from windows, stood in doorways of rooms where he sat unaware of me.

I had a magician come to me, in secret, and he conjured up ghost things in a circle on the floor. It was all trickery, but it filled the hours.

I had not spoken to Vazkor for forty-six days.

There came a morning when I woke with a sense of unreasoning fear. My skin was drenched with sweat, my night garment and sleep mask soaked in it. I lay for a long while, trying to calm myself, and then sat up to rise. The pale room tilted, and it seemed a herd of white horses pulled it like a chariot round and round the Skora of my bed. I lay back, and my whole frame ached and trembled. I saw then that I was sick, and could not understand it. My body, so strong and healing it had survived death, had

betrayed me at last to some fever of the cold weather. I was lucid enough to press the carved flower by my bed for the women, but I do not remember much after this. There was a scared physician, I seem to recollect, who did not dare touch me, and prescribed many coverings, and braziers around the bed, but this did no good. I recall glimpses of Oparr, restless and ill-at-ease, watching me, I guessed, to be certain I spoke no slander against Vazkor in my ravings. He was little enough comfort to me, and at last I made him understand I would not have him near me.

Months later, it seemed, I began to drift toward the surface of myself. There was not much left of me. My skin was flaccid and raddled as an old woman's, and my thoughts would not keep still in my head.

Then, as I lay like a skinny corpse on my pillows, the women fluttered like birds and were gone, and my husband was standing beside me. My brain seemed to clear at his coming. He set his mask down by the bed, and he was very pale. I thought for a moment it might have been concern for me, but this was foolish.

"I am sorry you are sick," he said gravely and gently.

"I do not know how long I have been ill," I said, half petulant, for no one would tell me.

"Nine or ten days," he said. "I came before but you did not know me."

A sudden little chill went through me, and I asked, "Do they know in the City their goddess is sick?"

"Oh, yes," he said quietly, "they know."

Drearily I said, "And now they doubt she is a goddess, because she is mortal enough to be ill."

"No, you're wrong, goddess. They have been in a tumult of fear for you. But there was never any doubt. Oparr has led prayers for you day and night. The women have torn their hair and breasts for you, and a black bull has been slaughtered every dawn."

"What a waste," I said.

"But now you're getting well," he said.

I took his hand, and though I saw him flinch ever so slightly, he did not pull away, and I did not let him go.

I must have slept.

After a time, a smear of golden lamplight on my lids. I half opened my eyes, and he was still there, sitting by me. I was not properly awake, but there was a sense of conviction and urgency on me.

"You are in danger," I said, "you must go. They will kill you."

My eyes would not focus, I could not see his expression.

Softly he said to me, "I know."

"Then go now, go," I whispered, thrusting at him weakly with both my hands.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "I have waited for this moment all my life."

Helplessly, I felt the sleep miasma pull me down. I struggled to keep hold of him, but I could not do it.

In a dark corridor, I saw him walk calmly ahead of me toward a burning, terrible brightness. I ran after him, calling him back, calling and calling him, but I could not seem to reach him, and he did not turn, only went on, walking so calmly, his hands loose at his sides, toward the devouring light.

There was a terrible sound in the palace: a wild beast roaring and trampling.

I woke, and sat upright in the golden bed. It was very dark, and the noise beat round and round the room. Abruptly, ice-white lightning seared through the windows.

A storm.

Now I made out the separate sounds of the blustering wind, the lashing snow-rain, the hammering fist of the thunder. There was no one in the room; the lamps had blown out. Still petulant with illness, I pressed at the carved flower. But no one came.

After a time, I made out once more the other noises I had heard in sleep that the storm had muffled but did not explain away. Shouting and screaming, shrill screams of exultation or terror, I could not tell. I pressed at the carved flower again and again, without result. Finally, I pulled myself from the bed, and began to make my way toward the double doors of the chamber. It was a slow laborious business. I did not dare to walk across the open floor, which seemed to shift under foot, but slid myself along with both hands on the walls. Another lightning flash fell blazing on the dark, and then another immediately after it, but this one gold, not white. The doors had been flung open. In the doorway many black figures, priests and priestesses, and in front of them, Oparr. He raised his hands, and cried aloud in his temple voice:

"Praise and love! The goddess is safe! Uastis is unharmed!"

The cry was echoed and reechoed. Priestesses ran into the room with me, and Oparr shut the door on us.

I was bewildered and very weak. All things were uncertain and strange to me, and so it did not seem so much stranger than anything else that they stripped me, and painted me with the cream which made my skin golden, and dressed me for the Temple, and hung on me the jewels of the Temple, and finally placed the cat mask on my head over my lank hair, even over the sleeping mask itself. Dimly I saw that the women were afraid.

When I was ready, one called out, and the doors were opened again. Oparr stepped forward.

"It will do," he said; and then, to me, "The people have been frightened for you, goddess; you must show them that you live and are well. We will help you."

They did not carry me, but a priest came on either side of me, and led me firmly by the elbows, so I should not fall. Something about these men told me they were not really priests at all. They walked with a soldier's stride.

After a time, Oparr stopped them. He came close, and said quietly, "We are nearly there, goddess. There is only one thing you must remember. When the High Commander, who has saved you, kneels before you, you must touch his shoulder and say, 'Beheth Lectorr.' Only those words, that's all you need

to remember. When he kneels. Do you understand?"

I nodded. I could remember, but they made little sense to me then, those two words of the Old Tongue.

There was red light ahead. We turned a corner and came into the long hall which opened onto a high terrace above the City. The terrace doors were wide, and scarlet torchlight streamed against the black racing sky. Below, thousands of people were massed, the gardens and the walks were flooded with them, and they were shouting, calling, screaming out in a frenzy of anger and fear a single name.

"Uastis! Uastis! Uastis!"

The storm had eased. Hail had fallen, and the terrace flags were very slippery. Men stood here, black still shapes, with silver skulls for heads. Near the edge of the terrace a man with a golden wolfs head stood alone. Oparr halted. The man with the wolfs head turned to us, then back again to the people. He raised his arms, and a crescendo of ragged cries broke the drumbeat of the chant. Slowly he left the edge and moved toward us.

"Let her go," he said to the priest-soldiers who held me. He looked at me, and his eyes were fierce behind their glass shields, strong enough to hold me up instead. "Now you must walk out where they can see you," he said. "They are very afraid for you, and you must reassure them."

His eyes held me hard; my body braced itself, and the paving did not seem to tilt beneath my feet. Stiffly, I began to walk toward the terrace lip, Vazkor a pace or so behind me, holding me firmly without touching me. Moving me like a mechanical toy.

The crowd below could see me now, and they began to sing and cheer.

I stared down at them without thought, and behind me he said, "Give them your blessing, goddess."

And without thinking, I raised my hands, and made over them the sign I made in the Temple.

A hush fell on them then, and, in the hush, Vazkor came and kneeled beside me, his head bowed.

I was very tired and wanted to sleep, but I had not forgotten. I bent and touched his shoulder, and said the two words, which meant nothing; to me, at least. At the sound of them, the crowd erupted once more. I am not certain how they heard my voice; it was little more than a whisper. I suppose there was some trickery in the structure of the terrace which allowed the whisper to carry.

Vazkor rose. His eyes willed me to turn and go back inside the hall. I did not understand the command, only obeyed it.

I walked before him, away from the noise, and away from the light and the attendants. No one remained; even Oparr was gone. In the faintly lit corridor he let go his mental control of me, and lifted me up physically instead. The doors of my bedchamber were ajar. He nudged them open with his foot, kicked them shut behind him when we were inside. He put me on the bed, neatly and precisely.

"Things have gone well," he said. "You can sleep now."

A little cold pain.

"Where is he?" I asked Vazkor.

"Who?"

"The Javhovor, my husband. He was with me before Oparr came."

"The Javhovor has gone, goddess; he need trouble you no more."

Weights of lead were piling themselves upon my body, but I must speak a little longer.

"Vazkor, where is he? Is he dead?"

"He's finished, goddess, and as well for you he is. You have been sick, and now I will tell you why you have been sick. Your husband, afraid of your Power, has been poisoning you. A human woman would be dead by now, but you, goddess, being what you are, will recover and live."

"No," I said. "No, Vazkor, no."

But he was gone. The doors were shut.

Far away the crowds still faintly roared, merciless in their joy. The snow was falling again.

7

Five more days it took me to be strong again, and in those days Vazkor achieved the last bastions of temporal power in Ezlann. Yet it had been quite easy for him, once the goddess had uttered the ancient words over him: "Beheth Lectorr" "Here is the Chosen One."

I remember how Vazkor had spoken of the gathering of the steaders as being for the Javhovor's latest campaign. But he had not been one for war; it was Vazkor's levy. He had been planning, even then, as if he sensed my coming.

Each day, despite my weakness and reluctance, I had to go out to the terrace, and let the people see me. I learned the story of the lost days from the physician who attended me now, though I learned it in secret. My husband, the Javhovor, had attempted to kill me by poison. On the night of the storm, Vazkor, suspecting the worst, had roused the crowd and come with his men to the palace. The Javhovor was called out. He denied the allegation very quietly, it seemed, and half smiling, and then, in the very act of the lie, some unseen Power had struck him down before the whole crowd. After this, I had been brought forth, and had selected the new Lord of the City—aptly my rescuer and champion.

I had no doubt it was Vazkor who killed him—killed, as I had killed, with the white knife of hate that leaps from the brain. I did not ask what became of his body, it seemed only Vazkor would know, and there was no point. As to the poison, it was a fallacy. How fortunate my illness had been for the High Commander—but he was Javhovor now, and the chosen one of the goddess.

But as I grew well, I grew hard in my bitterness. I saw Vazkor truly as he was, my enemy, and I knew my danger. Wherever I went I was attended by his people, both women and men. Outside my doors stood his guards—to protect and honor me, it was said. One day I was called out and taken to a small room, where Vazkor and Oparr and various priests waited. Here Oparr intoned over us words I recalled from that other ceremony in the Temple. And when this was finished, hand in hand, Vazkor and I presented ourselves at the high terrace, and the people roared. It was formality, yet I was afraid now

what this lie would mean; but it proved even less of a marriage than the last. Vazkor was occupied in sending and receiving messages across the snow wastes to Ezlann's five sister Cities, and had no time for me.

For many days after this I saw no one except the women, but eventually Oparr came. Since I had struck him, he had come to me, cringing a little with fear. To the fear—after the night of my first husband's murder, when he had a brief power over me in taking me to Vazkor—was added a curious gloating little triumph. Now he both whined and exulted, one emotion or the other, in turn, getting the upper hand as he sensed my anger or weakness. He would be dangerous to me in distress, yet I dared not harm him, for I still feared Vazkor's strength.

Now he bowed low, and informed me that I must go next day to the Temple and be worshipped there. The people pined without their goddess.

I answered "Yes," and sent him out, and thought in terrible frustration of the great power which was mine in the City, and yet how helpless it had made me. In my sleep I dreamed myself a giantess, crushing Ezlann in my hands, throwing her towers into the desert, where they broke, and ran like blood.

In a yellow dawn I rode there in the goddess' chariot, behind me thirty black guards, ahead thirty other guards, on either side two black archers with silver skull faces. Everywhere, the phoenix badge of the Javhovor, but under it the wolf's head. I do not remember the worship in the Temple, only the murmur and sea-sound of the chanting, and smells of heavy incense. Going back, the snow was thick in the streets. In the huge forecourt my driver reined the white mares. Men waited courteously for me to retire. Slowly, with the goddess' erect, stiff gait, I left the chariot, began to walk across the snow. Danger, all around me, and no help for it. Through the black doorway, along corridors with glassy floors. ...

Abruptly I was aware that someone was behind me, matching his speed to mine.

I turned. Three men had followed me, soft-foot as cats. Under the silver masks, I sensed a waiting. Had Vazkor sent them to remove me already? Yet it was the phoenix they wore, not the skull, and it was oddly reassuring, though it meant nothing now.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"We are the goddess' new guard," one said. He was taller than the rest.

"Vazkor's men," I said with a bitter emphasis.

The tall one said, "Now we are Vazkor's. Before, we were the guard of Asren, Phoenix, Javhovor of Ezlann."

I had never known before the name of my first husband. I started at it; spoken at this time by this man, it seemed as if I glimpsed him suddenly, alive and immediate.

I turned away and continued the walk to my apartments, yet my blood tingled. I was aware of a great difference, a sort of sea-change in the air. They moved behind me, and I felt no menace in their presence. At the double doors, I halted again.

"You may enter," I said.

I went through, and they followed me. The third guard pushed the doors closed, shutting us in.

There was a moment's silence as I stood facing them across the beautiful room, and then they were kneeling, unmasked. I went to them, and raised the face of the tallest guard in my hand. Recognition. This man had knelt to me before, on the causeway outside Ezlann—not the captain. for Vazkor had disposed of him, but one of the arrogant, silver blond soldiers.

"I am Mazlek," he said.

The name was familiar:*She was dead—Mazlek killed her—I saw the blade go in through her left breast—*

"Goddess," Mazlek whispered. His eyes were wide on me, open, and coolly reverent.

"How did you escape from Vazkor?" I asked him.

"Easy. He did not know me, and I was Asren's man."

"A spy," I said.

"Perhaps. I was Asren's man. When death came for us because we had seen you, I slipped away. I'd expected it of Vazkor."

"And so Asren Javhovor knew from you how I came to Ezlann."

"Yes, goddess."

I smiled a little at a mystery solved—for Asren, my husband, had never believed my god-head, only in my Power. Yet this soldier believed.

"And now you are my guard," I said. I turned to the other two, a little smaller, both blond and very handsome—they might have been brothers. "Your names?"

"Slor," one said.

"Dnarl," the other said.

Even their voices were similar.

I motioned them to rise, and I saw now that Mazlek, their captain, was very tall indeed, and very strong, he who had killed me once in the moon-darkness.

"How long are you to watch me?"

"It will be easy at first, goddess, to prolong our stay. Later, perhaps, it will be necessary for you to declare us your honorary guard. In all, goddess, I have eighty men under me. Not a great many, but enough to save your holy person from immediate insult or assault."

Again I smiled, involuntarily. I took his hand, and shook my head at him when he began at once to kneel.

I would be safe now. More, much more than physically safe.

It had been uneasy, that first time, in the green woods of Darak's second camp, something that must be given a different name. This was an open thing, without dishonor.

I lay down early to sleep, before the day's candle had quite smoked itself out over the snow wastes. And beyond the doors my guard waited to protect me, Mazlek, Slor, and Dnarl, who had once been Maggur, the black giant, Giltt gold-earrings, and little Kel the archer.

8

Oparr came in the morning.

I received him, and sensing my mood, he cringed a little over his words.

"Vazkor Javhovor requests the goddess' presence."

"Why?"

"I am only the goddess' priest. I do not know all things."

"You are the worm in the woodpile, Oparr," I said sweetly. "You worm in and out of things, and you learn a great deal."

He hesitated, fidgeting, his black-gloved hands busy with his skirts. Then he said, "It is to do with the council at Za, goddess, I believe."

Za, the central City of White Desert, was a vaguely known name to me. Of the council I had heard nothing, yet I wanted no further truck with the venomous priest. I rose, and he led me to Vazkor, and behind me walked eight men; Slor and his cohort.

He waited for me in the library, among Asren's books and the beauty Asren had engendered there. Oparr, Slor, the rest, were shut outside.

Vazkor was masked, and very still in his chair.

"Sit, goddess," he said.

It was a small thing, but he made it sound like a command. I sat.

"So, we are to go to Za," I said. "Why is that?"

There was a moment's silence. He had not expected me to know anything about it. The last time he had seen me, at our formal marriage ceremony, I had been listless, malleable. Finally he rose. He went among Asren's things as if he understood them, and had some right there. Stupidly, it angered me, but quickly he was back, and unrolling a parchment map before us on the polished table. The map was light brown in color, painted in black, and beautifully drawn with little superfluous drawings of ships and chariots and horses, farmers busy in fields, marching soldiery. To the north there was one single gash of sapphire, below the mountains, which was Aluthmis, the Water.

He set the onyx weights at each corner, and pointed things out to me. I scarcely heard him. I could only think of Asren's hands unrolling, caressing the map. But abruptly I was aware of the Cities, set forth like a

formation of stars, around which had been drawn the shape of some nebulous animal, such as might be described on an astrologer's chart. Ezlann marked the head, and four others the body, and, stretched out behind, the last City tipped the tail.

"Here is Ezlann," Vazkor said. "To the southwest of her, Ammath, to the west, Kmiss. To the southeast of Ezlann, So-Ess, and between and below So-Ess and Kmiss, Za. Beyond Za, the mountain City Eshkorek Arnor. You will see now that etiquette demands any meeting of the six Cities of the Alliance should be held at Za. Her position is symbolically central, between the other five."

I recalled the messengers who had ridden back and forth in the long days since Asren's death, and I understood a little.

"You are drawing the five High-Lords together to master them at Za, and take the reins of power."

"I plan so," he said.

"And I, why must I go with you?"

He removed the weights, and the map curled in on itself swiftly, like a disturbed fetus.

"It is necessary the goddess should be there."

"And why, Vazkor, is it necessary?"

He said nothing. Still masked, he turned to replace the map in its jar.

"Because, Vazkor," I said softly, "without the goddess you are nothing." We both knew this well, but it gave me great pleasure to say it.

After a moment he said levelly, "You have made a complete recovery from your illness, I see. I am glad, I should not have liked to risk your health on the journey to Za."

"When do we leave Ezlann?" I asked him.

"Two days," he said. "You can bring five women, no more; they are bad travelers. Naturally I'll send you a detachment of my men, as personal escort—the Cities will expect to see you honored."

"No need," I said. "I have my own guard. Eighty men and their captain, my commander. That should be enough for my honor, should it not?"

He turned to me swiftly, and I knew behind the mask he was staring.

"Who is this man?"

"You will no doubt discover by your own methods," I said. "I should not like to discourage your labors. Only remember, he is under my protection."

His stiffness eased. Very politely he said, "You have been a little unwise, perhaps."

"Indeed? Perhaps I am not alone in that."

"You must not persist," he said, "in your mistrust of me. We are one, you and I, however hard you try to put it from your mind. If you are goddess, then Vazkor is god. They have no legend here for me, that is why I must use you as my shield. For a time."

"It is foolish of you," I said, "to use as your shield the spear," for abruptly I remembered Asutoo's words in the cave, when I had made him tell me how he had betrayed Darak. "Too narrow for defense," I said to Vazkor, "and much too sharp."

He did not answer me, and I left the room and went to my apartments. At the doors I called in Slor.

"Get word to Mazlek that I have announced my Guard of Honor to Vazkor Javhovor."

Unmasked, I saw his face tauten, then relax. He smiled grimly.

"Well and good," he said.

"Will you wear my badge?" I asked him.

"Goddess," he said. I did not understand the familiar emotion on his face; I had seen it so often in others, yet still it made no sense.

"The head of the cat," I said. "Can you find smiths to cast it? We have only two days."

He bowed.

"Easily, goddess."

When he had gone, I sat a long while in the winter-lit room, and passed from my triumph to deep depression. I had the sensation—so often on me now—that having left any place, I should not return there. Even so, I did not understand why it should distress me to quit this city, until the thought came that it was Asren I must leave. I cannot explain this aching super-awareness of his presence, even after I knew him dead. He seemed all around me, particularly in the library, which was so entirely his. I longed to take and hold things that had been his, yet I had nothing of his, except that necklace he had sent me on our marriage night, which possessed nothing of him because he felt nothing for it, had given nothing to it, knowing it was for me. The day wore on, and with my knowledge of impending departure, the sense of no return, I began to pace the room, ridiculously desperate, and unable to be still.

Finally I went to the doors and opened them. Outside, four men, phoenix-masked. I knew they were all strangers to me, yet I could tell even from so small a thing as the line of their bodies as they looked at me that they were mine.

My mouth felt stiff and dry, but I said to them, "The dead lord, Asren Javhovor—where is he buried?"

"Goddess," one of them said, "it was done swiftly, and with shame. Vazkor's work. We do not know."

"But give us time," another one said. "We can discover."

"There is no time," I said.

"Perhaps," a man said. He hesitated. "Possibly one of the women—Asren Javhovor's women—might know. There must have been some rights allowed. He was not the steader Shlevakin, after all," he added

with intense bitterness.

"Find out for me," I said. I touched his shoulder lightly, and felt that peculiar quickening under my fingers that was not sexual but spiritual desire. He bowed and was gone.

The windows blackened. Women entered and lit the lamps, their dresses coiling and rustling on the floors.

Then Dnarl came and two others, and they brought a girl with them, and left her in the room with me.

I had expected to feel jealousy—jealousy of any kind, sexual, mental, anything, I was not sure. Yet I felt nothing of this.

She was very young, fourteen or fifteen, very fragile and lovely; like him, she had reached perfection before her years, and by token of the very swiftness of this achievement, there seemed to be something ephemeral about her. Long icy-gold hair spilled on her shoulders under a dark veil. I would not have asked her to unmask, but I suppose Dnarl had told her she should. The gold thing, some flower shape, dangled from her hand. Her arms and naked breasts were pearly, and quite perfect. She wore no rings or jewelry, though she seemed made for adornment. And, though she was plainly terrified, it would have been useless to tell her not to be.

"I have asked for you to come to me," I said, "because I want to know where my husband is buried."

"Yes, goddess," she said, not looking at me.

"Do you know this?"

"Yes, goddess."

"How?"

She made a little nervous gesture with her hands.

"Vazkor Javhovor sent a man to tell me. It was a burial of shame, he said, because of what had been done, but only fitting some should remember and go to the place."

"Why were you told?" I asked her.

"Because—" she stammered. "I was his—but I am of no importance. Don't be angry with me!" And she began to cry out of pure fright. She, it seemed, had also expected my jealousy.

"There is no need for this," I said gently. "There is no anger in me for you. Will you take me to the place?"

She nodded dumbly, and turned at once.

It was a long journey. Two guards came behind us, and they had a lamp, which at first seemed unnecessary. But soon the lighted corridors were behind us. We went through dark, earth-smelling ways deep under the palace, through old and neglected cellars crusted with dust and misty with hanging gray webs, down worn staircases that twisted round and round on themselves in the shadows. It looked a dangerous way for her to come. I remember it surprised me she did not seem afraid of it. At last there

was a level corridor, and, at the end, a great iron door. She moved her fingers in the grooves and it lumbered unwillingly open.

What lay beyond filled me with bitter fury.

Some earth-heap in the desert would have angered me less.

Black velvet draped the five walls of this underground chamber, which reeked of dust and neglect. Despite the drapery, the floor had not been swept clean. Filthy scraps of cloth and glass lay scattered everywhere. Damp would soon eat holes in everything. At the center of the room, a black draped slab—wood or stone, I did not know. On this rested the ornate tomb-cask of a High-Lord—cedar wood plated with gold, ornamented with phoenixes and serpents, set with blue stones and jades, nailed shut with diamond-headed nails. Around the cask flowers had been scattered to wither, adding their decay to the rest, precious oils had been spilled, and now ran sticky, rancid and evil-smelling down the cracks of the floor.

The guards waited in the corridor, the girl slid into a corner, wide-eyed as I walked round and round the coffin until my anger, like a pain, eased a little. The girl had begun to weep again, for him, I think, this time. The aching loss I felt must be unbearable to her; she, after all, had known him and been one with him.

"If you wish to stay a while, I will wait for you in the corridor," I said, but she choked off her sobs immediately, and ran after me.

So she led us back the long dismal way. We reached my apartments and I beckoned her inside. I thanked her, but she did not seem to understand the thanking.

"Later," I said, "if I can, I shall have him reburied, openly, and with honor, in the tradition of Ezlann."

But she did not comprehend, and, anyway, how empty it seemed, all of it, how pointless, for he could not enjoy or suffer anything of it now. Yet I could not get the filthy room from my mind.

I let her go after that. She was so afraid I could not keep her another moment. I had wanted to ask her for something of his, some small thing he had given her that meant less than the others, but I knew she would give me the best and dearest because she was so frightened, and besides this, it seemed such a desolate thing to ask. So, I said nothing and regretted it later.

There were many dreams that night, formless but terrifying. Waking, I recollected only the stone bowl and the flame whose name was Karrakaz, and the words of the curse, and how I cried out that I was stronger, much stronger than the he-she thing in the bowl.

The next day there were preparations for departure, and, at sunset, I must go to the Temple and bless Ezlann for the last time, though, it is true,*they* expected me to return. As I stood there in the stiff gold things, my eyes never once left the bowl where the flame burned. Yet the flame was very still and no voice spoke unspeaking in my brain: "I am Karrakaz the Soulless One, who sprang from the evil of your race ... there is no escape ... you are cursed and carry a curse with you ... there will be no happiness. Your palaces are in ruins. The lizards sun themselves ... the fallen courts let me show you what you are."

Part IV:*War March*

1

When I left the village under the volcano, the crowds stood sullen and fearful at my going; women had wept and plucked at me. And later, from the amphitheater of the hills, I had looked back, and seen the scarlet lamp which was the villages' burning in the volcano's second aftermath. Now I rode with Vazkor, though not side by side, not even with the remote nearness I had had then to Darak. Hundreds of inanimate and living things separated us: soldiers splendidly clothed; horses incredibly appareled in silken body drapes with purple ribbons plaited in manes and tails, and golden nuggets on harness; wagons of provisions dragged along by mules; even the levies from the steadings, trapped out as soldiers in leather, but unmasked, their eyes and faces dead as I had seen them first.

Bells were ringing in Ezlann, deep and endless, and crowds milled at the edges of the streets and on the balconies. I rode in my open chariot, a ceremonial thing which would be discarded at the gate for a carriage. The people shouted, and cheered us. It was more than the procession of a goddess and a king—this was the magnificent riding of the warlord to his war. Beyond White Desert stretched the War March, the jousting place, where each alliance did battle with the others, yet Vazkor knew, and others too, perhaps, that his war march began at the back gate of Ezlann. Every city was a prize to him, conquest and power, something to blot the running wound of his pride, for a time. Yes, even more than this, not only the Cities of the south, but everything outside his own body, even the body itself, must be subdued and held in iron to satisfy the craving of his mind.

The cheers and bells rang on and on. So unlike the village, so unlike. But then, their goddess had not really left them; her Power was everywhere, in the great statues still, and in the person of her chief priest Oparr.

I almost laughed.

At my back rode eighty men, phoenix-masked, each bearing on the right side of the breast the golden cat, each ten groups of seven captained by an eighth man who wore a green sash about his waist. This had not been my idea but Mazlek's, presumably. Yet no one could now mistake the Honorary Guard of the Goddess. I did not know how they had settled with the smiths and dye merchants, for I had no revenue of my own.

It took us fourteen days to reach Za, more than twice as long as it would take a single mounted man, but so it is with caravans of any sort. There was little of individual interest to me; for most of the time I was immured in my traveling carriage—a stuffy gilded box, that left me each night stiff and aching, and was drawn by four toiling and temperamental mules. Several times each day the carriage would judder to a halt, and I would hear the drivers arguing and cajoling, while the mules stood regarding them with polite interest, until leather-thong whips were applied.

I had brought only two women with me—the prettiest, because it had occurred to me I should have to look at them a great deal—but they were petulant and uneasy, frightened of me at such close and prolonged quarters; and their conversation, when it came in little bursts, was the hollow chatter of fools.

Each night a camp was made, a military and architectural undertaking, which helped put days on our journey. First, about late afternoon the foot soldiers would be marched briskly ahead, reach the proposed site, and begin to erect there the movable metal walls carried by their pack horses. By the time the mounted men and carriages arrived, the camp was securely walled by five-foot-high sections of iron with quaint little gates in them, and the tents and pavilions were going up. Sentries were posted, horses were quartered and fed, and fires accurately built and cooked over. For the dark, we were a town, and a

rowdy town at that. Despite the efficient iron walls and sentries, drunks roamed the lanes all night hotly pursued by furious superiors, horses broke loose and galloped about, snorting and defecating and knocking into things. The scattering of prostitutes held nightly revels in their gaudy arbors at the camp's lower end, and at first there was fighting on every side, due to absurd rivalries between one section of soldiers and another. Fierce and individual loyalties existed; whichever captain a man served was better than any other captain, an egoist extension of self that apparently went unrecognized. Each dawn discovered the dead and dying remains of these ridiculous fracas, until Vazkor put a stop to it by threat of execution in the cold and sober morning for all who drew sword on a brother soldier. There were three of these executions, however, before the new law penetrated to their brains.

Vazkor's pavilion was the centerpiece of the camp. Mine stood a lane or so away, under the protection of my own guard. There had been no fighting among Mazlek's men, I had noticed, neither did any of the regular troops come to challenge them.

In the icy-red daybreaks of winter the camp would fold itself up and prepare for departure. The Ezlanns, for whom all natural functions had assumed such colossal taboos, were cleverly secretive in all that was necessary. The levied steaders, as if in studied insult, ate and drank and performed all other bodily duties quite in the open. They were regarded as animals, and so behaved as animals, and curiously, in so doing, had achieved something of an animal's dignity. No longer was there disgust and pity in me for men tied to such necessities; it was the secretive and denying Ezlanns I pitied now.

The greater part of the journey, as I have said, was deathly to me. I had brought books with me from Asren's library, but the jolting of the carriage and the dim light made reading while in motion quite impossible. Only at night could I turn to them, and then I did not read, for the ghost of him was in every page I touched and brought its own peculiar melancholy. The winter scenes from the small carriage window—all blank whiteness, very flat, with snow-haze on the near horizon obscuring sky or possible mountains—gave me dead, pale dreams at night. Nothing seemed to live in the desert, not even snow wolves and bears as on the Ring. The caravan itself made a great noise, but beyond that clamor there seemed nothing, nothing at all.

At the dawn of the tenth day of journeying I called Mazlek into my pavilion.

"Mazlek, find me a horse to ride, and some sort of man's clothing to fit me, so that I can ride it."

He looked astonished.

"But, goddess—" He hesitated. Then he said, "it would have to be boy's clothes—and, does the goddess realize how cold it is?"

Despite his argument, the clothes came, plain black and, though clean, I could see they had been worn before. I donned the leggings, knee-length side-slit tunic, and the boots. Drawing the belt far around on itself, and forced to cut a new notch for the catch, it came to me suddenly, with unexpected pain, how I had put on the bandit boy's clothes in the ravine, Darak standing behind me. There was a cloak Mazlek had brought, black also, but lined with some animal's thick gray fur—the fur of several animals, in fact, for I could tell from the markings, and the little joins where each skin met the other. I counted the skins so I should know when I rode through the day if it were twelve or fourteen deaths which kept me warm. I pulled my own gauntlets on my hands, gold stitched. They, and the golden mask, no doubt looked quite incongruous with my new apparel.

Outside a black mare waited. They had picked me a very docile and well-behaved one. They could not know how I had leaped the furious brown horses in the woods with Maggur.

I swung onto the mare's back lightly, causing enormous surprise. It was curiously emotive to me to feel once more a living creature between my thighs, that phenomenon which seems always to evoke a sexual imagery, and yet, for me at least, spells a kind of elemental freedom. I had known men of Barak's who had been "one" with their horses, and I understand very well what they meant, though there had been no horse-mate for me. I leaned over the mare's neck and stroked her, and looking up, saw Vazkor across the semi-dismantled tent lanes which divided us. He turned immediately and spoke to a man who came running instantly to me.

"Goddess," the man called up to me, "Vazkor Javhovor asks if he may speak with you."

It amused me very much, this deference he exhibited in public—because he must.

"Certainly," I said. I turned the horse, and rode leisurely toward him, startled men gawping at me on every side. Even some of the steaders turned their blank faces to look as they sat gnawing their bread.

"Well, Vazkor," I said, looking down at him for once, a petty thing, but still it was pleasant enough.

"Will the goddess deign to enter my pavilion?" he asked.

"The goddess will deign," I said.

He put up a hand to help me down, and ignoring it, I dismounted easily and walked into the pavilion first. I had not seen it before, but it was black and austere as the exterior, with a few burning lamps, a brazier, and ebony desk neatly stacked with maps and various military objects. The flap fell shut, and it was very dark, despite the lamplight.

"Goddess," he said, "I would strongly advise you to continue this journey as you were—in your carriage."

"Vazkor," I said, "I would strongly advise you not to advise me."

"You must understand," he said harshly, "that being a goddess entails certain obligations of dignity. Ride in this manner, in that inelegant clothing, and you will destroy your own image."

"I have ridden many times. I shall not fall off. If you object to my clothing, find someone who can make me riding clothes to which you do not object, providing, of course, you do not expect them to include a skirt."

He was masked and did not remove the mask. He stood stone-still and said, "This is very stupid of you. Beyond a certain point your stupidity will outweigh any use you might be to me."

His voice was emotionless and very quiet. In spite of myself, a little coldness ran through me, and I knew myself still afraid of him. Yet what could he do to me that would not mend or heal? Perhaps it was more a desire in me to fear him than an actual fear which I felt. I shook it all from me.

"Brother," I said, rising against him that kinship he used against me, "we must not quarrel over such trivia. I will do as I please, and you will do as you please, and while it serves both of us to help the other, we will do so. You cannot ride into Za without Uastis."

There was a brief silence. Then he said, "Tonight I will send you a tailor. We will leave it at that."

It was a defeat for him, yet it frightened me a little.

I went out, remounted, and rode out that day at the head of my guard, Mazlek behind me, leaving the carriage to my women and their fool's chatter.

From the horse, the white dead world was not so different. Once a flock of birds flew over, calling, going away to the east.

The tailor came by night, and a scared woman, to fit me. I wore fine black wool now, a black slit tunic of velvet, slashed gold. The boots had gold buckles; the cloak was lined with a white bear fur, almost indistinguishable from my hair.

Late on the twelfth day, we passed through a village of the Dark People, huddled around a frozen fall among some rocks. Men were out chipping the ice for water, but, as I recalled, the women, animals, and children were hidden away elsewhere. Vazkor's soldiers went through the village, and appropriated jars of oil and a store of wood, and also, more surreptitiously, leather skins of beer. Dusk came on, and our camp was built about a hundred yards from the settlement. In the dark, men stole away and raided the steaders for food. Later, I heard screaming, left my pavilion, and saw a great bonfire burning a few lanes away. In the glare of it, one of the village girls was being enthusiastically raped. I did not know how they got hold of her, or why she in particular was so afraid, for I remembered the girls who had danced with the lizard by the Water.

Looking aside at Vazkor's pavilion, I saw him standing there among his guards, watching a moment, curious as I had been at the noise. He was masked but there was something strange about him. Only for an instant. Bored, he withdrew almost at once. I am not sure why I turned and walked immediately towards the bonfire—anger at him, perhaps, or because it was a woman they were hurting. Certainly I felt nothing for her as a living creature.

"Stop this," I said when I was near enough.

Men turned and stared, guiltily. One, on top of her still, either had not heard, or was too far gone to care. Her screams had stopped. I leaned over the bucking rapist, got his shoulder, and hauled him off her. As he came up, helpless in my grip, the semen was already spurting from him. I struck him across his unmasked face several times. He came out of the paroxysm staggering, glassy-eyed, bemused and furious. There was nothing special to his face, only ignorance and bestiality and anger. I do not think he knew who I was. Perhaps no one had told him the goddess rode as a man now. He drew his long-knife and aimed at me, panting and ridiculous, the apparatus of his sex flopping lethargically in front of him. Men yelled at him to come to his senses, and hissed my name as a warning. A drunken string of curses came from his mouth. He lunged at me, but he was a fool. I stepped aside and caught his leg with mine. He fell heavily. I did not even think to kill him with the Power; there seemed no need. He lay on the ground grunting, and presently was still. I realized finally he had taken his own blade in the guts. The soldiers were cowering. I looked at the girl, but she was dead. I told them to bury her, and returned to my pavilion. It was only an incident of the journey.

On the fourteenth day we reached Za. Her name is a corruption of an ancient word which means dove. It is her symbol, and I had heard her spoken of as the Dove a few times among the soldiers. Like Ezlann, she was named for her color—the pearl-gray stone from which the rocklands hereabouts are formed and from which she was quarried. She too stood high, not on a cliff but on a man-made stone platform, raised twenty feet from the surrounding area. A beautiful city, full of toys, and birds which had found a refuge here from the desert, and nested on her roofs and steeples and towers.

We entered the gates at evening, and rode for an hour or more through wide roads lined by shouting crowds, and even above this noise the birds of Za, circling and circling overhead, which was their ritual before sleep, made an incredible storm of twittering. The palace of the Javhovor of Za stood in a great circular square, a terraced tower with innumerable turrets, and ornamental work that looked like the decorations added to a cake. Facing the palace, a solitary finger tower, with a mechanized clock to strike out the hours of the day and night. At each striking—an appalling clangor from a brazen gong—ten fantastic figures of gilded iron and enamel in the shapes of maidens, monsters, and warriors progressed around the crown of the tower. It was a masterpiece of unique torture, clanging through my time at Za like a pretty and irritating child which grows worse and worse until tired out, its peak achieved at midnight—the twenty-fourth hour of the day, when the twenty-four pealing hammer blows of triumphant precision roused every soul from sleep or thought like the trumpet of Doom.

2

The High-Lord of Za who welcomed us was a small, plump man. Though the phoenix is the symbol of every Javhovor, it is designed and cast so differently in every city that you can easily tell one mask from another. The art-form of Za was languid, with soft curving lines. The Zarish lord's hair was long, yellow, and curled. Jewels dripped from his ears, and on his hands were openwork meshes of gold and pearls. Beautiful dove-masked women in the sheeny gray clothes of Za fluttered in the background. Music played. Formal words of greeting were spoken between lord and lord. There was a little embarrassment because the Javhovor of Za had not known the goddess was already present. He bowed hurriedly, striving not to look askance at my riding clothes, and a silence fell on the room.

Later, in my separate apartments, I heard the toy clock crashing the nineteenth hour.

They were all in the City, the lords of Ammath, Kmiss, So-Ess, and of the mountain place Eshkorek Arnor. The different colors of their soldiery and pavilions stretched down from the palace, through the broad open field at its back: red for Ammath, magenta Kmiss, So-Ess blue pastel, and the dull yellow of Eshkorek. Presumably these were the colors of their city stone, and it seemed incredible to me. I wondered what temperaments would come from a blood-colored place such as Ammath, or the purple wound of Kmiss.

I understood very well that I was to be a goddess again once inside Za. I donned the pleated jade-green silk, and countless ornaments of jet, emerald, and gold. The two women, in black velvet and jewels, came solemnly behind me with two colossal fans made from the stripped feathers of many white birds. The fan is a symbol to them of Greatness Honored, but seemed absurd when snow lay thick on the ground. Behind the women came Mazlek and his ten undercaptains, also clacking with ornaments and medals.

We entered the Great Hall of Za from its west end, where the huge marble stairway sweeps down a hundred steps into the room. Like staring from a mountain peak at the snake carved pillars, a cypress tree of ebony and gold in the center, its branches touching a ceiling of gold lamps. There had been a fanfare at my entrance, they had cleared a lane for me; now, to a man, they bowed to me—heads dropped, most of the women on their knees. Contemptuously I glanced over them, and noted the ornamental false wings which drooped from many shoulders of both sexes.

I descended, and Vazkor approached and kneeled. I touched his head lightly, and said, "Rise, my husband," after which he escorted me to a golden chair beneath the cypress tree. Here I sat throughout this first formal evening. There were entertainments—dancing and acrobatics I think—I hardly remember

them. The High-Lords came to me and presented themselves. Each was arrogant, well-fed, and oddly in awe of me—except for the lord of Eshkorek. He was little, and bowed over like a man trying to withdraw inside himself; if he had possessed a shell like the tortoise, none of us would have seen him at all, I am certain. More than this, he was terrified of me, and I could tell quite plainly from the politely unmasked face and eyes that it was not my god-head he feared, but my Chosen One, Vazkor. There were some women too, rather lovely—princesses of the Cities, and concubines or wives of the Javhovors.

Toward midnight the affair began to end. Vazkor and I withdrew together. I had already noted his apartments adjoined mine. We parted at my doors, but, a little later, one of my women told me he was waiting in my reception hall. There was, apparently, a communicating door between our anterooms, though I could not see it.

"This is very formal," I said when I went out to him. He was masked as he usually was now with me, except on occasion in public.

"Don't trouble yourself," he said. "I will not keep you long. You did well tonight."

"There was nothing for me to do."

"Sometimes the manner in which nothing is done is important. Despite your curious entry into Za, they are very enamored of you. Do you recall the dark-haired woman Kazarl of So-Ess' wife?"

"Not particularly."

"Never mind. She'll be sending to you shortly, begging an audience." He paused, but I said nothing so he continued. "She wants a child, I believe."

"Am I supposed to give her one?"

"Indeed yes, Uastis. Though I imagine she does not expect you to do it in the normal fashion. You will promise her a conception."

"And if she remains barren?" I asked. It seemed a pathetic request, and I was not certain I could help her.

"So-Ess," he said deliberately, "is a friend."

"And Eshkorek?"

He looked at me for a moment through the glass wolf eyes.

"Why do you ask?"

"The mountain lord seems to understand what this council is truly about."

"There is danger in Eshkorek," he said. "She is very much on her own, and very secure in her mountains. It's necessary I have absolute control of her. It would be foolish to ride out against the dragon, leaving a dragon's egg to hatch at home." He nodded to me. "I'll go now."

About half an hour after he had left, a woman came to me from So-Ess' wife, and minutes later the

princess herself entered. She drew off her mask, and kneeled, a beautiful cold woman, well-suited by her ice-blue dress.

"Rise," I said. "I know why you have come."

She flushed slightly.

"Now," I said, "tell me why the child is necessary."

"But, goddess, unless I bear, I will be cast off." She looked at me hollow-eyed. "I have prayed and longed for your coming to Za. You must help me—I am desperate." Stiff proud woman, she was unused to pleading. I looked at her intently, and seemed to know her suddenly.

"You do not conceive because you do not enjoy your husband," I said.

"It is true," she said, and looked away.

"Enjoy him, and I promise you a child."

She sobbed a little, and I thought of the southern people who dreamed they were the Old Race, yet still judged their women on the ability to bear, and still bred frigidity, because the act of sex to them was still such a tremendous curiosity.

"Come here," I said. I touched her forehead and looked at her through the open eye-pieces of the cat mask. She flinched once, then relaxed.

"I will give you this ring," I said. "Wear it whenever your husband comes to you, and you will have both fullfillment and a child."

I touched her forehead again and put the ring on her finger. She thanked me profusely and left. It had been easy, after all, though I was not certain her belief in me was strong enough, for all her prayers.

I took what sleep I could between the strokes of the clock.

At Za I dreamed of Karrakaz many times, and they were strange dreams, not particularly frightening, but somehow desolate. My life was very empty. Yet I could not seem to break free from it. Where, after all, could I go? Nothing was left that might have belonged to me.

The Council met—So-Ess, Kmiss, Ammath, Za, Eshkorek, and Ezlann. Behind each Javhovor, an array of bodyguards and captains, behind my golden chair at the table head, Mazlek, Dnarl, and Slor. Vazkor had sent me a letter, directing me how and when to speak, and telling me the cues he would give me. Committing the precise words to memory, I thought of Darak's only written message to me, the misspelling and erratic formation of the letters. Vazkor's was an elegant and scholarly hand, which gave away nothing except that it would give away nothing.

At the first meeting there was a lot of talk about the war, the campaigns to come, honor, victory, and the final amalgamation of the three alliances. At each new utterance, they would look to Vazkor. He had them already, and they knew it—his decision, the powerful aura of his iron mind, the sense of mental Power that hung about him, had quelled them utterly. By what he said, and by what he had instructed me to say, they began to edge themselves toward the election of one total overlord. It was an amazing sight. I felt no pity for them, tangling themselves in Vazkor's web. Except for Eshkorek, perhaps. He was not in

awe—he was terrified, and there is a great difference. At the first meeting he held back, his head bowed. At the second and third meetings he was noisy in his silence. At the fourth coming-together the lord of So-Ess voiced the opinion that Vazkor, honored of the goddess, is should take possession of the five sisters of Ezlann. I recall I thought myself naive that I had not seen before So-Ess was a friend indeed, and Vazkor's man into the bargain. I do not know what Vazkor had promised him, or how it had been done—possibly by the Power itself. I glanced around the table, and, like a dog sniffing out rats in the walls, abruptly I knew them all: So-Ess, Kmiss, and Za were his. Ammath was ready to fall. But Eshkorek ... even as I reached him, he rose and stood there, bowed over, a bewildered, angry, frightened tortoise, sticking out its head at a serpent.

"No," he said, "I do not think so."

"What, my lord, do you not think?" Vazkor inquired.

"I do not think," Eshkorek stammered, "I do not think any of our Cities should lose her independence."

"There is strength in unity," Vazkor said softly.

Eshkorek shook his head. He turned around to the others desperately. Surely he must know there was no help there?

"I simply say I do not think—"

"Truly, you don't think," broke in Kazarl of So-Ess stridently. "Purple Valley might turn on us all in the spring, and howl around our walls all summer. One petty argument between City and City—only one—and there is isolation and collapse. No. Safer to be under one rule. I'm happy to bow to it."

"The war has never created such a situation before," Eshkorek said. There was silence. Abruptly, impossibly, he turned to me. "Goddess," he said, "I appeal to you."

I was astonished at his stupidity.

"Eshkorek Javhovor," I said, "I am of one mind with my Chosen Lord."

An incredible thing happened. I had seen it before, and I have seen it since, but it is always curious. Eshkorek s fear turned to fury. He made a great lashing movement with both his hands.

"You!" he screeched at me. "Vazkor's witch-whore! Fine goddess for an ancient line to grovel before."

The table erupted into righteous horror; soldiers drew their swords. Eshkorek grunted, turned, and walked from the room,

"Vazkor Javhovor," Ammath cried, deferring already and apparently instinctively to Vazkor, "let me send men after him. The insult to the goddess must not go unavenged."

"Goddess?" Vazkor turned to me.

I did not know what to say. I was oddly shaken, for I could see the tortoise had judged me very well, despite his stupidity.

"Let him go," I muttered.

They bowed low to me, and the meeting ended.

A little later in the day, while Eshkorek's Javhovor was riding in the square, ordering preparations for departure from Za and the journey eastward to his mountains, a tiny piece of tile, dislodged from one of the turrets—by a bird presumably—fell and struck him. It entered the brain and killed instantly. It was a freak accident, yet none were particularly surprised that unseen forces had struck him down after his insult to me. The death had an enlivening effect on the City lords. They began to press for Vazkor's sovereignty. Murder can be a useful lesson, and Vazkor's men, of whom there were many, were everywhere.

After Eshkorek's death, there was strange weather at Za. A three-day storm came from the east and blanketed the world in blackness. Candles and lamps burned in the palace night and day. In this eerie and unnatural light Vazkor was made overlord. There were various ceremonies, but I do not remember them very well, only the flicker of the false gold light on gold, and the greenish-dark sky, and the thunder. I saw less of him privately than ever before, though I saw him more often in public.

The crowds in Za were afraid of the storm. When it cleared they chanted prayers of thanks to me in the square. I do not know why they did not thank their own goddess, whoever she was, but then she had not woken yet.

There were other meetings after this, though he sent me word I need not be present. I was very tired, and glad enough not to go.

Five nights passed. On the sixth Vazkor came through that mysterious door which joined our apartments.

"Goddess," he said, "everything has been settled for the winter campaign. We shall be riding southward in two days, by which time the bulk of the armies of Kmiss, So-Ess, and Ammath will have joined us here."

"And Eshkorek?" I asked him.

"We shall meet them on the way to Purple Valley."

"Who is lord there now?" I asked.

"A man," he said.

"Yours?"

"Yes. I had been planning for this time, goddess, a long while before your fortunate advent. Your arrival made this day sooner, that is all. It would have come anyway."

He used a different tone with me, and he had come unmasked. I felt weaker than usual; the tiredness was intense. I had needed sleep a good deal in the past days, as seemed necessary with me from time to time, and the clock had made sure I had not got it

"Well, then," I said, "we ride in two days."

"No, goddess. *We* do not. You will remain at Za."

I saw then that it had finally come, the moment of my elimination—not to death, but to womanhood and uselessness—and I had not been ready for it. It is true I did not want to ride with him across the bitter white wastes to make war on a name. But I wanted less the role into which he was so gently thrusting me.

"I, too," I said, "ride southward."

"Though a goddess," he said, "you are a woman. I have heard of your brawl with my soldiers over the village slut, but that is not enough to carry you through a battle."

"I know nothing of you," I said, "and you, Vazkor, know nothing of me. The world beyond the Ring would not interest you, so I will not tell you what I did there."

"You lay with a man named Darak," he said, "who resembled me."

Of course it was quite logical he could have deduced as much from our first meeting, but it was shocking and painful to have him talk of it in this way, as if he knew all of it. Suddenly I began to tremble, and could not speak to him. I turned from him and walked toward the doors of my bedchamber, then stopped because he had followed me.

"I believe you did as I told you to in the matter of So-Ess' wife," he said behind me. "I gather she is both happy and hopeful. I have set you very high, and it is time you carried my seed to remind them you are mated with me."

I stood in the doorway, petrified. It was not the act I feared, it was the act's intention and purpose, and this man, so totally passionless in all he did, who was prepared to lie with me as passionlessly. I could not imagine such a thing between us. And yet I could. Suddenly my sense came back to me. There was nothing to be gained by denials. This moment was his, and it would be foolish to struggle against it.

"You are my husband and lord," I said courteously, "you may lie with me whenever you choose, since I have found you acceptable and pleasing to me."

We went into the large dove-carved room, and he shut the doors behind us. There was no one else there, the women had long since gone away. A few candles flickered, almost burned out, casting a dim thin light. One of Asren's jeweled books lay by the bed.

I removed my garments without speed or hesitation, and let them lie where they fell. I began to think of Geret whom I had helped elect leader of the wagon people, Geret who feared me and raped me—though it was little enough to me what he did. Turning to Vazkor, I saw him standing quite still, clothed and silent. I lifted my hands, and pulled the mask from my face. His eyes narrowed, that was all. There was no longer any power in my ugliness to protect me against him. I let my hands fall. I went, and lay down on the silken bed. After a moment, he came and stood over me.

"You see, Vazkor," I said, "I am quite submissive."

Two candles fluttered and went out together, then another, and another. Darkness was settling. He did not bother to remove his clothes, only what was necessary. Geret. Yet Vazkor could not sicken me or make me laugh at him. I could not best him afterward with cold water, and the threat of a fat white god. I had forgotten he must touch me, I had forgotten he would be clever in what he did, I had forgotten his weight on me would feel like Darak in the dark, the hands would be Darak's hands, even without their

scars. Even the moving shaft between my thighs. ... Despite his silence, there was a kind of opening in me I could not help, and yet I hung above it, watching my own responses as if it were a dream. I do not know if he found pleasure in it. He did not seem to. For him it was another achievement, some thing else settled. He was so perfectly controlled, so perfectly indifferent, I did not even know his moment of helplessness until it was past.

His long hair brushed my face as he pulled away and left me, not Darak's hair at all. The candles were dead. In the dark he said, "Thank you, goddess. I hope I shall return before the birth."

It was ridiculous, his certainty, yet it chilled me. I said nothing, and soon he went away. I lay cold on the bed until at last the moon shone in on my nakedness and I found my sleeping mask and put it on. The clock began to strike the second hour of morning, and then the third, fourth, and fifth hours. My sleep had not been good in Za the Dove.

3

For two days the armies of Ammath, So-Ess, and Kmiss rumbled and clattered into Za. There was a great deal of noise and confusion, but I heard little of it, nor of the dreadful clock. I had sent for a physician, and, sorting out from among his herbs and drugs things my time with Uasti had taught me to recognize, I made myself a sleeping draft. It seemed absurd I had not thought of it before. For two nights and the day between I slept without waking. I opened my eyes in an oddly silent dawn, and they were gone, Vazkor and his war-force and the wagons of their train.

I rose, bathed and dressed, and called Mazlek to me.

"Is there more of the fighting force to pass through Za?"

"Yes, goddess," he said, "there are several blocks of troops still to come, and a great deal of foot. They'll be marching through the City for many days."

I told him we were going to join Vaskor, and he seemed surprised but pleased at this prospect of action. Yet it was a strange business. I waited patiently until the fourth day after Vazkor's departure. In the afternoon five hundred riders and two hundred foot arrived from Ammath, under the command of a huge blond man, fully armed for the march, as his men were not. They quartered themselves under the walls in the palace field, or found billets in the city, and it was a noisy night. At dark, lit by the torches of my escort, I crossed the short grass among the tent lanes, and arrived at the vast scarlet pavilion. Under a black cloak I wore the full regalia of the goddess. The sentries knew me at once, and within minutes I had entered and was facing the nervous, startled commander. He had been drinking not long since, and was at great pains to conceal the fact. He gave me a tall chair and paced about the table, not knowing what to do with me.

"Commander," I said at last, when his jerky courtesies had petered out, "I have been expecting your answer all day."

"My-my*answer!"* he exclaimed, stopping still.

"To fit my men for the march."

His unmasked eyes were round and stupified.

"I can see, commander," I said, "the messengers did not reach you. I am to ride with my husband the overlord on this campaign. The honor of arming me has been left to Ammath."

His face red with shock, he began to apologize and assure me of immediate concurrence with the wishes of the overlord.

It entailed a delay of two days for Ammath, but nevertheless Mazlek and his eighty were superbly fitted from among the march-wagons, both for themselves and their horses. The commander nervously inquired what I would choose for my self, but the armor was no use to me at all. They do not, as a rule, make it for women, and so it cannot be fitted second hand; in addition to which, every piece was far too large and bulky, and would probably have fallen off the instant my horse achieved a gallop. I chose only knives, therefore, and a long bright sword without a device. When he began to protest that I must be fitted separately—further delay of many days, and, in addition, iron breastpieces which would chafe me raw—I told him I needed only to attack, not to defend. He cleared his throat and nodded, assuming me, I suppose, clothed in my god-head and invulnerable. Yet every hurt I would suffer from, even if I could not die. It simply did not seem important. I do not think I had even visualized battle as such, I was thinking only of how Vazkor had determined to shut me away in Za, and that I would not be shut.

During this time, a cohort of So-Ess rode in and out of Za, and soldiery from Za itself went clattering under the vaulted archway, southward. The last night, as I sat late in my apartments, preparing a formal letter to my host, the yellow-crested Javhovor, one of my women ran in to me and informed me he had come in person.

He entered and bowed deeply, and fidgeted with his mask. I asked him what he wanted.

"Goddess, pardon me, but I understood you were to remain here, in Za."

"How did you understand such a thing?"

"Lord Vazkor..." He hesitated. "The overlord entrusted your well-being to my care. He—explained matters. Your delicate condition..."

I looked at him stonily, and he flushed.

"Delicate?" I asked him. "Why?"

The—*pregnancy,"* he got out in a throaty whisper.

It was at once laughable and macabre.

"The Lord Vazkor is, I am afraid, quite mistaken," I said. "Therefore you have no need to dissuade me from going, and indeed, I should strongly advise you not to do so. You will dismiss your guards from my doors at once. Any further attempts to restrain my person will be dealt with by my own guard. You will remember who I am and the Powers I possess. Did you wish me to demonstrate?"

He whitened and drew back, trying to find adequate words.

"I understand your dilemma," I said kindly. "You are torn between your desire to obey Vazkor, and your desire not to anger me. However, it is really quite easy. I am here, and Vazkor is not. Now go, and do not trouble me with any of this again."

He bowed, and withdrew shakily, and I never saw the guard I had guessed he brought with him, poor confused fool.

We rode out at daybreak into hard bright sunlight.

The road sloped down from the platform of the city, out into the white empty desert, yet it seemed very beautiful that day, sparkling like diamond under the clear pale sky. Far away to the east, I could make out now the faintest ghosts of those mountains which led to and enclosed Eshkorek Arnor. There a man had sat, waiting on the Council at Za for the death of a tortoise, and Vaskor's word, "Now*you* are Javhovor."

We made good time, for the wagons were few and did not slow us overmuch. At night the metal walls went up, the fires flared. Mazlek would come to me and teach me a little of war, but not too much; tired from the riding, I found sleep easy and pleasant. I was treated with great respect and courtesy. Ammath's commander clearly thought he was pleasing everyone. No doubt he was actually looking forward to the time when he might deliver me safe, honored and duly armed to my delighted husband.

I gathered Vazkor had set the meeting place for all his forces at a spot they called Lion's Mouth. Near this place, where great rock hills thrust up to make a stockade around Purple Valley, was a narrow pass leading downward. In winter such passes were blocked by snow, and there was some speculation and discontent as to how Vazkor planned to make a way through, or how long the wait would be until the spring thaw did the work for him. In any case there was grumbling. A winter campaign across the War March was a rare and uncomfortable thing.

As we rode nearer to the hills, we passed into a strange new landscape—frozen water courses, thin sprinkling of woodland, the trees stripped, the branches broken by snow. There were a few villages here, and the usual soldierly thefts took place, but there was no rape this time, perhaps only because they kept their women better hidden. Here also we began to catch up with and pass the long grinding processions of great wheeled cannon, siege-towers and other machines of war, dragged along by chains of mules or dead-eyed dark men. They left great black rut-trails over the white ground. Overseers prowled along the straining lines, long whips flicking up and down like the writhing tongues of serpents. On the tenth day two mules dropped dead at once as we passed, their hearts burst by the great metal ram they were hauling. The men with the whips cursed and shouted angrily, but it caused a great deal of laughter among the Ammath soldiers. I turned my head away from the twin shapes lying like a pattern on the snow. I do not know why it distressed me so much to see an animal die when human death did not move me. Perhaps because they were more beautiful, and there is no corruption in them, while in the best of men there can always be found some guilt or wickedness which seems to have earned him death.

The rocky hills grew and hardened into purple darkness ahead of us. The broken woodland clustered and withdrew. Birds embroidered the sky from time to time, and dawn brought a scattering of white wolves with it, nosing about the camp walls, and howling their flesh-lust.

"There are animals in the hills, then?" I asked Mazlek.

"A few, goddess."

"More now," I said, nodding around me at the soldiers and horses. He grinned.

Having sighted the hills, it took us two days to reach them, three to scale the first slopes, for they go up and down, and there is no road or short way around. On the morning of the fourth day of climbing the Ammath commander rode back to me politely.

"Up there, goddess"—he pointed—"the Lion's Head. Top it, and we'll reach the Mouth—probably before sunset"

I looked where he indicated, and saw a great formless chunk of black and snowed-white rock. It did not to me look even remotely like a lion, though I suppose in days long past it must have, presumably.

"There are the jowls," he was proudly telling me, "and the eye, and that stratification forms the mane."

"Ah, yes," I said.

Topping the head, a horse fell and broke a foreleg and they killed it. The shadows lengthened, the sky was low-slung and empty of sunset color. A sense of coldness and melancholy seeped into me. I had begun to fear my meeting with Vazkor after all.

There was a twisting track now, looming rock walls on either side, then an opening, and below a great snow-bound dip, terraced and falling away at its far end to a piled-up chaos of giant boulders. Beyond them there seemed to be a drop, where the heads of other rocks stood out faintly in the thickening color of dusk. In the dip itself a vast camp stretched out, milling like a hive. Already the red points of torches. Smoke from fires drifted up. There must be thousands grouped here, apart from the wagons, machinery, and picketed animals. Away to the east of the dip natural arches opened into further levels where other parts of the armies and their lights were moving back and forth.

I was at the front now, behind the men of Ammath, flanked by Mazlek on my left, the scarlet commander on my right. We picked a way down the rocks. I could not help but remember the ravine camp, and a dismal panic was growing on me helplessly.

Sentries challenged us. We rode between the tent lanes now, smoke, firelight, men moving out of our way. Soon I should see the black pavilion.

A man standing by the commander's horse was saying something. ...

"No, sir. The overlord has moved ahead to the lower camp—two days away now, sir."

Slowly the words penetrated my brain. Vazkor was gone.

Now the man was bowing to me. My pavilion should be got up at once, and all things arranged for my comfort. They were very surprised to see me, but it was an honor, an encouragement to them all to have my holy person in their midst.

It was true, my arrival seemed to have had a peculiar effect on the great camp. They appeared genuinely excited and glad of my presence. And it was the men of Kmiss, Za, So-Ess, and Ammath whose pleasure seemed doubled. I was still special for them, because I was not theirs. They cheered me as I rode now, and a sort of warmth ran through me—relief that Vazkor was elsewhere—and a sense of my own Power so abruptly evident to me in this unexpected place called Lion's Mouth.

4

I was very grateful that Vazkor had not been there. He had apparently ridden ahead with some two hundred men of Ezlann and So-Ess, to a lower area near to the pass, where a perfect view presented

itself of the valley terrain. There he made a new camp, plotting the moves of the game, while the last stragglers arrived at the Lion's Mouth above. The command of the Mouth had gone to Kazarl, Javhovor of So-Ess—a logical move, since only he, of all Vazkor's fellow Javhovors in White Desert, had come in person with his armies. The troops of Kmiss, Za, Ammath, and Eshkorek had come under the lords' younger brothers, elder sons, cousins, or nephews. Age, easy-living, and general disinclination had caused this absence of the first three; besides, I could see Vazkor would rather have the youthful and the willing on such a venture. No doubt he had taken measures to see no plots hatched among the figureheads left at home. As to Eshkorek's new master, he was too fresh in his seat to run out of it so quickly. Probably he had remained at Vazkor's express order.

My first full day at the Mouth was taken up with two enormous small things. First the business of getting from them the winelike drink on which I now so comfortably lived. I had brought enough of it for my journey here, but all wells run dry at last. With Vazkor there had been no problem, for he had seen to it. Alone, I must break down their barriers of embarrassment, describe it, and then witness its furtive and deferential arrival at my tent. I had not lost their admiration, nevertheless, for none of them could live on such a flimsy thing. My second trouble I considered a foolish one, yet it nagged at me. My bleeding had long since assumed a predictable rhythm, presenting itself to me after every unit of twenty days, and no longer distressing me in any way, being light and painless, and lasting only forty-eight hours or less. Now, twenty-five days had passed and the expected guest was absent. I reasoned with myself that very likely the journey here had upset things, but I was not consoled. A stupid, icy little certainty was growing in my brain, though I had not yet voiced it, even in my thoughts.

The second day at Lion's Mouth, I turned my mind to other matters. Soldiers had been marching in, in regular bursts, and the huge camp had grown even more crowded and sprawling. I sent Dnarl with two others to bear my greetings to the various High Commanders, Kazarl among them, and ask them to attend me at the twentieth hour in my pavilion. I knew they would respectfully come, and also that they would be very unsure of what should be said to a female deity roosting in the center of a war-camp. But they found it was easy for them. Throughout the two hours of their company, I spoke only a few words, and these were really promptings. I gave them free and full rein to talk about the war—its history, and its future campaigns. They had no notion Vazkor did not want me here. They thought it would please him that they had attempted to inform me of all they knew, and when they discovered that I could apparently follow what they said, and seemed both interested and involved with their prowess, they came, I could see, to a new opinion of me. I was, they would assess it, a woman, but with a man's mind; it shone out of their faces, this high tribute of the human male. They left me in good spirits, impressed with their goddess, having taught her a little of what to expect in the war, and a good deal about their own characters.

In the morning I rose early, and walked about the tent lanes, Mazlek, Dnarl, and Slor behind me. There were more starings than obeisances, yet the soldiers I stopped and spoke to seemed both awed and pleased to have been singled out by the Risen One. Tomorrow would see this camp on the move to join Vazkor at the lower site, and already preparations for departure were in progress. Kazarl appeared and took me on a tour of the war machines, and an inspection of the drilling of swordsmen and horses. In the archers' quarter men were restringing their bows, a few on horseback aiming practice shots at a swaying man of straw and sacking, others, on foot, at random targets hung upon poles.

I remarked to Kazarl that I had omitted to choose a bow for myself, and that I would now do so. He seemed amazed at each new thing I showed myself capable of, and this was no exception. He called a man, however, and we went among the stores, and after a while, I chose what seemed to handle best. It had no intimate feel to it, like those I had used with Darak—which had been made for me—but I hoped a union might come between us in time. I took it outside with some shafts, and made short work of the colored eyes of the targets. There was a murmur of interest around me from the archers, and I knew word would spread.

There were other things I did, perhaps foolish things, for I was not sure I would be successful at them, but then, I had very little time. I fought a practice bout of swords and knives with a thin and devious fighter among the officers' pavilions. I think at first he held off in alarm at the situation, but after a while my skill convinced him he had better do something about me. We were judged on points and ended as equals. I think I could have beaten him, though I will not swear to it, but I did not want any jealousy or anger from what I did. In an open place there were horse herds from the mountain valleys of Eshkorek Arnor, still wild, that men were breaking bit by bit for battle work. I had not liked this business since I watched Darak ride Sarroka in the tribal krarl and I had learned that to conquer a horse means to snap its spirit also. Yet I singled out a white stallion—the pride of the herd, ungelded, untamed, and furious at this whole world.

"That one," I said.

Kazarl began to protest, but I politely told him to be quiet. They got the white one into a separate pen by the use of goads and curses, and I jumped in after it. I see now it was indeed a foolish thing to do, but at the time the deed had its own perverse logic.

The white one turned and eyed me with the two blazing red wheels which passed for eyes, and clawed up the soil with alternate forefeet. I had told them not to hold him for me, and I hardly think in any case that they could. He swore at me, and stood back on his hind limbs in that impossible gesture of horses, and while he balanced there on the knife edge of his anger, I ran to him, and aside at the last instant before he could swing to me, and, as he dropped, I got his mane, and my foot on his icy side, and was up. He gave a leap, all four feet in the air, that seemed to shake every bone loose in my spine. I clung to his neck and hair, but my arms would not reach far enough around his huge neck to restrict the windpipe, in that old but necessary trick of breakers. The camp, the rocks, the sky broke up in small fragments, and began to whirl about our heads. It was a ghastly ride, and I thought more than once that now I had ruined my plans and would be tossed off, and probably eaten, for these wild herds from Eshkorek had a reputation for devouring men. Even so, I cannot deny there was a sort of panicky,pleasure in it—it was a real thing in the midst of experiences and troubles that seemed quite unreal.

The end came very suddenly. No slowing down, just an abrupt finish to all movement. I do not know how long the ordeal lasted, but quite a while I think. There were crowds of men around the pen, staring, cheering. Kazarl was masked and unreadable, yet he held up an arm in salute.

The horse stood under me, not shivering or seeming at a loss, only very quiet. I thought at first the frenzy might start up again, but after a while I ventured to get down. I went to the great head and stared at the one smoldering eye I could see. The horse leaned and butted my shoulder. I reached up and smoothed the pale neck, slightly mottled this close with a half-invisible lovely network of bluish freckles that made it seem cast from marble.

"Mine," I said.

I had made a point, but he caused some trouble, that white devil, for he would be quiet with me—and a groom or two, once he had been properly introduced—but with all others he was still man-eater and demon. Perhaps that is the best way, to restrict a horse only to one hand. At least I had not destroyed him, or his mad horse soul.

So we rode to Vazkor in the morning, a short journey of a day, and I went at the head of them on the white horse. It had not been difficult. I had told Kazarl I would lead the armies of White Desert to their overlord, and he had bowed and capitulated at once. Of the men who followed after me, I did not think

many were aggrieved. I was a goddess, after all, and a warrior-goddess at that. Altogether, it was really a very small thing—lord for a day, in fact. But it meant a good deal by its implications. I was no longer fearful to meet Vazkor.

When the sun lay on the edge of the rock hills, we wound down the old track—made in the long past by travelers, perhaps—and arrived at the vast level plateau with its scattering of tents and horse pens. It was an enormous open place, and beyond, the rocks yawned in many narrow defiles, which looked as though they must pass straight through to the valley in summer but were closed now with the snow. At one point a break in the rock showed empty space below, obscured at present by white evening mist.

The armies of the south snaked downward after me and spread themselves across the plateau.

Torchlight leaped red behind me in the soldiers' hands.

From the black pavilion a man came, wearing a wolf mask with scarlet eyes.

"Overlord," I called. I saluted him. "I have brought your fighting force to you, as you commanded."

He stood still a moment, then walked toward me. He stood by the horse, looking up.

"You are very welcome," he said formally.

He extended a hand to help me down, and I used it because of the many eyes on us.

I lifted one arm, and Kazarl followed the direction, dismounted, and discharged the rest of the great column to its separate captains. Figures on horses wheeled away. It was very noisy as the many tents began to go up, and the men quartered themselves.

Vazkor nodded to me. "My pavilion."

"No need," I said. "My own is already going up—over there, do you see?"

A groom had come for my horse, and he was stamping and tossing his head. I turned to quiet him, and found Mazlek and ten others of my guard behind me, very stiff and still, turned to face Vazkor. It was a beautiful gesture, uniquely theatrical and yet, so effective.

Vazkor nodded again, and walked away. I went to the white horse and smoothed him into quietness.

I could not be still that night. I was elated at what I had achieved, too much so, probably. I sat in my pavilion, in the red glow of many braziers and lamps, twitching like an animal in sleep at my waking dreams of purpose and independence.

And then Kazarl Javhovor came to the flap, entered, bowed, and looked at me palely.

"I trust the goddess is well," he said.

"Should she not be?"

"I have come to beg your pardon," he said.

"Why?"

"You must understand," he said nervously, "I was not aware of the goddess' condition, at Lion's Mouth."

"My condition," I said, and my thoughts congealed to flint.

"Indeed, yes—I did not know. The Lord Vazkor has informed us all, and he is angry. I hope and pray your health has not been endangered—"

He broke off and took a step backward. For a moment I could not understand why, and then I realized I had risen, and I felt the fury and the frustration singing around me, electric and terrifying, an aura he could sense, perhaps even see. I looked away from him, and a piece of crystal on one of the side tables cracked open. I clenched my fists and tried to push the fury back into myself.

"Vazkor," I hissed, "is mistaken. You may tell your army so. Now, get out."

He turned at once and stumbled outside.

I stood in the center of the pavilion, my anger turned inward like a blazing, raging sea, stopped in a jar. I passed my hands over my belly, and I spoke to anything which might be in my womb.

"No, not of him. Out, out of me. Not of him."

A sharp pain speared upward through my groin into my guts. It frightened and sobered me, and soon I grew very calm and cold. A thought stirred.

"No," I said to it, and I smiled, a small tight smile, a joke between my brain and my body, with the intruder shut out, "I will not believe in you. I am very strong. If I do not give you credence, you cannot be."

And I slammed an iron door shut on the thought, and turned my back.

5

For three days gangs of men worked ahead through the rock pass, clearing the snow as best they could. On the fourth day the great armies of the south packed up their gear and followed. I had already had a glimpse of what we were going to through the gap which overlooked the valley. A long basin of whiteness, far away a frozen lake, areas of evergreen trees, top-heavy with foliage, standing up like black birds on one leg. On the farthest horizon the unmistakable shape of a city, sloped walls, the defensive elevation of a platform, natural or otherwise, ringed apparently by woods.

The night of the third day, Vazkor and his captains sat in the black pavilion, and discussed the hill-crossing, and the march toward those walls. Orash she was called, this first fish of the catch. I, too, sat through this assembly. No one denied me my place. Vazkor did not speak to me at all, and neither did I speak to them, only listened. There seemed little plan, all in all, only the aggression of persistence, determination, and greed.

Though it was easier than they had anticipated, the riding was not good through the rocks. Snow falls came crashing down from the high places, dislodged by the reverberations of thousands of marching feet, hooves, rolling wagon wheels. It was a crossing of three days, and ten men died on the first. At night, camp fires made blood splotches on the ice walls above. On the third day the head of the army emerged

on the rock shelves below, and the rest floundered after. Part of an old roadway guided us down the last steep miles to the valley floor. There are many roads in the valley. They seemed to come from nowhere and vanish again into the ground after a mile or so, like the trails of huge primeval slugs.

There was a strange feel to that part of the valley. A silence. The desert had been silent too, but not in the same way. There had been a dry wind there, occasional birds. It was easy to imagine a little life might exist, in hiding now from the snow. But the valley seemed to have no wind—the hills seemed to seal it off like a bowl, and the low white sky was the lid. In the valley even the trees were unreal, the straight hard trunks, the persistent foliage which was not green but black. Men chopped them down for wood stores, and the grinding scream of each as it fell pierced my ears and struck through to my belly. And ahead the wood-garlanded City of Orash. Orash which seemed asleep, or vacated too. As we rode across the floor toward it, a curious conviction began to grow on me that it was quite empty, or else that everyone in it was dead. It was Uasti, I recalled, among the wagons, who told me the legend of the Lost—how the disease came, and they died where they stood or lay, finally with none left to bury them. A dream began to come at night. On the white horse I rode with the great army, not far back, with Mazlek's men, as I did by day, but at the very head, alone. The gates yawned open, and, beyond, the white streets lay straight as a rule, stretching to a distant burning point. In the dreams there was never any sound, not even the rumble of the host behind me. The ride went on and on, and a terror grew with it, a terror apparently without reason, yet cold and clinging and unshakable. There was no climax to the dream, no sudden horror revealed, only the ride, the emptiness, and the fear.

We made camp by the oval frozen lake on the fifth day of the valley march. Iced reeds stood up, sharp as knives, by the rim. A mauve sunset came and went, and the shape which was the City vanished into the dark. It was then something occurred to me I had not consciously noted before: there were no lights in Orash. For miles back we should have been able to spot the haze of them, however faint, over the sloping walls by night. Now, a day's march away, I could make out the pattern of her towers and ramparts, but the window sockets were blank and black.

I had been walking around the iron walls of the camp with Mazlek. Now I turned to him and told him.

"Yes," he said, "I thought so too. It is very strange."

My skin began to prickle nervously. I stared across the valley plain at the thick patches of trees that girded the City, and then spilled toward us, thinning as they came. At intervals along our metal stockade sentries of Ezlann, So-Ess, Ammath, stood stiffly, facing outward, spears grasped in their hands.

"The camp is well-guarded, goddess," Mazlek said.

I nodded.

It seemed a small thing, the darkness of Orash. Perhaps they hibernated like animals through the winter. White Desert knew little enough of their manners.

Asleep, the dream did not come. Instead, there were the cries of wolves screeching through the night, a pack of them, circling and circling the camp. I turned from side to side, restless, yet not properly awake. I had not heard wolves before in the valley, could not understand the noise of them, closer and closer. A horrible conviction took hold of me that they were over the stockade. I struggled with myself and woke abruptly. There were no wolf cries, only the silence pressing down like a cold hand.

And then. There was a tremendous crash, a cacophony of horses screaming, and the impossible thunder of their hooves. Beyond the cloth of my pavilion walls a fierce orange light opened itself, seeming to flare

and flap great wings. I might have reasoned it was some accident—oil spilled on a fire, a drunken man in among the horses—but an electric silver cord ran up my spine into my brain, and I*knew*. I slept mostly clothed for the march, so now it was simply a matter of snatching up the iron sword, the long-knife, thrusting the daggers into my belt.

"Dnarl!" I called, for he had been outside my tent tonight

But no one answered. I opened the flap and went out, and was instantly knocked sideways by ten mules running mad. The pavilion went next. The scene was starkly lit by the blazing hulk of three wagons on fire and several tents a few lanes away. Through the fire there plunged the bellowing wild horses, terrified and furious, and the yelling figures of men. Above the noise of snapping wood, shouts, and panic, I heard various captains roaring for order. Lying on my back, struggling in company with the mules to get free of my pavilion, I could have laughed at it. Away to my right there was a colossal booming thud of sound. Gold fire this time, a folding plume of smoke, and streamers of sparks as oil exploded among the wood stores. Almost free, I saw a dark shape running toward me, and thought at first it must be Dnarl.

"This line around my ankle," I indicated helpfully, but it was not Dnarl, it was a man in white clothes smeared over with dirt, his face masked like a nightmare in hell. He fell toward me, his hand alive with a curving blade, and I rolled sideways, ripping free of the tent, scrambled to my knees, and caught him in the chest as he tried to rise and finish me. I got up and stumbled over another dead man. This time it was Dnarl.

Two more thuds as oil wagons exploded. The sky was alight with blazing splinters and sparks. A tent caught near to me, and went up like burning pastry. I ran down between the pavilions, no longer bewildered or amused. I was angry with an old and well-remembered anger. Two of the white, demon-masked men of Orash spun to me from their work my sword and long-knife swung out as one, and caught them both before they could make a sound. Hands grabbed my hair, but I jerked backward with my heel at him and the hands let go. A blade lashed out and sliced across my back, so cleanly I scarcely felt it for a second. I turned and found five or six of them waiting for me, backed by the incendiary darkness. In the light their white was a murky magenta now, the iron masks dripped the flames like blood. They wore the faces of no beast I had ever seen or heard of, maned and horned, with long cruel teeth jutting from them.

I leaped forward, and the blades rang on theirs. Metal skidded, a man cursed. White pain darted across my ribs, and then I was thrust forward, down, smashed against the white red-black earth by the man on my back. There was no true battle frenzy on me. For a moment I panicked, slithering and jerking to avoid the certain knife thrust.

And then I heard him say, in the City tongue, with a little laugh: "A woman."

The pressure eased and I was pushed onto my back, to lie looking up at the hideous mask.

"No time," one of the others said. "Kill her, and come on."

But he was anxious, this man of Orash, to enjoy his discovery. Still holding both my hands flat on the ground, he leaned over me, and a little thin shell broke in my mind, and a lazy trickle of hate dripped into the bowls of my eyes. Before, it had been agony, but now it was fiercely sweet. A pale light flickered between us. He gave a squeal and rolled from me. I got up quickly and turned, and saw them staring at him. One lifted a knife to throw it. The sweet pain pierced my eyes and he arced over and fell on his side. I ran among the others and killed them with my sword, not noticing what they did.

There was a great deal of noise after that, the red light and stink of burning things. It seemed the scarlet volcano had burst once more, this time across the southern landscape of snow, and silence. Gradually the light grew dull, almost tame.

Through the groaning shadows, I made out the cry: "Goddess! Goddess!"

I leaned on the crimson sword and waited, not really knowing yet who would come.

It was Mazlek, masked but known, and various other soldiers—my guard, men of Ezlann and So-Ess. They stood still when they found me.

"Are you hurt?" Mazlek asked.

"Not much."

I suppose I was covered in blood. I heard later many had seen me killing the Orashians among the tents.

"Things are better now," Mazlek said, "most of the fires out, all the attackers dead."

They had come at midnight, apparently, to the eastern section, killed the sentries at the wall, slunk in and set some horses loose, and managed to fire a wagon or two before the camp woke in confusion. Surprise is a great ally, but there had been too few of them. They had not done as much damage as it had seemed. The most revealing point was that Orash, too, had now presumably discarded the "etiquette" of war, to fight with raw hands and anger.

In my pavilion, after I had cleaned the mess from me, I asked them where Vazkor had been and what he had done in the fighting. I did not know why I asked. I knew, whether I wished him safe or otherwise, he could not come to any harm. He had sent no word to me, but then, I had not expected that he would.

So the vast army of White Desert marched against Orash, City of Purple Valley, and I thought there might be a good deal of fighting after that skirmish by the lake. But there was not much fighting at all. Whatever spirit has possessed them to come at us with swords seemed to have died with those other deaths among the smoldering tents.

We reached her at noon, and returned fire for fire. Ten villages massed among the trees, guardians of the City fields. These, together with all crops, orchards, stores of timber, oil, and cloth were ignited and totally destroyed, except, of course, for necessities taken by the army for itself. The villagers, I think, were mostly killed, though I saw some about the camp in after days, acting as unpaid servants or whores.

After the smoke cleared, leaving a reeking black deposit on everything, the army arranged itself around the platform slope and on the causeways which led to Orash from south and north. Despite the soot, she was a white City, in design a sister to any of the desert. No sound or signal came from her. Dusk fell, and not a light was lit.

"Conserving fuel, most probably," Mazlek said. "She guessed it might be a long wait."

This was logical, and yet the darkness of her was unnerving. Around the walls the camp fires blazed, the lamps moved; above, the moon made an icy appearance, and between the two the white City stood lifeless, and blind.

Morning, after a night uneasy with many marching sentries. No chances taken this time.

From first light, every hour, the war trumpets of Vazkor's force pealed their challenge, reminding me a little of the clock at Za. From Orash came no answer. Curious, it is in our natures to be so afraid, so suspicious of something silent. There seemed to be a trap in Orash that stopped the great rams from rolling at her gates, the laddered towers from leaning at her walls.

Evening came creeping to the eastern line of hills.

"How are things being decided?" I asked Mazlek.

"Vazkor has three men from the Orash villages with him."

"He is asking them about the City?" I was a little amazed. "Do they know anything?"

"It seems he thinks so, but they will not tell. You can hear the screams from time to time."

I felt nothing for the Shlevakin of the villages, nor did Mazlek, yet we both expressed an unspoken, mutual disgust at Vazkor's pointless cruelty—because both of us hated Vazkor, for different reasons.

"I have thought about Orash," Mazlek said. "I think she is empty."

"Yes," I said, "I think so."

No moon that night, and, in the blackness, the word ran that the time of our attack should be now. As they should not have expected us in the snow months, so they should not expect us to hammer their walls in the dark.

It was well-conducted, that muffled preparation, horses held still, men silent, the machines oiled and smooth on their wheels. The first true sound was the great beaked ram going headfirst at the north gate. After that thunder there was the briefest pause, the half-unconscious waiting for a response from the City. Yet there was no response, no warning bell, no shout, no hail of missiles, pouring of fire. After the pause, the sounds of anger came again, and there was no cessation.

I sat some way back from the offensive, on the great white horse I had won myself in the Mouth. He was restless and disturbed by the armor he had had put on him. Until this he had gone very lightly trapped, only a saddle pad and rein. Now he carried, like his fellow battle steeds, the large iron breast-guard, the belly-guard, and over his back the stiffened leather drape with its built-in saddle. On his head the crown piece to protect eyes, cheeks, and skull, with the short sharp unicorn spike protruding from the forehead. Most of the war horses were trained to kick and bite, and stab at their rider's enemy with this metal horn, but the white had not been so taught, and had no use at all for the encumbrance. He glared at the other steeds, and snorted to tell them what fools they were to brook man's impertinence.

The gate burst suddenly with a terrible sound. In the torch smoke-light men swarmed through the opening. Company by company the army cavalry galloped up the causeway, into the shattered maw of Orash. I kneed the white horse, raised my hand to Mazlek and his, and rode fast after them.

Through that gate, then, as in my dream, though not at the head, and not in silence.

All around, leaning up skyward from the broad gate-street, the towers and roofs and terraces. I was not uneasy now that the moment had come, it was too noisy, and there was too much light.

Perhaps an hour passed, and things were louder and brighter then. Orash was full of soldiers, run in from her front and back gates. Many had broken off from the main stem to loot and set on fire the occasional deserted house and mansion—for there seemed no one here at all. There was a rabid cheerfulness about the arson, the big warm fires of burning homes coloring the world like a festival. And then we reached the square, our riding column, Vazkor at its head now. A large open place, and at the crest of many steps the huge pile of a building, its ice-white pillars seeming to dance in the flame reflections. On the steps stood a woman, tall, white robed, her head encased in a devil mask like those we had met before. It was shocking to see her there, suddenly, this one life—unreal in the empty city.

She screamed at us, and the column halted. From her voice I could tell she was very old, a little mad, but not afraid. Across the curve of the riders I saw Vazkor, dark and tall on the black horse, looking at her under the black iron helm with its drifting plume.

"You," she said, "War-Death. This is the Temple of the City. They have fled before you to Belhannor, but I have not fled, and the goddess is behind me. You have breached the etiquette of the old war, jackal of the desert. Go back now, or die."

So, they had evacuated—an answer, and sensible. Vazkor's campaign was a new and dangerous thing, a sweeping and a devouring. But this one remained. She raised her hands, and fire opened in the air before her, then went out.

"Look," she shrilled at Vazkor. "I have Power. I will destroy you. Go back, or die."

Vazkor made a little movement with his own hand, I did not see at first, but then a string spoke and a shaft had pierced the priestess-witch under her left breast. She staggered, and fell over on the steps, but was not quite dead. She pointed at Vazkor and rasped out a mumbled chain of words I could not catch—some curse or other—then laid her head over on her arm and lay still, like an ancient crumpled bird on the staircase.

The steps were very wide, and Vazkor spurred the horse and rode up them, over her arrow-pierced body, and the column followed, stray groups of the foot running up beside us. The Temple would have many rich things in it, and presumably they did not fear the wrath of this goddess since they had the woken goddess with them.

Between the pillars it was black. In the dark narrow hall there came a sudden furious screaming, a thrust of bodies, blood. I drew my sword and hacked a devil-masked warrior from my side. They were here then, not many, but a few still fierce to guard the shrine. I lunged and stabbed in the half light, and the white horse, having never been trained to do it, kicked, and slashed with his lethal brow. Soon it was over, and there were dead men scattered on the floor among fallen dying torches.

I slipped from the horse and stood for a moment in the confusion's aftermath. The fight was done, yet, in this moment, the terror had come to me at last. I cannot explain the frightful sense I had. I must go on. I bent and picked up the nearest torch, and threaded among the soldiers, the dead, the frightened horses. There was a doorway, and inside the windowless place, a soft light from the stone bowl on its stand. Beyond, almost in shadow, the great marble figure of the goddess of Orash. I raised the torch and saw her white body, with its draped white skirt, the fall of silver hair, and finally, the face. But she was the first I had seen in the south who did not wear a mask. This was not the cat-headed Uastis. This one wore her own god-head. A sound came out of my throat, a little retching grunt. The torch dropped out of my hand, but the flare in the bowl was leaping now, and I could not look away.

Above the white body of the woman was the white face of the Cursed One—the face of all horror and

ugliness and despair, the mark of hate. And I had thought I had not seen before a beast which resembled the devil masks of Orash, the thing on which those masks had been modeled; yet I had seen this thing, could see it at any moment of my life I wished—it was the face Karrakaz had shown me under the Mountain. My own face.

A step behind me. I could not turn as I kneeled in the shrine. For a while there was no further movement, then a hand came coldly and precisely onto my shoulder.

"The goddess worshiping the goddess. How apt."

"Vazkor," I said, and even his name, in this place, and at this moment, seemed some sort of amulet.

He lifted me and put me on my feet, but I could not stand upright. The shame and revulsion seemed to shrink me, to eat me.

"Control yourself," he said to me.

I lifted my head a little, looking at him. An iron figure, armored limbs, mail plates across chest and back, helm, mask, metallic hands.

"Every City," I said softly, "here and in the desert, and at Sea's Edge—each one worships a woman. There are no gods for Vazkor to say he is, only goddesses." I am not sure why that revelation came to me then. I looked away from him and said, "Orash. Orash, not Ezlann, is my city."

I turned and somehow walked from that place. In the hall, where men were still taken up with the business of dying, Mazlek and Slor came hurrying to me. "I am hurt," I said, "not badly."

And when I lay in my pavilion outside the city, I whispered to Mazlek, kneeling by me, "Is there a limit to what you will do for me?" "No," he said intensely, "no, goddess." "Then fire Orash," I said. "Raze it, destroy it. Leave nothing."

He was quiet for a moment, then he got up, hissed my name, and left me.

I fell asleep, but in sleep I heard the trumpet call which means a warning. Outside there was great activity, but I knew no enemy was upon us. I slept deeper then. At dawn I woke and went outside the pavilion. Orash was a black City now, after all. Gutted, yawning, damned. The camp was still in turmoil—angry and bewildered at riches lost in the blaze. One of the small fires, they reasoned, had spread, and not burned out as we had all supposed. Not many of the looters had perished; there had been too prompt a warning for that.

Mazlek did not speak to me of what had been done, nor I to him. Vazkor, if he suspected, showed no suspicion. She was a small prize. Her brutal destruction might be more valuable to him than her abandoned hulk standing at his back for an enemy to possess.

It was stupid, what I had done. It should have brought no comfort, for I had not burned my own ugliness, only the mark of it. And yet...

6

From the black shell of Orash, we rode southwest to Belhannor. Here the fugitives of Orash had fled, so

the priestess had told us, leaving only a temple guard to ward us off. We passed the frozen-hard ruts of their wagons in the snow, but they had been quick in their escape. The only stragglers we overtook were dead ones, abandoned where they collapsed.

We rode close to the western hill line, and passed thin craning trees. The snow was long in breaking that year.

I do not recall much of that tedious march. I seemed always cold and slightly feverish, which led to brief peculiar hallucinations, so that I saw Belhannor ahead of us several times before we actually reached her. I had not bled for forty-two days and would not think about what this must mean.

We saw her first in the late afternoon, under a sullen amber sky, black silhouette of a pale City, white as Orash. She flickered before my eyes.

An hour later our camp was set in scrub woods under the hills. I went to my pavilion, and lay there, neither asleep nor awake, while the black night slid over us. In the dawn there were new trumpets, away across the valley floor. Belhannor, it seemed, was ready to fight in the old fashion, challenge for challenge.

I felt very ill that day, and the illness angered me. I went out and had them bring the white horse, but when he came I could hardly get up on his back. My eyes were swimming, and the whole world of camp, trees, hills, plain, distant army, distant City spun around like a potter's wheel. No one argued with me that I must not ride out with Vazkor's troops. Perhaps I looked better than I felt.

Brass whined from either side, became the single voice which sounded the advance, a pealed yellow blade splitting the morning from crown to gut. A lurch of movement, the ground running black and white like broken paving, lead-colored sky with a single rent of faded orange. Ahead, the force of Belhannor, a large swirling mass, not white but iron. Yet it was not the battle they hoped for. Ammath cannon spoke from our left in gouts of smoke and light. The Belhannese lines broke and tumbled apart like toys.

The white horse did not like the cannon. He swerved and cursed them, and soon the stink of powder and scorched metal drove him mad, but not to run away. Crazy as I was, determined as I was, perhaps, to submerge our rampant individuality in the morass of war, he plunged abruptly forward, leaving all vestige of conformity behind. Our own soldiery broke ranks and gave way. I do not remember very well how we burst ahead and were flung among the cannon-crippled forward line that was Belhannor.

I felt no sense of panic as fate-which-was-the-white-horse drove me in among an enemy. I was glad, I was exultant, for here was complete forgetfulness. I raised the sword in both my hands, and I was no longer the faceless woman in her trap of earth. I was the first rider, the archer, the charioteer, the warrior. I was Darak, I was Vazkor, I was Death. Their faces, helmed, masked, empty, sprayed up and away from me like the scattered petal-heads of flowers, and the enormous white beast between my thighs danced on their dying. The sky was red from the cannon blasts. I heard the great balls fly like iron birds above my skull, and knew myself safe. In that whirlwind of hatred and joy I found the beauty of pain, the triumphant cacophony of horror which is music. A great tidal hymn, the last coitus with darkness, of which the final note is a vast, piercing, orgasmic scream of agony.

The scream hung white and perfect under me and all around, sinking now, paling into scarlet.

The horse gave a convulsive shudder, scuttled like a ship. I let go of the rein and fell slowly sideways, aware only of the motion of the fall, the horse falling also, even more slowly, until we lay side by side, spent by the act of love, or death.

I woke, and thought I was in my pavilion, on the low mattress with its heap of rugs. Then my eyes cleared a little, and I saw it was a large curtained room, smudged with a small quantity of lamplight. Two indistinct female figures stirred at the foot of the bed. One rose, went out through the doors, and was back in minutes with a tall dark man following. My eyes did not seem to focus properly, and I could not raise my head. The man came and stood over me.

"My congratulations on your fight, goddess," Vazkor said. "Your last for some time, I imagine."

"Where is this?" I asked. My voice was very faint, I did not think he would hear me, but he had.

"Belhannor," he said. "The City yielded after the battle, and we are in occupation. The Javhovor is apparently intelligent and has realized resistance is useless. The ladies tending you at this moment are princesses of Belhannor. They are anxious to do all they can for your comfort. Outside, of course, there is a guard—your own men."

He must be very sure of the City if he had left me unconscious and helpless with these women—I was still valuable to him, after all. I could see a little better now, make out their pale and frightened faces. And beyond the door was Mazlek.

"Thank you," I said. "How damaged am I?"

"A little," he said, "but you heal quickly. Mazlek and his crew cut a way to you after you fell. The white horse was dead."

"I will need another, then," I said, stifling my guilt and pain so he should not see it. "When do we ride?"

"I shall leave a portion of my troops here, under the command of Attorl, Prince of Kmiss. The rest of us march at dawn tomorrow."

I knew then, of course, that the march did not include me. I could tell I would not have mended so quickly.

"I am to follow you, then?" I said. "As before?"

"No, goddess. You are to stay here, in our prize of Belhannor. You forget your pregnancy. I do not think we dare risk the child any further."

"The child," I said with weak fury, "this child does not exist."

Vazkor turned and moved toward the doors. I thought at first he was simply abandoning his cause as proven, but then I saw he had ushered my attendants out, and someone else had come into the room, a hunched-over, coarse-robed woman with the used-up, swarthy ugliness of the Dark People. She came to the bed with him, and stood looking at me from the blank unmasked face which was mask in itself, and two glittering reptile eyes, carved, black, and empty.

"This is a village witch," he said, "not worthy of you, but highly skilled they tell me. I apologize for her. But there. It is very necessary you understand your condition." He turned to the hag, and spoke a couple of words in the village tongue, directions for an examination.

I half hoped she would be afraid to touch me, but she had no emotions left, that one. He had chosen

deliberately and well. Her hands were dry and cruel on me, and he stood and watched us as she probed and prodded at my bruised and agonized body, and added new hurts to the old. Finally she stood back, nodded, and muttered something. Vazkor waved her away, and she went out. I knew what she had said, and he knew I knew it, but it was a mutual pretense between us that I did not.

"You are with child, and surprisingly healthy, considering your injuries. You have probably two hundred days yet to carry. In Ezlann your time would come in the month of the Peacock." He smiled a little. "Belhannor is safe, and you will stay here under the protection of Attorl. Your own guard will naturally remain also."

I lay in the sheets, unable to lift my head. I said, "I will not bear this child."

"You will," he said.

That was the deadlock between us.

He went out, and the two Belhannese princesses returned, and gazed in abject terror at me.

Sleep.

He rode out with his army in the morning, as he had said he would, he, the warlord, going on to his conquests. And I was left behind, with no hope of following.

I am not certain what injuries I had had, but in another day I was well enough to rise and walk about my suite of white marble and tapestried hangings.

I was not sure at first what I would do, but gradually I became determined to wrest what I could from the situation—a dry gourd indeed.

From the windows of my apartments I looked out over the snow-draped vistas of the City, gardens below, an icy greenish river straddled by three vast bridges of stone, towers, and winding streets, and terraces of steps. She seemed to have suffered no damage, here at least in her High Quarter. I learned from Mazlek that her capitulation had been swift and total. The Javhovor had kneeled and kissed Vazkor's gauntleted fingers in the gate-street. They were not used to the true burning breath of war, these Cities which had fought their toy battles for centuries.

Toward evening, after the lamplighting, I sent word to Attorl that I wished his presence. He came promptly enough, dressed for some festive occasion in magenta velvet and many jewels. He was a minor princeling, pretty and well mannered, with a very small mouth. Silvery fair hair coiled on his shoulders. He wore a phoenix mask when he entered, but drew it off for me.

"I understand, prince, that Belhannor has been left in our charge."

A little surprise. He had understood Belhannor had been left in*his* charge.

"I see your puzzlement, prince," I said graciously. "Naturally, you are commander of all our forces here. But equally naturally, your rulings are subject to my authority."

He looked dismayed, but did not think to question it. I was, after all, Uastis Reincarnate, and he believed in my religious power, if he did not take kindly to my temporal aspirations. He bowed, acknowledged what I had said, and I let him go. Thereafter, I was plagued by every petty affair which must be seen

to—the curbing of very minor disturbances, posting of guards to police the streets, diversion of supplies to our armies. My interference was confined mostly to setting my seal on documents already attended to by Attorl, or rather by his advisers and scribes, for paperwork of any kind distressed him. Nevertheless, it held for me some vestige of recognition.

The silver-robed princesses who attended me were, I discovered, daughters of the Javhovor himself. They became my official maidens, and each bore that cumbersome and incongruous fan of honor. They spoke only in answer to my commands, which pleased me well enough, and their fright never ebbed. Their father, a pale plump anxious man, came and paid homage to me of his own accord, and sent me sumptuous gifts of jewelry, silks, perfumes, and magnificently bound books, which rivaled even those I had of Asren's.

It was a dreadful time, Like the numbed white snow that would not break for spring, so my life seemed hardened and numbed by a covering I could not break.

It seemed I had nothing left, only these trivial pieces of power, my own Power, which came with hate, and grew in me day by day like a cancer. And that other cancer he had left in me, which grew also. I did not suffer the troubles most human women experience, there was no sickness or pain, only a sense of heaviness, out of all proportion to what I carried. From the eightieth day of pregnancy, the mark of my subjugation began to swell out from me. I realize I was not very big, nor did I grow very big, yet it seemed to me then that I was huge and bloated. To make it worse, the slimness of the rest of my body persisted; even my breasts grew only a little. More than ever, in the loose velvet gowns I had now to wear, the thing in my womb seemed an imposition, some thing nailed onto my own self, thrusting out, taking possession; a haunting.

Three times I tried to be rid of it—once by my own will, but the pain was terrible, and I could not force myself to go on; once simply by drinking too much of their wine, which did nothing. The third time I rode out of Belhannor to one of the tiny steadings still left standing at her foot (Vazkor had razed most of them before Belhannor bowed, and her walls were stained with their smoke). Only Mazlek and Slor rode with me for the sake of secrecy, but I spoke the tongue of the Dark People well enough to find their healer-woman, and ask her to assist me. She showed none of the alarm or surprise which would have met me in the City. She motioned me into her hut, and there I lay through the afternoon and night in a stinking blur of firelight, sickness, and fear. I had not realized there were so many varieties of pain—pain sharp and bright as silver, pain which burns like molten gold, and the dull booming bronze pain which comes after.

Finally she leaned over me in the predawn grayness.

"Is it finished?" I asked her.

"No," she said. She gave me no title at any time, and few words.

"What now, then?" I whispered, fighting back my panic at the thought of new horrors done to me.

"Nothing now," she said. "A loving child. He will not be parted from you."

So I called Mazlek, and he and Slor helped me mount and ride away. I did not see their faces behind their masks, and I was glad of it.

For several days I was violently ill, vomiting, and in great discomfort, and all that while I willed myself to lose Vazkor's seed, but it was no use. I suffered, and perhaps the thing inside me suffered, but it would

not let go.

News reached us by messenger of two Cities which had fallen in the forest land farther south, to Vazkor and his men.

7

Sixty days had passed for me in Belhannor, and we had entered the month which in Purple Valley is called the Time of Green. The spring is usually stirring by then, but the snow lay thick and hard across the city and the valley floor. Anxiety grew, the fear that always comes when an established pattern falters. The white-robed priests of their Temple offered lambs and pigeons to their goddess, a custom I had not seen in action since Ankuram. I recalled Za and the three days' darkness, and so was not very surprised when Attorl requested an audience, and entered with the Javhovor a few paces behind him.

"Goddess," they both intoned, and the eyes in their unmasked faces swiveled nervously from my belly.

"What do you want?"

"There's unrest, goddess," Attorl said, playing with a neck chain. He looked bored with the unrest. "There's some disturbance about the weather—men running around the streets, a mad woman going about shouting doom. ..."

"Goddess," the Javhovor said uneasily, "there have been prayers in the temples and in the great Temple of our goddess, but the snow does not break. Now, in humility, we turn our eyes to you—Vazkor Overlord spoke of your power—dare we hope...?"

I say I was not surprised, but neither was I pleased. Power, yes, but over elements and seasons? They expected a good deal of me, and if I failed—what? And if I refused what?

As I sat in my chair, disgustingly aware of my condition before their embarrassed eyes, the old festering anger woke in me, snarling, and I recalled abruptly the no-voice which had said, "Magicianess, who ruled the elements, the stars, the seas, and hidden fires of earth."

I am not certain what kind of knowledge was on me then, but I got to my feet and said, "The palace of Belhannor has a temple, too, I think? Then take me there and leave me there."

Both Attorl and the Javhovor looked startled, but I was conducted along the passages to a great door, manned by six of the royal guard.

"Let me alone in here," I said, "and when the door is shut on me, tell them to pray in your City."

Inside, closed in, a small golden room. So intense was this sudden irrational motivation, I had not even flinched from their goddess, in case she were Orash's sister; but she was not. She was small and beautiful, her head covered by a golden sunburst and hung with pendants of the jade so special in every southern hierarchy. Before her, the stone bowl, held in claws of gold. The flame was very low as I went toward it.

I did not know why I did what I did. I leaned over the flame, and whispered, "I am strong, even now, I am strong. Your Power and mine will be a great strength."

There were no words in my brain, I sensed only a tremendous struggle, not in the least physical, but nonetheless exhausting. I fought against the writhing thing, and finally it was still. I stood with my eyes shut, and my hands on the sides of the bowl, and pulled something up from within me, tense and bright and unwilling.

There seemed to be no time spent, yet I had stood here forever. It was very quiet. I pulled at the thread, and when it pierced my skull, I found a way out for it above and between my eyes.

It had seemed such an intense yet tiny thing to do, but now there was a terrible blast of sound, a great crashing of thunder over the palace roof, and the snapping violence of lightning searing through my closed lids. I found I could not open my lids, but I was not afraid. Rain came smashing like glass against the high shutters, and in the noise and light I lost my balance and fell, and lay there with my eyes still fast shut, and now I knew what it was I wanted.

At the time, it made sense to me, though afterward it was only a blur of shapes and feelings. I had the mastery of the enormous storm which would melt the snow with its boiling drops, and I turned it a little, like a wild horse, so that half its face was toward the armies of Vazkor. I did not know where they were at that time, bivouacked, perhaps, at the feet of the fifth City of Purple Valley, in the woodland there—though a picture formed of a frozen narrow river, and marching sounds came to me, and grinding wheels. I pushed the storm head and the lightning bit into my lids. Everything was lost in thunder.

I opened my eyes quite suddenly and got to my feet. I was trembling and shaking, but I felt very excited and happy. The flame was flat in its bowl, and the cold sky-blaze came and went on the walls.

I sat on one of the prayer-seats of the Javhovor and his family and tried to be calm, but it was difficult. The storm died slowly, and afterward the rain droned on for several hours. I think I fell asleep, for the golden room was abruptly red and purple from a stormy sunset beyond the windows.

I went to the door, and out, and the guards kneeled down in front of me. I was tired and locked inside myself, and ignored them. A little way on, I found Mazlek, my escort to my suite.

"In the City," I said, "What?"

"A storm, goddess. And now the sky is clear."

I dreamed I was with Asren, a strange dream, for though I knew it to be him, his features and his beauty unmistakable, he seemed little more than a child. Strange, too, because we were walking, hand in hand, very happily, in some green garden place. Then there were many white steps, and at the bottom, one of those stone bowls in which they kept alight the symbol of the Unawakened, the symbol which was Karrakaz.

The child Asren stared down at the bowl, then looked at me questioning, and I smiled and pointed, and nodded. He leaped from the steps in answer to that nod, and fell into the bowl, and the flames covered him.

The storm had swept Belhannor clear of snow and the black slush which followed. The skies were golden, and there was a new warmth in the air. I think I had forgotten half of what I did, or tried to do, in the palace temple. Certainly I did not think of it until I was reminded. Days passed, and buds were breaking on the trees. Beyond the walls, fields saved from the fires of War were melting into greens and citrons. They sang hymns to me in the City, the goddess who had ridden to destroy them, and now blessed.

We were seventeen days into our sudden spring, when the first of the messengers reached us. It was a dramatic entry, a frenzied man, shouting incoherently at the palace gates, whose horse dropped frothing and dead from under him.

I heard the hum of excitement in the corridors beyond my rooms, and sent one of Mazlek's men to discover what was happening. I had, however, no need to wait on him. The Javhovor came to me, and his face was yellow with alarm.

"Goddess," he said, "a man has come. The overlord and his armies—a storm among the High Woods—that is the forested hill line that runs east of us—an avalanche, massive accumulations of snow, and broken trees and rocks brought down with it, all loosened by the rain, and the river An in flood. Ah, goddess, many lost—"

I had risen, a cold hardness in me.

"And he?" I asked. "Is there word of my husband?"

"Safe," he said, glad to reassure me, "quite safe. But the army greatly depleted—and there are other troubles."

They had been making for Anash, it seemed, the mistress City of the river, and fifth of their goals. Now, cut off in sections by the avalanche, and in distress, the army found itself harried by troups of Anash, which had swiftly seized all advantage.

In the next few days other messengers came, and the story grew. A battle fought now, and Vazkor's men routed. Vazkor and a handful of his captains holed up in the hills, striving to pull together what was left to them from a morass of casualties, sick men, and deserters. The winter campaign was taking its toll at last. There was a disease at work, and rations were scarce since the disaster of the avalanche.

I had thought I might see now the gleam of defiance in Belhannese eyes, but in my stupidity I had forgotten all the divided angers of the three Cities which still stood, and worse—the fury of Anash and Eptor, which had escaped Vazkor's greed. Those two had joined to fight him off, and, his power smashed, might well turn their vengeance on their sister Cities, which had let him pass so easily, and where remnants of his force still lingered.

A rider came—the last messenger we were to receive. He brought word that Vazkor and his armies were no more—all slain, or dead of the sickness, or broken up into packs to run like jackals for the safety of the mountains. An abrupt end to war-might. The man enumerated those dead he could, among them Attorl's uncle, whereupon, apparently, Attorl collapsed weeping. No doubt when they brought me news of Vazkor's end, they looked for similar results. But I felt nothing, not even triumph, for I knew he was not dead.

For a while, then, we heard no more. A sullen depression and unease settled on Belhannor; a waiting.

I was well past the one hundred, and twentieth day (which, by the witch's reckoning, was the middle of my pregnancy), heavy and sleepy often, while my head ached constantly. I was asleep when the first weary troop of refugees trailed into the City from her two sisters farther south. Vazkor had taken them easily, now they fled from the forces of Anash and Eptor, which, having crushed White Desert's march, were striking north to finish the work.

Belhannor opened her gates to them, foolishly, out of pity. She had taken in the flight from Orash already. Now the numbers swelled—wagons of women, men, and children, domestic animals and household pets. The city grew crowded, slovenly; tents put up in the streets and gardens and horse fields, and the warrens of the lower quarters blocked and stifled.

Attorl, I heard, was struggling to organize defense, but he was ill with nerves and panic, and made a poor job of it. Belhannor's major war-machines had been appropriated by Vazkor and taken south. Now a few rusty cannon were wheeled out to protrude from the walls like mistaken drainage pipes. The soldiers in Belhannor did well enough, though it was a small garrison force, not more than four hundred men—adequate to subdue civilians but hopeless under the circumstances. Attorl's wavering attempts to recruit ordinary men, particularly from the refugee population, met with sickly failure.

Vazkor had allowed only for perpetual success, never once for the stumble that would come inevitably, with time.

I experienced no guilt because of the storm—I felt that I had simply introduced a certain catastrophe a little earlier.

Anash and Eptor rode fast, smashing their way toward us, extravagant and impetuous with anger. We saw their tokens on the horizon now, from our high towers—smoke pall, black and filthy—some burning village; nearer, the haze of camp fires by night. It was interesting that quite suddenly some of those who had fled into Belhannor packed up their gear and fled out of her again. They were the wise ones. Others felt a false security in the sense of walls around them. I imagine I must have had similar thoughts, though not consciously. I felt too heavy and dreary to attempt flight. Sour amusement had settled on me, I, once the besieger of Orash and Belhannor, now besieged by these Cities I had not even seen.

They reached us on a crisp bitter-green evening, spring rain spangling intermittently, an evening for nostalgia and old love songs.

Attorl had begged use of my guard for the walls, and I had put it to Mazlek. He nodded, seeing, probably, no other course. Now I sat in my bedchamber in one of the carved chairs. A jeweled book was spread open before me on the sloping ivory desk, a useful thing I could bring conveniently close across the obscenity which was now my stomach. It was a book of fabulous animals and beasts—salamanders, unicorns—and the pages blazed with beautiful color from masterly illustrations. I was not really reading it, only admiring, when suddenly I found a single word written in the margin. I had thought this book to be one of the gifts of Belhannor's Javhovor, had not realized I held one of Asren's books, one I had never before looked into. I did not know his writing—I had seen his personal seal, no more—yet I knew it at once. Without embellishment, clear, straight, wise yet open, inured to yet conscious of pain—all this I saw in the solitary word he had written. I reached out to touch the word with my fingertip, and in that instant the great thunder came, splitting the world. The room trembled and steadied. I pushed the desk away, went to the nearest window and saw the reddish glare on the river thrown back from burning houses in the lower quarter. They had fired across the wall, and the ball had struck. I had not realized the power of those iron birds of death.

Other crashes came after that, now close, now far off, always terrible. Gradually the sky reddened into smoky darkness.

The bombardment ceased at nightfall, though I did not notice then. I was still at the window, clinging there in helpless fascination, when the silence came. But not silence. A crackling from burning places, the occasional soft thud of a collapsing house, and cries, and warning trumpets brought with the ashes on the wind.

I did not leave my rooms. The palace was full of frightened women. There were three men of my guard by my door, and, when others relieved them later, there might be news of a sort.

At midnight the cannon roused again. It was clever, not allowing us to sleep. Mazlek came soon after, dirty from the wall, his arm bound around with bloody temporary bandaging.

"Little action to tell," he said. "There are many of them, and more to come from the look of it. I think there are men from the other Cities with them, recruited after the surrender."

"Have they tried to take Belhannor?" I asked.

"No. They're playing with her, goddess. A spokesman rode out, and called up there should be no quarter for the men of White Desert, but—" Mazlek paused, smiling slightly. "For Belhannor, if she opens her gates, sisterly love restored between the Cities of the valley."

It was a sharp little dagger, that. It pricked even my lethargy.

"What did Attorl do?" I asked.

"Fired on the man," Mazlek said, expressionless, "fired on him, and missed. The Belhannese cannon are useless, except to the enemy. The first blew up and killed thirteen men on the wall, and the ball never left her. Goddess," he said, "it is only a question of time before they think to save their own skins."

He spoke it softly, not so sharp now, but then, the blade was already in.

"I must leave," I said, but it was a blank statement. I did not know where I should go.

"If you will put the matter in my hands?"

I nodded.

"Then collect what is necessary to you, goddess, and be ready to come with me, night or day. I will guard you with my life. You know it."

Despite the intermittent noise of war, I slept that night, deeply and without dreams.

It was a quiet morning, very still. The river shone like green pearl. I could not see from my apartments any of the ruins, only the faint smoke, drifting like a girl's hair on water, across the pale sky. I bathed and dressed and they brought my drink. I remember sitting in a chair, staring around me at priceless things, combs and ornaments, and knowing none of them as mine. I would have little to carry, except—I went to the desk and touched the open book I had forgotten since the first cannon sounded.

A knock then, and, when I called for them to come in, a man entered in the livery of the Javhovor, and told me he begged my presence. It seemed strange, before they had always come to me, and yet it was a very polite summons. I followed the man, and was brought eventually to the great audience hall, its function virtually obsolete, but its splendor undimmed. Among the scarlet and green and white hangings, the pale-faced man, who was High-Lord, came to me, unmasked and bowed very low.

"Goddess, forgive my request that you come here, but I felt it was safer, perhaps." A little pause, during which I noticed several courtiers and ministers around the walls. Behind me, the white fans of the

princesses dipped nervously. "We have been forced," the Javhovor began, and halted. "We thought it best," he said. "A cruel decision. We have delivered ourselves to the mercy of our sister Cities, Anash and Eptor. There was no other path for us, goddess. I could not see my own die around me."

I was angry with myself for falling into this trap, angry at the Javhovor for ensnaring me, angry with Mazlek that he had not sensed, and come in time after all.

"What have you done?" I asked—a blind speech enough, but he answered.

"The men of Belhannor will rise against the men of White Desert on the wall. It has been arranged." He hung his head, gray and sick at the betrayal for which I did not even blame him.

"And I?" I said. "Where do I fit in this tapestry?"

"No insult will be offered you, goddess—I swear it."

"I am delighted you are so confident. I do not share your optimism."

There came a sudden, distant noise outside—shouts, cries, a roar of surprise and pain. No cannon uttered; there was no need. The men of Belhannor would be opening wide the gates now, welcoming their brothers inside, hopeful and a little nervous.

I sat my heaviness in a chair to wait, and noticed that the princesses slunk little by little away from me, to their father's side. Soon there was a sound of booted feet, horses, many voices under the windows, before long, marchers rhythmic in the corridor outside, the doors and curtains thrust aside, and twenty men emptying into the hall. Mixed uniforms of purple and bright yellow, armor pieces, the visors of helms tipped back to show the arrogant masks of lions and bears—Anash, the mistress of the offensive. A man, a silver-masked soldier yet very proud, spiteful in triumph, swaggered into the hall—their commander, thinking himself their Javhovor.

A half nod to the High-Lord of Belhannor, a vicious little chuckle.

"Well. An intelligent move, brother."

They might have been Vazkor's words, but the voice was very light and high, oddly matched with the bulk of the man.

And then the insolent turning, the gaze taking in the length and breadth of the hall, coming to rest at last on me.

"And who is this, brother? Your lady, perhaps?"

He would know of me, know of the cat-faced goddess of Ezlann. She who had carried the enemy of Anash to his power.

"I am Uastis," I said to the commander. "My husband is Vazkor, who would have plowed you and yours deep in the river soil had he but time to spare."

I said it to anger him, catch him off balance in this atmosphere of placatory groveling. His hand whipped to sword hilt, and I felt a laziness come on me, knowing what I could do, to him at least, and to his twenty, if I could summon hate enough. But after that, death would come, or the only form of death I

could know. And abruptly I was afraid. How my enemies could play with me, endless games of agony.

There came a startling little cry, just beyond the door, a little thrusting and cursing because a man had fallen and pushed others as he fell. The Anash commander turned, and in that moment the doorway changed color and shape and was full of black-liveried men, some green-roped at the middle, all with the badge of a cat on the right side of the breast. Swift swords and men dropping before them. The floor was littered purple and yellow.

Two men ran to me—Slor and Mazlek.

"Goddess—quickly!"

I ran with them, not pausing to watch the amazement on those figures left alive behind us.

There were many corridors in the palace at Belhannor, and those we ran through were very empty. I had the impression that we were going downward, but had no time or breath to ask—that other in me made it hard for me to keep up. Then we turned out into a broad dark hall, and found a pack of the purple and yellow soldiers, plundering chests. Apparently anything that ran and did not wear their colors was fair game for them. At once swords were out, and they came rushing at us up the hall, yelling. Mazlek pulled me across their path, through a side door which was slammed behind us.

Fewer men with me now. Many had stayed on the far side of the door to hold off the pursuit. A sloping passageway ran down, followed by flights of dark stairways where wall torches struggled to remain alight. I stumbled many times.

In the damp darkness, we heard the great clang of the door bursting open above, and knew the hunt was on again.

"Not far," Mazlek whispered. "A door soon they won't be able to open."

The steps narrowed and became a corridor without lights. Behind, the sounds were wild and raucous and savage. Slor came to a halt, and the rest of the men froze where they stood.

"We'll hold them here," he said, "a narrow place. By the time they can get past us, you will have got the goddess safe away."

Mazlek hesitated a second, then he nodded. He reached out and clasped Slor's shoulder hard in his hand, then he turned and pulled me on into the dark.

I was quite breathless by now, and hardly understood what was happening. It seemed only some awful part of my ordeal when my fingers met stone, and I found the corridor ended in a blank wall. I leaned on the cold pitted surface, gasping, and Mazlek thrust something into my hands.

"A cloak," he said, "and a plain silk mask—iron gray, the color of the lower orders in Belhannor. Please put them on."

I turned away and obeyed him,, though I could not see how this would help us. When I looked back, I saw that he had donned a tunic of this stuff over his mail, and a plain mask also. I dropped the cat mask where he had dropped his own, and his badge and sash with it, but the open skull-cat eyes glared up at me, my own self left behind. A rasping sound made me jump back from the wall. A narrow oblong opening had appeared, framing blackness.

Mazlek held up one hand on which a ring curled I had not seen him wear before.

"I bought this key many days ago," he said. "I thought it might prove useful."

He guided me into the black mouth, followed me, then shut the way behind us.

"They may never see the door," he said. "If they do, it will be useless to them without the ring."

He grasped my arm firmly and we started forward. I could make out nothing at first, but then a greenish luminance began to ripple about us, and I smelled the river.

The light grew. I saw mud and mosses clinging on the walls. Bright green weeds strangled about our feet.

We came out of a small cave, like a rat's bolt-hole, into the dull, white, faintly smoking day. The passage had opened on a low bank of the river, but not the river I had known from my windows. This was an oily trickle, clogged with weed growths and garbage. Rough steps led up from the mud to the narrow streets, peeling houses, and war ruins of the lower quarter.

8

The purple and yellow soldiery of Anash had filtered through into these streets, but by careful maneuvering we avoided a face-to-face collision with them. Despite their leader's promises of brotherhood, they were breaking down the doors of perfume shops, clothiers and jewelers, and taking what they thought valuable. In an alley we passed a dog they had used for archery practice. Their noise was always with us—now distant, now dangerously close. Twice other men passed our hastily sought hiding places, in charcoal colors, marching. Eptor, it seemed, were a more orderly crew.

Most of the house doors were locked tight and bolted from within. Many had fled, I think, at the last instant into the cellars and passages beneath their houses. Nearer the wall a whole street had been gutted by fire, still smoking, and a thick scattering of dead men lay there, some of whom I recognized; the last soldiers of Vazkor's army.

Finally, a white stone house with a courtyard, the door of which was swinging on broken hinges. We went inside, and Mazlek dragged furniture from inner rooms to block the entrance. He would not let me help him. Once the barricade was in place, we went in and upstairs, and found narrow empty bedchambers. He made me lie on a bed, and pulled the covers over me.

"I will be outside your door," he said, "if there's trouble of any kind."

"But, Mazlek," I said, "how long do we stay here?" "Not long. We must leave the city as soon as possible." "And then? Where?" "White Desert," he said.

I lay in the room but did not sleep, though I was very tired. Once there was a great commotion in the street, shouts and screams and crashes, but I was too exhausted to get up and look, and eventually the sounds died away. I spent a considerable amount of time reflecting, quite irrelevantly, on the fact that there seemed to be no hovels in the lower quarter. A City of palaces and houses, as I supposed Ezlann had been, as I supposed were all the Cities of the south—too proud to degenerate into slums, these bastard children of the Lost. The colorless sky crept toward darkness. Mazlek came in softly.

"I must leave you for a while, goddess," he said. "Don't move from this place, and light no lamps."

I nodded, and he went. The night pressed close, very black, except that outside many separate little firelights sprang up, and flickered rose-red on the ceiling of the narrow room. The house began to creak and squeak ominously in the way of all houses when they have a solitary victim in them. I heard countless steps on the stairs, heavy, sly, cruel steps, soldiers with knives, whose way with pregnant women was too well known to me from camp chat to leave me unmoved. But none of them were real, except the last. I sat up when I heard them, tense and very still, knowing this was no trick of the house. The door to the room swung open and a soldier of Anash stood there, the fire-glow picking out his livery, the bear mask, the stained knife stuck through his belt.

"Goddess," said the soldier of Anash in Mazlek's voice, "don't be alarmed. I found this one on his own, and got these from him. It will be easy now. Most of them are drunk—drinking openly in the streets like animals. The gates will have sentries, no doubt, but as incapable as the rest, I think. There's a horse in the courtyard."

I followed him out of the house, and he mounted me behind him on a shaggy pack horse, a sturdy, squat, dark little beast, with more than a share of donkey; there was a glass wine bottle tied on the saddle. Mazlek unstoppered it, and poured half the red liquid onto the paving.

"When I tell you, goddess, you must act like a drunken woman, cling to me and laugh." He sounded acutely embarrassed, and added: "Forgive me. I would not ask it of you if there were another way."

"Oh, Mazlek," I said reproachfully, "do you think me such a fool? Forget I am what you think I am because you killed me with your sword at the steading by the Water, and I healed, and followed you. If we are to make this journey together, you must understand I am nothing very special or particularly worth any trouble on your part. I will do what you tell me, and be grateful for your help." It was a moment of weary truth for me, very bitter, yet oddly comforting too. If he was shocked by what I had said, he did not show it. There was a moment's silence, and then he spurred the horse and we were off.

The ride was swift, punctuated by dark alleys, by abstract patterns of firelight and figures outlined on that redness. Drunken men shouted at us, but had no particular inclination to follow. Away in the heart of the city there was a fierce orange glare among the palaces, and gouts of purple smoke. So much then for sisterly love restored. We reached a broad avenue and ahead, quite suddenly, the wall loomed behind houses. A lower gate this, not of great importance, therefore presumably sparsely manned. We passed a crowded bonfire in the street, and a missile struck the horse, which swerved, corrected itself, and ran on. Around a block of plundered shops, and stables where a few stray animals wandered, and the gate lay ahead.

"Now," Mazlek said.

Even expecting his change of character, it was a surprise to me. He jerked on the horse's reins abruptly, so that it protested and pranced, and he began to sway in the saddle, yelling some formless song without words or melody. He had untied the half-empty wine bottle, and now waved it aloft. I was so enthralled with his performance I almost forgot my own, but finally remembered, put my arms around him, and began to sing at the top of my voice one of the musical offerings of Darak's camp, which might raise a few eyebrows, even here.

In this way we got to the gate-mouth, an entrance for drovers probably, judging from width and ugliness, and the amount of ancient animal droppings cemented to the road.

There were about ten men, more than I had hoped for, but unmasked, and with their store of bottles and wineskins about them, they were obviously not in their prime. I thought there might be some business with passwords which we did not know, but they had apparently forgotten all that.

"Halt!" The nearest one, who seemed to be in charge, came wavering toward us. "Halt, you drink-sodden son of a mare. Halt, halt, halt. What's that up behind you?"

He did not speak in the elegant manner of the Cities, though in a corruption of the same tongue—a kind of army slang, almost a language on its own.

"A woman," Mazlek said, and offered him the glass bottle.

The soldier drank, belched, and looked at me.

"Belhannese," he said.

"That's right," Mazlek said, "and very willing to make me forget it."

"Not much showing," the soldier said, "but I'd say she'd got one in the pot."

"That's all right by me. She won't be saying it's mine, then, if we come here again, will she?"

The soldier put up a hand and began to explore me, and I felt Mazlek's body stiffen. I gave him a little slap.

"Did I say you owned me, soldier?" I asked Mazlek. "Just because you gave me a ride? This is a nice man, I can tell." I patted my besieger's cheek, and the fool grinned. "We were going outside for a bit. Why not come with us?"

"Outside?" he queried, dubious. "Why not here and now?"

"I like to pick and choose," I said, "and besides, do you want that riffraff pushing in before you?"

He glanced at the other men, grinned again, and walked to the front of the horse. As he led us out of the gate there were a few shouts, but he told them to be quiet, and they were, so that was no problem.

A little path ran down from the gate. The platform had degenerated into a slope here, loosely mantled with springpared trees.

"Here'll do," our escort said.

"Never mind him," I said as I got down from the horse, nodding at Mazlek. I let the soldier pull me into some bushes, where he proceeded to get on with what interested him most. Mazlek was perhaps too quick, too angry, but the trained fighter in him saved us; he was also too professional to make a mess of things, for all his fury. He rose suddenly over us, palmed the man's mouth, and thrust the knife into him. The Anashian died without a sound, and Mazlek dragged him off me, and flung him aside.

I could not see Mazlek's expression behind the mask, but every line of his body expressed his horror.

"Goddess—I thought I had been too quick for him to—"

"Unimportant," I said.

He shook his head and turned away.

We remounted the horse, and rode quickly from the walls of Belhannor, through village fields, into the safe darkness.

We were lucky. An hour or so later, riding in the scrub woodland trailing from the foot of the hill, we found another horse, twin to the first, easily caught with a gift of sweet grass. Mounted separately, we rode down at a trot, and made the dawn without a halt.

Belhannor was only a shape on the horizon now, an ivory figure from the game of Castles, with a smoke plume like a thundercloud still poised above her head. We made our stop in a copse of twisted thorn trees, and lit a small fire. Mazlek stripped off the things of Anash, and put on once more the soft iron-colored tunic and mask of a lower citizen. Now we were only Belhannese refugees, one pair out of hundreds probably, making for ruined Orash perhaps, until it was safe to go home.

Mazlek drew from the saddle pack a small box, and I could see from his unease what it must contain.

"Mazlek," I said softly, "I can go for many days without food. You supply yourself as you want."

He nodded, but slunk off among the trees to eat. He had not flinched at the bald statement, but, even so, the taboos of a lifetime could not be blown away so swiftly, if ever.

Later, we rode on, keeping a steady but unhurried speed. The land around me seemed quite unfamiliar—I had seen it last under snow, and through a fever haze. Nevertheless, it was a strange journey, this going backward over ground I had crossed before—the first time ever I had returned to any place which it took longer than a day to reach. Beneath the horses' hooves the soil was now warmly brown, dappled with many greens. Dusk fell more slowly, and birds rang like bells at the dawn light. A fox's lair among the bracken, and a vixen mottled white on her russet, still half in her winter coat.

Five or six days passed, and Mazlek told me we were not making toward Orash, as I had thought, but would turn eastward now toward the hill line. Beyond the hills—mountains, part of the great chain of primeval children folded upward from the southern earth in the first struggles of the landscape. Northward, they would become one with the Ring, broken only by the blue water, Aluthmis. Northeast they would lose their peaks in the rock plains that fell away from Eshkorek Arnor, City of White Desert.

"The best road for us to take," Mazlek said. "If any followed us, seeking you, they'd guess we would go by the open path—back the way the armies came."*"Road?"* I said. "Are there roads across the mountains?" It seemed there were, though ancient and elusive, impassable in winter, tracks of an old mountain people who had vanished like the Lost, centuries before. Mazlek seemed confident enough, but a sense of foreboding settled on me. It was not the road I feared, but the destination—Eshkorek Arnor. I did not know why. I reasoned with myself that it was the Javhovor of Eshkofek who haunted me—that anxious tortoise who had thrust his neck from his shell too far by half. The brave, terrified man who had screeched at me across the Council table in Za, then died in the square with a piece of tile in his brain—Vazkor's example of power. Yet no need to fear, there was a new lord now—Vazkor's man.

The eleventh day of our journey, we rode into the hills, and left that valley of failure behind. There was a village or two, where Mazlek would walk off with the black-eyed chief, and return with small bundles of food. I ate a little every seventh or eighth day, and my pampered stomach rebelled each time with hideous pains. The worst trouble was a constant tiredness. Several times I fell asleep as I rode, and

miraculously kept my seat until some jolt would wake me up again. Each night, a six-hour halt. We kept no stated watch, though Mazlek slept little, I think. As watcher I was quite useless, and could not keep my eyes open. It angered me, but I was helpless; the thing in me made me so.

But there seemed to be no pursuit. Probably the runaway bitch-witch-whore-goddess had no great interest for them. They had not bothered even to pursue Vazkor, it seemed, simply accepted the word that he was dead. Fools. Where he was, what he did, were problematical, but I knew at least he could not die, my brother, with his healing skin.

Beyond the hills, the mountains rose, clustered, uncut amethyst, dully luminous against the soft spring skies.

I became aware that I was searching, asleep and awake, my brain burrowing into itself to remember something. Curious, the sensation of quest, without a known goal.

9

And they were kind to us, after all, the mountains. The horses, with their sure, shaggy, little feet, managed well, and enjoyed the tufts of ice-green mountain grass which cracked the stone. Fresh streams and waterfalls sprinkled themselves into shallow pools. Heather, every shade of purple, furred the old sleeping bones.

There were, at first, winding tracks, safe enough, but crudely hewn. But then we found the road—a pass, wide and paved, not as the slaves of the Lost had paved the roads of the Plains, but in small, palm-sized blocks. Mostly the mountain sides walled us on this way, but here and there a ghastly drop would open to left or right, jagged frozen cascades of rock, plunging into barren valleys. Less beauty now. The farther we rode, the more desolate the road became. Soon the greens and heathers were all gone. We had paid for our safe passage with ugliness.

Toward evening, perhaps five days into the mountains, we passed a ramshackle little hut about twenty feet from the road. A half-barren field stretched sloping toward us, and three or four despairing trees leaned on each other for support near the door. There were two old men in the field, both skin and bone got up in rags, with long light hair flapping in the breeze. Not of the Dark People, these two, but outcast city dwellers presumably. One crouched on his haunches staring at us, unmasked, the other stood up stiff and straight, his back turned. After a moment I saw that there was a flock of gray mountain pigeons in the field, pecking at the impoverished crops. Every so often a group of these would fly onto the standing man's head and shoulders, and stamp up and down, or settle to preen.

Our small supplies were low. I could see, from the tail of my eye, Mazlek drawing rein and dismounting.

Suddenly the squatting man called out: "Don't let her near me! Don't you let her!"

"Forgive him, goddess," Mazlek said, sounding irritated. "Only a mad old man—a woman-hater no doubt. He means nothing." He went up through the field, and the birds scattered with what looked an almost melodramatic act of fright, except for the group on the scarecrow, however, which remained unruffled.

Mazlek spoke to the man. He shook his head frenziedly, and waved sticklike arms.

"No—nothing left—those others took it—thieves!"

"Others?" Mazlek's voice came sharp and clear now.

'Ten men and horses—black riders—skull masks—except for him, the dark one—the wolf—"

Mazlek turned and looked back at me. My hands were tight on the reins, and my heart thudded in intermittent, painful, nervous beats. Mazlek left the man and came back to the road.

"Vazkor," he said unnecessarily. "Still alive?"

"Oh, yes. I never thought him dead."

"Making for Eshkorek—as we are," Mazlek said. He mounted swiftly. "We should hurry, goddess; perhaps we can catch them, now that we're on the same road."

"No," I said.

The old man shouted hoarsely at us, without words.

"Wise to ride with him," Mazlek said. "Twelve men can protect you better than one."

He was anxious for my safety. It was useless to protest. We urged the horses forward, and left the old man standing in the field, beside the pigeon-heavy scarecrow he had put up to keep the birds away.

Darkness thickened around us. Stars burned blue-white be tween the distant crag-crests.

"We do not know how long ago they passed," I said. "We may be days behind."

"I don't think so," Mazlek said. "That one would have had a short memory, yet he remembered them very well."

"I must rest soon," I said.

He nodded through the gloom.

"I will find a safe place, then ride ahead to them. He'll wait, or return with me."

"Will he? I wonder, Mazlek, if he will."

But he would, of course. I carried what was his.

Not long after, the road began to drop downward. Across rock thrusts came a new light, faintly red.

"A fire," Mazlek muttered.

We saw the dip a minute later, a trickle of path and scrub bushes clinging around it, and, at the bottom, a hollow full of firelight. It seemed blatant, careless even. I saw horses moving beyond the flames, shapes sitting against the rock. Abruptly two men leaped from the scrub, one for each of our bridles. A third stood a little behind, a couple of knives very ready. Not so careless, after all, for he had posted sentries. Mazlek's ambusher prodded at him. "Who are you?"

Mazlek said calmly, "I am Mazlek, Commander of the Goddess Uastis' Guard. I have conducted her to her husband."

The skull faces turned to me. There was nothing about me recognizable, no golden cat mask or rich robe. Even the pregnancy had shown itself since they saw me last.

"Well," I said, "go and ask your Lord. He will remember me, I think."

A little hesitation, then they pulled our horses aside, and led them down the path into their camp, the knife man coming last.

It was warm in the hollow, and smoky. One of our guides strode off around the fire into a cave beyond it. I began to feel stifled, the smoke catching in my throat and eyes. I wanted to run away, and cursed Mazlek unfairly for bringing me here. Damn Vazkor, I did not want his venomous weight on my freedom again.

The man ducked out of the cave, and another man followed him, tall, spare, dark; under the silver strings of the wolfs head, his own black hair hanging in long, raw silks. He came around the fire, and stood looking at me. "Welcome, goddess," he said.

When he spoke, the race of my fear stumbled. I looked back at him bewildered. Not Vazkor's voice, a stranger's voice, dry and old, and empty.

Mazlek was at my stirrup, offering his arm to help me down. I dismounted.

"Make the goddess comfortable," the unknown voice finished. He nodded and turned back into the cave, and was gone.

"So, even he understands defeat," Mazlek said softly. "It is finished for him, and he knows it." There was a bitter pleasure in his tone I might have shared if he had said it on the road.

I took my hand from Mazlek's arm, walked around the blaze, and followed Vazkor into the black mouth of the cave. Far back there was a leather curtain hung up for privacy, and beyond it the slight glow of a wick in oil. I let the flap fall to, and stood staring at the bed, made of one folded blanket, on which he lay. He was very still. The mask gone now, his face showed sick pale under the gray-olive skin, and the shadows of his face seemed bruised deeper. Except for his open eyes, which turned slowly to look at me, he might have been dead. His mouth stretched a little.

"Our positions are finally reversed, you see," he said.

"You are ill," I said softly, not quite believing it.

"Yes. I am ill. But I will be better soon. I'm sorry to disappoint you, goddess." His eyes shifted a little to my belly. "Well," he said, but even that could not anger me. The walls of hate I had built against him had crumbled instantly, of course. His vulnerability stirred me almost into an agony of compassion I could not help. I went to him and kneeled down.

"What can I do for you? Shall I fetch you anything...?"

I reached out and touched his face with my fingertips, and, as if it were a signal to my body, I began at once to weep, the silent scalding tears of our separate loneliness. He too had lost what was dear to him,

however perverse his desires and hopes had been. Lost. He could not even express any pain he felt. He lay like ice under my touch, Darak turned to jade at the bottom of the tomb-shaft because I could not weep for him.

"Let's put an end to this," he said after a moment, quite gently. "This is no use for either of us."

I got to my feet, and he shut his eyes, closing that last door into himself with the finality of stone.

There was another cave place they had found for me, and here I lay, Mazlek across the mouth of it, but his body defenseless in worn-out sleep. It was I who watched that night.

Dawn, ice-chill in the mountains, stippled rock flanks with incandescent red.

There was a beaker of the wine-drink for me that morning. Mazlek, like a child, stretching, rubbing at his eyes, glancing guiltily in at me because he had not stood guard all night.

Vazkor came from the cave as they were saddling and loading the horses. He saw to his own mount, slowly and carefully. The mask hid his face. After a while he mounted, and sat with an unusual stiffness, as if it took much effort to keep himself there. They waited for his signal, and followed after him up the road.

It came to me: I have done this. The storm I turned from Belhannor was the beginning of it. I have smashed the soul of Vazkor. Yet I could not quite believe it. Where, after all, was my triumph in the act?

Mazlek and I were some way behind. After a while Vazkor motioned another man into the lead, and waited on the road until we reached him. He turned to Mazlek, and Mazlek dropped back until out of earshot. Vazkor's black gelding dwarfed the horse I rode.

"I have seen that man before," Vazkor said after a while. His voice was slightly husky from the fever, yet different from when I had heard it last; how, I was not sure. "Your commander. One of Asren's men who rode with me for a time, I think. In Ezlann."

I said nothing, could think of nothing to say, since the words I needed to speak he had locked inside me forever.

"You think," he said, after another little silence, "things are finished with me."

Hooves bit sharp on the road.

"Well, goddess, the castle fell at the river An, but I can build it again, on its own ruins, out of its own bricks. This is not defeat, goddess, it is delay. We are headed for a mountain fortress that will keep us very safe until the time is right for me. Tower-Eshkorek—my gift from the last Javhovor of Eshkorek Arnor. I hope you will find it comfortable. Our child will probably be born there now."

Part V: *Tower-Eshkorek*

1

Where the mountains reach toward the City, leveling, they take on the tinge of lions. The great

tower-fortress, like Eshkorek herself, was built of this same fulvous rock. Not beautiful, but ugly, it threw its indomitable phallic shadow black across the sunset mesas and the sloping crags. Not beautiful, but very strong, very secure. Yet not to keep things out, but to keep things in. A prison. At once I had the sensation that if I entered I could never again get free, but I thrust it off.

Nearer, I saw how the place was ringed by a huge oval crater, filled to a third of its height by stagnant water, black and impenetrable, a sightless eye. Over this moat there seemed to be no way, except by swimming. Weed lay on the surface in glinting nets, clotted at the base of the tower.

One of Vazkor's men shouted. The rocks took his voice and split it into many voices, and hurled them at us from every side. A pause then, but as the silence crept back, another sound came in answer, and the silence ran like a hunted man. Grinding, grating, a narrow door was being forced in the tower, and from that mouth a long stone tongue began to thrust toward us. Over the moat the thing angled itself, to vanish with a rasping screech in some slot beneath the crater's lip: a bridge. It was ten feet wide, at least, but to a man they rode single file, exactly at its center, and led by instinct only I did the same. Riding over the water, my stomach seemed turned to ice. Against my will, I glanced down into the depths, saw nothing, yet looked away swiftly.

Beyond the narrow doorway, a roofed-over courtyard, stables on either side, a dark, primitive, cheerless place. Three men in gray liveries slashed with yellow stood like statues. Another man, fat under his long tunic of furs, bowed deeply.

"Warden," Vazkor said.

"My lord, your messenger reached me only a day ago. We are not as ready as we might be." Behind the silver eagle mask little eyes glinted. But no eagle this, but the mythological demon-toad, well-fed and venomous. Oparr, yet not Oparr, for this stream ran deeper and blacker.

For some reason I had not expected anyone to be here, yet, I supposed now, as a fortress it would be garrisoned to some extent. So I came to look for many men and servants, and, as we climbed the stone flights, toiled through the large oval hall, past storerooms and armories, for the efficiency and crowding of a barracks, and I did not find it. Few people lived here after all, a scattering of the gray-clad soldiers—the Warden's men—an old woman and a young, both apparently witless from the brief glances I had of them. It seemed a peculiar arrangement, but I was too tired to question it; we had been on the road together long days—I had lost count of how many. Vazkor, for all the last traces of the fever which still hung on him, appeared less exhausted than I—but then there was presumably some purpose for him here; for me, nothing.

I followed the thin, slightly limping servant girl to a small room near the head of the tower, and when she had gone, I sank down on the curtained bed and buried myself in sleep.

I woke again in darkness, tinglingly alert, listening. There was nothing to be heard, only the silent strength of the tower humming to itself. I went to the narrow slit of window, pulled aside the shutter, looked out over bleached crags, black sky, white-eyed stars. I was very tense and did not know why.

Standing there, I suddenly realized what it was my mind had been searching out since Mazlek had brought me to the mountains—that half-unconscious quest, without a known goal. I had been trying to remember the word which Asren had written in the book, the beautiful book I had meant to bring with me from Belhannor, and had left behind because there had been no time to plan. And now I realized that oddly I had examined the letters, the character in the formation of that word so closely that I had not seen what the word was in itself. Whatever importance it had had for him, or for myself, was lost. A trivial

thing, perhaps, but it troubled me. The last, the only, item I had had of him had slipped from my possession and my memory forever.

A movement caught my eye, unexpected in this place, where sky and mountains seemed locked in ancient immobility.

I looked across the rock shapes, then lifted my eyes, and incredibly found the answer in the black drift overhead. Between the fixed scatter of stars, three other stars, larger and very bright, sailing in the form of an arrowhead, southward. Ankurum, and the street, so late or early, and the moving silver light I had watched with Darak, the light Asutoo had watched also, and taken as a god-chariot, an omen to betray. The three glittering things slid over the tower, out of my sight.

I was afraid, more than that primitive fear because I could not understand the lights in the sky. I turned and faced the room as if an enemy waited for me. There was in this place—*something*—something I feared yet must find, deep in the bones of the tower. I had sensed it from the beginning, but the silver star chariots of Asutoo's gods had peeled away the last layers of my blindness.

In the morning the limping girl brought a pitcher of water, a silver cup of the wine drink, and a little later returned with a selection of silk and velvet clothes, and a silver mask—a curious shape which seemed to be the head of a lynx. Apparently the tower Warden had sent these things, and I wondered to whom they had belonged. Perhaps to an absent wife or lady, for he appeared to keep neither here at present. They were all shades and tones of Eshkorek yellow and rather full, but that seemed suited to my condition. The mask presented a subtle problem. The Warden's rank would not entitle him to wear the gold, and therefore he could not provide a golden mask for me, and yet, if only by chance, I was demoted by going in silver now. Yellow strings hung from the lynx head over my hair, each one ending in an exquisite marigold carved from yellow amber.

Mazlek came up the stairs soon after. I saw his eyes take in the silver mask, and then discard the thought which had come to him, as it had to me.

"What is happening, Mazlek?"

"A man has been sent to the City to inform the Javhoyor that Vazkor is here."

"Vazkor's Javhovor," I said softly.

"Yes, goddess. Vazkor's men expect immediate loyal help from that quarter—honored welcome into Eshkorek Arnor, a war council, fresh troops—but things are not so simple, goddess, I think."

"Why?"

"This man, the Warden—he is very uneasy. I don't think Vazkor is a welcome guest either to himself or his master."

I remembered Vazkor's words on the road, harsh, affirmative. Yet he could do nothing without the support of the Cities of the desert. If he had lost it, what would become of him?

"Where is Vazkor?" I asked Mazlek.

"A room on the east side of the tower. One man keeps guard outside the door, and no one has seen him since last night."

"Mazlek," I said, abruptly anxious to put Vazkor from my mind, and attack my fears of this fortress instead, "there is something in this place—something I must find."

"Goddess."

He was quite ready to follow me, to protect me, yet he did not understand. I think I had half hoped he might have sensed also the secret feeling of the tower. A sort of mental intimacy had seemed to grow between us during the flight from Belhannor; we had spoken little, yet things had been clear enough. I was reminded of Slor suddenly, and the blind offering of his life for mine, and thrust the thought away.

"I have explained badly," I said. "I do not know what troubles me here, even if anything exists to trouble me. But I have to search until I find it, or fail to find it." I discovered I had locked my hands together tensely. "Something hidden," I said.

He went after me, down the flights of stairs, to the oval dark hall, needing candles even in daylight, and stood ready behind me as I spoke to one of the three gray soldiers lounging there. I noted they did not leap to instant attention at my entrance, as they would for the golden cat goddess of Ezlann, and I learned a lot from that.

"Where is the Warden? I should like to speak to him."

"The lord Warden hasn't yet risen, lady."

Even the title—miserly enough—was delivered with a certain sneering slur. He found it easy to forget who I was—who I*had* been?

"Soldier," I said, "I am Uastis of Ezlann, Reincarnate of the Old Race, wife to Vazkor Javhovor, Overlord of White Desert. I am addressed as "goddess" by men who are standing on their feet, and have bowed their heads to me first."

There was an uneasy shuffling from the table as the soldier's two companions got up from their chairs, and stood awkwardly, in positions of uncertain respect. The man I had spoken to, however, seemed unimpressed, and my words tempted him into insolence.

"I have heard of a goddess," he said,*"in Ezlann.* And then,*lady,* you wore a plain mask when you came here, and a plain robe, too. Those things ... well, they're the Warden's bounty, if I recall correctly."

I did not feel angry, only knew I dared not let my authority fall out of appreciation, here, of all places, where I sensed so much danger.

"Soldier," I said, and I walked close to him, and stared at his eyes behind the bronze mask, eyes slippery, and unwilling to be caught. "Men do not insult me twice. Since you need proof of me, I am afraid I must give it. You will not forget who I am. Lift your hand." He whimpered, and I knew I had him then. "My touch is fire, the brand to you."

I laid one finger on his naked palm, and he screamed.

"Go free!" I hissed, and the trance broke from him. He ran back, nursing his blisters, sobbing with shock and fright. "Now," I said, "you say the Warden has not yet risen. Go and tell him to rise. I shall expect to see him here before that candle stub has burned out."

This time, I was obeyed.

I glanced at Mazlek, and his eyes had narrowed behind the mask in a malicious grin, proud of me and my ferocious powers. I sat down to wait, and watched the door across the yellow velvet hump of my belly.

In fact, the Warden was not long in coming, masked and ringed, yet still in his bedrobe. He took off the mask, bowed, and put it on again. I wondered if he had heard anything of the scene in the hall. I could see he wanted to draw nearer to the hearth where a fire was eating a breakfast of loss. He shivered meaningfully, but I sat where I was and left him to suffer. I was not certain how I should begin my interrogation, or even if I had been wise to start with him, and any advantage was a comfort.

"Good morning, Warden. I find I must thank you for my wardrobe."

"Nothing." He bowed again.

"Your hospitality is most welcome to the Lord Vazkor and myself."

"I—I trust the Javhovor is in better health today—some illness on the journey, I believe."

I noted that he had called Vazkor "Javhovor" only, not "overlord."

"No illness," I said carefully, "merely fatigue. But Eshkorek will provide him with rest." My host gave a little nervous laugh. "Tell me," I said, "this is surely a fortress; why is there no garrison?"

"Oh, but there has been no garrison for many, many years. A remote spot, and very little to capture, even if an army should cross the mountains from Purple Valley."

"As it well may," I said. He started. "You surely know of the havoc we left behind us, Warden? It would be advisable for the Cities of White Desert to hold together under this threat." Again a little start, as if I had probed into a bad tooth. Certainly there was trouble then, for Vazkor, and so perhaps for myself, but I set it aside. "I am curious, Warden," I said. "I am curious because, if there is no garrison, why is there a holding here at all?"

"A—matter of policy," he said, very stiffly, and I could tell I had touched a nerve once more, but a different decay this time, possibly more rotten than the first.

"Then your soldiers are guarding nothing?"

"No, indeed—except, in theory, the tower."

Liar.

I nodded, and, after a minute's polite talk, sent him graciously away. I went to my room, and asked Mazlek to follow me.

"What do you know of the structural plan of the tower?" I asked him.

"Very little," he said. "Stores and armories, private chambers above, below—kitchens, bathhouse, barracks—empty now."

"And below that?"

"Cellars probably."

Until that I had not been sure where my frenzied mental quest was taking me, drawing on my instincts only. But now I felt a rush of coldness through my body, knew I had grasped a piece of darkness, unseen, but vital.

"Cellars," I repeated, "and under those—dungeons, Mazlek?"

I saw him check, as I had done.

"Yes," he said, and stared at me.

Neither of us spoke of the sense of discovery which had come so abruptly. It was incredible, unthinkable. And yet, this tower: "My gift from the last Javhovor of Eshkorek Arnor," Vazkor had said. And so, Vazkor's possession, Vazkor's fortress, defense,*prison.*

"Mazlek," I said. "After dark. The first hour. It should be quiet then." And he nodded, so that I needed to say no more.

2

I did not mean to sleep at all that night, but tiredness made me lie on the curtained bed, and I dozed and woke up again in terrible starts. Dreams—faces, white with open eyes, staring, the stone bowl and its jumping fire ... Mazlek's scratch on the door. I sat up and pulled myself from the bed. I felt afraid, heavy with fear. I opened the door, and he stood there, a low burning lamp in one hand, drawn knife in the other.

"Goddess," he said, "I asked one of Vazkor's men how to get to the wine cellars. Not as low as we'll need to go, but near it, I thought. About an hour later I went there and searched them thoroughly. There seemed to be no way to get farther down, but there was luck with me. The old woman came into the cellars by the stairs from the kitchen."

"Did she see you, Mazlek?"

"No. I hid myself, but little need. I think her sight is weak, and her mind is worse. There is a moving panel, and steps beyond."

"Does it open only to her?"

"No, goddess. When she had come back, and was gone again, I tried the place—a harlot of a wall, open to anyone." For a moment he paused, the light flickering softly on his mask. Then he said, "She carried food of a kind, slops in a bowl. When she came back, she did not bring it with her."

"Mazlek," I said. My heartbeat was a fiery pain under my breast.

"If you would prefer to remain here, goddess, I will go there alone."

"No," I said.

He nodded, and turned away down the stairway, and I followed him.

I did not believe it, even then—could not let myself believe it. Yet I knew, with desperate certainty. Each step downward made me more impatient for the next, but, at the same moment, I was terrified.

It was a long way. Abruptly we reached the black vaulted place where they kept their wine and oil, and almost mesmerized by the endless winding stairs, I stumbled. Mazlek steadied me and I clutched his arm.

"Mazlek," I said hoarsely, "do you believe the prisoner here is who I believe it to be—or am I mad?"

"Asren, Phoenix, Javhovor of Ezlann," he said, as hoarsely as I.

I let out my breath in a stifled sigh.

"Yes, Mazlek. Yes."

His hand settled on half invisible notchings in the wall. I thought it would not open, and almost screamed, but there came a soft grinding sound, and an area of dark stone slid sideways. Beyond, the light tripped itself on the worn treads of thirty steps, which I counted irresistibly as we descended, insanely struggling to keep my hysteria in check. Mazlek, too, was unsteady. The light flicked and slipped on the walls, and I heard his breathing, harsh and uneven.

There was a smell of death—the smell of a tomb.

We reached a stone floor; on either side walls pressed close—a narrow passage. At the end of the passage, a wooden door, simply bolted on the outside.

We stopped, staring at the door. Impossible that in that moment of finding we stood there petrified. Then I ran toward the door, breaking my nails as I scrabbled at bolts, and Mazlek was there too in a second, reaching for others.

The door jerked, and we pulled it open.

The shuddering lamplight jumped on a tiny oblong room, windowless, and carpeted by reeking sacking. A figure sat facing us, cross-legged, covered in the rags and dirt of its imprisonment. Young, male, silent. Fair hair, streaked and matted, lay on the shoulders in tangled coils. Slowly the face was raised, catching a little of the light. Black-blue eyes looked into mine. Under the filth, a delicacy, chiseled too fine perhaps, beauty, yet not feminine in the least. ...

"My lord," I whispered, "Asren—"

I took a step forward, but Mazlek's hand fell brutal and burning on my shoulder.

"No, goddess." His voice was tight, bruising as his fingers.

"Why...? Why, Mazlek? Let me go."

But I knew already. Neither he nor I could hold me back from a brink I had already fallen into.

The boy in the oblong room gave a little gurgling groan, and pulled himself away from the light of the lamp into one corner, where he curled himself into the protection of the fetal position.

I stood very still in the doorway, Mazlek behind, no longer any goal ahead of us, for we had found what we sought—Asren, Phoenix, Javhovor: but behind the eyes—nothing; behind the face—nothing. A brainless, helpless, whimpering thing, trapped in a body we remembered.

"Where is he?" I asked Vazkor.

"Who?"

"The Javhovor, my husband. He was with me before Oparr came."

"The Javhovor is gone, goddess; he need trouble you no more."

I remembered many things as I stood in the doorway. I remembered that never once had Vazkor spoken of him as if he were dead. I remembered Vazkor's story that I had been sick because Asren had tried to poison me—a story I did not believe even then. I remembered the underground room with its draperies and littered floor, and, at the center, gold and precious stuff—the fantastic tomb-case—the *empty* tombcase. I remembered the Council at Za where the dead man who had been Eshkorek's High-Lord screeched at me, "Vazkor's witch-whore!" And the words took on a new meaning, for he must have known what had been sent to rot in his tower fortress—his propitiatory gift to the usurper. I remembered the lost word in the jeweled book of beasts. I remembered—

"Goddess," Mazlek said.

"Yes," I said, "yes. I know."

I stared into the cell again. The creature which had been Asren had uncurled itself, and lay with its back to us on the sacks. My whole body was one throbbing wound of pity, and of disgust—I could not help it, I could not help it.

"Mazlek," I whispered, "what now? We cannot leave him here—"

"No, goddess. But he is like a child. And afraid. If I take him by force he'll scream, wake the Warden's guards and Vazkor's jackals."

"Like a child," I said.

I dreamed I was with Asren, a strange dream, for, though I knew it to be him, he seemed little more than a child. ...

He had turned now, was facing me. The vacant black-blue eyes followed the swinging movement of the yellow silks hanging over my hair. I took Mazlek's knife and cut one of the strings. I shuddered as I entered the stinking room, but thrust my revulsion down. It was so unimportant. If I had loved, then I must love still ... I held out the yellow silk, the amber marigold shimmering at its end. He gazed at it, and did not flinch from me when I kneeled down beside him. One hand reached up, patted at the shiny toy. There was a little spark of interest in the wide-open eyes. I put it into his hand.

"Come, Asren," I said softly. I stroked the matted filthy hair from his face, and took his free hand. He let me draw him to his feet. At the door Mazlek took his other arm.

"Come, my lord," he said.

I could not see him weeping because of the mask, but the tears were falling under it across his breast in dark streaks.

We left the dungeon, went through the cellars, and up the endless stairs to my chamber. Asren did not make a sound; fascinated by the piece of amber, he did not seem to notice anything else.

3

I went to Vazkor in the morning.

There was a man at his door, as Mazlek had said, but it was easy for me to get by him. It was early, but Vazkor was up, fully dressed though unmasked, seated at a table by the open window, reading from papers stretched before him. I had thought he might still be weak or ill, but he seemed neither. Perhaps my own distress gave his looks, for me, a visual edge, making him invulnerable, cruel and strong.

He rose, and stood looking at me, and at my borrowed clothes.

"Good morning, goddess. I must ask Eshkorek for a golden mask for you."

"Vazkor," I said, "I have found Asren."

His face altered, a slight shifting of the dark planes. Impassively he said, "Really? It must have been unpleasant for you."

"There is more to it than my displeasure. I have found him, and now I have him in my room. He is under my protection. What you have done to him is unspeakable—unforgiveable—I shall not let you do anything further."

He regarded me a moment or so longer, then he turned away, and shuffled the papers together on the table.

"If you wish to act as his nursemaid, that is your own affair, goddess. You will have to feed and clothe him, bathe him, help him to achieve his human functions, and cleanse him afterward. Hardly a task I would have designated to your care. However, if it will ease your mind. I would only ask you not to overtax your own strength. You will have a child of your own shortly."

"A child?" I said softly, feeling I would choke. "A*child? Your* seed, Vazkor. A thing which will carry, no doubt, the likeness of its sire. Why did you not kill him? Why did you kill only the brain?"

"He may still be of use to me. In his present state I can control him when and how I wish."

"No," I said.

"For the present, no," he amended. "I am glad you have rescued him, goddess. You have perhaps anticipated events in a very fortunate manner."

"You will not hurt him anymore," I said.

"You forget, goddess, you also have destroyed men without reason. Your Mazlek will recall, I think, the wagoners you killed, simply to prove they were yours. Perhaps that will be your answer to me—to kill Asren when I come for him."

I left him, and returning to my room, I thought of how I had kneeled by him in the cave, and wept because of him, and I felt I should go mad.

Yet, I had Asren safe for a while. For a while the black shadow would not trouble us.

He did not seem properly aware of his new surroundings. I could not tell if he were any happier or not. It was not I, after all, but the limping girl who attended to his bodily needs; she had seen to it before, and it did not appear to upset her. I hated myself then because I could not do these things for him, gave myself no peace, and yet, they were so alien to my own needs. ... Perhaps I could have learned in time. But when he was clean, she would bring him in to me and I would dress him and feed him, like a small child. I do not recall there was any pleasure in this for me, any oblique maternal gratification. I remember I often cried as I did it, quietly, so as not to confuse him with my tears. He was easily confused, or scared, as a little child would have been. Rain beyond the window, some noise lower in the tower, the door of my room opened suddenly—any of these could shock him into hiding behind the nearest piece of furniture.

My days were absorbed in trying to occupy him—a piece of jewelry to play with, the shadows of my hands on the wall made into some animal shape, or a bird with finger wings. I found a way to the battlemented roof, and I would walk him there, Mazlek behind me, up and down, and around by the bleak parapet. Mazlek caught a mouse in the storeroom and brought it for him. We fed it scraps of cheese and bread, and it grew tame very quickly, and showed no desire to leave. Asren liked to watch the mouse, and stroke it when I held it for him. At these times that faint, far-off gleam of interest would come into his face, and I would grasp at the hopeless hope that I could repair his mind, and teach him to be as he was. But there was nothing left for me to heal. Nothing. He slept on a mattress by my bed; he could have had the bed, I the mattress, but the curtains frightened him and he would not sleep there. In the night I would lie awake listening to him breathe in sleep, calmly, sweetly. I could look at his face, sleep-smoothed, and see him as he had been, as I had never seen him then.

Besides all my time, I gave him all the love that remained unsoured within me. He had rejected me before, but now I was only a symbol to him, a security, and so he accepted the hand holding his, my caress on his face, and seemed comforted by them. Yet to me, it was a spoiled thing, almost necrophiliac, this embrace given to a body which would have thrust me off had it remembered, too dead now to know who embraced it.

Mazlek guarded us silently, closed in his own hell. He never spoke to Asren, but if he had to call him it was always by the meaningless title of "lord."

It seemed a long while then, but I do not think it was so very long. Suddenly I came out of the half-dream in which I had been living. It occurred to me that days had passed, and that I did not know Vazkor's position, that I must learn of it, because it would affect Asren—this much Vazkor had implied. Of course, he had some use for him, though obscure to me now. Why else would Vazkor, who wasted nothing, no one, have kept him alive here?

That afternoon, when we went to walk along the parapet, I saw an Ezlann man standing in one of the jutting alcoves of the wall, and drew Asren back out of sight. A sentry, the first Vazkor had set. And he did not face south toward the valley, but north and west toward Eshkorek Arnor and the Cities of the

desert.

I took Asren below. I did not want them to see him as he was.

A rose-red evening washed against the mountains, swimming with stars.

Mazlek told me Vazkor had called his men together in the hall, and instructed the Warden he should be present. The messenger, it seemed, had returned in the small hours from Eshkorek. For all I felt I did not sleep, I must have slept then, and had not heard the bridge grate out across its sinister moat, the hoofbeats, and weary steps in the courtyard. I left Mazlek to guard the door, and Asren inside it, and went alone downstairs to the hall.

A murky firelight and candle haze lay unevenly over the oval room. At the long table eight of Vazkor's men sat unmasked and openly drinking. The Warden with his guard stood near the hearth, and seemed uneasy. When I entered he glanced up at me nervously. Vazkor was not yet here.

"I expect we shall have some news now," the Warden said.

"I expect we shall."

I sat near the table in a tall chair, and waited.

When he entered, I could tell easily, without looking up. There was a contraction of movement all around me. The Warden, fidgeting and bowing, Vazkor's men coming to their feet, unembarrassed by their wine jars—presumably they knew how little he cared for certain City niceties.

He came to my chair and stopped, holding out a polite arm.

"Goddess."

I rose and let him lead me to the table. He set me on his right, and pointed the Warden to the opposite end. The golden wolf's face turned, slowly, the hidden eyes examining each of them briefly—not me, but then, he knew me and there was no need.

"I sent a man to Eshkorek Arnor—perhaps you recall? Ah, yes, Warden. I see you do. It seems there is some trouble from the south—Purple Valley in arms. The desert Cities have wisely vowed to strengthen their alliance. Unwisely, they have elected a new overlord."

He spoke offhandedly; I wondered how much it cost him to speak in this way, with the foundations of his ambition rocking under him. The Warden gasped and began to splutter something.

Vazkor cut him crisply short. "Your condolences are premature, sir. I am not yet dead." The Warden's unmasked face paled to a sludgy yellow, and he was quiet. "You must understand," Vazkor continued, "that Kmiss, Ammath, So-Ess, Za, and Ezlann have combined forces to smash the valley armies. They are also sending a small detachment to these mountains in order to smash me. About two hundred men—a great amount, it seems, but then they were not sure how many troops I had brought with me. Eshkorek has not yet sent men against me, but she will, no doubt, when pressed."

The captain of Vazkor's guard got to his feet, giving vent to some curse on Eshkorek's faithlessness.

"Overlord—"

"No need for panic, captain. I have kept one security. There is a charge that not the gods but I—by some incredible means—struck down Asren Javhovor. They have said they consider the evidence against him—his attempted murder of the goddess—was false, and they have elected their new lord out of the Ezlann royal house as a proof. Now, gentlemen, Asren Javhovor is still alive."

Startled exclamations along the table, except from the Warden, of course, who stared uneasily at his rings.

Vazkor waited for the outcry to subside. Then he said, in a very cool and measured voice: "What Asren tried to do was foolish. His loyal people would have killed him themselves, torn him apart in the streets, if they had been given his body when he collapsed. But the goddess was merciful, and desired no vengeance. I had him declared dead, and then I sent him here, where he has been a prisoner under the authority of the Warden ever since. When our guests arrive, I shall tell them this, and present them with Asren. Most probably they will elect him overlord in place of their present choice. The grateful Asren will then reinstate me as High Commander of his armies."

"Can you trust him?" the captain asked.

"Completely," Vazkor said. "Asren's mind has become somewhat—unstable, shall I say? And please do not forget, my divine wife has some influence."

They glanced at me warily. He did not look at me at all. He imagined I would see the foolishness of speaking now, of telling them whose influence would truly direct Asren in the next moves of this game. It was a curious situation. Vazkor's men did not know it was he who had destroyed Asren's mind, and, though they could not fail to see, when he produced him, what Asren had become, there was no fear they would betray Vazkor's manipulation—it was in their own interests that he succeed. As for possible traitors—how powerless. Myself—but I would be silent. Mazlek—but he was mine and would do as I did. The old woman and the girl—perhaps, but they were witless. Only the Warden presented any danger. I glanced at him, and he seemed abruptly aware of his trouble. As he quivered there in his seat, Vazkor turned to him.

"There are certain diplomatic errors in our present situation. It would be more fitting, Warden, if you were to return to your City of Eshkorek Arnor, before the next stage begins. Your presence here must be an embarrassment both to your master and yourself."

It was obvious the man could not believe his luck. He bowed and thanked Vazkor profusely for such tactful kindness.

Vazkor rose, holding out his arm for me. Two of his men fell in behind us as we mounted the stairs to his room. Inside, he shut the door, and indicated for me a chair by the lowburning fire. I did not go to it.

"The Warden," I said, "will naturally perish before he reaches the City."

"Naturally," he said, "and his men."

"It is possible someone may find their bodies."

"Not at all. This tower is well-equipped to take care of such things."

I said nothing, and he drew off the wolf mask, and put it on the table.

"I think you understand now why Asren has been kept here all this while."

"I understand. And I oppose you, Vazkor. You have done enough. He is not your horse to ride to market on."

"When they are at the door, my sister, you may think differently."

"Let it end here, then," I said. "Both of us possess enough Power to go free with our lives."

"I have used my life," he said, "and I shall not stop now. I am not a wanderer. I know my road." He sat down in the chair I had refused, and looked at me. His face was quite blank, completely closed, his eyes a steady bar of darkness that seemed to have no break. "Even you, my sister, see your life as a succession of units, a river, in which the men and women you meet are like islands. But you're wrong. Your vision is confined in the narrowness you have made. We are the sum of our achievements, nothing more and nothing less. The mountain road which led us here was built by a dead people none of us would remember otherwise. What we create is the only part of us which can survive, or has the right to. Man is nothing, except to other men."

I had no answer. There was no purpose in answering. I did not even marvel that he had spent so much of his philosophy on me. I put my hand on the door to go.

He said, "How long before the child comes?"

"Sixty days—eighty days—I think I have lost count. The month named for the peacock in Ezlann, so you said."

"You understand that now it is officially Asren's progeny," he said to me. "For the moment at least. A detail, but you should try to remember."

"There was a woman at Belhannor. A village healer. I did my best to be rid of what you gave me, but I failed. The result of my efforts may not be very beautiful."

"The child will be perfect," he said. "I am surprised you cannot see that. Your organs heal themselves from mortal wounds, and yet you expect your womb to succumb to a village abortion."

Oddly, I had not thought of this, had not compared these separate yet related facts before. I realized I had stupidly still half-believed I would not bear. I opened the door and went out. It was dark, very dark, on the stairways of the tower.

Through the evening I heard the Warden's preparations for his flight from the tower. He was to leave at dawn with all his few men. But not for Eshkorek Arnor. I did not know what Vazkor had planned for him—did not know if he or his guard would see to it.

Determined to sleep, to blot out any sound or sight of violence, I lay awake until the first red claw marks of the sun opened the sky.

There had been nothing. Yet neither were there hoofbeats on the bridge, riding away to the City.

The innocence of silence was too profound.

4

I took Asren to walk on the tower battlements, as I had not done since Vazkor's men were posted there. It was a warm bright day, the blue wheel of the sky turning itself slowly overhead. Asren had become brave with the mouse, and was letting it run from one arm to the other, stroking it whenever it stopped still for a moment.

Perhaps thirty feet away the solitary sentry stood, his back to us, curious eyes averted. I had not felt safe to speak before.

"We must leave the tower," I said softly to Mazlek. "Very soon, before the army of the new overlord arrives." I told him of Vazkor's plans, and Mazlek said nothing, but his right hand clenched on the parapet, clenched and unclenched rhythmically. "I do not know how we can do it," I said. "Possibly at night. We can deal with the stray guards we may meet, but any uproar will bring Vazkor. I do not think I can fight Vazkor, his powers are superior to mine—I have told you this already. And the moat—how can we cross it without using the bridgeway, which will make more noise than anything else?"

Mazlek shook his head.

"Perhaps there are underground passages here, as in Belhannor, goddess. Most strongholds have them as a final means of escape during siege or attack. But it would be difficult to trace them. Vazkor's wolves are not to be bought."

"The old woman," I said, "she may know, and she is too simple to betray any questions to him."

The sentry stretched, removed his helm, scratched at his blond hair, and subsided once more into immobility.

"And beyond this place." I said, "where can we go? No longer any shelter in the Cities."

"Eastward from the mountains there are rock plains and areas of forest, marshes to the southeast and south, and then the sea. A wild land, good to be lost in if any were coming after," Mazlek said.

"Deserted land?"

"Almost, goddess. A few tribal peoples, savage and war-mad, krarl against krarl, though, reportedly, they do no harm to out-clan strangers."

"Then that is the desolation we must go to, to be safe for a time."

It seemed a gray hopeless future for all of us, but there was no other way. Escape, the imperative need, left no margin for despair.

We walked around the oval enclosure, to lend authenticity to our presence there. The sentry's eyes flickered over Asren as we passed, surprised, amused, totally unsympathetic, a man watching a half-wit capering at a fair. Vazkor had picked his creatures well—narrow, unintelligent men, good fighters, unafraid because they had no imagination, loyal because they responded to their own sense, and until now, there had always been enough food and wine, women and prestige; trustworthy in this last extremity because the old order had been good to them, and Vazkor seemed able to restore it.

We returned through the little door into the stone gut of the tower.

"I'll bring her tonight, the old one," Mazlek said, "when her work's done."

I nodded.

The mouse, darting on Asren's shoulder, looked up at us from blood-drop eyes.

The day dragged its heels as I waited for her to come. The light in the windows thickened, blue as stained glass. A slender moon watered the peaks with highlights and shadows.

I sat on my bed, the curtains thrust well back, Asren beside me. Something had made him afraid; he cried and clung to me, and now I held him in my arms, and could not move because he would begin to cry again.

A soft knock came on the door. Mazlek entered, and the old woman followed, and stood gazing at me. She had taken off her mask, presumably at Mazlek's instruction, but her face was like a half-formed dough, pale, expressionless, and without depth. Round watery eyes blinked and blinked at me, and then at the man I held.

"I am to come for him?" she said. "The girl not to your liking?"

"No," I said, "it has nothing to do with that. I want to ask you something."

She blink-blinked at me.

"The cellars," I said, "and under the cellars—are there any other passages?"

"Passages," she said. She blinked. "Passages."

"Passages which lead out of the tower. A way out."

"The moat-bridge," she said.

"Apart from the moat-bridge."

She blinked.

"Under the tower," I said, "a passage under the tower which leads out into the mountains."

Asren stirred against me, and her eyes slipped from my masked face to him.

"Pretty one," she said, and clucked as if to a pet animal.

Mazlek seized her shoulders, and spun her to face him.

"A passage out of the tower," he hissed at her, and shook her. She squeaked and struggled.

"No way—no way!"

"Let her go, Mazlek," I said wearily. He took her and thrust her outside, shutting the door 00 her round

staring.

"This is useless," I said. "We are in a trap."

"I'll search the cellars," he said, "and below. There has to be some way, goddess."

"Yes, there has to be, Mazlek. And soon."

I turned to Asren, and saw he had fallen asleep against me. I reached to touch his hair, and, in that moment, I felt something thrust inside me, sharp, insistent, and very real. It was the first movement I had felt, the first proof I had had that the thing which swelled under my belly was animate, and I shuddered at the feel of it, as if I carried death, not life.

Mazlek searched, then. The cellars, the foul dungeon ways, the vaults and underground places of Tower-Eshkorek. And there was no exit to freedom, at least, none that he could find.

Four days had passed in that search. And on the fifth, about noon, a bell began to clang from the head of the fortress, a terrible sound, the most ancient noise of panic and expected violence.

Asren screamed, and the startled mouse leaped from his wrist, and up the curtains of the bed. I hurried to him, trying to shut the clamor out of his ears with soft words. Incredibly, my instincts of protection had dwarfed him, so that he seemed small enough for me to lift up and cradle in my arms.

Soon Mazlek came, to tell me what I did not need to be told. Vazkor's sentry had made out the marching column a few miles away: the soldiers of the new overlord would reach us before nightfall.

It is easy to judge afterward, when all decisions are theoretic, in the quiet, when the outcome no longer matters. Perhaps I should have left the game to Vazkor, should have given up Asren to be his instrument for the short time it was necessary. There were other days ahead, beyond that time, when I could have fled with him, out of the shadow's reach. And he would have understood, after all, nothing of the use to which he had been put.

And yet I could not let it happen, this final degradation, this final eclipse of his being. Asren, who had seemed to me in the Temple at Ezlann at once too innocent and too aware to have been drawn in. ...

There were many men, more than two hundred, all in all, I think. They settled about the tower, and lit their night fires to shine on the mixed liveries of the five Cities of White Desert, and of Eshkorek Arnor, for she too had sent her quota of power in the end. They did nothing, simply sat around us in a ring, letting us see what was possible to them.

Vazkor's man rode out to them when the moon rose, nervous, for all his supposed immunity as a messenger; he knew very well they had half a mind to shoot him on sight. Still, the archers held their hands, and he got to their commander and delivered Vazkor's words: that he held Asren alive, had protected him here, as his lord, since the night of the mob in Ezlann, that Asren would speak for him. There was some confusion in the camp. The commander—a prince of Za, who had known Asren well—demanded he be shown an hour after dawn at a low window in the tower. If the appearance did not take place, or he was unconvinced, their cannon would open fire on the fortress, and not cease until they had razed it. This arranged, he let the messenger go.

Mazlek told me all this, swiftly, in my room.

I pulled Asren gently to his feet.

"Take him," I said to Mazlek. "Go now, quickly. You have searched the lower reaches of the tower, you must know a hundred hiding places there; perhaps they will not find you. And if the tower falls it should be far safer."

"And you?" he said to me.

"You know I cannot die, Mazlek," I said. "There is no need to fear for me. Only take him now, before they come for him. I will delay Vazkor as best I can."

Mazlek did as I told him, only Asren hung back, staring at me, but I found the mouse among the curtains and gave it to him, and at last Mazlek got him away and down the stairs.

It was a confused plan, a stupid plan. But there was so little I could do, so few ways open to me.

Vazkor did not come for a long while, he was so sure of me.

He knocked courteously at the bolted door, and when I did not answer, and the door did not give, two of his men set their shoulders to it and, after a time, they and it fell into my room. At another hour, such a sight might have been very funny. Vazkor walked into the room while they were still picking themselves up and cursing.

"Where?" he said to me. Only this one word.

I had always been afraid of him in a way, though an almost willing and sexual way, perhaps. But now I was terrified, truly and utterly.

"Where?" he said again.

"If you assume I have hidden something, why should I tell you*where* it is hidden? That rather destroys the point, does it not?"

He came across to me, and pulled me from the chair. He was unmasked and his face was white, his eyes extraordinarily black. The heat of anger can be brutal, but his cold anger was horrible; there seemed no limit to what it would do, and no act, however crucial, seemed likely to appease it

"Tell me," he said, "where he is."

His eyes appeared to expand, to draw me helplessly downward. I felt weightless, floating ... useless to resist, simple to tell him what I had done ... Yet I, too, knew this art of Power, and I pulled free of him, a sensation so physical I seemed bruised after it.

"No, Vazkor."

"An hour to dawn," he said, "and then an hour after it. After that, their cannon, and the roof down over our heads."

"It does not matter to me," I said.

He pushed up my mask and hit me across the face, again and again. I lost count of the times he hit me.

There was no pain. One of the black rings on his fingers had cut my cheek, and warm salt blood ran in at the corner of my mouth. After a while, I realized he had stopped. I sat masked in my chair, looking at him. The two men had gone and the door was closed.

"You realize, goddess, you are an ideal victim for any torture I care to devise—your healing skin will provide you with endless variations of repeatable agony. And while this is in progress, my men will search the tower thoroughly. We shall find him, whatever happens. There is no point in your suffering unnecessarily."

I gave a little coughing laugh, for quite suddenly I was no longer afraid of him.

"You can do nothing to me," I said. "I am your sister, you remember. I have touched my own body with fire, and have not been burned. And, Vazkor, the very fact that you require me to tell you anything proves to me you think there is some chance you may otherwise find nothing."

He turned away from me, went to the window shutter and pulled it open. The dark sky was paling. He stood there a moment, then he turned and got me from the chair once again, and pulled me by my hand from the room and down the stairs.

I was light-headed from the beating he had given me, and, at first, what he was doing made no sense. We went deep, that same way Mazlek and I had gone. When we reached the wine cellars he did not, at first, touch the wall panel, but led me up and down the length and breadth of them all. There were signs of a recent search—his men had been violent, but too frenzied perhaps to be completely thorough. It came to me then why he had brought me here. Asren, with his child's instincts, still tied by the security he had found with me, might sense my nearness and run to me from whatever covering Mazlek had found for him. I stopped at once, but Vazkor pulled me on.

"No," I said.

"Good," he answered. "Talk all you want. He will find you the sooner."

The cellars covered, he took me to the panel, and moved it. He dragged me down the steps into the narrow dismal passage beyond. I saw again the wooden door, open as we had left it, and through it, the oblong, stinking, black horror of that room. Not here—surely never here. He pulled me to the doorway, and held me there, turning his head to inspect each corner. We went inside, and he stirred the sacking with his boot. Nothing moved. We went out.

Vazkor touched the right-hand wall, brushed a series of markings with his fingers. Part of the wall groaned aside and another dark corridor lay beyond. Had Mazlek found this way? Vazkor urged me into it.

There was no light with us, yet somehow I could see. Doors lay at intervals along the passage, iron doors with little gratings, each bolted on the outside. A flight of steps led downward to a dark hollow hall. Water dripped, black flickering shadows dipped and danced on stone pillars holding up a vault of ceiling. The corrupt odor of ancient water gone rotten pressed itself into my nostrils. Ghosts clamored.

Toward the far end of the hall a pile of masonry lay in a mountain of crumbled shapes, the relics of an earlier wall. Straw was scattered there and along the floor.

We began to walk across the open space between the pillars, toward the pile. It was very quiet except for the sluggish drip of water. Our footsteps sounded sharply.

In the straw something darted from my feet, back a little way, and then sat staring at me from bright red eyes. A mouse.

My heart clenched painfully. Vazkor's hand on my arm drew me relentlessly forward.

"Past dawn now, goddess," he said.

I willed that Asren would not recognize that sound, that familiar sound, by which he had heard Mazlek address me so often.

There was a scuttle of movement among the battered blocks of the fallen wall. Only his head emerged, the blank beautiful face almost expectant, the wide eyes searching for me.

"Asren," Vazkor said. "Come out, Asren."

Behind us both the swift hiss of breath, the rasp of a blade coming out of its scabbard. Vazkor whipped around, jumped sideways, and Mazlek's sword slashed lightly, cheated of its aim, across his breast. There was one second of immobility as the three of us stood in tableau. Then a kind of glitter in the air, a kind of bright flicker that might have been a trick of the eyes. Mazlek's sword clattered on the stone flags; his body leaned sideways and fell. I ran to him, but he was dead, and his skin was very cold.

On my knees still, I looked up, and saw Vazkor standing by one of the pillars, and Asren, out of the pile now, walking toward him, a puppet already, completely under his control.

"Vazkor!" I shouted.

He turned and looked at me, and, at once, as if a mechanism had been halted, Asren stopped.

"Goddess," Vazkor said, "your interference in this matter will cease. I am going to take him above now, to a lower window in the tower, where he will speak to them."

"No," I said.

"Except in this matter, he is useless to me," Vazkor said, "and so, if you prefer it, he can die now, and we will all suffer together."

His hand moved on the pillar. There came a deep rusty screaming from under the floor, a trembling like an earth quake. Blocks slid backward into other blocks, leaving, in place of that open area we had crossed earlier, a large oval well of greenish-stippled stone. In the depths of it, water, black as oil, oozed and quivered, and was never entirely still.

"Moat water," Vazkor said.

I shivered sickly, my hair prickling, feeling that same dread I had experienced when we rode across the bridge.

"The water is not empty," Vazkor said. "Living things. The Warden and his men know them intimately. Asren too can come to know them, if you so desire."

"No!" I screamed at him. I scrambled to my feet in panic.

"Goddess," he said, "you cannot stop me."

"My Powers," I whispered.

"Your Powers? You think they are superior, perhaps, to my own."

"They are the same," I said.

"Oh, no." He shook his head. "No, goddess. There is something you should understand, though a curious time and place in which to tell you, no doubt. There is a great difference between us and what we can command. Your Powers are intuitive, untested and unstable. My Power is learned, hardened and tried. Yes, goddess, learned. No, I am not of your Lost Race, after all. My father was a warlord of Eshkorek, a dabbler in magic. My mother came of the Dark People, a girl he raped on his way to one of the toy battles they played at in the old days. I heard of the legend early—the legend of the Power and the Second Coming. I set myself to work. He must have had some stunted ability, the man who fathered me, something which took root in me. I learned very well. By fourteen I had been hounded and stoned out of my village because of it. Men fear a magician, and when I came to the Cities, and found they looked only for a coming of goddesses, not gods, I thought my road was closed to me. Fortunately, I had enough of my father's looks to pass as a citizen, despite my darkness. I enlisted in the armies of the Javhovor of Ezlann, and, by dint of apparent courage, and also by bribery and intrigue, I became at last High Commander. And then, goddess, you were found for me."

My brain hummed; I felt in me a terrible stirring. He had thought to silence me forever because he had built himself from clay, and I was still unformed. But he had forgotten the hubris which had grown in me, the ancient contempt for humanity which he himself had helped to foster. White-hot lava began to bubble in my veins, my face set like a cold white stone, so that I drew off the lynx mask and felt no nakedness, only the sense that I could create fear. And I saw him flinch, very slightly, as he had that first time he saw my face.

"Vazkor," I said, "you are a*human man."*

"I have still deceived you very well. In Ezlann, when you were sick and I set the blame on Asren, you did not believe me. Yet did you not think your illness very opportune? I sent you that illness to serve my purpose, and you did not guess it, I think. And the balcony, do you remember that, when I controlled your movements and your mind as easily as I can this creature who was Asren?"

I sensed the scrabbling behind his level voice, the hands clinging onto the rocks, and the drop below. I scarcely heard what he said.

"Vazkor," I repeated, "you are a human man. You can die."

"You forget what Asren told you, goddess. There was an assassin who stabbed me mortally and I survived."

"Because you willed it," I said.

"And I shall cease wanting life?"

"Yes, when you can no longer order it."

I saw the fire leap from his pupils, clear this time, and very bright, and the deep fury answered from the core of my brain. A shaft shot out, blazing, and caught his little death-wish for me, and contained it, and turned it. I seemed much larger than Vazkor, taller, burning. I felt his Power shrivel and draw back, and I pressed after it, pursuing it into the very brain-cave of its lair, into the dark places of Vazkor's mind. And there I found the diamond spark of his knowledge, down the black corridors of the skull, which in most of mankind are closed and empty, but which in Vazkor were open and alive. I found the spark, the little hard, bright stone, and I scorched it to ashes, destroyed it without compunction, because he had claimed he was my brother, and was only a man.

I drew back. The light faded. I felt small and empty and afraid. By the pillar Vazkor stood, and I saw what I had done to him. I called out his name, but he only stared at me. His eyes flickered, as the blinded inner eye swiveled desperately to each of those doors of ability I had closed forever. As he had killed that part of Asren's brain which made him a thinking man, so I had killed that part of Vazkor's which made him a magician, and a god. The Power in him was dead.

I do not know if he was aware of what he did. He took several steps backward, and the last unbalanced him over the lip of the black moat pool. Hardly a splash, the water was so thick and turgid. And then a little dazzling movement all around him, as though the water itself were running to welcome a guest.

Vazkor screamed. The water reddened, sparkled. Vazkor screamed.

I put my hands over my ears and turned away, and began to scream also.

Silence came, only the drip of the water sounded. The liquid of the pool was black, and empty.

"Asren," I called softly, "we are safe now."

I was weeping and could not see properly. I found the lynx mask, and put it on, and stumbled across the straw toward him. The noise had terrified him. I put my arms around him, and rocked him gently in the dark.

The cannon began quite suddenly. I had forgotten them.

At first the noise seemed far away, thunder beyond the hills. Soon other noises came, bursting and tearing sounds, the thud of rooms collapsing above.

Smoke drifted through to us, and a dull red light. There were great cracks spreading on the vault above. At the far end of the hall, a pillar split slowly from end to end, buckled and collapsed. The gray avalanche gushed through.

Asren whimpered. I pressed his head to my breast, leaned over him as best I could, sheltering him with my body.

A great roaring came swooping to us like a bird of prey. For the first time I felt terror as the ceiling sagged and broke above me. Delicate little pieces scattered like a fine rain, and then the slabs broke away from the flooring overhead.

There was no more time to be afraid.

BOOK THREE

Part I: Snake's*Road*

1

There had been blackness, and in the blackness: nothing. Now, still closed in the dark, I began to hear a single sound, rhythmically repetitive, a tireless engine lifting, sinking, indrawing, expelling. Quite suddenly I had begun to breathe again.

My eyes opened a little on a cool, dim, greenish light. I thought it was the Jade, and was too weak to reach and touch it. I did not know where I was, or remember what had happened. Again, I lay under a mountain, awaiting birth; the sequences had become mixed and inseparable.

Yet the light was not green at all, clearing now, whitening. A little thud, and dust drifts dancing. I heard shouts and then a rattle of stone stuff coming down. Dust clouded gray, cleared, and showed a great gap ahead of me, full of the whitish light, except where it was full of the silhouette of a man, leaning forward to me, faceless. He gave a muffled exclamation, but the tongue was new to me, and it made no sense at this moment. A hand came groping toward my face, fastened on the silver mask.

"Do not," I said.

I used the City speech, could recollect nothing else to use. He did not understand, but his hand snatched back from me, and he cried out in surprise. He had thought me dead, no doubt.

He turned and wriggled from the hole they had made, and shouted to others. After a moment strong hands had a hold on my ankles and calves, and I was pulled unceremoniously out of my grave into the harsh searing brilliance of day. I had enough strength to get one arm up to shield my blinded watering eyes, and, in this position, I lay for their inspection, my stained and ripped mantle of yellow Eshkorek velvet rucked up about my thighs, and under that the filthy streamers which had once been fine silken undergarments.

After a while, one of them laughed—I did not particularly blame him—and observed something to the others. This time I seemed able to grasp—not what he said, but the tongue he used. It was new to me, quite new, and yet a far-off echo sounded, something I recognized. ... I lifted my arm a fraction, and stared up at three men. They wore wool leggings of dull reds and yellows, and leather belts and boots. To the waist they went naked except for armless leather jackets, and their brown, hard bodies were vivid with tattoos of many colors, and scars of many shapes. Tribesmen, speaking a language different from, yet with a tenuous kinship to, the tongue of the Plains. Against the assault of the blazing sky, I struggled to see faces, lean and set, long grim mouths, wide spaced eyes a salty blue. Their hair, more than blond, was reddish, and not bound in clubs or cut short, but woven into five or more thick plaits behind the ears, held out of the eyes by a circular strip of painted cloth stretched around the head.

I was very confused still, but this new awakening was beginning to make sense. I lolled my head a little, and made out other, similarly adorned males, going to and fro among the wreckage of the fallen tower. Looters, not rescuers. What had I expected? And if they had come so far in order to glory in this collapse of a piece of City power, they would have no time for a woman of that City, half-dead and

apparently worth nothing. They would strip my rings and the silver mask, for these were all part of the tower pickings, and then they would ride off and leave me to my fate, or else, perhaps, run a spear through me to help me to it. Unless, of course, they had a fancy for a high-born slave.

They were talking again, and I forced myself to hear what they said. This time the pattern came clear and strong, and I found I could speak it at last. They were discussing their holy man, or seer, who had apparently foretold the fall of Tower Eshkorek, and insisted they ride to it, declaring they would find something precious here. Precious? What other secrets had there been, then? I had no time for speculation. I took the cue luck had given me. They respected religion and magic, it seemed, and dimly I remembered now that Mazlek had mentioned their continual wars.

"I am the precious thing your seer spoke of," I broke in, and their faces dipped to me, startled. "I am a magicianess of great power, a healer and prophetess. I will help you in your battles, intercede for you with your gods."

It was a ridiculous announcement for a woman lying on her back, her hair matted with dust and filth, and her torn skirts around her waist. Yet they took it from me, with the naivete of savage men to whom all things are simple, or else extraordinary and great. And I had used their language. How could I know it if I were not what I said?

"Of Eshkir," one said, using the tribal name for Eshkorek Arnor.

"No," I said. "And what I am, or where I came from, is of no concern to you. Your wise man told you. Is that not enough?"

The third of them, who had said nothing all this time, leaned forward abruptly and picked me up. He was strong and it seemed easy for him. He did not carry me elegantly across his body, as a City man would have done, but over his shoulder, like a kill, and I thought of the wagon people.

I could see now that the tower, in falling, had filled up one side of the moat, making a bridge for them to cross by.

Things grew blurred, and somehow rather amusing. I was put facedown over a shaggy brown horse, which liked this state of affairs as little as I, and shifted discontentedly, so that my nose was banged with an infuriating rhythm against the rough horse blanket on its back. As I lay like this, their seeress, as untidily placed as before, the tribal men gathered themselves together, and presumably discussed matters. After a while of discomfort, dull heat, and nose-banging, my champion mounted himself behind me, and, with some jerks and bumps, we set off. My mind was closed to everything except the humor and indignity of my situation, and I laughed.

And so that is the way I left Tower-Eshkorek, head down over a horse, laughing.

I recollect little of the journey, only waking occasionally to catch glimpses, from the tail of my eye, of a round bluish moon. It seems they made no halt when night came on; they knew their road from the mountains very well. From time to time snatches of their brief conversations sounded through my dozing, but again I could not seem to understand. That did not trouble me much at the time. There were dreams, too, about the things that were past, though it was not for some days that I remembered how the tower had fallen in a close cradle over our heads, a trap, but one which held the rest of the rubble away from us. There was no air in that place, and gradually the murky soporific of death crept in. Asren had not been afraid, and of that I was very glad. He lay in my arms quietly, and long after he was dead, I held him as I waited. I had not thought anyone would ever come to bring me new air so I could breathe again, and

had not greatly cared. Yet these warriors, sent by their seer, had opened a way.

It was a long journey for them to come. I reckoned later it took three days or more for the return.

There was a halt or two. Once I was offered food, but I did not want it, and could not have eaten it, in any case, without raising the lynx mask.

How long had I lain under the tower? They would not have come immediately—not until the soldiers had gone. At one point I thought of the child, wondered if it were dead in the womb, and, if it were not, how it liked my position over the horse. The warriors had had scant respect for a swelling pregnancy. But I had not thought of it before.

Fourth day? Morning changing the sky as I cricked my neck trying to see it. A great deal of jolting, and I realized that we were working a way down from the mountain slopes; just a glimpse of their sun-painted terraces behind me. I was too fully conscious now to bear my comfortless position.

"Let me up," I called, and the warrior whose horse carried me grunted. It occurred to me I had spoken in the City tongue. I corrected myself clumsily, struggling with the new words. "Let me move—let me ride with you."

The man laughed nastily. I became aware no mere woman would be allowed to sit a horse, let alone a horse with a warrior already on it.

"Then let me down," I said. "I will walk."

He consulted his neighbors, a taciturn dialogue. After a moment we halted and I was pulled off. One of them tied a rope around my waist, and attached it to "my" warrior's saddle horn.

"This is not needed," I said. "I shall not run away. I come freely to your tribe to be seeress and healer." Their faces were blank, and I broke off, conscious of having slipped back again into City speech, and of waving my arms and hands in pointless gesticulation, as I have seen people do when they cannot express themselves properly in an alien language. Abruptly I wondered if I had managed it as well as I judged at the tower; had I imagined their apparent acceptance?

With a jerk at my tether, the horse began to move, and I began to move after, of necessity.

I thought at first it was a lucky place to have chosen, for we were on the last of those slopes, and the way grew easier by the minute. I was glad to be walking, even roped as I was, even though my legs felt weak and occasionally buckled unexpectedly at the knees, and even though court sandals are not made to stumble in over jagged holes and boulders, and I stubbed each toe a thousand times. We were going down into a valley of rocky turbulent shapes, clustered with stands of thorn, thin pines, and other dark slender trees. The valley was full of velour shadows, but the sky overhead was golden-green, still streaked with red fingers of cloud. I was far from happy as I looked at it; how could I be happy? Yet a sort of calm seemed to flow into me, inhaled like a drug of forgetfulness from the cool air.

And then, feeling better ground under them, my escort kicked at their shaggy horses, mine included, and broke into a gallop. I tried to run with them, but I had no hope. The rags of my dress caught my feet, and in an instant the rope snapped taut, and I was pulled down. Dust in my eyes and nostrils, grazed by every stony upthrust, torn by sharp rocks, I was dragged helplessly forward, practically strangled by the cord at my waist. This is what the charioteer goes in fear of, if he has room for fear, one of those deaths the Sagare can offer. My left arm across my breasts in an instinctive protection, I tried to claw the rope free

of me with the other. No use. I screamed for them to stop. No use.

Suddenly the way was smoother. More dust. Incongruously I twisted to avoid a heap of goat dung, and was hauled through a broken bush tuft instead. My journey came to an end.

I lay there on my face for a moment, and then crawled to my knees. Around the makeshift track was a scattering of dark blue tents among the tall pines. Ahead, a larger tent, painted yellow on the blue, and before it a big fire-pit, smoking, and only just alight from the labors of four shireen masked women in black sleeveless garments. They had stopped work to stare at me. One of the warriors gave a yell at them and they ran like terrified hens, into the trees and out of sight.

We had come to this place around a jut of rock, which hid it well from the roll of the slopes. They had otherwise no stockade, yet this was a krarl, though not large—about twenty tents in all.

The dust was still settling, the warriors riding circles, our horses still snorting and agitated from the gallop, when two men emerged from the painted tent, one before the other. The first was a very big man, yet with not enough stature for his girth, heavily muscled, and with a hint of fat to come from many jugs of tribal beer. His large blue eyes were pouchy stupid—and yet cunning, too; and in addition to red plaited hair, he wore a full beard, well greased and plaited also. This beard dressing must be an irksome thing to him, and, from the look of it, it was most probably performed not more than three times a year, the last session being long past. He was unmistakably a chieftain, and he swaggered as he came, very sure of his ground. Dressed as his warriors in leather jacket, leggings, and boots, he wore many collars and trinkets over his tattoos, armbands of burnished copper, and there were tassels swaying from his belt. The other, who came behind him was a different thing again. Thin, tall, covered by a long brown robe caught at the waist in a leather thong, his hair unbound and fiery-colored yet streaked with gray, his face shaved like the faces of the warriors but painted black, so that it seemed he, too, went masked. Wild pale eyes rolled around in that black face, which, despite the gray hair looked of indeterminate age. and he clutched at a wooden shape hanging on his chest. Their seer?

Arms went up in salute. The gaudy chieftain nodded and looked at me.

"What is this?" I heard him say through the throbbing of my blood.

"An Eshkir, from the tower, Ettook," one of them said, and then laughed. "A seeress, she said. The precious thing Seel sent us to find."

The holy man Seel moved around Ettook the chief, and came toward me. I wanted to get up to face him, but I could not seem to manage it, and, as I kneeled there, I struggled to find words instead.

"I am a magicianess," I said; but I had used the City tonaue.

Seel came very close, and I smelled the stink of his body, the stench of skin forever wrapped up in a covering, and never exposed to sun or air or water. He seemed angry, his dry hands knotting and unknotting, his sharp yellowish fangs bared in a grin of hatred for me. His eyes glittered and darted. Suddenly he spat into my masked face. He shrieked some words I could not understand, and broke into a hopping dance. He leaped away from me, and, still screaming, he ran to each warrior in turn, poking at them with bony fingers. The warriors seemed afraid and backed away. I could not properly follow, but it appeared I was not what he had wanted brought; there had been some other thing—and they had missed it.

Again I felt I might begin to laugh, despite the pain I was in. And yet I must deal with them now, these

tribal savages, or else I was lost. I made myself think of how they had dragged me those last yards over the ragged ground, of how the seer had spat in my face. Anger came, hot and bright, and filled me like a jar. I got to my feet.

"Old man," I called out to Seel, deliberately discourteous, and I had the right words now, for he flung around frothing, and glared at me like a filthy old dog, which can still bite. "I told you," I said, "I am a magicianess."

I looked at him, and the anger rose behind my eyes, a great throbbing tide. But no light came, no pain of opening, only the pain of a huge thing that could find no way out. I struggled with myself as I stood there, striving to release my Power on Seel, to kill him, and prove myself before these dangerous tormentors. But I could no longer control or utilize my Power. My anger sagged and lay still. I recalled how I had burned from the brain of Vazkor the nest of ability, how I had sealed the avenues of his thought forever. In doing that, it seemed. I had drained*myself,* destroyed*myself.* Oh, I should have known it sooner; I had been unable to understand their speech as we rode, was still unable to master it fully, and that was a gift I had always had until now, since I woke under the Mountain.

Appalled and terrified, I confronted Seel, totally at a loss. The warriors began to laugh. Ettook began to laugh. Seel, however, did not laugh at all. He came to me and clouted me several ringing blows across my head, until at last the sound became the warning gongs of Belhannor, clamoring because Anash and Eptor were at the gates.

2

The tent where they had put me was very dark, and smelled of women and women's things, yet I thought at first it was empty except for myself. There were goatskins and rugs on the floor, and I lay among these, stiff and sore and sick. I began cautiously to explore my body, for I was in a cold panic now lest, along with everything else, my self-healing had vanished too. It seemed it had not, for the rents and gashes on my body were sealing themselves, the black bruises fading.

Abruptly I saw the woman's shape ahead of me. She had been standing very still until this moment, now she moved and came forward. The little drift of light through the tent wall caught her, and showed me a covered face from which large dark eyes stared coldly. Perhaps thirty years old, which in the tribes would be the forty of Ankurum, yet beautiful; this I could tell without even seeing her face. She had a beautiful body also, under the black garment, or would have had, for now it was swollen with far-advanced pregnancy, and the large firm breasts were drooping with their milk. She was dressed basically as the ordinary women of the krarl—those who had run away from the warriors—in a sleeveless black shift and a black shireen. Yet her bare arms were ringed from wrist to shoulder with bracelets of copper, silver, and painted enamel, and around her throat was a collar of nothing less than gold, set with dull blue gems. Earrings holding the same stones rattled from her ears. Her hair was black as the mane of a black horse, and hung around her head and neck and down her back like a curtain. Clearly she was not of this krarl, and not of the Dark People either, for her skin was creamy, almost white, except for its slight acceptance of the sun.

"I am Tathra," she said to me, "Ettook's wife. Ettook's only wife," she added, asserting her rights to my respect and fear.

I said nothing, and after a moment she said, "You have been stupid. It is not good to anger Seel. I spoke to Ettook for your life. He listened."

"Why?" I said.

"You carry," she said without expression. "A City birth, but it can be weaned to our ways—one more spear for Ettook's might. Or else, one more to bear sons for him. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," I said. She had spoken slowly, so I should be able to follow. "And for me?"

"You I will have," she said.

"Your slave."

"My slave. A woman of the Cities must know many things, many ways for a wife to please her man."

Did I catch a flicker of unease in her words? Was she unsure then of the continuance of her husband's fidelity? I could not find the words to test her.

"Tomorrow dawn," she told me. "You can come to me then. This day you will lie here, in the tent of Kotta, where the women come when they are sick."

She turned her magnificent, laden body, and went out. Things were settled. I was to be, after all, the high-born slave I had feared to be as I lay by the tower. Yet it was the best I could hope for. I had no longer any power or status. Who was I to argue with this destiny? At least I had been spared the tortures of Seel. I would be a drudge now, among the tents, and I would kneel before the warriors, and run from them when they shouted at me. I would be a woman, as women were reckoned in this place, a half-souled, witless animal, created to bear and pleasure men; an afterthought of the god.

It was very hot. I dozed from the heat, uncomfortably and without refreshment. Later a woman came, big-framed as a man, with muscular arms, and her hair bound around with a blue scarf. Earrings clanking, she felt my body, and grunted to herself.

"Sound," she said to me, "for all the rough treatment of the braves. And this"—she prodded lightly at my belly—"many days yet; a hundred, a hundred and twenty." "No," I said, "less." She laughed.

"Ah, no, you read your signs wrongly, girl. Kotta knows these things, and you are too small." She poured me milk and I drank it slowly.

"Is it—" I felt for the words. "Is it yet summer?" "Yes, summer for many days and nights now. Soon we shall be moving east again."

"The tower—when did the tower fall?" "Man's business." Kotta said. "I do not know, or care." She went away from me, and busied herself at some chests I could hardly see in the gloom.

It was summer, then. How long had I lain beneath the tower? Many days, it seemed, many, many days. A little pain from the milk twisted in my stomach.

Kotta returned to me with a basin of water and a black garment over her arm. She put it by me, and with a few deft movements stripped the ruins of the velvet off my body. She sponged the dirt from me, and applied a little salve to my cuts, but they were healing fast, though it seemed to me not as fast as I had healed before. Then she slipped the black cloth garment over my head and arms, and did up the lacings at the neck. Her hands came for the lynx mask, and instinctively I shied away.

I had not noticed her eyes till then, but now I caught the glint of them, very blue and still, and fixed on my face.

"Ettook must have the mask," Kotta said. "It is his right. Later he will have a right to your body, when you are delivered of the child."

"I must not show my face," I whispered.

She gave a fox's bark of laughter.

"Oh, so you learn the tribal ways so soon. That is good. Well, no fear that Kotta will see your face. Kotta is blind."

She said it in such a way as if she said it of another, using her name also as if she spoke of someone else. It did not seem to distress her, at least, only as she would commiserate another woman's loss. And, for a blind person, she was very deft.

Slowly, I drew the silver mask from my face, looking at her eyes. They did not flinch at all. I put the mask in her large strong hands, and drew on instead the strange familiarity of the shireen.

The dawn came, and I went to Ettook's painted tent, walking at first but soon creeping, with head bowed and shoulders slumped, as I saw the other women did who were of no importance in the krarl. Tathra would not creep, but then she was the wife of Ettook and, like his horse, had acquired some value from his interest.

I had thought, despite the early hour, Ettook would not be there with her, for I had come to imagine she wished to have me there on her own, to learn those City ways she had hoped I knew. But he was still there, on his back among the rugs, naked and snoring. And he did not snore as other men rhythmically—but in fits and starts after irregular intervals—great snarling, snorting explosions, that had a sound of wild pigs at war.

Tathra sat beside him, but when I entered she pushed the rugs away and rose. She wore no garment and no mask; as a slave, apparently, my eyes on her face counted for nothing. Despite her pregnancy, she was, as I had already been aware, incredibly lovely. There was a lushness to her, a ripeness, yet with no sense of excess, as sometimes there is in women who carry this kind of beauty. And she had delicacy, too, narrow slender hands and feet, catlike chin and eyes and nose, and a mouth that might have been painted it was such a perfect shape, and colored like a pale red flower.

She nodded at Ettook, and put two fingers on this witch's mouth, in the warning I must be quiet. In sign language she pointed out perfumes and other cosmetics in a carved chest. Silently I washed her and applied her scents, and finally brushed her hair as she kneeled before a mirror of polished bronze. I did not feel in any way demeaned by this. She was too beautiful. I became aware of something in me which gave a kind of reverence to beauty—that special beauty I had seen in Asren, in the palace girl he had loved, and which now I found so unexpectedly among the tents of barbarians. I, after all, bore the curse of ugliness; even my body, which Darak had found lovely enough, was disfigured now.

I plaited strands of her hair and fastened on their ends little bells of silver. From a jar she took a blue cream and smeared it on her eyelids, and from another jar a red cream which she rubbed over her lips. I did not like her to do this. It offended me in some curious way, for it was neither necessary nor an improvement.

She got back among the rugs with him then, and a pang of anger clenched in my belly—not for myself, but for her, so special in her looks, to court the favor of the disgusting, snorting creature on its back at her side.

With gestures she sent me off for his food, and I made my way among the goats to the morning fire. There were no men about that I could see, and the women at the pit called out shrilly at me. When I went nearer one picked up a piece of wood and threw it at me. It glanced off my shin, and they laughed raucously.

I rummaged in my mind for words.

"Tathra," I said, "I am sent by Ettook's wife—for the food for the chief."

They muttered and drew together, and presently one of them, rather tall and full-breasted, with a vivid red-blonde tide of hair, came up to me and slapped me across the head. There was more laughter.

"You want food," she said, "you ask me."

"I ask you, then."

"I ask—I*ask* —listen to the City one, the Eshkir." She mimicked me, and was applauded. "I am Seel's daughter," she said. "You have angered Seel. Those who anger the seer do not feed among the tents."

"Not for me—but for the chief, Ettook."

She hit me again, casually, and before I had reckoned what I did, I had given her blow for blow, and she was on her back among bits of charcoal from the fire.

The women shrieked and screamed at me, and Seel's daughter got up slowly, and then would have come running at me, but another voice cut across the clamor and they were still. Kotta stood at her tent door, her blind eyes which seemed to see fixing on each of us in turn, unerringly.

"What trouble are you causing, daughter of the seer? She wants only to serve the chief. She is Tathra's now, so you should mind your manners with her."

Seel's daughter lifted the veil of her shireen a little and spat on the ground, then stamped on the spittle with obvious symbolism.

"Tathra," she snapped, "out-tribe, spear-bride whore." She stood away from the fire, and pointed to a row of cooking pots sitting on the flames. "Take, then, white-hair." I went by her, and she hissed at me: "You will remember later which one you struck."

Reluctantly a woman filled platters for me, one with a kind of thin porridge smelling strongly of goat's milk, one full of ripe black-red berries, a third with dark brown bread. There was also a jug of frothy beer which she ran off to fetch. The items were placed on a tray of stiffened woven matting and left on the ground for me to pick up. As I crouched to get it, a foot struck me in the side and I rolled over.

I did not know which of them had done it, but Kotta called out from her tent door, "No more of that. She has a child in her. Ettook won't thank you if you lose him a warrior with your bitch ways."

I did not know how she realized what they had done. There had been little sound. I picked up the tray

and hurried away from them, back to the painted tent.

Going in, I found Ettook was awake, sitting up and glaring at me.

"What were you at, slut?" he roared. "Did you have to do the berrying and brewing yourself before you could bring it?"

"The women—" I said.

He roared me into silence, and snatched the tray so that everything fluid on it slopped over the sides of its container. He began to thrust food into his mouth, while Tathra filled his silver-hound cup with beer. Abruptly he snatched at her nearest breast in much the same way as he had snatched the tray. He laughed. Tathra nodded at me.

"Go now. I will have you brought when I need you."

I turned and went out, and stood in the harsh sunlight, struggling with disgust.

The women were still at the fire, except for Seel's daughter—gone to feed her father probably. Kotta also had gone in. I did not know what I was expected to do now.

I crept across the camp, and found a narrow stream running through the pines, a little beyond the tents. I wondered if I should follow this stream which would perhaps find a river course between the slopes of the dark mountains beyond the trees, a course which would guide me, not toward Eshkprek, but ultimately south, toward the unknown sea. Nothing, after all, bound me here.

I took half a step, and an unseen wall seemed to block my path. I do not know what it was, prescience, perhaps, perhaps only a desire for whatever security I could find, how ever precarious. I shook my head, as if to the stream and the road it might offer, and turned back into the krarl.

I found out soon enough what my duties were.

I had sat down in the dust near Kotta's tent, puzzling a little over the blocked path at the stream, when the women called out their men and children to eat around the fire-pit. Not for them that first meal abed, which was Ettook's right, and Seel's too, presumably. I was roused to action by one of the krarl warriors, who dragged me to my feet, and cuffed me on the ear for sitting idle, and soon a thin woman, more anxious than unfriendly, recruited me to serve the men and boys their food, with all the other women. This took a while, and not once did the females of the camp eat, sit, or even stand still in the male presence. It was tradition with them, but they were more enslaved than the Dark People. Even I was less of a slave, for rebellion had stirred in me at last, and though I could do nothing about my lot, I did not accept it. The krarl women, even their little girls, did so wholeheartedly and without question; even Seel's daughter, who ministered with the rest. When the men were done, they got to their feet, wiping their mouths, not glancing at their servitors, and went about their mens' business: preparations for a hunt (for these ate meat, when they could get it), sharpening of knives, grooming of horses, and general important talk and discussion, not to be let slip into our ears. The boys slouched after in imitation. Their male glory began early, it seemed.

The women ate now, the scraps and bits of what was left, and, while the little girls played noisily at a distance, they, in their turn, talked women's chatter. It was all that was allowed them, that inane mode of conversation which consisted of: their possessions, their expected possessions, their children and babies (possibly this could be classed under the previous heading), planning of food, planning of chores, their

man's prowess, either in bed or at hunting or at war, and jealousy for any woman either not present or out of earshot.

It was Tathra they maligned most, as she qualified on both points. Listening at the fringe of their circle about the fire, I gathered Ettook had won her from an enemy tribe in a fight a year ago. She was not yet accepted—the Out-Tribe Bitch they called her. They did not like it that Ettook's favor had gone to her instead of to one of them; neither did they like her pregnancy, which could establish her further with him, particularly if she bore a son.

The women's meal, however, was not long. Soon they were up, and I with them, to scrape out bowls and cups, and rinse them in the very stream I had come to before. In the course of this work, I went by that earlier boundary without thinking, and when I realized this, I did not at first understand, though I suppose the moment when I could have gone was finished, like all those moments when I might have escaped events in the past, and was prevented by some circumstance or emotion.

After this cleansing came a washing of garments and rugs, a rinsing and pounding at smelly items over the rocks. My back was aching when we were done. It was midday, and I half expected some rest, but they pegged out the clothes to dry on little cages of wood constructed for the purpose, and then ran back to the main camp to begin chores of darning, weaving, and sundry other wearisome tasks. The girl children had shown some interest in me, mainly in poking me and calling me names—in imitation of their mothers, as the boys' indifference had been imitation of the warriors. Now they were sent off to play, and flew off into the pines, relishing this brief time of freedom.

Seel's daughter had been at the washing and pegging, and I had expected every minute that she would hit me or worse, but she did nothing. Then, as we were walking to the tents, she came up beside me and half-whispered: "I have told my father, the seer, of how you struck me. He is angrier than before. There was a great store of gold in the tower, and your impudence made the warriors forget. Now it is too late to return, for we are already on Snake's Road, and must go East. He will put a withering on you, Eshkir slut. Your bones and sinews will warp, and you will go crippled all your days."

Despite myself, I turned sick when she said this. I had no respect for Seel's powers, yet ill-wishing can do damage if hate is strong enough. But the worst thing one can do is to help the attacker by believing it.

"Seel-the-Goat's spells will do no harm to me," I said. "I have magic of my own—magic I have not loosed on him before because I was compassionate. Let him beware, not I."

"You," she snarled, "you cannot even speak our tongue."

"There are other tongues than the mouth uses. Your father, if he is anything of what you say—which I doubt—will know it."

She was silent, chewing reluctantly on what I had said. After a moment she gave me a push and hurried off.

I had to stop still then, and say to myself in my brain,*He is nothing and cannot harm you. Death cannot harm you, and the old man is less than Death.*

But then the words came suddenly into my mind as I had seen them scratched on the wall of that tunnel through the Ring:

Death, the old dark man, is coming to carry you off...

The curse of humanity against my own Lost Race.

Instinctively my hands went to my breast for the jade I had torn from Shullatt's neck, and did not find it. As I stood there, a girl's voice spoke.

"The Spear-Bride wants you."

It was the best name they could find for Tathra among the tents.

I think I was glad to go to her, to leave my forlorn self outside. Ettook was no longer there. He had gone to join the hunt. She had me dress her and brush out her hair once again. She said little to me, and I guessed she was uncertain as to how she should approach me. What did she think I knew? Perhaps more than that quest for knowledge to keep her safe in Ettook's liking, she needed another presence—if not friendly, then at least not actively hostile. We had a kind of kinship, she and I, not only in pregnancy, but because both of us were the captives and the unaccepted of the krarl.

3

Snake's Road they called their way eastward, to the marshes and the fertile forest-land beyond; who made the track they did not seem to know. It was a passage down from higher mountain valleys to the rock plains and across, and it twisted and turned to find room for itself among crags and subsidences like the one-eyed serpent some of them worshipped, the symbol of which was hung from Seel's stinking neck. Ettook's people, along with many other tribal communities, sheltered in the higher places during the winter, began to make eastward in the late spring and early summer, and came to feed off the bountiful pastures of the eastlands when the year was at its full. Along the way there would be fights and battles, and skirmishes, too, at the final camping ground. Territory, however impermanent, was hard won.

Two days after I had come among them, the tents were dismantled, pack horses laden, and we set off. There were vast stores of food dried by the women in those moments when they were not tending their men. Meat from the hunt—kill hung from horseback to dry in the sun, dripped blood, and attracted colonies of flies. The warriors rode some way ahead, disdaining the slow pace of the women, who walked or shared a few mules between them. Children ran about, occasionally remembering to drive the goats as they were supposed to do. The goats, meanwhile, milled around the track,*maa* -ing discontentedly, and watchdogs barked, and ran to lick up blood and gorged flies spilled from the strung carcasses.

Tathra rode a black mule, partly because of her status, partly because of her pregnancy. The mule was hers, and therefore no other had a right to it, and they grumbled at that. Kotta also rode, a privilege of her blindness, yet she seemed to see as well as any of us from the way she looked at things—deer bucks fighting on a distant level of the plain, birds wheeling overhead. When you talked to her, she would look intently in your face. It occurred to me that perhaps she retained a little of her sight, however dim, and traded on it, though this did not seem to be her character. And besides, she had witnessed me unmasked and had shown no reaction, and once I saw her bend near the fire with her eyes still raised to the woman she listened to, and there was no narrowing of the pupils. She was indeed sightless. I reasoned then that perhaps her other senses had sharpened to compensate the loss, and this was what had made her appear so aware of all things.

A camp was made at the end of each day's journeying, a little aside from the track. Seel would bless our setting out on it each morning, one hand on the serpent amulet.

Around us, the wild jumbled land ran away from the mountains. There were water pools in plenty, and glades of dark thin trees, but otherwise the summer heat pressed on us and drank us dry. I lived on goat's milk, and did not like it much. I brushed Tathra's hair in the first cool of dusk, before Ettook came in to her from the big evening meal around the fire, drunk, greasy, and belching.

I slept my nights in the open, which did not matter greatly in such mild weather, and yet it was a symbol of my little worth. None of the warriors troubled me; it was a rule with them not to lie with a woman once she showed her womb filled, though I had not noticed Ettook daunted by this ruling where Tathra was concerned.

My breasts grew larger and uncomfortable with milk, and I began to have pains in my back, and at the base of my spine.

"What is the matter?" Kotta said to me. Perhaps I had made an audible protest at the pain, but I did not think so. I told her my trouble, and she asked Ettook for a mule. It must have been the old argument—one more male for the tribe—for the mule was mine, and I rode after Tathra from then on.

Seel did not come near me, and if he had cast his spell, I knew nothing of it.

It was a monotonous traveling, but dullness can be preferable to certain other things.

On the ninth day out on the road, near sunset, there was some agitation among the warriors up ahead. We were passing through a narrow gully, where the track took up the path of a dried-out stream bed. Rocks went up on either hand, trees leaning over us from roots clawed into the rock side, and swaying darkly on the tops like plumes on a metal helm. Above, among those trees, the warriors had seen some movement, it appeared, not animal in origin.

Once this news trickled back to the van of women and goats, weak panic broke out among both. An enemy tribe, planning to attack us from the gully roof? Yet there was no attack then. We reached higher ground, and night came.

They made camp in the shelter of other rocks, and piled rocks around the three open sides as an improvised stockade, and lit brushwood fires on the inside of this. In the red light, warriors stood sentry, and there was a look on their faces of taut pleasure. It was good to fight. A sign of virility in the tribes of the valleys to have taken many women, fathered many sons, but best of all, to have slain many men. The women huddled near the main fire, chattering nervously as if purposely overacting fear in order to make their men's bravery the more obvious. I sat at my post, a little way from Ettook's tent, sewing without interest or accuracy at a bit of cloth. The cloth, in other hands, might have become a carrying bag of sorts, but it was, for me, only an excuse for labor. They did not like women in the krarl to be idle; this way I seemed employed, yet truly was not. Grouped at the wall fires, Ettook and his elder warriors were drinking and laughing.

Abruptly, hoof sounds opened the night. Silence fell in the camp. At once a man's figure, a horse shape, flying mane and hair showed, caught in the flame glare. Shouted words I could not grasp, an arm upraised, and something flung over the stockade of stones to bite deep in the soil. The rider turned again, mount rearing, and was gone, swift as he had come. Ettook ran to the thrown thing, pulled it up, and shook it—a pointed stave about four feet in length, tied with strips of scarlet wool, and ringed three times with white clay.

"War spear!" Ettook cried with a fierce joy in his voice.

Shouts went up. The warriors leaped and lifted their arms. The women came closer together—except for one, the tall daughter of the seer. She rose and went among the tents for her father, and was soon back with him.

Seel raised a bony hand, and clutched the one-eyed serpent with the other.

"War dance," he called out, and the warriors cheered.

As if it were a signal, all the women got to their feet and ran into their various tents, all but Seel's daughter and myself. They did not see me in the dark tent shadow. Seel's daughter carried over her arm a black robe, which now she put on her father. Over it were embroideries of many colors, barbaric depictions of sun and moon, tree and mountain, sea and fire. He shook out the wide sleeves, folded his arms, and began to intone some ritual chant which had no meaning for me. The warriors drew back in a half-circle, and into the space between the seer and Ettook and his men slunk the girl, hair like one of the flame tongues all around her. She spat on the ground left and right, and made a sprinkling action around the half-circle with her fingers. Seel's chant came to an end, and his daughter ran at once to Ettook, and Ettook clasped her to him. That she was the symbolic intermediary between man and the power of magic was clear, that she would now give herself to the chief was also clear. Perhaps sexual arousement was integral in their war frenzy. The warriors' feet began to stamp as Ettook's large and uncouth hands traveled the snake-writhing body of Seel's daughter.

"No, not for you," a voice said, Kotta's voice, at my shoulder.

I got up. I had no real wish to see their blood-lusts rise in the fire-lurid dark. We went among the shadows to the tent, and slipped inside.

"Had they found you, girl," she said to me, "it would be a beating or worse, perhaps. Even Seel's daughter must hide her eyes in her father's tent when they've done with her."

"When will they fight?" I asked.

"Tomorrow. Daybreak. It is man's work."

I laughed. "I too have fought and killed, Kotta. It is the work of fools, not men."

And then I sat very still, for a great truth had come to me out of my own mouth, as if another spoke it. I had indeed killed, not only with sword blade but with thought, also. I, in my hubris, slew and wounded, and because of it my Power had left me. It was quite obvious to me in that moment.

I bowed my head and whispered, "What have I done?"

Kotta said nothing. She took up my sewing and began to unpick it.

After a while I said, "I am blind also, Kotta of the tribe." I did not care what I told her, whether she believed or not. A slow procession of words came from my mouth, in which Darak and Vazkor, Asren and Asutoo, Mazlek and Maggur, the Sirkunix and the War March were inextricably mixed. She could not have understood, but she recognized the need in me to speak. When I was still, she, too, was still. We sat quiet for an hour or more in the dark tent, while outside their feet thudded among the red flicker, and they invoked their gods and the savagery within themselves.

After that time, I lay back on the rugs to sleep, and it was then she spoke to me, as if our conversation had had no break.

"Now I will tell you something. Kotta was born blind to the krarl—in the last years of Ettook's father, it was. A blind one is no use, as a cripple boy is no use, for he cannot ride to war. In a way, a blind woman is worse, for she may bear blind children, so I might not go to a man—had any wanted Kotta, which none did. But I was let live, for I learned my chores quickly, and could do most things as well, or better, than the womenfolk with whole eyes. And I learned to tend the sick, and help the women bear, so I am useful among the tents. Now tell me, one of Eshkir, why do you say Kotta is blind?"

I lay in the dark, and I answered as if she had prompted me: "Kotta is not blind."

"Yes," she said. "But Kotta does not look out through two sockets in her head, which men call seeing. Kotta looks inward, and there everything is. I did not know that I was blind until I was in my tenth year. When they told me, I did not understand, for I could*see,* and I thought they saw too, in the same fashion, looking in, not out." She had unpicked my work on the cloth, and began again. "What color is this cloth?" she asked me.

"Blue."

"Now what is blue? I have never seen*blue.* But I have seen colors you also have never seen, nor any who look outward. I turn to the sky and I see birds, but they are not as you see them, and I see men, but not as men see men."

"In your tent," I said softly, "when I took off the mask what did you see of*me,* Kotta?"

"Something I have not seen before. Put your hand into cool water when the day is hot. That is what I saw."

"Kotta," I said sharply, "I am ugly beyond ugliness; did you not see that?"

"To yourself, and to others perhaps," she said, "but to Kotta, beauty. Beauty I have not seen before. Beauty which is a fire and yet does not burn."

"Your inner eye has misled you," I said to her.

There was silence from beyond the tents. I got up from the rugs, and went to sleep in the open, curled among the rocks, cushioning my sore breasts with my arms. It seemed their man-magic had spread into her mind and mine, despite an averted gaze. Her words tormented me and I ran from her.

What bitterness she should see so well, and yet so falsely. And tomorrow they would fight.

4

I woke late, stiff and chilled in spite of the warming sun, and with a sense of wrongness—whether in the world or in myself I did not know.

I came out into the camp. There was no fire burning, though ashes in plenty strewn from last night's ritual. A wandering goat stared at me superciliously. Silence hovered. It was a strange thing; apart from the goat and myself there seemed no one else here, and yet I felt there was. I picked a way over the broken

ground, churned up further by stamping feet. Torn-off tassels lay about, and there was some blood not human, but from a war sacrifice they had made, as if their own and others' deaths were not enough. I reached the nearest tent, lifted the flap, and looked inside. The tent was empty. I crossed the track the women had already created, walking back and forth to the little waterfall on leatherbound hard feet, carrying pitchers. Three more tents, and into each one I thrust my search, and found nothing. I reached the fall where a spring burst in constant crystal urination from the lichen-stained rock, pouring into its own narrow well in the ground. No jars here now, and no sign that they had come today. My skin began to tingle. I turned to look over my shoulder many times. Was this some part of their battle I had missed—an invasion and taking? Yet, if they had been taken, why had I heard no sound of it? And there were no signs of violence.

Something nudged me in the side.

I cried out, flung sideways, rolled and scrambled upward, my hands reaching to grasp knives I no longer possessed.

My attacker—the goat—regarded me with mild amazement, and shook its head. I had begun to curse it when a sudden sharp spike of pain split my body. I bent over gasping, and, as if this were penance enough, was released from the vise as suddenly as I had been seized. Like the goat, I shook my head as if to shake the last vestige of the pain from me, and in that moment a woman shrieked, her cry, in the silence, seeming to fill the whole camp.

It was no ghost scream, too real, too large to be imagined.

I ran at once toward it, though I cannot judge why. It had occurred to me I was not courageous, had never been brave, only arrogant or unthinking.

Kotta's tent. It was quiet now. The dry throat rattle of some bird started up in a thicket. I pulled open the flap and looked in. It was very dark, but I could see the blind woman crouched by an iron pot set on the little brazier.

"Kotta."

She looked up.

"The Eshkir," she said. "So they left you too. Good. You can help me."

"But where have they gone?"

"The men to fight," she said, "the women to hide. It's always the way, in case the camp is taken."

"Why not you also, Kotta?"

"I have work to do, and so has she. We shall be too busy to run off into the rocks."

I looked where she pointed, and saw Tathra lying on the rugs. The brazier picked out beads of sweat on her uncovered face like little red glass jewels. She twisted and murmured to herself, and then abruptly tautened, and began a series of awful grunts, louder and louder, until at last she reached the summit of her agony, and shrieked once more as I had heard her do from the fall.

My impulse was to go to her, quiet her. I recalled Illka, the girl who died in the ravine, and was still.

Besides, what could I do now? Kotta drew the iron from the brazier, poured out thick liquid into a clay bowl, and took it to Tathra. She raised her head on one big arm and made her drink.

"A while yet," Kotta said. "This will ease you."

Tathra's head fell back. Her large frightened eyes closed themselves.

"Useless," she moaned. "Ettook will die in the fight, and they will kill me."

After this, she seemed to doze, only murmuring from time to time incoherently.

Kotta laid out her things, primitive shapes of metal which bore a little resemblance to physicians' instruments in the Cities. She set water to boil, and when it boiled away, sent me for more water at the fall.

The day dragged by and thickened into a brassy late afternoon light. I went outside, and looked around from the vacated camp. Nothing seemed stirring. I had asked Kotta where their place of battle was, but she did not know, or care. And it would be useless to look for them yet. If they won their fight it would be the other's camp they would go to, for the women and the beer.

The black figure of a bird on long ragged wings wheeled over the sky, and away.

I rubbed my back, which was full of a thin relentless ache, and went in again to endure the rest of the vigil.

A hot summer moon rested lazily over the camp when Tathra's child finally decided it would be free of her.

It seemed foolish for me to hate the child; it obeyed an instinct as old as woman herself, had no choice, and no doubt suffered also. Yet I hated it for the pain and terror it caused her, and through her and her shrieks and prayers to unknown gods, caused me.

Kotta had known it would be bad for her, though she had said nothing. Now she did what she could, but it was little enough at this time, for the machinery of birth was locked in Tathra, and could not be oiled or operated from outside. I gave her my hands, one after the other, and she tore them with her teeth and nails like a frenzied animal in a trap. All the black night hours she screamed in the tent, and the darkness wore itself down against us like a sharp knife blunting its edge on our nerves.

Toward dawn she lost consciousness and lay still. Her face was gray and shriveled, her body soaked in sweat. The waters had broken an hour before, and the tent smelled strong of blood. Kotta massaged her limbs, felt at her belly, under which the contractions rippled like sea-waves.

"Bad," she said. "The child is wrongly placed. I feared as much."

I helped her turn Tathra on her side, and kneeled so that her back could rest against me. Kotta took her copper instruments to the water and dipped them.

"I will do it now," she said, "while she feels nothing. You are a strong one. If she wakes, you must hold her still."

I put my arms around Tathra's arms, and grasped her. Kotta came, and I looked away from what she

did, abruptly squeamish and faint, despite the death I had seen and been the cause of. After a moment, I felt Tathra's body quicken. She came awake in one frightful lunging effort.

"Hold her," Kotta cried out, and it was very hard. My bones seemed snapped by her frantic twisting—and then she jerked twice, and she screamed as she had not screamed before, a mindless, unpremeditated scream, which was all one surprised, unbelieving accusation. Between the copper crab pincers of Kotta's birth tongs, lay the body of a child, which had come from the womb feet first in its hurry to be out. So tiny, this thing which had caused such great distress.

"Ettook has a son," Kotta said.

"Is it over?" Tathra sobbed, her eyes fast shut. "Is it finished?"

"All over, all finished," Kotta said. She cut the cord with her knife.

I let Tathra onto her back, and presently Kotta pressed gently on her body and the afterbirth left her.

Then into that new soft silence rang another noise, a commotion that came from the forgotten world beyond the tent.

"They are back," Tathra said dreamily.

"Back or not, you will rest now. Ettook can wait to see his child."

"His son," Tathra said. She had not even opened her eyes to look at it, yet she knew herself safe now, held fast by that symbol of her worth. A bearer of warriors.

I slipped out of the tent to watch them come up between the rocks, and I felt a heady contempt. They were drunk and bloody, tattered like hawks from a sky fight, tipping back their red-plaited heads to drink from leather beer-skins. After them came a string of valley horses loaded with stolen gear: weapons, food, jewelry, and a train of out-tribe women, whimpering from the rough treatment they had already suffered and premonitions of further rough treatment to come. They were redheads, too, a krarl half kin to this one, yet still fair game.

They jumped over their own stockade, knocking stones out of it, and bawling with laughter. Soon the krarl women would come forth from their hiding place to tremble, admire, and feast the heroes. The camp, from being dry and empty, was now one fluid red riot of motion under the sun-broken sky.

Kotta came out beside me.

"I must go and see to their wounds," she said.

"*Their* wounds?" The scorn was very bitter in my mouth.

"Either I go to them or they will come for me. Take care of her in my tent."

"You had better tell Ettook he has a son. He will need telling; it has cost him nothing that he should otherwise know it."

"Not even that perhaps," Kotta said. "The child is small and weak. I doubt it will live through the day."

I went back into the tent and kneeled by Tathra. She was sleeping, drained but peaceful, yet there was a dead look to her; part of her beauty was wrecked on the night, and the rebuilding might never come now. The boy lay at her side, in the wicker basket they used for their newborn. I looked at him for a long while, but then I went away and sat at the back of the tent. My belly and spine were all one continuous throb of hurt, and I had known for some time now that my womb was near to emptying itself. I did not feel afraid, perhaps because I was too tired. Besides, Tathra seemed to have borne for both of us, her trouble was so terrible. I could not believe whatever was in store for me could be as bad.

Outside the noise increased, thudding angrily. I heard women's voices and the sizzle of meats on spits. It was full daylight.

After a while a sharp knife came and pierced me, and red liquid ran free. I curled over and thrust against the thing inside me, my torn hands tight around the pole of the tent. If you will to be free of me, then*go,* I thought at it. There seemed a response, very swift and hard. This thing is too big for me and will never get out, I thought, but I thrust again at it, and my muscles cracked, complaining, and I felt it move. There was a brief interval then, but I felt the shifting pulse, and knew, and finally I pushed down at it with every ounce of my strength and rejection. I seemed to thrust a great stone forth from a cliff, saw it hang, ovoid and bloody, in my brain's eye. Then a new pain answered, and I cried out, shocked at it, a long cry that ended differently in triumph, for I knew I had at length succeeded, and was rid of my haunting forever.

Away from me, but still chained, rolled the image of my hatred, the curse Vazkor had put on me. I reached for Kotta's knife, and severed that final bondage, knotting it close to the child, then crouching and dispelling the afterbirth from me. "It was with as little trouble as this that my child was born.

My child, the son of Vazkor.

After I had sponged myself clean, I washed it in the brazier light, looking at it, yet not seeing. It was very small, as Tathra's son had been, yet perfectly formed, compactly healthy, despite the time I had given it in Belhannor, and the other times circumstances had tried it with since then. It had a pale skin, pearly in the half-dark tent, unfocused black eyes, a wisp of black hair, the legacy of its sire. (I cannot say father; he mated us as another man would mate horses.) I felt no stirring of emotion, not even triumph or dislike now. I removed Tathra's dead baby from its wicker tomb, and replaced it with my own. I did not even stop to think. The act seemed logical, precise, and very neat.

It waved its small hands at me, and rubbed its restless head on the soft lining of the basket.

When she was stronger, Tathra would wake and give it milk, and it would grow to its manhood among the tents of Ettook, dark-haired, dark-eyed, pale-skinned for its out-bride mother, possessing—what gifts? I could only guess at that. What a viper I might have left them—what a serpent to bite them long after I was gone. Would Kotta guess? Perhaps she who seemed to see might see this difference too—but who would believe her? Tathra would not dare.

I wrapped Tathra's dead baby in one of the filthy rugs, picked up my bundle and went to the tent flap. The feast was merry some way from this place, fire smoke, noise, movement, singing.

I slipped between the rocks, reached the unmanned stockade, and got over it.

I felt neither weakness nor remorse of any kind. My decision had been too quick, too abrupt, and yet I think I had known it long before, without realizing. There was no surprise in me at what I had done, what I did.

It was a steep treacherous way down from the krarl. After about half an hour's scrambling, I became aware of weariness and physical pain. Out of sight and sound of the camp, I crawled into a deep crevasse, hung over by yellow, sun dried bushes, and slept.

Pitch-black night hung in the entrance when I woke.

I eased a way out, and stiffly took up my walk again, still clutching my morbid bundle. At last there was a waterway, very narrow and brown, but here the ground was softer underfoot. I made a mud grave for the thing I carried, then worked downstream, my feet in the cool water.

I came to trees under a high moon. The light was transparent indigo, and the trunks stood up like dim dark pillars irregularly carved, and supporting moonlight on their latticed arms. Mosses, stones, leaf-growths struggling beneath my feet. A warm, a silent night.

I had not considered, even, that they might come after me. They were too busy with their victory, and besides, I was of little worth. I lay to sleep again in the open, not thinking of men, or of animals hunting. Not thinking of anything at all.

And waking, with the thin gold of morning pouring through rents in the sky, it occurred to me not only that I was free, but also that for the first time since I had come from the Mountain, I had acted alone. No external motivation, no influence of another, but an action sprung from, executed by my own brain.

The morning chill, the unrelieved pressure of milk in my breasts, the ache between my thighs, seemed a small price to pay for it.

5

A little mound of leaning stones.

So familiar to me, yet I could not seem to remember why, as I lay under the trees looking toward them. Some way off, and beyond them, the sound of the stream I had followed the night before. Yes, that surely was the answer: the stones marked water. My body and my mouth were thirsty for water. I rose, every joint cracking, and walked between the trees to the stones, and looked down. It might have been a different stream, fast flowing here, gold-lit and glassy. I had not noticed in the tired dark. I stripped the black shift, and stood knee-high in the current, laving my skin with the coolness, drinking from my cupped hands until the mouth veil of the shireen lay wet and heavy at my throat, and my hair plastered in soaking white strings on my flesh. I ran my hand over my belly, the skin still flaccid, the deflated bag of birth, nevertheless tautening itself quickly. Soon muscle and flesh would be firm and whole. I, with my unique gift of self-healing, rejoiced, splashing in the stream.

I became aware of the other presence slowly. Looking up at last, I met a pair of icy yellow eyes, and was confused for a moment in my joy, because I had not before thought yellow a shade capable of such coldness. Around the eyes a gray streak-furred animal face, teeth points showing delicately above the jaw, ears flattened and tufted—a wild cat of the rock valleys, and probably on a quest for food.

We stared at each other, this well-equipped, well-armored hungry thing, and I, naked in the water, without a knife to defend myself, and with no Power left to stun or kill. At another time I would have thought the cat very beautiful. It began gracefully to pick a way down the bank toward me, the pines behind it thrusting at the sky, throwing shadows now, striped as its coat. At the last moment it looked away, dipped its head, and drank from the stream, perhaps two feet from where I stood. I could smell its

musky odor. Its tongue made crisp pink motions, reminding me of Uasti's cat. After a while it lifted its water-beaded face, turned, and leaped back the way it had come, vanishing in the trees beyond the leaning stones.

Luck. It had eaten possibly after all, and had had no need of my meat. I began to shiver uncontrollably, scrambling from my bath, scrubbing my body with handfuls of dry grass until the action and the warm sun dried me.

Pulling on my shift, my hand struck the stone pile. One small pebble rattled loose and fell down into the stream where the current pulled it away. I watched that pebble go, and at once I saw an arrow in its place, and I remembered—the streams above the ravine, the river in the woods where Kel's arrow had floated, snapped in half because it had touched an evil place.*An altar of sacrifice —old as the ravine itself. I've heard them say some black god or other still broods here...*And I had lain here, rejoiced here, and the wild cat had not touched me.

Freedom was so brief, despite my joy. There was no freedom. I carried my darkness on my back everywhere I went.

I ran from the stream, through the woods in the morning. Birds beat up from my path. When I could ran no longer, I walked, swiftly, and without much thought. A steep way and many trees. I had no sense of direction. I snatched a few berries from a bush, and wept like a spoiled child when the stomach pains came to plague me.

The day passed, and night came when I was high on a rocky road, climbing from the woods to the darkening sky. I slept in a cave place, curled up small for there was little room, and I dreamed of a white marble chamber where I lay on a silk bed, a child by my side in a golden cradle. A pink baby, blue-eyed, with a trace of yellow hair.

"This is the child of Asren Javhovor," I said, then the doors opened, but the dark man with the black-masked face strode by me with a sword uplifted, phallic and menacing. The blade swung and crashed across the crib. I saw how black hair curled closely on the back of the strong neck, for the murderer was Darak.

I did not know where I was making for, though I guessed I must long since have left that way Ettook's people named Snake's Road; no trace of a track remained. It was a dangerous land, peopled with wild beasts and the wild tribes of Ettook's kind. Yet I saw no men, neither did they see me, presumably—or I would have been dragged away by them for their fun. Animals I glimpsed were of the timid variety: long-horned slender deer, winding sinuous gray snakes, birds, and russet squirrels. Once at twilight four wolves ran through a rock cut far below, and spurred me to climb into a deeper cave for sleep. Across the vistas of the hills and woods by night, the weird barks and screeches of things echoed hollowly. I felt I had no part in this lived-in country, an intruder without rights or the ability to survive. I ate red berries which made me vomit, and realized I had been poisoned. The hem of my shift I had torn off at the knee, and the rest was tattered and frayed. I drank from glassy streams or at the brown mirrors of round pools where frogs clustered, croaking in the dusk. My milk began to dry in me.

Ten days I traveled, without comfort or much intelligence, and with no destination in mind. On the eleventh day the land began to alter. It leveled and flattened, rocks faded back into the soil. From a dark crisp world, angular with stones and pines, it became a gray-green world, fluid and sloping.

The twelfth day. No longer the sharp, bittersweet scents of the highland, but smoke-mists clinging in the nostrils, stinging; mists so fine you could scarcely see them, only the effect they had upon distant things.

The sky was a hot metallic shield over many pools, reed beds, muddy places, steaming. The bird calls were different. Clouds of insects buzzed. At night I lay where the ground was driest, without thought of any bonus of safety, and whitish phosphorus moved between one stretch of water and the next. I had reached the marshes.

On the fifteenth day, my fourth in the marshes, I was weak and angry. The water was not any good to drink—I had tried it, and I*knew*. Apart from a few berries, some of which were poisonous. I had not eaten since I left Ettook's krarl. My breasts, still slightly tender and swollen with the unused milk, led me to wonder if I could feed myself from my own body—but they were not well-placed for such an endeavor, and I had no vessel other than my hands. I struggled a while, milking myself, trying to be cow, cowherd, and bucket at once, and, in frustration, saw the nourishment spurt thinly onto the ground. I cursed my breasts, a curse to which, luckily, they did not succumb.

I became dizzy from the mosquitoes' drone, and lay through the noon heat in the rush shade.

On the seventeenth day I came to a vast place of water, shallow, the ruined green of an old glass goblet. Trees grew out of it, smooth—full of liquid, ancient bends of brown marble leaning over or away from their own marbled reflections, spilling lank leaves among the reed drifts, all one colorless color that could be given no name. I began to cross this water, the mud sucking at my soles, the greenness, however, only reaching to my knees. Gray heat drizzled on my eyes, and I thought at first I imagined the shape ahead of me. Then I reasoned it was a tall, particularly thick-boled tree, then a stand of trees. Finally I realized it was the ruin of a tower made of old white stone, and around the ruin was a wedge of land solid as an island in the low water. I stopped very still, and listened. Over the insect hum and slight viscous*swash* of water, I heard sounds, sounds familiar and unloved and unlooked-for. Man.

Like an animal, I crouched back against the nearest tree, afraid of the hunters. And, like an animal, a single connective thought stirred in me. Man. Food. Where he settled, settled his cook pots, and his tents, even here, in the marshland.

Very quietly now, I slid toward the island. At the bank, I crawled among the rushes, and forward through thick springy undergrowth. I lay about forty feet behind the tower ruin, almost flat to the ground, and peered out. And saw them.

A krarl, this I could see, and yet...

They were not Ettook's breed, that was certain. Their hair was long, unbraided, shining like black fire, their skins very dark, almost as black as that hair. Moving about their fires, among their black hide tents, in black clothes, I could tell they had an instinctive elegance of movement, a physical beauty, a narrow, hard, sculptured look, that made them seem unreal. White tower, black tribe, glint of metal and ornaments and fire. Yes, another nomad people, traveling east across the marshes, as Ettook's krarl had planned to do. Yet—they were not on Snake's Road.

I lay in my hiding place all day, watching them, waiting for the dark. On the whole they were very silent. Tall, slight, grave children played games with white squares, cross legged in tent mouths. Toward sunset women cooked food at separate fires, and sat with their men to eat. I was very hungry. I began to notice only what they did with the food. Red sun-stains dripped across the water. I bit my tongue, stomach burning, and drifted into a half-sleep of longing.

Water, trees, and island one reflective glimmering turquoise in the dark. They seemed to have set no sentry.

I eased forward until I reached the base of the tower. No sound at all. I eased forward until I reached the banked-up smolder of the first fire. I had noticed a collection of about twenty goats, earlier, penned on the other side of the tower, and I was tensed as I moved for them to begin bleating (they are better than watchdogs usually), but I had not apparently disturbed their goat-sleep. I searched by the fire and found nothing. Unlike Ettook's men, they were not careless as they ate, unfortunately. No help for it then, but to go farther into the camp.

I prowled among the hide tents, my eyes very wide. Between the dull red crusts of embers I searched carefully, and found a scatter of tasteless crumbs. Horses—surely they had horses with them? And perhaps the stores might be there—yet they did not seem to have horses or wagons or carts. I paused by a tent shape, lifted the flap so slowly it and my fingers seemed to creak like a rusty door. Inside—blackness, black curled figures and the smooth sounds of their sleep. And—! My hand snaked out before I could stop it. Three grayish cakes lying by the flap on a dish, and a little pitcher of water. They might have been put there for me to take. It was all I could do to stop myself from eating then and there in that unsafe place. I dragged myself away, out of the camp, back to my shelter. There I drank deeply, and crammed my mouth with food, which tasted pleasantly of honey for all its color. It was the first time I had ever been truly hungry, with a desire for actual food. When I was finished, I dug out a scoop in the soft earth and buried the empty pitcher. Slowly I slid myself into the water, and trod carefully back into the shelter of the bending trees, some way from the island. One of these, with a cradle of low-slung branches, offered me a bed. I crawled into it, and, despite the raging pain in my belly, fell suddenly asleep.

I had not been sure that they would even notice the theft—which was stupid of me; to a traveling people not of great wealth, all things of life must be accounted for.

In the morning there were startled cries, though not many. They were philosophic in their loss. No one came searching.

That day, too, they gathered themselves and moved on, away from the tower, going on foot, carrying their gear. A heavy mist had come down, and for some reason I went after them in its cover. Perhaps it was the need for food, though that, for the present, was gone. Still, I did not know how long I must travel before I reached clean water and edible berries. Or perhaps, at that time, I had become so used to living among people, I needed their presence near me. I had not liked my time alone in the rock valleys. And yet, I think it was as it had always been—something drew me, something ordered the disorder of my life.

While the mists held, following was easy. Once out of the water, the soft ground masked most sounds, and I could find their tracks if I lost them. I think it gave me a peculiar pleasure, too, to hunt them in this way, like an animal. Especially because they sensed me, and grew uneasy. Goats, women, and children now went in the middle, the thirty or so men moved around them, long sharp spears in their hands. I could not properly understand their tongue, which once more was new to me, but, from a word here and there, I gathered they thought it was indeed a beast which followed them, one of the carnivores of the rocks, strayed because of hunger, for the marsh held nothing fiercer than hand-span lizards.

I was a fool to keep behind them once I knew what they thought, but I think I had*become* half-animal in the wild, half-cat perhaps, after that encounter by the leaning stones. After three days of our partnership, the mist lifted, and I dropped back into the greenish reeds which were very tall here. They made their camp long before sunset, on a solid stretch of ground some way down from where I lay. There was a different feel to the land—better and cleaner. A river ran along the skyline. The reeds moved with a crisp, not a sluggish, sound.

There were many fires in which they stuck their sharp wood spears to harden them. They were so

businesslike, there was so little paraphernalia, I did not realize for some while they were organizing a hunt.

Cold terror then. Yet more animal still than anything. I did not think to go into their camp openly—had never thought of it. Now I turned and maneuvered a way through the reeds.

I suppose I left smeared tracks-marks—the bruised and broken reeds. They were hunters after all. The sun was dipping low when I heard the first sound of them behind me.

In among the tall reeds I lost myself and my senses failed me; I seemed to hear them coming from every direction at once. I panicked and ran in circles. When the first dark shape parted the green curtain, I crouched low against the ground, and growled in my throat, because I could not remember any words, and I was all anger, fear, fury. I had not realized how the wild places had deprived me of the last vestige of myself, and I did not realize it then. Other shapes broke through the reeds and stood still, as the first had done.

There was a long silence, and in the silence the cat-fear lust drained out of me. I stood up and looked at the nearest hunter. His face was very still, carved almost, yet he was surprised; his eyes gave it away at once. He said something to me. I did not understand. I shook my head. He made gestures with his hands and after a time I realized what he was asking: You followed us? I nodded. He smiled, and made a sweep toward the way they had come, then pointing to me, his eyebrows lifted. Incredible. He had said: Do you wish to come with us? They were being kind to me and tolerant, and I could not grasp it. Yet I grasped the hard fact. I shook my head in denial.*No,* I did not want to go with them. A rash thing to do, they might have killed me. But they did not. He nodded, turned, walked away through the reeds, and the other men followed him.

I still did not believe what had occurred until some moments after they were out of sight.

Then it came to me what I had been offered, and by whom. I ran after them, and caught them among the reeds, and they turned and looked at me inquiringly. I felt like a silly child when I nodded to them. The leader smiled again and walked on with his men, looking back only once to see if I were following.

Part II:*The Edge of the Sea*

1

The day after I had come among them, the black tribe gained the river I had seen on the skyline, and crossed the brown water, either swimming or aided by those who could swim. There were tangles of rushes on the other side, and beyond that a drier, curving plain, dotted with many hanging trees, a species of vivid willow, shivering their lime-green hair over the stretches of water which still possessed the landscape.

They set their tents, tethered and milked their goats with sure narrow hands. I had learned little of them, except that they were calm, unquestioning, and generous, which had been quickly obvious. They had looked at me, not stared, when I had followed their chief into the krarl. They had offered me food, which I had refused, being no longer hungry. I could understand nothing of their tongue, but by signs and facial gesticulations, they let me know that I was welcome to travel with them and share their shelter. They asked for nothing in return. They indicated one of the black tents where I was to sleep, in company with two young unmarried women. I thought these two might resent this, but they gave no sign of it. One took

me and showed me a secluded pool where I could wash, and gave me a black garment to replace my rags. Coming back from this excursion, having forgotten how to manage a long hem among reeds and brambles, the cloth caught on some thorn or other, and I stumbled. The girl caught my arm and helped me get free, smiling gravely when I thanked her. I had thought the difference in our skins might make me an object of loathing to them, yet I sensed no allergy in her touch. She had made me understand her name was Huanhad.

Dusk smothered the reeds, and she cooked a little meal on a fire by our tent. The two girls sat to eat, and again offered the food to me. I shook my head. Huanhad pointed to my shireen, and made a play of averting her eyes. It seemed she thought I could not eat in it. The women of the black krarl went unmasked, though apparently were acquainted with the female taboos of other tribes; Huanhad had not attempted to remove the mask, though she helped me remove my ruined shift. Again I shook my head, and they returned to their eating.

They came early to sleep, but first placed within the door flap three of the grayish cakes and a pitcher of water, exactly like the arrangement I found when I came among them to steal food. That night I was puzzled, but later, as I learned something of their tongue, I discovered that the cakes and water were an offering to their gods, put out freshly by each tent every night, so that any wandering deity might eat and drink if he chanced on the krarl in the darkness. No wonder there had been an outcry when they found an offering gone.

In the morning, before we set out for the river, their chief came to the tent. He managed to tell me about the crossing, and that the tribe was making east, yet not as I had thought to the fertile lands, but toward the sea. His name, he explained, was Qwenex, and he politely expressed the wish that they might name me also. As I was so ignorant of their tongue, a personal name might be essential, perhaps might even save my life if called to me in time of danger, when nothing else would make sense. I indicated that I had no name. He showed no particular surprise. He touched my forehead gently, and said the single word, "Morda." It was, I found afterward, their name for ivory.

We spent two days traveling in the willow-green land beyond the river. Little waterways trickled by us, making, as we were, for the sea. In the dusk of the second day, coming from among the trees, I saw a small herd of horses at the stream on the slope below. They were wild, there could be no doubt of that, nor of their beauty; neither were they the mad man-devourers of the Eshkorek valleys. Their long heads dipped and lifted, arched necks turned, and the black oval gems of eyes stared at us. I thought they would leap the stream and run from us in the way of all wild horses, but they made no move to go. We went by them quietly, and they gave way to us. I saw Huanhad reach up her hand, and a black silk head reached downward in turn to brush her shoulder. Their leader nodded to Qwenex as he passed. They seemed neither afraid nor disdainful. Perhaps they sensed that these men at least would not leap high on their backs, choke them and break them, and burn out their strong lungs in the service of human commerce or war. I do not think I imagined that from me they averted their heads, politely and with dignity ignoring my existence.

In three days more the plain had paled and sharpened, giving way to limestone and crops of thorny trees. There was a strange tang in the air, a sea promise I did not yet recognize. What they sought by the salt shores I did not know. They were a quiet people. They neither ignored nor made a companion of me. Perhaps because of this gentleness and this protected solitude, or perhaps merely because it was the time for it, my sorrowing began. I can call it nothing else. I did not weep or tear at myself within. A weight was chained to me. It was not even regret, which is fruitless, nor despair, which has necessarily no reason. It was not terrible or unbearable in any way, although it was pain. It lasted three days and two nights. Not until it was past did the other petty miseries steal in. Then I wept.

On the sixth night I ate with Huanhad by the fire, and a woman came and sat with us, holding her child in her arms. I stared at the child across the fire flicker; it was as old as my child would have been, my child which I had abandoned in Ettook's krarl, to learn his disgusting ways and thoughts and deeds. Never before had there been any sense of loss. Before, always, it had been Vazkor's, a piece of him, his will imposed on me. I had been glad, glad to be rid of it. And now I saw it differently, for the first time. It had been also a part of me. And more than that, it had been an individual life, a new, a created thing, that I, by the unique laws of nature, had earned a right to participate in. And I had thrust my right away from me, thrown off the wage, confusing it with the hated labor.

I got up from the fire, and walked slowly away among the spiky thorn trees. I clung to them, and cried bitterly in bewildered distress. Yet all the while a cold voice murmured in my brain,*It will pass, fool. It will pass. Not for you, at this time.*

I fell asleep among the trees, tasting salt on my lips from my tears and from the sea wind, and when I woke, I think I understood that it was my luxury to weep, not my right or even my need. I thought of the warrior he would become, and how he would protect Tathra as his mother from the jeering tribe. I had done well to leave my child with her. And it was easy to give what I did not want.

Yet as I walked through that day toward the unknown sea, all the ghosts and sins of my life came to me and hammered on me. I rode in the Sirkunix, watched Darak die, swung my sword in Vazkor's battles, shrank from the scarlet water of his death. White horses screamed under me, men fell in my defense with the faces of Maggur, Kel, Mazlek, Slor.

Huanhad came in the sunset and put her hand gently on my arm. I knew enough now to understand almost all of what she said to me.

"What is your trouble, Morda? You walk by yourself, mutter; is this a fever that you have?"

"Yes," I said, "that is all it is."

I went into the tent, and lay staring into the shadows until sleep picked me up, and I flew with burning fire-feathered wings across the black cliffs of my doubt.

Below, a great stretch of water crinkled moonlight. I soared above it, and away to the south, saw a shoreline scattered with broken, bone-white cities. I wheeled toward them, the wing-thrust in my ears like a wind-drum, beating with my heart. Over the black bright rollers of the sea, where the froth burst silver on the faces of the dunes and the bastions of crested rocks like the shattered bodies of dragons, eagles, giants.

But out of the white carcass of the cities a shape rose, a man's shape—Darak? Vazkor? He beat up toward me on black wings, and he grinned as he held wide his arms—not to embrace me but to keep me out. Nearer and nearer—I could see him well now, the plaits of his black hair, the scars on his sunburned skin, the tribal ornaments, the knife in his belt.

"Your son," he shouted at me across the air which divided us. "Ettook's warrior! Do you like what you made of me? I have killed forty men, and I have four wives and thirteen sons, and three days from now I will die with an out-tribe spear between my ribs. I might have been a prince in Eshkorek Arnor, or in Ezlann. I might have been a king with a great army at my back, beautiful women to please me, and Power to make all men do as I wished. Do you like what you have made?"

And he drew from his belt a knife, and with one strong beat of the black wings, twisted and threw it. It

soared toward me through the darkness.

"This has no ability to kill me," I said.

But then I saw the knife for what it truly was, or what it had become. The knife from the altar beneath the Mountain—the one blade which could end my life, which Karrakaz had shown me—the Knife of Easy Dying. Its cold tip entered my breast, so sharp I did not feel it. I screamed as it burrowed to the hilt in my flesh.

And found Huanhad's face and the dawn, instead of death.

2

That day we reached the sea.

Since the marshes, the weather had been strange, drab and dull for summer, yet often very hot. Now, in the afternoon, the skies had a still intense grayness; there was a pre-storm glare on the outlines of the trees. The ground had sloped downward for some while. Rough meadowland stretched away into shadowy valleys. Then ahead, against the gray light, appeared the jutting silhouettes of a cliff range, and beyond that, a faint mauveness like a chalk line on the sky.

Huanhad stopped, pointed, and cried out, "The sea! The sea!"

One or two others joined in her cry, using other words I had not learned yet. It was the first time I had seen them in anything resembling excitement. The children skipped and laughed, and the goats bleated crazily. Qwenex lifted his arm and called us on, and the normal rhythmic walking speed increased to a brisk trot. I hurried with them, but why, I did not fully understand. The smudgy line of color meant nothing to me, and after my dream, there was reluctance besides.

After a few minutes, a guttural roar broke open the cloud sheet. Brazen lightning shot across the open land, and rain fell in large heavy drops, warm on our hands and necks, widely spaced at first, gradually joining together, until we moved through a chain mail of tepid water that beat like a drum on our heads. Lightning made rose-pink interludes in the sudden darkness. I could not see where we were going, and had an abrupt conviction that we would all run over some cliff edge, like a herd of pigs driven mad.

But they knew the way too well for that. Huanhad firmly grasped my shoulders and brought me to a halt, and I found they had spread out in a line along the cliff top, about a yard from the drop. So I looked down and saw the sea, stretching out and out from the sheer rock strand, two hundred feet below us. On either side the ghosts of other headlands thrust forward to the water, pale in the streaming rain. Ahead, the boiling caldron, seething, limitless, seeming to curve with the round shape of the world, banded with every color of the changing sky, joined to its last perceptible horizon with a thin green lacquer of spume and a hallucination of violet. True beauty is always oddly surprising.

I understood then that I had known the sea before, as my dream should have warned me. I turned my head slowly southward, looking for that scatter of broken bones on this eastern tip of the land. Rain and cliffs were in the way of my eyes. I sensed nothing southward, only empty land, stone beaches, and the carving chisels of the waves. Yet my Power was gone. How could I know?

Huanhad touched my shoulder softly.

"The sea," she whispered. "You will be better here, Morda."

After a time, Qwenex called to them, and they turned away, one by one, as if reluctant to let go of the sight of the sea. Through the rain we trudged, parallel to the brink, though a little farther inland. I stumbled over the white limestone outcroppings. We went in a curve and upward, and suddenly there was a white shape ahead, squat, disheveled, and we had reached a broken tower, open to the rain, and breached in a hundred places. Perhaps it had been a watch or beacon in earlier days. It had something of that tower in the marsh where I had first found their krarl.

Swift as its coming, the rain began to ease. In the last drizzling, they formed a circle around the tower's base, a few feet from it, and stood quite still, as if waiting. A silence fell in place of the rain. Muddied pink lights quivered over the sky. There was something secret, close, mystic even, in the way they stood around the tower. I drew out of their circle, shivered, and waited also.

Qwenex raised his arm, all one black narrow shape against the pale rumbled ruin. He saluted the tower. And then he moved to one of the broken openings, stooped, and went inside.

A gull screamed furiously, out at sea. There was no other sound.

Qwenex came out of the tower, and in his hands he carried a wooden cask covered with the white powder of the stones that had been laid on top of it. With his knife he prized up the lid. The lid fell off. Inside, a dull glimmer, something metallic?

He lifted the something out, and it was a great book, covered all over with plated gold. At first, all that stirred in me was the memory of Ezlann, Za, Belhannor, and the books of Asren Javhovor, set with many jewels, glittering and priceless in the candlelight. Qwenex carried the book forward and went around the circle to each of them in turn, and each man, woman, child, touched the book, very lightly, as if it were too hot or cold for them. I remembered then what Uasti, the healer of the wagons, had told me—of the wandering tribe and the golden book that contained legends of the Lost Race. My heart sprang against my ribs. I reached across the circle, and laid my hand full on the surface of the golden book. Qwenex looked at me. He let me touch the holy thing, but he would not let me do more. This much I could see. What had Uasti said? No woman was allowed to look inside it. Yet I felt the inscription, blurred by age and handling, seek my palm like a moving snake. I lifted my hand, and saw the words as I had seen them written in the green dust on the wagon floor.

BETHEZ-TE-AM, Herein the Truth.

Then Qwenex was moving away from me, carrying the book to others, waiting motionless and yearning.

I shuddered, and before I could stop myself, I laughed. They did not seem to notice what I did. They, the black peaceful ones from the marshlands, who carried the sin and sorrow of what had created me, who worshiped the annals of hubris and stupidity; the annals that were perhaps the key to what I must know of myself, to my lost Power—even the location of the green comfort, my soul-kin, the Jade.

A huge vermilion gong rapidly sinking over the inland meadows was the first and last we saw of that day's sun. Their black tents were up between the sea and the tower, and along the flinty scrubland behind it. Their cook-fires sizzled and popped and hiccuped smutty protests in the wet grass. They went about their ordinary tasks as I had seen them do every evening since I had been with them, yet I had been with them long enough to know that there was a different feel to what they did. The women talked more than usual, the men less. The children ran about and rolled in the meadows, where the goats nibbled and stared around them with bright mad eyes, catching the anticipation that tingled in the air. Some ceremony

or feast or rite was to come with the full darkness. Some rejoicing which had to do with the sea, and the ancient book.

The Book. I was obsessed with it. It lay now in Qwenex's tent, and a circle of warriors stood around the tent, guarding it. It was more tradition than anything, that guard; who of the tribe, after all, would interrupt the Book's privacy? Yet I could not break through the chain of spears and men. I prowled about the camp, not eating or drinking, going from fire to fire, trying to catch up snatches of their talk and understand them. I learned nothing.

An oval moon pierced through the cloud, and the sea under it burned white from edge to edge. The breakers exploded below us with soft concussions.

Their meal was finished. The women laughed and shook their hair in the dusk. A string of children came running from the goat fields with armfuls of small pale flowers. They tossed them down, and I saw countless garlands lying on the grass. The women bent and put the flowers around their heads, and on the heads of their men. Something in me grew tight and afraid, and I drew back from them along the cliff. I had seen too many ceremonies, obscure, hateful, and empty, to welcome this one. Huanhad came picking her way toward me, a warrior walking a little behind her, both of them garlanded. She held out flowers to me also.

"You are not of us," she said slowly, so that I should understand, "but you are welcome to be glad with us if you wish."

My hand stayed stiffly by my side, but I thought of the Book. I reached out and took the flowers, put them on my hair, and thanked her. They turned and went back into the camp, and I followed them.

They had laid a new fire in the meadowland, a little way behind the tower, and now they were forming around the lank red banners of its smoky flames in their repetitive circle, linking hands. A tall boy, fifteen years old, perhaps, began to play on a long narrow pipe made from the tough stem of some reed. A strange thin sound came from the pipe, not in any sense a melody. The circle began to sway one way and then the other. Huanhad, her warrior, and I slid into the circle. Hands disengaged to receive us, clasped again around our own. Caught now in the swaying motion they made, the fire slid before my eyes, the reed-wailing made a jumble of my thoughts and senses. The circle began to flow leftward and around the fire, trotting at first, soon running. I saw the blur of faces beyond the flames. Feet thudded softly over the crackle of damp twigs, the sea-thunder below. Suddenly a man's voice cried out behind the circle. The chain broke, hands dropped hands, the men, women, and children fell away from the fire, and ran instead, forward, after the boy with the pipe, and Qwenex, who carried in his hands once more the golden Book.

The moon blazed coldly overhead, and against the still-blue sky, I saw the thin ebony lines of the running figures, stringing out like the scattered notes from the pipe, their hair flying under the silver sprinkle of summer flowers.

I did not know where they were going, nor what significance this thing had to them. I followed blindly, without their ecstasy, tearing my way through tall grasses and staggering across sharp stones. A long time seemed to pass, and my breath came short, and hurt under my breast. I was afraid I would lose them—I was already the last, and far behind. Panting, I clambered over white rocks, looked up and saw that they had gone. I stared out along the cliff line, but they were no longer ahead of me. I held my breath and listened for the pipe, but it was silent. They might have vanished off the earth.

And then I thought to look down, over the cliff edge, and I saw the breakers were pounding far out

now, leaving a long stretch of open beach. On the beach lay the tribe, like people resting after a hard journey, on their backs, hand touching hand, quite still, describing once more, by some curious intuition of their bodies, that circle which expresses infinity for it has neither beginning nor end. For a moment I thought they had flung themselves down there from the cliff to die, and then, in the center of them, I saw the hub of the wheel, picked out by the moon, which was the Book.

I scrambled across the rocks, searching out their way down. When I found it, it was a treacherous limestone slide, broken by natural terraces. I dared it, clinging to handholds of gorse and long grass, and pebbles rattled away from me to the beach far below. Bruised and torn, I landed on the last stretch where the stone gave way to sand. I crept around the bastion of the cliff, picked a path beside its green-stained underside. They did not seem to hear me, and again I wondered if they were dead. When I was nearer, however, I saw them breathe, though their eyes were closed, their faces trancelike. I touched the shoulder of a woman, and she did not stir. I jumped across her body, and was inside the circle.

Sand splayed up from my feet. I looked at them, and they did not wake. I had again that feeling of a wild animal, an unthinking thing. I had profaned some secret holiness of theirs, but in my own need I did not care.

I ran and kneeled by the Book. My eyes dazzled with black darts of excitement. I flung open the cover.

I cried out. I turned the pages, one after the other, in a frenzy. I could not believe what I saw, would not believe it. For the pages of the Book were blank.

Oh, yes, there had been writing, this much I could see, but the inks had faded. Now there were only faint smudges and marks here and there on the yellowness. And I could tell nothing from them.

I rocked my body, still kneeling by the Book, staring out at the black retreating sea.

I had realized quickly that this tribe was not the tribe Uasti had spoken of, the hill tribe of healers who had trained her. I had reasoned then that this book was not the one she had told me of but another, perhaps a copy, or even a different thing. Yet it bore the same name, was revered; it must be*some* relic of the Lost—some clue for me. I had hoped. And there was nothing here after all.

I got to my feet, leaving the Book open, the night breeze faintly riffling the empty pages. I jumped clear of the circle, and began to walk southward, up the beach. If not the Book, then the broken ruins of the cities. They at least must be here, for where else had the tribe discovered their relic?

I was tired, walking with my eyes half closed and my feet dragging. At the edge of the sea I left my footprints, the lace fans cold on my skin, smelling the ancient fish smell of the water. Sand gave way to pebble, and then again to altered, muddier sand. I threw my garland to the sea, and watched the waves carry it off, then bring it back to me.

It came to me, as I walked, how bitter the irony of the Book had been which had said: Herein the Truth. For it had a truth of its own in its bleached barrenness. What was truth except something which faded, lost its shape, grew unreadable and indistinguishable, at last a blank page for men to write on what they wished.

All pebbles and chunks of the white stone now underfoot. The night was sliding down behind the land on ruffled wings, and the bitter cold of the sea-dawn fastened on me. Most of the night I had walked under the towering giant's pottery of cliffs, while the tide drew in and out, breathing. Once I had climbed to a higher place, out of the water's reach, and slept there until the new silence of the waves slipping away

again woke me, and I went on. I was hemmed in between the long flat water and the high irregular stoneworks.

A marigold sun rose from the sea, seeming to drip back its color into the silver breakers. Seabirds wheeled and cried.

I rounded yet another cliff face, and found it was the last. Before me lay a wide and open sandy bay, scooped back to the terraces of low hills. Beyond the bay, far off, half painted on the morning mist, a tongue of land that poked out many miles into the water. At first I did not see the white shapes scattered across the hills of the bay and the tongue of land. But the sun pointed with a chilly orange finger, and I realized I had found my dream's cities with the dawn.

I walked into the cold water of the bay, following the curve of it, yet not going any closer. A kind of extra sense, all that was left to me of my Power, told me that this place was very old, older than Ezlann, the Dark City, older even than Kee-ool, and not only ancient, but unlived-in, unvisited. Some atmospheric barrier surrounded it that kept men away The far-off ancestors of the black tribe had come once—and they had found the Book. Perhaps others had come—briefly, yet never staying long enough to leave any imprint on the cold stones. And whoever had come and gone, the cities had forgotten them. I thought of those cities of Sea's Edge in the far south, that last alliance Vazkor had planned to conquer. Had they also fallen into decay? Would his armies, if they had come there, have met with another such ancient indifference?

A sound broke harsh behind me, making me spin, wide eyed, to see what demon-guardian the ruins had woken against me.

Three tall black men stood waiting in the surf, the wind lifting their long hair, spears in their right hands, knives at their narrow hips. Their leader, the tallest, spoke again:

"To men and women of our krarl comes the need, sometimes, to seek this place. All who feel such need come here. Was there such a need in you?"

"Yes," I said, "and a need to be alone here, too."

"Not good to be alone here," the warrior said gently. "There are strange things in the cities by day, and stranger things, with the night."

The cold wind nicked my skin. I shivered.

"I am Fethlin," he said.

"I am Wexl," "I, Peyuan," the second and third men said.

Again the magic number of three had repeated itself—my guard, once more, stood waiting to serve me, having followed me through the night—and I had not even sensed their presence. But this time I did not want this security. No more men should die for me like fools.

"Go back," I said. "Go back to Qwenex and your people. I profaned your trance-circle on the beach. I opened the golden Book—I broke the hearth-bond and the guest-promise of your krarl. Spit on me, and go back."

Fethlin looked at me, and he said, "That was your need."

"You know nothing of my need," I shouted at him. "Go back—go away—I will have no more butchered lives strung around my neck!"

I stopped shouting, and the wind filled the silence, as it had filled all the silences in this bay for thousands of years.

"If you enter the city, we will follow you," Fethlin said. "That is how it must be. Your need is our need. Only our own gods understand why."

There seemed something completely final in that they had recognized, as Maggur and his would not, as Mazlek and his only partly would, that they were bound to me by some motiveless and insane unnatural law.

"Very well, then," I said. "None of us has a choice. I am sorry, for you will die."

I turned my back, and began to walk inland toward the curved scoop of the bay, ignoring that they came after me.

3

Farther south, a causeway led from the sea, rising clear of the beach. Perhaps there had been a harbor there, and a watch beacon; nothing remained. Beyond the sand a grassy slope, tangled with tough dark green trees, and, climbing up between these, I found the first ruin of a road, once forty, fifty feet across, set with those great slabs I remembered from the Lforn Kl Javhovor; there was not much left of it now. Paving had been heaved aside by growing things. Lichens and weeds wove together like a tapestry, a pall to cover something dead.

Then there was a green open stretch where the road lost itself entirely and reappeared twenty feet away, dividing a broken wall, flanked on either side by the bases of pillars. They had been very tall once, now they seemed like the melted-down stubs of candles. When I reached them, I put out my hands to touch the blurred carving. Nothing stirred inside me or around me. Yet this had been a phoenix gate, long ago.

When I went through it, and stood inside the city, I had to glance back quickly. Behind the figures of the warriors I saw the sea's pale glitter still moving in the bay. I turned, and went on over the green and white patchwork paving, between the open foundations which were all that remained. A few cracked marble obelisks leaned toward the hills, as if undecided whether to fall now or to wait a few centuries longer. The strange howling winds which live in deserted places blew through the wreckage of palace walls.

The sun rose higher, and the sky was a brittle uncertain blue. It was noon, and I had passed through many gates, across many ruined roads. They had become one and the same to me. We were higher into the terraced hills, the sea behind us, remotely turquoise. Here, between buildings, a tree had thrust itself. I sat down beneath it, staring out across the empty plaza.

Fethlin, Wexl and Peyuan crouched a few feet from me, shared a small meal of goat cheese and dried dates. I refused the food they offered, but took a sip or two from the waterskin Fethlin carried.

The ruins made me ill at ease, I needed to move on, despite my tiredness, yet I did not know where to go, nor what I must look for. Though the wind still blew hard, it was warmer. I shut my eyes, leaning against the tree. I was dozing, slipping into sleep, when suddenly the green spear opened my brain. I

started awake, and in that moment, felt the Pull, strong as I had felt it on the plain before Ezlann. I got to my feet and stood still, trying it, as a dog sniffs out a faintly remembered scent.

There was a little side street, flanked by a few solitary standing walls, leading southward out of the plaza. I walked toward it, and into it, and down it, and heard the sounds of Fethlin and the other two, rising and coming after me. In a while, the Pull became so strong I began to run. One of my black shadows ran beside me, three others behind me. The street vanished in among trees. And beyond their dark moist shade, the land fell abruptly away and downward. I stopped, finding I was looking out across a small valley, hidden by the terraced hills from the beach, and the cliffs.

A flight of steps had been cut in the hill, now as green as the hill, leading down. The valley was also green, and almost empty. A few white stones lay on their sides like sheep, strayed into an enchanted place and petrified.

At the far end of the valley rested a cloud of fir trees, and out of this cloud appeared the hand of a giant, with one long finger pointing up, toward the sky.

Behind me, Wexl uttered an unknown hushed word, perhaps the name of a god.

But the hand was stone, like everything else, though not quite like, for the color was warmer—a harder building stuff, which had lasted longer. There was a ring at the middle joint of the finger-tower, which seemed to be a great balcony circling it. There were still bits of gold in the ring; they caught the sun and glittered yellow-white.

I began to go down the overgrown stairway, and at once I was cold. I thought the three warriors might not come with me, but they did.

Near the valley floor shrubs had grown over the steps, and they hacked a way for me with their knives. The grass in the valley was like velvet under my feet, but nearer the building it grew coarser and longer, and there were purple flowers with thorny stems. I looked back several times beyond the warriors. The valley was very still.

I turned my foot on a peculiarly smooth stone, and again, a few feet later, on another. I think I looked down because they had not really the feel of stones at all, and saw a skull lying in the grass, polished and brown from age. I was careful where I put my feet after that, but I saw others, and bones besides.

In the icy shadows of the firs lay the skeletons of three large dogs, or even wolves, perhaps.

Something about the bones terrified me. Yet the cold tingling of my spine and neck, the desire to look over my shoulder, had become so much a part of me that I was almost able to ignore them.

Tree shadows sprayed across the base of the hand, on the intricate stonework and carving which represented a bracelet. Facing me, set like a jewel in the bracelet, was an oval dark door which seemed to be made of onyx. There was no marking on the door, no indication of a way in. Across the threshold something lay staring at us with black sockets.

"The Guardian," Fethlin said softly.

The skeleton was fully clothed in an ancient decayed armor, a cloak from which all color had faded, a helm with a long crumbled plume. A sword rested on its bone thigh, vivid with rust. It was strange, for the flowers and grass which had overgrown all the rest had not touched him.

The dread I felt then, I realized, did not come from me, but from the place, and from some long ago atmosphere laid on it by a curse or a Power.

"No farther," I said to Fethlin. "I must go in alone, if there is a way in."

They did not argue with me, and I forced myself forward to the oval door. I stooped over the dead sentry, and touched his armored chest with my fingers.

"Peace, old one," I said. I was not sure why I said it, but the words seemed to come into my mouth. "I mean no harm, and I have a right to walk here. Know me, and let me by."

There was no lessening of the cold or terror, but I went past, going around him, and not stepping over, and when I put my hand on the oval door, there came the snap of a lock, and it opened inward in front of me.

I do not know what I expected, I suppose, the worst or the best that could come to me. Certainly nothing so ordinary as the round white room. I went into it and the door flew shut behind me. I felt no particular panic, for somehow I had known it would. With the shutting of the door, the room grew darker, yet not totally dark. Light came, not from windows but from the well above where a stairway led upward into the tower.

On the walls there were faint shapes, the ghosts of pictures. I could make nothing of them. I needed my lost sight—that sight which could make out the engraved words on the High-Lord's way, so blurred and faded no other could tell what they were. I left the walls and went toward the stairway of white marble. On the first step a second skeleton-warrior sat grinning at me.

"To you, also, peace," I whispered. Eyes seemed to move far back in the sockets, the hideous mouth laughed. I went around him and up the stairs.

On the first level there was nothing, only replicas of the faded walls, and the light was stronger. At the second level the wind blew in coldly on my face. Five oval open doorways pierced the walls of the room. I crossed the marble floor, and emerged from one of them on the ring-balcony of the finger tower. The balustrade was very high, its carved head a foot above my own. Only tall men or women could have looked out over the ring, across the green valley. To me, only the sky showed itself, hard and icy blue, and the tips of the hills beneath it. I moved around the balcony slowly. The floor was laid with colored stones, red and brown and green and gold, the same as in the ruined theater at Kee-ool, yet the pattern was more intricate, almost mathematical. I moved round and round the balcony, my eyes on the colored paving. Round and round. It came to me, dreamily, that I might walk here forever, round and round, until I died. Yet the paving held such a variety of vistas, it did not seem I crossed the same space, but over water and treetops, and the red sands of some other world. ...

A gull, flying inland, saved me. It shrieked high above the tower, as if to warn me, perhaps in its own fear of the valley. I came to my senses, ran in at an oval door, and stood in the pale room, panting. Fool! Surely I had known there would be magic in this place, and traps to catch every brain and will. Had I forgotten already the brown bones in the grass?

The stairs still led up, this time away from the daylight. I went to them and began to climb. Black marble here, and darkness. And narrowness. My dreams came back swiftly to me now, those dreams I had lost in Ezlann. The white marble leading to the black, and then—

I screamed in irresistible, brief fright. In the dark I had come face to face, breast to breast, with a third sentry. Unlike the other two, he stood upright, balanced in some inexplicable way across the oval door-mouth at which the stairs ended. There seemed no way past.

"Peace, old one; know me and let me by," I said.

We stood facing each other, and he towered over me, glaring down from the pits of the skull. And then anger came to me, fierce and sudden.

"Let me by," I hissed at the thing, as if it were some soldier and I the cat-goddess of White Desert, and when the skeleton stayed in its place, I struck out at it with my hand. It tottered, and tumbled by me down the stairs, rattling. At the bottom, the hard marble cracked the helmed skull free of the spine, and it rolled away, out of my sight. To the clammy persistent terror, a new terror was added then. I knew the superstitious worth of all guardians—those men set to guard till death and beyond it the hallowed places of vanished peoples. Still, it was done now, and for a purpose. I went through the doorway into the last room of the tower.

There was a source of light in the darkness. It flickered and flared up, and many different colors played over the three painted walls. I had no time to spare for the light, for the paintings took my whole attention—they were clear and unfaded, and very, very old, and my whole body trembled when I looked at them.

On one wall there was the painting of a black mountain.

Over it a purple cloud rested, and under it a woman lay asleep. Her body was very white and her hair was also white; she had no face. Instead, there was a piece of jade set into the stone. On the second wall, this jade-faced woman was shown again, dressed in a green robe that left bare breasts and arms. She carried in one hand a golden whip, in the other a silver rod. Behind her, three warriors, dressed as the skeletons had been, in golden armor and green cloth, green plumes trailing from their helms. They bore no resemblance that I could see to Maggur, Giltt, or Kel; Mazlek, Slor, or Dnarl; Fethlin, Wexl, or Peyuan. On the third wall the woman stood for the last time, behind her the symbol of a sinking bloody sun, and in her two hands a knife I remembered well—the Knife of Easy Dying, its sharp point directed at her breast.

I would not look at it. I turned to the fourth wall, over which a long curtain was hanging. I reached for it, and tore it down, and beyond it there was a wide golden couch, and on it a white-skinned woman in a green robe, her hair plaited with gold and pieces of jade, with a veil of gauze across her face. I did not know if she were statue or embalmed thing, but I knew now well enough what place I had entered. It was a tomb. And the tomb was mine.

My impulse was to fall to my knees, to whimper with fear, but one last curiosity drove me on. I leaned across the creature, which could so easily be me, and I pulled the gauze away.

No, this was not my body, after all. I stared down at her a long while. A carving of something beautiful, yet no words had ever come from the pale mouth, no brain had ever woken behind the wide forehead. Her closed eyelids were like two green leaves that had fallen on the sleeping face.

"You forget," I said to the room, "you forget what I am. You forget that I have been made to know myself."

And I turned.

I understood then what had given me light to see all these things. On a block of stone, a smooth stone basin, and in it a bright flame leaped and burned. The voice began as no more than a whispering. I would have shut it out.

"So—So—So—"

"Be still," I said. "Be still."

I began to edge around the walls toward the stair shaft.

"So. Ahhh! So—So Karrakaz enorr—" sizzled the no-voice in my brain. I had never heard such power in it, such electric triumph. "I am Karrakaz the Soulless One. I—I—I—"

"No!" I shouted. "You are nothing."

"I am I—I remember. I remember our bargain at the place men call Kee-ool—and that we did not keep it. But all that is dust now. I remember the wagoners on the road to the Dark City, and the Chief Priest, and the battle before Belhannor. You have fed me well. Lie down now, and die. You have done much."

I could not seem to reach the stairway. My limbs were lead, dragging me down. I began to crawl on my belly, pulling myself forward with my hands clamped to the slippery floor.

"Die," whispered the voice. "Sleep-death. Silence. Peace. Die," whispered the voice. "Only pain in the world, and trouble, and misery. Sleep."

My hands were on the oval door-mouth. The marble burned and blistered them. A web seemed to hang across the opening. I pushed my head very slowly outward, and through the web, and it hurt very much. I could no longer feel my body, only my face and my hands.

"Fethlin!" I called, and knew he would never hear me.

"Do not call," the voice whispered. "You have no other needs. Only sleep."

"Fethlin!" I cried, and my voice came stronger, and cracked itself against the marble walls. Scarlet pain splintered my spine. "Fethlin!" I screamed. The scream was huge and terrible. It seemed to rock the tower to its base. Far below I heard the crash of the onyx door thrown wide, though how they opened it I could not tell.

"Better to die," crooned the voice.

There were running feet on the marble stairs. I tried to pull myself down the steps toward them, and could not. A colored lightning split the room behind me. Nearer and nearer the running feet—a dark shadow moved upward toward me.

"Death comes," said the voice.

I thought I saw then the trick it had played on me, the he-she thing in the stone. I struck out blindly and wildly at the assassin on the stairs, but he caught my hands, and, after a moment, I knew that it was Fethlin after all.

He dragged me clear of the doorway, and ran with me down the steps, holding me up by a grip around my waist, while my numb feet tried to make running motions and failed. I sensed and answered to his urgency, but did not understand why. In the last hall Wexl waited, and Peyuan held open the door.

We fled out of that place, Wexl and Peyuan holding me now by the arms. My feet touched the grass, and a little sensation came back to them. They were running. The ground spun by beneath me, the sky overhead. And the sky was black with storm. Out of the shadow of the fir trees, into the open valley. I found my feet and legs. I began to run. The air hummed around us.

Suddenly the world tipped sideways. We were flung down into the cruel grasses, among the thorns and skulls. We scrambled to our feet, and struggled on again until the next shock overtook us. The valley grass rippled without wind. We had reached the lower steps of the hill. Shrubbery clawed out and caught at clothing, hair, skin. The earth drummed angrily.

I crawled and clutched and tore my frantic way up the hill, my face to the greenness, unseeing. When the thunder came, I thought it was the end for us, but the quake was spent. Lightning washed across the sky. Fethlin laid his hand on my shoulder, and I turned and saw that the valley was still, secretive, poised once more in its deathly enchantment.

"I led you into an evil place," I said. "I am sorry."

We reached the summit of the hill, and Fethlin looked upward at the thunderclouds.

"Did you find what you sought?" Wexl asked me.

"No," I said, "not what I sought. There is no answer for me here, after all."

I stood still and empty. I could think of nothing, no solution or hope. What was there for me now? My life had been a meaningless journey indeed. I stared back at the valley. Perhaps I had been wrong to call for help. It would have been easy to lie down beside my other self, and give myself up to the dark.

"We must find shelter," Fethlin said. "Sunset is near, and the storm may mask it. We cannot reach the sea before the night comes."

I glanced at their faces. I could tell they were not afraid, yet their looks were set and stern with unease. They did not trust the ruined cities by night.

No rain had come with the storm, yet a twilight chill settled as we followed Fethlin over the boulders and the broken walls. The thunder folded itself away into the sea, leaving an immense silence.

4

Darkness gathered. In the hiding place Fethlin had found us—a tiny sunken room, still roofed over, and with a low narrow door-mouth—we crouched around our little fire. Wexl and Peyuan had piled loose stones against the door, now only a small hole remained. The room became very smoky, and even so the orange warmth of the fire leaked away. I did not know what it was we hid from, neither, I think, did they. Old tales and older instinct had combined to make them wary.

They ate oatcake and cheese, and Fethlin set a watch—himself first, Wexl second, and Peyuan last, through the hours of the night. I was not included, whether out of politeness, or because he thought me

incapable, I am not sure. I did not argue the point. I curled myself into a corner where a stubborn bush was growing, and slept wearily, not even caring what dreams or memories came.

But it seemed at first an empty, quiet sleep. Once I woke, and saw that Wexl had replaced Fethlin by the door hole.

The second time I woke, things were very different. Wexl was no longer at his post, and beyond the fire were no longer stretched the sleeping shapes of Fethlin and Peyuan. The fire itself was out, yet I was aware of a great glow in the blackness beyond the door.

I stood up and went to the door, and found I could move out of it standing upright. Beyond the shelter, streets of tall buildings stretched away, steps led up and down, obelisks stood straight as spear shafts. I knew then that I dreamed, for this was the city as it had been, not as it had become, and its sisters with it in the terraced hills. Yet there were no lights in any of the palaces, no lanterns swung from poles, no colored lamps went by in the hands of men. Only that great harsh glare that flared eastward, out toward the sea, an unwholesome red beacon of some disaster. I walked out into the city streets, under the shadow of the old walls. I climbed higher and higher into the hills until at last I could look down and see that huge torch burning on the tongue of land that ran out from the beach. There was some movement around it, a dismal mechanical movement. Occasionally the flames would leap very high, and magenta smoke clouds would funnel into the sky. The sea glittered bloodily across the bay.

A dreadful certainty came on me that I would be trapped by my dream in the old world with its miasma of calamity. I made that supreme effort, so like the thrust of a swimmer up from some river's muddy bottom, and my head broke the surface of the dream, and I woke.

At once Wexl's hand grasped my arm.

"Make no sound," he whispered. "There is some danger."

I nodded and he let me go. I sat up. The little fire had been darkened by a heap of loose soil. Fethlin and Peyuan were kneeling by the door hole, staring out, looking this way and that.

Then the noise came, from somewhere outside the shelter. My skin became icy, and my hair prickled. Never had I heard such a noise. Not knowing even what it was, I became sick with fear and loathing. A sort of slithering rustle that seemed like the movement of dry old flesh, dragged inch by flacid inch over the grassy paving of the street. The first thing that came to my mind was that some huge snake was pulling itself around our hiding place. I had never seen these great serpents in the wild, but I had heard the bandits, and later the wagoners, tell stories of them, and remembered the creature the woman had danced with in Ankurum, as wide as her waist and twenty feet long, or more. Despite their terrifying size, they did not eat man, but preferred smaller juicier morsels, such as unlucky hedgehogs. But then the sound came again, and there was something in it that made me certain it was more than a snake; it was too large, and there was nothing sinuous in it, none of the grace of the serpent. And it was coming closer.

I crawled to the door hole and looked out.

Between the broken walls, something came. It stood in the street, flexing its body, turning its head, twitching the long tail backward and forward, with a sound of dry, old flesh scraping on stone.

I had heard of dragons. Now I saw one. Though it was not a true dragon, I realized, when I had begun to reason again.

After I had crossed Aluthmis, I saw the three girls dance in the chiefs hall, and the object of their dance had been the great lizard, large as a wolf, a mutation of its kind. I had thought that horrible and curious enough. Now I saw that Change was not finished with its experiment in size. I told myself that the thing in the street was only a lizard, yet it was hard for me. No wolf-sized creature this. It towered high above the walls, its broad flat head was the length of a man's body, its tapering thrashing tail as thick as four men roped together. The faintest hint of starlight picked out the dry, rustling, black cascade of its scales; its whole body was armored. In its long mouth were well-developed teeth, and a long, black, whiplike tongue. Its enormous eyes turned on their incredible axis, each one a different way. It heaved itself upward on its stumpy legs and came toward us.

Silently, stiffly, we drew back from the hole. But I think there was still a hope in us that it did not know we were there.

Through the chink of the hole we watched the ghastly head lower itself, slide toward the opening, and stop short. It made another sound now, a hissing spitting noise of anger, and the stench of its breath filled up the room, a stink of death, and foulness, and everything decayed. We had flattened ourselves against the walls, and as well we had. The long tongue darted, and flashed in through the doorway at us, large as a snake in itself, blindly questing about the tiny space in spasm. It was how a smaller lizard would catch flies.

None of us thought to strike at the tongue as we stood congealed against the walls. In another moment it was with drawn. And almost immediately a frantic scrabbling began outside as it started to paw its way in to us.

"We will be killed, Fethlin," I said, "if we stay here." I made no effort to keep my voice low; there was no longer any point.

"The roof will fall soon," he answered. As if to emphasize his words, an avalanche of stones rushed and rattled outside.

"Or it will open the doorway wide enough to see where it thrusts its tongue," Wexl muttered.

A slab thudded from over our heads and exploded in the street. I felt sick, but a thought came to me.

"There is no moon," I said, "and the thing has slept by day. Perhaps it is afraid of the light. When it came you doused the fire."

"True." Fethlin drew the flint from his belt. He leaned and struck flame from a stone, and shook the flame off into the heaped-up fire. A twig snapped alive. "Our only chance," Fethlin said. "If light keeps it back from us, then we must run toward the beach; we do not have enough kindling to last the night. It will follow, no doubt, but I do not think such a thing likes salt water, either."

We pushed the soil off the fire and threw on further branches snapped from the bush in the corner. Peyuan cracked loose four of the sturdiest limbs and gave us one each to dip and use as torches. Outside the thing gave a snuffling cough as smoke irritated its hungry, merciless throat. A rush of red flame came suddenly, lighting up the door hole, and the lizard hissed. We heard its awkward flight backward, the crunching as its great paws crushed pebbles. Wexl and Peyuan thrust the stones out of the door-mouth; Fethlin flung the burning stuff after them. The spitting branches in our hands, we burst from cover. I had one glimpse of it, cowering back, yet only a few feet from us, its eyes half-blinded, and saliva gushing a poisonous yellow from its jaws. Then we had turned and were running hard and silent through those streets of white bones, making for the sea.

It followed us. We had known that it must. We saw the sea below, and heard its rustling, unstoppable progress behind us. We found the road and the trees, and by this time our branches had guttered out in our grasp, extinguished by the damp wind from the bay. There was no time to stop and make new fire among the trees, and no scattered branches ready to hand. But there seemed to be fire enough in my lungs.

We stumbled out onto the beach. It was very wide and gray under the overcast sky. The sea lay a long way out, ink-black, whispering.

Peyuan took my arm, and hurried my flagging body forward.

"Only a little way," he panted.

"Peyuan—I do not think I can swim—"

And then the sound came in the sand behind us, unexpectedly immediate.

We had the sense to break free of each other, and each run to opposite sides, but one paw glanced across Peyuan's neck, and he fell and rolled a little way, and was still. I thought of the third warrior I had pushed aside in the tower, and how his skull had snapped from the spine. I could not think how it had come on us so quickly, but I suppose I had dropped behind, and the beach was an open place for it to cross, with no obstacles in the way. Now it spat, and lurched sideways after Peyuan's body. I found a stone by my foot, and reached, and threw it at the lizard. Its armor deflected the stone, but it turned back, and its eyes fell on me. I did not understand why I had done such a thing. Peyuan was dead—I could not help him. Why had I not left him, and run for the sanctuary of the water?

A shout came from my left, and Fethlin ran back up the beach. The monster turned yet again, once more distracted. Wexl leaped on my right with a high hooting wail. He flung sand up at the lizard, and ran around it waving his arms. Stupidly the terrible head swerved to follow him.

It became a grotesque game. Dancing and shrieking we ran, with an energy gouged from our weariness, in circles around the lizard, edging always nearer to the sea, safe while it could not decide which of us to strike at first. But my head swam, and my legs could scarcely carry me. I did not think I should reach the sea.

We made a great deal of noise, and the monster hissed at us venomously; I am not certain when I first became aware of that other sound. High, steady, a throbbing whine almost beyond the pitch of my ears. I thought at first it was only the quick prelude to the faintness which would finish me. And then the Shadow fell over us all.

It lay across the sand, containing us, a vast oval of blackness, and we responded to it with an automatic fear of the unknown thing which beats down from the sky-lands where men cannot go. We drew back, not even daring to look up at whatever hung there, our eyes riveted on its earthbound manifestation. Only the lizard remained unmoved. It started after us, spit flying from its hissing jaws. In that moment, a thin line of white fire struck down and covered it, blinding us. And when we could see again, a pile of smoking stinking stuff lay where the lizard had been, and the sand was black dust.

I had heard them tell stories, in camp and krarl and village, of the gods, and the bolt which a god casts that burns and destroys. I fell to my knees, but my head tilted back on its own, and I looked full at the gliding, thrumming silver thing which hovered a moment more, high above the beach, then dipped

sideways and southward, and vanished beyond the far line of cliffs that marked the bay, leaving a thread of golden fire behind it on the darkness.

5

After such a thing has happened, men find they cannot speak to each other of it. It is too alien and too immense to be grasped, it has no place in the world of normal things, therefore they make no place for it. The stuff of legends had touched us, and we said nothing.

We got up, and walked back to where Peyuan's body was lying. Wexl leaned over him, and gently rolled him onto his back. Peyuan's eyes opened.

"Did you kill the beast?" he asked.

"It is dead," Fethlin said truthfully.

Peyuan grinned and Wexl helped him up. Peyuan shook sand from himself.

"Now you will not have to swim, Morda."

I could hardly believe that he was alive. I had seen Giltt die, and Dnarl die. I could hardly believe. I went to him and touched his shoulder, and he grinned all the more.

"Yes, I live." He laughed, and he hugged me to him. "A miracle, a god-gift."

We walked back up the beach together, found branches among the trees, now that the need was no longer urgent, and built a fire. There was a warmer feel to the night and no sense of danger, yet Fethlin set his sentries anyway.

The predawn coldness woke me. A gray light was opening over the sea, and against it Peyuan patrolled up and down before the trees, trying to keep himself awake. I rose, and picked my way softly by the fire.

"Peyuan," I said, "I will take your watch."

"No, no, I wait to see the sun rise." He yawned convulsively.

"You took the lizard's blow that should have fallen on me," I said. "I at least can take your last hour here."

After a little arguing, he went to the fire and lay down, and fell instantly asleep.

So I saw the sun come up again over the long sea.

And I thought many things. I thought how rarely, since I had come from the Mountain, had I turned back into my past. Events divided each section of my life, and now the ruins, the lizard, and the great Shadow had divided it yet once more. I could not now return to Qwenex's people. I must go onward into the unknown places yet again. I turned and looked at the three sleeping warriors, and I thought how Peyuan lived. I wondered then if he had lived because I had at first rejected them, when before always I had welcomed the three guard who came to me, as my protection and my right. I understood what I must do.

The sun was full in the sky, and soon they would wake. There were no dangers on the beach now that the day had come there. So I turned my back, and I ran down toward the sea and lost my footprints in its chilly advancing foam. Southward then. Behind me the tongue of land where I had seen the sick redness of the fire in my dream; ahead the far cliffs at the end of the bay.

By noon I was past those far cliffs, and there were no more cities.

The day grew hot, the sky hard and blue. I left the warm sand in the afternoon, having found a way up from the beach. On the headland spreading trees clustered, and waist-high ferns wove around their trunks. It was an uninhabited place, run wild, full of strange bright flowers and the calls of birds. I wandered through it, keeping the sea on my left hand as a guide.

Sunset stained scarlet, purple, green, between the branches, and the trees were thinner. I could see ahead an open place between them, a wide comparatively bare valley set into the woods, and I became aware that the sounds of the woods and the cries of the birds had stopped. I hesitated, listening. All around me was the silence of fear, yet I felt nothing at all. Cautiously I went on, and the quiet seemed to grow more and more intense. Uneasily I stopped again, and listened, and this time I heard a new sound, felt rather than heard, a high thin drumming in the air that made me want to shake my head to clear it.

Step by step now, linking my body to each tree and shadow, I edged to the brink of the valley, and, looking out, I saw what I expected to see there.

Asutoo had spoken to me long ago of the silver sky chariots of the gods, which sometimes rode to earth, and in Ankurum and later in the mountains of Eshkorek, I had looked up and seen the stars which moved, burning, across the dark. But I remembered now the falling star I had seen when I rode to Barak's camp in the hills—the star with a trail of golden fire, which seemed to come down in the plains beyond. What had passed above us on the beach also issued a trail of flame. Perhaps in my unconscious self I had equated those two consciously unrecognized facts; perhaps I had followed deliberately, with the stupid fascinated curiosity of all breathing things, the fall of this brightest, closest star.

Its silver oval rested in the valley, seeming to pulse and tremble with impossible light, and around it the grass was blackened.

Last sunlight dropped red flakes across the trunks, as I moved out beyond the trees.

Part III: Inside the*Hollow Star*

1

Indigo night colors filled the valley and the woods, but the light of the great star remained, pale, and very bright. I had crawled a way to a stand of the wild trees grouped about a hundred feet from the thing; I sat in their shadow, staring out at it, almost mesmerized. I could not go any nearer, for there was no more cover, and I could not go back because ... All reasoning seemed suspended. As on the beach,*this* was so alien to me, made so little sense in my world, that when I sat before it, nothing else seemed believable either. I had thought at first perhaps it was the star which lived, but after a while a piece of the silverness slid aside, and four figures came out into the dark. The star was hollow, and these were the gods who rode in it. Like the star, they were silver, and moved twinkling around their chariot, across the burned grass.

My eyes probed, trying to pierce the darkness that showed beyond the opening in the star. Curiosity tingled; I felt an incredible urge to move forward, to enter the darkness. I dug my fingers into the valley grass, half afraid I would rush toward the glittering danger before I could stop myself. And then the horror began.

Abruptly a figure reappeared around the silver thing's side. Beside the opening it paused, hesitating, then turned to the stand of trees, and began to run toward me. The three others followed. At first I could not believe what I saw. But they drew nearer and nearer, and I was spectator no longer. On fright-numbed legs I got up, and propelled myself away from them, staggering and stumbling in the tall grass. No use for cover now; they knew I existed, and had broken whatever sacred privacy they held as their due. I ran from tree line to tree line, making desperately back the way I had come, for the shelter of the woods. But I knew all the time that they would outrun me. Thrusting out between ferns and narrow trunks, I met a silvery glowing shape in my path, and spinning around and back, found another. They circled me, hemming me in, and quickly the last two hunters had joined them, and I was trapped in a ring of light and fear. I raised frantic eyes to the lost woods above the valley. I did not even have a knife, not even a stick, though what use would these things have been? Against such a death as they had given the great lizard on the beach, to use a blade or spear was even more pitiful than to stand empty-handed. The light which came from them blinded me. Drunk with terror, I wished they would destroy me then and there, for the suspense of waiting was unendurable.

Then one of them spoke. I did not understand what was said. It was a new tongue, and very different from anything I had ever heard. After a moment the words stopped. A glittering shape leaned forward. Now is death, I thought, but it drew back, and something lay on the grass at my feet. When I would not touch it, the figure motioned to itself, and I saw that it wore one of these things on its wrist. In the senseless blur of bewilderment and fear there seemed no point in refusal. I picked up a silver band in which a green gem winked, and clipped it on my wrist.

"Now we can understand one another," a man's voice said.

I thought at first my lost Power had come back to me, but then I realized this phenomenon stemmed from the wrist band.

"Don't be afraid," the voice said. "We mean you no harm."

The voice was so like a human voice it reassured me, even though I was not certain if that were an effect of the band or not.

"If you mean me no harm," I panted, "why hunt me through the valley?"

"This is the woman from the beach," another male voice cut in. "White hair and the strange face-mask."

"Yes, indeed," said the first voice. "My name," it added, "is Yomis Langort. We would like you to come with us, back to our ship."

"Yours*hip?"* I queried. "But it has no sail."

Yomis Langort laughed. "No, that's very true. But then it has no need of one."

"I will not come with you," I said.

"Why not? Surely you're not afraid? With that creature on the beach you seemed brave enough. And

you're curious, aren't you—about our sail-less ship?"

I turned my head and looked back at it between the trees. Perhaps they would destroy me if I did not come. Perhaps they would not harm me if I went with them. And the conviction was growing on me that these, at least, were not gods, only men.

"I will go with you, Yomis Langort," I said.

"Good."

We turned.

"Be careful not to touch us," he said. "This is a protective clothing we wear. Look—" He picked a handful of grass and brushed it against his arm. The grass twisted and shriveled, and I thought once more of Asutoo's gods.

"I am warned," I said.

So we walked toward the hollow star.

I had not realized before how huge it was. The dark opening I had stared at was several feet from the ground, yet, as we drew near it, there came the purr of life, and the door way slid down far enough for us to enter. Lights came on softly as the opening slid up once again and closed itself. A semicircular room with open doors giving onto a corridor beyond. The room was quite plain, but the walls and floor and domed ceiling shimmered in the light-glow. Here my four guards—companions, captors—stripped the silver from their bodies and let it fall by the walls. The walls hummed and opened, and a draft of air like an indrawn breath pulled the clothing inside and shut again. I did not marvel at all; I had expected strangeness, and these things were at least logical as well as strange.

The men—they*must* be men—stretched and grinned as if glad to be free of the silver stuff. Under it they wore trousers, boots, and close-fitting, unornamented shirts of a white material with a metallic gleam. Low-slung on the hips was a broad belt, one man's red, two of the others brown, while the belt of Yomis Langort was black and violet. Otherwise there seemed little difference in them. Each was tall and leanly muscular, with tanned skin, blue eyes, and light-colored hair that was shorn at the nape of the neck. Their ages were peculiarly indeterminate, the faces young, the bodies strong, but around and behind the eyes the look of a longer life that has seen much.

"Come with me," Yomis Langort said. He went through the open doors into the corridor beyond. I followed, and the three others fell into step behind me. The corridor shone with cool light. At intervals along its length, black and silver painted symbols appeared on the walls. From time to time a humming vibration would stir deep in the ship. The corridor stretched on and on without side turnings.

Abruptly Yomis Langort turned aside, facing one of the painted symbols. Concealed doors, which the symbol seemed to indicate, moved apart, but he did not enter.

"If you will wait here a moment," he said to me, politely.

I went closer, and looked into a large oval room. The floor seemed like glass that was opaque and transparent at once. Tall, incredibly thin pillars of the same luminous stuff and set at apparently random intervals tapered upward to a ceiling flooded by pale gold light. There appeared to be no other furnishing. A scent of alien things—pleasant but alarming drifted in the room, and I hung back, more because of this

than any suspicion of imprisonment.

"First you run after me," I said, "then you tell me 'wait.' "

I glanced at the face of Yomis Langort, and saw on it that indulgent amusement I have seen on the face of a bandit with the time to be good-humored as he tries to coax some nervous, skittish animal into the horse-field.

"Yes," I said, "you are not mistaken. I am not at ease."

"There's nothing to worry you here," he said. And then firmly: "Please."

There seemed no choice, so I went past him into the room, and the doors whispered shut behind me.

Alone, I wandered over the crystalline floor, ran fidgety, quick fingers across the icy surface of the pillars. I waited a long while, and grew weary of standing, so sat myself on the floor. At once a gasp came from the near wall, and through an opening glided a round, backless couch of some semi transparent material. I walked about the couch, half afraid to sit on it. It seemed the thing had read my mind, or perhaps some mechanism had judged what I wanted by my action of sitting. Finally I tried the couch, which was both resilient and firm. A silly game came into my mind. "Water!" I said aloud, to see if there would be any response. There was. Almost immediately, through the wall, came a slender one-legged table, bearing a tall flagon made of what seemed to be a sort of milky glass. I sniffed at the liquid inside it; water glittered and tasted cold and sparkling on my tongue. "Wine," I said. And another table entered with a brown glass goblet like a hollow egg on a tall stem. Russet fluid seared my nostrils and burned my mouth like acid. Strange wine, then, that the sky gods drank. I called for apples, but when they came, in a green tripodal bowl, they were a curious shape and had a speckled skin, and the peaches were too long and covered by soft red fur. I recollected then that I spoke through the intermediary of the wrist-band. All these things were equivalents, and it was perhaps dangerous to make any further demands, not knowing what I might receive.

I left the couch and the scatter of tables and dubious refreshment, and now a sudden claustrophobia took hold of me. It was more than fear, a kind of panicky excitement, as if something vast, terrible, insupportable were about to happen to me, not necessarily damaging or evil, but not for a moment to be borne. And it would happen—must—if I remained here in this room.

I hurried to the place of the hidden doors and, as I had thought, they opened at once. And, as I had also thought, two men turned and blocked my way.

"Please wait a little longer," one said impassively.

"We have our orders," the other said. "We're not to let you pass."

He moved a little so that I could see clearly the weapon thrust through his belt. It was like no other weapon I had ever seen, and this, more than anything, convinced me it could be dangerous.

"For what must I wait?" I asked them.

But in that moment the two guards lost interest in me. They turned abruptly to face the corridor. Doors farther along and to the left had opened, and a man had stepped through. I caught a glimpse of his clothing—black, not white, though a white belt rested on his thin hips. Yomis Langort and another man came through behind him.

I backed into my room, and the doors shut, but it was no safeguard, they would open as soon as the stranger approached them.

The stranger.

I backed farther across the room, between the pillars, until I had reached the far side. My spine rested against the wall. I pressed my hands flat to it, while my blood and brain curdled, and a horse leaped under my breast. I could not think. I could think of nothing.

The doors opened. I tried to shut my eyes but the lids would not stay together. He was alone.

Across the black shirt slashed four violet bars, and, where the material ended and the tanned line of his neck began, some silver insignia was clipped. The thick black hair, grown only to the nape and then lopped short, reminded me of so many things which no longer mattered. He stopped still, facing me.

"I am Rarm Zavid, the captain of this ship," he said.

Fury and terror flooded into my eyes like tears, into my mouth like blood.

"No," I screamed at him. "You are Darak. You are Darak, or you are Vazkor—you are the nightmare, the undead—the haunting Karrakaz sends to destroy my will and my life." I was quite mad by now. Pressed at the wall, I railed against him, and cried, and cursed him, and begged him to leave me. It was the culmination of all the passion and despair I had ever known. "I will not ride with you in the chariot," I shrieked out at him. "Or fight for you, or bear your children, or watch you die! In the name of all the dead gods of the world, what have I done to conjure you up again!"

I suppose he stood and watched me all this time. He did not come to me, or touch me, or speak to me until the outburst ended. And what ended it was nothing of his will or mine. It was the feel of the wall beneath my hands, trembling and throbbing like a great tortured heart.

Silence closed my mouth. And in the silence I heard the roar of some vast machinery subsiding thrust by thrust. I pulled my hands from the wall. Bewildered, I could only look to him for an explanation, and so it was to him I looked.

"I came here to ask you questions," he said. "There's no longer any need. You've given me my answer." The narrow dark eyes gave away nothing at all, yet his face had none of the arrogance of Darak's, nor the cold blankness of Vazkor's. "I think," he said, "that you've also convinced me that I greatly resemble someone who has been close to you, and died, out there—" He made a vague gesture with one arm, indicating a world which was mine, not his.

"Two men," I said. "Two men. Now three men. Darak the bandit, Vazkor the sorcerer, Rarm Zavid the captain of a sky-ship which has no sail."

The madness was spent. Wearily I watched him come closer to me.

"You don't understand what you've done," he said. "Do you?"

"What have I done."

"If you truly have no idea, then I don't think that you're ready to be told."

"All my life," I said, "knowledge has come to me for which I was not ready."

"My ship," he said, "this vast space-wanderer. You plucked it out of the sky like a grape from a vine; pulled it down so fast, two shields were damaged. And when we were near enough, you activated our defense beams and killed the dragon-lizard on the beach with them. This impudence not being enough for you, you followed us. and when you found the place we had berthed to repair the shields, you kept open our main hatchway for reasons best known to yourself. This activity gave away your presence. Yomis and three others caught you and brought you back. Since then you've played with circuits of the ship designed to respond only to members of the crew." He indicated the couch and tables. "And finally you have communicated your emotional distress to the ship, with the results you yourself have just heard and felt." I said nothing, no longer caring greatly that I did not understand. "Until now," Rarm Zavid said softly, "the men who watched your planet considered themselves further advanced in development. Now I begin to wonder. I see you are a woman, but beyond that,*what* are you?"

"I am nothing," I said. "Let me go."

"Nothing. And the ship. How do you explain that?"

"I cannot explain. I do not understand. I did not even know of your presence until the sound, and the Shadow on the beach. How can I have done all these things you say I have done? How?"

"I think I could tell you," he said.

He stood in front of me, but I could no longer look at him. His voice, the voice of Darak and Vazkor, came to me distantly across great hills of exhausted misery.

"The ship," he said, "is more than a ship. It is built around a core of—Power is a word I think you will understand. This Power is like a great brain, linked into every part of the ship. We have our own words for this brain, but your world, as yet, has none. In the brain of each ship is endless information about every man who travels in her. These memories can be changed or wiped clean at any time, but they make life easier for us. Because of them the brain knows from our commands, actions, even our thoughts, what we need. A meal, a book, a chair, come when we want them. If a man is hurt in some inaccessible part of the ship, there's no fear that he'll go unattended, because the brain will send equipment to his aid. The brain also guides the ship, defends her, and takes her from world to world. All systems, in fact, are connected intimately with the brain, and the brain responds to the particular mind-patterns of her crew. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I said dully.

"Normally," he said, "no mind-patterns outside those of her crew can interfere with the brain of the ship; the minds of our worlds are not powerful enough for that, nor have we found such power beyond our worlds—until now. It was an unforeseen circumstance that a mind, to which the brain had never before been given access, should suddenly reach out, make contact with it, and dominate. The brain was powerless. It obeyed you. It brought the ship down to the beach and killed the lizard."

"Obeyed me?" I said. "I did not call to your ship." "You did," he said. "The proof of that is our presence in this valley."

"I did not know I did it. When the Shadow came I was afraid."

"Yes," he said slowly, "I believe you didn't know. It was clear you didn't understand when the ship responded to you a few minutes ago."

"Then let me free," I said.

He stood looking at me, and his eyes penetrated my tiredness. I looked up at him also. His face was absorbed, serious.

"No," he said. "It's plain to me you have nothing to go to. It's plain to me you are in distress and danger. In all the time that we've watched this world, our rule has been never to interfere with the frequently mistaken and bloody development of its human life. You have forced us to interfere. So let's forget that rule as regards to you." "I am unimportant."

"You don't believe that," he said. "Why expect me to believe it?"

"I am a bringer of death," I said. "The two men that you resemble died because of me. You will die if I stay near you."

"No," he said, "I don't think that you'll bring death to me."

There was a stirring in me, a little trickle of hope and warmth that ran into my veins and thoughts. Darak had always believed me more than him, and feared me, and so the curse I carried had found him easy prey. Vazkor, in his power-lust and single-mindedness, had been even more afraid, perhaps, of the goddess on his right hand. But this man had no awe of me. No real awe for all he said. He sought to understand a mystery he imagined he had found in me; he who rode and was master of this great thinking ship. He had no fear.

He smiled. He saw I had given up my will to his. It had no feel of chains or panic, but only of a great relief and quietness.

"Beyond this room," he said, "there is a room where you can bathe and sleep. Tell the door not to open to anyone else until it has your permission, and you'll find it very private. You could have held these doors shut against me. I wonder why you didn't. Anything you need, the ship will provide. In the morning—but that is the morning."

I turned to follow his instructions, but he said abruptly, "Why do you wear that mask?"

"I am cursed with great ugliness of face," I said. It did not occur to me to evade the question, or to lie.

He said nothing in answer, and so I walked to the far wall once again, and moved along it until doors opened. I went through, and instructed them as he had told me. I did not see the room, except that there was a place to sleep. I lay down on it, and thought and sight and pain extinguished themselves like sudden lamps.

2

I woke, I thought, to full sunlight, but the glow spread across the ceiling, and not from any window. I lay still, remembering at once all that had happened to me, in a curious detached way. After a time I sat up and looked at the room about me.

My bed was a dark blue circular couch, much larger than the one I had called up before, and quite opaque ... yet it had the same resilient firmness that gave comfort without pampering. Like the couch, the room was circular, topped by its soft sunburst of a ceiling, with smooth walls the pale blue color of harebells, and a floor set with a pattern of little squares of dark blue and silver. On my right a painted dark blue symbol seemed to indicate doors other than those I had entered by. The artists of Ankurum insist that a room of blue colors can bring only melancholy, but they are very wrong. This room had warmth and security.

I put my feet to the floor, and noticed it was smooth and softly heated. As I stood up, the bed retired gracefully into the wall. The symbolized doors opened before I was halfway to them. Beyond lay a tiny bathing apartment and, as in Ezlann, water ran hot as well as cold from silver beaks into the bath. Blue towels presented themselves as I left the bath, and a fan of warm air. A crystal tray slid from the wall, bearing crystal bottles of perfume, combs, and even cosmetics, while a long mirror sidled out behind me, and frightened me when I turned and saw myself so abruptly. It seemed oddly ungrateful to refuse such an ardent host. I could not help but think of it as something with feelings, though this made no sense. I washed and dried and combed out my hair, perfumed it and my body, and looked with distaste for the dirty tattered shift I had left on the floor. It was gone.

I remembered then how Yomis Langort and my captors had discarded their silver clothing, and the wall had whisked it away. I looked appealingly at the walls, and nothing happened. Hastily I clipped on again the intermediary wrist band.

"My shift," I said aloud, and still nothing happened. A smug silence hung over the room. "My clothing—what I was wearing—please give it back to me." I had the distinct feeling that I was dealing with a mischievous animal or child. "Then I will go naked," I said. But I did not want to. I also had learned by now the human superstition that nakedness is vulnerability.

I walked back into the blue room, and there was a stand there, and on it hung a long dress which seemed to be made from hyacinth-blue silk, and a delicate array of blue under garments such as I had worn in Ezlann. I put them on slowly, enjoying, despite everything, the luxury and comfort. When I lifted down the dress, I saw it was a model of that other dress I had worn in Ankurum, the white brocade in which I had sat through the agent's supper, and in which, later, I had heard Darak give up both our lives to the Sagare. The dress had been beautiful, and somehow the brain of the ship had picked that information from my memories, yet, presumably because all the things in this room were blue, the dress was blue also, and I was glad of that one difference.

A mirror came and nudged me. When I turned, I saw the long reflection of myself, and there was a kind of beauty there, all the whiteness held in its shimmer of blue silk. Only the black mask denied beauty. I put my hands to it, and then drew them helplessly away.

"I am cursed with great ugliness of face," I said.

The mirror and the stand slid away. A circular chair came, and I sat on it, and then a table with blue flagons of what seemed to be milk, and water, plates of what seemed to be new bread, and fruits like strawberries.

I sipped the liquids and nibbled at the foods. The pains were not very bad. I walked about the room.

He must know by now that I was awake, dressed, ready to speak to him. The ship would have told him. Yet I was not ready to speak to him. Despite all acquiescence, fear had come back with the day. Fear of him, and fear, yes, fear of myself and what he said I had done.

And he did not come.

At last I turned away from the room, and went to the doors I had come in by on the day before. They opened for me, and beyond lay the glassy pillared space where I had waited. Someone else waited there now. I stopped still as the doors closed behind me. A man, rather older than Yomis Langort and the other men I had seen here, yet, like them, sparely and strongly built. Unlike them, he wore his whitish blond hair to his shoulders. A belted white tunic hung to his knees over the familiar, palely metallic trousers and boots. On his left wrist was clipped a silver band with a winking bright green light.

"Good morning. I am Ciorden Jathael, Computer Master of this ship." He paused and eyed me with large gray eyes, shrewdly and swiftly taking in my appearance as if it were something he must quickly capture, store, take out again when I was gone, to examine more closely. "I see that you don't understand. I believe Rarm—our captain—has told you of the brain which guides this ship? Computer is simply another name for it. But no matter. I am the guardian of the brain. I am able to link with it, gain a telepathic union with it. In order to do such a thing I must open my mind totally to the flow of information in the—brain. An ungifted and untrained man would be killed by such an act. I am blessed with the talent and instruction to survive the operation. Do not think I boast. I know my place. In times of danger, disaster, or malfunction I am invaluable. In a time of quiet and plenty, such as now, I am"—he smiled and made a gesture of amused self-negation—"very little."

"And why are you here, Ciorden Jathael?"

"Because my captain sent me. Though I assure you, I am delighted to meet at last my rival in the computer—er—the brain's affections."

"Why were you sent, Ciorden Jathael?"

"Please," he said kindly, "it's quite unnecessary for you to call me by both names at once. Generally, it would be normal for you to address me by the second one, plus a suitable prefix, such as 'Master.' However, under the circumstances, Ciorden will do very well. Why was I sent? To take you to the computer's core—the Hub."

"Why?"

"Why." He considered. "I've no idea," he said finally with a look of slight despair.

I laughed, and some of the tension drained out of me. He seemed both incongruous and real in this new world.

"Well"—he smiled—"a better beginning than I hoped for. And do you also have a name?"

"I have no name."

"Disturbing," Ciorden said. "In our worlds, all things have names. Surely your planet isn't immune from the nasty habit?" He held out his arm for me. We might have been in Ezlann or in Za, going in to some state occasion.

"My name, like my beginning, is lost," I said.

A wall opened, and a pair of blue sandals emptied themselves onto the floor. Ciorden leaned down and

picked them up. He sighed.

"The computer is always overjoyed when the ship carries a passenger. Men who live in uniform and travel the same starways year after year bore it no end. There's no excitement in guessing what they require. But you—not only new, but different, and a woman as well."

"Does this—computer-brain—think and feel as a man would?" I asked him. I had imagined from the tone in which Rarm spoke of it that it was inanimate and passionless.

"Not as a man, perhaps. But as a being. Our scientists disagree with this. A machine, they say. But if there are no emotional quirks in the thing to begin with, it grows them. All Computer Masters would tell you the same. Now, don't disappoint your admirer. Put on the sandals, and we'll visit the Hub."

The corridor beyond my rooms branched a little farther along into two fresh curving ways. Ciorden led me leftward, and a little farther on, when this corridor also branched, to the right. The walls and floors altered as we walked. There were no longer symbols indicating doors. Everything was silver as on the outside of the ship. The corridor ended apparently in a blank wall, but when we reached it, that section of floor and wall began to sink with us.

"Don't be alarmed," Ciorden said. "The Hub lies between this and the two lower decks. A flight of stairs would have done as well."

For a moment or so we remained in a cage of blank walls, falling, and then the vista of a new corridor slid into place in front of us, and we were still. The corridor was white. At the far end a silver symbol on the closed wall.

Ciorden went to the wall, and stood aside to let me enter first as the doors parted.

It was a large oval room, held in a kind of luminous darkness. Each wall glowed metal, and the occasional eye of a light burned and extinguished itself. At the center of the room, a single metallic column reached for and obtained the ceiling. Colored panels smoldered like sleepy jewels across its surface. But I did not enter the room. I was afraid to touch the glittering spider's web which threaded and cross-threaded over it, weaving every wall together without a break.

"I cannot enter, Ciorden," I said.

"Oh"—Ciorden smiled—"I should explain. What you see are quite harmless light rays." He stepped past me, and stood among them, his face and body abruptly latticed with color. "As you see, I don't hurt them, neither do they hurt me. If, however, some intruder or madman ran in here to damage the Hub, the computer, reading his mind, would activate the rays to stun him and also to sound an alarm. A defense is essential here. It's only in this one space that the computer stands vulnerable, naked, one might say, an opened heart revealing all its complexity of valves and mechanisms. Come."

I followed him then, and was absorbed also into the web of light. He walked about the gently purring column, stroking it with one hand. Panels ignited and darkened.

"In here," he murmured fondly, "endless knowledge, balanced judgment, and the intimate details of every life aboard this ship. We are at present fifty-two men. Each of our minds has a replica inside this metal covering, a much finer and more accurate mind than the one we carry inside our skulls. Every detail of our experience is caught here, the truth as it happened to us, not as we*think* it happened after twenty years of forgetting. Babies cry in this column, boys climb trees, and fall in love, and dream of the

spacemen they long to become. Fifty-two unblurred memories." He paused and looked at me. "And, of course, now yours also."

Tangled in the web, my skin chilled stiffly.

"Mine? I am not of your worlds. How can I be—in there?"

"Because your brain contacted, overruled even, the brain of the computer. To serve you, it had to understand you, as it has to understand the crew of the ship, in order to serve them. That is the way in which it was built. Imagine," he said, "imagine that one year ago you were given a wonderful food on some far planet, and you*thought* it had a certain taste of this and that, but you had forgotten, and were wrong. The food which the computer brought you would also be wrong. Allow it to penetrate your mind, and find what it*really* tasted like one year ago, and it can give you what you want. That is perhaps a frivolous example, but the basic principle holds true from a chosen meal to a man lying injured and unconscious and in need of help."

"So," I said, very softly, as if I might keep the thing from hearing me, "all my thought, memory, every atom of my life—is known to your computer."

"Yes," Ciorden said. "Known better than you know it yourself. You told me that your name, like your beginning, was lost. Inside this column nothing of you is lost. If you have a name, it is here, and the beginning of your life, which you have consciously forgotten, is remembered."

My beginning. My child's life before I had woken under the Mountain. The things which came in dreams, the swan lakes, the marble stairways, the leaping evil of the flame. Panic filled me. I did not stop for a moment to think why. I turned to the doorway of the room to run away, and Rarm stood there, the doors shut behind him. I did not know how much he had heard. All of it, it seemed. His face appeared dark and emotionless and without compassion, the face of Vazkor.

"You tricked me here," I said to Ciorden. "And you also," I said to the man in the doorway. I was terrified. I gripped my shaking hands together. "I never thought you gods. Now I see you are truly men, with all the petty curiosity of men. If I have given my brain to your machine I will give nothing further to you. Let me go. I will be no part of your outworld experiments on a race you consider inferior to your own."

"I'm afraid," Rarm said, "that you can't leave this ship now. In the past few minutes we've lifted from the valley, and are now in orbit around your world."

"I do not understand you," I said. But I did.

"Ciorden," Rarm said.

Ciorden brushed his hand along the column. The metal walls of the room melted. Only in a nightmare could I have believed such a thing to exist about me. On every side black skies filled with the searing white drops of stars. On every side, distance, the void, black walls pulling the soul outward through the eyes, to fall into limitless nothingness. And below, a bluish sphere hanging like a lantern. A world. The world that I had run through, which had seemed so solid and so huge to me.

The need to cling to something stable was unbearable. I turned to the metal pillar and hid my face against it, shutting my eyes, holding to it, as if to let go would be to send myself spinning into the black emptiness forever.

And under my hands, the pillar throbbed and whined.

3

Trees, growing from metallic channels in the floor, spread their green feathers against the high roof, dusted black feathers of shadows across the painted walls of this indoor garden of another planet. Elongated red flowers spilled like blood from urns of glass.

I sat among the flowers, smelling their strange scent, watching him look at me. I was not entirely sure how I had come here. There had been sound and burning lights, and alarms like the alarms of war. Their ship had responded to my horror until Ciorden presumably managed to quiet it. Then Rarm must have brought me to this place, as if these strange growing things could put an end to the hollow icy tension in the pit of my belly, which had come with the knowledge of the blackness all around me. I was glad to have inconvenienced them. Yet it was all the pleasure I had.

"You're a risk to my ship," Rarm said. "Your mind holds a power which you can't or won't control. You could kill us all."

"Then let me go."

He came and sat beside me, and I turned away from him, staring at the red flowers.

"Let me go," I repeated.

"Can't you see your own danger? Your life is misery to you. The computer can analyze all our minds, and that is what it has to say of you. If you let me, I can help you."

"Why?"

"Not as an experiment, which is what you think."

"I am," I said, tasting the bitterness of the words, "inferior to your race."

"Inferior is a word you misuse. Men of my worlds have watched your planet for many years, because it held men like themselves—human men. Primitive by our standards, perhaps. Our bloody struggles are in the past, yours are to come. Time is the barrier, only time. And time does not make superiors or inferiors, only differences. Let me help you."

"What can you do?" I said coldly.

"Not what I can do. The computer."

"No."

"Why 'No'? Ciorden believes there's an answer to this thing which locks you out from yourself—and the computer has it."

"No."

"Yes. Are you afraid to be answered?"

"I am afraid," I said. "That is enough."

"Of what?" He grasped my shoulders suddenly, turning me toward him, his hands insistent, strong, well-remembered.

"You are Darak," I murmured. "Darak in the inn-room at Ankurum, in the dark tent on the South Road."

"Through the computer, with the help of Ciorden as your intermediary," he said levelly, "you can relive, in the space of a few hours, your life from the moment of your birth."

"No," I said. I began to cry. "Let me go."

Abruptly he stood up.

"Then I must do it," he said.

He turned toward the doors. I ran after him. I shouted at him and tried to hold him back, but I did not seem to have any strength. I did not want him to know me as I knew myself, could not bear it. And then there was a barrier between us. I could neither feel nor see it, but neither could I pass by it. He had reached the doors.

"Before," he said, "I was unprepared for you. Now I take no chances. I am the captain of this ship, and my final instruction overrides even your powers. That instruction has been given. Without a contrary order from me, you will not be allowed to follow me, though you may return to your room. Any attempt to undermine the computer with emotion will result in your instant anesthesia. Do you understand me?"

"Please—" I said.

But the doors had shut behind him.

For a long time I lingered in that garden room. I touched the flowers and they opened briefly. The shadow of the trees stirred in a little artificial breeze.

My thoughts came spasmodically. I longed to hide myself, to seek out a death I could not achieve. Shame and despair and the unknown dread pulled me down.

Finally I left the garden, and it let me. In the corridor I realized I did not know the way back to my rooms. At once a beam of light struck down from the ceiling, pointing ahead of me. I walked toward it numbly, and it moved away. It led me through many corridors, and upward on another of the moving floors. Twice I passed a group of men, who fell silent as I went by them, following the beam. I sensed intense interest, and little liking. I was a danger to them, yet rare and curious for all that, like the orchids of the north which will snap off a man's finger for the meat. I reached the glassy place, crossed it, and entered the blue silence which was the only part of this ship I might be safe in.

The bed slid from the wall, and I went to it, my body heavy as lead.

I lay silent, thinking how he raped my mind in the light webbed room. I thought of the emptiness and the void in me, terrible as the void which had swallowed the ship.

And then a new thought came, a little sharp thought, burning its way into my skull. I recalled what I had feared at their hands when they took me. Their power was vast, the power of the computer-brain seemed godlike.

"Kill me," I whispered to the silence. "Let me die."

A deep humming filled the room, a frenzied angry sound.

"Serve me," I said. "Obey me. Death is what I want. Give me death."

My bed trembled. There came the drone of distant thunder. A new, a limitless cold settled on me. My eyes darkened. Tears choked me. It had given me what I wanted. And perhaps it was strong enough, stronger than the swords of Vazkor's soldiers, more lasting than the grave in the desert, and the fallen tower at Eshkorek.

Something glittered through the dark. A knife swooping down on me from the light-glow of the ceiling. I felt my breathing stop.

"Wake up," Darak said to me impatiently.

"Let me alone," I muttered. "I am dead."

"No, you're not dead,*goddess*. Drink this."

Something forced itself under the fold of the shireen, and into my mouth. Thin cool fluid found my throat. I swallowed, and pushed the thing away. Without opening my eyes, I sat up. Whirling colors filled my brain. To escape them I opened my eyes after all. I saw the blue room, and could not remember where I was. I laughed stupidly at Darak's angry face. I could not understand why he was so angry.

"Dead." He tried the word contemptuously on his tongue. "Didn't it occur to you that a machine especially programmed to bring comfort and life to its crew would also be programmed never to kill them? If you were a savage or a barbarian it would make some sense—but you can think and reason." He stood up. "My whole ship damaged if I hadn't blocked you with that one inspired order. Anesthesia the moment you presented the computer with an emotional problem." He leaned over, took my shoulders, and shook me violently. "Couldn't you trust me?"

"Darak," I said.

"No, I'm not Darak Gold-Fisher, the hill-bandit charioteer. Neither am I Vazkor the murderer, the first successful step toward death and darkness that your planet has so far taken. I am Rarm Zavid, the fool. Up on your feet." He lifted me, and held me upright. "Drink some more of this. Now walk." We walked. I began to recall where I was and all that had happened. I tried very hard not to, but he would not allow me. Finally he let me go, and I saw his face clearly for the first time. It was strained, concentrated into a look of frustration and regret rather than anger. I remembered that he and Ciorden had lived in my mind in the Hub. And I hated them.

"Has my life brought you joy, Rarm?" I asked him, spite fully sweet in my shame.

"As much joy as it brought you, goddess."

"Never call me that."

"What, then, am I to call you? You say you have no name. No," he said suddenly, "I shouldn't be angry with you."

"You have no right to be angry. You had no right to my mind."

He looked at me, and again the helpless anger caught his face, then faded.

"Listen," he said. "One thing I learned; the flame—the creature you saw in the stone bowl, what you call Karrakaz—told you, you would be free, would regain your beauty and your powers, when and if you found your soul-kin, the Jade. If I assured you that the computer holds the solution to that quest, would you do as I told you?"

My heart throbbed thickly. I stared at him.

"How—can it know?"

"Because*you* know. The answer is in your own mind. But it comes from the time before you woke under the volcano. That time—that short time—is all you have to relive in order to set yourself free forever."

"I cannot believe you," I whispered.

"Are you willing to let go by such a chance to find the Jade?"

I turned to him. Hate boiled in me. I gripped his arm.

"You tell me! You know!"

"I can't tell you. Not until you understand. You must come to the computer."

I half turned toward the doorway, half ready to go with him. But the unreasoning fear rose and engulfed me.

"The computer," I repeated. I took one stiff step forward, and my knees melted. I fell, and found I could not get up. I could not move my legs, my feet, my arms or hands. Paralyzed, deadened, I cried out to him in despair. My eyes were almost blind; I could hardly speak. "Karrakaz," I choked out, knowing now that the Jade lay within my reach, and that, seeing this, the demon of my race had risen to deprive me of it. "Karrakaz will destroy me."

"No," he said, though his voice seemed distant and almost meaningless. He had picked me up, but, numbed, deafened, blinded, in an incredible extremity of terror, I could not follow what happened to me, or where he took me, and at last the horrible darkness swept in like the hungry sea, and drowned me, and bore me away into itself, and I was lost.

4

Birth is pain. All emotions of sorrow, fear, and anguish begin in that struggle and rejection. After birth the world is abstract, senseless, yet peculiarly orderly. Nothing is logical, therefore illogicality is rational and sane. Suck, sleep, silences and sounds fill and refill a distorted plane where colors slide on the unfocused eyes. There is no time, yet time passes.

Out of the cloudiness things grew, and took on meaning. White swans moving across glittering water, stretching out their looping necks to be fed. A woman with long pale hair, who led me by the hand through ornate gardens leading to the sea, over the floors of incredible rooms where elegant men and women sat. Sometimes there would be others, large, uncouth, staring, dirty, their bodies brown and scarred. They made me afraid, for they were not like us. Like savage, ugly animals, they haunted the walks, their figures contorted to dig at the beds of flowers. Our slaves.

I must not speak to them, but I did, one, a man slave, axing down a slender tree. I asked him why he did it.

"The tree is diseased, princess," he said, in the awkward grumble with which they stumbled out our tongue. Then he stared down at me from his great height. His face was hideous, distorted by a pain I could not understand, for he was smiling. "All diseased things," he said, "must be cut down. And burned." His eyes ate their way into mine. Frightened, I backed from him, and in that moment the prince who was my father came. The slave's face altered to a look of moronic terror. The prince picked me up with one arm. With the other he summoned the four guards who came behind him. Two seized the man and brought him down on his face. Another stripped his shirt. A fourth stood ready, a metal edged whip dripping from his hands.

"Now kill him," said my father, stroking my hair. "But slowly. My royal daughter must see what happens to all those who dare insult us."

The whip rose and fell monotonously. The man screamed and flopped and blood wriggled in the grass like snakes. I was glad at first, but soon I grew bored. I looked at my father's soldiers, and they too were slaves, though, better treated and better clothed, they looked very different. It did not seem to matter to them that they whipped one of their own kind.

Soon the man died, and my father took me away.

Three years and many days of lily-lakes, marble-pillared rooms, entertainments of death and beauty. Then fear came. At first fear was only a transparent shadow thrown in the distance, a whisper, something hidden behind layers of thought and activity. Then fear grew deeper and closer, and lay inside the mouth, ready to be hinted at and half-spoken.

To begin with, I did not know the fear, only sensed it. I heard the word "plague" and it meant nothing to me. I heard of death, but that I rejected totally. We would live almost forever. Nothing could harm us. We were not slaves to die from sickness or a wound.

But then, a scarlet dawn, and my mother's sister screaming and screaming, running through the palace walks naked, her pale hair flaming behind her, an insanity of whiteness against the blood-red sky. Her lover was dead of the Plague, had died lying across her. She had woken to find him, his flesh decomposing against hers. I did not know what was done, but, as the days passed, I came to know, for others died. A pyre was built beyond the lake, and here what remained of them, and of their clothes, was burned. If the corpse was discovered quickly enough, slaves could be sent in to make a cast of the body, and this would be painted and decked in jewels and buried in the owner's tomb in place of their flesh. But often it was too late for that; the body would already be putrescent. And this was why the Plague was so damaging to us, for nothing would remain to heal itself, not flesh or sinew or any organ, not the brain, not even the bones. True annihilation had come among us at last.

There were no symptoms of the Plague in its victims before they succumbed to the coma, therefore, no

warning. And the infection spread like rottenness.

My mother died. I could not understand why she should leave me. I was terrified, and wept with terror, not sorrow, as I walked behind her jeweled bier—empty, for she had been too quick for them. I stared at the painted pictures of her tomb deep in the vaults of the palace. The sleeping woman-shape under the mountain with its sky cloud, which was the symbol of birth and of the planet which supported it; the woman with her guard, and rods of office, a symbol of her temporal power; the woman holding the knife toward herself, symbol of her final acceptance of death. I hated these terrible paintings—the same in every tomb, save that in a man's sepulcher a drawn man would replace the woman in them. I hated the traditional jade set in at the face, as though death had made my mother faceless.

My father came to me at dusk. The low lamplight picked out the small luminous triangle of green above and between his eyes, as he leaned toward my bed.

"Tomorrow you must be up early," he said. "We are going on a journey."

"Where?"

"To a place, a place underground, a temple. We shall be safe there."

The summer too was dead, and rains and winds blew across the land as we traveled from the northern shore. Drifts of bronze leaves stagnated on the rivers and the lakes.

Members of other great houses came with us. The slaves drove our wagons, put up our tents at night, and saw to our needs much as they had done in our palaces. None of them took the Plague, nor did they seem to fear it. Only one man tried to run away. From my wagon flap I watched him blunder on spindly legs across the harvested fields of some village. One of the princes turned and looked hard at the running man. The man fell immediately, and did not rise. The power to kill had not come to me yet, nor the power to levitate my body from the ground. The slaves watched in terror any of us who did this; in their own abominable tongue they called us the Winged Ones, imagining we must have invisible wings, and that we flew.

A princess died on the fifth day of our journey. And, at a little mud-brick town they called Sirrainis, my father's almost whole body was burned on the branches of forest trees.

My mother's sister, who still lived, became my formal guardian, though she was frowned on for she had taken one of the human guard for her lover. To me he seemed as disgusting and as ugly as the rest, though he pleased her well enough.

Two days later we reached the mountain under which the temple lay. I did not fully comprehend the notion of gods, but that my people had occasionally worshiped them had always been vaguely apparent to me. The great offering cups of the palace, holding always their undying flame, were the symbol of prayers unspoken. As in the tomb paintings, the mountain was the sign of the earth which had bred our might. It had seemed fitting to them, therefore, to hollow out their holy places under mountains, or rather to have them hollowed out by the slaves.

It was a black frowning height, which seemed to offer no comfort. Beyond the massive doors, dimly lit corridors and stairs had been chipped from the dark rock. White-robed men in golden masks chanted in a cavern about a huge rough-hewn stone bowl, fountaining flame. Dismal, cold, unwholesome place. I cried myself to sleep in my little rock cell, as I would cry myself to sleep for half a year.

In the first months there were few deaths from the Plague. Those few were consigned to a blazing crater higher in the mountain, reached by a narrow stair above the cavern. This crater, the white-robed men told us, was all that remained of the volcano it had once been. They were priests, these men, though they had not been so for long, perhaps. They gave an impression of impermanence, and stumbled sometimes over their chanting. They were of our race, and walked like the princes.

Our toll being lighter, a kind of optimism came. It seemed the holiness of the temple had indeed granted us sanctuary. We went three times each day to offer prayers to the nebulous gods I could not comprehend. Adults and children alike, we kneeled in the icy cavern about the bowl with the flame, entreating forgiveness for the hubris which had angered them. This also made no sense to me. Who were we to beg and wail on our knees, who had been masters of all men?

Apart from the prayers, there was little to fill my time. No entertainments were allowed. They gave me books to read, which I did not manage well for again they spoke of our gods. Some, the writings of princes and princesses, told only of our offenses and our punishment. Those who admitted their guilt, however, might be saved, might escape even after the coma of death had claimed them, sleeping, but not dying, awaking whole after some indefinite period of time, to reclaim their powers.

I wandered most of the day about the gut of the mountain, straying into forbidden rooms where the priests' robes hung, up great flights of stairs, into dark places which frightened me.

Chief among the priests was the prince called Sekish. I feared and hated him. He wore a scarlet robe, and, while many of our people were very fair, Sekish was dark-skinned and black-haired. Tall and gaunt, his shadow fell black across me as he stood before my mother's sister and berated her for her human lover.

"You choose beneath you," he snarled. "You bring the anger of the Powerful Ones upon us all."

"You are what I should choose, perhaps, Sekish?" she said, and I cowered for her. But he straightened, the green triangle above and between his eyes glinting like the third eye of his contempt. He turned and left her, and three days later he pronounced a ban on slaves. Either they left the mountain, or they would be killed. They went gladly, her lover among them. He was her talisman against death, it seemed to me, and, after four months of hope, she was the first new victim of the Plague.

Within a space of seven days, ten more were dead. Hysteria broke out within the mountain, and Sekish, the Dark One, walked among us, boring into our souls with his narrow black eyes, telling us to pray, to repent, to acknowledge our wickedness, and the evil which we had created, and which had returned to destroy us.

From morning to night now the chants of self-abasement before the stone bowl. The fine clothing, the jewelry, were put away. Men and women walked with their hair loose about them, in plain shifts and tunics, beating at themselves with rods until blood ran, beating again as soon as the swiftly healing wounds had closed. Everywhere the sound of terror, frenzied contrition, despair, as the lords of men groveled on their knees.

"Karrakaz," I whispered before the flame in the bowl, my body stiff and aching, "I am the evil on the earth's face, I am the blight, the diseased thing, the filthy, the accursed."

Around me others whispered as I did. Clouds of whispering rose like steam. I thought of the statue of my father in the hall of his palace, the glossy stuff of which it was made, how I had laughed to see both him and it stand side by side, two identical men, short-bearded, long-haired. Now the statue would be all

that was left of him. I began to cry. I buried my face in my hands, forgetting my chant of self-sin, until the black cold shadow of Sekish lay dank on me.

"Yes, child, weep," he cried out in his terrible voice. "Weep for your maggot birth, and the foulness which is in you, the foulness which your mother and father allowed to grow from their lusts." He leaned closer and seized my arm. Around us the chanting faltered and ceased. "But you do not weep for that, I see. It is a rebellious child, daring to dream of its damned past. This child may bring Their wrath on us." Eyes stared at me. He dragged me nearer to the huge stone bowl, and the flame slashed his face with color. He held me facing that fire, and leaning close, he hissed into my ear: "You are filthy, you are evil, the spawn of evil, the womb of evil. The Power in you is corrupt, horrible. The full Power—pray, pray never to attain it! Hubris, wickedness, ugliness, evil. You are the dirt of the dark places, dung of monsters in the pit of lust. Speak it.*Speak it."*

In terror, I limped after him.

"I am filthy ... evil ... Power is corrupt, horrible ... I will pray never to attain it!"

Over and over again the ghastly words were spewed as he held me before the flame in his iron hands. I repented that I had thought of my father. I did not understand, but I learned. I became degraded and filthy. I shriveled and twisted and was damned.

When he let me down, I ran to my cell and curled myself together, hiding my face and as much of my body as I could from any awareness in the room. I felt the watching eyes of gods upon me, judging and condemning. Could I doubt that I would die also now, my flesh dripping from my bones in the dark?

Yet I woke to my misery with the new day. Sekish lay before the stone bowl, what there remained of him.

After Sekish there was no other leader. Yet we did not need one, our own guilt and fear was leader enough.

In that last month, death stripped us, until only a handful remained, eight or nine princes and princesses of the great houses of the north, and a handful of priests. If any lived outside our shelter, we had no word, neither any hope of it. The earth had snatched her gifts from us, given herself back to the human savages who had once possessed her.

And then the thunder came which set the final seal on our darkness. Deep within itself the sleeping mountain had stirred and trembled. Upper galleries of the temple had fallen, leaving in their wake staircases which now led nowhere, their platforms shorn away, rooms hollowed out by collapsing rocks. Where it finally settled, the debris had blocked the great air funnels built into the mountain. Now the air that meant life and food to us could no longer enter, and the air which remained grew stale and poisonous.

One by one they fell into the sleep of suffocation, and one by one, as they lay in their rooms like pale embalmed dolls with stopped clockwork hearts, the Plague came and melted them into wax.

I wandered the silent temple slowly, panting, and sobbing when I had enough breath for it. I watched them die. There are no words for the emotions in me as I lingered, waiting to follow them to their disgusting end.

There was a princess, and she remained whole longer than the rest. She lay in her trance, her white hair

spread around her, her straight white limbs bright under the thin robe. Between her breasts glistened a drop of diamond—the gift of some long-dead lover—which she had not taken off even in her agonies of repentance. Each day I would drag myself to her cell, and sit by her on the floor, holding her limp hand as if this were a protection and a comfort.

One day I came and the white lamp of her skin was spilled into a reeking stain on the couch.

I went back to my little cell. I curled myself together. For the last time I cried myself to sleep.

5

To wake, and not to know where or who you are, not even to know what you are—whether a thing with legs and arms, or a beast, or a brain in the hull of a great fish—that is a strange awakening. But after a while there was a new darkness, full of a pattern of light. I was afraid. I struggled to release myself from the bands which seemed to hold me, tried to cry out, and even my body and my voice were new to me.

Then came an avalanche of color, sound, movement, cascading across my mind, drenching it and leaving it bruised. The rest of my life had passed swiftly, as if someone had flicked over the pages of a huge book, too fast. Yet I could remember now that this was not that first awakening under the mountain, that first awakening as a woman, who had fallen asleep as a four-year-old child.

Around me the throb of hidden engines in the silver star ship.

Hands drew a metal circlet from my head, and metal bracelets from my wrists. I rose from the metal chair, and I was free.

I looked at Ciorden, where he still sat, slowly drawing the metal bands from himself. His face was clenched and pale. He glanced at me and smiled a little.

"A tiring journey," he said, "for both of us."

I nodded. I was quiet and empty. Feeling the stir of understanding, I seemed to have no need to scrabble toward it. It would come.

A doorway slid open in the far wall; beyond lay a small, dimly lit room. Rarm's tall figure intercepted the light. He beckoned to me, and I went into the room without trepidation. He followed me, and the doors softly shut.

There was a silence between us. Finally I said: "Strange to recall the experience of birth. The first struggle which we all forget."

"Your birth," he said, "is unimportant. Have you unearthed your own secret?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Then tell me," he said.

"It seems laughable," I said, still not wanting to say the thing aloud.

"As important as finding it is the need for you to admit it," he said. "Now tell me, as you see it, what has

happened to you."

I sat on a couch which came to me from the wall. I looked at my own hands, calm, white, slightly open in my lap.

"Darak, Vazkor, and you, Rarm Zavid, I can see that much," I said softly. "You bear only a superficial resemblance to each other; there is none of the great likeness I have imagined linked each of you to the last. I see also whose likeness began my obsession with the tall dark narrow-eyed man—Sekish, whose face came in my first dreams after I had left the mountain. Sekish, who terrified and degraded me, who made me aware of my evil and unworthiness to live. I see, too, why I blocked my thoughts against the four years of my past, and particularly against the last halfyear of death and misery. Except that I remembered, Rarm, far too well—without remembering."

"You were strong," he said. "By some miracle you escaped the Plague, and grew into a woman as you lay in the airless cell for sixteen years. The*airless* cell. Unbreathing, you could only lie in a coma. Do you know now what woke you?"

"I think—I am not sure."

"In the last days of the Plague," he said, "the volcano roused itself; rock fell and blocked the air funnels. For the sixteen years of your coma the volcano grumbled and trembled, preparing itself for an eruption. On the last day, the walls of the mountain cracked open under the pressure of built-up gases inside. Through the cracks, a little new air filtered in to you. You began to breathe. After a time, in the last hours before the eruption, you woke."

"And so," I said, "and so my waking did not create the eruption as part of the curse and punishment I must suffer for going out of the mountain. It was the eruption which caused my waking."

"Your curse and punishment," he repeated. "Yet you understand now, don't you, who cursed you. and who punished you? You understand finally the nature of Karrakaz?"

"Karrakaz was my invention. I invested the offering bowls of the Lost with the Power of my self-terror. There has never been an Evil One, a Soulless One, created from the wickedness of my people, returning to destroy them. I feared my Power, because Sekish had made me fear it, and I strove with every ounce of my unconscious will to prevent myself achieving it."

"And that," he said, "was the ridiculous irony behind everything that has happened to you. Because you woke with Power, with your*full* Power. The voice which you imagined spoke out of the offering bowl told you that you could never repossess your greatness until you found your soul-kin of green jade—the quest, the hopeless quest. If you had continued to believe and follow that instruction, you need never have discovered your own strength: the demands of Sekish would have been obeyed. So you fought yourself. Despite your obvious gifts—your ability to understand any manner of speech by a form of telepathy, your ability to cure the most terminal diseases—you made excuses for your achievements—the crowd healed itself—and dreamed of the Jade you could never find. Darak came, and you buried yourself alive in his way of living, regretting your lost quest, but unable to break free. In the ravine camp you went to the leaning stones because you sensed their aura, the evil feel to them because of the superstitions of the bandits. It fitted ideally into the picture you had built of yourself. On the South Road empathy, another part of your Power, asserted itself. You saw things that had happened there in the past, you saw the Lost, but you saw through the eyes of their human slaves, to such an extent that you, also, confused levitation with flight. And then, Kee-ool. You had threatened yourself with lightning at the Road Gate, but the ruin still drew you."

He paused, prompting me with his silence.

I said dutifully, "I was repelled and attracted at the same time, as I have been repelled by and attracted to all places I could invest with the character of Karrakaz. I wanted to destroy myself, and at the same time, suffocated by Darak's personality, I also longed to link with my own self—the severed part of me which I had made a demon."

"Hence the bargain with Karrakaz," he said, "and then your attempt to kill Darak with the falling stone, when he shook you out of your trance."

"And the earth tremor, the flying stones that killed Kel and so many other men—was I the cause of that?"

"Yes. With the Power in you that you didn't even understand you had. You raised the storm to destroy Darak and the life you had with him, to destroy yourself if you could."

"But I was afraid," I said.

"You had a death-wish and a wish to live," he said. "That's common to all men. Unfortunately you had the power to organize both."

"And Darak's death in Ankurum. Did I make it happen?"

"I don't think so," he said, and I wanted to believe him. "You were convinced there was a curse on you, that there could be no happiness for you or for anyone you loved. That conviction communicated itself both to Darak and Vazkor, but not directly through you, because you never spoke to them of it."

But I recalled how I had said to Darak, "To see my face is death to you."

I wanted to believe him. I thrust the memory of Darak away, and the memory of Asutoo, the warrior I had hypnotized and murdered for revenge.

"The Mountain Ring," I said, "and Uasti. My mental strength grew because of her. I thought she was teaching me new things, instead of releasing abilities I already possessed."

"Uasti was a good teacher," he said. "She made you look a little way into yourself, see what you could become. She might have taught you restraint, if she'd lived."

"But she died. I ruled the wagoners, and crossed the Water. I was killed, and healed, and lived, and reached Ezlann. And Vazkor."

"Vazkor," Rarm said. "One of your worst teachers. In order to match him, you grew like him. You achieved the hubris Sekish had made you fear for yourself. And even before Ezlann, you killed the wagoners on the road."

"I have always thought," I said, "their death was my worst crime, even out of all the crimes and cruelties I committed."

"Don't judge yourself," he said. "None of us are ever good at it. I think, at that time, to yourself you were already a goddess. Before, you had always thought you could die, yet you rose from the grave—only

gods do that. In the City you unconsciously exerted influence to draw three guards to you—as you had unwittingly done in the bandits' camp."

"Because part of me recalled the three guards in the tomb paintings, the symbol of Temporal Power. As I recalled the symbolic knife, and thought it could kill me."

"Exactly," he said.

"In Ezlann and the Cities, the flame I called Karrakaz was still. It never troubled me. And in Belhannor, to raise the storm, I made a union with the flame—"

"In the first place, the flame left you alone because you were finally too strong—too strong even for the self-terror Sekish had given you. You'd faced yourself, you had said: 'I*am* everything I was afraid to be. There's no help for what I am. I can do nothing about it. Therefore I shall enjoy and reap benefit from my superior status, and crush the ants under my heel.' In Belhannor there was no*link* —you simply drew on the extra reserves of Power now open to you without their self-inflicted barriers. You were Uastis, the Risen One, the goddess of White Desert. And finally you set your strength against Vazkor—in contempt, because he had no right to share your "hubris."

"I killed him," I whispered to my white, half-opened hands.

"You killed him," Rarm repeated. "And then you lay down to die under the tower."

"And when the tribe found me my Power was gone. I could not even understand their tongue, let alone kill their seer."

"Which was your final punishment against yourself. You had seen yourself achieve Power. You had fulfilled Sekish's assessment of you. So now you blocked your Powers totally, and let the cruelty of the tribe complete your chastisement. You suffered, but you needed and wanted to suffer. When you were treated as a useless woman, a fool and a slave, it was the action of the princes and princesses under the mountain, beating themselves into miserable humility. You left your child as much because it would hurt you, as because it was expedient. And finally you became an animal in the marshes, shut off from all rational contact with man."

"Until the black tribe took me in," I said.

"And the striving began again," Rarm said. "The peace, and then the Book—one of those diaries of repentance you were given as a child—recalled your quest for the Jade. You went to the ruined cities on the shore, and there you found Karrakaz, as you knew you would, because part of your mind recognized the structure of a tomb, and where the offering cup would be."

"I tried to destroy myself completely," I said. "A sleep of death I had willed on myself. It was not a demon I fought, only myself. Yet, so terrible. So real to me. No surprise now that Fethlin was able to save me. The Power was directed only at me—until we reached the valley. Did I cause the earth quake there as at Kee-ool?"

"Yes. You've always been able to harness great elemental forces for your own suppression."

"The dream," I said, "the dark deserted city, and the red fire on the tongue of land in the bay. A pyre," I said. "The Plague had come for them too. And then the lizard. And then, on the beach, the shadow of the ship, and the beam of light—"

"You brought us down," he said, "and you used the computer to kill the lizard. One of your few actions of self preservation." "Why?"

"Perhaps," he said, smiling, "perhaps in some way you knew all this would follow. You have, after all, the gift of foreknowledge also." There was another little silence between us in the room.

He said, "All your Powers have returned now. For example, we've communicated all this time with no trouble."

"The wrist-band," I said. But when I looked down the green light did not sparkle. I drew it from my wrist. I said, "I understand now, but I am not complete. I have had one year of life since my childhood. But I made certain that when I was reborn, I would be born dead."

He rose.

"You're still dead," he said to me, and I understood him very well. He came and lifted me until I stood facing him. "You haven't yet found the Jade."

I turned away.

"Of that last thing, I am afraid."

"You know the answer. As a child you knew. As a woman, you made yourself forget. There's only one way for you to be free."

With a slight breath of sound, the silvery ice of a mirror slid from the wall in front of us. It stood before me like an invulnerable guard, blocking my last way of escape. In it I saw our reflections, a dark man, a pale woman with a covered emptiness of a face.

"Before I took you to the computer to learn the truth of all this," he said, "the part of you which you called Karrakaz paralyzed and blinded you to prevent your going. Now you've destroyed that assassin, and there's no longer any way you can hide from reality." He paused. He set me in front of him, before the gleaming cruel mirror. "Take off the mask," he said.

My hands rose a little way, faltered, fell back.

He held me still.

"Take off the mask."

My hands moved to my neck, upward to my hairline where the black forehead of the shireen ended. My hands froze and stiffened and would not do anything else.

"I cannot," I said. "The ugliness—like a beast—"

"The Jade," he said.*"The Jade."*

"Yes," I said. I screamed at the reflection as if it now were my enemy. I ripped and tore the shireen free of my skin, and my skin breathed, the air struck like snow on the flesh of my face. But I could not bear to look at what gaped before me. I covered my face with my hands.

I was crouching low against the floor, one arm over my head, my chin pressed down against my breasts.

"No," he said. Kneeling behind me, he peeled my fingers from my face, and when I replaced them with my other hand, he took that away also. He held my hands to my sides. His face was against mine as I tried to bury it in my breast. "Look up," he said. "Look up." There was something in his voice—part laughter, part bitter sadness. I raised my head a little way, though not far enough to see. "Look up," he said to me. Gently he put his hand under my chin and lifted it, and now I looked into the mirror.

I saw then what the villagers had seen when I came to after the volcano's first anger. I saw what Darak had seen by the lake, and later in the half-darkness, and after that through the nights and dawns of our privacy together. I saw what Uasti had seen, what Vazkor had seen and flinched at, what Kotta had visualized in the tent on Snake's Road. I saw what Rarm saw as he kneeled behind me.

And I saw what it was that made them afraid, or silent, and it was not what I had thought.

It was because I was beautiful. More beautiful than the best of human beauty, more beautiful than a beauty which can be understood, and because it was not a beauty which is of men, though of their planet, the beauty which had been, like Power, the birthright of the Lost.

Slowly, with infinite care, I touched my face, the flawless whiteness, the planes and curves like the map of some undiscovered landscape in a dream. My fingers brushed the mouth, lightly, the forehead, the long, long diamonds of eyes, which are, of all the differences, perhaps the most different from the human. I stared at myself, and felt no hubris at all, because it seemed, will always seem, that this is not my face, I, who was cursed with great ugliness.

"Now you understand." Rarm said to me. "It was the last cut against yourself to become convinced of your own hideousness. You held to it and nurtured it, and even identified with the devil goddess of Orash in your determination to be accursed. And it never occurred to you that perhaps you saw a false image under the mountain." With one hand he reached out, and his forefinger lay across my forehead, pointing to that triangle of soft green light above and between my eyes. "And there is your soul-kin, the green Jade. Inserted under the skin, as with all your race, a few hours after birth, when the child sleeps. How hopeless you made your quest, searching your world for what you already carried inside you." His hand moved away, softly touching my hair. "The third eye of the nameless Princess of the Lost. Who has, after all, a name which she now remembers."

"Yes," I said.

Kneeling before the bowl of offering, I had whispered it as all who knelt there whispered their names, before beginning the chant of contrition. I had whispered it so often there, it had become the symbol of the bowl, and the symbol of all I feared in myself. But no longer fear, and no longer separation.

"I know my name," I said to him. "My name is Karrakaz."

6

So, in the black void of space, in the silver star, I let go the shackles and became myself. And knowing now, able to see beyond myself, I saw that I must leave the ship, and begin again to live in the world of men as I knew them. Not for me the technical power and splendor of the planets which had bred men like Rarm Zavid. My own civilization had gone far in its advancement before pride and stupidity and the

curse of men had finished it. But it had traveled a different road from the road which had produced the hollow star. There could be a meeting, but no union. There was no link to hold the pieces of our alien lives as one.

He would not tell me what he had risked to help me. Neither would Ciorden speak of it, but I think it had been much. The men of his ship were anxious to see me go, and to be away back to their home worlds, where men of their culture would judge Rarm for what he had done, his interference in the ways of our world, his delay and his involvement. I could do nothing. Except let him go in peace, trusting his own integrity and intelligence, his own knowledge of what he went to.

And I did not want to let him go. I did not want to lose him in life as I had lost Darak and Asren and Vazkor in death. Nor did he wish to leave me, this much I knew.

Four days after I had come to the ship, it landed smoothly in a rocky valley high in the hills beyond the sea. A new land, yet the same as the land where I had dragged through my year of life. Summer heat droned in the valley, over the tumble of green-edged boulders. No human habitation showed itself for miles. Three or four wild sheep ran from our coming, and I knew that silence would be there, that silence of fear for the unknown thing.

I stood in the glassy room among the pillars, staring at the valley through a viewing screen in the wall. Ciorden had come, and kissed my hand, reminding me again of the notaries of Ezlann or Za. I had thanked him, and smiled at the awe which stole onto his face as he looked at me. It was foolish for him to be taken aback by what he had helped liberate. We both knew it, but it was there all the same. After Ciorden I knew that Rarm would come. And when he came at last, I realized fully that after this I should not see him any more. The tie that had held me to Sekish was dissolved. There was no fascinated hatred in my love for this man, the man who had given me myself.

"I must take the ship up very soon," he said. "I've overstayed my leave here."

"I understand," I said.

"And you'll take nothing with you?"

"No, Rarm, only this one dress. Before the winter comes I shall have shelter of some sort, and, as we both know now, I do not need food at all, only what I draw from the air as I breathe. It will be a hard lesson for me to relearn, that lost habit, but it can be done, and the sooner I begin, the better."

"I wish this didn't have to be the finish of it," he said quietly. "I don't want to leave you."

"Nor I you," I said, "but there is no other way for us."

"No, there isn't any other way."

It seemed I had been coming toward him from my past all the years I traveled; and now that we met and touched, the moment was achieved—and ended.

He came to me then, and kissed me, intently, yet without particular passion. There was no point in any passion or desire between us. It was too late for us, more than that, there had never been a time for us, would never be. It was the first and last meeting, and now there was almost nothing else to say or do.

Together we walked to the lock of the ship and the hatchway, which gave onto the valley. It opened for

me, slowly, lustily, as if reluctant.

"Ciorden would say his computer didn't want you to go," Rarm said.

I looked outward, and the world yawned before me like the empty void which had hung about the ship.

I put my hand in his a moment, then I looked away from him, into the valley. The hatchway slid toward the ground. I stepped out. I did not look back. I walked over the rocks and the rough mosses. Small pink flowers stood up like a child's vision of stars embroidered on the grass.

I did not look back at him, nor at the ship.

When I reached the crest of the valley, I heard the thin high moan start up behind me. I did not turn. I imagined the oval silver thing lifting, gleaming, from the burned earth, lifting, lifting, high into the blue summer sky, dwindling, changing to a tiny silver light, vanishing, going away and away.

The sound eased and melted into the air. The silence all around me stirred a little. First a cricket creaking, next a flutter of bird wings as a brown pigeon circled over the rocks. Soon a thousand small twitters, rustlings, scutterings. Fear had gone.

Over the crest the world was green, running down toward trees and the far-off glitter of water. Toward pastures, too, perhaps, and toward people. Toward villages and towns and cities, which held their own scattered remembrance of the Lost, where there might be stone bowls burning flame, and golden books with faded leaves whose guilt and fearful hope of surviving the Plague had given rise to a legend of a second coming of gods.

A hot breeze burned on my naked face, lifted strands of my hair.

I am alone. No one stands beside me, I have no Dark Prince to ride in my chariot, to walk with me, to hold me to him. I have no one. And yet. I have myself at last, I have myself. And to me, at this time, it seems enough. It seems more, much more, than enough.

v2.0 converted from rtf & proofed by billbo196

About this Title