

A Question of Guilt

MUCH OF THE pit's four-acre floor was in shadow, but reflection from the white limestone of the eastern walls kept it from being wholly dark. Its three occupants could easily have seen the watcher if they had chanced to look toward him. However, his silence and their own occupation combined to leave him unnoticed. He stood motionless in the tunnel mouth a few yards above the pit floor, and looked at them with an expression on his thin face which would have defied reading by the keenest beggar of Rome.

There was nothing remarkable about those he watched. Two were women: one a girl not yet twenty and the other ten or twelve years older. The third was a boy of five or six. They were playing some game which involved throwing two fist-sized sacks of sand or earth back and forth, apparently at random. The child's shouts of glee whenever one of his companions missed a catch echoed between the walls of the sinkhole. More decorous chuckles and an occasional cry of encouragement from the older woman reached the witness's ears at longer intervals.

The eyes in the lean, pale face seldom left the boy. Unlike the women, whose clothing somewhat hampered their activity, his thin body and thinner limbs were nearly bare. The short, kiltlike garment of brightly dyed wool which was his only covering left him free to leap and twist as the game demanded. It was these actions the watcher followed, marking each move of the pale-skinned body and nervous little hands, noting each bit of clumsiness that let a bag reach the ground, each leap and shriek of triumph as a double catch was made. The tiny fellow was holding his own—perhaps even winning—against his older adversaries, but no one could have been quite sure whether this was due to his own agility or their generosity. Perhaps the watcher was trying to learn as he stood in the shadow of the tunnel mouth.

The game went on, while shade covered more and more of the garden which made up the pit's floor. The players began to slow down, though the child's shouts were as loud as ever; if he was getting tired, he did not intend to admit it. It was the older woman who finally called a halt.

"Time to rest now, Kyros. The sun is going." She pointed toward the western lip of the pit.

"There's still plenty of light, and I'm not tired."

"Perhaps not, but you must be getting hungry. Unless Elitha and I stop playing, there will be no food cooked." The boy accepted the change of subject without actually surrendering.

"Can't I eat before cooking is done?" he asked. "There must be things to eat that don't have to be cooked." The older woman raised her eyebrows quizzically at the other.

"There may be something," was the answer to the unspoken question. "I will see. You could both stay in the light while it is with us, mistress." The girl turned toward the watcher, and saw him instantly.

Her gasp of surprise caught the attention of the other two, and they looked in the same direction. The boy, who had been about to fasten a light woolen cloak about his shoulders, dropped it with a yell of joy and dashed toward the tunnel mouth. The older woman shed the dignity which had marked her even during the game, and sprang after him with a cry.

"Kyros—wait!"

The girl echoed the words, but acted as well. She was closer than the boy to the tunnel, and as he rushed past her she reached out quickly and caught him up, swinging him around and almost smothering him for a moment in the folds of her garment. She held him while the other woman passed her, and the silent man came toward them down the slope of rubble which led from the tunnel to the pit's floor.

As the two met at its foot the girl let her captive go. He instantly resumed his dash toward the embracing couple; reaching them, he danced up and down and tugged at their clothing until an arm reached out and drew him into the close-locked group. Elitha stopped a few yards away and watched them, quietly smiling.

At length the older woman stepped back, still gazing at the newcomer. The latter now held the boy on his left arm, looking at him as he had for the many minutes of the game. It was his wife who spoke first.

"Four months. It has seemed like the year you thought it might be my own." He nodded, still looking

at the child.

"A hundred and thirty-one days. It was long for me, too. It is good to see that all is well here." She smiled.

"Well indeed. Open your mouth and show your fa-ther, Kyros." The boy's response might have been mere obedience, but looked more like a grin of triumph. The man started, and his grip on the small figure tightened momentarily as he saw the gap in the grin.

"A tooth—no, two of them! When?"

"Forty days ago," his wife said quietly.

"What trouble?"

"None. They loosened not long after you had gone. Elitha watched him carefully, and we were very particu-lar about his food. He was very good most of the time, though I never knew him to be so fond of apples. But he kept his hands away from the loose teeth, and finally they just fell out—on the same day."

"And?"

"That was all. No trouble." Slowly the man put his son down, and for the first time a smile appeared on his face. Elitha spoke for the first time.

"You two will want to talk. I would like to hear what has happened on your journey, Master, but the meal must be prepared. Kyros and I will leave you and—"

"But I want to hear, too!" cried the child.

"I will not talk about my adventures until we have all eaten, Kyros, so you will miss nothing. Go along with Elitha, and be sure she makes food I like. Do you re-member what that is?" The gap-toothed grin appeared once more.

"I remember. You'll see. Come on, Elitha!" He turned to dash up the slope, and the girl moved quickly to take his hand.

"All right," she said. "Stay with me so I don't fall; the stones are rough." The man and wife watched sob-erly as the other two disappeared into the tunnel; then the mother turned quickly to face her husband.

"Tell me quickly, my own. You said you might be gone a year. Did you come back now because you learned something, or—" She stopped, and tried to make her face inscrutable, but failed signally. The man put an arm about her shoulders.

"I did learn something, though not nearly what I hoped. I came back because I couldn't stay away—though I was almost afraid to come, too. If I had known of Kyros's teeth I might have been able to stay longer." The woman's face saddened slightly. "I might have, my Judith; I don't know that I would have."

"What did you learn? Have other healers spoken or written of this trouble? Have they learned how to cure it?"

"Some of them know of it. It is mentioned in writings, some of them many years old. One man I talked to had seen a person who had it."

"And cured him—or her?"

"No," the man said slowly. "It was a little boy, like ours. He died, as—" Both their heads turned slowly to the north side of the garden, where three small mounds were framed in carefully tended beds of flowers. The woman looked away again quickly.

"But not Kyros! There was no trouble when his teeth came out! It's not like that with him!" Her husband looked at her gravely.

"You think we have wasted effort, being so careful with him? You have forgotten the bruises, and the lameness he sometimes has? You would go back to live in Rome and let him play and fight with other chil-dren?"

"I wouldn't go back to Rome in any case, and I'd be afraid to have him play with other children or out of my sight," she admitted, "but why was there no trouble from the teeth? Or are teeth just different? None of the others"—she glanced toward the graves again—"lived long enough to lose teeth. Little Marc never grew any." She suddenly collapsed against him, sobbing. "Marc, dear Marc, why do you try? No man can fight the gods, or the demons, who have cursed us—who have cursed me. You'll only anger them further. You know it. You must know it. It was just not for us to have children. I bore you four

sons, and three are gone, and Kyros will—"

"Will what?" There was sternness in the man's voice. "Kyros may die, as they did; no man can win all his battles, and some men lose them all. If he does, though, it will not be because I did not fight." His voice softened again. "My dearest, I don't know what I, or you, or we may have done to offend before I started to fight for the lives of my sons, You may be right in thinking that it is a punishment or a curse, but I cannot cringe before a man and don't like to before a god. Certainly if men had attacked and slain my sons, you would think little of me if I did not fight back. Even when the enemies are not men, and I cannot see them to fight them directly, I can hope to learn how they attack my children. Perhaps I can find a shield, even if there is no sword. A man must fight somehow or he isn't a man."

The mother's sobs were quieter, though the tears still flowed.

"He might be a man, but he wouldn't be you," she admitted. "But if no healer in all the world has learned how to fight this thing, why do you think it can be fought? Men are not gods."

"Once there must have been a healer who first learned how to set broken bones, or cool fevers. How he must have learned is easy to guess—"

"The gods told him! There is no other way. Either you learn from another person or you learn from the gods."

"Then perhaps the gods will tell me what to do to keep Kyros alive."

"But surely they will not, if they have brought the sickness to punish us. Why should they tell you how to take it away again?"

"If they won't, then maybe the demons will. It's all the same to me; I will listen to anyone or anything able to help me save my son's life. Wouldn't you?"

Judith was silent. Defending her children was one thing, but defying the gods was quite another. A more thoughtful husband would not have pressed the ques-tion; a really tactful one would not have asked it in the first place. Seeing into the minds of other people, even those he loved best, was not a strong point with Marc of Bistrita.

"Wouldn't you?" he repeated. There was still no an-swer, and his wife turned away so that he could not see her face. For several seconds she just stood there; then she began to walk slowly toward the tunnel, stumbling a little as she reached the irregular heap of stones which formed the "stairway" to its mouth. The man watched for a moment in surprise; then he hastened after her to help. He did not repeat the question again; he was sometimes slow, but seldom really stupid.

No more words were exchanged as they made their way up to the opening and into the deepening darkness beyond. The tunnel was very crooked, and the last trace of daylight from the pit quickly vanished. The only illu-mination came from pottery oil lamps which were more useful in telling direction than in revealing what was actually underfoot.

Then the way opened into a cavern some forty feet across. It was well lighted, to eyes accustomed to the blackness of the tunnel; half a dozen lamps flickered around the walls. In a grotto at one side a small fire glowed. An earthenware pot was supported over it on a bronze trivet. Steam from the pot and smoke from the fire swirled together through a crack in the top of the grotto.

Elitha and the child were kneeling a yard or two from the blaze, working on something which could not easily be made out from across the cavern. As his par-ents came nearer, however, they saw that the child was cracking nuts with a bit of stone and carefully extract-ing the meats, which he placed in a clay bowl beside him. The girl was arranging other dishes for the meal, which seemed nearly ready. Except for the background, it was a typical family scene—the sort that Marc of Bis-trita had known all too seldom in his forty-five years of life, and was to know very seldom in the future.

As he and his wife settled to the stone floor by the others, the boy grinned up at them; and it was the tiny distraction of their arrival which changed the atmo-sphere. The rock which he was using as a nutcracker landed heavily on his finger instead of the intended tar-get. There was a startled cry, and a flood of tears which was stopped without too much trouble; but there was also a portion of skin scraped from the finger, and it was this which took most of the attention of Marc and his wife. The injured spot was oozing blood—not much by ordinary skinned-finger standards, but their stand-ards were not ordinary.

The two women paled visibly, even in the poor light of the cavern. The man showed little facial change, but he acted. He drew a dagger from inside the cloak which still enveloped him and made a small cut in his own fin-ger. The boy did not see this; his mother was still com-forting him. Both women saw and understood, however, and both were visibly distracted during the meal which followed. Marc had seated himself so that his own cut was not visible to the boy, and had begun to tell the prom-ised adventures; but the eyes of mother and maid flick-ered constantly from one injured finger to the other. Twice Elitha spilled food. Several times Judith was un-able to answer questions asked by her son, or made ran-dom comments which quite failed to fit the situation. Kyros became quite indignant, at last.

"Mother! Aren't you listening to what Daddy says?" The shrill, shocked voice did catch her attention. "Didn't you hear what he told the soldier at—"

"I'm afraid I was thinking of something else, little one," she interrupted. "I'm sorry; I'll be good and listen more carefully. What would you have said to the sol-dier?" The question turned the youngster's thoughts back to his father's account, and saved her from having to explain what she could possibly be thinking about which was more interesting than adventures in the out-side world. She tried to listen to Marc's words, but nei-ther her eyes nor her thoughts could leave the two trifling injuries while the meal lasted, or for the hour or more afterward while Elitha cleared the dishes. She almost hated the man as his talk went on; she wanted to get the child to his bed so that the conversation could turn to the only point which meant a thing to her then. Marc, whatever his failings as a diplomat, could hardly have been entirely ignorant of this; but in spite of his wife's feelings he focused his entire attention on the boy. He kept the child enthralled with accounts of what had happened—or might have happened—on the six-week walk to Rome, and the stay there, and the return. The tales went on while the little fellow gradually ceased his excited responses and settled at Judith's side, with his eyes still fixed on his father's face. They went on while Elitha finished her work and seated herself at Kyros' other side. They went on until yawns too big to conceal began to appear on the small face; and then the stories ceased abruptly.

"Time you slept now, son," Marc said gently.

"No! You haven't said what happened after—"

"But you're sleepy. If I tell you now, you'll forget and I'll just have to tell you all over again next time."

"I'm not sleepy!"

"You are, Kyros. You're very sleepy. You've been yawning all through my story from Rome to Rimini. Elitha will take you to your room, and you will sleep. Perhaps tomorrow we can finish the story." For a long moment the eyes of the man and his son held each other in silence; then the youngster gave a shrug which he must have acquired from his father's mannerisms, took Eli-tha's proffered hand, and got to his feet. He tried to look reproachfully at Marc, but the gap-toothed grin broke through in spite of his efforts. He finally laughed, gave good-night hugs to his parents, and went off hap-pily with the girl.

The mother waited until the two were presumably out of hearing along the passage, and then turned to her husband.

"I told you. He's going to be all right. The finger has stopped bleeding."

"True." The man's answer was slow, as though he were trying to find the happy medium between absolute truth and the woman's peace of mind. "It's stopped now. It took time, though. Mine had stopped while we were eating, but his was still flowing after we were finished—long after Elitha had replenished the fire at least twice."

"It wasn't flowing very hard."

"It wasn't much of a cut. The one I gave myself was worse—I made sure of that. No, my dear, the curse is still there; maybe not as badly as with the others; maybe I won't have to fight as hard as I expected; but if we are to see Kyros grow to manhood I will have to fight."

"But how can such a thing be fought? You said it yourself—there is no enemy one can see. There is noth-ing you can do. It isn't like the broken bones you men-tioned; a person could see what was sensible to do, in something like that."

"It is very much like a fever, though, in one way," her husband pointed out. "There is nothing one can see to fight, but we have learned about medicines which cool the body. I talked to one of Aurelius' army healers when I was in Rome, and he reminded me of that. I knew it, of course, but I had been feeling as

discouraged as you, and he was trying to point out grounds for hope."

"But you can't just try one medicine after another on Kyros."

"Of course not. I want to save him, not poison him. I don't yet know the battle plan, my dearest, but I will fight as a general rather than a soldier who simply slashes at all in his path. I must think and work both; it will take time—probably a long time."

"And I cannot help you. That's the worst part; I can only watch the boy—"

"Which is the most important of the task." Judith ignored the interjection.

"—and will have no idea whether each new day's play may give him a hurt from which you are not yet armed to save him."

He laid a hand on her shoulder, and with the other turned her face toward him.

"You can help, dear heart, and you will. You are wiser than I in many ways—I learned that before we had known each other a week. We have talked and thought, studied and lived together for twelve years now; how could I doubt your ability to help? You would not have left Rome with me, and come to live in this wilderness, if you had not been so much like me as to value this sort of life more than all Rome could offer. You know why I loved you, and why I still love you."

She smiled briefly.

"I know; but even you need to talk with other people sometimes—not just for this, but years ago when you first left this place to visit Rome. We wouldn't have met, had you been completely satisfied with solitude."

"Well, it is good to talk to people who think of some-thing besides boats, nets, and planting. I'm quite glad I went to the city; I'd have stayed there if you had insisted, even with its noise and smells. I still think the silence here is better, though, and I loved the garden up in the pit even before you came. I guess I'm just a her-mit at heart."

"Not in all ways. Tell me tomorrow how you will fight, and I'll help. We should sleep now; you walked far today."

But Marc did not sleep for a long time. After his wife went, he stood for a long time staring into the fireplace, while the blaze sank to coals and the coals faded. He had not told all about his trip, nor all about his plans—Judith would not have been so emphatic about promising to help, even for Kyros, if he had.

Abruptly, he turned toward the passage leading to the sinkhole. Out in the starlight, he found the ladder which Elitha used to go up to the plateau for fuel, and made his way up this to the broken surface of the Karst. It extended beyond eyeshot to his left as he faced south, dotted with sinkholes and weak spots in the water-rotted stone where a new hole might be an unwary traveler's grave. Few people went that way; there was little to attract them. The water vanished from the surface too quickly to do crops much good; the garden in his own sinkhole survived because of water brought by hand from an underground stream to supplement the rain accumulated in the clay catch-basins he had made long before.

To his right the plateau fell off toward the sea, some two miles away. He went in that direction, rapidly. Much had to be done before morning.

Judith was awakened by Kyros' voice echoing from the main cave. She rose, cast a fond glance at her soundly sleeping husband, took the lamp from its niche at the entrance of their sleeping cavern, and made her way two hundred yards down a steep passage to the underground stream. Washed and refreshed, she was back in a few minutes, finding the man still asleep. She finished dressing and went out to greet Kyros and Elitha.

"Where's Father?" cried the boy. "Breakfast is ready."

"He is still asleep. Remember, he has traveled a long, long way, and could not sleep as quietly or as safely among all those people outside as he can here. He is very tired. We will eat now, but save something for him."

"Then I suppose you have to carry water."

"Not today, son. There is enough in the basin from the last rain. We will take care of the garden, of course, but there will be time to play."

Marc slept until after Elitha and the child had finished eating and gone to the garden. Judith was cleaning the living cavern when he finally appeared. She stopped when she saw him, set out some fruit, and seated herself beside him while he ate. She was silent until he finished, but watched his face closely; and hard as it would have been for most people to read those features, she seemed to see something encouraging in his expression. When he finally stopped eating, she leaned forward and sought confirmation of the hope.

"You've thought of something, Marc. What can I do to help?"

"The hardest part may be in agreeing with me," he answered. "In a way, you thought of the same thing; but you didn't carry the thought to its end, and I'm sure you won't like it when I do."

"Explain, anyway."

"You said last night that anyone could see what was the sensible thing to do if a bone were broken. It seems to me that there is something equally sensible to do for someone whose bleeding won't stop."

"We tried. The gods know we tried. Sometimes we stopped it, but sooner or later, for each of them—"

"I know. I wasn't thinking of stopping the bleeding with bandages and cords and such things. That's all right on limbs, but it's harder on the body and nearly impossible inside the mouth. We don't know where the curse will strike Kyros."

"Not inside the mouth. Remember the teeth!"

"I remember. I wish I understood that; I keep thinking the gods must have made it happen to tell me something, but I can't think what it might be. Anyway, that wasn't what I started to say. If a water jug leaks, and you must keep the jug because you have no other, and you can't mend it, what is the only thing left?"

"You let it leak, and refill it whenever—oh, I see. But how can that be done? You or I or Elitha could give blood, but how could we get it into Kyros' body? Would it be enough for him to drink it?"

"I—don't—know. It has been tried, the Roman said, after battles; but the patients sometimes lived and sometimes died anyway, and he wasn't sure whether it did any good."

Judith grimaced. "I don't like the idea of drinking blood, or of making Kyros do it."

"One can do almost anything, if it is for life." The man frowned thoughtfully as he spoke. "In any case, something else would have to be done before such a test would mean anything."

"What do you mean?"

"There would have to be a person who was suffering from lack of blood, before we could tell whether more blood would help."

"I see. And if we wait until Kyros—no, Marc! I see what you mean, but you couldn't do such a thing. You could not do it on yourself, because of the danger; if you die, Kyros' last hope is gone. I would gladly let you take blood from me until I was sick from it, but I am sure I couldn't drink any for the test—not even for Kyros. The thought just—" Her face twisted again, and Marc nodded.

"Likely enough. And Elitha would be the same, no doubt, though we could ask. We would have to find someone who could be made—forced—to do it."

"But how—no, Marc! Not even for Kyros! I wouldn't let you do such a thing to anyone. You must not fight that way!"

"I was sure you would feel so. I do myself, a little. I have thought of one other thing, but there is a bad point about that, too."

"What is it?"

"I could go back to Rome. The healer I knew there would be more than willing to have me go with the emperor's army; he's supposed to himself, but doesn't seem very eager to leave the city. There would be plenty of chance to see and work on men who needed blood."

"But you'd be gone from here! What would we do if Kyros—"

"Precisely." He nodded agreement with her point. She looked at him, started to speak, bit her lower lip, got to her feet, and took two or three steps toward the garden passage. Then she turned to face him again.

"There must be some other way."

"I would like to believe it. The gods have not seen fit to show me one."

"If you killed other people in trying to find a cure for what Kyros has, we would deserve the curse."

"Would Kyros?" he countered. She was silent again for several minutes, pacing nervously back and forth the width of the cave. Then she turned suddenly and shifted the line of attack.

"What if just drinking blood is not enough? What else have you thought of to try? You once said that eat-ing an enemy's heart to give courage, as some barbari-ans do, is superstition; why is it any more likely that drinking blood would restore blood?"

He smiled grimly. It was tempting to point out the glaring flaw in that argument, but seemed unwise.

"I have thought of other things; but all of them would have to be tried out before I could be sure they were good. All of them."

His point was clear. Judith said no more, and walked slowly out of the chamber toward the garden. Marc sat where he was for several more minutes. Then he, too, got to his feet and entered still another small cavern opening from the main one.

He had not been in this room since returning from his long journey, but took for granted that it would be ready for use—tools clean, writing materials at hand, lamps full. He had come to expect this over the years, and had very seldom been disappointed. Sometimes, but rarely, he was surprised; usually it was his own fault.

So it was this time. The lamp was full, the few tools ready, the workbench neat—everything which was Eli-tha's duty was properly taken care of. The charcoal bin, however, was nearly empty; and charcoal came from the village. It was Marc himself who made the trips there for meat, and oil, and other things the cavern and garden could not supply. Neither of the women ever went far from their home; Kyros had never even been up to the plateau. The cave was home—the finest of homes—to all of them.

Marc had known it longest. He had found it during his boyhood. Had he been born and raised in any of the nearby villages he would probably have stayed away from the dangerous caverns; but at the time he had not even spoken the local language well. He had been born in a Balkan village, spent much of his childhood in Gal-ati as personal slave to a Roman official of literary in-clination, and had survived the wreck of the ship carry-ing the Roman back to the city. He had come ashore near the village at the edge of the Karst, and by the time he was twenty years old was a well-established citi-zen of the place. His acquaintance with Roman civiliza-tion and literature had fired an imagination which might never otherwise have awakened. Exploring the caverns, which the villagers feared with ample reason, and construction of the garden in the sinkhole had been outlets for a mind which once awakened could not lie idle.

Twice during the years he had left the village, deter-mined to live in the Rome he had learned about from his former master. Each time he had been back, disillu-sioned, within a year. The third time he had met Judith and stayed longer; when he finally returned to the vil-lage on the Adriatic, she and the child who had been her personal slave had come with him—and he had never again felt the urge to leave. With his caves, his garden, and his family he had been happy.

That was when he had had four sons.

He jerked his attention back from the thoughts which had softened his expression for a moment. He had meant to work, but charcoal was needed for what he had in mind. Should he go to the village for it today, or stay and think? Judith's words, though they had not come as a surprise, had left him much to think about.

He was spared the choice. Kyros came running in, wondering loudly what was keeping his father in the cave when it was so much better in the garden. That took care of the rest of the day, and the night took care of itself; Marc was not long past the prime of life, but he did need some sleep. It was not until the following morning that he resumed attack on the real problem.

"I need fuel for the forge," he announced after Kyros and Elitha had gone to the garden. "I'll start now, and should be back before evening. Will you come as far as the valley with me?"

She was surprised, but picked up one of the lamps in answer. An hour and a half later, after a walk through the dimly lit splendors of their "garden of stone," they reached the entrance Marc usually employed. It was barely noticeable from inside—a lost traveler could have been twenty yards from safety without knowing it. They had to work their way through a narrow space behind a wall of flowstone for

perhaps ten yards before daylight was visible; a few more steps brought them, not entirely into the open, but the bottom of a small gully whose walls could easily be climbed. Marc helped the woman to clamber out of this, and as her head rose above the bushes flanking the declivity she found her-self able to see farther than she had wanted to for many years. She shrank back against her husband, but made no sound at first as she looked over the landscape.

The gully was at the edge of a broader valley, which lay between the cliff at their backs and a similar one a quarter of a mile away. To their left it narrowed rap-idly; in the other direction it sloped gently downward and grew broader. Its floor was covered with heavy brush, punctuated by an occasional tree. The latter growths, far apart as they were, took on the aspect of a scrubby forest as the eye followed them down the slope. Above them in this direction the eye could just detect a blue-gray line which might have been the sea. Judith turned her eyes from it.

"It's ugly!" she exclaimed. "Dry, and brown, and not like the garden at all. Do you want me to go all the way to the village?"

He looked at her with some surprise.

"It's not that bad. The bushes aren't as green as the ones you take care of, but they're not really brown. The village is several thousand paces from here; I didn't want you to come with me, and maybe it would be better if you didn't. You can wait here; I'll be back in a few hours."

"But I don't want to wait out here; I don't like it. I'll go back inside."

"What's wrong with staying out in the light? You al-ways want Kyros to do it."

"I don't like the idea. What would I do? I can't just sit and wait for you. I should be taking care of Kyros, and the garden—"

"Elitha is there. There's nothing to worry about." "But I'm not happy about it."

"Don't you trust Elitha?"

"Yes, of course. I just don't—don't like being away, even now when you're home again. Will I be able to help you if I wait, or is it all right if I go back by my-self?"

"Can you? Are you sure of the way?"

"Oh, yes. I watched, and you've marked it very well. I have a light, so there'll be one left for you."

He hesitated. "Do you realize—" He cut the question short, and thought for several more heartbeats. Then he changed his line of attack. "You really don't trust Eli-tha, do you?"

"I do. I trust her more than I trust myself, when it comes to taking care of Kyros. That's not it."

"What is the trouble, then? What's wrong with your waiting here? We didn't bring food, but there's water in the stream a few hundred paces down—"

"No! I couldn't go there! No, Marc, let me go back. I can find the way. I'll see you there tonight." She turned back toward the cave entrance, then faced him again with an expression which he had never seen be-fore and which mystified him completely. Poor as he was at seeing into the minds of others, at least he knew this time that something strange was going on.

"I'd better go back with you," he said abruptly.

"No." She spoke barely above a whisper. "You need those things from the village. Even when I can't help, I mustn't hinder. Go on. I can find my way—but you must let me go." He stared at her in silence for fully another minute; then, slowly, he nodded his head. Her expression was replaced by a smile.

She started down the side of the gully; then she sud-denly turned, climbed back to where he was standing, and kissed him. A moment later she had disappeared into the cave.

His own face took on the unreadable quality it had borne so often in recent months, as he looked silently at the spot where she had vanished. Then he blew out the lamp he was still holding, started to put it down, changed his mind, and with the pottery bowl still in his hand slipped into the entrance after his wife.

His sandals scuffed the rock; he stopped and re-moved them. Then, carefully, he looked from behind the flowstone barrier which veiled the inner end of the entryway.

Judith was fifty yards ahead, walking slowly. Her lamp was held in front of her and he could not see the flame, but its light outlined her figure even to eyes which had just come in from full sunlight. Silently he followed.

It was high noon when he reappeared at the cave mouth, blew out the lamp, set it on the ground at the entrance, and started rapidly toward the village. It was almost sunset when he got back to the spot laden with more than sixty pounds of material—a skin bottle of oil, a leaf-wrapped package of meat, a basket of charcoal, and other things. He had some trouble getting these through the narrow entrance—in fact, he had to carry the bulkier items through one by one. With these inside he returned to the tunnel mouth, lighted the lamp with flint and tinder, carried it into the darkness, re-sumed the load he had already borne for six miles, and started along the marked route to his home.

He had to rest several times along the way, and took it for granted that everyone would be asleep by the time he reached the living cavern. As he lowered his burden to the floor and straightened up, however, he saw the two women by the fireplace.

The fire itself was low, and even Marc's dark-adapted eyes could not make out their expressions; but the very fact that they were still up at this hour meant that something was out of order.

"What is it? Has something gone wrong?" he asked tensely.

Both women answered together, a startling action on Elitha's part.

"I told you! It's my fault—I told you I was cursed. As soon as I got back here!"

"The skin is broken only a little, and the bleeding has stopped. He is asleep now."

It took the man several seconds to disentangle their words.

"You're sure it has stopped, Elitha?"

"Yes, sir."

"How long did it take?"

"Perhaps half the afternoon—much like the last time."

"Did it hurt him much?"

"No. He gave it no thought after the first surprise and pain. He wanted to play again after we had com-forted him."

"Good. You go back to his cave now, and sleep if you wish; there is no need to watch him." The girl obe-diently rose and departed, and Marc turned to his wife, who had been sobbing almost inaudibly during the ex-change. He knelt beside her and gently turned her face toward his.

"It is no worse than last time; you heard Elitha, and you saw it all yourself. Has something else happened? There's still no reason to blame you rather than me."

"But there is!" Judith's words, emphatic as they were, were almost inaudible. "There's all the reason in the world. He fell this time just because of me. He had missed me, and was worried, and when he saw me he came running and tripped—"

"But it was I who made you come away," Marc pointed out.

"I know. I thought of that. If I were your slave in-stead of your wife that might mean something. I was uneasy about going, but not firm enough about refusing until it was too late. No, Marc, the fault is mine. The guilt is mine. The curse is mine."

"I'm not convinced. Every fault you claim for your-self could as easily be laid on me. In any case, it makes no difference; whether it be a curse on you, a curse on me, a curse on both of us, or simply another of the trou-bles given indifferently to the sons of men, the task and the fight are mine."

"No, you wouldn't be convinced. I know the sort of thing it takes to convince you. You are not sure whether the curse is on you or on me or on both of us because the children who have been touched are of both of us. I have thought of that, too. A child of Elitha's—" She let her voice trail off, watching him. He was several sec-onds catching her meaning; then he shook his head neg-atively.

"No! You said it a moment ago—you are my wife. A curse on either of us, or a trouble for either of us, is a curse or a trouble for both. It is not that I don't know which of us it is; I do not care."

"But why should you grow old with no sons because the gods are angry with me? I still don't believe that anyone can fight the gods—you'll just make them angry with you, too, for trying. Forget that I gave you sons; we've been warned often enough. Kyros will join the others—you know it as well as I do. Take Elitha—"

"No!" Marc was even more emphatic than before. "I tell you it is not your fault. If gods or demons are pun-ishing you, I blame them, not you, and will fight them—"

"Marc!" The woman's voice was shocked. "No! You can't."

"Yes! Many times yes! If it will make you feel bet-ter, I don't believe it is either gods or demons, or even a curse. I think I am just trying to learn something men should know; but if my sons have been killed by any living thing, that thing I will fight—man, devil, or any-thing else. I will not listen to any word of surrender, from you or anyone else."

"But if you yielded and stopped fighting, they might spare Kyros."

"What reason have I to expect that? They—if it is anyone—did not spare little Marc, or Balam, or Meth. They have done nothing to suggest that they would spare Kyros if I stopped fighting—you know that. I hadn't started fighting when Marc and Balam died. You can't suggest the smallest of reasons to believe what you just said; you just hope!"

"What else can I do?" Her voice was down to a whis-per again.

"You can help. You said you would, in most things."

"I couldn't help you with something that would take another woman's children as mine have been taken. Why should I pass my pain over to her?"

"Because if I can learn to fight this sickness, the knowledge will ward that pain from all other mothers from now on. Can't you see that?"

"Of course I can see it. In that case, it would be right for you to test your ideas on Kyros. Would you do that?"

"No." The answer came without hesitation. "Kyros is my only remaining son. I have given my share."

"And learned nothing."

"I learned enough to let me talk about it sensibly with healers in Rome."

"And all they told you was that it couldn't be cured!"

"That no one knew how to cure it," he corrected. "I would not even have known that, if I had not seen—what we saw. Seeing that three times was more than my share, and far more than yours. We will see it again, per-haps; but if I have learned enough in time, we will see only part of it. Our boy will live."

"But promise me, Marc—tell me you won't try your ideas on other people. I know you don't believe there's any other way to learn, but promise me—not that way!"

"What other way is there?" he almost snarled. Then, in a gentler voice, "I can't promise, my own. I would do anything in the world for you—except what I think to be wrong. If the gods have any hand in this at all, it is not a curse but a warning—an order. Galen in Rome had never heard of more than one son of the same fa-ther who had suffered this way. I have lost three to this thing; one remains. That is either a warning, an order, or a challenge, if it was done deliberately. I heed the warning, I obey the order, I accept the challenge. I can do nothing else. I do promise not to try my ideas on people as long as I can see any other way; more than that I cannot promise, even for you." He got to his feet; after a moment she did the same, and stood facing him. Their shadows, magnified on the cavern wall by the steady flame of the single lamp, merged briefly and sep-arated again.

"Sleep now, my own," he said softly. "I must think—I will think of all the other ways I can possibly learn what I must, before I use the one you don't want. You must sleep; I can't. My thoughts won't let me."

"Shouldn't I stay to help?"

"You can't help until I've thought of something for you to hear. Then you can tell me what's wrong with it. You can do that better if you've slept." She went.

For half an hour the man stood motionless where she had left him. Then he strode softly to the entrance of their sleeping cave and listened carefully for several more minutes. Then he took another lamp, lighted it from the one which was burning, and went toward the garden again.

He had not listened at the other sleeping cave.

Judith missed the chance to ask her husband about his plans the next morning. Her attention and his were otherwise taken up. Marc examined his son's knee a soon as the boy was awake, and found that Elitha had been right—the blood had clotted well enough. The knee was badly bruised, however, and Kyros admitted that it was hurting. For once, he walked to the living cave instead of bouncing to it.

The moment his mother discovered that he was less active than usual, she lost all thought for anything

else. She kept anxious eyes on him while he ate, and went with him to the garden when he finished. Marc made no effort to follow, though he looked with concern after the pair. He went to his work cavern instead. The girl followed him to ask whether she should remain within call or go to the garden as usual with the others. He thought briefly, then smiled rather grimly and went to one of the bundles he had brought back the day before.

"Take one of the smallest pots, which we can do without for cooking or eating," he said as he opened the package. "Take the head off this, and boil it for the rest of the day. I want the skull complete, so handle it care-fully. Once the pot is boiling do not touch it except to add more water if it seems to be going dry." He handed the corpse of a fair-sized snake to the girl. She shrank back for an instant, then got control of herself and accepted the repulsive object. Her voice trembled just a little as she asked, "Should I skin it first, Master?"

"No, don't bother. It will be much easier after the boiling, and I don't need the skin. That will be all; you may work in the garden with the others, as long as you don't let the pot boil dry. This thing was too hard to get for me to want it burned."

"Yes, sir." Elitha took the snake and left the work-room, showing rather less than her usual serenity. The man either didn't notice this or didn't care; he turned back to the forge.

He was not an experienced metalworker. He had sometimes seen goldsmiths at work when he was a child, and had deliberately watched them again during his recent trip; but seeing something done is not the same as doing it oneself. He could melt gold easily with his charcoal fire and a bellows he had devised, but casting or otherwise working it into a desired shape was another matter altogether. He lost himself in the problem.

Sometime about the middle of the morning Elitha reappeared. She stood silently by the entrance until he noticed her; just how long this was he was never sure. When he did see her, as he straightened up from another failure, he was rather startled.

"What do you want, girl?" The answer was hesitant, in contrast to Elitha's usual self-possession.

"I wondered whether your pot should be at the cooking fire when the lady and your son come to eat. The boy might not notice, but do you want the mistress to know about it—about the snake?"

"I don't see why not." Marc was honestly surprised.

"Do you think she'd like black magic? She is very fond of good, and might not like bad magic even for a good purpose."

The man's surprise and annoyance vanished, washed out on a wave of amusement. "This is not magic, black or white, Elitha." He laughed. "I'll show you what I need the skull for when it's ready. Bring the pot back here before the evening meal, though; it should have boiled enough by then."

"I don't want—I—very well, Master." The girl left hastily and Marc returned to his work and his frustration. The rest of the day was uninterrupted, uneventful, and unsuccessful for him.

It was worse for Judith. As long as her son was active and happy, she could usually persuade herself that the threat to his life was at least postponed; but today he was neither. His knee kept him from most of the games he enjoyed, and made him crankier than usual about the necessary garden work. Judith tended to take each complaint, each bit of disobedience or stubbornness, each departure from what she considered his normal behavior, as evidence that the curse was about to reach a climax. Elitha, who was skillful at controlling the youngster tactfully on his bad days, was spending more time than usual inside the cave. Since Judith in her present mood was quite unable to be firm with the boy, it was a bad day for both. About the only successful order she issued was the standing interdict against climbing the ladder which Elitha used to go up to the plateau for firewood. Even this might have been disobeyed if Kyros had actually felt like climbing—though it is possible that the sight of her son climbing might have driven even Judith to something stern enough to be effective. No one will ever be sure.

The four ate the evening meal together as usual, though less happily than usual. Kyros was fretful, Judith silent, and Marc was becoming more and more worried—about his wife rather than his son. She had promised to help with his work. She was, he knew, perfectly able to do so in her normal state of mind, since she was a highly intelligent woman; but because of Kyros' condition she had been useless all day, and seemed likely to remain so. She asked not a word about the work, but watched the boy as she

ate.

The youngster himself had a good appetite, whatever else might be wrong with him. He finished what was set before him, asked for more, and finished that. He re-belled at the suggestion that it was time for sleep, which seemed normal enough to Marc but bothered Judith. A compromise was finally effected in which Elitha was to go back to the garden with him and tell stories until the stars could be seen. Marc engineered this arrangement, partly to get Judith from the boy for a while and partly so that he could talk to her himself. It almost failed; Judith wanted to go out with the others, but saw in time what her husband had in mind and managed to control herself. She remained silent until the two were out of earshot; then she burst forth:

"Marc! What can we do? You can see that it's aim-ing—"

"No, I can't. Think, dearest, please! All that's really wrong with him is a bruised knee. The blood from the cut dried, just as the finger did the other day. Why do you worry so about a bruise? Boys have bruises more often than not; you know that." Marc was actually trying hard to retain control himself; he was carefully not telling his wife everything he had learned from Galen of Pergamum. "Please stop worrying about him, at least until something serious really happens, and help me so that we can be ready for it when it does."

"I'll try." Judith's voice gave her husband little ground for optimism. "What have you thought of? What can we do?"

"Nothing, without—well, you know."

"You have thought of nothing?"

"I have ideas, but I have no way of knowing whether they are good. How could I?"

"I should think that if an idea is good, anyone could tell that it is. What are the ideas?"

"One we mentioned before—replacing the blood which a person loses. We thought of having him drink it—"

"I remember. We didn't like the idea."

"It's not so much that we didn't like it, but I doubt very much that it would work. A person's stomach must turn the things he eats into the things his body needs, and maybe if you drink blood and your body needs blood it will go right through your stomach unchanged; but I'm not sure. After all, by that argument any food must turn into blood in your stomach, if that's what you need. When the other boys were dying we tried to get them to eat. When they could, it didn't do any special good, and toward the end they couldn't. Remember?"

Judith bit her lip. "I remember."

"So I thought it might be better to put new blood right into the veins, where we know it is needed."

"That seems perfectly all right. Why didn't we think of it sooner? We might have saved the other boys!"

"How would you go about it?"

"Why, just—" Judith stopped, her mind running over the various ways of getting a liquid from one container to another, and rejecting each in turn. "I don't see how, right away. Some sort of funnel, with a little pipe—but I don't see how—" Her voice trailed off.

"That's my general idea, too, and I think I see how; but I'm having trouble making it work."

"What are you doing?" Marc sighed inwardly with relief; he had apparently weaned her mind away from her son's condition for the moment.

"I'll show you; come up to the workshop," he said. She followed eagerly. "One part was quite easy," he went on as they reached the cavern. "There is a way made by the gods, if you want to look at it so, for putting something into a person's veins from outside. A vi-per can do it very easily, you know."

"Of course! I should have thought of that. You can make a sort of hollow needle, like a viper's tooth."

"Unfortunately I can't. I'm not that good a smith. What I thought of doing was using an actual viper's tooth, and fastening it somehow to a funnel; and I'm having trouble even with that."

"You have the tooth?"

"Yes. Here." He indicated the white skull on the bench. "The teeth are there. I haven't tried to get them out yet—perhaps your fingers would be better than mine. The real trouble has been to make a

funnel which could be fitted to the tooth. I know that gold is one of the easy metals to melt, and I've been trying to make out of it a funnel and tube which could be fitted to such a small thing; but I've had no luck at all."

"Isn't lead easier to melt?"

"So I understand, but I don't have any. We do have some gold coin still."

"But what is your trouble?"

"I'll have to show you. I can melt the gold easily enough in a clay pot, and I can even make a sort of cup which could be used for the top part of a funnel; but I can't make a hollow tube. If I try to pour the gold into a narrow clay pipe, it just fills up to form a solid rod. If I put something down the middle of the pipe to keep the gold at the sides, I never can get it out after-ward."

"Why not use clay for the tube you need, without bothering with gold?"

"Any clay tube I've made which was small enough cracked all to pieces when I tried to harden it in the fire. You can try that if you like while I melt up the gold again; you'll see."

It took several tries, and several hours, to convince Judith that practice could be more difficult than theory, and that ideas could be basically sound and still difficult to execute. When they finally stopped work for the night, Kyros and Elitha had long been asleep—at least, Judith's quick check of their cave produced no change in the breathing of either one.

The next day was somewhat better. The boy's bruise was less painful, and he showed something more like his normal activity. Judith was able to devote some thought to her husband's problem, while Marc himself alternately thought and tested out new variations on his amateur goldsmithing techniques. Elitha kept busy with her regular housekeeping and nursemaid duties. In spite of her reaction to the snake, she occasionally appeared in the work cave to make sure the lamps were full, though she came no closer to the working area than she could help. Marc suspected that she still considered him a black magician.

The night was similar to the preceding one; Judith joined her husband in the workshop for a time, and assisted in another failure or two. Marc saw that she was becoming discouraged. He couldn't blame her, but the fact discouraged him, and he decided to stop the forge work earlier than on the night before. He did not, however, go with her to sleep; there was thinking to be done, as he emphasized and as she was quite willing to admit. She left him alone at the workbench. His trip to the garden, and beyond, was quicker than before.

And so the days passed. Kyros' knee recovered. Then he scraped an elbow while running through the passage to the garden, and Judith relapsed into near-panic during the ten hours or so which the injury took to clot. Perhaps the experience was useful, though, for she produced a constructive idea a day or two later. She had long since extracted the fangs from the snake skull, adding to Marc's problems by giving him a realistic idea of the size of the tube he was trying to match. He had managed by now to make finger-size pipes of gold, but this was a long way from what was needed—in fact, when he took his first good look at an extracted fang he suffered a spell of discouragement almost as bad as one of Judith's. He had recovered from this and resumed the struggle before Kyros suffered his elbow injury, but was making very little progress.

Then, with the boy back to normal, Judith appeared in the work cave bursting with an idea.

"Marc! I've been wondering. Why do we have to make a tube to connect the bowl part of the funnel to the snake's tooth? Why can't the tooth be right in the bottom of the bowl?" The man straightened up from his furnace, and his eyes narrowed in thought.

"It might be all right," he said slowly. "It would be a bit hard to see whether the fang was going into a vein, but maybe that's not very important."

"I hadn't thought of that," she admitted, "but any-way, what I really wanted to know is, is there any real reason why the tube has to be gold?"

"Only that I can't think of anything else to use which I have here and can handle. The clay seems to be hopeless."

"You mean there isn't anything else you can make a tube out of. But what about tubes already made?"

"What sort? I can't think of any."

"When Elitha cleans a chicken, there is small tub-ing—veins, I suppose—"

"I don't like that idea too much. I'd have to tan it or something to keep it from rotting, and I don't know how. But wait a minute; how about a hollow reed?"

"All right, I should think, if you can find one small enough. I started thinking of chickens, though, and kept on that way; how about the quill of a feather?" Marc raised his eyebrows and was silent for a long moment; then, still without a word, he headed toward the garden. Judith, smiling, followed.

They never had more than four chickens—there was little for the birds to eat but the insect life in the sink-hole—but there was no difficulty in finding dropped feathers. A few of these were brought back to the cave. Marc tried to take the largest of them apart, using a tiny steel knife which was one of his dearest possessions. After he had ruined this one, Judith took over and quickly produced several tiny tubes, from perhaps half an inch to over two inches in length. All were satisfactorily hollow—at least, it was possible to suck water through any of them—and all seemed strong enough. One of the longer ones had just the right inner diameter to enclose on the snake fangs, to Marc's delight.

This emotion faded during the next hour as he tried to fasten the two together with rosin, and repeatedly blocked the tiny channel in the fang with the sticky material. After having to boil the intractable object three times to melt the adhesive out of it, he let the woman take over once more. He himself set about preparing the golden cup which would form the top of the apparatus. Even with his lack of manual skill, the task was not too hard. He formed a clay bowl about the size of his two cupped hands, dried it hurriedly over the charcoal, and began to pour small quantities of melted gold into it, rocking the vessel about so that the metal would harden in a thin coating over its inner surface. This was far from professional technique, but it worked. With the metal hardened, he had no trouble breaking the clay away and punching a hole in the bottom of the resulting cup. A little careful reaming enlarged the perforation to the point where it would admit the upper end of the quill. A little more work with the rosin, which even Marc could manage this time, produced an apparently finished device.

Judith was delighted. Her husband was more reserved in his enthusiasm, but did feel more encouraged when a quantity of water poured into the bowl began to drip slowly from the end of the bit of ivory.

"That's done it!" the woman exclaimed. "Don't you feel as though you'd started to live again, Marc? Come on—let's go out to the garden. I feel as though I hadn't seen Kyros for days—and now I can bear to look at him!" She turned toward the passage, and then turned back as her attention was caught by the expression on Marc's face—the old frown of uncertainty. "Marc—what's wrong?"

"Nothing for sure. Supposing that we do have a way of giving Kyros blood when he needs it; where does the blood come from?"

"Why, from you and me, of course. He has our blood now; what else would be right?" Marc did not have the knowledge to be able to pick holes in this argument. He had had something else in mind anyway, so he merely nodded and tried to put on an appropriate expression. He succeeded well enough for the lamplight, and Judith led the way into the garden without further question. Even Marc, despite the major doubt which he had managed to conceal from his wife, was able to join in the family amusements for the rest of the day.

Since it was not the night for the trip beyond the garden, he was able to enjoy himself for the next day as well. Judith seemed to have shed all her worries, and played with Kyros as she had with her firstborn in the days before the curse had ever shown itself. Her joy did much to make the man forget some of his own problems, but not all he could have wished. The thought of what he would have to do that night kept obtruding, even while he entertained Kyros with stories after the evening meal; and for once he was in no great hurry to get the youngster off to bed. Even Judith noticed this, but fortunately attributed it to a relief like her own, and asked no questions. In fact, and very luckily, she actually retired herself before the boy did.

What Elitha saw and thought was impossible to tell. She finally took the child to his rest, leaving the man alone by the fire. As usual, he stood thinking for a time, then checked to make sure Judith was asleep, went to the work cave briefly, took a lamp, and set out on his usual trip.

He was much later than usual getting back, and he went down to the underground stream and washed

very carefully before going to sleep.

He slept late—deliberately. He needed to think, without having Judith see his face as he did so. What could he tell her? And how could he tell it? Could she stand any part of the knowledge, after what had happened in the last few days? But if she weren't told, what would happen if Kyros started to go the way of his brothers? For that matter, what would happen then even if she had been told? The questions raced endlessly around in his mind, with no answers to any of them.

The fight had to go on—Kyros was the only remaining child—Judith could never help now—the boy had lived longer than any of the others; maybe he would be spared—or maybe it would happen today—there must be something he could do—no, that was childish, unless the gods really had made the world for men instead of for themselves—what had gone wrong? What had he done wrong? What could he do—what else could he do?

No answer. He couldn't tell Judith—that was evasion, not an answer, but he couldn't. Maybe nothing would happen to Kyros, for a while anyway. That was an evasion too, but he could hope. In fact, as Judith had said not long before, what else could he do but hope?

At that thought he rolled from his pallet and stood up. He was a man. He could do more than hope; he could fight!

So he told himself.

At least, there need be no more night excursions—unless some new idea should come up. And even if hoping were not enough by itself, whatever hope could be summoned up would be useful. And Kyros had lived longer than his brothers. Maybe

Marc went to wash again, and joined his family.

The hope lasted for nearly three weeks. Judith was happy most of the time. She was able to dismiss Kyros' occasional sore knee as an aftermath of the earlier fall. Even Marc, who remembered more objectively what had happened to the other boys, saw nothing menacing in it. When one sore knee became two, he was concerned, but could still see no connection with the curse. In fact he never did. What might have been an informative if harrowing year or more was cut short; Kyros fell again.

Perhaps it was the joint trouble. Perhaps, as Judith promptly decided, it was his mother's relaxation of care. Perhaps it would have happened anyway; the boy was becoming increasingly independent. None of the adults saw the accident.

Elitha was up on the surface gathering fuel, Marc was in his workroom; and although Judith was in the garden, her attention had wandered for a moment from the boy. Kyros himself was not doing anything particularly dangerous—or at least, what he was doing would not have been very dangerous for anyone else. He was backing away from the side of the sinkhole, looking up to see whether Elitha was near the head of the ladder, and tripped. The fall might have been harmless even for him, since he landed on the soft soil of the garden; but by sheer bad luck he fell at a place where he himself had set a sharpened stick in the ground for one of his games. It went through the fleshy part of his right arm, a few inches below the shoulder. His shriek was quite loud enough to get his mother's attention, and hers was audible both to Elitha and Marc.

Just how the stick was extracted from the arm was never well established. Judith may have pulled it out herself in the first moments of panic. Since it was firmly fixed in the ground, Kyros' own attempt to get up may have been responsible. However it happened, when Marc reached the scene there was work for him. He quickly tore a strip of cloth from his garment, thankful that the wound was no nearer the shoulder—half an inch higher a tourniquet would have been impossible to apply.

He should not have been thankful. His effort to tie the limb off above the injury was badly misjudged. The stick had not come anywhere near an artery, but had torn several veins; until Marc gave up on the tourniquet idea and jammed cloth directly into the wounds, blood continued to flow at a frightening rate. Marc didn't know why. Even with the cloth right over the wounds blood kept coming, though much more slowly.

Judith, in a state of shock, had stood back and done nothing while her husband worked. By the time he was done, Elitha had descended the ladder and was standing beside her; and as Marc gathered up his now unconscious son and carried him into the cave, the younger woman guided the almost equally pale

mother in the same direction. There is no telling how long she would have stood staring at the soaked ground without that help. Even as she walked, she seemed neither to know nor to care where she was going; she looked at nothing—not even at the child in her husband's arms.

Inside, Marc laid the boy down near the fire and spoke to the women. "Get his bedding here." Elitha obeyed. Judith stood motionless, but gradually brought her eyes down to what lay before her. Very slowly she spoke.

"I said it was my curse. You wouldn't believe me. Now I've killed the last of my children."

"You haven't killed him." Marc's tone was harsh, but he didn't know how else to speak at the moment. "In the first place he is not dead, and in the second this was not your fault."

"Then whose was it? I was the only one there. It was my place to look after him. I failed to do it."

"There was nothing you could have done, unless you were to spend your whole life holding his hand—not even then; that would not have kept a stone from falling on him. No one—no one—can foresee everything."

"Except the gods. They foresee. They waited until only I was there. You would not believe. You believe now—you must! Who could help but see it?"

"I could help it. I don't believe. Judith, what has happened is not your fault, and what will happen will not be your fault—unless you do nothing." He stood up and moved aside as Elitha appeared with the rough blankets and gently began to arrange them. "There are things we can do, dearest; the bleeding is slow, now—little faster than it was on his last hurt. The things we have done before are still right; keep him warm, keep him quiet so that his blood does not flow so fast—it has worked before. It will work again. Time after time I have seen men—and women and children—recover from far worse hurts than this."

Judith shook her head negatively and firmly; but Marc took her shoulder and turned her to face him.

"It is not your fault," he repeated slowly and emphatically. "Not your fault, ever. You make mistakes, so do I—all people do; but what happened just now was not your mistake any more than it was mine or Elitha's or Kyros' own. It is not your fault!"

The headshaking continued for a few seconds after he began to talk, but gradually it decreased as he went on. The woman's eyes met those of her husband and stayed fixed on them as though she were trying to read his mind and learn what sincerity lay behind his words. Even more slowly the tense, frightened expression on her face relaxed; but then, quite abruptly, a new one took its place. She grasped his arm suddenly.

"That's right, Marc! There is something we can do! He's lost nearly all his blood, and what is left may go before he stops bleeding. He needs more. We can give it to him! Come—come quickly! Get your knife and the funnel—I can fight, too! I can give him my blood. Come on!"

This time it was the man's face which blanched, and his voice which fell almost to inaudibility.

"No," was all he said. Judith stood shocked.

"No? Why not? You made it—you saw it work—you know he needs my blood—"

"No. It works with water, but not with blood. I couldn't think how to tell you. The night after we made it I tried it out—I had to be sure." He bared his left arm and showed a scar inside the elbow. "I filled it with my own blood. A few drops went through the fang—and then stopped. Your blood and mine do harden, my dear. It hardened very quickly in the fang. I had no way even to clean it out; there was nothing small enough to push through that tiny channel." Judith's expression went dead again as he spoke, but she did not freeze into her earlier state of shock. She answered after only a short pause.

"Very well. We'll keep him warm, and quiet, and feed him if he awakens. But Marc, my own"—her hand reached out and gripped his arm, as firmly as any man's hand ever gripped it—"you must find a way. You believe it can be found. I am not so sure, so you must do it—you must—he is all we have—" She let go and knelt beside Kyros again. Marc nodded.

"I will. What I can do, I will." He thought briefly, and spoke to the girl, who had been listening intently. "Elitha, have food ready at all times. We ourselves must eat, however little we want to, and the boy will need it when he awakens." The girl silently set about obeying, though her eyes were as often on Kyros or Judith or Marc as on her work. Marc seated himself at a little distance from the others and

thought. He never knew how many hours passed.

He was brought back to awareness by Elitha's voice. "You must sleep, Mistress. I will watch."

"I can't leave him." Judith's voice was drowsy.

"You need not leave him. I have brought your bed here. I will watch while you sleep, and call you if there is need."

Marc expected an argument, but the mother silently went to the blankets her maid had spread. That was a relief. He had been afraid to leave before, unsure of what Judith might need; while she slept, he could work. He made his way to the cavern where his materials lay, sat down before the workbench with the funnel and tube in front of him, and resumed his thinking.

Elitha, as she well knew, had been right. Sleep is a necessity.

He awoke abruptly, aware of two things. The girl's voice was sounding in his ear and her hand pulled frantically at his shoulder; and the funnel was gone from the bench top.

"Master! My lord! Come—come quickly!" He snapped to his feet, took one look at Elitha's face, and preceded her to the main cave as fast as his still slightly numb muscles would carry him. He need not have hurried.

Kyros lay as he had. Judith was crouched beside him; she neither spoke nor moved as Marc approached. The funnel of gold lay beside the child's bare arm. The quill had been cut off at an angle, and its end was stained. A cut had been made inside the boy's elbow at the same point where Marc had withdrawn his own blood for the test which had failed. The fang was not in sight.

He picked up the cut quill. There was no blood in it, and no sign that there had been any. Blood would be of no use to Kyros now.

For long minutes Marc and Elitha stood silent as the older woman. She seemed unaware of them; but at last she spoke. She uttered only three words, and Marc had no answer.

"I did it."

Slowly she rose to her feet. Her husband tried to lay a hand on her shoulder, but she shook it off silently and disappeared into their sleeping cave.

And the next noon, when Marc came back from the fourth grave, she had disappeared from there as well.

The discovery cleared the numbness which had gripped him ever since seeing the body of his last child. He suddenly realized that there was still something to live for.

"Elitha!" His voice sounded faintly in the garden, but the girl heard it and came running. As he heard her footsteps in the tunnel, he called, "When did you last see her?"

"Not—not since she went to the sleeping room last night, sir," the girl answered breathlessly. "What has happened?"

"I don't know. She's not here."

"She is not in the garden, I am sure. I called her when you took the little one there, but there was no answer. I hoped she was asleep, and didn't call again or look. Have you tried the workshop? Or she might have gone to wash."

"Not yet. You look in the workshop; I'll go down to the river. Hurry!" He was back in minutes, to find Elitha waiting. The girl reported that there was no sign of Judith, but that one of the lamps was also gone.

"Then she must have gone into the gardens of stone," said Marc. "You wait here to help her if she comes back; I'll search the way to the entrance first. I'll be back in a few hours."

"But, sir—" Elitha started to speak, but paused. "Yes?" he asked impatiently. The girl hesitated a moment longer, as though gathering her courage.

"I might have missed her if she went through the garden quietly. Maybe she went to—to the other place."

"What other place?"

"The one you used to visit late at night."

"How do you know about that?"

"I saw you, many times." Marc wanted to ask further, but managed to bring his mind back to the

immediate problem. "Did you ever tell her?"

"No, sir."

"Then I don't see how she could be there—she couldn't know about it. I'll search there if nothing else works, but the entryway is more likely. Wait." He disappeared from the girl's view into the passage that led through the "gardens of stone."

He traversed it at reckless speed, more alert for a glimmer of light ahead than for any of the dangers of the way. Time and again only a combination of subcon-scious memory and luck saved him from a bad fall. There were places where the floor was wet; these he examined eagerly for footprints, but he had found no trace of his wife when he reached the entrance.

Here he sought carefully for the missing lamp, which would presumably have been left behind if Judith had gone outside, but there was no sign of it. He looked in and around the gully for footprints and other traces in the brush. He was not an experienced hunter or tracker—what little he knew was a relic of his early childhood—but when he had finished he was almost certain that Judith had not left the cave that way. When his mind was made up on this point, he instantly began to retrace his path to the living caves.

Elitha had food waiting when he got there; she offered it to him in silence and he accepted it the same way, thinking furiously as he ate. Considering Judith's state of mind when last seen, there was an all too likely explanation for her disappearance; but Marc preferred to consider possibilities which offered not only hope but a line of action.

"I don't see how she could have known of the other place, or why she should have gone there," he said at length, "but I'll have to look there, too."

"I have already looked there, sir. She is not there," said Elitha quietly. Marc frowned.

"How did you know where it was?"

"I know most of the ground above, for a long way around the garden. The second night I saw you go, I followed—I will tell you why later. I saw you go to the other hole and climb down."

Angry as he was, Marc had control enough not to ask whether she had seen what he had done there; he kept to the problem of his wife's disappearance. "Then she has simply gone out into the caves."

"I'm afraid so, sir. I should have watched her."

"Now you're sounding like Judith herself. If anyone should have watched her, it should have been I. It is not important to fix blame; what we must do is find her."

"And if she does not wish to be found?"

"She must be found anyway! Even if what happened to Kyros drove her to, madness she must be found—she mourned each of the others, just as I did, but she recovered each time."

"But how will you find her? Even you do not know all these caves and passages. If she simply started walking with no plan, the gods alone know where she might be now. And if you did find her, how would you get her to come back if—"

"I have persuaded her before. She will come back when I find her. Wait here, and keep food ready; I will come back to rest—I don't say every day, because I won't know when the days are over, but when I have to." Elitha looked at him thoughtfully.

"But I should help, Master. She should be found quickly, since she is without food; two of us can search more places before it is too late." He pondered that point, and finally nodded.

"Very well. You search the caverns closest to here. Mark your way, and start back while there is still enough oil in your lamp—"

"I understand, Master. I will not lose myself."

But the search could not be continuous. Food and sleep were necessities; oil had to be replenished—sometimes from the distant village. Elitha did this errand once so that Marc could keep on looking, but she was not able to carry nearly as much as he; more time was lost than gained. Marc made the trip thereafter.

At the end of the first week, Marc was pointing out that there was water in the caves, so Judith could still be living. At the end of the second, his tune was, "At least she won't be moving around now. We're more likely to find her." Elitha made no reply to either theory, even when the third week had passed and no sane person could have expected to find the woman alive. Marc, at this point, was not sane. The girl

knew it, and spoke and acted accordingly.

On the twenty-third day he came back from one of his searches to find her waiting. This was not too un-usual, but the bowl of food she handed him did catch his attention.

"Why did you take time to cook?" he asked. "Have you stopped searching?"

"Yes, sir. Since yesterday. Finish your food and I will explain." Somehow she dominated him as he had dominated Judith in similar circumstances, and he emptied the bowl, never taking his eyes from her face. When he had finished and set the bowl down, she took up one of the lamps.

"Come, my lord." He followed dumbly. She led the way along the tunnel to the garden for a short distance, and then turned off into a narrow passage to the right. Marc could see that the route was marked with soot, as they wound their way into a region which even he scarcely knew, close as it was to the home cave. He commented after a few minutes.

"Did she leave this trail?"

"No, sir. I marked it during my search yesterday. I had not come this way before."

"Then you found her?"

"You will see. Follow." He obeyed, and for half an hour the pair made their way through the unnoticed beauties of the cavern.

At length the way opened into a space some fifty feet across. The girl stopped at its center.

"Look," she said, pointing to the floor.

Marc saw a clay lamp at her feet. It was dry, and the wick had clearly been left to burn down as the oil disappeared. He looked down at it briefly, then turned to the girl.

"You found this here?"

"Yes. It had been left where you found it now." "You mean she left it here when it went dry and just wandered off in the dark?"

"No. I think it was burning when it was put down. Look again, Master." She gestured toward the far side of the chamber, and led the way toward it.

A pit, a dozen feet long and half as wide, lay before them. Elitha walked around one end of it to the wall on the farther side, where a cluster of finger-thin stalactites grew. She broke one of these off, and tossed it into the hole.

There was silence for several heartbeats, then a clatter as it struck. This was repeated several times, and terminated in a sound which might have been a splash, though it was too faint for Marc to be certain.

Elitha pointed to another broken stalactite, a few inches from the one she had used.

"She could have used this to find whether—whether this was deep enough," she said gently. She regretted for a moment being on the far side of the hole, but reflected that Marc liked to be sure before he acted. She was right.

He stood looking down into the blackness for what seemed a long time, while the girl stayed where she was, almost without breathing. Then he turned and walked back to the place where the lamp had been set. Elitha took the opportunity to round the pit again, and followed him. She waited behind him while he stood looking at the empty lamp once more, wondering whether the heartbeats she could hear were her own or his. Then he turned and began to walk slowly but purposefully back toward the pit.

She was in front of him instantly, barring his way. He stopped, and a faint smile crossed his face.

"Don't fear. You can find your way back," he said softly.

"I know I can. That's not it, Master. You must come, too."

"Why? The only thing I had left in life is down there." He nodded toward the pit.

"No. There is something else."

He raised his eyebrows, Judith's suggestion of a few weeks before crossing his mind. He chose his words carefully.

"Can you say just what is left for me? My family is gone. My fight is lost."

"No!" she almost shouted. "You're wrong! Your fight isn't lost—it's scarcely begun! Can't you see? I can't read or write—I haven't her wisdom—but I can hear. I heard much of what you said to her, and I learned much from what I heard. I know what you are fighting, and I know that you have already learned more about that fight than any man alive. It is still your fight, even though your own children are lost."

"My lord, I am a woman. I may never have children of my own, but I can speak for those who have or will. I know what your fight has cost—I know what you had to do in that other pit, where you had the child you stole from the village. I know why you couldn't tell our lady what you had done or why it had failed, until the little one was hurt—"

"I couldn't even tell her then," Marc cut in. "What I told her was not true. I did get my blood into that child, and my blood killed him. How could I tell her that?"

Elitha's eyes opened wide. "You mean one person's blood kills another? That Kyros was killed by his own mother's blood?"

"No. He might have been—I can't tell. But he wasn't. I don't know whether his mother's blood would have helped or harmed him. He died before she had opened her own vein. She used the knife to go into his arm, then put the quill into the blood vessel she had opened; but she never put any of her own blood into the funnel. She must have seen he was gone before she could start. I don't know what killed him; he may have been about to go anyway, or perhaps putting the empty funnel into his vein harmed him in some way I can't imagine now. How can I learn the truth when so many things may be true? Maybe she was right—maybe the gods did curse us."

"Or her."

"No! No god that would curse a woman like Judith is worth a man's worship."

"But a demon which would do so is worthy to be fought."

"That may be." He pondered silently for a while. "But I don't see how I can carry on the fight. Judith is gone, but even without her to help plan or—or hinder testing, I can't work alone—I don't know—I can't think straight anymore—maybe she was right about not trying things on other people—"

"She was wrong," cut in Elitha. "She could not help feeling so, because she had children of her own. If I had children, I might be the same; but as it is, I can think of other women's children, both now and in years to come. I loved your wife. I was her slave all my life that I can remember. I loved her children, though they were not mine; and because I loved children not my own, I can think of still others. I am not as wise as she was—"

"I wonder," he muttered inaudibly.

"—but I am sure she was wrong and you were right about this. She could not think of your using other children, because she could think only of how she would feel if they were hers. You yourself could not use your own child. Now you would listen to her dead voice, and stop the struggle. Listen to mine, Master, and fight on—for the children and mothers of the years to come!"

"You tell me to do what I have done—steal and kill children?"

"I say what you once said to her. If you do not, this sickness will kill more."

"And you could bring yourself to help?"

"Gladly. I saw your four sons die. I would do any thing to stop that curse."

"But I can't keep stealing children from this one village. Sooner or later our work would become known. Could you face what would happen then?"

"If necessary, I could. But you need not stay here. Go back to the mountains where you were born—there must be many places where you could live and work. If we are feared and hated, it will be worth it—though I think we can remain unknown if we move often enough."

"You know I am right, Master. Leave her to sleep alone here, and come back to the fight."

The man nodded slowly, and spoke even more slowly.

"Yes, you are right. And she was wrong. She thought the curse was her fault, and that Kyros' injury and death were her fault, and could not forget it. I feel that her death was my fault—I didn't tell her enough of the truth; but whether my fault or not, there is still the fight." He looked down at the girl suddenly. "I even feel guilty for letting you join the work"—her eyes fell, and a faint smile crossed her face—"but I accept the blame. Come."

He, stared to pick up the empty lamp, but she fore-stalled him. She took it, strode to the pit, and tossed it in. Heartbeats later its crash came back to them. After a moment he nodded, took the burning lamp, and led the way from the cave. Elitha, following in his shadow, allowed a momentary expression of relief to cross her features as she wiped oil from her fingers.

