

The Desert

Spider World, Book 01

by Colin Wilson

Back Cover:

Eight legs good -- two legs bad

Under the bleak 25th Century desert Niall and his family eke out a meagre existence, hidden from the predatory eyes of the giant spiders that float silently overhead in their silken death balloons.

For Niall has committed the ultimate crime -- he has killed a Death Spider, and now it seems only a matter of time before the invincible spiders take their revenge.

However, Niall has one advantage of which the spiders are unaware -- he shares their gift of telepathy. And when his family is captured, he turns his mind to the task of liberating humanity from the Spider Lord.

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For Sally, Damon and Rowan

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CW

Cornwall, 1986

As the first cold whisper of the dawn wind blew under the flat stone that covered the burrow, Niall placed his ear against the crack and listened with total concentration. Whenever he did that, it was as if a tiny point of light glowed inside his head, and there was a sudden silence in which every noise was amplified. Now, suddenly, he could hear the faint sound of a large insect moving across the sand. The lightness and speed of its movements told him that this was a solifugid, or camel spider. A moment later, it crossed his field of vision -- the barrel-like, hairy body glistening in the sunlight, the immense jaws carrying the remains of a lizard. In a moment it was past, and there was no sound but the wind in the branches of the euphorbia cactus. But it had told him what he wanted to know: that there was no scorpion or tiger beetle in the area. The camel spider is the greediest of creatures; it will eat until its stomach is so distended that it can hardly move. This one had looked only half-fed. If there had been any other sign of life in the area, it would have abandoned its half-eaten prey to attack.

Cautiously, he brushed aside the sand with a double movement of his hands like a swimmer; then he slid his underfed body through the gap. The sun was just beginning to show above the horizon; the sand was still cold from the frost of the night. His objective lay fifty yards away, at the edge of the cactus grove: the waru plant whose green flesh, as thick and almost as yielding as an earlobe, formed a cup to capture the dew. For the past hour he had lain awake, his throat burning, and conjured up the joy of dipping his lips into the icy liquid. There was water in the burrow, water gathered by the slave ants fifty feet below the surface of the desert; but it was red in colour, and tasted of mineral salts. By comparison, the cold dew of the waru plant was like champagne.

Its cup, formed of two curling leaves, was half full, and there were crystals of ice at the edges. Niall knelt on all fours, lowered his face into the cup and took a long, deep draught. The pleasure made his muscles tingle and relax. For the desert dweller, icy water is one of the greatest of all luxuries. He was

tempted to drink every drop; but his training forbade it. The shallow roots of the waru needed this water to live; if he drank it all, the plant would die, and one more source of water would be gone. So Niall stopped drinking while the cup was still half full. But he continued to kneel there, staring into the cold liquid as if drinking its essence, while a chilly wave of delight ran from his shoulders down to his feet. In the depths of his being, strange racial memories stirred: memories of a golden age, when water was plentiful, and men were not forced to live under the floor of the desert like insects.

That mood of deep quiescence saved his life. As he raised his eyes, he saw the balloon against the pale eastern sky. It was about half a mile away, and moving swiftly towards him. Instantly and instinctively, he controlled the reflex of terror. The inner-calm of a few moments ago made it easier. At the same moment, he realised that he was kneeling in the shade of the immense organ-pipe cactus, whose fluted trunk stretched up seventy feet above his head. Against the dark western landscape, with its pools of shadow, his brown body must have been totally invisible. Only the reflex of terror could betray him. And this was difficult to control as the balloon swept towards him, as if the creature inside had marked him for its prey. He thought of the others, lying below in the burrow, and prayed that they were fast asleep. Then the balloon was bearing down on him, and for the first time in his life, he experienced that enormous sense of menace transmitted by hunting spiders. It was as though a hostile willpower was sweeping the desert like a searchlight beam, probing every area of shadow with an almost tangible force, trying to provoke a reflex of terror that would rise towards it like a scream. Niall deliberately averted his eyes to the cup of the waru, and tried to make his mind as still as the clear water. It was then that he experienced the odd sensation of being aware of the soul of the waru, the passive vegetable soul whose only purpose was to drink, absorb sunlight, and stay alive. In that same moment, he was also aware of the prouder soul of the giant cactuses, soaring above him like a challenge to the sky. The ground itself seemed to become transparent so that he could sense the presence of his family, his parents and his brother and two sisters, all lying fast asleep, although his father stirred as the beam of malevolent will swept across him.

A few seconds later, it was gone; the balloon was already a quarter of a mile away across the desert, moving towards the great inland plateau on the horizon. The will-force was sweeping the desert ahead of it, and he could feel its presence as clearly as if it were a beam of light. He sat perfectly still, watching the balloon dwindle into the distance and observing with interest that it swerved aside to avoid a needle-like pinnacle of rock.

When it was gone he hurried back to the burrow, moving swiftly and silently as he had been taught since childhood. His entrance awakened his father, who leapt instantly into a crouching position, his right hand closing on a bone dagger. As he recognised Niall, he also sensed there was something wrong.

"What is it?"

Niall whispered: "A spider balloon."

"Where?"

"It's gone now."

"Did it see you?"

"I don't think so."

Ulf allowed his tension to escape in a long breath. He climbed up to the entrance, listened for a

moment, and peered out. The sun was now above the horizon, and the sky was a cloudless blue still tinged with white.

His elder brother, Veig, spoke out of the darkness. "What is it?"

"They're hunting," Ulf said.

There was no need for Veig to ask what he meant. "They", used in that tone of voice, could only mean the death spiders. And when the death spiders were hunting, it was the most serious thing that could happen to this small band of human beings who spent most of their lives underground. For as far back as they could remember, men had been hunted: by scorpions, by tiger beetles, by striped scarabs and saga insects -- but most of all, by the death spiders. The beetles and the mosquitoes were natural enemies; sometimes, they could be killed. But the spiders, who were the lords of the earth, were unconquerable. To kill a spider was to invite appalling revenge. When Niall's great-grandfather, Jomar, had been a slave of the spiders, he had seen what happened to a small colony of humans who killed a spider. An army of thousands was mobilised to hunt them. A line of spiders more than ten miles long marched across the desert, with hundreds of balloon spiders overhead. When the human beings were finally captured -- about thirty of them, including children -- they were brought back to the city of the Death Lord, paraded before the whole populace, and then ritually injected with a nerve poison that brought paralysis. The victims remained fully conscious, yet were unable to move anything but their eyes and eyelids. After that they were slowly eaten, the whole process taking a matter of days; the leader continued to live for almost two weeks, until he was only an armless and legless trunk.

No one knew why the spiders hated men so much: not even Jomar, who had spent his whole life among them until he escaped on a spider balloon. All Jomar knew was that there were thousands of hunting spiders who spent their lives searching for human beings. Perhaps it was because they regarded human flesh as the supreme delicacy. Yet this explanation seemed illogical, since the spiders bred their own human beings for food. Apparently they liked them fat -- so fat that they could scarcely walk. So why should a spider prize the flesh of the underfed humans of the desert? There must be some other reason why the spiders regarded humans with such single-minded hatred.

The others were now awake -- his mother, Siris, and his two younger sisters, Runa and Mara. Ulf said little within the hearing of the girls; yet they could sense that something was wrong, and their fear was like an unpleasant vibration, or a sweet-sickly smell.

From the entrance stone, Veig beckoned his father. Niall also crept to the mouth of the burrow, and before the two heads blocked the daylight he glimpsed the white balloon, moving fast over the tops of the organ cactus, more than a mile away.

Ulf said softly: "The little ones must be put to sleep."

Veig nodded and disappeared into the depths of the burrow where the ants were stabled. Ten minutes later, he returned with a gourd full of the sweet, porridge-like substance that the ants secreted in their craws. Siris scraped portions of this on wooden platters and the girls ate hungrily, unaccustomed to such generous helpings. When Niall accepted his platter, he smelt the heavy, flowery scent of the ortis plant that came from the forest of the Great Delta. But he had no desire to sleep; he was confident now that he could control his fear reaction. To satisfy his father, he swallowed a mouthful but as soon as no one was looking, pushed the plate under a pile of alfa grass used for bedding. Five minutes later, the little girls were fast asleep again. Niall also felt a pleasant heaviness from the narcotic, a warm glow that soothed the feeling of hunger; but his mind remained alert.

Siris had waited until the girls were asleep before she ate sparingly of the honeydew porridge. Like Niall, she wanted to remain awake. But this was not so that she could help defend the burrow. It was so she could kill the children, then herself, if the death spiders detected their presence.

She was swallowing the first mouthful when the fear-probe invaded the burrow. It was literally an invasion, as if one of the enormous spiders had leapt into the midst of their underground home. For a moment, Niall almost lost control; but his mind instantly grasped that this invisible terror was bodiless and impersonal. Siris was not so lucky. Niall felt as well as saw the fear that poured out of her like a shriek. Ulf and Veig felt it too -- the searching will of the death spider seemed to have some quality that amplified their feelings and also released involuntary bursts of fear. Niall alone remained perfectly controlled and calm. He had contracted his mind to a point, so the light seemed to glow inside his head, and he felt strangely detached from his surroundings and from his own personality.

The fear-probe seemed to hesitate, as if it had stopped to listen. But now all the humans had their fear under control, and the inside of the burrow seemed full of a throbbing silence. The two girls breathed peacefully. As the fear-probe faded, like a sound dying away in the distance, Niall experienced a brief glow of satisfaction. If the children had been awake, their terror would have announced their presence in waves of hysteria, betraying them to the spiders as hundreds of other human children had involuntarily betrayed their families. The juice of the ortis plant was a great blessing, even though it had cost the lives of his uncle Thorg and his cousin Hrolf. Both had been overcome by the plant and eaten. Five times more that day, the fear-probes invaded the burrow; but the minds of the human beings were still as their bodies; no echo of fear betrayed their presence. Propped against the smooth wall of the burrow, a wall made of sand grains cemented by the saliva of the tiger beetle, Niall felt as if he had been turned to stone.

As the day advanced, the temperature in the burrow rose steadily. Under normal circumstances, they would have sealed the entrance with branches and stones, and the wind would have completed the work by filling the cracks with sand. But Ulf wanted to be able to see the approach of the spider balloons; it was easier to resist the fear-probes when they were expected. So the aperture under the flat stone was left open, and the hot desert wind blew into the burrow, carrying sand that was allowed to form a carpet on the floor. The children perspired as they slept. The adults were indifferent to the temperature; tension kept them at a high level of alertness. Twice during the day, Siris brought food -- prickly pears and the dried meat of desert rodents -- but they ate sparingly, their eyes fixed on the strip of electric blue sky.

At mid-afternoon, Niall was keeping watch when he saw a balloon on the horizon. Minutes later, another appeared to its left, then a third to its right. Soon the sky was full of balloons -- he stopped counting when he reached twenty. The sheer number made his heart contract. He hissed to the others, and they joined him, standing back a few feet from the aperture so that all could see.

Ulf said softly: "Why are there so many?"

Niall was puzzled that his father failed to see the answer. The spiders knew they were being scanned by human eyes. It must have been infuriating for the Death Lords to know that down there in the desert, their prey was watching them from some hidden shelter, and that there was no way of driving them into the open. This armada of balloons was designed to cause terror. It might have succeeded in its purpose if it had come from another direction, so as to approach unseen. But in the five minutes or so that it took the balloons to pass overhead, the watchers had time to control their fear. The wind had now risen, so the balloons passed over quickly. The fear stabbed at them for a moment, seeming to illuminate them like a searchlight beam; then it had moved on.

From his vantage point at the side of the aperture, Niall could see that the balloons were spread

out in a symmetrical zigzag pattern. He knew instinctively why this was so. A solitary balloon had no chance of getting an exact bearing on its prey. Its powers of observation extended downward in a kind of cone, and unless a spider's attention was focused on the precise point from which it received an echo, it had no way of knowing exactly where that echo had come from. It might be anywhere within a square mile. But if two spiders received the echo simultaneously, each could judge its direction, and their prey could be located at the point at which the two echoes converged. And if more than two balloons received the echo, its source would be even more obvious.

Strangely enough, this insight gave Niall a curious satisfaction. It meant that he was beginning to understand the minds of the spiders, that they no longer represented the terror of the unknown. But an instinct warned him against too much self-satisfaction.

In the late afternoon, the two children stirred. Their faces were flushed from the heat, and their throats were dry -- the usual after-effect of the ortis juice. Siris gave them water, and then, as a special treat, the succulent fruit of the opuntia cactus, with its astringent flavour. After that, they were given more of the drugged porridge and fell asleep again. Mara, the youngest, breathed quickly and her long hair was damp with sweat. Her mother sat with her arm extended over her in a protective gesture. Mara was everybody's favourite, and their protectiveness had grown stronger since they had almost lost her. Three months ago, playing among the euphorbia bushes one evening, she had been attacked by a big yellow scorpion. Niall, who had been gathering prickly pear, had heard Runa's screams and arrived in time to see the scorpion disappearing into its lair under a rock, clutching the child's body in its enormous pincers. The sight paralysed him with shock. He had often watched with morbid fascination as a scorpion paralysed some creature with that overarching swing of its tail, then shredded and tore the carcass with its chelicerae, the short, powerful claws below the mouth; after that, the wounds would be injected with a digestive enzyme that reduced the tissues to a liquid so the scorpion could drink them. Now his first impulse was to rush in and try to grab his sister; but the sight of that moist sting, still poised above the creature's back, warned him that this would be suicide. He ran back to the burrow, shouting for his father. Ulf acted with the control of a man whose life has often depended on his coolness. He called to Veig: "Quick, bring fire." It seemed an unbelievably long interval of time before Veig emerged from the burrow with a burning torch of grass. With arms full of the dry, straw-like esparto, they rushed and stumbled through the cactuses to the scorpion's lair. This was underneath a large, flat stone. The creature was waiting for them; they could see its row of eyes gleaming in the darkness, behind the huge pincers. The torch had almost burned out; Ulf blew on it to light the esparto, then rushed unhesitatingly at the entrance to the lair. The scorpion gave its dry, menacing hiss, and retreated before the flames and the smoke. Ulf kicked the burning fragments into the lair, then gave a leap sideways as the scorpion rushed out, its sting poised to strike. The giant pincers, like those of an enormous lobster, made it clumsy compared to the man. Veig rushed forward with more burning grass, which he hurled between the pincers, swerving aside to avoid the top-heavy rush. It hissed with agony, tried to turn instinctively towards its lair, and was headed off by Ulf waving a burning torch. Niall knew what he had to do. He plunged into the lair, paused a moment amongst the empty shells of beetles, then snatched up his sister and ran with her into the daylight. The scorpion saw its prey escaping and made a rush at him; Veig jumped forward and hurled his spear between its pincers. Niall handed the cold, still little body to Siris, and turned in time to see their enemy scuttling away across the desert. Veig said later that his spear had destroyed two of its eyes.

It looked as if Mara was dead. The naked, white body was cold and had the peculiar smell of the scorpion's lair. There was no sign of heartbeat. Yet after two days she began to breathe again, and a week later was able to drag herself across the floor of the burrow. It took another month for the effects of the poison to vanish completely. A raised black welt on her shoulder was the only sign of her encounter with the scorpion.

The fourth wave of spider balloons came an hour later. His father touched his shoulder lightly, and he realised he had fallen into a light doze. Still secure in the quiescence of drowsiness, he felt the fear pass over him like a cold wind, and noted that it made the hairs on his arms stand on end. And when the fear had passed, he reflected that it was stupid of the spiders to do it so often. It allowed the human beings to become accustomed to it, and taught them how to resist it. The spiders could not be as intelligent as he had always thought.

The last time was the worst. It happened as dusk was turning the sky a deeper blue. The wind was dropping, and it seemed unlikely that the spiders would mount another reconnaissance. Overhead, through the roof of the burrow, they heard the scrabbling noise of some large insect; it could be a scorpion or a tiger beetle, even a camel spider dragging some heavy prey. The sound was a welcome distraction after hours of silence, and they listened as it moved towards the entrance of the burrow. Suddenly Veig, who was standing on watch, started. Looking past his head, they saw the balloons, now within a dozen feet of the floor of the desert, drifting towards them. At the same moment, sand cascaded through the aperture and the huge lobster claws of the scorpion came into view. This alarmed no one; they assumed it was passing by in its search for food. But the scorpion stopped, and more sand fell into the burrow. The flat stone moved, and Niall realised with incredulity that the creature was trying to force its way in. With the balloons almost overhead, it was the worst thing that could have happened. He could feel the alarm of the others, amplified by fear that their fear would betray them. For a moment, it looked as though the spiders had won.

Niall acted involuntarily, without thinking. Ulf's spear was propped against the wall, its head made of a needle sharp jackal bone. Neither Ulf nor Veig would have dared to use it, in case the burst of aggressiveness betrayed their presence to the hunters. What Niall did, naturally and spontaneously, was to close his mind, as if drawing a shutter over his thoughts and feelings. Then he took a long step towards the entrance, pushed Veig to one side, and struck with all his force between the claws that were enlarging the entrance. There was a hiss and a blast of a sickening smell. With a lightning reflex, the thing withdrew, and they could see the nearest balloon, only about a hundred yards away, drifting towards them. Niall stood there, freezing into stillness, and continued to shield his mind from the probing beam of will-force. It brushed over him, now so close that he had the illusion he could feel the creature's breath, and its physical presence. A few seconds later, it was gone. They remained there for another ten minutes or so, all experiencing the same fear: that the spiders had detected them and would land in the desert and surround their burrow. As the minutes dragged past, the anxiety receded. Niall thrust his head out of the burrow and saw the balloons far away, outlined against the red and purple sunset behind the mountains. The scorpion had also disappeared. The point of the spear was tinged with blood mixed with a white substance like pus.

Ulf placed one arm round his shoulder and hugged him. "Good boy." The compliment, which Ulf had always used to praise some childish piece of obedience, sounded absurdly inappropriate; but Niall understood the gratitude behind it, and felt a surge of pride.

Ten minutes later, with the suddenness of tropical nightfall, they were immersed in darkness as if in black water. Ulf and Veig blocked the entrance with rocks and stones. Then Veig lit a rush light that burned insect oil and they ate a meal of dried meat and cactus fruit. Niall sat propped in his corner, watching their shadows on the wall and filled with the contentment of fatigue. He knew that his action had saved their lives, and that the others were aware of it too. But he also knew that he was probably responsible for what had happened today. Niall had also killed a death spider.

It had been almost ten years since Niall's family moved into the burrow. Before that, they had lived in a cave at the foot of the great inland plateau, some twenty miles to the south. Even with the cave entrance blocked with stones and rock fragments, the temperature had often reached a hundred during the day. Food was scarce, and the men had spent much time on foraging expeditions. The spider balloon on which Jomar had escaped provided silk for makeshift parasols, which enabled them to survive the midday heat. In a nearby dried-up watercourse there were barrel cacti, whose juice was drinkable. (That of the organ cactus was poisonous.) Yet for the small band of human beings -- in those days, Thorg and his wife Ingeld, and their son Hrolf lived with them -- life was a continuous misery of thirst, starvation and burning heat.

Early one day, farther from home than usual, the hunters had seen a big tiger beetle disappear into its underground burrow. By comparison with their home at the foot of the plateau, this area seemed a paradise. The waru plant gave promise of fresh water, while the distinctly green colour of the alfa grass revealed that the night brought moisture in the form of fine mist. Alfa grass meant rope for traps; it could also be woven into baskets and mats. Moreover, the shell of a blister beetle promised a source of oil.

The men were weary, exhausted by the heat and it may have been this that decided them on the rash enterprise of attacking a tiger beetle. The mandibles of the tiger beetle could sever a man's arm or leg; they were feared for their swiftness and for their incredible voracity -- Niall had once seen one capture and eat twelve enormous flies in less than half an hour. But if the beetle could be driven out of its burrow and attacked while it was struggling in the narrow entrance, they stood a chance of killing it before it could make use of its speed.

The first step was to collect a pile of creosote bushes, hacking them out of the ground with their flint knives. With its brittle wood and rank, tarry-smelling leaves, the creosote bush would blaze like a torch after a few hours drying in the sun. They also collected piles of alfa grass, and prevented it from blowing away by weighting it down with stones. Then they collected the largest rocks they could find and piled them in heaps near the beetle's lair. Aware of all this activity, the creature watched them from its burrow, but made no attempt to emerge; there were too many of them. When Hrolf went too close, a pair of claw-like mandibles were thrust out menacingly from under the stone over the entrance.

As the sun rose higher, it became impossible to work for more than a few minutes at a time; even in the shade of the organ-pipe cacti their sweat dried and evaporated before they were aware of it. With the sun directly overhead, they crouched in the shade of their parasols and sipped sparingly of the water to prevent dehydration.

They had retreated into the cactus grove to give the beetle a sense of security. Then, in the early afternoon, Jomar decided it was time to attack; no desert creature expected danger at this time of day. He made fire, using chips of dried bark, then ignited a pile of the alfa grass. The sun was so blinding that the flames were invisible; but when the creosote bushes caught fire, the black smoke billowed into the air. This, they knew, was the most dangerous moment; some distant patrol of spiders might see the smoke. Swiftly, they seized the burning bushes by their roots and dragged them across the sand. With a single powerful movement of his spear, Ulf levered aside the stone that covered the entrance; all prepared for the beetle's swift rush. Then, when nothing happened, Jomar thrust his creosote bush into the hole; the rest of them did the same, and staggered away, eyes streaming and their faces damp with bitter sweat.

It was perhaps half a minute before the beetle emerged, bewildered by the flames and the black smoke. The movement of the entrance stone had made the hole higher and narrower, so the beetle had to

struggle to extricate itself. Standing above the entrance, his arms raised above his head, Thorg waited until it was almost clear before he dashed down the heavy rock with all the force of his arms. It struck the thorax just behind the prominent eyes. Another stone, hurled by Hrolf, smashed a front leg at the joint. The beetle opened its great striped wings in an attempt to fly, and Jomar darted forward and drove his spear into the segmented abdomen; the creature twisted in agony, and the powerful mandibles gripped Jomar's leg. Jomar screamed, and tried to pull himself free. Then another big rock crashed down, destroying an eye and smashing the tough integument that covered the head. The mandibles released Jomar, who was bleeding heavily from the thigh. Hrolf drove his own spear deep into the flesh where the wing joined the body. The beetle gave a convulsive jerk that knocked Ulf and Jomar flat, and landed on its back several yards away. It continued to twitch for perhaps five minutes more.

It was Veig, peering into the burrow, who noticed a movement behind the burning creosote bushes. There's another in there!" Instantly, they were all alert, prepared for another attack. But none came. Jomar limped into the shade of a parasol and took a long drink of water. Hrolf tended the wound, while the others ignited the remaining creosote bushes and threw them into the burrow. Then, suddenly overcome by the heat, they lay there, panting, and watched to see what happened. Half an hour later, when the creosote bushes had burned themselves to ashes, there was a movement in the entrance to the burrow and the long antennae of a beetle emerged. The female beetle, much smaller than her dead mate, dragged herself out of the hole, followed by half a dozen larvae, each about two feet long. Describing it later to his younger brother, Veig said that he suddenly felt sorry for the beetles -- although he knew that if he ventured too close, even the larvae would attack him. The men watched them drag themselves over the burning sand, moving towards a gully half a mile away. They behaved as if some terrible natural disaster had struck; their only instinct was for self-preservation.

When, later in the day, they explored the burrow, they were surprised to find it was so deep. Jomar's theory was that it had once been the lair of a family of wolf spiders. It was virtually an underground cave, the walls cemented with a mixture of sand and the beetles' saliva. Two half dead larvae lay in its deepest recess, overcome by the smoke; the desert wind, blowing direct on the entrance, had driven the smoke and sparks in like a poison gas. They killed the larvae and threw the corpses outside -- the flesh of the tiger beetle had an unpleasant flavour that made it unsuitable for food. Then they sealed the entrance and collapsed into a long sleep in the cool depths of the lair, which still stank unpleasantly of creosote and smoke.

The next day, two hours before dawn, Ulf, Thorg and Hrolf set out to fetch the women and seven-year-old Niall from the cave at the foot of the inland plateau. Jomar and Veig remained in the burrow, in case the tiger beetles made an attempt to repossess their home -- a precaution that proved to be unnecessary. Later, they discovered that the tiger beetle has a deep antipathy to the smell of burning creosote, and would not even cross a strip of land where there was any trace of it.

Niall could still remember the excitement when his father came back. His first intimation was when Ingeld, Thorg's wife, began to shout, then to wail; she had seen only three men and assumed that the other two had been killed. Then, when the men arrived and described their new home, she became hysterical with excitement -- she had always been a woman with poor control of her emotions -- and wanted to set out immediately; it took a great deal of persuasion to make her understand that none of them would survive if they set out in the midday heat. Even so, she remained fretful and impatient for the rest of the day.

When they finally left, two hours before dawn, Niall was the most excited of all. They chose this hour to travel because most of the desert predators hunted by night; as dawn approached, they made their way back to their lairs. The temperature was around freezing point; even wrapped in a hide made of caterpillar skins, Niall shivered uncontrollably. But inside, there was a glowing happiness as he peered

over his mother's shoulders -- for part of the time she carried him in a pouch -- and an excitement that made him feel as if he might float up into the air. He had only once been more than a few hundred yards from the cave, and that was in the week the rains came. The wind had turned pleasantly cool; black clouds came from the west, and suddenly water was gushing from the sky. He had stood in the warm rain and laughed and jumped up and down. His mother took him for a walk, to a point where a dried up watercourse cracked the edge of the plateau. There he stood and watched with amazement as the ground heaved and split open and a large bullfrog pushed its way out; half an hour later, it was happening in a dozen places at once. The creatures hopped down to the pools that were beginning to form, and soon there was a loud, non-stop chorus of croaks as they called for the females to join them. The sight of coupling frogs struck Niall as unbelievably funny, and he shrieked with laughter as he splashed in the stream that had sprung up around his feet. Plants and flowers also began to push their way up from the sand, which had now turned into oozy mud. There were hundreds of tiny explosions as dried pods sent their seeds into the air like bullets. Within hours, the surface of the ground had been covered with an amazing carpet of flowers -- white, green, yellow, red, blue and mauve. Niall, who had never seen any colour but the yellow-grey of sand and rock and the fierce blue of the sky, felt as if he was in fairyland. When the rain stopped, bees appeared from nowhere and burrowed into the flowers. The brown pools, looking like mushroom soup, were full of tadpoles who writhed and thrashed and devoured one another. In other, clearer pools, tiny newts devoured fragments of green algae. After four years of living in a lifeless wilderness, Niall was suddenly surrounded by seething, blossoming life, and the sensation filled him with a kind of intoxication.

This is why, as he bounced along on his mother's back or trotted by her side, he experienced the same joy. His father had used the word "fertile" about their new home, and he imagined a place full of flowers and trees and tiny animals. There awakened in him a sense of boundless anticipation of marvels to come. If his father, who had spent his whole life in the desert, had been able to read his mind, he would have shaken his head sadly.

At midday, when the sun became too hot, the men dug deep holes in the sand, covered them with parasols, then poured more sand on top. A few inches below the surface, the sand was quite cool. Less than a mile away, there were pillars of wind-eroded sandstone which might have afforded some shelter; but in the searing heat, they would never have reached them. Niall and his mother and father lay in one of the holes, sweating and chewing at a succulent tuber to prevent dehydration. Niall slept a little, and dreamed of flowers and flowing water. Then once more they were on the move.

The wind had changed direction and seemed cooler. Niall pointed in the direction from which it was blowing and asked his father: "What lies over there?"

"The delta," Ulf said. His voice was tired and indifferent, yet something about the word made Niall shiver.

When they arrived, an hour before nightfall, they were all totally exhausted. Niall's first sight of his new home was of acacia trees on the horizon, then of the immense, many-branched organ-pipe cactus. He had never seen a tree before, although his father had described them. As they came closer, he saw, to his disappointment, that there were no flowers; neither was there the running water he had been dreaming about. Instead, there was barren, rocky ground with a thin covering of sand. The ground was covered with grey-looking shrubs, creosote bushes and alfa grass, and with exposed rocks and stones. Only the tree-like euphorbia cactus, with its deep green leaves, provided a touch of colour. In the distance there were more of the strange columns of distorted red rock, while on the southern horizon, behind them, he could see the inland plateau towering like a mountain range. Yet in spite of its dreariness, this was undoubtedly an improvement on the endless sand dunes of their former home.

Jomar and Veig came out to meet them; the burrow was not facing the direction from which they were approaching, but Jomar had sensed their arrival with that natural, intuitive awareness that desert dwellers took for granted. Even if they had known the word, they would not have described their vague awareness of one another's presence as telepathy; it was as natural to them as hearing. And it was possessed in a far more terrifying degree by the death spiders.

Jomar was hardly able to walk; the thigh gripped by the mandibles of the tiger beetle had swelled like a grotesque black pumpkin. Veig had dressed the wound with the crushed root of the devil plant, which grew nearby; it had powerful curative properties. But it could not repair the severed muscle, and Jomar would walk with a limp for the rest of his life.

That night they feasted -- at least, it seemed a feast to beings who had never lived much above starvation level. Veig had speared a large, squirrel-like mammal and cooked its flesh by exposing it on hot rocks at midday; for Niall, it was a completely new taste. Then there were the cactus fruits, yellow and astringent, and the juice of the barrel cactus. Clearly, in spite of its barren appearance, this place contained far more life than the inland plateau. It was also, they all realised, far more dangerous. There were the sand scorpions and tiger beetles, the striped scarabs with their poisonous stings, the millipedes and the grey sand spiders, which were non-poisonous but very strong and swift, and which could truss up a human being in their sticky silk in less than a minute. Fortunately, these predators also had their predators. The spiders were a prey to a wasp called the pepsis, or tarantula hawk, a creature not much larger than a man's hand, which would paralyse them with its sting then use them as a living larder to feed its grubs. And most of the desert insects and small mammals were regarded as fair game by the enormous solifugid or camel spider, an ugly, beetle-like creature with immense jaws which could move so fast that it looked like a ball of thistledown blowing over the desert. Strangely enough, the camel spiders made no attempt to attack human beings; as Niall watched them, he often had a feeling that they were vaguely benevolent, as though they regarded human beings as some kind of ally or fellow-creature. It was just as well; their shark-like jaws could have bitten a man in half.

For many weeks after they first moved into the burrow, Niall spent his days peering out of the entrance at the creatures that went past. There were not many of them -- during the heat of the day, most desert creatures retreated to their dens -- but to a child brought up in a cave with an endless view of sand dunes, it was like a picture show. He learned to distinguish many of the creatures simply by sound, so that he could instantly tell the movement of a scorpion or desert spider from that of a tiger beetle or a millipede. And when he heard the movements of a camel spider, he knew it was perfectly safe to venture out; most sensible creatures kept out of its way.

During those early days, he was left alone a great deal. The women were delighted with the variety of their environment and wanted to explore. To the civilised eye, this area of shrub-steppe land at the edge of the desert would have seemed a desolate wilderness; to human beings who had lived in the true desert, it was like the Garden of Eden. Many bushes contained spiky, thick-skinned fruit that had to be picked with caution, but which proved highly edible when the skin was hacked away. Brown, dead-looking plants often had tuber-like roots that stored water. In some cases, this liquid was too bitter and unpleasant to drink but could be used for cooling the skin. Guarded by the men, Siris and Ingeld wandered far afield, carrying baskets woven from alfa grass, and returned with all kinds of strange delicacies. The men became experts in setting traps, and often caught hares, suricates and even birds. Ingeld, who had always been greedy, became distinctly plump.

Niall was ordered to stay in the depths of the burrow while the family was away; but the moment they left, he pushed aside the branches and stones that covered the entrance, and stood on the large rock that formed a step, peering out at the strange creatures that went past. If, as occasionally happened, some huge ant or millipede tried to force its way in, he discouraged it by thrusting a spear out of the hole;

as soon as they knew it was occupied, they hurried away.

As with most children Niall's sense of danger was at once exaggerated and unrealistic. To begin with, he was terrified of anything that moved; later, when he discovered that most desert creatures fear the unknown and prefer to avoid trouble, he became over-confident. One morning he grew bored with looking out from the entrance and decided to explore. He carefully closed the burrow behind him, then wandered among the organ-pipe cacti. Because it was still early, the cup of the waru plant was still half full of dew, and it was deliciously cool to the throat. He found a prickly pear and tried to detach one of its fruits, but he had forgotten to bring a flint blade, and it was too tough for his small fingers. He stooped over a devil plant and was fascinated by its grotesque, claw-like appearance. He walked over to the euphorbia that stood a few feet from the burrow and, after making sure that no creature was hiding in its branches, climbed into it and found himself a comfortable perch. It was not unlike being in a cage. This vantage point was far better than the mouth of the burrow, for he could see for miles. When a big tiger beetle came and rested in the euphorbia's shade, he almost stopped breathing. Then it struck him that this might be one of the original inhabitants of the burrow come to reclaim its home, and he had to fight against panic. A large fly more than three inches long alighted on a drooping branch and cleaned its forelegs; with breath-taking speed, the tiger beetle had launched itself off the ground and, although the fly caught the movement and started to rise, it was too late; it disappeared into the beetle's jaws. Niall was petrified as he watched the beetle chew the fly, with disgusting crunching noises, then swallow it. He leaned forward to get a better view and his foot slipped. The beetle pushed itself up on to its front legs, and peered into the tree with its prominent, button-like eyes; Niall gripped the branch, convinced he was about to be dragged from his perch and eaten like the fly. The beetle continued to stare up for what seemed an age, its long feelers waving gently. Then it seemed to lose interest and ambled off. Niall had never experienced such deep and enormous relief. Yet as the beetle had stared into his eyes, the sensation he had experienced had not been fear, but a curious suspension of his senses as if all the normal functions of his body had paused in their activity. In that state of mind, it had seemed that everything had grown very silent, and that he was communicating with the beetle exactly as he might have communicated with another human being. Nevertheless, he ran back to the burrow as soon as he was sure the beetle was out of hearing, and stayed there for the rest of the day.

A few days later, chance saved his life. Having recovered from his fright, he decided to go and see if there was water in the waru cup. It was empty -- some creature had been there before him -- so he wandered on through the cactus grove and stood looking out over the desert. A few hundred yards away there were more cacti, of another variety; these, he could see, had clusters of the astringent fruit of which he was so fond. There was no obvious danger, but he had the whole day before him, so he sat in the shadow of a cactus and stared out over the steppe. Idly, he picked up a flat stone, cradled it in his fingers, then placed his index finger along its edge and threw it so it spun through the air. It landed twenty feet away, with a puff of sand. At that moment, something happened. It was so swift that for a moment he disbelieved his eyes. Some large creature seemed to be there, in front of him; then, in the time it took him to blink, it had disappeared. He stared hard, wrinkling up his nose. There was nothing there -- only the flat, sandy ground, littered with blackish rocks. He threw another stone, and his aim was good; but this time, nothing happened. The air was already trembling with the heat; he wondered if the brief apparition had been some kind of mirage. But the area of ground between himself and the fruit-bearing cacti now communicated an air of menace. He sat there, perfectly still, for perhaps an hour, his chin on his knees. Then, from the other side of the cacti, he saw a movement. It was a crablike insect, slightly more than a foot long -- later he would recognise it as a species of darkling beetle -- with a greenish-yellow skin resembling a toad's. It ambled on slowly, and paused under the cacti to poke its reptilian face into the empty shell of a dung beetle. Then it kept on coming, straight towards him. As it approached the spot where the stone had landed, Niall held his breath. Then it happened again. With incredible speed, some large, dark creature seemed to leap from out of the ground. As it grabbed the darkling beetle, it paused long enough for Niall to see that it was a big, hairy spider whose segmented

body must have been more than three feet long. A moment later it was gone, and a circular trapdoor seemed to close behind it. The beetle had gone too, and the sand looked level and undisturbed. If Niall had glanced away, even for as long as it took to turn his head through ninety degrees, he would have seen nothing. The thought of what would have happened if he had walked across that empty space made his skin crawl with icy shivers.

When his mother returned -- with a basket half full of some brown, smooth seeds -- he told her about the trapdoor spider and begged her not to tell his father. When his father grew angry, his slaps could leave bruises that took weeks to disappear. But Ulf was not angry. He listened with grave attention, then beckoned Niall and made him point out the place where he had seen the spider. With Veig, Thorg and Hrolf standing by with raised spears, Ulf threw several large stones to try to lure the spider out of its den. But nothing happened; the creature could probably tell from the vibrations in the ground that the enemy was too numerous. After that, the men avoided the stretch of ground between the cactus groves.

It was more than a week before Niall was again left alone in the burrow. Before leaving, his father made him promise to stay inside, and not, on any account, to move the stones and branches that covered the entrance. Niall, who was afraid of his father, promised in all sincerity. What he had not reckoned on was his nervousness at being left alone. Only a few rays of light filtered into the darkness, and as he lay on his bed of grass, he began to imagine that the trapdoor spider was creeping towards the burrow. A slight sound overhead convinced him that he was under observation. He lay perfectly still, trying to breathe silently. Finally, he crept towards the entrance, stood on the stone and peered out. His field of vision was restricted to a few feet, and nothing was visible; in any case, he was convinced that the spider was waiting overhead, on the roof of the burrow. After standing there for half an hour, his legs began to ache, so he crept silently back to his couch and lay holding the spear that always stood at the entrance to the burrow for instant defence.

About an hour later he heard a sound that made his heart beat violently. There was a scraping noise from the wall behind his head. He sat up and stared at it, expecting to see it crumble and the hairy legs of the trapdoor spider to emerge. He reached out and cautiously felt the wall; it was hard and smooth, having been cemented by the saliva of the tiger beetle. But could it survive an attack from the other side? As the noise continued, he went and stood on the stone inside the entrance and prepared to push aside the branches and run outside. But when he tried to enlarge the hole, he realised that his father had wedged a twisted piece of acacia wood so tight under the lintel stone that it was impossible to budge. And while he was pushing at it with gritted teeth, he thought he heard a slight sound from the roof of the burrow. His imagination immediately conjured up a second spider, waiting there to pounce.

The scraping noises from behind the wall had ceased. He tiptoed over to it and placed his ear against the smooth surface. A few minutes later, the noises began again. As far as he could judge, they were several feet away. He tried to recollect everything his grandfather had said about burrowing spiders: for example, that when they encounter a large stone, they are often forced to change the direction of their tunnel. Perhaps this had happened to the creature on the other side of the wall. As far as he could tell, it seemed to be moving parallel to the wall, not towards it.

The noise continued, sometimes stopping for minutes at a time, then starting again. He began to evolve a plan of campaign; as soon as the wall began to crumble, he would thrust in the spear with all his strength, before the creature had time to enlarge the hole. . .

The tension was giving him a peculiar sensation in his head, a feeling of pressure as if his heart was trying to force more blood into his brain. It was not unlike the sensation produced by the narcotic juice of the ortis plant. His heart was thumping powerfully and steadily against his ribcage. He soon

noticed that if he paid attention to this feeling of pressure inside his head, and to the beating of his heart, he seemed to be able to sense the precise location of the creature behind the wall. By now, he had been listening for more than an hour, straining all his senses. The initial feeling of terror had disappeared -- since it was clear that there was no immediate crisis -- but the non-stop focusing of attention had produced a heightening of the senses, a feeling of being more wide-awake than he had ever been in his life. It was as if a tiny point of light were glowing inside his head. The sensation was so interesting that he forgot his fear of the invisible enemy. Instead of thumping against his ribs, his heart was now beating slowly and quietly. When he concentrated on its beat, he realised that he could control it -- make it go faster or slower, louder or quieter, at will. This realisation brought a strange feeling of harmony, a kind of inner richness. And underneath all this, like some dim, shapeless cloud of happiness, was a curious sense of optimism about the future. This was perhaps the strangest thing of all. Niall had never consciously thought about the future. Living in the desert, among people who never spoke more than they had to, there was little to stimulate his imagination to daydreams. He took it for granted that he would be trained as a hunter as soon as he was old enough, and would then spend his life looking for food and praying for success in the hunt. The hunter's life is centred on an obsession with luck, and therefore on a sense of being at the mercy of chance. The sensation that Niall was now experiencing was too vague to translate into words, or even thoughts. Yet its essence was the certitude that his life was not totally at the mercy of chance. Somehow, it was more important than that. This sense of power inside his head -- which he could intensify by pulling a face and wrinkling up the muscles of his forehead -- aroused a glow of optimism, an expectation of exciting events. He *knew* that for him, fate held something special in store.

The scraping started again, and he transferred his attention to it, but this time with curiosity rather than fear. Half an hour before he had listened with a kind of inner shrinking, as if he preferred not to know what it was. Now the fear was still there but he was somehow up above it, as if it were somebody else's fear. As he listened in this frame of mind, he could sense that the scraping was made by some creature whose legs and mandibles constituted a digging instrument. And that clearly indicated a beetle, not a spider. Then, with sudden clarity, as if his mind had reached through the intervening yards of earth, he seemed to see a brown scarab beetle, little more than six inches long, burrowing its way down in search of long-buried vegetation. His other self -- the lower self -- suddenly breathed a sigh of relief, and the point of light went out inside his head. He was no longer two people, only one, the seven-year-old boy called Niall who had been left alone for the day, and who now knew he was safe. That other Niall had been an adult, the equal -- perhaps the superior -- of his father or Jomar. And the memory of his existence remained clear and objective, nothing in the least like a dream. It was the boy who seemed in some way unreal.

Niall continued to have nightmares about the trapdoor spider until the day he saw it destroyed.

About a month after he had seen it capture the darkling beetle, he was sitting in the shadow of the organ-pipe cactus, watching the spider's nest. The spear lay at his feet. He knew that if the spider decided to attack him, it would be useless to turn and run; his best chance would be to face it with the spear. The thought terrified him; yet some deep instinct told him that he had to learn to face his own fear. In the past weeks he had seen it capture insects, birds and even a gecko lizard.

A big peepsis wasp, about six inches long, buzzed lazily around his head and flew away as he waved his hand at it. It was an attractive creature, with a metallic blue body and great yellow wings. Niall had a vague impression that it was a flying dung beetle.

A moment later, he held his breath as the wasp buzzed slowly above the spider's trapdoor, flew around in a circle, then alighted on the ground a few feet away. He strained his eyes, expecting to see the

flash of movement as the spider emerged. But nothing happened. The wasp sat there, obviously unaware of its danger, cleaning its forelegs. Niall, staring unblinkingly with total concentration, caught the tiny movement as the spider raised its trapdoor slightly to look at the intruder. Then it closed it again. Perhaps the spider had dined too well to be interested in a wasp.

What happened next made Niall gasp with disbelief. The wasp had evidently noticed the movement of the trapdoor. It went across to it, inspected it for perhaps a minute, then began trying to lever it open with its jaws and front legs. At any moment, Niall expected to see a blur of movement followed by the wasp's disappearance. What actually happened so astonished him that he moved forward several feet to get a better view.

The wasp managed to prise open the trapdoor a few inches, at which point it became clear that the spider was pulling on the underside to keep it shut. The contest went on for a long time. At one point, the spider won and the trapdoor closed; but the wasp patiently levered it open again.

The spider decided to fight. Quite suddenly, the trap flew open; the wasp jumped backward, and the big, hairy body crawled out of its hole. The wasp stood its ground, only rising up on all its legs as if to make up for its lack of size. The spider also tilted backwards into a defensive attitude, raising its forelegs above its head so that it seemed to be invoking a solemn curse on the wasp. The dangerous-looking chelicerae, or pincers, were now exposed, and, since the spider was facing towards him, Niall could see the extended fangs. It was a terrifying sight, but the wasp was obviously unafraid. Moving with swift, sure steps, it advanced on the spider as if to drive it back into its nest. The spider rose up on all its legs so that it towered about a yard above the wasp, and was obviously beyond its reach. But the wasp darted under the overarching belly and gripped the spider's rear leg between its mandibles; then, lying on its side, it struck upwards with its sting between the third and fourth legs. At the second attempt, the sting penetrated. The spider closed its legs on its enemy and began to roll over on the ground, trying to bite the wasp; the pepsis kept it at bay with its own long legs. Its sting, which had slipped out when the spider began to roll, now began to probe the spider's armour and drove into a soft spot at the base of the first leg. Now, suddenly, the two became still, the spider still trying to get its pincers down to bite the wasp, the pepsis bracing its legs and driving home the sting. Then it became clear that the spider was weakening; its movements became slower. After about a minute, the wasp withdrew its sting and extricated itself; the spider immediately resumed its previous position, belly high in the air. The rear leg, which the wasp had been biting, seemed to be moving of its own accord. But the legs seemed to lose their strength, and collapsed into their normal position, bent at the joints. With complete nonchalance, the wasp walked towards the spider, climbed up on its back and once more inserted its sting between the joints. It held this position without moving for a long time, and the spider seemed to endure it. As the wasp withdrew the sting, it collapsed on to its belly and lay still.

Now the wasp gripped the spider's front leg between its mandibles and began dragging the hairy body back towards the nest. It had to move backwards, bracing its legs; with each pull, the spider moved a few inches. Finally, the wasp positioned the body on the edge of the hole, went around to the other side and wedged itself under it, then pushed with all its strength; the inert spider toppled down into its own nest. The wasp rubbed its front legs together as if dusting its hands, then vanished down the hole.

Niall felt as if he were bursting with impatience; he wanted to run and tell someone about the battle he had just seen, but there was no one to tell. He considered creeping across the sand to look down the hole, but decided that this might be foolhardy; the wasp might mistake him for another spider. So he sat there for more than half an hour until the wasp emerged from the hole, its metallic body gleaming in the sunlight, and flew away. When he was quite sure that it was out of sight, Niall tiptoed over to the nest. What he saw made his skin crawl with a mixture of fear and disgust. The spider was lying on its back a few feet below him, sprawled exactly as it had fallen. In the centre of its upturned belly there

was a single white egg, still moist and shiny, stuck to the spider's hairs.

The sight was so menacing -- even with the spider on its back -- that Niall glanced around to make sure that no other spider was creeping up on him. Then, as he peered down at the inert monster, his nervousness slowly vanished, to be replaced by a kind of scientific curiosity. He was able to see that the eight legs were attached to the central portion of the spider's body, the cephalothorax, and that the big round belly, the largest part of its body, had virtually no support. At the far end of the abdomen there were a number of finger-like appendages which Niall guessed to be the spinnerets, or web-extruders. But he was most fascinated by the head, with its two long feelers, and the evil-looking pincers, each with a fang at the end. At the moment, these fangs were folded inward, so Niall could see the tiny hole down which the venom could flow. The pincers looked powerful enough to crunch through a man's arm.

The spider's eyes were on top of its head; by changing his position, he could see two of them, lying directly above the fangs. They were black and gleaming, and he had the uncomfortable feeling that they were watching him.

The nest itself was a tube, only just wide enough for the spider's body; just beyond the place where the body lay it turned through an obtuse angle so that he could not see into its depths. Its walls were lined with a coating of spider silk, and he could see that the trapdoor was made of an ingenious mixture of silk and earth, and was hinged with silk.

Now he could examine these things at leisure, they no longer seemed so terrifying. Finally, afraid that the wasp might return, he jumped to his feet. As he did so, he dislodged some earth, which fell down on to the spider's head. The eyes seemed to flinch, and he suddenly knew with total certainty that the creature was still alive. The thought almost made his heart stop. To restore his courage, he picked up a stone and threw it down the hole; it struck one of the infolded fangs and rolled down to the base of the pincers, where it blocked the mouth. Once again, the two eyes seemed to focus him for a moment. As he walked back to the burrow, he experienced a strange, disturbing feeling that was a mixture of revulsion and pity.

The family returned from their foraging expedition about an hour before nightfall; he could tell from their voices as they approached that they had been successful. They had come upon a swarm of desert locusts, and their woven baskets were full of them. The insects looked a little like big ears of corn, still wrapped in outer leaves, but with long legs and black eyes. Because they were in such high spirits, they lit a small fire in the entrance of the burrow, and thrust the locusts in to roast, having first removed their heads, legs and wings. When they were half cooked, they were pulled out of the fire, rolled in herbs, then put back again. Niall found their taste unexpectedly pleasant: crunchy and rather greasy, but saved from insipidity by the herbs and the woodsmoke.

It was only when they had finished their meal, and were sitting around in the darkness, staring contentedly at the ashes of the fire, that Jomar caressed Niall's matted hair and asked:

"What have you been doing all day?"

And Niall, who had been struggling with his impatience, told them what he had seen. He had never had such an attentive audience. Although none of them would admit it, the men -- with the exception of Jomar -- found the trapdoor spider as frightening as Niall did. Jomar was the only one who had had a chance to exorcise that natural human revulsion towards spiders by observing them at close quarters; and even Jomar found the presence of the trapdoor spider disturbing, purely as a natural hazard. So Niall's news was welcomed with rejoicing, and he had to recite his description of the combat several times -- not because they failed to take it in the first time, but because they wanted to savour it to

the full. Moreover, his father said nothing about his disobedience in venturing out of the burrow alone.

The excitement made Niall drowsy, and he fell asleep with his head in his mother's lap. Later, his grandfather lifted him quietly and carried him to his bed, which was in a corner next to his own. Niall woke up as he was being covered with the caterpillar skin; although it was dark, he could distinguish his grandfather by his distinctive smell.

"Why did the wasp lay its egg on the spider's belly?" he asked sleepily.

"So the grub will have something to eat."

"But won't the spider be rotten by the time the egg hatches out?"

"Of course not. It's not dead."

Niall's eyes widened in the dark. He had not mentioned his suspicion that the spider was still alive, for fear of ridicule. "How do you know it's not dead?"

"Wasps don't kill spiders. They want them alive, to feed their young. Now go to sleep."

But Niall was now wide awake. He lay there in the dark for a long time, experiencing again that strange mixture of revulsion and pity; but this time pity was predominant.

Early the next morning, they all went to look at the paralysed tarantula. Niall was surprised to see that the trapdoor was now shut. With the point of his spear, Jomar levered it open -- Niall noticed that, in spite of his confident assertion, he did it with extreme caution. Peering over his shoulder -- his mother was holding him -- Niall was startled to see that the spider was no longer there. Then he saw that it had been dragged into the bend of the tunnel. The wasp had evidently returned and moved it, then closed the trapdoor -- a considerable feat for a creature only six inches long. The women shuddered, and Ingeld said she was going to be sick. But Niall observed that his brother Veig became oddly quiet and thoughtful.

Veig had always been fascinated by insects. Once, as a child, he had vanished from the cave one afternoon when his mother was asleep; she had found him a quarter of a mile away, studying a nest of scarab beetles. On another occasion, the men had returned from their hunting with several live cicadas, each more than a foot long; and although they were half-starved, Veig had begged with tears in his eyes to be allowed to keep one as a pet. (He had been overruled, and the cicada had been roasted for supper.)

So Niall was not surprised, two days later, to see his brother slipping off quietly in the direction of the spider's nest. He waited until Veig was out of sight, then followed him. Niall assumed that his brother wanted to take a closer look at the tarantula, and he was right. From the shelter of the cactus he watched Veig lever open the trapdoor, then lie flat on his stomach to peer into the nest. A few seconds later, Veig lowered himself cautiously over the edge. Niall ran quietly across the sand, approaching from an angle from which his shadow would not betray him. Veig was crouched two feet below him, staring with total absorption; when Niall betrayed his presence by a slight movement, he leapt to his feet, already raising his spear. He sighed with relief when he saw it was his brother.

"Idiot! You frightened me!"

"Sorry. What are you doing?"

Veig simply pointed to the spider. By leaning over the edge, Niall could see that the egg had burst open and that a large black grub now wriggled on the spider's upturned stomach, its tiny legs too feeble to allow it to move. But when Veig gently poked it with his finger, its powerful little mandibles instantly gripped the skin of the spider's belly; for if it rolled off, it would die of starvation. When Veig caressed it, the larva twisted and tried to retaliate with its tiny, undeveloped sting. But Veig persisted; and half an hour later, the grub accepted the light caresses as a matter of course. It was more interested in trying to penetrate the thick, hairy skin of the belly. For two hours they watched it, until the heat of the sun drove them back to the burrow. By that time, it had already gnawed a hole in the skin, and Niall felt no inclination to see more. As they left, Veig carefully closed the trapdoor behind him.

"What would you do if the wasp came back while you were in there?" Niall asked.

"It won't."

"How do you know?"

"I just know." Veig never said much, but he seemed to know things by intuition.

For the next few weeks, Veig spent at least an hour every day in the nest of the trapdoor spider. Niall went with him only once; the sight of the red cavity in the tarantula's belly disgusted him, and he no longer took pleasure in the downfall of his enemy. He found it impossible to understand how Veig could patiently cut tiny slivers of flesh from the spider and feed them to the voracious grub. Soon Veig found it necessary to close the trapdoor, leaving it propped open an inch or so with a stone; otherwise black desert flies were quickly attracted by the exposed entrails. These flies were slightly smaller than the common house fly, being only about three inches long, but the blood-sucking proboscis and sharp mandibles made them capable of destroying an exposed carcass within hours.

One day, Veig came back to the burrow with the wasp on his wrist. It was now almost fully grown, and with its metallic blue body, yellow wings and long, graceful legs, looked at once beautiful and dangerous. Yet it clearly regarded Veig with total trust; it was astonishing to watch Veig turn it on its back and prod it with his forefinger, while the wasp wrapped its long legs round his hand, nibbled at his finger with its sharp mandibles, and occasionally allowed the long, black sting to slide out like a dagger. It also liked to climb up Veig's arm and hide itself in his shoulder-length hair; then, with its feelers it would investigate the lobe of his ear until he laughed hysterically.

The next morning, Niall was allowed to accompany Veig and Ulf as they took the wasp hunting for the first time. They walked to the acacias that Niall had seen on the horizon when they first came to the burrow. There they soon found what they were looking for: the webs of the grey desert spider. These creatures were smaller than the tarantula, their bodies scarcely more than a foot long; but the legs, by comparison, were enormous. Trussed up in the corner of one of these webs was a grasshopper, helpless in its cocoon of silk. Veig moved around underneath the tree until he saw the spider, concealed in a fork where a branch joined the main trunk. He threw a stone; the first one bounced off the trunk; the second struck the spider. In a flash, it had lowered itself to the ground on a thread of silk. Just as quickly, the wasp was humming towards it, like a hawk descending on its prey. The spider had no time to square up to its antagonist; the wasp was underneath it, gripping its back leg and arching its body upward. They all saw the sting penetrate, and watched the metallic body quiver slightly as it injected its nerve poison. The spider struggled and tried to wrap its legs round the wasp; but its instinct provided it with no defence. A few minutes later, it lay on the ground, limp as a discarded toy. And the wasp, now it had obeyed its

instinct, was also uncertain what to do next; it crawled over the fleshy grey body and seemed to be sniffing it. Veig went and knelt gently beside it, reached out very slowly and moved the wasp onto his wrist. Then, from a bag suspended from his waist, he took a fragment of tarantula flesh and fed it to the wasp. After that, they chopped off the spider's legs, to make it easier to carry, and Ulf dropped it into his own basket. It provided the wasp with meals for the next month.

Ingeld, typically, regarded the wasp with dislike and mistrust, and screamed if it came near her. (It proved to be a friendly creature that liked to walk up and down their bare arms.) She also protested that the dead spider had an unpleasant smell. There was some truth in this; spiders had their own distinct and peculiar smell, which increased after death. But they kept the spider-meat in the remotest depth of the burrow, covered with a thick layer of grass, so the smell scarcely penetrated to the living quarters; in any case, human beings who live in close proximity, with little opportunity for washing, soon become accustomed to a variety of natural odours. Niall sensed intuitively that Ingeld's objections arose out of a desire to get herself noticed, and he was amused to observe how quickly her attitude changed when Veig returned a few days later with a bird that the wasp had attacked on the wing. It was a member of the bustard family, about the size of a large duck. Veig described how he had seen it perched in the top of a tree and directed the wasp towards it. (The wasp seemed to respond directly to Veig's mental commands.) Alarmed by the hum, the bird began to fly away, then pecked frantically as the wasp fastened onto its leg and drove in its sting. Veig had to walk two miles to locate them; the wasp was sitting quietly on the back of the bird, which lay with outstretched wings as if it had crashed from a height. Veig gave the wasp its reward of spider-meat, then killed the bustard with a twist of his muscular hands.

The women were in some doubt about eating a bird that had been paralysed with wasp poison, and left it untouched for a while. It was also the first bird they had seen at such close quarters, and they were not sure how to deal with its feathers. Finally, hunger overcame their misgivings; and after Veig had roasted and eaten a slice of the breast without ill effect, the rest was devoured until only the feet remained. The nerve poison -- quite harmless when taken orally -- had tenderised the flesh, and the result was delicious. From then on, roast bustard was included with running water and coloured flowers in Mall's idea of paradise.

Ever since Niall had learned to walk, he had been trained to keep watch for spider balloons. Before he ventured out of the cave at the foot of the plateau, he had to wet his finger and decide the direction of the wind. Then he had to scan the horizon for anything that seemed to reflect the sunlight. Until he was convinced that the sky was completely clear, he had to stay in the cave.

If he saw a balloon heading in his direction, his instructions were to bury himself in the sand -- if there was time -- or otherwise to remain perfectly still. He was not to follow the progress of the balloon with his eyes, but was to look down at the sand and concentrate on whatever he was looking at. The death spiders, Ulf explained, had poor eyesight, so would probably not see him. They hunted by will, not by the sense of sight, and they could smell fear. This puzzled Niall, who could not understand how fear could have a smell. Ulf explained that fear produced a vibration which was exactly like a scream of terror, and the spider's senses were attuned to this vibration. So if the spider balloons passed overhead, it was necessary to make the mind as silent and as still as the body. To give way to fear would be exactly like jumping up and down and shouting to attract the spider's attention.

Being a cheerful and confident child, Niall had no doubt this would be easy. All he had to do was to empty his mind and tell himself there was nothing to be afraid of. But at night this confidence evaporated. If he lay awake listening to the silence, he often became convinced that he could hear something creeping through the sand outside. Soon his imagination had conjured up a giant spider, trying

to peer over the rock that blocked the doorway. Then his heart began to beat faster, and he became aware that he was sending off signals of panic. The harder he tried to suppress them, the more persistent they became. He felt he was caught in a vicious circle, his fear increasing his fear. But eventually, because he was young and self-confident, he learned to counteract the fear before it could send the adrenalin flooding into his bloodstream, and to command his heart to beat more slowly.

His mother was the only one in the family who would talk about the spiders. Later, he understood the reason. The menfolk were afraid that Niall's imagination might become obsessed by the creatures and that his fear might betray them all when the balloons came too close. His mother recognised that fear of the unknown might produce precisely the same effect; so when they were alone, she answered his questions freely. But he knew instinctively that she was only telling him half the truth. When he asked her why the spiders wanted to capture human beings, she said it was because they wanted to enslave them. When he asked her if they ate human beings, she denied it, and pointed out that Jomar had escaped unharmed. But when he questioned Jomar about the spiders, the old man always pretended to be sleepy or deaf. The few things Niall learned about them were picked up from fragments of whispered conversation, overheard when he was supposed to be asleep. And these left him in no doubt that the spiders were not only carnivorous but horribly cruel.

Fortunately, the spider balloons seemed to avoid the desert -- either because the heat was too great, or because they believed that no human beings could survive in such conditions. Before they moved from the cave to the burrow, Niall had seen only a dozen balloons, and these were on the horizon.

It was different on the edge of the desert; here the spiders kept up regular patrols, usually at dawn or dusk. They were obviously routine patrols, but disturbing all the same. It was as if the spiders knew that, sooner or later, the humans would be tempted out of the desert to these less arid regions with their abundance of cactus fruit and small animals and locusts. One day, when a spider balloon had passed almost directly overhead, they had seriously discussed returning to the safety of the desert. Ulf and Siris were willing, even though Siris was pregnant again; but Ingeld flatly declined even to consider the idea. She said that she would rather be dead than go back to the cave and a diet of prickly pears. Niall was secretly relieved at her refusal; he also preferred food and danger to starvation and boredom.

When his sister Runa was born, Niall ceased to be the baby of the family. He was nearly eleven years old and began to accompany the men on their hunting expeditions. At first he found it exhausting, walking sometimes twenty miles in the heat of the day, his eyes constantly alert for spider balloons or for the telltale signs of the lair of a trapdoor spider or yellow desert scorpion. The men soon realised that his sense of danger was keener than their own. One day, approaching a grove of thorny desert trees where they had set bird snares, Niall experienced a feeling of reluctance, as if some force were trying to pull him backwards. He laid his hand on Hrolf's arm, and his sense of danger communicated itself to the others, who stopped and stared intently at the trees. After perhaps ten minutes, Ulf saw a slight movement, and they; all glimpsed the long, thin leg of a cricket. Ulf said: "It's only a decta," -- a name for the harmless desert cricket. But Niall's sense of danger remained persistent, and he refused to move. The men finally decided to give the trees a wide berth and struck out across the rock-strewn wilderness towards a clump of fruit-bearing cacti.

On their way back, towards dusk, they again passed within a few hundred yards of the trees. They were moving very quietly, and startled a desert cricket, which frightened them all by suddenly bounding into the air and vanishing with twenty-foot leaps towards the trees. Then, suddenly, there was a blurred cloud and the decta was struggling in the grip of a nightmare creature that towered into the air above it. It was like a very large cricket, perhaps eight feet tall, but its grey-green legs were covered with spikes or bristles. The strange-looking head resembled a long, blank face, surmounted by two spherical

eyes; at the lower end of this face were long, pointed jaws, not unlike the claws of a scorpion. As they watched, it pressed the cricket tight against its bosom, lifting the cricket's hind legs clear of the ground, so that they kicked in space. Then, with a single slash of the armoured jaws, it ripped open the cricket's throat. They were so horrified at the demonic apparition that they stood and stared. The creature paid no attention to them, but chewed its way into the cricket's head, which collapsed at an unnatural angle. The goggle eyes of the demon seemed to stare unconcernedly over the desert as it crunched its way down its victim's body. When it had almost finished eating, the hunters realised that it might still be hungry; it would be expedient to remove themselves from its vicinity. Badly shaken, they hurried back towards the burrow.

Jomar, who had remained behind that day -- his leg was becoming increasingly stiff -- recognised their description of the creature, although he had never seen one. It was a particularly savage member of the cricket family sometimes called a saga insect. Its armour made it practically invulnerable, and its long legs meant that it could leap on a prey from a distance of a hundred yards. If the hunters had approached any closer to the trees, one of them would undoubtedly have been eaten as voraciously as the desert cricket was.

After that experience, the men came to accept that Niall's intuition of danger was keener than their own; he became a valuable regular member of the hunting party.

Ulf and Thorg were skilled hunters; but for them, hunting was simply a necessity; when the larder was full, they preferred to rest in the cool depths of the cave, lighted by a flickering oil lamp, and talking in low voices. Veig and Hrolf, being younger, regarded hunting as a sport and an adventure. If this rocky wilderness was like a paradise compared to the desert, then perhaps the lands to the north contained an even wider variety of game. Ulf warned them that the north was also the region of the death spiders. But Jomar had told them that a wide sea lay between this land and the country of the spiders. He had also told them about the great delta that lay to the north-east, a vast green area of forest and lush vegetation. Other hunters had told them about the delta, with its flesh-eating plants; but Veig and Hrolf had the confidence of youth, and did not doubt that even a man-eating plant would be less dangerous than a tiger beetle or giant scorpion. One day, in the cool season, they would cross the wilderness to the great delta. Meanwhile, the land to the north offered promise of adventure.

So one morning, immediately after sunrise, Veig, Hrolf and Niall left the burrow and marched towards the northern horizon. They were armed with flint knives, spears and slings, and carried their food in the sheets of spider-silk that would later be used as parasols to protect them from the sun. Niall loved to caress the spider silk; it was smooth and cool and seemed to ripple under his fingers like a liquid. He carried the smallest of the three bundles, containing the cactus fruit and a sealed gourd of water.

An hour later, they passed the distorted columns of red sandstone, worn into strange shapes by the sand-laden wind. They sat down to rest in their shade and ate some cactus fruit. From here, they could see that the land dipped into a shallow bowl, strewn with large boulders. It was important to press on quickly; in a few hours, these boulders would be too hot to touch. On the far edge of the bowl, they could see trees. Veig, who had the keenest eyesight, believed he could also see water.

The distance was greater than they had thought. By midday, they were still in the middle of the rocky wilderness, although the boulders had now given way to flints and shards of granite. They cleared a space of a few square yards, drove spears into the rocky soil to form makeshift tent-poles, and spread the spider silk over them. With the sun directly overhead, the shade was poor, but it was better than nothing. The ground was too hard and irregular to lie down, so they sat there, clasping their knees and staring out over the depressing wilderness towards the trees on the northern horizon, and the green vegetation that was now clearly visible. Niall was again daydreaming of scented flowers and running

water.

After three hours' rest, they again set out towards the north. The day was still hot, but they had to move now if they hoped to reach the trees by nightfall. Niall's legs had become leaden weights, and he was suffering from homesickness; but he kept his eyes fixed on the trees, which grew steadily closer; Veig said they were date palms, which at least promised food. Niall was passionately fond of dates, but seldom had a chance to eat them.

The terrain was now changing; the rocks underfoot were smaller, seldom larger than a fist, and inclined to roll underneath them; plodding wearily with his eyes on the trees, Niall suddenly felt his feet sliding from under him and landed on his back, taking the skin off both elbows. He wanted to rest for a few minutes, but Veig insisted that they had to keep moving. Niall dragged himself to his feet and kept his eyes on the ground, partly to avoid another accident, partly to conceal his tears of fatigue. A few moments later, he caught Hrolf and Veig exchanging a troubled glance, and realised both were wishing they had left him at home. It had the effect of making him clench his teeth and force himself to make an effort to control his misery. For a brief moment, the misery became more acute, so that he felt like flinging himself on the ground and giving way to tears. Then, as he concentrated, the point of light glowed inside his head. Quite suddenly, the fatigue vanished -- or rather, it was still there in his limbs, but *he* felt quite detached from it, as if observing it from above. He was controlling his fatigue instead of being controlled by it. It was such an exhilarating sensation that he gave a chuckle of satisfaction; Veig looked at him in astonishment and was amazed when Niall smiled back cheerfully.

They strode on, over the hot rocks that shimmered in the heat; through the distorted air, the green countryside ahead looked doubly welcoming. Now Niall observed another change in the terrain. The stones beneath their feet were smaller, varying in size from a hen's egg to a mere pebble, and at fairly regular intervals there were funnel-shaped craters, each about twenty feet deep. As they approached a particularly large crater, they stopped to look down into it. If they had been less tired, they might have scrambled down the sides, merely to satisfy their curiosity; but in this heat, it would have been a pointless waste of energy. As it was, Niall kicked a stone down and watched it bounce to the bottom. Then he noticed a green plant, not unlike the waru, growing a few feet down the side; in its centre was a spherical, pale green fruit similar to the cactus fruit. Niall sat down, and cautiously slid down towards it. The ball, about the size of an apple, was hard and unyielding to the touch; a firm twist pulled it loose, and he tossed it up to Hrolf. The movement dislodged the stones he was sitting on and he felt himself slipping. He lay flat on his back and tried to dig in his heels; this worked for a moment, but the stones were too loose and cascaded away from under his feet. His momentum made it more difficult to use his hands or feet as brakes. Finally, halfway down, he came to a halt, and cautiously sat up, aware that any sudden movement would cause him to start slipping again.

Then, very slowly, he turned over onto his hands and knees and began trying to scramble up again.

A shout from Veig made him look round, and his heart contracted with terror. The stones in the bottom of the funnel were moving, heaving as if pushed aside by a giant mole. First, long feelers emerged, reflecting the sun as if they were made of blue metal. The top of the head was a blue dome covered with downy hairs, on either side were large, metallic blue hemispheres, not unlike the eyes of the saga insect; yet to Niall it seemed there were a second pair of eyes at the base of the feelers, narrow and predatory, and surrounded by yellow armour. The rest of the face was also yellow, but with bands of blue, with a protruding, sickle-shaped jaw which made it look not unlike a baboon. The head was followed by a mobile neck, then by powerful-looking forelegs. The armoured yellow and black body might have been that of a coloured armadillo.

It was unmistakably looking at Niall, and he tried frantically to scramble up the slope. He gained a few feet, then began to slide again. He looked round, expecting to see the armour-plated monster advancing on him; but it was only sitting there, its strange, monkey face turned blankly towards him.

Something struck his hand; it was the end of the rope woven from alfa grass that they always carried on hunting expeditions. Thankfully, Niall grabbed it with both hands. Heaving on the other end, Veig and Hrolf began to pull him up the slope.

Suddenly, a blow on the head, and another in the small of the back, drove the breath from his lungs. For a horrified moment he thought the monkey-faced creature had seized him; but when he looked down, he saw it was sitting in the centre of the pit, its face turned away from him. Then, as he watched, it seemed to bury its head in the loose stones and jerk it violently backwards. With astonishing accuracy, the shower of stones struck the side of the pit just above him and rolled down on him; one struck his eye, and he felt blood running down his cheek. Another shower of stones struck his body, making him gasp with pain. At that moment, Veig gave a jerk on the rope; his bruised hands released it, and he began to slide, feet-first, down the side of the pit. Now, at last, the creature turned and began to move towards him, with a slowness that suggested it was quite sure of its prey. Again Veig threw the rope, but it was too short and landed several feet above Niall's hands.

Now Veig, recognising that the creature's jaws were close to his brother's feet, began to scramble down the slope, hurling stones as he went. One of them struck the creature on the head, and it paused to survey its attacker. There was something very frightening in the robot-like impassivity of that brightly coloured face. Veig tried to bring himself to a halt, slid on the stones, and threw himself on to his back to slow down his fall. He managed to dig in his heels, and lay with curved back and bent knees, suddenly aware of his folly in venturing into the pit. Niall had used this diversion to climb a few feet up towards the end of the rope. Slowly, Veig turned over on to his belly and tried to claw his way back up the slope. Immediately, a well-aimed shower of stones struck him on the head and shoulders, knocking him flat.

Niall could see Hrolf lying on his stomach, leaning over the edge of the crater, trying to give Niall a few extra inches of rope. He slipped and managed to retrieve himself and scramble back, sending another shower of stones down on Niall. One of them struck the creature's head, and stopped it briefly.

Niall shouted: "Never mind the rope. Throw stones." Hrolf began to bombard the creature with rocks, but most of them bounced off its armoured back.

Veig saw what was happening. "Use the sling!" Hrolf was the best sling-shot in the family. For a moment, he vanished from against the skyline; when he reappeared, he was carrying the sling. He whirled it round his head, and Niall felt the stone whizz past him. Hrolf's aim was excellent, but the creature had again buried its head in the stones, so the missile bounced off its back again. A moment later, another shower of stones struck Veig as he tried to climb and made him slip down.

As the creature moved towards Veig, another stone from Hrolf struck the blue hemisphere on the side of its head. There was a crunching sound, and the dome seemed to disintegrate into blood. Both Veig and Niall shouted with joy. The creature stopped, and for the first time showed signs of indecision. A second stone missed and bounced off its armour; the third missed altogether. Hrolf was becoming over-excited.

"Listen, Hrolf," Veig called. His voice was a strained croak. Hrolf loosed another stone, and it bounced off the armour. "Stop! Listen to me." In spite of its tension, Veig's voice was calm and controlled. "Take your time. See if you can get its other eye." He himself hurled a stone at the creature,

which had the effect of making it start towards him again. Hrolf took his time, swinging the sling several times before he released the stone. It was a good shot; it landed square at the point where one of the antennae joined the head and knocked it sideways. A second stone struck the centre of the face. The creature stopped, its head turning from side to side as if trying to see its attacker, then turned and buried its head in the stones. Niall thought it was going to throw another shower of stones, then realised, with immense relief, that it was burying itself. There was a final twitch of its back legs, and the striped monster had vanished from their sight.

Both Niall and Veig were too bruised and breathless to move for several minutes. They sat there, staring at the spot where the creature had vanished, expecting to see it looking out at them. When it became clear that it had given up the fight, both renewed their efforts to climb the sides of the pit. Now they could move more slowly and deliberately they were able to progress a few inches at a time. Niall soon reached the end of the rope, and Hrolf heaved him up to safety. Then Niall and Hrolf did the same for Veig. Then all three sat at the edge of the crater, looking down at the spot where the creature had disappeared. Niall and Veig were bruised from head to foot, and their hands, feet and knees were raw; but this seemed unimportant compared to safety.

Veig touched Hrolf on the shoulder.

"Thanks."

Hrolf shrugged with embarrassment. "We'd better get moving."

They knew he was right. This wilderness was no place to spend the night. They collected their bundles and their weapons, and limped on over the stones, towards the green landscape that held promise of rest and water.

An hour later the trees were close, and they came upon the first vegetation: creosote bushes, alfa grass and waru plants. Then, suddenly, there was real grass under their feet: coarse and wiry, but amazingly soft to their bruised flesh. Now they could see that the trees were bigger than any they had ever seen before, stretching up twice as high as the giant cactus. There was sand underfoot, but it was not the fine, powdery sand of the desert; it was coarser, and pleasant to walk on. And from this sand grew plants and bushes in unimaginable abundance: flowering cactus with bright rose-coloured flowers, fleshy green plants like warus, but with big yellow flowers, sorb apple, Rose of Jericho, bright green euphorbias and dozens of others that Niall had never seen or imagined. Lizards darted from under their feet, and enormous bees hummed among the flowers. There was even the sound of birdsong. Niall found it all so overwhelming that he forgot his fatigue and bruises. It suddenly seemed to him that it would have been worth a week's travel in the wilderness to see a place so beautiful and full of living things.

As they approached the trees, Niall could see that they grew along the sides of a shallow stream that meandered along in its rocky bed. They threw down their bundles and weapons and plunged in without hesitation, dropping onto their hands and knees and drinking greedily. For Niall, the sensation was ecstasy. Even in the middle, the stream was scarcely knee deep, so that when Niall sat down, it hardly came up to his waist. As he stared down into it, the continual movement of the water produced an almost hypnotic sensation. His mind relaxed and blended into the rippling flow, and some deep instinct told him that water and green plants were a part of his birthright.

As he sat there, splashing water over his face and chest, his eye caught a movement on the bank. He stared with incredulity at the huge, blood-red creature that scuttled across the sand and vanished into a flowering bush.

"What's that?" he gasped. Instantly, all three were still, suddenly aware of their vulnerability as they sat there without weapons. Then another of the creatures ran out into the open on its spidery legs, and Veig gasped with relief:

"It's only an ant."

"Do they attack human beings?"

"I don't think so." Veig was obviously unsure.

Reluctantly, they left the water and returned to their weapons. On the opposite bank, ants emerged periodically and vanished into the vegetation. Sometimes they halted, for no obvious reason, then went off in another direction. Most were about two feet long. They had the same blank faces as the saga monster and the crater insect, and the claw-like mandibles looked formidable; yet there was something about those triangular heads, with their flat-looking eyes and the bent antennae which resembled an upturned moustache, that made them seem quite unmenacing.

Veig looked at the sky; the sun was near the horizon. "We'd better move." He heaved himself to his feet. The heat had already dried his wet loincloth. "Wait here."

They watched him splash through the stream and out onto the far bank. A red ant paused in its scurrying, headlong motion, surveyed him for a moment, then hurried on. Encouraged by its lack of interest, he advanced a few feet and stood direct in the path of an oncoming ant. It merely changed direction and scuttled around him. When this had happened half a dozen times more, and it was clear that the ants had no interest in human beings, Niall and Hrolf picked up their bundles and crossed the stream. Once again, an ant stopped to survey them, studied them for a moment, then went on its way. After that, the other ants ignored them. It was as if the first had sent some kind of message, classifying them as harmless.

Nevertheless, they advanced cautiously. This vegetation could conceal the lair of a scorpion or tiger beetle -- even a saga insect. But although they saw many beetles, aphids and bugs, and even a seven-foot millipede, there was no sign of carnivorous insects. Half a mile farther on, they came upon a spot that promised shelter for the night. At the foot of a huge rock, there was a hollow in the sand. They prodded into its depths with their spears to make sure it was not already occupied, then settled down to enlarging it with their hands and flint knives. In less than an hour, it had been transformed into a small den, its entrance concealed by bushes hacked and torn out of the sand. Here, at last, they could feel relatively secure.

The sun was on the horizon; the landscape to the east was already dark. Veig had one more task to perform before they retired for the night: to try and establish contact with his family. Back in the burrow, Siris would be wondering if her sons were safe. As the sun sank below the horizon, she would be sitting alone, emptying her mind, hoping for a message. Veig therefore found himself a comfortable spot at the foot of the rock, where he could stare in the direction of their home. Then he also relaxed and emptied his mind. He should have done this half an hour ago, to allow his thoughts and feelings to become quiescent; but they had been preparing their refuge for the night.

Daylight became dusk; dusk turned swiftly into darkness. Quite suddenly, they were surrounded by a blackness that was like the blackness in the depth of the burrow, without even a gleam of light; it was as if they had been blinded. But in this velvet blackness, Veig suddenly became aware that his mother was listening, as if she were sitting a few feet away. Then, from the depths of his own inner silence, he conveyed to her a picture of the place they were in, and of the den in which they intended to

spend the night. The pictures had to be conveyed quickly, for communicating like this was exhausting, requiring a concentration that was difficult to maintain. He also showed her a picture of the rocky wilderness they had crossed, and then of the stream and the scurrying red ants. Their communion lasted, in all, perhaps ten seconds; then, before he could say goodbye, it faded. He could have renewed it with a further effort, but it would have been pointless. Now she knew they were safe and could sleep without anxiety. Veig made his way round the rock, feeling its surface with his hands, groped his way past the barrier of spiky twigs, and stumbled into the shelter, pulling the bush by its roots into the narrow gap. There was no need to ask him if he had established contact; his silence told them the answer.

They were hungry, but too tired to eat. Within minutes, all were fast asleep. Outside, the moon rose, and nocturnal creatures came out to seek their prey.

Niall awoke to the sound of birdsong and the chirping of insects. He yawned and stretched, then gasped with pain. His body felt stiff and bruised all over, and when he tried to sit up, a sharp pain in his elbow forced him to lie down again. But the pleasure of being in these new and strange surroundings made the discomfort seem trifling.

Veig proved to be in the same state. The skin of his back was a mass of bruises where the crater insect had bombarded him with rocks, and he had a lump on the back of his head like a small egg. Hrolf had escaped cuts and bruises, but admitted that it was difficult to bend his knees. They decided there would be no point in trying to return home today; in their present state, they might die in the wilderness.

Niall started to push aside the barrier, then shrank back. Drifting across the morning sky, about fifty feet above the ground, was a spider balloon. A trail of gossamer floated in the breeze behind it. He had never seen one so close. Veig and Hrolf were sitting with their backs to him, and had not noticed his sudden movement. He closed his mind and watched the balloon as it drifted out of his line of vision. If he had alerted the other two, they might have experienced a momentary panic which could have betrayed them to the spider. As it was, Niall was somehow aware that this was a routine patrol, and that the spider inside the balloon was sleepy and inattentive.

Five minutes later, he poked his head out of the den and scanned the sky. The balloon was now a speck in the distance, and there were no others in sight. He waited until it was invisible, then told Veig and Hrolf what he had seen. They were shaken, and he knew he had been right not to alert them.

Veig said: "As close as that?" He was afraid the spiders might know of their presence.

"Just above those trees."

Veig's breath exploded in a sigh of relief. "We were lucky. . ."

But in his mood of relaxed optimism, Niall knew that it was more than luck.

An hour later, when they were convinced there were no more balloons, they made their way back to the stream. Once again, they soaked themselves in the cool water, lying full length and splashing one another. To Niall, it seemed incredible that Nature could be so wasteful of such a precious

commodity. In the desert, a few drops of water could mean the difference between life and death; so could a single cactus fruit or a sand rodent. This superabundance was intoxicating, but also somehow alarming.

They followed the stream for more than a mile. It came down from distant hills; on the other side of those hills, according to Jomar, lay the great delta, where there was even more abundance and even more danger. And somewhere on the far side of the delta, on the other side of the sea, lay the city of the death spiders. He wanted to ask Veig and Hrolf about the spiders, but he knew they would be reluctant to talk about them; they were hunters, and believed that to speak of what one feared most was to invite bad luck.

Here, in this multicoloured paradise, they all experienced a continuous sensation of delight mixed with fear. Everything that moved alarmed them, for they were too inexperienced to know what might be dangerous. There were giant dragon-flies, as large as a man, whose gauzy, net-veined wings formed a roof over the body when they were at rest, and which turned into vast, buzzing apparitions when they suddenly took to the air. (Niall did not even suspect that these glittering creatures were fully-grown versions of the crater insect that had almost killed them.) There were bright green fungus flies that seemed to take a pleasure in buzzing past their ears so that the high-pitched noise made their heads ring. As they passed close to some immense trees, they saw webs of the grey spiders stretching like enormous nets; in one of these, a big living creature about the size of a man, was still struggling, so encased in spider silk that it was impossible to guess its identity. They kept well clear of the trees. Huge butterflies flapped lazily past them, their great wings creating a pleasant draught. Niall found one of these wings lying on the ground and was amazed at its lightness and strength; he discovered he could lie on it on the surface of the stream, and float along as if on a boat.

They were now ravenously hungry; they had left their food behind in the shelter. The problem was that they were unaware which of these various fruits was edible. Niall took a tentative bite at a purple fruit like an oversized grape, and spat it out immediately; it had a strange, bitter flavour, and the taste stayed in his mouth for the next ten minutes. An experiment with a yellow, fleshy fruit was equally unsuccessful; it tasted like rotten meat. A bright red globular fruit had a pungent, oily flavour.

Then, marching across the sand ahead of them, they saw a number of big black ants, about twice the size of the red ants, each carrying a large, light green fruit. Cautiously, in case the ants were aggressive, they followed the trail backwards until they arrived at a grove covered with a tangle of green plants, among which were the green fruits, in various stages of ripeness. Many kinds of insect were already there, feeding on the ripe fruit, and the air was full of a pleasantly sweet smell. Niall found a large fruit concealed by a tangle of leaves and vines, slashed it open with his flint knife, and scooped out a handful of the ripe flesh. It was deliciously cool and sweet, although the yellow seeds were too hard to eat. It was Niall's first taste of a melon, and he went on scraping and eating until only the skin and the seeds remained.

Their hunger appeased, they sat and watched the black ants collecting fruit. The ants would slice through the vine with their big, dangerous-looking mandibles, then pick up the melon in their two forelegs and march away on the remaining four. They seemed to ignore completely any other living creature that crossed their paths. One of them marched up to a large, overripe melon on which a butterfly was already feeding, snipped through the vine, and proceeded to pick up the melon in its forelegs with the butterfly still eating. The butterfly, apparently indifferent to the ant, went on eating until the fruit suddenly vanished, then flew away past their heads, its wings creating currents of air.

They found all this activity endlessly fascinating. They were accustomed to the desert, where there was little to engage the attention, and to sitting passively for hours in the depths of the burrow. This

new world of endless variety was like some marvellous picture show; whenever the attention became fatigued, some new wonder excited it again.

Veig and Hrolf engaged in a discussion about whether ants were vegetarians; Hrolf was convinced that they were, while Veig argued that the serrated mandibles looked as if intended for tearing flesh. This argument was settled when Niall caught a movement in the distance and saw a black ant dragging the corpse of a grasshopper more than twice its own size. The ant was forced to walk backwards; yet it unerringly followed the trail of the other ants without once looking round to check its direction. Niall solved this problem when he observed tiny sticky blobs on the trail, and noticed one of the ants dropping a similar blob from the end of its body; it was clearly laying a trail which the other ants followed by smell.

Out of curiosity, they followed the ant that was dragging the grasshopper along the trail. At a certain point, two more ants approached and seemed to offer to help. The human beings watched with interest, expecting to see an instructive example of ant efficiency. In fact, the three ants seemed to have no fixed plan. One of the ants tried to push its way under the grasshopper, with the intention of carrying it; another grabbed it by the wing with its mandibles, while the original ant once again proceeded to drag it backwards. This pulled the grasshopper sideways, so it slid off the back of the carrier, while the membrane of the wing was torn by the force of the pull so that the third ant was left holding a flaky fragment. Then all three proceeded to push, heave and shove without coordinating their efforts, the result being rather less efficient than when a single ant had been pulling alone. The humans found this confusion uproariously funny, and shrieked with laughter.

They soon located the ants' nest, a large hole in the ground close to the roots of an acacia tree. Big soldier ants stood on guard there, and gently touched every ant that went in with their antennae, presumably to check its identity. They settled down at a distance, behind a spiky acacia, and watched the endless traffic. They were unaware that the shelter was unnecessary -- that the soldier ants were blind, and the workers had poor eyesight. The ants were guided by an acute sense of smell, and were perfectly aware of the warm-blooded animals watching them from behind the spiny bush. But since food was abundant, and the creatures seemed to intend no harm, they had no reason to attack.

Hrolf eventually began to find the spectacle boring, and Niall found that the warmth of the sun made him sleepy, even though they were in the shade of the acacia. But Veig, who had the instincts of a born naturalist, watched everything with total absorption. It was Veig who recognised that the tree above them and the flowering bushes around were all an integral part of the ants' nest. In the branches of the tree and in the roots of the bushes lived large green aphids, looking like fat grapes, which ate leaves and sap. Periodically, an ant would approach an aphid and stroke the bulbous abdomen with its antennae; then a large globule of a clear, sticky substance would emerge from the aphid's anal cavity and be swallowed greedily by the ant, which might then make a second demand by stroking the aphid's stomach. Veig tried it himself, gently stroking the stomach of an aphid that lay in the roots of a bush; at first, there was no response -- his touch was maladroit -- but eventually he achieved precisely the right quivering motion of the fingertips and the globule of sticky dew was extruded. Veig tasted it cautiously, frowned, then smacked his lips and tasted it again. Niall and Hrolf were finally persuaded to try the experiment and were agreeably surprised; it was sweet, syrupy, and in spite of a curious vegetable flavour, oddly satisfying to the stomach. As desert dwellers, they found nothing repellent in the notion of eating the product of a green fly's digestive system. They had often eaten far less appetising things.

Hrolf said thoughtfully: "Pity we couldn't take some of these bugs back home."

"We've got them already. I've seen them." There was no living creature within a mile of the burrow with whose habits Veig was not familiar.

Soon after, they witnessed another curious encounter. A big highwayman beetle, with its broad armoured back, blundered past them in the direction of the entrance to the nest. They expected to see it promptly attacked or driven away by the soldier ants. In fact, it approached a passing worker ant and advanced its face towards it as if inviting a kiss, at the same time tapping the ant with its short feelers. The ant stood still, and a small, glistening droplet passed from its mouth into the mouth of the beetle. A moment later, the ant seemed to recognise that it had been stopped on false pretences and furiously attacked the beetle. Two more passing ants came and joined in. The beetle seemed quite unalarmed; it simply turned on its back, raising its feet in the air as if dead. Two ants tried to bite its armoured belly with their mandibles, and another did its best to damage the indrawn head. After five minutes, they gave up and walked on. The beetle immediately struggled onto its legs, approached another worker ant, and repeated the procedure.

They understood what had happened when a worker ant emerging from the burrow approached a returning worker and stroked it with its antennae, at the same time raising its mouth. The workers had apparently been collecting nectar from flowers, which they seemed to store in the upper part of their bodies. If another ant wanted to eat, it approached the gatherer, indicated its need with its antennae and received a drop of regurgitated nectar. Hrolf and Niall had the utmost difficulty dissuading Veig from trying it; if the worker decided to attack, it would be useless for Veig to roll on his back and raise his legs in the air. Veig finally allowed himself to be persuaded, but nothing would draw him away from the ants' nest. Their activities fascinated him, and he wanted to understand precisely how the ant society operated. Finally, Hrolf and Niall went off in disgust to look for food and to cool themselves in the stream. This was Niall's idea of total happiness: to sit in the deepest place he could find, where the water flowed over his shoulders, and just relax and study the light reflected on the rippling surface. It not only soothed his bruised legs and his scratched hands; it also brought a strange sense of inner-control.

An hour before dark, two spider balloons drifted past slightly above the level of the treetops. By this time, all three of them were settled in their shelter under the rock, the entrance sealed with a double barrier of thorny bushes. They watched the balloons through small gaps in the branches, and Veig and Hrolf agreed that this must be a routine patrol; the movement of the balloons communicated no brooding sense of watchfulness.

As they lay in the dark, wrapped in their blankets of spider silk, on thick mattresses of pleasantly scented foxtail grass -- which, unlike the esparto of the desert, was yielding and springy -- Veig tried to argue them into staying there for another week. Hrolf might have been persuaded, but Niall was homesick; he was missing his mother and sister. Besides, his sixth sense told him that his brother was hatching some dangerous plan.

He proved correct. As they bathed in the stream the next morning, Veig revealed what he had in mind, and even Hrolf -- who was usually willing to follow Veig's lead -- was incredulous.

"They'd eat you alive!"

"Only if I was stupid enough to let them."

Veig's scheme was to try to obtain some of the ant larvae -- the unhatched babies -- and rear them in the burrow as he had reared the pepsis wasp. To kidnap the larvae, he was willing to risk venturing into the ants' nest. The secret of admittance, he believed, was to change his smell. Watching the ants throughout the previous day, he had at first concluded that they recognised one another by their

sense of touch. The soldier ants felt the workers before admitting them into the nest -- which also argued that the soldiers were blind. But he had then observed beetles and millipedes approaching the nest entrance, and the soldier ants had driven them off while they were still some distance away. They had also driven off some large brown ants, which obviously came from another nest. Even worker ants had unhesitatingly shown signs of mistrust of these strangers. This suggested that ants distinguished friends from strangers through their sense of smell, and also seemed to explain why certain creatures -- like the highwayman beetle -- could persuade ants to disgorge food from their crops. They had somehow succeeded in counterfeiting the ant smell.

Niall asked: "And how do you intend to make yourself smell like an ant?"

"That stuff they use to mark their trail -- it's a kind of oil."

"But if it doesn't work, they'll kill you. You saw how three of them attacked that beetle."

Veig, who was a man of few words, said stubbornly: "I'm going to try, anyway."

Hrolf and Niall waited at a distance, while Veig concealed himself behind a bush at the side of the ant trail. When a passing ant exuded its drop of oily substance, Veig darted forward, snatched it up and rubbed it on his skin. In half an hour, his body was covered with a mixture of oil, sand and dust; he even rubbed it into his hair. A black ant approached along the trail, and Veig walked unhesitatingly towards it. Niall had to admire his brother's courage; although the ant was smaller than a man, it looked formidable with its long, spidery legs and powerful mandibles. The ant did not even pause; it simply walked round the human being that blocked its path, and continued without change of pace.

That seemed a good sign. Veig now walked back along the trail towards the nest. Niall ran ahead and concealed himself behind a bush. Several ants passed his brother, and paid him no attention. Niall watched breathlessly, trying to control the pounding of his heart. Veig was still several hundred yards away, approaching very slowly. Suddenly, it struck Niall that he would be better employed trying to stop his heart beating so painfully; it was, after all, something he had learned to do as a child. So he forgot about Veig and turned his attention to his fear, ordering it to stop. For a moment it ignored him; then it began to submit to his control. He tried harder; the point of light glowed inside his head. When he looked up again, Veig was only fifty yards away, and his shiny, mud-coated skin made him look absurd; Niall could sense his fear and his determination. Like Niall, Veig was keeping his tension under control. A worker ant came out of the nest and advanced towards him. Niall could sense its confusion as Veig approached; the smell was familiar, yet it was not the right smell. But then, this creature was obviously not hostile, since he also had the smell of an ant. . . It was not until the ant and Veig had passed each other that Niall realised he had been reading the ant's mind. It was a sensation like actually *being* the ant, as if he had momentarily taken possession of its body. And while he had been inside the ant's body, he had also become aware of all the other ants in the nest. It was a bewildering feeling, as if his mind had shattered into thousands of fragments, yet each fragment remained a coherent part of the whole.

Then Veig was approaching the soldier ants, and they had no shadow of doubt that the creature ambling towards them was a stranger who had to be challenged. This thought passed between half a dozen of them, as clearly as if they had spoken aloud, but only two of them responded by making an aggressive movement in Veig's direction. Veig recognised it for what it was, and turned and walked away. Niall's concentration faded, and so did his insight into the minds of the ants.

Niall was struck by an interesting thought. If he had wanted to, he could have interfered with the pattern of communication between the ants. For example, while he was inside the ant's body, he could have suggested that it should stand still instead of walking past Veig. If he had done so, the ant would not

have realised it was acting upon his suggestion; it would have assumed it was obeying its own impulse. . . Was this how the spiders controlled their human slaves?

Veig joined him behind the bush.

"It's no good. It must be the wrong stuff."

"Of course it is. That's the stuff they use for laying trails, not for recognising one another."

Veig looked at him with surprise. "How do you know?"

Niall could not have told him; he just knew.

The sun was now directly overhead, and the ants had retreated to the coolness of their nest. Veig went and washed himself in the stream, and for the next hour or so they enjoyed the luxury of soaking themselves in the running water, then lying in the shade of date palms to dry. Hrolf climbed one of the palms -- covering his arms and legs with scratches from the spiny trunk -- and tossed down a bunch of dates; they were less than ripe but were still good to eat.

Then Veig went back to studying his ants, and Niall and Hrolf explored the territory near the stream. There was a tense moment when a big stag beetle rushed out at them from its lair under a bush; but when they fled, it quickly gave up the pursuit. Most of the insects here seemed to be fruit-eaters, and food was abundant. There were many varieties of fruit, few of which they recognised. On the whole, it seemed safe to eat any fruit that the insects found edible, although the most tempting, a large purple globe with green and yellow streaks, proved to be oily and bitter. Others, like the round, hard fruit that had lured Niall into the pit of the crater beetle, were sweet and slightly astringent, and seemed to be a favourite of the ants.

One small tree or bush, not unlike a barrel cactus, grew on the edge of the rocky wilderness. It had long, dry leaves that trailed on the ground -- their purpose was probably to collect water -- and they were as tough as alfa grass. Niall tore off three narrow strips and plaited them together into a rope. Rope-making was a craft he had learned as a child, and he did it so skilfully that his handiwork was indistinguishable from his mother's. This new material was so easy to use that he went on tearing off strips of leaf and lengthening the rope until it was more than eight times his own length.

Hrolf, meanwhile, was sitting at the top of a pit made by a crater beetle and was trying to lure it into the open by throwing stones. The first stone, rolled cautiously down the slope, had made the beetle peer out of its lair; but when another stone bounced off its head, it had buried itself in the ground and refused to emerge again.

Idly, for want of anything better to do, Niall began throwing stones down the crater, trying to hit the slight bulge that indicated the presence of the insect. Then it struck him that they could lure it into the open if he offered himself as bait. With the rope tied round his waist, it should not be too dangerous. First of all, they tested the rope: Hrolf held one end and Niall pulled with all his might; if anything, it was stronger than their grass rope. Niall sat on the edge of the crater and began to edge his way down, making sure that he caused a cascade of stones. Before he was a quarter of the way down, the creature had poked its head out of the stones. Niall slid another two feet -- Hrolf was paying out the rope behind him -- then sat still again. The insect heaved itself out of its stones and sat there looking at him. There was something horrifying about that menacing, blank face, and Niall began to experience misgivings -- suppose it could bound up the slope quicker than he could scramble to safety?

He felt the rope go slack round his waist, and knew that Hrolf was getting ready to use his sling; the other end of the rope was tied round Hrolf's waist. Then the stone whizzed over his head, so close that it stirred his hair. Hrolf's aim was good; it struck the insect square in the centre of its face, and it flinched and jumped backwards, landing awkwardly on its short legs. The massive armoured body was not made for swift movement, and it rolled sideways. Another stone struck it on the side of the face, causing visible damage. When a third stone struck it between the feelers, the insect made a sudden decision to retreat; within seconds, a bulge in the stones was the only indication of its presence; then this also vanished. Hrolf grasped the rope and pulled Niall back to safety. They hugged one another and laughed noisily.

A few hundred yards away they found another crater. Once again, the insect was lured out by the shower of stones; once again, it waited with menacing impassiveness as Niall slid down towards it. It was this impassivity that added spice to the game. The nightmare creature seemed to be sure that its victim could not escape. They could almost feel its amazement and outrage when it found itself under attack. This one was so infuriated when Hrolf's first stone smashed one of its feelers that it tried to charge up the slope towards Niall. For a moment he was in the grip of animal terror, but it changed to relief as the cumbersome insect lost its foothold and slid on the stones. Four well-aimed slingshots were all that were needed to make it retreat hastily, and it made no attempt to retaliate by hurling stones at Niall. This, apparently, was a reflex caused by the victim's attempt to escape.

When they found a third crater, shallower than the others, Niall was confident enough to remain upright as he advanced towards the beetle; he simply crouched down as Hrolf bombarded it with stones. He hurled a few stones himself, but they bounced harmlessly off the armour; once again, it was Hrolf's slingshots that made it turn tail.

Niall was becoming bored with his role as bait; he wanted to try using Hrolf's sling. Hrolf was perfectly willing, but he was too big and heavy to serve as bait; Niall could never have pulled his weight back up the sides. Then Niall had a fresh idea. Hrolf stood a few feet away from the edge of the pit, his feet braced apart, and Niall stood as far away as the rope would allow. Then he ran towards the edge of the pit at an angle, ran down the depression, and back up again, like a weight on the end of a pendulum, while Hrolf leaned backwards, taking his weight. The shower of stones brought the crater beetle scrambling out of its shelter. As it looked round in bewilderment, wondering what had become of its prey, Niall had time to loose off several slingshots. Compared to Hrolf, his aim was poor, and only one of them struck the creature on its head. But that was enough to make it decide to bury itself in the stones.

Their entertainment had made them hot; they went back to the stream to cool off. The game with the crater insects had served its purpose and exorcised the fear of their first encounter. They were feeling "lucky" again. As they sat in the stream, Niall raised the idea that had been in the back of his mind for the past two days: persuading the family to move from the desert to this land of abundant food and water. Hrolf's eyes brightened with enthusiasm, but it lasted only a moment.

"The strong one (Jomar) would never agree to come. He is afraid of the spiders."

"But the spider patrols come only twice a day."

"But where we live now, they come only twice a month. And in the desert, they never come at all." He added, after a pause: "Where my mother's people come from, they come about once a week."

It had never struck Niall that Ingeld originally came from somewhere else; he had assumed she had always been a member of the family.

"Where was that?"

"In the place of ruins, three days' march to the south."

"What is a ruin?"

"It's a . . ." Hrolf looked puzzled; he had no words to explain what he meant. "It's a place where men used to live in the days before the spiders."

"The days before the spiders?" For Niall, this was an equally startling concept.

"The legend says there was once a time when men ruled the earth, and thousands of them lived together in the ruins."

"Thousands?" That idea struck Niall as absurd; he found it quite impossible to imagine more than a few dozen human beings. "But how could thousands live in burrows or caves?" He was trying to envisage a city made of underground holes. If the ground was honeycombed with holes, surely it would collapse?

"Not burrows or caves. You've seen a termite's nest?" Niall had, indeed, seen a strange, brown cone on one of their hunting expeditions. "Men used to live in places like that, above the ground."

"And were they not afraid of the death spiders?"

"The strong one says there was a time when the spiders were as small as my fist, and they were afraid of men."

This was such a revolutionary concept that it took Niall some moments to absorb it. It filled him with a tingling excitement that was tinged with a touch of fear. Men who challenged the spiders died a horrible death. Niall was too imaginative to be courageous. Yet this amazing thought -- that men might once have been masters of the earth -- brought a sensation that was as delightful as running water. Suddenly, there were a hundred questions that he wanted to ask.

He was distracted by a movement further downstream, and for a moment his heart skipped with alarm. Then he recognised his brother Veig, standing in the middle of the stream and beckoning to them. They waded ashore, collected their rope and spears, and hurried to join him.

Veig was in a state of suppressed excitement.

"Where have you been? I've looked everywhere." Niall started to tell him about the crater insect, but Veig interrupted him. "They're fighting." He pointed in the direction of the ants' nest.

"Amongst themselves?"

"No, stupid. The red ants are fighting the black ants. Come and see."

It was an amazing sight. Hundreds of dead ants lay on the ground under the great tree, red ones as well as black. And there seemed to be red ants as far as the eye could see; they were pouring out of the undergrowth in a regular column. And although they were considerably smaller than the black ants, they were far more formidable as fighters, swifter and more compact. When a red ant faced a black ant, it hurled itself towards it with concentrated determination, trying to bite the front leg. The legs of the black

ant were longer and more spidery than those of the red ant, and if the red ant succeeded in avoiding the mandibles of its adversary, it seized the leg in its grip and then braced its legs and wrestled. The black ant could only attempt to bite its armoured back. In many cases, a second red ant -- they seemed to greatly outnumber the black -- would grab a rear leg too. Within moments, the damaged legs would be hanging uselessly or lying severed on the ground. With two of its six legs destroyed, the ant was helpless. The red ant would attack it from the side and try to turn it on its back, then would attack the "throat" -- the point where the head joined the thorax. While the ant was kicking helplessly, the second aggressor would attack the point where the thorax joined the rear section, the petiole and gaster. What impressed Niall was that the whole operation looked so oddly deliberate and planned: the red ants even seemed to bite and tug in unison. Sometimes -- but not often -- the black ant could outmanoeuvre them. If it could keep its front legs out of the clutches of the attacker, then the red ant would disappear under its belly, and the black ant could attack its rear legs, or the "waist" between thorax and petiole. Even so, another red ant could then attack the undefended legs.

They watched the battle with intense excitement. The ants completely ignored them, even when they blundered against their legs. This was obviously a grim war to the death; the red ants were determined to force their way into the rival nest.

"But what are they fighting about?" Niall asked. It seemed incredible that two lots of ants who lived scarcely a mile apart, and who had co-existed in peace -- Niall had seen both black and red ants foraging side by side for melons -- should suddenly engage in mutual slaughter.

At first it appeared that the red ants were bound to be winners. But after half an hour or so, this was by no means so self-evident. It was true that there were far more red ants swarming around the nest; but as fast as the black ants were killed or disabled, more of them poured out of the hole in the ground. Their tactic, it seemed, was not to try to engage large numbers of the enemy but simply to make sure that the red ants were unable to invade their nest. To Niall, it seemed an incredible example of courage and altruism. When a dozen or so black ants poured out of the nest, each one must have known that it would be dead within minutes; yet there was no sign of hesitation or fear. If there were enough black ants underground, it looked as if they would eventually drive off the enemy by sheer courage and persistence.

Then a strange thing happened. From the direction of the nest of the red ants, a column of black ants came marching. Niall assumed that they were workers who had been out foraging and were now returning to defend their nest. He was baffled when these newcomers advanced on the entrance to the nest and suddenly began to attack the guards. The defenders themselves were obviously just as confused. To judge by their smell, the newcomers were their own kind, friends who could be allowed into the nest. Yet the friends were trying to kill them. They fought back unwillingly, as if convinced that it was all a mistake.

This confusion gave the red ants the chance they needed. While the guards were struggling with the newcomers, the red ants pushed past them and into the entrance. A new wave of defenders poured out, to be met by the bewildering spectacle of the guards fighting to the death with their own kind.

Veig suddenly chuckled; this was so unexpected that they both stared at him in surprise. Veig slapped his thigh.

"Now I understand. Jomar knows all about ants. The red ants are slavers. They capture the larvae of the black ants and turn them into slaves. They're trying to get into the nest to steal more larvae."

Now they understood what was happening. The black newcomers were slaves, and had been summoned to attack their own kind, which they did with blind obedience. At some point in the battle, it

had dawned on the red ants that they could use their own slaves as shock troops. This revealed a degree of intelligence. Yet they were not intelligent enough to see that all this fighting was unnecessary. The slaves could probably have walked unchallenged into the nest of the black ants and kidnapped all the larvae they wanted. . .

The black ant defence had now broken, and red ants were pouring into the nest. In the dark corridors inside there would be slaughter and confusion. Niall suddenly felt saddened. He had hoped the black ants would win. He turned away and waded upstream towards the date palms; he was beginning to feel hungry again.

Fifty yards upstream, he stopped and stared. A column of black ants was pouring out of the bushes -- apparently retreating from the conflict. When he looked more closely he understood the reason. They were marching three abreast and the ants in the centre column were carrying the larvae in their front legs. They were evacuating the nursery area.

He glanced downstream. Only a few strides away, the red ants were overwhelming the black defenders. It seemed astonishing that none of them should notice the column fleeing from the scene of battle.

Gently parting the bushes, he saw that the ants had opened up a rear entrance. The underground burrow must have been enormous -- an ant city with a population of hundreds of thousands. One of the black soldier ants scented him and made a menacing motion towards him; Niall hastily retreated into the water. Clearly, the ants were taking no risks where the precious larvae were concerned.

But where were they taking them to? Some other stronghold? Or did they intend to excavate another nest in some remote spot?

By now, the last of the retreating column had left the nest. Niall caught Veig's attention and beckoned to him. Veig and Hrolf had been so absorbed in the battle that they had not noticed the ants in retreat; now they splashed upstream to observe this new development. A mass of soldiers had formed a tight defence formation around the exit from the nest. As they watched, the first of the red invaders appeared at the exit and was instantly attacked. But, just as Niall had expected, red ants who were pouring into the entrance, fifty yards away, suddenly changed direction and surged towards the exit; the signal to change tactics must have been instantaneous. Some of them surrounded the phalanx of black soldier ants and attacked them; others hurried on the trail of the retreating column. Niall ran along the far bank of the stream to see whether the column would sense the pursuit and increase its pace. What happened astonished him. The column of ants turned towards the stream; without hesitation, the leaders waded into the water. Only the ants carrying the larvae held back. Since the ants were less than a foot high, they were soon submerged; the leaders were swept away by the current. But they continued to pour into the stream, struggling over the backs of their drowning comrades. In less than a minute, there was a solid bridge of ant bodies across the stream, wide enough to resist the increased force of the rising water. Then, as if at a signal, the larvae-carrying ants poured across the bridge. The soldiers massed on the bank to resist the onslaught of the pursuers.

Keeping their distance, the three of them walked parallel to the escaping ants. These were moving fast, but not as fast as they were capable of moving. It was an orderly retreat. Few soldiers now guarded the column; most of them had remained behind on the far bank of the stream to hold back the pursuers. The last of the larvae-carriers had crossed the bridge. It looked as if they were now safe; the mass of black soldier ants defending the bridge was dense enough to hold back the attackers for the rest of the day.

But the red ants had other plans. Their pursuing column also swerved towards the water. It was now shallower, since the bodies of the black ants formed a dam a few yards upstream. Another bridge of corpses was created; within minutes, the red ants were closing in on the retreating column. As soon as they approached the rearguard, the black ants who were defending the bridge suddenly hastened in pursuit; again, it was as if someone had blown a bugle to give them new orders. The three human beings now realised with alarm that they were caught between the two armies, with red ants sweeping towards them. But as far as the ants were concerned, they might have been invisible. For a moment, they were in the middle of the sea of red ants, armour-plated bodies blundering against their legs. They lost no time in withdrawing to a safe distance.

Now there was chaos. Larvae-carrying ants were attacked, sometimes by as many as six at a time, and forced to lay down their burden to defend themselves. Instantly, a red ant would seize the larvae and retreat with it back towards the stream. Here they encountered some of the black soldiers, and there was a further struggle, which sometimes ended in the black ants recovering the larvae.

Niall looked at Veig, and knew what he was thinking.

Many of the larvae lay abandoned while the ants struggled. They were white grubs, each about three inches long.

Their eyes met. Here, in this moment of crisis, Veig was asking his brother's advice: shall I risk it? And from Niall's face, he knew the answer was yes.

Veig darted forward among the struggling ants; within seconds he had gathered up half a dozen of the larvae. Niall was carrying his woven shoulder bag, which contained dates and a few other fruit. These he emptied out onto the ground as Veig returned with the larvae.

Veig said: "Let's go."

But a few yards away, a black ant was being attacked by several red ants and had abandoned the larvae to defend itself. One of the red ants instantly snatched up the grub and darted towards them. It was too much for Veig, who leaned over and snatched the grub with a single movement.

Then, for the first time, the ant seemed to notice their presence. Without hesitation it rushed at Veig's leg; Veig twisted aside as the powerful mandibles were about to close on his calf. He kicked out, and the ant was lifted into the air and landed six feet away in the midst of the fighting.

"Run!" Veig yelled.

There would have been no point in running back towards the stream; the whole area that lay between was a battleground. For the time being at least, safety lay in the wilderness.

As they ran towards it, Niall looked back. What he saw confirmed his fears. A column of red ants had peeled off from the main body and was moving towards them. He tapped Veig on the arm and pointed. Veig cursed with dismay.

"Shall I get rid of the grubs?" Niall asked.

The stubborn look crossed Veig's face. "No. They can't catch us."

It was true that the ants were not moving fast. But they were unmistakably marching towards the

human beings, and there was something frighteningly purposeful in their motion.

They emerged from the bushes at the edge of the wilderness. The ants were for a moment out of sight. Veig pointed to a big rock twenty yards to their left and they ran towards it. A few moments later, the column of ants emerged from the undergrowth. Without hesitation, they turned towards the rock. They were following the smell of the ant larvae.

Hrolf said: "I don't want to run far over those stones. Why don't we try and get back to the stream?"

But even as they began to run back towards the bushes, more red ants appeared; dozens of them were advancing in a line from the undergrowth. Suddenly, Niall began to experience panic. There were ants in front of them and ants to their right. If they were not careful, they would find themselves surrounded. They turned and ran back towards the wilderness. Soon the hard, round stones were underfoot. With the bag containing the larvae bouncing up and down against his back, the coil of rope round his shoulders and his spear in his right hand, Niall found it difficult to keep his balance on the slippery stones, which moved under his feet; he almost fell on his knees and used the spear to recover his balance. The ants seemed to experience no difficulty negotiating the stones.

Hrolf, who was about ten yards in front of him, suddenly swerved. He had almost run into the pit of a crater insect. They had to run around its edge, and the change of direction cost them precious seconds; the nearest ants were within fifty yards.

Veig noticed Niall's distress and snatched the bag from his shoulders. "I'll take that." He flung it over his own back and ran on.

A few yards farther on, they encountered another crater. Niall and Hrolf swerved to the left; Veig turned right. The foremost ants changed direction and followed Veig. One of them was not fast enough, and ran over the edge of the crater. Niall glanced back, and saw, to his relief, that all the ants were now pursuing Veig. He also noticed that the ant in the crater was having difficulties struggling back to the top.

Suddenly as if someone had whispered in his ear, Niall saw the answer. The insight seemed to give him new strength and he ran after Veig with relaxed, easy strides. It was not difficult to catch up. Veig was deliberately pacing himself, holding the bag against his side to prevent it from bouncing up and down. But he was beginning to look worried.

"Veig, stop a moment!" Niall called.

"Why?" Without breaking his stride, Veig jogged on.

"I know how to get rid of them."

"How?" This time Veig stopped.

"I'll show you," Niall said. "Give me the bag." He uncoiled the rope from his shoulders and tied the end round his waist. He handed the other end to Hrolf. "I'm going to try to lead them into one of the insect craters." The ants were dangerously close; the humans ran on with Veig in the lead.

A hundred yards farther on they saw a crater to their left. Niall swerved towards it. At the top he paused for a moment, then crouched down and slid over the edge. He halted about ten feet down the side. Stones bounced down to the bottom; the ground heaved, and the hideous face of a crater insect

emerged.

A moment later, the first ant appeared at the top of the crater. Without pausing, it ran on, down towards Niall. But its feet slipped on the stones; as it tried to slow down, its legs went into an undignified collapse, and it shot past him. Another ant followed it; this one ran straight towards Niall and he had to jump aside to prevent it from cannoning into his legs. Then a dozen ants rushed over the rim of the crater and descended towards him. All of them encountered the same problem; their forward motion made it difficult to brake, and they skidded past him in a shower of stones. Other ants cannoned into them, driving them downhill.

Hrolf and Veig were standing at the top of the crater, at right angles to the direction from which they had approached; both were holding on to the rope, which was now taut. One of the ants bit into Niall's leg as it went past, and drew blood; it made Niall aware that it would be dangerous to stay there any longer. He began to scramble cautiously across the slope, making for the opposite rim of the crater. Many of the ants followed him but, without the advantage of a taut rope, found it impossible to keep their footing. A few moments later, Niall was safe on the edge of the crater, pulled to his feet by Veig and Hrolf. Behind him, the pit was full of struggling ants. More were pouring over the edge of the pit on the opposite side and joining the heaving mass below.

In the bottom of the pit, the crater insect was demonstrating its formidable strength. It towered above the ants with its armoured bulk. As soon as an ant came within range, it descended on it with its full weight, pinning it down with its powerful forelegs. A single bite of the ape-like jaws severed the head, or bit through the waist between the thorax and petiole. The creature was obviously undismayed by the sheer mass of struggling bodies that had descended into its trap; it killed with the efficiency of a machine, and soon the bottom of its pit was slippery with blood. The ants tried to defend themselves with their stings, but it was no use; even when a dying ant succeeded in driving its sting into the creature's throat, it merely severed the sting with its jaws.

The last of their pursuers had plunged into the crater; there must have been more than a hundred ants swarming over one another in the pit. Their sheer number made escape practically impossible. Any attempt to scale the sides of the pit was obstructed by the mass of struggling bodies. A few ants succeeded in dragging themselves out of the mass and reached the rim of the crater; the humans pushed them back with their spears, sending them rolling down to the bottom.

Now Niall understood the disadvantage of the ant communication system. The access to one another's minds which had made them such terrifying pursuers now became a handicap, causing each of them to share the general sense of confusion and defeat.

They watched for perhaps half an hour, until the piles of ant corpses made it difficult for the crater insect to move about. The ants themselves were becoming sluggish, as if they no longer had the strength to struggle. Finally, as the sun began to approach the western horizon, the human beings turned their backs on the slaughter pit and made their way back towards the stream. They walked slowly, for the run across the stones had made their limbs stiff. Niall felt a strange heaviness inside his head, as if all his emotions had become exhausted. Even when he saw the spider balloons floating low over the trees ahead of them, he felt no alarm and watched them as if they were passing clouds.

They made a wide detour and encountered the stream at a spot about two miles below the nest of the black ants. What terrified them at this point was the possibility that the red ants might scent their burden of larvae; they knew that none of them would have the strength to flee back into the wilderness.

But they encountered no ants: only a few beetles and millipedes and one big, grey spider, which

contemplated them hungrily from its web between two trees but made no attempt to follow them. Finally, as dark was falling, they reached their shelter under the rock. Several large flies had discovered their store of melons, but they drove these out by using branches as fly swatters. Then they pulled the bushes across the entrance, wrapped themselves in their blankets of spider silk, and sank into a sleep of exhaustion.

The following day they set out before dawn. When the sun rose, they were already in the wilderness. And when, an hour before nightfall, they saw in the distance the great columns of twisted red rock, Niall experienced the pleasure of homecoming with an intensity that brought him close to tears. It felt as if they had been away from the burrow for months rather than days.

Within days, the larvae had turned into baby ants, tiny, grey, helpless creatures with endlessly open mouths. Veig spent his days collecting food for them. He searched for miles around for ripe fruit that could be mashed into a sweet pulp, and spent whole mornings milking aphids for their sweet juice, which he collected in a small gourd. Niall found the ants delightful and entertaining; they had never had pets before -- the pepsis wasp was too formidable and independent to be regarded as a pet -- and he found them as amusing as his sister, and far more lively and mischievous. Veig made them a nest of the softest grass he could find, and there they crawled over one another, nipped one another's legs with their mandibles, and tried to bite Niall's finger when he poked them. Their soft shells soon hardened, and it amused Niall to flick them with his fingernail and make a metallic clinking sound. He loved to relax until he had tuned in to their simple, instinctive minds. Then it was exactly as if he had also become a baby ant; in fact, it was rather like becoming a baby again. He seemed to be part of some enormous, pleasant, furry, buzzing confusion, a glowing warmth and security that seemed to extend to the whole universe. If he went outside after lying there beside the ants, he continued to experience the same sense of total security. It seemed to him that the cacti and the shrubs were aware of his presence -- not sharply and consciously, but warmly and dimly, as if from the depths of a pleasant sleep. And when a huge, sharp-nosed fly tried to alight on his arm to try and drink some of his blood, he felt no irritation or disgust, but a tolerant understanding of its need; he flicked it away gently, without resentment.

Within a few weeks, the ants were enormous, and were investigating every corner of the burrow. Veig had to spend an increasing amount of time searching for food; their appetites seemed to be prodigious.

One morning, very early, Niall was aroused from sleep by a curious scratching noise. It was coming from the depths of the burrow where the ants were kept. He groped his way down the sloping tunnel that led to the lower level and felt cautiously over the bed of dry grass that formed their nest; it was empty. Moving around slowly in the dark, he bumped into a pile of earth. The scratching noise seemed to be coming from the darkness beyond it. The mystery could only be solved with the aid of a light and so as not to disturb the others, he took the tinder box down into the tunnel and ignited a pile of wood shavings. Treading cautiously -- in case he set fire to the bed of grass -- he made his way into the ants' chamber. It was empty. But behind the pile of earth at the far end, there was a hole in the wall. He held the light inside it and saw that it sloped downward. In its depths, he could see the reflection from the hard carapace of an ant. A moment later, one of the ants came back up the tunnel, its forelegs clutching a load of earth. This it deposited neatly on the pile on the floor. A few minutes later, a second ant emerged, also carrying earth.

The mystery was solved many hours later, by which time the pile of sandy earth had almost reached the ceiling. The forelegs of the ants were covered with mud, and the earth was damp. They were digging down to the watershelf underneath the desert. An hour later, they were no longer muddy, and

when Thorg held the oil lamp down the ant tunnel, they could see its flame reflected in water about thirty feet below the surface. And when Veig delicately scratched an ant's thorax with his fingers, it placed its mouth against his and obediently regurgitated a mouthful of water. The water was a brown colour, and tasted of mineral salts, but it was cool and refreshing. Veig soon trained the ants to regurgitate into a gourd; after that, they had a permanent source of water in the burrow. It seemed an unimaginable luxury.

Quite suddenly, the ants were adults. They began to wander out of the burrow and forage for their own food. Sometimes they returned carrying fruit or sweet berries; sometimes the stickiness around their mouths revealed that they had been milking aphids of their "honeydew". Their instinct for food seemed to be extraordinary. When they left the burrow in the morning, they would set off into the desert with a certain air of purposefulness, as if they knew precisely where they were going. Sometimes, Niall or Veig followed them, but usually gave up after a few miles; the ants moved fast and seemed indefatigable. They were also totally unselfish. Returning hours later, often at nightfall, they would instantly regurgitate food on command. It became clear that the upper part of the body was basically a storage tank in which food was held in reserve. When the ant became hungry, it simply digested a little of its own reserve, allowing it to pass down into its stomach. In the meantime, anyone could gain access to the larder by simply tickling its thorax lightly and presenting the mouth, or a small gourd, to its face. Niall's sister Runa -- who was about a year old at the time -- developed a passionate fondness for the sticky honeydew nectar, and for the light pink flesh of a fruit not unlike the melon. She soon learned to persuade the ants to regurgitate, and within a few weeks was transformed from a tiny, skinny child with arms like twiglets into a chubby little girl whose face was as round as the full moon.

Suddenly, life was more comfortable than they had ever known it. Under natural conditions, the life of most animals is a continuous search for food, and this had always applied to this small band of human creatures. It was nothing for them to walk twenty miles for the sake of a cactus fruit or a few prickly pears. Ever since he was a baby, Niall had become accustomed to a permanent feeling of hunger. Now, with the ants and the pepsis wasp to do their foraging and hunting, they had almost forgotten what hunger was like. From force of habit, they still spent part of each day in the search for food; but it no longer made any difference if they found nothing. In the wall of the burrow, Ulf had excavated a deep hole to serve as a larder and lined it with stones. In its cool depths, fruit could be kept for weeks at a time. And even when it became rotten, it was not wasted. Jomar recalled that if rotten fruit is left to soak in water, it ferments and produces a peculiarly sickly smell, and that after many weeks, the cloudy liquid would turn into a drink that was both sharp and thirst-quenching and would induce a pleasant sensation of light-headedness. When the men drank this liquid as they sat around in the burrow after dark, the tiny flame of the oil lamp casting huge shadows on the walls, they suddenly became talkative and reminisced about their hunting expeditions. In the past, such talk had been rare, for they came home exhausted and were usually too hungry to waste energy in conversation. Now they were neither tired nor hungry, and often talked until the oil lamp had burned itself dry. The ants, who seemed to respond to the mood of their masters, would come and lie at their feet, occupying most of the floor space, while the pepsis wasp dozed in its own fur-lined nest high on the wall.

And now, for the first time, Niall heard stories about earlier generations: about Ivar the Strong, who had fortified the ancient city of Korsh and resisted all the attempts of the spiders to drive him into the desert; about Skapta the Cunning, who had carried the war into the land of the spiders and had burnt their capital city; about Vaken the Wise, who had lived twice as long as other men, and trained grey desert spiders to act as spies in the land of the death spiders. Little by little, Niall began to understand why the spiders hated and feared human beings, and why they went to such lengths to destroy and enslave them. It had been a long and brutal war between the spiders and humankind, and the spiders had only won it because they had learned to understand the thoughts of human beings. This had come about,

according to the legend recounted by Jomar, because a prince named Hallat had fallen in love with a beautiful girl called Turool; but Turool had preferred to marry a poor chieftain named Basat. Hallat became almost insane with jealousy; he dreamed of Turool day and night and made plans to kidnap her from the camp of Basat. Turool's faithful dog Oykel was hunting rats outside the camp and recognised Hallat by his pungent smell; he roused the camp and Hallat was driven away. Hallat was so enraged that he swore revenge and made his way to the city of the spiders. There he allowed himself to be captured by the guards and demanded to see the Lord of the Spiders, a hundred-eyed monster tarantula called Cheb. Taken into the presence of the great tarantula, Hallat offered to betray his ally King Rogor as a sign of his good faith, and King Roger's city was betrayed to the spiders, who ate two thousand human beings at a great feast. After that, Hallat promised Cheb that he would teach him how to read the thoughts of human beings if he would destroy Basat and capture Turool. Cheb agreed, but he demanded payment in advance, and Hallat spent a year teaching him all the secrets of the human soul. Until the Great Betrayal -- as it became known in human legend -- the spiders had been unable to understand the complexities of the human mind, for the souls of men were far more intricate and strange than those of the spiders. But little by little, Cheb came to understand the secrets of the human soul. It is said that he had prisoners brought in front of him and made them stand there for hours while he read their minds, until he knew every detail of their lives. Then he made them tell their life stories until he grasped the meaning of all the things he had failed to understand. After this, Cheb ate them, for he felt that he could only truly understand them when he had absorbed every atom of their bodies into his own.

When he understood the mysteries of the human soul, Cheb kept his promise. Thousands of spiders descended on the camp of Basat by night, and the attack was so sudden that all but a few were captured alive. Basat and Turool were brought in front of Hallat, who made Basat kneel down and struck off his head with his own hand. But his cruelty lost him the prize for which he had sacrificed his own kind; Turool became insane with grief and sacrificed her own life by attacking one of her guards with a knife; the spider injected her with its venom, and she died instantly.

There was still one great enigma that Cheb had been unable to solve: the mystery of the White Tower. This tower had been built by men of a bygone age and stood in the centre of the city of the death spiders (for this city had once been inhabited by men). The tower had no doors or windows and was made of a smooth substance that seemed impenetrable. The slaves of the bombardier beetles had once been ordered to blast their way into it with explosives, but the tower had remained not only undamaged but untouched. Now Cheb offered to make Hallat the king of all the men on earth if he would help him to penetrate the mystery of the White Tower. Hallat was tempted, for he longed for power. He had many old and wise men tortured in his attempt to learn the secret of the tower. And at last, an old woman -- the wife of a tribal chieftain -- offered to tell him the secret if he would spare her husband's life. She told him that, according to an ancient family tradition, the secret of the tower was a "mind lock". The mind of a man must interact with the atomic lattice of the walls, which would then yield as easily as if they were made of smoke. The key to the interaction was a magic rod, with which the man must touch the wall. The old chief possessed such a rod as a symbol of his kingship. Hallat took it from him by force and went to the tower the next day at dawn -- for, according to tradition, the first rays of the sun would fall upon a hidden door in the wall of the tower. But when he tried to approach the tower with the magic rod, some force threw him to the ground. He tried a second time, and the same thing happened. The third time, he stretched out both his arms to the tower and shouted: "I command you to open!" But when he tried to touch it with the magic rod, there was a flash like lightning and Hallat was burned into a piece of black charcoal. Cheb, when he heard what had happened, had all the prisoners murdered, including the old chief and his wife. And the mystery of the White Tower remained unsolved.

The story made Niall shudder, and that night he woke from a nightmare in which he heard a noise outside the burrow and went out to confront a vast tarantula, tall as an organ-pipe cactus, with a double row of glittering yellow eyes and mandibles big enough to tear up a tree. Yet as soon as he was fully

awake, the fear vanished. Ever since he was a child, Niall had been terrified of the *idea* of the spiders, rather as he might have been terrified of ghosts if he had ever heard of such things. But the knowledge that the spiders were not invincible, that Ivar the Strong and Skapta the Cunning had won spectacular victories against them, endowed them with a reality that was more complex and therefore less frightening. He was intrigued, for example, by the notion that Hallat had to teach the Spider Lord to understand the minds of human beings. Niall had never had to be taught to understand the minds of Ulf or Jomar, or even of the ants. There were moments when he knew what they were thinking or feeling just as if he was inside their heads. So if the spiders found it difficult to understand human beings, that suggested that their minds were totally different, as if they spoke another mental language. And -- this was what filled him with a mixture of excitement and terror -- if understanding the minds of men had made the spiders the masters of the human race, then would not the reverse also be possible? If men could understand the minds of spiders, could they not one day conquer the spiders?

The next day he set about trying to find the answer. Half a mile away there was a grove of huge pistacia trees, the home of grey desert spiders. When Niall arrived there not long after sunrise he saw that the lower branches of the trees were festooned with tiny webs; above them hung a white egg-sac, from which the babies had recently emerged. The larger web of the mother spider was scarcely visible among the higher branches.

As Niall took up his position in the shadow of a desert shrub, he was aware that the female spider had noticed his approach and was watching him carefully, hoping that he would walk under the tree and give her a chance to drop on his back. He sat there and tried to calm his mind into a state of relaxation, but it was difficult; the knowledge that he was being observed caused a persistent alarm bell to ring in his subconscious mind.

Then a large bluebottle buzzed past, pursued by a robber fly. The robber fly, a large, yellow creature not unlike a wasp, attacked its prey on the wing, pouncing like a hawk; but its first attack had evidently been a failure. The panic-stricken bluebottle swerved upward to avoid the tiny webs spun by the newly-hatched spiders and blundered straight into the web of the mother; the robber fly, too late to change direction, also flew into the sticky silk. A moment later, the grey mother spider, hardly able to believe her luck at this double catch, scuttled swiftly down the web to truss the prey with threads of silk. Then she became aware that the nearest of the two victims was the dangerous robber fly, with his long, pointed snout that could inject a powerful nerve poison. She paused, clinging to the vibrating web as the two insects struggled to tear themselves free by sheer force. The bluebottle almost succeeded, but as five of its six legs freed themselves from the sticky fibres, it keeled sideways and its wing was caught.

Watching all this with total absorption, Niall experienced the sense of deep relaxation that had escaped him a few minutes earlier. He concentrated; the spark glowed inside his head, and suddenly he was picking up the vibrations of terror from the bluebottle and the anger of the robber fly. The robber fly was a far more courageous creature than the bluebottle, and its reaction to its situation was a determination to make someone pay dearly for this indignity. Aware of the watchful gaze of the mother spider, it was saying, in effect: Come near me and I'll pierce a hole right through you. . . And the mother, accustomed to inspire panic, was disconcerted by this blast of defiance.

Niall could sense her uncertainty; but when he tried to place his mind behind her eyes, he found it puzzling. It was almost as if there was nothing there. He tried again -- this time so persistently that the spider might have sensed his presence if she had not been so totally occupied by her more immediate problem.

Now he became aware that, in the branches of the next pistacia tree, another female spider was watching the conflict with interest. Niall tried to place himself on her wavelength, to see the world through

her eyes. Again, there was the same puzzling sense of emptiness. At this point, the furious struggles of the robber fly distracted his attention, and his concentration broke. It was several minutes before he felt able to renew the mental effort. And this time, his clumsy attempt to place himself behind the eyes of the watching spider made her suddenly aware of what was happening. He felt her attention sweep around in a probing beam, trying to detect the intruder. Unable to see Niall -- who was concealed by the shrub -- her watchfulness gave way to alarm. And then, for the first time, Niall began to understand why he found it so hard to pick up the mental vibration of the spider. Its mind was almost as passive as a vegetable. It seemed to exist in a twilight world of pure watchfulness. By comparison, the bluebottle and the robber fly seemed whirlpools of noisy, aggressive energy. And because her mind was so passive, the spider was also aware of the turbulent life energies of her victims.

Suddenly, he understood. The spider spent its whole life in the corner of a web, waiting for passing insects. For her, the vibrations of the web were almost a form of speech; each one was like a word. She had nothing to do but wait passively, studying the thousands of vibrations that surrounded her - the living vibrations of the tree, the vibrations of insects tunnelling in the roots, the impersonal vibration of the wind in the leaves, the strange, throbbing vibration of the sunlight beating down through the atmosphere like a great engine. The spider had been aware of his presence long before he came within sight of the trees, for the vibrations of a human being are as loud as the hum of a bee.

At the same time, Niall understood how the death spiders could control other creatures by the will alone. Merely to look at something is to send out a beam of will. Niall could recall many times when he thought he was alone but had an uncomfortable feeling that he was being watched -- and turned round to find that someone was looking at him. This was why the grey spider felt uncomfortable when he tried to probe her mind -- his will had reached out to touch her like a hand.

Spider consciousness was almost pure perception. The spider is the only living creature that spends its life lying in wait, hoping that victims will walk into its trap. All other creatures have to go out and seek their food. So spiders have developed the ability to turn perception into a beam of pure will. As a fly buzzed through the air, the watching spider tried to will it into its web. . .

Then why were these grey desert spiders relatively harmless? His intuition told him the answer. Because they were quite *unaware* that they used will-power to lure flies into the web. When they willed a fly to change direction and blunder into the trap, they believed it was an accident. The death-spiders had become masters of the earth when they learned that the will-force can be used as a weapon.

What happened next was an object lesson in the power of the unconscious will. The spider returned to the corner of its web and moved round to the other side, so that the robber fly was no longer between itself and the bluebottle. As the spider advanced onto the web, the bluebottle hurled itself into a frenzy of activity, so that it almost tore itself free: but in its panic, its other wing became glued to the web. Now, as the spider came closer, its eyes fixed on its prey, the fly suddenly collapsed into momentary exhaustion. Swiftly, the spider threw a strand of silk across its body, then another, binding it to the web. A few minutes later, the fly was little more than a cocoon. And, as it struggled in the web, the robber fly experienced an increasing conviction that it was also doomed -- a conviction that was almost entirely due to the gentle but demoralising pressure of the spider's will. In fact, the robber fly was still dangerous; it had enough freedom of movement to defend itself from almost any angle; one thrust of that poisonous snout would have paralysed the spider in the centre of its own web. Yet when the spider had finished trussing the bluebottle, and moved towards the robber fly with a sinister air of deliberation, the fly merely watched its approach and, after one more desperate attempt to tear itself free, allowed itself to be trussed into a bundle. For a moment, Niall's mind entered the stream of its consciousness, and he was appalled by its exhaustion and defeat. As he withdrew his mind, it was like waking from a nightmare.

He walked home in deep thought, shaken by his experience yet also fascinated by it. This insight into the power of the will was a revelation. Because the world around him seemed full of terror and danger, his mind remained alert for any suggestion of a hostile will. And as he passed within twenty yards of the lair of a yellow scorpion, he became aware of its gaze as it watched him from the darkness. It was tired after hunting all night, and therefore disinclined to make a daylight foray. Niall sensed its indecision and deliberately reinforced it by sending out a suggestion that he was armed and dangerous. The scorpion decided that it was not, after all, worth the effort and the risk to attack him.

When he entered the relative coolness of the burrow, he flung himself down on his grass couch feeling utterly drained. But the tiredness was in his head, not his body. It was his attempt to use an unaccustomed will-muscle that had exhausted him so much.

Niall was fifteen when Siris gave birth to another daughter. The child was premature, and for the first two weeks it was uncertain whether she would live. They called her Mara, meaning "small dark one", because her tiny shrivelled face had a curious brown pigmentation. It was undoubtedly the sweet ant-food that saved her life. And as soon as she was out of danger, she began to cry -- a piercing, wavering little cry that irritated everyone but her mother. When she was not hungry, she was suffering from colic or heat rash or a runny nose. For the first six months of her life she cried for several hours every night. Ingeld, who had never been fond of children, became very bad tempered and began urging Thorg and Hrolf to look for another home. In fact, they found a roomy lair about a mile away, not far from the twisted red rocks, and the men soon drove out the dung beetles that lived there. But Ingeld spent only one night in her new home, decided she felt nervous, and -- to Niall's disgust -- moved back again the following day.

Mara's health began to improve when she was six months old; but it was clear that she had a nervous disposition. Any sudden movement made her jump and burst into tears. Loud noises sent her into paroxysms of sobbing. She screamed with fear every time an ant came near her. One early morning, when Thorg and Ingeld thought they were alone in the burrow, Niall overheard them talking about Mara. What would happen when she was older and knew about spiders? "She'll be the death of all of us!" Ingeld said dramatically. Niall felt a mixture of anger and contempt, yet he knew she was right. Mara's terror could betray them all. Yet what could be done? They could hardly murder the child.

It was Jomar who suggested a solution: the juice of the ortis plant. When he had been a child, a dozen brave hunters had ventured into the great delta and returned with gourds full of the juice. The plant was carnivorous and lured its prey with a marvellously sweet smell -- a smell so heavenly that it made men dream. When a flying insect settled on the blossom of the ortis plant, it exuded a single drop of a clear liquid. The insect would drink this greedily and then become drowsy. Like tender fingers, the tendrils of the plant would delicately propel it into the mouth of the great, bell-like flower, like a beautiful girl popping a delicious morsel of food into her mouth, and the petals would close round it and digest it.

And how did the hunters avoid this fate? By deliberately choosing small ortis plants that were too weak to kill a full-grown man. One of the hunters would lightly touch the blossom with his finger, causing the juice to be exuded into a tiny cup. If the smell of the plant overcame him, others would rush forward and drag him clear. The problem, apparently, was that the perfume was so intoxicating that some men made no effort to fight it; they allowed themselves to be overcome and woke up later wearing a strange,

dreamy smile. One man had allowed himself to collapse into a small plant, and a dozen of the bell-like suckers had instantly fastened on his face, his arms and legs. As the others tried to drag him clear, the tendrils resisted, trying to pull him back; they had to be hacked off with flint knives, and meanwhile, clouds of the sweet perfume had stunned two more of the men. When they pulled the suckers off his face and arms, drops of blood lay on the bright red blotches like dew; the tremendous suction of the plant had drawn it through his skin. The man remained unconscious for two days, and when he woke up, moved like a sleepwalker. He returned with the others, but had become sluggish, lazy and shifty; after he had been caught on several occasions trying to steal the ortis juice he was executed by order of the elders.

As Jomar spoke, Ulf was looking thoughtfully at Mara, who was feeding at her mother's breast. He turned to Thorg. "Would you come with me?"

"Of course."

"Very well. We set out at the time of the full moon."

Niall said: "Can I come?"

Ulf placed his hand on his head. "No, boy. Someone has to stay and look after the women."

So, ten days later, Ulf and Thorg, Veig and Hrolf, set out for the delta. By that time, they had another reason for wanting the juice of the ortis plant: Ingeld was having bouts of morning sickness that convinced her she was pregnant.

It was a well-equipped expedition. The men wore clothes of millipede skin to protect them from the heat, with hoods to draw over their heads. They had strong sandals, with multiple soles, and also carried lightweight shoulder bags of woven grass which could be suspended from a yoke. There was no need for a great deal of food or water, since these would be available along the way; they carried only a quantity of meat dried in the sun and gourds of water. They were armed with spears, slings and knives and also carried ropes.

They left at dusk on the night of the full moon and travelled north to the stony wilderness. Four armed men ran little risk of attack from scorpions, tiger beetles or other night predators. Niall wanted to accompany them to the edge of the wilderness, but his father refused; returning home alone, a fifteen year-old boy would be an easy prey.

Siris and Ingeld were nervous. The men had often spent days away from home on hunting expeditions, but the women knew this was different. Hunters were accustomed to the ways of giant insects and had a sixth sense for avoiding them. But the delta was full of unknown perils. Even Jomar had never been there, although he had flown over it in a spider balloon.

The next day, at dusk, Siris sat alone in the depths of the burrow while they all remained silent. Mara had been well fed two hours before, and now she slept quietly. After half an hour or so, they heard Siris breathe very deeply and knew that she had established contact. Niall lit the oil lamp as she rejoined them. "They are safe," she said. "Hrolf has been attacked by a mosquito, but they killed it before it could drink his blood." The men were carrying medicinal roots in case of malaria or other fevers.

Ingeld asked: "Is Thorg well?"

"He twisted his ankle, but it is not serious."

Ingeld could have made contact with Thorg if she had been willing to make the effort. But she was impatient and found it difficult to relax and clear her mind. She was also lazy, and preferred to leave it to Siris, who was too conscientious to avoid anything that was expected of her.

On the following day, the women went out looking for fresh cactus fruit; Niall accompanied them to guard them, carrying the pepsis wasp. It was now old, and had lost much of its skill. Somehow, the wasp seemed to know that its master, Veig, was far away, and that it was expected to guard the family from trapdoor spiders and other predators. As Niall relaxed and allowed his mind to blend with the mind of the insect, he experienced a stronger sense of kinship and affection than he had ever known before. When they were returning, exhausted by the heat, Niall saw a distant speck in the sky -- not a spider balloon but a large bird. As he stared at it, he realised that it was flying direct towards them; he tried to project his mind into the mind of the bird, urging it not to change direction. The wasp, sensing his excitement, also became alert. Suddenly the bird was only a few hundred yards away, flying at the height of a tall tree, and Niall ordered the wasp to attack. It soared up from his wrist, rising straight into the air with a speed and power they had not witnessed for a long time. Like a missile it flashed past the bustard, straight up for another hundred feet or so; then, changing direction, it dived. The bird was totally unprepared; it obviously felt it had nothing to fear from wasps. It fluttered with distress at the impact, and Niall experienced its agony as the sting drove home. A few seconds later, it lay on the ground a few hundred yards away. When Niall arrived, the wasp was sitting quietly on the crooked wing, and the bird's eye was already covered with the film of death. It was enormous, and that night the burrow was full of the smell of roasted bird flesh. Even Ingeld was good tempered and cheerful.

That evening was the end of the time of contentment. The next day, a strong, gritty wind blew from the direction of the delta directly into the entrance of the burrow; when Niall ventured out, it made his eyes run, and the sand grated between his teeth. Mara cried most of the day until even Niall felt like suffocating her. That evening, there was no contact with Ulf or Veig, although Siris sat for over an hour. Jomar told them not to worry; hunters often had other things to do at nightfall. But it was the same again the following day. By this time, Ingeld had become so anxious that she also sat cross legged on the floor at dusk and tried to empty her mind; but Niall could tell by her breathing that she had no success.

The next day they were all tense and worried. At nightfall, Siris and Ingeld again sat a few feet apart, their heads bowed, while Jomar and Niall lay on their mattresses and tried not to move in case the rustling sound distracted the women. They heard the change in Siris's breathing as she made contact, and Niall sighed with relief. Then, almost immediately, Siris gave a piercing cry and they heard her fall. When Niall reached her, she was lying on her back and her face felt cold. Ingeld was already moaning something about death, and Jomar told her sharply to be silent. Niall propped up his mother, while Jomar forced water between her lips; she gasped and began to cough. When she spoke, her first words were: "They are dead. Thorg and Hrolf are dead." Ingeld began to scream and wail; the children woke up and began to cry. And Siris also sobbed quietly. She could only tell them that the two men had been killed by the ortis plant, and that Ulf and Veig had managed to escape with their lives.

Then Ingeld began to scream with rage. "Why did it have to be mine? Why not yours?"

They let her scream on until she grew tired and began to sob. She cried most of the night. Niall felt ashamed to be so happy that his father and brother were alive.

When Ulf and Veig returned ten days later, both were exhausted. Ulf's right breast and shoulder were covered with circular marks that looked like burns; Veig had become very thin, and there was an expression in his eyes that Niall found deeply disturbing: the look of a man who is haunted by something

he cannot forget. Both collapsed on their beds and slept deeply for most of a day and a night.

The juice that had cost Thorg and Hrolf their lives was contained in a small gourd that held little more than a pint; it was sealed tightly with leaves and leather thongs. When, a few hours after Ulf's return, Mara set up her incessant wail, Siris carefully unbound the thongs, levered off the top of the gourd and gave the child a tiny quantity of the clear, syrupy liquid in a wooden spoon. Within less than a minute, Mara was asleep; she was still sleeping sixteen hours later, when Ulf woke up.

At the first opportunity, Niall sniffed the ortis juice. It had a pleasant, sweetish smell not unlike honey, with a touch of a certain mauve flower he had seen in the country of the ants; but after Jomar's story about the plant, he found it disappointing.

For days after their return, Ulf and Veig seemed listless and depressed. Veig later admitted to Niall that during the last thirty-six hours of the return journey, both had been staggering like drunken men, and that neither had expected to reach home alive. In the rocky wilderness, Veig had collapsed three times, and for a while after the last occasion, Ulf had carried him on his shoulders. Fortunately, they had encountered no predators; if any creature had attacked, they would have been helpless. They were too exhausted even to scan the skies for spider balloons.

Ingeld had now recovered from the first shock and had become bitter and surly. They put up with her angry jibes because they felt sorry for her. But one day when she had been drinking the fermented fruit juice, she went too far, and accused Ulf and Veig of being cowards who had allowed her men to die. Ulf gripped her arm so hard that she screamed with pain.

"Never say that again or I will strike you to the ground, even if you are my brother's wife."

She collapsed on the floor and began to sob. "I am too young to be a widow. Am I to live for the rest of my days without a man's embrace?"

Ulf saw the justice in her claim. She was still under forty, and many men would find her beautiful. He said thoughtfully: "There are no men here for you. But you could return to your own people."

She looked up with a gleam of hope. She loved any kind of change. "How could I reach them?"

"We could take you there."

She placed her hands on her stomach. "I shall soon be too big to travel."

Ulf considered this. "All right. We leave on the next night of the full moon."

Siris protested that this was too soon -- they were still exhausted after their return from the delta. But Niall caught the hard, stubborn look on Ingeld's face and knew she was determined to have her own way. For her, the thought of any delay was intolerable, although she knew that Siris was right; it would be safer to leave it for another month. It made no difference to her if Ulf and Veig died on the way back; by that time she would be safe with her own family.

As the time of the full moon approached, it became obvious that Veig would not be fit enough to travel; he was still too weak to go outside, and he suffered from a recurrent fever. Jomar's limp made it impossible for him to walk more than a few miles. Siris tried to persuade Ingeld to wait another month; Ingeld, averting her eyes to conceal her true feelings, replied that if he left it that long, she would be unable to walk such a distance. Finally, Siris shrugged her shoulders and gave up the argument; they

would all be glad to see the last of Ingeld.

Niall caught his father looking at him speculatively and knew what he was thinking.

"Couldn't *I* go instead of Veig?"

"Do you think you could walk that far?"

"I can walk as far as Veig."

"But this is a five-day journey, perhaps more." Ulf drew him a map in the sand. Ingeld's people lived near the shores of a salt lake called Thellam, about two days' journey south of the great plateau. The most difficult part of the journey was across the desert that lay at the foot of the plateau, for there were few landmarks. On the far side of the desert there was a country of bare rock and wadis, descending to the salt lake. There was vegetation there, and some water; but there were also poisonous centipedes.

Niall pointed to the plateau. "Could we not avoid the desert by climbing up onto the plateau?"

"There is nothing there but bare rock, and the air is thin."

"But bare rock is better than sand dunes that change every day."

Ulf only said: "Perhaps."

By the time of the full moon, Ulf had recovered his strength. Veig still had hollow cheeks, and his eyes looked tired. Siris was unhappy at the idea of Niall travelling so far, but she knew there was no alternative. It would be dangerous for Ulf to attempt the return journey alone; there were many predators who would attack a lone traveller but think twice about attacking two men.

At least they were well provisioned. On the day before they set out, Veig went hunting with the pepsis wasp, and caught a large desert rodent. Siris stuffed this with herbs and seeds, and roasted it whole. She also baked them thin wafers of bread from a flour made of wild maize. For many days before the journey, the women collected clear water from the waru plant; they had also learned to place gourds under the long, twisted leaves of the welwitschia, to catch the dew the plant intended for its own roots. The brackish water that the ants collected from the depths of the burrow was not suitable for long journeys, for it was full of minerals that left a bitter taste in the mouth and made the throat dry.

They set out an hour before dusk, each carrying two baskets suspended from shoulder-yokes. The day was still hot, although the wind had dropped. When darkness fell, they rested for an hour in the sand, and Niall fell asleep -- having been kept awake most of the previous night by excitement. As soon as the moon rose, they went on. The night was cold but the exercise kept them warm. Ingeld -- who, having got her own way, now felt slightly ashamed of herself -- plodded on silently, making no complaint about the pace. The desert was beautiful in the moonlight, and they could see the plateau clearly ahead of them; but it was a great deal farther than it looked. When the moon set, they were still able to travel by the light of the stars, their eyes having become accustomed to the dark. They reached the foot of the plateau an hour before dawn. As the sun rose, they entered the cave in which Niall had spent the first seven years of his life. They ate a light meal of maize bread and cooked locust, then slept through the heat of the day.

Niall was delighted to see his old home again; but it seemed smaller and somehow different. He

had also forgotten how hot and stuffy it could become in the midday heat if the wind was blowing the wrong way. So in spite of his nostalgia, he was not sorry to leave it behind.

They set out while the sun was still hot, because Ulf had decided to take Niall's advice and climb up onto the plateau. Above the cave, it towered up hundreds of feet in the air; to find a point where they could ascend, they had to walk for ten miles or so.

They reached the dried river bed an hour before dusk. Hot and tired, they decided to rest before attempting the steep climb. When the moon rose, they began to ascend the river bed, which became increasingly steep. Then the track became a goat path that zigzagged up the hill; it was too steep to climb except on all fours. Soon it became so precipitous that it made Niall dizzy to look down; where rocks bulged out, forcing them to press tight against them as they edged round, they were aware of the sheer drop below. Ingeld's rather large breasts were here a disadvantage, and in one place she refused to go forward until Ulf had tied a rope round her waist. Before they reached the top of the plateau, sometime after midnight, she was stumbling and staggering, obviously wishing that she had decided to stay at home.

The view here was impressive. Behind them stretched the desert, silvery and peaceful. Before them the plateau sloped to the south-east, rocky and covered with shrubs and mats of thorn. It looked unwelcoming, but the white rock was beautiful in the moonlight. They were tempted to rest, but the ground was so uncomfortable that it was simpler to go on. And after stumbling along for half an hour over the uneven, barren ground, they rejoined the bed of the stream, which was made of white shingle and was pleasant to the feet. Suddenly, Ulf gave a cry of satisfaction and pointed. A hundred yards ahead of them the moon was reflected off something that looked like a silver mirror. It was a small pool of water, little more than a yard wide, in a hollow in the shingle. They dropped down with relief and removed their burdens. The water was white in colour, like watered milk, and had a sweet flavour. They had been rationing water since they set out; now it was unimaginably delightful to be able to drink as much as they liked. They ate some cactus fruit and refilled their gourds; then, reluctantly -- since their limbs were aching -- set out again. The going was unexpectedly smooth, and even when the moon set they were able to march on over the compact pebbles.

At dawn Ingeld wanted to rest, but Ulf refused to allow it. In a few hours, the sun would be directly overhead, and in the meantime they had to look for shelter.

In fact, before the sun was high, they saw a thicket of trees on the southern horizon and cut across towards it. They looked like overgrown bushes, about six feet high, and the lower branches formed a concave arch. They were able to stretch sheets of spider silk over them to form a sunshade, and to use another sheet, pinned to the ground with heavy stones, as a windbrake. It felt almost like being in a cave, and they slept deeply and heavily until the sun was low in the sky. Then, after a light meal, they moved on again.

The track now lay across a lava field covered with large boulders; after a few miles, this became unexpectedly smooth, like hard-packed sand. Ingeld was beginning to complain that her feet were sore; Ulf and Niall glanced at each other, anticipating that her period of good behaviour was finished and that the difficulties of the journey would now be augmented by her complaints. Fortunately, they came upon another pool of water, larger and deeper than the first; after they had drunk their fill and refilled their gourds, Ingeld asked them to look the other way, then stripped off her clothes and plunged in. Standing there, up to her waist, she looked so happy that Niall decided to join her. The water was still warm from the heat of the day, and refreshing to the limbs. When they set out again, he felt as if he had just awakened from a pleasant sleep.

By dawn, the ground was sloping upward again, and since the plateau was basin-shaped, they

assumed they were nearing its southern edge. An hour later, they were standing on this edge, looking at the reflection of sunlight on distant water -- the salt lake called Thellam. Ingeld was excited; she felt that another day's march would bring her to her own people; Ulf pointed out that the height made distance deceptive and that they probably had at least another fifty miles ahead of them.

Since there was no sign of shelter at the top of the plateau, there was nothing for it but to look for a way down, and seek a camping place on the plain below. Niall went to the edge and looked over. The drop made him feel dizzy; it must have been a thousand feet. Moreover, the cliff curved back underneath him; it had been sand-blasted into a hollow by the desert winds. If the edge had crumbled, nothing would break his fall straight down to the rocks below.

It was a question of turning either left or right -- to the west or east. And since the westward direction would eventually lead them back to the place at which they had ascended, they decided to go east. They also chose to return half a mile inland, since the terrain at the edge of the plateau was rocky and split with rifts; inland the going was smoother. But it was also hotter, the sun reflected back from the white lava underfoot. Glancing at his father out of the corner of his eye, Niall realised with concern that he was very tired. He was not yet recovered from the journey to the delta. He glanced at Ingeld, plodding sullenly along with a martyred expression, and experienced a flash of hatred.

An hour later, he saw a huge shape against the western horizon; it might have been a hill, but it was too irregular.

"That must be the citadel of the warriors," Ulf said. He was so obviously tired that Niall decided against asking for more information, but as they drew nearer he was amazed by the sheer size of the citadel; it must have been five hundred feet high. He had never seen anything so magnificent and majestic. Now he could see that it had been built on top of a natural hill of rock in such a way that it seemed a continuation of the hill. It was made of great stone blocks, each about six feet long and three feet high. Against the skyline were the remains of rectangular towers, some of them half ruined. These were supported below by immense buttresses. The closer they came, the more obvious was the devastation. There were great rectangular columns, more than ten feet wide, which had once supported a roof; now only two of these were their original height; the others were shattered stumps.

At the foot of the hill they paused to rest and to drink some water. But the heat was now so great, in spite of the wind from the south, that they were in danger of sunstroke. Unwillingly, they dragged themselves to their feet and began to look for the easiest way to ascend.

Halfway round the northern face, they found it; a stairway, scarcely a foot wide, cut into the rock. It seemed to go on forever. But since there was obviously no alternative, they began plodding upward, their suspended baskets dragging on the stair. Its steps were irregular, some narrow, some deep, some badly crumbled or eroded. Ulf went first; Niall followed, with Ingeld in the rear (this being from motives of modesty -- her spider-silk dress came only halfway down her thighs). Niall clambered on wearily, keeping his eyes fixed on the next step; when he finally paused to look round, he was surprised to see that they were now high above the plain and that the walls of the citadel were only a few feet above them. A few minutes later they staggered in through an arched doorway into the outer courtyard.

Niall found it all so astonishing that he forgot his weariness. If someone had described such a place to him, he would have assumed they were exaggerating. The courtyard was full of rubble and gigantic tumbled blocks from the walls; yet even so it looked vast and empty. Arches all around led into great halls. Part of the main building had been cut out of the rock itself, and the red and yellow rock gave it the appearance of a castle out of a fairy tale. The summit of the citadel still towered more than a

hundred feet above them.

The immediate necessity was shade, somewhere to rest. They crossed the courtyard and went in through one of the arched doorways. They found themselves in a hall so immense that the far walls and the ceiling were lost in the shadows. It was startlingly cool, being on the side of the building that was protected from the morning sun. Here they spread out their blankets, flung themselves down and lay panting, listening to the endless thunder of the wind. Within minutes, Niall was fast asleep.

He had a strange dream; the Spider Lord, Cheb, was looking down on him from some immense height and mocking him. As he began to struggle back to consciousness, he realised that he was cold. Outside, the sunlight was blinding on the white courtyard; next to him, his father and Ingeld were both fast asleep. He sat up, pulled some of his blanket out from underneath him and wrapped it round to form a sleeping bag. In one of the baskets, he had another lightweight blanket made of caterpillar skin but he was too sleepy to get it out. The memory of his dream disturbed him; the Spider Lord had been sitting on the topmost tower of the citadel, looking down at him. But with his father beside him, he felt safe; a few minutes later he was asleep.

He woke with the feeling that someone had touched his shoulder. Somewhere above him, a fly was buzzing. The blanket had slipped off his shoulder, and it was cold; he reached up to cover it and had difficulty raising his arm; it was as if his blanket had become tucked underneath him, restricting his freedom of movement. At the same time, the buzzing took on a note of frenzied alarm, the sound of a fly caught in a web. He raised his head and looked across the hall; something seemed to scurry into the darkness, and he thought he could see a hundred gleaming points. Suddenly, he was fully awake, trying to sit up. Then he saw what was preventing him. Bands of spider web had been stretched over him and somehow fastened to the floor. The web was lying all over him, like a soft blanket. He looked at his father and Ingeld; they were also covered with a loose-meshed web of spider silk that was still damp and sticky with the spider secretion. And now he saw that the gleaming points were the eyes of dozens of spiders, watching from the shadows.

His cry woke up the other two. As soon as they tried to sit up, they found themselves tangled in the sticky blankets that covered them. Before they tried to move, the web had been stretched over like a loosely flung sheet; as soon as they sat up, their bodies came into contact with the sticky silk, which clung to them, and as they tried to pull it free their hands and arms became entangled.

The spiders had now moved forward out of the shadow as if to get a closer view. To his relief, Niall saw that they were fairly small -- with bodies about six inches long and a leg-span of about eighteen inches. He could also tell at a glance that they were related to the grey desert spider, and that they were non-poisonous.

It was now that Niall realised how fortunate he had been to wake and cover himself with the blanket. The spider net covered his blanket, and came into contact only with his shoulder, right hand and left foot. He was able to reach out with his left hand and pull his yoke, with its attached baskets, towards him. He found his flint knife and sawed away the web at his wrist; then freed his shoulder and left foot. He slipped out of the blanket and stood up, and the spiders retreated into the shadows. He picked up a large fragment of stone and flung it among them; he heard them scuttling away.

"Lie still!" he told Ingeld. She had given way to panic and was making unpleasant gasping noises as she tore at the web; he could see from her eyes that she believed this was the end. He sawed at the ends of the web where it was stuck to the floor, and a few minutes later she was able to stagger to her feet, although she was still covered with the sticky silk.

"Go outside," Niall said. She needed no encouragement; trailing loose ends of web she rushed into the sunlight. Then Niall freed his father. As he did this, the spiders began to advance again, and he threw more stones at them. Once more they retreated. It was now clear that they were in no immediate danger; the spiders would not dare to attack now their prey was awake.

Outside, the sunlight was blinding; it was mid-afternoon. Niall helped them to peel off the web by hanging on to it as they pulled in the opposite direction; it left behind sticky filaments and lines of shiny stickiness on their skin. It took nearly an hour for Ulf and Ingeld to disentangle themselves from the fragments.

Their bags were still inside: when they went in to fetch them, they again found themselves watched from the darkness by hundreds of tiny eyes. The ends of the web still attached to the floor seemed quite solid and immovable, as if the spider-glué had hardened into a kind of resin. The spiders had exuded their light filaments, then thrown them over the sleeping human beings so that they settled as lightly as flakes of snow. It was the touch of one of them that had awakened Niall. If he had not been covered by his blanket, he would have been entangled as tightly as the others. And by now, the three of them would probably have been wrapped from head to foot in cocoons of spider silk.

At least the danger had removed the last vestiges of tiredness; they all felt capable of walking a hundred miles to escape this frightening place. Yet there would be no point in leaving until they were sure of their direction. Leaving their shoulder bags in the shade, they set out to look for a vantage point over the southern plain. They found what they were looking for in an adjoining courtyard -- a flight of stone steps that went up the side of the outer wall. This was one of the few places where it was undamaged. More than a hundred regular steps brought them out on top of the wall, which was about six feet wide with a stone sentry box at the junction with the wall of the next courtyard. Niall went into the box and looked out of its window; he felt safer there than standing on top of the wall in the strong wind.

In the distance, he could see the gleam of the waters of the salt lake. Below, there was a sheer drop of fifteen hundred feet to the plains. Here the wall of the cliff was less precipitous, but it was still far too steep to climb down.

Ulf had reached the same conclusion. He said gloomily: "No way down for miles."

Niall stood staring out over the plain. "But what did they do if they wanted to go over there?"

Ingeld said irritably: "Walked."

"But which way? I can't believe they went across to the other side of the plateau."

Ulf was struck by this observation. "No, you must be right. There *must* be some other way down."

They began walking along the top of the wall. At twenty-yard intervals, there was another "sentry box", usually perched on an obtuse angle between two courtyards. Walking along the walls made them aware of the size of the place. It was far bigger than it seemed from below.

Niall asked: "Do you think giants built this place?"

Ulf shook his head. "No. Those stairs were made for men the same size as you and me."

Niall found the idea staggering. So men like himself had built this vast citadel. But surely it must

have taken many lifetimes? That depended, of course, on how many there were. . . For the first time, it dawned on Niall that perhaps there *had* been a time when men were lords of the earth. Before this moment, he had entertained it as an idea but never actually grasped it as a real possibility. Now the thought of thousands of men carving stone blocks, building these tremendous walls, brought a strange sense of exhilaration that was as delightful as cold water poured over his head.

It was at the next guard house that Niall saw what they were looking for: steps cut into the side of the cliff. They were only visible from directly above. At this point, the cliff was no longer a sheer rock face. The sand-laden wind had cut into it, carving away softer material so that the rock was a series of irregular columns and hummocks. Trees and bushes grew out of crevices. This was more like the point at which they had climbed up to the plateau. And immediately below them they could see steps leading down, and vanishing from sight around a great hump-backed rock which had been carved into wrinkles until it looked like the skin of a living creature.

They found more steps and descended into the courtyard. But there seemed to be no archway in the outer wall. They walked through into the next courtyard, then the next. There were no doors. And that, Ulf pointed out, made good sense; what was the point of building an immense fortified castle and then putting hundreds of doors in its walls through which enemies could gain entrance?

That still left the problem of how the inhabitants had gained access to the top of the stairway. Niall climbed back to the top of the wall -- being the youngest and most active -- and looked down directly on the flight of steps. Now he noticed something he had not seen when inspecting them from the side. They apparently started twenty yards down the cliff. But if they stopped there, how could people who had climbed all the way up from the plain reach the citadel?

He went to the other side of the wall and looked down into the courtyard. Immediately below was a dim circular mark on the ground, about six feet in diameter. He called down to Ulf: "What's that?"

"What?"

"There's a circle on the ground right below where I'm standing."

"I can't see it."

"You're standing right on it now."

He hurried back down the stairway. Back in the courtyard, the circle had become invisible; but since he knew his father was standing inside it, he went on all fours, examining the ground closely. With his flint knife, he began to scrape where the dust seemed soft. There was a crack between two stones. Now Ulf, Niall and Ingeld all used their knives, and in five minutes had uncovered the circle of stone. Further examination revealed a metal ring. Niall had never seen any kind of metal in his life, and thought it must be some rare kind of stone. The ring was about six inches in diameter, wide enough for all three of them to be able to grip it simultaneously. They braced their feet and heaved; nothing happened. They tried again, and this time the great stone trapdoor seemed to move very slightly. They tried for five minutes until they were panting, and had succeeded in raising the lid about two inches.

Now, in spite of their dislike of the inner rooms, they decided to look into the hall across the courtyard. This was smaller than the one in which they had slept, and was full of strange objects made of wood. Never having seen a chair or table, none of them guessed that they were in an officers' mess room. Much of the furniture was worm eaten, and a chair broke when Niall tried to pick it up. Fragments of carpet on the floor were bleached with the sunlight, although in remote corners, where the sun had

been unable to reach, there were still coloured patterns, badly faded, but oddly rich and exciting.

And protruding from a heap of rubble in a corner there was a wooden beam, ten feet long and four inches wide. Ulf held it by one end, and pressed his foot on it; the wood was unyielding. Niall took the other end and they carried it into the courtyard.

They placed it through the metal ring, and Niall and Ingeld took one end while Ulf took the other. They braced their knees and gave a tremendous heave; the stone lid came out of the ground, and a six-inch gap appeared. The weight was too great, and they had to let it fall. Niall went back into the room, and found another piece of wood. And next time they raised the stone lid, he used his foot to manoeuvre the wood into the gap. Then, using the other beam as a lever, they forced open the trapdoor and succeeded in pushing it to one side. A blast of wind blew up into their faces. Below, they could see stairs descending into darkness.

Ten minutes later, they were climbing down cautiously. For a space of twenty feet or so, the tunnel became so black that they had to move very slowly, testing each step with their feet. Then there was a glimmer of light, and around the next bend, the entrance admitted a blinding beam of sunlight. Then they were standing in the narrow doorway and experiencing vertigo at the sheer drop below them and the distant horizon.

Looked at from above, the steps seemed to descend almost vertically, like a ladder. Ingeld sat down, pressing tight against the wall of the tunnel.

"I'm sorry. I can't go down there. I can't stand heights."

Ulf looked at her in astonishment. "You climbed up the other side."

"But that was going up. Besides, it was nearly dark."

Ulf grinned sarcastically. "All right. We'll wait until it's dark."

She began to cry. "I'm sorry, but I just can't do it."

Ulf shrugged. "Do you want to spend the night sitting there?"

"But there *must* be a better way down."

"There's nothing wrong with this."

The sullen stubborn look came into her eyes. "I'm not going down that way."

It was the worst possible thing to say to Ulf; he had often felt infuriated with Thorg for giving way to his wife's determination to have her own way. Now he stared back at Ingeld with a stony, set expression.

"You can do what you like. We're going down to spend the night at the bottom."

Ingeld was not accustomed to being thwarted.

"And what am I supposed to do?"

"You can go and spend the night in the fortress."

"What about the spiders!"

"What are you more afraid of -- spiders or heights?" He began descending, his face towards the steps. "Come on, Niall."

Unwillingly -- for although he felt as his father did about Ingeld, he still felt sorry for her -- Niall began to descend the stairway. It was, in fact, less dangerous than it looked, for although each step was only a few inches deep, hand-holds had been cut in the rock beside them. A hundred yards farther down, where the steps turned at an angle behind the hump-backed rock, the slope suddenly became less steep. Here, out of sight of Ingeld, Ulf beckoned him to sit down. They stayed there for a quarter of an hour, and ate a prickly pear and some maize bread. After that, Ulf left his baggage and went back up the cliff. A few minutes later, he reappeared with Ingeld. Her face was stained with tears and her lips were set in a sullen pout; but the mulish expression had disappeared.

There must have been over three thousand steps. They followed a twisting curve, sometimes descending into clefts, sometimes exposed on the face of the cliff, and at one point passing through a valley with massive and rectangular carved rocks, sculptured with bas reliefs of strange animals. Some of the creatures looked a little like desert rodents; but they were as big as insects. They stood and contemplated these things with a feeling of awe. Niall pointed to a particularly fierce looking creature that seemed to be surrounded by hunters. "What is that?"

"I'm not sure. . ."

Ingeld said contemptuously: "It's a tiger."

"Did such things really live on earth?"

"Of course."

Ulf said: "The spiders killed off all the larger animals."

"Then why did they allow man to survive?"

"Because man cannot protect himself. He has no claws, no tusks, no sharp teeth."

"But he has weapons."

Ulf said grimly: "But weapons can be taken away. You cannot take away a tiger's claws without killing it first."

They tramped on. For the last few hundred feet the descent became more difficult, for the cliff was broken and eroded. At its base it had been hollowed out by the wind; they had to throw down their baggage and jump the last ten feet, landing in soft sand. Looking back up, they saw that the stairway was now invisible. Its builders had taken care not to make it obvious to enemies.

By travelling over the plateau, they had avoided the worst of the desert. The countryside ahead was not unlike the region around the burrow, but with more vegetation. Compared to the plateau, the atmosphere here was hot and oppressive. In spite of the menace of the spiders, which now lay behind them, Niall felt a sharp pang of regret at leaving the ruined citadel. For him, it represented something he

had never before encountered: romance and mystery.

The sun was near the western horizon. The long descent of the stairs had made them all tired. Ulf decided to rest until the moon rose. The hollows worn in the base of the cliff argued that there should also be caves. They walked due west for almost a mile but found nothing deeper than a few feet. However they encountered another group of the low trees or bushes under which they had slept on the plateau. They selected the lowest one, spread blankets over it to form a sunshade, then lay down to rest. Ingeld lay several yards away; she had still not forgiven Ulf for making her climb down the stairway.

When the edge of the sun neared the horizon, Ulf took himself off into the middle of the bushes, and sat cross legged, his back against the twisted root of a tree. It was time he tried to make contact with Siris. Since they were roughly in the same longitude, they should observe the sunset at the same time. Their agreement was to attempt contact as the sun touched the horizon. This moment seemed to facilitate contact between minds.

Niall moved his position slightly so he could watch his father. Ulf was tired, and instead of relaxing, might easily fall asleep. Therefore he intended to keep Ulf in sight, and to make some small movement to arouse his attention if he seemed to be dozing.

Suddenly, he stiffened with horror. In the twisted root behind his father, something was moving. As he watched, the long, sinuous body of a grey centipede crawled into the open. It was about three feet long, and the many-jointed antennae were vibrating curiously; it had sensed intruders in its territory. But it had not yet noticed Ulf, who was sitting still as a stone. Niall had seen very few centipedes, and the movement of their tiny legs fascinated and repelled him. Unlike the millipede, the centipede is poisonous; this one was of the soil-burrowing type. And when, in the course of its cautious survey of its territory, it became aware of the man, its head reared upward into a position of alertness, revealing poison claws like those of a spider.

While Ulf remained still, he was in no danger. But if he became aware of the centipede, and moved suddenly, he would instantly be bitten.

Niall also realised that Ingeld was lying in a position from which she could see Ulf. Her eyes were closed; but if she opened them and saw the centipede, she would scream.

Niall suppressed the panic surging in his veins and made his mind calm. At that moment, Ulf's deeper breathing indicated that he had made contact. The centipede was still poised, its poison claws within a few inches of Ulf's bare back. But as Ulf remained immobile, this fighting posture gradually relaxed. Very cautiously, Niall looked around for his spear; it was propped against the trunk of the tree a few feet away. Moving very slowly, in case he disturbed Ingeld, he reached out towards it. It was slightly too far for his reach; he had to edge forward. His hand closed round its shaft; silently, he raised it into the throwing position. But Ulf's breathing told him that he was still in contact. Everything was silent. Then Ingeld stirred, and the bone bracelets on her wrists rattled. Instantly, the centipede was again in the striking position. When silence ensued, it again relaxed. A full minute went by. Suddenly, Ulf sighed deeply and stirred. Without hesitation, Niall hurled the spear. It struck the ground a few inches from the centipede, but its momentum drove it on so that its point ploughed through the ground and under the centipede's belly. Startled, Ulf looked round. The spear had carried the centipede several feet away. A moment later, Niall was standing over it with his father's spear, stabbing the writhing body again and again. Ingeld woke up, saw what was happening, and screamed piercingly. Two minutes earlier, the scream would have cost Ulf his life. Now it only galvanised him into action; he seized the other spear and helped Niall dispatch the thrashing predator, whose erect fangs were now harmless since the head was half-severed from the body.

When the creature lay still, Ulf placed his hand briefly on Niall's head. "Good work, son." He seldom addressed Niall as "son", and Niall blushed with pleasure.

Ingeld was still frantic. "Oh, let's get away from here! It's horrible. . ."

Ulf shrugged. "It should be safe enough now." He prodded with his spear deep into the roots of the tree.

"I can't bear it here!" Her voice was tense with hysteria.

Ulf sighed. "There's no point in moving until the moon rises. We can't see where we're going."

"Then I'm going over there!" And she moved out into the open, fifty yards away, and sat there defiantly. Niall wanted to tell her that she was in more danger from scorpions and centipedes in the open than under the bushes, but decided it was not worth the effort. The thought that they would soon be seeing the last of her filled him with relief.

An hour later, the moon rose and they began the march south. A few miles on, they came upon a well-worn road that seemed to run from the plateau in the direction of the salt lake. They followed this for the remainder of the night. Often they were alarmed by movements from the desert on either side of them -- scabbling noises, scuttling sounds, and on one occasion a menacing hiss -- but they saw nothing; few desert creatures would risk attacking a group of three.

When the moon set, they rested for an hour. Ingeld flung herself down on the ground and gave a deep sigh. Ulf lay on his back, using a flat stone as a pillow. Niall preferred to sit with his back against a boulder; the sounds from the desert had made him nervous. He began to doze, but a rustling sound woke him; he listened intently, but there was no further noise. He allowed himself to relax, while concentrating at the same time. Because of his fatigue, it worked more easily than usual, and he suddenly experienced that deep inner quiet as if he had walked into some vast empty hall. Ingeld stirred, and as his attention switched to her, he became aware of her thoughts: of her feeling of weariness and her resentment at the efforts she was being forced to make. He saw that she felt no gratitude towards himself or his father for bringing her this far: only a feeling of angry contempt. She was, he now realised, deeply resentful about the deaths of Thorg and Hrolf, and blamed them on Ulf and Veig. Still nursing her sense of injury, she fell asleep. Ulf was already asleep; when Niall turned his attention to his father, he was aware of a sensation like a grey, pulsating mass, full of images and dreams.

When he used this new sense of inwardness to scan the desert, he immediately became aware of hundreds of living creatures: beetles, spiders, ants, solifugids, centipedes, rodents, all thinking about food. It was a strange sensation, like *becoming* the desert. Some of the creatures -- the grey spiders, for example -- were aware that his mind was scanning them; others were completely oblivious.

Something was disturbing him, like a nagging worry at the back of his mind. His mind came back to the here-and-now and he realised it was already daylight. Then he started as something brushed his leg. He was sitting in the midst of small, moving bodies, dark, hairy creatures like caterpillars that had emerged from the underbrush a few feet from the road. His first thought was that they were poisonous centipedes; a closer look revealed that they had the typical hump-backed locomotion of a caterpillar. Their length varied between six inches and a foot. Ingeld was lying on her back, her mouth open, her arm flung above her head, and one of the caterpillars was crawling over her dress. Niall bestirred himself to shake her awake. At that moment, the caterpillar rose up on her chest, like a striking snake, and made a plunge forward. Ingeld woke up and began to choke. To his horror, Niall realised that the creature was

in her mouth, about six inches of its length hanging over her chin; as he watched, the six inches diminished to three. Ingeld was thrashing and struggling helplessly. Niall rushed forward, grabbed at the creature's furry body and pulled violently. It came out, struggling and writhing, and he felt its sharp mandibles bite his wrist. Ingeld began to be sick. As he hurled the creature to the ground, Niall became aware of others crawling up his legs and saw that his father's body was also covered. As Niall yelled, Ulf woke with a start and jumped to his feet. One of the hairy creatures tried to enter his mouth; he clenched his teeth, biting its head off, and hurled the rest to the ground.

Ignoring their baggage, they ran, beating off caterpillars that tried to climb their legs. Fifty yards away, they halted; the caterpillars had made no attempt to follow. Ingeld was gasping convulsively, and Ulf, his face distorted by disgust, spat repeatedly to clear his mouth. The air was filled with a sickening smell like rotting vegetation.

Niall said: "What are they?"

"Bore worms. One of the vilest creatures in the desert. Ugh!" He spat again.

Ingeld, sobbing like a frightened child, said: "It tried to get into my mouth."

Ulf nodded. "And if it had succeeded, you'd be dead by now. They feed off intestines."

This was too much for her; she collapsed on the ground, sobbing hysterically. Ulf made no attempt to comfort her; he knew that it was the quickest way of exorcising her disgust.

A few minutes later, the bore worms had gone, vanishing into the bushes on the other side of the road. They went back to collect their weapons and baggage but all the food was ruined. It had not been eaten, but the maize bread, meat and cactus fruit was covered with a slimy excretion that had a bitter, sickening smell. Reluctantly, they emptied their baskets onto the road. At least it lightened their burden. Then, their baskets now containing only the water gourds, they tramped on. But as the sun rose, the slimy substance that covered the baskets like the trail of a slug began to decay, producing a pungent, rotting stench. Finally, they decided to abandon the baskets. The smell was now so nauseating that they did this without regret.

Half an hour later, Niall heard a sound that made his heart lift with joy: the gurgle of running water. They parted the bushes at the side of the road and found a small stream. The clear water flowed over smooth white pebbles. They plunged in, dropping on all fours to drink. Then Niall sat down in the water and washed himself all over. When they left the stream half an hour later, they no longer smelt of decay.

A few miles farther on, their route took them through boulder-strewn slopes of white scree; the road had been carved out of the limestone. Now they could see clearly the shimmering expanse of the salt lake. The sight of the water produced in Niall an almost choking feeling of breathless excitement. The road descended into a valley between walls of rock; high up on one of these were a number of immense carvings: men wearing strange head-dresses, with rectangular beards and long garments.

"Who are they?" Niall asked.

Ulf said: "No one knows."

Ingeld said: "I know. They are my ancestors." She glanced at them contemptuously.

At that moment, there came a sound that made Niall's heart stand still with astonishment. It was a human shout. At the next bend of the road, half a mile ahead, men were coming towards them and waving.

"You see -- my people are coming to meet me," Ingeld said proudly.

Niall said incredulously: "How did they know you were coming?"

She smiled disdainfully. "They know many things that are beyond your understanding."

Ulf glanced at her mockingly, but said nothing.

A few minutes later, they could see the men clearly. There were about a dozen and the one who walked in front was tall and wore some kind of white garment. He raised his hand in salute and, when they were within hailing distance, called: "Welcome to the land of Dira."

His voice echoed between the cliffs. This in itself astonished Niall. Since childhood, he had been taught never to shout, except in cases of absolute necessity: survival depended upon being unheard and unseen. But this tall man behaved as if he didn't care if he alerted all the predators for miles around.

A moment later, he and Ulf had locked forearms in a clasp of friendship.

"My name is Hamna," the young man said, "the son of Kazak. These are my kinsmen. We have been sent to greet you and bid you welcome."

Niall asked: "How did you know we were coming?"

"My mother Sefna received a message from her sister to say that you had arrived in our land."

Ulf smiled at Ingeld with a trace of satire. "So it's not beyond our understanding after all. Siris said she was going to try to contact her sister."

Ingeld ignored him as she stepped forward and embraced Hamna, "I am your cousin Ingeld." With a glance at Ulf she added: "I am glad to be back among my own people."

Hamna said formally: "You are welcome."

Ulf said drily: "We are also glad she is back among her own people."

Fortunately, the ambiguity of this comment seemed to be lost on the newcomers.

Introductions followed; Niall was fascinated and impressed by everyone he met. They all seemed so much bigger and stronger than the males of his own family; it was obvious they were better fed. Instead of garments of caterpillar skin or spider silk, they wore a woven cloth; but what astonished Niall was that their clothes were of different colours; he had never heard of dye. The stout sandals on their feet were all of the same design.

Hamna and his companions had set out at dawn, so there was still a long way to go. But now he was among other men, Niall's fatigue had vanished in eager expectancy and he was indifferent to the heat.

The youngest of Hamna's companions was a youth named Massig, who was apparently about

Niall's age; but he was at least six inches taller and had a broad, powerful chest. His hair fascinated Niall, for it seemed strangely tidy, all its strands running parallel; it was held around the forehead by a white band of cloth. Massig seemed an amiable, good natured youth, and he asked Niall all kinds of questions about the journey. It was some time before Niall realised, to his astonishment, that Massig envied him for having travelled so far from home. Niall also observed that Massig cast admiring glances towards Ingeld; it had never struck Niall that anyone might regard her as attractive. Ingeld herself was so intoxicated at being surrounded by strong males that her eyes sparkled and her cheeks glowed; Niall had never seen her look so happy. The only thing that troubled him was that his father was limping badly, and was obviously tired; this journey had drained his resources.

Niall asked Massig about the great carvings on the cliff-walls but Massig knew little about them. "They were made by men of a remote age -- so long ago that no one knows when it was. In the face of the cliff, there are also tombs where ancient men are buried."

"Have you been there?"

"No. They say they are haunted."

"Haunted?" Massig explained about the spirits of the dead, and Niall shuddered; no one in his family had ever mentioned ghosts.

The welcoming party were carrying food and drink, and they ate as they walked in the midday heat. The drink was water flavoured with a fruit Niall had never tasted; it was, in fact, lemon. The sharp flavour made it marvellously refreshing. The dried meat was of the same kind they had been forced to throw away, but more abundant and of a better flavour. There were also cactus fruit, persimmons and oranges -- the latter again a new sensation for Niall.

The scenery became less barren; palm trees and flowering bushes reminded Niall of the country of the ants. The lake shimmered ahead and a stream ran parallel to the road. Niall suddenly experienced keen regret that his mother and sisters were not here to see all this: it would have made it somehow more real if they had shared his sense of wonder.

Then, to Niall's surprise, they turned away from the lake and took a path that led into the desert again. The road began to ascend; the landscape became barren. He asked Massig: "Why do you not live near the water?"

"Because of the spiders. They expect men to live near water, so we live in the desert. There was a time when our people lived close to the water, but the spiders found us and took away many captives."

It saddened Niall to think that even here, in this land of plenty, no one could afford to forget the spiders.

His eyes scanned the distance; he was looking for any sign of the habitations that Veig had described. But there was nothing -- only the rocks and the sand stretching towards the distant plateau. He began to wonder how much further he had to walk.

The question was answered immediately. Hamna came to a halt in the midst of a patch of rock-covered sand that looked indistinguishable from the rest of the landscape. He picked up a heavy stone and, dropping on to one knee, gave several hard bangs on the ground. There was a hollow sound. A few moments later, an irregular patch of desert rose upward and a man's head emerged. Hamna turned and beckoned the guests to follow him. Niall found himself looking down at a flight of narrow steps only

a few feet wide. He also noticed with interest that the sand and rocks on the upper surface of the trapdoor were stuck fast, and did not slide off even when it was turned upside down.

Hamna went first. The steps led into darkness, so they had to feel their way with their hands. A narrow corridor, not unlike that which led to the lower depths of their own burrow, sloped downward at such a steep angle that it was necessary to press both hands against the walls. These seemed to be made of stone. In the air, Niall noticed the distinctive smell of burning beetle oil, although he could see nothing in the pitch darkness.

They came to a halt, and three loud raps sounded. After a silence, there was the sound of something heavy being moved. Then the first gleam of light came from ahead, revealing that they were in a low-ceilinged chamber, about ten feet square. The light was admitted past great slabs of stone, which were being moved aside, and a cooler air blew in their faces. Two large stone slabs were being carried bodily apart, each by four men; beyond them, dozens of lighted lamps illuminated a broad chamber. Niall gasped. It was an enormous room, at least fifty feet long, and the lights, set in alcoves in the walls, made it almost as bright as daylight. But this, apparently, was only a kind of corridor. Hamna led them forward, and more slabs of stone were moved aside. There was yet another lighted room, whose ceiling was higher than the previous one and whose walls were supported by stone buttresses. And this was also apparently a corridor, for beyond it he could see a large chamber whose stone doors had already been moved aside. As they approached, he saw that it was filled with a crowd of people, including women and children. They parted to make way for Hamna, and down the aisle between them, Niall could see a big stone chair, approached by several steps. In it sat a tall heavily built man, his grey hair held in place by a gold-coloured band; the white garment he wore came within a few inches of his feet. The old man stood up, smiling, and held out his hand to Ulf; they clasped forearms.

"Welcome to Dira. My name is Kazak." He had a strong, broad face, somewhat too flabby, and the look of a man who expects unquestioning obedience.

Niall was less interested in the old man than in the tall, graceful girl who stood by his chair. Her face bore a family resemblance to Ingeld, but the features were more clean cut. Her red-gold hair was held in place by a circlet of shiny metal. When he noticed that she was also looking at him with curiosity, he quickly looked away.

Ulf introduced himself, then Niall and Ingeld. The old king, Niall observed, looked at Ingeld with keen interest, taking in the short, spider-silk garment that revealed the curves of her body. Ingeld's dress was far shorter than the tunics worn by the other women, including the beautiful girl beside the throne.

Kazak was saying: "This is my daughter Merlew, who runs my household." When Niall clasped forearms with Merlew, he was thrilled by the softness of her skin, and by the delicious scent that came from her, quite unlike his own rank smell of sweat. When she smiled at him, showing even white teeth, his heart seemed to collapse with an emotion that was like fear, but far more agreeable. But with the self-control that came naturally to him, he gave no sign of his feelings.

Niall found himself being kissed and hugged by a large-breasted woman with very white shoulders and a firm chin. This, he gathered, was Sefna, his mother's sister. She was ruffling his hair.

"Poor boy, you must be tired. Come and eat, then you can rest."

She made a perfunctory obeisance to Kazak, bringing her right knee close to the floor, then, taking Niall by the hand, led him away. Massig waved cheerfully to him and called: "I'll see you later."

Another sloping corridor led to what were evidently the living quarters. Niall expected a large room; instead, he found a wide chamber with other corridors leading off it. What impressed Niall was the straightness of the walls and the neat right-angles of the doorways. It all struck him as unimaginably sophisticated and marvellous.

Sefna halted in front of a door in a side corridor; two steps led down into a large, square room with rushes on the floor. There were seats, made of sliced logs of wood, and a low table that consisted of one great round of wood, three feet in diameter. Through a low door in the wall, a dark-haired girl looked into the room. Sefna said: "Dona, come and meet your cousin Niall." The girl came in and shyly accepted his handclasp; she had large brown eyes and an olive complexion. Niall judged her age to be about twelve.

In spite of Niall's protests that he was not hungry, Sefna began to prepare food. Suddenly, Niall was very tired -- so tired that he could scarcely keep his eyes open; this, after all, was normally the time of the afternoon when the travellers had slept. And his last sleep had been in the great fortress on the plateau. He relaxed on the couch of leaves and rushes and tried to answer Dona's questions. Periodically, other children looked into the room from the corridor, but Dona shooed them away imperiously. It dawned on Niall that he was an object of general curiosity, and that Dona was the centre of some envy because he was her guest. In the pleasure of proprietorship, Dona soon lost her shyness, and Niall found himself treating her as if she were an older version of his sister Runa, teasing her and telling stories; she was so enthralled by his account of the country of the ants that he had to repeat the whole thing twice.

When the food arrived he found he was hungry after all -- perhaps because it was hot -- an unusual luxury. As he ate, he did his best to answer Sefna's questions, but sheer fatigue made his eyelids droop. He was relieved when his father arrived, accompanied by Kazak, and he ceased to be the centre of attention. He dozed through much of the conversation that followed. Finally, he and his father were shown into a smaller chamber with grass couches that were covered with woven cloth; it was luxuriously soft, and he soon fell into a dreamless sleep.

When he woke up, he found Dona sitting by his bed, patiently waiting for him to open his eyes. She told him that in an hour's time, Kazak was giving a feast in honour of his guests. In the meantime, she would show him where to wash and then take him on a tour of the "palace" (which its inhabitants referred to as "the shelter").

He was impressed to learn that there was another level beneath this one. They had dug down to the water table, thirty feet below, and excavated a series of basements. In these there were the communal wells, and rooms in which the men and women could perform their ablutions. There were also astonishing sanitary arrangements, and an army of dung beetles disposed of the human waste.

The people of Dira had also domesticated ants and grey spiders. The ants were of the aphid-tending variety; they had cut galleries deep into the walls in which they had built their nests; in these nests they tended the greenfly larvae until they were large enough to be taken into the outer world; there, in the greenery by the shores of the lake, they were farmed like cattle, and milked of their honeydew several times a day; the honeydew was one of the most important food sources in the "palace". The spiders were kept for their silk, which was treated by some process that removed its stickiness and then woven into cloth. There were workshops in which the women wove cloth from cotton and spider silk, and workshops in which stonemasons worked on large chunks of stones, transported from many miles away on rollers, and lined new galleries and corridors. This underground city was in a perpetual ferment of activity, like an ants' nest. But this was not simply because such activity was necessary to keep everyone fed and clothed. It was because, as Niall knew only too well, one of the chief problems of life underground was boredom. Only a small percentage of the human beings in Dira went outside more than

once a month, and even then, it was only for an hour at a time. The spiders knew there were human beings somewhere in the area of the salt lake; many years ago, they had captured hundreds of them in a great raid. (Niall's grandfather Jomar had been among the captives.) But in those days, the humans had lived in caves near a ruined city, a dozen miles away on the shores of the lake. After the raid, the survivors had scattered into the desert; many had died. Then Kazak had reorganised them and, with the aid of fire, had driven a colony of leaf-cutter ants out of their underground city on the edge of the desert. This city became the "shelter". In twenty years, Kazak's people had turned it into a palace and an impregnable fortress. The purpose of the massive slabs of stone that covered the walls was not simply to prevent the earth from collapsing; it was to prevent insects from tunnelling into the palace.

Niall learned more of the history of Kazak's people at the feast that took place that night. They ate at low tables made of slices of tree-trunk. The floor was covered with rugs made of animal pelts, some of them consisting of dozens of skins of small rodents sewn together with artistry and skill. Ulf sat beside Kazak, with Niall on his other side, and since Kazak's voice was deep and impressive, Niall could hear every word. Kazak described how they had discovered tools in the great fortress on the plateau -- metal axe-heads and saws, hammers and pincers -- and how paintings on the walls of tombs had taught them to use these. The slabs of stone had to be moved by night, because of spider patrols; even the "shepherds" who looked after the ants had to take them out an hour before dawn and bring them back after dark.

At first, the greatest problem for the inhabitants of the underground city had been lighting. Although there was an abundance of the green "copper beetle", from which oil could be obtained, there were not enough of them to provide oil for the whole community. Then one of the men who had explored on the far side of the lake told of a black, tarry substance that bubbled to the surface in a remote inlet, and whose smell resembled that of burning beetle oil. Kazak despatched two men to fetch samples. And he discovered -- as he expected -- that this black, sticky oil burned with a smoky flame. And if the flame was kept small enough, there was no smoke. From then on, the black oil was mixed with the oil of the copper beetle, and the underground city had its own street lighting system. Teams of men took it in turns to bring the oil from the other side of the lake -- a six-day journey -- while women and teenage girls had the job of replenishing the oil lamps and trimming the wicks to avoid smoking.

Niall listened to all this as he ate his way through course after course. He had never seen such an abundance of food, and much of it was completely new to him. Jomar had told him about fish, but he had never tasted any; now he ate three different varieties, caught in the river that ran into the salt lake. There was also a great deal of meat, most of it heavily salted. (Kazak spoke with pride of their food store, which -- he claimed -- was so large that they could sustain a six-month siege.) Niall was particularly delighted with a tiny mouse, hardly bigger than the tip of his finger, which was skinned and roasted with some kind of seed; he ate a whole bowlful to himself. The drink was either honeydew diluted with water or fermented fruit juice. This juice was far more intoxicating than the kind he had tasted at home, and he observed with sly amusement that Ingeld drank far too much of it, and became increasingly talkative. She also made no secret of her interest in Hamna, and in Hamna's younger brother Corvig, stroking Corvig's shoulder-length yellow hair and squeezing Hamna's biceps. Halfway through the meal, the attractive girl who was serving the guests tripped on the rug, and emptied a bowl of an oily salad over Ingeld's head. She apologised profusely; but Niall, who had seen exactly what happened, was aware that it was no accident; he caught the girl's eye and smiled, and she smiled back demurely. Ingeld, trying to conceal her fury, had to retreat to the dwelling that had been assigned to her to wipe the oil out of her hair. But she was back half an hour later, her hair tied back with a ribbon, and was soon as talkative and demonstrative as ever.

Kazak was an impressive figure of a man, in spite of his double chin and fleshy nose. But he obviously enjoyed exercising his authority, snapping orders at the serving maids and generally treating his

subjects as though they were unruly children. Everyone showed him the greatest respect, and agreed with everything he said. After his third cup of wine, Kazak became boastful, and told stories that illustrated his wisdom and foresight. There could be no doubt that these stories were basically true; but Niall still felt that it was unnecessary for such a great chieftain to proclaim his own virtues.

At the end of the feast Kazak stood and proposed a toast to the guests. Everyone stood up and drank to them. Then Kazak slapped Ulf on the shoulder and suggested that he should bring his family and come and live with the people of Dira. Niall was thrilled and delighted at the idea; the thought of living permanently in this magnificent palace struck him as too good to be true. Yet he knew his father well enough to realise that he was altogether less enthusiastic; he could tell this by the way Ulf nodded slowly, keeping his eyes averted. He resolved to use all his powers of persuasion to try to change Ulf's mind.

After the toast, Kazak asked his daughter Merlew to sing. Niall found the idea puzzling and rather embarrassing. His mother used to sing him to sleep as a child, and she still sang lullabies to his sisters. But the notion of singing as a public entertainment struck him as altogether incongruous.

His doubts vanished when Merlew opened her mouth. Her voice was sweet and pure. The song she sang was about a girl whose fisherman lover was drowned in the lake, and there was something about its simplicity that made Niall want to cry. When the song was over, everyone applauded by banging their clenched fists on the tables; Niall applauded loudest of all. Now he knew beyond all doubt: he was not simply in love with Merlew; he regarded her as a goddess, someone who deserved to be worshipped. Everything about her intoxicated him, from her slender figure to her copper-gold hair and her brilliant smile. Merely to look at her made him feel as if he were dissolving inside. It would have been ecstasy to die for her.

Merlew sang two more songs: one a lament of a queen for a warrior killed in battle, and one a light-hearted ballad about a girl who fell in love with a big, shiny fish. Again, Niall laughed and applauded louder than anyone else, and then was suddenly stricken with embarrassment when she looked across at him and smiled. He sat there with his heart pounding against his ribs, aware that his face was red, and hoping that Ingeld had not noticed. The thought that Merlew had not only noticed him, but also smiled at him, filled him with bursting happiness.

After Merlew sat down, Hamna stood up and recited a stirring ballad about a king marching to war against overwhelming odds. It was Niall's first experience of poetry, and again he felt moved to the point of tears. He also felt relieved that Hamna was Merlew's brother; he was so handsome, and recited so impressively that Niall was sure no woman could resist him. When Hamna sat down, Ingeld took his hand and kissed it, and Hamna looked embarrassed.

After this, there were many more songs and many more poems. For Niall, it was a magical experience; each song and each ballad seemed to carry him away into another land, so that when it was over, he felt as if he had been on a long journey. The tales of heroic deeds made him feel proud to be a human being; at the same time, he felt sad that his own life had been so devoid of heroism. He resolved that, at the first opportunity, he would do something to prove his own courage. He kept glancing cautiously sideways, hoping that Merlew would smile at him again; but it was obvious that she had forgotten he was there. On the other hand, he frequently glanced across to the opposite table and found Dona watching him. Her obvious admiration flattered him; but he accepted it as his due, as he accepted the admiration of his sister Runa. If he had been told that Dona's feelings about him were exactly the same as his own about Merlew, he would have been embarrassed but indifferent.

A point came when a boy came and whispered something in Kazak's ear. The chieftain stood up, raised his arm for silence -- a quite unnecessary gesture, since there was instant silence when he rose --

and announced that it was time for the herdsmen to take out the ants to the lakeside. Half a dozen young men stood and went out, halting at the door to bow to Kazak. This seemed to be taken as a signal that the feast was at an end. Merlew also went out, terminating Niall's interest in the proceedings. Kazak beckoned to Ingeld to come and take her place, patting the seat beside him, and she did so obediently. Other people began to drift out, all making a bow to Kazak as they left the hall; he was too absorbed in Ingeld to notice them.

Niall asked Hamna: "How can you tell what time it is when you live underground?"

"We have clocks."

"What is a clock?"

"A bucket of water, with a small hole in the bottom. It takes exactly half a day for the bucket to empty."

Now, suddenly, Niall understood the purpose of the bucket in Dona's house, suspended from the ceiling and dripping incessantly into another; he marvelled at the ingenuity of Kazak's people and again longed to be one of them.

Hamna said: "Are you tired?"

"No, wide awake."

"Would you like to go out with the herdsmen?"

"Very much."

"I will have to ask the king for permission. No one is allowed out without a pass." He went and bowed before Kazak, who looked annoyed to be interrupted, nodded his head and gestured impatiently. Hamna came back looking pleased with himself.

"Let's go before he changes his mind."

They left by an exit at the far end of the palace; Hamna had to assure the sentry that they had Kazak's permission to leave, and he handed them both a small wooden tally. Hamna placed these in a leathern wallet he carried at his waist. "If we lose these, we shan't be allowed in again."

Niall was puzzled. "Why are they so strict?"

"Safety. Only the king is allowed in and out without formal permission. You see, with so many of us in the shelter, it would be a disaster if someone went out without permission and was seen by a spider patrol. We have to be strict."

"But why does that apply to you?"

"Why not?"

"You're the king's son."

Hamna shrugged. "We are all the king's sons."

It was a clear, starry night, and dawn was showing in the eastern sky. A cool breeze blew from the lake. Niall was surprised how glad he was to feel the wind on his face again.

Ahead of them, a herdsman was walking, half a dozen ants following at his heels like dogs. Hamna fell in step beside him and they began to talk about the aphids, which were exceptionally abundant this year. Niall was glad to be left to his own thoughts; he was dreaming about Merlew, and about the songs and stories he had been listening to. They filled him with an almost painful excitement. As the sky gradually grew paler, and the grey light was reflected in the waters of the lake, he tried to imagine what the world would be like without the menace of the spiders -- a world in which men could live openly above ground and travel anywhere they liked. When the herdsman had turned off down a path into the bushes by the stream, Niall asked Hamna:

"What do you think would happen if the spiders found out about your shelter?"

"Life would become very dangerous. But we'd put up a good fight."

"But could you win?"

"I think we might. You see, we've tried to make the shelter impregnable. There are only two entrances, and they're so narrow they could each be defended by one man. So they'd have to besiege us and hope to starve us into surrender. But we've got stocks of food to last for six months -- perhaps more. I'm told the spiders don't like the heat, and this place becomes a furnace in the summer. So I think we'd stand a good chance."

"So you're not afraid of the spiders?"

"Oh no. We're not afraid of them." His voice sounded so confident that Niall believed him.

They had reached the shore of the lake. On the far side, directly opposite, there were low hills rising to mountains as high as the plateau. At this point, the lake was about ten miles wide; Niall found its silver-grey expanse disturbingly beautiful. But as usual, his eyes scanned the eastern sky for spider balloons; he had come to associate beauty with danger. The sky was clear, already turning blue.

Hamna said: "Aha!" and quickly stripped off his tunic. In three steps, he was swimming in the lake. A moment later, he returned to the shore holding a large fish.

"These swim down the river, but they can't live in the salt water. The birds usually eat them, unless we can get there first."

Hamna made a cairn of stones and hid the fish underneath it. Then he ran back towards the water.

"Come on."

"I can't swim."

"Yes you can. Anybody can swim in this water."

And, to Niall's astonishment, this proved to be true. When he advanced into the lake up to his chest, he felt himself being lifted off the bottom. A moment later, he was propelling himself forward with

his shoulders out of the water. Hamna taught him how to move his arms and legs in rhythm, and he was soon gliding through the water. It had an unpleasant taste, like the water in the depths of the burrow, but stronger. He bumped into something and cried out in alarm. Hamna swam alongside him, reached down and found another fish. During the next half hour, they found half a dozen.

Then they waded ashore, wrapped all the fishes in a piece of cloth Hamna carried in his wallet and walked along the sandy beach to the point where the river flowed into the lake. By that time, the water had dried on them, and Niall found that it left an unpleasant stickiness behind. But this was soon washed away in the river. After that, they lay down on the sand in the shade of a palm tree and dozed in the warm air.

Niall was still full of questions. "Why did you say that you are all the king's sons?"

"Because in our city, we all have equal rights. Besides, the king has many children."

"How many?"

"Perhaps. . . oh, fifty."

"But how many wives does he have?"

Hamna thought carefully. "About a hundred and eighty."

Niall was bewildered. "And where do they all live?"

"With their husbands, mostly."

"But you said the king was their husband. . ."

Hamna said patiently, as if explaining to a child: "They have husbands, of course. But they are also the king's property -- just as we all are. He can choose anyone he likes."

This idea astounded Niall. "But don't the husbands object?"

"Of course not. If they wanted to, they could leave us and go and live elsewhere. But they prefer to stay."

Niall thought about this. "And if we came to live with you, would my mother also become the king's wife?"

"I suppose so. If he liked her."

Niall's heart sank. He suddenly knew, beyond all shadow of doubt, that his father would never agree to live here. He asked the question that had been troubling him since they arrived.

"Does the princess Merlew have a husband?"

"Not yet. She's only seventeen. Besides, she's too busy. Since her mother died, she's been mistress of the royal household."

That, at any rate, was a relief.

Hamna sat up, yawning. "We'd better get back. The spiders should be over soon."

"Do they come every day?"

"Oh no -- particularly at this time of the year. This is the season for sandstorms."

Back in the shelter, it seemed very dark. In the corridors, only a few lamps were lit -- Niall learned that this was the usual state of affairs. Yesterday, the king had ordered all the lamps to be lit in honour of the guests; now things were back to normal.

In Sefna's dwelling, Dona was sewing by the light of a single lamp. Sefna, apparently, was at work in the weaving sheds. Everyone above the age of twelve had to work for a few hours every day. When Dona saw Niall, she brightened and asked him if he felt like playing a game.

"What is a game?"

She took out a pot containing a number of coloured stones and demonstrated various games of skill -- resting the stones on the palm of the hand, tossing them into the air and trying to catch them all on the back of the hand, then introducing many additional complications. After this they played guessing games, each trying to outguess the other about the number of stones they kept concealed in the hand. Then Dona glanced at the water clock and asked: "Would you like to go and play with the others in the big hall?"

Niall was feeling sleepy. "I think I'd like to rest. What do you do?"

"The children play games after the tenth hour -- hide and seek, blind man's buff, wrestling. . ."

"Wouldn't I be too old?"

"Oh no. Merlew often joins in, and she's seventeen."

"All right." He managed to sound so casual that he surprised himself.

There were thirty or forty children in the big hall, their ages ranging from about ten to fifteen. To Niall's disappointment, the princess was not among them. A mischievous-looking lad called Eirek seemed to be in charge, and since he looked only about eleven, Niall found this puzzling, until Dona explained that they chose a different play-group leader every week. It was an attempt to develop leadership qualities. When they were introduced, Eirek clasped Niall's forearm and asked: "How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"You're not very big for sixteen. Kles there is bigger than you and he's only fourteen."

"Where I live, we aren't as well fed as you."

Eirek sighed. "Here there's nothing much to do except eat."

The observation made Niall thoughtful.

Eirek clapped his hands. "All right, we'll start with the flute game. Dona, you play the flute. The

rest of you sit down." They sat in rows on the floor, Dona a few yards away with her back turned. Niall, sitting at the end of the front row, was handed a smooth wooden stick about six inches long.

"We pass the tally from hand to hand while the flute is playing," Eirek explained. "When the flute stops, whoever is holding it has to kiss the person next in line. And he's out of the game." Niall was sitting next to a blue-eyed little girl of ten, who gave him a demure sideways glance.

As Dona started to play, Eirek called: "Stop. Merlew, are you going to join in?" Niall's heart skipped; the princess had entered from behind. She was wearing a single garment made of spotted fur which left her arms and her long legs bare.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she said.

Eirek accepted her apology with a nod. "All right. Sit there on the front row." Niall took care not to look at her as she sat beside him. He could feel the warmth radiating from her body against his bare arm.

Dona started to play again, and Niall was impressed by her skill; she played a merry dance tune that repeated itself over and over again. Everyone passed the tally at top speed. Periodically, Dona stopped; then there was much laughter as the person holding the tally had to kiss the next person along. Gaps left in their ranks by the children who dropped out of the game meant that boys often had to kiss boys, and this occasioned shouts of mirth and some embarrassed blushes. Niall laughed as loudly as the rest. After a few minutes, there were only a dozen left in the game, and Eirek ordered them to form a circle. Now the tally passed round at great speed, and Dona deliberately made her solos longer, to increase the tension. Every time it reached Merlew, Niall willed the music to stop. And after a few minutes, it happened; she was just about to put the tally into his hand when the flute ceased. Niall smiled broadly in an attempt to disguise the beating of his heart; Merlew leaned sideways, quite coolly took hold of Niall's head in her hands, and planted a firm kiss on his lips; everyone laughed approvingly. For a moment, her eyes met his; they seemed calm and mocking. Then she stood up and joined the others. The next time round, Niall found himself holding the tally when the music stopped. The small girl held up her face to him, and her lips held his for a moment longer than necessary. There were mocking "Oohs", and as Niall retreated from the game, the girl blushed rosily.

For Niall, the remainder of the morning passed far too quickly. It dawned on him, with delighted astonishment, that he was an object of curiosity, particularly to the female sex, and that the boys were disposed to admire rather than resent him. When the girls were told to choose partners for a three-legged race, four tried to seize Niall simultaneously; the winner was a rather heavily-built, dark-haired girl called Nyris, and the two of them won the race, just ahead of Merlew and her partner. After this, the younger children sat down to rest, and Eirek announced that the last game of the morning would be a wrestling contest for everyone over the age of thirteen. Niall was surprised but far from displeased to learn that the girls were expected to take part. Soft mattresses stuffed with grass were laid on the floor. The girls were again allowed to choose, and Niall found himself partnered with Nyris.

Each bout commenced with the two adversaries facing one another, arms raised with forearm resting against forearm and fingers interlocked. At a given signal, they braced their feet and began to push, each trying to drive the other backwards. When they slipped and lost contact, they interlocked arms and legs, each trying to wrestle the other to the ground. Then, on the ground, they struggled until one was able to sit astride the other and press the hands back against the mattress. There were points given by judges -- the younger children -- for each stage.

Nyris, being heavier than Niall, easily won the first stage of the contest. But when it came to

wrestling, her weight was no match for his sinewy strength, and he was soon sitting astride her, pressing the backs of her hands against the floor. As he stood up, he observed to his relief that Merlew had beaten her opponent, a broad-shouldered but clumsy youth whom she immobilised by pinning him to the ground with her full weight. It was clear that she was a great deal stronger than she looked.

Niall's next two opponents were male, and both were bigger and heavier than he was. But, like Nyris, they lacked agility, and Niall had no difficulty in beating them both.

Now, as he had hoped, he found that he and Merlew were the two finalists. Both were panting, and before they started, Eirek allowed them to recover their breath. Then they faced each other and locked forearms. Her hair, damp with sweat, was clinging to her forehead, and Niall found her enchanting.

Eirek gave the signal to start. Quite suddenly, Merlew braced herself and pushed with all her might; Niall reeled backward and everyone applauded. She was on him immediately, trying to fling him to the ground before he had a chance to recover. But Niall was not to be caught out a second time; their arms interlocked, their legs intertwined, and each tried to upset the other's balance. Her face was pressed against his, and she was breathing heavily in his ear; the sensation was so pleasant that he stopped trying to unbalance her and simply allowed himself to enjoy the consciousness of feeling her in his arms. She tried to upset his equilibrium by relaxing, but he only took advantage of it to press her further backwards.

At that moment he realised there were two more spectators: Kazak had emerged from his dwelling, which opened onto the hall, and Ingeld was standing beside him. For a moment, Niall wondered if the king would be angry to see his daughter clasped in the arms of his guest, and relaxed his grip; with a fierce twist of her body, Merlew threw him to the ground and landed on top of him. They struggled, panting, for several minutes, until she forced one of his hands back against the floor. Now he tried the trick that she had used against him a moment ago; he suddenly allowed himself to relax, as if surrendering. Automatically, she relaxed too. With a violent twist of his hips, he threw her sideways, twisted her arm to the ground and lay across her. She hissed: "Cheat!" But his weight pinned her to the ground. Cautiously, he moved sideways, so their bodies were parallel and, holding down her head with his own, he tried to force back her wrists. Her breath was warm against his ear. They seemed to be locked in a position in which neither had the advantage, and although he could have subdued her by brute strength, he felt this would be a triumph of force rather than skill.

At that moment, he felt her lips against his ear, as if she were about to whisper; then they parted, and her teeth gently bit into the lobe of his ear. The sensation was at once erotic and disturbing, and he became still. Before he was aware of what was happening, she had twisted from under him and wrenched her hands free. A moment later, she was gripping his wrists and forcing them back.

He chuckled: "Cheat."

She whispered: "That makes two of us."

Still laughing, he allowed her to push the backs of his hands against the mattress. To underline her triumph, she struggled on top of him and sat astride his hips. The spectators burst into loud cheers. Ingeld, he noticed, wore a mocking smile.

Kazak came forward and patted his daughter lightly on the head. Merlew sprang lightly to her feet without giving Niall a second glance. Kazak turned to Ingeld. "You see why I made her mistress of the household?"

Ingeld's smile was inscrutable. "She is indeed a remarkable young lady."

Ingeld gave Niall a gentle kick in the ribs with her bare foot. "Come on, boy, get up." The "boy" was at once patronising and affectionate.

Later, as Niall and Dona walked back towards her home, she said: "You shouldn't have let her beat you."

"I couldn't help it."

"I saw what she did. She bit your ear." She reached up and touched the lobe of his ear. "Did it hurt?"

He said modestly: "No, not much."

Dona said with conviction: "She's a dreadful cheat."

Her tone made Niall feel guilty. "Perhaps I am too."

"No, you're not!" She took hold of his arm, and laid her cheek on his shoulder.

That evening, as he and Ulf were on the point of going to bed, Ulf said: "We're leaving tomorrow."

"Tomorrow!" Niall could not keep the dismay out of his voice.

"Don't you want to go home?"

"Yes, of course." His voice lacked conviction. "But couldn't we stay for just a few days more?"

Ulf laid his hand on Niall's head. "Do you think you'd be ready to go then?"

Niall said doubtfully: "Yes."

Ulf stared at him with furrowed brows, then shook his head. "Would you like to live here?"

"Yes, of course." He could not keep the eagerness out of his voice. "If we all lived here."

Ulf shook his head. "That's impossible."

"But why, father? Don't you like it here?"

"Oh yes, I like it here. But I don't think I could live here."

"Why not?"

"It's too complicated to explain." He climbed onto the mattress and pulled the blanket round his shoulders. "But if you want to stay here, I could go back alone."

He said with dismay: "Oh no, you couldn't do that."

"Why not? I know the way back. Hamna wants to come with me to the far side of the plateau. I'd be almost home by then."

"And leave me here?"

"We could fetch you later. Sefna says she'd like you to stay."

It was very tempting -- to stay in the same house as Dona, who was like an adoring young sister, and be able to see Merlew every day. . .

"What about the king?"

"It was Kazak who suggested it."

"And what do *you* think?"

"I want you to make up your own mind."

A few minutes later, Ulf's regular breathing revealed that he was asleep. But all Niall's desire for sleep had vanished. From the next room, the tiny light of a single lamp percolated past the curtain that hung in the doorway, making a moving shadow on the ceiling. From outside, in the corridor, he could hear voices, the comforting sound of human beings going about their business -- it was still two hours to midnight, and the palace of Kazak never fell silent until the early hours of the morning. (Absence of daylight meant that it was easy to lose the habit of sleeping at night.)

The temptation to stay here was enormous. His presence was not needed in the burrow. Since Veig had domesticated the ants and the pepsis wasp, hunting had become a sport rather than a necessity. There was food in plenty within five miles of the burrow. And he could -- as Ulf said -- go home any time he wanted. Why not stay here for a few weeks, a few months, longer. . . ?

Niall badly wanted to convince himself. But the thought of deserting his family touched his conscience, and made him question his own motives. The chief motive, he was well aware, was Merlew. He thought of the cool touch of her lips, of her small white teeth biting his ear, of her slim legs locked around his own, and a feeling of enormous joy made his heart expand. He allowed himself to daydream of becoming Merlew's husband, perhaps of taking Kazak's place as king. And it was then that he suddenly began to experience the cold finger of doubt. He remembered Eirek's comment: "There's nothing much to do here except eat. . ." and tried to imagine what it would be like to be cooped underground for year after year. At home, at least, he was free to come and go as he wished. There was a whole world to be explored, a world full of marvels like the country of the ants and the great fortress on the plateau. Here, they spent their lives hiding from the spiders.

Now he saw the problem with great clarity. If he lived here, life would be pleasant and safe. But it would also be predictable. A child could be born here, grow up here, die here, without once experiencing the excitement of discovery. Why did Dona question him endlessly about his life in the burrow and his journey to the country of the ants? Because for her, it represented a world that was at once dangerous and full of fascinating possibilities. For the children of this underground city, life was a matter of repetition, of *habit*.

And this, he suddenly realised, was the heart of the problem. Habit. Habit was a stifling, warm blanket that threatened you with suffocation and lulled the mind into a state of perpetual nagging dissatisfaction. Habit meant the inability to escape from yourself, to change and develop. . .

He was distracted by the sound of laughter from outside; two children were chasing along the corridor. It brought back the memory of the games in the great hall, and the thought of Merlew. All his certainty vanished. How could he ever become bored when he could see Merlew every day?

He had been lying awake for more than an hour and still felt no desire to sleep. He began thinking of Kazak. Why had the king asked his father if he could stay? Could it have been Merlew who suggested it? If only he could talk it over with someone instead of lying there with his head full of unanswered questions. . . Perhaps Sefna was still awake?

Very slowly, so as not to awaken his father, he slipped from under the cover and tiptoed to the door. But the room next door was empty. He tiptoed across it, and listened against the curtain of the room where Sefna and Dona slept; the sound of steady breathing told him they were also asleep. He went to the main door and peered out into the corridor. Hamna's younger brother, Corvig, was strolling by, his arm around a girl.

"Hello, Niall. What are you doing?" he said.

"Nothing. I couldn't sleep."

"Sleep! It's too early to sleep. We're going to Nyris's house to play a game of brads. Why don't you come along?"

He said apologetically: "I don't think I'd better. We may leave in the morning and I ought to get a good night's sleep." He was disappointed that Corvig had a companion; he would have liked to ask his advice.

Corvig tucked his arm through Niall's. "Well, walk along with us anyway."

The girl, who had large, attractive eyes, asked him: "Why do you have to leave so soon?"

"My father wants to get back. I wish I could persuade him to stay a few days longer." He turned to Corvig. "Couldn't you ask your father to talk to him?"

They had emerged into the main thoroughfare, the one that led to the great hall.

"He's over there," Corvig said. "Why don't you ask him yourself?"

The king was walking alone, looking at a roll of parchment which he held within a few inches of his nose. Passers-by acknowledged him respectfully, but he paid them no attention. Corvig approached him, bowed his head, and said: "Father. . ." Kazak glanced up irritably, then saw Niall and smiled.

"Excuse me, sir, but Niall wants to ask you something," Corvig said.

"Yes, yes, he's very welcome." He took Niall's arm. "What is it, my boy?"

"It's about leaving tomorrow, sir. . ."

Kazak frowned. "Tomorrow? As soon as that! Why can't you stay longer?"

That's what I wanted to talk to you about. Couldn't *you* ask my father?"

Kazak shrugged irritably. "I've asked him already. He says he's worried about his family. But that's no reason why you shouldn't stay."

"I'd like to sir."

"You would? Good!" A guard approached them and saluted the king. Kazak said: "Look, I'm busy at the moment, but why don't you go and talk to Merlew. You'll probably find her alone."

"Thank you, sir!"

The king's dwelling was two storeys high, the main door approached by a short flight of steps. The guard who was standing in the doorway stood aside to allow Niall to enter. He found himself in a wide entrance hall supported by pillars of stone; the walls were covered with dyed curtains in royal green. A dozen lamps made it almost as bright as day.

There seemed to be no one about. He crossed to a curtained doorway and peeped in. The large, comfortable room had rushes on the floor and wooden carved furniture; it was also lit by many lamps. But there was no one there.

To the right of the entrance hall was a flight of stairs. Standing at the bottom of these, Niall thought he could hear voices. He hesitated -- it seemed wrong to walk around someone's house like this -- then remembered that he had the king's permission. His bare feet made no sound on the stone steps. He found himself in a low, well-lit corridor, with several curtained doorways to the right and left. From behind one of these came the sound of women's voices. Niall approached it hesitantly, and was about to call: "Is anybody there?" when he heard the sound of a woman's laugh. He recognised it immediately; it was Ingeld's voice. Again, he was tempted to retreat. But as he turned away, he heard the sound of his own name. As he hesitated, Ingeld went on: "It wasn't his fault. I blame his father and brother."

Merlew's voice asked: "How did it happen?"

"I don't know. They wouldn't tell me. That's what makes me suspicious. You'd think they'd tell a woman how her husband and son met their deaths."

"Perhaps they didn't want to upset you."

"Upset me!" Ingeld's voice was incredulous. "Do you think they'd care! I'll tell you something. They almost left me to die in that fortress on the top of the plateau."

"Oh no! What happened?"

"I can't stand heights, and when I looked down all those steps, I felt dizzy. So they just turned their backs on me and walked off."

"That's disgraceful! And what did you do?"

"I just had to close my eyes and follow them. They were already out of sight and I couldn't bear the thought of all those horrible spiders."

Merlew sounded genuinely angry. "They shouldn't treat a woman like that."

Ingeld snorted. "They don't know how to treat a woman! They're savages."

There was a brooding silence, and Niall felt it was time to withdraw. He was already ashamed at having overheard so much. But as he turned away, he heard Ingeld say:

"You seem to like the boy."

"What makes you say that?"

"The way you were wrestling with him this morning. . ."

Merlew's voice said coldly: "I don't know what you mean. Wrestling is one of our customs."

"The king thought you found him attractive."

"Attractive! That skinny boy! You must be joking!"

"The others all seem to like him."

"Of course they do. Because he's a stranger. But the novelty will soon wear off."

His cheeks burning, Niall tiptoed away. There was a strange, leaden feeling inside his chest, the same feeling he had experienced when he heard that Thorg and Hrolf were dead. He was tingling with humiliation. As he passed the soldier at the door, he felt that his face must be revealing everything he felt. But the man merely nodded in a friendly manner. He made his way back down the main thoroughfare, deliberately walking in the shadows in case someone spoke to him. Inside his brain, Merlew's voice repeated again and again: "Attractive! That skinny boy! You must be joking!" It was true. He could see it now. To a king's daughter, he was bound to look underfed and undersized. And he had imagined that she found him attractive. The thought made him writhe with embarrassment.

Yet when he thought back on this morning, he could have no doubt that she had been flirting with him. Why had she bitten his ear? Why had she given him that secret smile as he said goodbye to her? Had she merely been playing with him? His misery turned to a dull rage and he decided that he hated her. That, at least, was better than the emotional turmoil that made him feel like bursting into tears.

As he entered the sleeping chamber, Ulf's voice said: "Where have you been?"

"I couldn't sleep, so I went outside."

He settled himself down on the grass couch and pulled the blanket up to his chin. After a silence, he said:

"I've been thinking about tomorrow. I'll come with you."

Ulf grunted. "You'd better get some sleep. I want to set out early."

But Niall knew his father well enough to detect the note of gladness in his voice.

They left the city an hour before dawn, at the same time as the antherds. Hamna and Corvig, who

had obtained special permission from the king, accompanied them. Kazak himself walked with them as far as the entrance and embraced them both, kissing them on the forehead and both cheeks. To Niall's relief, the king expressed no curiosity about why he had changed his mind. The streets of the underground city were deserted at this hour, and Niall had to swallow back a feeling of intense regret as he looked on it for the last time.

"Remember," Kazak said, "you have my permission to return here with your family." He added reflectively: "I haven't seen Siris since she was a little girl."

Ulf bowed respectfully. "I'll discuss it with her, sire." But Niall knew that he had no such intention.

"Do that," said Kazak, and hurried back inside again; it was evident that he found the dawn wind too cold.

The eastern sky showed a streak of grey, but the sky overhead was still black. Ahead, the salt lake reflected the stars. It looked so beautiful that for a moment, Niall forgot his bitterness about Merlew. Then he recalled her comment about "that skinny boy", and relapsed into sombre brooding. And for the next half hour or so, he daydreamed pleasantly of various situations in which he made her pay for the insult. She had been captured by the death spiders, and carried off to their city. Niall was her only hope.

Ulf said: "We've decided to avoid the plateau. Kazak says it would be quicker to cross the mountains to the north-west."

Hamna said: "I cannot advise you, because I've never been that far. But I am told that the land on the other side of the mountains is easy to cross. There has been much rainfall in the past ten years."

Now they had reached the shores of the lake and were travelling due west. They were more heavily laden than when they had left the burrow a week earlier -- Kazak was generous with food supplies -- but their loads felt lighter because they had been provided with panniers, held on the back with straps around the shoulders and waist.

As the sky lightened, Niall glanced back over his shoulder, and saw the spider balloons reflecting the rising sun. There were two of them, high up and moving in a direction that would carry them over the salt lake. He warned the others and they took cover in the undergrowth, under the twisted branches of a thorn tree. It was unlikely that the spiders would have seen them in any case; the light was still poor, and the balloons were at least two hundred feet up. Hamna and Corvig, he observed, did not seem to be in the least troubled or anxious. They produced fruit, bread and meat from their packs and sat eating as cheerfully as if on a picnic excursion.

When the balloons had vanished over the horizon and they were again marching along the shore of the lake, Niall said: "You don't seem worried by the spiders."

Hamna shrugged. "We've learned to live with them."

"But. . ." Niall caught a warning glance from his father and relapsed into silence.

With the dawn, the wind rose and changed direction until it was blowing from the west. As the morning advanced, it became stronger, and acquired a dry, hot taste until it seemed like the breath of a furnace. Finally, it turned into a half-gale, carrying dust and grains of sharp sand that made their eyes smart. Hamna and Corvig looked increasingly depressed as their excursion turned into a test of

endurance. They wrapped their mantles round their heads so that only a small slit remained, and plodded on obstinately. After half an hour of this, Ulf advised them to turn back. At first they refused, feeling it was a matter of honour to accompany the travellers on the first day of their journey. Ulf pointed out that the purpose of companionship was conversation, and that in weather like this, conversation was almost impossible. Hamna allowed himself to be convinced; they embraced, exchanged promises to meet again soon, and separated. Hamna and Corvig turned their backs on the wind with evident relief.

Now Ulf found himself wondering whether it was wise to choose the route over the mountains. It was longer than the route over the plateau, although less arduous. But in this cutting wind, which dried their mouths and chapped their faces, the advantage was neutralised. Leaning into the wind, peering out through the napping slits in their headcloths, they plodded forward at a rate of about five miles an hour. Niall looked longingly at the choppy waters of the salt lake; but he knew that bathing would be impractical. With no river to wash off the salt water, the aftermath would be even more discomfort.

By the time the sun stood directly overhead, both were exhausted. They decided to take advantage of the first clump of trees or bushes to halt for the midday meal. But for the next two miles, there was no sign of even a single tree. Half an hour later, they realised they were at the western end of the lake, heading out into the desert, towards a country of broken foothills and dry wadis.

At this point, Niall saw an object like a large rock a few hundred yards to their right. He tapped his father on the shoulder and pointed. Ulf nodded, and they hurried towards it. Another fifty yards made it clear that this was no rock, but the remains of a building. Most of it was buried in the sand; all that remained were the broken profiles of walls against the sky.

On the western side of the building, the blown sand formed a ramp. They scrambled up it to the lowest point in the ruined wall and found themselves looking down into a sand-filled courtyard. On the far side, a flight of badly eroded steps led up the side of a broken tower. They were looking at a smaller -- and more decrepit -- version of the fortress on the plateau. But it was a shelter from the wind. As they landed on the soft sand inside the walls, they experienced immense relief to be in a haven of stillness.

They were so tired that for the next half hour they sat in the shade, backs against the wall, luxuriating in the pleasure of no longer having to move their limbs. The wind seemed to be howling with frustration as it tried to reach them. As he sat there, his eyes closed, Niall felt his heartbeat slow down to normal, and waves of relaxation carried him into a realm of freedom from all anxiety.

Ulf touched his arm, and he realised he must have fallen asleep. He looked up at the sky to check the position of the sun, and was surprised to see only dark clouds. The wind had risen to a shriek, and although they were still sheltered from it, the sand on the far side of the courtyard was being blown into clouds. The sky became darker; then, suddenly, they were in complete blackness, surrounded by flying grains of sand. The wind was now so powerful that Niall was afraid it would tear down the wall that gave them shelter.

From their panniers they unpacked the covers of spider silk and wrapped themselves inside them. The wind now seemed to be blowing from all directions at once, as if determined to reach them, and sand blew over the broken wall behind them like water surging over a harbour breakwater. Niall thought of Hamna and Corvig, and hoped they had reached the shelter before the storm began. It seemed to him providential that they had discovered this ruined fort at exactly the right time. If necessary, they could remain here all night.

Gradually, the wind died down. The sky cleared, and the returning light was like day breaking. Then, quite abruptly, the wind died away altogether, and sunlight beat down on them. The sun was still

high above them -- it must have been about two hours into the afternoon. They were both covered in sand up to their necks. On the opposite side of the courtyard, it had piled up against the wall in a ramp. Niall rose unsteadily to his feet, his legs painfully stiff, and stretched. He tried to peer over the wall behind him but it was a few inches too high. With his feet sinking into the soft sand, he walked across the courtyard and scrambled up the sand to the top of the wall.

What he saw made him gasp. A broken city lay below him. Its ruined buildings were all at least twenty feet lower than the wall he was standing on, and they had now been uncovered by the gale. Facing him was a building with tall columns -- not square columns like those in the fortress on the plateau, but slim cylindrical columns, some of them still supporting fragments of lintels and walls. And in the midst of the empty space in the centre of these columns, there was an object that glittered dazzlingly in the sunlight. Niall shouted: "Father, come and look."

A moment later, Ulf joined him. "Ah yes, I should have known," he said. "This is the city that was ruled by Kazak's father Beyrak."

"You mean they lived above ground?"

"Until the spiders drove them out."

"And was this place built by Beyrak?"

"No. It's been here for as long as anyone can remember. They say it was built by some ancient people called the Latina."

"And what do you think that is?" Niall pointed to the glittering object.

Ulf shrugged. "I don't know. Whatever it is, it's made of metal."

It took them ten minutes to find a way down to the sand below, scrambling over the uneven walls. From outside, they could see that the fortress was a square building of carved blocks, the walls partly covered by cement. There were tall, narrow windows, and the door that faced the city was also tall and narrow, with strange unknown symbols carved into the wall above; this door was completely blocked with fallen masonry and sand. Leading from this doorway towards the ruined city was a double row of columns, most of them merely stumps, while broken fragments of column lay on the road. The tops of some were carved with imitation leaves and vines.

Most of the houses were little more than broken walls, although a few had the remains of upper storeys; they were built of a mixture of baked mud and brick. The rooms seemed very tiny, some no more than a few feet square.

While Ulf explored the ruined houses, Niall wandered in the building with the columns, which lay at the end of the causeway. Underfoot were slabs of stone set in some kind of cement. Between the columns were a number of immense rectangular boxes, carved out of stone. When Niall concentrated, and then allowed himself to relax, he received a strong impression that these boxes were somehow associated with the dead.

The causeway ended with a flight of steps, each one twelve feet wide, leading up to the remains of a gateway. Of the temple to which this gateway had once afforded admittance, there was nothing but a great circle of columns, each one standing on a six-foot cube of granite and most surmounted by lintels. Niall was astonished to see that the pavement underfoot was made of small squares of coloured stone,

forming pictures of birds and animals. And in the centre of this mosaic pavement stood the glittering object that had so intrigued him. As he approached it, he was amazed to realise that he could see his own reflection in the curved metal surface. But it was frighteningly distorted, and changed as he came closer. The thing looked a little like a huge beetle supported on metal legs, with glass eyes around the front of its head. But it was obvious to Niall that these straight legs, braced apart at an angle, would be useless for walking.

Niall tried to grasp something of its purpose by relaxing his mind and attempting to absorb impressions; but such faint impressions as he received were so confusing that they meant nothing; it was like trying to read the unknown symbols above the door of the fort. Whoever had made this glittering monster, with its mirror-like surface, was quite unlike the men he knew. Yet there was something man-like about this structure; only a human being could have made it. But for what purpose? Could this metal insect have been made to carry men across the desert on its segmented legs?

In the curved side, just below and behind the "eyes", there was a structure that was unmistakably a door. Niall knew this from an instinct derived from racial memory, without ever having seen a real door. He touched it; the metal was hot from the sun, yet not so hot as he might have expected. On one side of this door there was a curved metal handle. Niall grasped it, pushed it, pulled it, twisted it, even banged it with the heel of his hand. This, he knew instinctively, was the key to entering this bizarre insect. But the door behind did not even vibrate. Then, as he grabbed the handle impatiently, something yielded to his fingers, and he staggered as the door slid open. He jumped back in alarm; the door had behaved exactly as if an invisible man had pulled it open. But there was no sign of anyone inside. Cautiously, Niall peered through the doorway, then climbed in. It was only then that he realised that the "eyes" of this insect were made of some transparent substance, like white sand when it was fused by a hot fire, and that they admitted the daylight.

He was in a small "room" in which there was space for very little but the leather-covered seats. Everything else in this room struck him as magical yet totally confusing. There was nothing in his experience with which he could compare the control panel, with its gauges and dials, or the steering columns in front of one of the seats. All that he knew was that this metal insect had been created with a precision and delicacy that staggered his imagination. Having no concepts that would enable him to interpret his impressions Niall found himself overwhelmed by a feeling of awe which convinced him that this incomprehensible device had been created for purposes of religious worship.

He sat down cautiously on the sunwarmed seat, and delicately prodded the control panel with his finger. Nothing yielded; it defied his curiosity like a blank wall. But underneath the panel there was an open compartment containing a number of objects, which he examined one by one. When he pressed the handle of an oilcan, the oil squirted out into his face and made him jump; he tasted it with his tongue, found it unpleasant, and wiped his face with his hand. Wrenches, screwdrivers and box spanners all failed to yield up their secrets. He had never felt so completely bewildered and baffled. One short, cylindrical piece of metal, about half an inch in diameter and a foot long, intrigued him because of its weight; it was heavier than solid granite. He decided instantly that, no matter what happened, this was now his own property; neither father nor brother -- not even King Kazak himself -- could persuade him to part with it. He smacked it into the palm of his other hand and reflected with satisfaction that it would kill an ant at one blow, and stun the most heavily-armoured beetle. With this in his hand, he would not be afraid even of a crater insect.

He examined it more closely. The ends were made up of concentric circles, and close to one end, on the curved surface, there was a finely etched circle about half an inch in diameter. He put the cylinder between his teeth and tried biting it. To his astonishment it proceeded to elongate itself, stretching itself out of his mouth like a telescopic cigar. The other end struck a button on the control panel; instantly,

there was a strange high pitched hum and the seat began to vibrate beneath him. With one single bound, he was out of the doorway and on solid ground, looking with horror at the machine that was now throbbing with life.

His father heard the noise and came running towards him. Niall realised that he had left his newly found weapon behind; his fear of the noise was overruled by his determination not to lose it, and he reached in and grabbed the telescopic rod, which was now about five feet long.

Ulf said: "What happened?"

"I don't know." A green light flashed on the control panel, then the humming noise stopped.

They walked around the device, tried to rock it, walked underneath it, and finally decided that it was not worth any further effort. When Ulf asked to see the telescopic rod, Niall handed it to him with reluctance. Ulf examined it carefully, swished it through the air, and then, to Niall's relief, handed it back.

As Niall took it from him, grasping it by the broad end, there was a click and the rod contracted, and once more became a short, heavy cylinder.

Studying it closely, Niall realised that the secret lay in the finely etched circle on the curved surface. When he pressed this, the metal yielded slightly, and the cylinder expanded into a rod with a pointed tip. As he held it in his hand, balancing it gently and trying to fathom its purpose, he observed a curious tingling sensation in his fingers. If he held both ends of the rod, stretching out his arms to their full extent, it became stronger.

He pressed the circle again; there was a click, and the rod contracted again into a cylinder. The mechanism baffled him; he spent five minutes, making it expand and contract, and finally decided it was beyond his comprehension. Yet the tingling sensation he experienced when it was fully extended was somehow oddly familiar.

Time was passing; it was now the middle of the afternoon, and they had to think of moving. Back at the fort, they scrambled up the sloping ramp of sand, and Ulf jumped down into the courtyard and handed up their panniers. It was while Niall was reaching down for the second pannier that the first one unbalanced and rolled down the slope. Niall made no attempt to stop it; its closed flap would prevent the contents from escaping. But as he helped Ulf back up on to the wall, he seemed to detect some movement at the foot of the slope. He stared hard and decided that the pannier must have slid under its own weight. Slowly, he made his way down the ramp, staring intently at the pannier; once more it seemed to him that he detected some slight movement. Cautiously, Niall reached out and grabbed the strap. As he took the pannier's weight, the sand underneath seemed to crumble. Then, to Niall's incredulous horror, a hairy, segmented foreleg broke through the surface. Another one followed. A moment later he was looking into the eyes of a big spider, as it tried to scramble from the sand that entombed it. His reaction was immediate and instinctive; he raised the telescopic rod and drove it with all his force into the hairy, strangely expressionless face. The spider hissed with pain, and Niall recoiled as he experienced the almost physical force of its will, striking out at him like a poisoned sting. He knew with total certainty that if the spider pulled itself clear of the sand, it would be upon him with a single bound, holding him pinioned with its forelegs as it sank its fangs into his flesh. He pulled the rod free, and struck again and again -- into the mouth, the eyes, the soft body behind the head. The will-power of the creature seemed to hold him at bay like an arm; his own will, nerved by terror, resisted it. Then, suddenly, its resistance ceased; he was aware that its awareness was dissolving into death.

His father was standing above them, looking down in horror. Then, when he saw that the spider

was motionless, he circled round it and stood beside Niall.

The spider's body was halfway out of the sand, and they could see that it was bigger than the grey spiders they had encountered in the fortress on the plateau. This one was about the size of the trapdoor spider on which the pepsis wasp had laid its egg. The double-segmented fangs, with a channel for poison, showed that it belonged to the tarantula species. But while the tarantula's hairy body was brown, sometimes with patches of yellow, this spider was jet black. Instead of the double row of eyes in the front of the head, this had a single row that seemed to extend in a continuous band around the head.

The same thought struck them both together. This was not some primitive desert spider that lived in the empty rooms of the fort; it was a death spider.

Then Niall remembered the two spider balloons that had drifted overhead before the wind changed direction. He used his telescopic rod as a lever to force the black body out of the sand. Underneath it, he could see the silk of the balloon.

Ulf looked nervously over his shoulder.

"The other one must be somewhere round here. We'd better go."

"What about the spider? If the other one finds it, they'll know it's been killed." Suddenly, he remembered the story of the execution of the rebel humans who had killed a death spider -- the slow, cruel torment lasting many days -- and shivered.

"Yes. We'll bury it."

It took only a few minutes to cover the spider with sand, and to keep this in place with a number of flat stones. As they walked away, Niall looked back; from ten yards distance nothing betrayed the spot.

Niall walked to the edge of the lake and washed his telescopic spear in the salt water, cleaning off the blood and the white, gluey substance with a handful of grass. After that, he made it contract and stowed it in the bottom of the pannier. They hurried on towards the distant mountains, suddenly oppressed by a sense of danger, as if unknown eyes were scanning the landscape in search of them.

Kazak's advice proved sound. On the far side of the mountains, rainfall had transformed a wilderness into a land of moderate abundance. The landscape was not unlike that in the vicinity of the burrow. So although the detour cost them an extra day's travel, it was nevertheless far less arduous than the journey across the plateau. It was more than ten years since Ulf had been in this region, and he remembered it as a rocky desert. Now some climatic freak was transforming it into a habitable area. This also meant there was more danger from tiger beetles, scorpions and other night predators. So in spite of the heat, they travelled by day and spent the night in improvised shelters.

On the morning of the third day, Niall woke up in a shelter built of rocks and thorn bushes and smelt an odour that was strange to him. It was not unlike the smell of caterpillar hide when set to dry in the sun. The wind was blowing from the north-west. When he asked his father about it, Ulf shrugged and said: "It's the smell of the delta." It was the odour of decaying vegetation, mixed with a sweeter, slightly nauseating smell. Niall observed that Ulf seemed depressed until the wind changed.

On the morning of the fourth day, Ulf met with an accident that could have been serious. While they were sheltering under a tree in the heat of the day, they both noticed a movement in some bushes

about fifty yards away. A large tailless rodent was standing on its hind legs, trying to reach some edible berries. Because Ulf and Niall were resting, it had not noticed their presence. Ulf seized his spear and moved carefully out of its range of vision, then began to move cautiously towards it, taking advantage of the shelter of creosote bushes. Niall quietly took his telescopic spear from the pannier and pressed the button to make it expand. At that moment, he heard a shout of pain, and the rodent took fright and vanished.

Ulf was on one knee, and his right foot and the lower part of the leg seemed to be in a hole. For a moment, Niall assumed he had simply stumbled into a crack in the dry ground. Then Ulf dragged the foot out, and Niall saw that a dark, hairy creature, not unlike a caterpillar, was clinging on to it. Without hesitation, he rushed forward and drove the end of the spear through the creature's body. Even that failed to make it let go. A convulsive contraction of its body almost dragged Ulf's leg back into the hole. Then Ulf was free, although he was no longer wearing his sandal, and the blood ran from his ankle.

Niall drove his spear down the hole until the creature stopped moving. "What was it?"

Ulf was sitting down, examining his foot. "A lion beetle larva. They're like trapdoor spiders -- they hide in a hole. . ."

It took an hour to dress the cuts -- a number of deep parallel scratches, obviously made by sharp teeth or mandibles. Ulf was carrying an ointment made of the root of the devil plant, and he smeared this on strips of cloth and bandaged the ankle and foot. It seemed a pity to make such use of the cloth -- a present from Sefna for Siri -- but it was a necessity. With spare sandals, presented to him by Hamna, on his feet, he limped forward vigorously for the rest of the day.

By evening, they were in country they recognised, about twenty miles from the burrow. Again they slept in an improvised shelter of rocks and bushes. But in the morning, Ulf's foot was badly swollen and beginning to turn blue. Niall took his pannier and marched awkwardly with one on either shoulder, while Ulf used a crutch made of a branch of a tree. Both were aware that it was now a matter of urgent necessity to reach the burrow before nightfall; by the following day, Ulf's foot would probably be too poisoned to walk. So they staggered on, covering less than ten miles during the heat of the day. Then they paused in the shadow of a rock, and ate and drank; Ulf slept a little. The foot was now so swollen that he could not rest his weight on it; the crutch had to take the full weight of his right side as they moved forward a dozen yards at a time, halting for frequent rests. Then, as the sun dipped towards the horizon, Ulf seemed to call reserves of strength from somewhere and began to swing forward at a steady pace. The great red rocks became visible on their right, then the cactus grove. They were now so exhausted that they would have been an easy prey for any scorpion, tiger beetle or trapdoor spider. Niall clutched his telescopic spear, using it as a staff, and staggered unevenly as the panniers swung on his back.

Suddenly Veig and Siris were running towards them across the sand, with Runa trotting behind. Niall was relieved of his packs and felt at once absurdly light, as if about to float off the ground. Siris put her arm round her husband's waist and supported him across the last fifty yards to the burrow. As he stood waiting for them to go in first, Niall looked out across the desert at the distant plateau and felt a kind of incredulity at the thought that he had been so far away from home. Even the thought of Merlew seemed slightly unreal.

There was only one cause for sadness in the relief of homecoming. Jomar was too feeble even to rise from his bed to meet them. In the light of the oil lamps -- they lit all six as a celebration -- it was obvious that he was dying. In the two weeks since they had seen him, his face had become very thin, and his eyes were sunken. Siris told them that he had only just recovered from a fever. But the real fever was weariness, a sense that he had seen all there was to see, and that life held no more interest for him. Now

Thorg and Hrolf and Ingeld were gone, and he was unable to walk more than a few yards beyond the entrance to the burrow, Jomar had lost his delight in being alive. He listened with apparent interest to the description of Kazak's underground city, but when he asked "Are there still rats among the ruins?" it was obvious that he had not taken it in.

Niall could understand his apathy. After Kazak's palace, life at home seemed unbearably dull. Although he had been in Dira for only two days, it had taught him the meaning of living in a community, of consorting with others of his own age and exchanging ideas and feelings. In retrospect he idealised it; everything about Dira now seemed charming and exciting. He envied Ingeld for being able to live there for the rest of her days. He often thought fondly about Dona, and was saddened by the thought that he had left without saying goodbye -- she had been asleep at the time. Only the recollection of Merlew made him wince.

The burrow seemed strangely empty without Thorg and Hrolf and Ingeld, and the realisation that Jomar was dying brought an oppressive feeling of loss, a sense that something was coming to an end. They had moved the old man into an inner chamber of the burrow, so that he could sleep undisturbed. Every morning, they helped him out into the daylight; there he sat until the sun became too hot, dozing and listening to the hum of flies. Sometimes, if there was no wind, they moved him into the shade of the euphorbia; Niall sat on guard, his spear close at hand in case of attack by some predator. He noticed that when the old man asked to be taken back inside, his hands were as cold as if they had only just emerged into the daylight.

During these final weeks, Mara played an important part in keeping the old man's mind alert. She was now exactly a year old and had changed greatly. The juice of the ortis plant had transformed her from a nervous, fretful baby into a lively child who was interested in everything. She spent a great deal of time sitting on her grandfather's knee and asking questions; if he failed to answer she drummed on his chest and said: "Tell me, tell me." Jomar told her stories about his childhood, and legends of the great hunters of the past. And Niall sat in the corner, hands clasped round his knees, and tried to memorise everything the old man said. He had always loved stories; but since the trip to Dira, he had a consuming desire to know about the past.

One day, when Mara had fallen asleep on Jomar's knee, Niall asked him about the ruined city. Jomar had been born a few miles away, in the foothills, and had played there during his childhood. Birds and rodents lived there, and Jomar had often set traps for them.

Niall asked him about the building with the tall columns; Jomar said it had once been a temple to the gods. But when Niall asked about the strange boxes carved out of solid stone, Jomar confessed that he had never seen them. And his description made it clear that the city had then been covered in sand to a depth of about ten feet. This explained why he had never seen the stone boxes, or the shining metallic monster in the midst of the temple.

Niall asked: "How old were you when the spiders carried you off to their city?"

The old man was silent; Niall assumed he was unwilling to speak of it. But after a long pause, Jomar said: "It must have been -- when I was eighteen summers. Eighteen or thereabouts. . . It was a black day for the men of Dira."

"What happened?"

"They came on us in the dawn. There must have been hundreds of them. I knew they were there as soon as I woke up."

"How?"

"I couldn't move in my bed. I tried to sit up, but it was as if I had a big rock on my chest. Then I tried to move my arms. They'd gone dead, as if I'd been lying on them."

"But what had happened?"

"They'd pinned us down. We were all the same."

"But how?"

"With will-power."

Niall felt the roots of his hair stirring. He was thinking of Kazak's city. "What happened then?"

"Nothing until they found us."

"Found you?" Niall was bewildered. "Didn't they know where you were?"

"Not exactly. They knew we were in there somewhere."

"But if they pinned you down, surely they must have known where you were?"

"No. They kept us pinned down until they found us."

"What happened then?"

Jomar moved Mara from his knee, and carefully laid her on the bed; it was as if he did not want to be in contact with her while he remembered.

"They killed all those who resisted. They killed my father, and our chief Hallat."

"Did they try to attack the spiders?"

"Not physically. But they tried to fight back with their wills. The spiders didn't like that. Hallat was a strong-willed man."

Jomar described how the spiders had kept them prisoners in the caves all through that day. The spiders disliked the heat; they preferred to travel by night. During the course of the day, the spiders ate the men they had killed. Unlike human jaws, the chelicerae of the death spiders move sideways. Jomar could not bear to watch as his father was eaten by four spiders; he turned his eyes away. But he could still hear the sound of tearing flesh.

With time to spare, the spiders preferred to soften their prey by injections of venom, and eat when it was a few days old. But there was no time now; they wanted to return to the spider city. That evening, as the sun set, they began the long journey back. Some of them took advantage of the change in the direction of the wind to travel by balloon; these carried the children with them. But adult humans were too heavy for the balloons; they had to march. It was a long journey of many weeks, for they had to make a great detour round the intervening sea. And the spiders were in no hurry; they were determined to bring back all their captives alive.

But why, Niall wanted to know, were the spiders so keen to preserve their prisoners? He was anxious to discover some less terrifying aspect of the spiders, something that would enable him to feel less afraid. But Jomar's answer brought him no comfort.

"They wanted them for breeding -- especially the women." Jomar's breathing was hoarse; the effort of talking had exhausted him. "The men weren't so important. One man could father a lot of children. But they never had enough women."

Mara began making whimpering noises in her sleep. Niall realised immediately that it was his fault; his fear and loathing had communicated itself to her. Jomar reached out and laid his hand on her forehead; she sighed and became quiet. Jomar said sadly: "No, never enough women."

"How did you escape, grandfather?"

The old man smiled. It took him several moments to summon the energy to speak. "In a balloon. We took balloons." Niall waited. Jomar said finally: "The other two worked for the bombardier beetles. It was their idea. They were intelligent -- not like the men in the spider city. The spiders killed all the clever ones. They wanted us fat and stupid. But the beetles didn't care. All they wanted was explosions. . ."

"Explosions?"

"They liked big bangs -- the bigger the better. That's why they wanted human beings -- explosives experts. These two decided to escape -- Jebil and Theag. They found out how to make a gas to fill the balloons -- hydrogen it was called. They asked me to help. That was the day I found out the spiders meant to kill me. So I had nothing to lose. I showed them where the women made the balloons. . ."

"Women made them?"

"Yes. Under the supervision of the spiders. They had a storehouse with hundreds of balloons. We just walked in and helped ourselves. The guards didn't try to stop us. They thought we'd been ordered to fetch the balloons. Why should they think otherwise? . . . No human being had ever tried to escape that way. They simply let us walk out." He laughed, but even his laugh revealed his exhaustion. Five minutes went past, and Niall assumed the old man was asleep. Then Jomar began to speak again. "The other two died. One of them came down in the sea, the other in the delta. Their balloons must have been faulty. But mine carried me to the mountains near the lake. I landed fifty miles from where I'd been captured."

"Did they come looking for you?"

The old man laughed drily. "They've been looking for me ever since."

Mara began to whimper again. Jomar said: "Hush", and again laid his hand on her head. A few minutes later, his own regular breathing revealed he was asleep.

Two days later, Jomar died. Runa came in early, while they were all asleep, and said: "Grandfather won't talk." And suddenly, they all knew he was dead; it was the kind of instantaneous certainty they all took for granted. Jomar was lying face down on the floor, his hands spread out about his head, as if he had fallen from a great height. But when they turned him over his face was peaceful. It

was clear that his last moments had not been haunted by fear of the spiders.

Ulf, Veig and Niall spent all that day digging his grave, at the foot of the euphorbia; they dug deep to try to preserve the body from insects. But when Niall looked at the grave a few days later, it was full of the characteristic holes of the scarab beetle. In the desert, food was seldom allowed to waste.

On the evening of Jomar's death, Siris tried to make contact with her sister in Dira. She used the inner room -- the room where Jomar had died -- and the rest of them sat in the next room in total silence, listening to her breathing and waiting for that change of rhythm that would indicate success. They sat there for perhaps half an hour; then she sighed and rejoined them. During the meal that followed, she was obviously worried.

"What is the point of fretting?" Ulf said finally. "In Kazak's city, only the antherds know when it is sundown. The rest of them lose all sense of time."

Siris nodded, but said nothing.

She tried again at dawn the next day, hoping to awaken Sefna from her sleep. Again, there was no result. Listening to her breathing, Niall understood what she must be feeling. The first stage of an attempted contact was to clearly picture the other person, and to send out thought-waves. It was easiest if both communicators made the attempt at the same time. But this was not essential; if the two shared a certain basic sympathy, then the sender could attract the attention of the other person, who would suddenly experience a nagging feeling of anxiety. Then, as contact was established, both parties would experience a strong sense of the other's presence, exactly as in a normal conversation.

If the sender failed to make contact, then a grey and unresponding space developed, with its own peculiar variety of silence -- a silence often broken by the echoes of other voices. This usually indicated that the contactee was preoccupied, perhaps involved in some activity. Yet even after the sender had abandoned the attempt to make contact, the other person might suddenly become aware that the attempt had been made. This often happened between the two sisters, and on such occasions each would remain receptive for as long as possible in case the other "called back".

This is why Siris was worried. Staring into that grey, empty space, with its hint of other voices, she had had a foreboding that something was wrong. And as the days passed without contact, the foreboding became a certainty.

Niall himself was oppressed by a presentiment of evil. Neither he nor Ulf had spoken about the killing of the death spider, but it had never been far from their thoughts. They remembered Jomar's story of the ritual execution of the small band of desert dwellers who had killed a death spider. And they also remembered that, on the day of the sandstorm, two spider balloons had passed overhead. From the moment Niall had looked into the eyes of the death spider until the moment he watched the life drain out of its jointed limbs, only a short time had elapsed -- perhaps half a minute. But that was time enough for the dying animal to send out its message of alarm to its companion.

Kazak believed his city to be impregnable. Niall knew this was wishful thinking. He had experienced the power of the spider's will as it tried to paralyse him into immobility. Jomar's story of his own capture told how that power could be used.

A week after the death of Jomar, Niall's foreboding was confirmed. That was the morning when, drinking the dew out of the waru plant, he became aware of the spider balloon bearing down on him. And in the hours that followed, as the armadas of balloons drifted overhead and the fear-probes invaded

the burrow, he tried not to allow himself to reflect that he was responsible for this misfortune. Instead, he comforted himself with the thought that, since the spiders were mounting this large-scale search, they could have no clear idea where their quarry was hiding.

Then, as he was falling asleep that night, a sudden thought shocked him into wakefulness. If Ingeld had been captured by the spiders, she could tell them precisely where to look. . .

Ulf had been struck by the same thought. The next day, as they were eating, he said: "We must leave this place and return to our old home at the foot of the plateau."

Siris, whose eyes were dull with lack of sleep, said: "When?"

"Tonight at dusk. It would be stupid to delay. They will keep coming back until they find us."

Niall looked down at his father's foot, which was still swollen. "Do you think you can walk that far?"

"There is no alternative."

"We need the leaves of the gereth plant," Veig said.

The gereth bush grew on the edge of the desert; its leaves had powerful medicinal properties; mixed into a poultice, they could reduce most swellings within hours.

Niall said: "I saw one when we came back from Dira."

"Where?"

"Not far -- perhaps two hours away."

"I will come with you."

Ulf shook his head. "We shall need you here, Veig. There is much to be done if we intend to leave tonight. Niall is old enough to go alone."

So Niall set out as soon as he had finished eating. He carried a woven basket for the leaves, a small gourd of water, and his metal spear. This, fully extended, served as a staff. The sensation of its weight in his right hand gave him a feeling of confidence. With this, he could defend himself against most predators.

There were still at least five hours before midday. If he encountered no problems, he should be home before then.

Niall maintained constant vigilance throughout the ten-mile walk, surveying the ground for the convex hump that indicated the lair of the trapdoor spider, and the sky for spider balloons. He also made a wide detour around large rocks, knowing that scorpions liked to make their homes underneath them. Periodically he concentrated his mind, checking for subconscious warnings of danger. When he was fully alert, a sixth sense would warn him of most dangers in advance. But he encountered nothing more menacing than a big camel spider, which came close enough to see whether he was a rodent or a lizard, decided he was neither, and went on its way. Niall had never understood why solifugids were uninterested in human beings.

A mile beyond the clump of trees where they had once encountered the saga insect, Niall found the gereth bush he had noticed earlier. It stood about four feet high, and its broad, shiny leaves had small red shoots at the upper end, shoots that would turn into pointed flowers. To Niall's surprise, the whole bush was now covered in a silken web, fastened round it like a tent. Peering inside, through the close-woven mesh, he saw dozens of baby spiders, each no more than an inch in diameter. When he touched the web gently with the point of his spear, the mother spider came out of concealment to see what was happening. She was light brown in colour and had a big, fat body and very long forelegs, covered with small bristles that looked like thorns. She was about a foot in diameter, and had tiny black eyes that seemed to look at Niall with a kind of intelligence.

Niall had never encountered the tent spider before, and had no idea whether they were poisonous. In order to get at the leaves, he would have to cut the web with his knife. A mother spider defending her young might well decide to attack.

They contemplated each other for several minutes; then the tent spider lost interest and retreated behind one of the broad leaves. Niall sat down where he could see the tip of the forelegs protruding and emptied his mind. It took him only a few seconds to clear his mind of thought and induce the sense of timelessness that was so important to this type of contact. When this happened, he felt for a moment as if he was looking down on the spider from a great height. Then, suddenly, he had become the spider.

This surprised him. When he had attempted to attune his mind to that of the grey desert spiders, he had been aware of them as separate identities. It was as if they had some kind of instinctive defence against his probing. The tent spider seemed to lack such defence. It was as if she recognised no difference between his mind and her own. His consciousness blended naturally with hers. With the grey spiders, there was no blending; they were like oil and water. And with the death spider, there had been active rejection, an attempt to penetrate *his* mind.

He found this fascinating. It meant that his relation to the tent spider was like the relation of the death spider to himself.

There was a whining sound as a dew fly plunged past his head and into the web. It was attracted by the scent of the red flowers and failed to see the thin, clear strands of web. Instantly, the tent spider was in motion, and Niall became aware that she was hungry. The last few insects that had blundered into her web had escaped, being too large and powerful. But the dew fly, shiny and black, was no more than three inches long, and its feet were entangled in the sticky droplets. In two bounds, the tent spider had approached the fly from the other side of the web and struck with her fangs. The venom was a quick acting nerve poison, and within seconds the fly had begun to struggle in slow motion. With her long forelegs, the tent spider reached through her web and hauled him inside. By this time, she had totally forgotten the intruder watching her; Niall was too big for her to take in. Her mandibles crunched into the soft underbelly of the dew fly, which was still alive but unable to react.

For Niall, it was a disgusting sensation -- to be inside the spider's mind as she wolfed down the living flesh. It made him feel sick. Yet he continued to be fascinated by the clarity of the sensations. He was aware of the spider's visual field, which extended all the way round her head, and of her satisfaction as she filled her stomach with the first meal in a day. He had to look at his own arms to convince himself that they were not long legs covered with spiky bristles. He even felt a protective warmth for the baby spiders which clambered around among the leaves and looked for a hole in the web through which they could investigate the blinding sunlit world outside.

He was also aware of a certain instinctive conflict that was taking place inside the spider. She

was hungry, and while she was protecting her young, she was unable to hunt for food. (Niall was aware that this primitive spider hunted her prey, lying in wait for passing insects rather than using a web to trap them.) She was also a mother, and knew her children were hungry; she ought to offer them the remains of her feast. But her own hunger overruled the desire to feed her children. She had no real choice; she was wholly ruled by instinct.

Niall deliberately controlled her will, to make her stop eating. Then he made her drop the remains of the dew fly down to her children, who instantly swarmed over it, biting one another in their anxiety to get at the flesh. And, as he felt the mother's unappeased hunger, Niall felt a pang of regret for the joke he had played on her.

It was the strangest -- and in some ways the most exciting -- sensation he had ever known: to be in control of the will of another creature. He felt a strong affection for this spider who had, in a sense, become a part of himself. At the same time he recognised that this was akin to the emotion he had experienced towards Merlew -- this desire to mingle his mind with hers and take possession of her will. This, he realised, was why he had found it so exciting when she had kissed him, and when she had nibbled his ear: it had seemed to be an admission that she was willing to subjugate her will to his. *That* was why he was so shocked and angry to hear himself described as "that skinny boy". He felt that she had set out to cheat him, merely for the pleasure of feeling that his will was subjugated to hers. . .

His emotions were troubling the tent spider, which had never experienced jealousy, and found it a bewildering and frightening sensation. In spite of her venom and her predilection for eating living creatures, she was fundamentally innocent and vulnerable. This was perhaps the strangest realisation of all. He was experiencing a sensation like love for a creature that lived by eating live insects.

Niall carefully parted the strands of the web at the top of the bush and began to gather the leaves. The smallest and thickest made the best medicinal poultices. He was so preoccupied with the sensations of the spider, wondering what was happening to her web, that he failed to notice the shadow that floated past a few feet away. His attention was attracted by the next one, which was like the shadow of a small, swiftly moving cloud. But the sky was cloudless and there was only a light breeze. That was why the spider balloons were drifting past so slowly, and so close to the ground.

As on the previous day, his total absorption allowed him to suppress the fear-reaction before it began. The balloons were so low that it seemed inevitable that he would be seen within moments, and he accepted this with the calm of a man who sees there is no escape. He was standing in the open, with no concealment. He made no movement, looking down on the bush, and allowing his consciousness to merge with that of the spider. They were aware of his presence; of that he was certain. They were aware of the life-field of every living thing on the ground below them. Five minutes passed, and he raised his eyes. The last of the balloons was already floating away from him; he could see clearly the outline of the spider in the semi-transparent bag underneath, its legs folded into a knot.

Now the danger was past, he had to make an effort to prevent a delayed reaction of fear and relief. He sat down on the ground and stared after them. In the distance, to the north-west, he could see the pinnacles of red rock on the horizon. Directly south of these lay the burrow. The spiders were drifting directly towards it. And Niall had no possible doubt that this was their objective.

He was flooded with anguish, a sense of being totally overwhelmed by events. He was, after all, little more than a child; his whole life had been spent under the protection of his family. Now, quite suddenly, it seemed that his world had been shattered. The first reaction was a reversion to childhood, a sense of helplessness that threatened to drown him in terror and self-pity. Then something of his new-found manhood reasserted itself. At the same time, he realised it might still be possible to warn his

family. Crossing his legs and bowing his head, he sent out an urgent thought message to his mother. He continued to do this for several minutes, until his concentration wavered and he felt mentally exhausted. He tried again, trying to force his mind to be calm, but his sense of urgency made this impossible. He was totally unable to relax into the receptive state of timelessness in which he could establish contact.

It was a long time before he was able to fight off the feeling of weakness induced by dejection. But the increasing heat made him aware that it would be pointless to sit there any longer. Once he began to walk back in the direction of the burrow, he felt better. He also experienced a certain grim pride in the fact that he was indifferent to the heat. He noted the weariness of his body, the sweat that ran down his sides, with a sense of detachment, as if experiencing someone else's discomfort.

When he came within sight of the organ-pipe cacti, he felt a glow of hope; everything looked normal enough. But while still a hundred yards from the burrow, he knew something was wrong. The large stone and the thorny bush that normally concealed the entrance had been dragged aside; the bush lay ten feet away. Now, suddenly, his misery became so acute that it seemed to burst his chest; it was as sharp as physical pain. He shouted as he ran the last few yards, and his own voice shocked him into a sense of reality.

The body of a man lay upward across the threshold. He could tell it was a man because the naked breast was exposed. For a moment he experienced relief, for the black, swollen face was that of a stranger. Then he recognised the bracelet on the upper arm and knew he was looking at the body of his father. The combination of spider poison and heat had already started the process of decay.

Three oil lamps were still burning. On their last day in the burrow, they had evidently decided that they could afford the extravagance. Baskets containing food and water had been neatly arranged against the wall, and the roll of cloth Niall had brought back from Dira was tied in a bundle. There was no sign of a struggle. The spears stood in their usual place near the door, and a bowl of ant porridge lay, half eaten, on Runa's bed. If it had not been for the decaying corpse across the threshold, Niall could have believed that the family had gone outside for a moment.

He took an oil lamp and searched the rest of the burrow. There was no one there; even the ants had gone.

He had ceased to feel any emotion. The weight of reality seemed to crush his feelings. Even the corpse of his father seemed too real to arouse a response.

He sat on his bed, staring blankly into space, trying to adjust to this new and empty reality. Then his eyes fell on the bowl of porridge, reminding him that Runa and Mara were probably still alive. This stirred him out of his apathy. He went outside and examined the ground. It was dry and hard, but to his trained eye, the few marks on its dusty surface left no doubt of the direction the spiders had taken. They were headed north-west, towards the sea.

Back in the burrow, he nerved himself to move the corpse, pulling it by its clothing onto his father's bed. The face was now so bloated that it looked like a monstrous statue, the teeth showing yellow between the black lips. Niall kept his eyes averted from it. He covered Ulf's body with the cloth from Dira -- out of a desire not to look at it rather than any feeling of respect. Then he packed food from the baskets into one of the panniers. He also packed his telescopic spear.

At this point he had no definite plan of action -- only a desire to escape his sense of inner desolation by forcing himself to move. If his father's body had not been there, filling the air with an increasingly nauseating stench of decay, he might have stayed in the burrow indefinitely.

As he left, he dragged the stone across the doorway, then spent half an hour sealing it with smaller rocks. The sun was now directly overhead, but he was indifferent to the heat. His intention was to make sure that the burrow should remain impenetrable to insects. The place that had been their home for the past ten years was now Ulf's tomb. He wanted his father to sleep undisturbed until his children could return and give him a warrior's burial.

About the Author

Colin Wilson is one of the most prolific, versatile and popular writers at work today. He was born in Leicester in 1931, and left school at sixteen. After he had spent years working in a wool warehouse, a laboratory, a plastics factory and a coffee bar, his first book *The Outsider* was published in 1956. It received outstanding critical acclaim and was an immediate bestseller.

Since then he has written many books on philosophy, the occult, crime and sexual deviance, plus a host of successful novels which have won him an international reputation. His work has been translated into Spanish, French, Swedish, Dutch, Japanese, German, Italian, Portuguese, Danish, Norwegian, Finnish and Hebrew.

Scan Notes, v3.0: This is actually the first book out of an Omnibus Edition called "The Tower" that includes the first three books of the series - *The Desert*, *The Tower*, and *The Fortress*. To avoid numbering confusing, I am releasing each book separately as I finish it. Proofed carefully. 'British quotes' were changed to "American quotes".