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# **The River And The Dream**

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### *INTRODUCTION*

*Llanthor is a world on which no man would choose to be born—if he had a choice. The south pole is aimed eternally at the sun. The southern third of the world is a furnace where no life endures. The northern half is a frozen waste. Only in a semi-temperate belt south of the equator does Llanthor extend even the smallest kindness to the life it bears.*

*How man came or evolved there not even the wisest of Wise Men know. But man is there. He is in the northern waste. He is in the southern desert. And he is in the zone of temperance.*

*Semi-barbaric tribes and groups inhabit the frozen lands. In the desert, savage nomads reel to and fro in their eternal purgatory. In the temperate land, man has some peace with Llanthor. Here is a place where abundance can be had, where there is time for man to think of things beyond avoidance of death.*

*The sun, Detra, is forever in the southern heavens. While the south knows no night, the north has a feeble day by the light of the great moon, Illam, who circles Llanthor over both poles and whose plane of revolution moves exactly with the rotation of Llanthor. Hence, the day and night of the north are constant and never varying, which fact alone is perhaps responsible for men existing in the frozen lands.*

*Violent storms suck moisture from the south and feed it northward, from whence it flows once again down Llanthor's single, mighty river and its numerous tributaries. The Great River has no other name by any*

*of the peoples who live along it. At its widest it stretches far beyond one horizon to another. And it is feared by all who know it. Men do not sail upon it. Only a few of the bravest know what a boat can be.*

*In the deserts of the south, the Great River dries up, and its moisture is returned again by the winds to the north. This is all of the moisture known to Llanthor, for most of the planet's water is locked forever in the ice of the north.*

*Once in three lifetimes a small and quick precession of the poles turns Llanthor at a small, different angle to Detra. Then is the Time of Great Waters, for ice melts that has not melted since ages before, and the Great River swells and roars as it has never roared for generations of man, and many cities built low on its banks are flooded away. But this happens only once in three lifetimes, and by then men forget that it ever happened at all.*

*The men of Llanthor are strangers to one another. Those of the north do not know of the southern lands except through vague and doubtful traditions of unnamed Ancients who once traveled that far. The nomads huddle in the desert, riding their great white lerts, fighting fiercely with one another and raiding the cities where men have created abundance in a less hostile world. But men of the cities know little of each other, too. They keep to their little walled worlds and try to hold back the nomads, who would take what little they have gained.*

*But at a Time of Great Waters a Wise Man of the north, who believed the traditions of the Ancients, thought there was a way to find the rich lands and cities of the south. And he persuaded a strong young man that it could be so.*

## CHAPTER 1

Smoke from the forge of Windl the swordsmith edged over the top of the low hill protecting the valley beyond. Manvar brought his sled to a halt and rested the dozen panting addks for a moment. The powerful, furry beasts immediately sank down in their harness and each burrowed a circular depression in the snow.

Manvar threw back the fur about his head and glanced at the sky. Illam

was halfway up, but her silver light was thin behind the rising clouds. The day would not be much different from the night. That suited the events Manvar anticipated. If the Council meeting was to be as he had heard, the whole land might as well go down in darkness.

He covered his head once more and shouted to the resting addks. They leaped up and bent to the harness, jerking the sled into motion. Manvar guided them down the long slope to Windl's shop and house.

At the swordsmith's door, Manvar dismounted and tossed a meat delicacy to his animals. They snarled while the leader made his choice, then settled down to contented chewing and waiting.

Windl opened the stone door. Manvar stepped quickly inside to prevent the cold following him. "Day's meat to you," he said. He opened the fur coat and hung it on a hook. The heat in the forge chamber was intolerable.

"To you," said Windl. The smith wiped his forge-reddened face. "You are early. I told you another three days. I have not finished the final edging."

"It will have to serve for today," said Manvar. "I may need no ordinary blade. I must have a Kingsword at my side in the Council meeting."

Windl's eyes widened. "It's an Exodus Judgment Day, isn't it? There's no call for weapons—unless you plan a challenge?" His voice was uneasy. The whole kal was in turmoil for days when a challenge was placed at Exodus Judgment Day.

Without answering, Manvar walked to the polishing bench and picked up a nearly finished blade. He balanced it on his wrist and felt its weight as he cut the air with it. "One of your best," he said.

Windl came to the bench, a middle-aged man who walked with a stiff limp in his right leg. His eyes were bright with pride. "Not one of the best. It is the best, Chieftain Manvar. I have never made a blade as fine as this Kingsword I have made for you. But the final finishing—I must have time—" he extended a hand in plea for the sword.

Manvar shook his head and fitted his own belt to the scabbard of the Kingsword. "I will return it for the finishing—and hope that I do not have to use it before."

"There are the rituals," the swordsmith said. "Some say they are necessary before a Kingsword is used. Otherwise, the blade may as well be returned to the furnace. You and I know, of course, these things are not necessarily so." He smiled in comradely superiority. "But I hope it will not be used, anyway."

Manvar smiled without humor. His voice was bitter. "And I hope, too, that the blade remains unused until I return it to you."

Outside once more, he roused his animals and turned the sled around. It was not far to the Council Hall, but news of the meeting had reached Manvar late. He was certain that this was deliberate, in the hope he would not show.

He forced the addks at top speed and arrived at the edge of the kal in time to see the other chieftains entering their own door at the side of the hall. He would be held in ill regard before this day was over, and lateness at the Council meeting would not help his name.

Manvar was the youngest of the chieftains. He had been chosen to represent his kal only two meetings before, when the former chieftain had voluntarily chosen exodus, as a worthy chieftain and kalsman was expected to do at the proper time. But the chieftain had left no mandate for selection of his successor, and Manvar had been chosen by the voice of the people and sustained by his sword against three challengers. There were few in any kal who could approach Manvar's skill with the sword.

He entered the warm hall and hung his fur on the rack by the door. He took his seat on the last of the three rows of benches and nodded pleasantly to his neighbors, who were unbending a little now. It was custom to haughtily ignore the newest member until he had proven his wisdom in their Councils. Likewise, the voice of the new member was rarely recognized. It was only with difficulty he made himself heard.

But they had all come up this way. Manvar sat back, satisfied to let the proceedings take their course.

Men and women of the kals who wished to witness the actions of the Council were seated at the far end. They jostled noisily, shucking their heavy outdoor garb, searching for space on the clothes pegs. And, today being an Exodus Judgment Day, a score of Old Ones were now seated at the side of the hall between the chieftains and the audience. Most of them

walked proud and straight. Only a few were bent or had to be helped in finding their way.

Manvar had watched Exodus Judgment many times, but always from the audience end of the hall. He had watched his own father sit proudly on that bench.

Most of the Old Ones were volunteers, but some were brought in judgment against their will. For these, a case would be made and objections heard. On rare occasions, a challenge, to be settled by the sword, would be made. This was an occasion of turmoil for the kals, for it stirred peoples' hearts to witness the rite that was so much a part of their existence.

Manvar stiffened as he sighted the last figure of the group on the judgment benches. The news had been correct: Crogan was called to Exodus Judgment. Crogan the Wise. Crogan, whose head contained wisdom beyond that of all the chieftains together.

Manvar fingered the hilt of his Kingsword, the blade that had never tasted battle, nor yet the rituals to ordain it. His mouth was dry, and his heart beat faster than it ought.

A wave of murmuring dismay swept through the watchers as they caught sight of the old Wise One. Crogan had been too long with them for his going to pass unnoticed, even by those who recognized he was long past his time of exodus.

Only Crogan himself seemed undisturbed by his presence in the hall. His lined face and thick, white hair seemed to symbolize a serenity that was part of his great age. He took his place, murmuring only to excuse himself for having touched his neighbor in seating himself.

Jek, the First Chief, entered from the chief's door at the left. The crowd stood as he took his place in the center before the front row of chieftains.

The room was stifling hot. Manvar wiped his face and wished the heatman would better control the open oil fires in the walls. They spread fumes into the room, too, when they were too high. The man must never have learned how to tend a heat fire.

Jek stood for attention, a bored expression on his heavy, lined face. A

snatch of white beard covered his lower jaw; the signs of his own age were apparent on his dark face. He began the reading of the ritual as he had done hundreds of times before. The audience stirred, glancing at Crogan the Wise, many wishing they had not come.

"We meet today for Exodus Judgment," the First Chief announced. "No other matters shall be considered at this session of the Council. Objections, divergences—challenges, if there be any—shall be presented as the Master of Rolls reads the names of those called for exodus. The voluntary shall be read first. Each will stand as his name is read."

The Master of Rolls was a round, florid man, who concerned himself with nothing but his records, written on irregular sheets of corus hide. He looked neither at the chieftains nor at the audience, much less toward the faces of those he would now record only as former inhabitants of the kals.

"Sid-oy," he said without interest.

An old man arose from his place on the bench. He was bent, but he tried to stand straight as he nodded to his friends in the crowd and to the chieftains. Manvar remembered him from his own childhood. Sid-oy had been a mighty hunter, and more than once his skill had provided meat for his whole kal. Remembering also, his friends sat tight-faced and still.

The Master of Rolls began the ritual.

"You submit yourself for voluntary exodus?"

Sid-oy bowed his head. "I submit."

"You are old and chill in the bone."

"I am old and chill in the bone."

"You can no longer hunt."

Sid-oy faltered only briefly, but a betraying catch checked his voice. "I can no longer hunt," he said at last.

"You do not wish others to hunt for you."

"I do not wish others to hunt for me."

"You will go alone from your friends and companions and seek the Cold Sleep."

"I will go alone and seek the Cold Sleep."

Manvar knew how it would be. No one would watch the old hunter leave the kal. The people would turn their backs and go quietly about their business as if unaware of Sid-oy's movements. The old man would dress only in a light cloak, taking meat for no more than a single meal. He would walk away from his kal, bidding goodbye to no one, neither his children nor his old hunting companions. He would walk away and no one would observe his going.

At midday, somewhere out in the white barrens, he would eat his single meal. Then he would move on for the rest of the day. By nightfall, he would be able to go no farther. His limbs would be icy. His great heart would be cold, and he would drop to the snow as Illam masked her light. When she rose again, there would be no sign. The night blizzards would have covered the old hunter, and Sid-oy would have found the Cold Sleep.

Manvar forced his eyes away from the old man's face. He often wondered if there were not another way, but he knew there would be none. Not in the world in which they lived. When a man or a woman became incapable of caring for himself, or of no use to his kal, there was only the answer of the Cold Sleep. There was no other. And since all had to seek it sooner or later, it mattered little that it be sooner. Delay would be only ignoble and cruel to one who had served well.

But there were times when matters of judgment differed, and the question of usefulness required niuch interpretation. Today was such a time, Manvar told himself.

The Master of Rolls continued through the list. One by one, the old ones stood up, answered the rituals and sat down again. Manvar closed his mind to the proceedings until, at last, he was startled to find that today all were voluntaries except one.

Crogan the Wise.

Now there was a new stir in the hall. Both audience and chieftains had dread of the Judging of Crogan. All had known him as a wise counselor and teacher and confidant.

He had not volunteered. He had been called.

The First Chief took up the reading of the ritual for Crogan. "You submit yourself for exodus?"

"I do not." Crogan's voice was sharp and clear as he turned his gaze from the chieftains to the audience. "I do not submit," he repeated.

"You have been called by the Council for exodus. We will hear the declarations of the caller."

Jek seated himself. Beside him, Radok, the Second Chief, looked around defiantly, then stood. He was a big man, not old, a hunter in his prime and well regarded for his skill. To hunt, day in and day out, to eat, to sleep, to attend Council—that was his life. He defied any variation of it. Small discrepancies with the existing order aroused his rage.

He turned upon Crogan. "You cannot hunt."

"I cannot hunt," acknowledged the Wise Man.

"Then you must depend on others," Radok roared. "They add to their own burdens by carrying yours."

"I have young friends who do so willingly—in exchange for the teaching and counsel I offer them."

"And this is the heart of the matter!" exclaimed Radok. "You have long forgotten the wisdom that once made your counsel of worth to the kals. Now you teach old men's dreams and imaginings. You excite the young men to vain adventures. You speak of a Time of Great Waters at hand, when we have long since learned this is only the imaginings of fearful men who cannot understand the world about us. We do not need such frightening traditions."

"Then this is another matter," replied Crogan mildly. "Exodus is not determined by a man's teachings or his counseling. That is for other judgment."

Jek snapped at his fellow chief. "Crogan is right. His actions and teachings are not at judgment. Only his capacity to hunt and to serve."

"Then he must surely be called for exodus!" said Radok. "He has admitted he cannot hunt and must be cared for by others. His service no longer satisfies the needs of the kals. I call for the exodus of this man!"

Jek turned to his fellow chieftains to pool their judgment. A small number, like Manvar, opposed the exodus of the old Wise Man, but these were far in the minority. *Jek stood to announce the vote.* "The judgment is exodus for Crogan the Wise." He stared around at the assembly of kalsmen. "Is there challenge?"

Manvar rose. "I challenge," he said quietly.

A wave of dismay and fear surged through the assembly. Never in the memory of any man had a chieftain challenged. This was always left to ordinary kalsmen. Only one could answer the challenge of a chieftain. Another chieftain. In this case, Radok.

Crogan exclaimed as he jumped to his feet, "No, Manvar! You must not do this thing!"

He was ignored.

Jek turned to Manvar. Although he had suspected the young firebrand would do something like this he could not believe it had actually happened. "It is unseemly that a chieftain challenge," he exclaimed. "The word of the Council is binding upon all. Do you wish to withdraw your challenge, having considered more carefully?"

Manvar remained standing. "Only, First Chief, if the judgment is withdrawn."

"That is the decision of the caller. Radok, do you wish to reconsider your call?"

The Second Chief glared defiantly. "I do not! This is but an example of the dangerous and deceiving counsel that even those who would lead us are receiving from Crogan—the Once-Wise! I answer the challenge, which, by law, I alone can answer!"

"So be it," said Jek.

As if by rehearsed planning, the space between the Council and the

onlookers was cleared. The Master of Rolls was moved to a corner, and those already judged for exodus were released. Only Crogan remained, a withered figure seated against the far wall.

Four junior chieftains took positions at the sides of the vacant square to perform as judges.

Blustering, furious, Radok took his place at one corner of the square and drew his Kingsword. Manvar strode slowly and deliberately to the opposite corner. He had no illusions about his opponent. Radok was no fool, in spite of his bellowing and his efforts to drive all kalsmen between narrow fences. Radok was not only a renowned hunter, but a deadly swordsman. Although the challenge need not be to the death, the judges could not often stop a fatal thrust.

Manvar drew the untried Kingsword he had obtained from Windl that day. Radok's weapon had come from the same forge. Any difference in the outcome would be a measure of the men, not of the weapons. But Manvar remembered Windl's words: "I have never made a better blade."

He hoped it was even partially true.

The chieftain on the neutral side gave the signal for the contest to begin. Radok leaped toward the center of the square, his blade poised. Manvar came more slowly, as if regretting what must be done.

"Are you ready to fight, or do you deal only in words?" Radok taunted.

Without answering, Manvar touched the tip of his blade to Radok's. The Second Chieftain drove Manvar's sword aside and thrust. Manvar parried and stepped aside, his full attention on the enemy blade—and Radok's shifting feet.

That was the key. Manvar had watched Radok in practice many times, and he knew the older man's feet had a limit, past which they became heavy and clumsy. They had been frozen too many times on fruitless treks through the desolate land. They had been burdened on too many hunts with carcasses that Radok's pride would not let anyone carry but himself.

Radok knew his own weakness. For that reason he put all his fury into his first rushes. If he could overwhelm Manvar in the first minutes of conflict he would be all right. But he had no illusions, either, about

Manvar's skill.

Radok's swift rushes and skillful retreats carried them back and forth across the too-small square. Manvar parried and strove for time. The more he did so, the angrier Radok became. "Will you come out and fight, or are you going to remain forever in your hole like a scared ort?" He lunged repeatedly, beating aside Manvar's parry, until he drove him against the wall and his sword pierced Manvar's upper arm.

A shout went up from the judges on the floor. Two of them flashed their blades between Radok and Manvar. For a moment Manvar leaned against the wall, but burning pain sent waves of numbness down his sword arm.

"Do you yield the challenge?" the First Chief demanded.

Manvar shook his head, trying to get the feeling back into his sword arm and into his neck and shoulder on that side. "No," he said. "No, I do not yield."

From the bench where he sat, Crogan uttered a cry of protest. "Yield, Manvar! Do not go on."

Manvar smiled weakly at his mentor. "We need you, Crogan. We cannot let you go."

The judges had taken Radok to the center of the square, and now they gestured impatiently. "Resume, or we declare the contest for Radok."

The blood still trickled down his arm, but the feeling was coming back. In a moment he was sure his arm would be under full control again. He moved slowly toward his opponent. His tactics would have to change. He would have to assume the offense now and count on his skill and the weakness of Radok's legs and feet.

As if sensing his intent, Radok moved more slowly. He met Manvar's sword with a cautious parry and retreated. The moment he did so he knew his legs had betrayed him. The time of inactivity had left them as frozen.

Manvar saw at once the clumsiness of Radok's retreat. He drove Radok fiercely against the wall, and the judge intervened with his own blade. Manvar leaped back and challenged Radok to come out. Radok's slashing charge abandoned the precise and careful swordsmanship that had

carried his first attack. He swung too wide and failed to recover for a parry. Manvar fainted and thrust downward. His sword bit deep into Radok's thigh.

The Second Chief went down, blood spurting from a severed artery. He lay a moment, then struggled to rise.

"Do you yield the challenge?" the First Chief demanded.

"No! I'll never..." Radok collapsed, the words frozen on his lips.

Jek rose as the judges bore off Radok. "You have won your challenge," he said to Manvar. "I release Crogan the Wise forever to your charge. Now you shall have power over him to make the Exodus Judgment when you see fit!"

## CHAPTER 2

*He was called by some, Manvar the Dreamer, because he talked of things no other man conceived, except in wildest dreams. He talked of strange lands far to the south that did not consist of ice and snow, but whose surface was the black and brown substance found by digging far beneath the ice.*

*He also talked of a great light in the sky over that land, a thousand times brighter than over Illam. And he talked of a Time of Great Waters, which was at hand.*

*In all this, he spoke only of the things he had learned from Crogan, for no one else taught such things. And for this he was also called Manvar the Foolish, although not in his hearing, for everyone knew that Crogan was now only a simple old man, even though he had once been the great Wise One.*

*Didn't Crogan even persuade Manvar to speak of going to the south, not on foot or by addks, but by something called a boat? No one knew what a boat was, but Crogan spoke of it as being like a dish and said it would sit on top of water and hold a score of men. Was not this the mind of a feeble old man? Who could suppose there was that much water in all the world?*

They came to Crogan's house, and it was cold, for Crogan had put out the fire, all except the small parent flame that was always alive. Manvar replenished the oil in the bowl and adjusted the flame that caressed the heating stones.

"You shouldn't let the fire go away," said Manvar. "You freeze half the night while it comes back."

Crogan sat down heavily against the fur robes on the bench near the fire. "I thought I would have little need of fire after today. The Cold Sleep takes no oil."

Manvar growled in his throat. "That Radok—I should have killed him. I would have waited for a better thrust if I had not been so clumsy as to let him touch me first."

"It was a foolish thing to do," chided Crogan, "but I am grateful. I am not yet ready for the Cold Sleep. There is so much to do—so very much..." He passed a hand wearily over his face.

"There is no thanks due me," said Manvar gruffly. "How would we find our way South? And how would we build these things you call boats if I had not challenged for you? Without you, the dream would die."

Crogan shook his head. "You would go on without me, because you are like me. There comes one of our kind in the time of a dozen fathers. We were lucky that we came together in the same time, you and I. What great things we would have done if we had been young together!"

"We'll do them," said Manvar fiercely. "We'll go to these great lands south, of which you have told me."

"Ah, yes... but in the meantime we must attend that wound of yours. It must be washed and the ointments applied."

Manvar sat on a stool by the fire watching while Crogan prepared and applied his medicines. "We must begin earlier than we planned," said Manvar. "I shall not be welcome long in the Council. Radok and his friends will find cause to challenge my position there. It is not worth fighting them all. There are greater battles to fight. I want to seek these fine lands

far to the south. That is what I am made for."

"It is well," agreed Crogan. "The Time of Great Waters also comes more quickly than I had thought. But we should have more men than the 200 you have obtained. We could not hope to conquer new lands with such a small number. I do not think it wise to attempt any conquest until a second or a third visit. Then we will know what lies before us."

Manvar shook his head. "We will do with what we have. Who knows if we will even come back. We must be fully prepared the first time."

"You are not prepared. There are not enough men for conquest. And have you the supplies and tools I described for making the boats?"

"We have all the men we are going to get. The tool-makers are nearly ready. Windl, the swordsmith, has charge of them."

"Your men cannot leave women behind, or children. They will be judged into exodus if there is no one to care for them."

"I have chosen no man who has a child. A few have women; they will take them. It is well that there should be women if we do not return."

"And you," said Crogan, "do you take your woman?"

"I have none."

"Alena would be your woman. What of her?"

Manvar shook his head. "She is too weak. Besides, the leader cannot be bound by a woman. Perhaps one day I may return for her. That is not important."

"You are important to her. I think you treat her not kindly, Manvar."

"I treat my woman as I please! Is there reason why this disturbs you?" Manvar asked hotly.

"Forgive my speaking. It is no concern of mine. I only regard Alena as desirable for a young chieftain. But such as she do not remain long while chieftains choose and decide. When you return she will be in another chieftain's house."

"Then it is well," said Manvar. "The lands south are more important to me now than all else in the world." He stared into the flame of the fire. "What a dream you have brought us, Crogan! What a dream. I cannot imagine the things you have described, but I know they are true. I know they must be there, or you would not have declared thus to us."

He paused and remained silent while Crogan finished the treatment and bandaging of the wound. Then he spoke again. "Now it will be your turn to be angry with me, for I would ask: How do you know these things of which you have spoken? You have told me much, but you have never told me how you know. You have not been to this land south?"

"I have not," Crogan said. "But others have—in long times past. One at a time. Two at a time. Long years apart."

"Why have we not heard of them?"

"Because they were always destroyed as liars and perverters. Only the Wise Men kept a record of these things. There are enough such records, and they are so nearly alike that it can be seen there is truth in them.

"For most of my life I have not dared speak of these things, but it has been my dream to see the land south before going into the Cold Sleep. Now we have reached a time when such things may be spoken aloud—although but in whispers. I have not found young men I could trust before you and your fellows. Now with your help and with the miracle of the Time of Great Waters I may see the lands south and be at peace when I go to the Cold Sleep."

"Tell me what these ancient travelers have said."

"They have not left much. They were men like you, who wanted to go ever beyond the farthest horizon. They all report that there is a point—farther than other men have gone before—and beyond this point there begins to appear a great light, which they call Detra, in the sky. It is not another Illam; it is a thousand times brighter than Illam. And the farther men travel, the higher in the sky this light appears."

"Is it always there? Does it never go away and come back as Illam does?"

So they say. It is always there. And it is warm. Men do not have to wear

such great clothes as we wear. And sometimes they may wear no clothes at all under the light and heat of Detra, and there is no Cold Sleep for them. They die otherwise."

"I do not understand such a thing."

"I have told you before there is no ice underfoot, but soil and rock everywhere. And trees and plants, of which the people eat as food."

"What are these trees and plants?"

Crogan smiled and spread his hands in a gesture of futility. "I do not really understand it myself. The Ancients left some drawings of these things, but they are like nothing a kalsman has ever seen. I think we shall not understand them until we see for ourselves. One thing: It is of trees that boats are to be built. One of the Ancients has left much instruction as to how this is done. It will be a great task, but I think we shall be successful."

"And the people—they are fierce?"

"It does not seem so. Their lives are easy because of Detra. Food comes easily to them."

"We shall conquer them easily," said Manvar.

"Do not be overconfident. The stories are sketchy and may deceive."

Manvar stared at the flame bathing the rocks in the heat chamber and shook his head slowly. "Detra. The land south. Warmth where men can stand under the sky without clothes... Is there any way I can understand these great mysteries? Do you really understand them, Crogan?"

"Any man can understand if he will put his mind to it. I will tell you how it seems to me." The old Wise Man crossed the room and picked up a scrap of corus fur, which he rolled into a ball and tied. Then he plunged through it a long bone needle, which he used in making his fur cloaks.

He held up the ball, impaled on the needle. "This is Llanthor," he said. "The needle is only to hold it and turn it. Llanthor floats amid the stars. They surround her on all sides, and as she turns, we see different ones. You know this, for you have seen the stars slowly cross the sky, then come back

again. This is because Llanthor shows her face first to one, then another." Crogan turned the ball of fur slowly.

Manvar shook his head as if to clear it.. "The thought is more than my head can hold. But go on—"

"Illam gives light to the men who live on Llanthor." With his finger, Crogan traced a circle in the air, passing over the ends of the needle stuck through the ball of fur. "She moves through the sky this way, once around, while Llanthor turns once on her own points." He twisted the fur sphere once, and made a single circle with his finger. "So—back to the same point, both of them at the same time. And so there is day, and there is night on Llanthor, by the feeble light of Illam."

"I can see that this is the way it might be. And what of Detra? How can we know there is even such a thing as Detra? Where is she?"

"Let me show you first," said Crogan. He pointed to a spot somewhat less than half way between the two points where the needle pierced the ball. "Here are the kals. This is where the kalsmen live. We know only of ourselves. Perhaps there are others not far away. We do not know. The ice and the darkness are our prison. We cannot see over the edge of Llanthor to what is in the other half."

"The land south?"

Crogan nodded. "The land south. We cannot see it nor any of the stars or any other thing beyond."

"But if we moved over the edge of Llanthor and looked to the other side—"

"Ah, yes! If we moved over the rim of the world and looked at the other side, what wonders we might see!"

"And Detra?"

"There!" Crogan jabbed the other end of the needle abruptly toward the blazing oil fire. The flames lit up the half of the fur ball which was turned toward them. "See?" said Crogan.

Manvar saw, but he didn't believe. "There is no great fire in the sky."

"How do you know? You who see only the dark half of the world and the sky. How do you know what is on the other side? Always, Llanthor points one side toward darkness, and the other side toward light. How do men who live in darkness know what light is?"

"We are not men in darkness. We have Illam."

"Illam! A poor, feeble thing that shows a pale face, and we think we have seen light. If we crossed over the edge of the world we would then know what light is. The light of Detra!"

"But we still do not know there is a Detra."

"The Ancients knew. The ones who crossed over the rim of the world. They left us their word. All we have to do is go and find out for ourselves."

Manvar's eyes stared at the bright flame of the fire. "Yes, what a sight that would be. It's a sight I must see. And the great cities of the land south—they must be wonders. We could conquer and make them our own. But more than all that—freedom from this prison."

Crogan held the ball of fur in his hand and watched Manvar's eyes. "What prison do you speak of?" he said.

"The cold, the night, the endless, purposeless round—birthing—hunting—the Cold Sleep. Over and over—me, my father, his father. Who was the first father who began this senseless journey? This is the prison. Somewhere there must be a place where these walls are not—or else some purpose is made clear so they are no longer walls."

"You seek hard mysteries," said Crogan. "You will lie of the sickness on such a quest. Be content with the fine lands south and the warmth of Detra. Think of the cities to be taken when you have men enough."

"The men we must take will favor such things. They think of their bellies and their backs. But we will use them and use them well. I think if there are men in the south they may have found answer to these greater mysteries. They have not had to fight ice and dark and hungry bellies as we have. They would have had time for greater things."

Crogan turned the fur ball with his fingers on the needle points, "Llanthor has not distributed her gifts well. Imagine if it had been like

this." He held the needle so one end pointed to the floor and the other to the ceiling. He turned the ball slowly near the fire. "If it were like this," he said, "the warmth of Detra would be spread over all of Llanthor. No man would starve for light and warmth. No man would hunger, for there would be enough for all. The gods have indeed been unkind to Llanthor, when it would have been such a simple thing to make a kindly world."

"What the gods have failed to do, the kalsmen will change—if the stories of the Ancients have any shred of truth," said Manvar. "Tell me, Crogan, do you believe these things are true?"

Crogan's aged eyes looked into his own. "What can man say is truth until he has seen it with his own eyes? I have not seen, but I know it could be so. If I were a young man I would stake all my life on this believing."

"This Time of Great Waters—how is it to come?" said Manvar.

"Once every three or four lifetimes—so long that men forget it ever happened—the light, Detra, comes farther to the north. It is like so." He held up the fur ball again, the needle pointing toward the fire. "Just a little—it tips and no longer points straight toward Detra." He tilted the far end of the needle as he turned the ball slowly. "You see, the light of Detra moves higher, a little way into the north, when this happens. It does this for a time and then goes back to the old way.

"But during the time Detra lights more of the north, her heat turns ice into water. More water than any kalsman has ever seen. It flows along the land and makes many small rivers, which all flow into the one Great River that flows all the time. This Great River flows even beyond the land south until it disappears under the heat of Detra. Where it goes, I know not."

"And we are to travel the Great River? Perhaps we shall disappear, too, at our journey's end."

"We shall leave the river for the land before that occurs."

"I cannot imagine such water," said Manvar. "We melt a handful of ice over our fires to get water to drink. How could there be so much as to flow over the land? And why must we build boats and move on the Great River? Why can we not travel on land to the end of our journey?"

"It would be possible, but the way is so difficult and consumes so long a

time that it is our good fortune to be able to take advantage of the Time of Great Waters."

"And we do not even know if the Time of Great Waters is to come—"

"Ah," interrupted Crogan, "that is the one thing we do know, for that I can prove. Put on your cloak and I will show you."

In puzzlement, Manvar obeyed the old man's directions and went with him out into frigid night. Crogan led the way to a small hill beyond his house. There, he removed the stiff corus hide covering from a spindly object that pointed to the sky. It appeared to Manvar like a long sword mounted on tall legs. "Windl made it for me," said Crogan. "I can move it about and point it to the stars and discern their place in the sky."

"And what does this tell you?" said Manvar.

"It tells me the stars are slowly moving higher in the sky. I keep the pointer on that one bright star you see above you. There." Crogan pointed a thin arm to the sky. "And night after night I watch, and the star climbs a little higher. Such a little amount—but it is moving. Higher. That means that Llanthor is tipping slowly toward the south. Toward Detra. Very soon the ice begins to melt, and then is the Time of Great Waters. We must be ready!"

Manvar glanced along the straight knife edge that pointed to the sky. It lay a tiny distance below the star beyond its tip—so little that Manvar wondered how this could have any significance. Yet Crogan counted it a great and marvelous thing. He straightened, accepting Crogan's understanding of what he saw. "It sounds like dream enough for a man's whole life," he whispered softly. "I think I shall never return from these fine lands to the south."

### *CHAPTER 3*

The addks rose impatiently as Manvar took the reins of the sled and headed back toward the little valley of Windl the swordsmith. He had tarried far too long with Crogan. There was much yet to do in spite of the lateness.

Windl opened the door and greeted Manvar anxiously. "I heard... from the Council floor. Your arm, Manvar..."

"It is nothing. Crogan treated it. I have brought back the Kingsword."

Windl took the blade in both his hands and looked at it regretfully. "Perhaps it should be returned to the furnace, and we should start over again."

"No! It is a good blade. There is none finer, and I have made it mine, now."

"The rituals—"

"You said they are meaningless."

"I don't know. Sometimes I am not so sure."

"I have made it mine by the ritual of blood. Finish the blade."

"As you say, Manvar."

Manvar drew off his coat, wincing faintly at the strain on his wound. He leaned against the work table, where a trio of Kingswords lay in different stages of completion. "There are more important matters," he said.

Windl looked at him expectantly.

"Our journey to the south starts quickly. How soon can the toolsmiths be finished and ready to go?"

"We had planned by Dael Day. Must we go sooner?"

"Crogan is old. He cannot guide us much longer. More than that, my challenge of Radok endangers us all. We must leave before the Council determines to take action against us."

"Will they do that?"

"A challenge to a chieftain does not go unrewarded. We must be gone before they collect their dull wits and decide what action to take."

Windl shook his head. "Some of the men may not like that. They will not want to put themselves against the Council for you."

"It is good that we find out," said Manvar. "We want none of that kind with us. What of you? Does this frighten you?"

Windl's face, reddened from long years bent over the forge, creased in a reproving smile as he shook his head. "You know me much better than that. I threw my lot in with you when you first spoke of the land south. All my life I have tried to look beyond these ice-white hills and have seen nothing until you showed me Crogan's dream. I will go."

"Thanks." Manvar touched his shoulder. "With a few like you, we will reach the land south regardless of what stands in the way. Get the men and their tools ready by a fourth of the time to Dael Day."

"It is impossible. But we will do it."

Manvar set the addks on a course now for his own kal. Behind him, Windl waved briefly and closed the heavy door. Manvar wished he had 100 more men like the swordsmith. That would be enough to conquer any city the south held. They could take the world.

Windl was not an old man, but neither was he young. He had spent a life over the forge, crafting steel into the best swords men ever hefted. He lived alone, never taking a wife, and poured all his ambition into finer steel. But he had said once to Manvar: "To what end? Only that men can better slay each other?"

"Killing is a part of life," Manvar had answered. But he sometimes wished it were not so.

A dozen low hills separated his kal from Windl's valley. A kal consisted of a loose confederation of related families that traced beginnings through a not-too-precise genealogy to a common ancestor. The 20 kals that made up the Council comprised a population of 4000. Beyond this number, the inhabitants were forbidden to increase. Judgment sometimes had to be made against a newborn to the Cold Sleep if there were no elders to go. And in times when the hunt was unusually poor, the number diminished

even further.

The hunt had been good the past time, and the storage in every kal was full to the lawful limit. The corus, the great, shaggy beasts that provided food and clothing and hides for a thousand uses, had to be conserved, too. Sometimes they became so scarce it took a hunter 100 days to come back with a single animal.

Manvar crested the last hill and saw the smoke of the oil fires rising from the stone houses of his own kal. He, too, lived alone in the house that had belonged to his father. His mother had died long ago of the sickness. His father had been injured on a hunt and had gone to the Cold Sleep long before his time because he was no longer able to provide. Manvar had been old enough by then to hunt on his own. He had been granted the right to his father's house.

He unharnessed the addks and led them to their sheltered place at the rear of the house. He stowed the sled and his goods and entered.

It was warm, and the oil fire fed a yellow light into the two rooms. For a moment Manvar dropped to the pile of furs in the corner next to the fire. He put his head back and closed his eyes. The wound in his shoulder throbbed painfully, and somehow the heat of the room inflamed it all over again. He resisted the desire to tear loose the wrappings that Crogan had bound about his arm.

After a time, he arose and shrugged out of his coat. He turned to the cooking table by the fire and prepared a soup of coru's meat. It consisted only of meat bits and salted water. It revived him and eased the throbbing of his arm.

He knew there were things he should be doing, plans that should be made, but he felt so very tired. He lay down on the furs again and slept for a time.

He roused to the sound of beating on the ponderous stone door of the house. Slowly he got up and moved to the speaking hole, which he unplugged.

"Who is it?" he called.

A muffled voice from beyond the wall said, "The Elders have come to

see you."

They were early. He had expected them tomorrow, or even the next day. But they had lost no time. He opened the low door and stood aside as they bent over and entered.

There were four of them: Jandro, Elesha, Michor, and Senna. The Elders who had proposed him for chieftain to represent the kal. Now they had come to depose him.

"Will you sit?" He indicated the fur-laden bench against the far wall.

They remained standing, wrapped in their thick furs in the steamy room. It was the custom not to remove one's coat in the house of one not regarded as a friend.

Jandro was the father of Alena. He was Chief Elder for the kal. He spoke for the group. "You disgraced your kal in the Council meeting today."

"I defended a wise and worthy man as was my right by law. That was no thing to be ashamed of."

"There are many things permitted by law that a man may yet be ashamed of," said Jandro. "You have not represented the will of your kal, which you were appointed to do. You have acted out of head-strong and selfish interests of your own. For this reason you are no longer to sit for us in the Council."

Manvar looked from the faces of one to another. He felt a little sorrow for these men. They were afraid. Afraid of some offense other kals might take against them because their chieftain had dared challenge in the Council. Afraid of what they had heard of the great dream of Crogan the Wise.

Afraid of the land south—and another way of life.

"You may resist," said Jandro. "It is your right. A champion will be selected if you wish to draw swords."

"How many times need I defend? Have I not already defended this day?"

"Not to us."

Manvar grimaced and moved his wounded arm. "I would be an easy target for any boy in the kal."

"Then resign. Or we will wait until your arm is healed— with another speaking for us in the Council."

"No." Manvar shook his head wearily. "I do not wish to resist. If it is your will that I do not represent you longer, I will not shed more blood to prove my right. Appoint a man who has no thought of his own, a man in whose ear you can whisper what he shall say and what he shall think. I choose no part of your thoughts as my own. Whatever I do, I'll think my own thoughts and be my own man."

"That is well," said Jandro. "We hoped you would be a sensible man."

"A sensible man I always am," said Manvar.

They turned to go, stooping once again for the low door, like a string of corus slogging heavily through the snow. The last, Jandro, straightened before he left. His face was thin with sternness and disapproval. "One more thing. You are not welcome at the house of Jandro. Alena will not see you again."

He stooped and moved out.

Manvar closed the door against the fierce cold and turned the oil higher.

He had snarled at Crogan for mentioning the name of Alena. He had taken offense at his old friend because of the turmoil her name caused in his own mind.

A part of him said that he should remain in the kal, take Alena to his home and breed children to take his place and hers when it should be their turn for the Cold Sleep; that he should spend his life hunting so they might have food to exist from one day to the next. It had been done this way by countless generations before him. It was what Alena wanted. All she wanted. Her world was the kal and her people. She could conceive of nothing beyond that.

And the other part of Manvar revolted at the thought of such a futile, meaningless existence. Somehow there had to be more for a man than eating and breeding. There had to be another world besides the world of endless ice and bitter cold that imprisoned them all. Perhaps it was the land south. He did not know. But somewhere in the infinity of existence it had to be.

He would spend his life finding it if he had to. But Alena could not share that kind of life. She would die.

He slept fitfully during the night and rose early. After a hasty breakfast he roused the addks and harnessed them. He would look in on Crogan first, and then the day would be spent with those he had recruited for the long journey.

In the dimness of the morning light the icy landscape was a gray, barren infinity. The beasts were refreshed and moved swiftly, sweeping him over the undulating ice hills in a dimness that made it seem as if he were floating alone in space, detached from anything solid and real.

Then, in the distance he spotted another moving speck against the dim whiteness. It could only be another addk sled. He wondered who else might be out on a journey so early. But he had no desire to meet anyone now. He veered aside to avoid the path of the other.

It appeared after a moment that the other rider, however, was intent on intersecting Manvar's course. He turned again and watched the stranger also turn to meet his passage. Manvar felt at his waist for the short dagger that was his only weapon. He wished for the Kingsword he had returned to Windl, but it was too late for that. He would have to meet the stranger with the weapon he had.

He no longer tried to avoid contact, but turned to a direct course with the oncoming sled. The stranger seemed to welcome the approach. Then, as the addk teams slowed on their advance to each other, Manvar recognized the other figure.

"Alena," he said softly.

The girl pushed back the fur headpiece a trifle, and Manvar felt the old sense of longing and peace that he always felt when she was near. "What are you doing here at this time?" he said.

Her small face seemed lost in the massive cloak and hood. She appeared pale and exhausted. "I felt sure you would be out this morning, on your way to Crogan or Windl or some other. I wanted to see you."

"Your father came to me last night."

"I know. That's why I am here."

"He would challenge me if he knew we met. I want no more bloodshed in my kal."

"Are you suddenly grown afraid?" Alena said with unfamiliar harshness. "You and I have to meet. You have to accept challenge if it be given. We have promised to each other. And now I hear from others the talk of your plan to go soon to the land south. You have said nothing to me."

"I am going to the land south," said Manvar slowly. "It is a place you cannot go. The journey would kill you."

"What do you know of what I can endure? Do our promises mean nothing? Do I not have the right to go with you? Are not other women going?"

"Other women—yes. Strong women who have borne many burdens. You are a small and delicate thing, Alena, who belongs in a house, cared for by a man who does not run off to wild lands. When I come back, perhaps I shall be such a man."

"When you come back I shall be the wife of the mightiest chieftain in the kals! And I shall have sons of a chieftain, warriors who could cut down the mighty Manvar with a flick of their hands!"

"Let it be so, Alena. Let us not quarrel."

"Manvar—Manvar! I am as strong as any woman. I will fight beside you and work until I drop."

"That is it—you would drop too soon, little Alena. I do what I have to do. You are far better free of me."

He backed away, stepped to his sled, and turned the addks aside. They

bore him off, and he could not bear to turn to look back at her.

## CHAPTER 4

Manvar's sword was respected and feared throughout the kals. All men knew that one day—if that day had not come already—he would be the greatest fighter of all. But Manvar's sword was not often unsheathed. Men looked to him for his words as well as his weapons. When he spoke of Crogan's dream he found listeners, although they knew the words were Crogan's and they turned aside when the old Wise One himself spoke of the great secrets of the land south and the impossible Detra and a world that did not suck the life out of a man.

Manvar spoke of these same things and found listeners. Most men, he came to suspect, arrived at a period in their lives when, like him, they looked to the years ahead and grew sick of the vista of breeding, endless hunting, and final succumbing to the Cold Sleep. He was not the only one who abhorred that vision. The difference was that others came to quick agreement that there was no other way. This was the destiny of man, and it was not to be changed.

Manvar believed it could change. In his heart he had fought against it all his days.

Manvar caught some of them, however, in their own moment of abhorrence and taught them with his own gift of magic persuasion that the land south did truly exist, that men could there find warmth and comfort and purpose. These threw their lots gladly with Manvar and with Crogan's impossible dream.

There was no place for them to meet. There was no house that would hold but a handful of them. Many of them still lived in the houses of their fathers. Only the Council Hall could hold them, and it was not open to rebels who would abandon the kals.

They met in the open, at one of the gathering places used by hunters before spreading out in their solitary searches for the coru. Here were places where camps had long been made, fireplaces where roaring pools of burning oil lit the dark sky and surged against the perpetual whiteness of ice and snow. The nearest camp was in a small valley a day's journey from

the kals. Manvar passed word they were to meet the next morning.

He spent the day alerting the leaders over his tens and his fifties and his hundreds. He visited Crogan and found the old man well but exhausted after his torment of the previous days. He went to Windl's valley, but the sword-smith was gone. Undoubtedly visiting his toolsmiths to urge them on. Manvar left him a letter telling him of the meeting at the hunters' camp.

He returned to Crogan for a fresh dressing of his wound. For the remainder of the day he sketched plans for the journey and submitted them to Crogan for approval or criticism.

Manvar was there first, but the men began arriving early, after traveling most of the night. They built a huge fire and fueled it with oil brought in coruskin vessels. The yellow, smoky glow brightened the hills of the small valley, but was not so bright as to be seen in the kals.

Manvar stood by the fire and watched the trains of addks move down the hillsides silently, like ghost beasts. The men parked the animals and the sleds in the fiat space beyond the fire. It would take much room for the hundreds of animals to be congregated there. Some men rode two and three to a sled, but many came alone.

As the gathering increased, there was a low, constant growling from the addks while they munched the delicacies of meat tossed them by their owners, but they were not wild. The addks were quiet animals.

Manvar greeted each man as he entered the circle by the fire. He gauged each one as the yellow light illumined the hooded face. Most were cheerful and filled with suppressed excitement. Some were grim, as if they were taking all eternity in their hands by being present. Some seemed suspicious, as if doubting all they had heard.

He had made some mistakes, Manvar knew. Some of them would not endure well. Some of them would defy him before the journey was out. Some would probably try for his life. He was not good enough at this kind of thing, but he had done the best he could. He must do what he had to do and be willing to pay for his mistakes.

There were more than 200, and the women who were going were not present. He wondered if he had too many or too few. Crogan advised against attempted conquest the first journey. But Manvar sensed there would be no other. They would find their goal with this one, or they would fail.

He stood on the small stone cairn by the fire and raised his voice for their attention. Crogan sat on a rock ledge in front of him.

"You know of the happening in the Council. It calls for a change in our plans. I have been ousted as chieftain of my kal. The Council will find some other action to take against us. We must leave as quickly as possible.

"You all know your posts. Twelve days from now we will assemble here and begin our journey. I will keep in constant touch with group leaders. For the remainder of this day, I want each leader to consult with his people and determine what obstacles must be overcome to meet this date. Each leader will report to me the condition of his preparation.

"Is there any question of importance to all of us that any of you want to ask?"

A dozen voices called out. Manvar raised his hand to signal order.

"What will the Council attempt against us?" a voice asked.

"Only the Council knows that. Perhaps they will attempt to stop us. But they will not close their eyes to us."

He started to ask for another question, but a stirring at the outer edge of the group disrupted the gathering for a moment. A latecomer had driven up swiftly and left his addks and sled where he stopped. He was pushing through the crowd.

Then, as he came into the light of the oil fire, Manvar recognized him with a shock. "First Chief, Jek!"

Manvar stepped down from the cairn in deference to the leader.

The First Chief looked coldly at Manvar, then turned slowly to sweep his glance over the nearby ranks of the crowd. Finally, he mounted the cairn. A gasp went through the assembly as they recognized the First Chief.

Manvar watched him. He had no quarrel with the First Chief. Jek was an honest man. He ruled the Council and the kals with strict conformance to the written laws. His duty was to the people.

"You want something better," said Jek at last. He let his gaze rest for an instant on each man alone. The intensity of his eyes gave each one the momentary sense that the two of them were alone. "So you think to run from all you have and believe—run to some finer world somewhere beyond the Barrier Storm, somewhere in these mythical lands south."

He thrust out an arm toward them and thundered: "I say: Go! You disgrace the homes of your fathers who have fought the cold and the night for generations before you. They survived and showed you how to endure. And now you choose to run from their gifts and their memory. You disgrace them. Go!"

"But remember this: There is no return. No man who turns his back on his kal will be welcome again. His house will be given to another. His woman will belong to another if she stays. His child, if there is one, will curse his name. His brothers will greet him with the sword.

"Think well before you cast lots with these madmen who have cheated the Cold Sleep. Far better had they been called for the sleep on the day they were born. They have troubled many, and their troubling has not ceased.

"We will survive you, make no mistake. But your going leaves us with need of many hunters. Your fathers' homes will be empty and cold with your going. Your absence will be felt, but we will fill it, and you will be hated for the cowards you are, that you run from the land and the gifts of your fathers."

He let his eyes rest a moment on the circle of men. Then abruptly he stepped down. He came face to face with Manvar. "Call them off," he demanded. "Tell them there is no land south."

Manvar said, "I will tell them the truth."

He mounted the cairn and faced the silent men. "We did not expect the First Chief to so honor us with his presence, but we welcome him and his admonishment. Consider his words carefully.

"It is true that we go on a crusade based on dreams. But dreamers are not cowards. We face unknowns greater than the discomforts we leave behind. Many lives will be lost—perhaps all. We accept that risk.

"We deny not our fathers. We honor them and the generations that have endured. We ask only: To what end, this endurance? Must men merely endure forever? We wager our lives against the chance of something better.

"But if any man has not weighed this wager carefully in his mind let him do so now. The First Chief has spoken truly: We turn our backs upon the kals. We do not expect to be forgiven. Let no man go to the land south who is not willing to accept the judgment of the kals and the Council. It is just. We will abide it."

He stepped down. Jek awaited him. "You are a fool," the First Chief said. "But only because you are young. How much we need men like you! When you learn wisdom you could become First Chief and guide your people to greatness. Take your own advice, Manvar: Think carefully upon this thing that you do."

He was grateful for the unexpected appearance of the First Chief. A score of men packed their sleds and followed Jek at his leaving. It rid the group of that many weak ones.

It sobered the remainder, too. They looked reflectively upon their commitment, recognizing there was no returning from this course.

Six days later the first group of sleds left. These were the hunters and trailbreakers, who would find and mark the best passage and who would hunt and deposit the carcasses of corus for those who would follow.

Three days after that, the supply sleds left. Those carrying fuel, tools, extra tents and food supplies beyond what each man carried for himself. The women who came were to ride with their men, and for these the burdens of their supplies were shared by their fellows.

Crogran was given to the care of a young man named Nimed, who was overwhelmed by the honor. Crogran was to ride in Nimed's sled, and part

of their supplies were carried elsewhere. Manvar was confident the aged Wise One was in good hands.

With the third group, on the twelfth day, Manvar left the kals. As with the earlier groups, no one watched them go. No one wished them good hunting. They were thought to be dead men already.

They crossed the near hills and halted at the top to look back. All but Crogan. He could *not* turn his head far enough to see. "And it's better that way," he joked. "You gain nothing by looking back."

Manvar agreed, but he had been tempted beyond resistance to look one final time at the distant house of Jandro—and Alena. He had not seen her since the morning he had told her she could not come with them.

The first days went well. It was like the beginning of a great hunt in which the men looked forward with joyous expectancy to the success of the kill and the filling of the storage pits. The black words of the First Chief were forgotten. So was the knowledge of unknown terrors that lay ahead—in and beyond the Barrier Storm. There was nothing for the moment but the joy of swift movement over the white waste and the freedom of wild pursuit.

Those days were filled with much laughter and childlike bantering. Manvar watched without participating. He felt infinitely old in the command he had assumed. This time would be over soon enough, when the terrors came upon them. Let them play and forget care and danger. Such a time as this might never come again in the lives of any of them.

"You are too serious," said Crogan, watching him as they rested the addks at noon on the third day.

"The children can play," replied Manvar. "I have serious things to be concerned about."

"One must be a child some part of each day," warned Crogan, "or he becomes an old man long before his time."

Manvar smiled. "When we reach the lands south—if they are as has been said—we can play the rest of our days. Until that time, I am serious. I dread the Barrier Storm. Not for myself. But have I men I can trust?"

"They chose between your words and those of the First Chief. Men can do surprising things when they have come to a decision."

That night, just as the meal was beginning, Jandro came into camp. He came in fury, driving exhausted addks that would have been dead had they been pushed another hour.

He searched for Manvar and strode wildly toward him when he found the startled leader.

"Give her to me!" he demanded. "Where is she?"

Manvar felt a stab of fear. He didn't need to ask what Jandro was talking about, but he answered in defiance, "I don't know what you mean."

"You know well enough. Alena. She's not been seen since the day you left. I want her."

"Then find her. But you'll have to look elsewhere. I know nothing about her."

"You're lying. You took her." Jandro made a wild motion to draw his sword.

Manvar put out his hand. "Hold your sword, Jandro," he said tiredly. "If Alena has gone, I am as concerned as you are. But she is not here. You may search the camp until you are satisfied she is not with us."

Jandro hesitated, then thrust his sword back into its sheath. To the three companions who accompanied him he said, "Search the camp, every tent and concealment. Examine every face. She is here somewhere."

Manvar gave orders that Jandro was to be permitted his search. The camp went on with preparations for the meal.

When the futile task was ended, Manvar said, "Eat with us, Jandro. Then rest the night before you return."

The older man was crushed by the failure of his search, but he remained defiant. "I will not eat with you. Where is the rest of your camp? This is not all that left."

"Two parties are ahead of us, the hunters and the freighters. They are

within a day or two only, since they have stopped to hunt. I will go with you tomorrow, and you may search those camps to prove I am telling the truth."

Jandro looked at his own men and wavered. "I will wait until tomorrow. We will make our own camp."

With his companions he went a short distance and set up tents where they prepared their own meal. Manvar paced indecisively between his own tents, torn by the knowledge of Alena's disappearance. He spoke to Crogan,

"You know about these things, Wise One. Was Alena such as to take her own life because of me?"

Crogan chuckled and patted Manvar's arm. "You flatter yourself. She is far more likely to have done as she threatened: find herself a new young chieftain and run off to bear him children to quell the mighty Manvar."

"If that were so, I would be content. But I do not believe it any more than you do."

"How do you know what I believe?" said Crogan. "My years have accumulated wisdom that is useful in deceit as well as truth."

"Crogan would deceive no man," said Manvar. In the morning Manvar pushed out ahead of the camp with Jandro and his companions. By nightfall they had caught up with the freighting camp and made the same search for Alena in vain. They spent the night and followed on to meet the hunters' camp the next day. The results were the same. The expeditioners thought it a great joke that Jandro would accuse Manvar of taking Alena. They thought it so until the sight of Manvar's face silenced them.

Manvar was torn by an impulse to return to the kals with Jandro and help search for Alena until she was found. But he knew he could not. He was committed to the expedition, and his men would reject his leadership if he turned aside even for a moment. And there remained the threat of Jek: "His brothers will greet him with the sword."

It was most likely that Crogan was right, after all. In her fury, Alena had probably given herself to another and would soon be back to her father with the man to whom she belonged.

"I am sorry for your grief," Manvar said to Jandro. "I would help if I could. You must know by now that I have not taken your daughter. She is away; she will come back to you."

Jandro looked about the hunters' camp for the last time. Three days among the exiles had given him a glimpse of a world beyond all his previous understanding.

"If she had come with you, I would at least have known where she was," he sighed.

## *CHAPTER 5*

The three groups rendezvoused two days later: the one-day rest allowed the addks to recuperate and the group to replenish the stores from the hunt. Corus were abundant in the area, but the hunters were still careful to take no more than could be used now. It was futile to kill more than they could carry.

On this day of rest Manvar looked up at the sky. It was black, and Illam was hidden. Oil lamps of the night still flickered their yellow light against the snow. "It feels like a big one," Manvar said to Crogan. "Surely we are not near the Barrier Storm yet?"

"Far from it. This is a small thing that will pass in a day or two. I suggest we rest this one out. When we reach the Barrier Storm there must be no waiting. We must plunge on through."

The wind began to rise about midmorning, whipping snow through the air with cutting force. The addks dug into the snow and curled their backs against the storm. Manvar checked his leaders who, in turn, checked the tents of their men. They awaited the storm's fury.

It was no more than any of them had experienced a thousand times before. They had been taught to anchor their coruskin tents against the blast and wait it out rather than stand against it.

All of them, of course, had been caught by sudden storms during a hunt and had been forced to drive the addks on through it. They knew what it was like to face storm. And each of them knew what was possible and

what was impossible.

The great Barrier Storm that lay somewhere ahead loomed as the impossible.

The storm howled and roared and struggled to bury them through the day, then quieted somewhat by nightfall. The next morning, duties were exchanged, and a new crew of hunters moved out ahead of the main camp. The first days' exuberance had begun to wear away now, and the expedition settled into the more serious business of covering as much distance as possible each day.

Crogan kept track of the days in his coruskin log, and he had a little wheel on his sled that counted the distance traveled in a way no one but himself understood. They paused every five days to rendezvous and take stock and rest the animals. Storms slowed them at times, and on clear days they tried to make up for it. Crogan was satisfied with their progress.

Manvar watched his men closely. He began to wish for a return of their initial exuberance. As it died, a boredom, then a tension, began to rise among them. Irritations and quarrels increased, which he was called upon to settle.

They passed and went far beyond the boundaries familiar to kalsmen in their ordinary hunting expeditions. They were in new land that none of them had seen before. It looked no different from all the white-laden hills and valleys they were used to. But it felt different. There was a sense of vast distance, a feeling of how far they were from all that had been familiar. And the knowledge that they were never to return.

There were more days now with a sky that was almost wholly black, and the oil lamps had to be lighted the whole day long while they traveled. The winds increased, not in the sudden turbulent bursts accompanying the storms through which they had passed, but with a steady, rising whine of air across the land.

"We are coming to it," Crogan told Manvar. "We are near the edge of the Barrier Storm. We should rest here and make our final replenishment of supplies."

Kalsmen knew of the Barrier Storm through vague, legendary accounts of men who had penetrated some distance into it. But there were none

now living who knew it first hand. It was a region of perpetual terror and fury, where storms never ceased, and it was said by some that it hid the edge of the world where men would vanish if they dared cross.

Crogan believed it had something to do with the meeting of the darkness of the north and the light of Detra of the south, but even he was not sure. He only knew that the Ancients recounted their successful crossing, and what they had done could be repeated by modern men.

Manvar agreed to the rest stop before entering the Barrier. It was only three days since their last rest, but he called a halt and gathered his people. "Rest well," he said. "See that your meat cache is full. Tomorrow—or the day after—we will be in the Barrier Storm. You have all been told what to expect; now it is here. Once in the barrier we cannot stop and wait for the storm to pass. It never dies. We will rest only as much as we must. Then we go on. The darkness of the day will be like the darkness of the night. Only the ever-seeing eyes of the addks will guide us much of the time. May you have been good to your beasts so that they will guide you aright."

"How long?" a kalsman asked. "How long to cross the barrier?"

"According to Crogan the Wise, some writings of the old ones have said 20 days. Some 30. Some did not say, but wrote as if half their lifetime had been spent in the barrier. We do not know how long. What we do know is that men have gone through—and returned. Of that much we are sure. And what other men have done, we can do."

The people of the kals distrusted storms. They were the enemies of man, the tools and weapons of the gods. And the gods were not to be trusted. What they had given to one man for 20 days, they might indeed give to another for half a lifetime. Around the bright oil fire in the pleasant hunters' valley near the kals it had been easy to shout agreement to this great venture. Now, face to face with it, some wondered about their delirious conviction of that moment.

Lying in his tent that night with Crogan nearby, Manvar found sleep impossible. He had tried to fight off thoughts of Alena, but tonight he could not free himself of her. He was tormented by imaginings of what might have happened to her. Was it possible she had killed herself? That she had tried to run away—when there was no place to run?

The wind shook the tent with fierce, ripping bites. He got up and went outside to check the tents and to look at the animals. The camp gear was withstanding the buffeting well. The animals were at rest in their snow caves. He looked to the stormy emptiness above while the wind rocked him.

*What is it, he thought. Am I afraid to go on?*

It was not that. There was no question about going on. Some of the men feared the Barrier Storm, and some would perish in it because of that fear. But for him it was the old yearning that wouldn't die, the yearning to be assured there was meaning and purpose in what he did. The great fear that haunted him was that he could not find that purpose.

It was a great dream to find the fine, warm land south. But what then? Would he still struggle for something yet beyond him? How much better to be like the men who remained in the kals. How much better to be like First Chief Jek and know there was destiny in the kals.

No—it was not better. For Jek did not have any such knowledge. He was only ignorant of the fact that there was no destiny, only endurance.

His own curse, Manvar thought, was the knowledge of other men's ignorance. But for that curse he was grateful. He would not have had it otherwise.

Alena—surely Jandro had found his daughter by now.

They spent the following day checking gear and replenishing meat to their utmost capacity to carry. Hunting had been poor for a number of days, and this had a depressing effect on the camp. There would be no hunting at all in the region of the Barrier Storm.

Manvar gave the order to move out the following morning. As if to give a final challenge, the wind surged through the night and bore thunderously against the hills and the frail tents. In a prelude to what was to come, they prepared a fugitive meal and broke camp. The addks, who usually rallied to the challenge of a storm, seemed reluctant in the harness now, as if dreading, too, the Barrier Storm.

Manvar took his place at the head now, great oil beacons supported on posts on his sled weakly lighting the way as their flames fought the wind.

The addks, their night vision discerning a way, strained reluctantly at the harness and moved out.

All day they struggled, stopping a little now and then to huddle against the wind in the lee of a low hill and give the addks a respite. Then they moved on, and it was hard to tell if it was the end of the day or if they traveled half into the night.

They pitched tents in wind and slashing ice pellets. The men had skill from many hunts and storms and they used all their skills now. In silence and endurance they lit their oil fires inside the tents from flints that ignited oil-soaked strips of dried coruskin. Some, not so skilled with the flints, were tempted to borrow from a neighbor whose fire already lit the darkness. But it was a shameful thing to have no skill with the stones and the oil, and a man would rather freeze through the night than admit he could not light a fire.

They continued for nine days, or what seemed to them nine days, for there was no light of Illam to record the time. Men moved with the stiffness of ones frozen, caring for the animals, erecting the tents, eating meat that was mostly frozen and raw and riding the sleds to another day's unknown destination.

That ninth night, three tents were blown away and the occupants frozen. Six men and the women of three of them. They were left where they lay in their own Cold Sleep. Only their addks and their sleds were taken for replacement use. A dozen addks had already sickened and died.

On the twelfth day there was a small respite. The wind died somewhat, and the ice stopped falling from the sky. Illam's light became visible through the parting billows. The caravan pulled to a halt in the lee of a hill higher than any they had seen since entering the barrier. All about them, mountains had formed, and they marveled that the addks had led them through the valleys without getting lost.

"We will stop here for the night," said Manvar.

"You must go on!" Crogan cried. "This clearing is an opportunity to gain time."

"There has to be a stop," Manvar repeated wearily. "The animals will die. More men will die. We've got to give them a rest while the storm

breaks."

"More than a rest, Manvar."

Manvar turned at the sound of a voice behind him. It was Caldec, a group leader over 50, and one who Manvar had known for many days should never have been chosen. He found disaster in every swirl of wind.

"What more is there, Caldec?" said Manvar.

"Back. We're going back. A number of us have talked among ourselves. We made a mistake. But we think you lied to us about the great land south. Or that old dreamer Crogan simply made you believe his nightmares. There's no great land in this direction. It leads only to the edge of the world, where men will drop into nothingness. We'll all die if we keep going. We're going back and claim our rights in the kals."

"You forget you have no rights in the kals," said Manvar. "You forfeited them the night you refused Jek's order to stay."

"We'll worry about that when we get there."

Manvar glanced about the group that edged near Caldec. Two dozen, perhaps three dozen supporters at the most.

"No one goes back," said Manvar. "You had your chance. We need every man now. The loss of one means that much less chance for everyone. No one goes back."

"You can't make us stay! We're free to do as we please!"

"You made a commitment to see this journey through. You are not free to go back on that commitment, because, we do not release you from it."

"We made no commitment to pursue an old man's wild imagining. That's all that the land south has become. We have no commitment to throw away our lives on your lie."

"I say that no one goes," said Manvar evenly.

"We go now." Caldec moved to his sled and grasped the lines of the addks.

Manvar's sword flashed in the dim light. The severed lines dropped to the ground, leaving Caldec holding a fragment. Caldec looked to the point of Manvar's sword and to the score of others that suddenly surrounded him and his followers on all sides.

"That is easy," he snarled. "There are five times as many of you. Will you cut us down and leave us in the Cold Sleep because we learned your lie? Give us fair contest, Manvar. My sword against yours to determine if we go or if we stay!"

"No!" Crogan cried. "The rest of us depend on Manvar. And he is in no fettle to fight. The care of all of us has been his burden, while lazy Caldec has not stirred except to eat and sleep."

"Crogan, my old friend," said Manvar, "someday someone is just liable to whack off that flapping tongue of yours if you don't keep it behind your lips. Ready, Caldec!"

At once it was apparent the words of Crogan were true. Manvar's steps were slow and clumsy in the snow. His thrust was almost the thrust of a tired, old man, and the onlookers remembered the nights he had spent hurrying between tents, assuring the well-being of all the camp before taking his own rest. They remembered the incessant drive that pulled them all through the blackness and blinding storm behind the addks of Manvar.

And Caldec was fresh. No man's concern was his but his own. He taunted Manvar. "Hunter with the frozen feet! Say that Caldec goes and that all who will shall go with him. Spare your blood from spurting on the snow!"

Manvar remained silent, his blade thrusting and parrying mechanically. He had seen Caldec in fight many times. Caldec was rash and enjoyed showing off to an audience. But he was a good swordsman. Yet he could wear himself out in showy tactics if he were allowed to do so.

He danced about Manvar in the snow, flicking the tip of his sword to the great furs of the leader, cutting a swath now and then. Manvar contented himself with fending off the thrusts until Caldec saw his strategy.

"You agreed to fight, not play," Caldec shouted. "Let us fight, then!" He

slowed his whimsical pace and retreated, holding his blade ready.

Manvar advanced suddenly with fierce attack that kept Caldec moving back until he fell in the snow. He rose to his knees, blood staining the shoulder of his furs.

Manvar's lungs burned. He shook his head in bewilderment. That small effort should not cripple his breath. He waited, panting, for Caldec to get to his feet.

The other man stood up. His fingers clasped the bloody fur of his right shoulder.

"You will stay," said Manvar with finality.

"We will go!" Caldec hurled himself upon Manvar in fury. He slashed and thrust and parried. Manvar was forced back. His feet seemed to entangle themselves with one another, and he went down on one knee. Caldec rushed in, his blade aimed for the bare spot of flesh at Manvar's throat. A cry of anguish went up from the watchers.

Then, even as Caldec rushed, his hands flung wide in the air, the sword falling from his grasp, and his back arched in sudden agony. He gave one shrill cry and fell face down in the snow at Manvar's side.

The thick blade of an axe was half buried in his back.

In a fury of rage, Caldec's followers seized the axe-wielder and flung him to the snow in the center of the ragged circle of kalsmen. One of Caldec's rebels rushed upon the downed man, sword drawn. "He dies!" the man bellowed. "He has intervened in a battle to the death. He has no claim for quarter!"

But Crogan staggered forward and slumped to the snow before the downed man. "Hold!" He raised a hand against the advancing swordsman.

"You first, old man—and then him," the assailant snarled.

Manvar, on his feet again, lunged and struck aside the sword of Crogan's attacker. "Take Caldec's place," Manvar said. "Caldec would have killed me while I was down. I will defend him who saved my life."

"I want none of your blood, Manvar. But the coward that struck Caldec in the back must die."

Crogan spread his arms in front of the figure in the snow. "It is not one of our fighting men," he cried. "It is Manvar's woman. She had the right to strike down Caldec!"

"You old fool." The swordsman pressed his blade against Manvar's sword that barred his way. "Manvar has no woman. We all know that."

Crogan touched the figure. His fingers swiftly stripped open the furs and the robe beneath. "It is Manvar's woman! She had the right. Manvar's woman had the right to slay his killer."

## *CHAPTER 6*

Alena sat up and closed the furs about her again. She drew the hood over her butchered hair and wiped her stained, haggard face.

Manvar moved slowly toward her and knelt in the snow. He took her hand in his. "Alena... Alena..." he said softly. "How did you come here? Where have you been?"

Her exhausted eyes stared up at him. "You said I was not strong enough—too weak to come."

Manvar turned back to the rebels. "No man goes," he said.

The kalsman who had been about to attack Alena lowered his eyes and backed away. The others moved to the tasks of erecting the tents. Four men lifted Caldec's body and carried it beyond the camp, where they laid it in the open, on top of the snow.

In his tent, Manvar lit the oil fire and sat Alena on the furs. He drew back the hood and looked at her face, which he would scarcely have recognized under any circumstances, so haggard had she become.

"How did you do it?" he said again. "Where have you been?"

"I knew my father would come looking for me," Alena said. "I stayed

away from the camp until he had come and gone. But I traveled not far from you, always staying out of sight. After my father left, I fell in with the second group and told them I had dropped back from the first group because of repairs to my sled. No one questioned me. Each thought I was from some other kal and wasn't sure if he should recognize me or not. After the storms began to come no one knew or cared if one more person was in camp.

"Crogan was the only one who found me out. He is not called Crogan the Wise in vain. It was during the first great storm of the barrier, and I put my tent next to your others. Crogan found me somehow the first day, and I begged him to keep my secret. He wanted to tell you I was here. He said you would forgive me, but I was afraid you would turn me away and make me go back. I wanted to stay unrecognized as long as possible. Crogan agreed to be silent.

"Then, when you fought Caldec and I saw him gaining over you, I knew what Crogan had said was true—you were exhausted, and Caldec was fresh. He was going to kill you. I wasn't going to let him do that, no matter what they did to me. I picked up the axe and carried it under my furs and stood close while you fought. When you fell, and he was about to kill you, I sank the axe in his back."

"You could have been killed by Caldec's followers before Caldec fell to the snow."

"I was ready for that. I did not expect Crogan to save me."

"The law saved you. The law that says only a man's woman has the right to come to her man in a battle to the death."

"The law would have been too late, except for Crogan."

Manvar was silent, pondering the miracle by which Alena had offered her life in exchange for his. At last he spoke.

"Why did you come? Maybe Caldec was right. Maybe it is all a lie and there is no fine, warm land south. You have come out here to die with us."

"That's what a man's woman is supposed to do. Other women have come. Haven't I as much right as they?"

He shook his head. "You are different. You belong in a house—"

"Because I am weak and frail and too little to be of use in the camp! What other woman has made her way alone all these days? Who has pitched her tent alone, prepared her food and her fire? Who has killed her man's enemy? Only I have done these things, and still you say I belong safe in a house in a kal!"

"Yes, you belong safe in a house where none of these things can touch you."

"Tell me... just tell me you are glad I am here, Manvar."

He touched her gently. "I am glad you are here, Alena."

They rested for two days, much against the advice of Crogan. And maybe it would have been better to continue, for on the third day the winds rose again, and the stinging ice attacked from the sky.

They broke camp and continued. Manvar led out. Alena by his side. Food supplies were diminishing rapidly. They had seen no corus since entering the Barrier Storm. Manvar ordered a reduction of rations, but there was no way of knowing when they would find fresh game again.

They bore through the storm for three more days, and then it raged upon them with a new fury that exceeded anything before it. The addks refused to stand up to it. They dropped in their harnesses and buried themselves in the snow. It was useless to whip them. They lay as if already dead.

Fighting the wind, the men spread and tied tents over pairs of adjacent sleds, then huddled over feeble oil flames whose smoke almost smothered them. They warmed frozen meat and fed it to each other and to the animals, and for three days of merciless fury most survived. Four men and a woman suffocated in their tent. Three others froze to death.

When the storm lessened, they were able to stir the animals to life once more.

For 29 days, by Crogan's count, they battled the Barrier Storm. And no one could say for sure that it wasn't a dozen days more than that.

Almost as abruptly as it had appeared, it vanished behind them; the winds died and the light of Illam was seen again. The land seemed pleasant again.

But it was a land such as they had never seen before. They came out on a high place from which the land dropped away a hundred times the height of the highest hill they had ever seen. Instead of small slopes and low hills there were sheer walls and jagged peaks. It dropped away to broad ice plains and canyons of snow.

"This is the wonderous land south!" exclaimed Gryer, one who had followed Caldec.

Manvar ignored him and turned to Crogan. "Do you know this land? Is this spoken of by the Ancients?"

Crogan nodded. "They speak of it. We are on the right path." He gestured toward the far horizon, where patches of black appeared on the hills across from the broad ice plain. "Trees," he announced. "It is from those trees that we shall build our boats."

No one understood what a tree was. Crogan thought he knew, from the old descriptions, but he wasn't sure.

They finally found long, tortuous slopes that led down from the heights to the sloping plain below. At times it was necessary to tie weights under the rear runners of the sleds to stop them from overtaking the addks.

Three days later they were at the foot of the mountain.

Manvar planned to stay here for as long as it took to rest and repair the effects of the storm. Many sleds were badly damaged. Tents were torn and shredded almost beyond repair. Men and their women were afflicted with the sickness. Three or four were so ill they chose the Cold Sleep rather than endure.

Manvar tried to dissuade them from this. He needed every man he had, and he knew some could become well again. But he did not have the authority to prevent them choosing the Cold Sleep. No man had that authority over another.

The greatest problem was food. The last of the meat was gone. A party

of hunters left immediately to search for corus. After four days they had still not returned. Manvar dispatched another party in the opposite direction.

On the sixth day, a single man, Geneal, returned. "I got sick," he said. "I had to come back. The others went on. We found tracks, but they were not like any coru tracks we had ever seen before. I do not know how far the others may have determined to go. I had to come back."

"You smell sick," murmured his companion. "What have you done?"

"I have done nothing. I only want to lie in my tent until I am better—or until I must seek the Cold Sleep. Let me lie in my tent and I will be well."

"You have not eaten. You will never be well."

"I need no food," said Geneal. "I need only to lie in my tent."

He struggled from his sled to the door of his tent and collapsed within.

Others began unharnessing the sick man's addks and putting his goods away. One of them suddenly gave a shout. "No wonder he needed no food. He has eaten of the corumeal!"

A hush came over those who approached the sled to look at the man's find. It was a container filled with a black, spongy substance that all recognized. Corumeal, the food on which the coru subsisted, but which was forbidden to man on pain of death.

The corumeal formed at the edge of the oily pools from which men obtained oil for fires and light. It was said to float up from the bottom of the world. It gathered at the edge of the oil pools and was the only substance the corus ate. Without it there would be no coru. Without coru there would be no men.

But it was forbidden that a man should eat corumeal, for doing so made him coru. It made him not-man. It made him unclean. It made him mad.

They dragged the hunter from the tent and confronted him with the find of corumeal. He retched upon the ground.

"My belly could wait no longer," he gasped. "It will save us all. There are no corus here. But there is corumeal—great mounds of it. Enough for all." He retched again. "It will save us. Eat of it and be filled—"

One of the men silenced him with a blow. Another raised a sword and brought it down. They carried him beyond the camp and laid him on top of the snow.

From a distance, Manvar watched. He knew the taboo and its punishment. He had no power to stop it. But perhaps the hunter had been right. Their salvation might lie in the unhallowed muck the corus ate.

Pains of hunger tortured all in the camp when the second group of hunters returned on the eighth day. They had sleds piled high with carcasses as they burst into camp near the end of the day. People had seen them coming from afar off and had run to meet them when they saw the laden sleds.

Their race was feeble with the hunger that was in them, but they shouted welcome to the men on the sleds. Hastily, others prepared the cooking fires and waited for the arrival.

As those who ran to greet the hunters reached the sleds, however, they suddenly recoiled and backed off with wild cries of dismay.

"Taboo—the forbidden!" A woman started it, and others took up the wailing cry until the whole camp seemed to echo sorrowfully to the word.

Manvar and Crogan moved a little way toward the oncoming sleds and stopped. "What's the matter with them?" said Manvar. "What are they crying about?"

Crogan pointed a finger. "Don't you see? They are not carrying coru. What it is, no man knows, but it is not the coru."

Manvar understood. Even the ancient writers had spoken of such things. Other creatures that were not coru. And he remembered now; one had said they even ate such creatures for food, for there was no other. The rest of the writers had not mentioned such eating, perhaps because they did not want to reveal their breaking of taboo.

The camp people moved back from the contamination of the sleds with

their alien creatures. Then they began to revile the hunters.

"Unclean! Take them away! Take away the taboo!"

The hunters stopped the sleds and dismounted wearily. Manvar approached Lain, the leader of the group.

Lain spoke first. "We did not know what to do," he said. "If you tell us to remove the carcasses far away we will do so. We will do as you command, but we came to let you judge. There are no coru out there. No coru in this land at all. We saw many thousands of tracks of creatures, but none of coru.

"So we hunted these others. Their flesh seems like coru, even though the form is different. We have not eaten. We have not broken taboo. We let you be our judge."

Manvar looked at Crogan. "We die if we do not eat," said the old man quietly.

Manvar held up his hand for silence in the camp. "Coru do not inhabit this land. The ancient writers have told us so."

"Then why did you not tell us," a man called, "and we would not have come."

"You had little enough of courage to sustain you. But I had supposed you would know that in an alien land you would eat alien food. So be it. This food is clean. Prepare the cooking pots!"

With some reluctance, the cooks returned to their pots and spits. The butchers attacked the animals. But many remained aside, refusing to touch the alien meat.

Manvar ignored them. When the first of the meat had been roasted over the flames, he was the first to eat of it, and he did so with obvious pleasure. He handed some to Crogan, and the Wise One followed his example.

One by one, others approached and partook.

"Only a little," Manvar warned. "Your bellies are tight and will give you

pain if you stuff them."

They were familiar enough with hunger to know this. And there still remained some outside the circle who did not partake at all. These clustered together and, during the night, set up a wailing lament for their betrayal in this lost land.

In their tent, Manvar said to Alena, "We'll move out in the morning. They'll eat when they can stand the hunger no longer. We'll leave sign for the other group of hunters to follow us."

It was as Manvar predicted. During the night, one by one, the recalcitrants stole bits of the despised meat. It was cold now, and greasy, but they ate it hungrily and were sick for their greed, but their bellies filled.

In the morning, the camp ate again, and then the long trek across the ice plain was begun. They traveled quickly now. The ice was smooth, and the storms wholly abated. Illam shone with unfamiliar brightness, silvering the landscape generously.

The first party of hunters did not show up. They were never seen again and were never spoken of, for to do so would invite the same dark fate that had overtaken the missing ones.

The plain on which they traveled was an enormous glacier. Crogan observed this as they came to the far edge of it. The tongue of the glacier lay in a huge gorge with rough-carved walls that had once been sharp but now were eaten by time and wind.

It was what Crogan had been looking for. Manvar didn't understand.

"Don't you see?" said Crogan. "This is where the water begins. The ice behind us—it melts and runs in torrents to join the Great River that flows beyond us into the land south. When water runs here it carves the land. See how these ancient walls show that long ago the water ate its way through here."

Manvar looked back at the endless vista of ice they had crossed. "I cannot imagine such a thing. What could cause the melting of so much ice

that it would turn into such a river?"

"Detra, as I have told you, causes this. And my instruments, which I observed last night, continue to show the stars ride higher in the sky. Llanthor bows to Detra, and the Time of Great Waters is near."

"And as yet no man knows if there is such a thing as Detra."

"Only what the Ancients wrote. But our eyes will soon tell us. I will show you soon."

"Well enough. But now that we are here what must we do?"

"We must find a place for the building of the boats. Another six or ten days' journey and we shall find the place and the trees, and there we shall build our boats and wait for the waters."

The land seemed easy and friendly now after the harsh fury of the barrier. The air was pleasant and the traveling easy. The addks were filled with new vigor and pulled triumphantly the burden of the sleds. The men and women of the camp seemed also to be filled with new life, anticipating what lay ahead. Manvar and Crogan were redeemed in the sight of all who had doubted. Surely it was true that somewhere ahead lay the warm and secret land south.

Through some great magic that only Crogan the Wise One possessed they would find the great, mysterious river of which he spoke.

They saw the trees long before they came to them, bristly stalks on the ridges against the sky. They had no conception of how big they were. But before the trees there were the little dead stalks, thin brittle fingers rising out of the snow. These had lived long ago, at the last Time of the Great Waters, but died in the cold and bitterness after, when Detra vanished again.

This is what Crogan told them, at least. Manvar did not understand it, but he accepted Crogan's words.

Alena was happy, too, and this gave great pleasure to Manvar. He had feared she would die in the storms and terrors through which they had passed, but she had been as tough as the toughest hunter or swordssftan. She exulted now in the joy of the adventure and rode the sleds with her

hood thrown back, and her hair that had been butchered to concealment now partly grown out and swept by the wind.

"I'm glad!" she exclaimed to Manvar. "I'm glad for everything: that you challenged for Crogan; that his vision came true in our lifetimes. I'm glad for the fine new land south and the world we'll find there. It's going to be a glorious world, Manvar."

He smiled at her exuberance. She was so childlike and gentle that it was hard to believe she had endured the barrier, and so much of it with no one's help.

"It's going to be a wonderful world, Alena," he agreed.

It became more than the six to ten days Crogan had promised before they came to the trees. The dead stalks rising out of the ice and snow became so thick they had to chop a way through for the sleds. Manvar sought a way around, but Crogan knew that the way to the trees lay through fields of the small protrusions. They hacked their way through the small stalks for 12 more days before these thinned out and began to give way to gradually increasing sizes of stalks, which Crogan announced were trees.

They were long poles, rising out of the snow, things such as no man had seen before. And high above their heads, jagged stalks reached out toward each other from the standing poles.

The men halted the sleds in the midst of a great cluster of them and went forward to touch the trees. Pieces came away in their hands, and the men recoiled in fright.

"Are these what we make our boats of?" Manvar asked.

Crogan seemed puzzled by what he saw. "They are not right," he said slowly. "They look different than the old ones described. They are supposed to be living things—and these are surely dead."

Manvar laughed. "Living! You mean these poles are supposed to be running around on legs, like coru? Now you can be sure the Ancients did not always tell the truth!"

Crogan turned to the gorge beside them. "We must find an easy way out to the ice. Then we will camp. I must examine these trees."

By nightfall they had found a long slope that eased gently down to the ice-filled gorge. They made camp at the edge of it and cooked more of the alien meat for their night meal. Then, as they settled for the night, Crogan asked Manvar, "Cut some small pieces from a large tree and bring them to me, please."

Manvar obtained an axe from the sled and did as the Wise One requested. When he returned, Crogan had a potful of water obtained by melting snow over the fire.

Crogan took the chips of the tree from Manvar and placed them in the water, where they floated. He punched them down with his finger, they returned to the surface. Then he placed a pebble on the top of the broadest of the chips. The chip and the pebble continued to rest on the surface.

"That is a boat," said Crogan. "That is how we will travel the Great River."

Manvar touched the chip and the pebble with his finger. He pushed them down into the water and felt the fragile force of upthrust against his finger. "A boat," he said. "Why did you not tell me it was like a piece of fat floating in the soup? I do not think this boat is such a great thing, after all."

Crogan laughed. "All mysteries are such simple things, once they are known. I needed to test to see if this tree floated, because it is old and dry and dead. I think we shall have very fine boats from these trees. Tomorrow we will begin."

## *CHAPTER 7*

From poles covered with stretched hides they built shelters. A small crew was assigned to this task, while others began learning how to cut and fell the large trees.

The pole and skin dwellings were not so comfortable as the stone houses of the kals, but they were very welcome after the long days and

nights spent in the tents. A central kitchen was set up and managed by the women to save the time of each man preparing his own meal. They even found time to dry skins and soften them to make new garb.

As always, the hunt was constant to keep the camp supplied with food. New kinds of animals were constantly being found, and once the initial shock was over, the kalsmen took pleasure in trying new kinds of meat. Once, they saw some of the animals eating something on the ground that was certainly not corumeal.

After a number of days the men gained some skill in cutting the medium-size trees. They learned to pick the straight, solid ones as Crogan directed. They skidded them down the long ice slope to the building site Crogan had selected. It lay a distance from the walls of the gorge.

It was planned to build ten boats. They were to be simple in construction. Two large trees formed floats, and across these were laid smaller ones to form a platform. The front was narrower than the back. A rail was to be built on each side to keep men and supplies from being washed overboard. Long poles were to be carried for maneuvering the craft, and Crogan planned to devise something to be used at the rear to help in guiding. A cabin of poles and skin, like the shelters they had built on land was to be constructed on each platform. And each boat would carry a pair of large weights to sink into the water and bring it to a halt when they wished to stop.

Fastenings consisted of leather bindings. For this purpose many animals were hunted for their hides alone, beyond their use as meat. Alena gathered a group of women and set them to cutting and drying the endless strips of hide needed for bindings.

The work went well. There was excitement and pleasure in it, and it seemed purposeful. To Manvar, watching the work go forward, it seemed as if he had never seen people of the kals so happy as these men and women were now.

Crogan had asked for the building of a small shelter for himself on a nearby hilltop. Here he installed his instruments, curious and mysterious to all but himself. He spent long hours of the night observing the stars

along the straight edge attached to circles that showed their direction. He made delicate adjustments and obtained confidence of the stars out of his careful work. Manvar watched many times, never tiring of Crogan's company and his work. He remembered the time Crogan had first shown him this mysterious instrument.

"That bright star up there—" said Crogan "—I am watching it now. Each night it rides a little higher."

"And this little thing shows us that Llanthor is slowly tipping toward Detra?"

"Yes. I showed you the night after you challenged for me how Llanthor always keeps her center pointed towards Detra, except at the Time of Great Waters. Then she tips a little so the light of Detra comes farther this way."

"I see no great light coming our way."

Crogan beckoned. "Come out and let us look at the whole sky."

They donned their furs and stepped outside the hut. Crogan extended an arm to the south. "Look along the edge of the hills as far out as you can see. Is there no difference there?"

Manvar looked to other horizons and then back to the direction of Crogan's pointing finger. A kind of chill passed the length of his backbone. He sensed some mighty event.

"It is lighter. Just a trifle, so that your eyes can scarcely see it, but it is lighter than the rest of the sky. How long have you known this?"

"It began even before we left the kals. That is why it was urgent that we leave at once."

"How long until we see the full light of Detra?"

"Not long now, I think. The stars are rising faster and faster in the sky. Already do you not notice warmth in the air? It is less cold than it was. So we must hurry the construction of the boats. We must be ready when the waters begin to run."

A few days later, others of the camp noticed that it did not become quite wholly dark when Illam went down. Some stood on the edge of the gorge, pointing. And soon the whole camp was aware of the band of faint brightness at the edge of the night sky. They called Crogan. He nodded, smiling at their discovery of proof of his prediction. "Detra comes," he said. "We must hurry."

The camp went sleepless that night. The thing so long awaited was now frightening in its approaching reality.

Forty days later, the boats were nearly finished. Night by night, the edge of the sky had grown brighter. Then, one night for the first time, the flaming saucer edge of Detra showed itself above the horizon.

Most of the camp cried out and hid their eyes from that terrible sight. But gradually they raised their heads and watched in silent awe. It was only a sliver of light, and it seemed to pass slowly behind the distant hills and then disappear from sight.

"Tomorrow it will last longer," said Crogan. "And eventually it will be in the sky all the time as we move farther south. It will rise and fall, but it will never go away as Illam does."

The next day, at midday, someone found a tiny pool of liquid water on the ice near one of the boats. He touched it and it froze again, but it was the first time such a thing had ever been seen.

During the next ten days the cabins on the boats were completed. Personal belongings were moved aboard. The sleds were abandoned, and with great reluctance, the addks were turned loose to roam the new wilds. To each man, his animals were as close as any other man, for his life had depended on them so many times. But there was nothing now for them but to be freed to the wilds.

Each night Detra rose a little higher and stayed longer, and while she was there in the sky it was almost as bright as day. Her golden yellow light was so much more brilliant than Illam's pale face. It would soon be that the night was far brighter than the day.

With the coming of Detra, the long period of quiet and stormless days was at an end. Storm clouds rolled in the sky, and the wind rose in gusts, whipping the shelter walls on the cabins of the boats. Manvar ordered

these reinforced.

Fire raced across the sky in sudden jabs of brilliant light, and the kalsmen howled in sudden fright. Never had such a thing appeared in the land north. Manvar stood beside Crogan on the deck of the lead ship and watched the shattering sky. "Do you know what it is?" he whispered. The sky roared at his words.

"No," said Crogan, himself overwhelmed with awe. "Nothing in my wisdom or the Ancients' can explain this. Perhaps it is the coming of Detra that brings it. I do not know."

And then one day liquid pelted from the sky. Not ice or snow, but water. It froze and clung to the decks and timbers of the boats as soon as it struck.

The kalsmen huddled in the cabins while water fell and ice congealed all about them, and the wind tore at the light shelters.

But the ice did not remain long. The torrent of water increased from the sky and ceased to freeze. The ice on the boats melted. The kalsmen were astonished at so much water. More in a day than they had seen in their whole lives before—and falling from the sky no less!

Then the water began running on the surface of the ice and collecting in pools about the boats. It flowed around the logs that formed the main structure of the boats. The kalsmen looked over the side in disbelief.

But there was greater disbelief in the possibility of the boats moving upon the water. The kalsmen knew the massive weight of the logs. They had hefted them and bound them into place. Those great beams would never ride on top of the water. All at once the men knew again they had followed a phantom. They looked up at the tormented sky, and on the edge of the gorge the abandoned addks raced after one another and howled in despair.

They counted the risings of Detra. Each night the alien light rose a little higher and stayed longer, until night and day were reversed. Night, with its fiery Detra, was brighter and warmer than the day, with only pale, silver Illam to light the world. When they began to think of Detra time as day and Illam time as night, they began to eat and sleep accordingly.

Their despair increased as they counted 20, then 30 risings of Detra, and they continued their cramped, imprisoned existence on the decks of the boats. Manvar began to hear whisperings again of abandonment, of returning to the camp above and trying to gather the addks for survival in this land, if not to return north. The dream of the great, fine land south was thoroughly broken once more.

"How long?" Manvar asked Crogan. "Do you have any idea? We can't hold the men much longer. They're all nearly ready to give up again."

Crogan pointed to the water flowing liberally under the poles of the deck and around the timber floats. "When the water reaches three fourths of the way up the logs we should be floating. It's almost there. At the rate it's rising, only another day or two."

It happened while they were sleeping, during Illam's rising. A sudden shifting of the decks of three of the boats startled them all into wakefulness. They sat up, listened and heard the grinding of timbers scraping the ice. Men on other boats got up and ran to the rail and shouted to Manvar.

"We're tipping! A beast has grabbed the boat and shakes us!"

Manvar called back. "It is no beast. It is the water. We are beginning to float on the water."

The whimpering cries quieted somewhat, but the people were not reassured. The surging motion beneath their feet was terrifying. Some lay prone upon the deck, grasping the wooden crosspoles tightly and lamenting they had ever left the kals.

The flagship of Manvar and Crogan rested on a higher point of ice and had not yet begun to float, but they could feel the surging tug of water. The entire surface of the ice was covered now with flowing water, shimmering under the light of Illam. On all the boats, men and women piled against the rails, watching in amazement, fascination and fear.

Manvar and Crogan felt it then. A gentle nudge, and then a settling against the ice. Then once again; it was as if a giant hand held the boat and rocked it gently.

"We're afloat," said Crogan. "I think all the boats are floating now. We

will wait until Detra's light and until the water is higher. Then we will draw up the anchors and begin our journey."

No one slept any more that night. The rain resumed, but frightened by the unknown, the kalsmen clung to the rails, or huddled by the small fires in the cabins. As the night grew longer, the boats began swinging downstream on their anchor lines. By the rising of Detra they were all fully afloat.

The current was not swift. The slope of the glacier at this point was almost flat. But the accumulated run-off from the sloping land and the great glacier itself, which rose into the far mountains through which they had come, caused the water to surge and swell.

Manvar allowed time for breakfast, then ordered the anchors on his own boat drawn up. As they were brought aboard, the boat slowly turned into the current and began drifting away from the others. Manvar waved the signal for the next boat to cast off, and each of the others would follow in sequence as had been agreed upon.

Two men on each side manned the long poles Crogan had required to steer the boat away from projections. Two more men were on the rudder he had devised at the stern to keep the boat headed downstream. These posts required skills that did not exist. They would develop as the journey proceeded.

The clouds thinned, the rain diminished and Detra blazed upon them with new brightness beyond any she had shown before. They had to turn their eyes from her painful light and squint as they looked out over the bright water.

On the shore, the abandoned addks raced the boats, yelping for succor. Men all but wept for the companionship of their lost animals. The stream grew swifter than the fastest addks, and slowly the animals were left behind.

The stream became deep as time passed, and it was soon joined by another small one that came from a small valley beyond the near hills, and then another, first on one side and then the other. The little fleet was suddenly in the middle of a giant plain of water, flowing with vast purposefulness toward the south. The riverbank was so far away on either side that it was difficult to distinguish the animals that looked up from

among the trees at the strange sight of the boats.

Through the beginning of the voyage, Alena remained unmoved by the excitement, undisturbed by the mystery and strangeness of the happenings. Manvar watched her with pride. How mistaken he had been to think her too frail for such a journey. She had withstood it as well as the hardest of the men.

He approached her as she stood alone at the rail near the bow of the boat. "You have made me very proud of you," he said.

"I'm glad," said Alena. "It was quite different just a short time ago."

"I was very wrong," he agreed.

The light grew more intense as the days passed, and the discomfort to their eyes increased. "Stay out of the light as much as possible," Crogan advised, "until our eyes grow more accustomed to it. We are men who have lived in darkness all our lives. I should have realized what such light might do to our eyes, but I didn't think. We must take care."

It grew warmer, too, as the days passed. They cast off the heavy furs and dressed only in the light, leather indoor wear of the kals.

The landscape gradually changed. As the ice thinned, layers of black and red soil and rock began to show through. And, ahead of them, a mountain range loomed. They could not see how the river would take them around it. At last they discovered they were not going around it; they were going through it.

The breadth of the river narrowed and grew swifter and deeper. Ahead the vast walls of the mountain opened to create a great channel.

It was like a sudden entrance into prison walls that seemed to reach the sky. The kalsmen looked up at walls that seemed about to fall upon them. And as it grew swifter the passage of the water made a thunderous roar in the confines. The movement of the water and the nearness of the stone walls gave the boats the appearance of traveling with such enchanted swiftness that the kalsmen's hearts turned cold again.

Alena, standing by the bow, was pale at the thunder of the waters. "Do we know where this leads, Manvar?" she asked quietly.

He threw back his head and laughed. "Of course we know! It leads to the land south! Where else?"

After the passage of time, the noise and the walls became familiar: nothing harmed them. The boats stayed a distance from each other so as not to collide, and word was passed from one to the other that all was well.

Manvar wondered how long they might be between the walls, but Crogan could not even guess. The Ancient ones were silent here.

They drifted through the night, keeping watch to guide the boats. Morning was almost as dark as night, with Detra's light hidden by the walls. With morning, there came the sound of increasing thunder in the canyon. The water moved more swiftly, and white waves appeared. The boat tumbled on the uneven water. The polemen struggled to keep distance from rocks that appeared perilously close.

"The water is going faster—it is running downhill," Manvar exclaimed to Crogan. "Do you understand this?"

"Only what we see. I don't know what lies ahead."

They should stop and go ahead on shore on foot to find out what lay before them. But Manvar could see no place or way to stop. The sheer rock walls offered no place to travel on foot. The only way out lay ahead—on the water.

The boat tumbled furiously and slewed from side to side. Men and women fell to the deck, clinging desperately to the cross poles. The polemen tried to man their posts, but they were tossed aside and their poles torn from their grasp. Water poured over the deck and washed through the cabin.

Ahead of them a giant hole suddenly appeared, the water boiling down into it. The boat followed, almost standing on its bow. The timber floats struck hard against the hidden rocks. Then slowly the water lifted the boat once more and flung it towards the sky. It dropped with a crash to the face of the water.

Manvar lay beside Alena and Crogan, all gripping the deck poles to keep from being thrown off. Manvar released his grip momentarily to touch Alena and the Wise One with reassurance. Alena was white-faced, but her eyes were wide and she was not crying and howling as some of the women were. Crogan's teeth were clenched, but his lips were parted in a kind of wild exultation.

At the other end of the boat a man suddenly loosened his hold and was flung off into the boiling water. Another simply slid away, as if too frightened to cling.

Abruptly, it was over. The water smoothed out again and raced swiftly and almost silently between the stone walls. Behind, Manvar saw the second and the third boats enter the rapids. They tumbled and rolled even as his own had done. He saw the fourth boat enter and careen end over end. And then a turn in the channel cut off his view.

"We'll stop at the first available place," he said.

They drifted, both the guiding rudder and the steering poles gone. Their only control was dropping the anchor stones when they neared a shallow beach against the rocks.

This came sooner than they expected. The gateway from the canyon walls opened wider before them. The stream became placid and slowed its terrible rush. A sandy beach appeared in the distance.

They lowered the stones near the beach to drag bottom. And the men climbed fearfully into the shallows of the water. They had no concept of how a man could swim. Nor did they understand how a man might meet his death in the water. They only knew it was a fearsome, ghostly thing.

Their feet barely touched bottom as they struggled to push the boat in to shore. Those on deck raised the anchor stones as those in the water shoved. Slowly, they inched against the current and beached the floating timbers. With ropes of hide they lashed the boat to a nearby tree.

Manvar ordered the men out to help the boats coming behind. One by one the other craft pulled into the beach and lashed down. Nine of them. The shattered remnants of the other drifted by. Corpses of the lost kalsmen floated on. There was no way to retrieve them.

## CHAPTER 8

It was impossible to repair the boats on that narrow beach of sand. Nothing grew there, and barren mountains rose steeply beyond. No trees for poles. No beasts for food or hides.

The bindings between deck poles and floats had broken in many places. All the cabins were wrecked. Most had lost their poles and steering oars.

Manvar walked among his people as they lay on the beach or sat despairingly on the edges of their boats. He knelt by a man whose arm bent at a crazy angle. The white bone protruded through the flesh.

"Put your sword through me, Manvar," the man said. "I do not wish to die of the sickness of a broken arm."

"You will not die. You will see the cities of the land south."

Manvar grasped the arm in his hands and stretched and straightened it while the man howled in pain. "You!" He called to the man's companions nearby. "Bind his arm that it may heal."

The men obeyed unwillingly. They knew the sleep was the only remedy for such an injury. Bound or not, few men lived with a hurt like this.

There were other serious injuries as well. Normally, it would be best to put such injured into sleep. But Manvar could not give the order. He needed every man, and some of these might live in spite of their hurts. He set Crogan to administering to them as best he could.

After the captains of each boat had reported, Manvar found that 18 men had been lost in the rapids besides the crew of the boat that turned over. Most of the foodstuffs and extra clothing had been lost. Fortunately, the weapons and tools had been stored more safely, in boxes bound to the deck and locked with lids. The oil containers also had been securely lashed.

They stayed on the narrow beach that night, but early the next morning they prepared to move off to find a landing where repairs could be made. The current was fairly swift, but smooth, and as the distance lengthened,

the river widened and became slower. The boats emerged from the canyon into an area of lower hills on which trees and other growing things appeared, all of them strange and foreign to the men and women of the kals. But no one had taste for these things now. They only wanted to make repairs and find food.

They beached again late that day in a place where small trees grew. A few times, they had seen animals from the river, and they realized that for the first time they would have to hunt on foot and carry their kill all the way back to the boats.

The coru, wading through deep snow and ice, were fairly slow-footed. Other animals they had since hunted were more fleet. But the ones they glimpsed now on the shore were the swiftest of all. They wondered if their short arrows could catch such beasts. And how could a man shoot, when the target was so swift? This land would kill them yet.

Manvar had noted the speed of the animals. When the men were again in camp he gathered the most skilled hunters around him. "The food-beasts are no slow-moving com here," he said. "The greatest hunters will be tested to the limit. As a reward, we make a house—or capture one—for the first man who brings in a food-beast. Agreed?"

The proposal aroused some enthusiasm, but far less than Manvar had hoped. "Are these strange beasts beyond the skill of the hunters of the kals?" he demanded.

Volen, who had seen the longest hunts any kalsmen present had known, spoke up. "We are no children, springing our first bows," he said. "But we came to find rich cities spoken of by the bedeviled Ancients. Did they dream those lies, or has Crogan given them out only that he might cheat the Cold Sleep?"

"We looked for cities where slaves will bring us food and make the hunt for us. We have crossed the Barrier Storm and passed through the mountains and defeated the Great River. And our only reward is a barren land where meat is more scarce than we ever knew in the kals. If this is all there is to the great land of the Ancients you should have turned back with us when Caldec challenged."

Manvar spoke evenly. Volen was a big man, and fast. Manvar's hand remained away from his sword—but within grasping distance. "We are

not at the end of our journey," he said. "The fair cities await us, and their people shall serve us. But we must eat to reach them and replenish what the river took from us."

Another spoke up, brash young Nimed. "I make no complaint. This is a good land, warm, and we shall find food. We can hunt these swift, wild food-beasts as well as slow corus. Let us forget the cities—if there are any. We are few enough, and many of us will die in taking the cities. We can make a home and hunt in this fine land right here."

"We shall find the cities first," said Manvar, "even as we planned from the beginning. After that, there is a whole world here to make your own. Each man may make his own choice. Until then, we must eat. Are you hunters or stonecutters only?"

Three days later they returned empty handed.

In their absence some live creatures had been discovered in the water of the river, and a few of these had been caught in bags and nets made of strips of skin. Again, it was only the most adventurous who ate of these at first, but afterwards as many as could tried the flesh of the strange, swimming creatures.

Food was critical. They had to move on to a place where hunting might be more profitable. They didn't know where that was; they could only continue the journey. An equally great need was means to repair the boats. Poles had been obtained, but hide bindings to replace the broken ones were lacking. Strips were moved from one place to another for temporary repairs, but they would last only for a time.

They put out once again, more confident now with poles and rudders. Almost immediately, they saw food-beasts racing along the shore in abundance, as if they had been in hiding, watching and waiting for the men to leave.

The beasts did not seem to find the boats frightening. Cautiously, Manvar picked up a bow and bent it while directing his polemen to steer carefully in close to the bank. Within shooting distance, he let the arrow fly. An animal reared in sudden anguish and tumbled into the water.

They got four more that same day and pulled in to shore to dress and prepare the meat and to cut the hides into strips for boat repairs. There

was meat left over to carry with them the next day. They were puzzled as to how to do this, however. They knew that meat left in a house in the kals soon stank and made a man sick. So it was left in the ice outside to stay hard until used. Here, it would remain soft, and they supposed it would soon stink and make a man sick.

This proved to be true. Two days later, the remainder of the meat was unfit and was thrown into the river even though the bellies of the kalsmen were growing tight with hunger again. Some of the swimming creatures were caught as the boats moved along.

The light of Detra was growing a little more tolerable to the eyes of the kalsmen, but they kept their faces turned away as much as possible. Everyone's eyes were reddened like flame and burned constantly. Some of them dashed cooling water from the river constantly against their faces. Others rubbed oil about their eyes, but this only increased the sting and did nothing to heal them. Crogan had no antidote for Detra's blinding invasion; he would only advise them to turn away as much as possible and hope that time would make the light easier to endure.

At midday, a few days later, the watchman in the bow of Manvar's boat called out and pointed ahead. "Smoke— a fire!"

Manvar climbed to the small watch stool and shaded his eyes. Unmistakably, a small, ragged column of smoke was rising from some point near the bank far ahead of them. Its source was obscured by the low hills.

For the next hours they watched the spot carefully as the boats drifted with frustrating slowness. The smoke vanished for a time, and they held the spot in their minds as the river slowly turned them to the right and to the left. Then, later, the smoke resumed, so black against the sky there was no doubt of what it was.

"It must mean houses—and people," said Alena in awe. "Are we come already to the beautiful cities of the land south?"

"It may be," said Manvar. He felt a quiver in his chest. "We may be at the great cities at last."

He put an arm about Alena and held her close, his hand shading her eyes. She, more than anyone else, seemed afflicted with pain and swelling

about her eyes from the cruel light of Detra. She made no complaint, but Manvar sensed she was in great pain.

As they came to a bend just before the spot of smoke they lowered the anchor stones to drag bottom and allow them to advance cautiously. Manvar debated sending a party on foot to get a look at the city.

But already they had glimpsed it. On the bank of the river, a cluster of houses stood, gray brown and unpleasant to the sight. The group was about the size of a kal. A few individuals were visible in the space about the houses. They seemed dressed in rough skins, much like those of the kalsmen.

Suddenly Volen burst out laughing. He emitted hysterical guffaws and waved his hand toward the ragged cluster of dwellings. "The cities of the south!" he cried. "There is the fabulous city of riches and ease that the witless Ancients wrote about! There is the dream Crogan and Manvar have brought us through hell to see!"

Some others joined in the laughter. Still others gave a moan of despair. Manvar glanced at Crogan. "What have we here? Do you know?"

Crogan shook his head, and his shoulders sagged in sudden despair. "It is surely not one of the great cities the Ancients wrote of. But maybe the men are right. Perhaps this is all there is."

"Don't say that!" Manvar snarled in sudden fury. "This is not it. The great cities do exist!"

"Who knows?" said Crogan in deep weariness. "It was all so very long ago. Let us go ashore. Maybe these people can give us food and guidance."

Manvar felt there could be no danger hiding in this poor cluster of houses. He drew his boats up to the beach at the foot of the village and jumped ashore.

Already a score of villagers had gathered to watch the newcomers. They were dark haired, with browner skins than the kalsmen, but about the same height. They stood in silent awe except for one who stepped forward and began talking rapidly in an unknown tongue.

Manvar called three of his men to arm themselves and take a look in

the houses. "Harm no one," he ordered. "See if there is anything that is of value to us. I think you will find little. Report your findings to me."

Near several of the houses were pens with large, slow-moving animals not unlike the corus, except without the thick fur. These beasts were what interested Manvar most. His people were eyeing the animals also. He ordered Volen, "Take enough animals for today and tomorrow. No more. Do not waste them."

Alena looked dismayed. She watched the bewildered villagers on the beach. "They have so little..." she began.

"We have less."

Volen and his men moved to one of the pens and tore open the gate. They advanced upon one of the animals to slaughter it. From one of the village men came a sudden wild cry. He rushed to Volen and tried to pin his arms. Volen shook the man off. The villager fell to his knees and grasped a nearby club, then sprang to his feet and leaped toward Volen. The kalsman whipped his sword in the man's direction. The assailant dropped the club and grasped at his middle with a searing cry as he fell to the ground.

Manvar turned at the cry and saw the bloody sword in Volen's hand. "You fool! I gave orders no one was to be attacked!"

"He attacked me!"

The men beside Manvar nodded. "It's true. He would have struck Volen."

Manvar shouted to all his people. "These poor fools can hurt no one and they have little that we want. I want no more bloodshed. Prepare the fires. We eat here and sleep the night."

Villagers gathered around the fallen man, wailing their anguish at his death. While Volen and his crew quickly slaughtered the animals—which caused more wailing—the people carried the body of the dead man to the nearest house.

The men who had searched the village returned to Manvar. "There is nothing here but poor things, less than our own. There are covers for beds

and clothing, but it all has a strange smell, and we did not care to take it for our own."

"Leave it," said Manvar. "We will take nothing but the animals from here."

They camped below the village and cooked the meat that evening. They had observed a strange thing in the village. The smoke of fires seen from a distance had come from burning—but not of oil. The villagers burned pieces of trees, and when the kalsmen tried it they found such a fire very good for roasting the meat. They resolved that from now on, whenever they were on shore near wooded areas they would do this to conserve their meager oil supply.

They sat around the strange, wood-burning fires that night, eating the meat, which was delicious, far surpassing even their familiar coru. The villagers stayed far away, but their laments filled the night and rested in the ears of the kalsmen.

"I could stop them in a moment," Volen offered.

"Let them alone," said Manvar. "We have injured them enough."

Volen scoffed. "I hope when we find the great cities we will not be so anxious to spare blood."

"Blood will flow in all the abundance required—when it has a purpose. We do not waste coru when we are not hungry; neither do we fight to no end." Manvar wearied of Volen and stared into the fire. He turned to Crogan. "I wonder if we have reached the end of our journey without knowing it? Is it possible the Ancients who traveled this way invented stories of fabulous cities to hide their own disappointment?"

"It was so long ago," said Alena. "Maybe these were great and rich cities then, and this is all that is left of them..."

"We can go back—" said Crogan "—if we can find a way back. Or we can stay right here and build our own kal, Or we can follow the Great River to its end and see what we find. I can say no more than this."

Other tributaries joined the river soon, coming from the right and from the left of the drifting boats. The river became so wide the kalsmen could

not see from one side to the other, and it was apparent the water was overrunning much land that was not normally under water. The crews were frightened to find themselves suddenly so far from shore on either side.

They poled desperately for two days to try to bring themselves nearer shore, but the river was deeper here than the length of their poles. They drifted helplessly with the current, except for the aid of the rudders, passing the washed-out ruins of villages like the one they had raided.

Floating, bloated bodies of animals such as the ones they had captured drifted near from time to time, but they had such a stink they were obviously beyond use for food.

Detra was much higher now, and her heat was felt like a lash on the skins of the kalsmen, who had never felt such radiance before. Eyes continued to burn, and flesh reddened and swelled. Some of the men and women howled in their anguish and threw off more of their clothes.

Crogan warned them. "Keep covered! It is the light of Detra that burns you. Do not let her see you!"

They huddled in pain and hunger in the shade of the cabin walls and moaned wrath against Manvar who had led them into this hell.

On the third day of drifting after leaving the village, they saw it.

Manvar's lookout was first, but he did not cry out. He exclaimed in a hoarse whisper, "Manvar! The city! Can it be the city, Manvar?"

Manvar climbed beside him and saw the vision coming into sight around a peninsula jutting into the river. It looked like a white jewel on a low bluff by the river. There was no mistaking it. It had to be one of the great cities of which the Ancients had written.

Even from this distance buildings greater than a whole kal could be seen, and houses of white and gold lay upon the gentle hillside behind a great wall, like a vision in a dream.

"Look, Crogan, Alena," cried Manvar. "There... is not that one of the

great and rich cities?"

Crogan grasped the railing fiercely and strained his hurting eyes. "It is the city!" he breathed. "It is just as they described it in the old books. I could have drawn a picture, but I dared not. It would have been a picture of just what you see before you now."

When other crewmen and those on the other boats had sighted the city also, a great cry went up. Manvar looked over his fleet, tiny specks on the breast of the Great River.

"The poor fools," he murmured. "They think with a whisper they can call the city theirs. They must think the inhabitants will welcome them with open arms and throw open the doors of their houses to them."

"And what do you think, Manvar?" Alena asked.

He looked again at the city of white and gold. "I am suddenly weary of thinking. My thoughts all seem silly and vain. Look at it! Only the gods could build such a city. Shall we dream of making it ours?"

"We have already dreamed that dream," said Crogan. "Does your heart grow faint?"

"It grows sick when I think of turning them—" he gestured towards the other boats—"into that city. There must be Wise Men in every house of such a city—men of your kind, Crogan. I would talk with them, not kill them. Shall I turn upon such men with these I have brought with me, who know nothing but the sword?"

"The men of the city are not going to invite you in to sup with them," said Crogan. "Strangers enter only by the sword. There is no variance in that rule. I think it well you brought greedy swordsmen with you, Manvar. They will make an entrance that will force your Wise Men to talk to you."

"Do you not wish to talk with them?" Manvar demanded.

"I do. But first a pathway to their door must be cleared. Only by the sword is that possible."

"If any of them are left alive when we get through with them. Or—" he gazed at the expanse of buildings on the heights—"if any of us are left.

Who knows how to take such a city? We are swordsmen who know how to fight, man to man. We never fought together to take a city. There must be clever ways to go about such a task, but we haven't time to find them."

"We aren't likely to need them," said Alena practically, "unless we find a way to bring the boats to shore."

It was true. On their present course they would pass the city far out in the waters of the Great River.

But even as they began to slip past the peninsula jutting into the river, the waters began to swirl toward that headland, and the current slowly turned the boats. "We're turning inland," the lookout observed.

Manvar peered closely at the waters ahead. Muddy swirls and drifting debris showed the current was indeed turning in toward the headland. It would bring them to shallows where they could pole the boats. But they would be within the distant view of the city's inhabitants if any of them should be watching in this direction of the river.

Detra no longer plunged below the edge of the world to form a night. She was constantly in the sky, dipping only a little lower, then rising higher once more. The kalsmen grew weary of the constant light and had to bind their eyes to get the darkness of night for sleep.

Now, they would have welcomed a night to hide them from the eyes of the city as they came in, but there was no darkness to hide them. The shore held a grove of trees that would partially shield them. Manvar directed his polemen toward it. "We land there," he ordered.

## *CHAPTER 9*

At poling depth, the current moved more swiftly downstream, but they fought against it to bring the boats ashore. By the time Detra had reached her lowest point and was ready to climb the sky again, the boats were beached.

They were in a grove of trees that ascended a long, sloping hill. The tops of trees sticking out of the water showed how the land had been flooded by the rising river. There was no sandy beach, but they pulled the boats onto

flooded meadow between the trees and tied them there. They were well hidden now from the city's eyes.

Additional good fortune appeared. A small village, which they had not previously noticed, was nestled against the inner curve of the headland. It had been built on a bluff overlooking the river, but now the waters lapped at its edge. Manvar sent a small group to raid it for animals. They succeeded and worked so quietly they did not arouse any inhabitants, who were sleeping at Detra's lowest dip. By the time the tents were set up, the raiders were back with four large animals and casks of drinking water.

At the same time, Manvar chose three of his steadiest men to form a scouting party and find out what they could about the city. He set guards about the camp and ordered the rest of the kalsmen to their tents, where they cooked the fresh meat over low oil fires to try to prevent detection from the city heights.

It was sleeping time then, so he ordered the camp to rest while awaiting the report of the scouts. Only the guards remained awake.

Manvar slept for a time until he was roused by the guard reporting the return of the scouts. The leader of the scouts, a serious young fellow named Niacas said, "It was sleeping time, as we assumed, and few people were about. There is a path just beyond the trees, which leads along the edge of the hill to the gates of the city. We followed it. There are sealed gates, but we climbed the nearby wall. There were no guards. Inside, we moved along the wall halfway around the city. Three times we found single guards posted near the wall. Two of them slept. We were not observed.

"We followed a street to the center of the city. There are great houses all about and a large open space paved with stones. The greatest house of all is bigger than many kals. It has a large pool of water in front of it. We supposed this must belong to the First Chief. We crossed through this place, carefully hugging the walls of the buildings. There was no sign of armies or war or weapons.

"Beyond the city, on the other side from the river, are many small houses—several villages of them—and they stretch out into open fields far beyond the walls of the city.

"Once, we had to kill an animal like an addk that made a noise at us. But this disturbed no one. A few people were on the streets, and in some of

the houses we could see people at feasting and play. It is a city that sleeps and thinks not of danger. We have only to walk in and make it ours."

Manvar thought of the kals. Suppose a stranger found ways to approach the kals. What would they find? No guards. No great evidence of readiness for battle. But within each house would be a swordsman of good skill and willingness to fight.

He asked the scouts. "Within the houses you saw and on the persons of the people, were there not weapons at hand? Did you not see swords or knives?"

Niacas shook his head. "None. Neither on the persons nor in the houses. They are not ready for battle. They will be easy to take."

Manvar turned to the other two men. "Is this your report also?"

They nodded. "Other than the three useless guards we saw, there was no sign of defense or preparation for fighting. We think we will have little trouble making this city ours. And its riches will make any trouble worth our effort!"

Manvar ordered them to draw a map as the city appeared to them and then dismissed them. "Get food and sleep. You will be called when we are ready to move. Your report is good."

Alone, Manvar stared out over the river waters, shining red in the rising light of Detra. He felt ill at ease. He would have been more satisfied if the scouts had given him a count of armed guards and weapons at the gates and the walls and evidence of swords and bows in the houses. A complete lack of defensive appearance could be deceptive. These were a wise people, else how could they build such a city? They must be wise in the ways of battle, too.

He studied the map the scouts had drawn for him. It showed, as Niacas had said, a palace at the center and great houses close to the wall by the river, a network of streets and lesser houses out to the far wall and distant villages and scattered houses on the lands beyond the walls, away from the river.

If there were any guards, they would surely be located on the wall between the palace and the river. Therefore, it would be best to come in

over the wall on the other side of the city. Coming in at sleeping time, they could slip through the streets as easily as the scouts had done and capture the palace.

He passed word to his captains that a morning meal could be made, but the fire tenders, on pain of death, were to watch that it did not smoke. As an added precaution, he dispatched a group to watch the village from which they had raided food animals, to prevent any alarm being given from that source.

These details completed, he ate with Alena and Crogan and his men, listening to their enthusiasm for the takeover of the city. Once again, they were satisfied to follow him and had ceased their complaining over hardships and losses. They were as changeable as children.

But he blamed them unjustly, he thought. They did not have the same goals he had. They dreamed only of conquest and wealth and ease, and when these goals appeared unattainable the journey itself was futile. In that case there was no one to blame but the leader who had failed them.

His own goals were still almost without name. He sought the comforts of the land south, but he still sought the unnameable purpose and the wisdom Crogan had called his curse. As he glanced up toward the walls of the shining city he felt a fear in his bowels that the goal was not there.

He called his captains to him after the meal and explained his plan. He told them of the scouts' report and described their findings. "We will take only 100 men with us," he said. "The rest will be held in reserve. We will attempt to reach the palace before fighting begins. We will fight only to achieve our objective. I want no unnecessary bloodshed. The kings or princes or First Chief, or whatever their leaders may be called, will be held as hostage without harm if they surrender to us. If they fight, then it is battle to the death. Is there any question?"

He turned to the scouts' map and laid out a plan by which the captains were assigned sections of the wall and streets, with a final rendezvous near the pool in front of the palace. Any group that met trouble was to fight its own way out. The others would continue their march on the palace.

Manvar released them to return to their tents. It was the best he could do. The kalsmen had never been taught to fight in a group. Each man would go his own way as likely as not.

Many still suffered burned and swollen skin from the intense light of Detra. Bubbles of water formed and broke and turned to painful sores. All now followed Crogan's advice and hid themselves as much as possible from the face of Detra, but a great number were in agony. Manvar was forced to take this situation into account in selecting those for the attack on the city.

He was concerned, too, when many complained they could not see very well. Alena was still affected the worst of all. Her eyes were swollen almost closed much of the time. But she went about her camp duties without complaint, even though she sometimes stumbled because she could not see.

Tension increased as the day went on. It would have been better if they could have launched their attack at once. But sleeping time offered them some advantage.

Just past midday a guard ran suddenly from outside the camp to Manvar's tent. "Manvar—they come!" the guard called urgently.

Manvar leaped to his feet and looked in the direction of the guard's pointing hand. "Who comes?" he demanded.

"Out of the city—there's a whole procession of them coming out the gate and moving down the path in this direction."

Manvar ran to see what the guard had reported. At the edge of the camp he peered from the shelter of a clump of trees in astonishment. The guard had spoken correctly. A procession of at least 100 people was moving out of the city—they were well beyond the gates now. And they were moving along the path that would bring them near the camp.

Manvar's eyes searched for weapons. In even greater astonishment he was forced to recognize there were none.

The group was completely unarmed as far as he could discern. And so he held back the call to assemble and ready an attack, which had been upon his lips.

Most of the group were afoot, but at the center of the procession was a carriage of some sort, the like of which no kalsman had ever seen. It was on wheels and was drawn by four animals. They were not small like the

addks, but large, like coru or the food-beasts the kalsmen had hunted since leaving the mountain. But neither were they heavy-legged like coru. They were slim-legged and smooth—and somehow very beautiful to Manvar.

The animals were harnessed with decorated straps and had plumes and shining metal on their heads. The carriage they drew was likewise decorated and painted and bore ornaments that Manvar instinctively knew represented great wealth.

A man sat at the front of the carriage holding lines that directed the animals. Inside the carriage, Manvar thought he glimpsed a single occupant, but at this distance he could not see clearly.

Before the carriage, brightly dressed men marched in precision order. This is the way men at a common task ought to move, Manvar thought. He tried to imagine his followers moving to the attack on some enemy in such unison! If those marching men were the enemy!

Behind the carriage were other men and girls, also brightly dressed. And these were smiling and singing softly now.

Manvar continued to watch as the procession advanced. He saw no need to call an alarm to his men, but the word had spread and the whole camp was gathering to watch from the concealment of the trees. Manvar could see now the occupant of the carriage. It was a woman. Such a woman as he had never seen before. He glimpsed the white skin of her face, and the black hair twined upon her head. She wore a plain band about her hair to keep it bound.

Volen came up to Manvar, sweating and exuberant. "We don't even need go to them! They come to us!" He fingered his sword greedily and gestured toward the carriage. "That can't be any but the First Chief." Then he stared and added in astonishment, "But it's a woman!"

"Hold your sword!" Manvar ordered. "I will tell my captains when it is time to move." He gave the low whistle that was their signal to attend him.

The captains hurried to his side, and he pointed silently to the carriage. "It is a woman," he said at last, "so it can't be the First Chief, but surely it must be the woman of a First Chief or some other great person. I see no weapons. Does any man?"

The captains shook their heads in bewildered agreement. "No weapons," Caldeus said.

"I will take three of you: Caldeus, Artoro, and Jaklai. Bring you each your first ten. That should be sufficient to capture this unarmed procession. I want no bloodshed unless they draw on us. And I want the woman in the carriage unharmed at all cost."

Volen warned, "They may have hidden weapons."

The captains brought up their men quietly. The remainder of the camp stayed at a distance in the trees, watching. Alena watched from her tent, the scene dim to her swollen, painful eyes. But as the carriage approached she got a glimpse of its white-faced occupant.

Manvar let the procession come directly opposite the camp, then gave the signal for his men to move out in a broad line and surround the group. Manvar stepped out opposite the carriage driver and touched his sword to the lines the driver held in his hands, as a signal to stop. The driver complied and bowed low to Manvar. He stepped down from the carriage seat and moved to the door. Manvar hesitated, but did not stop him. The man opened the door with great ceremony and gave Manvar a full view of the woman sitting on the soft cushions inside the carriage.

He stared without attempting to speak. His first impression had been more than correct. This woman was like none other that he had ever seen. Here was beauty that exceeded all he had ever imagined. Her white skin seemed to glow in the shadowy interior of the carriage. The black strands piled upon her head formed a dark jewel. She wore a simple dress of soft material so different from the coruskin clothing of the kals. It was white and tied at the waist with a band of color that Manvar did not know. It did not cover her arms. Sandals were banded to her white feet.

"Come out," Manvar said. He was unable to make it the command it should have been. And he knew she did not understand his words.

Instead of complying, the woman smiled and moved back farther in the carriage and beckoned Manvar to enter the carriage with her. He recoiled.

"Come out!" he demanded, knowing still that she could not understand.

She smiled and beckoned again. And this time she lifted something

from the floor of the carriage and placed it on the seat beside her. It was a box or case made of wood. The woman unfastened a lock and opened the lid.

Manvar could not see at once what was inside. Instinctively, he grasped the sides of the carriage door and lifted himself up. He sat on the carriage seat with the woman, the open case between them. Her enigmatic smile invited him to take what was in the case.

He glanced down. Lying on a golden cloth inside the box was a short sword, about as long as a man's arm. Its polished metal gleamed in the light of Detra that blazed through the carriage window. The woman sat back in the corner, smiling as he stared at the sword in bewilderment.

For a wild instant Manvar remembered Volen's warning about hidden weapons, and he thought the woman might have intended to seize the weapon and thrust him with it. But there was no such intention in her eyes or hands. She watched his face intently, then slowly put out her hand and picked up the sword and put it in his grasp.

He took it with both hands. The workmanship was of such as the best from Windl's forge, but it was far more ancient than any work of Windl. Manvar had once seen a sword that was said to have been handed from father to son for 40 generations, more than 1000 years. He had never believed the tale. But this looked to be of even older craftsmanship than that ancient weapon.

He turned it slowly, examining the carving on the hilt. There, in the knob of bone that was the head of the hilt, was the image of a coru. Its fine, exquisite carving made the animal's head almost lifelike in miniature.

Manvar gasped and leaped from the carriage, the blade in his hand. "Crogan!" he cried. "Crogan, come here!"

From the distant edge of the camp the Wise Man heard the call and hurried as fast as he could. He came through the trees and saw Manvar standing by the carriage with the sword gleaming in the light of Detra.

Wordlessly, Manvar held it out to him with both hands. The old man took it curiously. Then he, too, gasped as he saw the ancient carving of the coru.

"Where have you seen like it?" Manvar asked.

"No living man has seen like it," said Crogan. "But it came from the kals. The head of the coru proves that."

"Is it older than Teru's sword—that he says belonged to 40 fathers?"

"Surely as old as that and older," said Crogan. "It can only have been brought here by one of the Ancients who returned to the kals and wrote his tale. It is proof that their story is true!"

"What can it mean to these people? Why have they kept it all this time? Why have they brought it now to give to me?"

Crogan looked at the woman in the carriage, the smiling woman whose beauty exceeded all that any man of the kals had ever seen. "It can mean only one thing," said Crogan. "They know who we are. It is a symbol, a key. I would say a key of friendship. I would say they have waited long for the man to whom they could return this sword. Let us treat them well, Manvar, and they will be our friends. Do not allow these blood-letters who have come with us have their way with these people."

Manvar nodded. Crogan's words seemed like true wisdom. "I will see that no treachery is done to them."

"What do you do now?" asked Crogan.

Manvar glanced back to the woman. She was watching as if expecting him to return to the carriage.

"We go to the palace," said Manvar. He signaled his men to accompany the procession.

From her tent, Alena watched the procession turn about and slowly make its way back toward the walled city. She glimpsed the face of Manvar as the light of Detra shone upon him a moment in the carriage.

## *CHAPTER 10*

The procession wound slowly along the narrow, steep trail and through

the iron gates of the city that opened and closed upon them. The feet of the animals were loud upon the stone pavements leading to the palace square. There, between the great columns of the palace and the blue, sparkling pool of water, the carriage stopped. Servants approached and opened the carriage door. They were startled a moment by the sight of Manvar, but made no other sign. The woman alighted first, followed by Manvar. He walked behind her as they entered the great hall, not knowing where they were going. Otherwise, he would have led the way.

Without looking back, she led him to a corridor at the left and finally turned into a spacious chamber of blue and gold, fitted with furniture of such craftsmanship as went only into the swords of Windl. The floor and the bed and the windows were covered with soft fabrics that excelled the finest com fur.

The woman smiled and gestured to the surroundings, uttering words in a sweet-toned voice that Manvar did not understand. He turned to go.

She touched his arm and held him. Then he allowed her to guide him to an adjacent chamber where a small pool of blue water was centered in the floor. Three other women sat about it as if expecting him. They were dressed in short blue robes. And, although not as beautiful as his guide, they exceeded the comeliness of kalswomen by far.

The woman beside him gave him a gentle nudge toward the others, then backed away and closed a door behind her. Manvar called out, "Wait..."

The others were beside him now. He backed to the wall in bewilderment. One touched his sword buckle, and he snatched her hand away in fury. She did not cease to smile but put out her hand as if asking him to hand the weapon over to her. Astonished at his own actions, he found himself doing so.

Then two of them began gently attacking the fastenings of his clothes, while the other stepped into the waters of the pool and beckoned invitingly to him.

He permitted them then to divest him of his clothes and lead him to the pool. It was the first time in his life he had immersed himself in such a way.

The women began to laugh playfully then and touched him lightly with soft pads and white, foamy substance that had a pleasing smell. He felt the incredible gentleness of their hands over his body and closed his eyes in disbelief. Their hands moved tenderly about the still-fresh wound of Radok's sword, and they exclaimed over the older, jagged cuts upon his body. At last they took him out of the water and dried him and rubbed him with scented oil and then they sat him down to cut his hair and trim his beard. He jumped away in frenzy, but the girls never lost their smiles. One of them ran a comb through her own hair and clipped the ends to show him how it was done. They led him gently back to the chair, and he submitted wonderingly.

Afterwards, they dressed him in garments of soft leather and gave him a thing that showed him to himself like a pool of water. He laughed aloud. "Who would know me in the kals now?"

The girls laughed with him and then surrounded him and rushed him forward to the doorway. The woman of the carriage was waiting in the other room. She, too, smiled and nodded approval. Then she turned and led him to a room across the corridor that appeared to be her own chamber. There, on a table between two chairs were dishes laden with foods such as he had never known. The woman gestured to the chairs and the food. He nodded, although nothing on the dishes was recognizable to him.

Then she pointed to herself and said, "Lanara."

Manvar hesitated, then tried the word on his own tongue. "Lanara," he said. It was his first word in the strange, new language, and afterwards he always remembered it as the most beautiful.

He touched himself and said, "Manvar."

Slowly, discouragingly, and with much laughter, they began to learn each others' tongues. They spent the afternoon over the sweet fruits and the language lesson until Detra declined in the sky again.

Manvar had all but forgotten his companions. Now he jumped up and exclaimed, "Where are the men who were with me? What has become of them?"

Lanara laughed protestingly at the flood of unintelligible words. But she

sensed the meaning of his words. She offered him her hand and led him out of the palace and into the nearby quarters area. Manvar felt suddenly embarrassed by the change in his appearance.

But he needn't have. As soon as he saw his men he saw they had received the same treatment. He had to admit they looked better for it, their ragged coruskin garments gone, and their wild beards and hair conquered. Nevertheless, they laughed when they saw him. "You took a shearing, too, Manvar!" said Caldeus. "What will your woman say to that?"

He had not thought of Alena the whole afternoon.

By gestures he asked Lanara that the others from the camp be brought up and housed within the city. She indicated an emphatic agreement.

"Caldeus and Artoro," Manvar said, "you will return to the camp and tell the rest that they will come tomorrow and find quarters and supplies in the city. You will remain through sleeping time with them and lead them here tomorrow."

The men nodded reluctantly, glancing back at their new, rich quarters. "Yes, Manvar," Caldeus said, "and all our days from now on will be like this. Is it not so?"

Manvar felt a strange sadness. "It is so."

He was left alone then, and from the window of his chamber he looked out upon the city that gleamed like gold in the low light of Detra. He could see the Great River and the place where the boats were hidden beyond the trees. Although the camp was hidden now, he knew they must have been observed as they brought the boats in for a landing. It was well that Lanara's people had not been hostile, experienced fighters. The kalsmen would have had little chance fighting ashore against a determined enemy.

He did not yet understand the hospitality that had greeted them. It had something to do with the Ancients and the sword in the jeweled wooden case as Crogan had said. He was sure of that. But there was more than this, and it troubled him, not knowing what it was.

And over all was the unbelievable truth that they had reached the goal for which they had started out so long ago in the kals.

They had reached the land south. They had reached the great rich city of which the Ancients had written.

For the men and women who had come with him it was the end of the journey. For himself, he did not know. It almost seemed as if it might be the start of a new journey for him, but in what direction or toward what star he did not know. Perhaps there were Wise Men in this kingdom who could tell him things beyond the learning of Crogan. Somewhere there had to be wisdom that exceeded all he had yet found, for he knew he had not yet come to the end of his own journey.

The greatest urgency now was to learn the language of Lanara that they might discuss the future of his people in her city and why she had been so generous in allowing them free access.

Manvar indicated his request for quarters in the palace for Crogan and Alena, and Lanara readily agreed. The following day the remainder of the camp was gradually moved. Crogan and Alena were granted quarters adjacent to Manvar's own.

All of those suffering from the burns of Detra were treated by Lanara's physicians, who applied healing oils that quickly soothed the parched skins. To the kalsmen, who were in pain that was almost unendurable, this came as a welcome miracle.

Crogan was much concerned about Alena's eyes. "She can scarcely see, Manvar," he said. "Detra has burned them out and has made her sick and weak in her whole body. And sometimes I wonder if this is not to happen to all of us. Many of the men suffer so that they must keep their eyes shut much of the time. Has Lanara's people any medicine for such ills?"

Manvar showed Lanara the condition of Alena's eyes. Lanara called her physicians, but they shook their heads and applied ointments, although they said these would be of little efficacy.

Manvar charged his captains with keeping order among their men and keeping them from molesting the people of Lanara. But there was a sense of change in the relationship of the men of the kals. Manvar had been the leader of the expedition, but never their ruler, their First Chief. Now that the objective of the expedition had been reached it was sensed that every man might go his own way.

Manvar knew this was true. He had fought Caldec to the death for mutiny, and the kalsmen had honored his right. They had submitted to his driving power all through the journey on the Great River. But now he had no real claim upon them longer.

Slowly, as many days passed, he learned to converse in Lanara's language, haltingly and with much waving of the hands at first, then gradually with more fluency and ease. At the same time she learned his rough, harsher tongue, which sounded very strange upon her lips. And so they talked, sometimes in her language, sometimes in his—often in a grotesque mixture of both that left them laughing hysterically.

He was often to remember those days as the sweetest days of his life, for there seemed a clarity and a vision and ease that he had never before known and was never to know again. It lasted so short a time, but there was so much of it crowded into those days.

And it was then he came to love Lanara, Queen of the city Delphos.

When they could talk, they told each other all about themselves and the worlds in which they had lived, alien to each other.

"I am a queen," said Lanara, "because my father died without sons. And just before he died he gave me the case with the silver sword of the Ancient. He told me, 'When the man comes who will claim this sword, he will be your king and save your kingdom.'

"He told me that many generations of kings past, a stranger came out of the north and was cared for and made well until he could return. He left the sword and said if a multitude of his people ever came again they would recognize the sword and treat my people well.

"That is why I brought you the sword, Manvar, for we saw you on the river and saw you land your boats and knew that the people of the ancient sword had come."

Manvar shook his head sadly. "Legends grow, and pleasant lies are added to truths until there is no telling one from the other. In truth, the sword was brought from my land so long ago that the ancient traveler would be utterly forgotten except for the record he left to us. But there is no mention of the sword, and his name will never be known.

"He could make no promises for future generations. He could not promise that because I have come I would be king, nor that I would perform any great deeds for your people. I cannot perform great deeds even for myself."

"I am content, Manvar," said Lanara. "You have come, and you will be what you will be. But most of all, you shall be my king and share my throne."

"I already have a woman for whom I must care. You have seen her, the half-blind one."

"A man has many women. It does not matter. I will be kind to her and share every good thing with her, and my physicians shall care for her. But you will be my king, and I will be your queen."

"I belong on no throne or to no kingdom. I sometimes think I belong nowhere. I have come on a quest to find Wise Men who might answer riddles that I seek. Have you any Wise Men in your kingdom, Lanara?"

She laughed with a mixture of anger and bitterness. "I have some fat fools who sit all day pouring over books written by other fools, and who dispute from morning until sleeping time about the dancing of ghosts in the cellars. Would you talk with these?"

"Oh, Manvar—there is more wisdom in a wisp of your hair than in all the Wise Men who ever lived. You are wise enough to ask great questions. Now be wise enough to know there are no answers, or ever will be!"

"Is that your own wisdom, my queen? Is your wisdom above that of all the Wise Men who study great things?"

"It is my wisdom—it is a woman's wisdom—a queen's wisdom. It is the wisdom of all the world for anyone who will open eyes and ears to it. Let us rule our kingdom, Manvar, and do it well, and you will have seen all and done all before you die. There is no more to it than that!"

"You may be right, and I am a blind one. But at least I am no king. I am wise enough to know that."

She moved near him on the couch on which they sat.

"Are you so wise, too, Manvar, that you would not want to be my husband?"

For a little time he remembered Alena's poor eyes, which used to look at him in the depths of her love. He remembered her face, which had once seemed to hold all the beauty of the world, but which had been roughened by the wind and touched by the frost. Her tiny hands he had thought gentle...

He wanted to cry out for Alena, but Lanara covered his mouth with her own, and her smooth flesh and unworldly beauty became his only reality.

"You will be a king and save your kingdom," she said again. "For if you do not, there will be no kingdom."

"What do you mean?" Manvar asked.

"We have need of warriors now, and we have no warriors. Our highborn men are old and fat—or young and fat. Our lowborn are but workers and farmers who know the chisel and the sickle and the plow, but not the sword and the bow.

"And the nomads come upon us now, who have sworn to destroy us, every living flesh and every stone piled one upon another. Their camp has been upon the lowlands many days, and we know their intent. I offered much prayer and sacrifice over the sword of the Ancient that its owner would come and claim it. And my prayers were answered when you came. I cannot believe the gods will not move you now to take your rightful place."

Manvar threw back his head suddenly and laughed. "So that is the gift of a kingdom you offer. We have to take it by the sword, after all!"

"Yes. You think I have deceived you, Manvar? I have told you truthful words since we first spoke. I cannot rule this kingdom by myself. Our men cannot defend it for they have grown fat and weak with idleness and richness. I give you my kingdom. I will be your queen-wife if you will have me. But you must keep the kingdom from the destruction the nomads would bring upon it. And all this is in accord with the Ancient who gave the token of the sword with the coru image. Have I not spoken truth to you, Manvar?"

His laughter vanished and Manvar spoke gently. "You have not used us deceitfully, my queen. What you have done has been according to your traditions and your understanding. Who are these nomads?"

Lanara seemed to shudder at the mention of their name. "They are wild men. They live nowhere, but move about in the deserts of the far south, under the hottest blaze of Detra. They prey on the cities and take what other men gather. They are fierce warriors who strike again and again, waiting between times for men to re-gather and rebuild what has been taken and destroyed. But they have vowed to ruin Delphos when they come again, and we have no way to stand against them."

"I do not like the sound of these men," said Manvar. "They need a sharp taste of the sword. What we must do now is simply what we expected to do in the first place. We will fight for your city, and then whatever we take in it is surely ours."

"You will be a wise king, Manvar," said Lanara.

He called the captains and the men together in the great hall of the palace the next day and told them of the threat to the city. "You can see the camp of the nomads by the canal downriver from the city," he said. "So we are not cheated out of battle, after all."

"Who wants battle?" Volen exclaimed. "We have what we came for."

"You will have battle whether you like it or not. The nomads will not give you the choice. If you want what you have found, you will have to fight for it."

Caldeus spoke up enthusiastically. "I say praise to these nomads, whoever they are. We need battle to keep us from going fat like the men of Delphos. May the nomads ever keep us fit."

Artoro said, "Do we do all the fighting for these fat ones? Are they to do nothing?"

"No one knows how much time we have," said Manvar. "But whatever time there is, we will use to prepare. Windl will set up forges. Many of you have trained under him or other swordsmiths. Those will prepare

weapons. You who are best skilled with the sword will teach the fat ones to at least defend themselves for a time before they are thrust through.

"But most important, all of us must learn to ride the lerts. The nomads ride these beasts and fight while they ride. We cannot hope to stand against them on foot. If we are to have equal combat we, too, must learn to mount the beasts."

The kalsmen looked doubtfully at one another and growled in their displeasure. A man should fight with solid ground under his feet. How could he do so with a prancing beast beneath him?

He made assignments for specific tasks and weapon-making and training. There was emergency now; they were under his control once more and subject to his orders.

With Lanara's help he would call her people to assist and to become trained to handle swords and bows. He did not expect much of them, but his own men would not take kindly to the idea of defending the city while the men of Delphos watched in idleness.

After the meeting, Crogan approached him. "I have been watching the nomad camp," he said. "I suspected what it might be, even before Lanara told you. I have thought of a way we might best defend."

"I would welcome your thoughts," said Manvar.

"We must not wait for them to come to us. We must go down to the attack ourselves. These are men who are accustomed to having their own way. It must be that they always do this—they camp near a city and wait and choose their own time while their prey becomes sick with fear and waiting."

"I am sure it is so. But how can we attack? Our forces at best are very much smaller than theirs. I, too, have watched and have counted their men. They have nearly three times our number."

"They are camped close by the canal that leads water from the river to fields below the city. There is tall growth all along the canal, even with the water as high as it is. We could float through the canal on some of our boats at sleeping time and surprise them while they sleep."

"They will have guards. We could never get near."

"There will be guards. But I think they are lax. They have no reason to believe anyone would dare come upon them. We will lie flat on our boats and disguise and conceal as much as possible—and handle the guards when we come to them. Whatever the risk, it is far better than sitting here behind this wall and depending for help from the fat citizens who have never handled a sword before in their lives. And better than trying ourselves to learn to fight from the backs of the lerts."

Manvar nodded his head slowly. "Your wisdom is good, Crogan. I think we shall do as you say. But we will continue with our sword-making and our training of the fat ones and learning to ride the lerts. In case there are spies among us or those who would betray us to the nomads, this will be our apparent course. Tell no one. Not even the queen shall know. You and I will counsel with each man who is to go, and we will do it just before the task is begun."

## *CHAPTER 11*

Alone in his chamber, Manvar opened the wooden box and lifted out the sword of the Ancient, which Lanara had given to his keeping. He turned it slowly in his hands, the light of Detra glinting from it and sweeping the walls of the room as the blade turned.

What providence had preserved the sword through such long ages of time? What manner of man had brought it from the north to end up here in the hands of Manvar, the kalsman? Was it possible that some manifest destiny had spoken to him after all, in the symbol of the sword?

No one could tell him. Not even Crogan the Wise. And perhaps Lanara was right: the greatest wisdom was in knowing there were no answers to the great questions. But still, he wondered. Through so many ages this sword had lived. It had passed through so many hands, and no man had lost it or befouled it. It had come to him just as if the Ancient himself had placed it in his hands.

Was this destiny? Was it a sign from the gods that here was his answer and his place? He did not know much about the gods or their workings, but he knew there were certain things that happened to a man that could

be explained by no other means.

This seemed one of them. He clasped the hilt with the coru head carving. It felt like something he had held once long ago, so long that he could not remember. But familiar, now that his hand closed upon it once again.

It could be. It could be that he, too, had found the object of his search in Delphos. He could be king here. Perhaps that was his destiny. Perhaps the gods themselves, through the hand and the sword of the Ancient had led him to this place and this time. Perhaps he could lead Lanara's people and together they could find greatness and wisdom.

Well, he would be King of Delphos and see what came of it.

Lanara readily approved the plan to train her people and to make weapons. She called her palace counselors and turned them over to Manvar to present the plan. They greeted his proposals with apathy and reluctance. It would be difficult to get the citizens to participate, they said.

"We will require every man, including yourselves," said Manvar.

The counselors protested with exclamations of inability and excuse.

"Tell that to the nomad chieftain," said Manvar. "I hear he is not a very talkative fellow—except with his sword. You have a choice: Either this, or a nomad sword through your soft bellies. Maybe that will be your end anyway. But I offer you a chance. Decide quickly. There is little time."

That same day, Windl had his crews setting up a shop of forges, and a half dozen young craftsmen of the kals were ready to prepare metal and forge blades. There was little enough iron to be had in the city, but they made a beginning.

The captains selected their instructors, and the citizens were initiated into the rudiments of sword work with wooden sticks. In spite of the counselors' opinions, they went at it with some enthusiasm. The kalsmen, too, found the training less burdensome than they had supposed.

Manvar undertook to learn to ride the lerts. In the stables belonging to

the palace, Lanara's grooms provided a gentle mount for him and assisted him to the seat strapped to the back of the animal. Manvar did not like it.

He handled the lines that directed the animal's actions and listened to the instructions of the groom who rode alongside him. It was unpleasant and gave him a feeling of helplessness at being dependent on the animal's legs instead of his own. Yet, when he watched others ride at full speed it was apparent to him that the swiftness of the animals would offer an advantage under many circumstances.

He was more than ever convinced, however, that it would be hopeless to try to acquire sufficient skill to battle the nomads on their terms. Crogan's plan of initiating the attack seemed the only feasible one.

He continued with the lessons, spending long hours on the animal, until his entire body ached. His men did likewise, taking their turn on the training track.

Manvar had attempted to ignore the effect of Detra on his own eyes. He had shaded them and kept out of the direct light of Detra to some extent, but he had considered it a problem that would go away. His body—his eyes—was strong enough to accommodate to anything that Llanthor or Detra could thrust at him.

But it hadn't turned out that way. His eyes were red and swollen and painful, though not as much so as many of the others, and nothing approaching the condition of Alena's eyes. But he was most concerned that his vision seemed dimmer, and he could not distinguish distant objects that had once seemed plain. He found it so in trying to observe the distant nomad camp. He applied the ointments of Lanara's physicians and found them useless to him. At moments, in desperate fury, he attacked the pain and dimness with his own fingers, clawing and rubbing and intensifying the discomfort that left him exhausted. He forced himself to ignore it as he made plans for the attack on the nomads.

On the pretense of practising riding the lerts, he let Lanara guide him along the paths outside the city walls. Here he could see the canals leading from the river to the distant fields downstream and the land on which the nomads were camped. The canals were filled to their banks and flooded the land in many places because of the swollen river.

The intakes to the canals were actually far upstream, because the

normal river level here was below the level of the fields. Now, these intakes had been blocked to hold back the flood, but the river overflowed into the canals anyway. Manvar hoped the water level over the bank between the river and the canal channel was deep enough to float his craft. That would have to be investigated.

"They are watching us," Lanara said. She nodded toward the distant nomad camp.

"Why do they wait? Why don't they come up at once?"

"This is their way. They come from a far distance in the hot land. They always rest and plan and frighten the city by their presence. And then they strike."

"This has happened to your city before?"

"Many times, but it has been long since the last occasion. We had begun to hope they would not come again. They steal our food and our goods. It takes long to recover, and the last ones promised they would destroy us next time, because some of us tried to fight back."

"Is it always the same ones? Is this the group that promised to destroy you?"

"There are different bands. But this is the one that threatened us. Turo. We know him. Turo the Destroyer, he is known."

Manvar smiled. "Then it must be time to destroy Turo. He has had things his way long enough."

Manvar selected two of his most trusted men to explore the river bank and determine the best place—if there was any at all—where the boats might be taken from the river across to the channel of the canal. They made their search that same sleeping period and reported the river bank was under far more water than needed to float the boats. They could cross anywhere within a wide span.

Three days before the attack was to be made, Manvar called his captains together in a chamber of the palace and told them of the plan. "The men of Delphos, no matter how long we train them, can not hope to stand for very long against Turo's men, who have been fighting all their

lives. Nor can we hope to equal them in fighting from the backs of the lerts. Crogan's plan to attack them in their own camp, while they sleep, gives us more chance for success than any other. The problem is getting close enough before we are detected."

The captains were enthusiastic. Waiting behind the city's walls for Turo to attack had already defeated them. But now the plan to mount an attack of their own gave them a confidence of success already attained.

Caldeus was on his feet at once, exclaiming, "This is the way men of the kals fight! Hiding behind walls is no way to meet an enemy!"

Manvar smiled at his youthful enthusiasm. Caldeus would be a great warrior someday—if his impulsiveness let him live that long.

Artoro was more restrained. He was older. "This is the way it should be," he agreed. "If there was only some way of putting the fat ones in the way of Turo's swordsmen..."

"Never mind the fat ones," said Manvar. "We'll decide what to do about them when we have finished with Turo."

One by one, the captains gave their approval. Even Volen was unable to find objections. "We should have done this in the beginning and saved all the nonsense of training the fat ones and making swords for them and breaking our backs on the lerts."

A small crew was assigned to prepare some disguise for the boats by erecting shallow covers of poles and hides on the nomad side. To these were fastened small limbs and brush and grass to make the boats resemble floating piles of debris. Such piles were not uncommon on the flooding river, and sometimes they made their way into the canals. If the boats were spotted by the nomads they might be taken, for a time at least, for such piles of debris.

All of this work and the leaving and the entering of the city had to be done with great care to keep out of range of observation from the nomad camp. But this was not difficult, for the grove of trees where the boats lay and all the landing area was on the opposite side of the plateau of Delphos, away from the nomad camp.

On the day of the attack Manvar posted lookouts to keep a careful

watch on the movements of the nomads and report any who might be moving about near the city's walls, as they sometimes did. None were seen at any time that day. Near the beginning of sleeping time, the first of the kalsmen began moving over the wall and making their way singly or in small groups down to the grove where the boats lay. They gathered in the depths of the grove until all were ready and then embarked on the boats prepared for the attack.

Silently, they took their places on the decks, crowding together behind the wall of debris. The polemen and the steersman hunched low over their shortened poles. The anchor stones were drawn up, and the strands that tied the vessels to the trees were loosed. Slowly, they began to float away.

No one spoke as they drifted. The walls of the city passed behind them and Manvar directed the polemen to steer them inland over the submerged banks to the channel of the canal.

The boats turned easily. Even the current seemed to be helping them as they drifted towards Detra's blaze, low in the sky. The distant sound of an animal from the farmers' village crossed the stillness. The polemen dipped their poles and retrieved them silently.

Manvar had estimated his timing from observation of the current of the canal carrying bits of debris past the nomad camp. But the boats seemed to travel more slowly than he had anticipated. A quarter of the sleeping period had passed since they started, and still the nomad tents lay far ahead. There was no way to speed up the boats.

Manvar remembered their plan to storm the walls of Delphos and take the city. They had wondered then if they could be successful in such an attack. Now they were embarked on quite a different venture, and he wondered equally if they would be a match for the nomads, whose fierceness had been described by the terrorized people of Delphos. Whatever the outcome, it seemed fitting and right that they should have to fight for what they obtained. The free gifts of Lanara had made an obligation they could not discharge.

They were about to discharge it now.

From previous observation, the kalsmen knew the locations of eight guard posts that were manned at irregular intervals. Sometimes all eight were occupied, sometimes as few as three. These guards had to be found

and dispatched if possible. A last minute observation before leaving showed that six of the posts were probably manned now.

A high growth of thick-leaved grass provided some concealment on the upstream side near the camp. The boats pulled over and slowed. Six men disembarked from the last one and slipped into the covering growth. Their figures could be seen faintly through the thick leaves. They crouched in hiding. Then there was a flurry of silent motion, and Manvar knew they had found their first guard. They rose in a moment and moved on.

In silence the boats waited for the return of the scouts. Sweat poured over the faces of the kalsmen as they crouched near each other in the steaming heat. A sword clanged faintly as a man moved and jarred his neighbor. Manvar anxiously squinted his hurting eyes to spot the delaying scouts.

They returned at last, one bearing a bloody slash on his arm. "Four guards," the leader reported. "That's all on this end of the camp."

"Good," said Manvar. "The others won't matter. We'll be in the camp before they know it."

They let the boats advance a short distance farther, then dropped the anchor stones silently into the water and began moving all the men ashore. From the careful maps Manvar had drawn, men had been preassigned to particular nomad tents. During the day, when tent walls were sometimes drawn up, it had been possible to even determine the layout of many of the bunks inside. There were four men to a tent.

On signal, the kalsmen swept silently forward, a group of four men to each of the 20 nomad tents. Dirks drawn, they rushed in and plunged their blades into the sleeping nomads. Most was silently done, but a few shrill cries of dying men suddenly split the hot, still air.

Simultaneously, a dozen kalsmen archers lit their fire arrows and shot their oil-soaked projectiles into the remaining tents.

Nomad warriors burst out, some fighting the flaming hide walls that collapsed upon them, wrapping fire about their flesh.

At the fenced corral, kalsmen tore open the gate and whipped the frightened lerts into flight.

Manvar's eyes surveyed the swift events with grim satisfaction. The first thrust had reduced the nomad superiority of numbers. And many others were trapped and screaming in their flaming tents. Those who now engaged the kalsmen in swordfight were less in number than their attackers.

But the nomads were swift, fierce fighters. Manvar watched in dismay as one after another of his men was cut down. There was no quarter. A man who fell was a dead man.

The tent of Turo the Destroyer stood magnificently in the center of the battle ground. But a fire arrow had caught it, and now it blazed wildly against the sky.

Almost calmly, the nomad leader emerged from the flames. He stood in unhurried silence surveying the scene before him. A huge man of black hair and beard, he adjusted his leather helmet and fighting jacket and shifted the long sword at his side.

He was aware of Manvar, the kalsman knew, but appeared to ignore him entirely as he assessed the sword fights and bloody, shouting men on all sides. It seemed to Manvar that Turo regarded the victory as his already.

"Turo!" Manvar advanced, his sword unsheathed.

The nomad leader finally turned and regarded him. His smile bared white teeth in the center of that black beard. He uttered a few words in a dialect difficult for Manvar to understand, but the kalsman caught some of the words "—little birds from the hilltop come down to be eaten."

The blaze of burning tents was brighter than Detra about them. The clash of swords dinned from beyond the ring of fire. Though his camp was in ruins, the nomad seemed not to notice. He drew his sword and advanced carefully toward Manvar.

Abruptly, he plunged. His massive form moved with swiftness and grace that astonished Manvar. The men of the north, stomping about on feet and legs many times frozen, seemed clumsy animals beside this dark demon from the desert south. Turo laughed a hacking, derisive laugh as Manvar retreated from the fierce attack.

"Little birds... clumsy beasts..." Turo spoke as if to himself.

The two warriors lunged and parried, their swords reflecting the firelight about them, while oily smoke dimmed the sky above. The heat was intense. Their bodies glistened with sweat. Their breathing was labored as they locked weapons, broke and flung each other away, then rushed together once more seeking advantage.

To Manvar, the heat was intolerable. The man of the desert seemed almost to enjoy it as the sweat streamed on his face, and his great white teeth were bared in laughter as if he enjoyed playing with his opponent a while before finishing the battle.

Manvar had never seen such a swordsman. Turo was faster than any man the kals had ever seen. All Manvar's skill was required to hold back the vicious lunges and thwart the unfamiliar tricks that Turo's skilled hands knew.

But the kals had also taught Manvar a few devices that Turo did not seem to know. In the snow and ice, a man fought low and with his feet wide apart to steady himself. Turo did not seem to know quite how to reach him as Manvar came in low and upthrust. And that was the way he would defeat him, Manvar thought. He had tried the maneuver twice and each time Turo stumbled and jerked back as if not knowing how to counterattack it.

Manvar straightened. Once more. The next one would have to be the last, or Turo would catch on and frame a defense. Manvar parried and retreated to let Turo think he had abandoned the maneuver.

Then slowly he mounted an attack of increasing swiftness and began driving the nomad back. With all the skill of his years of swordsmanship he played against the nomad leader. And he knew Turo was letting him come on, preparing to launch his own counterattack.

Manvar spread his feet wide, lunged low, and thrust toward the belly of the nomad.

At that moment an arrow flared through the smoky light and pierced his right shoulder. His sword fell from his paralyzed hand, and he hunched low, sinking to the ground in sudden, unbearable pain.

Turo whirled in fury and thrust his sword in the direction of the archer. "Get that man!" he roared.

Far off, there was a sudden, piercing scream as a knife sank home.

Turo bent over the fallen Manvar and turned him on his back. He held his sword in abeyance. "I would kill you with my own sword, but I would not finish another man's work. Nor will I have another do mine. Tell me your name before you die, my valiant friend."

Blood appeared on Manvar's lips as he tried to rise. He sank back, looking up at the dark face of his conqueror. "I shall not die of a scratch with a stick from the hand of a slobbering child," he said.

Turo nodded. "If you do, I shall regret it much." He waved his sword to the distant city beyond the fire and smoke of his camp. "You are not one of them. What do you do here?"

"I am Manvar of the north." The kalsman coughed painfully, his head moving from side to side. "I am a guest in the house of Delphos. I would not permit little thieves to break in among my hosts."

"I would that you were my guest, Manvar of the north," said Turo. "One day I shall come again, and if you still live I shall invite you to be my guest." He looked up as the sounds of the fighting between their men grew nearer and more fierce. The nomad warriors were drawing back. "I must go," said Turo. "Your men are valiant, too. We could do with your kind. I will come to you again in better times."

Manvar had a blurred, fleeting vision of the nomad leader running swiftly and mounting a lert awaiting him patiently by the embers of the burned-out tent. The flickering images of a dozen others passed before his vision, and then the sounds of battle died away.

Caldeus found him. The captain knelt down and cut away the wooden arrow shaft, a thing that could not be done with the metal shafts of the north. Manvar stirred and opened his eyes at the pain of the arrow's jarring.

"Such a little thing," he murmured. "It's no more than a puncture with

a knife point..."

"They put something on them," said Caldeus. "Something that makes a man sick besides wounding him. We'll get you to the physicians of Delphos as soon as we can."

"The men," whispered Manvar. "What of the battle?"

"The nomads are dead—or have fled. It cost us greatly. Half our men are lost; many more badly wounded."

"We came so far... for this," said Manvar. His eyes closed again.

Caldeus, Artoro, and Volen with two others were the only captains left. They gathered the able survivors and made litters of poles and hides for Manvar and the other wounded who were unable to walk. They debated dispatching some of these with the sword, as would be the custom in the kals, but they remembered Manvar's directive that every man who could possibly survive was needed. Perhaps the physicians of Delphos could save some of these.

The sleeping period was ended, and Detra swung higher in the sky as the procession of battered kalsmen began its trip overland to the city. The boats were left where they lay in the canal at the edge of the camp.

To lighten their gloom on the long trek back they sang some of the old songs that had been handed down in the kals for longer than men could remember. Manvar, half conscious at times, heard some of the music and tried to join in, thinking he was back in the kals. He cried out for Alena in his delirium, and he cursed someone named Turo—he couldn't remember who it was.

Detra had begun to swing down again when they finally neared the city. They had been seen long before, and men with carts had come to carry the wounded back. Physicians had come to attend them on the litters, but Manvar told them, in a fleeting moment of consciousness, to leave him alone.

Lanara met them sadly at the gates, shocked by such grievous battle wounds as she saw. Townspeople, high-born and lowborn alike, crowded the streets on the way to the palace and both cheered and wept at their salvation from the depredations of the nomads.

Manvar was taken to his chamber in the palace and there he was washed and his wounds dressed by the physicians. They had nothing to offer to offset the poison of the nomad arrow, except an ointment they placed in the wound after the point was extracted.

"He is strong. He can do battle with the nomad evil," the chief physician said. "He is strong enough to live, if he wills it. And you can help, if you will it, too, my queen."

"You are all fools," Lanara said. "You have many words, but little healing."

"Sometimes words can heal, too, my queen. Tell the stranger from the north that you want him to live."

When the physicians had gone, Lanara bent her head to rest it lightly on Manvar's own. Her tears stained his face. "Manvar, I have waited all my life for your coming, Manvar. Now that you have come, don't leave me again. Stay with me, Manvar. Live and stay!"

After a moment she heard a small sound at the door and looked up. Alena stood there in the late golden light of Detra. Her hands were outstretched as if she could not see before her. Her eyes were almost shut. She walked with a staggering halt.

"Is he here?" she asked. "Is Manvar here?"

Lanara got up and took Alena's hand and led the blind girl toward the bed. "He is here," she said. "Come and sit by him." She led Alena to a chair beside Manvar's bed.

"Is he well?" Alena reached out a hand to touch him. Lanara guided her fingers to his face, away from the wound in his shoulder.

"He has been hurt, but he will be well," said Lanara. "My physicians promise me he will be well."

"He has come so far, we all came so very far. We dreamed of a great city where we would find happiness and wisdom such as the kals never knew. Our dream has died for most of us, but perhaps for Manvar it can still come true. Make it come true for him, Lanara. Make it come true. He

came so far for his dream."

"It will be true for all of you," said Lanara gently. "The dream is not over, you will see."

For many days Manvar remained unconscious. Elsewhere, his men recovered slowly and were cared for by the physicians and people of Delphos. But for each of them the battle with the nomads was more defeat than it was a victory. Too many of their companions were gone. Too many who were left were badly hurt by the fierce enemy. They knew that, back in the kals, they would have gone to the Cold Sleep, and, therefore, they felt they should be dead men.

Manvar regained his senses slowly, and after he wakened he moved about with weakness and difficulty for many more days. At last, however, his strength gradually returned and he moved about the palace and the grounds and went to see his companions. He found them dispirited still.

Windl told him, "The men did not expect so high a price. And we are among strangers, even though they treat us well. Besides, the men are not well. Their eyes trouble them more and more, and their skin burns, always."

"Then let them go back! The way north is still open."

Windl shook his head. "You know they cannot do that. No one of us could ever make that journey again and live. The men know it, too. That adds to their bitterness."

"Then let us make this land south what we dreamed it would be!" said Manvar. "What are we to do? Sit about and whine that we can go neither this way nor that? Are we kalsmen or not?"

"Do not underestimate the men. Their losses are great. They have much to make up for."

He went to Alena. He remembered vaguely that she had come to him while he was hurt. He sat by her bed and touched her hand. Her eyes were bandaged with some ointment the palace physician had prescribed. Manvar was tempted to tear the bandages off, but he refrained. He took

Alena in his arms, and she seemed more frail than she had ever been. The journey had done it. She had used up a lifetime of strength in that journey from the kals just to be with him, and now she had none left.

"They told me of your great deeds," she said. "They told me how you fought off Turo the Destroyer and saved the city." She pressed him close. "Stay with me tonight, Manvar. Stay with me. The queen can do without you for a little while."

"What has the queen to do with me?"

"She is very beautiful, isn't she? And you have won her city for the kalsmen, and its queen for yourself."

"You are my queen, Alena."

"You are a liar, Manvar. But stay with me tonight."

He held her poor, birdlike form in his arms and rocked her like a child. And he could not keep the image of Lanara from his mind.

## *CHAPTER 12*

The depression of mind and spirit passed with the gradual healing of the body. And the kalsmen ceased to remember their companions just as they ceased to remember any who entered the Cold Sleep in the kals.

This was the dream, after all. And it had come to pass beyond the most extravagant imaginings. Crogan and the Ancients had been right. The land south had been found. They had a city for their own, and its wealth and ease were theirs.

For Manvar, the kalsman, was king.

He had determined that this was his quest, that he would make Delphos greater than its people had ever dreamed. They would have riches and Wise Men and such power that the nomads would never dare challenge again.

He rode with Lanara in an elaborate procession that carried them from

the palace, through the streets of the city along the perimeter near the wall and back to the palace again. Every citizen who could stand or walk was on hand to greet him. The lowborn and the farmer peasants from beyond the walls were wildly enthusiastic about his coronation, for Turo's destruction would have fallen most heavily upon them. They would have been the last to receive rations after Turo sacked the city of its goods and foodstuffs and laid waste to the land.

The highborn were less enthusiastic. Manvar and the kalsmen were newcomers and usurpers.. But they, too, were not unappreciative of Manvar's conquest of Turo. The destroyers' invasion would have left a great many highborn corpses on the streets of Delphos.

Manvar watched the faces of these strangers who smiled and cheered him. What did they expect of him? What was he doing here? Suddenly he felt he didn't know. He had listened to the words of an old Wise Man named Crogan and had caught a vision of the great land south. Here was the vision. Here was the dream. What did it mean?

The people threw flowers in the path of the carriage. But he did not belong to them, nor they to him.

Lanara appeared as jubilant as her people. She was to be his queen. For him she was enough reason for being here. She was worth whatever price was extracted.

They circled slowly back to the palace, and there they had a ceremony, none of which Manvar could understand. It involved the donning of great robes, said to have belonged to the first king of Delphos, who raised the city out of the river swamp. There were vows and promises and covenants made over sacred writings and handclasps over the Sword of Justice that hung forever behind the thrones in the great throne room of the palace.

It was a marriage ceremony as well as a coronation.

Lanara became queen and wife to Manvar the kalsman, King of Delphos.

Manvar became king and husband to Lanara, Queen of Delphos.

There was feasting and celebration the rest of the day and sleeping time.

Crogon was confined to his chambers with illness, the illness of age. Manvar went to him after the banquet. The Wise Man's eyes lighted as Manvar stepped into the room. "You'll be a great king, Manvar! Being king is as great as being First Chief of the kals, is it not?"

"It takes a man a long time to become First Chief," said Manvar. He sat on a stool by Crogon's bed. "A king can hardly be worth so much with such little effort."

Crogon chuckled. "You call it little effort, finding the land south? You call it little effort defending your kingdom against Turo the Destroyer? No First Chief ever bought his robes at so high a price."

"Soon you go to the sleep, Crogon," said Manvar. "The sleep will claim you as it claims all men. Tell me what you see before you go. What am I king for? What shall I do with this kingdom? How shall I make it great and this people wise?"

"Once the kals seemed the whole world to me, but now I scarcely think of them. It matters little whether they live or die. And perhaps there are 100 cities like Delphos here in the land south. What does any of it mean? I think perhaps I was never meant to find the cities, after all."

"Tell me, Crogon. What have I missed? What is it that I don't understand?"

The old man closed his eyes and lay silent before he finally opened them. He looked with great soberness at Manvar. "You and I bear the same curse, Manvar. We search for what we know ought to exist, but may not. I have sought it all my life, and I do not even know the name of it."

"Have you never found it?"

"From time to time I thought I had. When I first heard the old stories of the Ancients. When I learned how to tell the coming of the Time of Great Waters. When I learned how to measure the coming of Detra. When I found a young man like yourself, who was cursed with the same desires. At times like these it seemed I had found the thing. But there was always something to look for beyond the last one. It seems to be endless, Manvar,

and that is what you must die with."

"I will not!" Manvar clenched his fist and strode to the window to look over the city. "I found the dream above all dreams, the land south. I have brought my men and their women to this land that is warmer than the inside of a house, with riches and ease. We will build a great kal of Delphos. That is why I have come. We will build the greatest kal under Detra!"

"Let it be so," said Crogan softly. "Let it be so, Manvar."

"Have you no more to tell me?"

"I have no more to tell you. Each one who carries our curse must find his own way, for there is none who can tell him."

Manvar sighed. "I need you, Crogan. I need you to help me rule these alien people. I want to be a good judge. I want to do it well for Lanara and for myself, and for her people and mine. Maybe something can come of it that will put reason into this dream."

"Perhaps. But I shall not be long with you, Manvar. These things you must do for yourself."

He wanted to go to Alena, but he could not bring himself to do that. Not on his wedding day to Queen Lanara. While the feasting and revelry continued in the great hall he made his way down the corridor toward the queen's— the king's, he thought—chamber.

He knocked on Lanara's door and was admitted by a single attendant who curtsied smilingly and left. He moved on to the inner room and found Lanara seated on a couch by a window overlooking the city. To Manvar's eyes the room was very bright, but he knew that with Detra's light low in the sky it was dim to Lanara.

He sat beside her and looked out over the city. "And what are you thinking tonight, my queen?" he said.

"That I am now truly a queen, for how can there be a queen without a king?"

"I wish I could say that, but it is far from true. You must have ruled well. Your people obey you. No one opposes you. In my land the man who judges is the First Chief, and he has a council of lesser chiefs. All of them come up by the sword. A woman could not do that."

Lanara shuddered. "I should not like to live in such a land. There are those here who do not agree with me. And there are some who would take the palace from me if they could obtain enough support. But the people were loyal to my father. They are loyal to me."

"How loyal are they going to remain now that you have placed a stranger beside you? Will I have to fight hard to hold the palace—and my queen?"

"The ones who were always loyal will remain so. The others do not matter."

He held her close in his arms, and for a time he thought he had the complete answers to the bewildering questions he had asked of Crogan. "The legends of the Ancients told me there was great treasure in the land south," he murmured, "and I came through the ice and the Great River and the mountains to find it."

"And did you find all that the Ancients promised?"

"More," said Manvar. "More than they ever dreamed."

The sense of fulfillment remained with him. He endured long hours of formal receptions in which the highborn of the city were presented to him. It was a necessary duty of the court, Lanara said, and he submitted cheerfully.

He sat beside her in the formal throne room and greeted the guests—and thought that most of them would have been well qualified for the Cold Sleep.

The first duty of a king, it seemed to Manvar, was to obtain all possible knowledge of his kingdom and his people. He thought of himself in terms of a First Chief of the kals, and he had a feeling now for the skill and wisdom of Jek, which he had never understood or appreciated before. It

was Jek who knew every last baby bora to a kalsman and how many more infants could be allowed in terms of the last score of hunts. Jek guided the quarrelsome chieftains and held his own sword ready to settle their disputes if necessary.

Manvar suddenly felt awed by the magnitude of government. He called up to memory all the things he had seen Jek do and heard him say. He remembered one thing above all else. "The kal is like a great beast," Jek had said once. "You hunt the coru and know that some of them fall easily to your arrows and thrusts. Some of them give you a long hunt over many days before they wear themselves out. And some are so wise, so swift and so powerful that you never catch them. They go to the Cold Sleep before a kalsman's arrows or spears ever find them.

"So it is with the kals. Some men are the sharp eyes of the kal, like the eyes of the coru that pierces all darkness to spot the hunter. Some men are the swift legs, and some are the clever brain. The kal that has the best legs, the best brain, the best eyes—that is the kal that lives best and longest."

Manvar liked that, because he knew it was true. A kal, like a great beast, stood against the world. And when he thought of Delphos against the nomads, it seemed like a poor beast without legs or eyes or ears or any capacity to stand against its enemy.

He would be a great First Chief of Delphos, Manvar thought. That was greater than a king, by far!

He was anxious to learn his duties and undertake his work. But Lanara laughed at his eagerness. "The kingdom has been here 1000 years. It will not fall away if you do not begin at once."

She was right, of course. His eagerness, his restlessness came from a sense of displacement, a longing for the life he had known up to now. He had told Crogan that the kals had passed out of his mind and caring, but that wasn't true. He found himself sometimes hating the warm comfort of Detra, its yellow blaze that blinded the eyes and seared the flesh. He sometimes longed for the sharp sting of the ice barrens of the north, the air that froze the lungs on a long hunt, the ferocity of the wounded coru that had to be dispatched by hand knife.

He forced himself into the daily ease of the palace life. For a time each morning there were ministers and counselors to confer with. There were

special pleas from the townspeople to consider. There were accounts to be watched over, having to do with the production of foodstuffs and merchandise and building.

In the afternoons there were games for those who cared for them, and this included nearly everyone. Manvar had never seen anything like the thing they called a game. There were several kinds, but they were basically the same, having to do with the manipulation of some object between opposing groups.

Manvar sat beside Lanara in the royal sector with their attendants, completely puzzled by the first game of Broka that he witnessed.

"What are they doing?" he asked Lanara continually.

Delighted at being able to tell Manvar something he didn't already know, she explained the proceedings of the game. "The Burrs, on the right side, are trying to put the ball through the gate in the wall on the left side. The Rohs, on the left side, are trying to keep the Burrs from doing that, and they are also trying to put the ball through the gate in the wall behind the Burrs. The Burrs are trying to keep them from doing that."

"Why?" asked Manvar.

"Each time a group puts the ball through the, other's gate they get another piku." Lanara pointed to a row of stone images on a rack across the court.

"What do they do with the piku?"

"Nothing. The number of piku just tells which side won the game."

"And what does it mean when one group wins the game?"

"It just means they got the most piku."

Manvar frowned. "The number of piku determines who wins the game—and the ones who win are the ones who obtained the most piku. I still don't understand why they do all this."

"To see who wins the game!" Lanara laughed. "Didn't you ever play any games in the north? How dull it would be not having any games to play."

Manvar's thoughts went back to the days before they had left the northern kals. "I suppose you could call it a game I played," he said slowly. "Just before we left the kals, I played it with Radok. We played with Kingswords."

"What were you playing for?"

"The life of Crogan the Wise."

Lanara frowned now. "I don't understand."

"If Radok had run me through with the Kingsword, Crogan would have been sent out in the cold and ice to die—the Cold Sleep, we call it. If I defeated Radok, Crogan would be given into my care and live."

"And you won?"

"Crogan lives."

Lanara shuddered. "So many things we don't understand about each others' worlds, Manvar! It frightens me. Such a game as you speak of—I would not want to play such a game, or see one."

"In the north, we do not play games simply because we want to. We play them because we must. I suppose that is the difference between our worlds."

It was the difference, he thought later. It was the whole difference between the land north and the land south. Daily actions in the north were performed out of necessity. And he had longed for freedom from that necessity, freedom to live by choice, not requirement. Lanara and her people had always had it. And now he had it.

He didn't know what to do with it.

He wanted Lanara to acquaint him with her city and with her people, the craftsmen and the farmers, the lowborn as well as the many highborn and palace staff he had already met.

Lanara shook her head. "You can't do that, not as king, Manvar."

Contact with them must always be through one of the palace staff, one of the highborn."

"If I can't do it as king, then I will do it as Manvar, the kalsman. There must be no man in my kingdom I cannot speak to, face to face."

Lanara bowed her head. "As you will, Manvar. You are king. But it will disturb many of the highborn, and they will not favor you for it."

"Then I think it time they be disturbed!"

They took a carriage and a few attendants, and they spent a number of days exploring the city. Although the entire city and the village area and farms beyond the wall were visible from the low towers of the palace, there were great sections that Lanara herself had never seen. When they went into them it was like exploring another world, even to her.

It was not the same world the palace folk inhabited. Close to the palace itself were areas of magnificent houses and gardens belonging to the highborn. Beyond these areas, and separated from them by a series of terraces and low walls, was the area of the lowborn. These were the craftsmen, the accountants, the palace workers and the servants of the highborn. They lived in their own houses, but these were far below the magnificence of the mansions of the highborn. And beyond the city walls were the villages and fields of the farmers who supplied the city's food needs.

The city was very old. It was obvious the stories of its great age were true. But the kals were old, too. How old, no one really knew. And in the kals, the stone walls were tight, and the domed roofs were never unrepaired.

Here, Manvar saw stone pillars of the highborn mansions that were worn, cracked—and sometimes fallen. There were even some mansions unoccupied and obviously abandoned for a long time. One, with its walls and roof caved in, stood between stately buildings that also suffered from neglect.

"Why are they like this?" Manvar asked. "Don't the people care if their houses decay? Why are there so many empty ones?"

"There aren't as many people as there used to be, especially among the

highborn, so houses go empty. And there aren't enough people to repair the ones that are being used."

Manvar snorted in disgust. "Instead of playing and watching games they could repair their buildings."

"But it is only the highborn who attend the games," explained Lanara, "and it is the craftsmen who build and repair. There are not enough of them."

"Then it is time the highborn learned to repair their own walls and pillars."

"They could never do that. Such things are not for them!"

Beyond the terraces, the evidence of neglect and decay existed also. There were vacant places, disrepair, and some areas that looked as if they had been burned out many years ago. Lanara shook her head when Manvar asked what had caused this.

The carriage stopped, and Manvar spoke to a man walking by such an area. The man looked astonished, then frightened, and bowed low. "The king," he murmured.

"I am visiting in the city," said Manvar. "I want to know what happened to these places that were once burned out."

The man rolled his eyes toward the ruin as if in fear to speak of it even now. "Long before I was born," he began. "It was the nomads. They broke through here. There was great fighting, but they burned these houses and killed many people. It was long before I was born."

"Thank you," said Manvar. "That is all."

"The Delphians must have stood up to the nomads with some force at one time," he said to Lanara.

Lanara stared out over the ruined area. "Long ago—it is said—we were different from what we are now. We did have fighting men, and we had men enough to build this city and these great houses you see here. I think you are not pleased with what you see," she added.

"I think I see Delphians too lazy and too busy playing games to patch a broken wall."

"But I told you—the highborn—"

"In the north, those highborn would long ago have been judged for exodus."

### *CHAPTER 13*

Manvar and Lanara rode the trail from the Delphos plateau down to the lowlands away from the river. Here were the farms that supplied the city's food.

Manvar had been astonished when he learned the source of some of the food served him in the palace. He could not conceive of food from things growing out of the soil beneath their feet, like trees. He had wanted to examine such things since his introduction to them, but this was his first chance to do so.

At the foot of the long, rocky slope was the village, and many of the peasant farmers waited in a cluster about the square, having been alerted by the first one who saw the carriage on the brow of the hill. Others who were in the fields had dropped their work and were now running frantically toward the village center.

The palace attendants riding in front of the carriage turned with expressions of distaste, as if to ask if they should continue on this way. Manvar ignored them, but he watched the fields of growing things with fascination. His old feeling of joy and anticipation about the land south began to return. There were riches and mystery and good things here!

The village, like the main portion of the city itself, had a wall around it, but it was a poor thing, broken in many places. There were houses, too, that were broken and deserted, mingled with those that were occupied. Like the buildings of the highborn, many of these were in disrepair.

Houses and other buildings faced each other around the square. The road from the plateau led directly to a broad avenue that opened onto the square. The queen's carriage and the riders stopped inside the area.

Manvar opened the carriage door and stepped to the ground.

Before him, several hundred villagers stood in complete silence. They were astonished and frightened by the presence of their rulers.

Men, women, and children—regardless of age, they looked worn and hard-treated by Detra. They were scarred and roughened in the same way the kalsmen had been on their first exposure to Detra. The faces Manvar saw before him seemed as rough as the soil on which he stood, and almost the same color. All the men looked old, and there was no beauty in the women—so different from the women who lived on the plateau.

Abruptly, some of the people dropped to their knees before Manvar, a few scattered ones at first, then the whole assembly. He didn't understand, but he didn't like them kneeling before him. He motioned them up again.

Slowly, they arose. Then one man stepped out and stood before him, hands twisting nervously. "We know you are the new king who came from the far lands. Word has come down to us. We have never had a king in our village before. Not a king nor a queen, and now we have both. We are grateful. What would you have of us? What may we show you or give to you that would please you?"

"There is nothing I want to take from you," said Manvar. "I want to know you. I want you to know me. I want to know how you live and what laws you live by. What is your name? Do you speak for your fellows?"

"I am Gradag," the worn man replied. "I speak for the village when the collectors come for the food to take to the city. I speak when we have needs. I speak now to welcome you to our poor village."

"Let us eat with you, Gradag, and tell us of your ways."

"Oh, how grateful we would be to have you sit with us!" Gradag exclaimed miserably. "But what poor food we have is not fit for a king and a queen. We have no palace food here. It was all delivered yesterday."

Manvar touched the man's arm, hardened and sinewy. "I have eaten worse food than you have ever seen, Gradag. Let us eat what the villagers eat, and we will be grateful for your table."

Gradag bowed his head, his thin, stiffened hair quivering. "And we

shall be grateful. Food is prepared in the houses for our eating time. Give us a little while to prepare a place. And the people have a request of you now."

"What is that?"

"They would like to pass close and see you. Some stand so far away. If you would permit them to walk by..."

"Of course. The queen and I came for that very purpose, that we might be close to the people."

Gradag scurried away and conferred hastily with a dozen others. Manvar opened the carriage door and assisted Lanara to the ground. Then, as they stood there, the people began slowly maneuvering into a line that shuffled by. Slowly, then a little faster as they were prodded by those behind, the people passed. Their eyes stared in stolid wonder, as if they beheld some creatures from another world. Some gaped open-mouthed, and pointed gnarled fingers, and jostled one another in whispered comment. But most just stared, as if unbelieving, their work-worn faces incapable of registering anything but pain.

Manvar watched them in turn. He was used to rough countenances of the hunters and the women of the kals. They were hard and worn, too, by ice and winds and the hardships of little food when the hunt was bad. But their faces always held, too, a defiance of the world and a knowledge that they were surviving—or if they could not, that they would go willingly into the Cold Sleep.

The faces of these farmer peasants of Delphos held no such defiance or knowledge. They held only a kind of dumb acquiescence, like a wounded coru awaiting the hunter's knife. But they passed by, and they stared and murmured and bowed, and some smiled wanly.

Manvar saw now that their bodies were often so thin that their bones were visible in their arms. And some had wounds or great sores that remained unhealed.

He felt Lanara shuddering in their presence and turned to look at her. She did not find it a pleasant sight, he thought. She should have come to see her people more often.

Manvar smiled and nodded to the wretches, reaching out a hand to touch a child encrusted with dirt and whimpering on its mother's shoulder. Several hundred villagers passed this way. Manvar did not count them, but their number seemed interminable. And then at last Gradag appeared again with his half dozen aides or companions or whatever function they served.

"We have done our best," Gradag said. "The food is ready, poor as it is. If you will choose from among us, some of us will also partake with you, and we may be able to answer whatever you care to ask of us."

"You choose..." Manvar began. And then he saw this would not do. No matter how impartially Gradag chose, it would cause dissension. "Let all pass by the doorway and every tenth man and his family enter," said Manvar. "We wish we could sit with you all, and someday we shall."

Gradag passed the word along, and smiles of understanding and approbation appeared on the grim faces. It was a clever way to choose!

The hall where food had been hastily brought was the single public building in the village, and it served for every kind of gathering. It was a large plain chamber with rough tables and benches on which had been laid food brought from nearby houses.

Manvar and Lanara led the way to the head of the table. Their attendants remained without. Manvar ordered Gradag to bring his family and sit beside him. The others, who considered themselves unbelievably fortunate to sit with the rulers, entered shyly and hung back. Manvar asked Gradag to request them to sit.

The food was only a thin soup and rocklike bread. It was less than that served in any house of the city.

"I have eaten much worse," said Manvar. "I have hunted for days on none but raw coru meat. But you would not know the coru. They are like the animals you pen and breed for food.

"But I have eaten better," he went on. "Much better in the palace and the houses of the highborn. Do you not supply the food for those houses?"

A glow of pride showed in Gradag for a moment. "I provide much food for the palace. I am told that what I send is preferred above much else."

"Why does not palace food appear on your own tables?"

Gradag looked horrified. "You would not expect us to eat the same kind of food prepared for Your Highness!"

"You prepare it. Why should you prepare better for the king and the highborn than you prepare for yourselves?"

Gradag's face wrinkled deeper with bewilderment that brought him close to tears. "I do not understand. You play with us with words. It would be impossible for us to eat as kings and highborn do. The queen knows that!" He extended a hand in sudden appeal to Lanara.

She nodded. "That is the rule, I am told."

"I think we might even die if we ate of palace food," said Gradag.

Manvar nodded somberly. "I see. It is forbidden to you."

"Yes, that is it. It is forbidden...."

"But you *do* produce all of the food that goes into the city?"

Once again pride lit the countenance of Gradag. "Indeed we do. The finest under Detra!"

Manvar spooned the thin soup and broke the hard bread in front of him. He glanced about at the faces that smiled with wan pride at Gradag's words. They were indeed proud of their produce that went to the tables of the palace and the highborn, while they fed on thin, greasy soup.

And they were mad, he thought. Only madmen would slave to produce and give all their substance to others. The villagers were as worthless as the highborn and the palace court.

"I will make a pronouncement," he said as he arose at the end of the meal. "Hereafter, you will withhold one tenth part of what you have formerly delivered to the city and to the palace. You will distribute this among yourselves."

There was a moment of stunned silence and then a cry like that of an injured animal arose in the hall. Gradag all but wept. "The collectors will destroy us. That is the first law by which we live: Nothing is to be held

back from the city for ourselves."

"The collectors are my subjects, too, are they not?" said Manvar.

"They will beat us and burn our houses." Gradag's eyes were rolling in terror now. "They will take our children away."

"I will speak to the collectors before you are required to retain the food for yourselves."

"Oh, that is good!" said Gradag fervently. "But do not require us to hold it back, and do not let the collectors be angry with us!"

On the way back up to the plateau of the city Manvar ordered the carriage halted and climbed out. He looked back at the village below and at the surrounding fields. He saw distant figures trudging back to their labors, and some who had not left the fields for his visit worked, bent over, slashing the harvest, planting with sticks, turning over the soil with the help of a lert to draw a digging tool. He did not know how such things should best be done, but he knew that what he saw was being done poorly.

"Let us return," said Lanara impatiently. "Haven't you seen enough of this poor place?"

"Not nearly enough," said Manvar. "This poor place is where all that we eat is produced. What if something happened that no more food was grown there?"

Lanara frowned. "How could that happen? There is always food. The villagers have always produced it for the city. They always will."

"I see places that were once farmed," said Manvar. "Great areas that are now abandoned. The canals once ran much farther than they do now. Can you see that?" He pointed a finger to the distant landscape. "I think there was even a village or two where none exist now."

Lanara laughed uneasily. "Suppose it is so? What do those old things matter to us? The only things that matter are those that are now."

"I am not especially concerned with what once was. I am concerned

with what may be... with what Delphos may become."

"Yes? And what do you suppose Delphos may become?"

"Dead," said Manvar. "Like those villages out there that once existed. Dead."

It was late when they returned to the city. The palace was preparing for the evening meal. Manvar and Lanara went to their chambers and bathed and changed clothing. "Shall we have food sent up here?" asked Lanara. "Or would you prefer the dining hall?"

Manvar hesitated. His eyes burned furiously after the long exposure to Detra on the trip to the village and back. But there were things he wanted to say to the palace court. "The dining hall," he said. "Let us join with the others tonight."

The sweet, delicious aroma of the palace table drifted into the corridor and made Manvar think of the sour, unpleasant odors of the village hall where they had eaten that day. He and Lanara entered the softly lighted dining room where red and gold fabrics and finely carved furniture decorated the room. Forty or fifty guests of the court stood as the king and the queen took their places at the head of the table.

As the food was served, a quiet babble of conversation and palace gossip rose and fell about him, but Manvar did not join in. "You are so quiet," said Lanara. "Are you disturbed?"

He held up a steaming morsel of white meat on his fork. "I would like to offer this to Gradag," he said. "The man has probably never eaten anything like this in his whole life."

"He would choke on it. You heard what he said this afternoon."

"Then I would give it to one of his children. They would eat and grow strong."

"I just don't understand," said Lanara sadly, "why you are so concerned about the villagers. They live as they have lived for 1000 years, they and all their fathers before them. They have no complaint. Why should you?"

"Because all this—" Manvar waved a hand over the sumptuous spread—"will vanish when the villagers are no longer able to produce it."

Their neighbors on either side heard some of the words of Manvar and Lanara and looked startled. Helas, the wife of Allo, the First Advisor of the court, leaned toward him. "What is that, Your Highness? The villagers are no longer able to provide food?"

Manvar turned with a wry smile toward the ample figure of the suddenly agitated woman. "I did not say they were no longer able to provide us food. But what if that were so? What would you do?"

The woman recoiled in horror. "We would die! But that is not possible—is it? The villagers have always been there. They will always be there, will they not?"

Allo leaned his thick bulk forward with a sudden frown on his face. "Why do you speak of such things, Manvar? Do you have reason to frighten us with these suppositions?"

"Yes. Once—long ago—how long I cannot tell, there must have been three times as many villagers as there are now. From the heights above the village you can see the marks on the land where other villages once stood, where crops were grown on land that is now barren, where canals once flowed in channels now clogged with windblown dust. The food producing area is shrinking. The villagers are decreasing in numbers—perhaps very rapidly. Cannot any of you remember when there were many more than there are now?"

Allo shook his beefy head vigorously. "We know nothing of such things. No one in the court associates with the villagers. It would be the collectors who would know such things."

"Then I think we should ask the collectors what they know," said Manvar.

Allo looked distressed. His face reddened with consternation, and finally he blustered a jovial laugh. "Your Highness, surely there are more pleasant things to discuss. We do not need speak of the villagers and their possible treachery. It has never happened. If it is not spoken of, it cannot happen."

"It must be spoken of," said Manvar. "We must speak of it much—at another time. And while I traveled today I passed by your house, Allo. There is a very large crack in the south wall. You had better fix that before very much more time passes."

Allo shrugged disconsolately. "I have tried for ten long years to obtain a mason to fix that wall. There is none to be had."

"What will you do when the house falls down?"

"Oh, now you speak of things no one need worry about," said Allo cheerfully. "That house will stand for ages to come. It served my great grandfather. It will serve my great grandchildren."

"Someday," said Manvar positively, "that crack will cause the wall to fall and crush you while you sleep, Allo."

"I am sure I will get it fixed long before that time."

In their chambers that sleeping time Manvar watched the dormant city with Lanara standing beside him. "Delphos is dying," said Manvar slowly, "and none of you know it, do you? It is so slow that you cannot see it. But it is sure. The sickness you have lived with so long is real. If there is any purpose in my coming here, perhaps it is to heal the sickness of Delphos if I can."

Lanara gave a little cry and clung to him. "How you frighten me, Manvar. I don't understand what you mean. I think you do not understand my people at all. You see things that do not exist, dangers that you only imagine. And you frighten my people. Tonight they were upset by your words, and tomorrow it will be throughout the city. What do you intend to do? Nothing can change from the way it is."

"I will change it. You will see that, Lanara. I will change it."

## *CHAPTER 14*

The basic law of the kals was produce or take the Cold Sleep.

Manvar had never seen it written or heard it spoken, but he knew it was the law, just as every kalsman knew it. It was the law upon which exodus was judged, by which old ones went into the Cold Sleep when they could no longer hunt or sustain themselves. It was a good law. It kept the kals strong. There was no other way. If it were not so, a kal would find itself dying from the burden of keeping those who required support.

Just as Delphos was dying. Atop the palace roof, Manvar watched the rising of Detra from her low point. He could not sleep. The golden light intensified over the desert to the south, over the Great River, the fields and canals and villages, and over the sleeping city itself. How like his dream it was, in this golden light, Manvar thought. How far they had all come to find this golden city.

And what a mockery to find that, in their way, the kals were greater than the city of the land south.

The kals were strong, living—like the great coru that no storm of the north could beat down. But the golden city of the south was a sick, feeble coru, wandering aimlessly, waiting for the first strike of the hunter's arrow. And the hunters were out there. The nomads. Turo the Destroyer. Next time they would give the fatal thrust to the sick coru of Delphos.

He turned at the sound of Lanara's approach behind him. She smiled happily, her hair drifting gently in the morning breeze. She took his arm and pressed herself closely to him. "What wakes you up so early, Manvar? I looked beside me and you were gone."

"I couldn't sleep." He nodded toward the golden spray of light over the far distant desert. "A kalsman has never seen a sight like this. This land is very beautiful."

He rubbed his eyes against the brilliance that was already overwhelming. "My eyes weary of so much light."

"Don't become like the others! Not like Alena—"

"A kals chieftain is stronger than that! I will become used to the light in time."

"I hope that may be soon. Let us go in now. Detra musn't burn your eyes."

"In a moment. I was looking at the city again. I see not only scars of ancient fields and villages, but the city walls once extended far beyond the edge of Delphos today. Delphos must have once been much bigger than she is now. Every generation for a long time has seen the city grow smaller."

"You still concern yourself with these things!"

"I shall concern myself with them for as long as I am king. Is it not the business of a king to know whether his realm grows or dies?"

Lanara clutched his arm tighter and seemed to shiver in the breeze. "I am a queen, and it has been my duty to please my people and keep them happy. When they are happy and content, I do not understand how they can be dying."

"When one man eats what another hunts and gives him nothing in return, there is death in the kals. It is as simple as that."

"You are not in your kals any longer. I think you love your kals more than this land you came so far to find. You cannot make Delphos a kal. Is it in your heart to return to your own land?"

"No, my queen. It is in my heart to stay with the dream I have found in the land south. But to be happy is not enough. A sick man can be happy while he dies. A man, a kal, a coru, a city—must be strong as well as happy. We must make Delphos strong, make her walls and her fields grow wide. We must make her so strong that no nomad army will ever dare approach her gates again. Is that not desirable?"

"You make it sound very desirable. How can it be brought about?"

"Allo must fix the wall of his own house," said Manvar.

"Now you laugh at me again. You speak in riddles I do not understand."

He drew her close and turned toward the door that led down from the parapet to the palace halls. "I will explain it to you, my darling."

The following day he called a meeting of the palace counselors. This

group consisted of about 50 highborn representatives who administered the palace government and who had advised Lanara. Allo led the group as First Advisor. The others were much like him.

Allo had not forgotten Manvar's reference to the crack in the wall of his house. He had not understood it, but he felt it was a kind of insult that only a kalsman could understand. He had decided not to forgive Manvar for whatever had been intended.

They gathered in an ornate meeting hall of the palace. Lanara sat beside him as Manvar presided and rose to speak.

"I am Manvar, the kalsman, a chieftain of the kals in a land that is unknown to you," he said. "I and my people came as conquerors, prepared to take from you what we wanted, even as the nomads take. But, because of your ancient traditions you received us openly and offered us your hospitality. For this we are grateful, and it is our greatest desire to live in peace among you.

"More than this, your queen has honored me by allowing me to win her as my companion and sit beside her on the throne of Delphos. And so I become your king without conquest, without bloodshed. And so may it remain that we abide in peace with one another.

"But changes must be made. Wrongs must be righted. New laws must be invoked, if Delphos is to become and remain a mighty city.

"You live under the constant threat of the nomads, who raid and destroy, and you do nothing about it. You submit to Turo the Destroyer and his kind without protest. And someday he will return to burn and destroy all Delphos. There are other matters, as well."

In words he pictured for them his observations of a shrinking and dying Delphos that was decaying because the builders and the food producers were not able to provide for the highborn and for themselves as well. He showed them how it must have been much different in times past, when the city and its environs had been vast in extent compared with the present boundaries and capacity.

"Something happened," said Manvar. "Perhaps in the time of your grandfather, or in the time of his father. The first law of the kals was broken, and that law applies to Delphos or any other land. The law is

simple: Build or die. Because the kals keep this law they are great and powerful. No such horde as your nomads would dare approach the kals.

"Delphos has forgotten this law, and Delphos dies and the nomads do with you as they please. And even I and my small band might have done so if we had chosen.

"This law must be observed. To this end I will establish some new decrees, a little at a time because you cannot stand the full law at first, but after a time you can.

"Our first requirement is that each man bring his own house and property up to full repair."

An instant buzz of consternation and protest swept through the group.

Allo arose and asked permission to speak. Manvar nodded to him.

"You spoke of this to me before," said the First Advisor. "I explained the impossibility of complying because of the lack of masons and other craftsmen. This is my experience, and I am sure my fellow advisors have all had similar experience. What you require is an impossibility."

Murmurs of agreement followed him.

"I appreciate your explanation," said Manvar. "I understand the situation. For that reason I also decree that the all-day games shall close, except for one day in ten and every other evening. This will give each man time to do his own work, to become his own carpenter and mason. And so it will be possible to meet the first decree, after all. Private homes and public buildings shall be restored to full repair as quickly as possible. And then we shall go on to other things."

Anguished protests filled the air as the men turned to one another and voiced the impossibility of the requirements.

"The games can't be stopped."

"How can we be our own craftsmen? We know nothing of stone and wood."

Manvar let their protests flow. He stood silently, waiting for them to

run down. When they did finally, Allo asked for the floor again.

"Decrees are not made without counsel with the palace advisors. No such counsel has been made in this case, and we cannot accept such a decree. It is an utter impossibility."

"Do you counsel with Turo when he comes and decide what he shall have and what he shall not have?" said Manvar quietly. "I do not come as Turo, but I came as conqueror and I will rule as conqueror if I must. You offered me hospitality instead of war, and I will return the favor by showing you how to become great. Conlac, you are advisor over craftsmen, are you not?"

A thin man in the center of the group shifted uneasily and acknowledged. "I am, Your Highness."

"I charge you, Conlac, to organize the craftsmen to teach their crafts to all who must learn in order to put their houses in repair. The masons, the workers in wood, and whatever other crafts you employ. See to it this day."

The man stared at him, then nodded sullenly. "Yes, Your Highness."

"One other. Meelon, you are advisor to the collectors who gather from the villagers, are you not?"

"I am."

"You will order the collectors to obtain only nine-tenths of that which they would take from the villagers. The remaining tenth part shall remain for the use of the villagers themselves."

Again, a rustle of protest moved through the advisors. Meelon stood up. "We are already hard pressed, considering the amount we presently collect. The work of the villagers has been poor for some time. We shall be very short if we leave one tenth with them."

"Let us be short, then. Our stomachs are too round, as it is."

"May I ask what the villagers are to do with this tenth portion?"

"They are to eat it."

"They will refuse it."

Manvar thought of Gradag's protest at the proposal. "You will direct them in the name of the king to use this food for their own subsistence. All of you will make proper distribution of these decrees to all citizens, and compliance will be expected at once."

Manvar and Lanara departed, leaving the disgruntled advisors to discuss among themselves the decrees Manvar had made. In their own chambers Lanara said, "I am afraid, Manvar. These things will not be popular. The people will not support them. What will you do then?"

Manvar glanced toward the Kingsword made for him so long ago by Windl. It hung on the wall, ready for his grasp. "The sword is the way of the kals. I had thought there might be another way. Yet the sword is no more harsh than the sickness that lies in Delphos. I don't know. We shall simply have to see.

"I have made simple rules. If the people cannot follow them, what will they do with the strong ones?"

The sense of turmoil in the houses and in the streets of Delphos could be felt even in the palace as the news of Manvar's decrees was spread. The next day, the advisor of games kept the playing field closed as ordered, but crowds of would-be spectators and players milled around the gates in bewilderment and anger most of the day. Manvar was on the point of calling on his men to police and disperse the crowd, but Lanara prevailed upon him to hold back.

"If you want to make war on us, make war!" she said. "But you can't make laws that will make us great by warring on us."

"Greatness can only come through law," said Manvar. "And law must be enforced when necessary."

"It will take time, Manvar. Give them time."

Manvar consulted with Crogan, who remained bedridden, and told him what he had done. The Wise One listened without comment. "Have I done well?" asked Manvar. "Would you have done any differently? Would Jek, the First Chief, have done it better?"

"You are applying the laws of the kals to a different world," said Crogan slowly, "a different people. Do the same laws apply? I do not know this people that well. You say they protest. Perhaps they protest because they do not recognize the need for your laws. In the kals, all men know the need of the law. That is why they obey. Until this people understands the need, perhaps you will not be successful in governing them by those laws."

"If we wait until then, Delphos will be dead!"

"Maybe Delphos has to die. Nothing lives forever. Neither men nor cities nor worlds. All attain the Cold Sleep in the end. Do not try to prolong that which has no need to be prolonged."

"Who is to judge that?"

"Who makes judgment for the Cold Sleep among the kals?" said Crogan in fateful remembrance. "Men make all judgment, and sometimes men disagree with one another. Do as seems wise to you, Manvar. Let the past judge itself after all is done."

Manvar rode his lert through the streets of the city, observing whether there was any activity among the highborn with respect to their houses. There was some, but it was negligible.

Two days later, Meelon, the advisor to the collectors came to him. "They have piled the food in the square and refuse to touch it," he said.

"Who are you talking about?" asked Manvar.

"The villagers. They have refused the one-tenth of the palace food we left with them. It is rotting in the village square."

"Did you tell them it was my order?"

"I went there myself to see that your order was delivered to them. I spoke to Gradag. He told me you had mentioned what you were going to do, but he could not get the people to accept the food."

"And Gradag himself... did he use any of it?"

"He said he could not do it unless others did also."

"All right." Manvar turned to dismiss Meelon. "Thank you for your report."

"Shall I continue to return the tenth portion?"

"I will let you know."

Manvar returned to Crogan in bewilderment. "What is the matter with the villagers? They are starving and sick for lack of food, and they refuse to touch the choicest portions of their own production when it is offered to them."

"Tradition and fear make thick prison walls," said Crogan. "Could you keep a kalsman from entering the Cold Sleep after he had determined it was his duty? A man does what his convictions tell him he must. And you cannot change convictions at sword point. You cannot make the villagers eat the food they need by threatening punishment or life. They would rather accept punishment or death."

Manvar slumped tiredly in his chair by the bedside of the Wise One. He sensed a huge wave of defeat advancing over him like the flood of the Great River. "Nor can I force the highborn to repair their walls to keep their houses from falling and crushing them while they sleep."

"I think not," sighed Crogan. "I think not."

"In the kals they would be fit for nothing but the Cold Sleep," said Manvar bitterly. "I think that is what we need here."

"Yes, in the kals," said Crogan. "But we are in Delphos, where men do not know the laws of the kals."

"The law of the kals applies anywhere. No city can live where one eats what another hunts."

"And perhaps you are right." Crogan turned painfully away from the small light coming through the window of the room. "In that case Delphos dies."

From the palace parapet the following day, Manvar watched the city and saw the distant playing fields. To his amazement he saw crowds entering and teams taking their places on the field. He sent a messenger to bring Jopub the games advisor to him. It was a considerable time before Jopub appeared. He was terrified and disheveled.

"The game field is full," said Manvar. "It is not a games day."

"There were so many people..." The advisor said helplessly. "There is so much to tell. The craftsmen would not make ready. There was nothing to do. The people said they might as well have games as nothing. Besides, they would have killed me if I had refused to make the field ready. I did what I could to stop them. I could not do it," the man said meekly and in fear.

Manvar sighed. "All right. You tried to carry out my order. Other measures must be taken, then."

He sent messengers to round up his captains of the kalsmen. It took them a long time to appear, also. It was well after midday before they arrived. Caldeus, Artoro, Volen, Mencus, and Chursu. These were all of the captains left after the battle with Turo. Windl the Sword-maker came with them. Manvar had not seen any of them for some time. They looked well and fully recovered from their battle wounds.

Manvar invited them to a small conference room of the palace and ordered food brought in. "You look as if the land south agrees with you," he said.

"We owe you much for bringing us here," said Chursu. "It was our good fortune to be able to follow you."

"I am glad to hear you say that," said Manvar. "It is time to pay."

They sobered suddenly at his words. "What do you mean?" asked Artoro. "We paid enough just in coming through the barrier and down the river. We paid more than enough in the loss of half our men to Turo."

"We came prepared to conquer this city by the sword," said Manvar, "and by good fortune we were spared that when Queen Lanara gave us hospitality because of their ancient traditions."

"And made you king beside her," quipped Volen. "A very good fortune, I would say."

The others laughed with him, but not too boldly, due to the grimness on Manvar's face.

"The land south is all we dreamed," said Manvar, "but there is one thing we did not know. It breeds a sickness in men—perhaps because it is easy, and there is no cold to fight." He went on to describe to them his observations and the conclusions he had reached.

"These people do not know what it is to be ruled," he said. "They go their own way and care nothing for laws that mean survival or death. We must teach them. It is time for them to learn a small lesson by the sword."

"What lesson?" demanded Volen.

"A small thing to begin with—perhaps bigger ones later. I have forbidden games on most days—including today—so that the people might have time to rebuild this decaying city, its buildings, their homes, the streets, the walls. The people have disobeyed my order and have opened the playing fields today. We must close the fields."

No one moved. Volen said. "These people have given us everything we want. Food. The best houses we ever dreamed of. Women for our wives, for those of us who had no woman. We come, we go. We take what we please. We have nothing to complain of. We have no cause to draw the sword against them."

"You came here because I led you," said Manvar. "You will have the riches of this city only if I lead you. We will rule here only if this people obeys. This is cause enough to lift the sword against disobedience."

Volen shook his head. "We came here together, Manvar. We followed your leadership to the land south. And that is as far as our covenant went. We did not give you rule over us. We are no longer yours to command. If you quarrel with this people, it is your own quarrel, not ours. We see no cause to take up swords against them."

"Then go your way, Volen!" said Manvar. "I will take those who remain with me. The rest of you gather your men and be here at the palace tomorrow. We shall see that the playing fields remain closed tomorrow."

They remained silent again as Manvar looked from one stern and rebellious face to another. At last, Windl spoke. "I'm sorry, Manvar. There will be no one here. Volen is right. We have no quarrel with this people. They have treated us with riches and luxury beyond anything we have ever known. We will not fight them. None of the men will fight them.

Unbelieving, Manvar saw in the eyes of all of them the same answer.

"So you have grown fat already," he said. "Men of the kals! I thought I was taking the strong ones with me. Instead, it was simply the weak ones who could no longer endure the harsh life of the north. Now you grow soft with ease and fat with more food than you ever saw in your lives before!"

They arose to leave. Windl shook his head at Manvar. "Do not quarrel with us. We are grateful to have been brought here by your dream, but I think we need go separate ways now. I'm sorry, Manvar. Perhaps your quarrel with your subjects is not as great as it appears."

Long after they had gone, Manvar stood by the window watching the distant game field. But he backed away and closed the curtains, passing his hand across his stinging eyes. Their painful burning angered him.

Detra was low in the sky when Lanara found him still sitting in the empty chamber. "Manvar, I didn't know where to find you. I thought you were meeting with your people."

"They left long ago."

She sat beside him and touched his hand. "You look very tired, Manvar. Is anything wrong?"

He smiled bitterly and turned to her. "I am a king without a kingdom, Lanara. I am king, but I have no subjects."

"You tease me again. Tell me what you mean."

"You saw the playing fields today. They disobeyed my order."

"I know. I'm sorry. I was afraid it would not work."

"I tried to get my own people to help enforce my order. They refused. They will no longer follow me."

"I suspected that might be so. I am sorry for that, too."

"No one follows me. I cannot enforce my decrees. I cannot be king without a kingdom."

"I follow you," said Lanara quietly. "Wherever you go, I will follow you. Where will we go, Manvar?"

He shook his head. "Your place is here with your people. You understand them. They honor you. Even if they are a dying people, your place is with them."

"As for me, I do not know where I go. But wherever it is, you cannot follow, Lanara."

## *CHAPTER 15*

It was as if the city waited for a punishment to fall, like a child that knows punishment is due but not when it will come. And when no punishment appeared, Delphos finally breathed in relief and knew that none was coming.

The edicts were forgotten. The games continued. The feeble attempts at craftsmanship by the highborn were abandoned. The food collection from the villagers continued as before. Nothing was changed.

Manvar was ashamed to speak of his defeat to Crogan, but it was necessary. The old man was very weak now; yet he listened intently.

"So the decision has been taken from you," Crogan said. "Delphos chooses to die. And that is the way it should be. A city, like a man, must make its own choice and not be forced to live if death is what it wants. Be content. It is no great matter. And what of you, Manvar? What do you do now?"

Manvar stood looking far out over the city to the desert beyond. "There is one who knows a secret I want to have. I would like to find him and know his secret."

"And who is that?"

"Turo."

"The destroyer! What secret could he know that would be of worth to Manvar?"

"I don't know. But I think he must have one. Why does he do what he does? He raids and destroys and crushes those cities that have decayed too far to resist him. I think there is some great purpose here that I don't understand. Turo is like the cold of the north that provides the blessed and comforting Cold Sleep when it is needed. There seems to be something of great worth in Turo, and I would that I might understand that worth."

"And so you go to seek Turo? He will kill you when he sees you."

Manvar was remembering when he and the nomad leader had fought. "No. I think he would welcome me. But I do not go to seek Turo. I do not expect to see him ever again. I have to do something else."

"And what is that?"

"My eyes fail me. They are dimming, and I can see only half of what I ought to see. The men are all the same. I have talked with them in the past days. Few of them will admit it, but they are being blinded by Detra. They stumble when they walk, even now. Their eyes burn fiercely all the time, and the physicians' ointments do no good. Still, they refuse to admit it and do something."

"What could they do? I know what they suffer. My own eyes dim, and it is not all the result of age. What is there to do? What will you do?"

"The only thing left for kalsmen to do. Go back north, where Illam is kind to our eyes and lets us live in the world for which we were made."

"You give up your dream!"

Manvar laughed. "Is there any dream left? We have found a land in which we cannot live. We have found a city that seeks only death. We have found an enemy that has taken half our men. There is no dream. There never was. There was only our wild imaginings!"

Crogan protested feebly. "Do not say such words, Manvar. For, whatever you believe, whatever has happened—there was a dream. There

is always a dream, Manvar. There is always a dream."

Manvar waited to hear the old man say more, but when he looked more closely he saw that Crogan was dead.

After a long time he arose slowly and went to his own chamber. There he opened the wooden case that held the sword of the Ancient and lifted it from its shroud. He cradled it carefully in the crook of his arm and went back down the corridor. There, he entered the room of Alena.

He had not seen her for a number of days. It was difficult for him to look upon her, remembering her as she once was, and seeing now the blind, withered face. She lay almost as still and aged as Crogan.

She turned at the sound of his entry and smiled wanly in recognition. "Manvar!" she exclaimed.

He rushed to her bedside in gladness and knelt upon the floor. "Alena... your eyes... you can see?"

"No, I cannot see you, Manvar. But I would know your step anywhere. You have been away so long. You are so busy being King of Delphos you haven't time to visit me any more."

"I am not king any more. I will have more time now."

"I'm glad. But why aren't you king? Were you challenged and defeated? Have you been hurt?" She raised anxiously and reached out a hand to touch him.

"No, I am not hurt, Alena. The people didn't want to follow the laws of the kals, and so I decided I would not be the king any longer."

"Oh, I am glad! And now you can see me. Will Lanara mind if you come to see me?"

"No, Lanara will not mind. She loves you."

"What will you do now that you are not king?"

"I'm going back to the kals, Alena. I'm going back north."

"Oh, Manvar! You came so far to find the land south. Isn't it your dream any more?"

"It's not my dream. I was wrong. I'm going home."

"Take me with you! You'll take me with you, won't you, Manvar?" She raised up and clutched his arm wildly. "You won't leave me here, will you?"

"I'll take you with me," he promised. "That's what I came to tell you."

"Oh, Manvar—" she was crying now—"how I have longed that I might hear you say that. We're going home!"

"You'll be back in your father's house once again."

"No! In the house of Manvar, the chieftain. Lanara will not go north with you, will she? She must stay here and be Queen of Delphos."

"No. Lanara will not go. And Alena can go home to the house of Manvar, the chieftain if she wishes."

"That is my dream, Manvar. That has been my dream for so long!"

Her hands pressed her face in ecstasy, and while there was still gladness in her, Manvar raised the sword of the Ancient and brought it down swiftly. He did it so skillfully there was only a tiny cry from Alena's throat, and then she was still.

Lanara wept when he told her what he had done. "I don't understand you, Manvar," she cried. "You are kind and loving and desire to do great and good things. But you can turn and slay like Turo when you choose. What kind of people are you? What kind of land do you come from?"

"We are a people who live with death each day. We understand it and know it is no evil thing. We are thankful for its many kindnesses. As for my land, I am going back to it. That is what I came to tell you. I leave you in peace, Lanara—you and your people—to live your ways and your life as

you will. I have brought you nothing but ill in coming here. I will trouble you no more. My men wish to remain. They will cause you no harm if you let them stay. They will not live long under Detra. She hates men of the north."

"Manvar—" Lanara clung to him "—I am going with you. You must let me come with you." She reached out and touched the sword of the Ancient, as it lay upon the table where Manvar had placed it, still stained with Alena's blood. "I had a dream, too, and you made it come alive when you appeared to claim this sword. If you go, there is nothing for me here. Take me with you, Manvar. Take me with you!"

He turned away and watched the golden sleeping time of the city. He thought of Alena, whom he had considered too frail to make the trip to the land south, and how she had come on through much of the hardest part alone. She had made it, though it had killed her in the end.

How much harder it would be for Lanara, who had lived in soft ease all her life and had never known a world of bitter cold and darkness such as the land under Illam. Yet, what was there for her if she stayed? She understood enough of what he had said to know her people were a dying people. She understood the futility of their lives of games and idleness and knew they were doomed.

And he wanted her. He had to admit that. He wanted her to go with him.

"I have to tell you the truth," he said at last. "I am going to my home land, but I will not arrive there."

"Oh, your riddles, Manvar! Tell me what you mean and do not tease me with words I do not understand."

"It is the Cold Sleep I am traveling toward, Lanara. The Cold Sleep is my destination."

She backed a step, frightened. "I still don't understand."

"There's nothing more to understand. I will travel toward the north, but I do not expect to reach it. The mountains, the Barrier Storm—I came through them once with all my men to help me. I do not expect to be able to do it again."

"The Ancients did. You told me the Ancients came to the land south and returned and wrote about it. What they could do, you can do also."

"I think they were far greater men than I. And more, they had eyes to see. I grow more blind each day. Unless Illam can heal my eyes I will not see the land north even if I reach it."

"Then I will be your eyes, if I must. Take me with you, Manvar!"

"I will not deceive you, Lanara. It is not to the land north that I go. It is to the Cold Sleep."

"Then I will go with you to the Cold Sleep, if that is your destination."

"I will take you, my queen."

He planned to ride lerts and also pack food and other goods on additional lerts that would trail behind them. They would ride as far as the place where the boats had been constructed to float down the great river. There, he expected to find the abandoned sleds, with such goods as had been left behind. He hoped to be able to round up enough of the abandoned addks to harness sleds again. He was not sure this was possible, but he hoped for it. Anything could have happened to the addks. They could have gone wild or been killed by other animals. They could have vanished to other locations. He still hoped to find enough of them to pull a pair of sleds.

When he announced his plan to his men they were dismayed and a little surprised, although some of them expected he would do such a thing. None of them accepted his invitation to join him, which was what he expected.

Volen said, "You are a fool, Manvar. You've got everything you ever wanted, and now you have it you are ready to turn your back on it. What kind of craziness is that?"

Windl accompanied him to the street and said, "I understand how you feel, being defeated in your efforts to help these people. But staying here, even with our eyes going bad on us, is better than going back. You know what Jek promised any who tried to come back."

"I do not expect to see Jek again."

Windl touched a hand to his shoulder. "I thought as much. Perhaps if I were younger I would go with you. But, for me, this is best I think. May the gods be kind to you, Manvar."

Preparations were simple. Lanara turned her government over to her council of advisors and forbade any elaborate farewell. Manvar gathered clothing, weapons, oil casks and other items from the boats that still lay below the city. He carried his Kingsword and the short sword of the Ancient. They left the next day.

They rode north and neither of them looked back until they knew the city was out of sight. In a way it was to Manvar like the beginning of the journey from the kals, begun so long ago.

The Great River was raging now, and its flood waters were swelling ever higher on the banks. The villages the kalsmen had passed before were gone now. Manvar and Lanara turned farther inland to avoid the marshy flood plain that spread widely through the lowlands.

Their shadows were long, pointing northward, as the golden light of Detra remained behind them. The air was still, without a hint of storm, and the sky was clear. As the days passed, it seemed to Manvar that here, after all, was the sweet land south that he had come to find. With Lanara beside him and the hunting good, there seemed nothing he could yet want. But day by day his sight weakened, and the racing game animals that fled before his left escaped his arrows more easily.

He taught Lanara the use of the bow, and she learned with surprising adeptness. On the day she killed her first beast they stopped for the whole day and made a celebration feast for her prowess as a hunter.

She endured the long rides and the hardships of the hunt and camping as if she had been accustomed to it all her life. Manvar acknowledged to himself that he had underestimated Lanara's ability to endure just as he had Alena's.

He did not keep track of the days. He knew that Crogan had done so on

the trip from the north, but to him now it did not seem worth the effort. Time simply flowed by, like the Great River itself. One day melted into the next, and there was no division that seemed of any significance. They hunted, ate, slept and moved on. And Manvar had at times a sense that they would thus travel forever, that time itself had ceased and they were caught up in their simple routine that was pleasant and interminable.

From the plains they made their way up over the mountains that held the river in its mighty gorges. This was where they had lost a boat in the rapids. They approached the canyon walls at one point and looked down upon the turbulent flow of the depths.

Lanara shuddered at the sight of the fierce water. "I'm glad we're up here. I would be terrified down there."

"We lost a boat and several men from other boats," said Manvar. "None of us had ever seen anything like it before."

They crossed the mountain peaks with exhausted lert who were not used to such altitude. There was a trace of snow and ice here that caused the animals to shiver with cold. Lanara looked at the frozen stuff in wonder and dismay. "This is what covers the land of the north?" she asked.

Manvar nodded. "That is it."

He had hoped that with the advance toward the north and the dimming of Detra's light his eyes might heal. But so far he could see no sign of it. The world was blurred and indistinct, and more and more, Lanara was coming into camp with the successful hunt. If it had not been for this he would have gladly stopped where they were and been content to remain in this place with Lanara for the rest of their lives.

But he would be a blind man. He was sure of that.

"Go back," he said to Lanara when they ate before sleeping time that day. "You can find your way back. I shall not go much farther. There is no use of your going with me. You have a life. The Cold Sleep is not for you."

She smiled and offered him another helping of meat, moving about awkwardly in the fur garb that was unfamiliar to her. "Whatever is for you is for me also. We agreed to that a long time ago. There is nothing more to

be said of it. But perhaps it may not be the Cold Sleep, after all. Perhaps your gods have something else planned for you—and for me. Whatever it is, we will find it together. Do not ever speak of me returning to Delphos again."

They came across the mountains and down to the plain at the foot of the glacier where the boats had been prepared. As they came in sight of the area, Manvar could see the debris of their building, the piles of branches trimmed from the trees they had cut, the chips strewn upon the ground, even the marks of sliding the logs out to the ice. It looked as if they had worked there yesterday.

In returning to this spot that had seen so much of their labor there was a sense of homecoming. He thought of all the men and women who had worked there, of those who were gone, and those who had remained in Delphos to end their time in blindness, of Crogan and Alena...

"My tent was here," he said, pointing to a place on the ground. "We may as well camp here again."

It had been Manvar and Alena here in this spot, Lanara thought. "Was she pretty—before she became sick?" she asked.

Manvar nodded. "She was very beautiful. She was a very great and strong person." He folded Lanara in his arms. "And you are my queen, as great and strong and beautiful as any woman who ever lived. I love you very much."

"That's what I really wanted to know. I'm glad you had Alena. I loved her, too."

The sleds were there just as they had left them. It looked as if the addks or some other animals had chewed some of the leather harness and fittings, but otherwise there was no change. But of the addks themselves there was no sign.

It was here that the kalsmen had first glimpsed the fiery beauty of Detra when she began to creep above the horizon. Now, she was far above it much of the time, but there was still a period of darkness, a sleeping time that was night. Manvar had no way of knowing how long it would be that Detra would show herself this far north.

There was night for a time now, however, and it frightened Lanara. She had never seen the world in darkness before. She huddled beside Manvar in the tent and listened to the distant night sounds of the river and the animals.

Manvar heard the sounds, too, and he was sure that among them the voices of addks howled. He got up to lay some fresh meat outside in the hope of attracting them. In the morning the meat was gone, and in the mud and slush there were tracks that were unmistakably those of addks. He was relieved to know they were still around. Whether they could be caught and harnessed again was another matter.

They left meat once again and took to the lerts in the morning light to see if they could follow the addk tracks to any lair or gathering place. But it was impossible for Manvar to track them very far in the dim light and with the failure of his eyes. There would have been a time when this light was as bright to him as was the daylight of Delphos. Now he squinted and strained his eyes to see the outlines of the landscape.

They returned to camp and decided to see if any of the addks would be attracted during the day. They waited three days without seeing any. But each night their meat was taken, and there were fresh tracks around the camp. Once, Manvar was sure he saw some of the animals from the door of the tent, but they moved too swiftly for him to see.

Then, on the fourth day, as Manvar had given up hope of recovering any of the animals, he saw one standing at a distance in the trees, watching the camp. He motioned to Lanara, and they sat very still, waiting for the animal to move.

At last, the addk began moving slowly across the clearing. It continued without stopping until it stood a short distance from the meat. It hesitated, then turned and moved toward Manvar. In exultation, Manvar uttered the short barking sound the drivers used to call their animals. The addk responded with an exuberant bark of its own and then laid its head against Manvar's hand.

Manvar was sure he recognized it as one of the lead animals belonging to Windl's team.

Others came the same day and more the following day until there were more than enough for two driving sleds and a pack sled. Manvar fitted them to the harness again, and they behaved as if they had never been away.

He decided to take three sleds to carry their gear because so much of the way ahead was mud and slush. It would be hard going until they reached the glacier mountain.

They freed the lerts. Manvar doubted they would make their way back to Delphos. They would probably fall prey to other animals long before they could do that, but Manvar didn't tell Lanara. She regretted their abandonment. They were favorites from her stables.

At night the surface was mostly frozen so they decided to do as much traveling as they could in darkness, resting during the day. It was hard for Lanara to grow accustomed to the darkness and Illam's faint light but she struggled with it. Manvar lighted one of the sled lanterns during the darkest hours.

The days melted into a continuous dark flow once again as they made their way across the wet plain. It seemed an endless journey before they finally reached the base of the mountain they must ascend. They stopped at last for a three day rest at the spot where the kalsmen had first eaten the alien meat. Here were the remains of their camp and a broken sled that had been demolished in a fall down the mountain.

The ascent was almost impossible. Manvar was sure the Ancients must have used an easier way, but he did not know how to find it.

It was necessary to use all three addk teams on a single sled at a time to bring them all up the steep and icy slope. Manvar and Lanara pushed the sleds from behind. The Queen of Delphos struggled beside him and Manvar knew she was doing more than her share of the work.

He watched her face and saw it redden and crack and grow lined under the assault of cold and sleet that poured upon them now. Alena, he thought, would have been as beautiful as any of the women of the palace of Delphos if she had not known the battering cold of the north.

Time blurred into endlessness once more as they fought their way up the slopes, and at last they stood upon the plateau that marked the edge of

the world of the north. In welcome, the wind shrieked and beat at them, and pellets of ice tore at their faces.

"Away from the edge," warned Manvar, "it ought to be better."

But why should he concern himself with seeking the better? This was what he had come for. Somewhere in the midst of this storm and ice was the Cold Sleep he knew was his only destiny. He was certain there was insufficient strength in him to go through the Barrier Storm and reach the kals.

He regretted Lanara's coming. He couldn't recall why he had permitted it. Only that in his selfishness he had wanted her so much that he wanted her in the Cold Sleep as well as in life.

He signaled the tired addks and moved on slowly toward the icy barren that was the land north.

He had had a feeling for some days that his eyes were healing somewhat, that his vision was improving just a little. Now, as he tried to pierce the storm it seemed as if he could see almost as of old. He knew it wasn't true, but his vision was better than it had been.

The storm did lessen as they moved inland from the edge of the plateau. In the lee of a small hill, Manvar stopped the sleds and prepared to make camp. Their food was almost gone, and Lanara was exhausted. The addks, too, had to be rested before they could continue.

With the tent erected and a small oil fire warming it, Lanara lay back on the furs and rested. Manvar lay beside her for a time, but then rose and glanced out at Illam's light, which was approaching her brightest.

"There ought to be coru near," said Manvar. "I'm going out to find one. They will be huddling in the storm and easy to kill if any are near."

Lanara protested. "We have enough for another day. Rest until tomorrow. You are exhausted."

"It may take many days to find a coru," said Manvar. "But there may be a chance on the edge of this storm. I want to try. Wait for me. Do not leave the camp under any circumstances. I will be back."

"Manvar..." She forced down her protests. He would do what he must do, and she would wait. She must not be a burden to him, even though she was so tired she felt she would be sick.

Manvar prepared one of the sleds for the hunting journey and selected the least exhausted of the addks. He carried his bow, and he carried both the Kingsword and the sword of the Ancient, as he had done almost continuously since he had left Delphos. He knew that it was a foolishness and an encumbrance to carry both of these weapons when he had no visible need of either. But the Kingsword reminded him he was a kalsman, and the sword of the Ancient spoke to him of a destiny that remained a mystery. He kept them both at his side.

Illam had slid only halfway down from her high point of the sky when Manvar glimpsed the small herd of coru near a feeding hole. As always, an early find on a hunt was a sign of good fortune to a hunter. Manvar left the sled and approached the animals on foot to within bow range. They were sluggish and docile compared with the fleet, frightened animals he had hunted in the land south. But he had been overconfident about his vision. He knew he should be seeing clearly the outlines of each animal, but there was only an irregular blur where the animals were.

He loosed an arrow and one of the shadows dropped. The others lumbered away. He had a kill.

Illam was far down when he finally had the carcass cut and loaded on the sled. His weariness made him slow, but at last he got the addks turned about and headed toward the camp. He hoped that Lanara hadn't been frightened by his leaving her alone, but there was nothing else he could have done.

He almost half dozed in sleep as he rode the sled back, the addks finding their direction with little guidance from him. After a time he became aware of a bright glow somewhere ahead of him and sounds of strange commotion.

The light was a fire, he could tell from the flickering yellow glare on the snow. Its possible, unknown source frightened him. He urged the addks to full speed.

And then the sounds became clearer. Lanara's screaming cry was one. And there was another, a roar such as he had never heard before. It burst

again and again, mocking the terrified cry of Lanara.

Manvar lashed the addks with the whip that was almost never used. He barked at them in the voice the drivers used to demand the most from the animals, and the exhausted creatures plunged and drove their way through the snow at their utmost speed.

From the last small ridge Manvar glimpsed the scene below. The tent was torn and flattened. The oil fire left to warm it had spilled open, saturating the tent hide and burning now with a flaring yellow curtain of fire. On one side of the flames Lanara crouched screaming in terror. On the other side was an animal such as Manvar had never seen before.

It was twice as high as a man when it stood on its hind legs as it was doing now, slapping at the flames with its forelegs. It was covered with dense black fur, and white claws glowed in the firelight. The head was massive like a boulder mounted on shoulders that were mountains of flesh and fur. The great mouth opened in angry roaring, exposing teeth that gleamed like the claws.

Lanara moved desperately to keep the flames between her and the beast, but the fire was dying now, and her legs tripped and refused to support her.

The beast rounded the fire and scooped her up in its great forepaws. It clutched her to its furred chest and seized her shoulder in its mouth.

The Kingsword unsheathed, Manvar leaped from the sled as the addks raced by. He plunged the blade deep in the side of the beast.

With an angry roar, the beast flung Lanara aside and turned upon Manvar. His eyes blurred the vision of the monster, and his legs trembled with exhaustion. He had the Kingsword extended in front of him and backed slowly, seeking firm footing on the ice.

The beast rushed, its trunklike forelegs beating the air. Manvar sought to enter a fatal thrust to the heart of the creature, but his eyes betrayed him and his arm was slow. The paw of the beast smashed brutally against the Kingsword and shattered the blade in two. The shock of the blow sent arrows of pain through Manvar's wrist and arm.

The beast went down on all fours and cuffed Manvar a blow that sent

him rolling. Then it turned back to Lanara, who lay unconscious near the burned remnants of the tent.

Only half conscious from the blow, Manvar struggled to his feet, trying to find the adversary in the near blackness. Then he saw the beast, head down over Lanara, rolling her over with its claws.

Manvar drew the sword of the Ancient and stumbled toward the beast. He leaped upon the great furry back and plunged the sword with all his might over the spot where he supposed the heart to be.

The beast roared and reared up, throwing Manvar to the ice. It danced crazily about the burned tent, trying to reach the sword in its back. The addks yelped wildly as if recognizing the beast was near death.

Abruptly, the huge form collapsed. Blood gushed from the mouth and choked off the feeble death growls. Then it was still.

The addks howled.

Cold such as he had never known swept over Manvar. He shook in every bone of his body and cried out against the pain of it. His side felt crushed from the beast's blow. But he crawled, clawing at the ice and drawing himself toward Lanara. She lay still, unmoving.

After an eternity he reached her side. He put his face against hers, still trembling with the cold. He could feel her breath and the living still in her, but she was icy cold, too.

He looked at the dead beast, an infinite distance away.

Then he struggled to his knees and drew Lanara forward. A crawling step at a time, he drew her toward the beast and at last laid her against the warm corpse. He folded the monstrous arms about her to keep her warm. From the tent he managed to drag another fur to cover her legs. Then he sank down beside her, clutching the beast's fur for its dying warmth.

After a long time he stirred. The trembling had stopped. The great body beneath him was stiffening and growing cold, but in a little while he would

not need it. He felt Lanara stirring, half conscious. She whimpered in her agony like a child, and he tried to comfort her as best he could.

He lay back again in the sickness that washed over him. But he was not dead. He was alive. And the sword of the Ancient, now buried in the back of the beast, was the cause of his living.

Was this not destiny? Who could have supposed that the sword, carried to the land south 40 fathers ago, would have been the means of saving the lives of Manvar the kalsman, and Lanara, Queen of Delphos?

He rested his head against the cooling belly of the beast and pondered such destiny. He was not yet ready for the Cold Sleep, nor Lanara. This is what it told him.

There was another pattern for him. He did not know what it was, but he would not try to find out any more. He would simply follow it as other men followed theirs and not try to find out the workings of the gods.

A man could not see the whole pattern. That had always been his trouble. He had tried to see it all, and a man's vision was incapable of seeing more than a little fragment of the design. He would have to be a god to see more.

He had wanted to comprehend the whole universe and understand the purposes of the gods—and make himself one with them, establishing broad destinies.

It was not given to man to do this. It was given him to construct a little corner of the pattern and if he did well the whole pattern would be good, but it was not given to him to see the whole or know where his little design fit with all the others.

The unknown Ancient had made his portion of the pattern long ago when he had sought the land south, left the sword for a sign and a tradition and returned to the north to write. But he never knew the way his pattern would fit with that of a man named Manvar, who would seek the land south 40 fathers later. How could he know the sword would pierce the breast of a woman named Alena to end her agony and the heart of a beast with no name, to save the life of a woman named Lanara?

Manvar could see that much of the pattern, his little fragment of the

whole design—and what lay beyond, he did not know. Nor did he care any more.

He was tired of trying to gain the vision of the gods and see it all. For the first time in his life he felt the curse, as Crogan had called it, was no longer upon him. He was content with the small lines and the fragments of form that he would make. The gods themselves could fit it with other fragments and make of it what they would, even as they had joined the pattern of the Ancient with the pattern of Manvar the kalsman to make something that as yet only the gods could understand.

Lanara stirred. She opened her eyes. "Manvar, I hurt," she whispered. Her eyes closed again.

He touched her with love in his hands. He would heal her, and they would live. Somewhere in this land they would live.

They would have sons and daughters, and they, too would have children who would make a world of their own somewhere between the land north and the land south. And perhaps in a far distant time they would find ways of bringing the peoples of those lands together. The sons of Jek, and the sons of Delphos—if they survived— and the sons of Turo, and the sons of all the wild peoples who were even now building their little pieces of the pattern.

He was glad he was not a god.

## *EPILOGUE*

They tell the stories yet in the great cities of Llanthor. The fifth and sixth, and even the seventh generation from Manvar, they tell the stories of Manvar the Dreamer and Lanara the Beautiful—and they remember Alena the Gentle and Brave.

And, of course, there are mingled with these tales the story of Turo the mighty nomad, for, as it came about, the story of one could not be told without the other. These two, Manvar and Turo, so different and yet so much alike, left their mark together upon Llanthor.

The stories are not always clear, having passed through so many

mouths in so many years. There are differences in the telling.

At one time it is told how Manvar and Lanara were near death from the wounds of the great beast, how they lay in their tent for days after Manvar slew the beast but had not the strength to move on. The Cold Sleep was about to claim them when Turo found them and took them back to the plain below and nourished them to health and strength.

It is also said that it was the other way around, that Manvar and Lanara, having recovered sufficiently, made their way back toward the plain and there on the edge of the plateau found Turo and his companions all but frozen to death in their inability to cope with the fierce cold of the north. It is said they guided Turo to the plain below and there nursed him and his men back to health.

Of course, it is the sons of Turo that tell it the first way, and it is the sons of Manvar that tell it the second way. And sometimes they become so heated and vexed in their arguments as to how it was that they forget they are not simply sons of Turo or sons of Manvar but are brothers to each other. For there are few in these new great cities of Llanthor that do not trace their ancestry to the loins of both Manvar and Turo.

It is enough to know, perhaps, that Manvar and Turo did join their lives, after all.

As Manvar told Crogan, he longed to meet the nomad again, not as an enemy in battle, but as a companion in a quest, for he sensed that something drove Turo to a kind of madness, even as it drove himself. And he suspected it might be the same obsession.

Turo, for his part, was haunted by the meeting with the kalsman. Though their one encounter had been with swords in a battle to the death, Turo had found something in Manvar that spoke to him in silent words of mystery and the unknown. It had spoken in the singing of their swords as they clashed under the low light of Detra that day by the canal beyond Delphos. It spoke from the eyes of the kalsman as he weighed carefully every move of Turo the nomad and planned the attack that would fell him.

It was as if Manvar were providing the hands and the feet and the body, but something else guided the sword. Turo had sorrowed that Manvar was struck down by a villain's arrow, but he sensed that if it had not been so, Turo the nomad would have lain in his own blood on the ground beside his

men.

He fled from the frightening scene that day, and out in the desert where they had left their women and children and their old men and reserve fighters, he waited for the other survivors to catch up to the camp.

They straggled in, a pitiful handful left of the fighting force Turo had camped beside Delphos. Slowly, in the months to come, he rebuilt his force, and he ranged far beyond any bounds he had known before, hunting for new cities to prey upon, hoping with a part of himself that he might find another like Manvar and find out the mysteries such as Manvar knew.

He led his men into regions north, where no men of the desert had ever come before, and they grew afraid of the forbidding land. There were no cities to raid here, no enemy to fight except their own fears of a retreating Detra and a strange cold they had never known.

They did not go far—not even far enough to find the ice that lay unchanging on the ground. But Turo knew at last he was on a wasted quest. There was only one who knew the secrets of Manvar. That was the kalsman himself.

Turo turned the band back toward Delphos.

It was a journey of many days, but the men did not mind the hardship when they were told they were returning to Delphos. They longed to avenge their slain comrades and burn every house and kill every man and woman of that city.

But when Turo said there would be no killing in Delphos he almost lost his band. He killed three who sought mutiny against him and his insane vow of peace with Delphos. Only when his challengers were defeated were his men reconciled. It was their law that such a man must be followed and obeyed.

And so Turo came again to Delphos after long days. He camped again by the canal and pitched his tents beyond the ruin the kalsmen had made of his former place. It was like a shrine. He walked over the ground where so many had died. He stood on the spot where he had fought Manvar of the north. There, he looked to the distant walls of Delphos.

He did not know if Manvar yet resided there or not.

He remembered that day, lit by the flames, how Manvar fought in his strange way, crouching low, his sword pointing up as if rising from Llanthor itself, a demon, a challenge, a destiny.

He thought of all the cities burned, and all the men killed, all the blood shed, and precious things taken; the man from the north had come to demand an accounting, he thought. His men had been slaughtered, paid with their blood, and only the miracle of a man's villainy had spared Turo from the same end.

He had no right to that miracle, and now he had to find Manvar and learn how it had come about.

He started early one day and rode up to the gates of Delphos when Detra was at her highest. He came alone and without arms and sat his white lert while the men of Delphos and the kalsmen stared at him from within.

He shouted at them. "I come in peace to seek Manvar of the north. Tell him I have come without sword to sit at a table with him."

"Manvar is not here," Volen shouted back, "and you shall not move a dozen paces from these gates without an arrow through your throat."

"You do that," said Turo, "and my men will tear your city stone by stone until there is not one atop another, and your blood and that of your women and your children will sprinkle those stones until they are as red as the desert sands. And then fire will destroy anything that remains of the city and the men and women of Delphos. Let your arrows fly!"

Volen glared at the nomad through the gates. Slowly, he sheathed his sword and waved to the archers to lower their bows. "What do you want?" he demanded again. "If you thirst for blood, you shall have all you can drink— your own!"

"I come for no man's blood," said Turo, almost with a sigh. "I have told you: I come in peace. I come seeking the one called Manvar of the north. I would speak with him, and take counsel of him. Tell him I have come."

"I have told you. He is not here. He has returned north to his homeland."

"Somehow I think you lie to me," said Turo. He shifted position and drew his left closer to the gates. "If you lie, I will return and extract the truth from your throat with my blade."

Volen began a violent reply, but Windl the swordsmith pushed from behind and held up a hand for silence. "It is no lie," said Windl. "Manvar has gone and will not return. Since you are unarmed and come in peace, dismount and enter our gates. We would hear what you desire of Manvar, if you will tell us."

Turo hesitated, then dismounted and strode toward the gate, as if wanting to taste the adventure of entering without a mission of bloodshed.

He well knew there could be blood shed—his own. But he would not let these city dwellers see his fear. "My men watch," he said. "If I do not return quickly, they will swarm these walls."

"We mean no harm," said Windl. He opened the gate and stepped aside for Turo.

The nomad entered slowly, watching the archers on the nearby walls and rooftops, and the drawn swords of the kalsmen lining the way. "You had better caution your men," he said to Volen. "One slip could bring the death of all of you."

Volen glared in fury, fingering his own sheathed sword, then signaled angrily to all who stood by to hold their weapons.

Turo was escorted to the palace where refreshments were prepared for him, the kalsmen and the Delphian advisors with whom he sat.

"My request is simple," he said at last. "I only want to know what has become of Manvar of the north."

Windl continued to speak for them all. "He was ill. His eyes weakened under the light of Detra, as is happening to us all who have come from the north. Manvar and his queen, Lanara, decided to go alone back to the north. The others of us do not believe the journey is possible. Manvar will die before he reaches the kals. But that is his wish. That is all we can tell you. He is gone."

"Could a fast rider reach him?"

"He has been gone many days," said Windl. "I do not suppose he travels fast. There is no way of knowing how far he may be."

"Who can show me the way he has gone?"

Windl's pained eyes narrowed. "Why must you find Manvar?"

"Tell me why you are here—" said Turo "—why Manvar came here. Then perhaps I can answer your question."

"He had a dream," said Windl slowly. "He had a dream that the world was bigger than the ice-bound valleys of the kals, which were all any of us knew then. We followed him to find if his dream was real."

"I, too, have a dream," said Turo, "a dream that the world is more than it seems. I dream that a man is of some use in the world—but I have not found that use. When I looked into Manvar's eyes across our swords, I believed I had found a man who knew. That is why I would find Manvar again. Not to cross blades, but to find wisdom." Turo leaned across the table and his eyes fastened intently on Windl's. "Tell me, kalsman: Is Manvar such a one?"

"He has great wisdom," said Windl slowly. "We followed him and we have no regrets. He could not know the light of Detra would blind us. He could not know the laws of the kals would not rule in the land south. These things are not his fault. He has great wisdom, but he has lost his dream. He will find now only the Cold Sleep."

"We must prevent that," said Turo with finality. "Who will lead the way for me?"

"I will," said Windl quietly. He was the only one who spoke, and he astonished himself when he did so. He sensed that here was something whose importance exceeded all they had done before. These two had to meet again: Manvar and Turo. Perhaps this could be the great thing to which Manvar's dream had pointed. Windl didn't know how this could be, but it might be so, he thought.

Windl knew his own reward would be the Cold Sleep. His strength was not enough to take him all the way north. Nor would he ever return to the warmth of Delphos. But to lead the nomads to Manvar—this seemed good. And it was enough. Of the remaining kalsmen, some, like Volen, derided

him. Others sensed, too, that there was a destiny here that needed carrying out. But none offered to go with him.

Windl advised Turo on his preparations. The nomads had gone far enough to the north to feel a little of what the cold could be like, but they had no concept of the bitter fury of storm and ice such as raged in the Barrier Storm. They didn't understand even when Windl described it to them. But they prepared according to his directions.

Six of Turo's men went with them. They rode lerts and carried packs on others, containing tents and clothing and as much provisions as practical. Windl told them how they would have to hunt as they went, but the nomads knew all about such needs.

Windl assumed Manvar had taken the same way back as the kalsmen had come, although he had no assurance. But when they came to the place where the boats had been constructed and he saw the evidence that Manvar had taken some of the abandoned sleds and supplies, he knew he was right.

He suggested they try to attract addks as Manvar had evidently done and harness some of the remaining sleds, but Turo refused. Whatever the risk, they would have to make it with the lerts. Turo knew the nomads could not manage the addk-drawn sleds any more than the kalsmen could have conducted battle from the backs of the lerts.

They traveled as swiftly as possible, stopping only for short periods of rest. They crossed the long, sloping expanse of glacier, the lerts stumbling with unsure footing on the icy surface. They paused at the camp at the foot of the slope leading to the plateau, and here again Windl saw that Manvar and Lanara had preceded them—not too long before, he judged. Perhaps they were close upon them.

It took a long number of days to fight their way towards the top, and Windl felt his strength ebbing as the cold closed about them. In the last quarter of the climb the first storm struck. Its brutal fury astonished the nomads, but they stood against it after the first shock and moved on in persistent determination. Camp was made now under the dim and frightening light of Illam.

It was a world the nomads had never dreamed of.

"You must be gods or devils to endure in such a world as this," said Turo to Windl. "No wonder you are different from men of the south."

Windl nodded weakly and smiled. He had almost forgotten how great the storm fury could be.

That night he died.

The events of the days that followed are vague and obscure. The nomads did not abandon their quest, but without Windl to guide, they had no way of knowing which way to go. He had explained and had drawn maps, but to identify the icy, white land under the feeble light of Illam—to identify this land with the marks on the map Windl had left was hopeless.

Yet, somehow the nomads and Manvar and his queen found each other on that bitter plateau. Who saved the other is not especially important. It is likely they leaned heavily on each other for survival in that desperate time.

One thing does seem sure. When they did meet— Manvar and Turo—it was like the greeting of old comrades, separated by eons of time and the vastness of wasteland. They embraced and clapped one another on the shoulder, and made their way out of the storm and down to the lower plain below the plateau.

"You are one of the gods," said Manvar in bewilderment, "or else the gods play tricks on me and make me dream I am seeing Turo the nomad."

"Neither," said Turo. "I could not sleep at night after you and I fought that day so long ago. I saw there was wisdom in the man of the north, and I have come to this hell of yours to seek that wisdom."

"What wisdom can one fool provide another?"

"It is true that all men are fools, but some less than others."

Manvar smiled faintly. "But who knows which is the lesser fool? All right, Turo the nomad, I will tell you what I have learned of a beast here on this mountain, and of a sword left me by an Ancient 40 fathers ago. Let us camp and make food together, and I will tell you what I have learned."

And that night and the next day and the next night, while they rested

and recovered from their ordeal, Manvar told Turo of the dream, the dream to find a bigger, sweeter world than the land north—and of the vanishing of that dream. He told of the wisdom he had gained from the great beast and its death from the sword of the Ancient.

Turo said, "I have been a wild man. I have torn through the world seeking something I could not name. I have wasted the world and men in a mad search—and found nothing. I think I wanted to show I was greater than the gods by destroying all they had made. That is the greatest insanity of all, isn't it, for they can always build faster than man can destroy."

Manvar said, "The Cold Sleep is a destroyer, too. But it is man's best friend. It relieves all agony, and always the old must be destroyed to allow for the new. That is the way of the gods."

"I want to be on the side of the gods, well enough," said Turo. "But now I want to build with them. I am done with destroying. Let us build a city, Manvar. Let us build a city—two cities—a dozen cities—and people them with our sons."

"I had in mind to do something of that kind," nodded Manvar.

"We will take to ourselves 100 wives, and have so many sons we cannot name them all." He laughed. "I will have sons, and you will have daughters." Then he sobered thoughtfully. "No, we will divide them evenly. My sons will mate your daughters, and your sons will have the women of my house."

Manvar laughed gently, too. "Perhaps, Turo. But remember one thing: Do not try to be a god or to understand the workings of the gods, and you will be all right. That was my mistake. Just remember that one thing, and you will succeed in the destiny the gods have set for you."

Turo remembered. For, to him, Manvar never ceased to be a man of mighty wisdom. And Manvar remembered the thoughts the gods had put in his mind while he lay against the warm belly of the beast he had slain.

They built a city near the edge of the glacier. It was not much more than a village in their time, but they peopled it with their offspring. Turo returned to the desert and brought three of his women who were strong enough to come to the cold and barren land.

Manvar had five sons and three daughters, and Lanara died, for like Alena, she was in a strange land that ate up her years of life faster than her own land.

Manvar returned briefly to Delphos and found other wives who reminded him of both Lanara and Alena, though none were as beautiful and gentle as either. He became the father of more children than he could name, even as Turo had said.

Turo brought others from the desert who understood his ways, and Manvar went back twice to the kals with strong nomads and sons of himself and nomads. He found the old threat of Jek had been long forgotten, and he was welcomed as a man of wisdom, even as Crogan had once been revered.

Kalsmen were excited about news from the south, for the expedition of Manvar and Crogan had already become legend. It was not difficult to recruit a half dozen men and their women to return with him. Nor was it difficult to persuade the Council to establish laws permitting travel between the north and the south.

Under the kinder light of Illam, Manvar's eyes recovered somewhat, but never completely healed. He was able to see partially until the end of his time, and that was enough.

Manvar and Turo came to death in the same year, and when they were gone, both the sons of the desert and the sons of the kals began to speak of their own fathers— perhaps not as gods, but at least as sons of the gods.

Legends grew. It was said that during great storms on the plains and on the deserts two men on white lerts could sometimes be seen riding furiously with the wind, brandishing their swords and laughing such great laughter that it could be heard above the sound of the storm.

At other times it was said that a strange craft could be seen sailing the Great River under storm-darkened skies with two men at the helm fighting the wild waters and crying out a battle song to the whole world.