

From Robert E. Howard's savage Hyborian Kingdom comes  
a mercenary who is as beautiful as she is deadly...

# RED SONJA

5

AGAINST THE PRINCE OF HELL

DAVID C. SMITH & RICHARD L. TIERNEY

ALBERT E. SMITH & RICHARD L. TIERNEY © 1982 D.C. U.S.



RED SONJA #5: AGAINST THE PRINCE OF HELL

An Ace Fantasy Book / published by arrangement with the Estate of Robert E. Howard

PRINTING HISTORY

Ace Original / February 1983

Third printing / July 1985

All rights reserved.

Copyright © 1983 by Glen Lord

Cover Art by Boris Vallejo

This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part,  
by mimeograph or any other means, without permission.  
For information address: The Berkley Publishing Group,  
200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016.

ISBN: 0-441-71171-5

Ace Fantasy Books are published by The Berkley Publishing Group, 200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

"Know also, O Prince, that in those selfsame days that Conan the Cimmerian did stalk the Hyborian king-doms, one of the few swords worthy to cross his was that of Red Sonja, warrior-woman out of majestic Hyrkania. Forced to flee her homeland because she spurned the advances of a king and slew him instead, she rode west across the Turanian Steppes and into the shadowed mists of legendry."

—The Nemedian Chronicles

"The thing that makes man the most devastating ani-mal that ever stuck his neck up into the sky is that he wants a stature and a destiny that is impossible for an animal; he wants an earth that is not an earth but a heaven, and the price for this kind of fantastic ambition is to make the earth an even more eager graveyard than it naturally is."

—Becker Escape from Evil

## **RED SONJA #5: AGAINST THE PRINCE OF HELL**

**David C. Smith & Richard L. Tierney**

### **Contents**

**[Prologue](#)**

**[Chapter 1](#)**

**[Chapter 2](#)**

**[Chapter 3](#)**

**[Chapter 4](#)**

**[Chapter 5](#)**

**[Chapter 6](#)**

**[Chapter 7](#)**

**[Chapter 8](#)**

**[Chapter 9](#)**

**[Chapter 10](#)**

**[Epilogue](#)**

## **PROLOGUE**

High in the southern mountains, where autumn comes on slicing winds with the dry clatter of dead leaves, rides a solitary traveler. She is a woman in armor, a tall, red-haired outlander with a sword at her hip and a blade in her riding boots. The road's dust is caked upon her brow and her bright hair is drenched with sweat—for she burns with fever.

Seldom fatal in itself, the mountain-fever, she knows, nonetheless weakens and stultifies. Too weak to find food, she could starve to death; too ill to build shelter, she could fall victim to the freezing winds or the claws and fangs of predatory beasts. It is her fourth night on the mountain road.

The stars, high in a blue-black sky, wheel in a mad pattern, folding in and blossoming out. She hears herself breathing laboriously, and she rocks in the saddle as the horse plods on. She must find some place of safety—some little cave or delve, some place protected by rock or foliage. It takes all of her strength and concentration to keep from slipping from the saddle and down into oblivion. . . . Then she sees—

Dawn in the mist? No. Lights, distant lights glimmering in the darkness at the bottom of the mountain road. A city. Somehow, she must reach it.

But an hour before dawn she falls from the saddle at last and knows she has not the strength to climb up again. She crawls instead into a patch of shrubbery beside the road and, huddled against a tree, her worn woolen cape pulled about her shoulders, she gives in to the demands of sleep. Night-mares claim her.

Who are you, O Being—neither man nor woman? You glow with light; it is painful to my eyes. Put on your mask again!

I never wanted your curse—you should have left me to bleed to death. The sword you have given me is heavier than a mountain. Shall I put this burden down? And if I do, who then am I? I am no one. No one! Red Sonja they call me—red hair, white flesh, black heart. I am a woman cursed never to love. Cursed, I am cursed . . . And always alone . . .

## Chapter 1.

"Is she still alive?" asked a deep voice.

"Aye, still alive, Lord Omeron. She's babbling, I can't make out the words. Hyrkanian, I believe, sir. She has a bad fever, I'm afraid—can't tell how long she's had it. Pulse is still strong—that's a good sign."

"That must be her mount over there, in that grass. Beautiful animal. Bring her along, you two. Carefully, now! Sponge her down with some cold water, that'll help her fever. Try to get some food into her."

"She wears strange armor, sir—nothing matches. She must be a mercenary. Zamoran boots, Kothian mail shirt, Hyrkanian sword—and she doesn't have a helmet."

"Just bring her along."

"Sir, you don't think she's with—"

"With that monster Du-jum and his black crew? Hardly, Sadhur. Hardly. Look at her.

She's a traveler, though probably a hired sword, as you say. We can use her if she gets well. Tend her carefully, now."

"A comely woman."

"Aye, aye. But handy with her blade, I think. Look at the callous-pattern on her right hand; she's wielded a sword often, I'll swear! Take her along easy, now. We'll send a man back for the horse when we reach camp. And post a double watch, too, for night's coming down."

"Du-jum won't try anything tonight, surely, not while the looting's still good in the city."

"He'll try anything he can, Sadhur, to find us and murder us. Trust to it. Easy, now, with that girl. We've got to get her fit if we can; we'll need every sword we can muster." Shortly after sundown, Sonja awoke to voices discussing death, outrage, conquest. So she yet lived.

She tried to sit up, but could not; her muscles would not respond. As she became more aware of herself, more awake, she realized how heavy she felt.

There were bootsteps nearby. She opened her eyes more fully, shuddered as she saw looming above her a huge, armored man with scowling face and tumbling dark beard. Her instinct was to reach for her sword, spring to her feet.

Sonja tried to lurch forward, groaned, and coughed.

"Are you awake?" rumbled the big man. His dark eyes studied her carefully, then he turned his face away. "She's awake, My Lord."

Another pair of boots approached, another face appeared, this one fair-skinned, moustached, handsome—handsome beneath the metal brow of a notched war-helmet, handsome despite evident lines of ache and weariness.

"Are you awake, woman?"

Sonja shook her head to clear it, took several deep breaths, as if the aftereffects of fever could be gotten rid of as easily as a hangover.

"Here. . . ."

Strong hands gripped her upper arms to help her sit. Sonja pulled herself forward weakly, settled herself into a sitting position, and shook her head again. The world swam—a world of dusk, campfires, and torchlight. She saw crowds of armed men, and beyond them horses, supplies, more men, and more dusk.

"Where . . . ?"

"Just take it easy for a moment." The handsome man turned and gestured. "Sadhur?" The huge, scowling warrior nodded and proffered his waterskin; the other took it, opened it, placed it to Sonja's bruised lips.

"Water. Take it down slowly. Not too much; you've been leaking sweat, you can't force it."

But she gulped down the cold water until the man took the skin from her. Then she sat back, and the two men helped her prop herself against a tree bole for support.

"Where . . . am I?"

"In the foothills just east of Thesrad."

"Thes-rad?"

"No, you're not in Thesrad, you're in hills just beyond it. It's down there in the valley. My name is Omeron, and Thesrad is my city-state."

"What happened? How did I—?"

"Rest easy. Do you think you can hold down some food? Yes? Sadhur, please." As the large warrior walked off, Omeron continued, "You caught the mountain fever. You're

past the worst of it now, but you're lucky you got this far. If you'd fallen in the mountains, you'd be dead by now."

Sonja tried to recollect it. Stark and blurred memories of revolving stars, nausea, wheeling birds and moonlit trees cascaded in her mind. She looked at Omeron, focused as well as she could. He had deep blue eyes, clear and strong. Sonja liked his eyes, felt she could trust them now.

"How did you happen to find me?"

"We're renegades." His voice became touched with bit-terness. "For the past week we've been fighting for the survival of Thesrad. We were forced out, so we've taken refuge in the mountains."

"Thesrad—your city-state."

"Yes. Here's your food."

Sadhur had returned with a cracked wooden bowl; he bent and handed it to Sonja. She tried to lift her hands, could not. Omeron took it, stirred the soup in the bowl with a big wooden spoon.

"It's not much. Gruel—made from what we could take when we left Thesrad, plus what game we've been able to catch. But it's nourishing." He offered her a spoonful; Sonja tasted it and swallowed.

"I—prefer to feed myself," she said, fumbling for the bowl.

"Sure you can handle it?" Omeron said, smiling.

She set the bowl in her lap and lifted spoon to mouth with shaking hand, dripping soup with every lift.

"Can you tell us who you are?" Omeron asked.

"Red Sonja." She felt stronger with the first few mouth-fuls. "Red Sonja, an Hyrkanian."

"A warrior?"

"A free sword. I've been on my own all my woman-hood."

"I see. Looking for employment?"

Sonja shrugged. "I've still got some gold, unless—" She set down her spoon, reached to her belt. Her purse still hung there.

Omeron smiled knowingly. "No one took it. But, again—you're lucky robbers didn't find you in the mountains."

She returned to her soup. In another moment, however, she was overcome with a wave of nausea and pain in her head. She dropped the bowl to the ground, spilling the gruel.

"Here, Sadhur!"

"Tarim and Erlik!" Sonja grumbled feebly. "I am well! Give me a moment, it will pass. I am . . ."

"You're still weak, Red Sonja. Don't fight it, you'll only make it worse. You'll feel stronger in the morning."

"But I—"

"Damn it, woman, lie still and take your rest!"

Feeble anger flared in her at Omeron's tone, almost the tone of a father putting an ill child to bed. But she couldn't fight back. She felt Omeron and Sadhur lift her up, carry her nearer a fire. She lay supine, breathing, feeling the heat of the fire on her face and body, hearing the low, dull conversation of the camp.

Someone threw a blanket on her, tucked it neatly under her legs, hips, shoulders and neck. A rolled-up blanket or cape was pushed under her head as a pillow.

As she dropped back into her hot slumber, the fever in her seemed to recall a farmhouse on fire, and Omeron became her father, protecting her as both he and she, a young woman, escaped together from the holocaust. Then she fell entirely to sleep, and was visited by no more dreams.

Omeron and Sadhur took their places at a fire beside the handful of officers who had escaped with them.

"What do you think?" one of them asked his lord.

"A swordswoman for hire." Omeron stared at the sleep-ing woman. "Mayhap we can recruit her."

"To fight Du-jum? Can we pay her enough to die by sorcery?"

"Perhaps she has met sorcery in her time." Omeron con-tinued to stare, measuring, judging, appreciating. A beauti-ful woman fallen into his care, a beautiful swordswoman.

"Perhaps her coming is a good omen."

Lookouts on the mountain slope called back into camp, "Thesrad is still lighted."

Dusk fell fully into night.

Omeron slapped his knees, stood up, then sat again.

"Calm yourself," Sadhur warned him. "We will take the city back."

"He is torturing my people!" Omeron groaned out loud.

Some of the men at other fires glanced at him. All were fatigued, worn, bloody, some ill. And all felt close to their lord, their general, their master, driven out with them from their city and their home.

Omeron dug his boots into the dry soil of the mountainside and stared into the campfire. How to take it back again, against sorcery?

Sorcery, aye. But could not sorcery be fought? It was not only Du-jum, the Kushite wizard, who Omeron and his men fought. That had been bloody, violent, expected.

But Du-jum, no matter his sorcery, should never have been let inside Thesrad's gates in the first place. And he never would have, save for an act of treachery by a high-placed traitor—Omeron's wife, Yarise.

Omeron's fists knotted, the shadows deepened on his face in the blazing firelight.

Yarise, his own wife, had opened the door to the sorcerer. Yarise, his wife, whom he had loved with all his heart, whom he had still considered his bride after seven years.

Yarise, strong-willed, strong-tempered, but seemingly loving and knowing and caring all at the same time.

Yarise, daughter of a dead governor of Iranistan, and also a daughter of troubled upbringing, an exile, eager for power and excitement. Why had she done it? To harm him, Ome-ron? He still could not believe it.

Nine months earlier, Du-jum had paid a visit to Thesrad, acting like a pilgrim. He had entertained at court, and Yarise had been fascinated by his magic.

Omeron had noticed the fascination, but had discounted the possibility that it went beyond the art to the man himself. He had been philosophical and, as in all that he did, lenient and fair. But leniency and fairness work only with those who have these same qualities within themselves. Yarise had taken advantage of her husband's openness to promote a closer relationship between herself and the Kushite wizard. She had, Omeron now realized bitterly, probably fallen in love with him on that date, and since then had worked secretly and guilefully for months, behind Omeron's back, to unlock the key to the gate that would allow Du-jum to accomplish his conquest of Thesrad.

But why? Why should Yarise chance playing traitor to her husband and to a city she already half ruled? Even granting her fascination, this was a great risk. And why should Du-jum, on his part, want so much to possess this one small kingdom out of the many scores of such city-states that dotted the plains, valleys, and low mountains? Was it Yarise only that he wished? Yarise, who had admitted Du-jum, with his sorcery and his soldiers, that they might rip at Thesrad and take it and conquer it?

Every man on the mountainside knew that it was Lord Omeron's wife who had left the city open for conquest. And Omeron knew that each man, despite his loyalty and love and trust in him, had blamed him also. For leadership is not only leading in battle and in prayers, in governing and finance and law. Leadership is also knowing oneself, and those around one. At this, Omeron had failed.

The troops of Thesrad might have fought off Du-jum's sorcery and troops. But they had had no defense against their lord-governor's own wife's treachery—against a woman who had stabbed their master in the back even as she pre-tended to love him. A small city was Thesrad, with its old walls and its towering palace in the center of the main square. It was one of many small fortified cities in that vast region between the Styx and the Ibars—a dot on the landscape, primarily self-sufficient, and living an uneasy life between the great western governments and the volatile eastern kingdoms.

It was old—older than its inhabitants knew. Thesrad was only its latest name, given by a Corinthian governor a hundred years ago. Before that it was known as Akasad, and before that Kor-du'um: "empty with walls." Earlier than that, history faded and legend took over. There were deep tunnels beneath the newer levels of the city, old catacombs, and idols buried deeply under earth falls and collapsed corridors.

Thesrad's modern life was a veneer over a far older and more sinister foundation.

It was, at one time, so legend claimed, the refuge of sorcerers and dark worshippers.

Aye, Thesrad held secrets in the bottom of its old belly, and Du-jum had come to carve them out.

Yarise, Mistress of Thesrad, knew this for a fact, for she had readily conspired with the sorcerer in his plan to revive the old dark forces, so that she might share in his plan to gain great power, perhaps over all the earth.

Tonight, with sections of Thesrad ablaze, with Du-jum its conquerer and the people of her city being decimated, sav-aged, roped into submission like chattel, and with her husband dead or escaped—none knew which—Yarise looked into her own eyes. She sat in her tower chamber in Thesrad's palace and, with the screams of slaughter wafting through her windows, examined herself carefully in her burnished silver mirror. She wondered casually if her eye shadow was too dark or if the oil lamps were betraying her, and decided finally to lighten it.

She stood up, examined herself in her full-length mirror and was pleased with herself. Tall, slim, but generously full-breasted, she had always been attractive to men and had always found pleasure in that power. Dark-haired, dark-eyed, full-lipped, she knew that her beauty had not dimmed one portion with the passing years. Like her temperament, her beauty was volatile, enigmatic.

She had not yet seen Dum-jum since he had, with his army, cut a swath through the city; but she knew that when the screams finally died for the night, her dark lover would come to her and they would celebrate his conquest. Then she would pleasure a master she could truly love and respect.

For Du-jum was a great sorcerer, long-practiced; and Yarise—once the daughter of a



ruler who governed a kingdom no longer in existence, once a prostitute in a Stygian brothel, once a captive in a Turanian governor's harem, and now for seven years the wife of Prince Omeron—Yarise supposed herself something of a sorceress, and had tried to teach herself magic. With some success.

She recalled that time nine months ago when, as Omeron had raised a cup of wine in toast to Du-jum's sleight-of-hand antics, she had looked into the black sorcerer's eyes, and he had looked into hers, and a promise had been made between two seekers of the transmundane.

Yarise clapped her hands. A young blond girl, the only maidservant in the chamber, hurried to her and adjusted the tiara on Yarise's head as the princess demanded.

"I am beautiful, am I not?" Yarise asked.

"Very beautiful, my lady."

"Tonight is an historic night, Endi. Do you realize that?"

"Yes, my lady."

"You are trembling."

More screams rose, frantic and distant, through the window. Endi trembled acutely.

"You fear the slaughter?" Yarise turned and looked deeply into her maidservant's eyes.

Endi said nothing; all was in her frightened gaze.

Yarise smiled tolerantly. "You have nothing to fear, child. I am your mistress. I will protect you. You are fortunate, for you will be servant and handmaiden to a new generation of mighty wizards and rulers. Doesn't that please you?"

Nervously, Endi replied, "Y-yes . . . yes, of course. . . ."

"Doesn't it, Endi?"

"Whatever I may do . . . to serve you, my lady. . . . You know that."

"Du-jum will arrive soon. Here, Endi."

"My lady?"

"Kiss me, Endi. Am I not beautiful? My kiss will protect you. Come here."

Uncertain, trembling with agitation, Endi took a step forward. Yarise placed her hands on the girl's shoulders and smiled widely. "Kiss me," she whispered. "I will protect you."

Very cautiously, Endi tilted her head back and leaned forward, closed her eyes and parted her lips slightly. Sweat had sprung out on her forehead and cheeks, shimmering.

She felt a soft push from her mistress's lips, a lingering pressure. Endi, breathing nervously, smelled the scents of Yarise's perfumes and oils. . . .

And just as the soft kiss should have ended, just as Endi began to draw her face away, Yarise suddenly dug her fingers into the girl's shoulders, pulled her roughly forward, took Endi's lower lip between her teeth and bit.

Endi coughed and screamed, threw herself back, her eyes wide open with horror.

Yarise, again smiling widely, licked her white teeth. A spot of crimson gleamed on her lower lip.

Pain pulsed in Endi's mouth. She wiped her fingers frantically upon her lips, staring first at the thin streak of blood on her hand, then at her mistress, again at her fingers. . . . She mewed softly with pain.

"A blood-kiss," Yarise purred. "I have tasted your blood, child. That is strong magic.

Now you are protected."

Endi began to weep; the pain was intense and throbbing. She wanted to run away, but

long discipline held her where she stood, a mistreated servant awaiting whatever else her mistress demanded of her.

Yarise's tone mellowed, her eyes softened. "Go, now, Endi. Clean yourself up. You are protected, now."

Endi coughed, shook her head once and ran from the chamber, choking back sobs.

Yarise returned to her mirror, studied herself in the light of the oil lamps, and with one finger began to rub the spot of blood into her lips, darkening and moistening them so that they looked very red, adding to her beauty.

Guarded by his soldiers—black-skinned mercenaries, out-casts, wastrels in armor—Du-jum stood as a dark, glistening shadow in the fiery dusk. He was tall, muscular, with burning white eyes full of hatred. He had scars on his forehead and cheeks and neck, scars remaining even from those long-ago days' when he was not a sorcerer, not a general or a conquerer, but only another man's slave, the pawn of another man's wishes and actions.

"Today the world bows to my wishes," he muttered darkly, "to my actions!"

He listened to the city's screams, and knew he was responsible for them. The screams were as a lusty woman's love-groans to him. High around his dark form, flames leaped and twisted skyward from the tops of apartments and temples, and billows of black smoke funneled upward to blot the stars. Bodies surrounded him, armored piles of them, torn and twisted: the bodies of Thesrad's last defenders. Women shrieked, children wailed. The fires glowed, and Du-jum's sullen-faced soldiers trooped through the streets.

"I am my own deed," he growled to the night. "I, Du-jum!"

He had suffered; now he would make others suffer. He had wanted; now he would make others want. He had known violence; now others would know blood, fire, and steel.

Revenge was sweet, and though long ago he had had his revenge for the scars on his back and forehead, cheeks and throat, he had not lost his taste for it.

Besides, there was power, achievement, conquest—these mattered even more. Small men dream but remind them-selves that, after all, they only dream. Great men dream and forge those dreams into their own futures.

Du-jum breathed it in, his Destiny. His armor was not bloody; he carried a sword, but it was ceremonial, decorative. His deadliness lay in things of greater strength than physical weapons; his yellow-burning eyes betrayed the sorcery that was in his very nerves and veins. His dark robe, his sword and iron breastplate all bore symbols of necromantic import, and his gleaming cranium was shaven as completely as any Stygian priest's. An ugly carved bird dangled on a golden cord about his neck, and his long-fingered right hand gripped a tall scepter carved from greenish stone. It was a serpent scepter, decorated with glyphs and cartouches, topped with a jewel-inlaid serpent's head opened in a rigid hiss, fangs showing, tongue protruding.

The bird was Du-jum's, for he was a worshipper of Urmu, the Vulture God; the scepter, he had stolen.

The rioting quieted, and as Du-jum waited, the fires began to die down. His soldiers, those not on patrol, collected about him. All bore his mark on their foreheads—a deep "v" which he had made himself with sharp, long fingernails.

Then, his waiting done, Du-jum turned and raised his arms. He stood upon the front portico of an old, long-ignored building of dark stone, in a quarter of Thesrad taken over long ago by prostitutes, pimps, thieves, and murderers. The building was once a temple, but for many years had been used only as a combination of whorehouse,

flophouse, tavern, and dive.

"The blasphemers inside have been routed and slain!" Du-jum thundered. "Now let their blood flow from their carcasses in the name of Urmu, the Vulture. Let his altars drink anew!"

His yellow eyes glared up at the temple's cornices where, ignored by the passing generations of Thesrad, huge stone vultures hunched, wings spread, overlooking the city, which, long ago, had been controlled by priests and sorcerers of the Vulture. Du-jum raised his long arms again; he clenched his fists. His soldiers quieted; the city beyond still moaned.

"Urmu!" he intoned, his voice ringing out like the sound of a brazen gong. "Urmu! Kadulu imest!"

His soldiers began to sweat, to murmur, then grew quiet once more.

"Urmu! Live again! Your power is revived! The city sheds blood for you, Urmu! I have conquered for you! The day is dark once more, Urmu!"

A wind grew from the sky, blew down. The full moon, shielded by wisps of cloud, suddenly shone free. The wind rose to a howl, making torches flicker; the soldiers' capes and armor lacings fluttered and whipped.

Du-jum's great black cloak wrapped around him, flap-ping.

"Urmu! Kidesh kidera! Rise, Vulture! Rise, wings of darkness! Behold with thy far-seeing eyes—the carpet of blood is laid before your feet! The prey of sacrifice is placed before your beak. Your magic lives again, O Urmu!"

The wind swept down; the fires flared again.

"Urmu! Show us your sign! Confirm us in our conquest! We worship you with magic and blood, we await your sign, O Urmu!"

A shriek suddenly came from within the old temple. Du-jum turned, still holding his hands high, and looked into the shadowed recesses. There were hurried footsteps, another shriek. A maniac face appeared, white, wild-eyed, and an arm holding up a knife. The madman paused for an instant in the open foyer of the temple.

"Dogs!" he screeched. "Dogs! Do you take Thesrad? Dogs!"

Then he rushed out, onto the portico, a knife upraised to stab the sorcerer.

Du-jum laughed.

The wind suddenly rose to a whistling shriek, and high above, one of the vulture statues rocked, dislodged bits of grit and loose mortar, tilted, and plummeted, straight down.

"Do-o-gss!" screamed the madman.

Du-jum laughed again as, only three paces from him, the maniac was abruptly struck down by the falling statue. A huge thud—a loud crunching and snapping—and the man was crushed instantly against the flags of the portico.

A great pool of blood and brains oozed from beneath the fallen vulture. The bird was cracked and broken, but its stone beak was painted dark red with the blood of sacrifice. Du-jum's laughter boomed. His soldiers, intoxicated with fanatical ecstasy, screamed out to the sky: "Urmu! Urmu!"

The wind died out, the moans still rose from the city, and Du-jum, howling maniacally, led his chorus of soldiers again and again and again in the same resounding chant:

"Urmu! Urmu! Urmu!" At last, it was replaced by another: "Du-jum! Du-jum! Du-jum!"

The moon was waning when he finally left the temple of Urmu and was escorted by his soldiers to the main palace.

As he entered, flourishing his great cloak, his soldiers who stood guard bowed and

saluted. Slaves scampered before him, heads low, showing him the way to Omeron's chamber.

Yarise was waiting for him there.

Du-jum entered. His guards pulled shut the door, remaining outside.

Silence, save for the whisper of the torches in the room. Yarise stood wide-eyed, proud, expectant. Du-jum tilted his head slightly to her and smiled gravely.

She reacted as though in the presence of a god: adoring, worshipful, approaching him with careful, soft steps, face tilted up, fingers dancing nervously on the air to touch him, yet poised to pull back instantly if the intensity of his glow should burn like flame.

Du-jum reached out his arms and laughed his booming, maniacal laugh.

Yarise threw herself at him, kissed him passionately, held him, stared into his burning eyes, held him again, crushing her breasts against his armor and the hideous bird on his chest, rubbing her face against his with wild exuberance.

"I am yours!" she breathed. "The city is ours, Du-jum—Ours! Ours! And I am yours!"

The screams, the cries, still came faintly through the window. Winds whistled. Soldiers tramped and marched.

"Yours, Du-jum! After this long wait!"

"A night of vengeance and shadows!" growled the dark sorcerer. "A night of blood and fire and stone vultures, and now—" He lifted Yarise easily in his mighty arms. "A night of power and conquest and ecstasy!"

Yarise returned his gloating smile as she was carried to her bed—to Omeron's bed.

## Chapter 2.

Night—and the encampment sat in it like a tiny cluster of lost lights at the floor of an immensely deep black well. Forest and the steep wall of the mountainside loomed all around. Far above, between thin clouds, stars shone down. A few voices still droned on, subdued with sleep, almost gentle. Coals dimmed at the bottoms of dying fires.

And the eyes of the sentinels, like those of alert animals in the darkness, kept watch; their ears strained for the slightest sounds. Hands hovered not far from swords.

Far, far below, silent, lay the city.

Sonja, still ill, slept as deeply and passively as she had slept in the womb. But Omeron, watching her and listening to the night, could not sleep.

The yearning for vengeance ate at him like a crawling disease, mounted in him and would not abate, like an obsession. The appearance of this ill, red-haired swordswoman, an outlander, seemed to Omeron a kind of puzzle or symbol, which he could not yet fathom. Surely it was an omen, a much-needed omen of hope. He would not ignore it or doubt it now. For how many images and puzzles and symbols had he ignored in the past nine months, stupidly and carelessly, when an open eye, a discerning ear, a thoughtful pause might have warned him of the darkly impending future?

He shook his head angrily, stood up, and stretched. He felt utterly tired, exhausted, but his brain would not let him rest. Quietly he walked to where Red Sonja lay

sleeping, and looked down at her, lost in thought. He murmured a brief prayer to the gods that her coming might mean something, that this symbol might be understood. Beyond Sonja two wounded men lay. Omeron went to them and quietly knelt, placed his hands on their foreheads, and then felt for the pulse of each. One pulse was weak; the other was nonexistent.

Mentally Omeron subtracted another life, calculated another score to be settled with Du-jum and Yarise. Ishtar and Eliel! His very wife!

"Bring her to me now, O Gods!" he muttered quietly. "Bring her, and let me throttle her slowly. Let these an-guished men tear her to pieces, let her die and be brought to life again many times, so that she may suffer the death of each of her victims! Each of my victims! Aye, my victims! For I, too, am responsible!"

Harangued by his conscience, he walked on past the wounded, coming to a sentry. The soldier saluted. Omeron whispered something briefly to him; the man did not understand.

"Go on," Omeron bade him once more. "Get some sleep. I cannot rest, I'll take your place."

The man was reluctant. "It's all right, sir. Really. . . ."

"None of us is all right. Go get some sleep. Nothing is happening tonight. Nothing will happen until—until we make it happen."

"As . . . you wish, Lord Omeron."

The soldier went off, saluting, then yawning. Omeron turned from him, stared down at the ghostly lights of Thes-rad.

Behind him, the sentry let out a gasp.

Omeron turned instantly. "What is it?"

The man nodded towards thick forest off to one side: shrubbery, undergrowth partially concealed by mountain rocks, almost wholly darkened by the night.

Omeron walked quietly to the soldier, gesturing for silence.

The man was shivering with tension. He drew out his short sword, and used it to point towards the dark forest. Omeron placed a hand on his shoulder and watched, leaning close.

"What?" he whispered.

"A noise. Something."

"Are you sure?"

Long moments of silence, darkness, the groans of sleeping men. None else in the camp was roused. Staring at the corner of darkness brought blurs to Omeron's eyes. He almost felt that he could no longer be certain he was alive, much less that he had heard—

"Listen!" A hiss from the soldier.

Omeron took a step forward. Yes, definite movement in the forest, there. Definitely a noise, a betrayal of something.

"Indra!" the sentry murmured, tension rising in his voice. "It is Du-jum!"

"No."

"It is Du-jum, My Lord! It must be!"

"No!" Omeron's hushed voice was stern.

Nearby, a second sentry overheard, watched, then came towards them. Omeron cautioned him with a sign, then moved ahead, stepping over sleeping forms.

"Something!" whispered the first sentry to the second.

Omeron paused. He drew out his sword.

The moon broke from behind a skirt of clouds, cast brilliant silver upon the campsite. Yet the light did not penetrate the thick brake. Omeron moved closer.

Again, the noise—a very faint rustling. Omeron mentally prided his soldier on keen ears.

The two sentries crossed the campsite in Omeron's wake, until the three of them stood abreast, all their eyes on the concealing foliage.

Again, the noise.

"Du-jum!" screamed the first sentry, suddenly jumping ahead.

Omeron yelled at the man, then dashed after him, eyes still on the forest. The soldier, running with his sword up, tripped over a sleeping comrade and fell to his belly.

Omeron nearly tumbled over him, but still he kept looking at the forest. Then, in answer to the commotion in camp, the brake suddenly gave forth a long writhing or rustling sound, and as Omeron watched he thought he saw two lights, like yellow coals, pass upon the darkness and then vanish with the swiftly receding sounds of disturbed movement.

Cold sweat broke out on his face and arms.

"Did you see it? Did you?" cried the first soldier.

"Mitra!" whispered the second.

Now the whole camp came to life. Sleeping men sat up, calling out. Guards from opposite ends of the site crossed over to help Lord Omeron. Their voices grew into a clamor, a din.

"We are attacked!"

"It is the sorcerer!"

"We 're discovered!"

"Out swords!"

Angrily, Omeron yelled out to his men that they were not attacked, that it was nothing: a forest animal, no sorcerous fiend. But it took several moments for him to gain their ear, and then only by climbing atop a tall rock and holding up a torch and yelling to them that exhaustion and dreams were the cause of their fears, not Du-jum. "He is waiting for us to attack him!" Omeron yelled out. "Listen to me, men! Listen! It was an animal in the forest— an animal, or a dream!"

Eventually they calmed down, listened to Omeron, began talking sense. The moon returned behind the clouds; a small wind grew, and the stars began to pale low in the east.

The soldiers returned to their posts, to their blankets, to their fires.

Omeron stepped down from the rock, eyed the sentry who had started the pandemonium. But the man, ashamed, would not look at him, and Omeron could not find the anger to chastise him.

The camp quieted, and Omeron returned to the cold ashes of his fire. He sat on a rock, dug his feet into the ground, rested his chin on his fists. Around him, those men who could not sleep whispered and talked; some laughed.

Omeron watched Red Sonja. The commotion had not roused her or, if it had, she probably had assumed, deep inside herself, that it was part of a fever dream, and had not had the strength or will to rouse herself.

He watched her, wondering again if she were a symbol or a cryptic message from the gods. And slowly, almost involuntarily, his eyes returned again to that brake at the edge of the woods, and he looked for yellow eyes.

Yellow eyes. . . .

His heartbeat rose, old fears welled up in him, screams sounded silently in him, Yarise mocked him patiently, end-lessly.

Yellow eyes.

Animal eyes, surely. Yet, was he sure they were only animal eyes? Had those twin lights in the shadowed brake really been natural forest eyes? If not, whose eyes were they, what eyes were they?

Du-jum stood at an open window of the chamber, looking out upon his city. Across the room, Yarise still slept. Dawn was far off yet. The wild aroma of the city came to him, mixed with the scent of blood and the smell of fear, rising up pungently as incense from an idol's brazier. And he was deserving of it, of this god-offering of incense of blood and violence from the burning brazier of this trod-upon city.

Du-jum . . . Du-jum . . . Do-ju-umi. . . .

A whisper of sound from the bed. Du-jum looked over, saw Yarise lying on her side, smiling at him with white teeth. Her eyes were shadowed pools in the white of her face. "Awake?" he asked her.

"I was dreaming," she murmured pleasantly.

"I, too, was dreaming, though awake."

"I was dreaming of you."

Du-jum shut the window, crossed the dim room, slid into the bed beside her.

"You are a great man," Yarise whispered to him.

Du-jum grunted.

"My greatness lies not only in what we have achieved so far, Yarise, but also in what we will achieve—what we must achieve."

"I have no fears on that score."

"I trust," Du-jum told her, in the darkness of that room, "I trust to myself above all, and to the powers I possess in me and of me."

'I trust. . . too." She stroked his long thigh, kissed him on the face.

"But Omeron is not dead."

Yarise said nothing for a moment, then she spoke. "You know that? Yet, he is dead in all other ways. Dead to me. Is he in hiding somewhere? We will find him."

"Aye. We will find him. He will come to us, and then we shall finish him."

"Are you at all afraid?" Yarise asked, arching her fine-penciled brows slightly.

"Of Omeron?"

"Of Omeron. Of what it might mean, him not dead."

"I fear nothing—nothing that I can control. And soon I will control everything." He stroked Yarise's hair, touched the delicate aquiline arch of her nose. "Lookyou. What other man on earth can do this thing?"

He held up a hand, palm open, and stroked the dark air, as though it were an animal to be coaxed. "Do you feel the darkness?" he whispered carefully. "Do you feel it? It is our darkness, Yarise. It loves us, understands us. We are part of the process of darkness, you and I. The dark does not give way to light; the light gives way to the darkness. Can you feel it, Yarise? Can you?"

She wondered suddenly, with a tinge of fear, if his attraction to the darkness was because he was a black-skinned Kushite, and because the white men of the cities and fields of the west had made him feel as dark inside as he was outside.

'Listen. Listen to the darkness," he whispered, still stroking the air of the chamber. She wondered if by some process Du-jum had made the light inside himself, the light that all men were said to possess, as dark as the darkness of this chamber.

Du-jum continued to stroke the shadowed chamber air. "Listen, Yarise. Lisssten. ..." No—she would not fear him for it; she would trust him for it. Rather than suppress the darkness within, Du-jum had allowed it to release itself and take command. Yarise would strive to do the same thing. Thus, they would be stronger and more honest than other mortals.

"Here, Yarise. Here—my power. What other man on earth can do this?"

She reached out a tentative hand, felt where his hand, barely discernable in the dimness, was held open in the air. She touched what should have been a naked palm. Something semi-solid, dry and tangible was in his palm—a cold sphere of something. Coalesced darkness—darkness made solid, by the magic which was at Du-jum's command.

Yarise began to laugh softly, out of nervousness and a kind of fear. Du-jum swept his hand away and slapped his palms together.

"Enough!" he said.

Yarise buried her head in her pillow, shivering and laugh-ing. Du-jum stroked her hair. "You are tired, my queen. Go to sleep. Dream of me. Dream of achievements. ..." Eventually, she slept, her shuddering relaxing into the quiet shallow breathing of slumber. A sorceress asleep.

And Du-jum, too, fell asleep, with the incense of darkness in his nostrils, with magic in his being, with dreams of ultimate power in his soul.

She came in the morning, after the first full light of dawn, alarming and disturbing Omeron's already worn and fatigued men.

The soldiers were busy about the camp. Some were carting off and burying the corpses of those who had died in the night, others were cooking breakfast, while still others tended to the horses. Water had been brought from a spring discovered a short distance into the woods, and so skins were being replenished and some of the troops were washing themselves free of the grime and the dried blood of battle. Weapons were being honed; the incessant scraping of whetstones against steel rasped through the camp.

Omeron had just finished a bowl of soup and turned his attention to Red Sonja, who was yet sleeping deeply. He was bending over the warrior-woman, listening to her breathing, applying cool water to her wrists, temples, and forehead. She was still hot, flushed, but her fever was nowhere near what it had been yesterday; it had broken in the night.

Sonja had not awoken, and Omeron was just removing his hand from her forehead, when one of his men said in a low, guarded tone: "My Lord. ..."

He looked up. All his men were facing toward the far edge of the encampment, where rocks and saplings and scrub fringed the forest proper.

Slowly, anticipating he knew not what, Omeron drew himself to his full height. His men whispered uneasily; a few hands fell to sword-hilts; boots shuffled. Omeron stepped ahead.

She came out of the forest slowly, cautiously, yet with a determined, almost regal air to her, steadily approaching the camp of armed warriors. Her gaze was neither defensive nor fearless, merely objective. She had keen eyes—yellow eyes, it seemed, like the eyes of a cat or some other animal. They betrayed no emotion, but seemed only to watch, focus, gaze and move on.

When they rested on Omeron a chill passed through him and he could not conquer it. But the feeling was gone in a moment, and he was left only with the impression of a



tall, strikingly beautiful young woman with strange eyes advancing into his camp. Omeron strode to meet her, and his men moved forward as one, forming a corridor down which Omeron and the woman approached one another.

The woman paused, and Omeron did also.

Silence reigned, as all eyes studied her intently, as her gaze rested upon Omeron unwaveringly.

The wind caught the woman's long black hair and fanned it out, so that it rippled, opened like a bird's wing. Tall and slim, she was dusky dark and moved with a gracefulness that was feline—or was it, rather, serpentine? She wore a simple white linen shift, held in place by brooches at the shoulders and a thin gold chain belt at her waist, and slippers that seemed to be of lizard hide. A plain ring adorned the middle finger of her right hand, a simple pendant hung at her throat.

It was, thought Omeron, ridiculous to assume that the woman had come very far in these mountains in that useless attire. Was she some refugee from Thesrad?

But he knew the people of Thesrad, even the lowest and commonest, and this woman was not one of them.

"You are the commander of this camp?" she said, regarding Omeron steadily. Her voice was as severe, as dark and calm and cool as her posture, her beauty and her eyes.

He cleared his throat, then answered. "I am. Lord Prince Omeron, of Thesrad. And who are you?"

"My name is Ilura. I have come here seeking you, Prince Omeron. I regret that it must be under these circumstances."

"These circumstances?"

She spread her arms slightly, indicating the campsite. "You have been driven from your city, have you not? By Du-jum, the wizard?"

The chill returned to Omeron's belly. He heard his men grunting nervously. "And how do you know all this, Ilura?"

"Harken, Omeron." She blinked very slowly. "I am a servitor to the serpent-goddess Sithra, whose temple is very far from here. I have been sent by my mistresses to search out Du-jum."

"Why?" demanded Omeron, suspicious.

' "Because it is the time," said Ilura cryptically. ' "Long ago he stole a sacred object from our temple, and now I have come to recover it."

"What object? Was it a weapon of magic? For I sense sorcery in you, woman!"

"It was the Rod of Ixcatl," answered Ilura calmly. ' "The serpent scepter, from which Du-jum hoped to gain more power."

Silence, again, for a long moment. Then Omeron asked: "You mean to confront Du-jum? He's a powerful sorcerer, priestess. You—you've traveled all this way, alone, from—"

"From the south, for more leagues than you would believe, Lord Omeron. But I am of the Temple of Sithra; do not question my presence or my ability. I have journeyed far in solitude, and I have come prepared to do what I must. I am— possessed of unusual powers, but be not alarmed, for if you will let me I may aid you and your men. If you choose to drive me away, however, it will be your loss, for I cannot aid you against your will."

Omeron stared at her a long time. Was this woman insane, or was she really what she said?

Sadhur, coming up beside his prince, grunted heavily and made to say something; but Omeron cut him short with a gesture and turned again to the woman.

"We have fought sorcery, Ilura, and have been defeated by it. Temporarily. My men are nervous."

"As is inevitable. Yet, will you welcome me into your camp, Lord Omeron? Please, do not be so foolish as to drive me away. I intend you no harm."

Still Omeron gave it much thought.

Ilura said to him: "There is illness in your camp. You need every life, every sword you can muster to your side. I am trained in ways to cure illness. Allow me."

Slowly, Omeron nodded. Men stepped away from her. She came towards Omeron, then paused when she reached Sonja, still asleep in her blanket. Ilura looked to right and left, as if making sure that no one would lift a sword against her, then bent to the Hyrkanian. She passed a hand over Sonja's head and chest but did not touch her.

"Fever." She spoke mildly. "The worst is over, but she will yet need three or four days to recover fully, although she is a strong woman. Watch, Lord Omeron."

Ilura placed her hand on Sonja's forehead, pressed down. Sonja's body jerked once, twice, spasmodically; then she let out a long gasp, a sigh, and settled still. Ilura removed her hand, stood up.

Boots shuffled on the earth; chains and metal jangled.

Omeron looked sharply to his men.

Said Ilura to Omeron: "You may judge for yourself in a few hours' time. I have removed the last of the disease from her, and have given her the strength to recover. Shortly she will awaken, fresh and whole. Now, let me tend to the rest of your sick and wounded likewise. You will see that I mean you no harm, Lord Omeron. We had best help one another, you and your men and I, or else Du-jum will continue to cause us all harm. Trust me."

He stared into her eyes—her strangely yellow eyes—and thought of the forest last night.

"Trust me, Lord Prince Omeron."

But his silent deliberation was interrupted by sounds from the sky. Heads craned backward, and as Omeron looked he saw a large flock of birds wheeling and flying up from the city of Thesrad—up toward the mountain, circling, wheeling, then slowly dispersing.

Turning his eyes away, Omeron looked again at Ilura. She regarded him steadily.

"They are Du-jum's, Lord Commander. Be warned. Now the sorcerer will soon learn of your location. Those birds are his servants. Long ago he learned to control the evil spirits that are reborn in wild birds."

Late after dawn, Yarise awoke. Beside her in the large bed, Du-jum slept on, tired from his late vigil and needing rest after his conquests of the day before.

Yarise's eyelids fluttered, but her sorcery-sharpened mind sensed something, so she did not yawn or stretch or sit up suddenly. Half-opening her lids, she looked out into the room from behind Du-jum's broad shoulder.

The window shutters were closed and no lamps or torches were lit, so the chamber, despite the daylight, was dim. The door to an antechamber was ajar, and a line of light seeped along its edge. In front of that line of light a tall, slim shadow wavered, rocked, and steadily edged closer.

As the tall shadow came closer, step by careful, slow and steady step, Yarise recognized it as one of the many manservants employed by the palace. She could not

recall the youth's name, but that was not important. His intention was what mattered. Yarise did not breathe. She did not move. Frozen, she lay with eyes half-open, half-seeing behind the resting bulk of the city's new lord and conqueror. She saw the faint gleam of a knife blade.

The youth came on; faint light, seeping through the boards of the window shutters, brought him into clearer relief. His footfalls were very close now, quiet, quiet with stealth, hushed as hushed breaths.

Yarise could feel, sensationally and intuitively, the hot tension from him, the keen anger, the anguish and the hate, and the maniacal need to slay, to stab, to bring blood.

Yarise calmed herself, gathering her forces. The man was hunched forward, crouching, raising his knife, his muscles shivering for a wild leap. Slowly Yarise took in a deep, silent breath. Suddenly she sat up straight in the bed, threw out an arm and stared directly into the man's eyes, transfixing him.

"Yourself!" she screamed.

For an instant the servant glared into Yarise's eyes. Then in one swift, controlled movement he brought down the dagger, dug it into his own heart, and shrieked fitfully.

Du-jum was awake in an instant; he sat up, swung his legs to the floor, leaned forward, stared.

Yarise threw her hands to his shoulders, pushed her body against his back.

"It is done, Du-jum! It is done!"

Eyes wide, arms twitching, tongue lolling, the youth listed to one side; his knees buckled and he dropped slowly to the floor, then slammed forward, driving the knife deeper into his chest.

"It is done, Du-jum!"

"Yarise?"

"An assassin!" she hissed. "But he slew himself!"

Du-jum sat, muscles rippling and tensed, staring at the fresh, twitching corpse on the floor. And he understood. Yarise, too, knew sorcery. One hand snaked up and touched one of Yarise's hands on his shoulder, and he smiled, and understood.

"Fools," murmured Yarise. "Never shall they touch us—never."

## Chapter 3.

They had come from far places, the seven of them—young sorcerers, hoping to learn, communicating with one another from their distances by a correspondence of mirrors, dreams, and vassal demon-ghosts. And they had agreed upon Thes-rad, an ancient city built on foundations of prehuman stonework and the labors of countless long lost generations. They had met with one another at a low tavern in the city. They were dressed variously, some in armor, some in the motley of the student or the minstrel, but each dark-robed and with the secret sign in their eyes and in their bearing. They had agreed upon a plan to learn what they could in ancient Thesrad and then move on. Then the hour of Du-jum had fallen upon them, and they were forced to go into

hiding from his soldiers' swords. Now, with the lifting of the dawn, they were hidden in a dirty back room of an abandoned old building. As the alley lightened outside the barred window, signaling daybreak, they discussed their situation, knowing they must decide upon a course.

Aspre, the eldest among them, an aging novice of thirty-two, was respected by the rest for his years of travel and his insights. "We must," he said, studying the way the sun-light grew on the dusty floor, "we must face Du-jum openly."

Three of the others disagreed, principally Elath, a roust-about. "We must be gone. Blood is in the streets, the killing has only begun. When night falls again, we can guard our-selves with our sorceries and leave safely. This is no place for us. We are no match for Du-jum's strength, and our sorcery will not abet us much against his four thousand swords."

' 'Yet, think," Aspre urged mellowly. ' "Think back to the story of the Duke and the two thieves. The Duke knew they were in his house, both in hiding. The one came forth and begged forgiveness, and in answer the Duke showed him lenience, fed him a meal, and gave him gold. The other, when discovered, was beheaded. It was not the want nor the deed which the Duke punished, but the attitude of the man in need."

"A fine fable," countered Elath, "but it little serves us in the face of so powerful a sorcerer as Du-jum."

"No," said Menth, the youngest, a blond Corinthian. "I agree with Aspre. We are of the Brotherhood of the Border-land, and Du-jum will respect us for that."

"He will not. He will see us as threats," said Elath.

"We will seem threats only if we give him cause to think so," Aspre countered. "If we come forth and present our-selves honestly, he will have no cause to suspect anything. We are all of one kind, Elath, whether you worship the serpent-star and I the dragon of the Moon and Du-jum, Urmu. All of a kind. He will respect that, and he will respect us. But we must go to him as to any other master of the arts: not proudly, not insolently, but willing to serve and to learn, as we would wish apprentices to come to us one day when we are masters."

They all gave this serious consideration.

"We must vote," Aspre told them all. "Men linger, Time does not. All who agree with me, slap the floor."

Six clouds of dust lifted in a dry fog.

Aspre studied Elath. "And you?"

Elath said nothing.

"We must ask you, brother, to be gone on your own path, if you do not agree with us. We must have solidarity; such is the way with our community." •

Menth looked at him. "Elath?"

Elath made a face; his thin moustache quivered, but at last he slapped his hand to the dusty floor.

"Agreed, then," Aspre said, rising up and slapping the dirt from his garments. "Let us have breakfast, then. I think we can find something out there to settle our stomachs before going to the palace."

They went off, to search throughout the old building for any wine bottles ancient enough to be refilled sorcerously, or any stale crust of bread sufficiently moon-ripened that its wheat might be induced by magic to grow into a fresh hot loaf.

Only Elath paused, waiting to speak with Aspre.

"What is it, Elath?"

The acolyte spoke in a grim tone. "I disagreed, not because I doubt the truth of your words, brother, but because I doubt the truth of Du-jum."

"In what way? He is a master."

"A master, aye. But I believe him to be insane."

"What reason can you give for believing that?"

"It is an aura I feel. It is a sense I sense."

"I have not perceived it."

Elath shrugged. "You and I may use the same tools, Aspre, but we are different men. None of the others can sense it, either. But I feel it."

Aspre nodded. "Aye, the second sight. It is a gift. What do you sense, then? Doom?"

"Perhaps. I feel that we cannot trust Du-jum." "Yet, it is true that we can ultimately trust nothing." "But Du-jum has become—unaligned. We came here searching for truths, and we followed the Path. Du-jum has come, too—and see what blood and screams he leaves in his wake. I feel he seeks only his own power." Aspre did not respond.

"He is a master, yet blood and fear follow him," Elath persisted.

"It may be his destiny. Perhaps it is necessary for his Other Soul to have done these things, for ultimate balance."

Elath shook his head sadly in disagreement. "You make excuses, Aspre. I know why you wish to petition him, for if we do not, we may be in great jeopardy. So great a talent as Du-jum's might well sense us out and smite us. Well, I have no wish to die by sorcery. But I have no mind, either, to abet a madman, one who has strayed from the Path. I have much yet to learn."

"As do we all. Du-jum may help teach us." "Aye; but teach us what?"

Aspre made a sign before him. "Enough. You have guessed my reasoning; but is it not best for us young ones to trust the masters? After all, we bind only our talents to Du-jum, not our souls."

"Du-jum may wish it otherwise." "Then, if it comes to that, we are seven against him. But I am sure he will welcome us as his pupils. It is the way of those who seek the Outside."

"Welcome us, aye; but perhaps like the starving lion welcomes orphans." "Elath. ..."

"And there is one other quantity, Aspre, which you have not considered."

"And that is?"

"Yarise, Du-jum's lover—Prince Omeron's wife. She fancies herself a witch."

"Surely she is nothing."

"She studies independently. Who can know her power? And to Du-jum, she may mean much. She may be wings for him, a lead weight for us."

"Then," said Aspre, "we must do as we have been taught to do: walk the Path guarding our front with our right, our rear with our left, and keeping our senses alert to the Falls of Fire to either side. Now let us find food, brother. Effessa."

"Effessa, brother. But still—whom may we trust, if we have been taught to trust nothing in this world, and Du-jum wishes all the things of this world?"

Aspre needed time to think. "Effessa, brother; effessa. Let us go find sustenance and speak at length again, later."

The whips carried by Du-jum's soldiers were knotted with barbs of metal.

"Get along there, dogs! Into the palace! Beg from Du-jum before he steals the life from you!"

Their swords, sharp, poked the backs and sides of the prisoners.

'Get moving, damn you! I '11 shove this point up you if you dally!'

The chains, which held the twenty captives tight together in a crowded bunch, bit into flesh, hung heavily from neck and wrist.

"Get in there! In! Get up, you! Drag that one to his feet! Stick him, get him up!"

Though they bled, they did not whimper. Though they ached and were sore from their battle in the streets, they did not groan or give evidence of their agonies. Though the fear of impending death haunted them, they did not cringe or cry out to their gods, but stoically accepted the spear prods and sword pokes that took them, step by crowded, painful step, farther into the halls of Du-jum's palace.

They were men. They had fought like men, and would die like men, even at the hands of a sorcerer. Their families were captured or had perished, their prince was gone or dead, and their last energies had been expended in hopes of vengeance. Though they were doomed, their pride still burned fiercely. It was late morning. The huge portals of the audience hall had been pulled open by guards, and now the crowded, chained men were pushed and pulled down the bloody carpet. Dried and drying blood and gore were everywhere; some bodies had not yet been removed, and these were piled in corners of the marble hall, lending an unclean stench to memories of gilt and topaz, velvet and perfumed incense. Du-jum was regal, sitting in Omeron's throne high upon a basalt dais. He was dressed in somber gray and scarlet robes, his sleeves and hems fringed with gold. Upon his forehead he wore the heavy crown of Thesrad, yet it was not as it had been when Omeron had worn it. Somehow, Du-jum had mal-shaped the ornate headpiece: stretched, bent, lopsided, it perched on his head in a mockery of its true form.

Yarise sat boldly beside him. Where Du-jum was ostentatiously and redundantly garbed, Yarise, as though to provoke indignation, was daringly underdressed, flaunting her-self as she had never dared do when Omeron sat to her right. She wore a silver crown atop her long black curls, and a silver pendant about her throat. Her breasts were bare, and they were full and ripe, the large nipples tinted with some red pigment. Her girdle was of green jade inset with diamonds, and from it hung a scanty gossamer skirt of yellow. High-strapped sandals of leather and cloth of gold rode nearly up to her knees.

She was sucking on thick, purple plums and her dark eyes laughed insolently at the prisoners brought in before her.

The resisters knew not what to expect, save that they would surely die for defending their homes. They wished only for a quick death.

Now they were herded before the throne, and some of the chains were undone so that, chained one to another, they stood in a long line facing the sorcerer. Heads high, feet braced wide, they waited silently. Some dripped blood upon the stone floor.

Du-jum leaned forward, the great bird talisman on his chest swaying heavily. Then he rose, surveyed the prisoners coldly, and called out: "These are the insurgents taken this morning?"

One of his guards answered: "Aye, Lord Du-jum."

Du-jum scowled down at the prisoners. 'My ultimatum is simple: you men will tell me what you know of Prince Omeron, or you will die.'

So saying, he clapped his hands several times, then raised them and slowly intoned a series of sonorous, barbaric words.

Suddenly all twenty of the prisoners, still chained, felt their feet leaving the floor, felt themselves lifted a few inches into the air and tilted slightly forward. Some of them

gasped, as did some of Du-jum's own soldiers. The chains between the prisoners hung suspended in long U's, from waist to waist; and when Du-jum descended the stairs of the dais, he was at the eye level of every one of them.

Long he studied those men who, hanging there, immobile and without support in the center of the audience hall, awaited their fate. From her throne, Yarise continued to suck and chew loudly on the plums, the sound absurd and cynical. Then Du-jum paused before the man at one end of the line, looked him squarely in the eyes, and asked softly: "Will you tell me what has become of Lord Omeron, or will you damn yourself and your friends to an eternity of torment?"

Carefully, so as not to reveal his terror, the man re-sponded. "I do not know what has become of My Lord." "I will not ask you again." "I do not kn—"

Quickly Du-jum raised his hand to the man's face, touched his fore and middle fingers to the man's eyes. They rested there a moment; Yarise wondered if perhaps Du-jum were reading the soldier's mind. Then, abruptly, the sorcerer dug his fingers into the man's eyes. A hellish scream burst from the soldier.

Blood spurted out; a few drops struck Du-jum's face, larger drops splashed upon his breast and upon his black bird. The victim writhed as much as he could in midair, weighed down by his chains, shrieking frantically.

Bone crunched as Du-jum dug his fingers in, in, until they were buried full length inside the man's eye sockets. When he withdrew them, more blood poured out, but the screams had ceased.

Yarise had stopped sucking plums. Contemptuously, Du-jum waved his hand through the air, flicking off the blood; red drops spattered on the floor. He took one step and faced the second man hanging in midair. The man's eyes went wide, his face grew ashen, and sweat broke out on him profusely.

But Du-jum was too crafty to torture the men consecu-tively and thereby allow each to anticipate and prepare. He turned from the second man, giving him a false and brief reprieve, slowly walked down the line of hanging prisoners, then turned arbitrarily upon the fourteenth man.

And when that man, too, would not answer, Du-jum ripped the flesh from his face in a surge of inhuman strength.

He turned back once more, paused before the seventh man, heard him gurgle with terror, then strode down the line to the nineteenth man, and inquired of him.

And one by one they died—throats torn out, eyes gouged, necks snapped. One by one. .

And when it was done, none had spoken. Some had writhed, some had screamed, some had indeed begged for mercy or prayed aloud to this or that god. But none had told Du-jum what he wished to know.

Not one had spoken of the location of Lord Omeron, the numbers of resisters with him, or the location of other of his loyal followers throughout the city and the countryside. With an angry growl, Du-jum turned on his heel and hastened from the audience chamber, leaving Yarise alone on her throne with his soldiers and twenty gouged, broken, and mutilated corpses.

They hung in midair until Du-jum slammed the portals behind him; then, with a resounding clatter of chains, they fell heavily to the floor, awkward in their death postures.

At noon the sky began to cloud over. Omeron and his men, sitting at their cooking fires, eating and drinking, came to conclusions on a plan against Du-jum.

The birds had not disappeared entirely, but still hung in a long, low line far out across the sky, between the mountains and the city. If the strange woman, Ilura, had been correct that they had been sent by Du-jum to discover Omeron's whereabouts, they surely had succeeded; just as surely they would somehow report the news to the sorcerer. This made it more imperative that they decide on their plan and act on it. "We are agreed, then," Omeron said quietly, looking at his chief officers.

'Aye!" Sadhur was first to speak up—determined, angry yet disciplined, and eager to wield his sword in the cause of vengeance.

The others all responded likewise.

Omeron stood up, hitched his thumbs in his belt, and told his chiefs: "Go gather pebbles for a lottery, each of you—enough for the men in all of your squads. I'll take ten men from each squad; no more. And if any man doesn't want to go, then don't force him."

Sadhur's brows knitted heavily. "What are you saying?

That there are cowards amongst us, My Lord?"

"Cowards? No . . . no . . . I dislike that word. These

men were trained for battle, and I doubt any of them would shirk that responsibility. But we have been through Hell recently, Sadhur, and we must respect these men for their suffering. Some, despite what Ilura has done for them, may yet feel too wounded or weak. We must have the best men in the best condition. Some may have religious feelings; they have fought in Thesrad, and may now have doubts about jeopardizing their very souls fighting a sorcerer and his army. Some of us, if not all of us, who go into Thesrad on this expedition, will die by sorcery. You and I will go, and most of our men will agree to go also—but if any man out there doesn't want to, whatever his reason, don't force him. I want his reasons respected. We're all battle-trained, we've all fought valiantly, and I want each man's opinions honored." Sadhur grunted an assent, and the others there nodded in understanding.

"Now, then," Omeron continued, "after we've gone tonight, you, Ergas, will give us two days in which to return.

Two nights, two days. If we have not returned—or if, before then, you sense something evil occurring in the city—you are to send rider to Prince Sentharon in Ribeth and petition him for reinforcements. Understood? And I will leave it to your discretion whether to follow us into Thesrad then, or wait until Prince Sentharon shows up."

"We will follow!" declared Ergas, gripping his sword pommel.

"Don't decide now. Wait until the two days are up. "•

Doubtfully, Ergas replied: "As My Lord commands. . . .

The chiefs parted, and each began to collect things from the ground or from the nearby forest edge to apportion his men. The soldiers of the camp assembled by squadron, talking among themselves, wondering.

Not one of them held back from going down into Thesrad to take up again the fight against the sorcerer who had turned the city into a Hell.

Sadhur rounded up Omeron's loose troop and began pick-ing up small flat stones.

While this process went on, Omeron walked across the camp and approached Red Sonja, who was sitting, healthy and well, on a boulder by a small fire. Her sword was out, across her knees, and she was polishing it.

She did not look up as Omeron's boots came into her field of vision. But when he



paused, looking down at her, she said evenly: "I'm going, Commander."

"Going?"

"Down into your city, when you fight this sorcerer who conquered it."

"But I haven't even offered you—"

She looked up at him then, her wild red hair tumbling back and framing her pale face, her startlingly clear eyes piercing

Omeron's. "I know what's happened to you. I've been talking to your men."

"And?"

"You saved my life. I owe you something for that, and I never leave any debt unpaid.

Besides, I'm against sorcery on principle. It's evil. My path has crossed the path of sorcery before. Once I saw it destroy an entire city such as yours, and its king—"

Sonja stopped abruptly, feeling she had said too much. Memories of a city called Suthad briefly flooded her mind, and of a king named Olin whom she could have loved deeply. Dark memories, bitter memories. . . . Omeron looked at her sharply. "Don't condemn sorcery too quickly, Sonja." "What do you mean?" She sheathed her sword and stood up. Omeron saw that she was tall; her eyes were nearly level with his own.

'It was my men and I who found you, yes, and nursed you as best we could. But your fever was finally settled and your health returned to you, not by us, but by a sorceress."

Sonja's brows knit. Her eyes swam with a question; then she turned her gaze towards the strange woman who sat at the far edge of the camp. "Her?"

"Ilura, yes."

"She's a sorceress? And she cured me?"

"Yes. And not only you, but many of my men as well—all who were ill, wounded, feverish. . . ."

Sonja drew in a deep breath. "Yet I still owe you a debt, and I intend to repay it. I'll fight with you for your city. You're leaving tonight?"

"Aye, at moonrise."

"Then I go with you. And—it looks like I owe Ilura thanks, as well."

"You do, yes." Omeron was pleased; this woman was surely as strong in temperament, in self-discipline and pride, as any of his finest soldiers.

Sonja turned from him, and crossed the camp toward Ilura. The sorceress, sensing her coming, arose and stood quietly, exhibiting no emotion and keeping her eyes levelly on the Hyrkanian. There was an attitude of careful watchfulness in her stance. Sonja, for her part, betrayed an instinctive distrust in the raising of her hand to her sword pommel, in the almost mannish stride that carried her forward.

She paused only a short distance from Ilura and, as was her habit, regarded the woman straight in the eyes. Strangely, she sensed no evil emanating from the sorceress. Something cold—something vaguely unhuman, yes—but nothing evil, nothing threatening.

"I'm told I owe you my life," Sonja said evenly.

"That is not quite true."

"You may be a sorceress, but you saved me from the mountain fever, and so I owe you my gratitude."

"You were already recovering, Hyrkanian, when I came to you. I merely speeded up

the process through a mild enchantment. You cured yourself; I was but a catalyst. And I did it not entirely out of concern for you; I wished to gain the trust of Prince Omeron."

Sonja grinned a bit. "That's honest," she said tolerantly, "but it doesn't change the fact much. You helped me, and I owe you gratitude. I mean to pay it back."

"Do not be concerned."

"Nevertheless. ..."

Sonja stopped at the sound of Omeron approaching. Ilura's eyes went to the man; Sonja pivoted slightly and gave him a nod.

' 'Certain selected men and I are going down into the city

45

tonight," Omeron told the witch, "to battle Du-jum as well as we are able."

"I gathered as much," said Ilura.

"Thank you greatly for aiding my soldiers. If there's anything I can—"

"No. Listen, O Prince, and do not distrust me. You may be forcing things too quickly by entering Thesrad this night."

"I—I appreciate your concern, Ilura, but my men hunger for vengeance. I hunger for vengeance. And if you were right when you said that Du-jum's birds had discovered our

whereabouts—"

"In one night, perhaps two, Lord Omeron, I will have worked enough strong magic to enable me to know and do more."

"We cannot wait. We must move as quickly as we can. Surely you understand that the sooner we strike back, the greater our chance of surprising Du-jum. Besides, my people die under his foot hourly; I must save every life I can."

"I understand, Prince Omeron. I do. But I sense you are being headstrong. I will do what I can to aid you, only I need a little time. If you would but wait—"

"I cannot. And, you have helped me."

From behind, in the camp, Sadhur called out: "Lots are ready to be drawn, My Lord!"

' 'Excuse me, please." Omeron bowed slightly, turned and went away.

Ilura watched him go, then shifted her gaze to Sonja and said: ' 'I hope he does not jeopardize himself and his men by this."

"I'm going with them," Sonja told her.

"Be very careful, Hyrkanian. Du-jum is an exceptionally powerful conjurer. He owns much magic."

"As I understand it," Sonja pressed her, "he owns some of your magic, as well."

"Not mine; magic of my temple," said Ilura slowly. "But, yes—a scepter. The sacred stone wand of Ixcatl."

"And is that the only reason you aid Omeron?"

Their eyes held close, minds trying to read into one another.

Ilura answered Sonja guardedly: "Every act has many motivations, Hyrkanian. But all you need to know is that Du-jum stole magic from my temple and I mean to recover it."

"And use sorcery to do so." Sonja lifted one eyebrow, pursed her lips. "Don't keep too

many secrets from these men, Ilura. They're already on edge, and warriors on edge may turn in either direction."

"I understand fully."

"Just so you do . . ." She turned to leave, then paused. "And my name is not Hyrkanian, it's Red Sonja."

Dura nodded, then said to her: "Have you eaten much?"

"Some soup, is all."

"Here—eat some of my food. It will help you maintain your strength." From a skin beside her she took forth a fresh pear and offered it to Sonja. "Eat."

It was a friendly gesture. Sonja reached out slowly to take it, and Ilura marked her moment of uncertainty.

"It is only a pear, Sonja. There is no sorcery in it."

Sonja shook her head, took the pear, bit into it. It tasted good, ripe, nourishing.

"Again, Ilura, I thank you."

The sorceress nodded. Sonja walked off, and Ilura's cold eyes followed the warrior-woman as she moved across the camp.

The birds returned to Thesrad and landed in large flocks all over the city—vultures, kites, ravens, crows and heavy-beaked carrion storks, thousands of them, all cawing and croaking, cackling and screeching and rasping. Du-jum, from a tower window of the palace, listened carefully to their mingled noises—listened, and learned.

Yarise was with him, sitting on a pillowed divan, sipping wine. She studied the strange portrait of Du-jum at the window: solid and silent as a statue, not even seeming to breathe, face and chest and hands partially lit by the late afternoon sunlight pouring through the open casement.

There was a knock, small and hesitant, at the antechamber door. Yarise called: "Enter, Endi!"

Du-jum did not break from his trance as the young slave girl came in. Her feet pattered, her shoulders were slumped, she could not muster the courage to face either Yarise or her sorcerous lover.

"Another jug of wine, Endi, when you have finished cleaning up this mess."

"Yes, Mistress." Hurriedly but carefully, so as not to drop anything and cause trouble, Endi cleared away the platters and dishes of the afternoon meal, lifted the tray and exited by the antechamber door.

Du-jum awoke from his trance. "So . . ." he breathed.

As Endi went out, she did not shut the door entirely.

Carefully she placed her tray on a side table, then peered cautiously back into the chamber through the crack she had left between the door and the jamb.

Yarise leaned forward. "You know where they are?" "There," said the sorcerer, pointing out the window. "In the mountains. Omeron is yet alive."

"Damn him! How did he survive? How did he escape?"

"That is not important. He must be destroyed—that is important." Still seemingly half in his daze, Du-jum stepped back from the window, reached around his neck, unchained the great carved bird that rested upon his breast.

Yarise watched.

Endi, nervous and sweating, swallowing tensely, watched also.

Du-jum pulled the chain clear and dropped it to the stone floor. Then he held the great dark bird out in one hand, stared at it for a moment, and uttered one word.

"Aetra'aei!"

With a hideous shriek that nearly broke the crystal goblets in the room, the bird came to life. There was an outpouring of wind, a stench, and a flapping of great wide wings that cast huge running shadows across the chamber. The bird was alive! It screeched and rasped hawkishly, circling the room several times, beating its great wings in a thunder.

Yarise, astonished, slipped from the divan and landed on her buttocks on the floor, then pulled at pillows as if to protect herself from the great claws.

"My lover—stop it!"

Endi stumbled backwards in fear and knocked into the trays, sent them crashing to the floor in a wild, echoing concussion.

And Du-jum laughed as his great bird, circling a last time, folded back its wings and streaked through the open window and flew out over the city. It gave forth another cry and unfolded its wings, circled the nearest tower several times and then, screaming, flew off toward the mountains.

With each beat of its wings, with each rushing moment in the sky, the large bird seemed to grow larger, to swell until it was huge, until its wings spread a shadow upon the fields below like the shadow of a gigantic dragon, until its malignant cry echoed down from the skies like the shriek of a titan bird of legend.

## Chapter 4.

Dusk. Those soldiers who had been selected by lot to accompany Prince Omeron on his return to Thesrad were preparing themselves for the trip—looking after their horses, adjusting their armor, cleaning their weapons at the last minute, and instructing friends who remained behind what to do for them should they not return. Sonja, off to one side, said no goodbyes and shared no messages. She had faced sorcery far more often than most warriors ever do, and had not died by it. She had no intention of forming her plans around the possibility of dying by it now. Instead, she was sharing some of the finer points of swordplay with one of Omeron's rogues. Blades out, they were standing in front of a small birch tree and using it for a target.

"Now some of the Kushites," Sonja was saying, "have only lately come to use the sword. Since they've had no real experience or long practice, they've devised their own ways of handling the weapon. It can take you by surprise, but many of their moves are very practical, and most northern swordsmen aren't aware of them. So you'll have that advantage. Watch, now. He's coming at me full-front but I sense he's going to sidestep. I must parry. Instead of your usual thrust and follow-through, do this. ..." Expertly, she lunged at the birch tree, sword out, and executed the move.

Omeron's man was startled, as much by the smooth skill of the woman as by the move itself. "I've never seen it done that way!"

"It gives you a hair's breadth of a moment to decide which way you want to come in with it," Sonja continued. "It's safer than the usual way, where you leave yourself a little open in order to complete your thrust. Try it."

He did so. "Like this?"

"Bring the elbow up a little more, that balances you better."

He tried a few more times, and bark shavings peeled from the birch.

"You've got it," Sonja said, smiling. "That's the way." Omeron, meanwhile, was standing with Sadhur and a few other of his chiefs, giving last-minute instructions in a low voice. Ilura was nowhere present in the camp, and this disgruntled Sadhur.

"I'd like to know what that witch is up to," he grumbled.

"I don't trust her."

"We have very little choice," Omeron reminded him. "And I do trust her, Sadhur. Perhaps she has only gone off into the woods to prepare some magic to aid us. Do not fear. I sense that she hates Du-jum as much as we do, despite her lack of open emotion."

"Still, she's a sorceress, and I'm not certain of her." "I'm sure Ilura's no threat—and I fear she can't help us much from here on, either. At any rate, we have no choice now. Come ahead. I want to start down the mountain as soon as the shadows are deep enough."

The sky was darkening quickly, the clouds that had hung overhead all day long now obscuring the sight of the sunset. A few of the men glanced at the dimming band of light in the west, between the clouds and the horizon, then looked down at Thesrad and noticed a swiftly moving cloud, high against the thick coverlet. Strange, they thought, and turned away. Then they looked back, and motioned to their comrades close by.

The blot grew larger. No cloud—too solid, too dark.

Some men pointed. One of them called out: "Lord Ome-ron!"

Omeron looked over at him, followed his pointing finger, and looked skyward.

Sonja did so as well; perplexed, she picked out the blot in the cloud cover, and instantly a chill rippled through her.

Her companion, next to her, dropped his sword into his sheath and placed his fists on his hips. "Strange cloud."

"No cloud," Sonja told him. "Erlík! It's sorcery! Take your blade out—it comes fast!"

Then a loud screech rang out, freezing men in mid-step, pinioning them with shock in the middle of drawing blade. Omeron went ashy.

"Mitra!"

"It's Du-jum's magic, my lord!" yelled a soldier.

The screech again—hellish, ringing out over the mountainside, and then the speeding blot, coming as fast as Sonja had warned, suddenly produced wings, and its great dark shadow hastened faster and faster up the slope and blotted out the campsite.

Men screamed and bent, ran, turned, stumbled and fell. It was upon them with the roar of a tornado, blowing men off their feet with the rush of its speed and the beat of its wings. It passed over Omeron and the men closest to the mountainside, rose high in

the air, and briefly covered the campsite with its shadow, shrieking its deafening shriek.

"Omeron! Lord Omeron!" Sadhur called, his voice nearly washed out by the sound of the thing's passage.

Sonja dropped to her knees, held out her blade, kept her eyes on the bird. It rose high up, flapped and squawked, then circled, and suddenly dropped like a stone down towards the center of the campsite.

Men broke in all directions in a mad run.

As it opened its wings to break its fall, its rush tore men off their feet again and sent them skidding over the rock, into campfires and against trees. Of the few men left standing, one drew his sword, leaned back and stared up in a mad effort to fight.

He looked up in time to see something that seemed as broad as the side of a ship hurtling at him, claws the size of a horse opening for him. Screaming, he swung his useless sword, felt himself crushed as the claws wrenched him from the earth and pulled him upward. He had no breath to scream as he was dropped from the height and dashed against the rocks of the mountainside.

"Into the forest!" Omeron howled. "Into the forest!" In a wild scramble his men hurled themselves forward, breaking for the trees where the bird could not reach them.

"Du-jum!" Omeron screamed out, waving his sword furiously at the bird as it circled high above and screeched and prepared for another dive. "Du-jum!"

"Lord Omeron!" Sadhur pulled himself to his feet, grabbed Omeron by his cape and dragged him down again to the stone. "We must run to the forest! Protect yourself!"

Sonja did not follow the others among the trees; instead, she scampered across the ruined campsite, bracing herself for the growing wind of another dive, then slammed herself against the wall of a mountain outcropping. Crouched behind a pile of boulders, she watched as the thing swooped in from over the mountainside and dived again upon the last strag-gling soldiers in the camp. Too late to make the forest, Sadhur and Omeron, hidden behind boulders on the other side of the campsite, watched helplessly.

It came down, and branches and boughs cracked and broke free, were hurled in a mad whirlwind into the air. Caught in the hurricane of its own speed, the huge bird flapped and screeched wildly, tromped on the campsite with its claws and with its great wings shattered trees, sent boulders crashing.

Sonja, cursing, threw herself farther back alongside the outcropping, in time to save herself from a pouring cascade of loosened rubble.

Again the shriek, and again the huge beat of wings, as the thing made to leap from the mountain and soar once more.

"Oh, for poisoned spears!" Sadhur howled above the din of thundering air. "Oh, for fire-arrows! Oh, for—!"

"Nothing can stop it!" Omeron shouted. "Gods, what new armaments of Hell is the sorcerer unleashing upon us!"

In that instant there came a crashing sound from the forest, and the screams of terrified men. Omeron looked, then writhed in horror. A number of his soldiers broke from the trees and, seeing the great black bird clawing and flapping in the center of the campsite, held back, stumbled and fell into one another in a trapped confusion.

The bird screeched; its great neck bunched, and its iron beak shot forth to clamp upon one of the men and swallow him up.

Behind came the crashing from the forest, and the yells of more men. More terrified faces appeared, amid the crashing of boots through brush.

Sonja's nostrils flared; her grip tightened on her sword as she sensed new peril—as the scentless, psychic stench of sorcery swept over her from the forest.

"Damn the gods!" Sadhur raged. "Damn the—Lord Omeron! Look!"

The men were taking protection as best they could, crawl-ing and scampering beneath the wind, as fresh trees broke in the forest, as yellow eyes glowed within the darkness, as roiling scaly movements betrayed themselves, then burst into full view.

"Tarim!" Sonja swore, and threw herself back against the outcropping.

It was a monstrous serpent.

"Gods!" Omeron whispered. He remembered the yellow eyes ... the crash of the forest ... the fear that had strangled his camp last night. . . what the guard had seen, and what he himself had thought he'd seen. . . .

A gigantic serpent emerged—huge, gray-scaled, flopping and curling and smashing its way forward, massive arched jaws showing a thick, pulpy, white maw and a slithering ropy tongue as thick as a man's thigh. "Mitral"

It moved ahead, into the campsite, as the last man scam-pered for safety. The bird, seeing the serpent, screamed and beat its wings, lifting from the ground. The serpent arched, lurched ahead, and hissed from open jaws, its yellow eyes flaming like torches in the dusk. Dust and stones were kicked up, the coals of the fires scattered as it lunged forward.

The great bird backed off, flapped its wings faster and faster, lifted higher into the air. And the serpent coiled, and lunged—straight upward. The bird shrieked. Omeron, Sadhur, Sonja and all the men watched fascinated, horrified, as the great serpent's jaws clamped upon the throat of the bird and held. Blood spurted. The great avian shrieked and flapped its wings, beating them with the massive fury of a riptide. As it did so it lifted higher, higher, taking the serpent with it—the serpent which coiled and uncoiled, writhed and curled itself about the bird's claws and legs as it lifted up, stroke by heavy, labored stroke.

Higher—higher—and from far above the campsite, high above the trees, came down the rushing and whistling sound of frantic, beating wings, monstrous croakings and screech-ings.

The men straggled into camp, every neck craned skyward as bird and serpent rocked unsteadily in the air and drifted over the mountain forest. Sadhur and Omeron ran to join the soldiers, and immediately Omeron took charge by calling for a head count and ordering his men to attend to their wounded comrades.

Sonja watched the slow, eery progress of monster bird and mammoth serpent until they were hidden from her view by the jutting height of the mountain outcropping. Then, ignor-ing Omeron's plea for everyone to come forward and help, she sheathed her sword and began scaling the rocky side. It was not difficult; her only danger was her own eagerness not to miss a moment of the strange battle.

The sky was darkening but the moon was clear and full in the east, and the writhing

shapes of serpent and bird flapped and rocked and wheeled unsteadily. Sonja climbed, loosening bits of rubble and rock. Sharp edges cut through her gloves, and odd projections scraped and cut her thighs and knees.

But she never lost sight of the battle. And as she attained the topmost height of the outcropping, she witnessed the end.

Far to the east, outlined blackly against the great orb of the moon, the dark bird let out a monstrous cry, beat its massive wings, and shook its legs. The serpent fell free. Sonja watched, breathless, as the writhing snake dropped through the air and fell into a far part of the forest. The bird gave forth one last screeching cry and arched its wings, threw back its head and flapped upward, then wheeled away on the high air currents, disappearing swiftly into the dark obscurity of the heavy clouds.

Sonja stood where she was, staring carefully into the forest, marking the region where the serpent had fallen. Dusk and distance can play games with even the keenest observer's sense of reckoning, as Sonja well knew; so she studied the spot and mentally made note of all peripheral landmarks, imagining herself heading down the slope and into the forest, anticipating changes in forest and terrain. Then she started down. A cooling wind blew up, fanning her hair, whispering against her face and limbs, cooling somewhat her feverish excitement.

Slipping, sliding, finding purchase for handhold after foothold, Sonja made her way down the outcropping as surely as a forest-bred cat, and as the moon climbed toward the zenith, alternately darkening and lightening with the passing of swift clouds, she hastened on into the forest, heading toward the east and northeast—and toward whatever might be waiting there, mountain-born or sky-fallen.

"Five dead," Sadhur reported angrily to Prince Omeron. "And by Mitra's teeth, we're damned lucky it wasn't a score times that!"

"Aye, lucky. And yet—" Omeron looked around at the campsite and the landscape surrounding it, the unruffled landscape where not a twig was freshly broken, not a stone out of place despite the horrendous devastation he remembered so vividly. "And yet, Sadhur, it appears that all was not quite as it seemed to us."

Sadhur shuffled his feet uneasily. "Come and look more closely at the dead, my lord." Omeron followed him over to the center of the campsite, where the soldiers had placed the bodies of the five dead men. Kneeling, he examined them closely.

"A few deep scratches, such as the claws of a hawk might make," he observed, "But surely not the sort of wounds that should have proven fatal. I think these men all died of fright."

"Sorcerous illusion," growled Sadhur.

"Aye, aye." Omeron nodded, his face pained. "And no sign of Red Sonja or Ilura?"

"None, my lord. But the men are more ready than ever to take the fight down to Du-jum."

"Perhaps we should wait 'til tomorrow."

"Tonight, my lord," urged another of Omeron's chiefs. "The wounded can be replaced with fresh men. Their anger is stoked, Lord Omeron. There will never be a hotter fire than this that burns in their breasts."

"You're right, you're right," Omeron agreed. "Let them prepare themselves. We leave as soon as every man is ready."

It was a lake—a huge, round pool sitting low in a valley of the forested hills. Sonja



stood on the bank of it, at the end of the trail she had marked out for herself. A huge oak farther up the way seemed to her the same huge oak she had seen the serpent fall near on its plunge. If that were so, the thing might have landed in the lake. And sunk to the bottom? So this was the end of her trail, and an end to the mystery that had prodded and nagged her, the mystery that still tempted her, although now the pieces of it were like the pieces of a smashed urn, with some missing.

For something about the snake and the bird—and Ilura— were the missing pieces tumbling in Sonja's mind. The serpent—the huge serpent with yellow eyes. . . .

Sonja walked down to the edge of the water and stared into its black surface, tried to penetrate its inky depths, tried to sense some message in the reflection of the moon and the stars in it. But there was no message, and no huge serpent. Suddenly she heard a noise—a breath, a halting moan, farther up the embankment.

Wary, Sonja made her way in the deepening darkness. Her boots sucked and slobbered faintly in the mud, and her sword gleamed as she cautiously drew it.

Again the moan, conveying overtones of weariness and pain—and strangely familiar in some way.

The broad moon moved behind some clouds. Sonja came to a dip in the embankment and advanced carefully, holding her sword out in her right hand while with her left pushing aside some thick brush that hampered her path. The moon broke again from the clouds and its silver light swept gloriously and clearly, fantastically, upon the wide black pond and the tall forest ringing it. Sonja stepped around the brush and, as the moonlight shone like day upon the shore, she saw a figure stretched out upon the bank. A female figure, nude, dripping wet, white with dark hair, groaning. The skin was white, pale in the night, and oddly shimmering. Ilura. . . . Sonja sucked in a breath. By day, the woman's skin had seemed a dusky tan, but here beneath the moon it gleamed with an almost phosphorescent whiteness.

Ilura moaned again and rolled to one side; her eyes flickered, then opened. Sonja's heart skipped a swollen beat as the yellow eyes—sorcerous eyes, unearthly eyes—rested upon her, flickering and dimming, wavering and glowing more brightly, like small flames caught in a wind. Sonja swallowed.

The moon hid behind clouds again as all but the last trace of yellow died from Ilura's face.

Something—a fish, a bird, a serpent—splashed far out in the dark lake. And then as Sonja nervously watched the naked woman on the shore, Ilura's voice hissed out at her: "Ssssonyaa. . . ."

A serpent's sibilance. Sonja did not move. "Sssonnya . . . Do not be afraid. I am wounded." Sweat dripped down Sonja's neck and belly, itched beneath her mail.

"Pleasse. . . I cannot hurt you. I would not." Step by step, in the mud, as the moonlight dimmed and grew, hazed and blossomed, Sonja came closer, fighting down her deep instinct to attack with her sword this unearthly being.

She stood above Ilura, uncertain, grimacing. The sorceress was panting hoarsely. Her nude body, long and slim and pale, shone like a phantasm on the raw black mud of the beach.

"I—will be well in a moment," she said. "Please, do not fear me. What I did, I did to—fight Du-jum. It was necessary—to prevent him. . . ." Sonja started. "You were—the serpent?" Ilura laughed in a gurgle. "Aye. Aye." "You're a sorceress, and you turn into a serpent." "It is—an illusion, in some ways. And yet. . . ." Ilura ceased speaking. She began to breathe deeply, and after several breaths seemed revived

enough so that she could sit up on one hip, lean on one arm, and look Sonja in the eyes. Sonja saw where deep bruises showed on Ilura's legs and thighs, arms and breasts. Were they from the bird's claws? "Do not betray my secret, Sonja." There was a note of pleading in her voice. "However much you may hate sorcery, hate Du-jum. Hate Du-jum, and not me." "And why should I not hate you?" "You have said you owe me gratitude. And Omeron—him I have aided also. Is all sorcery evil?" Sonja did not answer.

"Are all swords evil, Red Sonja of Hyrkania? Or is it not rather that the evil is in the one who wields the sword?"

Still Sonja did not reply; she hesitated to compromise. Ilura made a small throaty sound—wholly human, now, with no serpent's hidden sibilance in it.

"Keep my secret, Sonja," she urged, "and I will tell you the whole secret." "The whole secret?"

"My serpent shape is but a part of my sorcery. I have been invested with strong powers by those who sent me, and there is a heritage of magic in me which I must discharge by evening up an old score. My temple has sent me to confront Du-jum, and to bring vengeance upon him, however I may. I am a shadow from the past, a shadow that falls upon Du-jum's soul, and I know he feels it even now."

Sonja found herself leaning closer. "Why, Ilura? Why?" "Du-jum . . . Du-jum, Red Sonja, is my father."

The moon was beginning its descent by the time Sonja left Ilura to rest and meditate on the shore of the dark lake under the moon.

Sonja hurried through the forest, angry at her own fears, confused, but even more firmly resolved upon her course of action. Now she knew the entire story, at least Ilura's side of it.

"My father was a mortal," Ilura had told her, "but my mother was one of the unmortal serpent women. I was born with the sign of the Descending Star on my palm, and raised by the serpent women in their hidden temples far to the south. My duty is to find Du-jum and slay him if I can. He is a powerful mage, and a man of powerful attraction, or so I have heard. He seduced my mother, one of the guardians of the temple, by magical means, in order to steal for himself the serpent scepter of Ixcatl, which he felt he needed to increase his powers. I am the byproduct of his plottings—the daughter he has never seen.

"The Elders of Set and Apop cursed the scepter when they discovered that it was missing, so that it has done Du-jum little good. But it is still in his keeping. I was raised, and taught what I must do. It is an initiation, and an appropriate fulfillment. Out of Du-jum's own crime must come the vengeance that shall consume him! I will not return without the scepter; sooner would I die."

Sonja reached the campsite just as the men were preparing to go down into the city. Omeron saw her emerge from the forest and warned his sentries to lower their bows.

"We almost shot at you," he chided her. "We thought you were dead, slain by the bird."

"I ran after it," Sonja told him. "I saw it drop the serpent and tried to find it."

"The serpent?"

"Aye."

Sadhur asked, gruffly: "And did you find it?"

Sonja eyed him carefully. "I found a lake, perhaps half a

league eastward. A large pond. No sign of the serpent, though, so I suppose it fell into

the lake."

Silence met her words.

"I didn't find the serpent," she repeated.

Omeron heaved a sigh. "Are you still planning on going to the city with us?"

"Aye."

"Then come along. There's no time to rest; we've got to get down to the valley before daybreak."

Sonja nodded curtly. "Let's be off. I'm as ready as any of you to fight Du-jum."

But suspicious, uncertain eyes followed her as she mounted her horse and followed Omeron, Sadhur, and the others down over the edge of the campsite, into the night, down toward the city in the valley.

A fete, Yarise had decided—a festival. Yes, a huge banquet, with dancers and entertainers, was in order to show Du-jum's and her own good will to the surviving elders and aristocrats of Thesrad. It would be a banquet such as she and Omeron used to have—a night-long entertainment, full scale. Only this time there would be subtle hints—perhaps a torture of dissidents, artistically arranged, and a small sorcerous display—to warn the wise and wealthy of Thesrad to accept the new throne and fight no more for the lost ideals of old. She would show these people, who had never loved her, who had always regarded her as an outlander, that she was now a power to be reckoned with!

Decided upon it, she could not wait until morning to announce her plan to Du-jum. Hastily she left the garden where she had been wandering and musing all night, hurried inside, and made for the antechamber off her sleeping chambers, where Du-jum had retired after his sorcerous invocation and dispatching of the bird. She left the garden, and just at that moment her heartbeat quickened, for she glimpsed a great shadow gliding over the trees and flowers. Not a moon cloud, but the bird returning, growing smaller, dwindling as it flew toward the window of the small antechamber where Du-jum rested.

Endi had decided to leave.

The time had come for her to trust the gods and, whether it was reckless or not, perilous or not, to try to get out of Thesrad and away from the horrors of the palace and the terrible dangers of the city. Du-jum and Yarise were both insane, and both were too strong for her to fight in any way. After seeing Du-jum's awful conjuring with the bird, she had run for her life through the palace and hidden in an alcove in the kitchens. There she had calmed down and come to a decision. She must escape. While Du-jum was resting from his sorcerous exertions in the anteroom of the bedchamber, and while Princess Yarise was pacing and plotting in the garden outside, little Endi returned to the servants' quarters without rousing anyone. Slowly and carefully in the darkness she collected her few belongings and slipped them under her bed, then lay for a long while, feigning sleep and gathering courage. When low moonlight slipped through the cracks in the shutters of the western windows, she began to cough and squirm on her cot, pretending illness. She didn't actually want to wake up any-one else in the room, but preferred to take that chance by coughing and groaning rather than have someone discover her leaving in the middle of the night suspiciously. After a few moments of feigned illness, Endi slid off the cot and staggered toward the doorway at the end of the room, concealing her small bundle in her dress. One shadow sat up near the door and asked her: "What is it?"

Frozen for a moment, Endi caught herself and whispered hoarsely: "I—don't know. My stomach hurts and I feel dizzy."

"All right—fine. Go on out."

"I'm sorry, matron. I'm going outside for some fresh air, and in case I throw up."

"Fine. Just fine." The matron rolled over disinterestedly and went back to sleep.

Endi went out the door and, forcing herself to walk slowly, came to the end of the hall and went down the stairs. She was afraid to chance taking a back way because she knew Du-jum's soldiers were there; she could hear them cursing, gambling, and drinking. The sight of one defenseless slave girl in the middle of the night, making her way through a remote corner of the palace, might be too much for them to resist. So, like it or not, Endi walked along the main hall, holding her stomach and keeping her head bent, taking the route that would lead her directly past Du-jum's and Yarise's sleeping chamber and, from there, down one of the major staircases to the entry foyer. She made it past the sleeping chamber, but at the top of the staircase she paused at the sound of voices. Carefully she crept to the banister and looked over to see what commotion could be going on this early in the morning.

"I've told you before," came the sound of a surly guard's voice, "that you can't see Lord Du-jum until his morning audience session."

"And I have already told you," countered another voice, "that we are just arrived in Thesrad and are safer here than in the streets. Lord Du-jum will want to see us, and so you will do well to let us wait for the duration of the night." "You've been in the city all night long?"

"No. At dawn we will have been here all night long. We are not bothering you; we wait only for an opportunity to see Lord Du-jum as soon as possible."

Peering over the banister, holding herself up on her toes precariously, Endi sought sight of the masters of these voices. The guard she could imagine, but the other voice.

...

Footsteps—and then she saw a tall man in a black robe pace the foyer. He was joined by some others, and all held converse in low voices. They looked like sorcerers. Gods! How could she get out of the palace if sorcerers were down there? Had the whole world gone insane?

Suddenly she heard footfalls behind her; she turned, frightened, and saw Mistress Yarise coming down the hall-way. Yarise saw her in the same moment, passed by the bedchamber and came straight towards the servant girl, asking as she approached: "Endi, what are you doing down here this time of night?"

"Mistress, forgive me! I felt ill so I wanted some air, but I didn't want to take the back way because of the soldiers." She was sweating; her hands were shivering; she found it hard to look Yarise in the eyes.

"Ill? Ill? We can't have you ill." A note of irritation sounded in Yarise's voice.

"I—I felt cramps and a fever. I've been shivering. I hope it's not—"

"Go to the kitchen. Have the servants prepare something for you. Broth, perhaps."

She looked more closely at Endi. "You're not afraid, are you?"

"Just a little. ..."

"Why? Why are you? What are those voices down there?"

"Mistress, there are strange men speaking with the guards. I saw them, they're—"

And then, in the quiet of the night, Hell erupted with a monstrous crash and a roar as of a tidal wave bursting through the palace. A tremendous avian screech blasted from

Yarise's sleeping chamber, and Du-jum's voice carried to the corridor in a sudden, harsh bellow.

"Gods!" Yarise turned from Endi, stared, then raced down the hall.

Frightened, looking in all directions, not knowing what to do, Endi hesitated a moment, then followed.

Yarise pushed open the door of the sleeping chamber and yelled to the guards who waited just inside, but they stumbled out into the main hall, their eyes round and white with terror. Endi ran past them, although one tried to grab her sleeve and hold her back.

Du-jum was howling maniacally—not in fear, now, but in a booming voice that rose and fell in a chanted cadence. Endi rushed in and stopped on the threshold of the chamber. It was the bird!

It circled and wheeled within the room, cawing and shriek-ing, swooping as it tried again and again to attack Du-jum, to rake the sorcerer with its claws, to snap at his eyes or face with its black beak.

And Du-jum, crouched in the center of the floor, had his arms raised and was waving them rapidly, conjuring to save himself. A faint nimbus—the glow of his waning strength—played about him, and from moment to moment the tips of the bird's wings or claws slashed through the guardian nimbus, and then sparks shot and flew, blue and yellow and red. Du-jum howled frantically and waved his arms more quickly, trying with incantations to ward off the terrible strength of his own power brought back against him.

Endi, more frightened than she had ever been before, stood frozen on the threshold, unable to move, unable to breathe. She could not know that the evil bird, repelled by sorcery and unable to act upon the sorcerous will Du-jum had invested it with, had returned to the sorcerer to discharge its hellish energy. The necromancy had rebounded; the curse was re-turning upon the curser.

And Yarise, who had made her way in, was cowering at a far wall of the room, shrieking her own useless incantations, waving her arms in a feeble endeavor to restrain the devil bird. Suddenly, desperately, she reached above her and took from its wall sconce a burning torch, advanced and hurled it into the path of the circling bird. The bird shrieked as the lurid flame swept into its path; one movement and it had the torch in its beak, then with a toss of its head it had dashed it to the floor. Sparks flew. Yarise yelled and retreated to the wall. From the hallway came the heavy sounds of many footsteps, and the clangor of drawn steel. Guards. And others.

"Stand back!"

Endi saw a tall, dark-cloaked man with yellow-glowing eyes leading six others like him into the antechamber.

"Stand back, you guards! You cannot save him! Blades cannot touch it! Stand back!"

"But—what can you do?" demanded a guardsman. "I am Aspre, a sorcerer, and these are my followers. All of us are marked with the Downward Star. Do not hinder us.

Stand back—quickly!"

The guards, astonished and frightened, crowded back from the room into the hallway again, pushing Endi out of the way. She crouched in a corner, numb, playing with her fingers, staring at the shadows, feeling the damp sweat springing out upon her flesh.

Aspre led his followers carefully into the chamber. "Sur-round its path!" he called out.

"Surround its path! Take the seven points and incant the hojus!"

The seven spread out, ignored by the bird. Staying just outside the wide circle

described by its sweeping wings, they raised their arms horizontally, fingertips nearly touching. Aspre lifted his hands. "Emburrus-uto-toa!" The bird shrieked—for the first time, apparently, noticing the sorcerers.

A blue glow surrounded Aspre's hands. "Esfu! Esfu tu-ota!"

The six with him repeated the command, lifting then-hands. Blue glows filled their palms and limned their arms.

The bird shrieked again, but its wings beat more slowly; its claws and beak ceased to lash out. And then, as the same blue glow began to coat its form, the bird slowly became a sap-phire blur, a hazy blot of luminous mist, flying in circles around the room, weakening.

Weakening . . . Dropping toward the center of its orbit, toward Du-jum.

Du-jum's own glow at last died out as his mighty strength was drained to the dregs. He crumpled forward, his forehead striking the stone, and lay still, beads of sweat growing from his face and arms.

## Chapter 5.

Just before dawn, Omeron and his band reached the base of the foothills and entered into the grassy plain that extended, an expanse of tall waving grass, to Thesrad. The walls of the city stood distinct and clear before them, less than a league distant. In the first glimmerings of the coming dawn, turrets and bronze domes began to glow, and scattered flocks of Du-jum's birds wheeled above the towers and battlements. "What now?" Sonja asked aloud, looking at Omeron and Sadhur. She was beginning to feel irritable—from last evening's battle with the bird, from long hours without sleep, and now this obvious mistake on Omeron's part, trying to cross the fieldland in plain bright daylight.

Sadhur scowled at her, obviously indignant that she should dare hint by her tone that she doubted Lord Omeron's judgment. But he said nothing.

And neither did Omeron say anything, for he was not listening to Sonja, but peering up and down the forest front at the base of the foothills. Finally, coming to some decision, he kned his horse ahead and walked the animal to a clump of trees some distance away. Sadhur, Sonja, and his men fell into line behind him.

Omeron dismounted at the trees and walked for a moment, again peering about as if deliberating or trying to judge. Then, deliberately, he strode ahead and paused before a huge rock overgrown with moss, foliage, brush. He reached for his sword, then seemed to think better of it and proceeded to pick up a heavy limb at his feet. Without turning around, he said: "Sadhur, gather some of the huskiest men. We'll need them."

Sadhur nodded to a half-dozen soldiers. They dismounted and followed him to Lord Omeron's side. Sonja watched, at first perplexed; gradually, however, it dawned on her that this strange action could possibly make sense.

Sadhur and the six found themselves some strong limbs and, lining up alongside Lord Omeron, shoved the ends of them beneath the rock and pried, heavily, to lift it up. It took several tries before the eight of them, swearing and grunting, dislodged the stone.

When they finally moved it, there was a strong grating sound, somewhat hollow—not the noise of a rock being uprooted from solid ground.

Omeron stood back, gasped a few breaths of air, then told the men to work at the stone a few moments more. With several more grunts and heaves it was done: the rock was levered aside to reveal a hollow pit beneath.

"A tunnel!" Sonja said.

Omeron looked up at her and grinned. "Aye, Sonja—and as old as Thesrad, at least. I learned of it from my father when I took the throne. Its original purpose was probably to allow escape from the city, should it be besieged. It was used often enough in ancient times for that purpose—every city in the valley owns such tunnels, I believe—but it was forgotten during long years of comparative peace. If the old maps are correct, this tunnel will lead into the sewers under the north end of the city."

Sonja smiled in silent approval. Omeron was a leader, and every good leader, she realized, is never defeated; there is always one more trick in his arsenal, one advantage saved for the last moment and, of course, one more advantage after that. Decent leaders, able to rebound in a crisis, Sonja knew, were as rare as fat hares in the deeps of an Asgardian winter. Surely the Lord of Thesrad would prove to be one of those lucky chances of history: a truly good, intelligent, strong man occupying a throne of leadership.

In pairs the soldiers dismounted and dropped down into the tunnel. When all but a dozen had entered, Omeron held them back. "I'll need you to stand guard over the horses," he explained.

"Lord Omeron, we want to fight." "I know that, I respect it—and you 'll get your chance, I 'm sure. But for now—"

"Don't argue with Lord Omeron," Sadhur growled at them.

"Easy for you to say," one of them answered bitingly. "You're going to get your chance against that sorcerous swine."

Sadhur sneered but did not retort; he knew where their hearts stood, and he could not blame them.

Omeron nodded to the men. "I'll tell you the same thing I told you before."

"Aye—we'll wait," said one of the younger men, " 'til tomorrow night. If nothing happens by then ..." "Return," Omeron told them. "We'll follow," the other answered.

"As you wish," said Omeron, shaking his head, as if feeling his own words to be against his better judgment. "I will not order you against your consciences—not this time. Farewell."

"We will see you enthroned again, Sire," the young officer proclaimed. He reached out his hand.

Omeron took it, looked the man in the eyes and smiled slightly. "Ah. ..." And then he let him go, turned to Sadhur. "Go ahead. Sonja will follow, then I."

Sadhur dropped down. Sonja followed him to the edge of the hole and jumped down also. "—And humility," she thought. "The final quality of a good leader.

Humility—trust in the gods. I could never be a leader."

Omeron dropped beside her and called up: "Move the stone to where it was, then lead the horses elsewhere. You understand?"

The young soldier nodded and slapped his chest. "Power and victory to you, Sire."

"Guard the horses, and give us until tomorrow night."

Omeron said nothing to Sadhur, Sonja, or the others, as he looked up at the faint light lent by the shielding forest, at the edge of grass and turf, at the hints of boots and hands—he watched as, bit by bit, daylight was taken away, as the growing edge of shadow climbed down the sides of the hollow and filled up the pit, covering him over. Then, when the darkness was complete: "Any of you with torches, light them now. And begin the march. We've nearly a league to go, and I want to reach the end of this before we break for a meal. And maintain silence—this many boots could cause sounds that will carry into the city."

The underground march began, Sonja following Omeron, watching him, his strong back, his long fair hair, as it wa-vered in and out of sight in the flowing, glaring torchlight.

Perhaps, she thought, perhaps this is the last trick in Prince Omeron's basket.

Du-jum awoke to sunlight filling his chamber, to silence, and the feel of many presences. He awoke full of strength and fully remembering what had transpired—sat straight up, swung his legs to the floor and sat on the edge of his bed, and stared at the seven in dark robes who lined the opposite wall, patient and unmoving.

"I thank you, brothers of the Craft." Each of them bowed, all in unison. "Your intervention was timely. Your prowess supplemented mine."

"We seven together but matched you, Lord Du-jum," said Aspre. "And then only in your last weak moment." "What is your name?" "Aspre, Lord Du-jum." "I have not heard it."

"I am young in the Art, as are we all. We came here to Thesrad to seek your guidance and counsel."

"And you shall have it, every one of you, for what you have done this day."

He turned then to Yarise, who stood in a corner of the room, hands knotted, eyes full of doubt and fear. He did not speak, only rested his eyes upon her. When the strength of those eyes became too much for her to stand, Yarise blurted out: "I did what I could, My Lord!"

Stonily, in a voice full of hard understanding: "I know that."

"I did what I could! I did! The monster was too powerful! You are too powerful!"

Du-jum turned his eyes from her to the seven. "You must leave me now. I would rest a moment more; then I must go to the Temple of Urmu and offer sacrifice. Please go with the guards—they will situate you in rooms. Consider yourselves my guests, my students, and my acolytes."

All bowed as one, their robes slithering and rustling. Then they departed in a silent file, leaving Yarise behind, the noise of her sobs and wails hollow and poignant in the room. "Leave me, please, Yarise. I would rest." But she cried out and ran to him, threw herself into the bed and curled up beside him, kissed him and fingered his flesh, held him—so aware was she that he had almost been taken from her.

"I love you, I love you, I do not want to lose you." "Quiet, Yarise, quiet. All is now well. We know our enemies and we shall conquer. Rest, my Yarise. I shall rest and you shall rest. Quiet. All is well, my beloved."

Within him the coals of an old fire blazed anew, and he did not truly rest, although Yarise fell into a fitful, groaning slumber beside him.

When their torches were nearly burned out, they came to the end of the tunnel.

Omeron was in the lead, having moved forward, with Sadhur, during the morning's progression. Now he faced a large iron door, grilled and attached with iron hasps to the stone wall of the tunnel.



"Put out all the torches," he called, back, "save one. Bring that one forward."  
The soldier nearest to him leaned forward, playing his torchlight upon the door.

Omeron said: "Sadhur. ..."

"I am here, Lord."

Omeron inspected the door closely, took the torch into his own hands, and sought to peer through the openings in the grille.

"As I thought," he muttered. "It lets into one of the main sewer tunnels of the city. If we can get it open we'll have air, and we can determine exactly where we are."

Taking that comment as a suggestion, Sadhur moved ahead and examined the grille with his large fingers; he felt his way around it, touching the hasps and testing their strength. They were old and very corroded, having rusted until the door had settled right into the stone blocks.

With a grunt Sadhur gripped the bars and pulled, pushed, twisted. Omeron offered to help but his giant officer ignored him; the men began to crowd forward, listening intently as Sadhur worked at the door.

It suddenly broke free with a grating series of rasps. Chunks of rust and rotten metal pattered on the floor of the tunnel.

Still gripping the bars of the grille, Sadhur stepped forward carrying the heavy door, crouched, then jumped the short space into the sewer. He landed on a low brick embankment, stepped aside, and set the gridded door down, leaning it against the wall. It was not wholly dark in that sewer; there was a gray twilight there, a miasmatic mist illumined by the regularly spaced grille-covered openings in the ceiling that let light in from the street. And there was the fetor, the old decaying powerful stench of sewage and waste and rot.

One by one the men dropped onto the embankment; as their eyes became used to the twilight of the place they began to discern thin walkways over the sewer proper, and small islands of brick and stone that dotted the channel. They gathered together, swearing at the stench in the air, growling when lizards or serpents or huge rats hastened by them or plopped into the murky water.

Omeron stood on the embankment by the wall, watching as his men collected in the sewer. He stared up at a nearby grillwork opening into the street.

"We'll wait the few hours until night," he said, "then move into the city. But we're going to have to look for other exits. We can't climb right into the middle of the main street; we'll have to check to find ways of getting into alleys."

Sonja was one of the last to exit the tunnel. She said nothing, merely noted the scene and looked about. This part of the operation was in Omeron's hands. The stinking air seemed to her to be no better than the close, smoky air of the tunnel. But she had been in sewers before, and the unsettling dimness, the stench, the clamminess and the dreamlike mystery of it all made her uneasy. It had been one thing to fight a giant bird on a windy open mountainside; she was familiar with battle, and had felt no pang of doubt or fear during the ride down the forested slope; but the journey in the tunnel had begun to work on her nerves. And now, hidden like a trapped rat with other trapped rats, in the stinking half-world of the sewer, she fully felt the weight of their perilous position. It was Du-jum, the sorcerer, who was responsible for their having to hide like the lowest of animals, with rats and reptiles, in the city sewers; that, as much as anything else, spurred Sonja's resolve to do all she could toward his destruction.

Late in the afternoon, as evening came down, Du-jum the conqueror left his palace in the company of fifty soldiers and proceeded to the ruined Temple of Urmu the Vulture.

About his neck he wore, reinstated, his wooden bird of prey; it had no life, no intelligence or power of its own, save for that with which Du-jum chose to invest it. At the temple he surveyed the progress of its reconstruction. Corpses had been taken away, to be used in sacrifices later, and the shattered blocks had begun to be replaced. The wails and moans of the toiling people of Thesrad welled up like a dark hymn to Du-jum's ears as they labored under the lashes of his soldiers to rebuild this ancient fane of the Dark Bird.

Du-jum watched. His guards stood silently about him. When silent, angry eyes were occasionally cast upon him, he met the hate-filled stare of the offending Thesradian fully, then glanced to a guard who immediately applied the lash with brutal harshness.

The sun went down. At its setting, Du-jum intoned a prayer for strength to complete his great task—his attainment of all that might be attained. Then he saw to it that those who could no longer labor were offered up in sacrifice to Urmu.

Finally he returned toward the palace, ready for a meal and some wine, and intending to have a long talk with the seven young sorcerers. On the way he seriously considered whether he should slay them now, out of prudence and to test his power, or whether they might better be kept in his service for possible use in his future plans. He had not decided by the time he returned to the palace.

Meanwhile the seven, having been told by servants that the meal was being served in the dining hall, were washing and dressing and speaking with one another.

"Du-jum," Elath said in a melancholy voice, "is our enemy. I feel it."

'Not yet," Aspre told him. 'He may become so if we act unwisely, but, no, not yet. Our likeliest enemy is Princess Yarise."

Menth, the youngest, sniffed in derision. "So what? She is only a woman, and a foolish one. Her sorcery could not aid Du-jum, nor can it oppose us. She dabbles with incense and oil-perfume spells, but obviously knows nothing as mighty as our star-conjurings." Aspre fixed him with a stern look. "Be careful, Menth—and all the rest of you, too. Do not underestimate a woman as an enemy, especially a woman as attractive as Yarise. Her power over Du-jum may outweigh all our sorcery." As all of them considered this, Aspre added: "I think that Du-jum cannot be won over, that no one can own him. But I fear Yarise thinks she can own him, with her fervor and the promises of her body, and I think she fears that we may ally against her with Du-jum. Therefore, she may be very dangerous. In matters of pride and hate and ambition, it is as the Book of the Way says: "There is no justice in pride. Trust no promises, have no faith in those ambitious for power. In them deceit closes one fist and blinds one eye; their tongues become daggers, their promises ashes.'" He raised his hands, stared at his palms, then pressed them together and mumbled a protective prayer.

Servants knocked on Mistress Yarise's door but did not enter, knowing better.

Yarise was sprawled upon her bed. She giggled and sighed, stretched her nude body sensuously, then reached over and took Endi's blond hair in her fingers, drawing the girl's head to her and planting a long, wet kiss on her lips.

"You have done well, Endi," she said finally.

'Did I please you?" The girl was trembling; she wiped the wetness from her lips, then turned away, trying to hide the disgust she feared must show in her face.

"You did well. Are you still afraid?"

"I shall always be afraid."

'Perhaps that is a good thing, after all. Perhaps you should teach me, too, Endi, to be

afraid."

Endi sat up; she felt chilly, and slightly sick. "Is fear a thing that can be learned, or taught, Endi? What do you think, heh?"

"With all pardons, Mistress. . . . I do not really think so."

Yarise said quietly: "Perhaps you are right. Perhaps I have had all the fear I shall have in my life—have worked out my birth's allotment of it. Well, I am now resigned to being only foolish, concerned, perhaps even desperate—but not afraid." She sat up, smiling. Then with a sudden change of mood, she flounced her dark hair and snapped: "Get me my robes and my scents, Endi. I must go to the dining hall."

It was dusk. Omeron had chosen the route, which led into an alley. One by one the soldiers had climbed into the open air—climbed into the streets of their home city, quietly and stealthily, like criminals and enemies and thugs. All seemed strange around them, where a long time before—a week before—all had been routine sameness. Now the shadows of pain, treason, and sorcery seemed to hang heavily in the night over their conquered city.

Omeron had told Sadhur: "Take your men and head north; we'll go south."

They had shaken hands, pledged their fealty, breathed prayers—and parted.

Immediately Sadhur broke his men into groups of three or four. "We meet again here just before dawn," he told them. "Omeron will meet us here also. Don't get yourselves killed, and kill no one unless you have to. Wherever you go, listen carefully, think wisely, pause before you speak or act. We want resisters; there must be many of them, wishing only for a chance to fight. But show them the salute only when you are positive they will join us, when you are certain of their loyalty and courage."

Then Sadhur went off by himself, angry and committed, wanting no one else with him. He felt an almost savage exhilaration. Now was the time of retaliation and vengeance, of undoing what had been done, of destroying those who had brought destruction.

He walked, slumped over and hiding his sword inside his long cloak, passing soldiers on the street, acting as though he knew where he was going, just like the other citizens he saw hastening quietly to and fro. Everywhere there were guards: in the torchlit streets, on the corners, in windows, on roof-tops; most of them were black, barbaric warriors from Kush, Keshan, and Darfar, with here and there a scattering of lighter-skinned mercenaries from Stygia and Iranistan.

Sadhur passed by offices that had been turned into bordel-los, banks that had become stables, libraries turned into dens of drink and boisterousness. Painted in blood on alley walls and brick shopfronts he saw alien, occult symbols. Some of these had been crossed out in charcoal or with the sharp points of stones or broken bricks, and defiant messages had been scrawled beside them: "Death to Du-jum"; "The wizard shall know the vengeance of the gods." And more often than any other, "Omero dqfu"—"Omeron lives!"

He passed some guards on a corner across the street; four or five of them conversing with a young woman, surrounding her. One or two were stroking her hair; she whimpered. Sadhur watched silently as he passed by, resisting an impulse to draw steel and charge them. The girl cried out as a soldier forced her to her knees; then another stepped in closer and slapped her across the face.

Sadhur took advantage of the situation; distracted, the soldiers did not see him slip down an alley. In the shadows, he breathed more easily, surveyed the alley carefully, then quietly advanced. He passed a low door and, beyond it, came to an open barred window. Light shone murkily from the window on the alley floor and halfway up the

opposite wall. As Sadhur approached, rats squealed in a refuse heap further on and scampered away. Pausing, he watched the dark forms rustle off in the dark.

From the open window he heard part of a conversation. "And what if we truly did suspect, Kiros, that you were plotting against Du-jum?" came a male voice. Sadhur's heart leapt.

Came the nervous voice of a youth: "Well, I don't know ... Listen, Sirt, this is nonsense since we're only supposing—"

A third voice, gruff and heavy: "Maybe, maybe not." The first voice, the man called Sirt, chuckled as though at an obscene joke, then said: "But there's been talk about you. ..."

"What?" Kiros's voice was almost a squeak. Both older voices laughed strongly.

Sadhur trembled in excitement, trying to decide if he had stumbled upon a resister cornered by two of Du-jum's soldiers, or if this were only conversation over drink. All three voices sounded Thes-radian.

"What kind of talk?"

"That little blond servant-girl from the palace. Is she one of them? You've been seeing a lot of her."

"Nice looking girl," commented gruff-voice. "Maybe that's why."

Pause. Then the young Kiros forced a laugh and replied, "I see. You think I'm using her to get information." "Are you?" "What if I were? What would you do about it? Du-jum hasn't done anything for us, anyway. We're worse off now than we were before."

"Women—food—roof over our heads."

"I had that before, as a servant of Omeron—and without all this forced labor."

"The kid has a point," gruff-voice said to Sirt.

"You're willing to try to run out on Du-jum, - then?"

"Why not? We 're only soldiers for hire, not heroes. I 'm in this for what I can get, and we've gotten all from Du-jum that we're going to get, I think."

"Then you're going to try to find Lord Omeron?" asked Sirt.

Gruff-voice did not reply.

"Well?"

"I was in this city when Omeron ruled. Nice town, then. What do you think, you young pup?"

"I'm no soldier," said Kiros, "whatever you two think. But I'm ready to fight for Omeron."

Sadhur was itching with anticipation. The revolution was progressing on its own! But wait—wait.

Sounds of footsteps, pacing. "Let's go find your friends, Kiros. They've been edgy, haven't they?"

The young voice said: "Yes, that's true. You'd be willing to help us?"

Before Sadhur expected it, the door to the alley opened; a big man stepped out, turned—and saw him standing there.

A moment of frozen time. Then gruff-voice said: "What's this? Who the hell—"

Sadhur dropped his hand to his sword.

The second man, Sirt, stepped into the alley, and then the young man, Kiros. All faced Sadhur, uncertain.

"Did you mean what you said?" Sadhur asked him. His accent was unmistakable; a Thesradian.

"Did we mean—"

Gruff-voice, the big man, nudged Kiros and stepped in quickly. "About turning against Du-jum?" "Aye."

"You're—a citizen, my man!" exclaimed Sirt. "Did you mean what you said?" Sadhur repeated. The three paused. At this moment, it was a choice between words or swords: three against one, but still, this was a big man, and his entire bearing suggested that he had dealt death in his career, and besides. . . .

The two older men glanced casually at one another. The youth stood behind, uncertain. "Well?" Sadhur grumbled. "Are you one of Omeron's men?" But Sadhur was not about to reply to that before he had his facts. "I was. . . ."

"And now you're a member of the resistance?" Sadhur said nothing. Think wisely, pause before you speak or act.

Gruff-voice said: "We're ready, my man. This youngster knows others who are tired of Du-jum and his crimes."

"That's true," spoke up the youth.

Sadhur eased his hold on his hilt by a fraction.

"Can we talk?" asked Sirt.

"Aye," Sadhur was still uncertain.

Sirt—a tall, lean, squint-eyed man, looked back at the youth, then at his companion.

"We were on our way to his friends," he recalled.

To Sadhur, Kiros said: "We can walk, sir. The streets are easier tonight. Du-jum feels his hold is secure. Just don't show your sword. My friends are at the Golden Toad Tavern."

That seemed to sway Sadhur as much as anything; he suddenly felt he'd sell his regenerative organs right now for one good mug of cold ale.

Gruff-voice sealed the whole matter. "Aye—let's go for a brew and discuss this.

Casually, though, for the benefit of the soldiers. Just walk as though you own the town and we'll be fine. The Golden Toad—that's Tros's tavern, isn't it?"

"Yes, Tros's."

"Well, well, who'd have thought he had it in him to be a resister! Come, my friend—are you with us?"

Sadhur nodded, keeping his lingering doubts to himself. "Lead on."

The youth was excited; he walked ahead and spoke with Sadhur as they went through the streets. "Do you really know Omeron? I—I mean, Prince Omeron? I've often dreamed of serving him as a soldier one day. And now, it's happening!"

And Sadhur told him—carefully, pausing before he spoke so as not to reveal too much—a few things about Omeron, speaking with obvious pride.

The other two passed them and strode a few paces ahead, smiling at one another and whispering while Sadhur and Kiros were conversing.

"Two of them," hissed Sirt, "and one an active resister! The gods are with us!"

"Aye—we duped the kid soundly. We'll have to get his friends later."

"No problem there. Just lead these two to the palace, collect our gold."

"More sacrifices for Du-jum. We're doing better at this than we ever did as flunkies for Omeron, by Tammuz!"

"And on our way back, maybe question Yarise's slave wench?"

"Why not?" agreed gruff-voice. "The night is young, and that blond girl has a nice ass. No, I think not. I hear the Princess likes to play with the little wench. It could be dangerous if we made her jealous!"

They laughed harshly, as if at a rude jest.

Sadhur, busily praising Lord Prince Omeron to young Kiro, imagined the pair's merriment might be due to a joke against Du-jum.

Omeron, Sonja, and five others had found a tavern, the master of which Omeron had known since boyhood; he had sent one of his men in first, through an unlocked back door in the shadowed alley, to determine if the gray-headed old man with one eye were still left alive.

He was found living in his cellar with four men and two women, one of them his granddaughter, who was with child. Omeron's man had nearly caused one-eyed Benfu to have a heart attack when he had whispered from the shadows while the old man was busy carrying loaves of bread and bottles of wine through his deserted tavern to the hiding place downstairs.

"I serve Du-jum!" he'd hissed back.

"Like hell you do! I'm with Omeron!"

"You lie!"

"We 're resisters, old man. Calm yourself. Omeron is with us. Come and see!"

"You lie, you lie!"

But the man did not lie. He had backed to the door, opened it—and Omeron, Sonja, and the rest had entered. And Benfu had hugged Omeron for dear life, weeping copiously to see his prince alive and returned.

While the rest of them gathered downstairs and ate a well-deserved meal, Omeron, with Sonja, sat upstairs at a table in the darkened tavern. They watched out half-open windows, but there were few patrols this near the edge of the city, few footsteps even, and those belonging to the hurrying forms of old women or frightened young girls going through litter for food scraps.

Sonja and Omeron ate bread and cheese while listening to the silence and the darkness, passing the time until two more would come up from downstairs to relieve them of their watch and let them get some much-needed rest. Off and on, they spoke to one another. "And your wife?" Sonja asked, picking up a thread of conversation Omeron had abruptly dropped.

"I hate her. I can't help it, Sonja. I trusted her, the gods know why, and that trust has now been broken completely. She is a spoiled child, lusting after goals greater than life can grant, despising the possible once it is attained. She could never be a person, a mere human. And now she has become a witch, and a traitor. I suppose her background had much to do with that."

"Each of us must learn to survive in his or her own way, Omeron."

"That's true. But it doesn't excuse her. There are still the values the gods have given us."

"It doesn't excuse her, no. But I have often wondered about values—"

Omeron eyed Sonja sharply. "Surely you believe in your-self as a positive force?"

"Yes—of course."

"You thank others when they try to help you, and you try to repay them, just as you expect others to repay you for your aid?" "Yes." "You believe in powers and orders greater than man?"

"Yes." Something inside her cooled a bit as Sonja re-lected on those outside powers, which seemed to have cast her to a barren fate.

' "You believe that man can institute such things as justice, fairness, honesty . . . that though he may seem to fail often, he should continue to strive after those things?"

Sonja nodded slowly.

"And that there is such a thing as love?"

"Yes—I know there is."

"And that so far as we know, being humans, some things are evil and others good?"

"I agree to all this, Omeron; what is the point?"

"These are values. Whether one is a soldier or a whore, a king or a shoemaker—these are values common to everyone who takes pride in being human, likes being human, and sees the struggle of life as something worth continuing. Anyone who does not believe in these values is to that extent less than human, and will grasp any opportunity to run even farther away from her humanity. She may even for a time gain great power in this flight from herself. But no matter how she may try to hide, never can she escape ultimate justice! The greater the boast, the more doubt to the boaster; the stronger the armor, the weaker the man inside; the louder the voice, the less certain the argument—and so on. You know all this, Sonja, or you would not be what you are. Sooner or later this quality reveals itself in a word, a gesture—in making bread or in making love, or in fighting for one's life."

Sonja was very quiet. Suddenly she realized that Omeron's philosophy stemmed from the deep hurt Yarise had given him. She felt herself wanting to reach a hand out to him across the table. Not in love, but in profound concern, in a sympathy shared by two outsiders, two battlers against the indifferent world process that seemed so endless, wanton,

and uneven in its distribution of tools and defenses.

"We use words to hide from action," Omeron said thoughtfully, "and actions to hide from words. Gods, gods! Where is the true balance? Where is the answer that leads to no more questions? Why is man but a hope and a ghost, soon gone, passing on just enough accomplishments for his de-scendents to destroy?"

He clasped his hands together, pulled them towards him across the table and sat back—the shadows in the room fell upon him as he did so.

Sonja stared at him, memories stirring within her. Olin— Suthad . . . No! She would not bring back painful ghosts to haunt her. Both she and Omeron were tired, exhausted, pained, cornered, unsure.

Suddenly a noise brought them up—a noise from outside, in the alley.

There were no lights within the room to betray them, but Sonja nevertheless crouched low and drew her sword si-lently, then stole to the window and raised herself against the wall, peering out. Omeron did the same, hugging the wall catty-corner to the window, staying deep within the shadows and straining to see the author of the noise in the dark alley without.

Silence, for long moments, and the slow itch of anticipa-tion.

Sonja began to relax. Could it be they had heard nothing except in their strained imaginations?

Then the noise came again, and something tall and dark moved in the alley outside. At the same instant footsteps came up the stairs from down below.

"Omeron. ..."

His men. Omeron hissed through the shadows: "Silence! Enemies!"

Instantly the soldiers—four of them—froze, stepped care-fully into hanging shrouds of darkness, watched, and quietly pulled free their swords.

Sonja sucked in a slow, even breath as the figure in the alley stepped in front of the window and peered in, an uncertain look on its dull, white features. It had yellow eyes,

glowing in the white, drawn face. A sorcerer.

## Chapter 6.

As they turned a corner, young Kiros looked up and noticed how close they were getting to the palace. He interrupted Sadhur with a gesture and whispered: "This isn't the way to my friends."

Sadhur slowed his pace and looked behind; Kiros, too, glanced over his shoulder. Soldiers were here and there in the street.

The two ahead of them stopped and whirled. Their swords were out; they had been carrying them, hidden, at their sides.

Sadhur halted. Coldness washed over him. "What the hell is—" He reached instantly for his blade.

But the two jumped forward, swords up, giving Sadhur no time to do more than clench his fists.

"Keep walking."

"I'll cut both your throats," Sadhur growled.

"I think not." Sirt held his blade to Sadhur's throat, keeping it there while leaning forward, intending to pull Sadhur's sword from its sheath. His companion was doing the same to Kiros, who stood speechless with shock, knowing that he had been played for a young fool.

"Omeron!"

Berserk with anger, knowing all was lost, Sadhur swept aside the sword blade with his left arm and smashed his massive right fist into Sirt's face. Bones crunched beneath that mighty blow; the informer flopped heavily to the cobblestones, spitting out half his teeth.

Gruff-voice whirled, raised his blade to smite before Sadhur could draw his own, then suddenly stiffened, bellowing with rage and pain. Kiros had whipped out his dagger and stabbed the informer in the buttocks. Gruff-voice whirled and hacked out, slicing empty air as the lad ducked and leaped nimbly away. Then, turning just long enough to glimpse Sadhur bearing down on him with drawn sword, he yelled a curse and dashed away down the street.

Sadhur cursed in turn, whipped out one of his long daggers and hurled it expertly.

The heavy blade thudded solidly home at the base of the informant's spine.

Gruff-voice let out a surprisingly high-pitched shriek and crashed full-tilt upon the cobbles, where he lay screaming, his arms threshing, his legs completely inert.

Du-jum's soldiers immediately began to run toward them from all quarters, drawing steel. Sirt, blubbering curses and spitting blood, groped for his fallen sword. Snarling, Sadhur swung his blade and hacked off the informant's arm at the shoulder.

"Back to back, lad!" he roared at Kiros as the soldiers of Du-jum closed in. "Here's my other dagger. Do your damndest with those blades—they'll buy our lives dearly, by Mitra! Ready—here they come! Omeron!"

Steel clashed in the streets as Du-jum's guards closed in around them.

They arrived just as dinner in the palace was coming to an end—a small troop of



soldiers, tired and sore and wounded.

"We bring two prisoners, Lord Du-jum," said their officer, a black Darfarian with bits of bone woven into his hair and a bloody bandage about his sword hand. "Thesradian insurgents. We took them alive, at much cost to ourselves, knowing you would prefer it so."

Du-jum welcomed them and promised them extra gold for providing entertainment so sorely needed to go with the after-dinner wine. Yarise and the sorcerers looked on as Du-jum curtly ordered his soldiers to bring the prisoners in.

They were in chains, and both were covered with cuts and bruises, especially the tall muscular one, whose left arm was so hacked and mangled that he would surely have bled to death but for a crude tourniquet just under his armpit.

"Who are these prisoners?" demanded Du-jum.

"Thesradian rebels, Lord. We do not know their names."

Du-jum peered at the pair more closely. "The young one is a servant, I think. I seem to remember having seen him in the palace once or twice, though I can't be sure—these pallid brats all look so much alike. Well, take him away to the dungeons. We'll use him as a sacrifice another time. But leave the big one here—I think he may prove significant."

The guards nodded, bowed, and two of them led the youth out of the banquet chamber.

"Tell me your name," Du-jum demanded of the tall captive, once the soldiers had left.

"Speak. Speak, or I will make you speak." He cast an eye at his own guards, who stood close behind him with long-bladed spears.

One lifted an eyebrow. "I think he is an officer of Ome-ron's, Lord Du-jum."

"Is this true?" Again the sorcerer looked at the tall man.

"Aye!" spoke up a Thesradian at the table, another of

Du-jum's paid informers. "He is Sadhur, an officer in Ome-ron's employ."

Sadhur suddenly spit in Du-jum's face. The sorcerer started angrily, but his next reaction, as he wiped the spittle from him, was to laugh darkly, vindictively.

"Where did you find him?" he asked his soldiers.

"In the streets, fighting two of your hired Thesradian informants. He injured them so badly that they will have to be slain."

Du-jum turned again to Sadhur. "Tell me where you are from, and where Omeron is now; he is no longer on the mountainside, I know that. Tell me who produced the magic to thwart my conjure-bird."

Sadhur eyed him, coldly and silently.

"Very well, then," said Du-jum in a gravelly quiet voice. He reached out his right arm and flicked Sadhur on the forehead with one slim finger.

The nail barely touched the giant's head, but Sadhur reacted as though a huge hammer had struck him with full force. Instantly he dropped backward, knees buckling, and fell supine, arms and legs still chained. He was numb; he could not move a muscle, could not even cry out. A shadow floated over him and he stared up at the tall shape of Du-jum—the long dark robes with the heavy, brooding face at the top.

"You will speak. You will tell me, or I will cause you to know such tortures as you never dreamed could exist in this world. Do you understand? I do not use tongs or coals for my tortures; I use these." He lifted his hands. "I will never touch you, but you will experience such agony as few on earth have ever suffered—and you will suffer it until you tell me all that I wish to know."

Chairs creaked loudly in the hall as Du-jum's audience leaned forward to study the

show. The few Thesradian traitors in the hall, frightened, stepped away from the banquet table and joined the guards at one of the entranceways to the chamber. Sadhur glared defiantly at the sorcerer, but his face went pale and sweat ran down it into his beard. He was still numb at the fact of his capture, as well as injured and exhausted. He knew that if he gave any sign of speaking, Du-jum might release the invisible hold on him, but still he refused to speak. Fierce anger and resentment were still in his eyes, so the supernatural bonds did not relax.

"Very well," Du-jum said finally. "I will make you speak." He stepped a bit closer and lifted his hands, and his eyes began to glow.

The banquet had not gone well for Elath. He had left early, before Sadhur and Kiros had arrived in chains, to wander the desolate streets in darkness, and to think.

"Where shall my destiny guide me now?" he muttered to himself.

No truth, or small truth, to any of this. Aspre was too confident in himself, too trusting toward others. He was playing into Du-jum's hands—although Du-jum might not yet know exactly what he intended to do with all of them.

"But he will see us as threats, the seven of us," Elath mused aloud, "—threats as only strong allies can be, as a willful child can be a threat to its parents."

No truth, no truth in playing a game of time with Du-jum, for time, and perhaps all other things, was on his side. The man was steeped in everything that was cold and forlorn, dark and tearless, warped.

"Guide me, O my Destiny," Elath muttered to the night. "Lead me, Lords of Fate!"

So pondering and muttering, he wandered down many boulevards and back alleys, until he found himself in that end of the town which was most desolate and ghostly with memories of old screams in the air and drying blood on the cobbles. A fog came up—from his mind? From his doubts? Elath realized he was in a back alley, and outside an old tavern that should have been lifeless.

But it was not lifeless.

He suddenly heard, with his sensitive trained hearing, the low rumble of voices in throats, and the questioning of human minds in contact. He paused in the alley and peered through the window, looked in, thought to see humans.

Humans. Children of storms, these humans, huddled in darkness. . . .

And as he stared in, his yellow eyes reflected back at him from the wavy glass panes like beacons, obscure through the filmy mist. His mind seemed clouded—divided. He found himself trying to decide whether he should befriend the humans, question them and answer them, or destroy them as possible enemies.

Then, footsteps—an opening door, scraping like the rumble of a hungry dragon's stomach. Voices, breathing—and angry, frightened faces.

Elath turned—to stare upon a woman and a man in the darkness, their swords out, and to hear them speak.

"Omeron—there!"

It had happened so quickly. Even the magic of sorcerers cannot match the impulse of fear that drives humans, on a world unsure of its orbit.

"I see him, Sonja! Lich or human, whatever you be, stand where you are!"

"Stand as you are!" echoed the woman's voice, loud with anger. Then they advanced upon him, came close with their sword-points.

Elath reacted, lifting his hands in the first gesture of a protective, magical defense.

"Sonja! Watch out!" Omeron moved in with his sword.

Elath hissed drastic words of power: "lak-sa-togo, iuta mei."

"Sorcerer! Sorcererrr!" As his sword swung with hate-driven fury toward the young magician's head, Omeron yelled through clenched teeth: "You—destroyed— Thesrad!" Sonja hung back, gasping to see Omeron's sword recoil as if the blade had met an invisible shield surrounding the wizard.

"Careful, Omeron—they're full of tricks."

But Omeron, furious, attacked again, flailing at the chest of the thing with yellow eyes, his attack powered by a tidal wave of pent-up fury and despair.

The wizard dropped back, eyes blazing, one arm reaching out, clawing hand weaving a potent, invisible shield in the air.

"Die, damn you!" Omeron shrieked, withdrawing his blade from a futile blow and arcing it up to strike again.

"Omeron!" cried the wizard. "Stop!"

But the prince's blade swung down again; a silver blur in the alley darkness, it thudded against Elath's magical shield and almost bit through. He drew back to swing again. Elath shook his head, eyes still blazing, then knelt on the ground, hands raised in a supplicating gesture. Omeron struck at him again with his sword, and again the blade shot away as from an invisible shield.

Still Omeron would not give up. He ran headlong at the wizard's kneeling form, trying to drive the point of his long blade again and again through the magical force screen—but to no avail.

"Omeron!" cried Elath.

With a final lurching series of grunts, Omeron dropped back, his sword trembling in his hand.

"Omeron! I am not your enemy, Omeron!"

"Careful—sorcerers are masters of treachery," warned Sonja. 'Don't get too close to him; he might turn upon you when you least expect it.' But she stood beside Omeron, looking down at Elath, wondering what thoughts really lay behind the wizard's yellow eyes.

"I'm not your enemy, Lord Omeron!" cried Elath again. 'The sorcerer is my foe as well as yours. He must be slain.'

"Slain!" Omeron choked the word. "Thesrad is slain!"

"Omeron." Sonja touched him cautiously on the shoulder.

"Thesrad is slain! Thesrad is slain!" he shrieked, kicking at Elath's protective screen, then slapping his sword against one brick wall of the tavern. "And I can't even strike down one of my city's slayers!"

"I had no part in that, Lord Omeron."

By this time others had heard the commotion; they had come out, holding back, watching, listening. Sonja glanced at them, looked back to Omeron.

'Omeron, keep your wits. I think this wizard may speak the truth, after all. He's right about one thing, we must slay Du-jum.'

He turned and looked at her; peripherally, he saw his swordsmen at the tavern's back door, and he looked upon them with tears running down his grimy, sweaty cheeks.

"Wizards!" Omeron's features bent into a mask of fury; he held his head high, pointed his sword behind him at the still-kneeling Elath. "Their blood—their blood—will cleanse the blood of our brothers and sisters, our mothers and fathers and children.

We shall rebuild this Thesrad with bricks mortared with the blood of our enemies."

No one said anything; all stared at him.

Proud, angered, and vengeful, wearied past the point of tolerance, Omeron stepped

ahead. His awed men parted out of the way, making a path for him. As he went into the tavern, he pulled a bottle of wine from a rack behind the counter, then went to a table in the shadows to brood and drink, and to try to blot the sorcerer's presence from his mind until he could cool his hot rage.

The others returned inside, as well. Sonja followed, and Elath rose and followed also. As she stepped in, she mum-bled to him: "You are really with us, then, wizard?"

"Yes—and Omeron, too, knows it in his heart, otherwise he would have set his men upon me. He will admit it when his madness passes."

Sonja nodded. "Aye, madness—a madness that should have possessed him far earlier than this. But it will pass, as you say; he is a strong man. Perhaps it is not too late—for Omeron, or for me, or for the city of Thesrad."

"Not too late," the wizard repeated in a low voice, closing the tavern door after him.

"Not too late. Thank you, warrior-woman, for sensing truth in my words. I will help you fight Du-jum.

"You must all calm your minds—for even in hidden corners of a city in the middle of the night, old bricks can see and overhear secrets for the benefit of one as powerful in magic as Du-jum. He can sense voices and footsteps only shadowed walkways know."

The wizard's voice grew more sonorous. "Time, wandering on, changes as man changes. Cities, laws, armies, mothers with children, adepts of sorcery, stone birds that come to life,—all these things change and fade, and transmute to new forms. And all cities are one—one nameless city, in the middle of the night."

The fog rolled in, dimming the feeble light from outside, hiding Elath's tall form. Only his yellow eyes remained visible. Omeron's men shuffled uneasily.

"If you 're really our ally," muttered Sonja, trying to stop the crawling of her flesh, "shut up! And help us light a candle or two."

Sadhur screamed as he was reborn from his mother's bloody womb, ripped from her and thrown upon her breast to nurse. But his mother did not nurse him; instead, she lifted him up—her baby child, a moment old—and held him above her face, looked into his eyes with demon eyes, then lowered his soft throat to her vampire fangs.

Sadhur shrieked—shrieked and wrestled, although he was newborn and strengthless. All the lives he had ever lived fought and battled and screamed, as his mother's jaws opened wider and uttered a terrible mandate in Du-jum's iron voice: "Speak! Speak, Sadhur! Tell me of Omeron—orn will birth you in the fiery bowels of a dragon!"

Sadhur shrieked as the fangs bit into him and burned like lancets of fire. He rolled and writhed inside his mind, yet knew he remained paralyzed on the floor. For a brief instant Du-jum's face, clear and distinct, appeared above him. Sadhur tried to blink burning sweat from his eyes, tried to speak. His tongue, thick and hot, clogged his throat. Du-jum said, sneering: "Tell me, Sadhur." Tears rolled down his cheeks; he worked his mouth and tried to manage some spittle, but Du-jum sneered again and made a gesture with one hand, and Sadhur was torn away again, shrieking maniacally in his mind as he fell and fell into a deep pit.

The pit glowed with red-hot darkness. Women appeared, forming themselves from the darkness—luxurious women, four of them, two buxom, the others more slim, all beautiful. They flew slowly towards Sadhur; his armor and clothes fell away from his body, and they began to ravish him. Deliberately, sensuously they kissed his flesh, stroked him with their fingers and mouths, pushed their bodies upon his. "Tell us, tell us," they whispered passionately, and when Sadhur would not, they began to bite and scratch him. He murmured in agony as the women began to transform—one into a

viper with poisonous fangs, another into a giant hairy spider, another into an icy phantom, the fourth into a huge leathery bird with a long pointed beak. "Tell us! tell us!" they demanded, continuing to bite and caress him, moan and scratch and press upon him. "I cannot, I cannot!" Sadhur shrieked; and then the bird-woman lashed forward with her beak and blood spurted from between Sadhur's legs. The spider jumped atop his head, and her huge hairy legs wrapped around his face and throat suffocatingly, and Sadhur screamed in his mind: "I cannot, I cannot!" And then, abruptly, he was dissolved gratefully in endless, unfeeling darkness.

Du-jum bared his teeth in ferocious disappointment. He stared down at Sadhur's corpse for a long moment and whispered: "Fool! You could have saved yourself for pleasures as great as your sufferings."

Guards came forward, staring at the corpse that had been mutilated while no hand had touched it. Blood poured out from between the legs, from the torn face and limbs. But Du-jum waved them back and worked his hands in the air over the corpse.

"Ka naku!" he intoned slowly. "*Astur im kanayam og ioto. . .*"

In a moment Sadhur's body began to mist, then dissolve with a blue fuming. A pungent smoke filled the room. Within the space of a few heartbeats all had vanished—flesh and bone and spilled blood—so that only a slight trace, a long black smear as of charring, remained on the tiles.

Without another word Du-jum turned and exited the chamber, casting a stern eye upon Yarise and the six young wizards who sat near her, aghast and shaken by the inhuman display they had just witnessed.

Towards dawn, Omeron's men began to return, singly and in groups. They crowded into the tavern and reported what they knew, what they had accomplished.

All had managed to make contact with groups of partisans, assuring them that Lord Omeron was indeed alive and that plans were in effect for a general revolt against the sorcerer at dawn—a siege of the palace. The first few minutes would sway the balance, for if the legions of Du-jum's guards could be overwhelmed, crowds of quelled citizens might take heart and join the battle against the sorcerer.

But Sadhur was missing. And as the last of the rebels filed in to report, one of them told Omeron sadly: "We saw him, late last night. He and a young lad were taken in a fight with some of Du-jum's soldiers."

"Taken?" Omeron's voice quavered. He had had some rest, but lines of great weariness still showed in his face.

"Yes, My Lord."

Omeron was silent for a long moment. "Then he is dead."

Sonja interrupted: "We don't know that."

"No!" The prince of Thesrad slapped a hand on a tabletop. "We must assume he is dead. We must also assume that Du-jum has tried to extract information from him. We can't know if he succeeded. We must proceed with our plan but stay alert for any sign of treachery."

All nodded in agreement.

As the first gray of dawn tinged the windows, Omeron administered an oath to all his warriors present in the tavern: To go forth and fight to the death to win back the city. Sonja, too, took the pledge. Soon, she knew, the moment would be at hand for her to be again immersed in the midst of life-or-death battle. She felt she had done little so far, but that was about to change. Her Fate had often cast her in a role opposed to sorcery. She was Red Sonja, taking an oath not only to help Omeron with his siege, but

renewing her old oath to herself to always be herself—to be Sonja, the Hyrkanian outcast, the warrior-woman, wielding her sword against the dark tide of evil. . . .

"You carry a strange destiny with you, Red Sonja of Hyrkania."

Sonja started from her reverie, and realized that it was the wizard Elath speaking to her. The glow of his eyes was scarcely noticeable in the candlelight and the darkness of impending dawn, and that made him seem more human.

"Aye—and I'm not surprised you know about destinies, sorcerer. Yet, you're a rather young man, no more than twenty-five, I'd guess. What made you sell your soul to the Hells?"

Elath sighed. "I'm sure you know better than that. Sorcery is not evil in itself, but can be as evil or as good as the one who wields it. Only a higher insight than that which sorcery provides can tell the evil from the good. This is why many sorcerers do evil. But do not most other humans also do more evil than good, whatever the powers they wield?"

"What you say rings true. Yet, sorcery is full of wiles."

"You have strong prejudices, Sonja, yet I sense strong doubt also. I sense, even, that once a feast in your wanderings you have met a sorcerer who did good in the world, and destroyed much evil. Is this not so?"

Sonja scowled for a moment, irritated, but then admitted: "Aye—Saureb."

"Please don't be angry. I do not read your thoughts, only your moods. And you use magic yourself, Sonja—I sense it. You are the most adept sword-wielder I have ever met, perhaps the best in the world, and your skill did not come to you originally in the usual way, by practice. Would I be prying to ask how?"

"I—I was raped, my parents slain. By brigands. One chased me, caught me, in an abandoned temple in a forest. Then a god—a being—something appeared and gave me power, and I slew my tormentor with my dead father's sword. Since then, I've never met my sword-match!"

Elath stared at her with awe. "I am proud to know you, Red Sonja. Yet, surely your own words must tell you that the influence of supernatural force is not always evil."

"I—I don't know. Still, against my better judgment, I can't say I sense evil in you. Did I see you taking the oath of fealty to Omeron's cause just now?"

Elath shook his head. "The seeker after ultimate knowledge makes but one oath in life, and that not to any human."

"You refused the oath? Don't you think that was a bit arrogant?"

"Yet Omeron has accepted my aid, Sonja. I gave him my word, and explained to him that if my word cannot be considered good, neither could my oath be. He read the truth in me, and accepted my aid. May I prove worthy of his trust! He is a good man, your Prince Omeron, and a noble ruler. Far better to serve him than Du-jum, who aspires to become the Prince of Hell and plunge all the world into the cruelty and terror of the All-Night—so greatly do his fear and hatred drive him!"

"Aye, a good, noble man, Omeron," muttered Sonja, remembering another like him. And Elath, reading memories of love and pain in her eyes, turned discreetly away, sensing that here was ground on which neither he nor any other would be welcome. By the black lake Ilura had prayed. The metamorphosis had come over her again and again, the changes in her energy pulsing through the wind and the air, through the rocks and soil of the earth, to alert the subterranean things, the spirits, and the minds of all adepts that the time had come to undo what had been done.

Swooping night birds had attacked her while she had sat and prayed and

metamorphosed by that lake; guardian serpents had fought them off with menacing fangs but they continued to circle around her under the moon on silent wings.

"I am Ilura," she muttered to the wind and the stars. "Hear me, O Sithra and Ixcatl! Soon I shall return from the woodlands of night into the lighted encampments of man. The night and the past have long hidden us, but now is our resurrection at hand! Hear me, O wild things of the under-earth, scaly things, creeping things! Remember your ancient masters, your ancient loyalties! Harken to your priestess, who has come up from your long-forgotten temple, and answer her call! Come when she beckons! Hear my summons, and remember your ancient hatreds. Renew your war against those who long ago took rulership of this world away from you!"

Thus she darkly prayed and cast her spells—Ilura, the serpent and the woman, fomenting rebellion amongst the things of Nature, the wild and intolerant things surviving from old times in dark places, in degenerate forms.

"Complete your Pact, O Ixcatl! Cursed be mankind, and may its doom come swiftly! O Sithra, let thy long-awaited justice be done!"

The night birds twittered in fear and flew rapidly away and suddenly, eerily, the forest shrubbery seemed alive with slithering, whispering movement. They were gathering, swarming legions of serpents and lizards, crawling and scuttling through the grass, around rocks, pulsing and moving to the rhythm raised by Ilura's prayer.

"Victims of mankind, soon shall you be creators of victims," intoned Ilura. And, my father Du-jum, she added in her most private thoughts, soon shall you know the victim's torment also!

Then, with this dream and prayer of vengeance begun, a nearly exhausted Ilura rose and turned towards the encampment on the mountainside.

Dawn came to the camp on the mountain, and with it a feeling of new peril, a chilling of ardor and optimism. Pauses between battles often lead to such changes of heart and attitude, and these changes do not always clear the eyes or the mind to see things more accurately.

Moreover, the grass around the camp seemed to be full of rustling, crawling things.

"Mitra's curse!" yelled a guard, striking wildly in the dim light. "Snakes! The ground's alive with them!"

The other soldiers were now yelling and smiting the turf also, drawing back into the camp in revulsion. Then the commotion subsided. The soldiers stood tensely, awe-stricken, watching as the vaguely glittering sea of scales rustled in the grass about the periphery of their campsite.

"We're surrounded by them!" yelled a young guard, panic in his tone.

"They're not after us," said another. "Look—they're all going around us, down the mountain!" "Mitra save us!" cried a third soldier. Then, even as the first dawnlight dimmed the flames of the campfires, Ilura emerged from the brush and stepped into the edge of the camp, the swarm of reptiles parting before her. Eyes looked up, angry, suspicious. Men clutched their weapons more tightly. They approached her.

"Where have you been, witch?" demanded the junior officer in charge.

"In the forest, preparing magic to aid Lord Omeron." "There was a battle here last night—a battle of magic. Where were you last night?" "Magic?"

"Aye—a giant bird sent by that sorcerer! And you nowhere about!"

Ilura stared at them coolly, unblinking. "I was within the forest. I return now to help Lord Omeron." "Help? You? A sorceress pretending to help?" They surrounded her in a group, two, three men deep, fingers eager on sword hilts. This strange woman, this

sorceress coming to them from the Unknown, claiming to want to help but causing such things to happen as giant birds and crawling waves of serpents.

"Omeron was a fool to trust her!" yelled a soldier. "I'm thinking the same thing," said the officer, "but remember what Omeron said!"

'She's not here to help us, damn it! She's an agent of that wizard who captured Thesrad. Help? Ha! She shows up, and pretty soon there's a giant bird, then some monster—and now this wave of snakes!"

A long silence, as the words sank in, as the sun rose and the grass rustled about the camp. Hostile male eyes stared into Ilura's feminine yellow ones.

She felt her hatred of humans returning. Ever humans, ever the hatred of humans—humans, making the world perilous for all life.

Then a whisper from one of the men—the tense whisper that spoke everyone's mind: "Kill the witch."

Ilura hissed and drew back. Boots scuffled, swords were drawn and lifted to strike! "Fooooo!"

It was a scream of rage, of hate, of horror toward a species too alien for her to feel any affinity for. And with her scream began also her monstrous transformation.

Swords reached out, but none touched her. Sparks crackled—the nameless energy freed when mortal things contact sorcery. The soldiers grunted, growled, shoved with the panicky unsurety of many trying to accomplish one task at once.

Then a wild shriek—another—and another.

And from that boiling knot of angry, vengeful soldiers a huge serpent reared up.

Ilura—with a warrior in her jaws.

She threshed, and men screamed wildly, leaping away to avoid her monstrous coils.

The soldier in her mouth cried out in frantic agony; Ilura dropped him on the other soldiers. Swords, arrows, stones, even flaming branches pulled from the campfires were hurled at the gigantic serpent—to no avail.

"Fooooo!" Ilura's serpent-voice was a monstrous, hissing shriek as she reared back, taller than any four of the soldiers. She threshed, crashed her coils into them, knocking aside small trees and whole rows of frightened men in armor. They scattered, yelling in terror. Ilura charged through them, clearing a wide swath through the campfires and sleeping blankets.

Within moments it was over. A few corpses, smashed or bitten, mutilated, littered the morning campsite. Dust, raised by shocked, frightened horses madly trying to escape, slowly settled, and the last eyes that turned to watch the serpent saw only its massive gray tail, dark yet silvery and as thick as a water trough, disappearing, sliding over the edge of the mountainside. The crashes of its progress carried back to them for long moments. Then it was gone, and with it, the rushing legions of lesser reptiles.

"Follow it!" "Slay her!" "She's in league with Du-jum!" roared the outraged, maddened soldiers. But even as they raged, they began to see—to realize—that things were not quite as they had seemed.

"Mitra! Look at the bodies—the camp!" There were no broken trees, no torn sod, and the only dust in the air was that which had been stirred by the frightened horses.

Three men lay dead but un mutilated—unmarked, even, by such tiny wounds as an ordinary serpent's teeth might have made.

"By the gods! It was sorcerous illusion again!" Their clamor faded to shocked silence, and in that moment they seemed to hear the dying noise of a gigantic serpent fading away down the mountainside towards Thesrad.



Dawnlight in Thesrad. In the city he once owned, where once he walked the bricks to resounding cheers of faithful subjects, Lord Prince Omeron, humbled and dethroned, now sought to repair himself with the same means that had damaged him: swords, violence, valor and—should it be necessary—sorcery.

In small groups they moved forward, Omeron leading a band, Sonja leading another, still others under trusted officers, measuring their way by footsteps and heartbeats, by furtive and trustless caution. And in Sonja's group was the problematical young adept, Elath.

There were soldiers of Du-jum's in the streets. "These, if you can, slay from behind," Omeron had ordered. "If you cannot, skirt them."

They approached the palace, coming forward like a joined series of claws, like one many-pincer crab; towards the palace—towards the place of blood, sorcery, tears, and shadows.

Sonja could see it now, mere blocks away, its parapets and towers, its high statues, its black pendants flapping in the sunny, early morning breeze. The sun continued to rise. Dust was in the air, and sounds of life began to be heard throughout the city. Angry swords, silent with wrath, approached—approached.

Sonja crouched just beside a small wall, kneeling against an old stone water jug. She peered around; behind her, a dozen armed and armored men waited for her sign.

"All clear."

And she led them forward.

There is no living, Sonja knew, without some foretaste of death—no life without some apprehension of fate, destiny, success, or failure. She was an Hyrkanian woman saved from death by an outlaw prince and a witch-woman—and now, in return, she was leading strangers in an attempt to recapture their home.

"I am no stranger here," Sonja muttered to herself, wondering at her Fate.

Soon, she knew, her blade would sing its old song and she, in her own way, as well as Omeron, would be reinstated upon a throne of Destiny—or both would fall before the dark might of the Prince of Hell.

Yarise slept still—not content, but resting with exhaustion. Du-jum paced the chamber, ignoring her—paced, sensing something. . . .

An intrusion upon his mind—perhaps his memory. The taste of something—foreign?—parting like a veil behind other veils in his brain. Something that had come to him in his sleep, just before dawn. Something. . . .

What of the six sorcerers? And the seventh who had not returned? Early this morning the six had subtly hinted that he, Du-jum, was somehow responsible for their missing comrade. Fools. . . . Had he wished it, he could slay them all openly.

Du-jum himself had opened ajar and thrown wine upon a mirror's coppery reflection to ascertain what had happened to the young adept, Elath. But there had been no answer. So—might he have escaped outside the perimeter of Du-jum's senses? Or might he be dead, or unconscious? Or was he guarding himself with a spell, and hatching a plot in the shadows?

As he paced, Du-jum's slippered foot stepped upon a long rug, one of many in the chamber, and the rug moved, but not because of his step.

The sorcerer's mind-patterns settled themselves instantly and he stepped back, crouching low, peering through the dimness at the rug.

The movement continued—like a long boil, writhing beneath the surface of the rug. Hissing, Du-jum gestured. A corner of the rug lifted into his fingers, and with one

strong pull he swept the entire thing up and away from the tiles.

Upon the bared stone crawled a serpent. It writhed, slipping on the smooth surface, then coiled up and stared venomously at Du-jum, its yellow eyes effulgent. It hissed, opening its mouth and rearing back as if to strike.

Du-jum growled a curse and waved both his hands before him; the serpent was drawn up into the air, where it squirmed helplessly. Then from his girdle Du-jum withdrew a knife and, with one swift motion, cut the serpent in half.

It hissed and dropped in two parts upon the stones, blood oozing from its severed ends. And then as Du-jum watched, sensing ill by some premonition, the halves of the snake uncoiled and froze in death and the oozing blood formed upon the tiles a symbol—a message—an answer to the sorcerer's unspoken, unformed question.

Du-jum gasped. Before him lay seven wavering lines conjoined at one center—seven thin trickles, long and wormy, like snakes. The sign of Sithra, the Serpent Goddess. The blood had formed it—this symbol of ancient power, rilling across the floor to harden for an instant and glow with a supernatural crimson luminosity. Then, dimming, the blood continued to course away, running deep into the cracks between the tiles, no more than the blood of a serpent.

The severed halves lay as they were, glowing with a fading yellow luminescence. "Sithra and Ixcatl!" muttered Du-jum.

Scowling, sure of the message and the symbol, he crossed the room and retrieved from a small closet behind a bookshelf the scepter he had stolen years ago. With it, he touched both parts of the snake's corpse. Instantly they metamorphosed, becoming smoke and blowing away.

Du-jum drew back his lips in a silent snarl of consternation. His throat felt tight. Sithra, then? Ixcatl? "Urmu and Set!" he muttered. "That dream!"

The scepter suddenly became warm in his grasp so that it, too, glowed. Instantly Du-jum let it go and it clattered upon the floor. Fear recoiled up his arm and struck into his heart. Fear! Sithra! Ixcatl!

They know—they come!

'I do not fear,' intoned the sorcerer. 'I will not fear. Fear has no place in my destiny.'

The scepter had reassumed its normal hue. Scowling darkly, his mind racing, memories churning, Du-jum picked it up once more and returned it to its closet, then sat quickly in a chair and folded his hands together, raised them thoughtfully to his lips.

Fear?

Fear of Sithra? Of Ixcatl? Or—Or of the daughter whom he knew existed, whom he had seen from afar, during his years of journeys, during sessions before his sorcerous mirrors and wine bowls—a daughter he did not know save, perhaps, by a name older than mankind: Vengeance.

Like a trumpet in the night, like a ripe fear bursting open to spray its seed upon a dark wind, the phrase raced through Du-jum's mind: The power of the serpent.

"Harken, all ye who would soar," muttered Du-jum, quoting a chorus of praise to Urmu, "the crawling things of earth battle always the flying things of the air. Yet as the clouds darken the land, as the rains flood the mountains, so the flying things of the air shall conquer all crawling, hopping, walking things. Be not trapped on earth! Be not bound to earth! This is the law of Urmu!"

Across the room, Yarise rolled over in her sleep, fluttered her eyes, opened them and stared through the dimness at Du-jum. She whispered his name, lifted her arms for

him to come to her.

"Ohhh—Du-jum. I... I had a dream; come and help me erase it, my love."

He did not move. Some heavy inner struggle still held him. Then within a heartbeat this emotion, too, was answered, as his fears had been answered by a bleeding serpent. Screams, sounding close at hand, rang suddenly from without the window, and in another moment Du-jum clearly heard the rising clangor of swords, the whinnying of horses and the tempest of furious warrior voices: "Omeron lives! Lord Omeron lives! Death to Du-jum! Join us, people of Thesrad! Join us for your families and your freedom! Join us for honor and vengeance! Death to the sorcerer! Lord Omeron lives!"

## Chapter 7.

The attack stunned those guards who, awaiting the change of patrol, were half-dozing at their posts. Six of them on the eastern flank of the palace, making small talk and chewing bori seeds to help keep themselves awake, suddenly saw a red-haired fury of a woman in mail leaping at them from behind a low wall.

Astonished, they moved for their pikes—and within a moment two of them had dropped lifeless to the ground, legs and arms twitching, victims of a swift and dazzling swordplay the like of which they had never seen.

Behind Sonja the Thesradians stormed forward, hacking down the other guards before they could cry out an alarm. Sonja threw herself against the wall of the palace and judged its entrance: a small gateway, probably leading to the kitch-ens or a storeroom; at any rate, she could see a door just across the small courtyard. She was about to enter, then hesitated, knowing it would be better to have two or three extra swords beside her when she did so.

Her decision came with the sounds of commotion within—running footsteps and furious curses approaching the courtyard from within the palace. At the same time she heard the first tidal roar of exploding violence from the front of the palace, where Omeron was leading an attack on the main entrance.

Sonja crouched low, sheathed her sword, and took up two pikes, which the slain soldiers of Du-jum had dropped. Resting one against the wall beside her, she held the other ready in both hands. From inside, the footsteps and curses came louder. Then, the slamming open of a door—and through an ivied trellis-work, Sonja saw a crowd of men with swords and spears rush out towards the gate.

She waited until they had smashed open the light metal grill work that barred the entrance way, then swung up the long pike and hurled it. The heavy, long-bladed spear trans-fixed the neck of the guard in the lead and ripped into the body of the man just behind him. The two went down in a welter of blood.

"Get that woman!" bellowed a soldier.

Sonja snatched up the second pike, hefted it an instant, then hurled it also into the dense knot of soldiers crowded into the gateway. More screams—and two more men in front were thrown back, weapons flying from outflung arms as the heavy spear drove through both, pinning them together and sending them flopping awkwardly on top of the first two so downed.

"Follow me, soldiers of Thesrad!" yelled Sonja, whip-ping out her sword again. "For Omeron!"

"Teeth of Nergal!" yelled the men ecstatically, surging forward. "Kill these dogs! Slay the sorcerer's puppets!"

They fought maniacally, blindly, driven by hate and long-withheld fury. Sonja screamed an Hyrkanian war cry as her sword dealt death—arcing, swerving, hacking. Screams choked in blood-filled throats. Gore and brains spattered Sonja's mail as she and Omeron's men smote in a rage on every side, overwhelming the guards within the gate and reducing them quickly to mounds of armored, butchered meat.

The survivors drew back, appalled at the Thesradians' berserk fury. Sonja charged over the pile of corpses to the palace grounds. A Kushite soldier lashed out at her with his axe, but she parried the blow and adroitly struck back, severing his axe arm from his body. The man shrilled a hoarse cry and fell to the flags, dying.

The remaining guards retreated across the court, regrouping at the door to the palace.

"Fools!" Sonja yelled after them, waving her bloody sword. "You have sold your souls to a sorcerer! You are damned to the Seven Hells for your madness!"

The last of Du-jum's retreating guards vanished inside the door to the palace. Sonja lowered her sword and breathed deeply. She was alive—alive and exhilarated! No longer half-dead, as she had felt while hiding from the foe like a rat, trapped in the city sewers. She was alive!

She felt in that moment like some war goddess, pulsing with frantic life. Her only life—life at its fiercest and fullest, though Death had just swarmed and screamed and fought furiously around her.

Someone touched her shoulder. It was the young wizard, Elath.

"I sense that you are close to yourself now, Red Sonja."

For reply she lifted back her head, shook blood drops from her long scarlet hair, held up her sword and, standing upon one of her slain foes, screamed to the cloudy sky above: "I am Sonja! I am Red Sonja of Hyrkania, and my sword is ali-i-ive"

Silence—a shocked silence on the part of the men who followed her—but only a momentary silence, followed by an enthusiastic cry of triumph in response.

And then, as if in answer to that outcry, an echo of thunder, rumbling from afar, but then growling more loudly. An unnatural thunder.

Suddenly Elath looked skyward and shouted: "Look! Up there! It's Du-jum!"

Sonja stared, as did all of Omeron's men. It was Du-jum, looking down from a high tower-balcony as he surveyed the entire city and the raging battle on his palace steps. A figure of menace he seemed, a Prince of Hell truly, imposing in his golden robe fringed with emerald and with his dark bird glowing upon his breast.

"Urmu!"

His voice, an invocation and a curse, howled out across the thundering wind.

"Urmu! Mentek upsa kele belem orku kra!"

The bird on his chest came alive shrieking. Du-jum released it, flinging it from his hand, and it winged out, still shrieking. Almost immediately hundreds and then thousands of birds filled the sky, rising up from rooftops and temples, trees and battlements, clouding the sky with their swarm, uttering forth an endless, abrasive screech that raked against the thundering clouds of heaven.

"Gods!" Sonja whispered, as Omeron's men came in close behind her.

"His birds again!" one of them snapped, tightening his grip on his sword. "His damned

birds again!"

"Fight them—" Sonja began, and instantly realized the foolishness of her words. The swarming sky of birds was descending, long lines of the avians peeling loose from the huge whirling circles of them, diving down toward the palace—and evoking in their descent the first mad shrieks of pain and anguish from the soldiers battling Du-jum's troops at the front of the palace.

"Fight them?" said Elath. "No, Red Sonja, there is no fighting them. The entrance—hurry!"

A dark wave of birds swooped around the palace, diving down toward Sonja and her companions. The soldiers yelled in panic. Sonja whirled and ran toward the open door of the entranceway, the men shoving after her. They gained access, and the birds did not follow, but dove madly into trees and bushes farther out. Sonja and Omeron's men cursed futilely as they heard wracking screams of torment rise up from their comrades.

"Damn him! Damn that black sorcerer!" yelled a young soldier.

The birds lifted up and continued their wide circling of the palace, some of them dripping trails of blood from their beaks and claws.

"Damn him!" screamed the soldier.

' "Shut up," snapped Sonja. ' "Du-jum's guards will probably be back here with reinforcements any minute. We've got to penetrate farther in before—"

Suddenly from the bushes outside came brutish sounds, bootsteps, and then a bloody figure emerged. Sonja sucked in a breath. One of the soldiers sought to move ahead, but another held him back.

"No good. We can't do anything for him now."

It was one of their comrades, streams of blood rilling down his face, waving his sword erratically, blindly before him.

"I can't see!" he screamed. "I can't see! They took my eyes!" He tripped on a root and slammed down against the ground on his belly, clawing the earth as he gasped his last. "They took my eyes! Du-jum—damn him!"

"We must get inside—" Sonja began.

"Aye—damn him!" shrieked the young soldier.

The cawing cacophony of the birds again, and the renewed tumult of shrieks from the front of the palace was countered by the echoing, dry blaze of thunder and lightning from the low clouds, although there was no rain.

Sonja remembered herself from a moment before, exulting triumphantly, and imagined herself a fool. But, no! She was a warrior again, and she would prove the quality of her enmity to the damned sorcerer!

"We must get inside!" she told the others again.

"And abandon Omeron?" cried the young guardsman. "Never!"

"We can't help him from here!" Sonja yelled. "Get hold of your wits, man!"

"She's right," another one said.

"Come on, while the way is unguarded," Sonja urged them. "We can get inside, and then—"

"I must help Lord Omeron!" cried the young guard again.

' "Listen to us!" One of his comrades grabbed his arm, held him. But the youth shook himself loose.

"Let me go! I must help!" Then he leapt over the mound of corpses and tore through the bushes, yelling: "Omeron! Omeron!"

The birds, sounding louder and closer, swept down again.

Sonja and the others, waiting as if for a voice from Fate, paused breathless for a moment. Then the soldier's mad scream lifted high and reached them. When it had died away to silence, they breathed again.

They crouched further inside as the second wave of birds swooped past them, a long line of dark flying things: hawks, ravens, grackles, pigeons, sparrows, kites, and a dozen other species large and small, their wings making a roar in the air.

"Inside!" Sonja hissed, then turned and closed the door behind them.

They were in a small room with walls of stone, lightless but for one oil lamp. Another closed door awaited them some paces beyond, with a grilled window in it at eye level. Cautiously, sword out, Sonja approached it and peered through.

"A kitchen," she said. "It's empty. . . ."

"There's another door here," said Elath, gliding over to it. He tested its latch, and it swung open. All eyes looked in.

"Dark," Elath said, and his voice trailed back to him as a low echo.

"Give him the lamp," Sonja directed.

It was taken down and passed to Elath; he held it up, stepped ahead carefully, spoke back: "Steps. They lead down. I feel we should go this way, Red Sonja."

"A wizard would choose the darker path," Sonja said. "But, let's take it. If nothing else, we won't be so in the open as we would be in the kitchens. We can look for

passageways—maybe overhear something—and strike from an unexpected direction."

Low voices assented to her judgment. Elath moved on, warning the others to proceed cautiously. Sonja lingered at the grilled window a moment more, as if hoping to see some sign of what had become of Omeron and those with him in front of the palace.

But she saw only a door opening on the far side of the kitchen.

"Sonja—hurry!" urged a hoarse voice from the steps.

Yet she watched for a moment more. Six figures had entered the kitchen—six men, all dressed in long blackrobes.

Immediately she sensed that they were devotees of some spiritual or magical cult; her nostrils flared, her lips drew back in a snarl.

Came a low voice: "In here, brothers, away from the blood. We must speak and decide for ourselves."

"Aye, aye," sounded other low mumbles.

"Sonja!" hissed the voice of the soldier.

She tore herself from the grille and followed, stepped down the first step and, as quietly as possible, pulled the heavy door closed behind her.

"What is it? What did you see, Sonja?"

"More sorcerers," she answered, sighing. "Six more sorcerers."

"Mitra!" exclaimed the soldier. And in that moment Sonja, glimpsing Elath's face in the lamplight, thought it seemed unusually strained, even sad.

But saying no more, they made their careful way down the steps, going lower and lower, those in the rear feeling their way with hands pressed against the dank wall.

Ahead of Sonja, Elath created a ghostly shadow of himself: a wavering silhouette illuminated by the smoky orange glow of his lamp, bobbing up and down as they descended into a subterranean corridor of dampness and old stench.

Of the one hundred and fifty-two men of Omeron's assault party who had fought Du-jum's soldiers and his flying army of birds on the front steps and portico of the palace, a mere sixty-three remained alive; of these, twenty-four had wounds so severe

and debilitating that they could no longer function wholly on their own. Eyes, ears and noses were pecked raw and bloody; legs, arms and necks streamed with numerous puncture-holes; scalps had been ripped open by the attacks of beak and claw.

When Du-jum had called off his army of avians and re-turned his black bird to his chest, where it became an inert amulet once more, he ordered his soldiers to herd the survivors into the huge front foyer of the palace. There they were grouped, and the severely wounded were pushed aside and made to crowd against one wall.

From the first step of the stairway to the throne-room, Du-jum surveyed them, and when all were collected, he gestured toward the wounded and told his troops: "Slay them! Collect their blood for the Temple of Urmu. Take these others into the audience hall, strip them and bind them with chains. We will use them tonight at our fete." He turned to Yarise, who stood trembling beside him, and said to her: "You wished a fete, did you not? And instructive entertainments of torture for our Thesradian guests? You will have it. Send servants to invite the nobles."

"Yes, my love, yes, yes," she answered breathlessly, but not looking at him, scanning the crowd of bloodied warriors jealously.

Du-jum studied her. "Do you look for Omeron?" he whispered to her.

She stared up at him, eyes wide. "Is—is he among these?" Her lips had gone white.

Du-jum smiled his friendless smile. He looked up, studied the crowd, pointed. "Bring forth Lord Omeron."

There was shuffling and a growling of threats, a brandishing of weapons, as guards entered the crowd of wounded and dragged forth Omeron. He walked limping, four soldiers holding him. His head was held high; he did not look at Yarise. Du-jum's deadly, earnest stare he met eye to eye. "Omeron . . ." Yarise muttered. He wrestled to control his trembling, his shame, his mad anger. "The Prince of Hell," he whispered drily—and, still

not looking at Yarise, "—with his whore."

Yarise paled still more; then her face reacted in a mask of wrath. "Kill him!" she screamed. "Kill him!"

"Take him to my chamber," Du-jum told his guards. "Strip him and chain him to the wall. I will come."

Omeron swallowed thickly, regarded Yarise briefly as he was taken away. He saw eyes of torment, eyes of anger.

'The mad spirits,' Du-jum muttered, 'will feast for long nights.' Then, aloud to his troops: 'Separate them! Take the wounded to Urmu! Now!'

"This tunnel leads to the dungeons," said Elath, pausing.

Sonja and the half-dozen of Omeron's warriors who had survived the battle of the gate had wended their way through a rock-hewn passageway deep within the cold underbelly of the ancient palace.

"How can you know that, Elath?" Sonja demanded.

The oil lamp flickered suddenly, and not from the air movement produced by its motion. Elath hushed the others to silence, and they paused.

"I sense human life close by. Human life, fearful yet hoping."

He held the lamp out from him and averted his face a bit so that his breath would not startle it. The flame still reacted to a slow breeze issuing from somewhere.

"Go on cautiously," one behind him warned.

They did so; and as the corridor bent up and down and swerved, the breeze came stronger, and they began to hear the dim resonance of voices.

Again they paused, listening. Sonja, last in line, could barely discern the talk far away from her. She took a moment to pause and, half dizzy from the rank damp air of the corridor, leaned against the wall with one shoulder. The block behind her gave inward. Grunting in astonishment, she ducked low, images of a clutching hand or a dagger or a trick coil leaping to her mind.

But there was nothing like that; only the gasping grate of an old loose stone settling inward, resting perilously close to falling as it teetered on the brink of the stone under it.

Those ahead of her turned. Sonja was erect again, testing the wall with her fingers.

"What is it?" The men closest to her approached.

"The wall," she whispered. "It's hollow."

"Sonja, we don't have time now—"

"We have all the time in the world. A place like this might lead to nothing, or it might make all the difference to us. Even Du-jum might not know of the passage we're in now; and if this hole leads anywhere, we can be sure he knows nothing of it." She continued to pry at the blocks with her fingers, carefully scraping away the ancient crumbling mortar, first with her short nails and then with her dagger tip.

She heard exasperated sighs behind her. Then Elath approached with the lamp in his hand.

"Go ahead if you wish!" Sonja breathed tensely. "I want to find out about this."

"As do I," said the wizard. "I prayed to the Fates to aid us; perhaps this is their answer." The soldiers stopped grumbling, ceased their sighing. "There, now." Sonja was able to pry free the block beneath the loose one and slide it forward. "Help me—if they fall they'll make a lot of noise. ..."

Two pairs of arms joined hers, and together the three of them lifted down the stone blocks with grunts and oaths, settling them carefully to the floor.

"What now?" asked a soldier.

"Bring the lamp over here, Elath."

The wizard did so. The weak light showed a hollow interior, like a cave. The inward rush of relatively old air collided with the ancient stench of wholly dead air, making Sonja and the others gasp.

"So what's in there?" asked another soldier.

"Lift me up," Sonja told them, sheathing her dagger and placing her arms on the edge of the opening, beginning to raise herself off the floor.

One of the men grunted, placed both hands firmly on Sonja's bottom and boosted her up. The opening was more than large enough to admit her; she crouched on the edge of it and growled back at her aide: "Thanks for the push—but watch it next time!"

"My hand slipped."

"I know, I know. Pass the light over here, will you?"

"Sonja, we don't know where this tunnel leads, or how old—"

"Just hand me the lamp! Mitra's balls, what're you men afraid of?"

That silenced them, her pointing out with a curse that it was fear that made them wary, not loss of time. Sonja took the oil lamp, placed it on the ledge beside her, then—judging the distance to the ground—jumped in. For a moment she was wholly within the shadows; then her tousled mane of flamy hair rose up again, and her white hand took up the lamp from its perch.

Three faces crowded at the opening, peering in, and what they saw was not what they expected.



Sonja, too, was disappointed. Within a moment she had made a circuit of the entire chamber. It was circular, walled with ancient stone blocks—and clearly led nowhere. Sonja cursed under her breath and started to cross again to the opening.

"There, are you satisfied?" said one of the guards. "Nothing ventured—oooff!" She half-sprawled but re-gained her balance, brought the lamp down to see what had made her stumble. "Mitra!"

It was a huge circular stone sunk in the center of the stone floor, and in the middle of it a heavy iron staple. Sonja peered around the edge of the slab, then set down the lamp and grasped the ring.

"Sonja." It was Elath, climbing—almost slithering— through the aperture, his eyes glowing.

She strained, trying to lift up the slab. It didn't budge. "Sonja, listen to me," said Elath, now standing by her. "There are legends about some of the cities in this valley. There are old routes beneath some of them, and some ancient writings say they lead straight to the Seven Hells, or even all the way under the earth into the Sea of Darkness that we float upon."

"What?" Sonja wiped hair out of her eyes and stood up, breathing heavily from her futile exertions.

"I think that is why Du-jum is here, Sonja. He is looking for a route to the Hells, to meet in person the infernal Master he has chosen to serve. And you may just now have found one of these routes."

She thought a moment, then responded in a very small voice: "Oh." Such a possibility she did not wish to test. Demons, wizards, sorcery—she had met all these, even fought them. But to battle the Primal Agents themselves, to stumble upon one of the Other Worlds directly. . . . 'Sonja, let's get going," urged one of the men nervously. "Aye—" She bent to retrieve the oil lamp and, in so doing, noticed what seemed to be a strange, raised carving upon the stone slab. Upon closer examination, it proved not to be a carving at all, but an implement, a dagger, so covered with incrustation as to seem almost a part of the stone.

Sonja crouched low, held the lamp near, took hold of what seemed to be the handle of the dagger. She yanked on it—and the blade pulled free from its sheath: a stone scabbard, part of the top of the slab.

"Sonja!" The soldier sounded angry, now, with fear or exasperation.

And another voice: "What is that?"

It was Elath who answered: "A dagger. It's a dagger."

And a strange dagger, Sonja realized—shining and solid, as though just forged and burnished, and perfectly formed. She brushed away the remaining incrustation from the handle, which showed no sign of corrosion and seemed to be carved of a stone like jade. The weight of it lay in her hand with perfect balance as she hefted it. The blade itself was of—what? Copper or bronze, silver or steel? It was hard to tell in this light—or perhaps in any light, for it seemed almost to shiver with a dull light of its own. Upon the blade symbols glowed; Sonja could not read them, nor had she ever in any of her wide travels seen symbols even remotely like them. The handle, too, was a wonder, smoothly polished and carved intricately. Sonja studied it in the smoky lamplight. Creatures were carved onto the handle: something at the top of the haft that looked like a winged octopus, and beneath it swarm-ing serpents, strange geometrical patterns, faces so demonic and so seemingly alive in the weird play of the lamp shadows that Sonja felt a curious revulsion rise within her. She had opened

strange portals in her day, had entered odd regions with little thought of what lay beyond, but never before had she sensed such a closeness to the Outside—to. . . .

"Sonja!" cried Elath. "Do not lose yourself!"

She started from her reverie, then rose, nodding, moved as much by an uncanny presentiment as by the warning in the wizard's voice. Slowly she stood up, thrusting the jade-handled knife into her belt. Taking up the lamp once more, she carried it to the opening and handed it through, then climbed up and, preoccupied, paid no attention to the hands of the men on her body as they helped her through.

Once she was back in the tunnel, Elath took up the lamp and began to lead the way again. Only one of the soldiers showed some interest in Sonja's find.

"That was a dagger?"

"Aye."

"Let me see it."

"In this light?" She shook her head, feeling a sudden reluctance to part with the weapon. "Just an old dagger. It might come in handy."

"Ummm."

A few moments more down the winding tunnel, and the voices farther on became more distinct; the draft blew more strongly, and another sort of light began to filter into the passage. They all proceeded more cautiously. A few turns more, and then Elath, holding the lamp, stopped and waved his arm behind him.

"What is it?" Sonja whispered, coming around to stand beside him.

"Look. Prison cells."

They found themselves upon the threshold of the palace prison. They could see it clearly: a long hallway, just beyond a massive iron door with a small grilled window in it. The cells lined either side of the corridor—and the voices issued from soldiers of Du-jum's who were standing before the barred doors of the cells, taunting the prisoners within.

Sonja said: "However many renegades there are, they'll be on our side."

"We're going to free them?" asked one of the soldiers.

"Just as soon as those Kushite jackasses decide to go upstairs for some breakfast."

The soldiers settled down, then, and listened, trying to sense if the guards would leave soon or not.

"What did you say your name was?" one of the turnkeys was asking the inhabitant of the nearest cell. His belligerent tone had a slurred, Darfarian accent. "I had a dog named that one time. Kiros? Didn't you say your name was Kiros?"

"You're the dog, you know. Du-jum's dog! Open this door, damn you, and I'll kill you so fast—"

"Du-jum's going to torture you like—"

"Shut up! Shut up, dog to a wizard!"

Sonja sighed, sat on the ground beside the door and muttered: "It looks like we may have a little wait."

Yarise, meanwhile, was taunting Omeron, who hung naked by his arms from chains set into the wall. His feet, similarly chained, were a small distance above the floor.

"And then do you know what Du-jum and I do?" she said, standing before him and licking her lips, wiping her hands over her body.

"It doesn't matter, Yarise. You're a whore—always were. Now you're a sorcerer's whore. What's the difference?"

"Du-jum will kill you slowly!"

'If he kills me, I doubt it will be because I called his whore names."

Suddenly giving vent to her fury, Yarise pirouetted about, looking for a weapon, and found it in a small silver bowl on a table. She picked it up and pulled her arm back to hurl it.

Omeron flinched, unable to move much in his suspension. The silver bowl flew, straight for his unprotected groin. "Stop!" Du-jum's voice boomed out.

Instantly, the silver bowl swerved in its course, spinning crazily through the air and clattering against the wall far from Omeron.

Yarise looked up in anger; Omeron watched the sorcerer as he strode into the room, robes swirling about him.

"Begone, Yarise," said Du-jum. "Go find some servants to harangue. I would have words with your—husband."

Sneering, not wanting to show Omeron the power Du-jum held over her, but afraid not to follow his orders, Yarise spat at her former lord, made an obscene gesture in the air, and departed with head held high.

Du-jum moved a hand; a large wooden chair squeaked across the floor and positioned itself a small distance from Omeron. Du-jum sat, groaned, and wiped his face with his hands, then looked up at the former ruler of Thesrad.

"She is a witch," the sorcerer sighed. "And I am not referring to her magical talents."

"A whore," said Omeron coldly. "Whore is the word you want. And she does have a talent for it. But above all, as you must know by now, she is a spoiled, vindictive child." Du-jum laughed out loud at the remark, then sobered. "Wine. You need some wine." He indicated a vessel, and it began to float up from a table—but Omeron shook his head.

"No wine for me until I rule in Thesrad once more!"

"Ah. I see." Du-jum's voice turned cooler as the wine vessel returned to its place. "You will wait long, then, to quench your thirst."

"Only vengeance can quench my thirst."

"No doubt. Omeron—Lord Prince—I admire you. I re-spect you. You have fought well against me, and you are no craven. I wish to learn one thing from you. If you will tell me what I would know—now or a bit later—I will slay you painlessly. For to those who do my will I am beneficent, merciful."

Omeron did not deign to reply.

"The choice is yours, Prince of Thesrad: Shall you die quickly, or in prolonged agony?"

"As Sadhur did?"

"You knew of that? Did Yarise—"

"I guessed."

"You guessed correctly," growled Du-jum. "Sadhur died in terrible agony, trying to be noble—as you are—and now he writhes in the Seven Hells."

"So you say. But even if he does, I'm sure he preferred it that way."

"Be not so sure. Sadhur's Fate is already decided; yours is not. You will tell me what I wish to know. There are caverns, passageways, tunnels beneath this city . . ." here

Du-jum stood up and approached Omeron, who eyed him warily. "They lead to—other places. I wish access to them. They are difficult to discover; they are more ancient than man, and attempting sorcerous divination to find them only increases their nimbus of protection. Humans have been known to stumble upon them in the past. Such accidents are rare, but not unknown; it seems the old Protectors of those gateways failed to guard against blundering, accidental discovery."

Omeron said bluntly: "I know of no such tunnels."

"Perhaps not, Lord Prince. Yet if you do know, I will learn it from you. Tell me of the tunnels and you will know my benevolence, my mercy. If you cannot—"

"I've told you that I don't know."

"And again, I must say I disbelieve you." Du-jum sighed. "I was afraid of this. Stern leaders are stubborn prisoners.

But what is wise in politics, Omeron, is often foolish in other areas. You leave me no choice."

"I had no choice from the moment you attacked Thesrad, sorcerer."

Du-jum smiled darkly. "I do admire you, Omeron. Know this: if I must cause you pain, you are the true cause of it, not I."

"Just get this over with, wizard!"

"Very well. As you ask." Du-jum rose; he approached Omeron, hands held out.

And guards in the hall outside heard a sudden shriek of agony from the room—and another, and another.

## Chapter 8.

"Now!" Sonja said. "Force the door!"

The day was half-gone. Elath had just told them that he no longer sensed any guardsmen nearby. Now the six soldiers of Omeron drew their heavy-bladed daggers and began working the steel points all around the edge of the door, searching for weak spots. The handle, locked long ago and so rusted that it had become part of the wall, was the strongest point. The weakest points, it proved, were the hinges.

"Not ordinary hinges, these," muttered Elath, peering close as the six worked. It was a strange ball-and-socket arrangement—iron bars with cupped ends somehow welded onto the iron frame of the door, pairs of them linked to other pairs on the wall in a fashion similar to an elbow or a knee. Iron balls rested within the pairs, held in place by pins. It was rather puzzling, for it was a much more complex hinge than was necessary, and more artificially organic in its design. The thought of that made Sonja wonder just how old these tunnels actually were, and who—or what—might have built them.

But the ball-and-socket hinges, no matter what their origin, could not long resist the attack of strong arms and durable steel. In a short while Sonja and her companions, sweating and gasping in the dead air, had forced apart four of the iron elbows and wrenched them away. The heavy door tilted inward dangerously as the fourth, one of the bottom ones, was pried loose.

Then all six of the men eased the door back; it grated, scraped and almost crashed, but they were able to back out from under it and let it thud at last to the floor.

"Who's there?" "What is that?" came the startled exclamations of the prisoners in their cells. Faces tried to look out through the grilled windows. "Gods, it must be Du-jum!"

"Quiet, all of you!" Sonja called to them, trying to keep her voice from carrying unduly. "We're resisters! Lord Omeron has entered the city, but many of his troops

were taken by Du-jum this morning!"

"Resisters!"

"Prince Omeron!"

"He's alive?"

"Listen to me! We may be all that are left. We're going to get you out of here, but we've got to act as a group!"

By this time Sonja and the others were in the center of the corridor, turning back and forth watchfully, looking at all of the prisoners and speaking to them directly.

"We're with you, woman!"

"Aye! Get us out of here and we'll help you slay Du-jum!"

"We'll help you fight for Omeron!"

"Where are the keys, then? Where do the guards keep the keys?"

"On a ring!" Kiros called. "The fattest one keeps it on his belt."

"And where are the guards? Still down here?"

"Keep following this tunnel," Kiros told her, "and you'll find the entrance after a few turns. There's a room there, and that's where the guards stay. Always at least two on duty, I think; sometimes more."

Sonja looked at Omeron's troops, and without hesitation one of them said: "I'm going. I'll be but a moment." "Take two others with you."

The three of them hurried down the corridor, swords out, and turned a corner. Their footfalls quickly vanished.

"Now. . . ." Sonja approached the youth, Kiros, whose face peered through the grillwork, his hands knotted on the bars. "How many of you are down here?"

"Hard to say. I was brought in last night; they found me with one of Lord Omeron's generals, but they didn't bring him down here." "Sadhur?"

"That was his name."

"All right. How many prisoners are down here?" Sonja asked the question all around. By the confusion of voices that answered her, she judged at least twenty or twenty-five.

She returned to the youth. "Your name is Kiros?" "Yes. I'm a rebel. I want to fight for Lord Omeron." "My name is Sonja. I'm not from Thesrad, but Omeron found me ill and saved my life, so I'm helping him." Kiros nodded. "A free sword?" "Aye. Do you know the palace well?" "Pretty well, yes. Maybe not so well as some others here, but together we can find our way around."

"Good enough. Because we've got to stick together, we've got to prowl around and find what's going on. We've got to make plans for a surprise against Du-jum." "We'll do it! He's—"

But just then the three returned with blood on their swords, jangling a ring of bronze keys. Voices rose up from the cells, clamoring.

"Take it easy, take it easy! We'll have you all out in a moment!"

"No problems?" Sonja asked the man with the keys.

"None. There were four of them. Never knew what hit them."

Sonja nodded as he walked to one end of the corridor and began working the keys into first one lock, then another, slowly moving down the line.

Yarise's invitations to a fete to be held that very night in the palace's main audience chamber were quickly and politely answered, by return messenger, by all but one of the fifty-three nobles still remaining in Thesrad. The one abstaining, she learned, had thrown himself upon his sword and died that morning.

Better for him, perhaps, Yarise thought, as she paced her chamber. Better that he should die, and go away from here. So should they all die, all these nobles who had always hated her. And so they all would—soon, soon.

Yet she was unsettled. Things were not progressing quite as she had hoped. Du-jum no longer took all his pleasure with her. Was she losing her hold on him? Had her hold ever really been all that strong? She pouted. It was unfair! And her mocking of Omeron hadn't won the hoped-for praise from Du-jum. Finally—perhaps worst of all—she was unable to help the wizard with the things that apparently mattered most to him. She knew little of ancient sorceries, nothing of the tunnels and caverns beneath the city supposedly leading to the Seven Hells. She wondered if her presence seemed to Du-jum an intrusion now, rather than a warm lamp?

He had accepted her idea for the fete, but he was not doing with it what she intended. There were too many tortures already, too many sacrifices. Killing the hated nobles was one thing, but did Du-jum intend to rule a necropolis? Was he simply killing off the entire city in chunks? She wished to rule a living city, but the sorcerer seemed to wish merely to devastate it, offering up its population to the dark gods until he reached his goal. And what was that goal?

Yarise was becoming afraid.

She began to realize that she was alone. Alone, without Omeron or Du-jum or anyone she could trust. Alone. And, alone, she must decide things for herself; she could blame no one else for things that her actions caused.

The thought was frightening, and she angrily put it from her. No! She would reign with Du-jum; they would be king and queen upon a great double throne founded upon sorcer-ous power. Yet, she did not wish the world devastated. She wished—She suddenly realized that what she wished was that Omeron could have been a mighty sorcerer to indulge her every fantasy, while their city magically went on and on in a closed circle, doing whatever it is that cities do, so that she, Yarise, could have been the goddess she was meant to be, resting sublimely on an ivory throne above this gross, con-temptible world of squalor and bustle. But Omeron had been only a man. The fete, she decided, would change things. There she and Du-jum would show their strengths. Omeron would be tor-tured to death, and that would be the end of him and his petty, judgmental mind. Du-jum would learn what he wished to learn, and then the two of them would be happy in Thesrad. Magicians and dignitaries would come from all corners of the world, and Thesrad would become a splendid metropolis of art, science, and magic. And she, Yarise, would be praised and worshipped as its queen for the rest of her life, and forever after that she would be adored in memory for being the cause of it all: a princess among barbarians, whose influence made her deserving of endless processions of ad-mirers throughout the ages.

The day was dimming and shadows were growing longer, purple over the fieldlands. Ilura the serpent, huge in the illusion she cast, bent and rolled and plied her way across the wide grassy plain, feeling the push and the pull, the rustling slow whisper on either side of her as her serpents and lizards flowed with her, crawled with her towards the city of Thes-rad.

The city was before her now, its walls bobbing in her vision above the windswept stalks of grasses, sitting upon its low rise in the valley and sloping down to the river, with sunlight turning ruddy upon its towers and pennons, some lights beginning to shine in its windows.

Tireless, eager, and thirsty for vengeance, she moved on, while all about her the

grasslands rustled with her countless servitors. The hatred was against her father, and she knew that he had been warned, but knew also that the warning would have stricken him with dark fear.

Justice would be rendered by the crushing coils and ven-omed fangs of Sithra's minions; the feathered ones who served her evil father with their beaks and talons would be destroyed. Death would revel; ghosts would howl and de-mons laugh. Vengeance would descend, and sorcery would meet sorcery with the force of storms and lightning bolts. Slowly, inexorably, the walls of Thesrad rose ever higher in the vision field of thousands of reptilian eyes.

There were twenty-five prisoners, some malnourished or wounded, a few close to madness, all weaponless but full of hate—and free, now, to decide their own fates and the fate of Thesrad.

They gathered what weapons they could find, stripping the four dead guards of what they had, then forced the door of a small chamber, which housed a few more arms: ten swords, a dozen daggers, some chain flails, and a few rods of iron left from some minor blacksmithing operation.

Armed, then, they left the prison corridors quickly, taking a back way through an old, broken, and unrepaired door. They plodded on, not saying much, lighting their way with torches that had lit the guards' entrance foyer to the subterra-nean cells.

Presently they came to an L-shaped storage room, which stank of litter and filth years old. Crowding around the bend in it, they extinguished all but two torches on the dust of the ground.

Kiros and a few of Omeron's troops hastily sketched an outline of the palace in the dust, showing the known stair-ways, inner wall passages, entranceways, chambers, and so on.

"We'll have to divide up," Sonja told them, "so that we can reconnoiter and share information later. We'll have to meet at one place—someplace where we can take Du-jum by surprise."

"His bedchamber," offered someone.

"No," said Elath, shaking his head. "He has protected it well with sorcery. Some public place in the palace would be better—someplace where he will think himself secure with a few guards around him—"

"Aye. Then we can rush him and his guards quickly, and take him with his sorcerous defenses down," agreed Sonja. "There are thirty-three of us. We might all die—but even if it comes to that, we can at least take Du-jum with us!"

"The audience chamber," another man commented. "It's very large, and there's a balcony running all the way around it. There are probably ten or twelve doors giving onto the balcony from the second floor."

"Guards there?" Sonja asked.

"Most likely. But we can sneak up behind them from the corridors and silence them. From the balcony we can look down at the audience chamber and decide what we want to do."

"There are enough of us," Sonja replied, "for some to go upstairs and slay the guards on the balcony, while the rest of us rush the doors on the chamber's level."

"You're right, Sonja. We could do it."

"Be prepared to die," she told all of them. "But first we must slay Du-jum. No matter what, we'll avenge Omeron and Thesrad."

Decided upon this scheme, they divided themselves into four groups; each group,

tracing in the dust, rehearsed its own path to follow through the inner walls of the palace to gain the upper and lower levels of the audience chamber.

But Elath, drawing Sonja aside for a moment, remarked: "Omeron was lucky to befriend you, Sonja, for I'm sure no native son or daughter of Thesrad could be more willing to fight and die for his cause than you. Yet, when you said we will avenge Omeron and Thesrad, I sensed that there were other names behind those. Am I right, Red Sonja?"

Sonja did not reply save with her eyes. It bothered her that the wizard had read her inmost soul so readily. Olin . . . Suthad. . . .

At sunset, the fifty-two nobles arrived precisely on schedule at the palace and were seated with their servants behind them at a long U-shaped table set against three walls of the large

chamber. Centered before the middle table, against the wall, sat Du-jum's audience throne on a low dais, and ranged on either side of it were other chairs to accommodate Yarise and the six young sorcerers.

In the exact center of the chamber, on a gigantic upright wheel of wood and iron, was stretched the naked form of Omeron. The prince was alive but obviously was to become an object of entertainment after the meal was served. An entertainment—and a warning?

The nobles, as they entered the chamber, were shocked to discover their respected lord in such a humiliating predicament. Some wept; others began to protest out loud. A number tried to approach Omeron to have words with him, but Du-jum's guards would not allow it.

Nor did Omeron say anything to these men, although a few called out entreatingly for some word from him. What message could he present to them other than the one they already witnessed: their lord, the prince of their conquered city, now at the mercy of its conqueror.

Upstairs, meanwhile, a guardsman raced frantically down the hall to Du-jum's chamber.

"My Lord!" he cried out, pounding on the door.

Du-jum was within, preparing himself for the sorcery he meant to perform for the evening spectacle. He was in a half-trance, concentrating.

"My Lord, you must have word of this!"

Outraged, Du-jum called out in a thick voice: "Begone! I am not to be disturbed when I am in this room! Speak again and I will slay you!"

Nervously, the guard decided what to do. If he could not impart his urgent message to his master, then he must confide it to Princess Yarise.

He found her in a small chamber outside the audience hall, preparing for her entrance. Bowing low, he approached and whispered in Yarise's ear: "The prisoners have escaped!"

"What is this?" she asked, shocked, then drew the guard aside. "Tell me again!"

"I tried to warn Lord Du-jum, Mistress, but he warned me away. He was within himself. But it's true. Somehow, all the prisoners have escaped from their cells. They slew the guards! We can't find them, we don't know where they are!"

"And Du-jum does not know this?"

"No, Mistress."

Yarise thought a moment. There were certainly enough guards throughout the building to adequately protect herself and her guests; but this might play well into her



own hands—something she knew that Du-jum did not. She could use this—slay all the escaped prisoners if they revealed themselves and thereby prove herself to Du-jum, gain his gratitude.

"Do not interrupt him again," she told the guard. "I will take care of this. Speak of this matter to no one else; you will only cause trouble if you do."

"Very well, Mistress. Very well."

The air of the audience chamber was thick with furtive whisperings.

The nobles, having been seated, were now waiting for Lord Du-jum's entrance. Most of them, all who were not cowards, had concocted a secret plan. They carried daggers beneath their robes, and their servants carried knives hidden in their boots or under their long hair. They knew that Du-jum would enter a magical trance tonight, while torturing Ome-ron, and hoped that when he was so distracted they would be able to rise up and destroy him. Forty of them, plus eighty servants, were in on the plot; surely they could manage to overpower Du-jum's guards, slay the dark lord and his six sorcerous flunkies.

The young sorcerers, Aspre and his followers, entered solemnly into the chamber.

Dark robes rustling, eyes glow-ing faintly even in the well-lit banquet hall, they seated themselves in the chairs near Du-jum's throne. The nobles, nervously fingering their hidden weapons, attempted to hide their tension under a veneer of light banter. Sonja, with Kiros, Elath, and seven others had made their way carefully, traveling through back rooms and hidden passageways, approaching the audience chamber on the balcony level while trusting that their companions were making similar progress. Now they were in a small, windowless cubicle of a room with shelves full of parchments along the walls. Silently they crouched, listening, looking out the door at the vacant hallway while sounds from the nearby audience chamber traveled to them.

"The hall is empty," Sonja whispered. "I'll go first to make sure—"

Suddenly a curtain was drawn behind them, across the room, and a young woman's voice called out in shocked tones: "Gods! What are you doing here?"

Ilura, a dim serpent shadow on the plain, came to the walls of the city.

Dusk was fallen. High above, against the fading light of the west, guards walked on the ramparts, unaware of the silent sea of reptiles that crawled beneath them in the shadows, probing about the ancient stone foundations of the city, seeking crevices.

"Sithra!" called the gigantic serpent, Ilura. "Ixcatl! Guide me within!"

She paused, nonhuman instincts and senses alert to subtle influences of deterministic sorcery. Then she turned to the left, slithering over the flat, grassy fields outside the city, through the small planted trees, around old ruined walls. Chickens and dogs scattered in panic, squawking and howling.

Not far from the river, she came to a low postern door of heavy oak—a way inside!

The serpent shape began to change obscurely in the gloom. Already much diminished, it dwindled still more, thickening, shrinking, becoming vertical.

And then Ilura stood there in the deepening dusk—a slender young woman in her simple garment, listening to the tall grasses rustling all about her to the movements of the innumerable crawling things.

She walked to the postern door, picked up a rock and began to hammer loudly upon the stout planks.

"Open!" she called out. "Let me in!"

She heard guards stirring and cursing atop the wall, but for long moments nothing else happened. Then many torches appeared upon the battlements.

"What do you want, woman?"

"In, you fool!"

"Are you alone?"

"Do you see an army with me?"

More moments passed. Finally there came a clattering of bolts and chains, and the thick postern gate swung open. Several of Du-jum's soldiers stood just inside, the torches they carried gleaming on their armor and barbaric ornaments of bone. At the sight of Ilura, they all grinned.

"Well, well," said the foremost soldier, "what's a fine young thing like you doing—"

"Satha na ikis Ixcatl!" Ilura shouted, extending an arm and pointing at them.

Instantly the grasses erupted with a wave of slithering, scaly creatures that poured through the doorway and over the feet and ankles of the guardsmen. Frantic squawks of pain and terror rang through the night for a brief while, mixed with the venomous hissings of a thousand reptilian throats. Then Ilura walked slowly, calmly through the portal, past the quivering bodies of the poison-bloated guards, while about her delicate sandaled feet flowed inward the scaly river of her thousands upon thousands of angrily hissing followers.

The door opened into a small room of brick, and an opposite door let out upon the riverside lanes of the city. Ilura saw a stable farther down, a metal shop across from her. A few drunken men in the torchlight were lewdly passing around a plump, naked woman whose skin glistened like copper. Shrieks of laughter rose amid drunken grumbles— then quieted.

Screams suddenly rang out.

The wave of reptiles passed down along a wall bordering the river, toward a larger entranceway with a rusted, disused portcullis chained in place high above it. They flowed through, scales winking in the torchlight, filling the street from side to side. Around the corner of a tavern appeared a man on horseback—an officer of Du-jum's, prowling the lanes of Thesrad for loot or the gratification of lust. His horse, sensing the reptilian tide, nickered and tried to back away. Uncom-prehending, the Kushite cursed and hefted his wide-bladed spear, looking to see what his horse was shying from. He saw shadows—moving. "Who's—aahhh!"

With the sound of rasping dead leaves along cobblestones, an autumnal sound, the reptiles came surging out of the darkness of the shadowed walls, a huge wave of them, fanged jaws agape, scales and claws rasping. The man screamed as he was thrown from his frantic mount to strike heavily upon the cobbles.

In a moment it was over; the man lay twitching beneath the flowing carpet of claws and scales, his body swollen with venom, his legs kicking in the last throes. The horse, scream-ing in terror, galloped away like a lightning bolt.

Ilura and her followers moved onward, leaving a trail of death and horror in the deserted darkness behind them— onward, toward the palace, now only half a city away.

Quickly one of Omeron's men clapped his hand over the girl's mouth and brought his short sword up to her throat. Terrified, she tried to break away, then relaxed in a near faint.

Sonja approached and looked into the girl's wide eyes. "She's just a servant. Put your sword away."

The soldier did so.

"If he removes his hand," Sonja said to the girl, 'will you promise not to scream?"

Violent bobbing of the head.

"Let go of her mouth."

The girl nearly swooned, but Sonja and the soldier held her up. In that moment, Kiros cried out: "Endi! Endi!"

"Kiros?" said the girl weakly. "Kiros?"

"You know each other?" said Sonja, surprised.

"She's a servant of Yarise's," said Kiros. Then, turning to the girl: 'Endi, we were prisoners. We escaped. You must not be found with us!"

"Aye, we escaped this afternoon," Sonja told her. 'Now, listen to me. Does anyone know that we're out?"

Endi shook her head violently. 'I haven't heard anything. What are you going to do?"

"We're going to slay Du-jum."

The thought seemed not to astound the girl. A change of expression came over her face. Gravely: "And Yarise, too?"

"Why Yarise? Why do you ask?" demanded Sonja.

Endi's voice quivered. "She's a witch. She hurts me; she hurts everyone!"

"We only want Du-jum."

"Give me a sword—a knife! I'll kill Yarise. ..."

From the door came a harsh whisper: "Sonja!"

She hurried over. The sounds of festivity arose: cheers at the entrance of Lord Du-jum.

"It's begun, Sonja!"

"Quietly." She turned to Endi: "Stay here for now, girl. When the fighting starts, run for your life—into the streets. Get out of here!"

They crowded into the doorway; Sonja stuck her head out, then scampered across the hallway and pressed herself against the wall. Another followed. Slowly they began to creep down the corridor, towards the sounds from the audience chamber.

But Kiros looked back at Endi, paused, then hurried back to her. She looked up at him.

"I'm a rebel now, Endi—a soldier for Omeron. I was a prisoner—the red-haired woman and some others helped me escape. You're still Yarise's servant?"

She nodded her face, pained.

"It's too bad we didn't know one another better—before all this."

Endi smiled at him, sadly. "Give me a knife."

"I'd better not."

Bitterly, tears in her eyes: "Then—give me a kiss."

He kissed her, tentatively, gently.

"Better," Endi said, "than Yarise's kisses. . . ."

Stunned, Kiros drew a knife from his belt. "To protect yourself, if need be," he said.

"But don't go looking for anyone to kill with it. Just run like hell, will you, and get out of here before the commotion starts?"

From the door he heard: "Come on, Kiros! You 're the last one!"

Another kiss and he hurried across the room, looked out the door, hastened into the corridor, and fell into line behind the others.

Sonja, up ahead at the corner, peered around. An entranceway to the balcony of the audience chamber was guarded by several soldiers, all looking out.

Sonja sucked in a deep breath. "Make it fast," she said to her men, 'and pray to Mitra that some of the others are on time! Where's that wizard, Elath? Maybe he can divine

whether—"

She stopped speaking, for in looking about she realized that the young wizard was not with them. Evidently the others had not noticed his departure, either, for all were looking around in a puzzled manner. How long had Elath been gone?

Then her speculations were cut short as wild cheers rang from the audience hall, followed by sudden shrieks, screams, the sound of armor clashing, blades being drawn, tables overturning, cries of outrage and anger, and Du-jum's bel-lowing.

"Come on!" Sonja yelled, and threw herself around the corner, sword out.

There are more ways to die than there are to live.

Omeron now knew the truth of this old saying as never before—now as Du-jum, having made pronouncements to his seated guests, turned and looked him in the eyes and lifted his hands for the first sorcerous torture.

Time slowed. Omeron desperately fought his bonds, tens-ing against the inevitable and impending pain. Du-jum smiled.

There was a scream from the main entrance—a guard, dying in agony. Then came wild battle cries as armed men rushed into the chamber.

More screams, and then something hurtled down into the banquet room, just missing Du-jum—a spear, clattering away on the floor.

Omeron looked up just as one of Du-jum's guards toppled screaming from the high balcony, fell threshing through the air, and smashed into one of the tables, splintering it. The nobles seated there leaped backward into their servants, so that all fell in a heap.

"Stand back!" Yarise shrieked from the dais. "I can slay you with magic!"

Then she reeled as a thrown object struck her on the head and brought blood.

Shrieking, Yarise stumbled away down the dais stairs and ran for an exit.

The six sorcerers rose up instantly and, pressing them-selves against the wall, shielded themselves with their magic. Missiles began to fly past them but did not touch them.

"Come on—at them!"

The cry sounded from above, and Omeron turned his head in time to see a red-haired warrior-woman charge through the brace of guards at the head of the balcony stairs—behind her, a roaring flood of armor and swords, spears, and angry faces.

Then a second mob stormed in from an inner door of the banquet room, and the insane fury mounted. More bodies dropped from the balcony onto the tables. Blood spouted, steel clashed furiously, and screams filled the air as men battled in rage and hate.

Now the nobles, having drawn their weapons, surged forward to join the fight against Du-jum's guards. The sor-cerer's troops retreated to the walls, shocked and disor-ganized.

Du-jum turned madly toward Omeron. "You did this!" he roared, yellow eyes blazing in fury. He raised his hands for a sorcerous attack.

Then a thrown knife caught the wizard in mid-gesture, the blade piercing right through his forearm. Du-jum hissed, glared back at the nobleman who had thrown the knife, then painlessly pulled it out and hurled it. Unerringly the weapon sped across the room and buried itself in the man's forehead.

"They will not win!" Du-jum called to Omeron—and then he was forced back by the wild, slashing mob of bat-tlers.

Sonja, in the forefront of the conflict, spotted Omeron writhing in his bonds on the rack and cried out his name, then hacked her way free from an entanglement and

raced around toward him. One of Du-jum's huskies, axe up, made for her. Sonja barely evaded the mad blow by dropping to the tiles. Skidding past, she swiped out with her blade and caught the man across the belly. Immediately he went down, howling and spilling out a trail of entrails, and Sonja leaped up and ran to Omeron.

"Don't move!"

Her blade flashed once, twice, twice again. The fourth hack cut the last of Omeron's bonds, and he dropped forward, pained and exhausted from the stretching of his muscles. Sonja grabbed him by the arm and pulled him with her. A space had formed in the battling crowds as Omeron's soldiers drove the guards to the far end of the chamber and against the walls. Through the shrieks and screams and flying blood, Sonja pulled the prince as he regained strength in his freed limbs.

A long row of pillars lined the walls. Sonja dragged Omeron between two of them, then kicked over a heavy table to conceal and protect them.

"Are you all right?" she gasped, kneeling beside him.

"Just . . . weak—surprised."

She rose, dashed out from behind the table, grabbed the corpse of one of Omeron's own soldiers, and dragged it over. "Put on his gear. Hurry! He has a sword harness!"

Quickly Omeron pulled on the pants, boots, and mail shirt, strapped on the dagger belt, and hefted the sword. "Mitra, I'm ready!" he yelled, rising. "At them!"

Together they dashed forth, screaming mad war cries, to run the length of the room and enter the fray, swords swinging.

Yarise ran and ran, tripped, kicked away her gilt sandals, scrambled to her feet again, and kept running. The upper hallways were entirely deserted. From the floor below came the frightening clashing and shrieks of battle.

She must escape—make her way to her chamber to gather up her things, then get servants to help her escape the palace, the city.

"Endi!" she yelled as she reached the door of her room. "Endi! Damn you, where are you when I need—"

"Yarise!"

She stopped cold, looked behind her.

A woman's voice, and yet—not a woman's voice.

"I know who you are, Yarise! Help me to get the stolen scepter of Ixcatl so that I may destroy my father, Du-jum."

Terrified, Yarise began to back away from the voice, looking down the hall, then looking frantically in all directions.

"Yarise! Conquer your own evil! Du-jum has protected the scepter with a magical protection. Tell me where it is."

"Who are you? Who are you?" cried Yarise, still backing away down the hall.

In answer, from one of the adjoining corridors, a shadow moved and snaked across the floor—a huge shadow, blacker than the darkness. The princess backed away more quickly.

"Yarise, I come to you in my serpent shape, to prove that I am what I claim to be—the daughter of—"

And from the shadows, around the corner of the corridor, she emerged, slithering and coiling.

"Gods of the Hells!" Yarise shrieked. She fell, picked herself up and ran, ran, ran down the corridor.

"Yarise!" called the giant serpent, its yellow eyes burning in the dimness of the hall.

"Yarise! I am Ilura—Du-jum's daughter. This is not my true shape. Do not run! Tell me where to find the scepter!"

"Gods of all Hells! Du-jum! Help meeee-!"

The enormous serpent crawled behind her, its belly plates rasping on the tiles, its scaled flanks scraping the tables and weapons racks of the hallway. "Yarise—stop! I will change—"

Yarise raced away from her room—raced past other rooms that would offer her no protection from the giant serpent. Blindly she dashed on until she saw the open shutters of a window before her, and thought wildly that if she jumped out she might fly away.

"Yarise!"

One more backward glance at the insane: a monstrous serpent with yellow eyes, rushing down the corridor, filling the corridor, bearing down on her, speaking to her!

"Yarise! I am changing! Tell me where the scepter is!"

"Du-jum! Help me with your bird magic—I must fly! Help me!"

Never pausing in her terror, she threw herself out the open casement—and did not fly. She dropped, dropped screaming, calling out Du-jum's name, down and down. A gargoyle jutted out from a deco-rated roof over a balcony below; there were horns on its head, jutting out also.

Yarise's shriek was cut short as she fell directly atop the gargoyle. The horns caught her body and ripped through, impaling her.

Ilura, now in her human form, looked down from the casement in silent frustration. Yarise's body, broken and torn, hung limply upon the gargoyle's horns, dripping blood onto the balcony below. The witch who could not fly had proven herself to be only human, as others are human—flesh and blood.

Ilura turned away, angry—and suddenly saw, some distance down the dim hall, a slender man in a dark cloak, who was watching her with yellow eyes that glowed faintly like her own.

'I am Elath, a wizard," said the man as he approached."I heard and saw all. Do not be alarmed—"

"Alarmed?" Ilura drew herself up coldly. "I could blast you where you stand, wizard though you be!"

"I don't doubt it, for I am only a neophyte in many ways. Yet I am gifted with the second sight, and I know you come to aid those with whom I, too, have cast my lot. I sensed you entering the palace and so came to seek you, knowing I would be of little use in a pitched battle with my meager talents."

"If you heard all," said Ilura, 'then you must know that I seek the scepter of Ixcatl, which Du-jum stole from Sithra's temple."

"It is in his chamber, in an enclosed space behind a bookshelf by the casement. He showed it once to me and my brothers in sorcery. Yet you must not attempt to enter there, for in his absence his quarters are guarded by such demons as even you would not willingly cause to materialize."

"As even I?" said Ilura. "Do you know who I am, then?"

Elath swallowed a bit nervously. "I heard you call your-self Ilura, before the woman leaped to her doom. But more, I know what you are—and I am honored, for never did I dream to meet one of the serpent women, even one half-human. Nor, I might add, to find her so lovely."

"You admire my artistry?" Ilura tossed her head disdain-fully. "For if you know so

much, you must also know that this form is as much an illusion as my serpent shape, though requiring far less effort to sustain. No human has even seen me as I truly am, and none ever shall."

"I fear we humans may say as much of ourselves," said Elath. "But we waste time. Omeron's troops battle against great odds in the banquet hall. I sense you come alone—"

"You sensed wrongly that time, second-sighted one. I have brought a great army with me. Even now they are in the city, slaying the troops of Du-jum in the darkness."

"An army?"

"Of my own servitors."

"Ah!" Elath nodded in sudden comprehension. "But now, Ilura, you must hasten if you would aid Omeron and find your enemy."

But Ilura was already hurrying away down the hall, toward the stairs that would lead down to the halls of the main floor and the feasting hall where Du-jum waited.

High in the mountain encampment, under the moon and stars, soldiers sat around their campfires and grew impatient. "They've been gone too long," said the officer in charge. "We'd better face facts, and ride to Ribeth for reinforcements as Omeron bade us."

Three men were chosen, two of them young, for stamina, a third because he knew the mountains well.

"If you're not back in two days," the officer told them, "We'll go down to the city."

"Don't," said the mountain-wise soldier. "We'll make it in less. Be here when we return!"

And the three rode off into the night—into the perilous night of the mountains, feeling somehow guilty, as though they were abandoning their lord.

## **Chapter 9.**

Sonja screamed furiously as a knife nicked her arm; whirling with the agility of a panther, she drove her sword through the chest of her unlucky assailant with a swiftness he could not hope to avoid. The warrior reeled and staggered back, spurt-ing blood, and collided with two others behind him, who in turn stumbled, causing more confusion.

Omeron's soldiers, together with the freed prisoners, the noblemen, and their servants were pressing with long-withheld rage upon the demoralized troops of Du-jum and hacking man after man of them to death.

Omeron threw himself into it with all the violent hatred and pent-up yearning for vengeance that he had borne for so long, hacking and dealing out death with roars of red fury. He was a wild, mad berserker of bloodshed, a whirlwind of death, providing no sure target other than a red-and-steel blur as he charged and spun and swung his notched sword everywhere. Bones shattered under his blows; brains spattered around him; faces screamed into his, then crumpled in a welter of blood. And the thunderous sounds of battle all about him were as music to his ears, a mad symphony of red violence and revenge.

And Red Sonja, too, howled her war cries and swung her sword with deadly fury. All about her the men of Thesrad were yelling the names of their prince and their city as they raged and slew, and Sonja yelled with them. But in that mad melee of death and vengeance and exultant fury, she did not realize that the names of prince and city sounded differently from her lips: "Olin! Suthad!"

But the madness cooled for Omeron at the moment when, finding himself momentarily in the clear, he suddenly realized that more of Du-jum's black troops were pouring through the main door of the banquet hall, greatly outnumbering his own forces. And then, he noticed that he was off to one side of the main battle, in the center of the hall and only a few paces from the dais steps. He looked up, shook the perspiration from his eyes—and saw, staring down at him with yellow-eyed intent—"Sorcerererrr!"

He threw himself toward Du-jum, sword up—and collided with an invisible shield at the first stone step. Thrown back, nearly losing his balance, he regained his footing and whirled at the sound of footsteps near him.

Just in time, Omeron crouched as a blade sang above him. He thrust furiously, driving his sword into his assailant's belly; the great blade ripped up under a breastbone and pulled free, spilling a deluge of guts upon the flags. Quickly he turned again to the dais and swung his sword.

It nearly flew from his jarred hand as a stinging, magical force jolted up his arm and shoulder.

Du-jum laughed. "Aid me now, my acolytes!"

He spread his robe like lifted wings, and the six sorcerers about him closed in, surrounding and reinforcing him, leaving open only a space in front for Du-jum to see his enemy. A cloud of terrible tension hung in the air, like lightning about to strike. Omeron scowled and tensed, ready to move again—then paused at the look of fear that suddenly contorted Du-jum's face.

Fear—but not of Omeron.

Men shrieked as a great shadow threw itself into the room, and those on the edges of the battle ran away in sudden terror. Thunder seemed to burst into the chamber; pillars trembled, arras whipped in a sorcerous wind—and then came a huge hiss like a wave of steam colliding with an iceberg. Du-jum screamed: "Ilura!"

The huge serpent-bulk slithered into the chamber and, scales rasping loudly, made for the dais.

Omeron, remembering the night on the mountain, dashed out of the way, threw himself behind a pillar, and watched. Ilura's huge tail cracked sharply against another pillar as she crossed the room, still hissing loudly.

Sonja, at the edge of the battle, spotted Omeron and scampered to him. He glanced at her but continued to watch the serpent.

"Not Du-jum's!" he said hoarsely. "That thing on the mountain—"

"Ilura!" Sonja told him, gasping. "Gods, no!"

"Ilura!" Sonja repeated, nodding wildly and throwing back her sweat-damp hair.

But before Ilura had gotten far across the stone floor, Du-jum lifted his arms to the ceiling and shrieked a garble of words, then brought them down, extended. His hands glowed.

The serpent, not quite to the dais, hissed madly and began to coil up. Her head fell back and she writhed in obvious pain.

Blood began to appear between her scales and smoke away as dark steam. Du-jum



laughed with dark glee. Sonja and Ome-ron both flinched at the sight of the smoking blood, for though they knew that most of this monstrous struggle must be illusion, still such a manifestation must betoken some sort of actual psychic damage being done. And it all seemed so real!

Ilura fought more strongly. She darted her head forward, the burning yellow lights of her eyes shining balefully upon her father. Suddenly one of the six young wizards, defeated by her will, fell screaming from the surface of the dais, enveloped in flames.

In an instant he lay in a charred heap, stinking like burnt meat and sulphur.

But there was not enough power in her to match Du-jum's. Again she began to curl up, and tried to crawl away, to gain distance. But her tail and middle coils flopped on the stone heavily, shuddering, and still the blood poured from beneath her scales and the pink steam rose up.

"Ilura!" Sonja screamed.

She ran from behind the protection of the pillar and threw out one hand to the serpent. The scales were hot—very hot—and Sonja grunted and drew back her hand. It was pink, burnt by the moment of contact.

Ilura looked down at her, eyes dimming. Suddenly she hissed, glaring at Sonja's belt: ". . . daggerrr. . ."

"Ilura, what—"

"Away!" thundered Du-jum; but his sorcerous gesture was blocked by Ilura, who had bent back a bit more, protect-ing Sonja.

". . . Your belt . . . Du-jum . . . dagger . . . throw it. . . ."

Sonja reached instantly, hurling herself forward and pull-ing the ancient jade-handled dagger from her belt, diving to the floor and rolling head over heels as a wave of sorcerous heat just skimmed her flank. She came smoothly to her feet near the dais, crouching, and brought her arm up. Du-jum saw the flash of metal and gestured frantically. "Die, sorcerer!"

The strangely carved dagger sped from Sonja's hand, as true to its mark as any of her sword strokes. The blade bit deeply into Du-jum's belly, clear up to the hilt, and blood spurted out over it.

A cry went up from the troops of Du-jum, and a cheer from Omeron's men. The sorcerer dropped to the dais, clutching at two of his young adepts.

Then a roar went up from the crowd in the chamber, and swordplay began again.

Sonja dashed to retrieve her sword, held it aloft, and yelled: "All those loyal to Omeron—to this door!"

Waves and knots of men broke loose as bloodied fatigued combatants raced for the exit.

Weak, Ilura began to fall out of her serpent shape. She grew smaller, but the bleeding ceased, the smoke dispelled. Omeron, bleeding from several slight wounds, helped Sonja drag her with them towards the doorway, and the crowds of men guarded them as they went. The serpent priestess looked human now, but Omeron noticed that her woman shape, too, seemed to waver slightly.

"Hurry!" Sonja yelled, as the last straggling men parried the swords of Du-jum's pursuing soldiers. A Thesradian screamed and went down with a spear through him. Sonja stood at the door as the last survivor stumbled through it, one of the sorcerer's dogs at his heels; she jumped out and lopped off the arm of the pursuer, then hauled the door closed and shot home a heavy iron bolt. Instantly a thundering rain of blows shook the stout portal.

Quickly, Sonja and the soldiers ran the two other bolts into place and began propping furniture and stone statues against the door.

"Where—are we?" she gasped.

"At the foot of a tower," Kiros told her. ' 'It runs up three storeys. This is the only entrance on this floor."

Sonja looked at him—to find that the young servant girl, Endi, was standing beside him, a knife in her belt. Kiros became aware of her in the same instant, as she clutched his arm as if for protection.

"Mitra!" he exclaimed. "I thought I told you to run!"

"I did," she said. "I ran in here."

Piles of corpses sprawled on a thick, liquid carpet of blood that covered the floor of the banquet hall. Broken furniture lay overturned; long streaks of red were splashed on the stone walls and the dripping arras.

Men still living huddled in groups, sitting or fallen, some screaming in agony as their wounds were probed.

A dead sorcerer lay by the dais, no mark of charring upon him. He was Menth, the youngest.

And on the dais itself sat Du-jum, gasping, with the five other sorcerers bent over him. He writhed in agony, bleed-ing, yet not so profusely as might have been expected. The sorcerers beside him pushed chairs out of the way, laid him down on his back, and tore open his robe to examine the wound.

"Du-jum!" said the sorcerer Aspre, bending close. "Du-jum—how badly are you hurt?"

"Not fatal," growled Du-jum. "Nothing can slay me. . . ."

"But we must patch it," Aspre said. ' 'You, Tos—wash it with wine and water. Get some cloths to staunch it." .

"It will heal," Du-jum gasped, ' 'by nightfall. Only let me rest. What dagger bit me? It was no ordinary one."

It was shown to him, and he groaned again.

"Ancient, ancient," he murmured, closing his eyes. "More ancient than mankind. Its magic will yet aid me, however—for surely it was found in the heart of one of the tunnels beneath this city, sealing an entryway to the Hells."

The battle within the palace had become a battle within one tower of the palace.

Omeron had collapsed in exhaustion; the sorcerous tor-tures had sapped his strength to start with, and the furious battle had drained him utterly. Sonja, therefore, had taken charge, being one of the few not wounded to any real degree. She had quickly sent men up the tower, ordering them to seal any entrances.

Then she had sat down with Kiros and Endi and a few of Omeron's men to learn precisely where they were in the palace and to judge, from details given her, how Du-jum might deploy his forces against them.

Finally she went to the cot upon which Ilura rested in the third-floor room of the tower, and was heartened to find her recovering rapidly. The serpent priestess was sitting up, conscious and alert, and her human form did not waver.

Sonja came to a decision, and called the rest of the Thesra-dians together on the ground floor.

"We'll destroy them by bits and pieces," she told them, "—in twos and threes, in fives and sixes at a time. We 'll fool small groups of them into the tower, and slay them. Anyone have a better idea?"

No one did, and Sonja felt disappointment at the fact. Though none mentioned it, they

all knew they were now fighting not for freedom or victory, but merely to take down as many of their foes as possible before they went under. The soldiers sent upstairs returned to report that all entrances had been sealed; Sonja sent two men apiece to guard those places, in any event. Then she and Ilura and the others prepared their strategy.

Du-jum directed the siege of the tower from the audience chamber. Too weak yet to move or be moved, too depleted by the dagger's magic to use much of his strength to repair himself until he had rested, he told his troops what he wished done, and they prepared to do it.

They had formed a phalanx before the entrance door in the audience chamber, and had sent lines of men to each of the three floors above to force the entrances there. They could not do it without heavier equipment than they had at their disposal, and reported so to Du-jum.

"We have them trapped," growled the sorcerer. "Yet they 're on the defensive, so have a care. My magic is weak at the moment; my daughter's is also, but she may recover soon. Have a care—and force that door!"

His men did so, using battering rams to shatter the heavy wood-and-iron portal to rubble. They entered, four abreast, several lines deep.

They met only darkness—no light, no movement. . . .

Suddenly the men in the forefront shrieked and fell back against their comrades, hacking futilely against a giant serpent that came at them from the darkness.

In their confusion, they offered little resistance to the many swords that followed up Ilura's attack. Seven of them were slain, twelve severely wounded, and the rest pulled back into the audience chamber.

Sonja, Ilura, Kiros, and the others hastened back into the darkness, pulled tight some leather lines, and made certain that the heavy wooden tables they had fastened together were secure.

"Take them!" Du-jum howled from his dais. "One of you acolytes—go with them!"

Aspre nodded to one of his fellows. "Tos—you go."

The young sorcerer accompanied the soldiers, taking the lead. Past the rubble, they entered, cautiously, not seeing clearly save for the acolyte. No serpents, no warriors—"Look out!" cried Tos suddenly.

Too late—for one of Du-jum's men had tripped a leather thong and the heavy tables dropped upon them from the ceiling—nailed tables, with swords and knives and iron spikes driven through them. Thirteen more of Du-jum's men died there—crushed, impaled, and buried under the murderous clutter, Aspre's young sorcerer among them.

Screaming, the men behind drew back, then regrouped and decided to rush their opponents.

Through the darkness they went, trying to hurry out of fear of Du-jum, yet holding back out of fear of more traps somewhere along their route.

But there was no more death in that floor of the tower.

Heartened, they took the steep stone stairs that curved around in the dimness, leading up to the second floor. The twelve in front did not reach that floor, for as they neared the top, the old stone and mortar, weakened to near collapse by the Thesradians' furious efforts, crumbled beneath their feet. Men screamed and dropped downward, and a dozen more were buried beneath a mountain of shattered stone blocks. Sonja and her troops, sequestered on the second floor and the floors above,

heard the rumblings and the screams of death. They waited long moments, but heard nothing more.

"My Lord, the city is overrun with serpents!"

Du-jum, still sitting on the dais surrounded by his acolyte sorcerers, scowled down at the Darfarian mercenary who had brought him the message.

"I am not surprised," he muttered finally. "Go and tell our men to close all the entrances of the palace; all who are not yet inside must take their chances. And slay any reptiles that have already ventured within."

"All that has been done, Lord Du-jum. But. . . there is one other thing. . ."

The sorcerer scowled even more darkly at the guard's hesitation. "Tell me, then. Out with it!"

"Yarise is dead, My Lord. We found her impaled upon the horns of a gargoyle above one of the lower balconies. She must have jumped or fallen."

Du-jum showed no reaction. For him, Yarise had served her purpose long ago.

"Remove me to my chambers," he commanded Aspre and the other young magicians.

"I am strongest there, and will heal faster."

They did so. The guard who had brought the message of Yarise's death was glad to find himself ignored.

As the afternoon wore on and evening came down, no more sounds of battle erupted within the palace. Du-jum lay in his chamber and rejuvenated himself, drawing freely upon the magical auras of Aspre and his followers, who stood guard at his bedside.

Outside, watchful soldiers lined the hallway. Du-jum brooded thoughtfully while he healed, turning over in his hands the ancient dagger that Sonja had thrown at him.

"Perhaps Destiny has turned in my favor, after all," he muttered. "The tunnel I sought has been found by others, the tunnel to the Hells. This dagger was the Seal, and is attuned to the Door; when I am healed I shall go to the vulture fane and lay it upon the altar of Urmu, that he may divine for me the location of that Door it once sealed. Surely my wound shall prove a small price to pay, for the dagger that inflicted it will lead me to Those who can give me power to plunge the entire world into the Ail-Night and rule it with a scepter of darkness!" He chuckled. Aspre and the others shuddered slightly at his words, in spite of themselves.

Ilura. Ilura. . . .

The serpent woman rose from her couch, instantly realizing that the voice inside her head was that of the wizard Elath. She was not surprised, for her own people were all capable of communicating in this manner, as were many human sorcerers.

"I am recharging my strength, second-sighted one," she said to the empty room. "Why do you disturb me?"

I am in a room not far to the north of yours, came the answer, and directly over Du-jum's chamber. He and his acolytes are there.

"Be careful!" hissed Ilura. "They'll sense you—"

No. I am using a mirror to send my thoughts. Place one on your north wall, that we may see one another.

Ilura found a round mirror of burnished silver and placed it on a small table against the stone of the north wall. In a moment she could dimly see the face of Elath within it. When he next spoke, the movement of his lips synchronizing with his mental voice gave an illusion of sound:

"Listen, Ilura: the chamber of Du-jum is no longer guarded by demons, now that he and his acolytes are within. I've told you where the rod of Ixcatl is hidden. Now is the

time for you to go for it, while Du-jum is still weak from his wound."

"You are offering to help?" said the serpent-woman.

"I can be your ears, but my magic is not capable of more. You must provide the eyes and hands, if you are able."

Ilura nodded. "I shall. Wait for me. I will return soon."

She left the room and walked down the stairs to the second floor of the tower. Sonja and the many soldiers gathered there were glad to see that she once again wore her human form.

"I sense much death below," she said.

"You sense correctly." Sonja gestured downward with her sword. "While you were resting, they attacked twice more. Many of Du-jum's soldiers lie crushed in the chamber beneath. He'll think twice before he attacks again."

"Yet you may be sure he will," grumbled a soldier.

Ilura walked to the door that led to the crumbled stairway and opened it. Taking up a torch, she peered down into the abyss, down at the damaged, torn, and twisted bodies below.

"I will need parts of them," she announced calmly to Sonja, "if I am to defeat my father. If your men are uneasy about sorcery, they should retire to the upper chambers now."

Many of the soldiers did so, but Sonja and a few others remained behind, watching uneasily to see what would happen next.

Bracketing the torch, Ilura spread her arms, lifted them out over the broken stairs and looked down into the ruins; and there, balanced perfectly upon the precarious blocks of the landing, she began to chant. Sonja shuddered, for she guessed those hissing syllables to be of a language alien to mankind—the language of the serpent folk, who had ante-dated humanity in dominion over the earth.

And then, sounds came from the gulf beneath—bubbling sounds, tearing and plucking sounds.

Sonja gasped, as did all the men with her—for as Ilura chanted and gestured, there rose out of the blackness before her a delicate web of scarlet tendrils—woven strands of blood, magically cohesive, rippling and glowing softly. Most horrible of all were the human eyeballs attached to it here and there, turning this way and that on slender crimson stalks, as if peering about in the gloom.

A man gagged and raced up the stairway, his face white. In that instant, Sonja felt glad that Omeron lay on his couch in an upper room of the tower, for in his drastically weakened condition this might have proven the final straw.

Ilura turned and faced the others, the bloody network writhing and shimmering behind her like a nimbus. Eyes of fear and doubt met her. To Sonja she said: "I will retire now to the upper floor, to make my final acts of magic. Du-jum is still weak, and may now be opposed; but first I must regain the scepter of Ixcatl. This servant—" she gestured to the gory, eyeball-studded net that floated in the gloom behind her, "—will gain me that, if we are lucky. My army of serpents and lizards is even now in the city, and more approach. Your swords have served well, but now it's the time for me to do my part—and if I am successful against Du-jum, his soldiers will fall away from him as leaves from a dead stalk."

She turned then, almost as if in a trance, and approached the stairway that led upwards.

Sonja, remembering, called after her: "But what of Yarise? And the young sorcerers?"

Their magic—"

"Yarise is dead," said Ilura, opening the door. "The young ones are not wholly trained, and if they interfere they will die. But I must hurry, or Du-jum will regain his strength."

Then she went to the stairway, while Sonja and the Thes-radian soldiers backed away to avoid contact with the horrid crimson network that floated after her upon the air. Night—a clear night, with moon and stars, and trees blowing in a cool breeze. Inside the tower, hungry wounded soldiers ate and drank the last of what little provisions they had.

Ilura, alone in her room, worked her magic, spinning blood out like the tendril of a growing plant, attaching eyes from dead men to it as it lengthened.

She worked it from her net, a crimson strand, phosphorescent and taut. Slowly it snaked through the air, out the only window in the tower room, wormed its way down the outside of the palace, seeking—with its own eyes, but with Ilura's senses—Du-jum's chamber. And meanwhile she listened—with Elath's ears—for any ritual being worked against her or her allies.

"Has he sensed us, wizard?"

No, serpent woman. Du-jum is still weak; he does not realize you are coming.

'Keep your thoughts silent, then, unless there is something you think I should know.' Psychic whispers in the night.

Phosphorescent human blood, woven into strands of magic, groped down a castle wall in search of a dark sorcerer—sent by his daughter, his enemy, in an ancient city linked to a still more ancient, magical, hidden past—a city now overturned and bloodied by its dark conquerors.

The rays of a bloated, rising moon gleamed on the scales of innumerable reptiles slithering and scuttling through the city's deserted streets—upon innumerable dark, avian forms crouching under eaves and along rooftops, as if awaiting some command. Slowly Ilura worked her tendril of blood, controlling it with her trained serpent mind, down the side of the brick palace wall . . . into the window of Du-jum's chamber.

Aspre saw it first, from the other side of Du-jum's bed. For a moment he said nothing, only watched, fascinated feeling suddenly, fatefully, like a purveyor of crimes and ruinations for having come to this city with his comrades on the eve of its destruction. Beside him stood Sus, and on the other side of the bed, Ahm and Piram.

Piram was the second to notice the slender, scarlet tentacle of blood.

"Aspre!"

"I see it. ..."

Du-jum sat up; his eyes widened with fear and rage. "Stop it! Stop it! It is from my daughter!"

The thing wavered slowly into the room, the eyes attached to it glistening in the oil lamp's dull glow. It turned this way and that, questing. . . .

Piram stepped forward, lifting his arm and describing circles and squares in the air in a preparatory ritual, then drew a silver knife from his belt. Crossing the room to the groping tendril, he raised the blade and brought it down—and immediately shrieked as wild red mist exploded around him and encased him with its glow.

Piram dropped to the floor, strangling, clutching at his throat and kicking his legs.

The dagger did not fall with him; pink mist enwrapped it and, while the tentacle held itself suspended for a moment, the mist about the knife condensed into a shorter, branching tendril that waved the blade threateningly, self-protectively, towards the

bed. The pink glow around Piram diminished as it pulled itself down his throat. His belly bloated, his chest heaved up expansively, impossibly, until finally he fell still, suffocated.

"Fool!" Du-jum yelled, trying to rise, then falling back on the bed with the effort. "That thing is after the scepter! Stop it!"

Still Aspre did not stir; his eyes looked from Ahm to Sus. They were already moving towards the tendril from two directions, pulling out daggers of their own as they did so. Ahm had gotten only halfway across the chamber when the short tendril holding the knife lifted up and cast it. Before the young sorcerer could half begin to react, the weapon reached him and buried itself to the hilt in his forehead. Instantly he flopped to the floor, twitching.

Sus, suspecting that Ilura's will power must be waning, jumped forward and swung with his blade, shrieking a curse. The blood tendril slid back on the air, but not quickly enough, for the blade lopped off one of the eyeballs. It flew into the air on a burst of crimson—straight into Sus's open, screaming mouth!

Sus fell back, terrified as he seemed to feel the eye within his throat bloating to a huge diameter, cutting off his wind. He panicked and threw himself back against the wall, then surged forward in a last attempt to cut the blood tendril.

It wove a path away from him, leaving a faint pink mist on the air.

Maddened out of his mind, Sus threw back his head and shoved his fingers into his swollen throat, as if they might dislodge the bloated eyeball—and fell forward, spurting blood, blood that quickly rose up in a pink mist, as did Piram's and Ahm's, flowing from their bodies and joining their amounts to the red tentacle, which continued to grow and lengthen and approach a tall bookcase standing not far from the casement.

"Stop—her!" Du-jum choked, struggling to get out of bed.

But Aspre only muttered: ' 'Stop her yourself! You have taken the lives of all my friends and given nothing in return. You are too weak to fight me or slay me, so I am free of you. Your doom is coming, Du-jum, and that is well; I regret that I did not sense earlier the umbra of death that surrounds you. I am leaving now. I will pray the gods to forgive my crimes, and I will conjure your image in a bowl of wine so that when you enter into the Hells I will see your arrival there and applaud it.' And so saying, he turned and went towards the door.

"You lie!" Du-jum howled after him. Then, as Ilura's blood-woven servitor knocked books and devices from the shelves, tore out wooden boards behind to reveal a secret door, he shrieked: ' 'Stop! Stop!' Weakened, he tried to cast magic after Aspre, but only succeeded in rattling the bar of the door as it closed behind the young wizard.

Hauling himself from his bed with a great effort, not screaming or raging—for that would use up more of his depleted energy—Du-jum fell to the floor, grimacing as his wound reopened and dripped blood on the tiles.

But then he did scream, loudly and wrathfully, as from the secret recess behind the bookcase Ilura's tendril pulled forth the long green serpent scepter of Ixcatl, coiled about it, and pulled it towards the window.

With an extreme effort of will, Du-jum rose to his feet, dripping blood. He mumbled phrases, lifted his arms half-way, and cursed Ilura.

But the scepter glowed in the tendril; and as it moved to the window, Du-jum felt the pulsing power of it, returning to its rightful owner, and knew he could not defeat it.

Frantic, he tore his bird from his chest and cast it at the red tendril, shrieking an unhuman word.

The bird came to furious life but did not grow. Rapidly it circled the room, swooping and diving at the scepter; but whenever it came near it, the blood tendril glowed and waved it at the bird like a serpent about to strike. So the bird held back, shrieking and beating its wings.

As the red tendril retreated through the window, growing darker and thicker as its length telescoped, Du-jum howled and staggered after it. Looking from the casement, he saw the scepter and the tendril retreating up the side of the palace and across towards the tower.

"Urmu!" he shrieked. "Urmu! Aid me! Aid me!"

Then he scooped up his circling bird, hurled it out the window, and watched it stagger on its wings. It cawed madly and swooped low, then high, circling upwards as it gained strength. Then, with a loud screech, it swooped for the tower.

"Ilura!" Sonja pounded on the door. "Let me in!" She waited but a moment, then pounded again. "Let me in, Ilura!"

From within came weak sounds—groans—and Sonja tested the door handle. It wouldn't move. She struggled with it, fearing it locked. Then the latch worked in her grasp, and the door opened inward.

"Ilura!"

She was slumped forward in a cross-legged posture before the casement, her arms held out rigidly toward it, and from her hands misted a pink tendril that faded, faded as she slumped.

Sonja dashed to the window where the tendril was struggling to rise. She felt heat and energy from the thing and did not touch it. Outside, only a few brick-levels below her, was the end of the tendril—and, clutched within it, the serpent scepter.

"Hold on to it, Ilura!" Sonja screamed. "I nearly have it!"

"Hold on!"

She leapt onto the window ledge, hung onto the stone with one hand, and leaned out as far as she could, reaching for the scepter.

"Hang on, Ilura! Don't let it go!"

A scream answered her—a hawkish scream, out in the sky: Du-jum's bird, fierce and dark, growing larger, its great wings booming on the air, aiming straight for the window, and for Sonja.

"Ilura, hold it!"

But the pink tendril, as if exhausted, dissipated into the air as with a groan Ilura fell backward. " Sonja grabbed out as far as she could reach for the staff. Her fingers closed—and she had it!

And then she felt herself slipping with it in her grasp from the window ledge.

"Ilura!"

Slipping—but then, Ilura let out a wild, unearthly shriek, and at the sound of it Sonja felt herself balanced in the air for an instant—only one instant. It was all she needed to get a firm hold on the scepter with one hand and on the window ledge with the other. Quickly she pulled herself in, as the bird shrieked, much closer.

She glimpsed Ilura, her human form beginning to waver, sinking back blankly on the floor. Kiros, Endi, and others were at the door but holding back. She whirled—to see



Du-jum's bird swooping right at the window.

"Deeemon!" Sonja screamed, gripping the scepter in two hands like a longsword as she backed from the casement.

The bird hurtled shrieking into the chamber, like a missile from a catapult. Sonja swung the scepter, aiming at the thing's head, and struck it. The bird shrieked again as it was knocked sidewise into the room—and burst into green flames. Then it flopped screeching around the chamber as the green flames rose and blew from it, until finally it collapsed twitching in a corner, a blackened, burning lump of wood. There came a dim, psychic cry of agony from deep within the palace—Du-jum's. And then—  
"Ssss—onn—"

It was Ilura, her shape wavering drastically. Sonja turned to her, knelt, and thrust the scepter into her groping hand.

And Ilura, with the rod of Ixcatl in her grasp, began to glow with a green aura—began to transform again.

## Chapter 10.

"Help me to a litter, you fools!" Du-jum gasped to his guards. "Hurry—get me to the temple! I must invoke the name of Urmu . . . place the dagger of the Old Ones upon his altar, that he may direct me to Them."

They took hold of him, those of his retainers who re-mained, and half-carried the sorcerer along the corridors, down the stairs towards the south entrance of the palace. As they passed, Aspre looked out from a barely opened doorway, shook his head, and whispered: "Go to your doom, traitor to the Way!"

But Du-jum, unaware, was in that very moment muttering of the dooms he intended for others: 'You were right, Aspre, you traitorous mage; I shall go to the Hells—not as you meant, but bodily. And I shall return therefrom leading unhuman legions, with whose power I shall establish my rule over all mankind forever!'

New waves of resisters were attacking the palace, armed with swords, knives, clubs, rocks, farm implements—anything. Watching from their houses where Du-jum's curfew had confined them, the Thesradians had seen waves of serpents attacking their enemies till the streets were littered with hundreds of black corpses swollen with poison; then the reptiles had gradually vanished down into the sewers, and the people of the city had come forth rejoicing, believing that the gods had performed a miracle on their behalf.

Moreover, they had learned of the battle inside the audi-ence chamber and, roused by the knowledge that Omeron had fought for them—that he might even still be alive, some-where within his palace—they had charged the dwindling remnants of Du-jum's motley army and brought another wave of blood and fury to the streets of Thesrad.

Du-jum's troops carried him secretly from the palace in a litter, guarding him within a thick phalanx of troops that bloodily began to hack their way across town.

Their route was not easy; they had to cut their passage a step at a time, while the troops in the center of the armed guard held Du-jum in his closed litter. But the sorcerer's strength was increasing as the moon rose, and because of this his many

birds—even those which were not nocturnal—began to rise up in huge flocks and circle the buildings, then descend in droves, attacking citizens and warriors of the city. New shrieks rose into the air. Du-jum's soldiers took heart as the birds helped them to fend off the attackers. The Thesradians fell back before the feathered clouds that swooped and screeched, snapped and clawed. But this time Omeron's subjects, prepared, unleashed a new assault. From many buildings a second wave of them issued forth, armed with nets and torches crafted and stockpiled during their period of captivity. Wherever flocks of Du-jum's evil-spirited birds landed or swooped low and thick to the attack, the Thesradians would hurl their nets upon them or scorch them with flaming torches, and in shrieking waves they would again ascend into the air, smoking blackly and leaving trails of flame behind them, and bits of charred feathers. "To—the Temple!" Du-jum snarled. "Faster! I must make obeisance to Urmu—he will renew my strength."

"We are halfway there, Lord," answered one of his men.

As they continued to carry him across town, they left a trail of blood and death behind them on the cobbled streets of the city—the city they had conquered for a while, and which had now risen up in fury against them. Of those who died in that bloody melee, more and more came from their own dwindling ranks.

"My people," Omeron said from the room in the tower, looking out the open window at the innumerable flaming torches in the streets. "They have risen up—and they are victorious!"

Sonja looked at him and frowned a half-smile. "Aye," she said, "So it sounds."

"Du-jum's men are in a rout. We must go among them and fight with them!"

"Time for that, Lord Prince," Sonja told him, "But first we should see to Ilura. She turned the tide for us."

Ilura still lay on the floor, bathed in a green phosphorescence, breathing shallowly, exhausted by her magical efforts, and changed.

Sonja did not know what to make of it. The creature she had known as Ilura was still recognizable, yet she could not say just why. There were reptilian characteristics in the sleek, smooth-scaled body and limbs—the shimmering blue stripes from snout to tail-tip, the delicate yellowish mottlings—and yet there were human, even womanly contours as well, besides features neither human nor reptilian. Sonja wondered why she felt no horror at something so alien.

"Why—she's beautiful!" said Omeron softly, wonder in his voice.

"Aye, she is," said a voice behind them. "But she doubted that humans would find her so—and perhaps most would not."

They turned to see Elath, who had entered the room silently as a shadow.

"Do you know something of this, wizard?" demanded Sonja.

Elath nodded. "This is her true shape. She wanted no human to see her thus, for her kind have always hidden from humans and felt profound distrust toward them—with good cause, I'd say."

But at that moment the serpent woman quietly opened her eyes—large, green eyes with vertical pupil-slits—and began to transform again, wavering and glowing and altering her shape. In another moment she was Ilura once more, the beautiful dark-haired woman they knew, a woman with yellow eyes and fluid gestures that revealed her reptilian soul.

She sat up, looking healthful and restored.

"I am—well now," she said in answer to Sonja's questioning stare. "Thank you, Red

Sonja—and you, too, Elath. ..."

"It's I who should be thanking you, Ilura," said Sonja. "I'd have fallen if you hadn't—"

The serpent priestess cut her short with a brief nod. "Both of us—all of us were necessary. Perhaps a lesson lies in that." She seemed to awaken wholly, then shook her head and stood up. "But, now—what of my father?"

Omeron answered her. "We don't know. My people are in the streets and seem to be defeating Du-jum's army. But we don't know anything of the sorcerer."

"We must get to the temple," Ilura told him. "The Temple of Urmu. You doubt me, Prince Omeron? Urmu is my father's deity. The Dark Bird's temple has long been abandoned by your people, but Du-jum planned to restore it; I am sure he goes there now to renew his powers."

"Aye," said Elath, "and to enlist Urmu's aid in recruiting legions from the Hells."

"Then let's get over there!" Omeron exclaimed.

Sonja looked at him. "Are you well enough?"

"Aye, by Mitra! And my people need me."

"And you, Ilura?"

"I'm fine now," said the serpent woman. "The power of the scepter is healing me, and Du-jum's magic is nearly dissipated. I feel only a thin drumming in the air; it will not last. Let us go."

At the temple Du-jum's men had fought their way up the stairs, for crowds of battlers had followed them. But once inside they forced shut the heavy stone doors, and six Thes-radians lost arms and feet trying to stop their ponderous closing.

The temple was quiet and dark inside. It reeked with the fetid, charnal stench of the piles of corpses Du-jum had had brought there in preparation for his mass sacrifice to the vulture god. But there would be no such celebration now.

The walls of the temple trembled with the huge movement of the crowds outside, although no shouts or screams could penetrate the thick stone blocks.

Du-jum pulled himself erect from his litter and walked, painfully and slowly, down the center aisle of the temple, facing the huge old statue of Urmu, the Dark Bird, which stood on a great dais at the west end of the nave.

"*Urmu . . . feror ismu betmu ara arera itba dibutu oi-yei. . .*"

The statue seemed to waver in the soft glow of torches, in the rising vapor of the stink of corpses. Du-jum felt his strength growing. Still the walls and pillars shuddered with a subtle trembling.

Du-jum's troops muttered and cursed amongst themselves, not eager to stay in this place, but not wishing to face certain death in the streets. Their only remaining hope lay in their dark master, could he but prevail upon Urmu to return his strength and make him fully master again of his powers.

Now Du-jum advanced and placed the strangely carved dagger upon the bloodstained altar of Urmu. Almost at once the weapon began to glow with a dim, pallid light.

"Fill me with thy power, O Urmu!" intoned the sorcerer. "Guide me to the Door wherefrom this Seal was taken, that I may serve thee by gathering dark legions to subdue all the lands of the world. Guide me, O Bird of Death, and I promise that I shall establish thy fanes in every land and thy worship throughout the earth, and that for all time the flesh of man-kind shall be offered up to thee—"

But then one of the crowd of soldiers milling at the front of the temple let out a hoarse scream. The man next to him did likewise, and still more screams followed. Swords were drawn, spears lifted.

Du-jum, interrupted in his dark negotiations, turned and faced the entranceway of the temple—faced a nightmare come to life, and for once not of his own making.

A wave of serpents was boiling up from the stairwells and drain openings from below the temple floor—a writhing carpet of serpents, coiling upon one another, eyes blazing and white jaws agape, a hissing, reptilian wave that flowed around the soldiers, striking and clawing at them.

"Ilura!" Du-jum screamed. "She is using the scepter!" He turned towards the statue at the end of the nave. "Urmu!

Feror ismu betumu ara arera!"

A pillar wobbled and crashed behind him, unleashing a huge cloud of dust that rose and billowed chokingly. From behind the fallen pillar poured another wave of reptiles, welling up from a hole in the stone floor.

The statue of Urmu trembled, began to rock and sway.

"Urmu! Dark Lord of Death! Your strength is great and endless!"

Behind him, his men shrieked hellishly, and he turned to see them dashing madly through masses of writhing snakes, amid great clouds of rising dust. Dozens of them were going down beneath tangles of vipers and clawing lizards, screaming and cursing.

"Urmuuu!" Du-jum howled.

The northern wall of the temple shuddered and cracked in half; from the split in it poured still more serpents, more lizards, thousands upon thousands of reptiles, smelling of the damp earth and the swamps and the sewers—the minions of the serpent gods Sithra and Ixcatl, come to wreak vengeance upon the minions of their ancient foe.

"Urmu!"

The dagger on the altar was now glowing brightly. The roof of the temple rocked and stone blocks began to fall from it. Incense braziers, lamps, and torches were knocked loose and fell, spewing oil and flame into the writhing masses of the endless carpets and walls of reptiles. Still they came on and on—and Du-jum, standing in the center of the rubble and the corpses, saw them in all directions. Raising his hands, he screamed and cursed and chanted dark invocations—but still they came on. ...

"Urmu! Slay my daughter and her minions! Ordara ento empori! Slay!"

Pouring over corpses and fallen blocks, crawling from beneath collapsed walls and pillars and fallen stone, the endless variety of reptiles surged on.

"Urm—!"

like living lengths of swamp, like some wave of animate fury revenging itself in a mindless way—clawing, biting, swarming—they reached him and began swallowing him up.

Du-jum, screaming and waving his arms, felt the serpents writhe upon him, bite him, crawl into his wound, coil around his throat. More walls rocked and fell inward as all light was extinguished, as a massive thundering crash marked the final collapse of the great fane of Urmu, the Bird of Death.

Then only Du-jum's hand remained above the mountain of rubble and the sea of coiling, crawling reptiles, many of whom were crushed also. The roof had fallen in, dumping ages of pain and blood and forgotten history upon the Prince of Hell.

An iron gong fell and struck stone, its deep and hollow knell the knell of the passing of the dark sorcerer.

The corpses were piled like mountains in the streets, and flowing down from them were rivers of blood. Other black mountains, flaming, crumbled into smoking ashes upon roof-tops, within fountains, in alleys, at doorways. . . .

And the cheers went up from Thesrad, a huge bellowing outcry, a great surf endless in its explosive enthusiasm: "Omeron! Omeron! Omeron!"

The Prince of Thesrad emerged from his palace. He looked upon his charred city in the gray light of predawn—upon the piles of bodies, upon the filthy crowds below, waving their rags and their makeshift weapons—and realized what it had cost his people to lose and re-win their city. Then Omeron fell to his knees upon the gory stone floor of the palace portico and, unable to restrain himself, he wept. . . .

When he rose again after a while, he saw Elath the wizard standing next to him, his eyes yellow in the faint light. Sonja and Ilura were nearby also.

"Lord Omeron," said Elath, "we should go now to the fane of the vulture with all haste."

"Why?" asked Sonja. "Do you think Du-jum might still be alive?" , "With a sorcerer of his power, one never knows."

Omeron scowled in doubt. "But my soldiers tell me no one in that collapsing temple could possibly have survived."

"Perhaps not. Still, we must find the dagger he carried away with him and return it to the Gate it sealed. The Old Ones do not often stir in their sleep, but if they should—well, you would not want an unsealed Gate beneath your city, Lord Omeron." Omeron, feeling somewhat uncomfortable at this news, gave orders for a score of guardsmen to accompany them. Sonja, too, felt a slight renewal of her discomfort at the presence of wizards.

When they reached the collapsed temple, dawn was break-ing. The murky light, as though filtered through blood-red clouds, revealed only a pile of gray ruins at the end of the avenue.

"It is finished," Ilura said. "I feel his presence no more. He is fallen beneath the temple."

Upon the avenue was a thick scattering of serpents and lizards, some of them bleeding and leaving trails and pools of blood on the brick cobbles.

"I must go to them," Ilura said, "and pray to Sithra, and heal as many of her minions as I may with the serpent staff."

So saying, she walked off, down the demolished avenue in the dusky red light of dawn.

"We should rebuild it," Omeron said doubtfully,

"—rebuild it, I suppose, as a temple to Sithra. ..."

"No," said Sonja, shaking her head. "Build no more temples on that land, Omeron!"

The ground shuddered slightly as portions of wall fell, stone and brick collapsing within the old temple, and the ground gave way a bit as rubble continued to fall in.

"You're right," Omeron said. "If we're lucky, perhaps the earth will open up to swallow it."

"And so it shall, Lord Prince," said Elath.

Sonja saw that the mystical light in his eyes was glowing more strongly. "Is that your second sight speaking, wizard?"

"I sense unguessed caverns beneath the fane of the Doom Bird," he replied,

"—perhaps even another sealed gateway to the Hells. It is well that such spaces should be filled up. I see the evil ruin continuing to crumble inward over the next several months. None in Thesrad shall care to go near its vicinity, even long after the

renovation by Lord Omeron of the rest of the city."

"And—Du-jum?" Sonja asked.

"Dead, as Ilura sensed. It is ironic. The gods, be they light or dark, foul or fair, somber or playful, must now be laughing—for I now sense clearly that beneath the temple's foundation lies an ancient, ancient tunnel, one of those Du-jum sought to his eager quest for the roots of the Hells and his own masters of destiny. And one day soon, his corpse shall fall through with the collapsing floor into the cavern, and lie covered over for an eternity by smashed stone, near that monstrous Gate he dreamed of finding."

"Yet what of that other Gate?" asked Omeron uneasily, "—the one you say lies beneath the palace? Was it not left unsealed when the dagger was taken from it? Should we not dig in these ruins until we find it?"

He was interrupted by the approach of Ilura, and surprised to see that she was companioned; at her side walked a large and colorfully mottled monitor lizard, like a dog beside its mistress.

Elath suddenly pointed. "Look, Lord Omeron! I believe the problem we were just discussing has been solved."

But Sonja and the prince had already seen, and both breathed a sigh of relief. For, clutched between the jaws of the monitor lizard was the dagger of the Old Ones—the Seal that would secure the unguarded gate to the Hells.

## EPILOGUE

Reinforcements arrived from Prince Sentharon of Ribeth the following evening, as Omeron and his people were beginning the painful task of reconstructing the city. Prince Sentharon himself led the four large cohorts, which had come too late to end Du-jum's reign of terror, but opportunely to help Omeron and his people begin to rebuild Thesrad.

Omeron declared a feast. Plenty of food remained within the city and there were cattle, goats, and horses as well. For two nights the city blazed with torches, songs, dance, and exhaustive merriment, like a springtime for the half-dead revived from icy halls of Hell. Omeron made speeches and wept when he made them. Sentharon vowed to aid Thesrad in every way possible.

The few Thesradian nobles still alive shared the table in the palace feasting hall with Omeron, Sentharon, and his nobles. Sonja, Kiros, Endi, and Elath all shared in the celebration also.

They avoided much talk of the horrors that happened—horrors still fresh enough to find no relief in the retelling.

Aspre, who had revealed himself upon Du-jum's death, sat at Omeron's table and made a plea that, in the future, any who sought out the path to the Other Way might keep in mind such things as had befallen Thesrad and its dark enemy. He grieved openly for his lost friends who had not had the strength or wisdom to successfully resist the lure of Du-jum. He was much gladdened to learn that Elath had not perished like the others, and the two greeted one another with thankfulness.

As for Elath, Omeron had urged him to stay on in Thesrad as the prince's consultant

on transmundane things, and the young wizard had accepted.

Ilura was not present. Following her prayers to Sithra, she and her reptilian followers had left without a word. Omeron had wanted to thank her profusely.

But Sonja had told him at the feasting table: "That is not her way, Lord Prince.

Believe me. Her reward was gained in completing her vengeance and fulfilling her destiny. We will probably never see her again; but if you ever travel, you might raise a light to an incense brazier, sometimes, in one of Sithra's temples."

Omeron smiled. "And how can I thank you, Sonja? With-out your help—"

"You thanked me enough when you saved my life in the mountains," she told him.

' 'And immediately brought you into peril as dangerous as any you've ever faced, I fear. Tell me, please: what can I do to repay you? Give you a fresh horse? A new change of armor? A bag of gold? Ten bags of gold?"

She pondered a moment, and a slow smile spread upon her red lips. "Well, My Lord. . .if you twist my arm. . .aye, all those things would come in handy, yes. ..."

Omeron laughed out loud and slammed down his wine cup. "Yours, all yours!" he boomed, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and hugging her in a wild surge of emotion. "All yours, Sonja. And my other throne, if you wish it!"

Her smile faded. "No thrones for me, Omeron, I fear."

"If you married me and stayed here—"

"Please—I'm honored, truly, but do not persist. You were born to the throne; I was born to—well, to journey mountain passes and fight sorcerers, I'm afraid."

"I respect you for that," said Omeron seriously.

"And if my uncertain path ever brings me back this way again. ..."

"Yes," Omeron anticipated her. "It must! You must come back sometime—return some summer when the city is built anew."

"I'll do it," Sonja promised him. "If I don't get too frail and weak first, I'll do it."

"You, frail and weak?" Omeron chided her. "'Never!'"

Sonja sipped her wine. "Never. . ."she said, rolling the goblet in her hand. She shook her head, and swallowed.

She left Thesrad on her new steed, dressed in shining new mail, bathed and refreshed and with two purses of gold in her belt and eight more in her saddlebag, and with enough bread and dried meat to insure her passage back over the moun-tains. Sonja had a companion in Aspre, the sorcerer, who also wished to return to the northwest. They left at dawn and by late afternoon were at the foot of the mountains; here they rested beside a stream and ate a meal. Sonja brought down a small pheasant with a bow and arrow, so she and Aspre were able to supplement their meager diet with that, and with berries and roots collected by Aspre.

"Don't mind my asking," Sonja said to Aspre as they ate, "but wouldn't it have been possible for you to bring down some game by use of magic?"

Neither of them had spoken much on their journey. Aspre responded evenly: "I have determined never again to use my sorcery."

Sonja considered that. "I see. You mean, because of Du-jum."

"Because of Du-jum. Because of what has happened, yes." He chewed on the last of his pheasant, then said, looking into the coals of their fire: "I have failed in my life.

Du-jum's power was far greater than mine, and he failed also. I was given a choice as a young man—two paths—and I chose the shorter, swifter path. I chose wrongly."

"I chose a path once," Sonja told him. "At times I've thought it was the wrong path; but at other times, later on, I saw the sense of it all. The weave of the skein is not always

clear."

"Perhaps you have made yourself believe that, Sonja. Perhaps there is no pattern at all."

"And perhaps you've never willingly used sorcery, Aspre."

"Oh, I was willing enough." The wizard regarded the backs of his hands as they were limned by the campfire in the dusk. "I imagined that sorcery might aid man against the terrible pains the gods have given him to endure, or accomplish vengeance for horrible wrongs, or—he hesitated—"—Or even lead someday to a means of overthrowing the gods and the monstrous world they have created."

"Your friend Elath," Sonja said, "once told me that sorcery is no better or worse than the one using it. There was a time when I would not have believed that, but now. . . ."

"That may be true, for I think Elath is a wiser man than I.

But you, Red Sonja—I sense some magic about you, despite your bias against it."

"Bias? I've fought sorcery when it's tried to harm me, but otherwise, no; I've always relied on my sword. I've never willingly committed myself to the—the Other, as you call it."

Aspre grunted and rose to his feet, wiping crumbs from his beard and robe. "I'll question you no more, Red Sonja. Our path, I think, parts here."

Sonja stood up. "Surely not. We both have to go over the—"

"The mountain," Aspre told her, "is the long road. As I mentioned, I chose the short road, long ago."

He said no more and Sonja did not pursue the matter. Aspre repacked his saddlebag and mounted his horse. He kned his mount towards Sonja for a farewell.

"Goodbye, Hyrkanian. Your path is long and dangerous, but it is a true path. A good path." "You know that?"

He nodded. "I have seen some of your future. Your way is—right. Someday you will find a true love; you will not give up your sword, but you will find a true love and become a full woman."

Sonja's brow furrowed. "What do you mean by that?" "And you will live to become old and gray, but strong in your age and grayness. You will become part of the history of the world, Red Sonja."

That perplexed her. "I mean only to—" "The sun is dead," Aspre said, cutting her short. "Time we both went on our way. Follow the long path, Red Sonja of Hyrkania, and strength will always be yours." With that, he rode off, and Sonja watched him go. She journeyed partway up the mountainside that night, and slept well beside a low fire. In the morning she bathed in a pool and, refreshed, breakfasted on berries, roots, leaves, and cold fresh water. She placed many berries in the glove of one hand and, beginning her day's journey, ate them, suck-ing the juice from them as she rode.

The sun had just fully topped the trees when Sonja's horse shied away from something in its path, neighed, and bucked back.

"Quiet . . . easy, boy! What?"

A serpent in her path.

Sonja smiled broadly. She watched the serpent and, re-mem-bering Ilura, saluted it mockingly. "Go on your way, old fellow! I've no quarrel with you—not after what you and your brothers accomplished!"

But the serpent did not pass on. It looped back and forth in the horse's path, making trails in the dirt, until somehow it entered Sonja's mind to follow the reptile.

As soon as the thought came to her, the serpent crawled off into the brush.



Sonja spurred her horse after it. The animal shied, but Sonja forced it, calming it with words and pettings.

The serpent pulled ahead through the forest, pausing at times to look back at Sonja, rear up and waggle its head, then go on.

She followed it for a good distance, until the sun was bright above the trees. Through the woodlands, around rocks, the serpent ceaselessly guided her along a path her horse could easily negotiate.

She lost sight of it behind a large outcropping of boulders and kneed her horse around the stones. There she saw a figure sitting on the ground. A horse stood nearby—a horse in

Thesradian harness and saddle. The seated figure was Aspre, his eyes glowing faintly in the forest shade.

Sonja approached; when her horse would not go farther, she dismounted, wrapped its tether around a sapling, and came near.

"I've been here most of the night," said the wizard, "waiting for you and improving myself by making friends with some of Ilura's comrades. I wish to thank you, Red Sonja."

"But—why?"

"I told you I have failed in my life—that I was given a choice as a young man and chose wrongly. I chose the short road long ago—and now I have re-chosen it, for your words and Elath's have convinced me that I must yet live on and pursue my destiny."

"You certainly took the short road up here!" exclaimed Sonja. "How did you—"

"We adepts have our ways. Accept my thanks, warrior-woman, for conveying to me the words of Elath. He is a wise man, and should have been the leader of our group, not I. Perhaps one day I will see him again, when I have grown in wisdom—but for now, I must roam the world and discover where that wisdom lies."

"When you left last evening," said Sonja, "you were planning to. . . ?"

"To kill myself," replied the wizard, "and thereby atone for my crimes, my stupidity.

But your words worked on my mind, and made me realize that atonement is not so easy. I shall wander, and learn—and perhaps I shall find pains to relieve, and wrongs to right, and even some small law of the gods within my power to overthrow. If so, then the short path may prove to be the long one for me after all."

"And a fulfilling one, I hope, Aspre," said Sonja. "Fare you well!"

"Fare you well, Sonja!"

Then she reined her horse about and headed back towards her mountain path.