

IN THE HOUSE OF THE WORM

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For ages past remembering, the House of the Worm had been lost in decay, and that was as it should be, for decay is but one name of the White Worm himself. So the *yaga-la-hai*, the worm-children, only smiled and went on as always, though the tapestries rotted on the walls of their endless burrows and their numbers dwindled each year, though meat grew ever more scarce, and the very stone around them turned to dust. In the high burrows with slit windows, awash with the red dimness of the vast dying ember above, they came and went and lived their lives. They tended their torches and held their masques, and made the sign of the worm whenever they passed near the dark windowless burrows where the grooms were said to mutter and lie in wait (for the halls and tunnels of the House of the Worm were reputed to be infinite, descending as far below the earth as the black sky ascends above, and the *yaga-la-hai* claimed only a few of its many ancient chambers).

It was taught to the worm-children that the White Worm comes for all in the end, but he crawls most slowly, and in the long decay there is fine feasting and the bright sickly colors of rot. Such wisdom was enforced by the current manworm and his bronze knights, even as their ancestors had enforced it for generations untold. Thus did the House of the Worm endure, though the grooms might crawl below and the sun burn out above.

Every fourth year the brightest and wittiest and highest-born among the *yaga-la-hai* would gather in the Chamber of Obsidian to view the sun and feast in its dying rays. The chamber was the only place for such a brilliant masque. It was high in the House of the Worm, so that all the tunnels leading to it slanted upward, and the floor and ceiling and three of the walls were sheets of fused obsidian, cold and shiny as a mirror and dark as death. For the four-years-less-a-day that passed between the Sun Masques, the lesser-born worm-children, called torch-tenders, worked tirelessly in the chamber, polishing and rubbing, so that when the bronze knights came to fire the torches, their reflections would gleam in the black glass around them. Then the guests would assemble, a thousand strong in gay costumes and fantastic masks, and the obsidian would bend and distort their bright faces and graceful forms, until they were a whirling motley of demons dancing in a great black bottle.

And that was only part of the Chamber of Obsidian. There was more; there was the window. It occupied all of the fourth wall behind the sand-filled hollow where the Manworm coiled; crystal clear the window was, yet stronger than any glass they knew. Nowhere in the House of the Worm was there another window a fraction of its size. The glass, if glass it was, looked out on a dead and desolate plain where no wind stirred; all darkness there, all empty, though there were crumbling stone shapes near the sometimes-seen horizon that might or might not be ruins. It was hard to tell; the light was very bad.

The sun filled half the sky; from one end of the horizon to the other it arched, bulking high enough to

touch the zenith. Above it was unending black sky, broken by a handful of stars. The sun itself was a softer black, the color of ash, except in the few places where it still lived. Rivers ran across it, twisting ribbons of glowing red, veins of fire across its tired face. The worm-children had studied them once, in the long-ago years when they played with telescopes, and each of the burning channels had once had a name, though most had been forgotten. Where the rivers met and joined, sometimes smoldering orange lakes could be seen, and there were other places where gleams of red and yellow pulsed beneath the ash-dark crust. Best of all were the seas, two huge oceans of angry red that grew smaller and darker with every masque; one up near the rim continued on the side never seen, and a second burned near the sun's waist and often outlined the maybe-ruins on the horizon.

From noon, when the Sun Masque commenced (all times were arbitrary with the worm-children, for the light was the same, day and night), until midnight, all the feasters would be masked, even the Manworm, and long curtains of heavy red velvet would be drawn across the great window, to hide the sun. Silent torch-tenders would bring out the feast on black iron trays, and arrange it on the long table: heavy mushrooms in cream sauce, subtly flavored puffballs, tiny slugs wrapped in bacon, fragrant green wine alive with struggling spiceworms, fried crawlers, roast hole-hogs from the Manworm's royal larder, hot mushroom bread, a thousand other delicacies. And, as a centerpiece, if they were lucky, a plump six-limbed groun-child (or two!), just below the age of puberty, basted with care and served whole, its meat white and juicy. The guests would eat until they could eat no more, joke and laugh through their veils and dominoes, then dance beneath the torches for hours on end while obsidian ghosts mocked their movements in the walls and floor. When midnight finally came, the unmasking began. And when all had bared their faces, the bronze knights would carry the reigning Manworm to the fourth wall, and he would pull the curtain cord (if he still had handsâ€”if not, the knights would pull it) and unmask the sun.

The Manworm that year was the Second Vermentor, fourteenth of his line to rule the *yaga-la-hai* from the High Burrow in the House of the Worm. He had reigned a dozen years already, and soon his time would be at an end, for the priest-surgeons had done their holy work all that while, and there was nothing left to purify but the too-human head that lolled atop the sinuous writhing torso. Soon he would be one with the White Worm. But his son was ready.

The bronze knight Groff, huge and stiff in armor, carried Vermentor to the window and acted as his hands. The velvet slid back smoothly, and the old sun was revealed as the Manworm intoned the ancient worship words and the worm-children gathered round to look.

Annelyn, surrounded by his friends and acolytes, was one of the closest to the glass, as was fitting. Annelyn was always to the front. He was a slim and glorious youth, tall and graceful. All the highborn *yaga-la-hai* had soft mocha skins, but Annelyn's was the softest of them all. Most of his fellows had blond or red-blond hair, but Annelyn's was the brightest yellow-gold; it crowned his head in delicate sculptured ringlets. Many worm-children had blue eyes, but none so blue and deep as Annelyn's.

He was the first to speak after the curtains were drawn. â€œThe black parts grow,â€• he observed to those around him, in a light, clear voice. â€œSoon our curtains will not be needed. The sun now masks itself.â€• He laughed.

"It dies,â€• said Vermyllar, a gaunt boy with hollow cheeks and flaxen hair who worried far too much. â€œMy grandfather told me once that there was a time when the black plains were smoky red and the seas and rivers were white fire, painful to look upon.â€• Vermyllar's grandfather had been second son of the Manworm, and thus knew all sorts of things that he passed on to his grandson.

"Perhaps it was so,â€• Annelyn said, â€œbut not in his time, I would wager, or even that of his grandfather.â€• Annelyn had no blood ties with the line of the Manworm, no secret sources of knowledge, but he was always quite sure of his opinions, and his friendsâ€”Vermyllar and stout Riess and

beautiful Caralee" thought him the wisest and wittiest of men. Once he had killed a groun.

"Don't you worry about the sun dying?" Caralee asked him, tossing blond curls easily as she turned to face him. She looked enough like Annelyn to be his sister-twin; perhaps that was why he wanted her so. "About the burrows growing cold?"

Annelyn laughed again, and Riess laughed with him. (Riess *always* laughed with Annelyn, though Annelyn suspected that the fat boy seldom understood the joke.) "The sun was dying long before I came into the House of the Worm, and it will continue dying long after I have left," he said, turning away from the window. He was splendid that night, in his costume of pale blue silk and spidergray with the crest of theta stitched above his breast.

"As for the cold," Annelyn continued, as he led his three companions back toward the feasting table, "I don't believe that the old sun has anything to do with heat, one way or the other."

"It does," said Vermyllar, who had come in brown rags like a mushroom farmer. He and Caralee matched Annelyn stride for stride across the obsidian, their images hurrying at their feet. Riess puffed along behind, struggling to keep up in the mock armor of a bronze knight.

"Did your grandfather tell you that?" Annelyn asked. Riess laughed.

"No," Vermyllar said, frowning. "But notice, Annelyn, how the sun resembles a hot coal stolen from a firebox?"

"Perhaps," Annelyn said. He paused beside the wine-bowl and filled two cut-crystal goblets with the rich green wine, fishing in the bowl until he found two worms tied in a writhing knot. He scooped them into Caralee's drink, and she smiled at the proposition when he handed her the glass. The second goblet, with a single worm, he sipped himself as he turned back to Vermyllar.

"If the sun is nothing but a large coal," Annelyn continued, "then we need not worry, since we have plenty of smaller coals on hand, and the torch-tenders can always fetch up more from the dark."

Riess giggled. He had set his knight's helm on the table and was now munching from a platter of spiced spiders.

"That may be true," Vermyllar said. "But then you admit the sun is a coal, that it helps to warm the burrows."

"No," said Annelyn. "I merely conjectured. In fact, I think the sun is an ornament of sorts, set in the sky by the White Worm to provide us with light and an occasion for masques."

Suddenly, startlingly, there was laughter, coarse and low. Annelyn's smile turned abruptly to a frown when he realized that whoever it was laughed not at his wit, but at *him*. He drew himself up and turned in annoyance.

When he saw who laughed, however, he only raised a glass (and a fine blond eyebrow) in mock salute.

The Meatbringer (so they called him "if he had a truer name, he did not use it) ceased his laughter; there was a silence. He was a low, broad man, a head shorter than Annelyn and uglier than any of the *yaga-la-hai*, with his straight white hair, mottled pink-brown skin, and enormous flat nose. His orange and crimson image etched by torchlight in the obsidian was taller and more handsome than the Meatbringer himself had ever been.

He had come to the Sun Masque alone and out of costume, horribly out of place, admitted only because

of the groud-child he had provided. Instead of masque finery, he wore his familiar suit of milk-white leather, sewn from the skin of dead grounds, with a colorless half-cloak of woven groun-hair. Throughout the House of the Worm his boast was known: that he dressed in the skin and hair of grounds he had himself slain. He was the Meatbringer, who went alone into deep burrows without windows.

Caralee looked at him very curiously. "Why did you laugh?" she asked.

"Because your friend is funny," the Meatbringer said. His voice was too low, too coarse. Annelyn felt a trifle absurd, being insulted by a mottled man who grumbled in the manner of a torch-tender. And now a curious knot of people began to gather around them; the *yaga-la-hai* were always interested in the odd, and the Meatbringer was oddest of all. Besides, everyone had grown tired of viewing the sun.

"I'm always pleased to find someone who appreciates wit," Annelyn said, studiously attempting to turn the Meatbringer's veiled insult into a compliment.

"I do appreciate wit," the Meatbringer said. "I wish I could find some. This masque is witless."

He had no subtlety, Annelyn decided. "Only in comparison," he said. "You are perhaps accustomed to delightful banter with the grounds?"

Riess giggled, and the Meatbringer smiled savagely at him. "The grounds have more wit than your simpering friend, and more knowledge than you."

There was stifled laughter around them, whether at the absurdity of the Meatbringer's words or at the insult, Annelyn could not be sure. "You know groud secrets, then?" he said lightly.

"They have them, yes. And I know them, yes. And more."

"The grounds are animals," Vermyllar put in.

"As are you," said the Meatbringer.

Vermyllar flushed. "I wear rags tonight, but only for the masque. My grandfather was a son of the Manworm."

"Better your grandfather than you," the Meatbringer said.

This time Caralee laughed. Annelyn looked at her, horrified that she could find humor in such coarseness. "You mock the honor?" he said. "The great knowledge? The responsibilities?"

"I have heavier responsibilities," the Meatbringer said in a level voice. "As do the others who try to go down and bring back groud meat. The Manworm has only musty ritual duties that no one understands. As to his great knowledge, I have more of that too. The *yaga-la-hai* know nothing of themselves or of the House of the Worm except half-truths and distorted lies. And *honor*?" He gestured toward the window. Groff, in his intricately wrought rust-dark armor, still stood stiffly with the Manworm in his arms. Another of the bronze knights was closing the curtains; the dancing had resumed.

"Yes?" Annelyn prompted, blankly.

"The honor is all hideous pain," the Meatbringer said, and as if to emphasize his statement, the Manworm suddenly lifted his head and his white body began to thrash wildly in Groff's arms. "Under the knives again and again, each time waking as less of a man. And it ends in deformity and death. Honor?"

Now the crowd around them looked shocked, except for a handful who had listened to the Meatbringer before and knew his amusing irreverence. "The Manworm is purified," Riess said. (Try as he might, he was dull and orthodox underneath, and they all knew it.) "He is becoming one with the White Worm!"

Annelyn shushed him; he thought of himself as inclined to the cynical and the shocking. "Perhaps you have a point about the honor," he said to the Meatbringer. "Freethinkers like myself have also questioned the custom, but..."

Again the Meatbringer began to laugh at him, throwing his head back and roaring. Annelyn flushed darkly and drained his wine with a snap "worm and all" as he fought to stay calm.

"*Freethinker!*" the Meatbringer finally choked out when his laughter had subsided. "I doubt that you have ever had a free thought. You are nothing, less than the Manworm." He pushed past Annelyn and began to fill his own goblet with wine.

"I have killed a groud," Annelyn said, quickly, not thinking, regretting the words the instant they were spoken.

The Meatbringer simply turned on him, and grinned, and then *everyone* began to laugh. There was no need to comment; all of the worm-children knew that the Meatbringer had killed perhaps a hundred grounds, not one. Even Caralee joined the general laughter, though Vermyllar and Riess were mercifully silent. Tall as he was, Annelyn suddenly felt as if the Meatbringer towered over him. He glanced down and saw his own face looking up, foolish and shaken, from the cold obsidian.

The Meatbringer studied Caralee with approval. "Share my bed tonight," he said suddenly, as blunt as any torch-tender. The Meatbringer had no shame. Annelyn looked up again, shocked. Caralee wore blue-and-spidergray, even as he did; clearly they were together. And he had given her the cup of the mating-worms!

She looked at Annelyn briefly, then seemingly dismissed him with a toss of her bright curls, turning toward the Meatbringer. "Yes," she said, strange excitement in her voice. Then they went off together onto the vast black mirror of the dance floor to whirl and writhe and slide together in the intricate ancient patterns of the *yaga-la-hai*.

"He has humiliated us," Annelyn said furiously to Riess and Vermyllar as he watched the Meatbringer clumsily parody Caralee's graceful moves.

"We should go to the Manworm," Vermyllar suggested.

Riess said nothing, but his round face was screwed up in agitation as he reached for another spiced spider.

"No," Annelyn said. Beyond the sea of wriggling dancers in all their gorgeous colors, Groff had returned the Manworm to his sand pit. Squat torch-tenders were moving around the fringes of the chamber, snuffing two flames of every three. Soon the obsidian grew clouded by darkness, and the bright reflections faded to red streaks on the glass. In shadowed corners, a few bold couples had already commenced the unmasking-of-the-bodies; others soon would follow their example. Annelyn had planned to unmask Caralee. Now he was alone.

"Why not?" Vermyllar was demanding. "You heard him. He called me an animal, and I am the grandson of a man who might have been Manworm."

Annelyn waved him quiet. "You will have your revenge," he said. "But my way, my way." His deep blue eyes stared across the chamber. The Meatbringer was leading Caralee off toward a corner. "My way," he repeated. Then: "Come." And he led them from the room.

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They met the next morning, early, amid the dust and fading tapestries of the seldom-used Undertunnel, which connected most of the main burrows of the *yaga-la-hai* before curving away on its long descent into infinity. Annelyn was the first to arrive. He was dressed all in shiny-smooth black, with a hood of the same color to hide his bright hair. His only concession to vanity was a gold theta, embroidered on his breast. A belt of black rope held both rapier and stiletto.

Riess soon materialized, in a tight-fitting shirt of mail and leather and a heavy cloak of spidergray. He and Annelyn sat together on a stone floor across from a black mouth that belched hot, moist air at them through a rusty grid. Light, such as there was, came from scattered torches set in bronze hands on the walls, and from the windows' narrow slits in the ceiling, twenty feet above their heads that leaked a dim red radiance. The windows were set ten feet apart all along the Undertunnel, until it began to sink. Once, as a boy, Annelyn had piled junk high in the middle of a burrow and climbed to look out, but there had been nothing to see—the glass, even as the stone of the walls, was thicker than a man is tall. It was fortunate that *any* light got through.

Vermyllar was late. Annelyn sat cross-legged, his eyes on the hanging tapestries whose images had all turned to mottled gray. Riess was very excited. He was talking about imaginative tortures they could inflict on the Meatbringer. "When we catch him, we should hang him upside down by running cords through his ankles," the stout youth suggested. "Then we can buy a pot of bloodworms from the surgeon-priests and set them all over his body to drink him dry."

Annelyn let him prattle, and finally Vermyllar appeared, wearing black and gray and carrying a torch and a long dagger. The other two sprang up to greet him.

"I should not have come," Vermyllar said. His face was very drawn, but he seemed to relax a bit in the presence of his friends. "I am the great-grandson of the Manworm himself," he continued, sheathing his dagger while Riess took the torch from him, "and I should not listen to you, Annelyn. We will all be eaten by grouns."

"The Meatbringer is not eaten by grouns, and he is only one while we are three together," Annelyn said. He started down the Undertunnel, toward the endless gray where the bands of red light no longer striped the stone, and the others followed.

"Are you sure he comes this way?" Vermyllar asked. They passed another of the square black mouths, and their cloaks stirred and flapped in its warm breath. Vermyllar gestured at the opening. "Perhaps he climbs down one of those, to where the grouns live."

"They are very sheer and very hot," Annelyn told him, "and he would fall or burn if he went that way. Besides, many people have seen the Meatbringer come and go along the Undertunnel. I asked among the torch-tenders."

They passed beneath the last window; ahead, the Undertunnel slanted down and the ceiling was featureless. Vermyllar stopped in the zone of light.

"Grouns," he said. "Annelyn, there are *grouns* down there. Away from the windows." He licked his lips.

"I have killed a groun," Annelyn reminded him. "Besides, we have talked of this. We have our

torch, and each of us is carrying matches. There are old torches all along the tunnel, so many can be lit. Besides, the grouns never come this high. No one has seen a groun in the Undertunnel for a lifetime."

"People vanish every month," Vermyllar insisted. "Mushroom farmers. Groun hunters. Children."

Annelyn began to sound cross. "Groun hunters go deep, so of course they are caught. The others, well, who knows? Are you afraid of the dark?" He stamped a boot impatiently.

"No," said Vermyllar, and he came forward to join them again. But he rested his hand on his dagger hilt.

Annelyn did not start again immediately. He walked over to the curving wall, and reached up, pulling a torch from a bronze hand. He lit it from the flames of the torch Riess was carrying, and suddenly the light was doubled. "There," he said, handing the torch to Vermyllar. "Come."

So they began to walk down the long dark burrow as it curved and sank, almost imperceptibly: past tapestries that hung in rotten threads and others that were thick tangles of matted fungus; past an endless series of torch-clutching hands (every other one empty, and only one in fifty light); past countless bricked-up tunnel mouths and a few whose bricks had shattered or turned to dust; past the invisible warmth of the air ducts one after another. They walked in silence, knowing that their voices would echo, hoping that the dust beneath would muffle the sounds of their footsteps. They walked until they had lost sight of the last window, and for an hour after that. And finally they reached the spot where the Undertunnel came to an end. Ahead were two square doorways whose metal doors had long since crumbled into flakes of rust. Riess thrust a torch through one and saw only a few heavy cables, twisting around in tangles and sinking into the yawning darkness of a shaft that fell down and down. Startled, he pulled back and almost dropped the torch.

"Careful," Annelyn warned.

"What is it?" Riess said.

"Perhaps a trap," Vermyllar suggested. He thrust his own torch into the second doorway, and they saw a stone stair that descended rapidly. "See? There were two doors here, once. An enemy or a groun might choose the wrong one, and fall down that shaft to its death. It was probably just an air shaft that they put a door on."

Annelyn moved over next to Riess. "No," he said, peering into the shaft. "There are ropes. And this shaft is cold." He shook his head, and his hood fell back, revealing blond curls that shone softly in the dancing torchlight. "No matter," he said. "We will wait here. Deeper than this and we *would* meet grouns. Besides, I do not know where that stair leads. So better to wait, and let the Meatbringer lead us."

"What?" Vermyllar was shocked. "You do not mean to take him here?"

Annelyn smiled. "Ha! That would be a child's revenge. No, we will follow him, deep into the country of the grouns. We will learn all his secrets, all the knowledge that he boasts of. We will see why he comes back and back again, always with meat, while other groun hunters vanish. *Then* we will kill him."

"You didn't say *that*," Riess objected, openmouthed.

"We've already come too far from the windows," Vermyllar said, and started to go on.

Annelyn laughed lightly. "Child," he said to Riess. "I came this far when I was half your age. This was where I killed my groun." He pointed to the stairway. "He came out of there, scrabbling

on four of his legs, not the least afraid of my fire, and I met him with only my torch."

Vermyllar and Riess were both looking at the dark portal of the stairway. "Oh," said Riess.

"Really?" said another voice, from behind. Vermyllar dropped his torch, and pulled out his dagger. All three of them whirled.

On the edge of the light, a huge, red-bearded man dressed in black stood staring at them, a bronze ax on his shoulder. Without his armor, Annelyn hardly recognized him, but suddenly the memory came.

"Groff," he said.

The bronze knight nodded. "I have followed you all down the Undertunnel. You are very noisy."

They said nothing. Vermyllar picked up his fallen torch.

"So you mean to kill the Meatbringer?" Groff said.

"Yes," Annelyn said. "Do not interfere, Groff. I know the Meatbringer provides much grounmeat for the *yaga-la-hai*, but we shall do that too when we learn his secrets. The Manworm has no cause to take his side." His mouth was set stubbornly.

Groff chuckled, deep in his throat, and hefted his heavy ax. "Don't fret, little worm-child. You shall have your carrion. I too was sent to kill the Meatbringer."

"What?" Riess said.

"Did the Manworm order it?" Vermyllar asked eagerly.

"The Manworm thinks of nothing but his coming unity with the White Worm," Groff said. He smiled. "And of pain, perhaps. Perhaps he thinks of that. No, his advisers ordered it. The Meatbringer has too many mysteries about him. He is not truly of the *yaga-la-hai*, the advisers think, and he is not tranquil. He is ugly and disturbs things, and he lies. Moreover, since we first grew aware of the Meatbringer, two years ago, fewer and fewer groun hunters have returned from below, save him alone. Well, I have hunted grouns, once. I may not have been as deep as the Meatbringer, who says he has descended to where the bronze knights warred against the grouns a million years ago. I have not been that far, but I have run the groun-runs, and I am not frightened of dark burrows." He looked at Annelyn. "Did you truly meet a groun here?"

Annelyn felt the steady gaze of Groff's eyes, beneath their thick red brows. "Yes," he said, a little too quickly, afraid that somehow Groff knew the truth. The groun had been lying at the top of the stairs, mumbling its death rattle, when Annelyn had found it. The boy had watched, terrified, while the creature's six gangling limbs trembled fitfully (and briefly) and the moist sunken pools of flesh that the grouns had instead of eyes roamed back and forth, without purpose. When the carcass had been quite still, Annelyn had charred it with his torch, then dragged it back to the burrows of the *yaga-la-hai*.

Groff shook his head. "They seldom come past the grounwall," the bronze knight said. "During the last years of my hunting, they seldom came at all. The Meatbringer must truly go deep." He smiled. "But so shall we."

"We?" It was Vermyllar.

Groff nodded. "I am not averse to help, and Annelyn's idea is a good one. We will learn the Meatbringer's secrets before we kill him." He waved his ax in a broad gesture. "Down the stair."

The doorway loomed pitch-black and ominous, and Annelyn began to feel nervous. It was one thing to impress Riess and Vermyllar with his bold plan to descend to groud country, but no doubt in time they would have talked him out of it. Perhaps the three of them would have fallen upon the Meatbringer *here* — beyond the light, true, but only a short way, and Annelyn had been here before. But to actually go *down*...

It was Vermyllar who protested. "No," he said. "I'm not going any deeper than this." He looked at Annelyn. "You kill the Meatbringer, or Groff can kill him, or Riess if he can, but he'll be just as dead without me along as with me. I'm going back."

"Down the stair," Groff said sternly. "I'll have no desertions."

Vermyllar stood fast. "My grandfather is a son of the Manworm," he said. "I do as I please." To Annelyn and Riess he made the sign of the worm, then with his torch in hand he started back the way they had come.

Groff made no move to stop him. "Down the stair," he repeated after Vermyllar's light had vanished behind a curve of the wall. They hurried to obey.

Down. The worst of all possible directions. Down. Where the grounds lay. Down. Away from light. Yet they went, and Annelyn remembered that even at the best of times, he disliked stairs. He was lucky, at that. Riess, holding the torch, had to go first.

At the foot of the stair was a narrow landing with two bricked-in doors, another gaping entrance to the still, cold shaft, and another stair. Down. There was another stair beyond that. Down. And another beyond *that*.

Finally they emerged. "Put out the torch," Groff said. Riess complied.

They stood clustered on one end of a slender metal bridge that spanned a cavernous chamber a hundred times the size of the Chamber of Obsidian. Far, far above was a vast roof of glass panes (each of them the size of the one behind the Manworm's pit, Annelyn thought) set in a latticework of black metal. The sun loomed over it, with its oceans of fire and plains of ash, so they did not need the torch.

There were other bridges, Annelyn saw — five of them; slim threads that swung from one black wall to the other, above a pool of some sluggish liquid that stirred and made noises just below their feet. And there was a sixth, or had been, but now it was shattered, and the twisted ribbon of its span hung down into the moving blackness below them.

There was a smell. Strong, thick, and sickly sweet.

"Where are we?" Riess whispered.

"The Chamber of the Last Light," Groff said brusquely. "Or so it is called in the lore of the bronze knights. But groud hunters call it the groudwall. This is the last and deepest place where the old sun can peer in. The White Worm created it to keep the grounds from the burrows of his children, some say."

Annelyn walked to the rail of the bridge. "Interesting," he said casually. "Are there no other ways for the grounds to climb up, then?"

"No more," Groff told him. "Once. But bronze knights sealed them with bricks and blood. Or so it is said."

He pointed his ax toward the shadows on the far side of the bridge. "Across."

The span was narrow, barely wide enough for two men to walk abreast. Annelyn stepped forward hesitantly, reaching out to the guardrail for support. It came away in his hand, a small piece of metal tubing, eaten through by rust. He looked at it, stepped backward, then chucked it away, off into the liquid.

"The damp," Groff said, unconcerned. "The bridge itself has rust holes, so be careful where you step." His voice was stern and inflexible.

So Annelyn found himself edging forward again, step by careful step, out above the sloshing blackness into the abyss of dim red light. The bridge creaked and moved beneath his feet, and more than once he felt something give as he set down a tentative foot, so he was forced to pull back quickly and step somewhere else. Riess came after him, holding the useless rail tightly whenever there was a rail to hold. Groff cheerfully walked on the places the others had tested.

Halfway across, the bridge began to sway "slowly at first, then with greater speed. Annelyn froze, clutched for the rail, and looked over his shoulder at Groff.

The bronze knight swore. "Three is too much," he said. "*Hurry!*"

Not daring to run, Annelyn began to walk as quickly as he could, and as he did so the swaying got worse. He walked even faster, and behind him he could hear the others. At one point, there was a sudden snapping and a crunch, followed by a screech of pain. *Then* he ran, all but jumping the last few feet to the stone semicircle that anchored the bridge on the far side of the chamber. Only then, safe, did he turn back. Riess had hit a rust spot; his right leg had plunged right through the metal. Groff was helping him out. "Hold it steady," the bronze knight shouted, and Annelyn went back to the stone precipice and steadied the shaking bridge as best he could.

Soon Groff joined him, supporting a limping Riess. The leather he wore had saved him from serious injury, but the jagged metal edges had still cut into his leg, and there was some blood.

While Groff tended to him, Annelyn looked about. The stone platform on which they stood was ringed by dark shapes, great square boxes that stood along its edge like a row of rotten teeth. He went to one. It was metal, scarred by rust and disuse, and studded by a dozen tiny glass windows, behind which was nothing but dust. There were holes in the boxes, too, and several of them had been smashed. Annelyn could make no sense of it.

Riess was on his feet again, looking shaken. "I dropped the torch," he said.

"There are others to be had," Groff said. "We could not have used ours, in any event. The Meatbringer would see its light. No, we must enter the goun-runs in the dark, and wait there until we see the light of *his* torch. Then we will follow that."

"What?" said Annelyn. "But Groff, that is madness. There will be gouns in the dark, perhaps."

"Perhaps," Groff replied. "Not likely, not this close to light, to the gounwall. Goun hunters, in my time and even before, had to go deeper to find prey. The upper runs are empty. But we will not go far." He pointed toward the wide black door that waited for them where the platform met the wall.

Annelyn drew his stiletto and went swiftly forward, not to look a coward. If a goun lurked in the blackness, he would be ready for it.

But there was nothing. Faintly, in the small light that still bled from the chamber, he saw the outline of three burrows, each darker than the one before.

"The left leads down," Groff said, "into the richer parts of the runs. The center is bricked-off and abandoned. We will wait there. We can watch the bridge, hidden by darkness, and follow the Meatbringer's torch when he passes."

He herded them forward, and they sat on the dusty stone to wait. The door to the Chamber of the Last Light faced them, like a dim red window; all else was black and silent. Groff sat unmoving, his ax across his lap and his legs crossed under him. Riess fidgeted. Annelyn put his back to the wall, so no gounds could creep up behind him, and toyed with his stiletto.

It was not long before he began to hear noises, soft mutters and low sounds, like the ugly voices of gounds grouping to attack them. But the tunnel was a solid blindness, and the harder he listened, the more the noise became blurred and indistinct. Footfalls? Or only Groff's breathing? Or perhaps it was the sound of the stirring liquid, not far off? Annelyn gripped his blade tighter. "Groff," he warned, but the other only silenced him.

He was remembering stories of how the gounds could see in total darkness, of how they padded up so quietly on soft white feet and wrapped their six long limbs around straying *yaga-la-hai* when the other noise began. Soft first, then louder; this could be no mistake. It was thin and ragged; it rose and fell, full of chokes and sobs. Groff heard it, too. Suddenly, silently, he was on his feet. Annelyn leaped up beside him, then Riess.

The bridge swayed slowly in the red window before them. Someone was coming.

The noise grew, and became more human. A voice, a real voice, warped by fear. Then Annelyn heard words: "*... please ... not into the dark again ... gounds ... they'll ... can't do....*" And then, very clearly, "My grandfather was a son of the Manworm."

They saw. Vermyllar was coming across the bridge. Behind him, holding a long knife half-seen in the light, was the Meatbringer, squat and ugly in his suit of goundskin. "Quiet!" the Meatbringer said, and Vermyllar stumbled onto the safety of the stone, looking up fearfully at the black door that gaped before him.

Suddenly Annelyn felt Groff's hand on his chest, pushing, pushing. "Back," the knight whispered, oh-so-softly, and this time Annelyn gladly went deeper into the shadows. Something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong.

Neither Vermyllar nor the Meatbringer was carrying a torch.

"Get up," the Meatbringer said. "Get up and walk. I'm not going to carry you."

Vermyllar rose unsteady and whimpering. "Don't," he said. "It's *dark*. I can't *see*. Don't."

The Meatbringer pricked him with the knife. "In and to the left," he said. "Feel if you can't see, animal. *Feel*." And Vermyllar went into the tunnel, groping for the wall, sobbing, seeming to look straight at Annelyn before he turned to the left. But the Meatbringer never glanced their way as he went by, prodding Vermyllar forward with his blade.

To Annelyn it seemed a solid hour that he stood in the black of the middle tunnel, but it could only have been minutes. Finally the sound of Vermyllar's protests and wails dwindled to a small noise down below them. Then Groff spoke. "No torch," he said, and even *his* stern voice seemed shaken. "The man's eyes are possessed by a gound."

"Are we going back?" Riess said.

"Back?" Groff was outlined in the red light of the door. "No. No. But we must see. A torch, we must have a torch. We will catch them. We know the way he went, and the Manworm's great-grandson was making much lament."

"Why does he want Vermyllar?" Annelyn said, in a whisper. His wits had fled him.

"I can conjecture," Groff said. "But we will see." He gave orders, and the three of them began to roam the small length of burrow, feeling for torch grips. Riess found nothing but an air duct, but Annelyn's hands finally closed over a familiar bronze fist. It held a torch.

While Riess lit it, Annelyn turned to Groff. "A fist, the work of the *yaga-la-hai*, here, in the groun-runs. How is that, Groff?"

"These were not always groun-runs. The worm-children carved these burrows, a million years ago. The grounds drove them upward in a great war, or so it is said. The burrows that have always been the grounds™ are different. Now the grounds cluster below, and the *yaga-la-hai* above; both were created many and strong, and both we and they have decayed, as all things great and small decay in the sight of the White Worm. So these tunnels and the Chambers of the Last Light and our Undertunnel are all empty where once they were full."

Riess, holding the torch, made the sign of the worm.

"Come," Groff said. "The burrow goes straight a long way, down and down, but it finally breaks, and we must not lose them."

So they began to walk—Riess with the torch and Groff with his ax, Annelyn clutching his stiletto—and they made good speed. The burrow was utterly empty: a long, wide stretch of hot-mouthed air ducts and broken bronze fists that clutched at air. Twice they passed bones—whether groun or human Annelyn could not tell; the rest was all dark nothingness. Finally, when they reached a juncture where many tunnels met and branched, they could hear Vermyllar's weeping again, and they knew which way to choose.

They followed for a long time, losing the sound twice in the maze of interconnecting burrows, but each time quickly retracing their steps when the sobs began to grow faint. These, Annelyn realized with a shiver, were the groun-runs, the real things, and *he* was in them, descending to infinity. His blue eyes grew wide and sharp, and he watched everything in the flickering torchlight: the black beckoning squares of the tunnels they passed, the endless corroded fists, row on row, the carpets of dust that lay thick in some places and were strangely absent in others. Noises, too, he heard, as he had when they waited for the Meatbringer: soft mutters and softer footsteps, growls, the stirring of impossible cold winds in tunnels not chosen, and a dim, distant rumble like nothing he had ever imagined. Real noises, phantoms, fevers of a nervous brain—Annelyn did not know. He only knew that he heard them, so that the empty burrows seemed to fill with dark and unseen life.

There was no talk. They went down and around until Annelyn had lost track of their turnings. They descended twisted stone stairways, climbed down rusted ladders in echoing empty wells (always afraid that the rungs would snap), passed wide, slanted ramps, and vast galleries that swallowed the light of their torch, and furnished chambers where all the furniture was covered with dust and worm-rich rot. Once they walked through a high-ceilinged room much like a mushroom farm; but here the water-runs were dry and empty, and the long, sunken growing tanks held only a foul-smelling fungus that glowed a faint and evil green. Another hall they found was rich with tapestries, but each of the hangings was a gray rag that came apart at the touch.

The noises went ahead of them. Always.

Groff spoke only once, when they had stopped at the end of a bricked-in tunnel and were preparing to descend another of the round, black wells. "There are no grounds left," he muttered, more to himself than to them. "These are the places they once swarmed, and now they are empty." He shook his head, and his face was troubled. "The Meatbringer goes deep."

Neither Annelyn nor Riess replied. They found the rungs, and began to climb down. Then there were more tunnels.

Finally, though, they seemed to lose the way. At first the noise was ahead of them "Vermyllar's sobs, holding steady" but suddenly the sound grew less. Groff muttered something, and the three of them walked back to the last turning and chose another burrow. But they had gone only a few steps into the blackness when they lost the sound altogether. Back again they went, and into a third path; it proved silent and bricked-in.

"This was the right way," Groff insisted when they returned yet again to the junction, "the way we went first, though the noise *did* dwindle." He led them back, and they heard Vermyllar again, but once again the sound began to fade after they had followed it a short way.

Groff turned and paced down the tunnel. "Come," he said, and Riess hurried to his side with the torch. The knight was standing next to an air duct, its breath warm around them. The torch flame danced. Annelyn saw that the duct had no gridding. Then Groff reached inside. "A rope," he whispered.

Suddenly Annelyn realized that the sounds were coming from the shaft.

Groff fixed his ax to his belt, gripped the rope with both huge hands, and swung into the plunging dark. "Follow," he ordered; then, hand under hand, he vanished below. Riess looked at Annelyn, his eyes frightened, questioning.

"Spidersilk, no doubt," Annelyn said. "It will be strong. Put out the torch and come after." Then he, too, took the jerking rope.

The shaft was warm, but not as warm as Annelyn had imagined; he did not burn. It was also narrower than he had thought; when he grew tired, he could brace his knees against one side and his back against the other, resting for a moment. The rope had a life of its own, with Groff climbing below him and Riess above, but it was strong and new and easy to hold onto.

Finally, his feet kicked free; another level had been reached, and another grid was gone. Groff grabbed him and helped him out, and both of them helped struggling, panting Riess.

They were in a small junction, where three tunnels met at the huge metal doors of a great chamber. But Annelyn saw in a glance that the rope was the only way here; all three burrows were bricked-in. It was easy to see; the chamber doors were open, and light streamed out.

They watched from the shadows near the air duct, Groff crouching low with his ax in hand, Annelyn drawing his rapier.

The chamber was a large one, perhaps the size of the Chamber of Obsidian; there all resemblance ended. Inside, the Meatbringer had mounted a throne, firing two torches that slanted from brackets atop the backrest. Their flickering light mingled with a stranger radiance, a glowering purplish gleam that came from huge fungus-encrusted globes along the walls. Vermyllar was visible, sobbing incoherently, manacled to a wheeled bed close to the Meatbringer. From time to time his body shook as he strained fitfully against the shackles that held him down, but his captor ignored his struggles.

The rest of the chamber, in the curious mixed light, was like nothing Annelyn had ever encountered before. The walls were metal, time-eaten, rust-eaten, yet still bright in places. Panels of glass studded the high, dark flanks; a million tiny windowsâ€”most of them brokenâ€”winked at the flames. Along the side walls, fat transparent bubbles swelled obscenely near the ceiling. Some of these were covered by dripping, glowing growth; others were dry and broken; still others seemed full of some faintly moving fluid. A gulf of shadows and chaos lay between the walls. There were a dozen wheeled beds like the one Vermyllar was bound to, four huge pillars that rose to the ceiling amid a web of metal ropes and bars, a heavy tank of the sort the *yaga-la-hai* used for breeding foodworms, piles of clothing (some piles fresh, others covered by mold) and weapons and stranger things, metal cases with vacant glass eyes. In the center was the Meatbringer's throne, a high seat of green-black stone. A theta of some impossibly bright silver metal was sunk into the backrest, just above his head.

The Meatbringer had closed his eyes, and was leaning back on his throne. Resting, perhaps, Annelyn thought. Vermyllar still made noises; whimpers and groans and choking sounds, words that made no sense.

"He is mad," Annelyn whispered to Groff, certain that Vermyllar's noise would cover their speech. "Or he soon will be."

"Yes," Riess said, crawling close to him. "When are we going to save him?"

Groff turned his head to face Riess. "We are not," the bronze knight said, in a flat low voice. "He deserted us. He has no claim to my protection. It is better for the *yaga-la-hai* to watch and to follow, to see what the Meatbringer does with the great-grandson of a Manworm." His tone gave no room for appeal or argument.

Annelyn shivered, and moved away from Groff, who was once again watching intently with no flicker of movement. Briefly Annelyn had lost himself, allowed himself to trust and obey the older man, simply because Groff was a knight, because Groff knew the groun-runs. Suddenly he remembered his pride and his revenge.

Riess came to him. "Annelyn," he said, his voice trembling. "What can we do?"

"Vermyllar brought this on himself," Annelyn whispered. "But we shall rescue him, if we can." He had no idea howâ€”it was one thing for Groff to face the Meatbringer with his great ax, but if the knight would not help...

Groff looked over his shoulder at them. He smiled.

Annelyn saw with a start that inside, the Meatbringer had risen. He was undressing, stripping off his suit of milk-white grounskin and his cloak of colorless groun-hair. He turned his broad back to them, a well-muscled expanse of mottled flesh, while he tossed his clothing over an arm of his throne and rummaged through a pile of other clothes.

"Groff," Annelyn said firmly, "we must save Vermyllar, useless though he is. He amuses me. There are two of us, you know, and only one of you, and you need our help." Riess, behind him, was making faint choking noises.

Groff looked at them again, and sighed. "Do either of you know the way back up?" he asked, simply.

Annelyn fell silent. He did not know the way back, he realized. They would be lost in darkness. "Riess," he started to whisper.

The Meatbringer pulled on new clothing and turned again toward Vermyllar. A knife was in his hand. He looked different. He wore a suit of fine mocha leather, and over his shoulders was draped a long cape of curling hair that glistened softly like spun gold in the firelight. He muttered something, deep in his throat, with a voice such as the gounds used in all the tales that Annelyn had ever heard.

Vermyllar was suddenly shockingly sane. "No," he shouted. "No! My grandfather was a son of the Manworm!"

The Meatbringer slit his throat, and stepped nimbly aside as the blood came out in spurts and the body twitched. He caught some of the blood in a cup, and drank it with obvious satisfaction. The rest darkened the bed and ran across the floor, one trickle coming toward the worm-children as if it knew where they lurked in the shadow.

When Vermyllar was quite still, the Meatbringer loosed his shackles, and hoisted the body up on one broad shoulder. Annelyn watched, frozen in shock, and it came to him suddenly how often the Meatbringer had walked among the *yaga-la-hai*, carrying a gound carcass in just that way.

Groff glanced quickly around when the Meatbringer started toward them. None of the burrows offered even the promise of concealment. "Down the rope," the knight whispered urgently.

"Down?" Riess asked.

"No," said Groff. "Too late. He would find us still climbing, and cut the rope." He shrugged and straightened and hefted his ax. "No matter. We know all we need. He is not of the *yaga-la-hai*, as those close to the Manworm suspected. He brings meat to both men and gounds, this Meatbringer."

Annelyn stood at Groff's side, rapier in hand, balancing nervously on the balls of his feet. Riess, trembling, yanked free a knife. The Meatbringer appeared in the doorway, Vermyllar's corpse slung over his shoulder.

The three worm-children were cloaked by shadows, in the darkest part of the junction, while the Meatbringer had just come from a well-lit chamber. It was no advantage. He looked straight at them.

"So," he said, and he shrugged, letting Vermyllar's body slide to the floor with a thunk. His own blade, long and just recently wiped clean of blood, materialized in his hand. "So," he said again. "Do the *yaga-la-hai* now come this deep?"

"Some," said Groff, lifting his ax lightly. Annelyn felt strangely light-headed and confident; bloodlust coursed through him. He would have his revenge, and Vermyllar's too. The Meatbringer could never stand before Groff. He was so squat and ugly, while the bronze knight was a near-giant, invulnerable even without his armor. Besides, *he* was there, and Riess too, though Riess hardly counted.

"What do you want?" the Meatbringer said, in the coarse low voice Annelyn remembered so well from the masque.

"To quiet your torch-tending tongue," Annelyn blurted, before Groff could answer. The Meatbringer looked at him for the first time, and chuckled.

"Who are you bringing meat to now?" Groff asked.

The Meatbringer chuckled again. "The gounds, of course."

"Are you a man? Or a new kind of gound?"

"Both. Neither. I have walked black tunnels alone for a long time. I was born a torch-tender, yes. But a special kind. Like the grounds, I see in total darkness. Like the *yaga-la-hai*, I can live and see in light. Both sorts of meat are pleasing." He showed a row of yellowed teeth. "I am flexible."

"One other question, before I kill you," Groff said. "The Manworm would know why."

The Meatbringer laughed; his thick body shook and the cape of golden ringlets danced on his shoulders. "The Manworm! *You* want to know, Groff, not your mindless master. *Why?* Because among the *yaga-la-hai* I am something less than a man, because among grounds I am something less than a groud. I am the first of the Third People. The *yaga-la-hai* decline, as do the grounds, but I go among both and plant my seed" he looked at Annelyn "in those like Caralee, and in the groud-women. Soon there will be others like me. That is *why*. And to know. I know more than your Manworm, or you, more than the Great Groud. You live lies, but I have seen and heard all who live in the House of the Worm, and I believe none of it. The White Worm is a lie, do you know that? And the Manworm. I think I even know how that came to be. A pleasant tale. Shall I tell you?"

"The Manworm is the living flesh of the White Worm," Riess said in a shrill, almost hysterical voice. "The priests shape him in that image, purifying, making him more fit to lead."

"And less fit to live," the Meatbringer said. "Until the pain drives him mad or the surgery kills him. You, Groff? Do you believe that? Or you, freethinker? See. I *do* recall you."

Annelyn flushed and brandished his rapier. Groff was a fierce bearded statue of bronze-made-flesh. "So it is in the lore of the bronze knights," he said, "and we remember things the Manworm has forgotten."

"It shocks me that the Manworm remembers anything," the Meatbringer said. "But I have talked to knights, too, learned their secret lore, listened to stories of a long-ago war. The grounds remember better. They have legends of the coming of the *yaga-la-hai*, who changed all the high burrows. The grounds are the First People, you know. The worm-children they call the Second People. I was a great puzzle to them at first, with my four limbs and my eyes that see, neither First nor Second. But I brought them flesh and learned their tongue, and so taught them of the Third People. You mock groud secrets, and in truth they are as rotting as you, yet they know things. They remember the Changemasters, their great enemies and the greatest friends of the *yaga-la-hai*, who wore the theta as a sigil, and in times long gone made the spiders and the worms and a thousand other things. Here, where I live, was where they sculptured and shaped the stuff of life, so the *yaga-la-hai* might live. Here they fashioned the blood worms that still afflict the grounds, the light-hunger that drives them upward to their deaths if they catch it, and the huge white eaterworms that multiply and grow more terrible every day. You, all of you, have forgotten these things, but the Changemasters were gods greater than your White Worm could ever be. Grounds flinch before the theta. With good reason. The *yaga-la-hai* do not remember this room and the grounds had forgotten where it was, but I found it, and slowly I learn its secrets. I learned about your Manworm here. After the grounds had brought darkness to the burrows and killed most of the Changemasters, one was left. But he had lost all the runes, and he despaired. Still, he was the ruler. The *yaga-la-hai* followed him. And he remembered how worms, a thousand kinds of worms, had been men's best weapons against the grounds, and he knew how worms flourished better down here than men. So the last Changemasters trained the surgeon-priests in a few arts and had himself made into a great worm. Then he died. You see? He wanted to fashion the Third People. He was a Changemaster, but a poor one, an animal. Since then, all the leaders of the *yaga-la-hai* are fashioned into worms. But no Third People exist. Except for myself. As I learn more Changemaster secrets, I will shape the Third People, and they will not be like the Manworm."

"You will shape nothing," Groff said. He started forward, and torchlight ran up and down the

sharp-honed blade of his ax.

"Oh?" said the Meatbringer. And suddenly he reached out, and seized the two great doors on either side of him, and swung them shut behind him, ducking beneath the whistling blade of Groff's ax in the same fluid motion. The doors came together with a great rending clang.

Darkness.

And the Meatbringer.

Laughing.

Annelyn thrust wildly into the black with his rapier, at the spot where the Meatbringer had been last. Nothing. He pierced air. "Riess," he called, frantic. "The torch, *outorch*." He heard Groff's ax swing again, and there was a jarring of metal, and a scream. A match blazed briefly; Riess, wide-eyed, held it in cupped hands. Then, before Annelyn could even get his bearings, a knife flashed in the small circle of flame and Riess's round face disintegrated in a rush of blood and the match was falling and there was darkness again and laughing. The Meatbringer, the Meatbringer. Annelyn stood blind and helpless, rapier in limp fingers. Riess dead and Groff he didn't know and the Meatbringer laughing and he was next, he Annelyn, and *he couldn't see*....

The air duct was behind him. He dropped the rapier, stepped back, fumbled for the rope in the shaft. In the darkness, a sound like a butcher cutting meat; thick fleshy chopping, and groans. Annelyn found the rope and swung out, started to climb. Something grabbed his ankle. He reached down with one hand to yank loose the grip and suddenly the other hand couldn't support him, and he was falling, *falling*, with one hand still on the rope and his palm burning, *falling*, plunging into infinite black. He threw his body back and smashed against one wall of the shaft, sliding a few feet as his knees came up and he wedged himself in painfully and took a firmer hold on the rope. Then he had it again, by both hands.

A chill went through him. The Meatbringer was up above him now. And he remembered what Groff had said, about cutting the rope. The Meatbringer would cut the rope. He would fall forever.

He kicked, and his foot met only metal. As fast as he could, he began to descend, hand under hand, down in total darkness, kicking every foot of the way. Finally his foot swung free; a new level, and the grid was gone!

He swung out and lay panting on the floor. He was a blind man now, he thought, and shuddered. Then he remembered. Matches. He had matches. All of them, he and Vermyllar and Riess, all of them had brought plenty of matches. But Riess had their torch.

Annelyn listened carefully. There was no noise from the shaft. He stood, his hand still shaking, and fumbled until he found his match box, his beautiful carved match box of fine metal and wood. He struck a match, and leaned into the air duct.

The rope was gone.

He moved his hand back and forth, just to be certain. But the rope was gone. Cut, no doubt, and fallen silently. He had no way of knowing how close he had come ... but the Meatbringer would know. The Meatbringer would know exactly where Annelyn was right now. And he would be coming.

The match burned his fingers. Startled, he blew it out, tossing it smoking down the shaft. Then he stood thinking.

The rope was cut. That meant—that meant there was no doubt left; the Meatbringer had won, Groff

was dead up above. Yes. That meant there was no way back. No, wait. It only meant that *that* way back was closed, unless the Meatbringer dropped a new rope, and Annelyn could not guess when or if that would happen. But there must be other ways up, ways that passed by the Meatbringer's level and the Chamber of the Changemasters, as the Meatbringer had called them. He had to try to find his way up. He didn't remember the exact way they'd comeâ€”Groff had been right, yesâ€”but he could tell up from down, and that might be enough. He had to start, before the Meatbringer found him. Yes.

First, he needed a torch.

He lit another match, held it high, and in its brief flicker looked around. A bronze fist, fingerless and torch-less, was just above his head to one side of the air duct. He could see little else; the match gave scant light. Then it went out, and there was no light at all again.

Annelyn considered. No doubt he would find another fist a few feet from this one, and another a few feet from that. One of them might have a torch he could use. He began to walk, one hand clutching his matches tightly, the other patting the unseen wall to make sure it was still there. When he thought he had come far enough, he struck another match. And saw another empty fist.

After he had wasted four of his matches, he tried a new method. He pocketed his match box and began to grope very carefully down the wall, *feeling* for the fists. He found eight of them that way, and a sharp stump of metal that cut his hand and had probably been a ninth. Each of them was empty, corroded. Finally, in despair, he sank to the floor.

There would be no torches. He had come too deep. Down here, though the *yaga-la-hai* had held these burrows once, the grounds had ruled for endless ages. They hated torches. It was hopeless. Up in the Undertunnel, yes, and even in the border regions, the so-called groun-runs, yes. But not here.

Yet, without a torchâ€”his matches were next to useless. They would never lead him out.

Perhaps he could make a torch, Annelyn thought. He tried to recall how torches were made. The shafts were generally wood. The crooked ones were cut from the bent yellow bloodfruit tree, after the leaves and the red-white berries had been put into the breeding tanks for the food-worms. And then there were the straight ones, longer and white, the shafts made by binding together thick strips from the stem of a giant mushroom and soaking them inâ€”what? somethingâ€”until they were hard. And then something was wrapped around the end. A cloth, soaked in something-or-other, or a greasy bag of dry fungus, or something. That was what burned. But he didn't know the details. Besides, without a torch, how could he find a bloodfruit tree or a giant mushroom? And how could he find the right fungus, and dry it, if that was what you were supposed to do? No. He could not make a torch, no more than he could find one.

Annelyn was frightened. He began to shake. Why was he down here, why, *why*? He could be up among the *yaga-la-hai*, in flamesilk and spidergray, bantering with Caralee or munching spiced spiders at a masque. Now, instead of munching, he was likely to be munched. By the grounds, if they found him, or by the Meatbringer. He remembered vividly the way the Meatbringer had quaffed the cup full of Vermyllar's lifeblood.

The thought sent Annelyn to his feet. The Meatbringer would be coming for him. He must go somewhere, even if he could not see *where*. Frantic, with one hand he pulled loose his stiletto while with the other he felt for the reassuring wall, and he began to walk.

The burrow was endlessly black, and full of terrors. The wall was the only sanity, cool and firm beside him, with its fists and its air ducts where they should be. The restâ€”there were sounds around him, rustlings and scurryings, and he was never sure if he imagined them or not. Often, in the long walk toward nothing, he thought he heard the Meatbringer laughing, laughing just as he had at the Sun Masque so long

ago. He heard it dimly and far-off, above him, below him, behind him. Once he heard it in front of him, and stopped, and held his breath and waited for an hour or perhaps a week without once moving, but there was no one there at all. After a time Annelyn saw lights too; vague shadowy shapes and drifting globes and crouching things that glowed and ran away. Or did he only think he saw them? They were always distant, or just around some bend, or glowing behind him and not there when he turned to see. He spied a dozen torches, off ahead of him, burning bright and crackling with hope, but each was snatched away or snuffed before he could run to it. He found only empty bronze fists, when he found anything at all.

He was walking very fast now, even running, and his footsteps echoed deafeningly, as if an army of the *yaga-la-hai* were trotting into battle. Annelyn didn't remember when he had begun to run; he was simply doing it, to keep ahead of the sounds, to reach the lights in front of him, and it seemed as if he had been doing it for a long while.

He had been running and running and running for what seemed like days when he lost the wall.

One moment his hand was on it, brushing the stone and the rusted teeth of the air-duct grills. Then nothing, and his hand was flailing in air, and he stumbled and fell.

It was dark. There were no lights. It was silent. There was no sound. The echoes had died. He was completely turned around. Where was he? What way had he been going? He had lost his knife.

He began to crawl, and finally he found the knife where it had dropped. Then he stood, his arms groping ahead of him, and walked toward where the wall should be. It wasn't there. He walked longer than he should have had to. Where had the wall gone? If this was only a junction, *something* should be there.

Annelyn had an idea. "Help!" he shouted, as loudly as he could. Echoes sounded, loud and then softer, bouncing, fading. His throat was very dry. He was not in a burrow. He had come out into some great chamber. He started to count his footsteps. He had reached three hundred, and lost count, when he finally came to a wall.

He felt it carefully, exploring it with his hands. It was very smooth; not stone at all, but some kind of metal. Parts of it were cool, others faintly warm, and there were one or two places "little spots no bigger than his fingernail" that seemed cold to the touch, almost icy. Annelyn decided to risk a match. Its brief flame showed him only a blank expanse of dull metal, stretching away to both sides of him. Nothing else. Nothing to indicate why some sections were warmer than others.

The match went out. Annelyn put the box away again, and began to follow the strange wall. The temperature patterns continued for a time, then stopped, then resumed again, then stopped. His footsteps echoed loudly. And his hand found no fists, no air ducts.

Exhausted at last, hoping that he had come far enough from the Meatbringer, he sank down to rest. He slept. And woke when something touched him.

The stiletto was beside him. Annelyn screamed and reached for it and struck all in the same instant, and he felt the blade cut something "cloth? Flesh? He didn't know. He was on his feet then, jabbing this way and that with his stiletto. Then, jumping around and whirling in circles, fighting vacant darkness, he began to fumble in his pocket for a match. He found one, and struck it.

The groun shrieked.

Annelyn saw it briefly in the light before it stepped back into the infinite black that surrounded him. A low crouching thing it was, covered by white skin and limp, colorless hair, dressed in gray rags. Its two rear

limbs and one of its center pair were supporting it, and it was reaching for Annelyn with its two arms and the other center limb. Its arms and legs and the middle limbs, whatever you should call them, were all too long by a good foot, and too thin, and this particular groun was holding something in one of them, a net or something. Annelyn guessed what *that* was for. Its eyes were the worst thing, because they weren't eyes at all; they were pits in the face where eyes should be, soft, dark, moist pits that somehow let the grouns see in total darkness.

Annelyn faced the groun for less than a second, then jumped forward, swinging the stiletto and throwing the match at the creature. But the groun was already gone, after one short shriek and a moment of indecision. He could imagine it circling him, getting ready to cast that net, seeing everything he did although he could see nothing. He danced around inanely, trying to face all directions at once, and he lit another match. Nothing. Then he froze, hoping to hear the groun and stab it. Nothing. Grouns had big, soft, padded feet, he remembered, and they moved very softly.

Annelyn began to run.

He had no idea where he was going, but he had to *go*. He could not fight the groun, not without a torch or some light to see by, and it would get him if he stood still, but maybe he could outrun it. After all, he had hurt it with that first stab.

He ran through the darkness, his knife in one pumping fist, praying to the White Worm that he would not run into a wall, or the Meatbringer or a groun. He ran until he was breathless again. And then, quite suddenly, there was no floor beneath him.

He fell, screaming. Then the darkness drew deeper, deeper, and Annelyn had not even fear to light his way. He had nothing at all.

* * * *

He and Vermyllar were standing together outside the great iron doors to the High Burrow of the Manworm. Groff was there too, death-still in his bronze armor, standing the ancient guard: But on the other side of the chamber doors, no knight stood, only a huge stuffed groun. It was twice the size of an ordinary groun, hideous and white, its two upper limbs frozen in a menacing, grasping pose.

"A horrible thing," Vermyllar said, shuddering.

Annelyn smiled at him. "Ah," he said lightly, "but so easy to make it beautiful!"

Vermyllar frowned. "No. What are you talking of, Annelyn? You can't make a groun beautiful. My grandfather was a son of the Manworm, and I know. There is no way."

"Nonsense," said Annelyn. "It is simple. To make a groun supremely beautiful, cover him."

"Cover him?"

"Yes. With mushroom sauce."

And Vermyllar grimaced, then chuckled despite himself, and it was a very fine moment. Except ... except ... just then the big groun came alive and chased them down the tunnel and ate Vermyllar, while Annelyn fled screaming.

* * * *

The grouns were all around him, closing in slowly, their long thin arms groping and waving evilly as they advanced on him despite his torch. "No," Annelyn kept saying, "no, you can't come any farther, you can't, you are afraid of light." But the grouns, the eyeless blind grouns, paid no mind to his

pleas or his torch. They came in and in, crouching and swaying, moaning rhythmically. At the last moment, Annelyn remembered that he had a skin of mushroom sauce at his belt, which would surely scatter them in terror, since everyone knew how grounds felt about mushroom sauce. But before he could reach it to throw at them, the soft white hands had him, and he was being lifted and carried off into the darkness.

* * * *

He was bound to a wheeled table, heavy metal shackles around his wrists and ankles, and there was pain, pain, horrible pain. He raised his head, slowly and with great difficulty, and saw that he was in the Chamber of the Changemasters. The Meatbringer, awash in the dim purplish illumination, was kneeling at the foot of the table, gnawing on his ankle. The cloak he wore looked strangely like Vermyllar.

* * * *

The visions faded. Annelyn was in darkness once more. He lay on a rough floor of rocks and dust and dirt, and sharp pieces of stone were jabbing him uncomfortably in a hundred places. His ankle throbbed. He sat up, and touched it, and finally satisfied himself that it was only turned, not broken. Then he checked the rest of his body. The bones all seemed intact, and his matches were still there, thank the Worm. But his knife was gone, lost somewhere in the run or the fall.

Where was he?

He stood, and felt his head brush a low ceiling. His ankle screamed at him, and he shifted his weight to the other foot as much as he could, and put out a hand to lean against the wall. It was all soft and crumbly, disintegrating under his touch. This was an odd burrow, a burrow of dirt instead of stone or metal. And uneven—Annelyn groped ahead hesitantly, took a step or two, and found that both ceiling and floor were woefully irregular.

Where was he?

Somehow he had fallen down here, he remembered. There had been a hole in the floor of the immense chamber, and he had been running from the groud, and suddenly he was here. Perhaps the grounds had found him and carried him to this place, but that seemed unlikely. They would have killed him. No, more likely the hole had slanted at some point, and he had been knocked unconscious, and rolled down the slope. Something on that order. At any rate, there was no hole above his head now. Only dry, crumbling ceiling, and bits of rock that showered his head when he moved.

A new fear came to him then; this burrow was soft, so very soft and dry. What if it fell in on him? Then he would be truly trapped, with no way out, ever. But where could he go?

One thing was certain; he could not stay here. The air was hotter and thicker than he liked, and he had not noticed any air ducts in these dust-dry walls. And he was hungry, too. How long had he been down here? Was it only this morning that he and Riess and Vermyllar had set out down the Undertunnel? Or a week ago? When had he last eaten, or drunk? He wasn't sure.

Annelyn began to walk, limping and favoring his sore ankle, feeling his way before him, crouching half the time when the ceiling dropped lower. Twice he hit his head on overhanging spears of stone, despite his careful progress. The bumps on his skull distracted him from his aching ankle.

Before long, the passage began to change. The walls, once dry, became faintly moist and then distinctly damp. But they remained soft—Annelyn could sink his fist into them, and squeeze the cool soil between his fingers. His boots sank deep into the floor with every step, and made squishing, sucking sounds when he pulled them free. But the air was no cleaner; it was growing thicker and more heavy and Annelyn had begun to consider reversing his direction. He thought he smelled something.

He decided to strike a match.

The flame burned for only a minute, but that was long enough for Annelyn. Something dark and feral chittered behind him, and he turned in time to see it briefly before it slid into the darkness: an eyeless furred shadow on many legs. There was a spiderweb hanging on a slant from roof to wall just behind him; he had broken it in passing with a clumsy, wandering hand. The spider was absent, perhaps eaten by some other denizen of the burrow. The walls on both sides of him were pockmarked by what looked like wormholes of all sizes. He lifted one foot, and saw that his boot was covered by a dozen small gray slugs, busily trying to chew through the tough leather. Before his match guttered out, Annelyn had plucked most of them free. They clung and made soft pops when he pulled them loose, and he crushed them between thumb and forefinger. Then he ate them. The taste was bitter, nothing like the subtle flavor of the fat slugs the *yaga-la-hai* served at their masques, and Annelyn reflected dourly that they might well poison him. But he was hungry, and the juices moistened his dusty throat.

His match burned out, and Annelyn decided to proceed. Here, at least, he had found life; behind him was only dry death. He could always turn around later if the air became much worse.

And it did become worse, as did the smell, which soon filled the burrow with a cloying sweetness that had Annelyn close to gagging. The sweetness of rot; ahead of him, something was dead in the tunnel.

He stumbled on, blind, wrinkling up his nose and trying to breathe through his mouth. He prayed to the White Worm that he could get past whatever had died.

Then he stepped in it.

One moment he was walking in damp clinging soil; the next, he felt something leathery split under his boot and he was ankle deep in mush and viscous liquid. The odor assaulted him with renewed vigor, fresh and horribly strong. Annelyn retched up the slugs he had just eaten and reeled backward, pulling free his foot.

When he had finished heaving, he leaned against the burrow wall, holding his nose, gasping, and with his free hand he found and struck a match. Then he bent forward, to see what it was. His hand was unsteady; he could hardly see anything but the match flame at first. He came closer.

The White Worm himself lay rotting in the burrow.

Annelyn drew back, frightened, and the match went out. But he lit another and recovered his nerve. Before he was finished, he had used at least ten matches; each served to illuminate only a part of the long carcass.

The worm—it was not the White Worm after all, Annelyn finally decided, though it was certainly bigger than anything *he'd* ever encountered—was far gone in its decay, past the peak of its ripeness, for which Annelyn was profoundly grateful. Even the ghost of its putrefaction was bad enough. Though shrunken in death, it filled the burrow three-quarters full, so that Annelyn had to hug the wall to squeeze by it. A thousand lesser worms and other wriggling things had feasted on its immense corpse, and a few still remained; Annelyn could see them crawling around inside, through the great worm's milky translucent skin.

The skin was part of the terror. Most of the monster's meat had decomposed into noxious fluids or had been consumed by the scavengers, but the skin was intact. It was like thick leather, cracked and brittle now, but still formidable. Not easy for an enemy to cut through. That was part of the terror, yes.

The mouth was another part. Annelyn saw it briefly by matchlight, and wasted a second match to be sure. It had teeth. Rings of them, five concentric rings each narrower than the one before, in a circular

mouth large enough to swallow a man's head and shoulders. The inner rings were bone, ordinary bone, and that was bad enough, but the outermost ring, the greatestâ€”the teeth were bluish black, glinting like ... like ... metal?

That was the second part of the terror.

The final part was its size. Annelyn measured it, match by match, step by step, struggling to get by, struggling not to choke. The worm was at least twenty feet long.

He wasted no more matches when the corpse was behind him. He plunged forward as quickly as he could, blundering noisily through the dark until the smell was only an unpleasant memory and he could breathe again. Sometime during his rush forward, Annelyn realized why this burrow was so strange. A wormhole. He giggled insanely. It must be a wormhole.

When the blackness was once again a *clean* blackness, he slowed down. There was nothing to do but press onward, after all.

He was remembering something strange the Meatbringer had said when he had been babbling about the Changemasters. Something about â€œhuge white eaterworms, who multiply and grow more terrible every day.â€• It hadn't made any particular sense then. Now, now it did. The Meatbringer had been talking of the Changemasters, of things they brought into the world to afflict the grounds. The thing that lay behind him was indeed an affliction. For the first time in his life, Annelyn felt sorrow for the grounds.

The burrow turned. He felt ahead of him and followed it around.

Then Annelyn saw a light.

He blinked, but it did not vanish; it was a small thing, a purplish glow so dark it almost blended with the blackness, but by now his eyes were very sharp for any trace of light at all. Not hurrying, he began to walk toward it, never daring to hope.

The light did not fade. It swelled as he drew nearer, growing steadily larger though scarcely any brighter. He could see nothing by it, nothing but the light itself, so dim was its glow.

After a time he saw that it was round. The end of the burrow. The wormhole came out somewhere.

When it had grown to man size and was still there, only then did Annelyn take heart and begin to tremble. He ran the last few feet, to the glowing violet circle of freedom, the magic portal that would restore his vision. He held the burrow walls with both hands as he looked through, and down.

Then he was very still indeed.

Below him was a huge chamber, bigger than the Chamber of the Changemasters. His wormhole had come out high above the floor, a round gap in a hard stone wall. He could see a hundred other wormholes with a glance, and things moving in some of them, and he could imagine a hundred others. The ceiling, the walls, the floor, all were covered by thick fungus, like that in the Meatbringer's throne room. Purple, purple, thick as a haze and ominous; the room was suffused with the vague glow of the omnipresent growth.

Annelyn barely noticed it.

There was a great tank, too, full of some liquid, and globes in the ceiling that dripped some other substance, and air ducts where ropes of fungus swayed in the hot breeze, but Annelyn took little note of them. He was watching the worms.

Eaterworms. Giants forty feet long, smaller ones like the corpse he had encountered, dead ones, and a million writhing younglings. The chamber was a nest of eaterworms, a breeding tank and nursery for the monsters. But not a prison. Not for creatures that could chew through stone, not for these nightmares with translucent flesh and iron teeth. Annelyn made the sign of the worm, then realized what he had done, and giggled. He was a dead man.

He stood despairing while shadowy shapes slid through the moist purple gloom beneath him.

But at last he began to think again. None of the things seemed to be coming toward him. He had escaped their notice, at least for now, and that fanned his tiny fire of hope. He would use whatever moments were left to him. His eyes strained, as he studied the bowl-like chamber.

Dimly, across the room, he saw lines running up and down the walls, bulging beneath the fungus, crossing on the ceiling, branching from the globes. Pipes, he thought, water pipes. The *yaga-la-hai* knew water pipes. But the knowledge was useless to him.

Other shapes, made vague and hulking by distance and growth, sat still on the floor. The worms moved over them, between them. Annelyn thought he saw metal, overgrown by purple, but he lost it quickly. No matter; it would do him no good.

On the curve of the right-hand wall, he could make out a gleam beneath a coat of fungus. His eyes followed it. There were outlines. More pipes? No. There was a design. It came clear. It was a theta, with wormholes all around it.

Annelyn touched the golden theta embroidered on his breast. Perhaps *that* was why the eaterworms had not attacked him. What was it that the Meatbringer had said? That the Changemasters had shaped the great worms and other horrors, that the Changemasters wore the theta, that they were the best champions of the *yaga-la-hai* and the worst enemies of the grounds.... Could it be that the monsters ate only grounds? That they thought *him* a Changemaster, and thus left him alone?

Annelyn couldn't believe it. A few strings of golden thread could not possibly stay those things. Annelyn looked at the right-hand wall again, then dismissed the subject from his mind.

He continued his examination of the murky chamber. And, one by one, he found the exits.

There were three of them, one on each wall. A fourth one, perhaps, lay below him, but the angle made it impossible to see. The doors to each were double, and they looked metallic. The one to the right was the closest; it lay just under the theta shape. He could make out its details, very faintly. He saw shafts, thick bars of metal running across the door, blocking it. Bolts.

Rusted in place, he thought. For how long? Impossible to move. Yet, what other answer was there? All the other ways out were wormholes; even those that looked vacant would be ground-black just a few feet away from this chamber. He would risk blundering into an eaterworm in the darkness. Anything would be better than that.

But if he stayed here, eventually he would starve, or the worms would finally notice him. He had to go either forward or back.

He knew what lay behind. The dead worm's hole was safe enough, but beyond it lay only the vast chamber and the grounds, the infinite empty blackness. He could never find the tunnel that had led him there. He would never get back.

Annelyn sighed. He had been so long in darkness. He was tired, and conscious of a change that lay like a

weight on his shoulders. He had forgotten the Meatbringer and the question of revenge. He was doomed, no matter what he did. The gounds, the Changemasters, the Third People—what difference did any of it make?

Once, at a half-remembered masque, he had called himself a freethinker. But now the ancient worship words came back to him, the mockingly obscure rote that the Manworm had intoned so often, so wearily. It had always seemed odd, in parts meaningless. But now the phrases seemed to speak to him; they danced macabre dances in his head, and came bubbling to his lips. In a hopeless voice, he began to mouth them, very quietly, much as Riess (old fat dead Riess) might have done in his place.

"The White Worm has many names," he said, unmoving, "and the children of men have cursed them all in the centuries behind us. But we are the worm-children, and we do not curse them. He cannot be fought. His is the final power in the universe, and the wise man accepts his coming, to dance and feast in what time there is left.

"So praise the White Worm, whose name is Yaggalla. And grieve not, though our lights burn dim and die.

"So praise the White Worm, whose name is Decay. And grieve not, though our energy fades and fails:

"So praise the White Worm, whose name is Death. And grieve not, though life's circle tightens and all things perish.

"So praise the White Worm, whose name is Entropy. And grieve not, though the sun goes out.

"An ending comes. Feast. The ships are gone. Drink. The struggling times are over. Dance. And praise, praise, to the White Worm."

Silence; Annelyn eyed the long, pale wrigglers moving below. How foolish it was to prolong things. The struggling times were over. He would go forward.

He tried to grab a handhold in the fungus that fringed his wormhole, but there was no strength to it, and it ripped free in his hand. So nothing remained but to jump, and hope that his legs would not crack and splinter, hope that the beckoning carpet below would prove as comforting as it looked. Annelyn turned and lowered himself; he looked down past his feet, and when the floor seemed clear enough of writhing life, he dropped.

And landed jarringly, though he tried to flex his legs under him. The growth was thick, layers on layers, waist deep; it softened his fall, but it also sent his feet skidding out from under him, and he tripped and fell in a tangle of purple threads. When he rose, on edge but unhurt, bits of glowing fungus clung to his burrow-black clothing.

Abruptly his immunity ended. A worm the size of his leg slid toward him, its mouth rippling rhythmically. Annelyn kicked free and brought his boot down on the attacker, as savagely as he could. His damaged ankle reminded him forcefully that he should not be doing such things. But the worm was forced down through the living purple mat and squashed against the floor. Its skin did not seem as thick or as strong as that of its larger cousins.

Other worms were moving beneath the fungus, pale writhings that Annelyn barely saw. One of the giants had noticed him now; it moved toward him, over the sleeping body of another. Annelyn glanced around hurriedly; worms were converging from all sides.

But the wall was only a few feet away. And the fourth door, the one he had prayed would be there. It was shut and overgrown like the others, but he would not have to walk on a hundred worms to reach it.

He struggled over to it, and felt a sharp jolt of pain just as he collapsed against the metal. A small eaterworm was boring into his thigh. Annelyn ripped it loose, whirled it around his head, and flung it spinning across the length of the chamber, to splatter on the side of the large tank. He turned back to the exit, and wildly began to rip loose fungus. There were three bolts. With the heel of his hand he hammered upward at the topmost bolt, once, twice, three times, and the heavy metal shaft finally moved an inch. Another smash, and the rust that had welded it to its brackets gave; it came free in his hands.

He turned, holding the length of metal like a club, and brought it down hard on the nearest of the eaterworms. The blow broke skin, but barely, barely; it was an old worm, as large as Annelyn. It oozed, and turned aside, colliding with one slightly larger. It did not die.

He could not fight them. He swung the club once more, then went back to the door. The middle bolt came free after three sharp knocks. The lowest shaft proved an illusion; it disintegrated into flakes of fungus-eaten rust when Annelyn wrapped his hands around it. Frantic, he pounded at the length of metal between the brackets until it fell apart, and the door was free. Something bit him. He screamed and pulled at the handles, and they came loose in his hands, but the door moved only a fraction of an inch. Then he scrabbled madly with his fingers, tearing loose a nail, wedging his hands into the slim black crack until he had purchase. He could *feel* the monsters behind him. With all his strength, he pulled backward.

The hinges screamed, the metal creaked, while fungus worked against him to keep the door shut. But it moved, it *moved!* An inch, two, then six all at once. That was enough for Annelyn. He flattened himself and held his breath and squeezed through, into the quiet dark beyond. Then he threw himself to the floor, rolling over and over and thrashing up and down, until the worm that had clung to him was only a slimy paste that coated his clothes.

When he got up, he struck a match. He did not look back at the purple hell beyond the narrow opening he had forced.

He was in a very small chamber, solid metal, round, dark. Before him was another door, also of metal, and round. In its center was a wheel.

His match went out. Fungus still hung from his besoiled garments and his fine blond hair, and more was scattered on the floor, glowing dimly. Annelyn pulled at the wheel. Nothing. He tried turning it, but it would not move. Beside it was a metal bar, in a slit. That refused to move also, until he put all his weight on it and forced it down. Then he could turn the wheel, though it spun slowly and with difficulty.

Annelyn was drenched in sweat, and the metal was moist with the wetness of his palms. But it was not rusted, he suddenly realized. It was dark and strong and cool, like something newly pulled from the forges of the bronze knights.

Hissing suddenly began, all around him. He stopped, startled, and looked over his shoulder, but none of the eaterworms had yet squeezed through, so he went back to the wheel. When it would turn no more, he pulled, and the door swung smoothly outward on its huge hinges. The hissing grew louder, and Annelyn was buffeted by a tremendous gush of moist air, rushing forward from behind him.

Then he was through, pulling the door shut. It was pitch dark again; the little fungus fragments that hung on him became worms' eyes in the blackness. But better this than risk the chamber of the eaterworms again.

His matches again. The match box rattled despairingly when Annelyn shook it. He counted the remaining matches by feeling with his fingers. A dozen left, if that; his fingers kept losing track, and he might have counted the same match twice. He chose one, grateful for its brief light.

He was standing less than a foot from a groun.

Annelyn moved, backward, in a leap. There was no sound. He came forward again, holding the flame before him like a weapon. The groun was still there. Frozen. And there was something between them. He touched it. Glass. Feeling infinitely easier, he began to move the match up and down. He lit another, and explored further.

A whole wall of grouns!

Annelyn briefly considered trying to shatter the glass and eat one of the imprisoned grouns, but discarded the idea. They were clearly stuffed; they had probably been here for more years than he had lived. And they were unusual grouns, at that. Males and females alternated, and each in the long row was partially flayed, a section of its skin peeled back to reveal inside. A different section on each groun, at that. There were also statues of grouns and groun skulls, and a six-limbed skeleton. The last groun was the most singular. Though colorless, its garments were as fine and rich as any of the *yaga-la-hai*. On its head was a metal helmet, such as a bronze knight might wear, all of black metal with a thin red window curving around the front for its eyes. And it held something, pointing it.

A tube of some sort, fashioned of the same black metal as the helmet. Strangest of all, both helmet and tube were emblazoned with silver thetas.

Annelyn used four of his matches examining the row of grouns, hoping to find something that would help him. He had so few left, but it was foolish to hoard them now. Finding nothing, he crossed the room, groping for the other wall. He tripped over a table, went around it, and collided with another. They were both empty. Finally he felt glass again.

This wall was full of worms.

Like the grouns, they were dead, or stuffed, or cased in the glass; Annelyn did not care which it was, so long as they did not move. A four-foot-long eaterworm dominated the display, but there were dozens of others as well. Most of them were unknown to him, though he had eaten worms all his life. They had one thing in common: they looked dangerous. A lot of them had teeth, which Annelyn found very disquieting. A few wore what looked like stings in their tails.

He explored the rest of the chamber; it was long and narrow, sheathed in metal, seemingly untouched by time, and capped by a large, wheeled door at each end. A lot of tables were scattered about, and metal chairs, but nothing of interest to Annelyn. Once he came across something shaped like a torch, but the shaft was metal and the head glass, totally useless. Perhaps he could fill the glass part with the glowing fungus, he thought. He tucked the instrument under his arm. Other things he found as well, bulking pillars and shapes of metal and glass, vaguely like those he had seen shattered on the edge of the bridge in the Chamber of the Last Light, and in the Meatbringer's throne room. He could not fathom their purpose.

At length, his matches all but exhausted, he went back to the wall of the grouns. Something was nagging at him, pulling at the back of his brain. He looked again at the last groun in the row, then at the tube. That was being held almost like a weapon, Annelyn decided. And it bore a theta. It might be useful. He took the metal shaft of the thing-that-was-almost-a-torch, and smashed at the thick glass with a series of sharp blows. It cracked and cracked and cracked some more, but did not shatter. Finally, when his arm had begun to ache, Annelyn ripped through with his hands, clawing aside splinters of not-quite-glass that still hung maddeningly together. He grabbed the groun's tube, and began to play with its various bars and handles.

A few minutes later, he discarded it with disgust. Useless, whatever it had been.

Something still bothered him. He lit another match and considered the helmeted groun. A wrongness there....

It hit him. The helmet, the reddish window. But a groun had no eyes! Annelyn widened the gap he had made in the glasslike wall, and lifted the helmet from the dead groun's head.

This groun had eyes.

He moved his match very close. Eyes, all right; small and black, sunk deep in moist sockets, but definitely eyes. Yet this groun was the only eyed groun in the wall; the next one down, a heavy female, was eyeless, as were all the rest.

His match died. Annelyn tried on the helmet.

Light was all around him.

He shouted, whirled, bobbed his head up and down. He could see! He could see the whole room, in a glance! Without a match, or a torch! He could see!

The walls were glowing, very faintly, smoky red. The metal pillars—eight of them, he saw now—were bright orange, though the other metallic shapes remained shadowed. The doors were dark, but yellowish light leaked around the edge of the one he had come through. It pulsed. The very air seemed to give a dim light, a ghostly glow that Annelyn found hard to pin down. The dead grouns and the worms opposite stood in rows like soot-gray statues, outlined by the illumination around them.

Annelyn's fingers found the theta on the crest of the helmet. He was wearing a rune of the Changemasters, clearly! But—but why had it been on a *groun*?

He considered the question for an instant, then decided that it did not matter. All that mattered was the helmet. He picked up his metal shaft again, a cool gray stick in the smoldering reddish chamber. The glass at its end had been broken into jagged shards by his efforts to smash through the window. That was fine. It would make an excellent weapon. Almost jauntily, Annelyn turned toward the far door.

The burrow beyond was dark, but it was a darkness he could deal with, a darkness he had dealt with every day of his life in the dimly lit tunnels of the *yaga-la-hai*; it was made of shadows and vague shapes and dust, not the total blackness he had wandered in since fleeing the Meatbringer. Of course, it was not really like that—once, hesitantly, he lifted the helmet and instantly went blind again—but he cared little, if he could see. And he *could* see. The cool stone walls were a faded red, the air faintly misty and alight, and the ducts he passed were orange-edged maws that spewed streams of reddish smoke out into the burrows, to curl and rise and dissipate.

Annelyn walked down the empty tunnel, for once imagining no sights and hearing no noises. He came to branchings several times and each time chose his way arbitrarily. He found shadowed stairways and climbed them eagerly, as far up as they would take him. Twice he detoured uneasily around the man-sized, dimly radiant pits he recognized as wormholes; one other time, he glimpsed a live eaterworm—a sluggishly moving river of smoke-dark ice—crossing a junction up ahead of him. Annelyn's own body, seen through the helmet, glowed a cheerful orange. The bits of fungus that still hung from his tattered clothing were like chunks of yellow fire.

He had been walking for an hour when he first encountered a live groun. It was less bright than he himself, a six-limbed specter of deep red, a radiant wraith seen down a side burrow out of the corner of his eye. But soon Annelyn observed that it was following him. He began to walk closer to the wall, feeling his way as if he were blind, and the groun who ghosted him grew more bold. It was a large one, Annelyn

observed, cloth hanging from it like a flapping second skin, a net trailing from one hand, a knife in the other. He wondered briefly if it could be the same groun he had met before.

When he reached a stairway, a narrow spiral between two branching corridors, Annelyn paused, fumbled, and turned: The groun came straight on toward him, lifting its knife, padding very quietly on its soft feet. Oddly, Annelyn discovered that he was not afraid. He would smash in its head as soon as it crept close enough.

He lifted his glass-edged club. The groun came nearer. Now he could kill it. Except, exceptâ€”somehow he didn't want to. â€œStop, groun,â€• he said instead. He was not quite sure why.

The groun froze, edged backward. It said something in a low guttural moan. Annelyn understood nothing of it. â€œI hear you,â€• he said, â€œand I see you, groun. I am wearing a rune of the Changemasters.â€• He pointed at the theta stitched in gold on his breast.

The groun gibbered in terror, dropped its net, and began to run. Annelyn ruefully decided that he ought not to have drawn attention to his theta. On impulse, he decided to follow the groun; perhaps, in its fear, it would lead him to an exit. If not, he could always find his way back to the stair.

He pursued it down three corridors, around two turns, before he lost sight of it entirely. The groun had been running very quickly, while Annelyn was still getting an occasional twinge from his ankle, making it difficult to keep up. Yet he continued on after the groun had vanished, hoping to pick up the trail again.

Then the creature reappeared, running *toward* him. It saw him, stopped, glanced back over a shoulder. Then, seemingly determined, it resumed its headlong, four-legged gallop, one of its remaining limbs brandishing its knife.

Annelyn flourished his club, but the groun did not slow. Then inspiration struck. He reached into his pocket, and produced his last match.

The groun shrieked, and four long legs began to scabble madly on the burrow floor as it skidded to a halt. But it was not the only one surprised. Annelyn himself, dazzled by the coruscating brilliance that seemed to stab into his brain, choked and staggered and dropped the match. Both of them stood blinking.

But something else moved. A cold gray shadow was drifting down onto the groun, filling the tunnel like a wall of mist. The front of it rippled in and out, in and out, in and out.

Annelyn shook his head, and the eaterworm loomed clear.

Without thought, he jumped forward, swinging his club over the head of the groun. The blow glanced harmlessly off the worm's leathery skin. Then Annelyn drew back, kicked the groun to get it moving, and thrust his glass-edged pole into the contracting mouth of the attacker.

He was running then, the groun next to him, darting around narrow turns until he was certain that they'd lost the worm. They retraced their old footsteps, and the narrow stair appeared in their path.

The groun stopped, and swung to face him. Annelyn stood with empty hands.

The groun raised its knife, then cocked its head to one side. Annelyn matched the motion. That seemed to satisfy the creature. It sheathed the blade, squatted in the dust thick on the burrow floor, and began to sketch a map.

The groun's finger left glowing trails that lingered for a time, then faded rapidly. But the symbols it used

meant nothing to Annelyn. "No," he said, shaking his head. "I cannot follow."

The groun looked up. Then it rose, gestured, and started up the stair, glancing back to see if Annelyn was behind it. He was.

They climbed that stair and another, walked through a series of wide burrows, pulled themselves up rust-eaten ladders through narrow wells. Then came more tunnels, the groun looking back periodically, Annelyn following docilely. He was nervous, but he kept telling himself that the groun *could* have killed him before; surely if that had been what it intended, it would have done so by now.

Other grouns moved through the burrows. Annelyn saw one, a skeletal red shape with a long sword and one missing limb, and then two together with knives crouching near a junction. They gave him ominous eyeless looks. Later, they passed whole crowds of grouns, some of them in long garments that dragged on the floor and shone softly in many colors. All gave him a wide berth. He saw worm-holes, too, most dark and cold, others ringed by faint halos that sent chills up his spine.

After more climbing and turning than Annelyn cared to remember, they came out into a large chamber. A dozen grouns sat over smoking bowls at long metal tables, shoveling food into their mouths. They regarded him impassively.

Annelyn caught the scent of food—a fungus mush, torch-tenders' food—and was suddenly, ravenously hungry. But no one offered him a bowl. His guide spoke to another groun seated near the center of the table, a grossly fat individual with an enormous, misshapen head. Finally the huge groun—he must have weighed more than Groff, Annelyn thought—shoved aside his bowl of steaming food, rose, and came over to Annelyn. His head moved up and down, up and down, as he inspected the intruder. Four soft hands began to pat him all over, and Annelyn gritted his teeth and tried not to flinch. It wasn't as bad as he had expected. He found himself regarding the new groun almost like a person, instead of a thing.

The fat groun cocked his head to one side. Annelyn remembered and did the same. The groun joined four hands together in a huge fist, raised it, lowered it. Annelyn, with only two hands, did his best to mimic the gesture.

Then the groun held up one finger, and jabbed at his own chest with another hand. Annelyn started to imitate him, but the groun restrained him. This was something more than a vision test. Annelyn was still.

The groun held up two fingers on a hand of an upper limb, his two middle limbs went out to either side, and his great body shook. His opposing upper arm came up, and *that* hand flashed three fingers. The groun looked from one hand to the other and back again, then repeated the gesture. He looked at Annelyn, and was still.

Annelyn glanced from the groun's upper right hand—two fingers—to the upper left—three. The Meatbringer's words returned to him. He raised his own hand, and spread three fingers.

The groun lowered all his hands, and again the immense body quivered. He turned back to another of his kind, and they spoke together in their soft, mournful way. Annelyn could not follow their talk, but he hoped he had made himself understood.

Finally the leader turned and walked back around the table, seated himself, and returned to his bowl of fungus. Annelyn's erstwhile guide took him by the elbow, and beckoned him to follow. They went together from the chamber. The groun began leading him upward once more.

As they walked on and on, climbing one ladder after another and ascending stairways only to descend

others, wandering through long burrows full of grouns shuffling and muttering, Annelyn grew increasingly conscious of his exhaustion. Whatever magic had kept him functioning until now was rapidly wearing offâ€”his ankle hurt, his thigh hurt, his hands hurt, he was starved and parched and filthy, and he badly needed rest and sleep. But the groun showed no mercy, and Annelyn could only strive to keep up with his rapid pace.

Afterward, of all the burrows they passed through, only a few pictures lingered in his memory.

One time, the two of them walked down a narrow passage that was frightfully, eerily cold; the gloom was thick enough to cut, and Annelyn saw pipes, intensely black and throbbing, along the low ceiling. Wisps of ebony fog curled around them, then fell like slow streamers to the floor; Annelyn and the groun walked boot deep in chilled black mist. Under the pipes, wicked metal hooks curved outward. Most of them were empty, but two held the carcasses of rope-thin worms of a kind Annelyn had never encountered. A third held poor fat Riess, naked and dead, an obscene carving of obsidian, with a hook in the back of his neck so he dangled grotesquely. Annelyn started to make the sign of the worm, stopped himself, and shuffled by. If he had held up two fingers instead of three, he suspected, he might now occupy the hook right next to his one-time friend.

Two others chambers struck him forcefully, for both were among the largest open spaces he had ever seen. The first of these was so hot that sweat ran down his arms, while the orange glare of the air stung his eyes. It was a room so large he could barely see the far side. Pipes were everywhere, thick and thin, some strangely dark and others brilliant, like metal worms running over floor and walls and ceilings. The vast spaces above were filled by a web of thin bridges and ropes: up there, Annelyn glimpsed a thousand grouns, limber on six legs and born to the air, scampering up and down and around on the web, turning wheels and pushing bars, tending five immense shapes of metal that stood several levels high and burned with stabbing white light. His guide led him through the chamber on ground level, detouring through the maze of pipes, while the other grouns swung by and paid them little attention.

The second chamber, three levels higher and long minutes later, was just as huge, but desolate. No light here, no shapes of metal, no ropes or bridges; and the only groun Annelyn saw here was a lone, armed hunter who stood like a tiny red bug in the far distance across the room, and watched them as they passed. The floor and the walls were stone, dusty and dry and melancholy, but in places they were lined by a metal paneling that shone faintly with lights of many different hues. When Annelyn and his guide walked near one of these, he saw that a picture was glowing on the panel. It was an intricate, la-bored depiction of sword-swinging grouns battling a giant whose eyes were thetas and whose fingers were worms. He had to look hard and long to make sense of the scene, however; as with the tapestries of the *yaga-la-hai*, here too the colors were dim and fading, and rust had eaten black, flaking holes in some of the panels. One more thing Annelyn noted about the great, abandoned chamber: wormholes. The floor was full of them.

Afterward, they went straight for a long time. Annelyn noticed broken bronze fists on the walls then, and some of his weariness lifted. He was closer to home. The *yaga-la-hai* had lived here once.

Abruptly, the groun stopped. Annelyn stopped too.

They stood beside an air duct. It had no grill. Annelyn smiled wanly, leaned forward, and reached inside. His hand brushed rope.

The groun made an odd sweeping gesture, turned, and set off back the way he had come, moving rapidly on four limbs. Soon Annelyn was alone. He reached into the warm shaft, gripped the rope, and started to climb. This time he could see where he was going. The metal sides around him were a friendly reddish color, the air faintly misty and moving steadily upward, past him. When he was between levels, he could

look up and down, and in both directions see the shadowed squares of exits.

He swung out one level up, and removed his helmet, cradling it under his arm. The great metal doors hung open. Annelyn stood in shadows, and let his eyes adjust to the pale, purple gloom. The fungus-encrusted globes still shone in the Chamber of the Changemasters, but the torches had been snuffed. Of the Meatbringer, he saw no sign. He waited until he was sure, then went inside.

The first thing he took up was a weapon. His own rapier was there, on top of a pile of rusting blades, and he reclaimed it with satisfaction. He tested Groff's great ax, lying up against the throne, but found it too heavy and awkward. Instead, he slid Vermyllar's dagger into his belt, and Riess's into a boot. If he were to blood the Meatbringer, it seemed appropriate to use those tools.

Then he wandered around the chamber, picking at things, exploring, searching for food. He finally found a cache of meat, strips salted and hung. Plenty of good white groun-meat, and some other kind as well. But Annelyn found he could eat none of it. He settled for a bowl of spiced spiders and a plate of mushrooms.

After eating, he rested on one of the wheeled beds, too tired to sleep, and too frightened. Instead, he scrutinized a book he had found lying open beside the throne. Its covers were heavy leather, impressed with the theta and a row of symbols, but the pages inside had not endured the long passage of time as well. Some were missing entirely, others were damp and overgrown by paper mold, and the few fragments still legible made no sense to Annelyn. The symbols were vaguely like the writing in the crumbling libraries kept by the Manworm; Annelyn had learned to read a little of it from Vermyllar, who in turn had learned the dark art from his grandfather. It did not help. He could puzzle out a word here, guess at one on the page following, and yet another, ten chapters on, but never two words together that made sense. Even the pictures were meaningless tangles of lines, depicting nothing that he recognized.

Annelyn set the book aside. Noises were coming from the air duct. He stood, took his helmet and rapier, and went outside the chamber doors to wait.

The Meatbringer emerged from the shaft, dressed in white grounskin with a colorless cloak. Ropes of spidersilk bound the body of a small male child to his back. The boy was of the *yaga-la-hai*.

Annelyn stepped forward.

The Meatbringer looked up, startled. He had begun to untie the knots that held his prey. Now his hand went to his knife. "So," he said. "You."

"Me," said Annelyn. His rapier was extended, his helmet cradled by his free hand.

"I searched for you," the Meatbringer said. "After I hung a new rope."

"I fled," said Annelyn, "knowing that you would search."

"Yes," the Meatbringer said, smiling. His knife came out, a whisper of metal on leather. "I feared you were lost. This is better. The grouns pay well for meat. Your friends, by the way, were delicious. Except for the knight. Unfortunately, he was quite tough."

"I wonder how you will taste," Annelyn said.

The Meatbringer laughed.

"I suspect your flesh would be foul," Annelyn continued. "I will not eat you. Better you be carrion for the eaterworms."

"So," said the Meatbringer. "More of your great wit." He bowed. "This meat I carry hampers me. May I cut it loose?"

"Certainly," said Annelyn.

"Let me place it inside, out of the way," the Meatbringer said. "So we might not trip over it."

Annelyn nodded, and circled warily to the side, suppressing a smile. He knew what the Meatbringer intended. The other took his knife and slit the knots that bound the child to his back, then placed the body on the far side of the door. He turned, framed by the purplish light.

Laughing, he said, "The *yaga-la-hai* and the grounds, you are so alike. Animals." He reached out and swung shut the wide doors, and again Annelyn's ears rang to the clang he had heard once, long ago.

"No," Annelyn said. "Alike, yes. But not animals." He put on his helmet. The thick darkness vanished like a mist.

The Meatbringer had danced silently and deftly to one side. A great grin split his face, and he advanced with stealthy steps, his knife ready to thrust and disembowel.

If Annelyn "like the late, unfortunate Groff" had tried a rush attack on the place where the Meatbringer had *been*, in the last instant of light, the thrust would have left him open and vulnerable to a fatal stab from the Meatbringer where he now *was*. It was a crafty, polished technique; but Annelyn could see. For once, darkness and deception were of no use. And Annelyn's rapier was longer than the Meatbringer's knife.

Quickly, easily, casually, Annelyn turned to face his enemy, smiled beneath his helmet, and lunged. The Meatbringer hardly had time to react; it had been years since he had fought on even terms. Annelyn ran him through the abdomen.

Afterward, he pushed the body down the air shaft, and prayed that it would fall eternally.

* * * *

The Masque of the Manworm was still in progress in the High Burrow when Annelyn returned to the *yaga-la-hai*. In the dusty libraries, men in dominoes and women in veils writhed and spun; the treasure rooms were open for viewing, the pleasure chambers open for other things; in the Highest Hall, the Second Vermentor lay beneath a thousand torches while the worm-children danced past him, and sang chants of his demise. The Manworm had no face now; he was one with the White Worm. Beside him, the priest-surgeons stood, in white smocks with scalpel-and-theta, as they had stood for a week. The Seventh Feast had just been laid.

Caralee was there, bright golden Caralee, and the bronze knights, and many who had once been friends of Annelyn. But most only smiled and made soft witticisms when he came striding unexpectedly through the doors.

Some, perhaps, did not recognize him. Only a short time ago, at the Sun Masque, he had been brilliant in silk and spidergray. Now he was painfully gaunt, cut and bruised in a dozen places, his eyes restless in dark hollows, and the only clothes he wore were black tatters that hung on him like a mushroom farmer's foul rags. His face was bare, without so much as a domino, and that set the guests to muttering, since the time of unmasking had not yet come.

Very soon they had more to mutter about. For Annelyn, this strange, changeling Annelyn, stood silently in the door, his eyes jumping from one mask to another. Then, still silent, he walked across the gleaming

obsidian floor to the feasting table, seized an iron platter piled high with fine white groundflesh, and flung it violently across the room. A few laughed; others, not so amused, picked slices of meat from their shoulders. Annelyn went from the room.

Afterward, he became a familiar figure among the *yaga-la-hai*, though he lost his flair for dress and much of his fine wit. Instead, he spoke endlessly and persuasively of forgotten crimes and the sins of bygone eons, painting deliciously dark pictures of monster worms who bred beneath the House and would one day rise to consume all. He was fond of telling the worm-children that they ought to lie with grounds, instead of cooking them, so that a new people might be fashioned to resist his nightmare worms.

In the endless long decay of the House of the Worm, nothing was so prized as novelty. Annelyn, though considered coarse and most unsubtle, wove entertaining tales and had a spark of shocking irreverence. Thus, though the bronze knights grumbled, he was allowed to live.

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