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HIERO'S JOURNEY

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THE UNFORSAKEN HIERO

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HIERO DESTEEEN

Sterling E. Lanier

Synopsis

Per Hiero Desteen was a priest, a telepath—and a highly trained killer. Together with his great riding moose and the young bear who was his friend, he was on an extraordinary mission. For this was five thousand years after the holocaust known as The Death. Now the evil Brotherhood of the Unclean was waging all-out war against the few remnants of normal humanity, determined to wipe out all traces of its emerging civilization. Hiero's task was to bring back a lost secret of the ancients that might save the humans. But his path lay through the very heart of the territory ruled by the Unclean and their hordes of mutated, intelligent, savage beast followers. And the Unclean were waiting for him!

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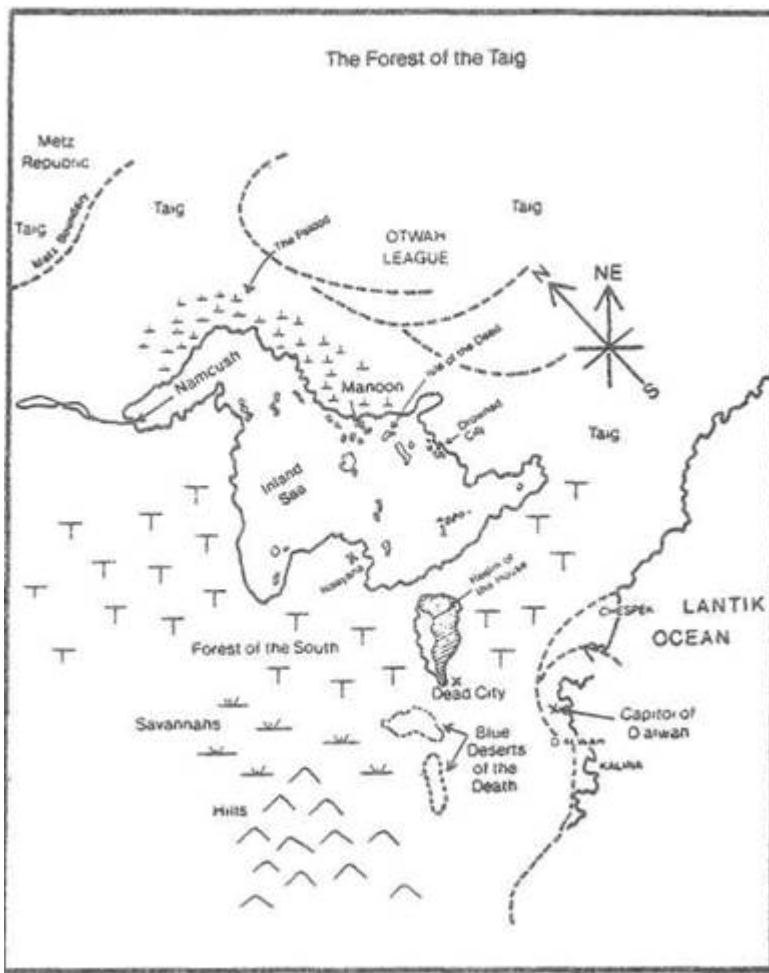
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A Romance of the Future

To Lester and Judy-Lynn del Rey, who did all the *new* work.



1

The Sign of the Fishhook

The Computer Man, thought Hiero. That sounds crisp, efficient, and what's more, important. Also, his negative side added, mainly meaningless as yet.

Under his calloused buttocks, the bull morse, whose name was Klootz, ambled slowly along the dirt track, trying to snatch a mouthful of browse from neighboring trees whenever possible. His protruding blubber lips were as good as a hand for this purpose.

Per Hiero Desteen, Secondary Priest-Exorcist, Primary Rover, and Senior Killman, abandoned his brooding and straightened in the high-cantled saddle. The morse also stopped his leaf-snatching and came alert, rack of forward-pointing, palmate antlers lifting. Although the wide-spread beams were in the velvet and soft now, the great black beast, larger than any long-extinct draft horse, was an even more murderous fighter with his sharp, splayed hooves.

Hiero listened intently and reined Klootz to a halt. A dim uproar was growing increasingly louder ahead, a swell of bawling and aaahing noises, and the ground began to tremble. Hiero knew the sound well and so did the morse. Although it was late August here in the far North, the buffer were already moving south in their autumn migration, as they had for uncounted thousands of years.

Morse and rider tried to peer through the road's border of larch or alder. The deeper gloom of the big

pinetrees and scrub palmetto beyond prevented any sight going further, but the noise was getting steadily louder.

Hiero tried a mind probe on Klootz, to see if he was getting a fix on the herd's position. The greatest danger lay in being trapped in front of a wide-ranging herd, with the concomitant inability to get away to either side. The buffers were not particularly mean, but they weren't especially bright either, and they slowed down for almost nothing except fire.

The morse's mind conveyed uneasiness. He felt that they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Hiero decided not to delay any longer and turned south off the trail, allowing Klootz to pick a way, and hopefully letting them get off at an angle to the oncoming buffer.

Just as they left the last sight of the road, Hiero looked back. A line of great, brown, rounded heads, some of them carrying six-foot, polished, yellow horns, broke through the undergrowth onto the road as he watched. The grunting and bawling was now very loud indeed. An apparently endless supply of buffers followed the huge herd bulls.

Hiero kicked the morse hard and also applied the goad of his mind.

Come on, stupid, he urged. *Find a place where they'll have to split, or we've had it.*

Klootz broke into a shambling trot, which moved the great body along at a surprising rate. Avoiding trees and crashing bushes aside, the huge animal paced along through the forest, looking deceptively slow. Hiero rode easily, watching for overhanging branches, even though the morse was trained to avoid them.

The man's leather boots, deer-hide breeches, and jacket gave him a good deal of protection from the smaller branches which whipped him as they tore along. He wore nothing on his head but a leather skull cap, his copper helmet being kept in one of the saddlebags. He kept one hand raised to guard his face and mentally flogged the morse again. The big beast responded with increased speed and also rising irritation, which Hiero felt as a wave of mental heat.

Sorry, I'll let you do your own job, he sent, and tried to relax. No one was exactly sure just how intelligent a morse really was. Bred from the mutated giant moose many generations before, although well after The Death, they were marvelous draft and riding animals. The Abbeyes protected their herds carefully and sold their prized breeding stock with great reluctance. But there was a stubborn core of independence which no one had been able to breed out, and allied to it, an uncertain but high degree of intelligence.

The Abbey psykes were still testing their morses and would continue to do so.

Hiero swore suddenly and slapped at his forehead. The mosquitoes and black flies were attacking, and the splash of water below indicated Klootz was aiming for a swamp. Behind them, the uproar of the herd was growing muted. The buffer did not like swamps, although quite capable of swimming for miles at need.

Hiero did not like swamps either. He signaled "halt" with his legs and body, and Klootz stopped. The bull broke wind explosively. "Naughty," Hiero said, looking carefully about.

Pools of dark water lay about them. Just ahead, the water broadened into a still pond of considerable size. They had stopped on an island of rock, liberally piled with broken logs, no doubt by the past

season's flood waters. It was very silent here, with the roar and grumble of the buffer only a distant background noise now, behind them and to the east. A small, dark bird ran down a lichened tree trunk and twittered faintly. Dark pines and pale cypress rose directly from the water, cutting off sunlight and giving the place a gloomy aspect. The flies and mosquitoes were bad, their humming attack causing Hiero to pull up the hood of his jacket. The morse stamped and blew out his great lips in a snort.

The ripple on the black surface was what saved them. Hiero was too well trained to abandon all caution, even when slapping bugs, and the oily "V" of something moving just under the surface toward the island from farther out in the open water caught his eye as he looked about.

"Come on up," he shouted, and reined the big beast back on its haunches, so that they were at least ten feet from the edge when the snapper emerged.

There was no question of fighting. Even the bolstered thrower at Hiero's side, and certainly his spear and knife, were almost useless against a full-grown snapper. Nor did Klootz feel any differently, in spite of all his bulk and fighting ability.

The snapper's hideous beaked head was four feet long and three wide. The giant turtle squattered out of the water in one explosive rush, clawed feet scrabbling for a hold on the rock, the high, gray, serrated shell spraying foul water as it came, yellow eyes gleaming. Overall, it must have weighed over three tons, but it moved very fast just the same. From a sixty-five-pound maximum weight before The Death, the snappers had grown heroically, and they made many bodies of water impassable except by an army. Even the Dam People had to take precautions.

Still, fast as it was, it was no match for the frightened morse. The big animal could turn on half his own length and now did so. Even as the snapper's beaked gape appeared over the little islet's peak, the morse and his rider were a hundred feet off and going strong through the shallow marsh, back the way they had come, spraying water in sheets. Stupid as it was, the snapper could see no point in following further, and shut its hooked jaws with a reluctant snap as the galloping figure of the morse disappeared around the pile of windfalls.

As soon as they had reached dry ground, Hiero reined in the morse and both listened again. The roar of the buffer's passage was steadily dying away to the south and east. Since this was the direction he wanted to go anyway, Hiero urged Klootz forward on the track of the migrating herd. Once more both man and beast were relaxed, without losing any watchfulness in the process. In the Year of Our Lord, seven thousand, four hundred, and seventy-six, constant vigilance paid off.

Moving cautiously, since he did not wish to come upon a buffer cow with a calf or an old outcast bull lagging behind the herd, Hiero steered the morse slowly back to the road he had left earlier. There were no buffer in sight, but a haze hung on the windless air, fine dust kicked up by hundreds of hooved feet, and piles of steaming dung lay everywhere. The stable reek of the herd blanked out all other scents, something that made both man and morse uncomfortable, for they relied on their excellent noses, as well as eyes and ears.

Hiero decided, nonetheless, to follow the herd. It was not a large one, he estimated, no more than two thousand head at most, and in its immediate wake lay a considerable amount of safety from the various dangers of the Taig. There were perils too, of course, there were perils everywhere, but a wise man tried to balance the lesser against the greater. Among the lesser were the commensal vermin, which followed a buffer herd, preying on the injured, the aged, and the juveniles. As Hiero urged the morse forward, a pair of big, gray wolves loped across the track ahead of them, snarling as they did. Wolves had not changed much, despite the vast changes around them and the mutated life of the world in general. Certain

creatures and plants seemed to reject spontaneous genetic alteration, and wolves, whose plasticity of gene had enabled thousands of dog breeds to appear in the ancient world, had reverted to type and stayed there. They were cleverer, though, and avoided confrontation with humans if possible. Also, they killed any domestic dog they could find, patiently stalking it if necessary, so that the people of the Taig kept their dogs close at hand and shut them up at night.

Hiero, being an Exorcist and thus a scientist, knew this, of course, and also knew the wolves would give him no trouble if he gave them none. He could "hear" their defiance in his mind and so could his huge mount, but both could also assess the danger involved, which was almost nonexistent in this case.

Reverting to his leaf-snatching amble, the morse followed the track of the herd, which in turn was roughly following the road. Two cartloads wide, this particular dirt road was hardly an important artery of commerce between the East of Kanda and the West, out of which Hiero was now riding. The Metz Republic, which claimed him as a citizen, was a sprawling area of indefinite boundaries, roughly comprising ancient Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta, as well as parts of the old Northwest Territories. There were so few people in comparison to the land area that territorial boundaries were somewhat meaningless in the old sense of the word. They tended to be ethnic or even religious, rather than national.

The Taig, the vast boreal forest of conifers which had spread across the northern world at least a million years before The Death, still dominated the North. It was changed, however, with many species of warm country plants intermingled with the great pines. Some plant species had died, vanished entirely, as had some animals also, but most had survived, and adapted to the warmer climate. Winters were now fairly mild in the West of Kanda, with the temperature seldom ever getting below five degrees centigrade. The polar caps had shrunk and the earth was once again in another deep interglacial period. What had caused the change to be so drastic, man or nature, was a debated point in the Abbey classrooms. The Greenhouse Effect and its results were still preserved in the old records, but too much empiric data was lacking to be certain. Scientists, both Abbey and laymen, however, never stopped searching for more data on the lost ages in an effort to help shape the future. The terror of the ancient past was one thing which had never been lost, despite almost five thousand years. That The Death must never be allowed to come again was the basic reason for all scientific training. On this, except for outlaws and the Unclean, all men were agreed. As a good scientist and Abbey scholar, Hiero continually reflected on the problems of the past, even as now, while seeming to daydream in the saddle.

He made an effective picture as he slowly rode along, and not being without vanity, was aware of it. He was a stocky young man, clean-shaven but for a mustache, with the straight black hair, copper skin, and hooked nose of a good Metz. He was moderately proud of his pure descent, for he could tell off thirty generations of his family without a break. It had come as a profound shock in the Abbey school when the Father Abbot had gently pointed out that he and all other true Metz, including the abbot himself, were descended from the *Metis*, The French Canadian-Indian half-breeds of the remote past, a poverty-stricken minority whose remoteness and isolation from city life had helped save a disproportionate number of them from The Death. Once this had been made clear to him, Hiero and his classmates never again boasted of their birth. The egalitarian rule of the Abbeys, based solely on merit, became a new source of pride instead.

On Hiero's back was strapped his great knife, a thing like a short, massive sword, with a straight, heavy back, a sharp point, a four-teen-inch rounded blade, and only one edge. It was very old, this object from before The Death, and a prize won by Hiero for scholastic excellence. On its blade were incised, in worn letters and numbers, "U.S." and "1917" and "Plumb. Phila.," with a picture of a thing like an onion with leaves attached. Hiero knew it was incredibly ancient and that it had once belonged to men of the United States, which had long ago been a great empire of the South. This was all he or perhaps anyone could

know of the old Marine Corps bolo, made for a long-lost campaign in Central America, forgotten five millennia and more. But it was a good weapon and he loved its weight.

He also carried a short, heavy spear, a weapon with a hickory shaft and ten-inch, leaf-shaped steel blade. A crossbar of steel went through the base of the blade at right angles, creating what any ancient student of weaponry would have recognized at once as a boar spear. The cross guard was designed to prevent any animal (or human) from forcing its way up the spear shaft, even when impaled by the spear's point. This was not an old weapon, but had been made by the Abbey armory for Hiero when he had completed his Man. Tests. At his saddlebow was holstered a third weapon, wooden stock forward. This was a thrower, a muzzle-loading, smooth-bore carbine, whose inch-and-a-half bore fired six-inch-long explosive rockets. The weapon was hideously expensive, the barrel being made of beryllium copper, and its small projectiles had to be hand-loaded by the small, private factory which produced them. It was a graduation present from his father and had cost twenty robes of prime marten fur. When his stock of projectiles was exhausted, the thrower was useless, but he carried fifty of them in his pack; few creatures alive could take a rocket shell and still keep coming. A six-inch, two-edged knife, bone-handled, hung in his belt scabbard.

His clothes were leather, beautifully dressed tan deerskin, very close-fitting, almost as soft as cloth and far more durable. In his leather saddlebags were packed a fur jacket, gloves, and folding snowshoes, as well as food, some small pieces of copper and silver for trading, and his Exorcist's gear. On his feet were knee boots of brown deerskin, with triple-strength heels and soles of hardened, layered leather for walking. The circled cross and sword of the Abbeys gleamed in silver on his breast, a heavy thong supporting the medallion. And on his bronzed, square face were painted the marks of his rank in the Abbey service, a yellow maple leaf on the forehead and, under it, two snakes coiled about a spear shaft, done in green. These marks were very ancient indeed and were always put on first by the head of the Abbey, the Father Superior himself, when the rank was first achieved. Each morning, Hiero renewed them from tiny jars carried in his saddlebags. Throughout the entire North, they were recognized and honored, except by those humans beyond the law and the unnatural creatures spawned by The Death, the Leemutes,* who were mankind's greatest enemy.

Hiero was thirty-six and unmarried, although most men his age were the heads of large families. Yet he did not want to become abbot or other member of the hierarchy and end up as an administrator, he was sure of that. When teased about it, he was apt to remark, with an immobile face, that no woman, or women, could interest him for long enough to perform the ceremony. But he was no celibate. The celibate priesthood was a thing of the dead past. Priests were expected to be part of the world, to struggle, to work, to share in all worldly activities, and there was nothing worldlier than sex. The Abbeys were not even sure if Rome, the ancient legendary seat of their faith, still existed, somewhere far over the Eastern Ocean. But even if it did, their long-lost traditional obedience to its Pontiff was gone forever, gone with the knowledge of **Leemute*: corruption of ancient words, "Lethal Mutation." Now, in altered meaning, a creature lethal *to* humans, rather than to itself. how to communicate across so vast a distance and many other things as well.

Birds sang in massed choruses as Hiero rode along in the afternoon sunlight. The sky was cloudless and the August heat not uncomfortable. The morse ambled at exactly the pace he had learned brought no goad and not one instant faster. Klootz was fond of his master and knew exactly how far Hiero could be pushed before he lost his patience. The bull's great ears fanned the air in ceaseless search for news, recording the movements of small creatures as much as a quarter of a mile away in the wood. But before the long, drooping muzzle of the steed and the rider's abstracted eye, the dusty road lay empty, spotted with fresh dung and churned up by the buffer herd, whose passage could still be heard ahead of them in the distance.

This was virgin timber through which the road ran. Much of the Kandan continent was unsettled, much more utterly unknown. Settlements tended to radiate from one of the great Abbeys, for adventurous souls had a habit of disappearing. The pioneer settlements which were unplanned and owed their existence to an uncontrolled desire for new land had a habit of mysteriously falling out of communication. Then, one day, some woodsman, or perhaps a priest sent by the nearest Abbey, would find a cluster of moldering houses surrounded by overgrown fields. There was occasional muttering that the Abbeys discouraged settlers and tried to prevent new opening up of the woods, but no one ever dreamed that the priesthood was in any way responsible for the vanished people. The Council of Abbots had repeatedly warned against careless pioneering into unknown areas, but, beyond the very inner disciplines taught to the priesthood, the Abbeys had few secrets and never interfered in everyday affairs. They tried to build new Abbeys as fast as possible, thus creating new enclaves of civilization around which settlements could rally, but there were only so many people in the world, and few of these made either good priests or soldiers. It was slow work.

As Hiero rode, his mnemonic training helped him automatically to catalogue for future reference everything he saw. The towering jackpines, the great white-barked aspens, the olive palmetto heads, a glimpse of giant grouse through the trees, all were of interest to the Abbey files. A priest learned early that exact knowledge was the only real weapon against a savage and uncertain world.

Morse and rider were now eight days beyond the easternmost Abbey of the Metz Republic, and this particular road ran far to the south of the main east-west artery to distant Otwah and was little known. Hiero had picked it after careful thought, because he was going both south and east himself, and also because using it would supply new data for the Abbey research centers.

His thoughts reverted to his mission. He was only one of the six Abbey volunteers. He had no illusions about the dangers involved in what he was doing. The world was full of savage beasts and more savage men, those who lived beyond any law and made pacts with darkness and the Leemutes. And the Leemutes themselves, what of them? Twice he had fought for his life against them, the last time two years back. A pack of fifty hideous, apelike creatures, hitherto unknown, riding bareback on giant, brindled dog-things, had attacked a convoy on the great western highway while he had commanded the guard. Despite all his forelooking and alertness, and the fact that he had a hundred trained Abbeyman, as well as the armed traders, all good fighters, the attack had been beaten off only with great difficulty. Twenty dead men and several cartloads of vanished goods were the result. And not one captive, dead or alive. If a Leemute fell, one of the great, spotted dog-things had seized him and borne him away.

Hiero had studied the Leemute files for years and knew as much as anyone below the rank of abbot about the various kinds. And he knew enough to know how much he did not know, that many things existed in the wide world of which he was totally ignorant.

The thought of forelooking made Hiero rein the morse to a halt. Using the mind powers, with or without Lucinoge, could be very dangerous. The Unclean often had great mental powers too, and some of them were alerted by human thoughts, alerted and drawn to them. There was no question of what would happen if a pack such as had struck the convoy found a lone man ready to hand.

Still, there had to be *some* danger anywhere, and forelooking often helped one to avoid it if not used to excess. "Your wits, your . training, and your senses are your best guides," the Father Abbots taught. "Mental search, forelooking, and cold-scanning are no replacements for these. And if overused, they are very dangerous." That was plain enough. But Hiero Desteen was no helpless youth, but a veteran priest-officer, and all this by now was so much reflex action.

He urged the morse off the track, as he did so hearing the buffer herd just at the very edge of earshot.

They are traveling fast, he thought, and wondered why.

In a little sunny glade, a hundred yards from the trail, he dismounted and ordered Kloodz to stand watch. The big morse knew the routine as well as the man and lifted his ungainly head and shook the still-soft rack of antlers. From the left saddlebag, Hiero took his priest's case and removed the board, its pieces, then the crystal and the stole; draping the latter over his shoulders, he seated himself cross-legged on the pine needles and stared into the crystal. At the same time he positioned his left hand on the board, lightly but firmly over the pile of markers, and with his right made the sign of the cross on his forehead and breast.

"In the name of the Father, his murdered Son, and Spirit," he intoned, "I, a priest of God, ask for vision ahead on my road. I, a humble servant of man,, ask for help in my journeying. I, a creature of earth, ask for signs and portents." As he concentrated staring into the crystal, he kept his mind fixed firmly on the road and especially the area to the east and south, the direction in which he was headed.

In a moment, as he watched, the clear crystal became cloudy, as if filled with swimming wraiths of mist and fog. Thousands of years after western anthropologists had refused to believe the evidence of their own eyes when watching Australian aborigines communicate over hundreds of miles by staring into two pools of water, a man of the seventy-fifth century prepared to see what lay ahead of him in his travels.

As Hiero stared, the mist cleared and he felt drawn down into the crystal, as if he were becoming a part of it. He shrugged this familiar feeling aside and found himself looking down on the buffer herd and the road from hundreds of feet up in the air. He was using the eyes of a bird, almost certainly a hawk, he thought with a detached part of his mind. As his vision swayed to and fro over a wide arc of country, he fixed everything he saw firmly in his memory. Here was a lake; there, to the south, a river next to a big swamp over which a distant road seemed to run on pilings (no mention of *that* in his briefings; better look out). The bird was not conscious it was being used. Hiero was not in any sense controlling it; that was a different business altogether and much harder, not always possible, in fact. But his concentration on his route had allowed the mind of the creature which saw that route most clearly somehow to *attract* his, as a magnet draws a nail. Had no bird been overhead, perhaps a squirrel in a high tree would have been his lens, or even a buffer in the front rank of the herd, if nothing better offered. Hawks and eagles were the best possible eyes, and there were enough of them about so that there was usually a good chance of hitting on one. Their eyes were not exactly the same as a man's, but at least they had a sort of binocular vision. This type of thing was easy for a man of Hiero's large experience, who could, if necessary, utilize the widely separated eyes of a deer which saw two images.

He noted that the buffer were moving at a fast, steady trot, not panicky, but alerted, as if some danger were coming but as yet was not too close. The two wolves he had seen earlier were most unlikely to have caused this feeling, and he wondered again what had. Sitting up, he broke the trance and looked down at his left hand. Clenched in his fist were two of the forty small symbols which he had scattered about the shallow, dish-shaped board. He opened his own hand and saw another hand in miniature, the tiny, carved Hand, which signified "friendship." He dropped it back in the dish and looked at the other symbol. It was the miniature wooden Fishhook. He dropped that in, too, and emptied the pieces into their leather pouch while considering. His subconscious precognition had found a curious combination, which needed thought. The Fishhook had several meanings. One was "concealed danger." Another was "concealed meaning," or, by extension, a puzzle. In conjunction with the open hand, one meaning could be "a friend approaches with a riddle." Another might well be "beware of a seeming friend who means you ill." It had, curiously, nothing to do with either fish or fishing.

With only forty symbols, the precognition markers were often obscure. But as was pointed out to every beginning student, if they saved your life, or someone else's life, even once, they were certainly worth it,

were they not? And a good, sensitive man or woman could do a lot with them. Hiero regarded his own ability in this particular area as only about average, not anywhere near up to his ability to use animal eyes as a concealed spyglass. But he had been helped by the markers before and he always felt better for having used them.

As he was repacking the saddlebag, the morse, who still remained on guard, snorted suddenly. Hiero turned, his heavy blade drawn out over his left shoulder and in a ward position as if by magic. Only then he saw the small bear.

Bears had changed over the millennia like everything else, that is, all bears had changed in some ways. This was a black bear, and a twentieth-century zoologist would have seen nothing odd about its body at first glance, except a larger and more rounded fore-head. If he had looked, not at, but into, the eyes, more might have been glimpsed. Bears were never stupid; now they were, unevenly perhaps, approaching non-animal levels. It was alone, Hiero saw, and nothing else was around.

The bear looked about half-grown and stood on its hind legs, front paws hanging limp in front of it. *It might weigh a hundred and fifty pounds*, Hiero thought. *It might weigh somewhat more and not be half-grown at all, but a new type altogether.* His mind probed at the animal, and he kept his guard up. The thought he got in return was strong.

Friend—human friend—food(a plea). Friend — help— danger(a feeling of heat). Friend — bear (himself—identity feeling)— help— danger. This was surprisingly vibrant and clear. Hiero was used to conversing with wild things, although with an effort, but this animal had almost the power of a trained human. What a lot there was in the world!

As the man lowered his short sword and relaxed, the bear settled on its haunches also. Hiero sent a thought at Klootz and told him to stay on guard, noting in passing that the big bull seemed to feel the bear was harmless.

Reaching into his saddlebags, Hiero brought out some dried, pressed *pemeekan*. The ancient travel food of the North, animal fat, maple sugar, and dried berries pressed into a cake, still kept its old name unchanged. As he broke off a piece and threw it to the bear, Hiero sent another thought.

Who/what are you? What/who brings danger?

The bear caught the *pemeekan* between his paws in a very human gesture and snapped it up in one bite. His thoughts were confused for a moment, then cleared up.

Food(good/satisfying)— more? Bad things come— hunt— hunt humans, animals— huntthis human— not far behind now— not far in front— death lies all around— bear(himself) help human?

There was a last blurred thought which the man realized was the bear giving his own name. It was unpronounceable, but Gorm was a fairly close approximation. Under the clear and obvious thoughts, Hiero learned more. Gorm was a young bear, only about three years old, and relatively new to this area, having come from the East. But the danger was real, and it was closing in on all sides as they stood there. For a briefly glimpsed instant, *through* the bear's mind, Hiero caught a flash of utter, cold malignity, an impression of something bloated and soft in a secret place, spinning a web of terror throughout the forest. The bear had shown him this deliberately, he now saw, to impress upon him the danger. Lee-mutes, the Unclean! Nothing else caused such horror and hatred in normal man or beast. Beside him, Klootz snorted and stamped a great forehoof. He had caught a good deal of what had passed between the two

and didn't like it.

Hiero turned and finished packing, his back to Gorm. He was convinced there was no danger from the half-grown cub and that the bear was both frightened himself and anxious to be of help. Civilized men seldom hunted bears any longer, and the old enmity of pioneer and bruin no longer existed.

Swinging up into his high saddle, the man sent a thought of inquiry to the animal on the ground. *Where?*

Follow— safety— danger first— slow—follow, came the answer as Gorm dropped to all fours and scuttled away from the clearing. Without even being urged, Klootz swung in his wake, maintaining a pace which kept him about fifteen feet to the rear. The fact that the morse trusted the young bear was a major factor in Hiero's own decision to do so. The morse stock was bred for alertness as well as strength and skill, and their mental watchdog capabilities were considered quite as important as their physical qualities.

They went south, back the way Klootz had come, and soon recrossed the road. Here, the bear did something which made Hiero blink. Signaling them to stop, Gorm recrossed the dirt track and then dragged himself back by his front legs, his fat rear end obliterating Klootz's broad tracks! Only the passage of the buffer herd and a smeared place now showed on the dust of the road.

Follow(Gorm)— walk hard ground(quietly)— not leave mark, came the thought. Following it, there came one more: *Not speak — watch (me) only — others listen(for)— speak— danger*.

Hiero nodded to himself. The bear was indeed clever, very clever. There must be a nest of Leemutes or some center or other nearby. If mind speech was used, it might well be picked up and some terror or other be sent on their tracks. He remembered that flash of shuddersome, gelid hatred the bear had shown him, and a tingle ran down his spine.

For some time, Gorm moved at a steady pace which was no more than a good walk for the bull morse. The warrior-priest kept a keen watch. A veteran woodsman, he noted that he and his mount were being led over underlying granite spines of firm ground and also that the woods were very quiet. The great forest of Kanda, where undisturbed, was full of life, in the trees, on the ground, and even in the air. Now the land was silent. No squirrels chattered at the travelers, birds were few and shy, and not a trace of the larger creatures, such as deer, was to be seen. In the windless hush of the late summer afternoon, the almost noiseless progress of the three yet sounded very loud in Hiero's ears. A sense of oppression was in his mind, almost of pressure from outside, as if the atmosphere itself had somehow grown denser.

Hiero crossed himself. This strange silence and spiritual oppression were not normal and could only come from the forces of darkness, from the Unclean, or some lair of theirs.

Abruptly, Gorm stopped. Through some signal that even his owner could not catch, the giant morse was given an order. Instantly, he too stopped and just as instantly lay down, crouching beside a great pile of deadfalls. Klootz weighed just a trifle under a ton, but he sank to his knees with the grace of a dancer and without a sound. Ten feet in front of the morse's moist and pendulous nose, the bear crouched, peering around a bush. On the neck of the morse, Hiero too lay stretched out, peering forward and trying to see what had alarmed their guide so.

All three were looking down into a broad, shallow hollow in the land, thinly planted with seedling alders and low brash. As they watched, from the tall forest on the other side of the dip and well to their right, a column of a dozen or so figures emerged.

Hiero had thought he was familiar with many types of Leemute, the Man-rats and Hairy Howlers, the

Were-bears (which were not bears at all), the Slimers, and several others besides. But these were new and, like all Leemutes, unpleasant to look at. They were short, no more than four feet tall on the average but very broad and squat, and walked erect on their hind legs, their bushy tails dragging behind. They were completely covered with long, dripping, oily-looking fur of a yellow-brown hue, and their beady-eyed faces were pointed and evil. It would have been hard to trace their ancestry back to a genetic accident in a wolverine family after The Death, even for a contemporary expert, and Hiero simply catalogued them as a new and dangerous breed. For they had actual *hands*, and their rounded heads and gleaming eyes indicated intelligence of a high if nasty order. They wore no clothing, but each carried a long-handled wooden club, in the head of which was set glittering fragments of obsidian. A wave of evil purpose went before them like a cloud of gas as they moved one behind the other, in a curious hopping gait, which still covered the ground at a good speed. Every few feet, the leader stopped to sniff the air and then dropped to all fours to check the earth, while the others peered about on every side. The three on the knoll above them froze into immobility, trying not to breathe. The evil Furhoppers, as Hiero promptly named them, were perhaps two hundred yards off and, if they continued their present course, would pass down over the shallow slope of the bowl and up the other side, moving off to the left of the three's position. But when the line of crouching figures reached the center of the depression, it halted. Hiero tensed, one hand instinctively reaching for his reliquary and the poison it contained. For another figure had appeared and was advancing on the Furhoppers.

It was apparently a tall man, garbed in a long cloak of a dark gray, which was closely wrapped around him and showed only his sandaled feet. His hood was thrown back, and his naked, hairless head was revealed in the rays of the evening sun. His skin was so pale as to appear deadwhite, and his eyes were a shifting color, impossible to see at this distance. On the right breast of his cloak was a spiral symbol, also difficult to see, etched in a dark scarlet, of interwoven lines and circles. He seemed to carry no visible weapons, but an aura of both spiritual power and cold menace radiated from him, as the chill of a great iceberg goes out from it to warn seafarers.

This was an extraordinary chance, for good or ill, and Hiero knew it. The Unclean had been rumored and more than rumored for centuries to have human directors, a race of men totally given over to evil and wizardry. On several occasions such people had been reportedly glimpsed directing attacks on Abbey convoys or settlements, but the information was vague and contradictory. On two occasions, however, men had been killed trying to penetrate the secret training rooms and guarded files of Abbey Central in Sask. Each time, the bodies of the slain had almost instantly *dissolved* into piles of corruption, leaving nothing to be investigated, save for ordinary clothing, which might have been acquired anywhere. But in each case, the Abbey guardians and priests had been warned by mental alarms of the spirit, not of the flesh, and in each case the man—or entity—had penetrated through many men on guard who recalled seeing nothing. This creature before him now could only be one of these mysterious men who were thought to rule the Unclean. No normal man, not even an outlaw, would or could associate with a foul pack such as this, and yet, as the man strode to them, the savage creatures cringed aside in evident fear.

The leader of the Fur creatures, crouching low, came up to the man and the two moved a little apart, while the others milled restlessly about, grunting and whining in low tones. Hiero could see that man's lips move and the yellow fangs of the Furhopper chief flash in answer. They were actually talking, not using mind speech, one to the other! Even as he inwardly shrank in loathing from the whole gang, the scientist in Hiero could not help applauding the feat. With normal speech, there would be no betraying mental currents, such as made him afraid to address Klootz more than was absolutely necessary and had caused the bear to impress mental silence upon them.

Now, the conversation apparently over, the man seemed to dismiss the pack of hideous creatures and, turning about, simply walked away in the direction from which he had come. This was to the south and east. The Furhoppers surrounded their leader, who snarled something out which silenced them. In a

moment they had formed their line again and were tramping the dead leaves back on the way they had come, which was from the west.

As the gray-cloaked man disappeared in one direction and the Furhoppermutes in the other, all three creatures on the edge of the bowl relaxed a little. But no one used mind, speech; they simply sat quietly and waited.

After what must have been a good half hour, Gorm the bear slowly rose and stretched. He looked around at Klootz and his rider, sending no message, but his meaning was plain. The big morse arose as silently as he had lain down, and from his vantage high on the great back, Hiero surveyed the silent forest before them.

The setting sun slanted down through the pines and maples and lit the patchy undergrowth in flashes of vivid green, turning various piles of dead leaves into russet and gold. Ancient logs glowed with color as green moss and gray lichen were caught in the last patches of sunlight. *How beautiful the land is*, the priest reflected, *and yet how full of evil under its loveliness*.

But Gorm was all business, and as he lurched down into the hollow, Klootz followed him, his great forked hooves making no more sound in the leaves than a mouse would have.

To Hiero's alarm, the small bear was headed for the exact spot on the far side of the depression into which the sinister person in the cloak had gone. While desperately anxious to know more about this dark being and his purposes, Hiero did not want a direct encounter with him. His mission, far to the East, came first above all else. He dared not send a mental message, not with the enemy so close about them that the sense of mental oppression was still a weight on his spirit, and he could think of no way to halt, or redirect, the bear except by physical means.

"Pssst," he hissed, and again.

Gorm looked back and saw the man gesturing violently to stop. He halted on a patch of leaves and let Klootz catch up.

Hiero, looking down at the bear, could think of nothing to do which would explain what he wanted. He was keeping a rigid mindblock on, and he had a more than strong feeling that loosing it would bring a pack of devils down upon them from every point of the compass. But Gorm saved him the trouble. Looking shrewdly up at Hiero for a moment, the bear bent down and swept aside some leaves with his curiously delicate paws. Exposing smooth earth, with one long claw he made a line and pointed it with an arrow, just as a man might. The line led on the way they were going. On both sides of the line and behind it, Gorm carefully scratched numerous small circles or spirals. Irresistibly, the priest was reminded of the spiral, interwoven symbol on the cloak of the enemy. The message was plain. Peril lay behind them and on either side, but despite the fact that they were following the sinister figure of the bald man, less danger lay on that route than on any other. The bear looked up and Hiero nodded. Gorm swept leaves over his artwork and started off again with no more ado. The man nudged his great mount, and Klootz followed obediently in the bear's wake.

On his back, the rider turned over in his mind the way the bear had reacted, ever since he had first appeared. Why, the creature was human! The Dam People were thought to be as intelligent as people, although with a different outlook on life. Many of the Leemutes, of course, were as clever as men, although altogether malign and dangerous to life and spirit. But here was another animal species rising to humanity. This would make a fine problem for the Abbey theologians, Hiero thought wryly. They still could not agree on the spiritual status of the Dam People, and a fresh species of creature for whom there

was no scriptural precedent would start the doctrinal pot boiling all over again.

The sunlight under the big trees was fading fast, but Klootz could see in full dark like a cat, and presumably the bear could also, so that Hiero felt no particular concern. He himself could see as well as many of the wild things when the light was dim, a result of a childhood spent in the forest as well as the cultivated ability of a trained woodsman. He was in no hurry to make camp, not being particularly tired, and he badly wanted to get away from the artificial silence of the wood, the zone of mental oppression which he felt so strongly.

For a mile or two, the little party moved under a pure forest of the great pines, the faint crackle of the deep-banked needles the only sign that bear and morse were passing. The light was very dim now, but an occasional ray of sunshine still broke through a gap in the foliage far above and illumined a patch of forest floor or a small clump of fern.

Suddenly, with no warning, Gorm was gone. One moment, he had been padding ten feet in front, the next he vanished. Klootz checked, his big ears lifting and his great nostrils flaring as he sought for a scent of some kind. His rider reached smoothly for the bolstered thrower strapped to his saddle, at the same time looking keenly about. *Is this treachery?* His mind raced. *The bear — had he been a friend, or was this the sign of the Fishhook being revealed, a false friend and a traitorous guide?* The thrower was halfway from its scabbard and lying across the pommel of the saddle when the silence was broken by a voice.

Musical and deep, the note of a trained doctor, it rang under the arched branches from their left, speaking in perfect Metz.

"An ugly beast and a still uglier rider. Who follows on the tracks of S'nerg? Is this the prey we have sought all day?"

One of the rare beams of last sunlight streamed down onto a flat boulder perhaps twenty feet from the morse's left side. Upon it, arms crossed on his breast and a thoroughly nasty smile on his face, stood the man of the gray cloak, looking coldly at Hiero. Of the bear, there was no trace. Apparently the two men and the morse were alone.

"A priest, and one of some rank in your absurd hierarchy, I see," the cloaked man, whose name was apparently S'nerg, went on. "We have seen few priests in these parts, having a dislike for such vermin. When I have made an example of you, little priest, we shall see fewer yet!"

As he listened, Hiero had been slowly tightening his hold on the thrower, which lay across the saddle, facing the other way from his enemy. He was under no illusions about his own safety despite the fact that S'nerg appeared unarmed. From the almost visible aura the man radiated, the electric sense of power, the Metz warrior-cleric knew he was in the presence of a great adept, a mental master, who in his dark way was perhaps the equal of a Council member or Grand Abbot. Against such, any physical weapons were a matter of luck.

Lowering his arms, S'nerg stepped from his rock and strode toward Hiero. As he did, Hiero whipped the thrower up and tried to fire. His finger could not reach the trigger. He was locked in a muscle spasm, the weapon's barrel halfway aimed, but unable to move further. Despite his best efforts, he could not move. He looked down in agony at S'nerg, who stood calmly by his left leg, serenely looking up at him, the power of his incredible mind alone holding Hiero rigid. And not just Hiero. In a dim way the priest could feel the giant morse straining to break a similar mental compulsion and no more able to do so than his master. The sweat of his effort streaming into his eyes, Hiero fought to break the bonds, using every

technique he had been taught to free his own will from the dreadful grip which the wizard had laid upon him. As Hiero glared into the calm eyes of S'nerg, a shudder ran through his frame. The evil master seemed to have no pupils, and his eyes were slanted, grayish pits of emptiness, opening on a nameless void. Despite all his efforts, Hiero felt a compulsion to dismount. He knew somehow that if he did, the control would grow even stronger, that the mere fact that he sat high on the saddle helped in a small way to limit S'nerg's power over him. Perhaps, a remote, absent corner of his mind mused, even as he fought, the morse's physical vitality somehow flowed into his master, helping him stay strong. As he stared down into the awful, pale eyes, he noted in the same detached way that, despite the smile on the cruel face, sculptured from sickly marble in appearance, beads of sweat stood out on S'nerg's forehead also. The strain was telling on him too. But Hiero could endure no more. He began to sway in the saddle. "In the name of the Father," he gasped aloud, fighting with his last strength. The Unclean adept's cold smile deepened.

At this point Gorm suddenly returned. Even a smallish bear has very powerful jaws, and they now clamped hard to a most sensitive portion of the sorcerer's anatomy. He screamed in pain and fright, a curiously high tremolo note, and his mental grip dissolved on the instant as he staggered and fell. Hiero's strength surged back and so did all his other faculties. While Kloodt still shuddered from the strain, his rider was out of the saddle and on the ground in a second. As the writhing tangle of bear and man rolled over, the priest saw an opportunity, and his long poniard flashed from his belt and was drawn once over the white throat, even as S'nerg tried to rise. A fountain of dark blood obscured the contorted features, and then the cloaked shape lay still.

Hurry, came the bear's mind. *Made (too) much (volume) noise. Go now—quick (run/gallop).*

Wait, Hiero said to the other's mind. He was busy searching the adept's body. There was a peculiar and heavy, bluish metal rod, over a foot long, a dark-handled knife with what looked like bloodstains on it, and a roll of parchment. Under the cloak, the dead man had worn a soft, woven suit, all one piece of grayish, neutral-colored cloth, with an odd feel to it, almost slippery. In a small belt pouch was a round metal thing which at first glance looked like a small compass. This was all. Hiero tossed the rod, knife, parchment, and compass-thing into a saddlebag and mounted in one easy motion.

Go now, he said. *All done here.*

The bear set off instantly at a rocking canter, in the same direction in which they had gone before. In long strides the morse moved in his wake, easily maintaining the distance between them.

Looking back, Hiero could no longer see the still form of his enemy in the gloom. *At least,* he thought, *he didn't seem to dissolve like the others had. Maybe they weren't men at all.*

For several miles the three moved at high speed, despite the fall of night. Many bright stars provided some diffused light, and a pale crescent moon promised more later. Also, to Hiero's relief, the terrible mental oppression was gone; the dull feeling of stifling which had choked him for the last few hours had been lifted. It must, he decided, have emanated from the monster they had overcome. He did not forget to say a soldier's brief prayer of thanks. He was under no illusions as to how close he had come to death and perhaps worse. He had been about to submit to the terrible mind of the thing who called himself S'nerg. Whether he would have been slain on the spot or taken elsewhere to some foul den for torture and questioning, he did not know. But save for the young bear, they all would have been destroyed, he was sure of that. It must have taken great courage, as well as high intelligence, to hide, wait, and attack as Gorm had done, and Hiero felt a powerful sense of respect for his new ally.

Eventually, the bear began to slow down, his faint puffs of breath indicating that he had run about as far

as he could. Klootz slowed his own pace, and they now moved at about the speed of a man trotting. The dark was full of sounds, but they were the normal sounds of the Taig, a grunting bellow in the distance, which was the mating call of a monster hog, the Grokon, the faint squall of some cat or other, the chitter-chatter of the night squirrels high in the trees, and the mournful tremolo of small owls. There was nothing about such noises to alarm. Once a large form, pale as a ghost, rose from the earth and flitted away before them in great, silent bounds which soon carried it out of sight. The solitary giant hares were a prey to everything and never left their carefully concealed forms until full dark.

At Hiero's estimation, they had come about five miles, moving steadily south and east, when Gorm signaled a halt. They were in a stand of great, dark firs, and rotting logs lay about them on the carpet of needles. It was very black under the trees, and even the dim starlight was blotted out.

Stay—rest—now(safe)—here? came from the bear. Hiero dismounted wearily and walked over to where the black form sat in the dark. Squatting on his haunches, he tried to look into the eyes of his friend.

Thanks—help(us)—danger—bad, he sent. He had noticed that each time, the exchange grew easier. He now could talk to the animal almost as easily as he could to his roommate Per Malaro at the Abbey college, who was also his frater and bondmate, closer mentally than anyone else in the world. The exchange was on the same level of intelligence too, not the way he talked to the big morse, whose answers were simple and contained no abstract concepts at all.

Now the bear responded. He felt a flick of the long tongue on his own nose and knew it for a greeting. Also, he sensed a wave of shyness, or some emotion akin to it, and with it a carefully buried element of humor. Gorm was amused.

(Almost) killed us — bad thing—saw it(felt it) watching us, so I went away before it (caught) me — made me(not alive) stay — not move. Then: *came back — bite behind—stop(break) bad thing—think at us. Good (luck?)* The bear paused, his mind not readable.

Why, why have you helped me? Hiero asked bluntly. *What do you want?* There was another pause. Behind his back, the man heard Klootz snuffling in search of some dainty, perhaps a mushroom growing on a fallen log. Finally, the young bear answered, his thoughts perfectly clear, but untrained—as if he knew what he wanted to say but not as yet very well how to say it. Finally:

(To) go with you — see new things—new lands—see what you see, learn what you learn.

Hiero sat back, nonplussed. Could Gorm have guessed his mission? It seemed impossible. Yet he had told no one and his coming was secret.

Do you know what I seek, where I go? the man shot back, fascinated by the new mind he was meeting.

No, the bear replied coolly. *But you (will) tell. Tell now. Perhaps (there will) be no time later.*

The priest considered. He was under a vow to say nothing of his mission. But the vow was not absolute but confidential, merely for common secrecy's sake, not because it was holy, or even a secret in itself. He could, at his own judgment, seek any aid he wanted. He made a decision and once more leaned forward.

The two figures lay, head to head, in outward silence. The great morse bull kept watch, nose and ears winnowing the night air for news, near and far, while those he guarded conversed, each learning many things under the dark of the firs.

2

In the Beginning

We are losing, Hiero, slowly but surely, we are losing." The Father Abbot's brown-robed form paced his underground study chamber as he spoke, thin arms locked behind his back. "Faith alone is not enough. Never was, for that matter. Again and again in recent years, we have become conscious of a will, or group of wills, working with the utmost secrecy and deliberation against us. The human-seeming things which tried to invade Abbey Central and almost succeeded are only a small part of the problem, though of great importance. But there is much, much more, which the Council in its wisdom has kept from the people. No agent of the newsletters has, or will, hear a word of it." He paused, and his lined, dark face with its pointed, white beard and drooping mustaches softened into a grin. "None of us have even told our wives." In an instant he was serious again, and picking up a piece of white chalk, strode over to a slate blackboard. The Most Reverend Kulase Demero had begun a most successful career as a teacher of the young, and old habits die hard.

"Look here," he said crisply as he began to write. "A large convoy two years ago was ambushed well north of the Inland Sea, on the main road from Otwah. Ten loads of old-time laboratory instruments taken and some found destroyed later. Those instruments came from an undamaged pre-Death site on the Eastern Ocean and, we think, were experimental matter involving advanced weaponry of which we now know nothing. We'll call that item number one." He continued, glancing over at intervals to see that Hiero, seated at a long table facing him, was paying due attention, just as he had done with a thousand pupils in the past. "Two, we sent a complete regiment of soldiers, under a good sub-abbot, twenty priests, a construction crew as good as any we had, and full supplies for all for six months, to start a new fishery-based Abbey up on the Huzon Gulf, to the far Northeast, in the cold woods. You have heard of that, I imagine, as it was too big to keep quiet. Despite all precautions, continuous mental communication with our own Comm chambers at Abbey Central and at other Abbeys, the whole force, roughly eleven hundred picked men and women, vanished utterly. Our only warning was a total and sudden lapse of communication. A Rover team found the site deserted and most of the remaining supplies being plundered by wild animals a half month later. There were vague traces of some element of the Unclean, but nothing you could put your finger on. Eleven hundred of our best! This was and is a terrible blow. So I say, we'll call that number two." He paused and looked at Hiero,

"Any comment?"

"Not yet, Father," Hiero said placidly. Those who did not know him sometimes thought him phlegmatic, but the abbot had watched his man for years and knew better. He grunted and turned back to his blackboard.

"That was about eighteen months ago. Next, which I'll call number three, was the affair of the ship. Damned few members of the Council know about *that*, so I'll assume you don't. About two months after we lost the Abbey colony, which would have become Abbey Saint Joan," and another look of pain crossed his face, "a great ship was reported to us by certain trusted persons on the Beesee coast to the west, well to the north of Vank and the great Dead Zone there, in a nest of rocky, wooded islands called the Bellas. These people are not Metz, but older still, in fact—"

"In fact, purebred Inyans," Hiero agreed. "And there are quite a few of them scattered about here and there, but they live in small hunting groups and won't come in and amalgamate. Some are good people, others trade with the Unclean and maybe worse. Now let's stop the baby stuff, Father. I'm not a

first-year student, you know."

For a second, the Father Abbot looked perfectly furious, then he laughed.

"Sorry, but I'm so used to explaining things in this manner to the average village councilman or even some of my more elevated colleagues on the Grand Council that it gets to be a habit. Now, where were we? Oh, yes, the ship.

"This ship, a big, odd-looking one, much bigger than any fishing boat we have, was reported wrecked on one of the outer islands of the Bella group. And there were people aboard from somewhere else, probably the other side of the Pacific! The ship was breaking up on the rocks, and the weather was bad. Our Inyan friends tried to get the people, who were yellow-skinned, just as the records say the East Pacific people should be, and just as the few rare fishermen who get wrecked here are, off in their small boats. We were already sending a cavalry squadron from the east, at Abbey St. Mark, as fast as we could. There are fairly good roads to that part of the coast.

"Well, when our people got there, nothing was left. The wreck was utterly gone, not a trace of it left. Three small Inyan camps on the coast, gathered for the salmon fishing, were gone too, with only a few traces that they had been there. But we found an old man in the woods, or he found us, an ancient cripple who had been taking a sweat bath and thus had been missed when the attack came. A horde of Leemutes, some sort of Hairy Howlers, I gather, had appeared from out of the *water*. They were riding great animals which looked something like the really big seals we see once in a while on that coast. They stormed the shore camps, killing everything that moved and hurling the dead and all their possessions into the sea. The old man did not know what had happened to the ship, which he had only heard of and not seen, but it must have met the same treatment. Who knows what new knowledge from the Lost Years we missed that time? Are you beginning to see a pattern?"

"I think so," Hiero answered. "We are being physically penned in, you feel, but more than that, we are being blocked off from knowledge, especially any knowledge which might prove dangerous to the Unclean, to the Leemutes. And the plan is concerted, is organized, so that when we do hear of any new knowledge, it is instantly snatched from our grasp."

"Exactly," the abbot said. "That's exactly what I think. And so do others. But there's more yet. Listen a moment.

"A year ago, twenty of our best young scientists, men and women both, who were working on problems of mental control, in a number of new and fascinating aspects, decided to have a joint meeting. They came here to Sask City from all over the Republic. Parment wasn't in session, but the Abbey Council, as the Upper House, was, and we received word of the meeting, and our permanent scientific subcommittee knew all about it, of course. A routine Abbey guard, two men for the doors, was provided. Now one of the two, a sharp fellow, thought he counted *twenty-one* scholars going in one morning, after the group had been meeting for several days.

"If it were not for him—! Even as it was, things were bad enough. The guardsman looked through a window in time to see the twenty killing one another, in total silence, by strangling, bludgeoning, pocket knives, whatever was handy. He burst in yelling and broke the compulsion. There were six dead and eight more badly wounded. As you might expect, those with the strongest mental powers of will were the least injured. We could prove that from their school records." The abbot sighed. He had ceased his pacing and now sat on a bench opposite Hiero.

"The scholars remembered little. They too had the vague feeling that another person was present at some

point, but they could not describe him, or it. The guard at the back door had been conscious of nothing at all. But to us, what must have happened is clear. It should be to you. Is it?"

"A mind of great power, I suppose," the younger man said. "One of the legendary dark adepts of the Unclean I've heard rumored. Is it, or they, really something besides a fairy tale?"

"I fear so," the abbot said. "Look, you understand the mental powers as well as any young man of the Metz. To accomplish this very daring stroke, aimed, mark you, at our freshest brains, our own greatest asset and greatest danger to any foe, a mind of extraordinary power, as you say, had to be close. Had to be physically close, that is, to the persons under the compulsion. There can be no doubt that the lad on guard (who by the way is now getting advanced training) had a good mind and indeed retained the memory of seeing an extra person enter. Once inside, while simultaneously holding an invisibility spell upon their minds, the creature worked on tiny, everyday resentments until they were built into murderous compulsions to kill. But there's another implication you may have missed as well."

"The silence." Hiero smiled. "No, I got that."

"Good boy," his superior said. "You do have brains, Hiero, under that lazy mask. Yes, the silence. What a mind! To compel them, twenty good minds, to slay one another in total silence! Noise would have spoiled the plan, so they had to be silent. I don't think there are four men in the Republic who could perform that feat."

"And you're one of them, of course," Hiero said. "Is there more, or do we now get down to specifics involving me personally?"

"You knew about the two who almost got into our inner files and research centers at Abbey Central," his superior said. "We may call them case number four, I suppose. What they were is beyond our present knowledge. If they were actually human men, then how was it possible for their very flesh and bone to dissolve into the substance of an amoeba? The Unclean is overreaching us, Hiero."

"There are many other cases of interest if they are considered as part of the whole thing. Small parties of trained explorers, men like yourself, ambushed or worse, vanished, in areas where no one should have known they had gone. Messengers with matters of unusual importance for the Eastern League at Otawah, or perhaps from them to us, also vanished, causing delays of up to a year on matters of common concern. And so on. It all adds up to one thing; a web, Hiero, a deadly, tightening web, is being drawn in upon us, even as we sit and wait to find out what is going so wrong!" The lean old man fixed his keen eyes on Hiero. "I still haven't heard any very searching questions from my prize pupil. But I need them: we all do. Hiero, you can't be mentally lazy any longer. You've been doing work any journeyman priest-exorcist could do, mixed with a lot of forest running and plain loafing. Your scores at Abbey Central, and you know it, were some of the highest ever achieved. And you're not even trying! Now listen to me, Per Desteen. I am addressing you as both your Godly and your temporal superior, and I want your attention at its peak! Those of us on the Council who know about you have been giving you rope for years, for two reasons. One was the hope that you would develop responsibility by yourself, always the best way, of course. The other reason, mainly advanced by me, young man, was so that you could get experience in many areas. Well, the time for idling is now, this minute, officially over. Am I plain? Now, sir, let's have some intelligent questioning, because I have a lot more to say."

Black eyes snapping with anger, Hiero was now sitting upright, glaring at his friend and mentor, any pretense of being bored gone forever. "So that's what you think of me, is it?" he grated. "A sort of chartered ne'er-do-well and good fellow. That's not fair, *Most Reverend Father*, and you know it!"

Abbot Demero simply sat looking at him, his wise eyes sympathetic, but not yielding, and Hiero felt his anger ebb away. There *was* truth, a good deal of it, in the charges, and being an essentially honest man, he could not deny it.

"I apologize for anger and impudence, Father Abbot," he said heavily. "I suppose I'm not really much of a priest, or a soldier either, for that matter. What can I do for the Council?"

"A good question, Hiero," the Abbot said briskly, "but not really the one I wanted, because it comes last, or ought to, and I want more thoughts from you first. Look now, my friend, what are your conclusions about what I have told you? I mean strengths, weaknesses, reliability, for that matter, plausibility, and above all— solutions, remedies. Let's hear your own ideas now."

"Well," Hiero said slowly, "one thing hit me from the very first, and it grew as the tragedies you related mounted. There has to be treason, at least one highly placed traitor somewhere in the Republic and probably more. I don't like saying this, but I have to, to be honest. What about the Council itself?"

"Good," the abbot said. "You're still able to think. Yes, there's treason, and it's being carefully, very carefully, searched out as we sit here. As for my peers, and your superiors, on the Council, you have no business knowing what steps might be taken if we ever should suspect a traitor in such an unlikely place. Therefore I shall tell you nothing about any such possible theoretical procedures."

Two smiles met across the table. The old abbot had refused information and (literally) told Hiero nothing. As well as everything, including the fact that the Abbey Council itself was nonimmune from suspicion.

"I can't argue against a conspiracy," Hiero resumed. "We are definitely getting a series of blows, savage ones, from someone. And what you tell me is the final word. It must be coordinated. Since we are meeting here at a sealed office and *talking*, at your insistence, you must be worried about some sort of betrayal even here. If our minds concentrate on a subject, even if we speak aloud, there are currents set up audible to an adept, especially one such as you describe. What are you doing to keep this from happening?" He folded his arms on his chest and stared at the abbot in turn.

"This," the abbot said simply. While they had been talking, the younger man had not noticed a plain wooden box, perhaps eighteen inches high, at one end of the table. The abbot lifted its lid and exposed a curious mechanism, a small, flat pendulum of some polished, ivorylike material, suspended motionless from a delicate wooden crossbar. Close on either side of the pendulum, two oval discs hung from the slender supports.

"There is a core of a very curious substance, something out of the Lost Years, which I'll tell you about someday, in that pendulum. If any thought, power, or what have you had come upon us, I think there is a ninety-eight percent chance that tiny weight would have rung against a side support piece. We've been testing it for two years, and it hasn't failed yet. In fact, it or a duplicate is what trapped the two spies at Abbey Central. Needless to say, very few of us know about it."

"I see," Hiero said, eyeing the little signal device. "Very reassuring. Let's hope it works, sir. Now, you wanted more thoughts, I believe. I only have one. There must be a plan, something to reverse this steady constriction you fear, and I'm to be part of it. It must need a younger man than yourself, and so some physical hazard is involved. Perhaps a journey, a probe into some guessed-at area held, or thought to be held, by the enemy? A reconnaissance of some sort? Beyond that, I'm in the dark."

"Think a little harder," Abbot Demero suggested.

"All right," Hiero said. "A weapon, or weapons, exist somewhere. As a result, one extraordinarily gallant man may barely manage to penetrate the Unclean enemy lines, relying on cunning, stealth, and sheer heroism, where a whole army could not get through. Frankly," he added, "I'm getting a bit tired of the mystery. Beyond the sarcasm I just gave you, I really have no suggestions and I hardly think a children's romance of the lone paladin against overpowering odds is what you're after. Come on, Father Abbot," he said impatiently, "what on earth *are* you after anyway?"

The Abbot looked a little nonplussed before he spoke, which in turn gave Hiero a bit of a start.

"Damnation, Hiero, you must operate on a level we can't tap! You see, that happens to be exactly what I want. You and a few other highly trained men are something of a secret weapon. We want you to go and try to raid some of the Lost Cities in the far South, in the hope, which I confess to be dim, that you will indeed give us some secret of the past before the Unclean overwhelm us."

Despite himself, the younger priest was instantly fascinated. He had been as far east as Otwah and into many wild areas of the North, but the far South was a closed book to almost everyone. For every mutated plant or animal in the northern part of the Kandan continent, there were a dozen in the South. There were rumored to be monsters so awful that a herd of morse would be but a mouthful to one of them, and trees so huge that it would take a man half a day to walk around the bole of one. Most of these tales could no doubt be relegated to fancy, rumor, and trappers' lies, but Hiero knew enough to know there was a grain of truth in many of them. He himself had been just far enough to see the southern end of the Taig and its countless pines and the beginning of the monster trees of the southern forest edge, which had few conifers, but many deciduous trees of far greater size. The lost empire of the once fabled United States had lain there, and every school child knew that The Death had hit it harder than anywhere else in the world, causing horrible changes to all life, such as had barely touched northern Kanda. Endless marshes, inland seas, and vast tracts of poisoned desert, the latter lit by the undying, blue, bale fires of the Dead Zones, were said to exist in the unknown area. And the Lost Cities themselves, the very places he was to go, they were the worst of all! Metz children were frightened into obedience with tales of the towering, vine-hung cliffs of the ancient, tottering buildings, even a glimpse of which was said to bring a horrid end. There were Lost Cities in the north country too, but most had long been either isolated or explored, that is, if known at all. And on them, in any case, the terrors of The Death had been laid lightly. Daring rovers and free rangers occasionally risked the anger of the Abbeys, political, not religious, and explored to the South, but few departed thus and fewer returned. All this flashed through Hiero's brain on the instant, as he looked into Demero's wise old eyes.

He sat back, for once effectively silenced, and the long, window-less room, lit only by the fluors on the wall, stayed quiet while both men took thought. It was Hiero who broke the silence, at length.

"Do you have any idea what it is I am to seek for, sir?" he asked quietly. "Or is it anything, just something that may turn up?"

"Well, there's that all right," the older man said. "But we're a bit more hopeful and knowledgeable, mind you, than that. We're looking for weapons, obviously. Now, The Death was caused by weapons. We don't want those again, certainly. The plagues, the nuclear poisons, all those things ought to stay buried. Unless the Unclean revive them, and I fear that mightily, I tell you! No, we want none such. But there are other things of power which are more or less intangible, at least in ordinary terms." He seemed to change his thoughts, and for a moment Hiero was puzzled.

"Did you ever reflect on our own central files at Abbey Central, Hiero?" the abbot asked, leaning forward eagerly.

"Of course, Father," the priest answered. "I mean, what do you mean 'reflect'?"

"What do you think of them, that's what I mean," Demero snapped. "Are they efficient, are they useful? They cover an area of over two square miles underground, and they employ over two hundred highly trained priests and scholars. Is it worth it?"

Hiero saw that his old master was leading up to something, but for his soul he couldn't see what it was.

"Why, of course, certainly they're valuable," he said, thinking hard. "Without their collected and collated information, we'd never be able to get anything done. Half our research effort is simply adding to the information in those files. What's the point?"

"The point is this," Demero said. "When I ask for information, information, mind you, which I know to be somewhere in the files, it often takes days to get it. Then, perhaps I need to balance several facts against each other; let us say the rainfall in the east of Sask province, the yield of crops in the south, the latest news of buffer migrations. So, it takes more time to get these. Then, with the help of others, I balance them, weigh them together, and make decisions. But you know all this, right?"

"Of course," Hiero said, intrigued by the other's manner, "but what of it? That's what's done with information; it gets utilized. So what does that prove?"

"All right," his elder resumed. "Now, suppose, just suppose I had gone to the files and told the files, *not*, mind you, the librarians, *the files themselves*, all I have just told you about our danger. Don't interrupt, boy, I haven't lost my sense yet. The files *themselves* next put all known information on this subject together and in ten minutes gave me back a sheet of paper which said as follows: If you do *x*, *y*, and *z* in that order, the enemy should be totally defeated." He paused, a gleam in his eye. "What do you think of that, eh?"

"Talking files?" Hiero said, one eyebrow cocked. "I assume, of course, you're not joking. We have begun to re-explore this radio thing, I know, but that's just people and an instrument. You're talking about a—well, a machine, a thing, holding all information and dispensing not just odd facts, but *conclusions*. Are you telling me such a thing is possible?"

The abbot sat back, satisfied. "Yes, son, not only possible, but well known at one time, in the years before The Death. The machines were called 'computers.' Some of the scientists doing research on the archives of the lost age are led to believe that certain computers existed that were larger than this building we're in. Can you begin to imagine the possibilities?"

Hiero sat staring at the wall behind Abbot Demero, his mind racing. If such things existed, and he knew the abbot would not lightly mention a possibility as a fact, the world could be changed overnight. *All* the knowledge of the past might very well still be in existence somewhere. It was a frightening thought, for it meant that all the secrets of the age of The Death were presumably hidden and available as well.

"I see you're beginning to reflect a little on the possibilities," the old priest said. "The Science Committee has picked you to go south and east, far to the East, where we have reason to believe these things may still lie buried in certain of their lost caverns. Five other men will go elsewhere. It's best none of you know the others' plans." He did not elaborate, nor need to. If any of the six should fall into the hands of the Unclean alive, the less they knew of their colleagues' venturings the better.

"Now come over here, Hiero, and I'll go over the maps with you. They have the latest information of

these probable computer sites. You mustn't expect to find a vast sort of library, you know. The information was apparently coded in different ways and put in the great machines in ways we only dimly comprehend. You'll get a briefing from some scholars who've gone furthest into the field later . . ."

And so the tale had gone. Telling this all to the bear, clever as the animal was, was simply not possible, if only because bears, even mutant bears, didn't read or write. But Hiero patiently and steadily made certain facts clear. In the blackest hours, before the first light of dawn, the man finally relaxed and willed himself to snatch a little sleep. Gorm now understood that his friend was on a long journey, but to Hiero's gratification, he still wanted to come. Also, the bear had enough reasoning power to understand that there was knowledge he could *not* understand; in fact, he might have been the first of his species to grasp the idea of abstract knowledge. He knew that the man was a foe of the Leemutes and that they were seeking something in a far land to hurt these evil things. With this knowledge he was content, and now he also rested, occasionally letting out the faint, puffing snore of a sleeping bear. Standing over the two, still saddled, his legs locked tight at the knee joints, the great morse kept his unbroken watch, in a state perhaps between dreaming and waking, but with all his magnificent senses alert for the first sign of danger. Klootz was not tired, and his kind did not lie down to sleep in any case, although they sometimes rested with their legs tucked under them. But tonight he rocked and swayed, chewing his cud and missing nothing that passed in the night, a sentinel without compare.

At first light, Hiero felt a velvet touch on his forehead and looked up to see the great, damp muzzle an inch from his. Satisfied that his master was awake, Klootz carefully lifted his huge hooves from either side of the man's body and moved out of the little grove into the gray dawn. In a moment the crunch of shredded bushes being devoured signaled that his breakfast had commenced.

Hiero rubbed his eyes. He was stiff, but not unduly so. It would have been better to have unpacked his bedroll and made a bed of spruce tips, but he had simply been too tired and too busy the night before. Besides, he was a seasoned woodsman, and a night spent on dry ground meant little to him. He looked over and saw Gorm was also awake and giving himself a wash with a long, pink tongue.

Any water about? he sent.

Listen(you can) *hear it*, came not from the bear but from the bull morse. A mental picture of a small stream a hundred yards off came to the man, and he rose and followed Klootz, who was ambling that way.

In twenty minutes, all had washed, eaten, and were ready for their new day's travel. Hiero ruefully checked his *pemeekan* supply. The way Gorm ate, it would be gone in no time and they would have to stop and hunt. This, aside from carrying an unnecessary extra element of danger, would further delay them.

Gorm caught his thought, which was unguarded. *Try and save the sweet food*, he sent. *I can find much of my own*. Once again, the brains and unselfishness of the strange creature who had appeared in his life out of nowhere made Hiero blink.

Hiero next rubbed Klootz down with a double handful of thick moss. He felt guilty for having left the big animal saddled and packed all night, but the morse seemed none the worse for it, and a roll in the little brook, which sent water cascading up the banks, put him in fine fettle.

The sun was now fully up and the forest was alive with sound and movement. Birds were everywhere, and as they began to travel, the priest glimpsed startled deer and small rabbits, as well as a sounder of Grokon passing along a distant aisle of the pines, even the striped young hoglets considerably larger than

Hiero himself.

Gorm, the night before, had attempted to explain the route he thought best to follow. The man could only grasp parts of it, but he gathered that a considerable marsh lay to the south and that it was necessary to cross it at its narrowest place. The road on which he and Klootz had journeyed for the last week was a place of great peril, watched by many unseen eyes. It was only luck that the two had come so far undisturbed, for no people had used that road in a long time, or if they had, they had not lived to go very far upon it. On no account must they return to it for any reason. The fact that so few human beings traveled alone through the wild might have dulled the watchfulness of the Unclean and allowed morse and man to come as far as they had. But now, surely the whole area would be on guard. And when the slain wizard was inevitably discovered, they could expect a hue and cry of massive proportions indeed to be set on foot by the enemy, so Gorm indicated. Once again, mind speech was to be halted, or at least understood by man and bear to be held to a minimum.

They had gone perhaps three hours from the night's resting place when they received proof that they were not to journey undisturbed and unsought. The three were fording a shallow brook when Hiero felt the morse stiffen under him and at the same time saw the young bear come erect on the bank just ahead. A second later, his own, less alert senses were assaulted. He had never felt anything quite like it before. It was as if something strange clawed for his mind. A savage, questing force somehow probed at his inner being. He drew on all his own years of training and managed to make no response, keeping the pressure and the *call*, for there was an element of that too, away, repelling it by not acknowledging it. For what seemed like a long minute and was probably very little time, a mere instant, the searching presence seemed to hover over him in an almost physical way; then it moved on. He knew it had gone on elsewhere, but he was not absolutely sure he had managed to deceive or deflect it. He looked first at Gorm and in turn saw the bear's weak little eyes fixed on him.

Something bad hunts, came the message. I was (only) a bear. It left me and did not (see) me.

I(think) it missed me, Hiero sent. And Klootz also, for it is not hunting four-footed animals, at least not yet.

There will be other things(like the) evil fur things of yesterday, came the bear's thought. This forest is full of many creatures who (serve/hunt for) the evil power. Many of them go on four legs and have good noses.

The priest found less and less trouble understanding the bear. The whole exchange, plus a new decision, now to utilize the stream, was over in a split second.

All day long, they followed the brook, for it was little more, down its winding path. As much as possible, they stayed actually in the water, so as to leave as few tracks as possible. The force or entity which had tried to locate them did not reveal itself further. They saw fewer animals, though, and none of the larger ones at all. Once a great, foot-long water beetle sought to bite Gorm with its savage pincers, but he avoided it easily, and Klootz, following close behind, brought a great, flattening hoof squarely down upon its armored back. Very few of the giant insects bred from The Death's radiation were much of a menace, since they tended to be slow-moving and clumsy.

They made an early camp on an island. The stream which Hiero had not been able to locate on his maps, probably because it was too small, broadened a little, without getting more than two feet deep, and the little, willow-hung islet might have been designed for them.

While the bear went shambling off in search of food and Klootz, now unsaddled, wrenched succulent

water plants from the stream bed, the man ate a frugal supper of biscuit and *pemeekan* while he tried to analyze what he had learned in the last few days. There was sunlight still, and Hiero had camped early because he needed light. He wanted very much to examine the various articles he had taken from the dead man, and this was the first opportunity.

The metal rod came first. A little less than an inch thick and about a foot long, of a very hard, bluish substance, not unlike patinated bronze, at first sight it looked unornamented. A closer look showed Hiero that four tiny knobs, set in a curved line, were sticking out of the sides. Hesitantly, he pushed one. At once an extension of the rod's other end began. The thing was a cylinder, with many tubes beautifully fitting one inside the other. While Hiero watched, it extended itself until it was a slender wand about five feet long. He pushed the same button again and it began to retract into itself once more. He stopped it by pushing it a third time. Next, he tried another button, the central one of the three. Two flat, oval discs on the end of two delicate arms emerged from the supposedly featureless rod, and each stopped at a six-inch distance away from the rod, forming a prong set at right angles to the rod's body. Hiero turned the rod over and examined it from every angle, but he could not fathom the purpose of the discs. He raised the rod's lower end to eye level to examine the discs better, but they were featureless. He tried to look at the rod's body again, while holding it upright, but he forgot the discs on their arms and - they banged into his forehead, just over his eyes. Annoyed with himself, he started to lower them when suddenly he stopped and gently put them back where they had been. They fit! Excited, he held the rod upright and extended it to its fullest length, keeping the two ovals on their extensions clamped to his forehead. He was now beginning to get an idea of what he held, and with great care, he slowly pressed the third tiny knob.

A tremendous voice slammed into his mind with overpowering force, almost physically knocking him over. *Where have you been? Why have you not communicated? Some strange creatures or groups of them are moving through our area almost undetected. The normals may be assaulting us with something new.* There was a sudden pause, and the dazed Hiero could nearly feel the almost tangible suspicion in the other mind. *Who is this?* came the mind voice. *Do you hear, I*—click. The priest had managed to shut it off.

He leaned back against a tree trunk, both frightened and angry with himself. The strange device was apparently both a communicator and an amplifier of great strength, obviously increasing the distance over which mental speech could be sent at least tenfold. He had never heard of such a thing, and he doubted any Abbey scientist had, either. He must get this object back to the Abbey research centers if he did nothing else. The thought that the Unclean even possessed a thing like this was nerve-racking. *No wonder the abbot has the jumps,* he thought. He looked at the rod again and then carefully made it shut and the two head pieces go back into the handle, noting as he did so that the machining was beautifully turned and that the metal was one he had never before seen. He was about to wrap it carefully and put it away when he remembered the fourth button. This was not next to the others but nearer the butt end and to one side. He considered it for a moment and then wedged the rod, extension end up, between two heavy rocks. Next he broke off a slender willow sapling about eight feet long and carefully positioned himself behind its parent willow tree, while reaching for the enigmatic button with his new pole. The thought that the sinister makers of this thing might have built in a self-destruct device was late in coming, he reflected, but might still save his life. He checked and saw that the morse bull was several hundred feet upstream and then, with only his hand exposed, probed for the button. Face pressed to the tree, he heard one swift metallic sound, as if a great spring had been released, and then silence. He waited an instant and then looked cautiously around the tree. He got up at once and tossed the stick aside. The amazing rod's last trick was both simple and entirely unexpected. It had fully extended itself again, this time in a single instantaneous motion. But now, projecting from the end was not the blunt cap of before, but a two-edged, razor-sharp lance head. It was over half an inch wide and almost as long as the original, folded-up rod itself. Hiero bent the extended rod sideways, but the tough metal gave very little. He hefted

the thing at shoulder height. It was a perfectly balanced javelin. Lowering it, he eyed the edges of the blade and confirmed his first impression that they were smeared with some sticky substance. *Undoubtedly not a face cream*, he reflected. He shut his new prize carefully up again and put it away.

Next came the knife. It was a short, one-edged thing in a leather sheath and had been used recently, being sticky with dried blood. There appeared to be nothing odd about it, and he cleaned it and put it away too, after ascertaining it bore no marks of any kind.

He now examined the rounded object which had looked to him earlier like a small compass. Many of his colleagues, indeed most people, still used compasses, but Hiero did not. He had a built-in sense of direction and while in school had won many bets by being blindfolded and always picking out the correct compass points.

It was obvious at once that if this was a compass, it was no compass he had ever seen before. There were no obvious compass bearings, no directions and their subdivisions. Instead, there was a thing like a circular wheel, or round track, under the glass plate on top. Set at intervals next to this track were symbols of some kind with which he was totally unfamiliar, for they were neither numbers nor letters he had ever seen before. On the circular track was a round, fiery bead of light, which swayed gently as he rocked the case in his hand, just like the air bubble in a carpenter's level. Hiero examined the symbols again. There were four larger ones set where the main directions on a proper compass should be. He aligned the four symbols one by one to a map of his own and managed to pick the one near the loop end of the object as north. But the fiery bead was not fixing itself on north or any of the four points when so used! *If the damned thing isn't a compass, what is it?* he wondered to himself. Reluctantly, he replaced it in its pouch and stowed it away again, determined to re-examine it again soon.

Last of all came the rolls of yellowish, parchmentlike material. He tried to rip a page corner experimentally and found that it tore, but with great difficulty. It was certainly not a paper, nor was it parchment either, but a synthetic material the like of which he had never before glimpsed.

Most of the papers bore writing, closely spaced and not printed, in a dark, reddish ink, which looked unpleasantly like dried blood, especially in the fast-waning light. Like the lettering or whatever on the compass thing, the symbols were totally unintelligible to Hiero. But one piece was mostly taken up by a large map, and this he studied with great care. It somewhat resembled his own map in general outline. The Inland Sea was there and, he thought, several familiar roads to the north. The main east-west Otwah road was quite clear. Most of the marks were obscure, though, especially many in the South. Rivers and swamps seemed to have been carefully drawn in signs he used himself, and he felt that the map might prove a useful guide. Many marks were thought-provoking. He was reasonably sure he had found some of the ruined cities of the pre-Death eras, for the few such sites marked on his own map were in the same places. But the alien map had many more of them, as well as much else that was strange.

Eventually, that too was put away and he prepared a bed, digging hollows for hip and shoulder and spreading his bedroll. Without being ordered, Klootz was feeding close to the island, and his master knew he had nothing to worry about, at least that was physical, in the way of nocturnal danger. The bear had not returned, but Hiero had earlier agreed on a travel plan with him, and he was confident Gorm would be back when wanted. He curled up with a sigh and dropped off while the last light of day still lingered in the west.

He was awakened by rain, a light spatter on his upturned face. It was very dark and the damp clouds had rolled out of the east, bringing moisture from the distant seas. He was about to pull his hood over his face and go back to sleep when a wet reek of fur strongly assaulted his nose. Gorm was standing next to him, and the bear's whole manner demanded attention.

Something comes in the night(perhaps) many things, but one for certain (emphatic)! We must go the way we planned/discussed. Listen!

Sitting up, the man did indeed listen intently. He was conscious of Klootz standing quietly nearby, his great ears also belled into the rainy night. For a moment, the falling raindrops and the muted gurgle of the stream were all that was audible. Then, far away in the west, at the very limit of Hiero's hearing, there came a sound.

It was a high, keening shriek, rising to almost the level of inaudibility and dying away then into silence. Twice it sounded, and then only the listening night could be heard. But no one, neither man nor beast, needed to hear it again. There was a menace implicit in that distant cry which raised the hackles on one's back. It was a hunter and it was on a track. In the situation they were in, it was no time to debate on whose track was whatever had screamed. The long-expected pursuit was upon them, and it was time to go.

For a seasoned traveler like Hiero, it was hardly more than a minute's work to break camp, including packing. Once up in the saddle, he loosened the great knife in its back sheath and, slouching comfortably, let the bear lead the way, Klootz ambling along in his wake through the shallow water. Hiero's time sense was not as good as his directional sense, but he had a fair idea of the present hour, about two A.M. Like many of the ancient mechanisms, clocks had been rediscovered, but they were large and clumsy. A woodsman of Hiero's caliber had no need for such things, indeed would have discarded a wristwatch if one had been available. Living in the wild for long periods gave you a built-in clock in your own body.

The rain lifted a little and became a fine mist. The animals did not mind getting wet particularly, although the bear liked to sleep in a dry place, and Hiero's tanned leather was treated with various water repellents which made him almost completely watertight. In any case, it was still warm in the last days of summer.

The little party traveled hardly any more slowly at night than during daylight. Hiero could rely on the sense of the two beasts to move without stumbling at a good pace, even when sight was at a minimum.

For two hours of steady and undisturbed travel, they followed the little stream bed, which still kept its same dimensions. Hiero eventually signaled a halt and swung down on the bank to stretch and do a few muscle-limbering exercises. Gorm flopped down next to him, also grateful for a rest. Bears can and do travel long distances, but steady marching, day in and day out, is not their habit. Klootz browsed in the shallows, adding more supplies to the many pounds of plant food he had already devoured that day. An eater of green stuffs never really stops unless asleep, since the nourishment is so much less than from a direct protein intake,

The priest now briefly said his morning prayers, a process the animals ignored as incomprehensible. The bear was mildly interested, but only mildly. Hiero, however, had detected that casual interest earlier and made a note in his mnemonic files that discussing religion with an intelligent animal might prove immensely rewarding.

Prayers over, Hiero stood listening in the dark. As he did, for the first time since they had left camp on the island, the faint scream of the hunter broke through the misty night. It was unmistakably a lot closer than at first. With a smothered oath, Hiero mounted and this time sent a thought to Gorm as he did so. *Hurry up, you, or we'll be trapped!* The young bear led off again at a splashing gallop, and spray fountained as the big morse lumbered after him through the shallows, his wide hooves coming down on the invisible water like dinner plates.

As he rode, listening hard, the man tried to think rationally and analyze their danger. He had no idea what followed on their tracks. Whatever it was, it seemed to be a night hunter of uncommon skill, and perhaps it was a pack of them. And whatever it (or they) were, it was moving incredibly fast. The bear and the morse had not been loafing, indeed, for nighttime had been setting a good pace. But neither walking in the running water nor moving at a steady clip had thrown whatever pursued off their track. What could it be?

One faintly encouraging thought rose to Hiero's mind at this point. Anything moving that fast probably could not carry, and certainly could not lead, any human master. Whatever atrocity was tracking them down almost had to be running unleashed and free. *At least*, Hiero reasoned, following this train of thought, *if I'm right, I won't have to worry about facing someone like S'nerg*. It was probably a purely physical danger.

Even as the thoughts came to him, the evil cry, clearly audible over the splashing, again welled up in the distance. The *near* distance, he observed. The hunter, whatever it was, could certainly move. Damn, the pursuit was going to catch up with them while it was still dark! This could be very bad. It was at least an hour to first light—Leaning over, he fumbled in his left saddlebag and finally located by touch the packet he wanted. To a stranger it would have appeared no easy task, doing this blind while the morse's great body lurched along underneath him, but he had practiced many times in the past and had little trouble securing what he wanted. Next, he loosened the strap on his holstered thrower so that it could be whipped out in a hurry. As an afterthought, he reached into the saddlebag again and took out the murderous rod he had taken from S'nerg's dead body. As an emergency weapon, should he lose his regular spear, it might be of great use, and he tucked it into his belt. The spear itself was in its socket at the saddlebow, ready to his hand at need.

Now he concentrated his mind on his steed and the bear. *Find an open place, close to the stream if possible*, he sent. *We must fight. Whatever comes is too fast to run away from*. In the back of his mind was the thought that Gorm, invaluable as he had proved in the recent past, must be tired now and probably not much use as a fighter. If the small bear could get even a few moments' rest, it might make some fleeting difference. The Abbey Battle Code was never out of a trained Killman's mind. "Use *every* tiny advantage and perhaps the enemy will use one less," ran one of the ABC rules.

The bear did not answer as he galloped on, but Hiero knew he understood. As for Klootz, the rapport between man and mount was so strong that he knew the great bull was already seething with rage and ready for a battle of any size, shape, or description. An Abbey morse did not like being chivied over the land by anyone, regardless of who it might be.

Behind them, the chilling cry broke out again, a hideous, thin screaming in the quiet, moist night. This time Hiero thought he could distinguish several voices and he knew the distance was shortening. It was logical. A solitary hunter, no matter how powerful, might be immobilized by sheer accident. A pack was always more effective. But a pack of what?

Here, the thought came suddenly from Gorm. *A place of grass and no trees. Is this what you want?*

Yes, the man sent. *Lie down and rest until they come. Do not fight if you can help it*. He urged the morse out of the water and onto the sward of a natural forest opening. The very first faint light in the east had appeared, not enough for any detail to show, but enough so that he could barely see they were in a natural clearing, one which sloped gently to the stream's edge. As Klootz stood silently dripping and the exhausted bear lay panting off to one side, Hiero considered tactics. The glade was perhaps a hundred yards wide at its tip by the brook. It was roughly shaped like a half-moon, and the forest edge at its

center was two hundred feet from the water. He urged the morse on until Kloodtz now stood almost exactly in the clearing's center, back to the trees, but fifty feet away from them, so that nothing could use the trees as cover to leap upon them from behind. Hiero reached into his saddlebag and extracted his beryllium-copper helmet, round and unornamented, save for the cross and sword on the forepeak. It fitted over his cap and was his sole piece of armor. He put it on and tried to catch the minds of their pursuers. He found blind, ravening appetite, more than one, coming fast, unreachable at any level he could influence!

Man and morse waited, alert and ready. They had done all they could. Gorm was silent now also, hidden somewhere in the black shadows and ready to pounce if possible.

They had not long to wait. The blackness of the dying night was still almost totally unrelieved when from up the shallow stream, the way they had followed, came the sounds of splashing water and many clawed feet striking on rocks. Sensing rather than actually seeing their attackers, the Killman-priest twisted the heads of the two objects he had been holding and hurled them away, one to the right and one to the left. As they hit the ground, the two flares burst into life and a white, incandescent glow illumined the whole area.

At once, Hiero saw that he and his animal allies had made a basic, if unavoidable, error in traveling down the stream and keeping to the water. The five sleek, sinister shapes poised at the brook's edge resembled grossly enlarged mink or some other water weasels quite enough to indicate that a river bed was the last, place in which anyone ought to try to elude them. *No wonder they came so fast*, Hiero thought as the momentary surprise of the lights froze the creatures in place.

Their undershot, sharklike jaws and vicious teeth glistened in the light as they blinked their beady eyes and then recovered. Each one, from wet muzzle to long tailtip, was at least ten feet and could hardly have weighed any less than a full-grown man. Collars of bluish metal glinted and betrayed their wearers' allegiance, even as they scuttled out of the water and rushed to the attack, snarling as they came.

Hiero fired the thrower and dropped it all in one motion. It took too long to reload, and these things were coming too fast. But the tiny rocket went true. The leading animal, head hit, simply blew up in a burst of orange fire, and the one next to it writhed aside, screaming shrilly and dragging a broken leg.

As the other three paused, shaken by the explosion and the death of the leader, Kloodtz charged with a bellow of fury. Spear couched, Hiero gripped the bull's barrel, ready to strike.

The wounded fury could not escape, and the morse's pile-driver front hooves crushed its life out in a terrible, smashing blow. Another one, leaping straight up at Hiero, took the heavy spear in its throat, right up to the crossbars. The savage brute fell back, choking on its own blood, and Hiero let the spear go with it, whipping out his heavy sword-knife as he did so.

The remaining two fell back for an instant, but for true mustelids, like all weasels, the thought of retreat never occurred to them. Separating, their grinning masks of fury showing the white fangs, they attacked like streaks of dark, undulating lightning, leaping at the rider and not the mount, and from two sides at once.

Fortunately for Hiero, he had worked out such a development with Kloodtz many times over on the Abbey's training fields. Automatically, the bull took the opponent to his left and paid no attention to the other, leaving that one to his master.

Rising in the saddle, Hiero cut down at the upthrust, rapid head in one terrible chopping blow. The solid

bite of the ancient blade could be felt all the way up to his powerful shoulder. The giant weasel-thing was dead before it hit the ground, its narrow skull cloven almost in half.

But even as he recovered, the man felt a terrible pain in his left leg. Overconfident, Klootz had underestimated the speed of his enemy. Even as his great hoof had come dashing down, the last of the hunting pack had swerved aside and altered its spring in midair. A slash at Hiero's calf had opened the flesh almost to the bone, and he swayed in the saddle from shock as the animal leaped away.

The bull was not to be taken twice this way. Knowing his rider and master was hurt sent him stark mad, but with a cold fury. He advanced slowly on the surviving hunter, rocking gently from side to side, grotesquely mimicking the way a playful fawn minces up to another baby opponent.

A fury to the end, the last servant of the Unclean sprang from a crouch, again at the drooping rider and not the morse. But Klootz, now on guard, was not deceived by the supple, twisting spring. A great, cloven hoof shot straight out, and the lashing blow caught the leaping death squarely in its midsection. There was an audible crack, and the next instant, the sleek-furred monster was writhing on the grass with a broken back. Not for long. In one savage rush, the infuriated bull morse trampled the creature into a pulp, even while it still snapped and tried to sink its teeth into its giant foe.

Hiero hung limply in the saddle while the morse lowered his own great body gently to the ground so that the man could dismount. The priest wobbled off Klootz's back and collapsed against one of the bull's huge, sweaty sides, breathing hard and trying to keep from fainting. Finally he looked up and saw the anxious face of Gorm looking at him from a few feet away.

I was ready but it was too quick, came from the strange mind. Can I help?

No, Hiero sent. I must bandage/cure myself. Watch for any danger while I do so. The bear padded off and left him.

Painfully, the priest removed his slashed leather boot, now full of blood, and examined the wound. It appeared clean, but any animal bite ought to be dressed quickly. He fumbled in the saddlebags, conscious of waves of blackness hovering over his pain-racked mind. The flares had gone out long since, but they had served their purpose. Dawn light was flooding into the clearing, and the chirping of the awakening birds seemed ironic after the blaze of sudden death, which had heralded the morning, and the five grim shapes on the reddened grass.

Hiero finally got the medicine kit out and gingerly spread the healing salve thickly over the long, bleeding wound. He next bandaged it as tightly as he could. It probably needed stitching, but in his present condition he simply wasn't up to it. When he was sure he had done all he could, he gulped a Lucinoge tablet. The mind expander was also a narcotic of sorts, and as he sank into slumber he could feel his muscles relax. His last thought was a mild worry that something or someone might take over his mind while he was unconscious. Then he remembered no more.

3

The Cross and the Eye

Hiero woke in the dusk. The hush of early evening lay on the land of the trees, and over his head a great balsam branch hung in the windless air. It was obvious he had slept the whole day away. Looking down, he saw that he was now lying on a pile of soft balsam tips and that his other boot was off. Instinctively, he

reached back over his shoulder for the heavy knife. It was in place, as the sore part of his back testified.

He sat up, feeling no more than a bit dizzy, and looking about, found Gorm lying a few feet away, sound asleep. Listening, Hiero caught the sound of shredding plant matter from a position around a bend upstream. He sent a thought to the big morse, and in an instant Klootz appeared, green fronds of pickerel weed still hanging from his blubber lips. Swaying over, he leaned down, and a stream of cold water ran off his shiny neck and into Hiero's face.

"Phew, get away, you horror, before you drown me!" his master spluttered, but at the same time his strong hands were gently rubbing the great antlered head.

"Your spikes are hardening, boy, which is just as well, because the way this trip is starting, we're going to need them." Shifting from speech to mental rapport, he ordered the morse to remain still while he used the big beast's legs to try and stand up.

He found he could remain erect without too much trouble, although walking at all made his leg throb painfully. However, with an effort, he managed to unsaddle Klootz and lay out the saddlebags where he wanted them. Then he dismissed the bull, but told him at the same time to stay close to camp and remain on careful watch.

Next, Hiero seated himself and turned to Gorm, who now also sat, looking up at him. Reaching over, the man touched the bear's nose gently.

Thanks(warmth/friend feeling), brother, he sent. Hot? did you make (the bed of) branches? And why did you take off my boot? This was actually the greatest puzzle of all. He could see that the young bear might well be clever enough to make a bed; after all, they used them in their own winter dens, but how did the creature know enough to remove his other boot so that his feet could rest?

It was in your mind, came the astonishing answer. *I looked to see (what) must/could/should be done. Your mind does not sleep,* Gorm added; *all that is there can be seen if (one can) look. I can see only a little, but what I saw, I did.*

Hiero once again got out his surgical kit and examined his wound carefully at the same time thinking over in fascination what the bear had just told him. Incredible, but it must be true! He, Hiero himself, had known what ought to be done, and the young bear had found what knowledge he could in the man's own unconscious mind. Incapable of surgery or even first aid, yet Gorm had made a rude but comfortable bed and managed at least to tease off one boot so that Hiero might sleep better. Resolving to look into this further, the rover priest bent to his task.

What followed was unpleasant but necessary. First Hiero cut off the blood-soaked stocking and the equally caked bandage he had applied the previous morning. Then, bracing himself by various forms of nerve-block training and a small further Lucinoge dose, he sutured the edges of the long, gaping slash with medical gut. Fourteen stitches later, it was done, again disinfected and re-bandaged. He hauled on his right boot and put a clean stocking and a moccasin, taken from the saddlebags, on the left foot. Then he directed the bear to take the bloody rags and bury them somewhere deep.

Doing this, he suddenly thought of something else and looked about. There were dark spots here and there on the grass, but the bodies of their assailants were gone.

From the shadows, Gorm sent an answer. *The big (horned/stick head) and I buried them. Their bodies (would have) drawn other things to (the) hunt. But only small things have come (easy to)*

frighten away. His mind sent a picture of jackals, bush cats, foxes, and other little scavenging creatures.

So the bear and the morse could work together, even when he himself was out of the picture! This was also fascinating, Hiero reflected. It meant, it had to mean, that the bear was the one giving orders, for Klootz, smart as he was, could barely think ahead to the consequences of any given action. More food for thought and future exploration, the man reflected.

Have you(felt) nothing else hunting/danger to us? he asked Gorm.

In the distance/far?(dimension problem) came the answer. The bear was not being clear, and he seemed to understand this and tried again. *Long way, far off (in) many directions. But only once (strong) and that came from above/the sky?* (impression of something both nasty and winged).

The man probed but could get little more, beyond a vague and distant sight of something with wings but not a bird apparently, glimpsed (or sensed) far off in the sky earlier in the day, and from which had emanated a powerful feeling of evil.

Filing this as one more piece of information to be mulled over later and also making a mental note to avoid going out into open areas as much as possible, Hiero repacked his possessions. Hobbling to the stream, he cleaned the blood off his weapons and sharpened both spear and knife. When he came back, he also reloaded the thrower, which had been replaced in its saddle holster.

Sitting down again, he ate some more *pemeekan* and biscuit. When he offered it to Gorm, however, the bear refused it and said he had been feeding on ripe blueberries all day. He showed Hiero where they grew nearby, and he was able to limp over and gather several handfuls for dessert. He refilled his big saddle canteen and the small emergency one strapped to his belt, and then, as the last of the light faded, took a quick bath in the brook, being careful to keep his wounded leg out of the water. Dried off and dressed again, he said his evening orisons and lay down again. There seemed nothing abroad in the night that could harm them, and the sounds of the forest were all normal. The death cry of a rabbit sounded in a nearby thicket, and the hum of many mosquitoes made Hiero unpack and draw a fine-meshed net over his upper body. Once that was done, exhaustion took over and he was asleep in a second.

The next day dawned hazy. The sun was behind wreaths of fog and low-lying cumulus clouds, and there was no wind. The air seemed damp and oppressive to Hiero, but only the normal result of a falling barometer, not from any other cause.

Once saddled, Klootz pranced a little, as if tired of simply standing around feeding himself. The man and the bear had decided to leave the stream. Their new route lay more to the south, and after another brief meal, they were off, alert but confident. Hiero's leg was now only a dull ache, and the rest had helped his tough frame almost as much as the medicinal salve of the Abbey doctors.

For five days they traveled uneventfully through the great pines and spruces of the Taig, always going south. They kept a strict watch, stayed under the trees, and used mind speech seldom, but detected nothing of any menace or importance. Game was plentiful, and Hiero was able to stalk and kill with his spear a giant grouse, as big as a child, while the foolish bird scratched away in the pine needles. He built a small fire and quickly smoked a lot of the breast, thus obtaining nearly twenty pounds of meat, which would feed both himself and Gorm for a good while.

On the sixth day, the priest estimated they had made perhaps eighty or so miles, and he began to feel a little easier. Whatever malignancy the Unclean tried to send after them now, if any, was going to have a fairly rough time in tracking them down, he thought. He had not yet learned the power and determination

of his enemies, nor had he guessed at the fury over his deed in slaying one so high in their dark councils.

Toward noon, the ground became boggy and moist. It was obvious that they were heading into either a swamp or the margin of some body of water. Hiero called a halt, stopped on a patch of dry ground, and got out his maps, bringing the bear over to consult with him while Klootz was turned loose to browse.

Ahead of them lay an enormous area, roughly given on one of the Abbey maps as a vast marsh, called by some the Palood, and both trackless and unknown. The bear's knowledge also stopped here, although he agreed with the map in that he felt the Inland Sea or a great water of some kind lay to the south, beyond a wide expanse of fen. But he had never in his life, not a long one in Hiero's opinion, traveled so far down into the unknown. Most of his information seemed to be secondhand, as indeed was the man's.

Reflecting, the priest decided to try a scan with the crystal and also to cast the symbols. He got them out, said his prayers, put on his vestments, and instructed the two animals not to disturb him.

Fixing his mind on the route ahead and staring into the crystal, he sent his thoughts out in search of a pair of eyes.

His first vision was disappointing. He found himself looking at a desolate stretch of water from very low down, apparently almost in the water itself. Nor could he see very well, since the frog, turtle, or whatever, whose eyes he had borrowed, was lurking behind a clump of tall reeds and, in addition, possessed short-range vision. Shutting his own eyes, Hiero willed a vision change, this time emphasizing height, distance, and clarity of sight. Surely, he felt, there must be a hawk or some other bird of prey quartering back and forth over the open water and marshes ahead of them.

Once again the crystal cleared, and this time the mental emphasis on height had paid off, but not at all in the way Hiero had planned!

He was indeed very high up, perhaps a mile or more, and he had an instant to note the land spread out below, the pines of the Taig fading into the great swamp, and, far off, the gleam of what could only be the Inland Sea. And his vision was now superb, much too superb! The highly intelligent mind whose eyes he had inadvertently borrowed was in turn aware of *him* instantly, and as it became aware, tired at once to find out who, what, and where he was. He was somehow linked to a furious brain which, cold and repellent though it was, was nonetheless almost identical to his own, seeking with every ounce of its being to locate his present position.

Just as Hiero broke the connection with a wrench which hurt his head, a last, close-up look through the enemy eyes showed the rounded nose of a strange craft, a thing like a huge bullet, and at the edges of his vision the beginnings of great wings, made of something like painted wood.

Flight by men was no more than a present dream of the Abbey scientists, but they were well aware that it had been a part of worldwide technology in the ancient past, and they had no doubt it could be and would be rediscovered when more urgent matters had been disposed of first. But here it was, in the hands of the Unclean! High in the blue sky of the Taig, evil and unsuspected eyes marked all the land below and now sought to trace the travelers and pin them down. And Hiero had led a deadly watcher right to his present position, at least in a way which would allow more rapid pursuit to be organized! He sprang to his feet.

"Lie down," he vocally ordered the bull, and led him under a dense clump of fir trees and with his free hand pushed Gorm the same way, urging them on, as best he could himself. The bear understood at once

and made no effort to talk with his brain. The trained morse and the untrained bear both had got the feeling of immediate and pressing danger and needed little urging to do what they were told.

Lying against the bull's side, Hiero kept the thrower cocked and ready across his outstretched legs. It was really only accurate for about three hundred feet, but it could be used for double that, and it was the most powerful weapon he had. Straining his eyes up through the canopy of needles and branches, he sought for his enemy. Presently, he saw it. Quite far up, in lazy circles, a black shape like a great falcon soared and sailed, now drifting out of sight and now moving back. The priest unpacked his seldom-used far looker, a short brass telescope, and tried to see how much of the peril he could discern. The machine, in fact an unpowered glider, a thing Hiero could not comprehend, stayed too high, however; and beyond seeing that the wings had a light bend backward, thus simulating a real bird's wings, he could learn little. *This, then, must be the thing the bear had tried to describe*, he reflected. The hunt had not been thrown off at all, but merely diffused, and despite the distance he thought he had put between them and himself, the forces of the Unclean were still on his track. He looked dismally at the ground and then at his left hand, still clenched into a brown fist.

A fist! He peered quickly out into the little clearing they had just left. The casting bowl and the pieces still lay there, and so did the crystal. He had scurried, under cover so quickly he had completely forgotten them. He was allowing the enemy to frighten him, to shake his inner confidence. He said a quick, mathematical table as a prayer and then looked down, at his now open hand and the three symbols which he had unconsciously caught up while battling in the mind of the flier high above.

First, the little Fish, an unmistakable, fork-tailed carving. It meant water, any kind of water. It also meant, or could mean, boats, docks, nets, lines, salt, and other watery concerns. It was also one of the symbols of male virility. The second symbol was the tiny Spear. It meant war, up to and including fighting of all kinds; also any dangerous hunt. The last sign was an odd one, and he had to think back to his early classwork for its various meanings, since it had never once before come to his hand, not in all his many wanderings. It was a cross, a tiny symbol of seven-millennium-old Christianity, but super-imposed on its center, where the arms joined, was the oval carving of a miniature eye. The Cross and the Eye! He felt a shiver run up his spine. This rarely turned-up symbol stood for the presence of a spiritual evil, something which menaced not just the body but the very soul.

He laid the three symbols gently on the ground and darted a look at the sky. The flier was still visible, but only just, now far away, at the limit of Hiero's vision to the north. The priest darted out into the open and retrieved the bowl and also the crystal on its wooden base. Not even an eagle could have seen a movement at that distance, he felt.

Repacking his apparatus in the bag while Klootz mumbled over his cud and the bear snored, utterly relaxed in an instant nap, the priest turned the three symbols over in his mind. He was heading for water. Even if he had tried to turn back, it was almost certainly too late. The flier knew roughly where he was and the pursuit must already have been summoned. He dared not use his looted rod to listen, for fear of being detected himself, but he was sure the ether was thrilling with the summons and exhortations of the Unclean. Leemutes no doubt were pouring from various dens in the North. But what of the South? Was a trap being laid there, or perhaps many?

The Fish, the Spear, and the Eyed Cross! Water, battle, and the coming of some spiritual bane or woe. But was that the right reading? As always, the little signs were chancy to interpret. The last sign, the Eyed Cross, could mean a grim psychic menace, but it could also mean a great sin upon the caster's own conscience, a mortal sin, in fact. *Be damned to that*, Hiero said angrily to himself. He had confessed before leaving the Republic, to Abbot Demero, in fact. And telling Leolane d'Ondote that she was going to be neither his first, second nor indeed any other wife, and further, that her talents were exclusively

prone was *not* a mortal sin, even if more than a trifle rude. That was the heaviest guilt currently on his mind.

Suppose, now, that the Spear meant a hunt and the Fish a boat? No, that was silly in his present condition. Well, then, what about other possibilities? Through the long afternoon, he turned over and over in his mind the various combinations of the three pieces. But the Eyed Cross dominated his thoughts. Deep inside him was the certain knowledge that he was not in mortal sin and that he was instead approaching some dread encounter with a great evil of the Unclean.

Determined not to expose himself to the man, Leemute or whatever, which rode the sky machine, he waited with his two allies until the sun was only a dim, red glow in the far West. Then they sallied out from the gloom of the firs and headed south into the muddy paths between the last straggling trees of the Taig.

Under the evening stars, gleaming pools of water began to appear and soon grew more frequent. The trees grew less in size, and the pines now vanished at last. Great spatterdocks and overgrown marsh plants, looming oddly in the night, began to replace them. Strange and lovely perfumes came from pale night flowers growing on the surface of muddy pools, and rank stench came from other and seemingly identical pools. Ferns, too, were increasingly large, often as high or higher than Kloodt's head, and they grew in great black clumps, some so thick that the travelers had to detour around them. The air had been growing steadily warmer for the last few days, but now it was suddenly both warm and damp, and even when perfumed, carrying a hint of fetid decay and overripe growth under the pleasant scents. They had left the Taig and its cool breezes for good and were now breathing the air of the Palood, the monster-haunted fen which for league upon league bordered the northern edge of the Inland Sea. It was a trackless, horribly dangerous waste, and only roughly defined on any map.

Even as Hiero recalled all this, a hideous, croaking bellow rang out somewhere ahead of them. It drowned the normal noises of the night, the constant hum of the swarms of insects, and the chorus of small frogs by sheer vibration.

Kloodt jerked to a standstill, and ahead of them in the dark, Gorm halted like the grotesque shadow of a distorted pointer, one foot raised, dripping from a pool of dark water. For a moment they listened and then, when no other sound came, began to move cautiously onward. Hiero's face and hands were now smeared with an insect-repelling grease, but the cloud of bugs still penetrated his clothes, and it was a sore trial not to be able to curse wholeheartedly. They had gone only a hundred feet or so when the grunting roar again broke out in the moist dark ahead of them. With it came a prodigious "splat," as if some vast platter had been slammed down hard into soft mud. The myriad small animal voices of the marsh, the night birds, frogs, and other things fell silent. Only the humming drone of millions of mosquitoes and gnats went on. The three again paused, but this time not for so long.

Behind them another awful bellow exploded in the night. The sheer volume of the second cry had to make the bulk of its owner simply enormous. And it seemed to be closer than the one in front.

Hiero looked desperately about. They were in shadows on the edge of a big patch of open, shiny mud, well lit by the bright stars above and the half-full moon. To their left and in front was only the mud, but to their right, some dark clump of vegetation rose against the stars.

Get to the right quickly, he sent to the bear and the morse. *Into those bushes or plants and lie down again. We can't face these things!*

They had barely begun to move when the growth parted on the far side of the mud patch and a face out

of nightmare leered over and down at them from a hundred feet away. Dimly, Hiero could see, the scientist still operating in his mind, that a frog or a three-quarter-grown tadpole might possibly have been its remote progenitor. The great opalescent eyes were set ten feet apart on the blunt, slimy head. The thing squatted many yards off the mud on monstrous, bowed forelegs, and horny claws tipped the giant toes. The incredible gape of the jaws now gleamed with lines of giant fangs, teeth such as no frog ever had, like a forest of ivory needles, each a foot long, glistening in the moonlight.

The morse did not move, and Gorm, almost paralyzed with fear, shrank against one of his rigid forelegs. The priest raised the thrower and took careful aim, saying a silent prayer as he did so. Even the powerful charge of the small rocket shells was simply not designed for this scale of being. Under his body, Hiero felt the bull gathering himself for an enormous leap. Kloutz's hindquarters tensed and sank down.

Wait! Hiero sent, just as Kloutz was about to explode like a coiled spring. The man had seen the attention of the monstrosity suddenly waver. It crouched as he watched, and its eyes and head shifted to the left and behind them.

Then, suddenly, it just took off. The pillarlike hind legs, no doubt the legacy of some pre-Death ravid ancestor, hurled the whole bulk of the titan, long tail trailing, past and *over* the three shrinking mammals. Before they could even blink, the weight of what must have been fifteen tons hit the mucky ground well behind them. The shock wave made the mud rise in a mighty wave, and at the same time an incredible flailing uproar broke out, great limbs kicking and tremendous bodies straining, while showers of plant matter and acres of muck were hurled into the night air. The vast creature had fallen upon another of its own kind, Hiero realized, suddenly remembering the second awful cry which had come in from their rear.

It took little urging to get Gorm and the morse away from the appalling sounds of the struggle. They galloped away through mud and slime, splashing recklessly through several shallow lagoons and over reeking patches of some evil-smelling herbage. Finally the uproar died away in the distance and Hiero commanded a halt. They now stood on a long, raised bar of packed, dried reeds, jammed together by some floor of a past year, and listened to the night.

The insect and frog chorus reverberated, but otherwise nothing else sounded or moved beneath the white moon, save for the cry of a startled heron which they disturbed. They could see quite a way in several directions, the principal obstacles to viewing now consisting of great reeds, whose clumps had been steadily increasing as they progressed. Some of the smooth stalks were two feet around, and the feathery tops towered up far over the soft up-thrust points of Kloutz's antlers. Between the reeds grew many huge mallows and stands of giant arrowweed, the triangular leaves of the latter dipping gently like fans in the gentle breeze. Lanes of still moonlit water stretched between the patches of mud and plant life, some opening into large ponds, others winding out of sight around distant corners. It was a scene of strange beauty, and even the ever-present smells of the dissolving marsh gases and rotting vegetation did not really detract from it, Hiero thought as he gazed.

With an effort, he recalled himself to the present. They were very lucky, in the headlong flight from the amphibian colossi, not to have blundered into some other and possibly worse peril. It was definitely time to pause and consider the next step. The Abbey maps were quite useless here, and Gorm was as alien to this strange country of mingled land and water as Hiero himself. What guides had they, then? They knew in which direction they wished to travel, south, and where it lay. They knew the Unclean were seemingly somewhere still on their tracks, coming from the opposite direction, the North they had left behind. The great swamp stretched before them unbroken to the horizon. The limits of its existence, both from the maps' outlines and the brief glimpse the priest had caught through the eyes of the Unclean flyer, were shorter ahead of them than to either side. The marshes might stretch for hundreds of miles in the lateral directions but barely for fifty in front, southward, if his vision was any judge, the man reflected. There

really wasn't much choice. South and through the narrowest part of the swamp the path had to go. There were sure to be dangers, but, true to his training, Hiero had selected the route which promised the most for the least, in terms of rewards and perils.

Through the remainder of the night they slowly moved on south, wading through many shallow pools and avoiding equally many deep ones. It was necessary to swim on two occasions, broad channels which intersected their path and could not be circled. In the first one nothing occurred, but as they left the second, and the dripping morse hauled himself out on the mud bank, Hiero, looking back, saw the black water heave ominously, as if something large were moving off the bottom. He had been carrying his thrower across the saddle, ready for any action, but above all he dreaded an assault from below, in which all of them would be more or less helpless. The bear he had made swim just in front of Klootz's nose, so that he could at least attempt to defend him if he were attacked.

As they now stood looking at one another, the priest could not help smiling ruefully. All three of them were soaked, and mud caked the legs of the four-foots. The clinging bog smell was vile, and there was no way of getting rid of it, not until they got out of the swamps, at any rate. One advantage the caked mud gave the animals was that it at least partially protected them from the incessant, droning attack of the mosquitoes. Slapping at himself, Hiero wondered if his protective ointment would last. He was used to bug bites, as any woodsman had to be, but the legions which rose from the Palood were something else again! To make matters worse, huge brown leeches had to be picked off the two animals at almost every stop, filthy things which haunted every pool of water.

The first day was spent huddled in a thicket of the towering green reeds. Determined not to be caught out in the open muck or water by one of the flying enemy during daylight, Hiero had hacked a careful way into the reeds which he thought unlikely to be seen from above. By the time the sun was fully up, they were well hidden in the heart of the reeds, but little more, if any, comfortable than if they had been in the open. It was a cloudless morning, and the August sun grew steadily hotter as the day advanced. The mosquitoes, shunning the light, were overjoyed to find helpless targets buried deep in the shade and attacked in new armies. Minute gnats and crawling bugs, mercifully absent during the hours of darkness, joined the onslaught and helped make them all miserable. As if that were not enough, the leeches, too, emerged from the water and, suckers waving, inched onto the three at every chance.

The man cut what he could spare from his own mosquito net and managed to rig crude muzzle screens for the two tortured beasts so that they could at least breathe in comfort without inhaling clouds of flying, stinging pests. Beyond plastering themselves with as much mud as possible, there was little else they could do. At least, Hiero thought, there was no water shortage. Where the pools were not churned up or too shallow, he had found the water to be perfectly clean and needing only to be strained once to remove insects and other vermin before being added to his canteens.

Food was another matter. There was some grouse, quite a lot of *pemeekan*, and even more of the biscuit left in the saddlebags, but he was aware that it really ought to be saved as much as possible. The morse would simply have to be allowed to feed before they started the night's journey; there was certainly enough succulent vegetation growing in or near the water. But what could the poor bear do but eat the dwindling rations along with himself? Aha! Aha!

He fumbled quickly in the near saddlebag, momentarily forgetting the insects and the cloying heat. Sure enough, the fishing equipment was still in its case. *Let's see now*, he thought, *can I reach the water from here with a throw?*

Carefully tying a shiny, weighted lure to the gut line, he threw it out into the channel which ran, brown and turbid, a few yards from the mouth of the tunnel he had carved for them in the roadbed.

On the third cast, a violent tug signified some luck; and soon a fat, striped fish, a perch of some unknown sort, he thought, weighing about three pounds, was flapping its tail on the packed mud bank. Before his luck ran out, he had caught two more of them. He gave one to Gorm, who fell upon it and seemed to find it excellent. The other two he cleaned and scaled, packing one away for later and eating one now himself. He had eaten raw fish many times before, and examination showed these not to be infested with worms, as was sometimes the case. Certainly lighting a fire would be the absolute height of folly, knowing that the heavens were no longer free of inimical eyes. He ate one of the dry biscuits with the fish and a small lump of *pemeekan*, since the fish contained no fat or oil. Then he curled up for a nap, doing his best to ignore the vermin, winged and legged, and to endure as stoically as his two allies.

At nightfall, having seen nothing of the winged watcher during the day, he told Klootz to go and eat; and soon the steady maceration of water plants added to the insect and frog drone. Some sorts of small birds appeared in quantity in the evening sky for the first time, and he could hear their many shrill calls as they hawked for insects over the marshland. He sourly felt that about eight million more of them would be needed to diminish the mosquito population in some degree. He shared two biscuits and the other fish with the small bear, who also had found and dug himself two whitish roots or tubers from the mud. Tasting one of them gingerly, Hiero felt the sting of some powerful acid and knew that he would be unable to supplement his own diet with this particular plant.

Giving the big morse an hour to feed, Hiero decided, would be about all the time he could spare. The marshes had to be traversed and the sooner the better. As things were now, they could travel only during the night, and even that time was cut into by feeding and finding shelter.

Klootz came willingly enough, and his master noticed that he had not bathed, that only his head and legs as far as the hock were wet. Since the big morse loved water and wallowed at every opportunity, this was surprising.

Something(nature unknown) *in the deep water* (under/watching), came the thought when the priest sent a question. *Bad too/ very bad (to) fight.*

This matter-of-fact statement from his mount made Hiero blink. He saddled hastily and, calling Gorm, rode to the far side of the reed island they were on. Moonlit shallows stretched away before them, broken by many mud banks, and no deep, open water was visible except far off and to one side. The man was very glad they had swum the other channel the night before and wondered what the morse had sensed lurking out there. It never occurred to him to question Klootz's judgment or his keen senses. If he said there was something bad out in the water, then there was, and if he was afraid of it, it must be pretty horrendous. It could be anything, from a colossal snapper to one of the great frog monsters they had encountered previously. *Or something nastier still*, Hiero reflected. He had wondered earlier why the flying watcher had made no appearance during the day. Perhaps the answer was too simple. The great marsh was (rightly) thought so dangerous that the Unclean either could not believe he had entered it or, if they did, were confident he would never emerge. Both conclusions made logical sense, he admitted to himself.

Once during the night they heard the vast, bellowing cry of a giant amphibian, but the sound came from far away and to one side, in the distant East. Again, later, from a tangle of tall vegetation they were skirting, there came a mighty hissing, as if the grandfather of ail snakes were suddenly angry. They made haste to leave the area, and although Hiero was careful to watch the back trail for an hour or so, nothing appeared to be following them. Gorm was very cautious in the lead, testing all the mud patches they traversed to be sure that they were not some quicksand or ooze which would sink the whole party. Twice such areas were found, but the bear seemed quite able to tell them from the rest of the landscape,

and the man gradually relaxed his fear of being mired in some sucking bog.

The damp air was stirred by fitful breezes, and ever-stranger odors came to them as they went deeper and deeper into the watery waste. It occurred to the priest, watching Klootz's broad hooves flatten on the mud, that he might well be the first man to try the swamp with both a steed who was semi-aquatic and a priceless guide and outrider such as the young bear. This might mean that they would succeed and get through where others had failed.

They spent another miserable day, this time in the rain, which fortunately was warm. Gorm had located another mound of rotted plant matter from which reeds and giant docks were growing, and once again Hiero hollowed out a cave into which they all had to crawl.

It was still raining at evening, and Hiero had caught no more fish, despite repeated efforts. He and the bear shared some grouse, biscuit, and *pemeekan*, but the animal could discover none of the roots he had found earlier. Klootz, however, seemed quite pleased with the water plants near their mound, and there was no deep water nearby, so that he was able to have a roll in the muddy shallows.

Eventually Gorm led off again, with a fine drizzle still falling and little if any light to illuminate their way. Possibly as a result, they had to swim on two occasions, though fortunately without incident.

In actuality, they were all very lucky, if Hiero had only bothered to think for a moment. For three days, they had safely penetrated the great wilderness of water and yet had seen or encountered few of the monstrous life forms which inhabited it. And despite the swarms of noxious insects which caused them all such misery, Hiero, much the most susceptible, had caught none of the sickening fevers which made even the very borders of the Palood feared.

Once again, the priest hacked away into an island of partly growing, partly dead plant matter. After adjusting the mosquito masks on the animals, he put on his own and prepared for another soggy, leech- and bug-ridden day of itching and cursing. They were camped on the edge of a dark, deep lagoon, but he ignored the black water, his wariness for once strangely lulled.

The priest was so tired, however, that he soon fell asleep, despite the bites and the steamy heat. As the day passed, he lay in a sort of drugged torpor and the two animals slept also, hardly moving and simply enduring, while even the thick mud-plastered hides of the morse and the bear were drilled again and again by the sucking worms and clouds of waiting gnats and stinging flies.

Exhausted they must all have been, but there perhaps was more to it than that. Deep in one of the saddlebags, a tiny bead of light glowed under a glass dial, brightened, dimmed, and then grew bright again. Forces and currents, invisible to the eye but nonetheless powerful, moved through the steaming fog which lay on the Palood. In dark places, unknown to normal mankind, consultations were held, fears explored, and decisions taken. Curious things stirred under the slime, and the Unclean concentrated their vast powers on the heart of the bog, where a telltale glow on one of their hidden control boards told them a deadly enemy of unknown power, a foe to their fell purposes, now lay concealed. From drowned cities, lost and buried forever under the fens and mud of the marshland, came the flicker of strange movement and unnatural life.

The morning grew old. A pale sun shone through a watery fog and yellowish vapor rack. No wind disturbed the quiet pools, and the tops of the tall reeds and docks hung limp in the mists and humid steams which rose from the surface of the great fen. Still the three drowsed on, occasionally murmuring or groaning softly in the tip of their overlong sleep. Afternoon passed and still they lay, unmoving. The light died slowly as the sun sank into the cloudy west. Now the white fogs of night began to rise from the

meres and dark waters, mingling with those left from the day, until vision shrank and one could see only in streaks where the veils curled aside before reclosing and forming new banks of haze and murk.

At this dree hour came the Dweller in the Mist. From what foul den or lurking place it issued, none would ever know. The ghastly cosmic forces unleashed by The Death had made the mingling of strange life possible, and things had grown and thought which should never have known the breath of life. Of such was the Dweller. How it had found the three, only it, or perhaps the Lords of the Unclean, could have said. Perhaps the telltale in the saddlebag helped. It had found them, and that was enough.

Some warning gave Hiero a fighting chance, some spark sent by the trained soul the Abbey fathers had taught, to the trained mind which they had disciplined. He woke, clutching the silver cross and sword upon its neck thong, and saw before him the doom which had stolen upon them as they slept.

The vapors had parted briefly over the dark lagoon which lay before the entrance to their refuge. Around a corner of the next islet of mud and reeds came a small boat. It was hardly more than a skiff, of some black wood, with a rounded bow and stern. On it, standing erect and motionless, was a figure swathed in a whitish cloak and hood. What propelled the strange craft was not apparent, but it moved steadily through the oily water, coming straight for the place where the priest now sat, staring.

Before the shrouded figure in the pale draperies, there came out a wave of fell power and evil intent which struck Hiero and piled over him like some vast and clammy net. Beside him, the two faithful beasts apparently slept on, unmoving. The force which the Dweller commanded held them in their places, if not asleep, at least numbed into unconsciousness. The man knew that something had caught them all unaware which might, in truth, destroy the bodies of the two animals, but which was really directed at him, and the aim of which was the total enslavement of his mind and soul. Here, he knew on the instant, was the embodiment of the warning given by the little Eyed Cross.

All this flashed through his mind as he prepared to do battle and the black skiff glided to a halt, nosing into the soft mud bank not ten feet from where he sat. From the place of his inner being, Hiero looked into the shadows under the pale hood; and from that caverned place, the Dweller's eyes, two pits of ocherous evil, stared silently back.

In one sense, though only the broadest, it was another mental struggle, such as Hiero had waged unsuccessfully against S'nerg.

But there were important differences. The Unclean wizard, bad as he was, was still a man, and his control owed much to simple hypnotic techniques, amplified and strengthened by years of training and practice in telepathic control. That which was called the Dweller was not remotely human, and the powers it drew upon were somehow inherent and natural to it. It sought control by a form of mental parasitism, as a vampire sucks blood by instinct, rather than by any design. Its form of attack was non-physical but two-pronged.

Hiero felt an intensification of the smothering, clinging feeling which had announced the Dweller's coming. His mind, his body, his inner processes, his center of being, felt steadily constricted and squeezed, as well as feeling a constant drain of energy. In addition, however, a subtle feeling of *pleasure* was projected at the same time, a sense that the Dweller meant all that was good and beneficial, both to his physical and to his spiritual well-being. There was a subtle biological side effect, sexual in nature, which filled Hiero's mind with mingled loathing and delight at one and the same time. The overall attack was very powerful. The psychic energy of the swamp-thing seemed almost a visible aura around its shrouded head, the bulk and shape of which, even under its wrappings, looked all *wrong* and somehow not physically possible or proper.

One hand clutching the Cross and Sword on his breast, the priest fought grimly back. The part of his total being which was being seduced by the promise of unspeakable pleasures he concentrated on memories of strength and austerity. Such were the Abbey choir services of the motet evenings, the mental courts where novices battled one another in silent struggles of the mind. He had obtained just enough time before the Dweller's net was cast to start reciting the table of logarithms with yet another part of his brain. Long ago, the Abbey masters had learned that the ancient mathematical formulas were a strong defense against mental attack. Based as they were on logic, repetition, and disciplined series, they formed a strong barrier, when properly utilized, against the illogic and confusion which, of necessity, were the chief mental weapons of the Unclean. Yet it was a struggle which Hiero felt to be steadily going against him. The draining power of the Dweller seemed inexhaustible. Each time the priest blocked off an avenue into his mind by which it tried to lure him into acquiescence, another similar attack would commence on some other flaw in his psyche. And the steady compression of what Hiero felt to be a net never ceased its remorseless constriction as well. The appeals to his gross senses and the black, strangling clutch at his thought processes seemed more and more hopeless to combat.

Yet, even as his will seemed to him to weaken, his courage and resolution actually flared higher in response to the danger. And an unexpected help came, unrealized in fact at this time, from the dead mind of S'nerg, whom the priest had slain. His struggle with the adept had given Hiero's own dormant powers a new strength of which he had as yet no conception. He battled on, therefore, no hint of yielding in his soul, determined that if this nightmare from the swamp murk were to conquer him, it would only be at the price of his death!

The physical world about him had completely disappeared. He was conscious of only the black foulness before him, the veil from which stared the twin pools of lambent horror, the eyes of the Dweller! And in those eyes he saw, or sensed, for the first time, something change, some shift or evasion. So close now was his rapport with the thing before him that he realized at once what had happened. It was no longer attacking! The doubt, faint as it was, had interfered with the stream of projections and mental bolts which the Dweller had been using, and even the tiny hesitation had broken the flow of its concentration. To gain the victories to which it had been used, weakness and weariness must help and undisciplined minds must inevitably yield to the frightful powers it both controlled and lived by.

For the first time, Hiero's mind *reached out* and, in a way impossible for a non-telepath to imagine, struck back at the Dweller. The stroke was not one of great strength, being both hesitant and clumsy. But the thing almost visibly staggered. It had never been challenged so in all its foul existence, prowling the swamp and its borders for prey. What became of its victims was best unthought. To what hell they had been lured and their subsequent fate there, no one would ever know, but Hiero always felt that some joint serfdom of physical pain and soul suffering was their fate.

Again he lashed out with a mental bolt and this time actually saw the horrid spots of spectral light which were its eyes blink in response. Gaining confidence with each probe he directed, he felt new strength surge through him. For the first time in a long while, or what seemed so, he became aware of the world about him and felt the night air on his face and saw the hooded shape before him and its place in the scheme of things, not as an inchoate force, but as a vile object to be destroyed. He next struck at the net of thought which the Dweller had tried to use to compress his mind in a cage, and one strong blow shattered the invisible bonds completely. Now, rejoicing in the clean surge of energy which he was using, he shaped a web of his own, willing the strands of psychic energy to form a pattern of power which would hold the living horror which was the Dweller enmeshed in its own turn. Remorselessly, calling on the Trinity and all the saints to aid, he began to choke the monster's mind and dark spirit as it had tried to do to him.

Neither one had moved a muscle during the encounter. But as the burning, almost tangible power of the warrior-priest began to slay the Dweller, it let out one fearful cry, a mewling sound, as if some ghastly stringed instrument, some guitar forged in the nethermost pit, had struck an impossible chord. Then, grimly, it fought for its existence. And fought in vain, for all its shifts and evasions, its counterstrokes and lurements, were to no purpose.

Fending off each rally by the mere-thing, Hiero, by the power of his trained will and armed spirit, inexorably drew the strands of his mind trap tighter and tighter. When he had bent a last effort (he thought) and still found the other's will unbroken, he breathed harder and, using his new knowledge, concentrated a dart of energy, which went through the net he fashioned in some way without disturbing it.

Once more, and for the last time, that awful mewling, twanging cry, the death scream of something never meant to give voice at all, echoed over the lonely fens.

Then—there was an instantaneous vacuum, as if a soundless bubble had burst, perhaps somewhere in another alien dimension superimposed upon ours. And then, nothing more. There was only the souging of the night wind in the reed tops, the hum of countless insect hordes, and the rasping obligate of frog voices.

The black skiff still lay nosed upon the muck, just in front of Hiero's tunnel. But no hooded figure now stood glaring in at the priest. A heap of colorless rags lay spilled half over the gunwales, and from the clothes, a sticky, oily substance was leaking, covering the now moonlit water with a foul stain. A charnel stench came from the rags, a reek which made the worst efforts of the marsh gases seem like perfume by comparison. Whatever had worn the hooded cloak had returned to its native elements, as foul in its strange death as it had been in life.

Choking at the vile smell, Hiero rose and, putting one foot on the strange little craft, gave it a hearty shove. To his amazement, the skiff did not simply glide off at the force of his push, but instead turned and moved away, in steady progress up the channel down which it had first come. He could see clearly now, for the mists had cleared while he had fought for his life, and he watched the mysterious boat, bearing the remains of its ghastly pilot, sedately turn a corner in the reed banks and vanish. In its strange going, it kept the last secret of the Dweller in the Mist.

Wearily, Hiero looked up at the white moon. The incredible struggle had gone on for at least three hours and yet had seemed like only a few moments. When the Dweller had first appeared, the last sickly light of the fog-shrouded sun still lingered in the west. But the position of the moon showed that it now was not far short of ten o'clock.

He turned and looked down at his two partners in jeopardy. For the first time, he smiled. The bear was swatting mosquitoes in his sleep and growling angrily as he did. Klootz was also asleep, but emitting gargantuan grunts and rumblings, while every inch of his great hide twitched and rippled in an effort to shake off the stinging bugs. Whatever spell they all had been under was completely lifted, that was certain.

The priest said a brief prayer of thanks while he watched the gibbous moon rise still farther. He was still somewhat bemused, and his nervous energy was a long way from returning to normal, while the tremendous dose of psychic strength he had utilized to fight the Dweller had taken a toll. He felt as if he had been riding for two days without a break, at a full gallop.

But it was not time to delay. The mystery of how the horror of the mere had found them was insoluble, at least at present, but one thing was clear, it had had help! That much he had been able to read from its

anguished brain, even as he destroyed it and sent it back to the nameless deeps from which it should never have emerged. Somehow, even though he had seen no flier, felt no follower of any kind, the three had been tracked. They must move on and at once, before fresh forces could be assembled for their destruction. Hiero felt fairly sure that the Dweller had not been able, even if willing, to summon any aid in its last moments, because he now knew the strength of the weapon which he had used to slay it. And it had been too preoccupied fighting for its unnatural life to send any messages whatsoever. But if it could find them, by whatever means, so could others. This was a matter on which he would have to take thought, but later on, not now.

He was amused that his new confidence seemed more than temporary. Beyond, and indeed underlying, the amusement was a hard-won feeling of mental power. Hiero knew, without even wondering *how* he knew, that Abbot Demero or any others of the Council would now be hard-put to stand against him. He hastily put aside such thoughts as vainglorious and impertinent, but they were still there, buried but not dead, in the deep reaches of his mind. He was learning something the Abbey scholars of the mental arts were just beginning to conceive, the fact that mental powers accrete in a geometric, not arithmetical, progression, depending on how much and how well they are used. The two battles Hiero had won, even though the bear had helped decide the first, had given the hidden forces of his already strong mind a dimension and power he would not himself have believed possible. And the oddest thing was, he knew it.

Tired, but feeling somehow wonderful anyway, he roused Gorm and the morse. The bear rose, sniffed the air, and then sent a message. *You have fought. It is in the air. (But) there is no blood (and) we have not waked. The enemy which strikes the mind? (Doubt/fear?)*

Marveling at the bear's perceptions, not for the last time, Hiero briefly told him of the Dweller and the fact that it was gone forever.

Gone, that is good. But you are weary, very!! Weary and also troubled(as to how) the enemy found (smelled out) us. Let us go. We (can) eat later.

The big morse nosed him all over and wrinkled his lip in distaste at some smell he seemed to detect on the mud-smeared leather. Hiero saddled him, picking off some more of the big leeches as he did, and in a short time they were on their way again, under the bright moon.

The night's journey was uneventful. Beyond Klootz's shying at a small water snake and Gorm's frightened avoidance of a still pool covered with the scented pale blossoms of some giant nenuphar, nothing occurred.

Dawn saw them camped in yet another clump of vegetation. But it was not a reed bed, but rather a hollow in some large, rounded bushes, with laurellike, dark green leaves. Hiero guessed, and rightly, that the appearance of these woody plants and also the solid ground on which they grew meant that at long last the Palood was coming to an end. He fell asleep as the sun rose in a clear sky. As he dropped off, he dimly heard the morse chewing his cud and, very faintly, far off in the distance, the apparent raucous screeching of many birds.

That evening, after sundown, when the three had all fed, the man and bear sharing pack rations and Klootz thirty pounds of fresh green fodder, Hiero sat for a moment before leaving. All day, while nodding drowsily in the high-cantled saddle, he had ruminated over the problem of pursuit.

How had the Dweller been led to them? The bogs and pools swallowed any tracks on the instant. No hunters trailed them beyond earshot. The three were too sensitive now to allow any undetected surveillance of that sort. Could a flier be so high in the sky at night that they, the travelers, were visible to

it? Perhaps a means of seeing at night lay open to the enemy of which the Abbey scientists knew nothing. But he had to dismiss the thought. If that were the case, there was nothing he could do about it anyway, but he did not believe it. No, the fragment of thought he had plucked from the dissolving mind of the living foulness which was the Dweller had seemed to say (or meant) that the creature had been *led* to its sleeping victims.

Led by what? The priest continued to brood as he saddled Klootz and swung up into the saddle for the night's ride. And as he rode along under the serene light of the moon and countless stars, he continued to dwell on the problem. The hunting pack of giant water-ferrets had simply followed the trail by means of their keen noses. Or had they? Had they, and perhaps the flier too, some better guide, some aid which allowed them, if not to pinpoint the exact location of the three, at least to know the general position where they might be found? "Damn it, how!" Hiero muttered aloud in vexation. "It's as if they had a string on me somehow, something on me they could follow, like a bad smell that never grows any fainter."

His thoughts shifted to the Unclean as he spoke, and suddenly he grunted at his own stupidity. Quickly he ordered a halt. They were crossing a hard-packed sandbar at the time, and the instant Klootz and the bear stopped, Hiero was down on the ground, tearing open one of the saddlebags. His hand seized what he wanted, and he pulled it out into the moonlight.

It was a moment of irritation, bitter and intense, when he held the betrayer in his hand. He smiled grimly at the realization of how the possessions of the dead adept, S'nerg, had led his foul avengers upon the tracks of his killers. The tiny bead of light in the thing like a compass glowed steadily as it rocked back and forth on its circular track. The priest needed no more proof; he *knew*.

Whatever else the curious instrument was, and it probably had several uses, it was also a "homer" of some kind, a fix which told the position of its owner to his friends so that he would never be totally out of touch. Enraged at his own folly, Hiero crushed the instrument under his heel. He had no fear of the rod and the knife, since he knew the former's powers, and the knife was simply and only that, a knife. Once more he remounted and, with a lighter heart, signaled his companions to lead off south.

Far away, in a place buried deep beyond the reach of the last, dimmest ray of the sun, a hooded figure turned from a great board of many-colored lights, and pointing to one darkened bulb which was set in a vast wire frame, showed by a shrug that it had now gone out.

4

Luchare

By the time the next dawn that they made camp, well before the rising of the sun, Hiero and the two animals could see that the great marsh was at last coming to an end. All night the hard sandbars had grown more and more frequent, steadily replacing the mud and soft muck of the swamp. Huge logs, some still bearing leaves, showed that seasonal flooding or storm-driven waters came into this area at frequent intervals. Patches of higher, firmer ground now supported stunted trees instead of the great reeds, and occasional spines of rock protruded from the ponds and channels, forming craggy islets in the wider and more open stretches. Halting on top of one of these, whose ramplike slope had tempted him to gain a better look about, the man glimpsed a number of great, domed shapes, black against the moonlit sand, moving on a beach below him. Their furious activity puzzled him until he realized that he had caught a group of snappers laying their leathery eggs in the churned-up sand. He dismounted and waited patiently, signaling the bear to do the same. After the moon reached zenith, the last of the monster turtles waddled back into the water and disappeared, their task of reproduction over for another season.

Keeping a sharp eye out for any stragglers, Hiero and the bear went down and dug up a nest they had previously marked in the moonlight as being in a shallow hole. Gorm gulped down three of the great, golden-yolked things, each an easy hand length in diameter, while Hiero spooned up one himself. But he packed the morse's saddlebags with eight more, all he could get in and then the group set off again, the bear moving rather more slowly because of his gorged stomach.

As they topped a small rise in the land, Hiero reined up. Ahead of them reared a row of dark hills which shut off the view of the country beyond. Where these mysterious mountains had come from was a puzzle to him, since they ought to have been visible a long way off and yet had not been. He decided to camp on the spot, selecting a handy cleft in a large rock which was partly overhung by vines and bushes. The puzzle of the suddenly appearing hills could wait for dawn, and that was not far away.

As the sun slowly rose, Hiero peered out and started to laugh, in both joy and relief, making the bear look curiously at him. The "mountains" he had seen a few hours before were nothing but a crest of tall sand dunes, and they were no more than a mile away, across a belt of scrub with a few streams trickling through them. He, or they, rather, had conquered the great marsh!

For a long time he lay, the morning sun warm on his tanned brow, and watched the dunes. A short distance beyond them could only lie the Inland Sea. A road led to the extreme western edge of this great body of fresh water, that is, a road from the Metz Republic, far to the northwest. But Hiero knew that he was nowhere near the place where that road reached the brawling port town of Namcush. He must be hundreds of miles further to the east, and what towns if any lay in this part of the sea or on its shores, no one really knew, beyond perhaps some few close-mouthed and suspicious merchants. The men of the merchant guilds sometimes voyaged for thousands of miles, but many of them were pagans with no love for the Abbeys, or the Republic either, or indeed any governing body, save their own loose, mercantile federation. They were not men who gave up information easily, and more than one of them was certain to be allied with, if not an actual servant of, the Unclean. Yet it was necessary to deal with the merchants, and some of them were good men who served as spies and secret messengers for the Abbeys, often earning themselves a horrible death.

It was mostly information given by trading merchants, sometimes filtered through thousands of miles of rumor, which Hiero had stored in his brain, ready for mnemonic recall whenever he needed it. But any information of the Inland Sea's eastern, central, or southern end was vague, out-of-date, and apt to be inaccurate.

A number of ships sailed the Inland Sea, some of them mere rowing barges but most with sails. Pirates manned some of them, and merchants and traders others. Sometimes it was hard to tell which was which, for, like the Vikings of remote legend, an honest merchant sometimes found a colleague in trouble too easy a bargain to resist.

Also in the deep waters and among the many islands skulked the Unclean, in strange, seldom-glimpsed craft. And there were great beasts too, lurking in the open deeps, some of which came into shallow water to seize their prey. Other vast, nameless monsters were said to be plant eaters, but were nonetheless bellicose and easily aroused to fury.

The worst of the so-called natural disasters and perils, though, were ancient, as old as the Inland Sea itself, which had once been five smaller seas, a thing the oldest of the Abbey's preserved maps clearly showed. These were the places of the cold Death, where the fires of the dreadful radiation of the last cataclysm still poisoned the air and water. Most of them had lost their once dreadful potency. Daring freebooters sometimes risked a horrible end to loot one of the Lost Cities which bordered the Inland Sea

and had been designated over five thousand years gone as First Strike targets. Some of these dreaded places were plague centers too, so that a man ran the risk of dying hideously of radiation poisoning, or, if he missed that, of some fell sickness and of passing that on to his neighbors before he died himself.

As a result, those who went to the Lost Cities, even those places judged to be cleansed by time and the elements, were apt to do so secretly, lest their fellows (unless pirates themselves) be inclined to kill them out of hand for threatening them in turn with an unpleasant death by disease.

Around the shores of the Sea and on its surface, too, roamed various groups of human nomads, some living from the water directly, as fishermen, others gleaning the refuse of the shore or doing both and living in semi-permanent camps. By all accounts, the Inland Sea and its environs was a lively place, where a man could get himself killed in a different way for each of the twenty-four hours, seven days a week, with no fear of repetition.

All this ran through Hiero's mind as he stared at the dunes and imagined what might lie on their far side. And so dreaming, he fell asleep, the sun beating down on his bearded face, tangled black hair, now stiff with filth, and his mud-caked clothes. A piece of abandoned human refuse, he looked, as he lay under the hot sun, instead of a Per of the Church Universal and an Abbey scholar of good repute.

Anxious to push on, he allowed Klootz only a short time to browse that evening. The young bear had caught Hiero's excitement and was as eager to be off as he. As soon as they had gulped a meal of five-day-old grouse (now growing a shade high) and biscuits, they set off, all feeling a sense of release after the ordeal behind them.

The moonlit scrub area which lay between them and the tall dunes proved to be mostly berry bushes, intermingled with a few low cactuses of the pincushion variety. The ripe berries, a reddish brown, were tasted by the bear, who at once began to gulp pawfuls. The big morse wasted no time in reaching out and lipping in whole branches, and Hiero, after failing to identify the fruit, nevertheless ate a pound of the sweet things himself and felt the better for it. When all three could hold no more, they ambled on, feeling much too full to set a fast pace.

The white sand dunes, soon reached, proved to be only about a hundred feet high and filled with gullies and other easy methods of gaining the top. In no time, the travelers stood at the summit of one of them and gazed in delight at the sight which lay before them, spread out clear and distinct under the soft light of the three-quarter moon.

They were gazing down at a great bay of the Inland Sea. Directly before them, below and no more than a thousand paces away, was a long, white strand, blotched and partially covered with driftwood and flotsam. Straight out to the calm south, the water lay almost motionless until the gaze met the dark horizon of night. Faintly visible to both right and left, tall, black promontories guarded the mouth of the bay, which was perhaps five miles deep and twice that wide. No breeze but the faintest, stirred, hardly enough to ruffle the man's filthy locks. The water was as calm as a bath. The Inland Sea, whose savage storms were legendary, was in a moment of repose and slept, undisturbed by any wind or other atmospheric turbulence.

But all was not lifeless. From the shore below them, and out some few leagues into the bay, great leaves, round and many yards across, floated on the smooth mirror of the water. White flowers, blooms of some enormous lily, opened here and there, and the intoxicating perfume they gave off was so strong that Hiero could almost feel the fragrance as a material thing.

In the open water between the giant lily pads, great, dark bodies noisily churned the water into boils of

foam and then vanished, only to reappear and shatter the calm surface somewhere else a hundred feet away. A herd of some enormous, feeding animals were disporting themselves, wallowing and splashing in the relative shallows near shore, and as they rose and sank, small waves rolled up the gentle beach and the huge round leaves of the lilies dipped and rocked on the water, set in uneasy motion.

Hiero sat down with a sigh to watch. His hopes of a clean bath in the sea were obviously doomed to postponement. Even allowing for the distortion of night, any one of those things down there would make four of Klootz, big as he was, Gorm and the morse sniffed the breeze in loud snorts, excited at the smells of the night and the noise of the sportive behemoths. Hiero bade them lie down and wait with him.

Presently one of the creatures emerged from the water and waddled out upon the sand directly below the watchers. It was huge, long, and low, balanced on four short, sturdy legs, each with three wide toes. There was a great, blunt head, shaped like a long-snouted keg. It yawned suddenly, displaying a pale gullet in the moonlight, which also glinted on huge tusks set at each corner of the gaping jaws. As the water ran off its great back in runnels, a short, plush coat of fur began to dry and give the animal a lighter shade of color. Something in looks like a cross between a pre-Death hog, a hippopotamus, and even a Brobdingnagian seal, what its ancestors had been was a mystery. It began to graze contentedly on some short-stemmed plants, and the contrast between its peaceable eating habits and otherwise horrendous demeanor made Hiero chuckle.

Faint as the sound was, the great beast heard it and its small ears flapped vigorously as it looked suspiciously about. Deciding the neighborhood was apparently dangerous, even though it could see nothing, it lumbered back into the water, twitching a tiny curled tail, and rejoined its fellows among the enormous lily pads.

Happening to glance beyond the herd and out to sea, the priest caught an even more wonderful sight, which left him dumb with amazement and awe.

From the quiet water out near the mouth of the bay, there soared into the moonlit night the black outline of a monster fish, long and slender with a sharp-pointed head, identical in appearance with the pike Hiero was used to hooking in every cool northern lake. For a fleeting instant he felt himself back in his piney wilderness looking at a leaping catch, not on the unknown shores of the warm sea of the South. Then, as he shook his head to clear his vision, the *scale* of what he was seeing came home to him.

"God in Heaven!" he murmured aloud. The titanic, falling shape hit the shining water with a crack which echoed like the noise of a colossal thrower shell, and the sound echoed back from the distant cliffs. *The fish he had just seen could have swallowed one of the ponderous water beasts below him in two bites!*

He looked down in amazement. A few ripples stirred the giant leaves, and tiny wavelets lapped the shore, but otherwise nothing stirred. Only streaks of iridescent oil on the dark water told him that he had not been dreaming. The advent of the leviathan he had just seen had made the herd of great water hogs vanish as silently as if they had never been there at all.

He waited with his impatient allies for a few more moments, but since the waters remained silent and undisturbed, he decided the big animals must have dived and gone elsewhere. In any event, the dirt and filth accumulated during the journey through the swamps were too unbearable to stand any longer unless absolutely necessary.

Thrower cocked and the butt resting on his hips, Hiero urged his big mount down the white face of the dune. Klootz simply sat on his broad bottom, braced his splayed-out front legs, and slid, the bear sliding

along next to him.

Once at the bottom, they all paused and looked about them, keen ears and noses testing the breeze for signs of danger. Seeing and hearing nothing, the calm bay before them still undisturbed, they tramped over to the water's edge. To the intense annoyance of the big morse, after unsaddling him, his master told him to stand guard. He stamped off up the beach, grumbling, and took a stance on a hillock of sand, shaking his still-soft antlers in anger.

Gorm waded carefully into water about six inches deep and then, lying down, began to roll over and over, emitting "whoofs" of sheer pleasure. Hiero painfully removed his filthy clothes, save for his linen and shorts, and laid them in the sandy shallows, weighted down by a large rock, to soak. He next carefully cleaned his undressed leather boots with a knife and a stiff brush, the latter taken from a saddlebag. This done, he was ready for his own bath. He also did not go very far in. He was a fine swimmer, but the recent glimpse of the local wildlife had cured him of any desire to leap out into the depths. Even where he was, he kept a wary eye out for any suspicious-looking ripples or surges. However, nothing disturbed his long-overdue wash, and he finally had had enough and came out, bringing with him the bear, whose sodden fur, pressed to his plump body, made him look a third smaller.

Grunting with joy, the big bull now rolled happily in the shallows, and chewed up several bales of the nearer lily roots and leaves when he was done, actually diving for some of them, which made Hiero very nervous. Not until Klootz too was out on the beach and drying off under the warmth of the August night did the man totally relax.

Working by feel, Hiero shaved, a rough but adequate job, and even trimmed his short mustache and his black hair also, so that it hung less heavily over his ears. With a second set of clean leather clothes from the saddlebags and his old ones now drying over some stones, he was able to enjoy the feeling of content that comes from cleanliness after a prolonged spell of enduring compulsory dirt.

A little back from the beach, a spur of gray granite thrust itself out from the sand dunes which had flowed around it over the centuries. Here, the man thought, would be a good place to camp for a day. The rock furnished a shelter on its rearward face, away from the sea, where an overhanging shelf gave access to a narrow cave.

Soon all the contents of the bags were stowed in the cave, and Hiero and the bear were snoring away in close harmony, while the faithful Klootz, chewing his cud and belching comfortably at intervals, maintained an unwearied sentinel's position just in front of the cave's entrance. Just as Hiero dropped off into a deep and untroubled sleep, he was conscious once again of the harsh, far-off screaming of many birds, and mingled with it this time, a muffled resonance, a faint vibration of some kind which he could not identify. Even while his tired brain attempted to form a coherent thought about the distant sounds, sleep overcame him.

He awoke in late morning, feeling better than he had in a week. Had *it* only been a week since he had left the unused, dusty road far to the North?

He went out of the little cleft in the rocks and found a warm, fresh breeze blowing from the lake, which was a sparkling blue, flecked with many whitecaps. Offshore, a great drift of swans was resting, honking and gabbling. They looked as if a great mound of soft snow had been sent down unseasonably from the High Arctic.

His two allies were so full of high spirits that they were playing a game out on the open sand. The small bear would charge at the morse, snarling in apparent savagery, and the big bull would try desperately to

hook him with his palmate antlers, always "missing" by a least a full bear length. When that happened, the bear would tear around in circles, trying to catch his stub of a tail, while Klootz would rear up on his hind feet and paw the air madly with his immense, bony front legs and platterlike hooves.

Hiero was so amused at the two that for a moment he forgot the possible danger of the aerial spy they had encountered previously. When he did remember, he quickly scanned the sunlit heavens, but except for a few small, puffy clouds, they were empty of motion. Nevertheless, he was disturbed. They had escaped several unpleasant deaths only by the narrowest of margins, and only a good day's ride away had he himself managed to destroy the telltale instrument which he had so thoughtlessly carried in his saddlebags. A sudden feeling of euphoria could get them all killed just as quickly as a blunder into an obvious trap. It was when you were feeling at your best that you were apt to relax, sometimes with fatal results!

He saw nothing dangerous, however, and could not help wishing he had four legs of his own so that he could join the game. As he watched, keeping a weather eye out in all directions, he thought about his further plans. For over four days the flying thing had apparently been absent. Why not try daylight travel? As they moved along the seashore, going east, it would be dangerous enough moving even in daylight, and they would need the extra vision time given by the rays of the sun. That was it, he decided. Unless he saw the flyer or found some hitherto unknown danger menacing them, they would travel by day from now on.

The two animals noticed him at this point and came gamboling over, sending up showers of sand.

Feeling good, eh, sent Hiero. You're a fine pair of guards! I could have been eaten/caught/killed by now (time past)!

They both knew he was fooling and paid not the slightest attention, except that Klootz butted him gently with his antlers, making him stagger and catch hold, lest he fall. He felt the horn, hard and getting sharper, under the soft velvet as he did so, and indeed, a piece of the latter peeled off in his hand.

Ha! hesent. Stand still, you big oaf, and (let me) try to clean you (up a bit) scrape/peel/rub.

The morse shook his head ornaments vigorously and then stood quietly while Hiero tested each section to see how loose the covering was. Like most male deer, Klootz had to grow new antlers each year, and it not only took a lot of energy but made him nervous and itched badly as well, particularly when, as now, the velvet was peeling and shredding to reveal the hard core beneath. The Abbey scientists had long ago discarded the idea of breeding the antlers out. For almost half the year they provided superb weapons of defense, and in addition, they made their wearers feel tough and confident. It was decided that the energy saved by eliminating them would be a bad bargain, and anyone who wanted to ride or drive an antlerless cow, such as most farmers used, could do so.

Hiero peeled a small amount of the covering off with his fingers, but whenever he met any resistance, let it alone. He and Klootz both knew how much help was needed and when to stop, for it had been six full seasons since they had chosen each other at the great annual calf roundup. Hiero next got out a small steel mirror and touched up his face, shaving more carefully and repainting his rank badges, now almost obliterated. This done, he repacked.

Soon they were swinging along up the edge of the beach, Hiero in the saddle and the bear lumbering over the hard-packed sand and shingle out in front. It was not long before they came upon signs that they were back in lands used by humans.

From a pile of riprap, sticks, and dried weed, which lay on the shore in a little cover, a polished human skull looked blankly up at Hiero. He dismounted and examined it thoughtfully. There was a gaping hole in the occipital region, and a few faint shreds of dried tissue there indicated the thing to be not too old. He put it down reverently and, mounting, rode on. It might be an accident, indeed there were a thousand ways of accounting for its appearance, but why a fairly fresh skull and no body at all, not even one bone? That hole looked as if something (or someone) had gone after the brains. He suppressed a grimace and said a one-line prayer for the repose of the skull's owner, assuming charitably that the man (or woman) had been a Christian.

They rested briefly at noon in the shade of a large, leaning tree of a variety new to Hiero. He recognized it as a palm of some unknown type from pictures he had seen and realized that winter could hardly be too severe in these parts if such a plant could endure it. The scrub palmettos of the Taig were able to grow only through buried trunks. He must be even further south than he had realized.

During the still heat of early afternoon they had one encounter with a foe, but it passed off without doing any harm. Rounding a shoulder of rock, and actually in shallow water, since the beach had briefly disappeared, they suddenly found a large, black-spotted, yellow cat tearing at a carcass on the next patch of open sand.

The big cat raised bloody fangs and snarled in angry warning.

Go! Suddenly deciding to test something, Hiero used a bolt from his new armory of mental weapons. *Leave! Out of our way or you will die!*

The animal cringed as if hit a blow by a stick. Its ears flattened, and emitting a frightened "miaow," like a vast kitten which had been spanked, it left the beach in one huge bound and vanished into the dunes in a second. Hiero was thunderstruck at his own success and then burst into laughter.

He got off and picked up the carcass, a small, striped antelope of some sort, hardly touched by the cat. It must have just been beginning to feed. Here was easily obtained food for himself and Gorm! He slung it carefully before him on the saddle. Klootz did not ruffle a long ear. Blood was nothing new to him, and he had carried far worse burdens than this one.

Sometime later, the priest, idly glancing out to sea, reined his mount up sharply, making him snort with annoyance. *Sorry, an accident*, Hiero sent absently. Far out on the blue, wave-flecked water, two small, black triangles were outlined against the horizon. The ship was moving along in the same direction they were, the man decided after watching it for a few moments, but far faster. Also, it seemed to be going away as well as east, so that even as he watched, it sank below the edge of the sea.

As he rode on, he made a note to keep more of an eye seaward. A telescope could probably pick Klootz and his rider out a long way off, and he had no desire to end up in one of the pagan galleys he had read of, chained to an oar with a whip instead of meals. Also, the Unclean had ships too, of some curious types, and they were supposed to haunt little-used parts of the vast freshwater sea.

They were approaching a dark promontory of rock some hundreds of feet high which projected out into the water for a short distance when the noise first came to them. It was late afternoon by then, and they had seen nothing of note for a considerable time. Hiero was wondering how deep the choppy water was at the foot of the rock massif and whether the going would be safer, if more time-consuming, inland when the rattling, screeching cry, the noise of a bird redoubled tenfold, fell upon his ears. Again, and yet again, it rang out, and then he saw it.

Briefly, over the crest of the towering, jagged rock in front of them, soared a brown bird whose saillike wingspread could not have been less than thirty feet. Before it dipped down again on the far side of the peak, it opened its long, hook-tipped beak and let out a repetition of the scream he had just heard. Other echoing screams answered it, and told him that more than one of the great birds were aloft just out of sight.

Then, mingled with the rasping cries of the birds, an unmistakable drum thundered out, a long roll of muffled thunder. When it ceased, he heard the massed yelling of a horde of people mixed with the piercing cacophony of the birds. Again the great drum rumbled, silencing for a moment the other noises. This was the noise Hiero had heard the previous dawn!

By this time, at his master's urging, Klootz was racing for the seaward base of the jutting rock. Behind him, tongue lolling out, Gorm galloped, laboring to keep up.

Not curiosity alone impelled Hiero to goad the morse on. The base of the rock was an obvious place to hide, should one of the huge birds sight him. The look of that immense hooked beak was dismaying, and the priest had no belief in his invulnerability from a flock of things that size.

Splashing through the shallows and circling the water-lapped boulders at the foot of the precipice, man and morse picked their way around the looming granite elbow and finally, both cautious, peered around the outer rim to see what had caused all the peculiar noises. Behind them, allowing them to brave whatever danger there might be, the young bear paused, waiting on events.

The first thing Hiero was conscious of was the stake and the girl; the next, the great birds; and last of all, the spectators. He did not at first notice the shaman, or witch doctor, and his crew.

A short stretch of curved beach sloped gently away from the sea, up to a high and artificial-looking bank of packed earth which backed the beach, cutting off any glimpse of further inland. A sort of arena, or amphitheater, was thus formed, one side wall being the cliff around which Hiero and Klootz now peered, the other being a similar, abrupt, rocky hillock a few hundred yards away. The sea, lapping at the white sand, formed the fourth side. The little beach was swept spotlessly clean, only the tall, wooden stake in the center interfering with the symmetry of the smooth, white sand.

Tied to the stake by a length of supple, twisted rawhide perhaps fifty feet long, was a very dark-skinned, almost naked girl. A scanty rag about her loins was her only garment, and her feet were bare. Her massed, tightly curling black hair tossed freely in the vigor of her movements. The rawhide was tied tightly to another lashing which secured both her wrists together in front of her. As a result, she could run, leap, dodge, or hide, turn or fall, but only in a fifty-foot arc around the wooden stake. She was doing all these things, her body a sweat-oiled blaze of dark movement as she sprang and crouched, ducked and spun, in her hopeless battle against the winged death.

The great birds! There were about eight of them, Hiero saw in one glance. Somewhat like giant gulls, but brown, not white, and with savage beaks, they circled and wove, always slashing down at the leashed prisoner. Like gulls too, their great feet were webbed, and thus they seemed only to use their murderous beaks as weapons. But that was enough. Despite her most desperate efforts, it was obvious the girl could only hold them off a little longer. As he watched, she scooped fine sand into her bound hands and hurled a cloud of it at the head of a swooping flier, which shied off with a scream of rage. But a long, bloody wound on her glistening back showed that the girl had not warded off all the attacks from above.

As the bird sheered off, the crowd let out a yell of derision. They made Hiero look at them then, with more than a passing glance. They sat in wicker-roofed lines of dirt seats, arranged in tiers on the earth

back at the rear of the arena they had so obviously created. The roofs were not because of the sun, obviously, but rather to keep the birds from selecting an impromptu victim from among the screaming audience.

They were very light-skinned, Hiero saw, an archaic human stock he had only glimpsed among the southern traders once or twice, or else learned of through the old books, and many of them had light brown or even blondish hair. All, men, women, and children, seemed to be half-naked and all were armed, no doubt as extra insurance against the birds. They were waving every type of sword, spear, and axe as they yelled a raucous encouragement to the flying deaths.

To one side, a group of kilted men, hideously masked and with towering plumes of feathers, presided over a bank of giant, polished drums. These people had no protection from the birds and apparently no fear of them either. Now, as Hiero watched, they bent to their drums and, under the direction of the most gorgeously masked and feathered, the obvious high priest, beat out another rumbling roll of thunder on the tali, black cylinders. The audience screamed anew, and their cries were taken up by the birds, who swooped again, their shrieks drowning out the human yowling. Then, suddenly, all noise ceased, and the arena was silent in shocked surprise at what they now saw.

Hiero had ordered Kloodt to charge and unlimbered the thrower almost without thinking. He also held two more of the tiny rockets in his mouth, praying he might get a chance to reload. As the bull morse tore out of the shallows and around the corner of the cliff, his rider noted in passing that a group of swarthy men, in good cloth clothes and leather hats quite unlike the rest of the audience, occupied the seats nearest to his end. Like all the others, they were gaping in amazement.

The great birds, seeing the charging bull and his rider as some terrible combined beast, flared lightly up like great feathers from their attempted kill. All except one, which was so intent upon the girl that it noticed nothing else.

She had fallen in a wild leap, and in falling had apparently knocked all her wind out. She was crawling, but as the bird sailed down, she seemed to sense it and turned face up with her bound hands raised in front of her.

She's still trying to fight, the priest thought in admiration. *That's really a tough one*. He was aiming his thrower as carefully as was possible, to intersect the great bird's swoop, Practice over a long period of time in handling all of his weapons while mounted made this sort of thing a matter of trained reflex, but never exactly what could be called easy. One went through the proper motions and then simply prayed.

The prayer or the training, possibly both, worked. The propel-lant fired perfectly, and the rocket hit the bird monster smack between the shoulders. There was an incandescent blaze of white fire and the two great, brown wings, no longer connected to one another, sailed to the ground, a few charred rags drifting away from between them.

Hiero had slashed the leather thong connecting the girl to the post and pulled her across the saddle on top of the stiffening antelope carcass before the still-stunned audience began to wake up. Circling high above, one of the great birds screamed once, fearful of coming lower or perhaps mourning the death of a mate.

As if the cry were a signal, an answering yell of rage broke from the flock's aroused patrons. Mounting in one movement, Hiero knew his spell was broken and that a shower of lethal missiles was next on the agenda.

"Travel, boy!" he shouted aloud, whacking Klootz with the wooden stock of his thrower. Only as he yelled did he remember the two shells in his teeth and the fact that in yelling he had to let them fall. He bolstered the thrower, pressing the girl tightly to the pommel with his left hand. Fortunately, she was either stunned or had good sense, for she made no move and lay absolutely limp, face down.

As they raced in the only possible direction, the water's edge at the far side of the arena to the east, Hiero saw the first spear hit the sand by one of Klootz's great legs. The next instant he heard the whistle of more, and worse, of arrows, one of which buried itself in the thick saddle with an audible "thunk."

But his chief attention was ahead. The tall, plumed priest who led the drummers had abandoned his drums and, followed by his gaudily dressed followers, was rushing down to block their escape. As they neared him, the rain of arrows ceased, since the crowd did not wish to kill their own men.

The priest ran well in front of his men, waving a long sword, and Hiero made a very quick decision. The high shaman had discarded his mask; in the pale, narrow face and blazing blue eyes, Hiero read both fanaticism and intelligence. This was not a follower one needed or wanted. The man could have been avoided, but weakening the opposition was a better strategy.

Kill him, Klootz! he sent, even as he tightened his grip on the helpless girl, for he knew what was coming.

The great bull swerved slightly to the left and ran as if to pass just in front of the leader of the enemy. The shaman, fearful of missing his blow, ran a trifle harder. And as his arm went back for a hard cut, he died.

With hardly a break in his stride, the battle-trained morse lashed out in one of his awful, stiff kicks, using his giant left foreleg. The terrible hoof took the priest squarely in the stomach and hurled him, broken-backed and gushing his life blood away, back into the arms of his followers. The morse raced on, and before the first yell of rage and despair had rung out, he was already in the shallows and thundering around the wall of the eastern cliff.

To his delight, Hiero saw that the empty beach stretched for miles into the distance before them. Nobody on foot was going to catch them now, and he urged Klootz on, hoping to make the lead as long as possible. The only obstacle he could see was a small river, whose waters glinted in the late afternoon sun about a half mile off. It did not look particularly wide or deep, and he felt sure that only the middle would require swimming, if indeed any of it would.

He looked back and saw a few black figures on the sand near the cliff, waving their arms and leaping up and down, and he smiled in contempt. Then, as the act of looking back made his memory work, a sudden thought came to him. Gorm! Where was his friend and guide? Had he been slain? Even as he thought this, his mount caught the thought and answered, once again surprising the priest with the realization that he would probably never know just how smart Klootz was.

He(will)follow/track/smell out (later), came from the morse's mind. *He goes (away) not/near water.* Having delivered this message, the morse lapsed into silence and once more concentrated on running steadily over the long, white strand toward the rapidly approaching river.

The shrill screech of one of the giant birds came to Hiero and he looked up quickly, wondering if they were going to attack or could be somehow controlled, perhaps by the priests. He could not take time off from his escape to concentrate mentally and probe the bird minds, or indeed any minds at this point. He had not forgotten the lonely skull and the hole in its back where a great beak had almost certainly probed. To his relief, the little flock of remaining birds was circling far above, and even as he watched,

they flew out to sea, no doubt heading for some distant island rookery. The interruption of their routine of human sacrifice apparently had confused them and rendered them incapable of further harm.

A torrent of high-pitched, angry, and unintelligible speech suddenly broke out from the rescued prisoner, and at the same time she began to kick and squirm vigorously. Hiero reined up and looked around. The river was a few hundred yards off still, and the antlike figures of their enemies were barely visible in the distance behind them.

"I might as well free you, young woman," he said aloud, and hauled the girl upright, turning her as he did, so that she sat facing him over the front of the saddle, the dead antelope serving as a seat for her. He had been reaching for his belt knife to cut the leather which still bound her wrists together, but at the first good look at her, his hand stopped and he simply stared. Quite unabashed, she stared back.

She was totally unlike anyone he had ever seen before, but in spite of that, lovely, in a rather wild and untamed way. Her skin was far darker than his, a warm chocolate, as contrasted with his copper color, and her great, dark eyes were no lighter in shade than his own black. Her nose was moderately long and very straight, her nostrils quite widely flared out, and her dark lips very full and pouting. The great mass of her hair was a tangled, uncombed heap of tight, almost screwed, black curls, each of which looked like black wire. Her firm, brown breasts were not large and gave the priest the feeling that she was considerably younger than he had first supposed. Metz women covered their upper bodies, but he instinctively sensed that nakedness meant nothing to this one. He doubted somehow that the loss of the very short and ragged skirt she wore would have bothered her at all.

She had been studying his bronzed, hawk-nosed face, with its short, black mustache even as he had studied her, and now she held up her bound hands and said something impatient in her unknown language. Obviously, she wanted to be cut loose; Hiero did so and then lifted her again and turned her forward, so that she now sat astride in front of him, facing in the same direction. He noted in doing so that her slim waist seemed to be muscled with steel and leather.

Once again he urged Klootz on toward the river. For some reason he could not fathom, some thought at the very back of his mind, the sight of the not-very-imposing stream disturbed him. It was as if some important fact were tied to it which it was necessary to remember. Something to do with the people back there, perhaps? *Now what the devil was it, anyway?* A feeling of guilt at risking the possible success of his whole venture at a moment's hazard for a girl he had never seen before? Could it be that? *No, not that, damn it, the river. Think of the river!*

The flash of mnemonic lightning hit his mind a bit late, in fact, just as they reached the river's brink and saw the long, log canoe, hard-driven by a dozen paddlers, sweeping down the muddy center channel at them. As the white-skinned rowers spotted them, a fierce yell rang out, and they bent even harder to their paddles.

The village, of course! Hidden from any sea raiders, it must lie up this river, since he had not passed it earlier. What had been plaguing his mind was the buried realization that there had to be a village close by from which all those women and children could have walked. Now a message had been sent to the village guard, perhaps, indeed almost certainly by crude but adequate telepathy. This art was common not just in Metzland, but among almost all living people at least in some small degree. The savage priests were probably pretty good.

As all this flashed through his mind, he was feverishly loading the thrower and at the same time kicking Klootz into the water. If they got trapped on this bank, . . . ! Better now to take a chance in the water. The channel was probably only a few yards wide; once they were across, the level beach stretched on

out of sight, empty and inviting.

In front of him, saying nothing, the girl reached down and lifted the broad spear out of its saddle sling. The casual arrogance of the gesture made Hiero grin in spite of their predicament. This was indeed a tough, young animal!

Hiero's luck with the thrower ran out this time, but it was partly his own fault, as he was the first to admit. He waited too long to fire, so that when Klootz stepped off into the channel at the exact instant the rocket shell ignited, the aim was hopelessly spoiled. Not only that, but the canoe was too close to allow a reload, its sharp prow thrusting down upon them in midstream, even as the morse swam mightily for the shallower water on the other side.

But they had never seen, let alone fought, a morse before, nor had they any conception of the deadly Abbey killer teams of morse and man. Hiero threw both arms around the girl, gripped tight with his legs, and ordered Klootz to dive. *Dive, boy, down!* his mind sent. *Come (up) under them!* As the bull porpoised down under the surface toward the oncoming canoe, Hiero saw the slack-jawed surprise on the faces of the pale savages, several of whom had dropped their paddles and had lifted weapons for the kill.

Klootz, through cleverness or luck, Hiero never would learn, came up gently, though firmly, from off the river bottom, which was not far under. Hiero, eyes shut, crouching over his rescued prize in an effort to shield her, felt the bottom of the canoe slide off his own back, pressing him down even harder, flattening him on top of the girl and the dead antelope. When the sliding canoe hit his crupper, though, which was the next thing to happen, Klootz abandoned gentleness and simply heaved up with all the enormous power in his great hindquarters.

The two half-drowned humans and morse erupted out of the water and into the light as the loaded canoe, hurled straight up in the air, broke and threw its occupants in various directions into the churning water. They could all swim and there seemed to be none dead, Hiero noted in relief as Klootz splashed through the muddy shallows and out on to the eastern marge. The priest could be ruthless enough to enemies of decent humanity and the Abbey, but he disliked killing men and women whose chief fault was ignorance, for which they ought not to be blamed.

Amid spluttered cries and curses, whose nature was evident from the looks and gestures of those who made them, the morse again bore his two riders away down the strand into the east.

The long rays of the half-set sun cast gigantic shadows before them as they went. Hiero now had released his death grip on the girl, and she sat firmly in front of him, apparently none the worse for the experience. The cut on her shoulder and back had begun to bleed again, though, and he signaled the morse to come to a halt after a mile or two. Lifting her down, he smiled as he saw that she still clung to the spear.

"You can put that back," he said, pointing at the saddle socket in which it belonged.

She gabbled something, looked about, shrugged as she saw no visible danger, and (reluctantly, he thought) restored the weapon to its place.

As Hiero got out his medical kit, she watched with interest, and when he indicated that he wanted to sew up the lips of the wound before bandaging it, she merely nodded. Whether this indicated native trust, ignorance of suturing, or what, Hiero had no idea. Even with the Abbey's salve it was a painful process, but aside from tightening her lips once or twice, she gave no sign that it hurt. Finally the wound was

stitched and bandaged, and the priest lifted her up on the morse again, while he repacked his belongings. When he was through, he noticed that she was leaning over Kloutz's long neck and scratching behind his flapping ears, something he loved dearly. Hiero gave her another good grade for liking and understanding animals.

Once mounted, he looked back, but he could see no sign of pursuit. Inland rose the same lines of dunes which had accompanied them all the way so far, except where the rock spines of the subsoil broke through, and he felt sure the swamp began and still stretched endlessly on, only a few miles beyond that.

It was late evening now, the low clouds red in the west and the sun's disc altogether gone. It was high time to look for a campsite, but they had only come a few miles and he had no idea how good the savages were at tracking. His decision to kill the shaman might have merely enraged them instead of helping to hinder pursuit by forcing them to mourn ritually the death of a leader. The girl, too, ought to have rest and food very soon. She might be as tough as she appeared, but what she had been through that day would have tired a strong man. The priest himself felt weary and he had endured far less.

Another hour's ride, and in the full dark, more water loomed up. It was impossible to see how broad it was, and it would be insane to try swimming it in the dark. Reluctantly, Hiero turned the morse inland, following the bank of the stream or inlet, and keeping double watch in case anything large came out of it and wanted dinner.

Their progress was necessarily slow and grew slower yet as cacti, vines, and woody plants grew more common. Eventually, peering about on the side away from the water, Hiero caught sight of a dark hillock somewhat to their left. He steered Kloutz that way and to his surprise found that the "hillock" was an enormous, rounded bush or low tree, about forty feet high, with a stout, central trunk. Its branches hung nearly to the ground and provided as close to a natural tent as one could hope to find.

Once "inside," after they had unloaded and unsaddled the morse, Hiero dismissed him to feed and mount guard, simultaneously. He decided to risk a very small fire of twigs, and after he had gathered them and got it lit, realized that no good reason for it existed, save to look at the girl. This discovery annoyed him.

She had sat quietly, arms around her knees while he unloaded and puttered. As he got food from the packs and water from the big canteen, she accepted a share in silence, but made no effort to talk. Eventually, the short meal over, she brushed a few crumbs from her lap and once again stared levelly and impersonally at him over the light of the wee fire. It was obviously time for some attempt to communicate.

Actually, it took only four tries. She did not speak Metz or Inyan of the western type, or understand the silent sign language. But when Hiero tried *batwah*, the trade language of the merchants, she smiled for the first time and answered. Her accent was very odd, if not downright bad, he thought, and many of her nouns were utterly strange to him. He guessed, rightly, as it proved, that he came from a place at one end of a very long trade route and that she was from far off, either near or at its other extremity.

"What kind of man are you?" was her first remark. "You look something like a slaver, like those who sold me, but you ride that wonderful fighting animal, and you got me away from those pale-skinned barbarians. But you owe me nothing. Why did you do it?"

"Let's have a few facts first from you," he countered. "What's your name and who are you and where do you come from?"

"I am Luchare," she said. Her voice was rather high-pitched but not nasal. She spoke with pride, not arrogance, just pride. *I am who I am*, was the unspoken message, that of one who valued herself. Hiero

liked her, but kept that fact to himself.

"Very interesting, Luchare," he said, "and a pretty name, no doubt of it. But what about my other questions? Where is your home? How did you get here?" *And what am. I to do about you?* was the unspoken one.

"I ran away from my home," she said. Her voice, like his, was now flat and emotionless, but she watched him carefully, her eyes bright in the firelight. "My home is far off, far beyond this sea. I think there." She turned and pointed unerringly to the northwest, in the direction of the Republic.

"I think it unlikely," the priest said in a dry tone, "because that's where *I* come from, and I never heard of anyone like you before. But don't worry about direction," he added in a voice he tried to soften; "that's not important. Tell me about your country. Is it like this? What are your people like? You called those white people who set the birds on you 'barbarians.' That's an odd term for a slave girl to use."

Their conversation, it may be added, was not at first this smooth and continuous. There were many gaps, fumbblings for alternate terms, corrections of pronunciation, and explanation of new words. But both were highly intelligent and quick at adapting. As a result, it went at an increasing rate of progress.

"My people are a mighty and strong one," she said firmly. "They live in great cities of stone, not dirty huts of hide and leaves. They are great warriors too, and not even the big, homed one could have saved you as he did this afternoon if it had been they you fought."

Just like a woman, Hiero thought bitterly; *give Kloodt all the credit*. "AM right," he said, "your people are great and strong. But what are you doing here, which I gather must be a long way off from wherever you started?"

"First," she said firmly, "it would be more correct if you told me who *you axe*, where you are from, and what rank you held in your own country,"

"I am Per Hiero Desteen, Priest, Scholar, and Senior Killmanof the Church Universal. And I fail to see why a bare-rumped chit of a slave girl cares what the rank of the man who has rescued her from an exceedingly nasty death is!" He glared angrily at her, but he might as well have spared himself the effort.

"Your church can't be all that universal," she said calmly, "if I haven't heard of it. Which is not surprising, since it just so happens,

Sir Priest, that we happen to have the only true church in my country, and if someone went around looking like you, with silly paint on his face, saying he was a priest, they'd put him in the house for mad people. And furthermore," she went on in the same flat, lecturing voice, "I was not always a slave girl, as any man with breeding, sense or manners could tell who looked at me!"

Despite his Abbey training in handling people, Hiero found her very annoying. "I beg your pardon, your ladyship," he rejoined acidly. "You were, I suppose, a princess in your own mighty kingdom, perhaps betrothed to an unwelcome suitor and forced to flee as a result, rather than marry him?"

Luchare stared, open-mouthed at him. "How did you know that? Are you some spy of my father's or of Efrem's, sent to bring me back?"

Hiero in turn stared back hard at her, before laughing in a nasty way. "My God, you've grabbed up the fantasy of every girl-child who has first heard the legends of the ancient past. Now stop trying to waste

my time on this silliness, will you? I want to know about wherever you come from, and I solemnly warn you, I have my own methods of finding out, even if the manners you boast of, plus a little common gratitude, don't get me the answers I want freely given! Now start talking! Where in the known universe do you come from, and if you really don't know even that, at least tell me the name of the place, what it's like, and how you got here!"

The girl looked at him darkly, her eyes narrowed as if in thought. Then, as if she had come to a decision, her face cleared, and she spoke reasonably and in softer tones.

"I am very sorry, Per Hiero—is that right?—I honestly didn't mean to be rude. I've made believe I was someone extra important so long that it's hard to be normal again. I come from a country which I guess is south of here, only, as you saw just now, I don't know where south is. I did really live in a city, and the country, especially the wilds, is not what I'm used to. Oh, yes, my country is called D'alwah, and part of it lies on the coast, the salt sea of Lantik, What else did you want to know?"

"Well," Hiero said more cheerfully, "that's quite a bit better. I'm not really as nasty as I just sounded. Only remember that I'm fond of straight talk, my girl. Save the fairy tales for the kids from now on and we'll get along. To start with, how did you get into the fix where I found you?"

As the tiny fire grew dimmer, until it was only an unregarded, winking ember, Luchare spun her tale. Hiero still believed not more than two-thirds of it, but even that was interesting enough to hold him riveted.

Judging from her description, she did indeed come from the far South and East, in fact just about where he himself wanted to go. Which made him listen to every word she dropped with extra special attention.

Her country was a land of walled cities and giant trees, a tropical forest which reached up to the very sky. It was also a land of constant warfare, of blood and death, of great beasts and warlike men. A church and a priesthood not too unlike that of the Abbeys, so far as he could gather, governed the religion of the people and preached peace and cooperation. But the priests were seemingly incapable of stopping the constant warfare between the various city-states. These states were socially stratified, with castes of nobles, merchants, artisans, and peasants, plus autocratic rulers. There were standing armies, just as large as could be economically maintained without crippling their respective countries through taxation exacted from the peasants to maintain them.

Hiero was frankly incredulous. "Can your people read and write?" he asked. "Have they any of the old books of the past? Do you know of The Death?"

Of course they could read and write, she retorted. Or at least the priesthood and most of the nobles could. The poor were kept too busy to learn, except the few who got into the church. The merchants could do simple, practical arithmetic. What more was needed? As for The Death, everyone knew about it. Were not many of the Lost Cities nearby, and some of the deserts of The Death too? But books from the pre-Death age were forbidden, except perhaps to the priesthood. She herself had never seen one, though she had heard of their existence and also that anyone who found one had to turn it over to the authorities on pain of death.

"Good God!" the Metz exploded. "Your people—and I'm assuming that most of what you've told me is the truth—have picked up all the discarded social junk of the dead past at its worst. I knew some of the traders down here had slaves, but I thought they were probably the most primitive people we knew about. The Eastern League at Otawah can't have heard about you either, because they're not far behind us. Kingdoms, peasants, internecine warfare, armies, slavery, and general illiteracy! What your D'alwah

place needs is a thorough housecleaning!"

His obvious disgust silenced the girl, who bit her full lower lip in anger at his open contempt. She was nothing near being stupid, and she knew that her strange rescuer was both a clever and, more, a learned man. For the first time in a long while, Luchare began to wonder if her longed-for homeland was quite as perfect as her dreams made it.

"I'm sorry," Hiero said abruptly. "I was rude about your country, and you had nothing to do with making it the way it is. I've never seen it, and it's probably a very nice place. It sounds interesting, anyway. Please go on with your own story. I'd like to hear what brought you so far from the Lantik Sea. I know how far away *that* is, at least up in the North."

"Well," she began, a little doubtfully, "I ran away, from my—my slave master, who was cruel to me. I really did," she said earnestly, her dark eyes large in the dim light.

"Oh, I believe you. Go on from there. How long ago was that?"

It had been well over a year, Luchare thought. It had been hard at first, and she had learned to steal food from peasant huts. Wild animals had almost caught her on several occasions, but she had got toughened up and had weapons too, also stolen, a spear and a knife. She had lived thus on the cultivated lands at the edge of a great jungle for several months, until one day she had fallen from a tree, breaking her ankle. While waiting for the inevitable prowling animal to find her, an Eleveners had come instead.

"What, you have them too?" he interrupted. "I had no idea they went so far. What do they do in your society? Are they well thought of, do people trust them?" He was really excited, for here at last was an actual link between the two widely separated areas from which they came.

The "Eleveners," the mysterious followers of the so-called Eleventh Commandment, were a group of wandering men whose little-known order dated back to The Death itself and perhaps even before. They wore simple clothes of brown cloth, were strict vegetarians, and carried no weapons beyond a belt knife and a wooden staff. They seldom appeared in groups and indeed were usually alone. They wandered from place to place, harming no one, occasionally doing some work for keep, teaching children their letters or watching flocks. They were skilled physicians and always ready to help the sick and injured. They hated the works of the Unclean, but sought no trouble with anyone, unless actually attacked. They had strange powers over animals, and even the Leemutes usually avoided them.

No one knew where their headquarters was, or even if they had one, nor how they were recruited or where. They seemed to be utterly apolitical, but many of the Metz politicians and even some of the Abbey hierarchs distrusted and disliked them. When pressed, such people could never say why, however, except that the Eleveners "must be hiding something." For they were no Christians, or if they were, they concealed it well. They professed a vague pantheism, in line with their ancient (apocryphal, the Abbey scholars said) commandment: "Thou shalt not destroy the Earth nor the life thereon."

Hiero had always liked the ones he had met, finding them merry, decent men who behaved far better than many of the self-proclaimed leaders of his own country. And he knew, too, that Abbot Demero both liked and, more important, trusted them.

He was leaning over, intent on further questions, when, with a strangled cry, Luchare sprang over almost dead coals right into his arms, knocking him flat on his back in the process.

5

On To the East

Look out!" she yelled. "A monster behind you! I saw it! Something black with long teeth! Get up and fight, quick!"

It had been over three weeks since he had even spoken to a woman, Hiero reflected, as he held her warm body tightly and made no effort to move. She smelled sweetly of girl, perspiration, and something else, something wild and fierce.

"That's my bear," he said mildly. "He's a friend and won't hurt you!" As he spoke, his mouth was pressed against a mass of warm, scented hair and a soft cheek. Hiero had detected Gorm some ten minutes back and sent him a mental order to stay outside the tree's domed shelter, but the inquisitive young bear had wanted to look at the stranger.

Luchare pushed herself off him and glared down at his smiling face. "So, what they say about priests is true, eh? A bunch of lazy womanizers and sneaking skirt-lifters! Don't get any clever ideas, priest! I can defend myself and I will, too!"

Hiero sat up and brushed himself off. Next, he carefully threw a few more twigs on the fire, so that it flared up, illuminating his copper skin and high cheekbones.

"Now, listen, young lady," he said, "let's get everything straight. I was the one jumped on just now, not the other way around. I'm a healthy, normal man, and regardless of what takes place down south in your peculiar-sounding country, Abbey priests have no vows of celibacy and are, in fact, usually married by my age, at least twice! However we do have rather firm rules against rape and any similar forced consent. Also, I am not in the habit of making love to children and rather think you're about fifteen. Am I right?" As he spoke, he was patting Gorm, who had now crawled all the way in and was lying with his head in the man's lap, peering shortsightedly at the girl across the fire.

"I'm seventeen, almost eighteen," she said in indignant tones, "and priests aren't supposed to go around with women; at least ours don't. Who ever heard of a married priest?" In a lower voice, she halfway apologized. "I'm sorry, but how was I to know? You never said anything about that new animal. And how did you know he was there, anyway? I heard nothing and I have good ears."

"I accept the apology," the priest said. "And I might as well interrupt your story briefly and spell out a few more things, since we're apparently going to be traveling together for some time, until I can figure out what to do with you. Does anyone in your country have the ability to speak with his mind? That is, send silent thoughts, so that without using his, or her, voice, another person or perhaps an animal can understand him?"

Luchare drew back, lips parted slightly, her dark brown skin reflecting the firelight in soft, shadowed movements.

"The Unclean, the evil monsters from the days of The Death, are said to do this thing," she said slowly. "And there are many rumors, which I know now to be true, that they are ruled by the most wicked of men, horrible sorcerers, who also have this power. An old church priest who taught me my lessons, a good man, said that such powers of the mind might not themselves be evil in theory, but that in actual practice only the Unclean and their devils seemed to know how to make use of them." Her eyes

brightened suddenly, "I see! You knew the animal was out there by thinking to him! But you are not one of the—" Her voice failed as she realized that she might be in the presence of one of the nightmares of her childhood, a wizard of the diabolic enemy!

Hiero smiled cheerfully. "Unclean? No, Luchare, I'm not. And neither is Gorm here." *Gorm, go over slowly, lie down, and put your head in her lap. She has (never) seen a bear (I think?) or believed (been taught) in thought/speech/mind sending. We'll (have to) teach her, like a cub.*

The slim, dark brown girl sat, frozen, as the small bear ambled over and did as he had been directed. But when a long, pink tongue came out and gently licked her hand, she relaxed a little.

"You—you told him to do that, didn't you?" she said in a shaky voice. "You really can talk to him, just as you do to me?"

"Not as easily, no. But he's very clever; in fact, I'm not sure exactly how clever he is. He's really something almost as new to me as to you, and we've only been together a week. Now Klootz, my bull morse, the big fellow outside, has been my partner for years. I can talk to him easily, but he's nowhere near as clever as Gorm here. Still, he fools me at times too, and just when I think I know the limits of his brain, he tries something brand new and surprises me."

"Gorm," she said softly, stroking the furry, black head. "Will you be my friend, Gorm?"

"He'll be your friend, don't worry," Hiero said. "And he's also a very effective guide and scout. But now please be quiet for a few moments. I want to ask him how he got here. We parted when I went clumping out in the open to pick you up." He leaned forward and concentrated on Gorm's mind.

The bear, it seemed, had drawn back behind the rocky point as soon as he had seen where Klootz was heading. He had tried to make mental contact with the departing priest, but realized that it would be hopeless in all the confusion. He had, however, picked up *other* telepathic minds, not Hiero's, although he could not make out what message they were sending.

I think that was our enemies(who were) trying to get people to hunt/stop/attack us from in front, Hiero sent. *How did you/Gorm smell/find (us)?*

Easy/cub/trick, came the answer. *Went (back from) big water, walked along — came down to big water— smelled— went back-swam small water above men's houses— came down(again), followed and smelled your trail.*

By that time, Gorm had come to the hut village of the white savages, most of whom were back from their bird arena and were milling around and all making a fearful racket in the night. He had watched for a while and then, seeing that the villagers had a large pack of yelping dogs, he had quietly swum the little river and gone on east, returning to the beach to pick up Klootz's tracks and then simply following them until he found their present camp.

The priest decided that pursuit that night sounded very unlikely and that they could relax and trust Klootz and the bear to warn them. Settling himself once again, he recommenced questioning Luchare where he had left off.

"The Elevener? Why, he looked like anyone else, an ordinary man of my people, perhaps fifty or so years old, except for those drab, brown clothes. Why?"

"That's very interesting," Hiero said. "In your country, it's obvious, the people are all as dark-skinned as you and have that curly hair and those dark, dark eyes, right?"

"Of course. Why? Until I ran away, I never saw anyone of another color, except once or twice a white-skinned slave from the North, from around here, I guess. But the few Eleveners I've seen have all been of my own people."

"Well," the man said thoughtfully, his eyes fixed on the tiny fire, "up *my* way, they all look like *my* people, that is, with bronze or the Inyan reddish skin, straight black hair, high cheekbones, and so on. Which, I think, tells us something interesting about the Eleveners that the Abbeyes hadn't known before. Now, before you go on with your own story, tell me one more thing about them. In our areas, they carry no weapons, teach children in school, serve as animal doctors, work on farms, eat no meat, and never take any pay, except mere subsistence. Also, they hate the Unclean, but never seem to do much about fighting them. Is all that true down in D'alwah?"

"Yes, I think so," she said. "The church doesn't care much for them, but the poor people get very angry when there's any talk of bothering them, so they're generally let alone. You see," she added naively, "the peasants have so much to get angry about as it is, why stir them up over something that makes no real difference? That's what my—a teacher I knew told me. They don't really mean anything one way or the other, just like the Davids."

"Who are the Davids?" Hiero asked.

"Oh, a funny group of traders who call themselves People of David, who live in our big city and in some of the others, I guess. They actually don't believe in the church, they won't eat lots of ordinary things, and they don't marry anyone but another David. But no one bothers them either, because they pay their taxes promptly and always trade honestly. Also, they can fight like wildcats if anyone tries to molest either them or their church. They have a funny one with no cross and no Dead God at all, and at school once, one of them told me it's much older than ours! They're really peculiar!"

"Humph," Hiero grunted, thinking, *at school, eh?* and trying to assimilate all he had learned. "Must be an odd heresy of some ancient kind we never got up our way. The last one in Kanda, a group called Prostan, I believe, reunited with our church over two thousand years ago. Since then, it's all been one Church Universal. You certainly have a lot of strange survivals in the far South. But go on with your own story now, and I'll try not to interrupt."

He fed the wee fire to provide a light, and as the faintest haze of smoke rose to the highest level of shiny leaves under the round dome of the tent-tree, the girl talked on, her matter-of-fact tones seeming to emphasize her extraordinary story. Hiero had lived through many strange adventures, including the most recent ones, but he was spellbound just the same. The bear lay dozing, head in her lap.

The Elevener, a quiet, elderly man, had set Luchare's leg and helped carry her to a shelter. He had then gone away, but soon had come back with a large draft animal, something like Kloodt, apparently, but striped and light in color, with short, straight horns, which stayed on all year, unlike antlers. It was commonly called a kaw. Both of them had ridden the kaw away on a trail to the northwest. The Elevener, whose name was Jone, had told the girl that he was going to try and take her to a place of safety run by his order, but that it was a long way off and that they would have to be very careful. He had asked no questions of her at all.

They had traveled for many days through the great, tropical forest, avoiding the main roads between the warring city-states, but using game trails and village paths where they could. The peasants and

woodsmen were always glad to see them, gave them food and shelter, and warned them of migrating herds, rumored appearances of Leemutes, and other signs of the Unclean. In return, Jone had helped the village sick, sat with the dying, and distributed sets of little carved wooden letters he had made, so that the children could learn to read and write. This idea, Luchare interjected, was one of the tricks that really annoyed her church about the Eleveners, since the priests did not believe, and still less did the nobles, in giving the peasants new ideas.

"Some of my own church don't like them any better," Hiero admitted, "though everyone can read and write in our country. But conservatives dislike them as a rival religious group. I guess they are in a way, but if we're not doing the job properly, then they *should* take over, as better men, that's what my abbot says. But go on."

After some three weeks of traveling, in a generally western direction, tragedy struck. They were now far beyond the limits of any of the city-states and their appendaged villages. Jone had told her that another week or so would bring them to a place of safety.

Actually, she had never felt more safe than with the gentle Elevenner. Dangerous animals almost never came near them, and if they did, snorted for a moment and then went away. Once, she said, a herd of giant snakeheads, the lords of the forest, had simply parted to one side while the patient kaw had carried his twin burden down a lane in the middle of the huge beasts. Jone simply had smiled when she expressed awe.

Hiero thought to himself that the Eleveners must long have been in control of mental powers he now felt burgeoning in himself, though his were drawn out by the two savage battles he had fought with his mind. And the broad extent of their society, in physical terms, was also news of the first magnitude. He listened intently.

They had been ambling down a game trail in the jungle, Luchare said, no different from a dozen others they had seen and exactly where, she had no faint idea, when suddenly a man had stepped into the trail ahead of them and stood with his arms folded, facing them. At the same time, a score of hideous, hair-covered Leemutes, things like enormous, upright rats, naked tails and all, but far more intelligent and armed with spears and clubs, had come from the jungle on both sides of the trail. (*Man-rats*, Hiero said to himself.) They were totally surrounded, though none had come closer than a few feet.

Luchare had been terrified, but Jone's gentle face had not lost its impassivity. The man in front of them was ivory-skinned, totally hairless, and wore a gray robe and hood, the latter thrown back. His pale eyes had been cold and evil beyond description. She knew that a master wizard of the Unclean held them fast and she tried not to panic. There was a moment of silence, during which she had simply shut her eyes and hugged Jone around the waist. Then she heard his calm voice speaking in D'alwah.

"Let us speak aloud. There is no need to frighten the child. I offer a bargain."

"What bargain, Nature-lover, Tree-worshipper? I grip you both tight in my hand."

"True enough, o Dweller in the Dark. But I can slay many of your allies, and even you yourself could be injured, or at least drained of power for days by the struggle. I am an Ascended One, as I think you are well aware. This trap was set with some care, and in an unlikely place."

Trembling, Luchare had heard the enemy's harsh voice ask again what bargain was proposed.

"Let the child and the animal go. If so, on my word and soul I will make no resistance to you and will

submit myself to your wishes. Speak quickly, or I will force you to kill us at once, and it will not be an easy struggle."

"So be it, Tree-man. One of your rank, even in your weakling order, is a rare captive in all truth, since usually you skulk in safety in holes and corners. Let the child and the beast go, then, and come with us."

"In all your thoughts and deeds there are lies," was Jone's calm answer. "I will send her away, unfollowed by any of your dirty pack, and I can easily tell if that is so. I will remain here for an hour, and after that time has passed, will go with you. That is the unalterable bargain."

Luchare could almost feel the terrible rage of the Unclean adept, but in the end, as Jone apparently had known he would, he agreed.

Blessing her gently in an unknown tongue, the Elevener had also spoken to the kaw, and the creature had at once moved rapidly away down the trail, now carrying her alone on its saddle. Her last sight of her friend had been of the slim, brown-clad figure standing patiently, facing the gray devil and his horrid crew of attendant monsters. Then a curve of the jungle wall of green had hid them all from sight. At the remembrance of how Jone had saved her, Hiero could see that Luchare was close to tears.

"He must have been a very good man," the priest said quietly. "I have met one of those wizards of the enemy myself, indeed a man so like your own description that it might have been the same foul being, were the distance not so great. And he almost slew, or worse yet, captured me. Had it not been for the fat, clever one there, with his head in your lap, he would have done so." As he had hoped, the girl was distracted and forgot her sorrow in her interest. He gave her a brief sketch of his encounter with S'nerg, and when he was through, encouraged her to resume her own story.

The poor, faithful kaw had been the first casualty a few days later. She had slept in a great tree one night, and some prowling monster had fallen on the kaw as he stood underneath and killed him. In the morning she had descended, avoided the bloody remains on which scavengers were feeding, and fled on foot, in which direction she hardly knew.

Great beasts, many of them things she had never seen before, constantly snuffed on her trail, and she escaped death only by inches on more than one occasion. Several times she had thought of suicide, but some tough strain or other had forced her on. She still had her spear and knife and had managed to feed herself, though mostly by watching what the birds and small monkeys ate. This had hazards, though, and she had got very ill on two occasions.

Exhausted, her clothes in rags, and close to starvation, one day she had heard human voices. Stealing close to investigate, she had found herself looking at a camp of traders, swarthy, black-haired men, not unlike Hiero, she said, whose kaw-drawn wagon caravan was parked in a large clearing. Moreover, the clearing was athwart a broad trail, almost a dirt road, which entered one side of it and left by the other.

While lurking in the brush, hoping for a chance to steal food and clothing, she had been surprised by an alert sentry who had with him a big watchdog on leash. She had tried to fight but had been knocked cold. When she woke up, she had been brought before the master trader, who had examined her carefully. She would tell them nothing, although they spoke some bits of her language. The trader chief had ordered some of his women (it was a big wagon train) to examine her physically, and on finding out that she was a virgin, had treated her well, but had her heavily guarded. It was made plain that she was valuable property, to be sold to the highest bidder.

She had ridden for several more weeks with them, always watched, but treated well enough. She had

learned to speak *batwah* then, she said, and was soon able to talk to the other women, who were not unkind, though making it plain that she was not on their social level. But she was not beaten or raped, and was allowed cloth to wear and given a riding kaw, though it was led by another.

They had crossed several wide expanses of open grassland, and once had avoided what they said was one of the deserts of The Death. One day they came to the Inland Sea, of which Luchare had only heard vague legends, and there found a walled harbor town and many ships, traders and merchants, inns and market places. Quite a large permanent population lived there, some of them farming the fertile land on the port's outskirts and selling grain and produce to the passing ships and caravans. There were people of all skin, colors, including both whites, dark browns, like her own, and the traders, most of whom looked more like Hiero than anything else. She even saw some battered-looking churches, though none of the traders she saw were Christians, and she was not allowed to go near the buildings or speak to a priest. She thought she had seen only one at a distance.

The town was called Neeyana and was said to be very old. Luchare did not much care for it. The people were apt to be sullen, and she saw faces in the shadows which reminded her of the Unclean wizard. The Unclean were not ever mentioned there, except under one's breath and after looking over one's shoulder first. She had the feeling that somehow the Unclean were *in* the town, woven into its fabric in some evil way, so that they both tolerated it and influenced it at the same time. The girl found this difficult to explain, but Hiero thought he caught her meaning. It was obvious that just as the Eleveners' order extended far beyond his previous conception of their scope, so too did the power of the enemy.

Luchare had been sold, after several weeks in guarded seclusion, to yet another merchant, a man who was embarking on a ship with his company and his trade goods.

He had also had her well guarded, apparently also appraising her maidenhood at a high price, which made the Metz smile inwardly. What on earth was so valuable to these strange southerners about female virginity? he wondered.

She had never been on anything larger than a rowboat or canoe before, Luchare went on. The ship had great, pointed sails and seemed immense to her, But a storm came up after three days' fast, smooth sailing, and there was a wreck. The ship was driven on to a small island of rocky precipices and cliffs at night. The following morning they had been discovered by a white, savage tribe who came out in canoes, the same ones from whom Hiero had rescued her. They seemed friendly enough to the merchants, and their chief priest had had a conference alone with the shipmaster. But in return for saving the traders and their goods, such as were not lost or ruined, they had wanted Luchare, whose skin color they had never before glimpsed, to sacrifice to the huge birds they worshipped.

"The traders agreed, the dirty lice," Luchare said. "They even came and watched. Did you see them, all sitting on one end? They were dressed a bit like you, but had hats." And the following afternoon, she had been stripped and tied to the stake where the priest had first seen her, while the flock had come from afar, drawn by the summons of the tall drums. Those drums, which Hiero had heard the previous day, had heralded the previous death of a male prisoner, a captive from another tribe down the coast.

Exhausted suddenly as the events of the last few days caught up with her, and with her tale finally done, Luchare fought to stay awake. Hiero got up and gave her a blanket and a spare coat of his own from the saddlebags. She smiled drowsily in thanks, curled up, and was sound asleep in seconds, the sleep of healthy youth, able to shrug off worry in a matter of seconds. A faint buzzing noise from her pretty mouth, her rescuer decided, was altogether too feminine to qualify as a snore. What a beautiful thing she was, even with that weird hair, like bunches of great, loose springs!

Hiero realized at this point that he was yawning so continuously his mouth was unable to shut, and hastily gathering up the other blanket, he fell asleep, quite as quickly as had Luchare.

Outside the shelter of the tree, the big morse browsed under the stars, the warm, scented air bringing him many messages from far and near. Presently the bear emerged and touched noses with the bull, then turned and set off into the night on a hunting expedition of his own, while inside the tree's shelter the two humans slept, knowing they were guarded.

In the morning, Hiero awoke with a start. A strange sound caught his subconscious and made him sit up and reach for his knife in one and the same movement.

But a second later he stopped the motion and grinned sheepishly. The sound was a soft voice singing a little tuneless song over and over, in a refrain that wavered up and down in an odd but pleasant way. It was enough like a lullaby in his own language for him to feel that it probably was one in Luchare's too.

When he pushed the branches aside and squinted at the sun, he knew it was mid-morning. He had slept over ten hours and must have needed it. A few feet away, with her dark back to him, the girl sat sewing something, using his own repair and mending kit, which she had discovered in the pack. Her gentle singing masked his approach, and realizing this, he coughed politely.

Luchare looked up and smiled. "You're a late sleeper, Per Hiero. See what I've made?" She stood up and, before he could say or do anything, had slipped off her ragged skirt. For a second she stood revealed, a slim, nude statue in polished mahogany, then slipped on the garment she had been working on. In another second she was laughing at him from a leather one-piece suit, with elbow-length sleeves and shorts that came to mid-thigh.

"Well," he managed, "that's very neat. My spare clothes, I gather."

"Only part," she answered. "I left you the extra pants and underthings, so this is only your other long leather shirt. You don't mind, do you?" Her face grew long at the thought of disapproval.

"Not a bit. You're a marvelous needlewoman. If I get any more holes in things, I'm going to have you fix them up for me."

"I only learned, well—after I ran away. I'd never sewn anything before. It's pretty good, isn't it?" She pirouetted, arms held out, a pretty picture in the sunlight. Behind her, the big morse looked on, blinking, and Gorm, as usual when there was nothing else to do, slept under a small bush.

The water he had not wanted to ford the previous night lay a hundred yards off. In the glare of the day, he could see it was nothing but a small bay, not a river mouth, and that they could walk around it in half an hour.

They ate a brief meal from the pack. The grouse even Gorm now disdained, and it was hurled away, but antelope steak, *pemeekan*, and biscuit were a whole lot better than nothing, and five of the great snapper eggs were yet unbroken in their packing. The bear and each human ate one. Then Hiero and the girl cleaned the saddlebags, washed out the squashed egg, and aired the rest of the contents. A little before noon, they were on their way again.

All the rest of the day, they followed the shore eastward. Occasionally, a rocky outcrop would make them turn inland, but they seldom deviated much from their course.

Hiero was pleased with his capture, though at intervals his mind would grapple with the gloomy realization that he had no idea what to do with her and that she was in no sense supposed to be a part of his mission. In fact, he thought in one of these moments of clarity, by distracting him, she was probably a positive danger! Still, she was from the very area to which he had been sent, she was a mine of information on the people, customs, and political makeup of her land, and besides—there was no obvious alternative!

Once they came to a place where a series of long sandbars, strewn with logs and other storm wrack, lay in the sea, just off the mouth of a small creek. On these bars, some of the great snappers, their dark gray shells crusted with growth and algae, lay basking and sunning themselves. They hardly blinked their evil eyes, however, as the little party went on by along the beach and splashed their way across the stream.

"Do you have those in your country?" the priest asked as they watched the comatose monsters warily.

"Yes, and much worse things," was the answer. It seemed that the very sewers had to be screened with great iron bars and grills of massive stonework, even in her own proud city. Otherwise, foul things, water-borne and avid, emerged at night to devour whatever and whomever they could. Bridges, too, had to be covered with strong barriers and roads near streams strongly stockaded when possible. Even with all that, heavily armed, mounted patrols went continually about on regular beats, looking for intrusive jungle creatures and repelling incursions of Leemutes. Hiero was used to a life of fairly constant strife, but he began to feel that he had always lived in peace and quiet after hearing about everyday existence in distant D'alwah.

That night they camped on a high, rocky knoll, from which, at early evening, Hiero could see well inland to the beginning of the Palood, its night mists rising in the still air. Far on the distant air, as he watched, came the faint bellow of one of the monster amphibians, a grim warning not to venture back into the great marsh.

As they sat talking after their evening meal, which consisted of one of the last snapper eggs and some chunks of the cooked antelope which they had carried along, the Metz priest suddenly fell silent.

Very faintly, out at the edge of his mind, his psychic consciousness, he had felt something, a touch, a thought, plucking. It was hardly enough even to notice, but he was becoming more and more aware of his widening powers in this area. He now could "hear," without even thinking about it, the "voices" of little birds and small, hiding animals they passed as they rode along. Luchare he did not probe, out of courtesy and decency, but he felt sure that he could do so if it should become necessary.

The dark girl noticed his intent look and started to speak, only to have him wave her into silence with a peremptory hand.

Concentrating very hard, he tried his best, using all his newfound (and hard-won) knowledge to pinpoint and identify what he was "hearing," but it was useless. Yet he had a more than strong feeling that whatever it was, it was finding *him*, albeit very gently and subtly!

Hiero got quickly up and went over to the packs. Coming back, face set, he carried the strange metal antenna-spear of the dead S'nerg and, sitting down, opened the thing out to its fullest length and drew out the two forehead contact rods. With these on his head, he felt the power he possessed within himself expand suddenly, and almost felt something else!

Greeting, Enemy! came a surge of evil force. The priest felt at the same time a wave of power as the person or entity on the "sending end" tried to use his strength to pinion Hiero and enclose his mind with an

intangible, yet very real, block. He had been incredibly lucky, he now knew, when he had first activated this thing. If the power on the other end of the communication band had then tried this trick at once, he would probably have been caught. But now, armed with his new-won strength and knowledge, it was easy to fend the other off, as a fencer wards a sword stroke, and at the same time keep open, the message level so that he could either listen, or talk.

You are strong, Enemy, came the next grudging thought. *Are you a renegade brother of ours or perhaps a new mutation we know nothing about? We have continuously watched and guarded this wavelength since we realized that you had slain our brother and stolen his (indecipherable name or symbol) communicator.*

Hiero sent no answering thought. The other knew he was listening, however, and he had a feeling that the Unclean, almost certainly one of their wizard lords, would not be able to stop talking. It was obvious that they had no idea who or what he might be. They were arrogantly sure, though, that he must have their kind of twisted, sick mind, whatever he was, and the idea that one of their despised foes, an Abbey priest, had such power was obviously alien to them.

You are not one of the disciples of the tree-worshippers, the soft Earth lovers, who call themselves the Eleventh Commandment Seekers, that is plain, came the thought. *We know their mind patterns, and you are far more like us in power and cunning,*

A dubious compliment, another section of Hiero's mind recorded, at the same time making note of the fact that the Eleveners, while implacable foes of the Unclean, yet apparently were also in some kind of communication with them.

We lost you in the great marsh, came the cruel thought. *And we sent an uncertain ally, now also seemingly lost, so that perhaps, though he is very strange, even to such as we, you slew him as well. In an case, you found, the (undecipherable), which you also took from our brother's body, And you silenced it.* There came a pause.

Will you not speak? The thought was sweet now, with the evil, persuasive sweetness of uncatalogued sin. *We, our great Brotherhood, acknowledge you as a full equal. We wish you to join us, be one of us, share our power and our purposes. Do not fear. We cannot find you unless you wish us to. We wish only to exchange thoughts with a mind of such power as yours, and one so different.* The thought was soft and honey, sickly, sweet. *Speak to us, our Enemy, whom we wish to make a friend.*

The priest held his mental barrier raised high, as a gladiator *secutor* once held a shield against the deadly net of the *retiarius*. He remembered the Elevener, Jone, who had died to save Lu-chare and his remark, "In all your thoughts and deeds there are lies." Further, Hiero was by no means sure that the other and his crew could not locate him, should he try and speak to them as they asked. *In fact, he decided, maybe they can even trace me now, while I just listen to them. Who knows what they can do?*

He tore the contacts off his head and slammed the antenna back in and telescoped the main rod shut, all in one motion. The alien voice stopped abruptly. Yet at the very edge of his mind once more, he could feel the faint (and irritating) plucking and twisting as it still attempted contact.

He concentrated, thinking hard. Perhaps if he altered the basic mind shield he had been taught at the Abbey, *so* —then, using his new powers, next activated another, different mental shield, causing that one to overlies the other, *thus*.

It worked. As his new barrier fitted over the old, the voice or mind touch ceased abruptly, like the light

of a snuffed-out candle. He was no longer conscious of any contact at all, and he was sure he had shaken off the enemy.

He looked up. It was full dark again, but the moon was bright, and Luchare and Gorm sat together a few feet away, in silent companionship, waiting for him to return to them. The morse could be heard as he fed himself down at the bottom of the rock, as usual keeping an unsleeping guard.

Hiero rubbed his eyes. "Don't worry," he said. "The Unclean were just trying a few games. They can't do it any more, and I'll be all the more ready next time."

"Are they following us? Are they able to—to talk with your mind?" the girl asked hesitantly.

"No, not now. They don't know where or, for that matter, what I really am, and I think they are getting a bit worried about me. Anyway, they've been sending out a constant wide-band signal, somehow tuned to what they had learned of my personal brain pattern, trying to get into contact. I felt it, took out this thing—" he kicked the communicator—"which belonged to one of them, the one we killed, and talked to them. You see," he went on, "they think I'm a Leemute or something, some new kind of evil mutation, or just a naturally evil human like themselves. My mind seems to be changing somewhat, and they can't figure me out.

"Well, I got worried and cut them off, and then I fixed their probe so that they can't annoy me either. I don't think they have a hope of locating us that way any longer."

He next repeated what he had said, only this time to the bear, using a short-range band he felt no one could pick up or home in on.

Gorm understood remarkably well and even drew a surprising conclusion. *You are strong now, friend/Hiero. It will be difficult/ impossible for most (of the) enemy, except for the strongest/oldest/ most senior, to overcome you.*

This was more of a statement than a query, and it made Hiero feel sure that the bear actually understood something of his, the priest's, new mental development.

They slept the night peacefully away, and after breakfast down on the beach the next morning, Hiero decided to cast the symbols and use the glass. He was almost certain that none of the Unclean were close by, and it seemed worth a small risk.

He explained the process, got his equipment, robed himself, said the brief invocation, and waited for events. The girl, the bear, and the morse waited quietly on the sand a little way off. Luchare was fascinated, but wise enough to realize that there must be no distraction and that questions could always be asked later.

Hiero's first view in the crystal was precisely what he wanted. A large bird, probably a sea bird, with white wings (he could see them flash) and excellent eyes, was flying along the coast to the east, going exactly the way the man wanted to go himself. The view was superb.

He could see that the seacoast sand ran, uninterrupted by river mouths or even small streamlets, for many, many leagues. The great Palood followed the coast only a few miles inland, but was separated from it by a more or less constant barrier of higher ground on which grew rank scrub and palmettos. Fair off, in one place only, the marsh touched the coast.

Far away too, in the remotest distance, Hiero could see what appeared to be many islands, but they were hard to make out. As the bird dipped and wheeled, using the air currents to plane, he also saw plumes of smoke rising from a stockaded village on a small river far back in the West. Obviously this was the camp of their erstwhile foes, the pale-skinned bird worshippers. Nothing else stirred, except that, well out to sea, on the distant horizon, some great dark thing made a stir on the water as it swam. If it was a fish, it certainly stayed curiously high out of the water, but he could make out no details.

He willed the sight to end and opened his eyes to examine next what he held in his closed left fist. First, before looking, he called Luchare and Gorm over. There was nothing really secret, or, for that matter, sacred, about the symbols. The prayer which preceded the casting in the bowl was simply to ask God's help in making the choice, but the things themselves were not like a piece of Communion bread or a cup of sacramental cider.

The girl was eager to know more and the bear appeared interested too, although Hiero wondered how much of the abstract thought he actually grasped. The amount of brain in that fur-covered skull was still a mystery.

What now lay in the priest's brown hand were some already familiar signs and also some not yet utilized on this particular venture. There were five symbols altogether.

The Spear and the Fish were both back. "War and water, battle and ships, fishing and hunting," Hiero said to Luchare as he set those two aside. Next he looked at the Clasped Hands.

"That sign means a friend in need." He smiled at her. "A good sign, one of the best. It can also mean an old friend will appear soon, or that I will make a new one, one whom I can trust. There's another symbol quite like it, this Open Hand." He showed it to her. "That one showed up when Gorm appeared first. But the Clasped Hands are a little different." They meant a friend for life, among other things, but he somehow did not mention that fact.

"Could it mean me?" she asked. "I mean, I have so few friends of my own, and I wondered . . . P"

"It almost certainly does mean you. I doubt if we're going to see many other people very soon, and those we do are most unlikely to prove friends. Let's assume we each have a new friend." They both smiled this time, the copper face and the dark brown one displaying twin sets of perfect white teeth.

"Let's see," Hiero went on, "what else have we? Two more? Well, first the Lightning. That has three meanings, of which two are very uncommon. First, I could be hit, that is, actually struck by lightning. I take leave to doubt that. Next, I could grow very, very angry. It sometimes means beware of anger. Possible, but I never felt less angry." He laughed and turned the little thing over on his palm. "No, I think the usual thing, the commonest of all its meanings, is meant again. Just plain, very bad weather; in fact, a big storm. We'd better keep our eyes open for it." He placed the Lightning with the other three.

"Last, what have we? The Boots, or Shoes, as some call them. A long journey, and one which hardly needed an appearance, since I knew that before I set out. I guess it means that as long as I thought it would be, it will end up being even longer still." He stared at the tiny, fringed boots in his hand and then gathered up all five symbols and replaced them in the bag with the other thirty-five.

"Can you really make more sense out of it?" the girl asked. "It seems, well, a bit vague. Most of the stuff could almost be guessed, if you think about where we are, who we are, and what we're doing."

"First," the priest said as he finished unrobing and packing, "you're absolutely right. It *is* a bit vague. But

I'm not a good talent at this particular form of foreseeing. I know men, friends of mine, who could get a lot more out of it, maybe draw ten symbols or even fifteen at one time, and make an extraordinary and detailed prediction. I've never got more than six myself, and I feel I've done well if I get even a modest clue as to what's coming."

They both mounted, Luchare in front as usual, and with Gorm ranging in front, he continued to lecture. "Now, we do have something to go on. The symbols are an odd mixture of forces, you know. Part of it is genuine prediction, part wish fulfillment, and part a subconscious—I'll explain that later—attempt to influence future events.

"So—we have the Spear, the Fish, the Clasped Hands, the Lightning, and the Boots. A reading of the obvious answers might, I stress *might*, run as follows: a long journey, filled with battle, impends upon us, or me. A true friend will help, and the journey, or perhaps the next part, will be on, in, or over water. Now there are lots of other permutations possible. Oh, yes, the journey will start with a bad storm, or in one or something. That's what I get, anyway. And I feel pretty certain that the storm is coming. That's the surest of all of the signs."

The prospect did not look much as if a storm were in view. The sun shone brightly, as it had for the past few days. The blue sea danced and sparkled, the tiny whitecaps not even indicating a stiff breeze. Rafts of small ducks and other waterfowl whirled out on the water offshore, rising in clouds and then settling as they fed and played.

Gorm, Hiero sent, *what weather is coming?* The animals could usually sense weather a day or two ahead, especially if the change were going to be drastic.

To his surprise, the priest received a negative answer from the bear. *No bad wind, water, coming. Sun, moon, quiet air is all (that) comes.*

"It may be," he said to Luchare, when he had explained his silent question, "that the weather is still too far away. The symbols are apt to be pretty uncertain about time, at least when I use them."

"Could I learn to use them, do you think?" she asked. They were so close, she riding only an inch in front of him, that she did not even have to turn her head. When the morse moved quickly, the scented, corkscrew curls blew in Hiero's face, and he kept resolving to ask her to tie them up. Curiously, he never seemed to get around to doing it.

"Can't see why not. There are children, back in my country, who can use them more effectively than I. It's a talent, that's all. My own are a little different. I can do a good job of farseeing, I can talk to animals pretty well, and now, just lately, I seem to be learning some new tricks, mostly about how to fight with my mind. But using the Forty Symbols to forelook just doesn't seem to be my best attribute. You might be a whole lot better. We'll try it out later on."

"What about using my own mind, the way you do? It would be wonderful to talk the way you and the bear do. Could I learn that too?"

"Well," Hiero said, "you could, I'm sure. It's just a talent and not a particularly uncommon one, either. But, unlike casting the Forty, which is more or less instinctive, mind speech and the other mind attributes, up to and including telekinesis, the manipulation of solids by mental force—that's a rare gift, incidentally—all have to be *taught*. And, once taught, practiced, practiced constantly. I started at the age of ten, and many of the Abbey scholars started earlier still. Some actually get selected when they can barely talk, on the basis of some very complicated tests. So, you see, it's not all that easy."

They rode in silence along the beach for a little way, and then in a small voice, she asked, "Do you mean I can't learn at all, that I'm already too old?"

"Good Lord, no," the surprised Hiero said. "I'll try to teach you myself when we have a moment. I simply meant it takes training, discipline, practice, and time. You may be a marvel at it and go extra fast."

Before he could even move, she had whipped around, eyes gleaming, and given him a tremendous hug. "Wonderful! Can we start now, right away?"

"Well, I, uh, well, that is, I hadn't . . ."

Most of the day passed quickly, in doing lessons. Actually, Hiero thought to himself, it was probably a damned good idea to have to recall all the basics he had learned in the Abbey schools. Luchare was very clever and she was also willing to work. The one thing she apparently wanted above all else in the world was to talk to Gorm and Klootz, and this was the goal Hiero held out to her as a reward. But he spoke bluntly first.

"Now listen to me, carefully. The shield for your own thoughts is the most important thing you can learn, and it has to be learned first."

When she wondered why, he explained that, with a decent mind shield, a child could evade the grip of the most skilled adept alive, as long as the two were not either very close physically to one another or linked by an emotional bond of some kind.

"But if you start sending messages without any ability to defend yourself, why, the Unclean could actually grab your mind, take control of it, and force you either to go to them or else to do whatever they wanted, commit murder, maybe, or anything! Even with a conscious shield, or the ability to create one, if you use the powers of your mind too widely, then another mind can home in on you, as if you were a target. That's what they've been trying to do to me for the last week, and it took quite a while to stop them completely from annoying me. *Now* do you understand why what I say is important?"

"I'm sorry, Per Hiero. I'll let you be the guide. Only," she burst out, "please hurry, that's all. Somehow, I feel it's very important! Why," she added, "don't the Unclean control everybody's mind, if so many are unshielded?"

He laughed. "I'm sure it is important, at least to you. Now let's review what I just taught you. But first, the Unclean can't control an *unconscious* mind, one that isn't sending at all, unless they have the person in their physical power or in close contact. Now, to begin, the shield is to be conceived by your mind as an arc, surmounted by the Cross. Visualize this and then practice, with your eyes open, making it appear in your physical vision, so that the picture blocks out the horizon. Next—" He droned on, using his superb memory simply to repeat what old Per Hadena used to use as the basis for his lectures. This allowed Hiero to think of other things and to keep watch. He kept an eye out for the enemy flier, but no trace of it appeared. Many hawks were in the sky, though, and he saw them diving on the countless water birds. Once they came to a place where a small herd of the great water pigs lay floating near the shore. At the sight of the travelers, the big, shiny-creatures submerged in a welter of foam and vanished.

At another time they had to cross the marsh, previously-glimpsed, where a long, skinny finger of the Palood thrust south and caused an oozing stream to drain into the Inland Sea. Hiero had Klootz and the bear gallop across the dirty shallows at the juncture of marsh and sea, while he watched the giant reeds carefully. Nothing appeared, however, and the whole area was only a quarter of a mile wide. Once

through it, the pleasant sandy shore began again.

They camped that night under a rock overhang, and Hiero allowed a tiny fire, first bringing a rock over to screen it even from the water, which the girl thought amusing.

"There are ships out there, you know," he reminded her. "Probably very few contain anyone or anything friendly. You ought to remember; you were on one. And a fire might draw other unpleasant things too, not human at all." Having silenced her, he relented, and after supper (the last snapper egg), he allowed the lessons to continue.

"I want you to realize something," he said next. "I could speed those lessons up considerably. The way to do it, and it's sometimes done in an emergency, is to go into your mind and do the teaching there. But I'm not going to."

"Why not?" she asked. "I don't mind, and if it will help make things go fester—"

"You don't know what you're saying." He threw a tiny stick on the fire and poked it gently. The soft night breeze brought them many sounds. The muffled grunting from down the beach to the west was probably the water pigs they had passed earlier. The squawking from offshore, which rose and fell, came from the sleeping flocks of waterfowl. Far away, so far as to be almost inaudible, a big cat screamed once. Little waves broke on the beach in front of their camp, a gentle splashing which never ceased.

Hiero went on gently. "To do what would have to be done, I would need to get into your mind almost completely. Do you want me to know your innermost thoughts, dreams, hopes, and fears, many of which are in what the ancients knew as the subconscious? That means the part of your mind which doesn't *think* so much as it does *feel*. Just reflect on that idea for a minute."

Her face was serious in the firelight. "I see what you mean," she said. "Thanks for being so patient. It's hard not to want to do everything quickly, because it all sounds so marvelous. It's a new world to me. But I see what you mean. No one would want someone else to know *everything*. Unless they were—or maybe not even then. I mean—"

"I know what you mean," he said in a firm voice. "And the answer is no, not even then. If two people in love open their minds to one another, they always shield something of the conscious mind and all of the subconscious. Now let's go back and review the techniques I told you to use in practicing. First . . ."

The next morning, Hiero felt a bit tired, but Luchare was as bright as ever. She wanted to work all day, and he finally had to call a halt, as much to give himself a rest as anything else. But when they rested at noon, he allowed her to try and call Gorm. To her inexpressible delight, the bear actually "heard" her mind voice and, as Hiero observed, seemed pleased too, almost as pleased as the girl herself.

The day was bright and clear again, and neither bear nor morse could feel the tingle of any coming weather change in their sensitive bodies. This made Hiero worry a little, though he said nothing as they journeyed on. The Lightning was about as close to being an infallible sign as existed in the whole Forty. While the priest felt himself to be only a mediocre artist in the use of the symbols, still he was not *that* bad. Or was he? Still, perhaps the time element was the key. He turned to thoughts of other matters and allowed himself to forget his puzzlement.

Another night and day passed. Once they saw a flock of huge, running birds, apparently flightless, racing up the beach far ahead, but beyond noting that they were a dark green in color, could see nothing more. Whatever they were, they had excellent eyesight and were extremely alert and wary.

The next night, by the light of the now full moon, Hiero hooked a huge, round-bodied fish, weighing over a hundred pounds, he believed. Everyone helped, and once, when they thought its thrashing would break the line, Gorm waded into the water and walloped at it with an expert paw, which tamed it enough for Hiero and Luchare to haul it out. Even Klootz pranced around in excitement, although when they began to clean it, he snorted and went back to his fodder of bushes and his sentry go.

Everyone else fell asleep full of fried fish, the bear so round the priest thought he would burst. Lots of fish were smoked and packed for the future, something which always pleased Hiero, who had the true woodsman's feeling of not wasting the almost imperishable trail rations, the *pemeekan* and biscuit.

The next day dawned cloudy. As they set off, a very gentle rain, hardly more than a heavy mist, began to fall, and Hiero got out his spare waterproof hood for Luchare. But it was not really uncomfortable, and the weather remained very warm, even at night.

The mild rain continued all night and into the next day. It was much too misty to see far. They paused briefly at noon and ate, then went on as usual. The sea was calm, but the fog had increased and a vague malaise was growing in Hiero's mind. He now wished he had used another bird the last time it had been clear and that he had looked ahead. Once again the thought of the Lightning came to him. A mild drizzle and a mist were hardly bad weather, at least in the sense of that particular symbol. It was most peculiar.

Luchare had been practicing her exercises very hard, which had made her unwontedly silent for the previous two days. She was now good enough to exchange mental "baby talk" with the bear, and Gorm also seemed to enjoy being told to *stop* and *go*, to *pick* (up) *that stick*, and in general to be ordered about like a not-very-intelligent dog. But as the afternoon passed, Hiero grew more and more uncomfortable and he finally told them both to stop using their minds, even at this close range. He could not see why he was disturbed, yet he trusted his instincts enough to believe there was a reason. Klootz and the bear seemed conscious of nothing out of the way, however.

Nevertheless, when disaster struck, the priest knew that it was his fault and that he had not been prepared or even alert, for that matter. In retrospect, the enemy had laid the trap with great care.

But if only Gorm had not been walking next to Klootz, if Hiero had not been laughing at the girl's mental effort to make the bear pick up a dead fish. If—if—if!

At first glance, the little bay looked utterly empty. They had rounded another of the innumerable rocky points which thrust through the sand and out into the water when they came upon it. The mist partly shrouded some small islets just offshore. On the shore itself, a few hummocks of gray stone, their feet circled by olive-colored scrub palmetto, reared about the lighter sand of the beach. Only the lapping of tiny wavelets broke the silence of early evening as Hiero checked the morse, some evanescent doubt troubling his mind.

He urged Klootz forward just as Gorm suddenly ran ahead of them, nose lifted high as he caught a rank scent. Luchare, unaware of any tension, laughed happily as she watched, finding the bear's pose ridiculous.

The rocks and bushes on the beach erupted leaping figures. A horde of fur-covered, bounding Leemute horrors, stub-tailed and with glistening fangs, resembling giant, distorted monkeys seen in a nightmare, came at them from all sides but the rear. As they came, their ululating, echoing cry, long familiar to Hiero on the northern marches, rang out in hideous familiarity. In their hands the Hairy Howlers bore long spears and clubs and brandished great knives.

Yet this was not the chief menace, bad as it appeared. From behind a small island of granite, a long, black vessel, bare of any mast, glided smoothly only a few hundred feet offshore. On its foredeck, hooded figures bent over a shining metal mechanism whose short-pointed, solid barrel was aimed at the morse and his riders.

The priest reacted by instinct, the unconscious, trained Killman taking over. His reflexes were thus even faster than either those of the bear or of his own great steed.

Get back out! was his savage message to Klootz and Gorm as, thrower in hand, he slipped from the saddle. The girl, frozen in surprise, simply stayed fixed desperately in her place as the morse turned about on his own rear end, so to speak, almost squatting in his effort to obey the command he had been given. He was already twenty paces away in the first of a series of great bounds when his master fell.

Hiero had been bringing the thrower into aim, determined not to miss the boat and its menacing weapon, when the Unclean gunner fired first.

There was a streak of blue fire and the stink of ozone. Hiero felt a terrible blow on' his chest and a moment of intense cold as he blacked out. His last thought as he slid into darkness was, *So this is what the Lightning meant!*

Then—nothingness.

6

The Dead Isle

Hiero's first sensation was of pain, the second of movement. Instinctively, the pain made him try to rise, but he found he was hindered, that he could not. This in turn made him realize that he was lying on his back on something hard which moved gently, heaving restlessly up and down, sideways and back, in a regular rhythm.

The pain was centered in the middle of his breast, a constant ache of tremendous proportions which sent ripples of lesser pain throughout his whole body. His right hand was free, and instinctively it sought his chest. It there encountered a hard object of unfamiliar shape and fumbled with it. *That's wrong*, his mind said indignantly. *The Cross and Sword should be there!*

He realized at this point that his eyes were open and had been for some time. He was in total darkness, then, or almost total. A very faint line of light, a little below eye level, showed some way off. As he tried to concentrate on it and at the same time block off the pain by Abbey techniques, memory also returned.

The Lightning! Something very like real lightning had apparently been used on him. The meaning of the little symbol had been its rarest attribute, then, and it had tried to warn him that he would actually be struck by the strange weapon on the Unclean boat's deck. And he was on an anchored boat now, probably the same one. He had been on small vessels of the Republic many times and on traders' boats too. The feeling was unmistakable.

The pain still a constant, but now rendered bearable at least, his mind began to work again. *What was this strange object that lay on his chest?* His free hands, left now as well as right, traced its outline in darkness until they came to a heavy thong which was attached to the object. As he realized what had

happened, Hiero offered a silent but fervent prayer of gratitude. The enemy weapon, the electric bolt or whatever, of the Unclean had hit squarely (or been directed: who knew God's will?) on the silver Cross and Sword medallion which was the badge of his order. Result: a fused mass of melted silver and a man alive who might otherwise have been dead!

His hands felt further down, to his waist, and encountered a broad band of smooth metal, whose very feel was strangely unpleasant. This was what held him firmly to the hard bed or table on which he was secured. Against his ear, though, he now heard the surge and rush of water, and he realized that he must be imprisoned against the actual hull of the ship, apparently down in the hold, or a section thereof.

His eyes were now as night-adapted as they would get, and he could see slightly more. The thin line of light was indeed the bottom of a door. Hiero was held by the broad waistband, on a narrow bunk, and the band was secured at one side of the bunk by a massive lock. The room or cabin was small, about ten feet square, and contained no furniture, except for a foul-smelling bucket in one corner whose use was obvious, although in his present condition his metal belt prevented his reaching it. Walls, decks, overhead, everything he could reach, were all of metal, featureless and blank, with no rivets or welds showing. Since all the vessels he had previously seen were of wood, with experimental iron hulls only being talked about, the priest was compelled to admire the workmanship. It was, he reluctantly conceded, well in advance of any type the Abbeys possessed, at least in the nautical realm. He remembered, too, that the boat he had seen was mastless and no sign of smoke had shown either, eliminating both sails and the crude steam engines of the newest Republic craft as a means of propulsion.

As he listened now, he began to hear other noises over the faint groaning of the hull and the slap of waves on its outer surface. Voices came faintly to him and also muffled barking and grunting sounds, the latter all too familiar. Apparently some of the Howlers were on board. Underlying the other noises was a thin, whining hum, barely audible if one concentrated. This, he decided, must be the ship's engine or whatever provided power, and he wondered how it operated.

Hiero had wasted no time in looking for any weapons. His belt dagger and his heavy sword-knife were gone, and the rest of the things were on the saddle. Had Klootz and the girl gotten away? Had Gorm also escaped in the confusion? Poor Luchare, her protectors were always getting trapped by the enemy!

His musings were interrupted by the clink of a lock or latch. The door opened, sliding into a recess, actually, and light flooded the little cubicle, causing the priest to blink and raise a hand to his eyes.

Before he put his hand down, a fetid stench warned him of one enemy, at least, a Howler. As he looked, his eyes adjusting to the new glare, he saw that his captors had turned on a fluor in the ceiling.

There were two men in the now familiar gray cloaks and hoods. One wore that mind-wrenching spiral on his breast, but this time instead of red, it was in a sickly blue. The same one, the obvious leader, had his hood thrown back, and he so resembled S'nerg that Hiero had trouble in not gasping aloud. The subordinate creature kept his hood on, but the priest glimpsed a brutal countenance in the hood's shadows, bearded and with a broken nose. Against the wall near the door crouched the Howler, a pink-faced monster, well over two hundred pounds in weight, its dirty brown fur matted and foul. But under the brow ridges, the deep-set vicious eyes were alive with intelligence and malice. In one huge hand it carried a metal weapon like a great cleaver.

The keen eyes of the leading human had not missed the flicker of recognition in Hiero's, and it was he who spoke first. He used *batwah*, Hiero noted, not Metz.

"So—you have seen one of us before? All the Brotherhood are close kin, priest, and if you have

glimpsed one, you have seen all."

Watching him under lidded eyes, Hiero could believe it. The man, if he was a human man, seemed a trifle older than Hiero's memory of S'nerg, and his throat lines were graven deeper. But the resemblance was still astonishing. Nevertheless, the priest said nothing.

The adept, for such he must be, spoke sharply in an unknown tongue to the other man, and the one addressed hurried to Hiero's side, bent, and released the lock in the metal belt which held him fast, Hiero did not move, however, but remained lying there, watching the three attentively.

"Good, good," the adept chuckled. "A man of great control. Had you leaped up, even got up slowly, I should have had you knocked down, just as a beginning lesson in obedience. But we knew you were clever. Why else all this trouble? Still, I am pleased. Now pay attention, priest, if priest you are, and not something else.

"I am S'duna. The big one in the corner is Chee-Chowk, and he does not like you. No, not at all. He had never seen a Metz priest, yet he knows an enemy, eh, Chee-Chowk? But actually, he's a delightful fellow. I only wish you could see him tear a man's leg off and eat it in front of the victim. Good sport, eh, my friend?" He smiled at the awful, grinning creature, and Hiero barely restrained a visible grimace of repulsion.

"Too bad humanity, or your weakling segment of it, priest, doesn't like the Howlers. Yes, we've adopted your name. It's not a bad one. You see, they're only mutated monkeys of some long-extinct species. We think they were laboratory animals before The Death, but we're not sure. They're very clever now, though, and they do hate humans, all except their good friends." His tone was light and bantering, and he appeared in no hurry to move.

"We're going ashore now for a few questions. As you'll see, escaping is silly. And Chee-Chowk and his merry crew will be watching, waiting for a new kind of dinner, please remember that."

He leaned over until his white death mask of a face was thrust close to Hiero's impassive brown one.

"You're something a little different, priest, I'll give you that. We may just come to terms. Think that over, too. We don't generally use prisoners for anything except amusement. Ours, not theirs, I might say. But in your case, well, who knows?

"Now get up," he added sharply, "and walk behind us and in front of Chee-Chowk. And do what you're told. You'll live longer." He turned and left the cabin, followed by his silent acolyte.

Hiero got up quickly, but not quick enough to avoid a nasty cuff from the Howler, which shoved him through the door at the same time. He fell, still weak, to his knees, and a great paw next jerked him roughly erect by his collar and thrust him further on.

Ahead of him, he saw the booted feet of the second man going up a narrow companion stair. The short corridor was gray and featureless, save for a few doors like his own. He wondered if Luchare were behind one, but he dared not use his mind for a probe, not in this place.

When he crawled out of the foredeck hatch, pushed from behind by the Howler, he found the rain still falling, if anything, harder. As he tried to look about, two more gray-hooded men took him by the arms and half-led, half-dragged him to the side and thrust him down a ladder into a large rowing boat.

They were in a harbor, a hidden anchorage surrounded by tall spires of smooth rock rising from the freshwater sea. Despite the rain and mist, the priest could see a few other craft, one of them with masts, at anchor not far away. None was large, and there was no sign of movement on any.

Behind him, the huge Howler now crouched in the stern, while the horror's two masters stood erect in the bow. The two oars in the boat's waist were manned by a pair of half-naked slaves, white men, covered with scars and whose hair and beards grew rank and undipped. They stank worse than the Howler, if that were possible, and their eyes were vacant and apathetic. They stared at the water and made no sound.

As Hiero looked back, moving as little as possible, the boat turned under the oars' power, and he got his first good look at the ship which had captured him. It was sharp-bowed, long, and slim, the hull of dark gray metal, and with a midship cabin, also of metal. A curious short tower rose just aft the cabin, with a crow's nest full of strange rods and instruments on poles, like giant fly swatters. On the foredeck, a cloth shroud of some sort covered the weapon which had felled the priest.

The rowboat turned further and the ship was lost to his view. Ahead of them, through the mist, Hiero saw a landing, a stone dock thrust out into the water from a rocky islet. On the islet above, half-hidden under an upthrust crag, crouched a squat castle, a low stone keep visible in the center of massive walls, which lay open now to view through a great gate. The ponderous doors of the castle were flung wide against the gray walls, which rose up some thirty feet above the surrounding rock.

Nothing appeared to grow on the islet, and all was gray or black stone. On the walls' top, a few figures paced, but not in any regular order. The fortress of the Unclean seemed guarded not by arms, eyes, or regular sentries of any sort.

The Unclean leader, S'duna, turned from his place in the bow and stared down at Hiero. Then he pointed to the oily black water through which they were passing. "Look there, priest! We have many guards and many wards upon our island. Look and remember! None leave the Dead Isle of Manoon, save by permission!"

Hiero stared at the water to where the white finger thrust. Close to the boat and clearly visible, even in the mist and rain, a round thing, several feet across, emerged, like a segment of greasy hose, magnified many times. As it turned and twisted, the Metz saw that it was an eyed head, a head of horror. It was some kind of giant worm creature, whose sucking, round, jawless mouth could not close, but gaped and contracted rhythmically, full of sharp fangs set in concentric circles. The thing dived under the boat as he watched, and he estimated the body to be many yards in length. It had made no sound.

He looked at S'duna and shrugged, very slightly, his face bland and unmoving.

The other smiled malignantly. "You appear a hardy one, I'll give you that, little priest. Let us see how hardy you remain when we go to visit in our order's house on Manoon. Is it not a heartwarming place?"

Hiero was now paying little attention. As the boat drew in toward the desolate island, an assault had begun on his mind. He sensed that S'duna knew of it but had nothing to do with it. The forces which laired on the isle had been waiting for Hiero, and their attack was the result of long preparation. It was both a test and an assault and also, in an odd way, a welcome. He knew that he was being subjected to enormous and increasing pressures which were intended to destroy him if they could, yet which might allow him to defend himself if *he* could. And in the very nature of the onslaught, there was an element of doubt. The Unclean rulers of Manoon did not yet know with what or whom they were dealing. They could have killed him while he slept. Instead, they were frightened enough to feel the need to experiment.

And they still thought, apparently, that he somehow could be induced to join them!

He was helped, or rather shoved, onto the stone quay, and with the Howler behind and the others in front, was marched up the path, paved and smooth, toward the gate of the Unclean castle.

This last physical exertion, while not especially strenuous, almost overtaxed his waning strength. He could not estimate how long he had been unconscious, but he was desperately tired and now felt the need of water and food as well. He expected none of the amenities, especially rest, however. The advantages to the enemy of questioning a weakened, half-exhausted prisoner were obvious. However, the process of holding his mind block against the mental assault, using his fast-waning physical energy to do so, was wearing him out at a geometric rate. Halfway to the shallow steps of the fortress, he fell, and when Chee-Chowk's great paw wrenched him erect, he fell again. He made no effort to rise, concentrating only on holding the mental barrier, and at the same time nerve-blocking any unpleasant physical stimuli. As he lay, the Howler cuffed him but he felt nothing.

S'duna looked down at him thoughtfully. "Wait," he said, lifting a pallid hand to restrain the Leemute. "Lift him. up. It will avail us nothing to have him die here. He is fast draining himself, and he is wanted for a long period of arduous questioning, if nothing more. Garry him gently, Chee-Chowk, as you would one of your dirty cubs, eh?"

The wizard certainly exacted obedience, Hiero had to admit. He was lifted gently in the great, hairy arms, and although the stink of the creature was appalling, he could block that out too. Carried, or rather cradled, he passed under the cold arch of Manoon. Few who entered that place left it, and of those who opposed the Unclean in their purposes, none at all.

As he was borne into the court of the fortress, the mental assault ceased. Hiero felt that S'duna had signaled somehow, in a way he could not detect, that the prisoner was worn out and had best be allowed some respite. Whatever the cause, the pressure and probing ceased, and although he kept his shield of force firmly in place, with the rest of his senses he could look about, especially with his eyes.

The fortress was not especially large. The whole extent inside the stone walls was perhaps two hundred yards square. Steps led up to the walls' angles, and as well as being low-walled themselves, the parapets were broad enough to walk upon. A few hooded figures paced them, the same he had glimpsed from the boat. There were no armed men about and he saw no obvious weapons in evidence, save for Chee-Chowk's cleaver.

The square stone keep which lay before them was low, only about three storeys high, and had few windows. Those it had were narrow and set in no obvious order. The roof was fiat, making the structure look like a great, gray, blank cube, its shape in some way an affront to any kindly softness or indeed the human condition. The pavement on which they walked looked like the same stone slabs as the walls and the fortalice. All seemed to the priest to have been made with one purpose, an arid and sinister efficiency, one which denied beauty or taste or even life as being necessary. Inwardly, far, far inside, he shuddered, but none knew or saw it by his actions or appearance. And too, his curiosity could not be quelled entirely, even here. No one had ever penetrated the lives of the enemy as he was now doing. He *must* observe, despite himself.

They passed through a narrow door and went silently along an ill-lit stone corridor. The dim blue glow of an occasional fluur provided the only light. Hiero looked back over the hairy shoulder of his carrier and saw the gray light of day in the door vanish as they rounded a corner.

Presently, after many baffling turns, the corridor began to go down. At the same time, the hollow,

echoing voice of S'duna reverberated back from in front.

"Manoon lies truly below, priest. We of the Great Brotherhood find the depths a relaxant, a shield against the silly clamor of the world. Only in the bowels of the earth is there the complete silence we crave, the spiritual emptiness we seek to encourage the growth of pure thought." His words echoed along the stone corridor in diminishing tones: "Thought, thought, ought, ought."

When the silence had returned, save for the pad of the three sets of footsteps, he added gently, "And the dead, of course. They are here too." The echoes sighed: "Too, too, oo, oo."

Eventually, the two ahead came to a halt. A small, metal door had been opened, and the great Leemute stooped and entered. He laid Hiero on a pallet of straw, not ungently, and then backed out of the room, snarling as he did, to indicate his true feelings toward the captive.

"Farewell for a time, priest," came the voice of S'duna. "Rest and prepare yourself. You will be summoned, never fear." The door of heavy iron slammed shut with a clang, and a lock clicked. Then there was silence.

Hiero looked about him. The room, or cell, a better description, had been hewn from the living rock. There was no window in the rough walls, but a small slit high in one corner, too small for a man's arm, brought air from the distant surface. A small fluor, set in the ceiling, protected by a metal grill, gave a dim but adequate light. The cell was about ten feet square and furnished with nothing, save for the straw mattress and a covered pail, the latter obviously for sanitary purposes. There was also an evil-smelling drain in one corner, again with a heavy metal grill covering its opening.

Next to the pallet was a wooden tray on which were set an earthenware jug of water, another of some sweet, dark wine, and a loaf of ordinary hard bread. One sensing taste, an art taught in the Abbey schools, told him the wine contained some unknown substance, but the bread and water seemed pure enough, if a trifle flat in taste. He poured the wine down the drain, ate the loaf, drank all the water, and lay down to rest. The air was damp, but not especially cold, and he was not uncomfortable. The pain of the great bruise on his chest, where the lightning gun's blast had struck him, was still vivid but perfectly bearable. He now began, very cautiously, to try a previously thought-out experiment.

He lowered the mental guard on his mind a tiny, the smallest, bit. Imagine a man weakening a wall of rough stones from the inside, in order to see if an inimical force, or a dangerous animal, is pressing on it from the *outside*. Bit by bit, careful to make no sound, the man removes first the larger stones, then the smaller ones which fill up the chinks. He pauses and listens at frequent intervals. He is careful to leave the outer face of the wall unchanged. But until he is able to make at least a tiny hole all the way through, he cannot communicate with the outside world and get help. This was what Hiero did with his brain, slowly dismantling his invisible wards and guards, one by one.

The very last step was not needed, so delicately attuned had his mind become and so sensitive the warning devices that he felt the Unclean outside waiting! It was a weird experience. He knew they were waiting, on constant watch, waiting in what numbers he could not tell, for him to relax his barrier. And he could feel them without so doing, feeling them waiting to invade his mind, hoping he would be lulled into letting his inner fences down for even one split second, which was all they needed. Give them that, and he would be in an instant a mindless thing!

As carefully as he had dismantled his shield, so he rebuilt it. A few moments later and he could relax again. The wards were up once more, and the whole thing had been put on "automatic." Invade the cell and kill him with a sword thrust, they could do easily at any time; but invade his brain and spirit, not at all.

He lay back considering. He was sure of one thing, and that was that he must have frightened the Unclean adepts badly. Had this not been so, he felt sure he would now be writhing on some torture rack to give pleasure to one of their feasts. But they wanted desperately to know more about him, that was obvious. They wanted to know who and what he was and (Hiero was certain this lay uppermost in their thoughts) were there any more like him! As long as he kept them guessing, he had a shrewd idea they would handle him with great care.

How on earth could he use his mind, since his body seemed trapped here? The mental communication bands were sealed off by the necessity of keeping up the wall between their minds and his. Yet he could never escape unless he could explore, could learn more about his prison, and the only way to do that was to use his unfettered mind. And he knew he had better hurry, for God alone knew how long he would last under the Unclean Brotherhood's idea of an examination. The problem was a snake devouring its own tail. Relax the defenses and be overwhelmed. Don't relax them and die, through inaction, a little later, but just as surely. The mind's "doors" were all locked since no one could communicate except on the known wavelengths, not the Unclean, not the Abbeyes, not the animals, not anyone.

Or—could they? Like many revolutionary ideas, Hiero's came partly through his subconscious. It was slow emerging into the conscious, and then suddenly it was there. *Or could they?* Where had he got that idea? Was it possible there were other bands, perhaps on another part of the mind's spectrum, one nobody had yet chanced upon? He began to probe, sending his thoughts out on a "wavelength" neither he nor anyone else had ever tried before. It was a thought channel which had long been deemed blank, or rather too full of "static" to be useful. The only thing it had ever been demonstrated to carry was the mass mind of a beehive or wasp nest, for the channel was so "low" or "coarse" that it was very close to the inaudible *sounds* of certain communal insects.

Once again, analogy is necessary. Try to imagine a specialized electronics expert, who only had knowledge of microwave amplifiers, forced to use a crowded police call band, and use it with the microwave equipment which is all he is accustomed to. In addition to adapting his unsuitable equipment, he must operate through the police calls, which are already apparently using that particular band to capacity!

This was what Hiero now managed to do. Lying on his straw heap, eyes shut, to outward appearances sleeping, he began to tap the minds of his guardians at a level they had never suspected anyone capable of utilizing. It was hard at first, but the new wavelength had fantastic possibilities. For one thing, he found he could easily maintain his shields at the same time he explored with it. The two "bands" were totally different, and one had no relation to the other.

First, he looked for the source of the pressure which never ceased to beat, although without any effect, on his outer, automatically maintained shield. In passing, he noted that he was now using his mind at *three* separate, quite distinct levels, at one and the same time.

The enemy who watched him and kept up the thrust on his brain surprised him. It was only one man. But he had help. He sat before a curious machine, whose low humming and buzzing varied in a rhythmic pulse as it went up and down a scale. Above a board, covered with lights and buttons, hung a clear glass tube filled with some opalescent fluid, suspended by wire at both ends. The fluid, oily and shimmering, seemed to move in keeping with the wavering rhythm of the board below. The man, another adept, apparently, hood thrown back and eyes shut, sat with his hands fitted into two depressions on the front of the board which were shaped to receive them. In appearance, he was another duplicate, Hiero saw, of S'nerg and S'duna.

Saw! Even as the word rang in his mind, he closed that channel off and mentally retired into his own skull again, safe behind his shields. *Saw!* Without the benefit of an animal's eyes, he had somehow *seen* the room and the man. There was only one possible explanation. On this new level, he was in the other's mind, undetected, and using the other's sense of perception. Could he use more than sight?

Cautiously, he eased himself back along the line to the mind of the Unclean adept who, in turn, was supposed to be observing *him*. He found to his amazement that he was occupying the other's brain and tapping the other's sensations all at the same time. The sickly scent of an unpleasant incense filled the control room in which the adept sat, coming from a small, smoking brazier. Hiero guessed that it had an effect like Lucinoge and enhanced the mental powers. But the key fact was that he, Hiero, was *smelling* it, using the olfactory sense of his unconscious watcher! And he could *feel* the cold metal of the instrument board, where the other's hands now rested. The next step was one he was reluctant to take. But he could see no way out of it. The strange machine was undoubtedly tuned to the other's brain, was in a combined mental and physical contact with him. The priest wanted to know more about the machine, indeed felt it vital that he know more. The Abbays were only beginning to consider mind enhancement by mechanical aids, and the enemy was obviously far ahead.

Slowly, as slowly as a person with poor sight threads a needle, Hiero began to use his new channel of observation to tap the adept's links with the machine. The experience was uncanny. Through the machine, he began to feel the mind of the adept beating remorselessly on his own, Hiero's, mental barrier! A feeling of intense heat began to overcome him and he withdrew again, hastily. This sort of circular mental polarity was obviously not without danger. It was not necessary to kill himself to test his new powers, and what he had just tried was something that obviously needed lots of lab work first.

When the sensation of heat, a feeling not physical, but nonetheless dangerous for all that, had vanished, Hiero sent his mind to explore elsewhere, and sent it roving, to seek other intelligences nearby. He was doing now, he realized, in a conscious way, what his subconscious had always done when he wanted to see and put himself in a trance with the crystal.

He "knew" S'duna's personality from observation, both physical and mental, and he set himself to find that particular master of the Unclean Brotherhood. He touched several other human minds, and one non-human fleetingly. This latter he took to be Chee-Chowk or some other Leemute, but he went on without investigating. Ah! He touched the mind of the man he wanted.

The adept was apparently resting, his mind under the influence of some strange drug. Hiero was able to see part of the room, a large one, hung with dark draperies and containing many strange instruments laid out on tables. S'duna lay upon a bed, and beside him, another small brazier emitted a thin trickle of bluish smoke which he was inhaling. One brief look into the thoughts of the enemy was enough for Hiero. The man's plans for imaginative relaxation involved much that was bizarre and sensuous and more that was hideous, foul beyond belief. Hiero withdrew his mind, sure now that he could find the other again whenever he wanted.

What next? The time element he was being allowed in which to plan was uncertain, but must be decreasing. The fact that S'duna was under some drug seemed hopeful. A mind of that power would probably be involved in any interrogation. What more could now be done with this new attribute he had acquired?

He concentrated as hard as he could on *distance*. That is, he began to use the new band in an increasingly wide arc. Whenever he tapped a mind or even touched one which could be identified as Unclean or as being on the island, he thrust further *out* and *beyond*.

Soon, he knew he was sending his thoughts far beyond the physical scope of Manoon, as ripples from a far-flung stone grow larger and larger. Now he concentrated on Gorm and the girl. He knew their mental identities well and he began to search for them.

He encountered many minds, but all were animals, the brains of birds, intent on prey, usually fish, and the minds of fish and other aquatic creatures. Once he touched upon a cluster of human minds, all in one area, like a group of blips on an ancient radar screen. This, he guessed, must be a ship, and he knew he was still *over* water in a physical sense. Wider and wider yet, he cast his net of awareness.

Just when he was about to despair and abandon the process for some other, more hopeful, line of endeavor, he found them.

Gorm! The mind of the bear lay open to him, or at least partly so. To his surprise, which he momentarily put aside, there were some areas he could not penetrate. Using the bear's weak eyes, he could see that he was looking at Luchare. The two were on a lonely stretch of beach, in what seemed to be late afternoon from the way the light appeared. A shift of the bear's glance now revealed a huge foreleg blocking part of the scene. Klootz, too, was still with them, then!

Now, could he communicate? *Gorm, Gorm*, he called, using the new wavelength as hard as he could. He could feel the animal shift uneasily, but he was not getting through. At best, he was making the bear uneasy, acting as an irritant. He tried again, this time not so *hard*, but using a narrower "needle" of thought. It must be remembered that the soldier-priest was trying something utterly new. The full capabilities of his recently won system were unknown to him.

Mainly by luck, he made a fleeting contact. *Hiero!* He felt Gorm literally jump as the message hit him; then he lost the bear again. He tried Luchare next, but got nowhere. He was not surprised. She was a novice at mind speech and the bear was not. In fact, he thought, recalling the sealed elements of the ursine mind he had just noticed, the bear was still an unknown.

There was no time for such speculation, however. Patiently, he went back up and down his odd channel, trying to relocate the precise point at which Gorm had been jolted. There it was again, a flood of thoughts! *Hiero*, the bear sent. *Hiero/friend, where are you? How do we speak, this (strange) way?*

The priest finally managed to quiet the animal and began slowly to explain what he was doing and how. This time Hiero was not too surprised to observe how quickly Gorm understood. He had thought previously, it came to him now, that the young bear owned a brain not far short of a human's in power. It was now apparent that the estimate was far too low. The bear was quite as intelligent as Hiero, only in a somewhat different way, that was all.

I am a prisoner of the Unclean, the priest sent. *I am on an island in the sea, where I do not know. I am going to try to escape very soon, since I feel sure they will torture me. Where are you and how are you?*

As Gorm developed practice, the story of the three unfolded. The brief fight, which had left Hiero dead, they thought, on the beach, had left them untouched. They had evaded all missiles and galloped away west. Easily losing the few Howlers who pursued, they had next gone a few miles inland to the very edge of the Palood and headed east again. Now they were camped some half a day's eastward journey from the place where Hiero had been captured. The enemy was not, apparently, seeking them. It was supposed that they were thought to be mindless brutes and a stupid slave girl, not worth bothering about. They had been trying to frame new plans when the wonderful message had burst upon them. It was now a day and a half since the battle, if it could be called such. What did Hiero want them to do?

The priest reflected for a moment. It would be silly for the girl, who knew nothing of boats or deep water, the bear, who knew even less, and the morse, too big for most vessels, to try and reach him. He must escape in his own way and seek them out instead. The problem was where to tell them to meet him. But it was not insuperable.

Go, he sent, to the east. Find a cove where a small boat can come in secretly. Wait there in concealment. The Unclean know nothing of this channel of the mind we use now. He told them to send him a mind picture through Gorm, once they had found such a location, and estimate how far it lay from the site of the battle. He would surely be able to direct himself to it with that help. He added a prayer, a message of comfort for Luchare, and broke communication. A plan had been growing steadily in his mind, and he felt he could no longer avoid trying it. Who knew how much more time he would be allowed?

Once again he mentally sought the nameless adept, the same who, by the help of the curious apparatus, was maintaining the combined watch and pressure upon him. Once again he had the weird experience of invading the Unclean wizard's mind and senses and seeing them focused on himself!

He began to insert a thought in the normal mental pattern of the adept, a thought which would simply appear as a subconscious command! The thought was simple: *The prisoner is too quiet. Turn off the machine and go and check on him. Too quiet; go and check.* Over and over the thought was built, Hiero increasing its strength by degrees, his concentration never faltering as he tried not to let the pressure mount too rapidly so that the adept, himself a master of mental science, would suspect he was being tampered with. On and on, up and up, went the pressure. All the while Hiero watched the instrument board before him through the eyes of the man he was trying to mislead.

Suddenly there was a click. The priest felt his enemy's worry plainly as the light in the peculiar hanging tube dimmed and went out. The board's lights, too, were now shut off. The pressure on the other part of Hiero's brain vanished. And at the same time, before the Unclean adept could even rise from his seat, Hiero struck. The mental barrier he had erected to defend himself was swept down, and he lashed out at the dark mind of the adept before the other could even think of guarding himself. Using *both* channels now open to him, Hiero captured the enemy's brain before any warning even could be formulated. Now Hiero paused, keeping a tight vise on the other, and waited to see if anyone else had been aroused. There was nothing, no thrilling of the ether, no alarm, no sign of awareness of what had happened.

After a moment, Hiero ordered his captive, bound no less strongly than if he had been loaded with chains, to come to his cell and release him. It was a risk, for the adept might have no key, but Hiero was gambling that anyone of that rank must have the ability to set him free.

He watched through the other's eyes as the adept left the chamber from which he had kept watch and headed for Hiero's distant place of imprisonment. Nor were the adept's eyes the priest's only aid. With the man's *ears*, Hiero heard footsteps coming at a cross corridor and made the other stand in an alcove until they had passed.

All this time he could feel the enemy's own mind raging against its restraints. It was a strong mind and it battled desperately to free itself and the body it was attached to from the strangling embrace of the priest's brain. But in vain: so quick had Hiero been that the entire forebrain was completely under his power, all senses, all locomotor ability, everything. The Unclean could only rage futilely in the dark recesses of his mind, helpless to intervene actively.

Through a maze of dark corridors they went, passing closed doors at intervals and using the occasional

dim bulb of a fluor set in the ceiling for light. Once, as they passed a door, Hiero caught the sound of a faint moan. But he dared not tarry to see what foulness of the enemy lay behind it. It would be all he could do to escape alone, and it would serve no one to have him die here in the course of a hopeless attempt at rescue of some other of Manoon's captives. Presently they were before his own door. He could feel himself *inside* and himself *outside* at one and the same time. Under Hiero's mental orders, the adept was forced to release a tiny, hidden catch in the stone corridor wall just outside the door. The door lock clicked, and the adept opened it and entered. As he entered, Hiero forced him to his knees. The door closed by itself behind the Unclean. At the same time, Hiero clamped down on every neural synapse he could reach in the adept's body. With a muffled exhalation of breath, the enemy passed out cold, completely unconscious, even as the Metz left his mind completely and reoccupied his own in full.

He rose from the bed and crouched by the body. Hastily he stripped the other, finding a nasty-looking dagger belted on under the robe. This he took and drew on the gray robe and hood over his own supple leather clothes. He listened for a moment and heard nothing. He built again his "ordinary" mind shield, simply as a precaution, lest a snooper try a chance probe at him. A sudden stillness made him glance down. There would be no need to tie the Unclean master up now, for he had ceased to breathe. The ferocious nerve shock must have stopped the evil heart, Hiero realized and promptly forgot the matter. The sooner such creatures as this were exterminated, the better, was his only feeling.

Before he had "led" the adept to his own cell, the enemy's memories had been extensively looted. Hiero knew now where his cell lay, where the various entrances were, and the whole maze of Manoon's underworld down to the last broom closet. He shut the cell door behind him, locked it, and went on his way down the corridor, his hood over his bent head, to all appearances a master of the Dark Brotherhood intent on some problem as he paced along at a steady rate.

He was not heading for the surface by the way he had entered. It was not the closest way out, for one thing, nor the most private. Also, there was something he wanted to get before he left. He kept his mind always on the warning pulse of the mental wavelength he had found the Unclean to favor. Any human being within range would be detected before he ever saw him and either avoided, the best method, or taken over mentally if necessary.

He had crossed several hundred yards of dusty corridor, listening intently, his new knife held firmly up a sleeve, when he thought he caught a faint sound. He paused, his ears straining. The noise, if it were a noise and not the blood beating in his temples, was a soft scuffling, and it had seemed to come from behind him somewhere. He heard nothing now. The buried world of Manoon was utterly silent. Far behind him, a dusty blue fluor glowed in the corridor roof, and equally far ahead, another.

Once more he went upon his way. Soon he slowed his pace even further. He heard footsteps ahead and saw the glow of a stronger light. He was approaching, as he had meant to, a more used part of the dungeon-fortress complex. The footsteps died away again and he moved on. It had only been an underling, whose mind radiated nothing but vicious stupidity.

Hiero saw that the light came from a strong fluor set at the junction of his corridor with a much broader one. This was also as it should be, and no Unclean minds were in close proximity. Hood drawn down, he stepped into the new hallway and turned left. In a short time he was before another door, and finding it unlocked, he quickly entered. The small storeroom was empty. Having mind-probed first, he would have been greatly surprised had it been otherwise. On a shelf, shoulder belt, scabbard, and all, lay his beloved sword-knife, flung there carelessly by hands disdainful of mere physical weaponry. In a second, he had his robe off and was belting the beloved weapon on. Only moments later, he was out again and moving off up the corridor outside, back the way he had come, storeroom door shut behind him. It had been luck that the dead man back in his own cell had known where his sword was stored, but it had been

forethought which had led the Metz to probe for the information. He wasted no time looking for the thrower. It already had been taken apart for examination, he had learned, and besides, he had no shells.

Hiero met no one and sensed nothing on the way to the little-used corridor from which he had come, but he was nonetheless nervous. A feeling was growing that somehow he had been detected. Once into the corridor, he quickened his pace, moving at a dog trot. All of Manoon seemed unconscious of his escape, but that feeling persisted.

The passage floor grew rougher, the jagged walls dripping cold water now and then, and the fluors were set even further apart.

This was a path to a seldom-used exit, one originally designed in the far past to serve as an emergency escape route in the event Manoon should suffer a siege. When Hiero had ransacked the now dead master's mind, this way had been the one which the Unclean himself had regarded as the most secret and the least likely to be either searched or guarded.

The passage floor now began to slope upward at a light angle, which reassured Hiero, who had been wondering if he had made a mistake. But the floor was even rougher, and bits of rubble and even a few large rocks littered it. Also, it twisted, cutting down the dim light of the occasional fluors even more. His pace slowed to a walk.

The priest paused. Had he caught another faint sound, the rattle of a stone far to his rear? Once again he "swept" the airwaves for an Unclean human's presence and detected nothing. If anything, a rat or some other vermin, he decided and went on. No human mind stirred in the fortress.

At length the passage straightened. It ran up now at a fairly steep angle, and a tiny gleam of light far away heralded its end. Encouraged, the Metz loped on, breathing evenly. He was beginning to feel the strain of all the mental effort, even more than the physical exertion, but he still had reserves to draw on.

He had passed the last dusty fluor and gone into the darkness beyond when the rattling scrape of claws on stone made him turn, freeing the heavy sword-knife and dagger together from the folds of the robe as he did.

One fluor's light beyond the near one, a great dark bulk filled the tunnel from side to side, rolling along at a terrifying speed. At the same time, realizing somehow that he had been detected, the monster gave forth with a ghastly ululating bellow which filled the tunnel with deafening noise.

Chee-Chowk! Somehow the giant Howler had sensed Hiero's escape and tracked him down. And the priest's watch for Unclean human minds had made him forget they too had allies who thought in a different band altogether! But there was no time for self-recrimination.

As the Leemute passed under the last fluor just in front of him, Hiero caught the glint of the cleaverlike weapon the filthy thing carried in one great paw. Then the priest attacked.

He had transferred his sword, letting it droop from his dagger, or left hand, while he stooped and then hurled a fist-sized piece of rubble as hard as he could, straight into the fang-lined maw which shrieked at him. Straight and hard went the missile, and the chunk of limestone smashed into the hideous mouth, silencing the cries on the instant and making the brute halt in sudden agony, pawing the air with his free hand.

Behind the rock raced Hiero himself, sword now in the right hand, dagger in the left, using the

downward slope of the tunnel to lend force to his charge.

Chee-Chowk tried to raise his own weapon, but using the long dagger as a *main gauche*, the defensive poniard of the forgotten *Cinquecento*, the priest beat it aside and struck a terrible blow at that awful, bleeding face which reared above him. The short, heavy blade, backed with utter desperation, for Hiero had no doubt as to the ultimate outcome if he should miss, came cleaving straight between the staring, red eyes. It drove into the skull beyond and split it with a "chunk" sound, as when a man splits a heavy tree knot with an axe.

That was all. The Howler's giant body fell slowly forward, eyes glazed in death, and Hiero had to twist himself sideways to avoid being crushed. Even so, his sword was wrenched from his weakening grip, so deeply was it embedded in the head of his monstrous foe.

There was silence, broken only by the priest's panting breath. As soon as he could think again, he tried to tear loose his sword and, while doing so, to use his brain to see if any general alarm had been given. But he could detect nothing. No mental clamor, no alert, nothing at all. The minds he was able to spot-check back in the main fortress were unconcerned, set only upon their own routine business. S'duna still lay in drugged slumber, a prey to evil visions.

Finally, Hiero tugged his weapon loose, and stooping, wiped it more or less clean on the dirty fur of the Leemute. He stood looking down at the huge bulk, whose muscular spasms went on despite death. "A pity, Chee-Chowk," he mused aloud. "Perhaps if decent men had raised you, you'd have been just another kind of man, not a foul, night-haunting ogre." Moved by the tragedy of the Leemute's mere existence, he said a brief prayer and then turned and resumed his march up the tunnel. Already he could smell the fresh breezes over the dank airs of the tunnel and the stench of the dead Howler.

The light was much further than it looked, however, and it was more time than he cared to lose before he climbed the ramp to the end of the tunnel. His legs now really ached, and he had a strong feeling that a Chee-Chowk one-year-old would have been too much for him.

The emergency exit from the buried world of the Unclean was not barred by any door. The tunnel walls made a double zigzag, that was all, so that no one could see out or in. The last portion of the zag was a narrowing slit, through which one squeezed.

The Metz priest peered out cautiously. He had to shade his eyes, even though the sun was setting, until they grew accustomed to the normal light of the outside world. The bolt hole from which he peered was set high up, on the left arm of the bay to which the ship had come bearing him as a prisoner. He now faced east, and the light of the setting sun was coming from above and behind him. While Underground, he had come a long way out onto one arm of the two which guarded the harbor of Manoon.

Down a tumbled slope of rock and scree, on which nothing grew, the harbor lay before him. The few ships still rested silently at anchor, including the thin black craft which had captured him. A slight chop stirred the waters of the harbor, and looking to his left, the entrance, he could see whitecaps outside where a brisk breeze was blowing. And he could see something else.

There was only one wharf, the one to which he had been taken, below the road up to the castle. The castle glowered at him across the silent harbor and the bare rock which surrounded its walls. The gate was shut. No one paced the walls and no sound came from the edifice.

But just to the right of where Hiero now crouched, a path led down to a tiny cove with a bare shingle of pebble beach. Spread out upon this were a couple of fishing nets, and near them two small wooden

boats were drawn up on the shore, held by anchors tossed up into the rocks at the end of their ropes. The priest decided that the rulers of the Dead Isle occasionally wanted fresh fish and made some of their servants go out and get it. Whatever the reason for those boats, they represented a chance. Their oars were plainly visible, simply shipped inside, and one of them even had a collapsible mast lying across its thwarts, a sail wrapped tightly about it.

Hiero had been maintaining a watch on the massed minds of the castle and its underground world. Still nothing stirred. Chee-Chowk apparently had followed his intended prey alone, not wishing to share what he no doubt thought of as a free dinner! But this could end at any time. Nevertheless, he decided to wait. The light was failing rapidly now, and it must be very close to sundown.

Nightfall would aid his chances enormously. It was a risk worth taking.

The shadows rapidly grew longer. No lights came on in the squat bulk of the castle, and its sinister outline grew harder and harder to make out. Nor were any lights visible in the harbor. *Not even an anchor watch*, thought Hiero, who had some experience of the Beesee coast and its seamen. These people were overconfident, he decided, too arrogant to believe anything could challenge them or their fortress. Their very lack of apprehension would be a shield to one of God's servants. Or would it? He remembered S'duna's comment in the boat, about Manoon's having "many guardians." Best to go cautiously.

A few stars had glimmered through the flying clouds, but no moon, and soon even the stars were invisible. The wind was making up now, and it moaned among the empty, barren rocks of the Dead Isle. The voices of the countless dishonored slain, the tortured victims of the Unclean, Hiero thought, and resolved that, come what might, he would not be among them.

He felt his way slowly down the slope, all senses alert, but heard nothing and sensed nothing with his mind.

Soon he made out the outline of the small boats. He felt his way around the one with the mast and freed its anchor. Then, with the anchor rope over his shoulder, he began to drag the boat into the water. It was a sturdy little thing, and it took some doing. Twice he had to pause and rest, each time checking the dark mass of the fortress for lights.

Finally he got the boat launched and, climbing aboard, stepped the mast, though leaving the sail furled. Then he went back and smashed a hole in the other boat with a heavy rock, first transferring its oars to his own in case he needed spares. In another moment he was afloat, had two oars in the tholes, and was pulling along the shore for the harbor mouth.

He rowed carefully, glancing ahead for rocks and not trying to make any speed. His little craft was almost invisible in the black shadows of the overhanging rocks, and he followed each dip and twist of the shore with precision. At one point he had to pass quite close to one of the larger moored vessels he had glimpsed earlier, but it was soon past and nothing stirred aboard it; nor could he detect any mind. His greatest problem was the increasing chop of the short, stiff waves as he neared the harbor mouth. Spray was already coming aboard, but he was grateful for the fact that at least he would be in no danger from thirst.

Two oval, flat pieces of wood, which sat on pins secured to the sides of the boat near the tholes for the oars, had caught his eye. Though he had never seen leeboards before, for his own people did not use them, he quickly grasped their purpose. The round-bottomed little boat would go faster sideways than forward under sail and might even turn over without a steadying influence. The leeboards rotated on bolts

secured to the boat's side, and one of them could be dropped on the side away from the wind when the sail went up. The priest had been in enough craft with sails, even though they had had fixed keels, to understand what tacking into the wind meant, and he could see what he had to do to make use of the fishing boat's best powers.

Even though he was prepared for it, the full force of the wind at the entrance caught him by surprise. Actually, it was not gale force or anything like it, but in the tiny boat, only a dozen feet long, it felt far more severe than it was. A capful of water, caught from a wave top, slammed into the back of Hiero's bare head and ran down his neck under the cloak, making him shiver momentarily. But it was not really cold, little less than blood heat, and he pulled stoutly into the crests, pounding up and down, quickly developing a rhythm which allowed him to avoid shipping much water.

He was squarely in the middle of the entrance, fangs of black rock rearing up on either side, when all his mental alarms went off. Instantly he slapped on his own new spy-proof mind shield and simply listened to the clamor, while continuing to row his hardest.

He could hear S'duna's mind, almost incoherent with rage, as the Unclean was awakened and told the news. The minds of other adepts, how many Hiero could not now tell, also tuned in, and he felt the mental search pattern they established at once. But he also felt that it was harmless. His shield was impervious, giving him a mental invisibility the Unclean could not even detect, far less crack. He was much more worried about purely physical means of detection and pursuit, and he felt sure the cold minds in Manoon would think of them, too, before very many more moments went by!

Luck, or something else, Hiero thought, mentally apologizing to God, was with him. He had barely rounded one of the corner rocks of the entrance when lights burst out on the walls of the castle. At the same time a flare hurled up by a rocket cast a spectral blue light over the harbor. Not two wavelengths to the left of the boat, Hiero saw the harbor's mouth almost as brightly illuminated as if it were day. But a wall of stone, the outer bastion of the Dead Isle itself, shielded him from view. Nevertheless, he was under no illusions about his safety. Once there had been time for logic to take over, the Unclean search would discover the missing boat. After all, how else could he leave the Dead Isle, save by water?

He shipped his oars and freed the sail from its lashings. It was a simple type, a kind called a "standing lug" in the Lost Millennia, and Hiero had seen similar rigs before. Next, deciding that he wanted to run along the island's coast in an easterly direction, he lowered the right leeboard into the water. Then he took one oar and locked its thole pin into a hole in the stern, so that he had a crude, but adequate, rudder.

It took a few moments to get the feel of the boat, and some of them were bad. Once he let her head fall off so far a bucket of water poured over the stem, but he managed to bring her up again and get her settled. Fortunately, the wind was steady from the west and did not blow in gusts. Also, the little craft was well balanced and, once given a chance, sailed stoutly along.

Hiero had been so busy mastering the boat and watching for rocks that he had let his mental probes slip, though not the shield, for that he had put on "automatic." Now he felt something new, a strange, unpleasant thrilling of the mental communication bands. It meant nothing to him and was not actively harmful, being merely a minor annoyance. Since he had no idea what it meant, however, it worried him.

Then, from the whitecapped water off to his left, beyond the shadow thrown by the island, an enormous coil of glistening rope, as thick around as his body, rose from a swell and sank again, clear in the light of the dying flare.

The worm-things of the harbor! Manoon had called new and awful pursuers from the slimy depths of the Inland Sea.

7

The Forgotten City

Luchare sat cross-legged and stared at the tiny, red fire in front of her. She shivered. But she was not cold, far from it. The young bear lay next to her, his head in her lap, and made faint woofing noises in his sleep. Beyond the mouth of the little gully, she could hear Klootz methodically chewing his cud even over the noise of the waves breaking on shore, and she knew that no unannounced danger could steal upon them in the night.

No, it was Hiero. The wonderful burst of communication had restored them all to life and purpose again. She herself had seriously contemplated suicide just before the priest had managed to reach their minds. Not that he had actually said anything to *her*, she thought illogically and quite angrily. No indeed, she was too stupid to hear him; a bear, a four-legged animal, was the only one smart enough, not a woman who—She shied away, even in her own mind, from the unspoken and unwanted thought. She, Lu-chare, daughter of Danyale IX, bothering to care about whether a common foreign priest, a lowborn, painted-faced nobody, talked to a stupid bear rather than to her! Ridiculous!

Overcome with sudden remorse, she stroked Gorm's shaggy head. "Clever bear," she whispered. "Clever bear, bring him back safely."

Their camp was set back in a pocket of a rock outcrop only a few hundred feet from the sea. As Gorm had told her, they needed to find a little bay or cove where they could lie undetected and to which Hiero could aim. Open to the sky, but otherwise walled except in front, it was a good location. Luchare, mindful of Hiero's warning, had built a screen of brush on the beach side, so that the fire was invisible unless you came within a few feet.

The bear awoke suddenly and sniffed the breeze. *Wind, stronger, Girl* (identity Luchare symbol). *The sky is dark. Hiero may have good luck (?)*. He lay back and shut his eyes again.

But he's in prison! she thought. The Metz priest himself would have been surprised at how well Luchare had learned to use her mind. She and Gorm could conduct a regular conversation with very few breaks now, and she could even give the big morse intelligible orders, although she usually asked Gorm to do this for her. Klootz accepted Gorm's commands completely, as he would have Hiero's, another thing the priest would have found worth pondering. The bear had been very careful, too, when planning their next moves.

Do not try(negative emphatic) *to talk to Hiero!* He had made the order plain. *Talk only to me or Klootz and when we are close together*. Being clever herself, she realized that he knew what the dangers were far better than she. She ought not to try and locate Hiero mentally, lest she unwittingly draw the enemy down upon them instead.

But damn this waiting and wondering!

An hour or so later, she felt the bear rouse himself again. This time he rose and stood, dark, pointed head erect, as if trying to see through the racing clouds about them. Somehow, she now was attuned enough to know, he was in communication with the priest again. If only she could understand and were

not so stupid! There must be some way she could help, if she could only think of it! Then she realized with a thrill, that Gorm was now talking to her.

I cannot describe this place properly. You must tell him what it looks like. He cannot see well with my eyes.

Then, into her mind like a flood, came Hiero! But there was no greeting, no warmth, only commands!

Quick, girl, where are you? Try to tell me what this place looks like from the sea, if you can imagine it. And hurry!" There was a pause. *I am pursued; I cannot keep this mind path open for long. Hurry!*

Luchare was terrified. She had wanted so much to help, but now she was unable even to think. Anything she thought might kill Hiero, if the information were incorrect. But she came of fighting stock and managed to rally.

Wait, she sent clumsily. I will try. We are less than a day's journey east from where you were taken. Offshore is a lone rock with two palms growing at the east end. The rock is high in the west, low to the east. Behind it is a small cove with a beach. We are there.

That's enough! Hiero snapped. *No more until you see me, or they will use you. Don't send any more messages until you actually see me, understand! Now wait!* There was a sudden blankness, a "silence." Luchare burst into tears. Here he was, in deadly danger, maybe about to be killed, and not one kind word for her, not even a "hello" or "how are you"! The next moment her tears increased at the thought of her own selfishness. Even as she stormed at his coldness, he might be dead!

Wait, be calm, came the thought in her mind. Looking down through her tears, she saw that Gorm lay on his stomach, head on his furry paws, looking up at her.

He will come back, the thought continued. *And he thinks of you too. Only now he must fight for his life. Be patient.*

Luchare blinked back the tears and then reached down and hugged the bear. How had he known what she was feeling?

Your mind was open to me, he sent. *When Hiero spoke to you, it was through me. Your own mind is not yet strong enough for such a task. Now sleep while I keep watch.*

Soothed, but still apprehensive, she lay down on her waterproof cloak, staring at the black sky above and listening to the small breakers hitting the beach and the rattle of the wind in the palmettos. She was sure she could not possibly sleep, and the bear observed with satisfaction that she was asleep in hardly any time at all.

These humans, he thought. *They take their affections so hard!* Then he resumed listening to the night.

His face calm, but his mind racing, Hiero watched the coil of the great water worm disappear below the surface. He was braced against the lee side, gripping his steering oar in one hand and the sheet, the line holding the sail, in the other. The little craft was tearing along the rocky coast of Manoon, the wind on her quarter, and he was keeping her as close to the cliffs as he dared. Something told him that the danger would be greater out on the open water. Soon, however, he would have to leave the shelter of the isle and strike out for the mainland. He knew by his Internal "compass" and the glimpse of the land at sunset

where he wanted to head, but keeping an unfamiliar small boat on course in this stiff breeze was something else again. And now the hunters of the depths were being loosed upon him. He could still feel the vibration in his mind which he had decided was the hunting call sent out from the Dead Isle to the monster worms. He strained his eyes through the black night to see if a worm or a sharp rock would appear first in the murk and destroy him.

Once a great swell broke two boat lengths to seaward of his little craft, but he could not see whether something was lurking below or a wave crest had simply toppled over naturally.

A vagrant fleck of moonlight pierced the wind-driven banks of clouds and helped give the priest his new bearings. He was leaving Manoon at last. The farthest, most eastern headland, gaunt and windswept, towered up to his right, blacker than the clouds, and beyond its point lay nothing but windswept open sea. Somewhere off there, how far it was hopeless to guess, must lie the mainland and his friends.

At this point, in order to head the boat around the island, he was forced to jibe and cross the sail over to the other side. This meant raising one leeboard, securing it, and lowering the other. Somehow it got done. Fortunately, the standing lug is one of the simplest rigs ever devised, which may account for its continual rediscovery throughout history. Bringing her around on the new course, Hiero looked back and instantly stiffened.

Out of the tossing sea, three waves back, caught in a ray of the fitful moonlight, the hideous round mouth, pulsing in horrid motion, of a giant worm appeared. To the priest, then and later, these dreadful brutes were "worms," but in actuality, their origin, like much else, dated back to The Death. In the past only foot-long sea lampreys, the scourge of the local whitefish and trout, forced mutation had turned them into mindless, ravening colossi, capable of overwhelming a small boat. The Unclean wizards of Manoon had found a mental wavelength which stimulated the hideous things into a simultaneous rise to the surface and quest for food. Only the adepts could then control them enough to keep them away from their own vessels, and they thus formed a most effective guard around the island, many of them always lying on the bottom near it.

As the creature bore down on him, clear in the persistent moonlight, the neck arched and cut through the water like that of a giant snake. The small, round eyes, set on the sides of the head, were visible as it swayed from side to side, following each movement of the boat. Almost, it seemed to Hiero, the thing was toying with him, for it advanced at a very slow rate, far slower than if it had been coming in earnest. Probably it was only instinctive caution, for the tiny brain was incapable of any thought. At length it seemed to decide this thing was prey. The motion through the water suddenly increased tenfold, and the head-mouth, barbed fangs all palpitating, struck down at Hiero as he sat in the stern.

The priest had never felt he had a chance, once he saw the worm come, and he was very, very angry. To have come through so much, only to be dragged down by a hideous, mindless thing like this! But he was trained to battle, and the first rule was never to give up.

He had taken a turn with the sheet to a rude wooden cleat, and as the horror struck down at him, he in turn stood up, the tiller-oar held between his knees. At the same time, he thrust stoutly into the yard-wide, sucker mouth above him. He used the butt end of one of the spare oars, snatched off the boat's bottom, and he drove it home down the foul gullet as strongly as he could.

There was a shock which threw him to his knees, but he never lost control of the steering oar and he saw the great worm fling back its head in agony at the hard morsel so suddenly jammed in its throat. The wash of its recoil helped drive the boat forward a trifle faster. As he watched in fascination, the monster churned the water to foam in its efforts to expel the unwanted tidbit. Soon it was out of sight in the murk,

but he dared not relax his vigil. There were assuredly many more of the things, and he could not always count on such luck. Besides, he was fast approaching exhaustion. The strain of the two recent combats and the necessity of keeping a constant watch on the mental airwaves had worn him down to a shred of his normal vitality. He had not had anything like a rest since his capture and he was not sure how much longer he could go on.

The island had long since been lost to view, and the now increasing gleams of the moon's rays on the dancing wave tops showed nothing but empty water as far as the eye could reach.

Tired as he was, Hiero decided it was time to try and get more information. He had no belief in the powers of good triumphing so easily. S'duna's rage alone had come clearly to his mind as he was leaving the harbor, and the other adepts could hardly be less furious. S'duna had said himself that no one had ever yet escaped the Dead Isle. Pursuit would be coming, and the sooner Hiero contacted his friends the better.

It was then that he called Gorm. If Luchare could have known his thought when he broke the mental contact with her, she would have slept with a smile on her face. Slowly, reluctantly, the priest was finding that her dark face and dancing, corkscrew ringlets were somehow always coming between him and any other work or thought, even in times of crisis. Almost physically, he shook off such feelings. *If he got out of this mess . . .*

His brain was now tuned to the island behind him again, and using his new wavelength, he was able to separate several sets of minds from what must be the main group back at the fortress. Using his newfound powers, he was able to locate no less than three separate "groups" of mind pulses, apart from the central one which had to be Manoon itself. These three pulse groups were stronger than the other, and that meant closer! They lay, physically, that is, in an arc, between the island and himself. The pursuit could thus be pinpointed as being in three vessels, all more or less on his track. The Unclean lords had quickly guessed which course he would take, that was obvious. Now, how far away was the mainland?

The priest strained his eyes, staring ahead through the night, but the fleeting moon gleams, though they came at closer intervals, revealed nothing but more of the great freshwater sea. He turned his mental energies to the subband again, God Almighty, the shore could not be too far distant, from the strength of the signals he had caught from his own friends. He must have come five miles at least since leaving the Dead Isle. On and on he sailed, up one wave and down the next, the wind steadily from the quarter, the little boat's best point of sailing. But she was not designed with speed in mind, and behind him, the three clumps of mental force which he knew represented three enemy craft grew remorselessly more powerful. He knew too that they were seeking his mind and not finding it, which was his sole consolation.

As the night drew on, the light grew better. The clouds began to thin out and the moon and stars appeared in greater and greater frequency. This was bad, but there was nothing the priest could do except hold his course and pray.

What was that? A dark line ahead, glimpsed in the waning moonlight? There, it came again, and yet again as he rose to a wave top. It was land, a little to the left of his bearing. He trimmed the small sail and the boat bore up, while his heart pounded. Once again there was a chance, and he was going to take it. Now once more he reached out for the bear's mind.

Wake up, break camp, and wait! Be ready and don't answer, or you'll be detected. Three times Hiero sent this on his new low-level wavelength and then ceased. He had done all he could.

The wind still drove him on with the same strength. But the clouds were almost gone now, and even his

small sail must be visible for some distance in the moonlight, he knew. He sought the enemy minds and marveled at how close their "images" were. Yet when he looked back, he could not see them.

He could begin to make out details of the land now, but to his disappointment saw nothing but a line of light-colored beach and dark scrub and whiter dunes behind it. No island such as Luchare had described appeared, indeed no islands of any sort. Had he overshot them? No matter; getting ashore was the first step, away from those pursuing boats. He aimed directly for the nearest stretch of beach, now no more than a half mile away.

As he did, he sensed the sudden surge of emotion in the minds of his nearest foes as they glimpsed him for the first time. Alerted, he looked back and saw them. Two dark triangles rose from the shining waters, rose and fell back, then rose again. The sails of the pursuing vessel were about the same distance from Hiero that he himself was from the beach and safety. It would be a close race. But he had been lucky and he knew it. He had struck the westernmost boat, the one at the left end of the line of three, and it was not one with an engine. But he could feel the thrilling of the communication bands as the Unclean sent out word that he was in sight, and sure enough, he felt the other two mind "clumps" begin to close up toward his position. He readied the long knife in his lap, this time for himself. He would receive no second chance to escape, he knew, and the enemy was going to get no live prisoner this time. He looked back, calculating his chances, estimating the speed of the two-masted vessel. It was gaining on him fast, and he could see the black outline of its hull now and even a twinkle of light as some edged weapon caught the moon.

But the beach was also very close. He heard the breakers rolling ashore and could make out the black outlines of individual palm trees behind the sandy margin, etched in chiaroscuro by the moon.

There was a "zzzup" sound and then another. Round holes magically appeared in his sail, but the tough cloth from which it had been woven did not fray or tear. With a sharp thud, a heavy bolt of some kind, *probably from a crossbow*, he thought in a remote corner of his mind, buried itself in the gunwale a span away from his hand. There was nothing he could do and he did not- even bother to look back, but drove on straight for the creaming surf. Shooting at one small boat from another at night and in a wind was as much luck as a matter of skill and hence not worth thinking about.

Now his boat was rearing up in the first breaker, and he hastily dropped the sail and steered her in. He had no time to raise the dropped leeboard, but he managed to loosen it so that it at least swung free on its pintle.

Down went the blunt bow as the wave caught the boat and hurled it at the beach just ahead. Crouched amidships but keeping the boat steady with the steering oar, Hiero rode her in, in a long, sweeping rush.

As sweetly as if the little craft had tried to come to rest, the leeboard and then the bottom grated on the sand. The priest, free of his stolen cloak, now tucked under one arm, was running through the ankle-deep water and up the sandy slope beyond almost at the same moment.

The zipping of more of the enemy missiles overhead and alongside did nothing to slow him down. Now an enraged, ululating yell rang out behind him, and as he toiled up a gully in one of the high dunes, he knew the boat had a complement of Howlers aboard. He stumbled to the dune top and as he did, looked back for the first time. His little craft lay on her beam ends in the breakers, white water pouring over her side. He felt a moment's regret, for she indeed had saved him. Just beyond the outer waves, the enemy lay hove to, and in the moonlight he could see black figures dancing with rage on her deck and hear their redoubled shrieks of fury. He smiled wearily and wondered how long he had before they put a company ashore to try and run him down. *God knows, at this stage it wouldn't take long*, he thought, rubbing

his eyes, his breath coming in pants.

He lay down now on the crest of the sand hill, hidden from his foes by some grasses, but able to watch, them. Time enough to run for it inland if he saw a boat being lowered. The enemy vessel was bigger than he had imagined, and there might be fifty souls aboard; plenty to spare for a landing party.

Then, over the waves, he saw the outline of the slim, engine-driven vessel which had captured him. It came fast from the southeast, a white curl of foam at the sharp bow, slicing through the waves like a knife. In a few moments it was resting bow to bow with the sailing ship, rocking up and down in the waves. He could see a cluster of dark figures on her foredeck and he knew the "lightning gun" again was seeking a target. He crouched quickly and slid down the back side of the dune. As he did he saw the grass burst into orange flame a few yards over his head.

Idiot! I never moved sideways from where I ran up the slope! He trotted slowly away from the dunes through the palmettos and scrubby bushes, picking a way around patches of growth too dense to cut through. Behind him, he heard more fires crackle. A stitch began to cause a sharp pain in his side, and he had to slow to a walk. All the while he tried to monitor the enemies* minds, but a new difficulty had come up. Apparently there were *too many* minds, and they were all trying to shield themselves and concentrate on him at the same time. He found it almost impossible to separate their thoughts, even on the new wavelength of which they were ignorant.

Suddenly a clear message came to him, standing out, so to speak, above the jumbled thoughts of the others, like a mountain above hills.

Priest, I think you can hear me! You have some new tricks, priest, and I want them. You have slain another Elder Brother(sacrilege!) and made away with the chief of our Howler allies in some manner, this too we know. Now listen well, priest!! S'duna, a Master of the Dark Brotherhood and Initiate of the Seventh Circle, swear by our most sacred bond to slay you, yes, and by the most horrible means we can devise. And I will never rest until I bring this about. I go now, but you will see me again!

Hiero sat down under the shadow of a large bush and stared dully at the moonlit vegetation before him. He felt so tired that further physical effort would probably kill him, but he also felt marvelous in another way. He could *feel* the enemy minds, and they were not coming ashore! And there was only one answer to that. They feared him, alone and worn out, feared him desperately! Only this could make a heavily armed pack of over a hundred (a guess) furious Unclean, including their acolytes and Leemute allies, abandon so hard a chase. They had no idea of what he was really capable, and their leaders feared an ambush! The priest giggled weakly at the thought. It was all he could do to stay awake and keep his mind shield up, and the Unclean feared a superhuman, one-man ambush!

He roused himself at length. What little store of strength he still possessed must be used before it too gave out. He concentrated in the new channel on Gorm. The bear must have been waiting, his response was so quick.

I'm ashore to the west of you, I think, Hiero sent, striving to keep his message coherent. *You'll have to find me. I couldn't see your island, but I'm back in the scrub about a quarter mile from the dunes. I can't stay awake much longer and my mind screen will be on lock. You'll have to use your noses and ears. The enemy is near, just offshore, so stay behind the dunes and guard your minds! Repeat, guard your minds!* He fell forward on his face in the sand, the last trickle of energy leaving his body. Anyone passing by would have had to look hard to see that one patch of shadows cast by the moonlight under a certain large bush had a solidity that the others lacked. A child armed with a rock

could have slain him.

He awoke to find it dark. Water dripped down his face, and for an instant he thought it was raining. Then he felt the canteen spout against his teeth and realized that he was leaning on something soft which smelled wonderfully of girl. His head was on Luchare's breast, and he now saw the young bear a few paces away in the moonlight and heard his snorts as he sought for a scent. The giant morse loomed in the background, dark against the star-filled sky.

With an effort, for he was terribly stiff, Hiero pushed himself up on his elbows and took the canteen from the girl's hands. She squeaked in excitement and surprise and started to babble.

"Are you all right, we looked all day and just found you a few minutes ago, that is, Gorm did. He smelled you and I don't wonder, I can myself, where have you been, you need a good bath and I—"

Hiero had freed one hand and pressed it firmly over her mouth while he drank from the canteen. When he had had enough, he put it down and released her lips.

"I need food," he said firmly. "While I eat I'll talk. But we're by no means out of the woods. Have you seen any of the enemy, either at sea or here on shore?"

She sprang to the morse's saddlebags and was back with food on the instant, but her voice now tried unsuccessfully to be indifferent.

"How—how are you, Hiero? We were hiding about three miles down the coast in a bay. I guess you couldn't see it. You look terrible and smell worse." As she spoke, she handed him some smoked fish and biscuit.

Between ravenous bites, he told her briefly what had happened to him since his capture. At the same time, he was telling Gorm the story, only with his mind linked to the bear's. It was tiring, but saved repetition. The mental history took only a minute or two, so fast was mind speech, and Gorm wandered away when he had heard all he wanted.

Hiero finished his meal with a chunk of *pemeekan*, explaining he wanted some sugar. Then he stood up and stretched, breathing deeply.

"You don't know how good this feels after those black dungeons," he said, inhaling the scented night breeze. "Manoon is really indescribably horrible. Even the air smells dead, and nothing grows there, not even weeds or cactus."

She shuddered appreciatively and he looked her over. She was still neat and immaculate-looking in her leather suit, the mass of dancing curls shining in the moonlight. Something in his eyes made her hand go up to her head and attempt to adjust her hair, while she rose nervously from where she had been sitting in front of him.

"I missed you, you know," he said quietly, first sitting down and then leaning back on one elbow.

Luchare now had her back to him and she seemed to be staring at the dunes, white in the distance under the moon. "Did you?" she said, her voice uninflected. "That's nice, because we missed you too."

"I said I missed *you*," Hiero returned. "I thought about you a lot. I was afraid you'd be hurt, much more afraid than I was of my own troubles, surprisingly."

She turned, and he could see the great dark eyes clearly in the moonlight. For a moment there was silence; then she spoke.

"Hiero, I'm not really a runaway slave girl," she began hesitantly.

"Now really," he said, suddenly annoyed for no reason he could think of. "I'd already come to that fascinating conclusion. And I don't give a damn, either, even if it seems so important to you. I was talking about how I felt about a—a—well, friend, a girl I liked, and who and what you are in your own benighted, barbarous country is of no conceivable interest to me at all!"

"Oooh!" she gasped. "You selfish, arrogant *man!* I was trying to tell you something important, but as far as I'm concerned, you can go get in a boat and go back to your Dead Isle as fast as possible! You're half-dead yourself, and you look like a dug-up body and stink worse!" Furious, she stamped away into the night, leaving the equally angry priest glaring after her.

His annoyance left him quickly and he scratched his head ruefully. Now why did I get so angry? he wondered. *I was the one who blew up first.* He could not see that the growing fear of personal involvement and other, even stronger emotions were clashing within him.

What news? he sent Gorm, rubbing his dirty, unshaven face.

Nothing stirs in the night, came the answer from nearby. *I can feel nothing, smell nothing but the ordinary night creatures. The enemy has withdrawn, perhaps to the island you were on.*

Wait here, he sent, *and all keep watch. I'm going to bathe and get clean.*

He walked slowly to the dunes and climbed them even more slowly. The Inland Sea lay empty and beautiful once more, under the bright moon. Only a light wind riffled the waves. His thoughts ranged far beyond his eyesight as he sought for news of his enemies. Up and down the coast went his mind. Never once did he encounter anything but the brain of a beast or a bird.

Then he gathered his new strength and his mind ranged far out, miles away over the water to where he knew the Dead Isle brooded. The new mental wave sought for the evil minds it knew to be there and found—nothingness!

Shocked, Hiero tried again. It was no use. There, out in the distant fortress, the Unclean had built a mind shield of their own. He could locate the island and even sense minds there, but he could learn nothing. He was in the position of a man who tries to peer through the dirty glass of a neglected aquarium. Behind the barrier he can sense dim shapes moving, but what they are and what they are doing remain a mystery.

That was quick, he acknowledged grudgingly as he slid down to the beach and stripped. Behind him, he heard Klotz also coming down the sand hill. The big morse was not going to risk losing his master again, and was determined to mount guard.

As he washed himself and shaved with his gear from the saddlebags, the priest brooded over the new enemy shield. Obviously, they were unsure of his present powers. But S'duna and his crew must have felt certain that a new mind power existed, and they had managed to nullify it in a very short time. They could not prevent Hiero from sensing where they were, but they had completely stopped any penetration beyond that.

The moonlight was strong enough so that he was able, after washing his clothes and changing to his set of spares, to retouch his badges of rank with the paint stick. Feeling a hundred times better and only missing the weight of his medallion, for he had thrown the remaining lump away, he headed back for the dunes again, Klootz falling in behind.

As he topped the crest, he found the girl and the bear climbing the other side. For a second, the blood beat in his temples as he looked down at her; then he controlled himself with an effort. *God in Heaven, what is the matter with me?* he wondered.

In her turn, she stared coldly enough at him, then merely smiled politely. It was an almost overwhelming temptation to invade her mind. *What in the nine Hells was she thinking? Why do I care?* his mind repeated, warding off the answer which made him so nervous.

"I'm sorry I was impolite back there," he said stiffly. "Please put it down to being tired." His voice sounded artificial even to himself, and he cursed his own clumsiness as he spoke.

"Not at all, Per Hiero," she said lightly. "I'm sure I overtaxed your strength and was being silly. Please forgive me!"

They glared at one another from behind frozen masks until Hiero mounted Klootz and held down his hand for her to take and then lifted her up before him. With Gorm ranging in front, once more they were a team.

After a while, the tension went out of both Hiero and Luchare. They did not speak again of the curious and disturbing exchange which had just taken place, but common sense made them both talk naturally of other things. The strained feelings were put aside by mutual and unspoken consent, buried but not forgotten by either party.

As Klootz carried them along at his mile-eating amble, Hiero explained what he thought might be the next order of occurrences.

"They must know fairly well where we are," he said. "Now they're somewhat scared of me, but that won't last too long.

"Still, here's how it would seem. We must go on, around the end of the Inland Sea or even across it, and get to the shore on the southeastern edge near this Neeyana place you went through. The Unclean will have alerted all their groups and allies ahead of us, you can be sure of that. My maps, even *their* maps, show nothing ahead on this coast but a complex of markings which apparently mean Dead Cities. Now, I'm supposed to hunt certain Dead Cities, but these particular ones, no. For one thing, they seem to be half-submerged. The Unclean map I took from the man I killed up north shows the Palood coming south again and touching the Inland Sea for the last time, just where the city markings are. I'd hoped to cut north before this, but we haven't time now or the thrower either. I'd need that to fight the big marsh animals."

They rode on beneath the moon until dawn, always on the landward side of the dunes, which necessarily slowed their pace. Klootz had to pick his way through thickets and palmetto scrub and also avoid cactuses, and he could not move in the open, not with S'duna and his evil company ready to pounce from offshore. All the time he monitored the mental bands, looking for any trap or signal, but the mind waves were silent. Evidently the Unclean had developed some inkling of his powers and were lying low and not communicating. This was all the more dangerous. But as the night drew on, he lost the ability to detect the Dead Isle at all, and this made him feel a little better. If his new powers could not reach out to them, the

reverse was probably true. Also, though he could not prove it, he had a feeling that their newly-developed shield was linked somehow to the fortress, to Manoon itself. Perhaps it was an actual physical device of some sort, such as the one he had seen his Unclean warder use, a mechanical amplifier of the mental powers. In this case, his thoughts went on, it might be too cumbersome to move. He would only have to avoid fortresses and concentrations of the Unclean. If he could find them, that is!

At dawn, they sheltered under a dense clump of some squat palm. Hiero had once again become wary of observation from above, though he had seen no Unclean flier since entering the marsh far to the west. This was no assurance that none was above, however; and he dared not try and use the eyes of a bird, lest the enemy be able to get on their track. He did not even want to cast the Forty Symbols, though that was mainly because he was depressed.

They ate quietly and drowsed the long, hot day.

He occupied himself with searching the neighboring trees and shrubs until he found one he liked, a low, tough thing whose shiny black wood met his chopping blade with a resounding "clang" when he cut at it. Off and on, he worked at securing some heavy pieces of this wood all day, and by nightfall and the recommencement of their journey, he had what he wanted. He had been forced to resharpen his sword and his best knife many times, particularly the latter.

"It's for a crossbow," he explained, when Luchare questioned him. "A Killman, a trained soldier, that is, ought to be able to make a complete set of weapons out of almost anything. I have no thrower any longer, and a heavy crossbow is the next best thing I know. I may use animal horn later, if I can get any, and I need metal and feathers or something for bolts. It will take a while, but I've got nothing better to do."

"Could you show me how?"

"Why not? I've got more than enough wood for a second one here. The better we're armed, the more chances we have. Look here, I'm whittling on this stock. The butt end runs so—"

It was hard to explain at night while they were riding, but during the next day he was able to sketch on sand, so now both of them whittled away on their weapons, chatting companionably as they did. Long spells of outward silence usually meant that they were talking to Gorm, who lay and watched them as they worked. Hiero had outlined the route ahead as he saw it, and warned the bear that the area seemed to be very dangerous and filled with the Dead Cities. To his surprise, Gorm seemed somewhat contemptuous.

I have been in some of them to the north, the places of your human past, he explained. They are evil; Unclean things there, what you call the Man-rats and others, but they are clumsy and do not use their noses and ears, almost as bad as you two, he added. I am not afraid of such places.

Hiero learned that the young bear had indeed ventured into several of the ruined towns of Kanda at one time or another, though he became evasive when asked why. *The Elder folk have us do it*, he finally sent, and would say nothing more. But the priest gathered that it was some kind of test, perhaps an emergence into adulthood.

He was quick to tell Gorm that the vast Dead Cities of the South were nothing like the abandoned places he might have seen in most of Kanda, being far larger and apt to be ten times as dangerous. Luchare chimed in to add her views.

"There are several of them, in D'alwah," she said to Hiero. "Tell him plainly, you're better than I, that no one, save for the Unclean, goes there at all. Strange things, horrible things, are said to lurk there, creatures which are not found elsewhere,"

Perhaps, was the bear's calm answer. *I am always careful. But we must go there anyway, so why worry?*

"My people have a few strange instruments," Luchare offered. "They are either very old or copied from very old ones, made before The Death, it is said. The priests and a few nobles whom they trust keep them. When it becomes necessary for someone to go near a Dead City, or one of the Deserts of The Death, one of these is taken out of safekeeping and sent along. It tells you when the invisible death is still there, the fleshrot"

"Yes," Hiero said absently, eyeing the grain of the wood as he whittled at his crossbow. "I know what you mean. We have them too. What you call the 'invisible death' is actually lingering atomic radiation. We can't produce it, but we know about it up north." He laid down the bow and watched the setting sun a moment before continuing. "As long as you're with us, you won't need one." He smiled. "Klootz and I are trained to detect it with our bodies. And I suspect our fat friend can do it too." A question to Gorm elicited the fact that he knew well the danger of hard radiation and could detect its sources easily.

Luchare marveled inwardly. She would rather have been flayed alive than let it show, but every attribute Hiero demonstrated seemed to put him on another and higher plane from herself. In her heart, she felt that her pride in her exalted origin was simply a last defense against admitting that a foreigner of no particular birth was too good for a girl from the barbarous South, no matter how lofty her social position.

Both too preoccupied and too honorable to probe her mind and a prey to conflicting emotions himself, Hiero saw nothing on her face to indicate any of them.

"Let's take another look at the maps," he now said. "We are fast getting into what seems a very nasty area. Did you hear the frogs last night?"

They had all heard the increasing racket of the amphibian chorus, and all knew what it meant. The Palood was angling toward the coast again. The soggy world of fen and marsh met the symbols of the half-drowned cities on the Unclean map and could not be far ahead.

"Look, if we can get through here," he went on, "this symbol down the coast might well be your Neeyana, Luchare. Now, I can't read the peculiar script they use and, knowing them, it may be in code as well. But see." His finger indicated a wavy line going away east from the southeastern corner of the Inland Sea. "This looks as if it might be the trail you came over with the people who took you captive. This blob here, then, looks like a good bet for a Desert of The Death. See, it has the same mark as these circle things just ahead that must be Dead Cities.

"Now, then, beyond that desert, here to the south, are three more cities, Dead Cities. One is very close to the desert marking.

Those three are marked on my own maps too, the first more heavily. They are among the few that are. This is where I'm supposed to start looking for—what I need." He rolled up the set of maps and carefully restored them to the saddlebag.

Again they set out in the half-light of evening. Not only were the frogs growing louder, but the buzzing, biting insects had made an unwelcome reappearance also. Hiero's salve was now exhausted, and there

was little they could do but grimly endure, slapping when the nuisances became unbearable.

Once more, Kloutz began slopping through puddles and mires. The great reeds and giant dock leaves now rose up in the dark again, replacing the dry land growth through which they had marched for so long.

All through the night they moved on at a walk. Twice they had to circle broad pools from which bubbles of marsh gas rose and burst. Once Kloutz stamped a great hoof down on a pale snake, an adder of some sort which made the mistake of striking at him. Hiero roved the night with his brain, searching for danger, but he was too unfamiliar with his abilities to be very sanguine. An amphibian mind is the same whether the creature is twenty yards long or three inches, and it gives off much the same emotional values and neural reactions. No true "thought" occurs at all. Thus, if the priest were trying to see if the thing he was inspecting was one of the huge frog monsters which had almost attacked him before, he had only the view from the animal's own eyes, dim at best, to give him a scale of reference. Once indeed, they heard one of the great creatures bellow, but the sound came from far away.

The first faint glimmer of dawn was barely beginning to lighten the east when they came to a halt. A few moments earlier, Hiero had ordered Kloutz to stop and had got down himself to test the surface on which they were traveling.

"Thought so," he muttered half to himself. "There's only an inch or so of muck here. I heard the hooves strike something hard quite a way back." He raised his voice so the girl could hear. "I think we're on a road, or at least something once constructed, a thing artificial." *Gorm, come back and tell me what you think,*

Man-built, very old, was the bear's verdict. They stood listening to the frog and insect chorus on the v/arm night, while clouds of gnats and mosquitoes descended on them. Hiero felt the bite of a leech through a tear on his ankle and, looking down, saw that the morse's legs were covered with the black, worm shapes, clearly visible in the waning of moonset.

"Day's coming," he said. "We'll have to find cover." He instructed the bear to look for shelter and began to walk by the morse's head.

The decision was soon made for them. With no warning, they rounded a clump of the big reeds and found a still expanse of open water before them, broken only by dark hillocks and peculiar, tall, peaked islands, fast taking shape in the dawning light. Looking about, Hiero spied a low mound not far away to one side, which had some vegetation growing on it. He remounted, and Gorm and the morse floundered through muck, for they quickly left the firm surface, until they reached the place.

Kloutz heaved himself out of the mud, which would have been up to a human neck, with a sucking noise, and the two humans quickly dismounted. They were on a flat-topped island in the mud, about ten yards square. Thick bushes and even a small palm grew on it, but none of the marsh plants, proving that it was solid ground. While looking at its curiously regular edges, the priest unsaddled the morse and began to pick leeches off his mount's body.

"This is an ancient building, I feel sure," he said at length, yanking the last rubbery body off Kloutz and hurling it out into the marsh. "We're standing on a flat roof. God Himself knows how much is sunk below us. This building could have been tall enough to reach, well, the height of a hundred men. The muck might be easily that deep."

They covered themselves against the insects as well as they could, and then all crouched down under the

cover of the palm tree and bushes, to pass the day as best they might. Hiero made sure that they were covered from above by cutting a few branches and laying them over the four bodies. They would be hot, dirty, and uncomfortable, but also hard to see.

As the day flooded the landscape with light, their spirits sank, at least those of the humans did. Klootz ate steadily at every piece of browse within reach, and Gorm managed to sleep, keeping his bearish thoughts to himself.

But the landscape, or rather waterscape, which now lay before them could hardly be considered inspiring, even with a clear sky above and a warm sun.

The Inland Sea had vanished. As far as the eye could reach, there was water, but it was brown and still. From it, stretching equally far out of sight, thrust the ruins of a vast and ancient metropolis, the hecatomb of a vanished race. Some of the buildings were higher than tall trees. Their original height made the imagination boggle, for now they rose from the unplumbed water. Smaller ones, or perhaps those which simply had sunk further into the surrounding mud, were only domed islets, covered with vegetation, like the one on which the travelers now lay concealed. Others were between these two types, and they made up the majority, rising a few storeys from the water, their tops alone heavily laced with plant growth. Even through these clustering plants and the wear of millennia, the destruction by some inconceivable force was still visible. Many of the ruins were shattered and broken, as if by some titanic blow, one which combined both fire and shock. Water plants, huge lily pads and arrowweed, others like great floats of green bladders, covered much of the still water. Here and there, great piles of logs lay tumbled, many overgrown with vines and creepers, the wreckage hurled in by past storms.

The brown and black buildings had dark and gaping windows showing in many places where vegetation had not obscured them. Here and there, amazingly, a fragment of incredibly ancient glass still glinted in the sun and occasionally even a scrap of some rustproof metal. It was a drear and sad prospect to see, a world of death and old ruin, old beyond memory.

The voices of the frogs had died down with the coming of the sun, but the insects still buzzed and stung, although mercifully in far lesser numbers.

Other life there was little, save for a few scattered flocks of some small, dark birds, which flew silently about the roofs of some of the buildings. Large blotches of white stained other buildings, looking to Hiero like the marks of nesting birds of a larger sort, but the birds themselves were absent. Perhaps the season was over and they had gone elsewhere.

The priest probed the area with his mind and found nothing. In the waters and under them, there was much life, but it was not of a kind he could reach or understand, having no intelligence, only appetites and fears.

Yet he did not like the place. Even in the sun, there was a brooding presence to it, a feeling that all was not well.

All day they watched the buildings and the water, but saw nothing beyond the movements of small creatures of mud and pool. The afternoon drew on and the sun sank lower toward the west. The first frog voices began to sound, hesitantly at first, then louder. The insect voices also restarted, and their humming battalions attacked in new numbers.

"Let's get out of here," the priest choked, spitting out a cloud of bugs.

They repacked Klootz and mounted. Hiero saw nothing for it but to try and move around the shoreline, muddy though it was, and circle the forgotten city. The water between the buildings, he felt sure, was too deep and also too extensive to try swimming. Who knew what lurked under the surface?

Hardly had they started, indeed Gorm had barely put a front paw off the islet, when they all froze.

The insect and batrachian chorus ceased. Over the still lagoons and through the ruined towers of the ancients, there rang a long, echoing wail. As they listened, it came again. "Aowh, aowh, aaaaouh," it sobbed, rising and falling on the evening air. Three times the mournful notes hung suspended, their place of origin a mystery. Then there was silence.

As the four listened, a frog spoke hesitantly, then another. Soon the full, croaking orchestra was in full swing again.

"Could you tell where it came from?" Luchare asked.

"No, and neither could Gorm. It seemed to be some distance away, out in the water, but I don't like it. There is an intelligence here; I feel it in my bones. Something malignant, evil, watching, and waiting. We must stop a while longer while I think. I don't like this plunging into the night with no protection. The Unclean may be here, hidden perhaps by a mind shield."

Full night was almost upon them. Only a red line showed the sun's last light. Hiero dismounted, his brow wrinkled. *Ought we to turn back? But where?* He felt he was being stupid. There must be some plan, some more sensible method of doing things, that he was missing. *Damn!* He slapped at the swarming mosquitoes, more in frustration than anything else.

"I wish we had a boat," the girl said, looking about. "But it would have to be a big one to hold Klootz. Then we could get out of this mud, at least."

"Up north we build—Holy Mother, forgive my dumbness!" he exploded. "We build *rafts*, rafts for our animals when there's no bridge! And I've been sitting a day staring at a thousand log piles, logs all but covered with long vines! The only thing I haven't been given is someone to step up and kick me awake! Come on down from there and we'll get to work!"

It was true. The storm-brought drifts of logs lay everywhere. All about their islet were numbers of them, a few with leaves still left on their branches.

Even Gorm was a help now. Klootz was hitched to a vine rope and tugged free the ones they wanted, while the bear helped untangle branches and vines. Hiero hacked off limbs with his sword-knife and generally supervised, while Luchare bound the big logs tightly together with cut lengths of tough vine.

At length they had done all they could. The priest had cut two twenty-foot poles and also made a couple of crude paddles, the latter in case the water grew too deep for the poles. The whole raft was about thirty feet long and fifteen wide. It was incredibly clumsy, but absolutely necessary, Hiero felt.

I(can) swim, Klootz sent, gingerly testing the structure with a huge foot.

No, Stupid, his master came back. *Danger under the water. You ride.*

It took every ounce of everyone's muscle to get the great thing off the mud and into the water deep enough to float, especially with the big morse aboard. He finally had to leap onto it from the islet, and the

shock drove the raft momentarily under the surface. But he landed neatly and stood carefully, and it rose again, spilling water, and floated.

8

The Peril and the Sage

The huge raft was even clumsier than Hiero had feared. Still, with patience, it was just possible to move it slowly along. The chief problem was the vast, tangled mats of vegetation which lay entwined on the water's surface. He had to lean over and cut them aside with his sword, and he finally sat down and lashed the sword firmly to one end of his pole. He used leather thongs from his repair kit and tied everything twice before he was satisfied,

From then on, he could cut more easily, and without having a fear that something would seize his arm as he leaned far over the raft's edge, and also without having to put down the pole.

Something bad near! suddenly came the bear's mental voice. *Not a human, something else which thinks and not-thinks.*

Hiero rested on his pole, and so did Luchare. The great raft moved sluggishly forward for a few yards on momentum alone while all strained to hear the night, both with physical senses and mental ones. But there was nothing, nothing save the almost deafening chorus of frogs and insects, a medley of croaks, trills, and stridulations which made ordinary speech almost inaudible.

It is gone, Gorm sent. *It was quick, like a moving fish. Now — nothing.*

The priest did not delude himself into believing the bear might be mistaken. Gorm's alertness had saved them several times already. If his quick mental perceptions, which after all were not human, had detected something, then something was there!

Thinks and not-thinks! There was no time to try and find out what the bear meant, not now. Worried and frustrated by the intangible menace, Hiero looked all around, taking in the still, dark water, the nearer buildings, and the patches of floating plants. He noted in passing that Klootz' huge, flat antlers were hung with the last shreds of velvet and were now almost ready for use as weapons.

But under the pale moonlight, nothing stirred. At last Hiero signaled to Luchare and thrust his pole deep in the mud again. Once more, the ponderous raft slid forward, headed for the wide opening between two towering ruins. Frogs blinked and fell silent, their cold eyes goggling from huge lily pads and bladderworts as the cumbersome thing went by. Once it had gone, the renewed chorus broke out in its wake.

As they passed into the first shadows of the shattered monoliths, the raft met with its first major check, a tangled mass of some floating weed. Hiero ran to the front of the raft (it had no real bow) and began to hack with his pole-knife while Luchare aided him by thrusting the cut portions aside. Fortunately, there was deep water under the weeds; and, once cut, they were little trouble. Still, it was arduous work, for the raft had to be poled a few yards and then the cutting had to commence again. It was to be only the beginning of such work.

Through the night, the raft's slow progress continued. Black windows and gaping rents in the rotted, ancient masonry leered down at the wayfarers as they struggled on. Once, a cloud of bats issuing from one such ruin and swirling up across the face of the moon made everyone jump, but beyond that, nothing

happened but hard work.

On two occasions they encountered a bank of thick mud, risen up invisible under the water plants ahead, and were forced to backtrack and seek another opening through the maze of the old city. Fortunately, there was one available each time. Again, while crossing wide stretches of water (perhaps, Hiero reflected, the remains of ancient squares or parks), they had lost touch with the bottom entirely. He blessed God's aiding his forethought in cutting the crude paddles. The silt-laden water was so clam that even these were sufficient to move the raft along until the poles could be brought into use once more.

As the first light of dawn came into the eastern sky, the Metz looked forward at his human partner, and somehow both managed to grin. They were both filthy, drenched in sweat, palms blistered by their pole work, and it seemed that not an inch of their bodies was unbitten by gnats and mosquitoes. But they were alive and healthy, and they must have come quite a distance, which was some satisfaction.

"I don't want to travel by day, not in this place," Hiero said aloud. "Look, over there, a sort of sloping place. We can spend the day there and still be at least partly hidden."

The rapidly growing light revealed them to be in one of the numerous squares, as Hiero had come to call them. On three sides, vast and rotted stone structures loomed up far above their heads, pierced with countless windows and ancient scars and rents, black openings on nothing. Long vines and twisted lianas hid many other places.

The fourth side was more hopeful,, however. Some huge building had evidently collapsed under the weight of the countless years, and in the not-too-distant past. The result was a great pile of rubble and broken stone, thrusting up in an irregular mound from the quiet waters of the lagoon. A few large bushes grew in one place, probably survivors of the original structure, but otherwise it was quite bare of vegetation.

Soon the raft lay in a shallow cove next to the island mound. Leaves covered it, and to a casual inspection, it was one more tangle of drifted logs. The travelers, two- and four-legged, soon were huddled together under the clump of bushes, waiting in sticky irritability for the sun to rise even higher and add another dimension to their discomfort.

Gorm— what was the thing that frightened you? Hiero sent. *The mind touch you caught as we started, I mean.*

Something new, the bear admitted, as he tried to cover his sensitive nose from the crowding mosquitoes. *Only one, whatever it was; a bad mind, quick, sly, full of hate for everything not like itself But not a human, not any animal I know either. Maybe —* there was a pause as the young bear reflected— *maybe, a little like a frog, but one that thinks!*

While the others absorbed this, he added, *It went away. Perhaps to find more.* With this parting message, he covered his nose completely with his forepaws and fell asleep. His thick, black fur saved him from most of the other bites, and he seemed to have the ability to sleep anywhere, at any time.

"We'll have to keep watch," Hiero said to the girl. "Try and sleep, and I'll take the first one." He wiped the sweat from his eyes with a filthy hand and managed to get dirt in one of them. As he rubbed harder, Luchare pulled his hand down and from somewhere produced a damp and (relatively) clean cloth with which she sponged his face, cleaning his eye out in the process.

"There," she said in a tone of satisfaction. "Now keep your dirty fingers out of it. What do you think

Gorm felt, Hiero? Could he be imagining things? This place is enough to make anyone have bad dreams, even a bear." She looked out at the brooding land, or rather waterscape, before them. Even under the now completely risen sun, the silent hulks of the past were not a pleasant sight. The green vegetation mats of water plants, the vines crawling up the buildings' shattered faces, the trees and bushes on their pinnacles, all added to the feeling of desolation.

"He doesn't imagine things," the priest said. He was trying to ignore the dirty, but enchanting, face so close to his and concentrate instead on what he was saying.

"There's something here, maybe a lot of somethings. I can't tap the mental channels, but I *can feel* thought going on around me, do you understand. Maybe several kinds of thought. We're going to have to be careful, very careful." *And lucky, very lucky*, he added to himself.

Another long day passed. They ate and drank sparingly. The canteens were running low, and though Klootz and the bear did not seem to mind the lagoon water, Hiero tested it and it was foul, full of green matter and with a sickening smell. He did not intend to drink of it except as a last resort.

The sun reached zenith, and the afternoon began and slowly waned. Luchare finally slept, and so did both animals. Save for the humming insects, which never ceased their myriad assault, no sound broke the silence. The towers were empty of bird life, and none appeared in the blue, cloudless sky. Listening on all the mental channels known to him, the priest could detect no coherent thought. Yet all around him, intangible and in stealth, some spying, probing presence seemed to glare at them. A busy undercurrent of activity was at work; he felt it in his bones, but could neither actually locate nor identify it.

They had just repacked the raft and were easing the big morse aboard when they froze in their tracks. The light of late evening still let them see the buildings around them clearly, but their eyes could detect no movement. The frog chorus had barely begun.

From out of the distant east, in the direction they themselves wanted to travel, there came the same strange cry they had heard the previous evening. The frogs fell silent.

"Aoooh, aoooh, aaaoooooooouh," it wailed mournfully. Three times it came, and then there was silence once more, save for the insect buzz. Slowly the frogs began again, while the two animals and their human friends stood in the gathering dark, each immersed in his or her own thoughts.

"Oh, I hate this place!" Luchare burst out. "It's not like the rest of the world at all, but some dead, wet, horrible wasteland full of moaning ghosts! The City of the Dead!" She broke into tears, burying her face in her cupped hands. Her long-held control had finally given way.

Hiero moved to her side and put his arms around her and patted her back, until at length her wet face was raised to his, a question in the great eyes which he had no trouble answering. He lowered his head and drank in the wild sweetness of her lips for the first time. Her strong, young arms rose and tightened around his neck, and when the kiss finally ceased, she buried her face in his jacket. He still stroked her back, saying nothing, his eyes staring sightlessly over her head into the gathering night. The bites of a dozen midges and mosquitoes were unfelt.

"What was that for?" came a muffled voice from his shirt. "A present for a frightened child?"

"That's right," he agreed in cheerful tones. "I do that to all the scared brats I meet. Of course, sometimes it recoils on me. I might even get to like it."

She looked up at once, suspicious that he was laughing at her, but even in the last light of day, what she saw in his eyes was so plain that her face was jammed back into his chest once more, as if what she had read in his expression had scared her. There was another short silence.

"I love you, Hiero," came a small voice from his chest.

"I love you, too," he said almost sadly. "I'm not at all sure it's a good idea. In fact, I'm fairly certain it's a bad one, a very bad one. I have been set a task so important that the last sane human civilization may fall if I should fail to carry it out. I need a further distraction like a third leg." He smiled down at the angry face which had popped up again.

"I seem to be helpless, however." He tightened his grip around the firm body. "Win or lose, we stay together from now on. I'd worry more if you were somewhere else."

She snuggled closer, as if somehow she could bind herself to him. They stood thus, the world forgotten until a mental voice whose very flatness made it seem sardonic broke in.

Human mating is indeed fascinating. But we are in a dangerous place to study it. That is something of which I feel certain.

This acted like a pail of cold water. They almost sprang apart. Studiously ignoring the bear, who sat looking up at them from the middle of the raft where he sat next to Kiootz, they seized their poles and pushed off into the humming, croaking dark. The moon had not yet risen, but the stars were out, and both of them had excellent night vision.

Once again, a night of toil and discomfort lay before them. Yet they detected no signs of an enemy, though there were moments when the appearance of one would have come as an almost welcome distraction. On and on through the drowned city they poled, hacked, and paddled their way. Hiero fell overboard once, but popped back up in a second, streaming foul, muddy water, at least cool for a few seconds.

The moon rose and made their task a little easier. The silent, black buildings stared down from a thousand ruined eyes as they struggled past. Perhaps they were following boulevards and esplanades which had once echoed to the tramp of vanished parades. All were buried now, forgotten and lost under the weight of centuries of mud and water.

Luchare and Hiero had become so inured to their toil that the first light of dawn was a surprise, brought to their notice by the fact that they could now see one another's faces clearly.

"My love," the priest said wearily, "if I look half as dirty and tired as you do, I must be the worst-looking thing around."

"You look much worse," was the answer. "I may never kiss you again, at least not until I can scrape you off with a knife first." Tired as she was, the girl's voice was buoyant with love and happiness.

"Look at that damned morse," Hiero grunted, changing the subject. "He's getting back at me for all the riding, galloping, spurring, and general hard labor I've put him through."

Kiootz was indeed asleep, only his great ears twitching under his antlers, giant legs tucked neatly under his barrel. Beside him, the bear also slept on, as usual allowing nothing to come between him and his rest.

"They're supposed to be on watch. We could have been eaten by now with guards like that!"

"I know, Hiero, but we haven't been. I'm so tired and dirty it would almost be a relief, anyway. Where are we, do you suppose?"

The raft was drifting slowly along what once must have been a mighty avenue. The close-packed buildings on either side were so tall, even in their antique ruin, that most of the sunlight never reached the water lapping at their sides. As a result, few plants grew here. The water, too, seemed much deeper. The two had been using the paddles for the last hour or so.

They could see light far ahead and equally far behind, but great, ruined structures hemmed them in on both sides. There were bays and gaps in the looming, moss-hung cliffs and walls of stone, shadowed niches and caves, but the general effect was that of being in the bottom of some vast canyon. As the daylight grew, this effect was heightened, rather than the reverse.

Hiero looked about him carefully. Then his eye returned to one spot; he saw something which sent a cold chill up his spine.

Luchare! His mental voice jolted her as no spoken word could have. *Don't make a sound. Look at that opening to the right, at the water through the big hole in that building.*

The gloomy light was nevertheless quite strong enough to delineate the place Hiero was staring at. A huge masonry wall, or possibly a vast gate, for it was hard to tell, had collapsed in a distant age. The water flowed through the wide gap and into a still pool, hundreds of yards across, completely surrounded by more shadowed and lofty structures as far as the two could see.

In the middle of the pool, directly opposite the entrance to the watery "street" on which now rode the raft, a tall, thin object rose directly from the surface of the quiet water. At first, Hiero had assumed that it was some inanimate structure of an unknown type, perhaps a spire of some long-sunk house. But his eye had strayed back to it, warned by a physical sense he could not define, and with a thrill of horror he saw that it was ever so gently moving. Then the shape, like that of a giant amber leaf, complete with ribs, or vanes, became clear. They were looking at a colossal fin, whose owner lay just under the turgid surface of the water. The sheer bulk of the creature defied the imagination.

It must lie there in ambush, Hiero sent, *waiting for what passes. If we stay still, there's a chance.*

Indeed, a gentle current was taking them past the opening, although at a rate which seemed absolutely leaden. The two animals still lay in the center of the raft, apparently asleep. Yet both were not.

I heard you, came Gorm's thought. *What is the danger? I can see nothing.*

Something very large, just under the water, came Hiero's answer. *Do not move. It watches. It could eat this whole raft, I think. I will try to reach its mind.*

Try he did, on every mental band he knew, including the new one he had learned to use while on Manoon. But as the raft lazily drifted on, he had to acknowledge defeat. Whatever monster lay embayed back there, it sent out nothing he could distinguish from the thousands of other life essences in the waters around them. The size of the thing was no clue to its mental activity, and its sheer bulk gave off no mental radiation, at least not any that he could perceive.

They drifted until even the buildings around the place where they had seen the fin were out of sight. Then

and then only did Hiero signal to Luchare to resume paddling. And both did so with great care, being careful to splash as little as possible.

They had still a very long way to go down the gloomy canyon when Hiero exclaimed aloud, "Push her over to this side. I see something we badly need."

Between the two of them, they got the raft wedged into the angle of a great building which jutted out a little beyond its fellows. Hiero told Luchare to hang on and hold it there.

"Look," he said, "we're in luck—a copper band around this level of windows."

He had glimpsed the sickly verdigris of the copper as the raft approached it and remembered their three-quarters-finished crossbows. Using his belt knife and the pole's butt end, he managed to pry a strip weighing several pounds loose and onto the raft. Under the coating of verdigris, the metal was untouched.

"I think it's bronze," he said, looking carefully at it. "Better than copper too, lots harder. We have enough to tip a hundred arrows here. Lucky it lasts forever."

Luchare shivered. "I'm glad too, but let's get moving. I still find this place makes me sick. All those old windows seem to be watching us. And where are we going to spend today? The sun's all the way up now, even if it looks so gloomy down here."

"I don't know. We'll have to keep paddling, that's all. Maybe we'll find an island or a cove or something. Perhaps an opening in the side of one of these buildings. One without an occupant," he added.

Despite the steady increase of light, they had little choice, save to keep moving. The gentle current was growing stronger, for one thing, and for another, no more large breaks in the walls of stone occurred. The eddying stream helped now, though; the opening at the far end of the long line of buildings drew rapidly closer, far more rapidly than if they had been forced to propel themselves unaided. And the current also had prevented the formation of any mats of vegetation, so that no more cutting was necessary.

Still, it was almost noon when the raft shot from the darkness between the lines of towering ruins and out into the sunlight. For a moment the passengers were dazzled by the light, but when they saw clearly, Luchare let out an exclamation of delight and, dropping her paddle, clapped her hands together.

They had emerged into, and now were drifting in, a small lake whose clear blue water indicated great depth and a probable close connection with the Inland Sea. Around its fringe, many buildings formed a ring, save in one direction, the south, where a wide gap was evident.

But it was the middle of the lake that held their attention. A small, green island, covered with bushes and palm trees and showing patches of grass here and there, rose out of the lake's waters. Bright-colored flowers, yellows and blues, glowed amid the herbage. And flocks of small birds circled here and there, while a raft of mingled geese and ducks, brown and white, fed in the shallows on the side facing the raft. After the days and nights in the gloom and stench, the insects and frogs, the fear and the labor, the place looked like Paradise.

"Come on, Hiero," she urged. "Let's get over there quickly. That place is big enough even to have a spring. We can get clean. Those trees may have fruit, and we can probably get a few ducks. Hurry!"

But the priest stood immobile, holding his paddle. True, the island did indeed look inviting. Perhaps too much so! He had not forgotten, tired though he was, the stealthy sensations of the past few days, the

weird calling in the twilight, the feeling that the party were somehow being kept under observation. This place was still surrounded by the drowned city and its ravaged buildings, attractive though it looked.

But fatigue won over caution. They had to rest somewhere, and both he and Luchare were nearly at the end of their respective ropes. Also, the need for food, fresh food, and clean water was urgent. And the animals needed them both as well.

"Come on, then," he said and began to paddle. "At least we can hide there for the rest of the day. But don't talk so loudly! This place is no Abbey home for the aged and unwell! I still sense some strange mental undercurrent that scares me, that I can't pin down."

A gently sloping beach on one end made the little island almost perfect. And there *was* a spring, or rather a dew pond, filled with clear, sweet water, set in the island's center and surrounded by tall ferns and sweet-smelling flowers. To make matters complete, Hiero found a bed of freshwater clams in the shallows of the beach, and the three carnivores feasted on the raw, juicy shellfish until they could hold no more. Klootz paid the clams no attention but began to put away pounds of grass and shrubbery at once.

By mid-afternoon, washed, cleaned, and with full stomachs, all were fast asleep, save for Klootz, who still roved the island, selecting the finest bits of leaf and twig while mounting an alert watch at the same time. Even he had rolled in the clear water, and now he was engaged at intervals in rubbing the last of the soft velvet off his great rack of gleaming, black antlers. At times he paused and looked about, then, seeing nothing, fell to eating again.

So exhausted were the two humans that they slept through the afternoon and most of the entire night that followed. Hiero awoke in the darkness before dawn and realized at once what had happened. Before he could even form a self-reproach, the bear's voice echoed in his mind. *You needed the rest. Nothing has come near. But still — something watches. I know it, just as I know the sun rises.*

We must be alert, Hiero replied. He stretched, feeling so stiff that he could hardly move, although the sleep had done him a lot of good.

Luchare awoke at the movement from her place nearby. "Is that today's new sun, that dim glow? We must have had a long sleep. But I still feel like sleeping again. Is that wicked?"

"No, it's not. We're both still exhausted. I'm going to declare a rest day. I think we can finish those crossbows and cut some bolts for them too, which will make me feel a lot better. We're going to need some missile weapons for hunting, if for no other reason,"

The day began more pleasantly than any in weeks. Hiero managed to finish his own crossbow and to cut some bolts from seasoned dead saplings washed up on the island's shore.

Luchare was no help, for she spent most of the time arranging her hair, bathing, and pelting Hiero with bunches of flower petals whenever she caught him looking "too serious." At mid-afternoon, he gave up on any further work simply to lie with his head in her lap while she gossiped about her past life and speculated on their future together.

"I hope we have a long and happy one, love," he said at last. "But we're a far and distant way from it now. And you've never mentioned, in all your gabble, just what led you to run away from D'alwah. An arranged marriage, one might guess?"

She gasped in astonishment. "I knew it! You were too peering into my mind!"

"No." He smiled up at the indignant face and with his finger transferred a kiss on the end of the dark, aquiline nose. "You admitted you were no slave once before. You're the daughter of one of your great nobles, I imagine, because, by your own admission, only the priesthood and the nobility get a chance to learn as much as you have. So it was a fairly easy guess. How great a noble is your father, in your own country's terms, I mean?"

"The greatest," she said in dull tones. There was a silence.

"The actual king, eh?" Hiero no longer smiled. "Now that's a pity. Are you the only child? It might be important."

"I had one older brother, but he was killed in a battle with the Unclean. My father wanted me to marry and cement an alliance with the next most powerful state. I knew, everyone knows, all about Efrem of Chespek. He beats and tortures his concubines. His first queen went mad and he had her blinded, divorced her as not being legally married, since the kings cannot marry people who are physically maimed, you see, and put her in a nunnery. That's what I was running away from."

"Can't say as I much blame you," Hiero said, chewing a grass stem. "I rather was hoping to establish contact with various countries, especially yours, so that I could open a trade route and, more important, we could start to recivilize your area. Stealing a princess, the only princess, is a bad start."

She bristled. "What do you mean 'recivilize'?" I'll have you know, Per Desteen, my bearded priestling, D'alwah is a great and powerful nation, with two walled cities and countless churches and other big palaces and buildings of stone. To say nothing of a great and brave army!"

Hiero smiled affectionately at her and said nothing. He rolled over on his stomach and still said nothing, his chin pillowed on his arms, apparently staring away off over the lake.

"I see," she said after an even longer pause. "Those things aren't enough to be called civilized by themselves, are they, Hiero?"

"Well, what do you think?" he asked. "They go along with a basis of chattel slavery, a stranglehold on wealth and education by a small, propertied class, crushing taxes, a state religion which seems to have degenerated, at least in part, into sheer superstition, and finally, incessant, bloody warfare with your neighbors. That last would be too silly and meaningless in any case, but it weakens your society terribly, just when it needs its strength the most to fight the Unclean and the ravaging monsters of your own forests. Now, you tell me if that's civilization. I'd call it pretty advanced barbarism and a plain path downhill to complete ruin."

"I suppose you're right," she said. "It's just that, having been raised as the royal princess of D'alwah and flattered and lied to by everyone from the time I could talk, I had no way of knowing anything could, or should, rather, be any different."

"I know," he said, patting her shoulder. "The amazing thing, little princess, is that you turned out the way you did. Not only lovely but smart, smart enough to admit you don't know everything. The only kind of brains worth having, that is."

Her face bent over his, and he pulled her down. The tall grass hid them from any observation, and he breathed into her ear, "Now?"

"I'm afraid," was the husky, low-voiced answer. "I'm a virgin. That's one reason I was supposed to be so valuable."

"You'll be my wife when we can find another priest. As far as I'm concerned, you're my wife right now. And my love. Forever and ever, until God calls us home. That's what our marriage service says."

Her lips came down on his then and silenced him. The grasses waved gently in the afternoon sun. Once there sounded a small cry, so soft and brief that even the bear could hardly hear it *These humans! he thought. At least that's over with and we can concentrate on other matters.* He drowsed too in the warm sunlight, half-listening to the grinding sounds of Klotz remorselessly demolishing his cud, over and over. The island slept, the silence broken only by the muted call of birds and insect hum.

They both awoke in early evening, or rather were awakened. Neither one said a word as they quickly drew on their clothes. The messages from Gorm, *Awake! They come!* had hit their two sleeping brains like a thunderclap. In the instant that this took, the terrible wailing cry which had grown so familiar to them came again, louder than they had ever heard it, and this time it did not cease.

"Aooough, aaaouugh, aaaooough!"

Now, in great volume, it came from all around them. In the half-light over the twilight lagoon, their island no longer seemed a haven of safety, but a tiny morsel of helpless sanity in a chaotic and implacable world. Hiero himself spared a brief and regretful thought for their first love-making, sandwiched between perils and duties, a moment already pre-doomed to evanescence.

With the morse and the bear, they rapidly took stations in the center of their island. Around them, the booming menacing wail grew louder still. "Aooough, aaaooough, aaough!"

Now, clearly outlined in the yet strong light, the travelers saw their enemies, and all knew at once that they had been watched from the beginning of their voyage through the drowned metropolis.

From every side but the open south they came, in small, narrow craft, half raft, half canoe, apparently made of tightly bound reeds, pointed at either end. From out between the encircling buildings, across the quarter mile of open water around the island, the strange craft surged, propelled by their owners' webbed hands, as well as paddles. And the white heads in the water between the boats showed where many more were coming fast by simply using their native element.

A new Leemute! Take a frog, Hiero thought, and stand him up; give him a high-vaulted skull and a pallid skin, white and sickly-looking. Give him evil black eyes, like huge bubbles of sparkling, vicious jet. Give him almost man size. Give him knives of bone, as white as his skin, and spears of fish bone and bleached bone clubs. And give him hate! As the things came steadily on, the priest thought of Gorm's first impression. *A frog that thinks. Must have been a scout and we've been stalked.*

The wailing, sobbing cry which had filled the air suddenly ceased. And only then did Hiero realize that the frog-things themselves were utterly silent. The strange noise had come from the buildings all around them but not from the creatures themselves. Was it a signal to attack? Who had made it? Many other questions filled his mind, but there was no time for any of them. The first attackers had reached the island and were swarming ashore.

The priest's first instinct had been correct: get away from the lagoon and meet the frog creatures on dry land. They ran awkwardly, half-hopping, half-scuttling, and were obviously far less at ease with solid dirt

under their great, webbed toes than with the swamp ooze or water. Still, there were many of them and only four of the travelers. But now Hiero had lapsed into the cold killing fit of his Abbey training. Defeat was not even a consideration. Luchare got the first one. Her long lance, the extendible javelin Hiero had taken from the Unclean priest, licked out, and a frog-thing's throat opened in scarlet. A shower of the barbed bone spears came whistling and everyone ducked. One struck Hiero full on the breast and he gasped. It had hardly penetrated the skin! The amphibian Leemutes were no spearmen. Apparently their skinny arms were not shaped for throwing. Even so, though this was a boost to morale, quickly communicated to the others, there were apparently hundreds of the ugly creatures swarming up the gentle slope from the water. *And they will be getting harder to see.* Hiero thought, for the light was now fading fast.

But again, the things' own physical characteristics worked against them! As the light died, they became more, not less, visible! A strange, spectral glow emanated from their dank, squamous skins, and they were thus outlined in their own luminescence. A weird and frightening sight, no doubt, but not to trained fighters, and by this time Luchare was one too!

Klootz! Hiero sent. *To me!*

The big morse had been guarding the left flank while the bear held the right, keeping his ground and scything with his great antlers at any Leemute who ventured near. They were afraid of him, and few of them tried that side.

Now he lunged forward between Hiero and Luchare and, at a word, crouched. Both swung up into the big saddle, one spear couched to the left, the other to the right.

"Charge!" the priest shouted. *Around the island, you big clown,* sent his mind. *Clean up on them! Follow us, Gorm!*

Hiero had suddenly seen the best, indeed the only, method of attack. Once the strange characteristics of the frog-things became apparent, it was obvious. Individually no menace, they yet swarmed in such numbers that they might pull down an immobile foe if allowed to. But if attacked, and on solid earth where their weak land legs made them doubly vulnerable, things might be different!

The giant bull morse was a creature such as they had never seen, and he was almost invulnerable to their feeble darts, which could barely do more than annoy him. The low bushes and the few trees were no impediment to his charge at all, and he simply tore through the glow of the crowding frog creatures as if they were not there. Their gaping mouths, rimmed with needle fangs, opened voicelessly in terror and rage. But save for the stamping, snorting, and grunts of the morse, the growling of the bear, and the gasps of the humans, the strange battle was fought in utter silence. Even as he thrust savagely with his spear, Hiero wondered at the creatures. He had been able to detect no mental activity at all, and since they seemed voiceless, how on earth did the creatures communicate? Twice around the islet they charged, scattering havoc through their phosphorescent foes.

Suddenly, they had won, at least for the present. With no signal that either human could see or hear, a scuttling, shambling rush back to the lagoon began. One instant they were surrounded by a hideous, glowing pack of nightmare demons; the next, innumerable blobs of living light were ebbing away to the water's edge. Even as Hiero signaled a halt, he observed that the dead and wounded were being taken too. *Probably to eat,* he thought sourly, unwilling to concede any decent values to the squatting Leemutes.

"They're gone," Luchare breathed, bloody lance resting across the saddlebow in front of her.

"Yes, but not very far; look!"

The island now was surrounded by a ring of cold fire! The amphibian horde lay in the water, aboard their reed boats or simply floating; it was hard to tell in the dark. But one thing was obvious: they were not going away. "I think they'll be back all right, come first light probably," the priest continued. "Anyone hurt here?" *Are you all right, Gorm? Klootz, any wounds?*

Their weapons are weak. I thought they might have poison on the points, but there is nothing. I am not even scratched.

Klootz shook his great antlers angrily. Drops of dark, evil-smelling blood flew back and caught his two riders in the face.

"Phew! I guess you're all right too?"

The man and woman dismounted and stood looking through the night at the weird cordon of light for a moment.

"Come on," Hiero said at length. "Let's clean our weapons and get some food into us. Then we can rest again. I'll take first watch. I've almost finished my crossbow, and I want to start to cut and trim some quarrels and bolts. The moon's rising again, and there should be enough light."

"I'm not staying asleep while you work!" his young lady stated flatly. "Maybe we can finish both of the bows between us."

The love and trust in her voice caused a pang deep in Hiero's breast. He had not admitted how forlorn it all looked, even to himself. What could the morning bring but another attack, one in overwhelming numbers this time? His ideas about completing the crossbows were only to avoid having to face the inevitable. Ringed by water and countless aquatic foes, what help could they count on in escaping? None.

A true Killman never gives up, said one part of his training. *A priest trusts in God,* said another. *You've been stuck before; look at Manoon, now,* said a third. He laughed, a quick, short bark, and Luchare looked curiously at him. But she said nothing. She was learning that her strange lover was a man of moods.

"All right," he said, "let's get busy, then. Our two fur people can keep watch."

It must have been well after midnight when Hiero suddenly stiffened, his sensitive hands pausing, immobile over their work of cutting vanes for the crossbow bolts. A strange mental signal had come to him. Something inimical moved in the night, but behind a shield he could not penetrate. Yet he was conscious of it coming, like a menacing cloud, which still conceals whatever lies within its heart.

Quickly he woke the others, for Luchare had long since collapsed, exhausted, despite her earlier boasts.

I feel it too, came from the bear. *What it is I cannot tell, but you are right; it comes through the dark in our direction. It comes from there.* He indicated the south, where the open water lay.

"Unclean!" Hiero burst out in despair. "These damned frog Leemutes must be more of their allies. The feeling hung around them like an evil stench, and I couldn't put two and two together!" *We should have tried to leave earlier, even if it meant fighting our way through the line out there. At least the*

danger from those things only hits at the body!

Patience, was the bear's calm reply. *You chose the best way you knew. You are our leader. We have escaped other traps.* There was a pause, as if the strange, literal, ursine mind was considering something new. Then there came a note of something surprising to Hiero—a touch of humor. *Let us not die before we truly are killed.*

Hiero probed the star- and moonlit night, using all the new power of his own mind. The inchoate force continued to approach steadily, and at last, just before dawn, he too was able to pinpoint its direction, the same as that which the bear had found. With the coming of daylight, he guessed what he would see. The familiar "feel" of the enemy, even masked and hidden, was unmistakable.

Quietly, he gave his instructions to the others, not even excluding Klootz.

Luchare stared at him, wide-eyed. "Must we die, beloved? Is there no way out, no other hope?"

"I see none, dearest. They took me alive before, and they will make no mistakes this time. From my brain, from all our living brains, they could force knowledge, a knowledge which would probably ensure their ultimate triumph. The ancient weapons I seek would be an irresistible force in their hands, plus whatever the bear knows and my own new skills in mind-fighting." He smiled sadly down at the dark, haunting face, ringed by its tight, black curls. "I have two death pills," he went on. "Here is one. Klootz will not be taken alive." *Gorm, can you die fighting? Will you?*

If necessary, was the answer. *My Old Ones laid that on me, just as yours did. When you give the word, that is enough. Still, let us wait for the dawn.*

Luchare understood him. "A false dawn," she said bitterly. "And one which means only night and death."

Hiero mastered his grief for her, so young and lovely, and spoke calmly, concealing what it cost him. "Gorm is right. Let's not die before our time. Who knows what may happen?"

His arm over her shoulder, they stood on the highest knoll of the islet and waited for the morning light. The two animals waited patiently by their sides, the giant morse "snoofing" loudly at intervals as he tested the dawn breeze. The phosphorescent glow of their enemies' bodies faded as the east grew pale and the sun rose. Their ring of reed skiffs and slimy, white shapes still covered the water, however, and they gave no sign of moving.

For the last time, the four now heard the awful wail which for them had come to symbolize the city.

"Aaaough, aaaooough, aaaooough," it rang out, from all about, its source as mysterious as ever. Far over the ruined towers it sounded, seeming to defy the very day itself. At last it fell silent, and the red disc of the sun appeared down one of the distant avenues of far-off buildings.

And those who had hunted the four so long also came with the morning. Out of the opening in the south came the hated black shape of that strange vessel which had caught Hiero. Perhaps, the priest thought, it was another like it, but it made no difference. In that black hull lay their destruction, sure and inescapable.

The pallid Leemutes, their slippery, pale forms gleaming in the morning light, paddled and swam away from the prow of the oncoming ship. A channel formed in their ranks, and the black vessel came slowly through it until, its speed diminishing, it coasted slowly toward the island. The guardian circle of monsters re-formed behind it. And all the other frog creatures followed, drawing in from all sides until they

occupied only one, massed in deathly white on the side in which the black vessel lay and a hundred yards beyond it.

Hiero had never ceased sending mental darts at the ship, indeed had continually done so, even before it actually appeared. Now, as it came to a halt only a few hundred feet offshore, he ceased and merely held his own defense ready, waiting on the faint off chance that the Unclean might drop their barrier. He knew well the chance was infinitesimal. He could feel Luchare's body trembling, but he shot a sideways glance and noted proudly that her high-cheekboned face was impassive.

The adept who stood on the open bridge, surrounded by human aides and several Hairy Howlers, spoke aloud in *batwah*. He was not S'duna, but again the physical resemblance was uncanny. Yet Hiero was not fooled by the shaven head and the close approximation.

"Priest, we have you fast and your grimy crew as well, including your wench. Are you ready to yield without a struggle?" The voice, like S'nerg's and S'duna's, was resonant, ironic, and powerful. Its purpose was to intimidate, to weaken confidence, to inspire fear. It succeeded in none of its purposes. Instead, Hiero laughed.

"Still want my brain, eh, Baldy?" he said. The distance was so close that he hardly needed to raise his voice. With relish, he saw the pale skin of the other redden, while the Howlers started to chatter angrily. Hiero spared a glance at the foredeck. He frankly hoped the lightning gun he saw there would be used on them. The silver amulet which had guarded him before was no longer in place, and that had been a million-to-one chance anyway. It would be a quick end, and they would feel nothing.

But the two hooded men who manned the contrivance were well-disciplined. They simply stood at its controls, waiting for an order from their master.

The adept waved a hand negligently, and the noisy Howlers fell silent. The shining head inclined gracefully toward Hiero, and the priest was surprised.

"You are bold, priest of a forgotten god, courageous too. Qualities the Brotherhood values. We have you in our grip, but we need not close our hand. What if we still offered alliance? I confess it freely, we could indeed use your mind, one of power and indomitable will. S'duna sent me, S'carn, one of scarcely less authority, to reason with you, though why you still cling to the animals, especially that stupid bear, I utterly fail to see." There was genuine puzzlement in this last.

The Metz hesitated not a second. "You lie, S'carn, and so do all your dirty tribe! S'duna even now fears me, or else he would have come himself, to see my capture or to watch my doom. You have a machine in your ship to keep my mind from slaying all of you. Well, come and try with your weapons! I defy your Unclean crew, your filthy, perverted Brotherhood, and above all, you, shave-pated master of foulness. If you have us fast, come and take us!"

For a second, staring over the calm water at the ship, only a stone's throw distant, Hiero thought he had succeeded. S'carn's face became a livid mask of horrid rage, and his hands twitched on the rail of the bridge. But, to Hiero's intense regret, the adept controlled himself and did not order the instant death the priest sought for himself and his friends. His voice was now low and grating, filled with venom and hatred.

"You seek a speedy death, priest, and when we have you on Manoon, you will pray to your foolish, nonexistent god for it. And it will not come, no, it will not come!" He turned to his swarming followers, who had stood in silent obedience behind him. "Put the ship's bow on the beach and take them! Take them alive!"

Hiero freed his right arm and raised his crossbow, which had hung from the left, a new-made, bronze-tipped quarrel in its slot, the bow cocked. He drew aim on S'carn, who with his head turned saw nothing of his doom. But he never loosed,

"Peace!" The new voice speaking in *batwah* was so strong and vibrant that, by comparison, that of the evil adept seemed weak and sickly, With one word, the voice took the whole situation under its control.

Hiero lowered his bow and frankly gaped, amazed at what he saw.

Around a corner of the islet, unseen by anyone, there had come a small wooden canoe. In its stern there sat an aged man, a paddle in his lap, his long, white beard and hair flowing over his plain dress of brown cloth shirt, pants, and soft boots, He seemed quite unarmed, save for a small belt knife. His skin was very dark, as dark as Luchare's, and his long, snowy-white hair was also just as much a mass of tight curls as hers,

The Unclean leader seemed as stunned as Hiero by this appearance. It was a second before he could gather his wits. His glance darted about as he sought for other enemies, it seemed impossible that one ancient had come alone into his power, as if out of thin air.

"What are you doing here, Elevener?" he demanded. "Are you mad to come between me and my prey? Even your bands of crazy sentimentalists know what we can do to those who oppose us!"

Elevener! Of course! Hiero thought. *One of the Brotherhood of the Eleventh Commandment. But what was he doing here? Was he indeed mad, to thrust himself into his enemies' power? A thousand questions jostled in his mind.*

But the old man was speaking again. "Servant of evil, you and your brute horde are summoned to depart. Go at once and cease molesting these wanderers, two-legged and four. I, Brother Aldo, tell you so, on penalty of your immediate death."

This was too much for S'carn. Indeed, Hiero himself was becoming sure the old fellow had lost his wits. To threaten a huge ship full of devil's weapons. Leemutes, and Unclean warriors, while sitting alone and unarmed in a canoe was certainly madness at its peak.

"We are favored by fortune, dotard, for we have you in our net as well as these. Cease your senile maunderings and approach at once to surrender, lest I lose my patience."

Brother Aldo, as he styled himself, rose and stood erect in his canoe. He revealed himself as being very tall and lean; despite his age, he balanced easily.

"We slay no one gladly, child of the Unclean, not even such as you." His arm thrust out, forefinger extended. "For the last time, I tell you, begone, lest I loose a destruction upon you! Can you not see your allies have fled, summoned by that which rules them?"

Hiero stared in fresh amazement. It was true. As the talk had taken this new turn with the sudden appearance of the old Elevener, the frog Leemutes were gone! Stealthily, silently, their living ring of bodies had vanished. Not a reed boat or leprous white shape remained. The black ship and the tiny canoe, a hundred yards separating them, were alone on the blue, dancing surface of the lagoon-Even S'carn seemed taken aback. His crew, too, began to mutter audibly, and one of the Howlers let out a piercing wail. But the adept still ruled.

"Silence, you chattering cowards! And as for you, you old troublemaker, enough of your lies and Elevener gibberish! Approach and surrender or I will slay you!" Yet a new, sudden fear showed in his ivory face, despite every effort to control it. The old man had frightened him. Brother Aldo dropped his hand, and an expression of sadness crossed his dark, lined face. "So be it. The One knows that I do this unwillingly." With that he sat down quickly in the canoe and raised his paddle.

And the black ship rose in the air!

Rose up, held in the pointed jaws of a fish of such bulk that it dwarfed the imagination. The thing's gleaming, ivory teeth, Hiero saw in numb fascination, were each as long as his own body! Not a sound came from the crew. It was too quick.

For one second the ship hung ten spans above the heaving, foaming surface; then the incredible monster shook its vast head once and the big vessel simply broke in half. As the two fragments struck the surface, the leviathan vanished in a boil of water. From out of this, there emerged a forked tail easily a hundred feet across! With a smash that almost pierced the eardrums, it came down on the lagoon squarely on top of the broken pieces of the Unclean ship and the surviving men and Leemutes who now struggled and screamed in the water.

Brace yourselves; hold Kloodz 's legs, Hiero sent, seeing what was coming. A great wave rushed up the islet's beach, and in an instant the two humans and the bear were waist-deep in the surging water. The priest's warning had come in the nick of time, for the big morse held firm and they with him. Gorm had flung his strong forepaws around a leg as well, and Hiero had held on to both a leg and Luchare.

The water raced back as swiftly as it had come, and the travelers stared out at the transformed lagoon. There was a long smear of oil, a growing slick, and vast rings of racing, foaming ripples, all coming from the place where the Unclean ship had been. Of the ship and its sinister crew, nothing remained. In less than thirty seconds they had been totally obliterated, as if they had never been. Only the small canoe, now half-full of water, lay rocking on the surging water a few hundred feet away, its solitary occupant staring sadly at the fouled area of lagoon.

Hiero let go of Luchare and strode down through the soggy grass and shrubbery to the water's edge. As he reached it, he saw the canoe shooting in toward him, propelled by vigorous strokes of the paddle. In an instant its prow grated on the sand and its tall occupant stepped onto the beach, his vigorous movements belying his apparent age.

The two men stared at each other in appraisal. Hiero looked up at a face so strong and yet so calm that it seemed to have grown almost beyond what could be called human. The very dark brown, almost black, skin was lined by a thousand wrinkles, yet the skin itself was clear and healthy. The broad snub nose surmounted a sweeping, curly mustache which merged into the white beard imperceptibly. The frizzy white locks fell evenly to the old man's shoulders and were neatly combed.

But the eyes were the clue to the whole countenance. Black as night, dancing with light, they seemed to bubble with humor and yet to be grave as a granite monument at one and the same time. They were eyes which loved life, which had seen everything, examined everything, and were still searching for, and finding, new things to examine. In them could be read great age and wisdom and also the gusto and joy of healthy youth.

Hiero was won over on the instant. He extended his right hand, and a long, lean hand met it in a grip as firm as his own, met it and held it.

"Per Desteen, I believe, of the Kandan Universal Church," the deep voice said. "A man currently much sought for, by many sorts of people, for good and ill."

With a shock, Hiero realized that Brother Aldo was speaking Metz, fluently and with no accent at all. Before he could say anything, the old man smiled sheepishly.

"Showing off again, Per Desteen. I used to be good at languages and I learned all I could long ago. And whom have we here?" He turned and gave Luchare a stare as frank as that he had given her lover.

She smiled and held out her hand. "You have killed our enemies. Father, and we thank you for saving us."

"Yes, princess of D'alwah, I had to kill." He sighed, taking her extended hand in his own left, for he still kept Hiero's in his right. He ignored the girl's gasp at his knowledge of her.

"Killing is sometimes necessary," he went on in the same *batwah*, now looking keenly at both of them. "But it ought never to be a pleasure. We do not need to kill for food each day, as do the lower animals. A burden on my mind, all those souls, weary with vice and evil though they were." He released their hands.

"We have much to talk of, we three. Or rather, I should say, we four." *Greeting, friend*, came the thought directed at Gorm, who had ambled up and now sat gazing at the old man.

Greeting, Old One, the bear brain answered. *We have much to thank you for. A debt is incurred. It will be repaid.*

If you feel so, a debt there is, was the courteous reply. *Now let us speak to one another. I am, as the two humans have heard, Brother Aldo, an Elder, albeit humble, of the Brotherhood of the Eleventh Commandment. I was sent to find you, if I could, and bring you to a place of safety.*

Why? It was Luchare who asked, her thought pattern ragged, but quite intelligible, evidence of her increasing confidence.

Why? Brother Aldo looked hard at her. *Have you forgotten one who promised you safety long ago and passed into the enemy's hands to save you?*

"How could I?" She broke into speech in her agitation. "You mean Jone, don't you, Father? Is he alive? Did you save him too?"

Yes, I meant Brother Jone, child. And I did not mean to sound so reproofing. And although I am indeed vastly older than any of you and probably all of you at once, call me "brother." The fur-man here, and he indicated Gorm, knows me as an "Old One." So I am. But being a father implies responsibility of a kind I don't have or want. A father directs: I guide, at best.

"Per" means "father" in an old language. Hiero sent in somewhat truculent meaning.

I know, and I think your church makes a mistake using it. But why do I wander so? I must be getting dimwitted. Let us sit and exchange thoughts.

When they were comfortably arranged on the fast-drying sand, Hiero asked the next question.

Are we still in danger, immediate, I mean?

No, or I should not sit here. My brother out yonder will wait if I choose. He nodded his head toward the still water. As they looked, first one battered piece of wood broke the quiet ripples and then another. As they watched, a growing collection of flotsam continued to surface.

How do you control that thing? I never dreamed a creature that size existed, or that if it did, that a level of intelligence that low could be mastered.

You have a few things to learn, then, Per Desteen, was the almost dry answer. *It would take a lot of training to teach you, and I don't mean to disparage your own powers. But it happens, in this case, to be neural rather than cerebral. And it's not always reliable. But let's say that control of our younger brothers and communication with them are and always have been specialties of ours. We are continually seeking contact with any life form we can reach.* Brother Aldo wrapped his arms around his knees before continuing.

Look— time is important. Before we go further, I need information. This whole part of the world is in a turmoil, mental and physical, and all because of you four. Now, then, Per Desteen, you lead this party. Suppose you tell me briefly what you are doing here and the recent history of this group. I'll try not to interrupt.

Hiero considered briefly. The question was, how much could he trust the Elevener? He had always liked the men of the order he had met, but this was no quiet teacher or animal doctor, but a most formidable old man, whose mental powers were of an order which made the Metz awe-struck. While he ruminated, Brother Aldo waited patiently.

At length Hiero looked up and met the dark, wise eyes.

"I don't know what the Abbey Council would say, Brother," he said aloud in Metz, without thinking, "but I think you are honorable and trustworthy. I will keep one secret, the reason for my mission, if you please. The rest is yours."

I appreciate the compliment, was the mental answer. *Use your mind, please, for it saves time. Also, we must all listen and understand. Do not worry about a mind search by the enemy. That which lairs in the Dead City was withdrawn, both itself and its creatures, the frog Leemutes, as you call them. Nothing else is left to hinder us, at least nearby.*

So, as the morning climbed into the sky, Hiero related the history of his journey with Klootz, adding the others as they had joined him. He started at the Abbey with old Abbot Demero and hid nothing, save exactly what it was he had been sent to find. On and on went the story, through the Taig forest, the Palood, the shores of the Inland Sea, the Dead Isle of Manoon, and at last, the coming to the drowned city.

When he was through, Hiero looked at the sun and was amazed that he had only taken about a quarter of an hour, for it had hardly moved.

Brother Aldo sat quietly and stared at the sand. At last, he looked up at all of them. *Well, a good tale. You should all be proud of yourselves. Now I have a tale, less exciting and more historic. But one you should know, indeed, must know, before we go further. And it starts, not two months ago, or even two years, but five thousand and more, in the ancient past, before the coming of The Death.*

9

The Sea Rovers

You look about you, children, came the message from brother Aldo's mind, and you see, in the world, green forest and glade, blue sea and river, yellow prairie and marsh. In them today lurk evil things, yet they also hold uncounted sorts of beauty and wonder. The singing birds, the breathing plants, the shy animals, the savage hunters, all have a place. Alone and unhindered, they change slowly, one kind yielding place to another over the centuries and millennia. This is the ordered course of nature, the plan as the Creator designed it.

But before The Death, things most rapidly were changing, yes, and for the worst. The entire world, as well as simply here in what was once called North America, was dying. It was being choked, strangled in artificially made filth and its own sickly refuse. He pointed a lean hand at the ring of ruined towers glaring across the lagoon.

See there! The whole planet, the good round Earth, was being covered by those things! Giant buildings blotted out the sun. The ground was overlain with stone and other hard substances, so that it could not breathe. Vast man-made structures were built everywhere, to make yet more vast structures, and the smoke and stench of the engines and devices used fouled the world's air in great clouds of poison. He paused for a moment and looked sad.

This was not all. The Earth itself trembled. Monstrous vessels, to which that Unclean ship of yesterday would be a skiff, fouled the very seas. Overhead, the air vibrated with the rush of great flying machines, whose speed alone, by its vibration, could shatter stone. Along countless stone roads, myriad wheeled machines, carrying ever more goods and people, charged madly along, their poisonous wastes still further fouling the already wearied air.

And then, there were the world's people. The warring, breeding, struggling, senseless people! The peoples of the planet could not, or rather would not, be brought to reason. Not only did they refuse to see how they were killing the life of the world, they could not even see how they were killing themselves! For they bred. Despite vast poverty, great ignorance, disease, and endless wars, humans were still tough! Every year there were more. And more and more, until the cataclysm was inevitable. Wise men warned them, scientists and humanists pleaded with them. God and nature are one, they said, and hence neither is mocked and defied with impunity.

A few listened, indeed more than a few. But not enough. Certain leaders of religion, men ignorant of any science and any learning but their own outdated hagiography, refused to heed. Other men, who controlled the world's wealth and soldiery, wished more power. They wished yet more men both to make and to consume what they sold and still more men to wage the wars which they fomented in the name of one political creed or another. Races warred against races of other colors, white against yellow, black against white.

The end was quite inevitable. It had to come! Men of science who had studied many species of mammals in laboratories of the ancient world had long predicted it. When overpopulation and crowding, dirt and noise, reach a peak, madness remorselessly follows. We today call that madness The Death. Across the whole world, by land, water, and air, total war raged unchecked. Radiation, hideous chemical weapons, and artificially spawned disease slew most of the humans then in existence, and much of the remaining animal life, too.

Nevertheless, a few had taken forethought. When the poisons had partly dissipated (they are not all so yet, even now), a few remnants of our Brotherhood emerged. Most were scientists of the day, specialists in a science called "ecology," which is the interaction of all living things. The Eleventh Commandment, as we call it, not in mockery of the Immemorial Ten, but in succession rather, was formally promulgated. It is simple: Thou shalt not despoil the Earth and the life thereon.

For five thousand years and more, we have watched as humanity limbed upward again, trying our best to aid and guide a natural, decent reascent, one this time in harmony with nature and all life.

We have seen much that was good and much that was not. Many of the pre-Death beasts now have become wise, as wise as humans (if that is wisdom). He sent a thought at Gorm alone, and Hiero could "feel" the bear's mind shift nervously. Brother Aldo's tale continued.

But long ago, a certain few survivors of other ancient sciences, principally psychology, biochemistry, and physics, also banded together. They sought nothing less than to regain the ancient human domination of the world, which The Death had finally ended. All the machine-made horrors of life which had passed away, to them were beautiful. They took many of the more dangerous, non-lethal mutations (although you call them Leemutes, Per Desteen, that is an error of language corrupted by usage) and bred them to their service and to a hatred of normal humanity, any, that is, not yet under their own evil sway. And these other groups from the past, we call, collectively, the Unclean. A fitting name.

It is the main business of these foul remnants of the past to destroy any rising groups of humanity which they do not themselves control. If they cannot easily do so, they strive to pierce their ranks, to become hidden councilors or secret allies of any who desire to rule over their fellows. Per Desteen, you no doubt guessed as much. But you, princess, have you ever thought why our people, for I am indeed one of you by birth, continually war against one another to no end but evil?

For a long while, our Brotherhood watched these evil groups, unseen and unknown to them. There is a basic weakness to most wicked people of this sort. No matter how clever and determined they are, each wishes absolute rule of all the others. Hence, cooperation is always difficult for them, a fact to bear in mind. We hoped, I say, that this flaw, this lack of cohesion, would rot them from within and cause them to destroy themselves. They were few, as were we, and it seemed possible, nay, probable.

Regrets are vain. We were mistaken. A twisted genius appeared in their ranks a thousand years or so ago and managed to forge a political device which allows them to cooperate without rending one another.

Now they form a dozen or so groups, each independent within its own geographic area. Promotion within each group lies in that group. But the Grand Masters of each group are also a permanent council, which can override any one group or minority in the interests of the whole. A sort of vicious but permanent oligarchy, well suited to evil, is the result.

It sounds like the Abbeys' organization, Hiero could not help interjecting.

It is. A good idea can usually be perverted to evil, you know. But let me go on. The old lose their patterns of concentration easily. His humor flashed at the thought.

There are several rising groups of humanity on this continent, he went on. The Kandan Confederacy, including the Metz Republic of the West and their confederates in the East, the Otawah League, is the most advanced, in both politics and science. The city-states of the Southeast, such as D'alwah, are strong in human, potential, but crippled by social archaisms and rotted from within by agents of the Unclean. They must be purged before they can be of use in the struggle.

In the far West and South and elsewhere, too, are others. With them we are not here concerned, though I can tell you that Eleventh Commandment Brothers try to watch over them.

So then, we come to the here and now. In the last fifty years, a concerted attack on the Kandan Confederacy has been steadily building. We had hoped it could be warded off unaided, without our direct help.

For I must make one thing very plain. The Brotherhood I speak for seeks to guard the whole biosphere! We are concerned with LIFE primarily and humanity only secondarily, indeed mainly as it affects all other life. I trust this is clear.

Now then, we come next to minds, minds and their powers, their powers and their abilities and even structures! Minds!

We of the Brotherhood have developed mental powers over several millennia which have aided our purposes, indeed made them possible. We grew overconfident, feeling that we alone had these secrets. As we here all know, this was folly! For the Unclean developed them too, although not in the same way, and they made curious machines and devices in their secret laboratories, devices which expanded their mental powers. And thus they became aware of us for the first time and were filled with fear and rage as a result, knowing very little but guessing a good deal of our long scrutiny of them. Ever since, they have sought to destroy us wherever they could. A number of good men and women have died to protect our secrets.

"Brother Jone," Luchare breathed aloud.

Yes, Brother Jone. But he died swiftly and in silence, as we Eleveners know how to do. And he told us of you first, princess, so that we have sought you ever since. A new factor to consider, for you, that is, since we have long studied it in fascination, is that of the radiation-spawned growth of higher intelligence in non-humans. Our friend here(he indicated Gorm with a mental dart) belongs to a new civilization. They are still observing humanity, we think. We have extended a welcome to their rulers or wise elders, but they distrust us as well as all other humans. So we wait, hoping that they will decide to aid us, eh, Gorm? I am young, was the quick answer. I go on my journey of youth, where I will, as I will. The bear folk, the new bear folk, are hidden and wish to remain so. Yet much of what I have seen will make them think. I cannot speak for the Old Ones.

Good. I hoped, we all hope, for no more than a fair look. I cannot think that the Unclean have won, or will win, your people over to their side. And there are the Dam People, too, of the northern lakes, neither friendly nor unfriendly as yet. The Unclean have their Howlers, and their Man-rats and others still. Then there are things stranger yet, if that is possible. These frog creatures you have just routed obey a different master again, something I cannot reach, which lairs in the depths of this sunken city. What it actually is I don't know, but it is both old and malignant, at least an ally of the enemy, if no more.

Stranger things yet, offspring of the atom and genetic frightfulness, alien and mysterious, lurk in

the forests and marshes. Perhaps you have met some? Hiero thought of the Dweller in the Mist and shuddered.

I see you have. But not all are malignant. Some are merely indifferent to humanity, others even benign. The world is full of pulsing, seething life, and many wonders still remain, undiscovered.

At last, I am coming to my presence here. We knew you were being hunted down the coast. I have an idea by the way, Per Desteen, what it is you look for in the South. But of that, more later. He went on quickly before Hiero could even react in surprise.

At any rate, it was decided to aid you if we could. We have come, we Eleveners, to the conclusion that the Unclean are gaining great power, mental and physical, too fast for us Brothers of the Eleventh to hope we can stop them alone. Our powers primarily are of the mind and spirit. We need physical strength, mechanical strength if you will, though we dislike yielding to the necessity. I can tell you, Man of the Metz, that even as we sit here, Eleventh emissaries are seeking to join formally with your Abbey Council and offer our help for the first time in battling the common enemy. This is a great concession for us, the greatest in our whole history.

I myself volunteered to come and try and help you. We did not know of the Lady Luchare, though, as I said, we have long sought her elsewhere. We feared she was dead. As such things go, I have a good deal of authority in our councils. I ask you to let me join your party and go with you from now on. Two nights past, I sensed a converging of mental forces in this place as I came up from the distant South. I struggled to reach you and was barely in time. Now we have a brief, a very brief, respite until the Unclean rally. They are terribly shaken by your mind, Per Desteen. You hardly understand your new powers as yet, but I can tell you that the ether was disturbed by you, half a continent away! The Unclean guess you seek something important. They are determined you shall not have it and that they, in turn, shall.

What does the group say? I do not ask the good deer, for, though his heart is great, his mind is not on a level with ours as yet; though that too may come in time. Thank you for enduring the rambling of the aged. His thought ceased abruptly and he sat back, looking from one to the other of the three with his sparkling black eyes.

All this tale had taken no more than a few moments. The mental pictures and concepts succeeded one another so rapidly and so clearly that no ambiguity was possible. The bear understood quite as well as the man and woman. Despite his asides about age and accompanying decrepitude, Brother Aldo's mind messages were as lucid and sharp as any Hiero had ever encountered.

Luchare spoke aloud, looking directly into the old man's eyes. "I go wherever Hiero goes, now and always. But if my word means anything, I think we are very lucky."

I agree. I am grateful for our rescue, too, but more, I think we have a great source of strength in our new friend. The future may prove worse than the past. Hiero smiled at the Eleventh and met an answering smile.

My own Old Ones told me that the Brotherhood were men we might seek help from if necessary. Also, I can "feel" that this man is a friend. This cannot be a lie. Gorn stared at Brother Aldo with his weak eyes. *Yes, he is a friend, this human Old One. And he is very powerful. Let us not anger him.*

The priest could not tell whether this last thought was simply a sample of bearish humor or not, but Brother Aldo apparently could, for he suddenly reached out and tweaked Gorn's nose. Gorn promptly

fell over on his back, paws over his muzzle, and gave a superb imitation of a mortally wounded bear, complete with gasps, tongue hangings, and pitiful moans.

The three humans laughed in unison, and only when his sides ached did Hiero suddenly remember where they were and what had recently happened here. His laughter ceased abruptly.

"Yes, humor and death make odd companions," Brother Aldo said. "Nevertheless, the chemistry of life itself is compounded of both." He stared out over the sunlit water.

Really Hiero thought (behind a shield), *too much empathy can be unsettling!*

"If I may suggest a change of air," the old man's deep voice went on, "I think we ought to eat and leave this area. I have a ship a few leagues down the coast, waiting for me, and us, if I were lucky enough to find any of you. The enemy will be wondering at the sudden cessation of signals from their party. They may be in communication with that which rules the frog creatures over there in the drowned city too. And I can sense very little of its purposes, save hate alone."

I can sense nothing at all of it, nor can Gorm. I marvel that you can. The priest's thought was envious.

Remember, both, or rather all three, of you are very young children compared to me. Even a stupid man can learn a lot if he has enough time granted him. This time, all three minds "smiled."

In no time they had eaten and set off again, on the far side of the island, their faces to the east once more. They took the little canoe and the old Eleveners' small supply of provisions, mostly dried fruit, aboard the raft as well, and he lent a hand with the clumsy paddles. Not surprisingly, he was both strong and agile,

The sunken city came to an abrupt end not far ahead, he now told them. Another half day's travel would have brought them to it and to dry land. The Palood curved away back to the north at this point and no longer strayed down to the Inland Sea. Instead, wide lands opened out, prairie and great forest, sweeping to the far distance and eventually the great salt ocean, the Lantik.

But they were not to go east for a long while yet; rather, their route lay south, across the eastern arm of the Inland Sea itself. Somewhere to the east of Neeyana, the trading port from which Luchare's captors had sailed, Brother Aldo hoped to strike a certain forest trail, without alerting the enemy.

That evening, on dry land, around a hidden campfire, buried deep in some brush, they again sought to plan for the future.

"If you have no objection, I should like to try the Forty Symbols," Hiero said to Brother Aldo. Gorm had vanished on some private errand, and they were using speech.

"Why should I object? Precognition is an art, if that is the right word, of which we Eleveners know little. Our teaching lies in other areas of the mind and spirit. But I cannot for the life of me see why it is wrong to use such a talent in a good cause. Save for the fear of becoming skilled enough to read one's own death. That might deter some people."

"You may watch if you wish," the priest said as he drew forth the box and the alb of his office. "There is nothing secret about any of this. We don't regard it as being hidden, although we do think of it as a service."

When Hiero eventually came out of the brief trance, he saw Aldo watching him closely, and next to the old man, Luchare, her eyes gleaming with suppressed excitement.

"There is some danger to your method, some that I had not quite foreseen," Aldo said. "Your mind was quite open and the power of the thought more than enough to reveal you to a mental listener close by. I cast over you a net of surface thought, a sort of mental screen, simulating the local small thoughts of animal and plant—oh, yes, plants have thoughts, though perhaps not the kind you are aware of—to deceive any spy who might be about."

"Thanks," Hiero grunted. He opened his hand and peered at the symbols now exposed on his palm.

The Fish lay uppermost. Water again! "That's no surprise," he said, after explaining it to the Eleverer.

Next, there were the familiar little Boots. "Half my life has been a journey. Now we have a journey involving water. Well, we knew that too." The hawk nose lowered over the small, third symbol. It was the House.

"What's that one?" the girl asked eagerly. "Is it good or bad?"

"Neither," was the answer. "It's the House. The sign itself is a peaked roof. Its meanings are various and unfriendly. You know, or I guess perhaps you don't, that the signs are very, very old. Many of the instructions and meanings of their first makers are obscure, open to several interpretations. This is one of them. It can mean simply "'danger indoors.' Or it can mean 'get under cover!' Or it can mean an enemy building, or even a town or city, is near. Not much help, really."

Hiero looked at the fourth symbol. It was a minute Sword and Shield interlocked. "That means personal combat for the one who casts the symbols." He looked at Luchare and smiled at the worry in her eyes. "I've drawn it three times in my life so far. I'm still here." There was no more to say. He put the signs away and called to Klootz to come and be rubbed down.

All three of them had been riding the morse, albeit at a slow pace. It was no great strain on him, and he had been feeding fairly well. Even at his deceptive amble, he covered the ground faster than a man could walk, and went straight through things a man would have had to walk around.

Two hours' jog the next morning along the shore brought them to a small cove set deep in one side of a towering headland. As they appeared on the beach, Brother Aldo cupped his hands and let out a ringing shout, startling both the humans and the bear, who had been sniffing some tracks beside the path. Klootz twitched an ear.

To the surprise of Hiero and Luchare, a section of low woodland on the far side of the cove began to move. Out from a shallow indentation in the shore pushed a stout little, two-masted ship. Tree branches had been lashed to her lateen-rigged masts and more branches and bushes woven into a great net which covered most of the hull.

Perhaps a hundred feet long over all, she was painted brown and rose high at both bow and stern. There was a tiny deck cabin amidships between the masts and various bales and bundles lying about here and there. Men moved briskly on deck about various tasks, and a small rowing boat now pushed off and came shooting in to meet them as they came down to the water.

They dismounted, and the two sailors who were rowing splashed out and pulled the boat up on the

beach. This allowed the man in the stem to step out dry-shod. He did so and came swaggering up to them. Luchare put her hand to her mouth to suppress a giggle.

"This is Captain Gimp," Brother Aldo said. "He has waited for me patiently and has been of great service, both in the past and recently as well. No more-renowned captain of merchants sails the Inland Sea. Captain, let me introduce friends and your new passengers."

Captain Gimp bowed profoundly. He was extremely short and very wide, a washtub of a man Luchare thought. His original color was hard to make out, for he was so brown and weathered it might have been anything. He was bald, or perhaps shaved, for a short, smoke-blackened pigtail thrust straight back like a bow, or rather, stern sprit. He wore a kilt of dirty, greased leather, boots of undressed hide, and a green coat of wool, much stained and worn. He limped a little, hence his name, Hiero guessed, and his black eyes were beady with impudent humor. His hands, at the end of long arms, were surprising, being as dirty as the rest of him, but with long, delicate fingers. He carried no visible weapon.

"Glad to make yer acquaintance, all," he said in understandable but accented *batwah* when the introductions were complete. "The Brother's word is good enough for me. Now turn your dear pets loose and let's get aboard. Wind's fair for the southward and it may shift." He spat something he was chewing in Gorm's direction even as he spoke and started to turn away.

The bear, who had been sitting up on his haunches sniffing the warm morning breeze, moved like lightning. One broad paw shot out and intercepted the wad of spittle. Next, the young bear rose on his hind legs and advanced on the dumbfounded sailor, who stood only a few feet away. Reaching him, Gorm peered solicitously into his face from an inch away, snorted loudly, and then wiped his paw down the dirty green coat. The coat now bore a new stain, as well as several leaves. Gorm sat down again and looked up at Captain Gimp.

The captain finally emerged from his trance, his face now a shade paler under the accumulation of smoke, dirt, and weather. Surprisingly, to Hiero at any rate, he crossed himself.

"Well, ride me under," he exploded. "I never see the half of that. That animal can talk! Who's he belong to?" he asked, swiveling on the others, who were all smiling. "I'll buy him! Just name your own price! I'm as fair as any master afloat; ask the Brother here, now, if you don't believe me!"

It was some time before it could be brought home to the little sailor that Gorm was not for sale and that he could think as well as a man. The captain was still muttering to himself when Brother Aldo asked him to warp his ship in near the beach so that a plank could be run and the bull morse taken aboard also. This, however, seemed to be altogether too much.

"Look now, Brother," he said to the old man, "I've carried those kaws on occasion, back when I had an old storeship, on local journeys, mind you, a day here or there. But I can't take that great ox of a thing. What would people think? My ship, *Foam Girl*, the finest thing in the trade, a dung barge? I ask you, now? It's not considerate of you, Brother. Talking bears, women who ain't proper slaves or wives, that funny-looking northerner—no offense, mister—and now this animal mountain. No, it's too much; I won't do it; my mind's made up."

By the time they were aboard, it was almost noon. Once his arguments had been beaten down, the squat little captain proved both helpful and extremely efficient. A log pen was quickly built next to the deck cabin, and Klootz was secured by broad straps so that he could not slip.

The crew, Hiero noticed as the ship eased out of the cove, were a wildly varied lot. There were dark

men who, with their curly hair, could have been Luchare's or Brother Aldo's cousins. But there were men in appearance like himself, though he heard no Metz spoken, and also there were others. He saw two, half-naked men with pale skins and high cheekbones, whose eyes were an icy blue and whose hair was fiery red. He had read of red-haired men in the ancient past, but had no idea that they still existed.

"They come from an island in the far North, from what used long ago to be called the Green Land, I believe," said Brother Aldo, who had followed his glance. "They were probably outlawed, to be so far from home."

"Do your Eleveners reach so far?" Hiero asked. He clutched the rail as the *Foam Girl* emerged from the cove and a strong wind in the great triangular sails made her heel sharply.

"We do reach there, though we are called something else, a habit of ours in many lands," Aldo said. "One of the assistant witch doctors of the white savages who were trying to kill Luchare was an Elevenner. That's how I got on your track, my boy." He smiled sadly at Hiero. "Yes, he would have let the birds kill her. He had no choice, and he was next in line to be chief wizard, or shaman. You see that then he could have influenced the whole tribe, to who knows what good end. The enemy works on such primitive people, too, and we cannot neglect such chances. I am sorry, but that's the situation."

"In other words," Hiero said bitterly, "you'd turn on me if you had a change of mind about how much good it would do you. Not a very inviting thought when we're so dependent on you."

"I'm sorry," Brother Aldo said. "I was trying to be honest with you, Hiero. I openly allied myself to you and gave my word. Now, the man I just spoke of made a calculated decision to remain silent in pursuit of a long-held purpose. Can you see no difference at all?"

"Possibly," the Metz priest said in a curt tone. "I am not trained as a casuist or debater of legalisms. It sounds a bit cold-blooded."

Now I think I'll rest. I haven't slept in anything like a bed since Manoon." He nodded and walked off to the little cabin, whence Luchare had already retired, taking the bear with her, for Gorm, surprisingly, was seasick and wanted to be shut up, away from the sight of the wind-tossed whitecaps.

As Hiero moved away, he missed the pain in Brother Aldo's eyes, which followed him until the cabin door closed.

The following day and for several more, the weather held fair. The travelers, even Gorm, grew accustomed to the wave motion and enjoyed roaming the little ship. Kloodt fretted, but Hiero spent a lot of time grooming him and keeping him soothed. Also, the old Brother seemed able to calm him at will, and Hiero actually felt a bit of jealousy at the morse's fondness for Aldo.

The bear became a prime favorite with the polyglot crew, who considered him merely a very clever, trained beast and fed him sweet things such as tree-sap candy and honeycakes until his furry sides bulged.

Luchare and Hiero had a marvelous time. The small cabin at last gave them some privacy and they made love constantly, with the fire and passion of superb health and no complexes. Hiero was worried at first, since the Metz Republic had a universally known drug used to prevent childbirth and he had none with him. But a quiet word to Brother Aldo about his fears produced some of it, or a workable substitute. In fact, the old Elevenner had quite an extensive pharmacopeia stowed away in a small sea chest, and Hiero and he discussed various medicines by the hour.

Captain Gimp also proved an entertaining companion. Despite his funny face and bow legs, the little freshwater mariner ran a taut ship. *Foam Girl* was as clean as her captain was soiled, and her strange mixture of a crew, though noisy and ragged, were also well disciplined. Most of them carried long sheath knives, and stores of boarding pikes and swords were racked in lockers around the cabin. A portable arrow engine, a device like a huge bow firing across a grooved table, could be mounted on the little poop abaft the wheel. It shot six long arrows at once and looked to the priest-warrior like a useful weapon.

"Never know what you'll need, not in these waters," Gimp said, while discussing his ship's armament. "There's giant fish—and sometimes we go after 'em with harpoons—and great beasts and pirates out for loot. There's slavers as'll turn pirate in a trice if given a chance. And then there's the Unclean. Been more of them about in the last few years. And some of their boats go by magic.

No sails, nothing. You can't outfight *or* outrun them, not if what I hear is true." Reflecting on the lightning gun and his stay on the Dead Isle, Hiero silently agreed.

Life abounded in the sun-flecked waters of the Inland Sea. Schools of fish leaped from the surface, driven by larger predators surging up from the deeps. Once, as the *Foam Girl* passed a small, rocky islet, a half-dozen sleek, giant, flippered forms, great, toothed jaws snapping at the end of long necks, roared at them from the shingle on which they lay basking. Gimp's name for them was *Ot'r*, and he kept a wary eye on them until the island was out of sight.

"They have good fur and meat too," he said, "but it takes a whole proper flotilla and trained harpooners to go hunting that gentry."

It was the fifth morning, a gray one, windy and full of scudding cloud, since leaving the northern coast. Hiero lay sleeping, his tousled head pillowed on Luchare's dark, gleaming breast, when a sailor's horny hand beating at the cabin door aroused them both.

Hurrying on deck, they found Brother Aldo and the little captain standing near the wheel, staring back beyond the wake. The reason was obvious. A great, dark, three-masted ship, all her square, brown sails set, was coming up behind them with the calm inevitability of Fate. Even Hiero, no trained mariner, could see that the newcomer was eating up the distance between the two vessels. Her decks were black with men, and an ominous twinkle showed among them. She bore a huge black banner at the main truck, and gaudy red and white animals, monsters, and human skulls were painted on her sails.

Hiero looked at the nearest streamers on the mizzen ratline. These showed the wind to be dead astern and growing stronger. The day was an overcast one, with a promise of coming rain, but visibility was at least a good mile. They were seemingly trapped.

Next, he stared at Aldo, their minds meshing as he did so, but on a "closed circuit," limited to the two of them alone.

Unclean?

No, I think not, was the answer, at least not directly. But a pirate, evil, yes, and cruel. And I think also, searching this part of the Inland Sea, perhaps on orders. The Unclean net is wide. When their own ship did not come back, they must have sent out new instructions, some to those they totally rule, others to those whom they merely influence and lead as yet. Their pawns rather than their servants, it appears to me. Try your own mind. Some of them seem not unprotected, which makes me even more suspicious.

Hiero closed his eyes, gripped the taffrail, and concentrated. Captain Gimp peered through a battered telescope, mumbling oaths through his quid. On the deck below, the first mate, a saturnine, black-skinned man with one eye, served out weapons in silence to the little ship's crew. The team of three men who manned the arrow engine were setting up their contrivance only a yard away.

Brother Aldo was right, Hiero realized at once. The crew of the strange ship, a large one, were indeed evil through and through. But it was the human evil of wicked men, the scum which has always infested unguarded seas since the first pirate robbed the first trader, five thousand years before the coming of Christ.

Yet their leaders' minds were guarded! All the Metz could get was an individual aura radiating from each one, an aura of power and evil. But the thoughts themselves were warded, even against attacks on the new band he had taught himself to use on Manoon. The Unclean truly learned quickly! For only they could have provided the devices and training which made his mental weapons useless. *But not quite useless*, he reflected. Only four of the minds on the ship were shielded from him, and the crew's were totally open.

He felt for the steersman of the pirate, for such he now knew it to be without any question. The man's name, he learned, was Horg, and his life had been evil, his mind a reeking cesspool. *Turn the wheel, Horg, my boy; edge off now, that's it, away a few points, now quick! Yaw; the ship's in great danger! Hurry!*

An exclamation from Captain Gimp made him open his eyes. Astern of them, the square-rigger had come up into the wind, her sails all flapping, the ship in irons. Hiero shut his eyes and simultaneously felt Horg's mind die, as the life went out of the man. The enemy wasted no time, though they had lost a quarter of a mile.

But as the big ship came around and back on course, a groan went up from the *Foam Girl's* idle sailors, who had been watching in fascination. A torrent of oaths from the square little skipper drove them back to their work and cleared the poop again, save for the helmsman, the arrow engine crew, Aldo, Luchare, and Hiero.

Once again, the priest probed for the helmsman. But whoever was the master of the great ship was a quick thinker. One of the four shielded minds now steered the ship. Undaunted, Hiero found a nearby sailor. His name was Gimmer, and his mind, if possible, was more repellent than that of the dead Horg.

The helmsman is your deadly enemy. He hates you. He is taking you into danger. He will kill you. You must kill him first! Quickly! Now! Coldly and ruthlessly, Hiero drove the craven will to the assault. Ordinarily a sensitive and kindly man, he had no compunction about slaying creatures such as these sealice. Wasting false sentiment over the truly wicked was no part of an Abbey warrior-priest's training. The world was harsh enough on decent folk without coddling vermin.

But this time he was frustrated. The mind he had overpowered was not allowed to consummate its fell purpose. As (watching through Gimmer's eyes) he crept upon the helmsman, a sudden pain in the captive chest, a blazing weakness of the controlled limbs, halted him in his, or rather Gimmer's, tracks. Then, as Gimmer, too, died. Hiero saw the arrow protruding from the sailor's chest.

Again he opened his eyes to the world as seen from his own body. He felt drained of energy. "It's no good," he shouted to Brother Aldo over the noise of the rising rain, "They had good archers stationed about the ship in key positions. Unless I can get one of *them* under control, I'm licked. They must have

orders to shoot down anyone who even looks suspicious. And it's tiring me out. I can't keep taking these people over in this rough and ready way, forcing totally unknown minds to do whatever I want. It's drawing too much nervous energy out of my own body. I'll try again, but it really doesn't get easier, just the reverse."

Actually, although he didn't want to admit the fact, Hiero was a bit ashamed. He had been sure he could do a lot more than he was able to do in fact. He had felt that taking over a whole ship all at once would be easy. And now, in mere moments, he was half-exhausted and seemingly frustrated as well.

Captain Gimp chose this moment to try a maneuver of his own. He bawled an order, and the two big lateen sails slatted as the wheel spun and *Foam Girl* came up into the wind, pointing as high as she was able to. Instantly the ship's motion changed into a steep up-and-down chop as she began to attack the waves instead of riding with them, as she had done on the previous reach. She now was heading almost due west, seeming to charge the gray clouds racing down from the northwest.

"Square-rigger's no good at pointing," Gimp shouted to his passengers as they clung to the heaving rail. "Maybe we can get above him." He was seeking the protection of the wind itself, trying to move *Foam Girl* closer to the wind than the enemy vessel. The wind would provide an invisible barrier if the trick could be worked.

It could not. The great, lean hull of their pursuer came around beautifully in line with their stern. The square yards, tiny figures scrambling along the yardarms, lay almost flat, and the trysails and stunsails set fore and aft between the mast now showed as they took the weight of the wind. With the help of these sails and a huge gaff spanker on the mizzenmast, the big stranger began to overtake them even more easily than before, for her hull's length and height out of the water made far less of the steep wave action than the little *Foam Girl*.

"She's really unprintably lovely," Captain Gimp shouted in admiration. The squat sailor instinctively responded to the beauty of the other vessel's design, even though it might mean his own destruction. He bawled another order and *Foam Girl* paid off, back on her old course to the southeast, with the wind in her quarter. At least this way she did not have to fight the seas as well, but could ride them. Behind her, close enough to see her black hull lift and the white bow wave, the pursuer came back too. She was less than half a mile away. A white figurehead, looking like a woman's body, glistened with wetness.

Can you do anything? the Metz asked Brother Aldo, once again mind-to-mind.

I am seeking what large water creatures are found here, was the old man's answer. *So far, I have found nothing. But I sense motion not far away. However, it is uncertain, and I need a little time. Can you reach one of the archers you spoke of, or are you too tired? Any delay will help.*

"I thought so!" Gimp shouted. His one-eyed mate had come and whispered something to him before slinking back to his control of the lower deck.

"Bald Roke is the man we have to deal with," the captain continued. "We can't be taken alive. His crew are cannibals and worse." Luchare wondered to herself how you got "worse" but said nothing. "That ship's *The Ravished Bride*, and she's manned by men, and other things, worse than any afloat. Bald Roke would skin his own sister alive for two coppers and a belly laugh. A good sailor, though, rot his dirty bowels, and that ship's a bloody marvel."

Hiero only half-heard him. Once again he was seeking the unguarded minds of the enemy. He passed two non-human minds, one a Howler's, the other something new to him, and then found what he was

seeking. In a lower crosstree crouched an archer armed with a crossbow, his gaze sweeping the deck as he watched for any sign of mutiny or other dangerous behavior. Hiero did not seek his name or anything else. With the utmost of mental strength he had left, he simply went after the man's own nerve endings, using the captive forebrain like a pair of pliers. The archer screamed in horror as his weapon rose to aim at the *Bride's* helmsman despite his passionate attempt to force it down.

Once again, Hiero failed, though not by much. The bow went off and the quarrel sped on its way to bury itself in human flesh. But not the helmsman's. Instead, the bolt drove into the brain of a man standing nearby. At the same time, the archer himself died as three arrows and a thrown spear struck him in turn. Hiero clearly saw the captain of the enemy, who gave the order, through the archer's fading sight, even as the man pitched from his lofty seat into the heaving sea. Tall, gaunt to emaciation, dressed in fantastic orange velvet, covered with jewels, his brown skull gleaming in the half-light, Bald Roke was a strange and repellent figure. His thin, clean-shaven face was disfigured by a scar running across it at the bridge of his nose, a crooked weal marking some past scuffle. Hiero felt him staring even as the priest withdrew from the dying body of his unwilling ally. Something else he saw too. Around the enemy leader's neck was a heavy chain of familiar bluish metal, and from it hung a massive, square pendant of the same, almost a shallow box. This was the source of the other's protection, the priest knew, a mechanical mind shield. He felt even wearier as he opened his own eyes again. Was there no weapon he could command against the hidden skills of the Unclean adepts?

But he was, mercifully, given no time to waste on self-pity.

"In the name of Blessed Saint Francis the Ecologist, they come!" Brother Aldo shouted. "Behold the children of the great waters!"

As he spoke, Captain Gimp ordered *Foam Girl* again into the wind and simultaneously had the sails lowered. They came down with a crash, and ail ran to the starboard rail to gaze at the new arrivals.

Protruding from the water between the two vessels, for *The Ravished Bride* now also came up into the wind and brailed her sails also, were two great heads. For a moment Hiero did not realize what he was seeing, and then he gasped, for they were birds, although of monstrous size. The sleek, giant bodies were almost invisible under the tossing waters, but each was at least two-thirds the length of the *Foam Girl* herself. The beautiful heads and thick necks were not, apparently, feathered, but almost scaled and a lovely, soft green. The titanic beaks were straight, rounded javelins, each at least twelve feet long. The great, bright eyes darted nervously about from one ship to the other, but the enormous invisible paddles kept the two avian monsters in place, responsive to the old Eleveners's will,

"I won't have them attack if we can scare the other ship off," Brother Aido said to the priest. "Even the Lowan are not invulnerable, and that ship is full of weapons,"

For a moment the two vessels hung, bowsprits to the wind, while the crews simply stared at one another and the birds, each seeming to wait for the other to take some action. Then a human voice, speaking *batwah*, rose above the wind and carried easily over the two hundred feet of foaming water.

"Ahoy, there, is that you, Gimp, you little tub of rat puke? Speak up, lardguts, if you're not afraid to."

Bald Roke, his orange suit glittering even in the gray light of the cloudy sky, hung rakishly from one of his ratlines, leering across at the *Foam Girl*. As he shouted, his crew exploded in a storm of laughter and obscene jeers, glad to have a relief from the strain of watching the great birds, whose appearance seemed sheer magic to them.

"I'm here, Roke, you dirty corpse-eater!" Gimp yelled in reply. "Better get your carrion barge out of here before we turn our little friends loose on it!"

"Will you indeed?" Roke said, smiling gently. He seemed to ignore the giant birds, and Hiero silently gave him credit for possessing his share of nerve, Roke went on.

"Tell you what, fatty, I think whoever runs these two pretty chickens would have turned 'em loose already, that is, if he dared. What do you think of that, now?" Again his crew screamed in delight, and a sea of edged weapons was brandished as they did. Moke waved one skinny hand and they quieted instantly.

"We could take you, birdies and all, you little blubber bag, but it might cost me some paint," the pirate continued, staring hard at the silent group on the poop of *Foam Girl*. "So, being inclined for fun, I'll make you an offer, a generous one. Give us the dirty-looking rat with the paint on his nose and the whiskers, and the girl. In return, you're free to depart. What say you, short pizzie?"

Gimp answered instantly, but not before spitting into the sea. "Go fry your crew of man-eaters in human grease, Roke. You'll get nought from us. But you brag, don't you, about how tough you are, skinhead? I dare you to fight *me* for a free passage, under Inland Seas Truce, man against man, hand weapons of choice. What do you say to that, you bony bag of slave girl's gauds?" This time it was the *Foam Girl's* crew who shouted and brandished weapons, while the *Bride's* crew were silenced. The wonderful birds still held their place, as if they were mere ducks on some farm pond, Hiero thought absently.

After a brief colloquy with two of his subordinates, Roke swung back into the rigging, a vicious look on his face, the smile gone.

"All right, you little blot of slime weed, I take you. Anchor, and so will I. But not us two alone, see. Me and one of my mates will meet you and that brown-skinned savage with the painted face. Otherwise no go, and I gives the order to attack. What do you say now, turdhead?"

"They're determined on you, Master Desteen," Captain Gimp said in a low voice. "They want you somehow, and what's more, Roke'll risk his whole ship and crew to get you. Can you fight? Are you game?"

"Try me," Hiero said, slapping him on the back. In truth, he was tired, but he saw no way out of this. "Will these dirty rogues keep such a bargain if they lose?"

"Oh, yes!" Gimp was shocked. "Even the worst sea scum will honor a Seas Truce for single combat. Oh, yes, have no fear. But Roke is a notable fighter. And who knows whom he'll bring with him? We'd better get ready." Captain Gimp turned and waved assent to Roke, who left the rigging at once.

Hiero now saw a ship's boat launched from *The Ravished Bride*; and while Gimp armed himself, he explained that the challenging vessel was always the scene of the combat.

"We have nought to lose," he went on. "All of the others will be slaves if we two are killed. But at least not killed and eaten. And if we win, we get their cargo or a good part of it; all we can carry, at any rate."

Luchare helped Hiero strip to his pants and soft boots. Daughter of soldier-kings, she said nothing and did not need to, but he could feel her body trembling through her hands. He knew she would not survive him by a minute, should he fall. Brother Aldo simply patted his hand and then turned away, back to his control of the birds.

Hiero weighed his short sword. He then turned and, from a pile on deck, selected a heavy, square brass shield, curved from side to side, for his left arm. His poniard was thrust, unsheathed, into his belt. With his bronze helmet on, he was ready. Gimp was now stripped to his kilt and was barefoot as well. He bore no shield, but a long, gently curved sword, rather slender, something on the order of an immense saber, save that the point was slightly angled. It was designed, obviously, for both hands. His arms were very long and rippled with muscle as he waved the big sword delicately about. He no longer appeared comic, and his square jaw was set.

The boat of the enemy grated alongside. Over the rail first came the bald head of the pirate captain, and behind him came his partner. Hiero shuddered inwardly. A Leemute, and one of unknown type! And it also wore a mind shield about its neck.

The creature was as tall as a man and, Hiero realized, might really be descended from men. It wore only a short leather jerkin, but its natural skin was a mass of tiny, dull gray scales. It had no visible nose or ears, only holes in both places, and its dull eyes were lashless under massive, bony brows. In one powerful arm it carried a single-edged, heavy axe; in the other, a small shield. The crew shrank away from it.

Bald Roke still wore his orange finery, and numerous rings glittered on his hands. Brooches and necklaces spangled his stained jacket, which had slashed sleeves for easy movement. He carried a slender, straight sword with a basket hilt and, in the other hand, a long, two-edged dagger.

The men of *Foam Girl* now scattered to the extremes of bow and stern, with a good few hanging on to the ratlines, but all well out of sword stroke.

"We fight around the ship, Skinny," Gimp said, "up to the fore-peak line and back to these steps. No holds barred, no survivors. You get forward now, we'll stay here. At my word we'll start for each other, you and Corpseface there against me and my friend."

The creature with Roke snarled, displaying a mouthful of sharp, yellow fangs, but Roke laughed jeeringly.

"Suits me, Low-pockets. But you and your mind-twisting magician here ain't met a Glith before. Loaned to me, he was, by good friends up north and west of here. We'll see how funny you think he is in a minute."

Hiero spoke for the first time, in a calm voice which nevertheless carried easily. "I know your fine friends, Captain Roke. They are among the living dead. The grave yawns for all of them and for this creature and for you as well." His vibrant tone seemed to carry flat certainty.

For a second, Roke appeared to pale. If the horrid thing with him, the Glith, was new to the company of *Foam Girl*, the Metz priest was equally so to him; and despite his new amulet's protection, Roke was unsure of himself. But he was a hardy scoundrel and rallied.

"Glad you found a voice, Whiskers. We'll mark your pretty paint in a few seconds. Come on, Daleeth, let's get forr-ard."

In a moment all was ready. The ship fell silent, save for the creak of timbers and straining cordage as her anchor line sawed the hawsehole. The two rogues who had rowed Roke and the Glith over clung to shrouds above the rail by their boat's painter, eyes glittering with excitement. A sea bird called, far off, a

faint, piercing cry.

From his place to Hiero's right, Gimp shouted, "Go!" and marched forward. The four, two and two, one to each bulwark, advanced cautiously toward one another. This care alone would have told anyone of experience that trained warriors were meeting. There would be no headlong rushes and novice blunderings here. All four of them knew their business.

Hiero faced the Glith, and the two captains, tall and short, each other. They met on either side of the little cabin, almost exactly amidships. A vagrant gleam of sunshine momentarily pierced the racing clouds and illumined the foul creature's axehead as it advanced, but aside from that, it was a thing of dead hues, gray-scaled skin, gray garment, and lustreless eyes. Yet it was alert, and every rippling muscle revealed power and agility. Nevertheless, it advanced slowly, very slowly. As it came cautiously on, Hiero heard the clash of metal to his left, where the other two had commenced. As any trained swordsman does, he watched fixedly his foe's eyes for a sign of its intentions.

Those eyes! Great, somber, empty pools, seeming to have no bottom. Even as he watched, they grew larger. Larger! The Glith was no more than a few yards away, its axe poised on its shoulder, shield lowered. And all Hiero could see were the eyes, the round, lightless caverns of emptiness, which seemed to swell and grow until all else faded. Far off, he heard a woman scream. Luchare! The eyes vanished, shrunk to normal size, and the consciousness of where he was returned. Almost too late!

Reflex and training saved Hiero. The old, retired Ranger Sergeant who had first trained him had always stressed one point in the Abbey school of arms. Close in! "Look," the old veteran had insisted, "always try to close in quick, particularly if your opponent looks better than you. There's no monkey tricks with sword or spear at someone's throat from two inches away, boys. Give luck and plain meanness a chance!"

Hiero felt the wind of the heavy axe as he dived under it, not trying a blow, but simply shoving with his shield's boss at the Glith's body. Until he was ready and again unshaken, he wanted no more of those eyes!

Hypnotism! No mind shield guarded against that! Roke, or perhaps the creature itself, had been very clever. Almost, Hiero had been lured into the axe, like a calf to the slaughter, helpless to avert the death stroke. Had not Luchare screamed, he would now be dead.

He wrestled now with the scaled thing, his shield arm holding off its axe above him, its own shield keeping his sword arm locked in turn. It gave off a mephitic foulness, and its skin seemed to radiate a chill. Its hissing breath was a charnel stench, but he kept his head lowered to avoid the eyes. God, but it was strong!

Hiero summoned all his own strength and simply shoved, at the same time springing backward. The axe fell again, but he was beyond its reach. For a second, he faced his enemy, panting slightly, watching the pointed chin and the shoulders, but never seeking the eyes. He crossed his shield over so that it hid his body and lowered his short sword so that it hung at the end of his arm. Dimly, he was conscious of the clash of arms continuing on the other side of the cabin, but he kept his attention riveted on his foe. He heard Kloodz bellow hideously, knowing his master was in peril, but he paid no heed.

It advanced again, axe held high. Was it inviting a low thrust? he wondered. He had trouble breaking the habit of years and never looking at the enemy's eyes, but somehow he managed it.

Then the Glith charged. As it came, the axe came down in a sweeping stroke and Hiero sprang back,

ready to spring in again as the axe struck the deck. He had fought few axemen, and it was almost the death of him for the second time. The Glith's powerful arms straightened and the blade of the axe swung, cutting a sideways arc with all its speed undiminished, straight at Hiero's knees.

This time, instinct took over and the priest leaped straight up in the air. Even so, the follow-through of the Glith's shield arm struck his thigh, a second after the axe itself hissed by under his feet. The impact sent him reeling backward. The downward heave of the deck now caught him dead wrong as he went, and he stumbled away, fighting for his feet, fetching up with a ringing crash against the mizzenmast. With a grating cry as hideous to the ears as its appearance was to the eyes, the Glith charged again, axe on high, clawed toes raking the planks of the deck.

But Hiero had never quite left his feet, though now he was crouching. And this was the chance he had been waiting for. As the Glith leaped forward, the edge of the square brass shield, like some strange quoit, came spinning at its legs with all the force the Metz could put behind it. When he had crossed the shield over his torso moments before, Hiero had also freed the arm straps which held it, in preparation for just this maneuver.

The skimming shield now took the brawny legs out from under the alien creature as neatly as if it had been tripped. The Glith crashed to the deck, prostrate, arms outflung, its noseless visage striking the wood with an audible thud. Even as it struggled to rise, the heavy, short sword came down on its scaled head, splitting it as a crow splits a cobnut. There was a rush of dark matter, the great limbs twitched once, and then the foul life departed.

The priest managed to recover his shield and he ran clumsily forward past Klootz's pen, ignoring the morse's bleating as he went to where he could still hear the clash of steel. The strained silence of the crew and their eyes glued to the scene up there told him that the issue was still in doubt.

It was indeed. As Hiero arrived, winded but with shield up, he saw Captain Gimp block a high thrust of the pirate's sword and barely miss being skewered by the long dagger held in the other's left hand.

"I'm coming," Hiero yelled. "Hold him a second, and I'll help take care of him." This was no matter of chivalry. In a stark, four-handed duel of this sort, it was expected that the survivors should have won by any means possible, save only illegal weapons such as bows. No quarter!

But Hiero's voice breathed new life into the little merchant skipper. Although his hairy torso was covered with blood from a dozen minor slashes, he still possessed plenty of energy. He stood, eyeing his equally bloody foe for an instant, and then ran in with a great whoop, the long, two-handed sword held high over his head. Nothing loath, Roke came to meet him, his eyes mad with rage and disappointment.

As they both charged, Gimp proved what his long, curved blade could do. Amazingly, he seemed to fall forward on his face, but his left hand caught the deck and held him off it. At the same time his long right arm, clenched fist now holding the long hilt by itself, swept out in a flashing backhand arc, like some monstrous scythe.

It was too late for Bald Roke, seasoned battler though he was, to check himself. He tried with his own sword to deflect the terrible blow, but all the force in Gimp's squat frame was in its onward rush. The razor-edge of the great sword cut in below the pirate's elbow and severed his sword arm in turn as neatly as a scissor cuts a thread. Passing on through, it drove deep into his orange finery until checked with an audible sound by some bone. A shower of blood sprayed out as Roke strove to keep to his feet, even while life faded from his glazing eyes. He took two tottering steps toward his enemy, who never moved, spread out like a four-legged beast on the pitching deck. One arm still gripped the bloody sword,

which had now slipped from the now scarlet tatter of Roke's dress.

Then, with a choked sigh, all ended, One instant Roke towered up, his poniard raised in a last defiance; the next, he lay a crumpled heap of blood-soaked rags, his severed forearm lying near him, still clutching his basket-hilt sword in its death grip. There was silence again.

Then the crew exploded. The shouting almost deafened Hiero, but he managed to lurch over and help the captain to his feet before embracing him. Then a dozen pair of hands tore them apart and carried them in triumph to *Foam Girl's* poop; there Luchare, her eyes blazing in triumph, waited for her lover.

Even as he hugged her in turn, forgetting Gimp's blood and the dark ichor of the Glith, Hiero suddenly began to laugh. For out of the ship's cabin, unbidden, had come a peevish thought.

What's all this noise? Why can't I get some sleep?

The lazy bear had slept through the whole night and the entire chase and subsequent battle. Now he was demanding to know what on earth was happening!

Still holding Luchare, Hiero watched in silence as the two bird giants, the Lowans, dived suddenly into the curling seas and disappeared, their vast bodies as easily handled as if they were dabchicks. He saw that Brother Aldo looked very weary, as weary as he himself felt, and he realized that the old man must have greatly exerted himself to have held the two bird-things obedient to his will for so long.

Gimp was now everywhere, personally looting Roke's corpse, bellowing orders, and calmly warping the *Foam Girl* alongside the *Bride* as if the latter were some peaceful barge he dealt with for hides every week in the year.

But his confidence seemed quite justified. Aside from some haggling over the worth of the *Bride's* cargo, there was no apparent animosity between, the crews. The pirates were as villainous a crew of unhung ruffians as Hiero had ever imagined, but not even the single, dirty-looking Howler offered so much as an insult. Indeed, various scurvy wretches bawled coarse praise of Hiero's skill with weapons along with sundry odious compliments to Luchare's appearance and probable amatory skills. These latter drove that young lady quickly into the cabin, her ears burning.

While Gimp checked *The Ravished Bride's* cargo along with a burly thug who was now her temporary new master, Hiero sat on a bench and expressed surprise to Brother Aldo that such utter scoundrels would honor anything at all, let alone freely give up valuable goods.

"A pirate ship did violate the Inland Seas Truce in my lifetime, Hiero, long ago, long, long ago, but I can still remember. Everyone, pirate, raider, and armed merchant, sought her for a season, and eventually she was found and trapped. The crew, such as were not killed outright in the battle, were first impaled, then flayed alive. The captain, who had caused it to happen, lost a joint on each finger and toe, arm and leg, every day until he died. The same severed joints, broiled, I believe, were his sole sustenance until then," the old man added thoughtfully. "If a captain even suggested such a thing now, I suspect his crew would kill him before he succeeded in drawing his weapons."

"But how about the Unclean? Surely they honor nothing? And where are those other two men with the mechanical mind blocks? I can't detect them any more. Have they somehow escaped?"

"That's interesting," Brother Aldo said, his eyes brightening. "Only one answer I can see. They're in the drink, my boy, put there by their own fellows for some foolery or other, such as suggesting a truce

violation. Or maybe just simple fear of the Unclean devices by their shipmates. No, they haven't escaped."

"We'd better get the two mind locks that Roke and my friend, the Glith, had, in fact right now, while I think of it," the priest said, starting up with a groan. His side bore a great blackened bruise where he had struck the mast, and he ached all over.

Brother Aldo chuckled. He patted the leather pouch which hung over one shoulder, and something within clinked musically. "I had Gimp take care of that right away. None of the common sailors wanted to touch them anyway. We'll have a look at them, you and I, when a little leisure presents itself." As he spoke, something stirred in the depths of Hiero's memory. Whatever it was could not rise to the surface, however, and he dismissed it with a sigh. Other matters came more easily to his attention.

"Would those birds really have attacked the pirates?" he asked.

"I'd have hated to do it, but yes, I think so. I think I could have made them." The chocolate skin of his face had lost its usual glow, and Hiero saw that Brother Aldo was a very old man indeed. *How old?* he wondered. Now, as they watched the two crews transshipping boxes and bales of goods from the large ship down a gangway to the *Foam Girl*, the Elevener went on. "Who knows how it would have ended? Six tons or so of squawking, flapping Lowans would make even that big ship look smaller, especially if they were trying to come aboard! They're not at all common, you know. I've seen them only three or four times in my life."

"It was a great feat, both to summon and to control such vast things," Hiero said in honest admiration.

The old man shrugged off the praise. "My business, Hiero, and I think you have learned more in a few months about such things than I did in a great many years. But something else is troubling you."

"Yes," the Metz said, his voice lowered so that no one nearby could hear him. "That thing I killed, the Glith, Hoke called it. It was a mighty hypnotist, you know, and damned near got me under a spell. Only Luchare's shriek brought me out. What was it? The crew threw its body overboard quickly, and I never got much of a look. Surely it belongs to the Unclean."

"I got little more of a look than you, but I did try to examine it when I took the mind lock from its neck. Gimp got the other one for me." Aldo paused. "We have heard rumors of new mutations, what you'd call Leemutes, new and more dreadful ones, which did not grow by accident from ancient genetic damage. No—these new creatures have been *bred* and trained from birth in the Unclean laboratories and fortresses. This Glith thing could be one such. Certainly I never saw anything like it before."

"It was like a loathsome reptile crossed with an even more wicked and repellent human," Hiero said.

"A very typical, concept of the Unclean it sounds, doesn't it?" Brother Aldo asked. He seemed to expect no answer and simply continued to stare blankly away over the gray and tossing seas.

10

The Forests of the South

Night lay over the ancient port of Neeyana. A few small craft moved on the surface of the moonlit harbor, mostly skiffs taking crews out to sailing ships at anchor. No cargo had moved on any of the long

piers and wharves since sunset. In the narrow, murky streets leading to the harbor, a few dim lights glowed where a street held a few taverns for late roisterers. Now and again a furtive, solitary shape moved in the shadows, bent on some dubious errand or other, but no honest man ventured out at night in Neeyana unless well guarded or simply desperate. Too long had evil had its way with the old harbor town, and now only those under the protection of that same evil could walk unchallenged, save in broad daylight or in well-armed company. Yet cargo had to move, and no other seaport served this southeastern corner of the Inland Sea. Hence the east-west trade passed through Neeyana, in haste and fear on one side and grudging reluctance on that of the other, which ruled. A greater tribute could hardly have been paid the mercantile instinct of the human race than the fact that the trade continued and in some sense even flourished.

From high in a tower, indeed the actual highest point in Neeyana, two dark shapes watched over the nighted harbor below and the moon-rayed expanse of sea beyond, out to the black line marking the northern horizon.

"All seems useless against this fantastic crew of intruders," a harsh voice said. "Whatever we do, whatever weapons we use, it seems to make no difference. The chief enemy bursts our bonds, evades our strokes, and destroys our ships without trace. Nothing seems capable of arresting his progress, even momentarily. A pretty pass we've come to!"

"I agree," a second voice said, as like the first as a twin. "But consider. They, or he, for we have no idea what his allies actually represent, has now passed through two Circles. The Yellow, ours, lies before him, unless he turns back or goes elsewhere on a tangent. And both ideas seem to me unlikely. He has always moved in this direction since we first had word of his coming. And the Blue Master, S'duna, is also coming here!"

"So he too will come here, our foe will, or at least near to here. In fact, I have news. He *is* coming. I just came from the instrument room. Two of the new Vocoderes registered by the Blue Circle are moving this way across the sea. We have established that the Blue Brothers gave out four! Three to shipmen in this area, men we know well, led by Bald Roke. And one, mark you, to a Glith! The Glith was along to keep Roke under control if necessary."

"And now?" The first harsh voice was eager.

"Two of the instruments are gone, destroyed, at a guess. Two are turned off, but, of course, still registering on our screens. I would hazard the four original owners, the Glith included, are now dead and that the enemy, unwitting, has pocketed the two remaining instruments, perhaps for study. A guess, but I think rather a good one." There was a pause.

"Now, I believe, we can start to summon some of our own forces. The Yellow Brothers at least will not fail the cause!"

There was silence again as the two dark shapes, their hoods drawn in the moonlight, stared out over the old town. The stone parapet on which they leaned had long ago encircled the belfry of an ancient church, but the tall tower now housed only nightmare evil.

Far off in the east, a faint light gave promise of coming dawn. The figures turned and vanished from the tower.

"We will have to trust to our wits, at least as much as any Unclean chart, Hiero." Brother Aldo's long, dark forefinger pointed to a line on the map spread out before them. "For one thing," he went on, "we

can't read all of it."

The bear drowsed in a corner of the little cabin's heaving deck, the flickering lantern light making him look larger than he was. At the round table, its base clamped to the deck, sat the Metz, Brother Aldo, Luchare, and Captain Gimp, all trying to interpret the secrets of the strange map.

"We Eleveners have learned to read some of their symbols, over the years, that is," Brother Aldo went on. "But things such as these maps have seldom fallen into our hands in my lifetime, which is not a short one. This must be a precious chance.

"See here!" His finger traced a thin, crooked line from the Inland Sea which inclined roughly southeast by east. "This is a trail I have not used in many seasons. It lies to the north of the track over which you were brought, princess. That particular one is the major route between the Lantik coast and this sea of fresh water on which we now ride. It goes to Neeyana, *here*." His finger indicated a circle.

"Now, as you felt in your bones, child, Neeyana is wholly given over to evil. This mark I know well, an enemy mark, unchanged for hundreds of years. It means 'ours' and, see here, it overlies the whole city. Still, trade, some of it quite innocent, passes through. The Unclean suffer it, taxing it not too heavily, but gathering a good deal of information and also using the traders as a cover for their own agents and schemes.

"Well, so do we! And I would wager we generally know more of their plans than they do of ours.

"But I wonder." Again his gnarled finger traced the narrower line of the northern trail. "This goes through the forest, and Hiero, my friend, you have never seen our southern trees! Look here, now, look, a patch of another circle. Blue it is. Without trying to figure out the enemy color chart, I can tell you what that means. A desert, and deadly one, for it was caused by the radiation of The Death. These blighted deserts and similar strange, radioactive spots are generally shrinking, but they still exist, and a few even spread, so long was the life of the deadly cobalt bombs, and the stranger life they engendered. Hence the blue. For on our own maps these places are colored blue also, 'cobalt' being an ancient pre-Death word for that color.

"So, Hiero, the large Dead City you seek seems to lie near to that waste, or on its northern edge. In the distance are other Lost Cities, but much further on to the east. Still, I would feel better if I could see the map the Abbey rulers gave you. If you will trust me."

There was a brief silence. The lantern creaked at the end of its short chain. No one spoke.

"Surely you trust the good Brother, Master Hiero?" Captain Gimp burst out. He banged his fist on the table. "Why, he's saved all our lives a dozen times over in the past, and yours twice I knows of!"

Hiero laughed, his swarthy, hawk face clearing on the instant. "Sorry, Brother Aldo. You're quite right, Gimp. I apologize. But Abbot Demero laid it upon me to keep this secret. My mission, I mean, or at least its ultimate goal. I find it hard to trust anyone at all. The Unclean have so damned many disguises!

"Still, if I can't tell my real friends by now, I'd better give up! And I mean you too, Captain! Here's the map, then. What do you think, Brother?"

"Ah!" For a minute or so, the curly white beard almost touched the surface of the Abbey map as the old man pored over it. Then he straightened and looked at the others, dark eyes glowing, the whites like new ivory.

"I thought so. This is a very old map, Hiero, or rather a new copy of an old map. There are things on here I did not know still to exist and others which I know for a fact not to exist at all, at least for many centuries."

"In other words," the priest said, "a quite unreliable guide?"

"Yes and no. Alone, with no other aids, definitely yes. But with me and with the Unclean's own set of maps, perhaps not. For, as I said, there are things on here, on your map, which are now covered by ancient forest and evil waste and yet which could perhaps now be found again."

They pondered this for a while as the even rhythm of the *Foam Girl* never changed, rocking up and down, up and down, as she rode the long swells running to the south. Above their heads, the lantern smoked and swayed in tune with the shifting motion. It was two days after their battle with the pirates.

A discussion of routes continued. Hiero had still not mentioned what he ultimately sought and he had no intention of doing so. The fewer people who knew, the better, even if utterly trustworthy. He could always kill himself if trapped, in which case the enemy would still be left uncertain as to his true goal. He knew more strongly, as each league rolled under *Foam Girl's* keel, that the Unclean would lay a nation in ashes to gain one of the ancient computers. With such a device, they would be literally invulnerable.

He saw that Brother Aldo was looking at him expectantly and brought his attention back with a start.

"Sorry, I missed that last remark."

"Well, Gimp knows of no harbor, at least none inhabited, on that coast where the northern trail comes down. He says it's untouched forest right down to the edge of the sea. But we'd better try and find that trailhead all the same. Even overgrown, I feel it is our best chance, and it heads straight to that desert. And one thing about the great woods is that there we will be on *my* ground. The Unclean do haunt the forests at times, but even with their beast and Leemute allies, they do not *know* them, not as we do. And, Hiero, you are a woods ranger too, even if only of the smaller woods of the Taig, which we southerners know to be stunted and shriveled." His laughing eyes made the others smile at the jest.

"All right," Hiero said, folding the maps and stowing them away. "How far from Neeyana is that trail end, do you think?"

"If that map, or rather all them maps, are right, not much more'n fifty miles up the coast," Gimp said. His small eyes stared beadily at them. "There's sometimes a few savages in the woods around there, mostly a wee kind of red dwarf man with poisoned arrows, that like to shoot at ships when we come in for wood or fruit. I'll do my best to get you in to where that line there ends, but how you'll find it in them trees is beyond me. And the animals! Whew!"

"Good," the old man said. "Never mind the beasts, Gimp. You'll be safe enough in our good ship here. The high forest does not reach out into your beloved waters. Hiero, we have a little time now and we should make land in only a few hours more. What do you say we examine those mind locks which we captured from the enemy? I have them right here."

In a moment the two strange devices were laid upon the table before them. Luchare looked at them with loathing, but Hiero and Brother Aldo with interest, while Gimp's battered face seemed to reflect both attitudes.

The locks themselves were of the curious, oily-looking bluish metal which Hiero had noticed the Unclean favored. The heavy neck chains were of some other metal, lighter in weight, though the color was not dissimilar. The mysterious mechanisms lay inside square cases, about three inches around and a half inch thick. There were certain marks like writing incised on them, but no one there, not even old Aldo, could read them. Other decoration there was none. And there were only very faint visible seams and no catch, or opening, on them at all.

"Don't you suppose," Luchare said, looking closely at a fine seam line, "that it would be dangerous to break one? Are they guarded in some way, do you think, so that a person opening it wrong would be hurt?"

"That's possible," Hiero said. He lifted a case and held it to his ear. Was it his imagination, or did he hear an almost imperceptible humming inside?

"No, I hear nothing," Brother Aldo said, on being asked, nor did the others. "But I know very little of such things," he continued. "To be quite honest, few of my order do. We have concentrated on developing empathy with all life through our natural mental powers, and again, quite frankly, we dislike mechanical devices of any sort. This may be a mistake. I think myself we may have gone too far in the anti-machine direction. There's no reason that a limited number of machines cannot help the world, if they are controlled and properly designed. And we had better figure out the working of many Unclean devices or we'll be in real trouble. But I'm not the man to do it, I'm afraid. Actually, Hiero, you've had a lot of experience lately with their devices. You should know as much as anyone not actually in their ranks, I would think."

Hiero stared gloomily at the two shining objects on the table. Once more something gnawed faintly at his memory, some random thought, but again it seemed too elusive to come to the surface of his mind.

"The only gadgets I've seen, that is, Unclean devices," he said slowly, "weren't much like this. There was Luchare's lance, which is a thought amplifier as well, and that compass-thing I also took off S'nerg, way back up North. I had to destroy that; remind me to tell you about it later. Then there was the mind prober they tried to use on me at the Dead Isle. And the machine I call the lightning gun, which blasted me down. I think it shoots charges of static electricity, though God alone knows how. These are mind blocks and they must be miracles of design: they're so *small*."

He sighed. "I can't figure them out at all, and yet something keeps telling me to be awfully careful of them. Maybe Luchare's right; some explosive or poison or something of the sort lies inside for the unwary."

"Well, I better go on deck," Gimp said, rising. "Landfall can't be many hours away, no, nor dawn neither. And I don't want to run on an uncharted rock, not off this coast!"

"I'm gong to bed, and so is Hiero," Luchare said firmly. "We'll need all our rest tomorrow, and only that lazy bear is getting a proper amount of sleep."

"You're right," Aldo said, also rising. "But old men don't need much sleep, princess, so I'll walk the decks with our captain. Perhaps I'll get a message or two."

Hiero yawned and pulled off his boots, sitting on the edge of the bunk. Beside him, Luchare had already closed her eyes. She fell asleep like a child, he noted, in seconds. *Damn it, what is there about those mind locks that worries me so?* He glared at the things as they lay, still glinting on the table, then blew out the lantern. Whatever it was could wait.

The long, wailing cry. "Land—hooooo," woke him up on the instant. Light, the gray light of dawn, was streaming in through an open cabin porthole. And then, as he sat up, he remembered! The memory was of the compass machine he had destroyed weeks ago, far up in the Palood! It had been a telltale, an Unclean homing device! And, for a dead rat's skin, so too were these damned mind locks!

In an instant, ignoring Luchare's startled cry, he was on deck, bellowing for the captain, yelling for Brother Aldo. Both appeared instantly and watched in horrified fascination as he smashed both locks on the deck, using a handy belaying pin. As he did so, he gasped out the reason, and the alarm flew in their eyes. Only when the deadly things were powdered metal did he look up and see where *Foam Girl* was heading.

The forest of the South! Not a mile away rose a rank of such trees as he had hardly dreamed possible, even though he had been warned what to expect. The actual shore was invisible, screened by rank growth, mostly bushes and shrubs, all of different shades of green. And behind them in turn reared up the giants of the forest, showing black boles, brown trunks, tan bark, and all the hues and permutations of brown to black, with reddish glints here and there. The Metz almost had to arch his back to see their incredible tops. Around some of the great trunks and hanging from the lofty branches, there twisted vines and lianas of every hue, some of whose girth looked greater than that of *Foam Girl's* hull! Splotches of color, mostly blazing reds and yellows, here and there revealed the presence of giant, flowering plants which clung to the trees far up their enormous lengths. Through Gimp's proffered telescope, Hiero could see a mass of intertwined, smaller plants festooning every vacant space between the boughs. The smells of the titanic forest reached out across the water to them, a medley of strange scents and musky perfumes. Beside Hiero's head, Klootz suddenly bellowed from his pen, as if in greeting to a wood greater than any he had ever known. The answering call of some strange monster, a thunderous roar, echoed back faintly from the distant shore, and a flight of large, white birds rose from the foliage directly in front of them. A physical wave of warmth seemed to reach out to them.

"Can you get her in quicker?" The priest turned to Gimp in question. "I'm suddenly horribly afraid. We've given someone a constant clue to our position for over two days. And we're not far from Neeyana, which they control." He ignored Luchare, who now came on deck fully dressed and moved up to his side. But she seemed not to mind and bent to adjust her boots.

"Well, Master Hiero, you can see the sails are half-brailed," the little seaman said. "I don't dare go ramming in at full speed. We've got three good lookouts in the bows and forepeak. But there may be anything from sunken logs to nice, pointed rocks just under the surface. A few moments more should do, though."

In the sun of early morning, the little ship sailed slowly in to the towering green wall of jungle ahead, a light breeze carrying her smoothly over the gentle swells. The hum of a tiny surf beating on the roots and tangled deadfalls of the shore now came to them.

Hiero finished a brief and private prayer session, but he was still nervous and inwardly cursing himself. Now he sent out his mind impulses, wishing he had thought to wake up hours before and start doing it to them. Beside him, Brother Aldo stood, eyes shut, seeming merely to breathe in the warm scents of the forest as they grew increasingly strong.

Hiero clutched the old man's brown sleeve suddenly. *Foam Girl* was now only a few hundred yards off the tangle of plants which made up the actual edge where forest met sea.

"There's something coming from the west! I can't probe it! There's a mind guard, a big one, like the one

on that Unclean ship you sank! They're coming fast." He felt sudden anguish. What was there he had failed to do?

Aldo instantly turned and rapped out an order to the captain. "Gimp, put us ashore, the ship too, and get your crew mustered. Hurry, or we're all dead men!" There was no benevolence on his face now, and the high, black cheekbones were ramparts of the decision. His great eyes blazed with imperious will.

Gimp now volleyed orders in every direction, at the same time aiding in rigging the arrow engine personally. The one-eyed mate, Blutho, took the helm as the two great crescent sails rose and were hauled up full so they filled to the breeze. *Foam Girl* put her nose into a trough, rose on the next long swell, and rushed headlong for the tree-girt shore.

Over the hubbub on deck and the swirl of activity, Hiero became aware of Luchare pressed against his side, buckling on his weapons. *I failed*, he thought to her as he adjusted his battle helmet. It did not occur to him to speak.

Nonsense, came her calm, answer. *No one else warned us at all. You've carried all the weight, mostly alone, for weeks.* Even as his brain received the answer, he felt wonder at both the ease of her message and the closeness of their combined mental-physical contact. Being completely male, he could not help his mind going further. *I wonder if we could yet*, he thought, toying with the idea of love-making simultaneously by mind and body, something he had not so far dared attempt.

Probably, came the prompt answer, *but this is no time for it, you clown! Go get Kloodz ready. I'll watch the bear.* It was like a (friendly) dash of ice water. He blinked and came back to the present.

The big morse was wild with excitement, and Hiero had to use his own mind hard, like a curb, to quiet him down. Barely was he saddled when they struck.

Foam Girl nosed straight and hard into a solid mass of outthrust roots and stunted, mangrovelike trees with a prolonged, grating" crunch. Many men on deck, who were concentrating on their tasks, were jolted off their feet, but nothing worse happened. Fortunately, the sea ran deep here, right up to the shore, and this made their crash landing fairly easy.

"Ashore, everyone!" came Gimp's stentorian shouting. He had conferred with Aldo constantly as they raced in, for, like any really good gambler, he never hesitated a moment to cut his losses. A squad of hardy rascals hurled themselves off the bowsprit, chopping madly with axes and heavy cutlasses at the packed vegetation. Nothing but a rat or small monkey could have got through that tangle of growth unaided. Behind this gang gathered most of the crew, now armed and loaded with hastily snatched-up supplies and emergency gear. Gimp and Blutho led them, and behind them, in turn, were Aldo, the girl, and the priest, who led the morse and the bear, though "led" was not how Gorm saw it. All of the humans, save those using the axes, were watching down coast to the west. As they looked, the black, slim shape they had grown to dread appeared, nosing around a point not a mile away, white foam curling under the sharp prow.

At the sight, Gimp himself seized a broadaxe and, shoving his men aside, fell upon the green matter before him like a fury, using great hewing strokes which severed foot-thick vines like so much string. Those of the men who could find a footing near him redoubled their own efforts. Brother Aldo noticed the arrow engine crew still stoutly manning the machine on the poop and now ordered them away with the others.

From the Unclean ship, now coming like a storm, a distant-screech came down the wind. At the same

time, a flare of vivid blue light winked from her foredeck.

"The lightning gun!" Hiero and Luchare cried together. A hundred yards off the stern, a column of steam rose suddenly from a white-capped swell.

"Come on now," Gimp screamed, now out of sight in the green growth. "We've cut a path for you and it widens. Shake your stumps, you lazy bastard whoresons!" This latter epithet was addressed to his loyal crew, who now scrambled off the bowsprit like so many ants. Behind them, Hiero led and urged Klootz forward, Luchare walking on the other side of the bull's head. Gorm leaped off the deck and followed the men in a second. Brother Aldo, nimble as a cricket, clambered after him.

Klootz trod warily over the tangle of ropes and discarded gear at the bow. The priest and the girl soothed him with soft words as the great brute cautiously examined the jungle ahead. Only Aldo was yet still in sight, beckoning them eagerly on. For some reason, the forest's warmth struck Hiero only now; it was as if they were entering a furnace, though a damp one. Klootz paused, hindquarters bunching.

Whoever was aiming the lightning gun finally got his range. There was a ripping crash, and looking back in horror, the humans saw the after half of the little cabin simply vanish in a cloud of white incandescence. The wave of awful, attendant heat almost scorched their back hair.

The bull morse let out a terrified bawl and sprang straight forward off the ship, dragging the two with him as they clung frantically to the reins. More by luck than anything else, the animal headed straight into the ragged gap cut by the crew in the foliage. Brother Aldo leaped aside just in time to avoid being trampled to death and, picking himself quickly up, scuttled in their wake. In a second, the empty *Foam Girl*, sails and cordage slatting in the offshore breeze, was the only sign that anyone had been there. The smoke of a brisk fire ascended into the morning sunlight from her blazing cabin and midships. With a sudden rush, the fire ran up the stays to the peak of the main mast, and in another instant, the peaked sail burst into a flaming blossom of orange light. The crackling bolts of the lightning gun continued to strike through the smoke and haze, but the electric charges simply blasted holes at random in the green curtain of plants on the shore; for the gunners, though now very close, could actually see nothing. At length the order to cease fire was given. The black ship lay hove to, close in; while from her deck, sharp eyes tried in vain to discern through the smoke what had become of their prey. It was a patently useless exercise, and soon the lean hull turned, the hidden engines started, and the Unclean ship swept away back down the wooded coast to the west. In a few minutes she was out of sight. The now furiously burning *Foam Girl* sent a column of reeking black smoke high in the air, from whence it was bent inland by the wind, over the tops of the enormous trees. Nothing moved on the shore, save a few small birds.

Far away, in a crypt deep under the earth and cobbles of old Neeyana, a figure turned away from, an instrument board with an exclamation of disgust. "Is this your vaunted efficiency?" the hooded shape hissed to another standing near. "The Yellow Circle would show the Blue, eh? I'll have a word with your Masters in due season!" S'duna of the Blue Circle, enraged and frustrated, left the chamber, his cold rage going before him like a noxious cloud. All who felt it shrank away and hid themselves, but elsewhere in the Unclean citadel, new orders were given and the servants of the Yellow Circle sprang to new action. Another stroke unaccountably had failed, but the chase would not be given up, not while one of the Dark Brotherhood remained.

The camp that night, set deep in the canopy of the great trees, was not a cheerful one. The seamen, long used to the open air, felt the dank heat and the smothering darkness as doubly oppressive and frightening, even though Gimp and Blutho maintained a stern discipline and also continually pointed out that no lives had been lost. Both Hiero and Luchare nursed bad bruises from being dragged through the thickets for a hundred yards in Klootz's initial panic. Two small fires kept some of the gloom away, and a low barrier

of fallen logs and branches encircled the camp, providing at least some psychological protection, if nothing more.

But the vast tree trunks rising out of the limit of firelight into the upper dark, the mysterious cries and sounds of the encircling jungle, and the blazing eyes which stared out of the night at the fires, all combined to make the men huddle together and talk in low tones or not at all.

"We were lucky to find this clearing," Hiero said, stoically trying to avoid noticing his battered arms and legs. He knew Luchare was equally in pain and also saying nothing, and his heart went out to her. They sat a little apart, with the bear and the morse, the latter now peacefully chewing his cud.

Brother Aldo had vanished earlier, saying only that he would be back before moonrise, "Not that the moon will shed much light down here," he added.

"I guess he went to find that trail, that is, if anyone can find it," the girl said. Her dark face was drawn and tired in the light of the flames.

"Listen to that, will you!" Hiero said, springing to his feet, hand on sword. All the others had leaped up, too, as a perfectly appalling racket burst out not far away, hideous, earthshaking screams of rage rising above a deep, hoarse bellowing, as if the father of all cats had attacked the granduncle of all bovines. The bellowing sound alone made Klootz's loudest efforts sound like a baby's squall. As suddenly as they had begun, the frightful sounds died away, leaving everyone half-deafened. The ordinary screeches, yells, and howls of the night resumed, aided by the sounds of countless stridulating insects. The men slowly settled down again.

A large beast indeed, came a placid thought from Gorm. And it was attacked by one almost as large, which it slew. Now it is very angry, I think I would tell the men to be quiet. Very quiet.

Hiero dashed to the nearest group, hissing for silence. One look at his face brought compliance. If the bear warned, he had learned, it was as well to listen. Soon all the men were waiting, weapons drawn, not moving, but simply crouched and staring nervously around and outward.

It comes, was the bear's thought. Be ready.

The Metz stood next to Klootz, trying to shield Luchare, who faced the same way into the dark as he did. It was to the south, he noted idly, trying to detect the creature's mind as hard as he could. Presently he thought he had found it. The brain was not too unlike that of the morse, but far, far more stupid, and now filled with insensate rage and much pain as well. Hiero tried to probe it, but the animal was simply too new to him. He had not realized previously how alien the minds of the great herbivores really were and how much simple affection and long, mutual training had to do with his control over the big morse. He tried again, but the brute mind was too full of mad rage for any inexperienced hand to take over its control. And Aldo was absent. *No, I'm back,* came a quick, clear thought. *Get one of its mind,*

Hiero, and leave me alone! I'll try to turn it. Hurry!

Now everyone could hear the monster. A footfall, so ponderous it actually shook the forest floor, began to echo at a steadily increasing beat. Great snorts and grunts sounded.

Get away from the fires! came the old man's thought.

Hastily Hiero passed it on, and Gimp and the men began to scurry away to either side. Luchare pulled

Klootz's head around, and the two tugged him off behind the buttress root of a great tree, clearing the flimsy camp barrier as they did.

Now the incredible steps broke into a crashing run, and almost at the same time, the creature gave voice. Its fight with the slain attacker must have been further away than he realized, the priest thought, as that awful, ringing bellow almost shattered his eardrums.

Out of the dark it came, perhaps just such a titanic bulk as must have peopled the earth for millions of years in the past, before the coming of man. Now, due to incredible hard radiation and consequent forced mutation, the same conditions of life had once again given such creatures another, second chance. Its great, brown head, short-trunked on a heavy, columnar neck and carrying upper and lower pairs of ivory tusks, towered up at least twenty feet above the terrified men. The close-furred giant body sloped from pillarlike front legs to shorter ones in the rear, and as it passed, the Metz saw its tiny tail, a mere afterthought, flapping in the air. Fresh wounds on its flanks gleamed red in the firelight, and the small, ruby eyes gleamed also as it sought for fresh enemies. But the fires seemed to distract it. It charged straight and hard at the nearest and careened right through it, sending burning logs spinning in every direction. Its voice rising to a new volume, it charged the next fire and scattered that also. Without ceasing its incredible rush, it blundered across the little clearing, through the barrier, and into a gap between two monster trees. Even as the light died, it vanished from sight. Everyone stood, appalled, in the gathering gloom, listening as it lumbered on and away, crashing a course off into the distance, still roaring hideously as the pain of its burned feet, added to the previous wounds, reached the tiny brain. Almost before one realized it, the sound had died away in the distance and the "normal" noises of the night forest once again resumed.

"All right, men," Brother Aldo's voice came cheerfully. "Let's get those fires going again and build up the barrier. It won't be back, but other things may. Hurry up now; no time for idling." The old Elevenner, appearing out of nowhere, stood in the middle of the clearing, helping Gimp and Hiero direct the work, until all was as before, except that the barrier was now chest-high at least. When new watches had been set, he told Gimp to turn over command to Blutho and join them. At this point they discovered that three men were missing, all ordinary seamen.

"Probably ran off in a panic and got lost or ate by something," Gimp said philosophically. "If people *won't* listen, what can you do? I tell them no-good swipes a thousand times, 'Stay here with us,' but they know better!"

"I'm afraid you're right," Aldo said. "Let us be glad it's not worse. At least I can detect no Unclean activity, only the Poros, that poor, simple beast which blundered into us."

"Poor beast!" Luchare burst out. "That great horror!"

"Well, yes, I think so," was the gentle answer. "This is his forest, you know, princess, not yours. He had just been in a terrible fight and he thought he saw more enemies in us. I sent him to bathe his burned feet in the Inland Sea," he added, "and now he'll feel better." His tone was exactly that of a nurse whose spoiled charge had been soothed.

Hiero smiled to himself. The Eleveners were indeed the guardians of all life! He rather approved, he realized, though it would take a long time for him to see the Brobdingnagian Poros as the simple-minded child that Brother Aldo obviously did.

"Now that that's over, I think I can keep us from being bothered by any more of the forest people, at least tonight. And I *have* found the trail, you'll be glad to know." The old fellow beamed at them in

pleasure and stroked his curly beard affectionately.

"I'll be glad to know a lot of things," Gimp said aggressively, "such as who's going to pay me for a new ship, not that there's another like old *Foam Girl*, mind. And all her cargo, too, gone in a wink, plus the juicy plunder I claimed from Roke's ship, and hard-won that was. All in all, Brother, I could have retired on that lot, and my men too. Who's to pay us, eh, and when and also where? Are you going to wander about in this wood until we're all ate by something like that walking mountain we just missed?" Despite his gloomy words, Hiero noted that the little seaman's eyes were still bright and his ridiculous pigtail still perky. Though he would have died rather than admit it, Gimp was a pure romantic, actually one of those people who revel in constant excitement and new ventures. He liked pay, of course, if he could get it, but it was only secondary, and so was his grumbling. Now he cocked an eye from Hiero to the old man in question.

Brother Aldo knew his man. "Why, Captain, can't your hardy men stand a little discomfort? Surely those who've ridden out gales and fought cannibal slavers and angry sea beasts aren't afraid of a few days' walk in the woods?"

Luchare and Hiero grinned at each other in silent companionship. "Few days* walk in the woods" indeed! But it was the right note to strike with the squat little seaman.

"I've got the toughest crew afloat," he boasted. "Why, Roke's men would *all* have run when that big beast come rampaging through here. No, those men'll follow me through hot pitch. But what about our pay? And where are we going now?" His voice was eager on the last question.

"Well," Aldo said, "I have no real right to promise anything like this, but if, mind you, if our Ruling Council agrees with me, all your damages will be paid, including the loss of your ship. After all, you are on Eleventh Commandment business, are you not?"

"Your word's good with me, Brother," Gimp said. "You can't say fairer than that. But what now?"

"I can supply some answers there, Gimp," the Metz interjected. "We're going southeast, the Brother and I, and I guess you and the crew had better come too." He waved his hand around at the monster tree trunks and the shadows at their feet. "I don't imagine your men are going to want to strike off alone, are they? Three are gone already. I've probed the night with my mind and so has Aldo, and we detect nothing. I fear they indeed have provided someone a quick dinner. Can you make this danger plain to those who remain? We must stay together."

"Yes," Aldo added, "and tell them Hiero will command the whole expedition from now on. This trip is land work, and we need land discipline and experience. I will assist him, of course, and you'll remain in direct command of your own people."

"Suits me," the sailor said. "There won't be no problem about that. I've got thirty men, no, twenty-seven; forgot those scourings that run off. Plus me and Blutho. We have food for two weeks, but only seven big water skins. How's this place for water?"

"I'll find you water and game too," Aldo answered. "We'll leave at dawn. The trail is less than a mile from here, overgrown but still a good road. The beasts use it and so can we, but humans don't seem to have been over it for a long time, at least as well as I can tell in the dark."

As the moon gleamed through the far-off branches and the fires died down to orange coals, they talked on, planning as well as possible the next day's march. At intervals, Hiero probed the night for enemy mind

sweeps, but encountered nothing suspicious. The high forest teemed with life, but it was natural to it, predators and prey, fur, scale, and feather.

Eventually they slept, though with watches set and regular changes of guard.

The next morning Klootz, to his annoyance, was loaded with supplies. *Behave yourself*, Hiero told him. *I'll get to ride you soon enough*. The morse bull was, in fact, trained to carry burdens on occasion, so that his irritation was a matter of pride. He had carried urgently needed supplies to more than one isolated Kandan village in the past. Now he shook his great, black antlers and brayed until Luchare's ears rang. The forest answered with a chorus of screams and yells, and the day's march began.

First went Hiero and the bear, scouting the path. Next came the mate and his picked crew of axe and cutlass men, ready to cut through any bad obstructions. The main body of seamen under Gimp came next, all armed with swords and pikes. A small group of picked bowmen followed, and last of all, the morse, Luchare, and the old Eleverer. While he disliked being separated from them, Hiero himself had chosen this march order as being the most sensible. It gave them a telepath at each end of the column, and danger was more likely to come from in front than the rear.

As Brother Aldo had promised, they soon struck the old trail. Hiero's instinct told him that it ran almost due southeast; and although small bushes broke its surface here and there, it was still easy marching. The sailors cheered up and began to sing, songs which Luchare appeared determined to ignore while carefully memorizing some of the worst to try later on her lover. Part of the cheer, Hiero learned when they stopped for a noon meal, was due to a crafty rumor of Gimp's that they were in search of a great buried treasure. This artless tale has seldom failed to arouse sailors of any time or nation, nor did it now.

Hiero could not help wishing as he strode along, alert for any movement, that he and Luchare were alone to explore the wonderful green world all about them. The heat had now come to seem normal and, in the shadows of the great trees, not even very oppressive. Stinging insects were surprisingly few, perhaps because bird life was so abundant and varied.

Monkeys, large and small, chattered overhead, and other small beasts, of unknown types to the Metz, scuttled up and down the looping vines and tendriled growths which shrouded the monster trees. Occasional huge footprints in the earth, none very new, renewed the knowledge that not all the life of the forest was small. And once, the bear shied suddenly from what appeared to be a smooth, shallow ditch across the trail itself. Hiero raised a hand to halt the column and summoned Brother Aldo. The great, rounded fold in the leaf mold of the road was stunning in its implied message, but the old man confirmed it.

"Yes, my dear boy, a serpent. Let us hope we do not meet it. They are very hard to control mentally and almost invulnerable to any weapon. I should judge this one to be eighty feet." He said no more and walked away. Hiero led off again, considerably shaken and now even more alert.

Occasionally, due perhaps to outcroppings of poorer soil or perhaps of hidden rock, the forest opened, and grassy glades filled with flowers formed sunlit breaks in the green gloom. It was in one of these that a new menace revealed itself.

The priest and his attendant, the bear, were halfway across the glade, which was no more than a hundred yards in extent, when something long and lean, or rather two somethings, erupted from the edge of the wood to their left and raced for the column at a speed so incredible that Hiero never could decide on it afterward. At first heading for him, the two creatures swerved and plucked the two leading axemen behind Hiero instead, sweeping them, off their feet without even breaking stride or hesitating. Before

anyone could even raise a weapon, they were gone! A vague visual impression was left on Hiero's forebrain of animals rather like giant, distorted foxes on legs like stilts, mottled dark brown on a fawn background, each one with a crewman gripped in great, grinning jaws. There had not been time even for the men to scream. Belatedly, he realized, he had used his mind to deflect the attackers from himself, used it subconsciously, as a man half-asleep raises an arm to defend himself from a blow. He explained this to Aldo when they all halted and also tried to excuse his conduct. But it was Luchare who snapped him out of it.

"Don't be so stupid! I'm sorry those men were killed, too, but you didn't kill them! And how many of us are alive because you have the abilities and courage to use them when you do! Now say a prayer for those two poor souls and go back to being our leader!" She turned on her heel and stamped off to the rear of the line again, Klootz following obediently in her wake.

"We're down to twenty-five lads now, but she's right, Master Hiero, she's right, you know. Without you, there wouldn't be none of us. No one blames you, I can tell you that." Gimp had overheard the dialogue, and his earnest, perspiring face now expressed his feelings.

Brother Aldo patted his shoulder affectionately. "Hiero, why not blame me instead? I am supposed to know these woods and the dwellers in them. Yet I never even noted or felt the minds of those swift creatures which took those two. In fact, to be honest, they are totally new to me, and not yet in our records at the Central Institute, I suspect. So take heart. And remember, we all still rely on you."

"All right, I suppose I couldn't help it. But I feel damned inadequate to serve as leader all the same. Let's go." The seamen marched in silence for a long while after that.

At dusk, they found another campsite between three great trees and built a strong barrier around it. But late that night, something large reached over it and simply removed one of the two seamen posted as sentries. The man's fading scream alerted the camp, but his mate had been facing the other way and thus had no real idea what had happened.

"His mind doesn't exist," Hiero said in a low voice after a moment. "He's dead, thank God. What are we going to do, Aldo? We can't go on this way. By odds it ought to be one of us next. These poor devils are getting grabbed because they have no concept of what dangers to expect. Should one of us stand watch, do you think? I'm at my wits' end!"

Eventually it was decided that Hiero and Luchare (she insisted on *that*) should keep a waking, if not talking, watch half the night, and Brother Aldo and the bear, who were great friends, the other half. This in addition to two seamen, who would walk guard on roughly each quarter of the night. It seemed to work, since for the next two nights there were no attacks, though Hiero felt that this was due to luck more than anything else.

On the fourth day since leaving the coast, they came at length to a fork in the trail. Both the left and right paths seemed to go roughly in the direction they wanted, but one inclined somewhat to the east, the other more to the south.

They called a halt to consider this matter, since in any case it was almost time for the noon break and meal. Hiero's and the girl's crossbows, and their heavy, bronze-tipped quarrels, had supplied them with plenty of small game, got by ranging only a little wide of the trail. The local wild creatures, though often savage enough, were singularly unwary of men, a fact that Brother Aldo and the priest found encouraging, for it showed that few human travelers had used this country.

As they inspected all of the maps, Brother Aldo looked increasingly doubtful.

"No fork shows here at all! Long ago, but, mind you, my memory is still fair, I used this road and there was no such fork then. Yet roads made by game, and this trail simply took one over, you know, don't change much over the centuries. Not unless the land itself does, if a river, say, should dry up or a new volcano arise."

He walked over to the fork and peered down at the actual junction of roads, where a colossal tree, against which he resembled a fly on a wall, towered up at the apex of a broadening triangle of forest. The men were eating silently, watching as their leaders debated. Overhead, the unending canopy of green shielded them from the burning sun. The mighty wood lay somnolent under the hush of noon, only an occasional bird song drifting down through the leaves.

Aldo came striding back, his eyes still downcast.

"We'll take the southern fork, I think, unless there's an objection. It would seem to skirt the desert on the map more than the old road did. I never went that far myself, but turned off before the open spaces began. But I am still puzzled as to why a plain fork like this should exist on a road no one human uses, for animals simply don't do such things." Thus they crossed over the border into the realm of Vilah-ree, unknowing.

For some miles, the new road, or rather trail, for it was no different from the one they had been using, marched steadily on, winding around and through the great tree trunks as it had for days. But late in the afternoon, Hiero became conscious of a change and held up a hand to halt the column and at the same time to summon Luchare, Aldo, and Gimp to him.

"So you've noticed too," was the old man's comment. "What do you think?"

"We're going down a very long, gentle slope, into a river valley, I guess. The trees are mostly the same, but there are many more hanging mosses and lichens and great ferns too. The ground isn't wet, but the air's damper. And I hear a lot of new bird calls and songs. What have you noticed, Aldo?"

"That animals are very few, and mostly far up in the trees. No large beasts use this trail at all, no dung, no footmarks, nothing. And yet I seem to feel something hovering at the edge of my thought, almost in reach but not quite. Your mind, boy, is more powerful than mine in many ways. Try using it and see what you can pick up. But do be careful!"

Luchare looked anxious for a second; then her ebony face became a mask as she assumed the role of the king's daughter. Gimp looked nervously about them at the leaf-strewn ground. This was out of his sphere of knowledge entirely. Hiero closed his eyes and leaned on his spear, which he had thrust point downward into the soft earth, while he sent his mind abroad.

He touched upon the minds of many small, shy creatures at first: birds high above, lizards on tree limbs, toads and snakes in the mold of the forest floor. Wider and wider he sent his mental net, seeking for any trace of intelligence with every atom of his powerful brain. At length he was sure that, for very many miles in a circle from where they now stood, no mind existed which he could contact on an equal level. He began to withdraw mentally, closing and tightening the mental circumference of his "net," but still watching closely for any trace of an observer, spy, or enemy.

Then a strange thing began to happen. He caught no trace of coherent thought, no actual communication, but he knew all the same that someone was there! And in his mind a face commenced to form! The face

of a woman!

Or was it? he wondered. The face was long, the chin pointed, as were the small ears, just visible under the helmet of hair. And the hair itself? *If it was hair*, he wondered. The tight, almost caplike covering looked as much like feathers as it did anything else and seemed to ripple with almost a life of its own. And the eyes! Long and slanted, with vertical, yellow pupils, their color was a shifting, opalescent green. No human had such eyes! Green indeed was the overall impression which the face conveyed. The pale, smooth skin and the strange hair seemed to have overtones of green, as if the forest had exuded a mist which covered the creature who watched him. Yet it was a female presence which observed him.

For he was under observation. That much was clear. The strange and beautiful (for it was both) face saw *him*, and although he could detect neither mind speech nor mental contact of any sort he knew, yet he was sure that the entity behind the strange eyes was fully aware of him and his companions. And he knew too that he had been *allowed* to see the face of his watcher. As this thought stirred in his mind, the image vanished, like a burst bubble, one moment clear, the next utterly gone. But still the watch over them was not relaxed. This also he knew. He brought his mind back to the trail and opened his eyes, to find the others still watching him.

"You have found something," Aldo said instantly. "I can see it in your eyes."

"Something, yes, or someone. We are under close observation. But I can feel no mind touch at all, which is strange and, frankly, makes me nervous. Even the Unclean mind shields are detectable as an impression or shape, though the thoughts they hide are not. But here . . ."

As he tried to explain the picture he had received, he saw a storm of fury begin in his love's eyes and instantly stopped the narrative to take hold of her shoulders and shake her gently.

"Now look, foolish one, a female seen once is no cause for jealousy. I said she was lovely in a way, yes; but, I feel, not altogether human either. So stop the female anger, eh, and let me go on?" His clear gaze met her eyes, and at length she smiled.

"All right, I guess I am jealous. But I don't like beautiful green women, whom I can't even see, looking at my man!"

"Quite so," Brother Aldo said impatiently, "but we have other concerns, princess. Hiero, does this strange creature, who must be one of a group, seem dangerous?"

"I don't know, frankly. But I do feel there is power there, and power of a kind I can't even grasp, behind that face. That in itself is quite enough to make me nervous."

"But what are we to do? Shouldn't we go back, before this invisible witch or whatever casts a spell on us?" What little he could grasp of Hiero's tale made Captain Gimp very nervous. He was a man who could face any physical danger with a bold face, but unseen (to him) green faces and mental warfare were something else again.

You know, he may have a point. This was Aldo's mind speaking directly to Hiero. *Maybe we are being warned and should go back, retrace our path, and take the other trail.* But he was interrupted from a strange source.

You cannot go back, came the bear's calm message. *The way is guarded now. You can only go forward, where the—*(his thought was untranslatable, but conveyed an impression of great power) *w*

ish you to. His mind said nothing more, and he simply sat up on his haunches and sniffed the damp airs drifting down the trail.

Can you hear— whoever is watching- us? Do they, or she, talk to you? Do you know their purposes?

I cannot tell you how I know, Hiero, was the answer, *I was told to say what I said, but not by the way you use your mind. It is the same way I know which is the way home. I just KNOW, that's all.* Gorm's thought conveyed the idea that the process he was talking about was quite inexplicable in human terms. As a matter of fact, he was partly wrong, for Hiero's own sense of direction was almost as good as the bear's. But the sub-mental communication wave or channel being used was certainly nothing either the old Elevener or the Metz priest had ever dreamed of.

What blocks the return path? was Hiero's next question.

Listen, came the answer.

From far back up the long, gradual slope down which they had lately come, there echoed a cry. The rippling calls of the strange birds above them were hushed, and only the cry could be heard, though it came from a long, long way. It was hard to describe. Luchare called it a "cross between a moan and a growl." Hiero thought it sounded more like the howl of an inconceivable wolf in great pain. Brother Aldo kept his own counsel. Whatever it was, it had to be very large, and the note of savagery in its voice was unmistakable. One word that subsumed all others in describing the sound might have been "disquieting."

It is a great beast, greater than anything I have ever seen. And it guards the back trail for those who sent it. We must go on. The bear's message was unequivocal.

Hiero looked at Brother Aldo, who shrugged. For the first time since they had met, the priest thought the old fellow looked tired. Again he wondered how old Aldo was.

"Let's get the men moving, Gimp," Hiero said. "Tell them a big animal's behind us, that's all."

"They know that all right, Master. They can hear that much as good as you!" He turned away and barked an order.

As they marched on, the great clumps of green and brown moss, some of it lovely, others simply grotesque, increased in number. The area to the right and left of the path became obscured, both by the mosses and huge ferns but also by a greenish haze, not a fog, Hiero thought, but more as if the light off the trail had some different properties, which ordinary eyes could not penetrate. He tried probing with his mind, at random intervals, both forward on their route and back, as well as to both sides, but gained no knowledge. He could not even tap the mind of whatever horrific beast waited behind them. Those who controlled it also shielded its thoughts. *A great feat,* he thought glumly. His own, hard-won powers seemed those of a child by comparison.

You are needed, suddenly came a thought from Gorm.

Who— me? Hiero was startled.

Yes. I don't know why. Those who speak to me are not clear, perhaps do not wish to be. But you, and no one else in the party, have a task to do. Or else we all are trapped.

Hiero kept marching, crossbow slung loosely over one arm, his spear over his shoulder. Only his helmet was missing, too heavy for long marches for him to be instantly battle-worthy. *Needed for a task? This grew stranger and stranger. He was wanted, personally, and if he failed, why, the whole party perished!* He said a few soldiery words into his mustache, then crossed himself and automatically asked God's pardon for blasphemy. Neither attitude struck him as contradictory. On they went, accompanied only by rippling bird song.

Just as the light faded, they emerged into a large, moss-floored clearing. The men suddenly shouted as they saw what stood there, but Hiero, Gimp and the one-eyed mate beat them back, cursing and shoving until some semblance of discipline was restored. Still, it was hard to blame them, as Gimp said.

In the center of the clearing were three long, wooden tables. There were not seats, but none were needed. The tables were laden with steaming earthenware platters, all carefully covered against the evening damp, and on them too, at regular intervals, great clay flagons reared up, stoppered in a suggestive manner.

After almost a week of constant danger and a diet of hardtack and tough, wild game, it was an incredibly seductive display.

"Wait a minute!" Gimp screamed, waving about the heavy staff he had been carrying. "Suppose it's been dosed, you sorry catamite bastards! D'you all want to choke on poisoned grub, you miserable, mother-delighters?"

Eventually, with even Brother Aldo and Luchare, of both of whom the men were in great awe, helping, things quieted down. When they did, and he got a chance to look more closely at the food, Hiero received another message, again from Gorm.

The food is safe. We can all eat. I tell you, Hiero, the Old One says you are needed! From the bear's mind came a picture of the strange female face! So this was the Old One of whoever held them, the leader of the -unknown forest creatures whom they could not even sense!

With Hiero's assurance passed on, all fell to, the majority cautiously at first, but after Hiero had tasted each dish, with more confidence. Indeed, the food was delicious, mostly strange, cooked vegetables and tubers, but also piles of some sweet bread, all very subtly flavored. There was no meat. And the clay flagons contained an odd, herb-flavored wine which managed to grow upon the palate as one drank.

"There's no poison," he told Aldo. "I'm trained to detect it. There's nothing to harm anyone, I'm sure of that. We're being helped, that's all, but why?" He had told the old man of Gorm's message, but it meant nothing to him or to Luchare either, except that she refused to move more than a foot from his side, determined that he was not going anywhere to see anyone without her.

At length, satiated, the seamen stretched out on the soft grass, groaning. Surprisingly, no one was drunk, for the strange wine seemed only to exhilarate. As night fell, under the canopy of the trees, the men were soon asleep, save for the two walking a watch and Hiero and Luchare, who shared the first guard. The bear and Brother Aldo also slept.

It was an utterly still night. No birds called any longer, no animals moved in the undergrowth. Overhead, no life could be detected. The whole forest seemed to lie under some hushed spell. Even the great, rounded piles of moss suddenly seemed tense and expectant to Hiero, as if listening in the dark. One small fire was all that could be got to light, and it sputtered dismally as the far mists of night closed in.

Hiero first felt his legs growing weak, with considerable surprise. *But there was no poison!* his mind cried out, even as he slumped into the mossy ground. His fading sight showed him Luchare lying next to him and, beyond her, the two sailors, also fallen. And then into his mind came only a green haze, which swirled in clouds and wreaths across his vision. He felt that some secret lay behind it, but what it was remained unreachable.

Then the mists cleared. He opened his eyes and looked into those of Gorm's "Old One," the strange creature who had watched, guided, and finally trapped them all.

He lay in a room, long, narrow, and high-ceilinged, which moved under him somehow. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed, for such it was, and looked about him in amazement. In a backless chair before him, staring calmly at him, sat the woman, for such she was, whom he had seen first in his own mind and second in that of the bear. She was nude, her small, firm breasts erect and provocative. Other than a necklace and a slim belt, both of which looked like fine metal mesh, she wore no ornaments. Her greenish-white body was utterly hairless, he noted, and the strange covering on her head seemed a cross between oval, green feathers and tiny brown leaves. Yet it was unmistakably part of her, a natural growth, not a cap.

She was indeed very beautiful, yet even as the manhood in him rose to the sexual challenge of her shape, he was also driven off, repelled by her alienness. For she was not really human at all, and the lovely outward appearance of her body seemed a mask for something utterly different. To his still-dazed mind came an unbidden thought. *Why, it's as if a tree or a flower had tried to be a rabbit or a cat!*

Now he could see that the room was lit by candles, fat candles, which burned in wall sconces and cast a strange perfume as they burned. Save for the chair, a small table on which stood some wooden goblets and a jug, and the carved wooden bed on which he now sat, the room was empty. And it swayed! Even as he realized suddenly where he must be and the motion of the wooden floor shook him, a thought came into his mind and he knew that his captress was speaking to him.

We(are) in the trees, high, high above, as you (guessed?), /(can) tell (what) you think but not speak/tell/talk back (?) except by an (effort). We do not speak so/thus/in a manner. Her thought was painfully slow, and looking into the green, slanted eyes, Hiero realized that it was actually physically painful to use her mind this way. She was forcing herself to do it, despite the hurt it caused her.

How do you speak, then? Who are you? his mind asked. He was feeling clear of head and he noticed that he still had his sword-knife and dagger. His strange captors had not restrained him in any way, apparently, and he was becoming intrigued as he lost any fear.

She trilled at him. A string of golden syllables came from her lips, as lovely as the rippling of a woodland waterfall, tinkling over polished stones. "Vilah-ree" was as close as he could come in speech, and he said it softly. "Vilah-ree." Now he knew one source of the continual bird music they had heard.

At his attempt, she shook her head and sang again. Her teeth were dainty and small. Again he tried to imitate her voice and then gave it up. *Vilah-ree*, he thought, *I can't say your name properly, I fear, not in your language. You'll have to accept my mind speech instead or let Vilah-ree do.*

Then, even as they gazed at one another, the thought of Lu-chare and his companions came to him. What was he doing, talking like an idiot, while his love and his friends were drugged and helpless, God knew how far away! Were they even alive?

The calm expression vanished from Vilah-ree's face as well, and her full-lipped mouth opened in

apparent distress. A stream of golden, chiming notes poured forth as she tried to tell him something. Realizing that it was futile, she fell silent, and he felt her thoughts on the edge of his mind again.

No(you are) wrong! We (have) hurt none of the other/untrans-latable /(earth-plodders?). Look into/at my mind!

As she became more practiced, the flow of message and pictorial communication between them became easier, just as it once had between himself and the bear, though indeed he always felt the bear to be the less alien of the two. Next she showed him the camp where he had fallen into a drugged dream, but now it was guarded by a high fence of some thorny bushes. And around it at intervals stood silent, white figures, so like Vilah-ree as to make it plain they were her people. All, he noted absently, were female, and he thought, *God help them if the crew ever wakes up!!* Luchare, Brother Aldo, and the bear lay apart, on a great bed of leaves, and even the bull morse slumbered in an angle of the thorn stockade, looking as if he had been newly slain, save for the rise and fall of his great sides.

We need you, my people and I, Vilah-ree thought, when he had satisfied himself that all of his party were well and unharmed. Her golden-pupiled, fathomless, green eyes were close to his as she drew her chair nearer. A faint, lovely scent—of flowers? bark? honey?—came to him, and her strangeness seemed to ebb, leaving her both vulnerable and desirable.

What do you want? His counterwrought deliberately was harsh, as he strove to break through the glamour, the witchery, of her near presence.

She considered him a moment, then rose gracefully to her feet, pale, rounded hips swaying as she walked to the end of the room.

Come— I will show you. She drew aside a long wooden shutter on a track, and sunlight poured into the room. She beckoned with one white arm, and he rose and joined her, striving to mask his wonder as he looked out.

They were in the top of one of what must have been the tallest trees in the great forest. Below them for miles stretched a green canopy of leaves and branches, some of the latter themselves as immense as normal trees. The room in which they stood was partly hollowed out, partly built into one such, in a way Hiero did not quite fathom, but which seemed to be a graft onto the living tree itself, one which Vilah-ree made plain did not injure it. But he had not been brought just to see the beauty of the daylight on the roof of the forest. She pointed, and he looked to the east and saw her enemy.

Far away, fringing the eastern horizon, lay a great, barren expanse of empty sand and rock, its pinnacles and jagged buttes glinting in the morning sun. But closer, between the desert and the forest, part of neither and repelling both, lay something else.

A vast, ugly splotch of color, composed of mauves, dull oranges, oily browns, and sickly yellows, it seemed to have eaten into the green edge of the tree world like a hideous, running sore. Without thinking, Hiero reached into his belt pouch and brought out his far-looker. With the eyepiece adjusted, the strange area was brought up close, and involuntarily he shuddered. It was indeed an evil landscape.

Even under the sun, the giant puffballs and huge, clustering toadstools looked diseased. Other strange fungi, both hanging and dripping foul ichor, covered all the other things in sight. He could see the shrouded shapes of many vast trees, every inch covered with loathsome growth, the trees obviously dead, their tortured skeletons serving as a prop for the bloated life which covered them. All of the colors and shapes were painful to look at, none appearing natural or the work of things that grew by nature's

design. Even as he watched, a bloated bag of some monster puff-ball sort exploded, and the view was momentarily darkened by the billions of tiny spores scattered for hundreds of yards.

Slowly he lowered the spyglass from his eye, then turned to his silent companion.

What can I do about this? The plant world wars against itself? This looks truly evil, but why not use fire, unless you fear it, of course? Surely this plague of fungi is not invulnerable.

Look again, came her thought. *See if you can see anything moving.*

He did her bidding, sweeping the distant area until at length he caught sign of a movement. Adjusting the focus, he watched carefully until he had located it again, then drew in his breath in a gasp.

Over a bare patch of ground between the forest and the blight, there flowed a thing, a monster made of living slime. It had no apparent head or limbs, but innumerable, waving organs rose, long and slender, from its soft back. Its gross body seemed composed of dark, rotted velvet, and the slender rods were tipped with something soft that glowed with a putrid orange fire. Yet it was not without purpose. Its intent, quick movements bespoke intelligence and organized will. Now, as Hiero watched, it suddenly paused, and all its long pseudopods or tendrils quivered. Then the whole mass wheeled and slid over the ground in a new direction, toward a clump of bushes at the edge of the still, living forest. From these bushes bounded a creature like a huge, short-eared rabbit, running for its life. It had delayed too long, however. One of the balls of reddish foulness on the end of a slender feeler touched it fleetingly. It gave a convulsive spring and fell dead, as if struck by lightning. The slime creature flowed on until it covered the body, no small one, as Hiero could judge. In only a few seconds it moved on again. Where the animal's body had been was nothing, not even grass, only a dampness festering on the bare earth under the rays of the sun.

Again the Metz lowered the far-looker. *Is there more?* his mind asked.

Much more, came the answer. *That thing, and (it is) one of many, is only one weapon of the House.* Now into Hiero's mind there came a picture of a strange object, something perhaps like a peculiar building made of brown, still wet, soft mud. It had no truly straight lines, yet somehow it seemed to maintain a basic four-sided structure, which yet shifted from one detail to the next, though only in small ways. A vaguely rectangular wasp's nest, made of soft muck and big enough for many men to live in. But it was alive! Or at least it apparently moved and shifted, and ripples seemed to run across its surface.

If the slime-thing he had just seen was foul, at least it seemed to answer to the basic laws of life. But this object or creature was repellent beyond belief, repellent because it was utterly unnatural and ab-human in a way like nothing Hiero had ever seen before.

Then, and only then—he remembered the last cast of the symbols on the north shore of the Inland Sea. Here was the House! He looked at its image in Vilah-ree's mind again and shuddered.

11

The House and the Trees

I want my woman and I want the old man with the beard and I want the bear! And I want them now! I need them!

The curious disagreement and discussion had gone on for over an hour. Hiero had learned much about his task, but he had not been able to make his own will in the matter felt. Vilah-ree could not, or perhaps would not, see that he wanted at the very least to consult with his partners. To her, he alone was all that was needed. Suppressing as egotistic a thought that her ideas about him had more behind them than a desire to see him defeat the House, he returned to his patient argument.

He had learned that the House—or whatever motivated it; Vilah-ree was not clear on this point—stayed hidden in the center of the fungus blight or infection. It had appeared, seemingly from out of the desert beyond, some time ago—again, how much was not clear—and at once had attacked the forest edge. Nothing seemed to harm it or its attendant fungi very much except fire, and it, or they, attacked and ate everything remotely organic. The spores raced up and rotted healthy, giant trees, the moving slime molds devoured all animal and small plant life, the toadstools grew from decaying plant matter overnight, and the great puffballs englobed smaller plants and somehow ingested them. Any organized attempt to interfere was met by bolts of mental? psychic? at any rate, invisible, force emanating from the House itself. Vilah-ree and her people were not warlike in any case and they were helpless before this foul onslaught. They had no physical weapons beyond small bows and spears; and, while they could blank out their minds to Hiero, the House somehow could always detect them and hold, them paralyzed until a giant slime mold was summoned to feed! And they needed the forest. Without the trees, they would die, Vilah-ree made that plain.

What about that very big animal guarding our trail, which you put there? Why not use that? he asked.

He had noticed that Vilah-ree never smiled, but now he detected something like humor in her mind, or at least a thinly veiled amusement. He was given a picture of one of her white-skinned women swinging a strange, flat, wooden device on a long cord, swinging it in great circles around and about her head. He had not seen one for many years, not since his childhood, but he recognized the bull-roarer he had once used to frighten his first girls. Its whirring roar sounded like a hideous monster indeed!

Your friend, whom you call the bear, had a picture of a terrible creature put into his mind. If such a creature truly lived, we would be helpless before it ourselves. Thus he convinced you in turn. He laughed, only half-bitterly. They had been ensnared by a bluff and a harmless sleep drug!

One other thing had Hiero learned, or rather, deduced. From his memory of the maps they carried, it appeared that the blight of the House covered much the very same area he wished to search! Here a pre-Death city supposedly lay hidden under the edge of the desert. This made him slightly more philosophic about his capture by the tree women of Vilah-ree. It looked as if a struggle, or at least a penetration of the horror caused by the fungus attack, would have been necessary in any case.

You attack the House with your mind, your mind which is so strong, came her thought again, reiterating this same simple theme. *While you do so, we will burn the foulness of the House.* Her green eyes revealed no feelings of any kind.

Hiero looked over the balcony again, over the forest roof at the distant splotch of livid colors which was her enemy. He sighed, wondering how he could get through to her. Perhaps, he thought, a new tack would be more useful.

What happens to us if we defeat the House? he sent bluntly. *Will you let us go; help us in our journey?*

For a moment she did not answer. Then her thought somehow seemed hesitant. *Do you wish to go so*

much? There was something wistful and puzzled about her mental question, almost like the attitude of a child who cannot understand why it has been told to stay home alone.

The priest studied her as coldly as he was able to. She was lovely indeed, whatever she was, but her strangeness increased with acquaintance. The pale ivory body, the calm, sculptured face, and those emerald eyes were all enchantment. And, all, he reflected, seemed less and less to be human! Who was Vilah-ree, or rather, what?

Where are your men? On impulse his thought was sharp and quick. *Why do they not fight for you and help destroy the House? Are they afraid?* As he sensed her confusion and alarm at his questions, he continued to probe. But suddenly her mind simply went opaque, "vanished," in fact, as it had when the travelers first had walked the trail far below. Unless she willed it, he could not even detect her thoughts, let alone interpret or control them.

They stared at one another, the very human man and the al-most-woman of another race, each entity seeming to make up his or her mind, each one dueling for position. It was Vilah-ree who weakened first, or appeared to do so, at any rate.

Our men are— elsewhere, came her thought suddenly. *They do not fight; no* (wrong meaning), *they cannot fight. Thus I was desperate/helpless until you came. Now — how soon can you fight the House?*

Hiero leaned back against the wall and matched stare for stare. The question of her strange people's absent males had seemed to bother her, but the tree queen, if that were truly her role, recovered quickly.

Pay attention, his mind said. *Listen carefully to what I tell you. Until the three, the woman, the old man, and the bear, are brought here and wakened, or I to them, I will do nothing. Do you understand? You know little of mind warfare, Vilah-ree. I need advice and help, help of a kind you cannot give. I will not bargain further. Release the three I named and we will try to aid you. And the others must be guarded and kept safe until the struggle is over in one way or another. They can neither aid nor hinder, but are in our keeping.*

In turn, she debated with herself. Her next thought was cold, but her anger nevertheless came through it. *I could slay them all, and you with them. Why should I not?*

Go ahead; I quite agree that you can. But since you need us, I marvel at the stupidity of such a thought.

Again their eyes met. He saw an emotion in the green depths this time which surprised him. It was more like the anger of a woman, almost, he would have said, a jealous anger. But it passed, leaving nothing but gold bars on pellucid emerald.

Yes, she replied. *We will meet at the foot of this tree. Wait, while I go to see to it.* She turned and was gone, flipping right over the side of the balcony in a way that made Hiero's heart catch a beat. He rushed to the rail in time to see her pale shape dropping through the branches along a tangle of great vines at a speed he would have thought impossible. In an instant she was out of sight, but a chorus of golden, chiming notes poured up through myriad leaves. It was answered on all sides, though he could see no one, and he knew a host of the tree women must be concealed in attendance all around.

Having descended more slowly, helped by two women to his annoyance, an hour later he was embracing Luchare, while Gorm blinked in the background and Brother Aldo beamed impartially at the

score of armed, cold-faced, naked dryads who surrounded them. He seemed actually delighted by the discovery of the tree people, pleased to such an extent that their own mission appeared minor by comparison. He actually patted Vilah-ree on her shapely rump, just as one might pat a dog; and stranger still, she did not appear to mind and even patted him back, her face immobile!

"Lovely, Hiero, just lovely! Imagine, a whole new race of these lovely beings produced by The Death. They must have lived here a long time, to be so adapted to tree life. Remarkable! And aren't they pretty things, too? Vilah-ree, my dear, you must tell me about your people when we can talk together, eh?"

"I can't stand the way they look at me, especially that one," Luchare whispered against Hiero's chest. She meant Vilah-ree, who was indeed staring at her with uncommon interest.

Tell your woman I wish to speak with her. Alone. Vilah-ree's mind was glacial but utterly clear. Before the priest could even frame a query, she added, *Tell her she will not be harmed in any way. But I must talk to her!* The intensity of the last thought was such that Hiero, who was unprepared, was almost stunned by it.

"She wants to speak with you privately. She says it's terribly important, though I have no idea why. Are you able yet to keep a closed channel with a strange mind?"

"I think so," Luchare said slowly. Something of the tree woman's passion seemed to have reached her, for, with no more ado, she released her lover and followed Vilah-ree, who strode away into the forest. Hiero watched the contrasting light and dark bodies, Luchare's being only minimally covered by her shorts and jerkin, until they were out of sight around a huge tree bole.

"Now what do you think that means?" he asked Aldo. "I have a feeling Vilah-ree is trying to pull something clever. She won't hurt Luchare, will she? If she does, by God . . . !"

"Calm, maintain calm," was the old man's soothing answer. "I cannot read her mind, my boy, but I can read other things, attitudes, faces, eyes, even muscle tension. These curious tree women have no gift for intrigue, I am sure of that. And I think lying is almost impossible for them. On whom would they practice it?"

"No, this is something female, purely female, if my guess is right. Vilah-ree wants more information about us and decided we stupid males couldn't give it, or perhaps understand exactly what she wanted, that's all."

To Hiero's relief, the two reappeared after not too long a time and came walking back to the group at a brisk pace. Luchare was actually smiling, though for some odd reason, she had trouble meeting her lover's eyes. Vilah-ree paid him no attention, but seemed, to a casual glance, to be more relaxed.

"Oh, she just wanted to talk. Never seen a woman before, I guess. She's not so bad," was Luchare's vague answer to the priest's question. "Goodness, how lovely it must be, living here in this great woods and never seeing another soul." Her lovely aquiline profile, etched in dusky clarity against a drooping, light green frond, seemed pensive. Whatever had happened, Hiero thought, it at least had not frightened her. He wished momentarily he had eavesdropped, but he knew he could not have lived with himself afterward, had he done so.

Vilah-ree conversed briefly with some of her attendant women, and now she came up to them again. Puzzled by her new attitude, Hiero watched her stroke Luchare's arm in passing, noting that Luchare seemed in no way annoyed by the caress. Women! Who knew what they were thinking?

"We are to go now and inspect the enemy," Aldo said. "I have been talking to her majesty here, for your guess was right, Hiero. She's the queen and apparently sole ruler. She wants us to eat first, though."

After a delicious but hasty meal of the fruit, vegetables, and bread which the tree women served, they were on the way through the aisles of the mighty trees. If they were following a trail, it was apparent only to their guides, a dozen of whom ranged in front, while a similar group brought up the rear. Even Hiero, trained hunter and accustomed as he was to forests and silent movement, had never seen anything like Vilah-ree's people. Like lovely, pale ghosts, they slipped through the lofty ferns and over the huge, moss-hung logs, never disturbing a leaf and making less sound than a hovering moth.

Twice they paused for brief rest periods. It was around mid-afternoon when the tree women scouting in front began to fall back, joining the main party. Ahead, the humans could see a much brighter light, and they knew the edge of the forest must be here at last.

Gorm, to whom the whole situation had been carefully explained, halted, sat up, and then sniffed the breeze. *Dirty air*, came from his mind. *Something long dead, but not-dead, up there in the light.*

Long dead but not-dead! The Metz drew in a deep breath and exhaled long and hard. On his palate now lay a faint film of corruption, an evil stench of some vileness or other. Drifting through the sweet scents of the forest it came, a wavering miasma of rotten life and seething putrescence, unnatural simply *because* it was alive and not dead, as anything so decayed long should have been. The odor of the House!

We dare go very little closer, came Vilah-ree's message. *We have lost many of our people, whom the House somehow caught and held unmoving while they watched from the forest edge. Then, those things you saw came — and fed!*

Now Hiero began to put into effect the plan he previously had worked out with the others. He advanced with caution, his mind probing for any sign of reasoning life, though not neglecting any lesser creatures either. With him the bear went prowling, and the priest could feel his strange mind also reaching out, feeling for alien or inimical contact of any sort.

It had been agreed that this would be the order of their approach, if not of actual battle. Remaining behind them with Vilah-ree, Aldo and Luchare would link minds and prepare to aid if they were needed. But this first move was intended to be a reconnaissance, nothing more.

"Still, we may get drawn in by this thing," Hiero said, when they had discussed the possibilities. "Gorm and I are old veterans now, but we still really know nothing of this House creature, not even what it is, let alone what it actually can do. Remember, it can detect the tree people, by their minds apparently, and we can't! That's enough to make one cautious."

"Then why can't I come, too, and help you? I *won't* be left in back!" Luchare was furious.

"Listen, love, we've been over this a dozen times. You haven't the mental training, although you're learning. You know that Gorm can use his mind better. Brother Aldo has to stay here to help try and anchor our minds if we need him. And you can help only there, by adding your mental energy store to his." His voice was patient, since he knew the sole reason for her anger was fear of his going into danger without her. Eventually, with Aldo helping, she had been argued into acquiescence, however unwilling. The plan made so much sense that she could really argue no longer.

As man and bear slowly advanced over the moss and through the undergrowth which ringed the great tree bases, the sunlight grew steadily. Hiero paused, seeing for the first time at close range the shrouded skeleton of a forest giant, bulging with repulsive growths, through a gap in the yet living trees ahead. There were no large animals in the area, not even small ones detectable by his mind. The exceptions were a few enormous greenish flies, their plump bodies shining in the sun with iridescent hues as they buzzed over the plants about them. Hiero brushed one away, a fluttering, pulpy thing almost three inches long, which hovered near his face for a moment.

Still his mind met nothing. Whatever lurked out there in the foul profusion of rot was quiescent. Cautiously, the two went on, their thoughts neatly overlapping as they spread wider and wider, like ripples in a pool.

As they approached the actual border of the living forest, the dead trees, each festooned with horrid growth, became more evident. For some time, the reek of the strange fungi had been growing in their nostrils, and now Hiero switched over to breathing through his mouth alone, so foul and purulent had the odors become. No warning of any attacker could penetrate that frightful stench, so why not cut it off at the source? Noses were no good here.

The great flies were still common, indeed seemed to be increasing in number, but nothing else moved. At last, unable to go further, they paused behind the last living tree near them and stared out over the awful panorama spread before them.

Directly in front, a vast puffball, its pocked, white circumference many yards in diameter, reared up in bloated isolation. To the left, a forest of monster toadstools, stems brown and broad, mottled umbels a sickly orange, stretched out of sight, broken only by the pulp-covered columns of the dead trees rising in their midst. On the right, the dead trees thinned, for here a finger of the outer desert had long ago crept closer to the woods. But now an uneven mound of various smaller fungi, of all shapes and ochreous and bilious colors, extended into the middle distance. There was no normal growth in view, not even grass, nor any bare ground not covered by some slime or smear or leprous muck.

No sound, save for the muted buzzing of the flies, broke the silence. Under the great heat of the afternoon sun, they saw faint steams and moist clouds rise at intervals from the surface of the noxious growths.

Slowly, ever so slowly, they edged closer to the border of crawling horror that was the blight. Still nothing stirred out in the nightmare world into which they looked and also sent their roving brain impulses.

Then—having lured its prey as close as it could by sheer inaction—the House struck! And it was the man who took the brunt of the blow.

Never in all his varied experience had Hiero felt anything quite like it. An actual chill seemed to settle through his body, paralyzing his will and numbing his nerve endings. Though his personally devised mind guard had been kept at full strength, the attack passed through his screens as if they were nonexistent. Yet not quite. The very last one, the one which guarded the control of his own mind, was untouched. But though he could see and hear, no muscle of his body could so much as twitch. Through eyes which happened to be looking half that way when the sweeping assault came, Hiero could see Gorm frozen, one forefoot raised. He knew that the bear was equally helpless, and in so knowing, he despaired.

For with the attack of the House there came knowledge of the attacker. And that knowledge chilled not the body, for that indeed was already numb, but the very soul, the inner being. Steeped in evil and all vileness and cruelty were the adept wizards of the Unclean. But they were nevertheless of human,

ancestry, and thus, malign though they were, they yet preserved a tincture of humanity.

But the House was other. Somehow, after The Death, but in the ancient past, a strange and awful mating had taken place, triune perhaps, between a mycelial spore, an amoeboid slime, and, somewhere, somehow, an intelligence. Or perhaps the intelligence grew from the slime and gained the spore, then took a different direction from all other life. Whatever had happened, the result was abnormal, beyond normality in fact. In some ways like the Dweller in the Mist, that seeming embodiment of total evil, yet even further from the upward path to reason and logic was the House.

Fiercely, Hiero strained to free his limbs. At the same time, he tried to link his mind with Brother Aldo and Luchare, back in the forest. Neither effort was successful. He could not move and he seemed enclosed in a curious, icy mental shell, so that any outside contact was severed and cut off. His link with Gorm had vanished as soon as the attack began. His brain was still clear and unhampered except by the screen, yet he could neither move his body nor communicate with others.

Through the screen about him, now another attack, if that was what it was, began. The House was revealing itself. As the image of Vilah-ree had first appeared in his mind, despite any real method of communication, so now the misty outline of the thing itself began to build on the beslimed earth fifty yards in front of him. He knew it was not real, but only what he was being willed to see; that the physical body or structure, he did not know what, actually, of the House was nowhere near, but well hidden, somewhere out in the depths of the foul world it had built for itself. But stay—was that world so foul? Even as the wavering shape of the House began to condense and apparently solidify before his eyes, so too a new thought crept into his mind. *The House was alien, different, yes. But was that enough to make it evil? Had it too not a right to live?* The siren message infiltrated his own thoughts very, very subtly. His inner screen was not so much pierced, for the House seemed incapable of doing that, as persuaded, soothed, and his mind was thus ensnared. Yet not quite.

For as the glamour of the strange spell grew upon him, his inner being realized two things. First, the House was utterly alien, something which should not *he*; and second, the House was not one entity at all, but many minds of things all swarming like so many maggots in and through the gelid and gelatinous structure. The creatures, whatever they were, were both *in* and *part* of the ghastly thing which now reared itself to a height of many feet in front of him, to the eye as much real as his own hand.

And he was being invited to share, to join! He too could take part in the work to come, the great work of cleansing the surface of the earth, so that only the living House remained, surrounded by the monstrous, mutated fungi which were its weapons and its seed.

The House's brownish, oily structure seemed to shake as he watched, horrified yet fascinated. Strange faces began to appear on its shifting surface, to leer invitingly at him, and to vanish again into the mass, only to be replaced by others, equally foul and evanescent. All invited him. *Come*, they seemed to say; *leave your mortal shell and become one with us and live forever.*

Then, in his despair, for though he was not tempted, he was utterly helpless, there came a new factor. It was the bear!

His thought came obliquely somehow through the mental sphere of thought with which the monster had surrounded the priest. The strong mind was like a draught of cold air. *I am here. It does not understand me at all, I think, and it uses a sending or a force which might indeed hold me if I were only what I seem, a creature of instinct and emotion, as once my people were. It is afraid of you, that I can feel, but not of me.* The bear's thought was full of mingled anger and also craft. Yet Gorm was giving away no points, nor counseling hasty action, Hiero realized, only waiting to see what he himself wanted.

They— or rather, it— grows impatient, came a fresh message. There are many very strange minds there, all mixed, but making one, like in an anthill or bees' nest. It will not wait much longer, he added. It is tired of your refusing whatever it is it wishes. Now — it summons something from outside. The cool bear mind was calm, detached, as if what were happening had no relation to himself.

The Metz had drawn on his own inner resources at the same time, deducing, analyzing, forming conclusions. Simply knowing that he was not cut off had given him immense strength of purpose. There had even been time for a battle prayer of split-second length, but in due and proper form—God preserve his warrior through all trial. Amen.

Can you reach outside? Get Aldo and above all tell him to bring the weapon we have ready. I'm going to keep struggling and focus the attention of this thing on myself. Hurry!

He felt Goon's mind withdraw and then he renewed his own struggle to escape, trying every level, every method he had taught himself or ever been taught, to pierce the web around him and free both his brain and his limbs.

The House now withdrew its sucking blandishments and its horrid appeals for alliance. It still sat before him, or rather, it kept its repulsive, mirage-simulacrum there, but it settled down to watchful waiting. Even as he renewed his apparently fruitless assault, he decided Gorm was right: the House was afraid of him, or at least wary. He must be something very different from anything it—or they—had ever encountered before. He wondered if the bear were having any success in reaching the Elevener. In a few moments they would know.

Now, through the ground itself, he felt a motion, hardly even a vibration, merely a faint stir, an almost imperceptible tremor. Something was on the move, and he knew, or guessed, what that something was. The slime-mold-things, or one of them, were coming to feed. His eyes locked on the House, not able to move at all, he saw and suddenly understood the cloud of bloated flies hovering in front of his face and realized then that they were the eyes of the House and had reported his coming. This, then, was how the thing penetrated the forest fringe and guarded its borders.

Suddenly the House vanished from his sight. In its place there appeared the quaking, soft bulk of the slime-thing it had summoned. He did not believe that its appearance directly before him and the envanishment of its ruler were accidents. Unable to move at all, by a refinement of cruelty he was to be made to see his destroyer coming and know what it was that devoured him alive.

Coldly, never relaxing his struggle to be free, yet to the outward eye simply standing still and peering forward, he watched the eyeless bulk glide toward him. The creature was far larger than he had realized when seen at a distance. The soft, plush mound towered far above his head, and the long rods which sprang from it, each tipped with that poisonous orange glow, were at least four times the length of his own body. It paused and then came on again, though more slowly. All the long rods were aquiver, their lengths rigid and yet soft, as soft as the purple pile surface of the unearthly shape. Now it was just in front of him, blotting out the view of all beyond. He breathed a prayer and also continued the struggle without a second's hesitation, wrenching his mind about its strange, invisible prison as an eel hurls itself against its woven willow trap, without success perhaps, yet never giving up.

Unflinching thus, he faced his doom and so he saw the horror struck down, even as it reared over him.

The blazing crossbow bolt had barely sunk to the feathers, deep into the pulpy flesh, when another followed, burying itself not a foot away from the first. Slimmer, longer arrows came in a sheet after that,

each one with flaming tow tied tightly to the shaft. One of the most ancient devices of man, the fire arrow, was being used against a hell creature spawned out of science-wrought cataclysm and devastation.

Over his head, the rain of burning arrows continued, and he realized that Luchare and Brother Aldo must have brought the tree women to their aid, conquering somehow their fear of the blight.

The slime mold reared up and shook in its agony, and for an instant Hiero thought it would fall upon and slay him in its death throes. Fire ran in coruscating runnels down its rounded, shifting sides and leaped into blazing light on the phosphorescent pseudo-pod ends, the clean light of honest fire burning out the poisonous phosphorescence by which the thing slew its prey.

At this moment, the mind control vanished. The House, unnerved by this sudden and unexpected onslaught, released its prisoners. No less alert than Hiero, Gorm instantly turned on his own stout length and scuttled for his life, the warrior-priest racing hard on his furry heels. In a few seconds they had reached and passed the clean wood's edge. In an instant more, Hiero again was squeezing the life out of his dark love, while to her right and left, Aldo and Vilah-ree directed the dryad archers as they still launched their blazing shafts out into the territory claimed by the House, Gorm promptly sat down and began to lick himself.

Satisfied that Luchare was unharmed (and that so was he), Hiero turned to look back, still keeping one arm firmly about the D'alwah girl's shoulders. It was a wonderful and awful sight.

The ravening molds and fungi of the blight all shared one terrible weakness. How the House had guarded its territory from chance lightning, Hiero could not imagine, but it must have had some method, for now the whole border of the foul infection was ablaze. Fire wrapped the scorched body of the giant, predatory slime mold, now writhing feebly in its death agony. But yellow flames raced over the ground, smeared and barren as well and bloomed on the mushroom forest, causing the great, stalked umbrellas to explode as the heat scorched them. The colossal puffball in the middle foreground exploded as the fire struck it, and each tiny spore became an instant coal, a second later a cinder mote. The great, murdered trees became living candles of flame as they too burned, from the caught fire of the shrouding growths which had slain them. Black, greasy smoke, foul and reeking with all the unpleasant scents of the burning fungi, wreathed the scene and began to drift into the forest beyond, where it met and drowned the perfumes of the wood.

Hiero looked at Vilah-ree anxiously. *Is your wood dry? Will the fire spread?*

Better to burn than be killed by that, was her answer. *But the forest is moist. Only two nights ago it rained. And we know how to keep water moving through the ground, my people and I.* She did not elaborate and turned away to watch the holocaust of the blight. He could sense the exaltation in her almost inhuman mind and spirit as the enemy of her beloved trees and her strange people suffered the flames.

As dusk grew, though occasionally choking and coughing, they still watched the destruction of the foul growth from their vantage point at the forest's edge. When night came, the smoke and filthy vapors hid most of the stars; but at length, when the moon rose, there came a breeze out of the north, which drove much of the shroud away before it out into the waste. To their surprise, no fire was now visible in the distance.

"Do you think it raced through the whole area that quickly?" Hiero was frankly puzzled. Aldo looked thoughtful.

"No, I think not, not from what you have told me. And there is the question of the lightning, which we discussed also. I'd judge this House creature had found a way of quenching the fires and has withdrawn, hurt perhaps, but not dead. We won't know until morning how far the fires actually went. So let's wait, or rather, rest while we can."

Soon all three humans were wrapped in cloaks and bedded down on the soft moss under a clump of fern. The bear was already-snoring a few yards away. As he drifted off into slumber, Hiero's last thought was of Vilah-ree, watching the stars as the smoke cleared. Once, through half-shut lids, he saw her watching him as well, her lovely face seemingly chiseled from alabaster under the moon's rays. Then he fell asleep.

His dreams were vague and formless for a long time; then— slowly they began to take a shape, to tell a story, half still a dream, half lovely reality, but all enchantment. He was awake in the dream, walking through the darkling woods under the pale stars, all alone. Nothing menaced him and he carried no weapons. Indeed, he wore no clothes and seemed to need none. Great fireflies lit his way, and patches of pale, luminous blossoms seemed to mark a path for him under the shadow of the vast trees. On and on through the titan forest he seemed to drift. He was going somewhere, but where he knew not, save only that journey's ending meant delight. Enticing scents both followed and led him on the breeze.

At length, in a moss-hung bower under the arching branches, he caught a glimpse of an ivory form. He sped toward it, calling out, only to have it flee. But from a few yards away rang out a rippling chorus of golden notes, questing, calling, mocking.

"Vilah-ree," he called, or seemed to, "Vilah-ree! Don't be afraid! Don't leave me." Again the golden-throated notes, the song or speech of some magicked paradise bird, rang out. Driven now by burning desire, Hiero followed down the aisles of the moonlit forest, his feet seeming to have wings, seeking nothing but the maker of the song, oblivious to all else.

Now he glimpsed her poised tiptoe on a low branch, next a marble arm beckoned from a fern thicket, but always when he pursued, she would be gone.

Yet he seemed in the dream to grow in strength, not weaken; and at length, in a tiny, open glade, where short-stemmed flowers made a soft carpet of the floor, the dancing white form seemed to falter and even stumbled as she fled from him. The next instant he had caught and held her. In the strange, green eyes now raised to his, he saw such a storm of passion that almost, for it was but a dream, he woke in fear. Then his own fires flared again and he covered her soft lips with his own, crushing the cold, slim body to him, forgetting everything except the miracle of desire.

And so the dream went and so the dream ended, for Hiero lost the thread, and all the lovely images and feelings went swirling and dissolving, down into oblivion.

It was mid-morning when he awoke. To his surprise, his first sight on opening his eyes was Captain Gimp, standing and bellowing at some of his men to "look alive there, you binnacle-butted slop-eaters."

Peering around, the priest saw that only a few of the tree women were in sight, standing together against the far side of the clearing. There was no sign of Vilah-ree, and he sighed, remembering his dream. But all of the seamen were mustering before him, looking well and hearty, as Blutho and Gimp shouted and bullydamned them into place. And Klootz was snorting nearby, tethered to a stump. *Hello, you big clown*, his master sent, eyeing the great, polished antlers and sleek hide appreciatively, *have a good rest?* A wave of affection came from the bull's mind in answer, affection and a wordless question which was still very clear to Hiero. When do we leave, when do we go, when do we fight, move, get on with

the struggle? All these sentiments welled from the mind of the morse and he snorted loudly, pawing the soft earth into great clods.

"I see our big friend wants to leave. Have you had enough sleep, or at least some sweet dreams?" Brother Aldo stood smiling down at him, having quietly come out from the forest behind.

"Where's Luchare, and the bear too?" Hiero got up and stretched, still feeling curiously though not unpleasantly tired despite his long sleep.

"I believe she and Gorm were invited and went for a little visit to Vilah-ree. They should be back soon. As you can see, the seamen and Klootz are in fine fettle. The men think they got drunk and have just waked up, and I have not disillusioned them. I did, however, mention that the tree women were not to be touched, being under a protective spell which would kill anyone who did so. It seems to have proved effective. Curiously, the men appear satiated and uninterested in women. Odd for sailors, wouldn't you say?" Hiero looked suspiciously at the old man, but Aldo met his eyes frankly, his high cheekbones gleaming darkly over the spotless white beard.

"What shall we do now?" Aldo went on, changing the subject. "Would you like to see the waste where the fire killed the fungus plague? I have some ideas about the next move, but I'd like yours as well. Why not have a bit to eat first, though?"

The men greeted Hiero boisterously and obscenely as he picked up some cold rations and beckoned Gimp to follow him. They all felt they were living in some strange and incomprehensible world to which he was the only sure guide, and they felt fine as long as they could see him and his companions, meaning the girl, the Sage, the bear, and the bull morse, all well and ready for anything.

"What's going on here, Master Hiero?" Gimp asked as they picked their way to a burned-over mound where a forest giant had fallen in flames the previous night. From this eminence, whence tiny curls of acrid smoke still rose into the sunlight, they looked out over the late battlefield.

Far away, rolling and undulating, the land stretched, blackened now and scorched by the cleansing flames. But in the remote distance, yet well before the crags and lofty sand dunes of the desert proper, the fire had come to a halt. Even with unaided eyes, they could see that the strident ochers, repellent mauves, and sickly orange hues of the House's crop were still in existence. From a quick glance around, Hiero figured that the House somehow had saved about a third of its realm. He pulled out his far-looker and adjusted the lenses, The edge of the fired area was five miles off at least.

The House indeed had possessed a trick in reserve, he soon saw, and as he saw, described it to the others. Gimp had been brought up to date earlier by old Aldo, so that he needed only a limited amount of explanation.

As the fire had raged down upon its lair, the House had somehow forced its brood of fungi (perhaps a special breed) to exude a gummed foam of sticky bile, which hardened on contact with the air. Whatever the stuff was, it must have been completely fireproof. Now a ragged, brownish wall of it, something like congealed glue, glazed over and pitted with holes and bubbles, formed a rampart between the toadstool forest beyond and the burned lands. Here and there in the latter, smoke curled, mostly from vast, still-smoldering logs, but the main fire showed no sign of reviving. Barren though the aspect now was, Hiero felt it to be far more cheerful than the realm of the House when that was flourishing. His mind could detect no sensation of the monster, but he knew from experience that meant nothing.

Now he could see, looking to right and left, that small parties of the tree women, armed with blazing

torches, were setting" fire to any small bits of the blight which the fire of yesterday had missed, chiefly on the edge of the true forest itself. No seed of that filth was to survive if they could help it!

The day was becoming overcast, with a hint of rain to come in storm clouds building towers far to the south. As they left the mound, they speculated on the chance of carrying fire further into the territory of the House and what that vileness might do in retaliation if further provoked.

"I don't think it's at the end of its resources, frankly," Hiero said.

"Indeed not, if what you tell of its strength is true, and also what I could feel of the mental barrier it was able to erect between us. How I hate to leave a wicked, unnatural thing like that alive. In a few years, perhaps even less, it will attack again, and we will not be here to save these women and their tree world the next time."

"Have you asked where the tree women's men are?" Hiero said, his mind off on a tangent.

"No, and if I had, I'm sure the answers would have satisfied no one. These strange, lovely creatures have a secret. Perhaps their males are very ugly, perhaps timid, or perhaps the women dominate them so, they are never allowed out in public. Why not simply accept it and not waste time on profitless speculation? They seem to be our friends at any rate."

"Yes." Hiero sighed. "But I had a strange dream, strange but beautiful. It was—" He ceased suddenly, for Gimp was looking at him oddly and had stopped walking.

"Did your dream have one of them white-skinned gals in it, now, Master Hiero? just you and her maybe? A *real* nice dream?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." Hiero was too old to blush, but he felt embarrassed. "How did you guess that, Gimp?"

"Because me and Blutho and all of the boys, mark you, even old Skelk, who's a bleeding grandfather, we all had the same dream. Each one of us had just one gal, see, and all to ourselves. Nicest dream we ever had, we all agrees. And do you know, none of them naked wenches will even talk to us this morning! How's that for a peculiar situation, eh?" His snub-nosed face looked both pleased and regretful.

As they walked on, Hiero was very thoughtful indeed.

At length, when they were back in the cathedral shade of the great trees, Brother Aldo asked to see the Unclean map again, and the three of them bent over it.

"The scale is not quite the same as the Abbey map," the priest said, producing that one also. "But it seems to me that the area I must search is quite close to us." He indicated the symbol marking the site of the ancients, "It must be here, I think, in the angle somewhere between the true desert, the southern corner of the blight caused by the House, and the very end of the forest. I'd put it, at a rough guess, between twenty-five and thirty-five miles away. You're used to charts; what do you think, Gimp?"

The squat little sailor stared hard at both maps before answering, "That's close to my reckoning also."

"And mine." Brother Aldo folded the maps and returned them to Hiero. "Now comes a time for hard decisions, my boy. Have we fulfilled your agreement with Vilah-ree? The House is wounded and driven off but hardly destroyed. And yet—I feel time presses. There were great waves of mental force used

yesterday, both by us, mainly yourself, of course, and also by that foul thing out there. In Neeyana and perhaps nearer, too, there are both instruments and evil minds which would take great interest in such phenomena. You have been ruthlessly pursued by the Unclean overlords since you slew that adept far up in the North. Do you think they have given up entirely?"

"Not S'duna, at any rate! He swore he'd kill me or die himself, and I believe him. You can't lie at that close range and deceive anyone as trained as I am. No, they haven't given up. And S'duna was apparently a person of great power in their councils."

"So I think as well. The main eastern trail to the Lantik Sea lies to our south, perhaps no more than four days' good march. If I were the enemy, I would be hurrying eastward along that trail even now, and when I had gone as close as possible to the area, that is, our area, whence came the mental disturbance I had detected, I'd head north. Let us say, to be on the safe side, that a week from yesterday divides us from our foes. Maybe more or maybe less, but a week seems safe."

Yet while the old Elevenner spoke, his words were being refuted. All that he had said was quite correct, but he, and Hiero too, had gravely underestimated both S'duna's cunning and his malice. An armed and armored host had been collected in the country east of Neeyana, and that host had been on the march for four days, even as the three took counsel! But of this development they were ignorant.

As they debated, the clouds overhead grew darker, and a moist wind from the south seemed to promise that rain would come soon.

Sooner than the rain, though, came Luchare. They heard her singing to herself, some song of D'alwah, apparently, for Hiero could not understand it. She emerged from a path under the trees and came up to them, her face soft and dreaming. Around her upper arm she wore a lovely, twisted torque of gold, with gems, mostly green, carved as leaves, set in its surface, so that the effect was that of a vine.

"Like my present?" she smiled at Hiero and linked her arms around his sinewy neck. "Vilah-ree's farewell gift to me. Gorm's still talking to her. She thinks he's the most interesting of all of us and wants him to come and live here."

"Exactly why should Vilah-ree give you a present?" he mused, fingering the heavy armlet, which possessed some of the strange beauty of the giver. "She didn't give *me* anything, did she?"

"Oh—I loaned her something she wanted. And maybe she did give you something." Her face was now pressed into his buckskin shirt and he could not read her eyes. He felt his suspicions growing as the bits and pieces of evidence in his mind fell suddenly into a pattern he had been trying not to see. He straightened up and held the lovely, dark face firmly between his two hands, so that she was forced to look at him. The other two tactfully had moved away out of earshot.

"Where are Vilah-ree's menfolk, my little vixen princess?" His voice was half-angry, half-amused, as he studied the black, defiant eyes. There was a silence, and then she made up her mind.

"There aren't any. Her people live a long time, though, when they stay in and near their trees. And they *need* men, poor things, to have children. But the children they do have are always more girls. They hope that someday, somehow, a boy will be born. They don't even seem to know how they first appeared here or who or what they are. But they know that human travelers pass south and east of here. And sometimes when a lone traveler or just a few camp for the night, they—well . . ."

"Have a very nice dream?" Hiero asked. But he was smiling at her and, encouraged, Luchare somewhat

timidly smiled back. "So you made a deal, and I got put out to stud. For a bracelet. Well, it's a nice one, I'll say that."

She wrenched herself loose, her breast heaving violently. "Oh— you—man! I suppose you think I *liked* the idea of your making love to her! And I never heard of the bracelet until this morning!" She tore the lovely thing off and threw it at him as hard as she could. He was barely able to get his arms up and catch it to prevent a broken nose. Then he ran to her, for she was weeping bitterly, hands pressed to her eyes, the tumbled, corkscrew curls hanging around her face like some odd but beautiful foliage.

Come on, love, he thought. *I was only fooling. You felt sorry for her, didn't you?*

She gulped and buried her face in his chest again, choking back the sobs before she could even use her mind.

Yes, of course I did. Any real woman who was honest would. She's never had a man and she fell in love with you. When she said to me (it was hard to understand her at first, too) that I'd have you always, but could she have just one night, well, I forgot any jealousy. But it was still the hardest thing I've ever done, and don't you forget it!

"Oh, Hiero," she said aloud, her voice sad, "do you know what her last thought this morning was?" *Maybe mine will be the first male. Do not forget me, you who have him for always.* "I almost cried right then."

He patted her back and made encouraging masculine noises. "Don't cry, love," he said. "I'm not mad. Besides, I *did* have a delightful dream."

She looked up, saw that he was grinning at her, and finally managed a smile. "Look, I don't want to hear any more about it, all right?"

At this point the seamen appeared in marching gear and order, coming out into the open near them, jabbering, and craning their necks as they saw the burned-over waste for the first time. Blutho and Gimp halted them and came over to join the two. Brother Aldo returned as well, leading Klootz, and Gorm emerged from the shadows of a giant tree's base. AM were now ready, and Hiero took up his place in the lead again. But though the bear still went with him, the priest now rode upon the bull morse. Klootz's eyes gleamed with pleasure and he bugled, a hoarse, bellowing cry which echoed under the cloudy heavens and through the humid air until the echoes died away into silence beneath the arches of the mighty wood.

Hiero looked back, hoping for a glimpse of the wood sprite whose dream he had shared, but he saw nothing. Once from the now silent forest, a golden burst of song rang out, but whether it was Vilah-ree or not, he never knew.

They will follow us along the edge of their realm, came Aldo's thought from the rear of the column. *They wish to know if the House is alive and think you can tell them. So the queen told Luchare.*

It's alive, he sent back. *But I hope we can avoid it, I made no impression before. Are we carrying coals?*

Yes, in a clay pot. We can kindle fire in seconds and we have many arrows ready, on my order to Gimp.

Let's hope they won't be needed.

They marched south at a steady pace along the wood edge, which towered like a rampart of green, with brown bark only rarely glimpsed. Occasionally, small bursts of flame off to their right showed them where the tree women still set fire to patches of unfired blight, working their way south on a general level with the column. Eventually even this ceased, however. They stayed a quarter of a mile out in the waste; and tramping over the bare burn, which was only gently rolling, the men made very good time.

They halted for a brief meal and then went on. Toward evening, the long-gathered clouds released a torrential bath upon their heads, and visibility became so poor and the newly bared earth such a glutinous mud that it was obviously silly to carry on. They made camp under the trees and had trouble even there in getting a fire to light. Eventually one was got going, under a lean-to, and they managed a savory stew for supper. The rain was warm, though, and all there were seasoned travelers, to whom a little extra water meant nothing.

It rained most of the night. When dawn came, they knew they were reaching the end of the forest at last. The trees themselves were changing. Palms and acacia-like shrubs began to appear in quantity. The real broad-leafed giants dwindled and soon no longer occurred at all. The heat steadily increased. To the south, wide, grassy plains became dimly visible, rolling through thinning copses of trees to the distant horizon. On their left, the outlying fingers of the eastern desert drew nearer, and with the desert came the all-too-familiar livid colors of the fungus belt. Down there in the south of the forest, the fire had hardly touched anything, for the House had not come so close to the trees, indeed was a number of miles away. Perhaps the absence of the great trees made the area less attractive to it.

However, there was plenty of wild game. Beasts resembling deer and creatures like large-horned antelope grazed in herds here and there, only moving slowly out of the men's way. Most were unfamiliar to Hiero. Once they came upon a short-tailed, striped brute, half as big as Klootz, which was feeding on the carcass of something fully three times the morse's size. They wisely skirted this scene, and the huge carnivore, which looked like a cross between a bear and a ten-times-magnified lynx, was content, or possibly replete, only growling in tones of thunder. That night they built both large fires and a high stockade, making camp early in order to construct the latter. The bellowings and roarings all about them made this move seem a wise one. This was evidently not a country which either knew or feared men.

The next morning dawned clear and hot, the humid air perfumed like a breath of summer. Flowering grasses scented each step. On this day they turned and marched east, and all the leaders were in front. The time had come, by all their reckonings, to search for the Lost City. Maps were no longer of use.

As they advanced out into the semi-scrub, semi-desert area, the colors of the House drew inexorably nearer. Soon they could distinguish individual growths, gnarled objects like giant, oil-brown shelf fungi mostly, and squat puffball things of dirty purplish red and yellow, whose pocked surface exuded some shiny substance equally repellent. The things were unlike the northern growths, but the hardened muck did not exist here, evidently not having been needed. They had lost all traces of the great fire, in fact, for it had never come this far to the south.

Hiero called a halt. "I'm not putting our necks into that damned, horrid thing's trap without a very careful search," he said. He indicated the first huge magenta puffballs. "Those things aren't half a mile away. That's quite close enough, judging from my own experience."

Aldo looked thoughtful. "We should, by all that's holy, be almost on the very site you're looking for, Hiero. In fact, we may be right on top of it. I can't see anything to indicate this wasn't always a plain, but that's true of many buried cities." He patted the priest's shoulder. "I hope you've also thought that it may

be hopelessly buried, son. We'll do our best, but who knows when those symbols were copied onto the maps, and maybe recopied a hundred times over?"

Luchare refused to be discouraged. A curious ally, as unexpected as he often was, was the bear.

"We *can't* have come this far, under such leadership, to find nothing!" the girl cried. Her faith rebuked Hiero's own, and he said so out loud.

"We'll need a careful search, but let's look in an expanding arc. Gimp, you and Blutho tell the men we're hunting a city under the ground. Any scrap of human occupation, any sign, anything at all, should be marked down at once."

Gorm's slow thought was as stubborn and cool as ever. *There have been many humans here once. I feel it in my bones. Somewhere, not far away, the human city is hidden.*

Hiero had been afraid the men might panic over the thought of a pre-Death city being uncovered due to the possibility of disease or radiation, but Gimp reassured him.

"They've seen you and Brother Aldo do such wonders, Master, I don't doubt they'd jump into a fire if so be it was you said to." Hiero had been touched, more than he believed possible, by this affirmation of the seamen's trust and liking.

Everybody spread out now, except in the direction of the blight. No one was anxious to get too close to that barrier of evil-looking growth, and the seamen gave it a wide berth.

After some hours, the group had become so widely scattered that Hiero grew nervous about them. Some of the men were little more than dots on the southern horizon. There were few animals in apparent evidence out in this dry scrub area, but who knew what lurked beyond the next bush? He had Gimp sound the ship's bugle in the recall, and felt better when the men straggled back again with no losses in about a half hour. He ordered a rest and meal while he took counsel again with the Elevenner, his girl, Gorm, and Captain Gimp. The sky was clear, but new thunder-heads piling up in the south gave warning of more rain to come.

"There's only one conclusion that I can draw," Hiero said reluctantly. "If the maps are correct and the city is *not* a mile beneath us and is even *remotely* accessible—well, we're too far to the west."

"I fear you're right. I am reaching the same unwelcome conclusion out of necessity." Brother Aldo stared at the wall of repulsive fungi rearing itself over the low shrubs and bushes to the east. "We shall have to search more closely that way. And we shall have to be very careful, eh?"

"You're not going without me!" Luchare seized Hiero's arm. "Once was enough."

"You'll do what you're told or be spanked." Hiero's tone was absent, his gaze bent on the distant but menacing barrier. "We will do exactly what we did before, Aldo. You and Luchare will serve as anchors, so to speak, again. Gorm ought to be better at reaching you this time, having had more practice. He and I will penetrate in that direction. Keep the men ready with the fire arrows." He had been keeping the bear in touch by mind as he spoke.

This is the best way, Gorm said. *We have no choice,* he added.

Hiero kissed Luchare gently, repeated a brief orison for both of them, and started walking toward the

masses of ugly color which walled off the east. Gorm walked about twenty feet to his right, seemingly unconcerned and sniffing busily. Behind them, the girl held tight on one side to the old man's arm and on the other to Klootz's bridle, and in back of the two, the sailors gathered under their leaders in a dense knot. Smoke curled from firepots they had kept kindled, and bowmen were ready in front.

As always when going into danger, Hiero felt the old thrill and the interest of what he was doing rise and suppress any natural fear. Carefully, ignoring the blight as if it did not exist, he searched the ground for any trace of humanity's ancient presence. As he did, he maintained a constant mental link with his four-footed partner. Half an hour passed, and always they drew steadily nearer the mold lands of the House.

Wait/The command thrilled Hiero. He saw that Gorm had gone tense and now stood, weak little eyes peering about, emitting great "snoofs" and "woofs" through his twitching nose, as he sought for some elusive scent. *There is metal somewhere*, came his thought again. *It is very faint, though; don't move, and I will try to locate it.*

Slowly the bear ambled forward. This part of the scrub and sand area had a few low mounds thrusting up through the flattish surface, and eventually Gorm halted before one of these, a rounded tumulus which rose some five feet above the surrounding plain. Thorn bushes grew from its summit, and tussocks of brown grass sprouted here and there. Gorm sniffed the base of the mound carefully and then began to walk around it. Hiero followed at a little distance, keeping the bear in sight, but not interfering with him in any way.

The eastern side of the mound, that which faced the fungus realm, was steeper and less rounded than that on the west. The blight growth itself was now only a few hundred yards away, and Hiero tried to repress a shudder as he thought of it. With an effort, he wrenched his mind back to the task at hand.

The bear rooted at a small pile of rock lying at the base of the mound. Still saying nothing, he moved a little farther on and loped down into a place where a long, low depression, still moist from the previous rains of two days back, lay before the now abrupt face of the hillock. Gorm rose on his hind legs and began to paw at the upright slope before him, using his long claws with a curious delicacy. A cascade of sand and small pebbles rattled down into the depression, and darker earth was revealed where it had been. Nothing daunted, the bear continued to pick away, as carefully as a woman doing fine embroidery.

Here, came his thought, as calm and unexcited as ever, *here is metal, very, very old human work. I can do no more, and you will have to see what it tells you.* He stopped his clawing and dropped down to all fours. Over his head, the priest now saw that a patch the size of a human face had been cleared of all earth. The smooth, blackened surface of some ancient, metal thing showed through, perhaps a wall, perhaps—even though he hardly dared to think this—a door!

The man looked thoughtfully at what Gorm had revealed. The bear sat watching, his task over, waiting for the next step. Hiero marveled at the fantastic power of scent his ally had displayed. Detecting the ancient, almost odorless metal under a good foot of earth, and at such a distance, was well-nigh incredible.

Humans simply have no noses, was the bear's answer when he was thanked. *I need your eyes often enough. We make a good team.* But Hiero knew he was pleased all the same.

Next he summoned the others with his mind. Now that he was actually at the site of a vanished civilization, he felt awed and in need of some help. If he and the bear should manage to find a way down into the buried world beneath, they might be utterly cut off. It was time to take a few more risks, despite

the House and the nearness of its creatures and creations.

While he waited for the others to arrive, he picked at the earth with the long dagger, his excitement rising. Slowly, a long, upright surface of dark, corroded metal, white underneath when scratched, began to appear, patinated by millennia of time and by secretions in the covering earth. Even as Brother Aldo and Lu-chare cantered Kloodz around the corner of the tumulus, he finished his work. A door stood revealed, unmarked in any way, but with the smooth stump of what must once have been a handle on the right side.

"Well, we have a success. But we are very close to the House, or at least to its minions, aren't we?" Aldo stroked the surface of the door. "Who knows what lies under this ancient thing? But—we are here and we had better make some quick decisions. Gimp and the men are coming on foot and will be here shortly. What are your ideas, Hiero?"

Eventually it was decided to leave the quiescent monster alone, but to maintain a constant watch and guard upon it. But the question of how to do this was more difficult. All four, Luchare, Aldo, Hiero, and the bear, were absolutely determined to go below if entrance could be gained. Who, then, would transmit orders to the men at the surface? Suppose trouble were encountered far below, how would any help be summoned?

A compromise was made possible by a suggestion of Luchare's. Her suggestion was simple: why not try and see if any of them, but most especially the bear, could communicate at all with Captain Gimp by using mind speech? This radical but obvious solution had been overlooked.

At once they began to practice, after Gimp had been carefully coached in what was to happen. The tough little skipper was very nervous, but he was no coward. When he was assured by the three humans he had learned to trust that he would suffer no harm, he relaxed and made his mind as receptive as possible.

He flinched visibly when Hiero's thought of a simple "good day" reached his consciousness. Finding it did no harm, he soon rallied and, screwing up his face, tried his hardest to send messages of his own. This proved impossible, though the faces he made had Lu-chare in stitches. But in a very short time, really, he could "receive" from all four of them. They tested his reception of the bear's thoughts over and over, at Hiero's special insistence.

"If we encounter, God forbid, the House or anything else down there, then Gorm may be the only one to get through. I would have been dead—and he also—if he hadn't reached you the last time. His mental channel is so different from a human's, it never seems to occur to an enemy it's there at all."

All was in readiness at length, and they began to work on the door. It was a sort of white bronze, to all appearances. Iron or steel would not have lasted so long, they knew, but this metal was new to them. Not even the Metz priest had examined the particular Abbey archives which spoke of aluminum alloys.

Despite their carefully cleaning all the remaining dirt away from the metal frame, the door refused to budge. "Small wonder!" Luchare said. "If I'd stayed shut that long, neither would I."

Two spearheads were broken in attempts to lever the stubborn portal open. Its faceless slab continued to defy them. It was the little mariner who solved the puzzle, using his common sense. Gimp had been peering aile along the crack between the door and its jamb, his eye glued to the crevice as he followed it.

"See here," he said suddenly. "That there's a catch of some sort, that is. But it's not on the side near that

little knob, but down here on the bottom!"

A quick glance showed them that the sailor was right. A heavy shadow showed where a bolt had been rammed into the hole in the metal jamb. And better yet, the jamb seemed slightly warped there. Another hastily requisitioned spear was jammed into the slot. The tough ash stem bent and creaked, but slowly, groaning and protesting, the door began to rise in the air! No one spoke as Hiero and Gimp got their hands under it and continued to force it up. As it rose, previously invisible lines formed across it, and it began to buckle. It was a folding door, of a kind none of them had ever seen before; and as it rose, it bent at regular intervals and then slid back into a recess just above its own top. Fortunately, no dirt had sifted into the narrow storage space above, a tribute to its ancient builders.

A last shove pushed the door up and as far in as it could be made to go. The two men stepped back, perspiring and breathing hard, for the effort required had been a strong one.

Before them all, as they stood in silence under the hot afternoon sun, a dark opening yawned. From it came a breath of cool air, not unpleasant, but vaguely stale, like that of a suddenly opened and long-unused attic or closet. More to their interest were the broad metal steps which could be seen gently curving down to whatever lay below. One seaman started a halfhearted cheer, but he was hushed by his fellows. Who knew what they had opened? They felt the moment was too solemn for any cheering.

"What about light?" Luchare said practically. No one had thought of it, of course, and they looked dismayed. But common sense triumphed. Two of the earthenware firepots were produced, which left three more in reserve. Luchare took one unlit, and Brother Aldo the lighted other. The extended wicks gave about as much light as a candle, which was deemed enough. At any rate, it was the best they could do.

Gorm went first, his small eyes gleaming with excitement for once. Then came the old man, clutching a light and his heavy staff. Hiero, sword ready, followed close. Last came Luchare with the reserve light and her spear ready, the one which Hiero had taken from S'nerg so long before and so many miles distant.

As they descended, the light from behind grew dim, until it vanished altogether. Soon they were relying entirely on the pottery lamp. Luchare carried a small skin of oil, hopefully to replenish these, but no one knew how long their quest would last.

The stair wound downward for an apparently interminable distance. Gorm's nose could detect no sign of life, and Hiero's periodic mind sweeps caught nothing either. They paused at intervals to make sure they could still reach Gimp and his men, and each time the contact with the sailor's mind proved easy. He was not alarmed, having been warned they would attempt this.

Eventually, after what seemed hours, the stair emerged from its tunnel onto a broad surface. The fleeting shadows showed that they were in a large, open space of some kind, and their very footfalls seemed to echo in the distance. Both Hiero and Gorm detected movement at the same time, high up and far away. A ghostly chittering and squeaking came ever so faintly to their ears.

"Bats!" Brother Aldo said. "This place communicates with the outside air somehow." The implications were disquieting. Where did the other entrance to this buried realm lie? And who or what had access to it?

Luchare had been examining something she had noticed while the others talked. Now she called them over to see it. On a sheer wall were set a large group of switches, each one numbered in some archaic

script.

"I'm frankly scared to touch these," the priest said. "What do you think?"

"So am I," the old man said after some debate. "But I think we must. Our oil may not last long, even if we husband it. There must be other sources of light down here, and we desperately need them. I feel we must take a chance. Our whole venture is a terrible risk. This is only another such,"

Hiero smothered his doubts and pressed the first switch. For a second, nothing happened. Then, to their gasps of wonder, around them grew a dim glow of light. It grew steadily brighter by degrees, until it finally stopped, well short of direct sunlight, but casting an effulgence perhaps equal to that of a very overcast day.

They were standing on a platform set high on one wall of an immense cavern.

12

An End and a Beginning

The view of the mighty cave of the ancients was one to make a first sight a quiet and reflective one. How far below the earth they were, they could not imagine, but it must be a very long way indeed. Yet this giant's delving was apparently artificial! The long, dimly glowing bars of pale light hanging far above from the invisible roof (reminding Hiero of the blue lights on Manoon) which now illuminated the whole great space showed that clearly, though there were obvious dark gaps where they had failed.

The walls, stretching out of sight almost, were geometric and regular, sharply cut in the shape of a pentagon from the bedrock of the planet. Above a certain height they were unfinished stone, but below that, to a distance of some thirty feet above the floor, they were smoothed and polished. The glint of metal showed where many of them were actually paneled. A wide circular space ran all around the structures in the center, separating them from the walls.

"Look at those things, will you!" Hiero's voice was low and reverent. The many great, shrouded shapes, standing about the floor, covered with the dust of countless centuries, were vast, almost beyond the comprehension of men of a later day. There was spiritual fear both in his voice and in his mind. These must be the actual devices of the legendary pre-Death era. Perhaps they themselves had helped loose The Death upon the cowering world above! Ingrained in every reasoning human, save for the Unclean, of course, was such a horror of The Death that gazing upon things such as this was very like a glimpse of Hell itself. Brother Aldo's face was rigidly controlled and might have been carved of jet, but the repulsion in his eyes was clear. Luchare had actually fallen to her knees. At only seventeen, even after all she had been through, an actual glimpse of the titan engines of the legendary and horrific past weakened her legs as perhaps nothing else could.

Hiero bent and helped her up, and as they moved together to the heavy metal rail of the platform for a better look, he kept an arm about her.

As they looked up, they also saw a spider's maze of slender catwalks and beams, strung from wires and metal cables, but so far off in the upper gloom that many of them looked suspended on nothingness. The hush of many centuries brooded over them. Above them, higher yet, glowed the lights, in turn hiding the ceiling from which they hung.

"You could put a regiment, ten regiments, of Metz Frontier Guards in here and lose them," was Hiero's awed comment, half to himself. His mind was staggered by the immensity of the place. And more than that. He knew what he was supposed to be looking for—the computers, if they still existed. But how to find them? Or anything else, in a place so huge and alien? True, he knew certain names, certain symbols in the dead languages, but would they be obvious, would they even be legible? His task, now that he had actually arrived at one of the ancient sites, suddenly seemed impossible.

Luchare had left him, and she and the white-bearded Elevenner were now examining something on the far side of their platform, where a metallic, boxlike structure thrust itself out on the floor. As he was about to join them, he felt Gorm's sudden thought.

The bats have all gone. Where did they go? There is something I don't like about this place, Hiero. Bad air is entering far off on the other side. I smell, very faintly again, the sort of deadness which yet moves.

Hiero used his far-looker while sweeping the area with his mind as well. There was no real sentience in the ether, but the small minds of a few of the bats were revealed, far away and getting further still. They had left by an invisible ceiling hole, some natural crevice perhaps, and were impossible to read for direction. The far-looker showed not one opening indeed, but several, black tunnel entrances, two, perhaps a half mile off, on the opposite, eastern side of the man-made grotto. As he looked, he saw yet another far off to the left, on the south side of the cavern. And around one of those on the west were things which did not appear artificially constructed. There seemed to be dark stains, perhaps pools of moisture, there, as well as he could see from that distance and in the poor light, the upright objects arranged in clumps. He had been in caves and seen stalagmites and stalactites before, but these appeared different somehow. Was there not a dim glow about them? However, he forgot them as Aldo spoke.

"Hiero, come here," the old man said. "I think we have a way to get down, if we can still trust the incredible mechanics of a long-dead age. I have seen drawings of things like this. This box-thing goes up or down on this track set against the wall. That is why the stairs, which I imagine were only an emergency exit, go no further. Come and look."

He explained to the three of them, using his mind, how an elevator worked. He and Luchare had been cleaning off the control switchboard of its accumulation of dust, and the three buttons were now easy to see. He next tested them by reaching around and in, while himself remaining on the platform. With a creak, the ancient thing began to move slowly down. He stopped it quickly.

"I thought so! I know the words. The bottom black button is 'down,' the top 'up.' The red one I don't know, but red was often used for danger, so we will ignore it. Let's get in. Hiero, what are you doing now?"

"Maintaining communication with the surface. Gimp and his crew are still all right. They're camped now and set up for the night. I wanted a last mind check before we got into that thing."

Despite the pleased certainty in his voice, Aldo would not have been human if he had not been nervous as they all climbed aboard the elevator. The layers of dust were over six inches thick on its floor, and they had already learned to move slowly to avoid stirring it up any more than was necessary. Fortunately, the dust must have contained much powdered rock, for it both rose slowly and settled quickly.

The elevator ran on two metal tracks set deep in the cavern's wall, and these had allowed only a little deposit of any kind to adhere. But of course the machine was old, old beyond the concept of even its designers. It creaked and groaned ominously as it started down, and the noises did not decrease as they

sank lower. Some long-ruptured circuit made them stop at each level, and it took an almost physical effort on Hiero's part to push the button and restart the contrivance afresh. There were five similar-appearing platform levels, and even the bear, who had been shielding his thoughts, let out an audible "whoof" of relief as they settled at last to the base of the shaft. They all felt the same. But their relief was to be short-lived.

As they left, farsighted old Aldo, who was the last one out of the metal cage, reached back and touched the "up" button. He had decided to find out if they could return again in a pinch. Now his cry of dismay alerted them all. The elevator would not move. For ten minutes they poked, prodded, and fiddled with the mechanism and tried at least to locate the power source. The latter must have been buried deep under the floor, for they could find nothing. Thus they were five storeys lower now, with no known way back to the surface.

"I would wager we must be at least half a mile down altogether," Aldo said soberly, putting their common thought into words.

We will have to find another way out, came Gorm's cool thought. *At least we are on our own feet, not in that thing which moves.* The alien mechanism had rasped the ursine nerves more than he cared to admit.

Around them now, in the much dimmer light of the cavern floor, loomed the dust-covered shapes of what had to be the great machines and devices of the past. From the platform far above, many of these things had looked to be of modest size. Now it was seen that all were large and many were absolutely monstrous.

Hiero walked over to the nearest, intrigued by something puzzling in its shape. He used the shuffling walk, which they had learned stirred up the least floor dust, and he gently brushed the coating of inches-thick grime away from the surface of the shrouded object, while the others waited.

"I thought it looked odd!" His laugh stirred remote echoes in the dusty aisles and corridors between the silent bulks and rebounded from cornices and projections far above.

"This is a cover! All these things are protected. Look, you can lift it and see what is underneath." He raised a corner of the heavy plastic wrapping, still moving slowly so as to avoid raising any more dust than was necessary. The soft gleam of a metal base, untouched for thousands of years, met their eyes, which by now were accustomed to the dim light.

Excited, the soldier-priest ran to the next great object and then the next. All were covered with thick plastic sheeting, a substance which mocked the centuries, and the metal underneath appeared untouched by any corrosion or other of time's ravages. Hiero drew his dagger and began to cut pieces of the plastic away, for the huge sheets were far too large to be pulled off by their puny efforts; many of the devices they covered were as high as a two-storey building and half an acre in extent.

"Hiero," came the Elevener's strong voice. "I think we had better be told what we are seeking, don't you think? I have no wish to pry, but . . ."

"Of course. I meant to tell you earlier, honestly. There's been so much on my mind, I simply forgot."

While they stood about, or leaned on the buttresses of the incredible machines, he gave them a mental, closed-circuit recapitulation of the Abbey mission, describing the lost computers, or at least their purposes, as well as he could and explaining carefully why the Abbeyes felt they were so important.

"If what Demero told me is true, and I believe every word," he concluded, "we need one of these things desperately. The attacks against us are mounting and coordinated. Our defense and any counterattack won't have a prayer unless they are also completely coordinated."

Aldo had no more questions. Now that he knew what to look for, he began at once to examine the nearest mechanisms, seeking labels or identity marks of any kind. The others joined in, the bear helping him to lift the plastic covers, the girl aiding her lover in the same task.

An hour later, they paused in their work, looked at one another, and laughed. Sweat and disturbed layers of dust had covered them all with a pale mantle, and even the bear looked a furry ghost of his former self.

"Let's see," said Brother Aldo, who had been writing in a small book he had produced. "We have found nothing so far about computers, Hiero." The priest wiped a grimy forehead with an even dirtier hand and tried to concentrate. Brother Aldo's knowledge of the ancient languages was vital now, since Hiero himself had been able to memorize only a few simple words and phrases before setting forth.

"We have found 'engines,' that is, machines," Aldo continued, "and we have found other things, controls apparently. What these engines ran on, their power source, by the way, baffles me. Unless," and he looked very grave, "it is the lost power of the atom itself, which caused most of The Death when misused. But I prefer not even to think about that." Hiero did not see fit to mention that he felt the Unclean well might have rediscovered that particular power source. It was only a suspicion, but he had never ceased wondering what silent engines drove their dark, sailless ships.

"We have found air-conditioning' and 'thermal control,' " Lu-chare put in.

"Yes, but these are things, as I said, which occur in other sites I have visited. They mean fresh air and artificial heat, that's all. We have no idea how they did these things, but we know they are neither weapons nor computers."

"We're poking around out on one edge of this place," Hiero said, after a moment's thought. "How about heading for the middle? If there is an information storage center, it might be there, logically. I am trying to recall how the place looked from up top, and I think there was a circular space, with things set about on it in some regular pattern."

This plan was adopted, and they began a circuitous approach toward the center. Time and again they found a pathway or aisle blocked by some rearing hulk or other and had to go around or even retrace their steps. Hiero felt they were all minute creatures trapped in some vast and incomprehensible maze.

Eventually, all coughing and sneezing by now, they emerged from a corridor between two long lines of machinery into the open space which Hiero had glimpsed from far above. For some time they had been moving up a very gentle slope, and it was now apparent that this radial point in the center was set higher than the rest of the cavern. "Probably a system of drains buried under all this dust so they could flush the place down when it needed cleaning," Hiero said.

They could see things of interest at once. Before them stood a vast, semicircular control board, its function very clear, since of all the things they had seen, it alone was not covered by plastic. Yet it had been, that was evident. For piles of plastic sheeting, *minus any dust*, lay here and there, as if each section had been ripped from the control board and cast aside at random. The thirty or so seats which were set in the floor in front of the board were not uncovered, however, and still retained their plastic

shrouds.

On the board's center, several small, unwinking lights, three amber and one red, glowed in which was obviously the main panel, since it lay in the center of the great board's gentle arc. The three humans stared for a moment, only realizing by degrees what was indicated by all this.

"Someone's been here," the girl breathed. "Who could it have been? How long ago? Look, those lights must have been turned on." She spun around suddenly, as if to catch someone or something stealing up behind them. Yet nothing moved, save for themselves. The dusty relics of the most ancient past towered up in forgotten, majesty around them, only the three tiny lights of the board the sole indication that life was not extinct in the relics of a vanished age,

The bear moved slowly forward and began, to sniff. *Come here*, his mind said. *Something has been here and it has left a track. Something we know*, was his grim afterthought.

Stepping forward, Hiero looked down and saw what Gorm had found. A broad, grooved mark, its greasy path only slightly tinged by dust, came from off to their left out of yet another aisle in the bulking engines. This trace went along the front of the control board, occasionally broadening into a wide smear where the plastic sheets had been flung aside, and then vanished again, down into the gloom of still another canyon in the forest of silent machines. The message was clear. Something had come, uncovered and examined the board, and then gone away again. Had it turned on the lights somehow? Where was it now and when would it return? Hiero shivered. Whatever had made this strange mark was certainly not human, and even before the bear's next message, he felt he knew what it was.

That House-thing or one of its creatures has been here, came Gorm's calm thought. *Can't you smell it yet?* In his four-footed friend's mind, Hiero caught the irritation at his duller senses, but he paid no attention.

Swiftly, now he relayed a warning to the other two. At the same time, he bade Luchare relight the lamp she had extinguished when they had managed to get the cavern lighting system activated. Fire had been their only weapon against the House before, and it might still save them, should the monster reappear, or should it send its servants.

"See here!" Aldo had been examining the portion of the board where the three small lights gleamed. "I can read these signs, or some of them. Some words such as 'gantry' and 'silo' are new to me, but here are 'missile launch' and a long series of numbers. We have found something terrible here, Hiero. This is a place which sent out into the air the flying Death itself, the great machines which traveled over and above the whole world, shedding foul poison and radioactive destruction." He was shaken to the core as he looked down at the silent board. "Perhaps," he added in a low voice, "perhaps some of those things are still waiting, waiting to spread more death, even after five thousand years." No one spoke, even the bear's mind, perhaps appalled at the thought that they might be able somehow, by mistake, again to loose such a horror on the world.

It was Hiero who recovered first. His active brain simply could not mull over the past for too long. He had come here to find something, a weapon in fact, and instead he had found a deadly enemy, which if not actually present, was certainly not too far off. These matters transcended any brooding over vanished tragedies.

"What are those lights?" he asked, his voice deliberately brusque. He wanted to shake Aldo out of his present mood and stir him to new activity. Tough as he was, the Elevener was a very old man, and he was facing in the flesh, so to speak, things he had thought of only as the abstract components of a

nightmare. But now it was a living, revived nightmare, whose return to the world he dreaded more than any mere bodily peril to himself.

With an effort, Brother Aldo returned to the present.

"Those lights? All of them are marked with one word underneath. The two yellow ones say 'standby,' which I believe means 'wait.'" He peered closely at the red bead on the smooth, black panel. "This one says 'alert,' which means 'be on guard.' A moment, though! A line of inlaid silver leads away to another area, over here to the right." Muttering to himself, he stepped around two of the chairs, still tracing the line of bright metal with his eye. The others followed in his wake, waiting for a translation. The line wandered about for a distance along the board, at last coming to rest on a black, ovoid projection. Under this bulge were more letters.

"Let's see now," the old man said. "Lift cover for total self destruct." "He turned and faced them. "Did you by any chance understand that?"

I did, Gorm said unexpectedly. *You are becoming very careless with your minds down here, all of you. You radiate even while using your human speech. You have found an old thing which will destroy all of this whole place, and us too, I gather.* His mind was quiet and amused again. One would have thought he was describing his last meal.

"I'm going to lift that cover," Brother Aldo went on in steely tones, ignoring the bear. "The best thing I know about this awful place now is that we may be able to destroy it. I frankly regret having aided you to come here." His passionate hatred of the pre-Death artifacts around him rang in every syllable of his voice.

"Let me," Hiero said quietly. "Don't forget, I'm more used to machines than you are. You look over my shoulder and tell me what you read there. I won't do anything without permission, I promise." So strained and taut had both Aldo's brain waves and his speech become, Hiero was beginning to fear the old man would do something irrational.

The Elevener closed his eyes for an instant. When he opened them, he suddenly looked more at peace, and a faint smile touched his mouth.

"I caught a fragment of your thought, boy," he said. "You are quite right. I must not give way to emotion, and I was very close there. You go ahead, and I'll try to supervise if I can."

The Metz examined the almost conical, black projection. He saw that it had a knurled edge, obviously designed for fingertips, and he began to turn it. A screw mechanism slowly revolved, and as it lifted, he saw both what lay underneath and the wisdom of such a cover. With sudden death for the whole area in one control, a screw opening allowed time to circumvent a madman or an enemy bent on self-destruction. A simple hinged affair would have been too easy.

Under the cap, which he laid carefully aside, was a thing like an uncovered dial. A row of thirty numbers, engraved in the archaic system of the ancients, bordered a curved slot. At one end, set sideways in a smaller slot, was a pointer. Studying the mechanism, Hiero saw that the pointer could be pulled up, out of its own slot, and moved down the larger to any of the numbers desired.

"Those are hours, or hour symbols, I feel sure." Aldo peered over his shoulder. "It must be that one can set the thing for up to thirty hours and then—the whole place goes."

"Suppose they're minutes, not hours, or some other unit of time we don't even use any longer?" Hiero asked dryly, Luchare gasped behind them.

"It says 'hours' here." Aldo pointed to a pair of tiny letters, which Hiero had not even seen, at the base of the slot. "This is an abbreviation, but one I have seen many times."

"Sorry," the priest said. "I'm getting jumpy. What do you say we have a meal? It must be well into the night up above, and I imagine we all could use some food."

Once their stomachs had been called to their attention, all were indeed hungry, and Gorm protested bitterly that he was being slighted when Luchare gave out each agreed-upon ration.

You 're so fat you could live for a week on nothing at all, she said, poking his plump sides. *Do you good to go without for a while.*

Hiero wondered to himself, as he ate the dried meat and biscuit, whether the water would last until they got out. He said nothing to disturb the others. They had brought only one large water skin with them, and when all had drunk, it was only a bit more than half full. The all-pervasive dust had made everyone very thirsty.

Barely had they finished when the bear suddenly rose to his feet, apparently sniffling, head erect.

Nothing comes, was his thought. *It is the mind of Gimp* (here a pictorial composite of the little captain was made clear). *He tried to reach us. There is trouble up above.*

Instantly both Hiero and Aldo shut their eyes in an effort to tap the sailor's mind far over their heads, up on the surface of the dark plain. It was full night now, on the portion of the world's surface nearest them.

Gimp felt them at once, and they could gather the relief in his mind as he did. He was not, of course, used to sending messages this way, but they persisted, probing and questioning, until out of jumbled images, emotions, and attempts to communicate, they got his story, or at least the gist of it. This was the tale:

A lone guard, for the others were asleep, had heard something moving in the brush and had the sense to keep quiet and awaken Gimp. That worthy had found two more men accustomed to moving quietly and had awakened one-eyed Blutho and put him in command, with orders to arouse the camp and get under arms in silence. Gimp and his two trustees sneaked out and presently heard a man, they thought, moving, off to the south. They stole closer and were able to see, in the moonlight presumably, a number of mounted men on hoppers. (*On what?— Hiero; Never mind, I'll tell you later— Aldo.*) Gimp cleverly ambushed one such person, killing the mount and capturing the rider without noise. This man, for it was a man, had been taken back to their camp and hastily interrogated. What they had learned was disquieting. A small, hand-picked army of the Unclean, both men and Leemutes, were coming from the south (the rider had been one of an outer screen of scouts) and were heading for a "buried world," one to which they had a "door." They were led by master adepts (Gimp called them "magicians") and they were hunting a terrible man from the far North, a dangerous enemy who had to be slain at all costs. The captain wanted advice fast, for he now could hear the approach of the army itself. That was all.

Hiero wasted no time. The prisoner was to be decently killed at once. The seamen were to take Klootz on a lead and move north as fast and as quietly as possible. The prisoner's body was necessary, since he might otherwise be mind-traced by the enemy. His total absence would probably be ascribed to wild beasts or to an accident. As usual, Hiero wasted no sentiment on the Unclean and their vassals.

His task done, he turned to the others and explained. Aldo had heard everything, but Luchare and Gorm had to be filled in. The girl pointed out the obvious clue, though the others had already guessed.

"They're heading for a 'buried world.' It must be this one! Hiero, Gorm told us we were using our minds too loudly. They must have been listening somehow. There has to be another entrance, and they know it. We're trapped!"

Gorm was less excited by the news and even a bit smug. *I've been telling you for some time that you were using your minds too much, but it can't be helped now. We must find a way out somehow. We have before.* He seemed unafraid and not even interested very much. He added: *Tell me when you want to start.*

Brother Aldo patted Hiero's shoulder in his kindly way. "The clue, Hiero, I'm quite sure, lay in our battle with the House. The waves of mental power that struggle gave off must have been easy to detect. Don't blame yourself, my dear fellow. The Unclean were a bit smarter for once than we gave them credit for being. Also, they must have been a good deal closer than we thought, must have been well on their way to reach us, from out of Neeyana. No one's fault, but we really have to think now."

"It's S'duna," Hiero said bitterly. "He's sworn to kill me or die trying. He must have done some brilliant calculating, all the same, to estimate where we were heading so well." He looked about at the dimly lit vastness around them. "How in God's name we can either fight or escape is beyond me." His shoulders sagged visibly.

"Think!" Aldo thundered, no longer sounding kind. "You are the warrior, as well as the priest, and this is no time for resignation. One thing even I can point out. They are still terribly afraid of you. Why else have they not used their minds, located and captured Gimp? They are using mind shields, those mechanical things they hide behind. For fear of *you*, that's why! Now take that fear of the enemy's and use it!"

Luchare said nothing. She came close and put her hands on his shoulders and looked at him, just looked, her eyes full of love and trust. Then she patted his cheek once, lightly, and moved away, humming softly to herself. Her man was there, and he would find a way out. How was only a detail!

The twin appeal was sufficient to galvanize Hiero out of his momentary despair. The strange, huge vault in which they were apparently incarcerated lost its brief terrors. Once again he was able to reason, to plan, to look at all sides of the problem. Brother Aldo saw the changed expression and the tightened jaw and waited, content. Their leader was back with them again.

The moment he began to think ahead once more, two factors occurred to him. The House was one and his unfulfilled mission the other.

"Spread out, but mark your path in the dust so you don't get lost, you two." *Gorm, go with Luchare. Give warning of the House or any enemy.* "Brother Aldo, look for signs, names, I guess, of computers, if the damned things ever were kept in a place like this."

"They were," was the answer. "We read that it was the computers which somehow sent these terrible weapons out into the world and told them where to go and whom to kill. Certainly there is one here at least." He turned and strode off, swinging his staff and clutching his own small knife, with which to cut any enshrouding plastic. Luchare and Gorm were already poking about, off in another direction. The bear was so sensitive to danger that he was a superb sentinel, and she had forgotten she did not understand the ancient languages and thus could be of little real help.

Hiero badly wanted to be alone. He had some mental probing to do and, once that was done, some very careful planning. Already the germ of an extremely grim idea had come to him, an idea fraught with horrible risks, but also one which might be of tremendous benefit.

His mind he sent roving ahead, seeking out the enemy. In a moment he found him, or rather them, and he was somewhat shaken as a result. He had forgotten to ask Gimp if his prisoner had worn a mind shield. For *all* the minds he now encountered had them, and he could not even make an estimate of how many there were. All he could do was estimate the physical distance from himself to an oncoming conjoint aura of defensive screens. Like a great blob of energy, it was advancing from the south and above, at hazard, no more than a mile away. It was a real feat, he ruefully acknowledged, to shield so many in such a short time.

Coldly he assessed his own and his companions* chances. One thing was clear: the Unclean somehow had acquired a good knowledge of this place and thus were coming on without hesitation. Did this mean they had been here before? He considered this. It seemed doubtful, on reflection, that they had. Only the central switchboard, of the entire complex, had been disturbed, and that recently. And he knew who, or what, had done that!

No, the Unclean Masters must have ransacked their own accumulated files and records, just as the Abbey Council had done before sending him out on his own quest. The place was marked on the enemy map he had looted from the dead adept's body. No doubt the enemy had other charts as well, with more detailed directions. This cavern would have been one of a large number of places indicated for eventual examination, when time and manpower permitted.

But that plan had been changed when S'duna and his allies had determined to follow him, now their single greatest fear and enemy, to his doom! And they had found him somehow, half by guess and half by detecting his mind's energy bursts when he fought the House, that is if Brother Aldo were right. He probably was. That struggle indeed must have registered a long way off, to those who were watching and aware.

All this went through Hiero's mind in no more than an instant. He was standing, leaning actually, on the central control panel as he thought, and he now made a sudden gesture and freed the cap on the destruct device. And as he did, he began to consider the House. From this thought, his decision hardened. His hand moved.

The Metz next replaced the cap and then walked quickly away, in the direction of the eastern tunnels or openings he had glimpsed from the platform. There was a relatively clear path and he moved fast, although with caution. Meanwhile, he contacted the bear and Aldo on a wavelength Luchare could not yet follow and told them briefly where he was going and why. He had not forgotten the House and its method of mental ambushade. Should he not communicate at regular intervals, they would come after him.

At this point he suddenly saw the slimy track of whatever creature the House had sent out, approaching the same corridor he was on from the left. He could see that, ahead of him, it continued on down the very aisle he had chosen. He instantly chose the next gap to the right and placed himself in a parallel alleyway between other lines of mechanical colossi. *No sense in going to the thing's front door.* He had seated a quarrel in his crossbow and now lighted the spare firepot as well. The crossbow bolt had oil-soaked cloth wrapped around it, and he could light it in an instant were it necessary. *And if I'm given an instant,* he added to himself.

Now a new sensation came to Hiero. Over the musty, stale smell of the whole place, there came to his nostrils a familiar whiff of organized corruption. The bear must have detected this all along, he realized, even if it were far fainter here than up on the surface. Sickly sweet and abhorrent, it came to him, the stench of the living rot which was the hallmark of both the House and its realm.

He stooped under and rounded a lofty corner of some ageless mechanism and then quickly ducked back again. Before him was the work of the monster!

Here, far underground, the fungi were stranger even than those on the surface. It was as if the House saved its more delicate and cherished outgrowths for this hidden realm. And it was obvious that they needed no light, for many of them glowed with an evil light of their own making.

A broad, dark pool, full of floating scum, had formed where the floor had actually sunk or collapsed near the east wall of the great cave. Water trickled steadily over and down a broad area of slimy rock, for this wall was unfinished, indeed hardly even smoothed down by the craftsmen of long ago. An underground spring must have burst forth in ages past and still flowed into the pool, leaving by some hidden outlet.

Around this sinister tarn, which was many yards in extent, there grew a forest of tall, gently tapering spires of soft, living matter. Several men's height they were, colored with pallid and crepuscular shades, ugly, faded violets, insipid yellows, and debauched, bleached oranges. On top of some of them glowed round areas of foxfire and dim phosphorescence. This was the light, the priest realized, which he had glimpsed far off when they first entered the cavern.

As he watched this buried, obscene parody of a living wood, Hiero was moved by its allure as well as by its horror. Totally alien and awful were the purposes of the House, but it could still create an eldritch beauty. He checked his mind sharply at this thought and examined his own reasoning, fearing a mental trap, an allurement into which the entity called the House might be subtly trying to draw him.

But there was no contact, and he knew he was truly free. Besides, somehow he had the feeling that this was a place of utter privacy to the House, a hidden chamber of repose which the monster deemed inaccessible and utterly safe. How he knew this, he could not have said, but perhaps his terrible struggle with the lord of the fungi had allowed him to fathom, if only unconsciously, its emotions and thought processes; he had thus established a strange rapport with his enemy.

At first he thought nothing moved, and he was about to emerge himself when he caught a flickering shadow out of the corner of his eye and instantly froze. The forest of fungoid spires was truly alive!

The things' movements were so slow and rhythmic he had almost missed them, but now that he watched carefully, he could see it all. The unnatural forms were not rooted or fixed, not even as much as a mushroom, but were moving, ever so slowly, about on their broad bases. As he watched, fascinated, he saw that it was like a mockery or simulacrum of some stately dance, or even a solemn religious service. The weird beings, plants or whatever they were, would approach one another slowly until their sides touched; then a rippling motion seemed to run up and down their entire length. Those whose crowns glowed with the pale phosphorus seemed to deepen that glow in these encounters. Too, as they approached each other, a clot of slime or soft, bulging flesh developed at their bases and then dissolved as they retreated in the same, almost imperceptible fashion, to begin their peculiar gyrations anew with a fresh partner.

The ghastly things were sentient in some way, of this he felt sure. Just as the great slime molds he had met far above were able to sense enemies or their food, so too were these living fungi able to feel, to

react, perhaps even to *know*. Had he revealed himself, he was sure that he would have been detected, if not even captured and slain. He drew back further into the shadows of whatever vast machine was giving him shelter.

The living cones, or fungus candles, for they were thinner than a normal cone shape, partially masked the black rift of the tunnel which opened on the far side of the water. It was a tunnel, of that he was sure. Its sides were regular and smooth, too rounded to have occurred naturally. Once, in remote ages, it might have been a major entrance to the underground hiding place of the great missiles. But the slime and muck which coated the lips of the entrance proved that nothing human had passed that way for many long years.

Well, he had learned all he could. He quietly slid further back, away from the stagnant water and the evil, living spires of mold. When once out of sight, he began to run, always angling toward the south. One portion of his brain, meanwhile, had kept a cease- less watch on the inchoate but collected mental force which he knew represented the Unclean horde. Since they had steadily advanced, there was only one place from which they could be coming, and that was one of the tunnels in the southern wall. A fairly clear road must exist to it from the surface, and the Unclean leaders would be moving into and down it as rapidly as possible.

He paused and calculated various times for a moment. No trace of his mind or that of the others could the enemy now detect. This he felt sure of, for his powers had become such that he could have kept a protective shield over many more than just four minds, even if Aldo were not on guard. In any case, defense was always far less effort than attack, for it could be maintained with and by an unconscious effort of mind. No, he could check on the enemy's progress, but not the reverse. Aldo had been right. Their fear of him was such that they were relying on physical strength and hiding under their mechanical mind screens.

Now he sent messages to his companions to join him, whether they had found anything worth taking or not. He simply stood still and waited, until they came. In a few minutes the white beard of the aged Aldo appeared around a corner, and the other two came only a little bit behind. The priest was so wrought up, he noticed nothing of the small package Luchare carried.

"Look," Hiero said, stooping. He traced a design in the dust of an engine's buttress next to him. It was hard to see in the dim Sight, but there was just enough when he added that of his little lamp.

"Here's where we are. Here's a pool of water over on the east side. The House has an exit here. I'll tell you about that later. Over here," his finger drew yet another circle, "is the southern entrance. S'duna and the Unclean must be coming this way. That elevator machine is broken, and we can't go back. All right, we're going *out* the way the enemy comes *in*, to the south. But you'll have to do exactly what I tell you." He paused and grinned, his face quickly looking years younger on the instant. "Even then, there's a good chance it may not work. It depends on two things. One, S'duna's so eager to get me, hell stop at nothing and, hopefully, not think straight. Two, so will somebody else, not think straight, I mean. Oh, yes, and neither of them knows or is aware of the other at all. That's the equation, and it has to be perfect to work."

Brother Aldo laughed, honest, chuckling laughter. "I see your plan, I think. It may work out totally, but if not, well, there's still a great load off my spirit. Tell me what you want us to do."

Gorm, who had been kept informed simultaneously, sent a quick thought. *A terrible idea. Let's hope it works.* Luchare simply pressed herself close to him.

"Here's what we do," the priest went on. "You go this way, over to the southwest wall, and hide the best way you know how. I'll find you. I have to go back where I came from. Now hurry!" He kissed the velvet cheek gently and then spun on his heel, erasing every thought but those needed for the task ahead. The Unclean army was very close!

Returning to the evil pool of water was easy, for his own marks in the untrodden dust of centuries were simple to follow. In a matter of minutes he was peering around the corner of another machine at the dark water and the moving nightmare garden (if such it was) of the House. In the dim light, the living candles still moved and stank.

He took a careful aim with his crossbow, lowered it, having once got the range, and raised it again. In the interval he had lighted the oily rags bound around the quarrel from the rekindled firepot. He released the trigger, and with a hiss, the now blazing dart shot across the water and deep into the pulpy substance of the tallest of the moving towers of putrescence.

The reaction was instantaneous. As he had prayed, the horrid things were every bit as inflammable as their fellow fungi far above, up on the earth's surface. The fire raced over the tall, writhing shape in seconds, and the sudden, whipping movements and frenzied gyrations of the mold beast touched and set fire to a half dozen of its fellows in hardly less time. Hiero had been readying another bolt, but so speedy was the awful destruction he had wrought with only one that he stayed his hand.

At the same time, there came into his brain a terrible shrilling, a piercing vibrato, on an incredibly *high* wavelength, which rose and fell like the skirling of some demoniac orchestra. He knew he was hearing the death agony of the foul things and, being a kindly man, felt momentary sorrow even for these.

Then he remembered his mission and stepped into the open!

The moving spires, such as were not already alight and writhing in their fiery death throes, were aware of him at once. He had been right, he realized; the creatures were indeed sentient! Immediately they knew him to be the author of their misery. The tall columns bent as one in his direction. He could feel an almost material wave of venomous hatred emanating from them as their fellows blazed and shook all around them. The very slime with which their movements had coated the naked rock was itself flammable, and fresh runnels and gutters of moving fire sought out many of those who were nowhere near their burning fellows.

The splendor and horror of the sight almost made him a victim himself. One of the awful spires, whose top was as yet aglow with only its own poisonous foxfire, bent until it pointed in his exact direction. Then, from its crown, a dully glowing series of blobs were launched in Hiero's direction. So unexpected was the attack that he barely had the presence of mind to leap aside as the first ball of glowing slime raced his way. Even so, it splattered almost at his feet, and one minute fragment struck his right hand. The pain was savage, and only the instant application of the oil-soaked rag he still clutched made it die down. He hastily backed away, keeping on his toes, so that the next poisonous missiles came nowhere near. Actually, if one stayed alert, he realized, they were easy to avoid.

All the while he was praying for something else. He had provoked the ruler of this foul realm, carefully and deliberately. *Where was it? Had he guessed wrong?* Mind and body keyed up to the highest degree, he backed slowly away from the inferno of the dying fungi. The stench of the corrupt and burning bodies, and the thick, greasy smoke, made even this close proximity almost unbearable. *Where are you, House, damn you?* And even as he bent his thought upon it, it came.

He had been watching the gaping mouth of the tunnel beyond the pool, a task made increasingly difficult

because of the swirling smoke wreaths and nauseating reek, for he was sure this was the entrance to the creature's lair. Perhaps it was, but there were others.

Almost before he had time to realize it, a surge of filthy liquid overflowed the near edge of the buried, underground pool and sent a wave of fluid corruption racing over the floor in his direction, and the bulging, gelatinous horror of the House began to emerge *out of the water*. As it grew in size, it sent one bolt after another of mental force at the lone man.

It was well that Hiero had armored himself against this very time. In odd, waking moments, ever since his first encounter with the monster, he had carefully analyzed its Medusa-like power of paralysis, and he had deduced that its true strength lay in an attack on the psyche, rather than on the actual brain. The emotional centers of the body were its targets, not the reasoning process, and in the subconscious alone could it establish its unearthly stranglehold.

One remote corner of his mind registered mild surprise at the relatively modest size of the alien monstrosity. Its brownish, slimy bulk was not too much higher than his own head and scarcely more than five or six yards in total width. It still preserved the odd, four-cornered shape which had made Vilah-ree name it, but the lines moved and shook, the angles continually re-formed in peculiar abhorrent and sickening ways. Hiero saw also that it could move on its blobby base, just as the horrible candle-things did, and that it could move fast. Also now, long, glistening tendrils or pseudopods sprouted from its upper parts and waved hungrily as it slid rapidly in his direction over the floor. And all the while its ravening hatred and power beat upon his mind. His own rapport with the alien growth had become so strong that he understood why it laired so deep here and what actually he had done when he had attacked the fungoid spires. The pool was the center of not so much a garden but more (though not entirely) a harem!

The seal which he had painstakingly set upon his inner being held. Even so, he prayed for strength as he backed away from the water and into the aisle in the machinery from which he had first come. After him flowed the monster, and behind it, in turn, came the remaining spires.

No more did the House use its vile blandishments to make him an ally and thus attempt to lure him within its reach. For it recognized him. Its hatred of the one being who had ever broken its power and had helped destroy much of its awful kingdom overcame it, until its strange composite mind could think of nothing else but to obliterate the impudent minikin before it. What—did the very inner parts of its buried realm, its hidden mates' playground, hold no safety from this feared and dreaded enemy? On, on, and slay! Its speed increased, and its groping, vibrissal pseudo-pods flailed the dead air as it sought to rend him.

Carefully, judging his speed to a nicety, Hiero fled from the thing and its pack of followers. The assaults on his mind he repelled, content merely to ward off the House's attack and not to try to retaliate. Any such trial on his part might serve instead to open new corners of his own brain to fresh and unknown assaults. Who knew of what else the monster was capable if allowed, even for an instant, to forget its mad rage?

Down the silent, dust-laden corridors, under the dim illumination of the glowing bars of millennia-old light, the strange chase continued. The human fled; the living lord of the slime sought to overtake him and extinguish its bitterest foe from the earth. Save for the light footfalls and breathing of the man and the sucking, slithering noise of the fungoid pack's progress, there was utter quiet. The deadly race, to an observer, would have appeared some strange and voiceless charade or shadow show. The squat House and the tall, dozen remaining mold pillars sped on; the man ran; the shrouded, ancient machines were backdrop.

Always, the priest led his pursuers south, shifting a little back and forth so that it would not be too obvious and straight a road, but never going very far from the line he had chosen. And now, at length, there fell upon his ear a sound for which he had yearned. It was the distant vibration of a legion of people moving, the faint but distinct echo of many feet! The Unclean host was upon them and must even now be debouching into the great cavern!

Still, husbanding his strength, Hiero ran on; and, implacable as ever, the alien master of the mold-things and its last minions followed on his track, centuries-old dust by now coloring them all the same pallid gray.

At a certain intersection of two opposing aisles, Hiero suddenly increased his speed. His careful appearance of fatigue was suddenly shed, as quickly as that of a parent bird whose apparently broken wing has led the searcher far from, its huddled young.

Now he turned and darted away at full speed, taking the House by surprise as he did so. He flashed away toward the south wall and then—barely before leaving the shelter of the machines—darted into a narrow gap between two huge engines and was gone. One instant the House thought it had him trapped, the next he was utterly vanished!

Ravens, the unstable, shifting bulk increased its speed, layers of filth and dust flying as it sped forward in the manner of some Brobdingnagian snail on its rippling base, its slender mates coming on in its wake.

Hiero, now two hundred yards off and well to the left of his former track, peered cautiously out toward the open, the southern end of the ancient cave. What he saw made him draw breath in exultation.

Pouring into the cave, rank upon rank, file upon file, came the massed forces of the Unclean. Even as he watched, the last ones entered the great cave, and the tunnel gaped empty behind them. At least two hundred creatures were already streaming across the open, some of them men in dark uniform clothes, armed with pikes, others Leemutes in their own skins. He recognized red Hairy Howlers, brown Man-rats, and, far off to one side, a clump of the new things he had first encountered on the ship, the Gliths, their gray, scaly hides glistening. Not far from the entrance itself, marshaling their forces, were a group of men in dark cloaks and hoods. The adepts were preparing for a master stroke, and he smiled grimly as he thought that only one man was the cause of all this preparation! Truly, the enemy had not been properly challenged for a long time.

And then it happened. The first part of his desperate scheme came to fruition, just as he had planned it and willed it, but (down inside) never dared believe it would.

Out into the open from the central passageway, charging along in its blind rage, seeking the hated human and oblivious of ail else, came the House!

From his vantage point, Hiero could see it all, every stage of the weird ensuing drama. All movement ceased instantly out on the quarter mile of open, between the machines and the cavern wall. Not a man, not an Unclean mutant, stirred. The little group of hooded masters of evil were frozen, standing with their heads together, as if turned to ice in the middle of their plots.

He spared a glance for the House. It too had checked and come to a halt, and for once its own unstable, wobbly outlines were not moving. A little way out in the open from the street he had just quit, it halted, its acolytes motionless also. Its pursuit was forgotten as it strove to adjust to a new situation with all the power at its command.

I'm right! the priest exulted. The strange, mesmeric power of the House was unaffected by the Unclean mechanical screens, screens which Hiero himself had been unable to penetrate. The House really did not operate on the brain at all, and the blocking power the Unclean scientists had devised was therefore useless against it.

Around him, surging in a way which to his sensitive mind was practically physical, Hiero could feel the ferocious wills of the Unclean overlords struggling to be free. But the only free brains in the House's environs now were his own and those under his protection. The monster's pressure upon him had ceased as it grappled with its new and unexpected foes. It had never had so many creatures to control before and it was having a hard time holding them immobile. Hiero, observing from the "outside," so to speak, could actually feel, with his mind, the House's efforts to maintain its screen as the swarm of enemy beings tried to break the hold it had laid on their bodies.

But now the priest was himself in motion again, running hard to the left along the southern tier of silent engines. He kept in the shadows, and neither the House nor the Unclean army seemed aware of his flitting shape, engrossed as they were in their silent grapple.

In a few moments he spied tracks in the dust ahead of him, coming from the center of the mechanical maze, and followed them to an alcove between two canopied buttresses. Here, Brother Aldo, the girl, and the bear were waiting, the humans' faces strained and intent and even Gorm shaking with excitement and shifting nervously from one paw to another.

Come on! Hiero sent. *Don't even think from now on if you can help it. I'm going to keep covering your minds. Aldo — build a reserve shield under mine, if you can. Now, let's go—fast!*

"Hiero," Luchare cried, trying to say something, but the blazing glance he spared her made whatever message she had die unspoken.

They were only a few steps from the open space on the south, and he led them quickly out into it. He felt Luchare, whom he was actually leading by the hand, tremble at her first sight of the massed enemy off to their right, but she never faltered. Behind them, the other two trotted in their wake, raising yet more dust. *By now,* Hiero thought, *we must be visible. God help us if my screen drops!*

The House did indeed sense their motion somehow. Despite the efforts it was putting forth to hold the Unclean ranks imprisoned, it spared another bolt for them. Hiero warded it off, using his new technique, with almost contemptuous ease. Once one knew how the House operated, its traps were not all that clever, and besides, now it could spare only a fraction of its strength.

But to the other enemy, who had never met it before, its methods were deadly indeed. Strain as they might, the Unclean army, masters and slaves, Leemute and human, could not move a muscle. Two evil forces worked to allow the good freedom!

Soon Hiero was compelled to pass close to a squad of black-clad soldiers with dark, metal helmets and long spears. They had been racing toward the northern section and the House had caught and held them in mid-stride. Their eyes gleamed with deadly hatred as the four loped by, but they could not twitch so much as a finger to impede their progress.

Another such group and another they passed, living yet locked like statues in the foul embrace of the fungoid horror.

Next they passed what had been a crouching, bounding crew of giant Man-rats, creatures Hiero knew well from the past as devilish foes, huge, mutated rodents with all of human reasoning ability and clawed hands as capable as any man's. Their fists now clutched sharp knives, clubs, and long lances, while their brown-furred bodies bore elaborate harness and equipment. But no more than their human allies could they break the grip of the House on muscle and nerve. Only the red eyes glared with hate.

Next, close to the mouth of the tunnel itself, the fleeing four came to the half-dozen hooded shapes of the enemy commanders. Of those looking his way, Hiero could see the knowledge and hatred flare in their eyes as his little group passed by. But though they would, he did not doubt, cheerfully die in order that he too might be slain, they were as helpless as the stupidest and least of the evil servitors in their forces. For it was obvious that they did not understand the House's power and methods any more than had the warrior-priest himself when he first encountered it.

His crossbow slung, he carried his sword-knife in his right hand as he ran, leading the panting Luchare with his left. But his fear that one or more of the Unclean would free himself proved groundless. On past the last of them, a pair of Howlers whose acrid stench supervened even over the drifting reek of the House, he sped, the others close behind. They were actually into the tunnel now, and he saw at once why the enemy had chosen and used it.

Before them, still clear in the remaining light of the cavern's glowing rods, stretched a smooth, level ramp, thirty feet across, curving up in a gentle spiral sweep into the gloom ahead. Many heavy feet had beaten a path down the dusty floor; the dust had hardly had time to settle, but the way ahead seemed clear enough.

The priest stopped and relit the firepot to which he had stubbornly clung ever since he had shot his flaming arrow into the living towers of the fungi. They would need some light ahead, for they were leaving the artificial glow of the lost cavern.

He released Luchare's hand, pushed her on, and waved the others past. In silence they moved, obedient to his orders. Alone, Hiero watched the scene below for a last, fascinated instant. About his head, he had never stopped feeling the surging currents and giant forces in contest as the Unclean tried to free themselves and the countergrasp of the House still stubbornly kept them trapped in its invisible mesh. One look only he spared, seeing for the last time the slime-bedewed, grayish shape, its attendant pale cones towering over it, and between it and himself, the equally silent, motionless legions which had come to destroy him.

The Metz turned and ran, holding his lamp high as he caught up to the others. They had not gone far, but were waiting for him only a little above. Aldo held the other lamp, and Luchare was just filling it from the now depleted oilskin, which she cast away. They did not light it but fell in behind Hiero and began their upward journey. He set a sharp pace and no one questioned it, but they were all too exhausted to run, and a brisk walk was the best they could do.

"How long can it hold them, do you suppose?" Luchare gasped at length.

"Long enough," Hiero said curtly. "For God's sake, darling, save your breath! We're not out of danger yet. The ancient had exact time devices and I don't! Just keep walking and try to keep your mind a blank."

She did not flare up in anger, for she recognized by now that his orders had reason, and they trudged on in silence. The light showed the ramp to be almost featureless, a great tube, lined with some age-defying substance, which had been cut into the earth and rock with micrometer precision by its long-dead

makers. Once or twice they passed a sealed opening in the walls, but they did not stop. There were no lights visible, and only the flicker of their little lamp lit the way.

This must have been the main path, the priest reflected, driving his weary legs forward and upward. They had been walking a long time, at least it felt like forever, but he dared not rest. The forces trapped in that place behind them were too awful to take any chances with. But talking might ease the strain.

"Did you find any computers?" he asked at length.

"No," was Aldo's answer. "Such a search might take a week, or a month. But Luchare found something. She is carrying it. Do you think the Unclean can free themselves? They have the man and beast power to find anything there. And what about the House? It is so *powerful*, Hiero. What might it not do with the knowledge of the past?"

"The house knows nothing about the past or machines or weapons. I know what it thinks or feels as well as anyone human that is now alive. It has no use for mechanical devices, but only what it makes or grows itself." He forgot Luchare's find as his worry reasserted itself.

"Yet it, or perhaps one of its creatures, was looking around at the control board. Don't forget that."

"I know." Hiero's laugh was grim. "And it had no idea what it was doing, I'm sure of that too. Yet it may have given us a way out by its action. How long have we been walking, do you suppose?"

"At least an hour, I should think. Are we safe yet?"

"No. Keep walking. We've got to keep on till we drop, if necessary. I can still feel the pressure behind me. And the House is weakening!"

"Can they kill it and follow us? Maybe we can block this tunnel, then." Luchare's tone was defiant, her attitude that of the princess she was. Hiero's heart warmed to her.

"Maybe we can," he said more cheerfully. "But it hasn't quite let go yet. It never had to control so many powerful minds before, all alien to it and all trying to break loose. It hasn't dared move, I can feel that, all right. Perhaps it's summoning some of its carnivorous slime molds. And the Unclean are still there too. I can feel all their minds, even under their screens, like one big ball of force."

"I also," Aldo admitted. "What an amazing creature the House is. How I would like to know it, to learn what it thinks, feels, and wants from life." His tone was wistful.

Hiero glanced at his aged ally in amazement. The Eleventh Commandment really embraced everything, it seemed!

We are close to the good air. Gorm had been waddling unhappily along, his pink tongue hanging out and his fur an inch deep in gray film. Now he scented escape from this underground world he disliked, and his spirits lifted.

Hiero momentarily covered the lamp with the edge of his cloak, and they all strained their eyes. Was there a faint lessening of the blackness ahead? The very thought revived their flagging energy.

Soon it was a reality. As the light grew, Hiero slowed his pace, may be a rearguard," he said. "They'd be fools if there weren't something of the kind. Let me probe a bit while you three rest and catch your

breath."

His mind sped forward ahead of them, seeking any intelligence that might be lurking above at the tunnel's mouth. But he could detect nothing, not even the shrouded energy which he had learned meant an Unclean mind shield. Unbelievable as it seemed, the whole force of the enemy had apparently plunged into the bowels of the earth, so overconfident of his destruction it had left nothing behind.

He told the others this, and they went cautiously on. Three more great curves, and the light was quite strong enough to make the guttering lamp unnecessary.

The faint calling and piping of birds came to their ears now, and even the human noses could catch the sweet scent of the air which poured down the shaft.

"Let me go first." Hiero took the lead again and soon saw the great, opened doors ahead. He absently noted the shattered hinges and, when he stepped outside, the cleverness of the device amazed him. For the two huge doors were made of something on the outside which imitated weathered, gray rock and yet which must have been far more impervious than any granite. The Unclean had been indeed cunning to penetrate their secret and so quickly follow on his traces.

All this raced through his mind as he drank in the cool air of the tropic dawn, but he urged the others on as before.

"Hurry," he said, "hurry! We can't delay yet! We may not be safe for hours!" He gave Luchare, who was stumbling, his arm again. He was oblivious to the packet to which she clung with her other hand, for her telescoped spear was now tucked through her belt.

The four set off to the south over the boulder-strewn waste onto which the huge tunnel had opened. Limping and staggering, they went on, no one questioning Hiero's iron determination or right to drive them thus. Aldo now frankly leaned on his heavy staff, something no one had seen him do before.

Still they staggered on, their breath coming in painful gasps, their muscles twitching and burning. The ground was semi-desert, tall weeds and thorn bush growing up through patches of rock and scree. The cool air of dawn gave way to the burning heat of morning and (very slowly now) they hobbled forward. Time seemed to pass with terrible slowness.

Then it happened. Hiero, who had been listening both with his mind and his other senses, felt it first.

"Down!" he shouted and, falling, pulled Luchare close to him. Aldo, too, fell prone, while the bear simply collapsed.

First came a gentle tremor of the earth, so slight it might have deceived them into thinking it was a muscle spasm of their own overused bodies.

Then the earth began to shake and heave, rising and falling in a great wave, as if the tiny atoms of flesh which clung to it were being tossed in some inconceivable blanket. For the first time, Gorm let out a howl of sheer terror.

A distant, muffled roar filled the air. Slowly the heaving of the troubled earth died away. A ringing in their ears also ceased. They raised their heads and looked at one another. Hiero was the first to grin, his white teeth flashing in a countenance so dirty it looked like pure mud. Then Aldo laughed, a deep-throated, ringing sound. Hard on his heels a bird began to sing nearby, tentatively at first, then bursting into its full

series of rippling cadences.

Luchare kissed Hiero. When she pulled her lips away, she murmured drowsily, for she was almost asleep from sheer exhaustion, "What was that?"

"That," Brother Aldo answered as he helped them both up, "was the button marked 'self-destruct*' on the central control board. Right, my boy?"

"Yes. I gave it four hours. What a race of men! After five thousand years their death still works! At least the Unclean got nothing from them. Nothing but destruction. The House too. And yet—if it hadn't held them, I couldn't have done it."

They looked north in silence. Where there once had been a wide, level plain, a vast, shallow bowl had now appeared, its sides and rim of raw tumbled earth and chunks of riven rock. The low trees and scrubby bushes had vanished, lost in the rubble caused by the great explosion.

"We'd better move," the priest said. "Klootz and the men are apt to be way up north by now, and we need to push on as soon as possible."

"Your road should be easier henceforward," Aldo said, the sun highlighting the gray in his once snowy mane and beard.

"I hope so," Hiero said wearily. "But I still haven't found a computer. And this army of theirs wasn't a real percentage of what the Unclean could put into the field if they wanted to."

"Besides," he added, "S'duna's not dead. I would have known somehow if he'd been down there. He wasn't. We have an appointment to keep somewhere, he and I."

"You may not have found a computer," the old man said, "but look what Luchare is carrying. She found a stack of these things on an apparently abandoned desk. Possibly someone's study area. I could read the title. Try it yourself."

Half-numb from what he had been through, Hiero scanned the title of the small, flat book which Luchare had handed him with one finger. "*Principles of a Basic Computer*," he read in halting English, the lost language. Inside were plastic page after plastic page of diagrams and close-printed text. He could say nothing and felt choked. Here was how a computer could be built, perhaps by anyone! The other two smiled at the look on his dirty, sweat-streaked face.

"Look," Aldo said, using his finger in turn, "it says, '*Volume I.*' Luchare found a stack of them. And she has the other two, Volumes II and III, as well. She called me over and I read off the titles. But I think she knew, somehow, even without me!"

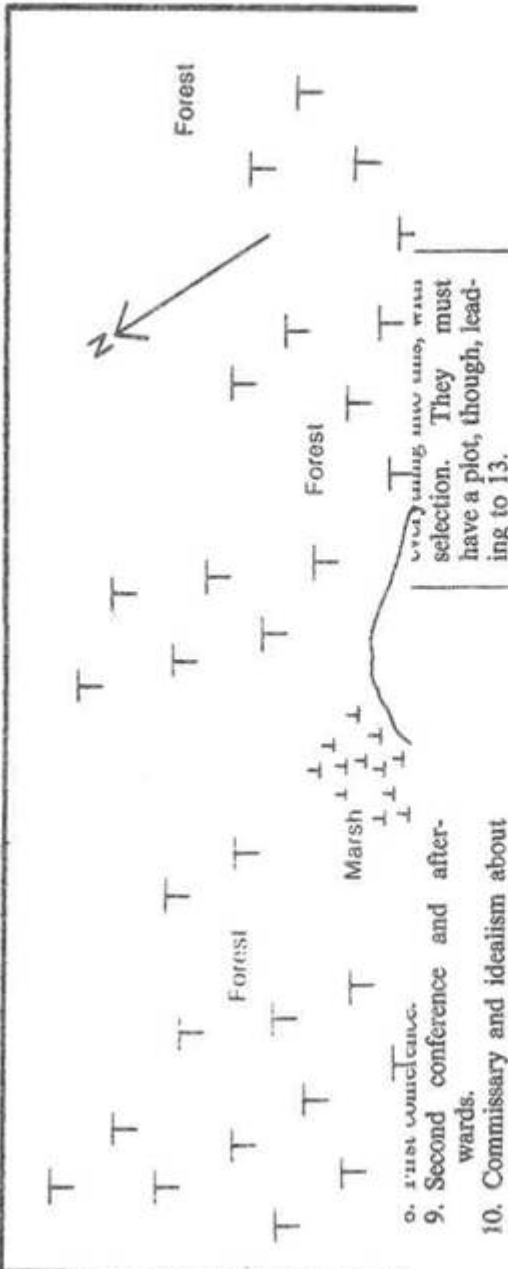
Wordless, Hiero pulled Luchare's arm around his waist, and the three humans and the bear began to retrace their steps, moving north like cripples over the barren and shattered landscape. Gorm tried to have the last word, or rather, thought.

No one ought to move so fast, he grumbled. From now on, let's try to move at a calmer speed.

The world moves at a certain speed, Aldo answered, after a bit. *We all must learn to move with it.*

The Unforsaken Hiero

For Brother Pete, AKA Berwick B. Lanier, who, for some reason I have never fathomed, remains my fan.

		<p>STAHHR and KATHI</p>	
<p>0. First council. 9. Second conference and afterwards. 10. Commissary and idealism about non-profit pictures. Rushes. Phone call, etc.</p>		5000	<p>Chapter (E) Three episodes. Atmosphere in 15 most important. Hint of Waste Land of the house too late.</p>
<p>D 11. Visit to rushes. 12. Second meeting that night. Wrong girl—glimpse.</p>		2500	
<p>E 13. Cecilia and Stahr and ball. 14. Malibu seduction. Try to get on lot. Dead middle. 15. Cecilia and father. 16. Phone call and wedding.</p>		6000	

Prologue

A Change of Mission

There were two fires burning in the night, providing the only lights on the dark plain. A small group was scattered about one. A short distance away, Hiero and Luchare sat by the other, facing Brother Aldo.

The old man was staring into the flames, his tightly curled white beard standing out brightly against skin that was as dark as that of Luchare.

"I must go north at once," Brother Aldo said at last. "I must arouse those of my Brotherhood. We have sought peace for many lives, but now there is no peace. Destruction is coming upon us, and we must take action against it. It is no longer enough to watch and study the foe." Sadness deepened the lines on his face, momentarily revealing his great age.

Hiero waited in silence. His skin was lighter and redder in hue than that of his companions, and his black hair was coarse and straight, trimmed just below the ears in a short bob. With his hawk nose and sturdy, lithe frame, he might almost have been one of his remote Amerindian forebears, save for the neat mustache; the facial hair indicated the Caucasoid admixture of his once despised ancestry.

Beside him, Luchare seemed to be drowsing, her head resting against his shoulder. He tightened his arm around her waist, smiling fondly. To his right, he could see that Captain Gimp and the sea rovers were still talking around their fire. Off to his left, the line of the great forest towered in the dark. He wondered what the strange women of the trees and their queen Vilah-ree were doing. Would he ever see one of them again? With an effort, he brought his mind back to the present as Brother Aldo began speaking again.

"We have done well, this far," the old man said. "We've blocked the Unclean, destroyed many of them, and we have this." He pointed to the packet that held the lost volumes of the ancients. "You have accomplished your mission, Per Hiero. But your work is not done. The next danger comes from the South. And it is there that you must go—you and Luchare!"

"What about the books?" Hiero protested. "I am supposed to get them to Abbot Demero as fast as I can. These southern wastes are not my territory. I came here only to get the knowledge we need in the North."

The Elevener smiled faintly. "Don't worry about Demero, my boy. The books will go north with me. Your abbot will approve. I know Demero—have known him longer than you have lived. Who do you think put me on watch for you? Why do you think I was so handy when you were trapped in the drowned city? Think about it for a moment."

Hiero grunted in surprise. But Aldo's words explained many things. It had been no accident, no fortunate coincidence, that had brought the Elevener to aid them so opportunely. How many others had somehow been alerted to watch over this mission? Hiero grinned ruefully. "I should have guessed that Demero would have a few extra tricks he never told me about," he admitted.

Brother Aldo chuckled, then sobered quickly. "I'll leave for the North at dawn. I'll take Gimp and his men with me. We'll get a boat somehow; there are many ways. But I must also take Gorm with me. Call him."

Hiero sent a rapid mind call on the wavelength of the young bear. A moment later, the burly shape of Gorm padded up to them from where he had been curled in apparent sleep. *Does no other ever sleep around here?* came a mental mumble as the bear flopped his bulk down beside them.

Hiero laughed. *You do nothing but sleep while we have to do all the hard thinking and planning.* He eyed Gorm appraisingly. It was fantastic that this strange folk had hardly been noticed by the Abbey students. Their brains were quite as good as human minds, and only their desire for privacy had kept them so long hidden. The Death had caused strange and horrible mutations, but it had also created

wonders, and one of those was the race of Gorm, the silent and hidden bear folk, whose Wise Ones had sent Gorm out to gather knowledge.

You want me to go north with the Old One here, came Gorm's thought. He seemed quite placid, and his brain waves were clear and undisturbed.

"I don't want you to go anywhere away from me," Hiero said aloud, then put the idea into thought. He was conscious of how much he would miss this furry friend. *But Brother Aldo thinks it might be best if you went north with him and got back in touch with the Wise Ones of your folk.*

To Hiero's surprise, Brother Aldo had picked up his thoughts, those he meant to be private as well as those to the bear. Now the old man sent a message meant for both Hiero and Gorm.

Listen well, both of you. This is a great struggle between that which is evil and vile and that which we believe to be good and blessed. The high Councils of the Unclean are sealed to us. But my Order has watched them for many years, back beyond the life span of the remotest grandsire of any here. They seek universal domination and they would restore the evils that brought The Death to the world.

We must work together, we of the honest and life-preserving ones of whatever form. We must fight them wherever they appear. There is great evil rising in the South, in D'alwah and its neighbors. I want Hiero to go there with Luchare, to her ancient kingdom, the nation where I was once a native and which I know well. And you, Gorm, I want to go north and make report to your Elders, to tell them of our need. What say you?

There was an instant of mental silence. Then an ursine thought came in answer. *I must go. I understand some of what you think. It must be so, for it is the charge laid upon me by the Wise Ones of my people. Now can I sleep?*

Suiting action to thought, Gorm got up and wandered off into the dark, where they could hear him curling up again.

"Well, Hiero," Brother Aldo said, "we can use speech again. All this thought sending wears one out, eh?" He smiled.

Hiero found little to smile about. "Even if Abbot Demero might agree to let me go, what do you think I can do down in the South? I know little of D'alwah, save for what Luchare has told me. How-can I help in a strange country with unknown laws and rules of behavior? What can I do in a foreign land without friends, except for this one?" He bent his cheek to nuzzle the mop of tight black curls that lay on his shoulder.

Luchare looked up at him with eyes that were clear, with no sign of sleep in them. "What can you do? Look, Per Hiero Desteen, have you forgotten who I am? My father is King Dariyale of D'alwah, and I'm his only heir. You're my husband. You'll be a prince of the unknown North. Everyone will accept you." She looked over at Brother Aldo. "You have many Eleveners there, don't you? I've seen them helping the village people when there's trouble. That means we have allies there—though not in public. And we'll have Klootz."

She whistled sharply and waved an arm over her head. Hiero smiled as a towering shape paced up to the girl, massive hooves clicking on bits of gravel as it came. A giant head with blubber lips and a drooping snout lowered itself so that the huge, soft nose touched her hair briefly. Then the morse stood

quietly waiting to see why he had been summoned.

When humanity began to pick itself up after The Death, the horses were gone, vanished without a trace. In the far North, the reviving structure of the Abbeys and their dependent farms tried many other animals and found these mutated descendants of the moose to be best. Hiero and Klootz had chosen each other at the annual calf-pick years before, and they had never been separated.

I wonder how he'll like the South, Hiero thought to his mate and the older man. *Nothing like him there. Will the people be afraid of him.?*

"Not afraid," Luchare answered, stroking a leg of the morse. "He would be admired as a creature no one had ever seen before. He would add to your prestige."

Hiero stood up and began to stroke the enormous, palmate antlers with careful fingers, peeling off the velvet where it came away easily. He could feel the heat underneath where this outer cover of the new antlers was not ready. Klootz lipped his shoulder affectionately.

Aldo resumed his argument. "Consider what you have already done in a land foreign to you and with only the help of friends you found along the way. You've saved a princess, crossed the great Inland Sea, and fought and beaten some of our worst enemies. And you've accomplished a nearly impossible mission."

"You've done what no one else could have done," Luchare added when Aldo stopped. "You have defeated the one who calls himself S'duna, the chief of their horrid Blue Circle. Now you can go on to be a leader of my people."

Hiero looked down at her, and his heart filled with this love that was greater than he had ever known before. Then he thought of Abbot Demero, the grim old warrior who had sent him on this mission. Would the ruler of the Abbey Council approve of his going south with a new wife and a new task? He seemed to see the lined old face in his mind, and it was smiling at him. A sign? Hiero shrugged at the idea and then thought again. Perhaps he was picking up a vague and transient thought from far away. He smiled and looked at Brother Aldo, another wise old man who had gone to war because he had no choice in his own soul.

"Tell Gimp that you'll leave for the North at dawn. Luchare and I will go south on Klootz. I assume that you can communicate with your Eleveners in the South? Then send me word and we'll open a channel of messages." He laughed a little sourly. "You say you know Abbot Demero. Then you can keep him off my back and not let me be cursed and expelled from the church. Now let's get a little sleep."

I

The Kingdom of the East

Golden sunlight streamed through the narrow windows of the palace, and a great gong boomed, announcing that day had come again to mighty D'alwah. The sound was echoed and re-echoed from far and near as the watch on the walls and the patrols along the bridges and covered ways answered with their smaller strikers of ringing metal. The whole walled city pealed and rang, a vibrant diapason of challenging sound. Hiero sat up in bed with a jerk, covering his ears against the clamor and muttering darkly.

"You do that every morning," Luchare's voice said. "After all the time we've been here, I should think you'd be used to the gong."

He pried his eyes open to see her dressed and seated at her mirror, coloring her lips and her eyelashes with the bluish paste which was currently the height of fashion at court. He pursed his lips and made a light spitting noise.

She looked around and grinned merrily. "Don't be so stiff. I have to look my best when I'm officially entertaining the noble ladies at breakfast. And what kept you up till all hours last night? Talking religion with our high priest again?"

"Umm." He'd found the breakfast she had ordered for him on a tray beside the bed and he began eating. "Old Markama isn't bad for a high priest—for a D'alwah high priest, that is. But, my God, what has happened to the church down here? *Celibate* priests! And all these so-called monasteries where the nobles send their unwanted young of both sexes to paint wooden pictures or sew and pray all day—and to live in silence and *chastity*! It's as if the Unclean were already in control and determined to make people go crazy." His face became suddenly serious. "And I can't be sure that this isn't a hotbed of the Unclean with their minions all wearing mechanical mind shields."

"Hiero!" Her face grew troubled as she stared at him. "I know you really believe that. You may even be right. But you haven't found any proof—just a few people whose minds you can't read. And you told me when you were training me that a lot of people have natural screens, people who are unaware of it themselves."

He sighed and dropped the subject, while she turned the conversation to the Court Ball that was being given in the palace that evening. But after she left for her official duties, he dressed and moved slowly out of the palace and into the maze of the city, still brooding as he exercised his legs.

There was something ugly and dangerous going on in the royal castle. He could feel it, though no clear thoughts came through to him. But there was a deep undercurrent of hatred, impossible to disguise from someone who had been through all he had with the Unclean and their allies.

Yet he had been treated very well. When he and Luchare appeared on Klootz, the guard at the main gate had saluted, let them through, and given her full royal honors. An hour later, he had been closeted with Luchare and her father, Danyale IX, hereditary ruler of the sovereign state of D'alwah.

To Hiero's surprise, he liked the king, and Danyale made it plain that he liked his new son-in-law.

The king was a large, heavy man, still muscular, but inclining a little to fat, now that he had passed the half-century mark. His curly, graying hair was worn short, and his face was handsome and open over his mustache and beard. His kilts and robes were of a magnificent weave and color, and he wore many rings and pendants. But he was never without a long, two-edged sword whose handle was plain and worn. His handgrip was firm and hard.

Was this the brutal tyrant whose only daughter had fled into the wilderness to avoid a marriage foisted upon her by her dynastic-minded father, as Luchare had claimed?

Danyale brought the matter up while he and Hiero sat on the edge of a parapet of the palace. The ever-present guards had been waved out of earshot and lounged some distance away, conversing in low tones and watching both their ruler and their new prince.

"Look, Hiero, I know what Luchare must have told you about that business of marrying her off to Efrem. But all my nobles insisted—the whole council, including the church fathers. What was I to do? God knows, we must have allies. Chespek was all there was. Efrem is afraid of me, and I thought I could control him, see that he didn't harm the girl. I know the bastard's reputation as well as she does. But, damn it, this kind of thing is part of being a king. And with my only son dead . . ." He looked into Hiero's eyes and said nothing further for a moment.

"I understand," the Metz priest said quietly. "The realm has to come first, all the time." He rather admired the older man. It couldn't be easy for the king to apologize for something he saw as a vital, standard matter of politics.

There was no trouble in communication. Hiero was a master linguist, and Luchare had coached him in the speech of D'alwah for weeks as they journeyed toward her home.

"What will Efrem do now?" Hiero's question was only partly idle. The priests, awed by his powers and knowledge of the past, had told him much, and he had learned more by mind search. But, as a matter of honor, he could not probe Luchare's father. And he needed to know what the man thought, how his mind worked, and what his capabilities were. If D'alwah were to be protected from the Unclean and their grim allies—if it were to be enlisted on the side of the Abbeys—then much still had to be learned.

Danyale's answer was a snort of contempt. "Hell fume in private, then do whatever the priests tell him when he goes to confession for half-murdering some slave girl. Forget him." He eyed Hiero, his wariness apparent all at once. "You seem to have pull with the Church Universal, my boy. Do the nobles up your way control the priests? Down here it has been a long, constant struggle to keep the power in my hands and out of theirs—or worse, from some puppet whom they might raise up against me. You seem to know all their priestly secrets and a lot of your own as well. You could be of much help to me," he added. The attempt was regrettable, Hiero thought; Danyale was no intriguer, but a decent, if not-too-bright, soldier, trapped in a decadent court and surrounded by schemers, both civil and ecclesiastic.

"We do things differently," he evaded. "Our nobles and gentry are so busy fighting the Unclean that we learned long ago to be one pillar of the state and support the church as the other. And," he added, as if in afterthought, "of course we have no actual king, but only a noble, supreme Council with both church and civil members." It was only half a lie, since the Abbey Council was actually that. The fact that there were no nobles could wait until Hiero and the Metz Republic were ready.

"Well," Danyale said heavily, "I suppose you have secrets, too. I find the world harder and harder to understand." He looked up, a smile tugging at the corner of his full lips. "One thing, though. I'm damn glad to have you as a son-in-law, prince or no prince. Oddly enough, I love my daughter and I'm glad to see her happy. But more than that—" He leaned over and tapped Hiero's knee. "I think you're going to be valuable to me, my boy—to me and to D'alwah."

He rose, clapped the Metz on the shoulder, and strode off to his day's duties. He was not an unkingly figure, Hiero reflected, and perhaps somewhat more clever than he appeared.

There were other meetings of a similar nature and meetings with the great men of the kingdom also. Markama, the archpriest, was a decent enough old man and could have exerted great power, had he possessed the basic ability to lead. But he was obsessed with ritual and hieratic obscurantism. But at least he was no enemy, being in awe of Hiero's knowledge, both of church secrets and of the Unclean, whom he truly feared and detested.

Most of the work of the church—the accounts, administration, schools, and such—seemed to be in the hands of one Joseato, a priest just below the archpriest in rank, a thin, colorless bureaucrat who always carried bundles of parchment and had a perpetually distracted air. Hiero found nothing special to dislike about the man. But Joseato had a shielded mind, which was a big factor to consider. Could he have a bluish metal locket under his robes, a mechanical mind screen of the Unclean? Of course, as Luchare had pointed out, the shield could be innate, as many were, or the result of the sketchy mental training which even the southern church had not completely lost. There was no way of telling what power, mental or physical, impelled a good mind shield, and he could hardly ask the priest to strip. Joseato simply had to be watched, as far as that was possible.

He was still pondering as he ceased wandering and turned back toward the palace stables. There were too many shielded minds that needed watching. There was Count Ghiftah Hamili, for instance, a fine soldier as well as a great noble and landowner. The youngish, quiet man had been a suitor at one time for Luchare's hand and was much at court. Although friendly enough, he had a disconcerting gaze which the Metz priest found fixed on himself far too often for his liking.

But at least Hiero had found one sure friend. A senior lay brother of the Eleveners had approached him, alerted through the agency of Aldo and the underground network of the Brotherhood. The fact that Mitrash was a lieutenant of the palace guard made things even better. Day or night, he could come and go without suspicion within the well-protected precincts of the inner fortress. The balding, middle-aged veteran exuded competence. Already, he and Hiero had held several conferences late at night.

The trouble was that Mitrash did not know very much. While eager to be helpful, he was simply a good, honest soldier who had been recruited as an acolyte by the Order and placed in the palace as an observer. He was deeply worried about the inner rot and subversion he saw about him throughout the kingdom, but he was not a mental master like Aldo. He had many contacts and could reach other members of the Order, but this took time. And he was mind-shielded—a good thing in his case. Hiero had requested that Mitrash be assigned as captain of his bodyguard, but the military red tape of D'alwah was no different from that of any other army. Meanwhile, the man was near at hand to guard Luchare if her spouse were called away.

Then the stables were ahead, and it was time to exercise Kloutz and Hiero's new mount, a hopper named Segi.

The giant morse was pleased to see Hiero and butted him playfully while being led from his stall by awed grooms. No one in D'alwah had ever seen or heard of a morse, and the great, antlered creature filled everyone with astonished respect, much of which accrued to his rider. Well aware of this, Hiero took every opportunity to display himself on the huge, swart back before the crowd that usually gathered at the exercise grounds to see them.

Behind the morse came Segi, ridden by a groom. At the appearance of the jumper, the mighty barrel of Kloutz swelled in rage; had the morse been able to catch Segi alone, he would have made pulp of his rival, since the idea of Hiero on another animal's back was intolerable, Segi seemed well aware of this feeling and gave Kloutz a wide berth.

Segi was a hopper, the chosen mount of the cavalry of D'alwah, another mutated replacement mankind had found for the long-extinct horse. Friendly and mild-mannered, Segi towered over his rider by a good six feet. He stood balanced on two giant hind legs and a long, columnar tail. His small forefeet, each no longer than a tall man's arm, were tucked up high on his broad chest. Clothed in smooth, tan fur, with a white blaze on his forehead and great, erect ears cocked first one way and then another, he looked what he was, the prize of the king's stud and a much-valued wedding present to Danyale's new son-in-law.

Hiero knew nothing of the ancestry of the hoppers. But he loved the incredible motion they gave their riders and was determined to learn the complex movements which made mounted drill on hoppers the most fantastic sight that could have been dreamed of by any cavalryman. Segi bore a heavy, almost right-angled saddle high on his back, and its broad girth passed just below his forearms. His jaws carried a snaffle bit, and twin reins led back to the rider. But instead of the conventional stirrups, such as those worn by the morse, a hopper's rider placed his legs in long, stiff sheaths, not unlike expanded versions of the saddle sheath for Hiero's lost thrower. These in turn were secured to the saddle's base and also, by swivels, to a second girth, which was buckled below the first. While difficult to get out of, which was a drawback, these stirrup-boots were absolutely vital. The new prince soon saw why when a guard put a hopper through his paces for the first time. The very high back brace of the saddle also assumed new meaning.

Any ordinary hopper, and Segi was the best, could jump almost fifteen meters from a resting position. Further, the jump could be angled in midair, the mighty tail providing the leverage. At a dead run, or a series of bounds on level terrain, a "full-out" hopper moved at breathtaking speed. Watching a squadron of the household troops drilling at their fastest took Hiero's breath away. Moving in perfect unison, line after line charged, changed direction in the air, and landed in the same matchless formation, never breaking ranks or pausing until the blast of a small brass horn signaled an equally abrupt halt. The long, pennanced lances rose, came to a salute, and were leveled, all in one beautiful fluid motion. Highly trained soldier that he was, Hiero had been enthralled on the spot. With a division of these wonderful creatures and their veteran riders as light cavalry and yet another on the giant morse behind in close support, what an army might one have!

He could have spent the entire day with the hoppers, had he not had a thousand other calls on his time. But he only allowed himself an hour or so, sharing the time exactly with the enraged morse, who paced up and down, snorting with contempt and anger while his master leaped Segi through his exercises under the correction of a time-expired sergeant who now served as royal instructor.

The speed with which their new and exotic prince had mastered his strange mount both amazed and delighted the men of D'alwah. They knew nothing of the mental orders which Hiero used instead of the countless hours they themselves had needed on the drill ground. Segi was by no means as intelligent as Klootz, but he was far from being stupid and took to his new rider at once.

When the exercises were done, Hiero usually took a ride on Klootz, and he always tried to go through the city. D'alwah City was far larger than Kalina, the only other city of the realm, lying many leagues to the south. From his studies and the incessant questions he asked, aided by a fair share of mental eavesdropping, Hiero had managed to acquire a considerable amount of knowledge about his new country. He had taken one all-too-brief trip to the coast and seen for the first time the great, white-topped breakers of the Lantik rolling in to the beach under the high, green dunes. It gave him a strange feeling to think that he was almost certainly the first man of his race ever to have seen both the great ocean of the East and that of the West. Across that foaming sea lay the ultimate in mysteries, Europe, the lost motherland of culture, the home of the original church, long Sundered from the children of the western continent. But there was not much time for musings of this nature, on that day or any other.

As he rode through the crowded streets on the great morse, with two hopper-riding guardsmen in front and two behind, the crowds fell back respectfully and caps and helmets were doffed in salute to his rank. Indeed, he looked like a prince, for he was garbed now in purple silk, both the short blouse and the gold-embroidered kilt, while his leather boots were scarlet, as were the supple riding gloves. His beloved short sword hung on his back, but was held now by a cross-belt of gold links. A thin gold coronet supported the purple cap of maintenance. One snow-white osprey plume nodded above his head,

secured to his cap by a gemmed brooch of great price. The D'alwahns liked color and what was new and interesting. Their pride was stirred by their new prince and by the bazaar gossip of his adventures and the manner in which he had appeared out of nowhere, bringing their lost princess back to them.

As he acknowledged the salutes by touching his cap, Hiero wondered who in the sea of dark faces did not mean the cheers and the congratulations hurled from every street and balcony. Among those white-toothed smiles and behind some of the shuttered windows lurked enemies, the more dangerous for being unknown. Of that he was certain. Try as he would, he could detect no worse thoughts than the usual leaven of envy from some of the poor and sneers from certain of the nobility who were obsessed with their own ancestry. This was only normal. *Where are the real baddies, boy?* he said to Klootz, who was preoccupied with picking his way over ancient cobbles slippery with modern refuse. *Where are the Unclean? They're here, Klootz, they're here, that's for certain. How do we find 'em, how do we smoke 'em out, before they come out and get us first?*

A laughing, half-naked girl shouted something funny and coarse about a possible heir. Hiero shrugged helplessly in mock puzzlement, and the crowd screamed with laughter. Yet all the while, he never really relaxed. The enemy was clever, but not perfect. If he watched without ever letting down his guard, and if Luchare did the same, as he had carefully taught her, sooner or later a break might come. Meanwhile, he could only wait and observe.

There was much to observe. Now crossing a plaza before him were men of a religion other than Christianity—something he had not known, except for the Unclean. They worshiped God, but through another prophet, and they revered the crescent moon. They were Mu'amans, dressed in snowy white and with green, flat-topped conical hats. They had a big colony on the southwestern fringe of the kingdom and mostly stayed within it, being great herdsman and famous breeders of the kaws, the long-horned cattle of the kingdom. For some reason, they despised the hoppers and would have nothing to do with them. But they were mighty runners and made up a fine corps of light infantry, being master bowmen and swordsmen of skill. With their kilts looped up, they could outrun even their own kaws and could keep up the pace for many hours.

Despite their alien rites, their loyalty had never been questioned. Aside from their clothes, they looked like any other D'alwahns, with tight curls and dark faces, sometimes broad of lip and nostril, at other times lean-faced and aquiline. They bowed as Hiero passed, but there was nothing subservient about them, and their sharp eyes carefully appraised him, his weapons and mount, but not his finery.

When they had passed, another company approached, this time a caravan of gaudily clad merchants newly come from the South and stained with travel. Some bore the marks of recent battle, and Hiero knew they would report, as all travelers did, to the court newsmen, whose business it was to know and collate whatever passed throughout the kingdom. Many of these newcomers bore a six-pointed star as a symbol, and Hiero knew them for Davids, the other odd religion of his new country. They seemed identical to all their fellow citizens, being both rich and poor and occupying all places in society. But, though believers in the one God, they had no prophets or saints at all, their priests relying only on certain secret books, never shown to any but coreligionists. Both they and the Mu'amans held high places at court, and some were hereditary nobles; but in private life they kept much to themselves and seldom intermarried with the mainstream of Christianity. Yet Lu-chare and Danyale trusted them implicitly. "I wish I could be as sure of my fellow churchmen as I am of the Davids and the Mu'amans," the king had said bleakly. And indeed, many of both were in the royal guard and the local militia units which made up the realm's army when assembled.

The street narrowed ahead, and Hiero saw that they were coming to one of the many high-walled bridges which crisscrossed the city. These bridges spanned the numerous canals which ran through the

city and far inland as well, linking up a dozen sleepy rivers and also leading to the coastal marshes and estuaries of the Lantik itself. As he approached, Hiero again saw yet a fresh reason for the stone walls of these bridges and the similar ones which lined the canal system. A hideous scaled head, at least two meters long, with fanged jaws still agape in death agony, was thrust on a great iron spike at the bridge's edge, the severed neck dripping scarlet blood into the gutters of the street. As he reined up, Klootz snorted in distaste, stamping his great hooves until the stones rang. One of the rearguard rode his hopper alongside and spoke with the easy familiarity of the long-service man.

"May be a new one to you, Highness. That's a grunter and a damned big one, begging your pardon. I've heard 'em bellowing at the moon in the swamps so you'd think you'd go deaf. Funny, but there weren't so many when I was a lad, or so I remember. Must be the bloody things are breeding more. We'll have to build new walls, even in the out-districts, if all I hear be true."

"Have they any use?" the Metz asked. "They look nasty as hell."

"Well, the meat's not bad if you cure it, though it tastes of fish. And the hide makes good shields and such, though it takes a powerful lot of curing. Whether it makes up for the folk and the cattle and hogs the buggers snatch up is something else. If the country folk don't have a well, getting water's a problem. Even a little grunter, not a third that size, can take a kid. I lost a young cousin off a barge some years ago; opened a hatch to look out and the grunter's head come in instead. Hell of a thing, the way they keep swarming into the cities now. Gets worse every year."

Studying the brown, reptilian head and the glassy eyes, Hiero pondered. The guardsman saw no further than effect. But could there be *cause* as well? If the water and boat guards had to be doubled to fight off these deadly vermin—only one of several equally inimical types—would not the kingdom be effectively weakened, with no trace of the directing minds behind the assault? That the Unclean Masters were capable of such a hidden and subtle attack he had no doubt at all. He had seen too much in the North and on his most recent journey not to know better. It was one more factor to ponder over in a complex and chaotic situation.

He crossed the bridge with his little entourage and went on, looping about the city in a lazy arc on his way back to the palace. He was supposed to review the guards in the late afternoon, and there were envoys from the far South to be seen as well. Danyale had been delighted to have his new son-in-law take such an interest in things and was insistent that as many of his subjects as possible both see and hear Hiero. Then there was the great Court Ball to get ready for, the first of the summer ceremonials, with this one being used as well to put the new prince on display.

The thin mouth under Hiero's black mustache curved in a wry smile. To think that he had been forced by Luchare to take dancing lessons! Fortunately, he was not likely to shame her. He had been born with a sense of rhythm, and the dances of the Metz Republic were something he had always excelled at.

Now, as he crossed yet another square, nodding and touching his cap to the continual salutes, a broad smile came to his face. A wildly ridden hopper was bounding toward him from the other side of the plaza. A gaudy figure was waving from its back, maintaining easy but perilous control as the creature leaped over clothing stalls and farmers' wains. The panting animal came to a halt with a thud not an inch from Klootz's disdainful muzzle, and a laughing face under the rider's scarlet turban flashed white teeth in greeting.

"Salutations, most noble prince from the land of ice dragons."

This was Duke Amibale Aeo, Luchare's young cousin, come from his great southern fief only a week

ago, but already a favorite of Hiero's, as he was of the whole city's. The son of the king's dead first cousin, only nineteen and still sprouting a first, thin mustache, the boy wore his honors lightly. When not galloping his hopper along the battlements of the castle for a bet, he was hunting the wild river beasts in a one-man canoe. A string of broken hearts lay behind him despite his age, and he could take the strong D'alwahn wine as well as any veteran of the guard. Under the laughter and the bubbling spate of conversation, jest, and gossip, Hiero knew there was a man, if a young one. The slanting black eyes were full of intelligence and wit, and the Metz had noted that when the face was in repose, strong lines etched the narrow, dark features. As he rode along, gossiping gaily, bare to the waist and wearing only a scarlet kilt and boots, Amibale made a fine complement to his companion. The slender, curved sword and dagger at his side proclaimed that he could fight if called upon at a moment's notice.

"All ready for the big ball, Hiero?" he asked. "Wait until you see what I'm wearing. I'll show these stuffy old types around the palace what a Prince of the Blood ought to look like for a change. I hope you and Luchare have something special to knock their eyes out with. Not that I worry about her. But you, you drab northerner, I hear it took the guard to get you out of that leather suit you arrived in."

"We're coming as man and wife in the Metz dress costume," Hiero said, staring straight ahead. "White linen robes with no jewelry. It keeps off evil spirits."

Amibale swerved his hopper neatly to catch a bunch of scarlet orchids a giggling girl had tossed him from a low balcony. He tucked one behind his ear and the others in his mount's harness before turning back to Hiero, his face a blank mask of dismay. At the sight of the broad grin on Hiero's face, the boy exploded in a volley of profanity, ending in more laughter.

"Damn you! That iron face of yours would fool anyone. For all I know—for all any of us knows—you might just do it. Seriously, what are you really wearing? It's a masked ball, you know—an old tradition, they say, from the days when everyone was afraid of being assassinated at parties or afterward. Come on," he wheedled. "I won't tell anyone, honest."

"Well, Luchare said I was to surprise people, but I suppose you don't count, as usual, you scamp. Luchare wouldn't even show me hers. I'm going as one of the Blue Men, but in silk and with a gold border. Be damned if I'd wear anything more elaborate than that. You people have a mania for fancy dress down here in the swamps. I believe most D'alwahns would rather starve than go without pretty clothes, especially on a feast day."

The young duke did not deny the gibe. "It's our warm southern blood, which you ice people can't understand." He looked thoughtful as they approached the main gates of the palace and the guard began to turn out. "Blue Man, eh? The veiled folk who live on the edges of the western desert. Pretty good disguise, that. They say they took the blue color from the Deserts of The Death, since they were the first to move back into those areas after The Death. It's claimed they can detect the fires of The Death in their own bodies and avoid the places that are still dangerous."

As Hiero returned the guards' salute, reining Klootz to a walk, he reflected that there was no point in telling his companion that he too could avoid such places of peril by the same methods. Idly, he mind-probed Amibale, confirming again that the lad had a mind screen as good as his own. The high nobles were often taught the technique in the monastery schools they attended when young, though the practice was falling into disuse, since the church saw no need for it any longer.

Hiero threw him a farewell, then forgot Amibale as he dismounted and headed for his own quarters, his mind burning with this new thought. No need for mental training? And this at a time when the Unclean were putting forth their greatest effort! The rot was deep in D'alwah, deep indeed. A lot of grubbing and

wrenching would be needed to tear it out in the face of ignorance and superstition, especially if the mental masters of evil were actively on the scene, as he and Brother Aldo suspected. The Metz priest was still fuming inwardly as he came into his apartment, his expression as he passed the guard in the corridor making that experienced courtier refrain from greeting him.

"Well," his wife said brightly. "We're alone. I could feel a black cloud coming up the stairs; from your face, I see its origin. What has the mighty master of the marvels and mysteries of Metzland found to annoy him this time?"

Hiero smiled in spite of himself as she kissed him. "Call it the murk and mire of maleficent, monstrous, and malign motivations. Allied," he added, drawing breath, "to the marble-brained moronity and mind-bending muddleheadedness of your—" Here, a small palm covered his lips.

"I know, I don't even have to guess. The stupidity of the local church, the decay of moral fiber among the priesthood and nobility, the unwillingness to face facts and see how the enemy has moved among us. Right on all counts, am I not?"

"On all. And more. But I shouldn't bother you on party night.

It's mid-afternoon already. Is that your party dress?" he asked, visibly admiring the semitransparent white shift which appeared to be her sole garment.

"You idiot! This is a house robe! Party dress indeed! Why did I yoke myself to a barbarian peasant who wouldn't notice if I wore rags instead of proper clothes?"

"Well," Hiero said, "you were hardly wearing even that when I first saw you. One look at all that smooth skin, indecent though it was, and I said to Klootz, 'Klootz, old boy,' I said, 'who needs clothes?' Ask him yourself if you don't believe me."

He dropped into a broad chair and she came and plumped herself into his lap. Sometime later, she sat up and looked serious. "Is there something new bothering you? Have you learned anything today?"

"No." He rose and walked to the narrow window, to stare out over the city, whose noise reached their tower suite in a muted hum, before he answered.

"But I saw a fresh head of one of the river monsters on a spike. Old Jabbarah the guard said that the things are much more numerous and more dangerous in recent years. Could be the Unclean are behind it. Nothing there they couldn't handle in some dirty way or other. That's not the real problem, though, at least not at the moment. What bothers me is the increasing *feel* that there is something at work right here, under our noses. I even felt suspicious of that young ape Amibale for a second. But there's something going on and I can't find it, despite all I've learned."

"A lot of it is probably nerves, plus having to wear what you think of as silly costumes and be on display all the time. Though," she added, "if you were a local, you wouldn't jib at being suspicious of Amibale. He's a young brat; but after all, he is also next to me in the royal succession, you know. My father has a lot of plans for him, if we can ever get him to grow up a little. Thank goodness, he doesn't take after his mother. The father was a bit dumb—cousin Karimbale, that is. But Fuala—whew!"

"What was her problem?" Hiero asked idly, still staring down over the distant streets. "I mean, she's dead, isn't she? And the father, too?"

"Very," was the dry answer. "A lover, one of many, stabbed her while in the ducal bed. He was pulled between two mad hoppers until he came apart. *Lese majeste* and all that. Frankly, my father was relieved. She never came to court much. Too many eyes. But I remember her well. God knows, she was really beautiful, but there was something purely evil about her. She spent lots of time off alone somewhere in the forest when she was down south, and she used to take Amibale off with her for weeks at a time with almost no attendants except some scary jungle folk who were her family's personal pets. She may have been just a nasty slut, but I never trusted her, nor did Dad. He always felt she had political ambitions. She really ran the duchy, and that fool of a husband did whatever she said. Some of her punishments for slaves were drastic. No, Fuala was not nice. Amibale is far better off with her dead. If she is dead."

"You just said she was very dead indeed. What kind of a remark was that, may I ask?"

It was Luchare's turn to look away, and Hiero realized with some amusement that she was actually embarrassed.

"More than a few people thought she was a witch, and of course they can't be killed, except in special ways." Luchare turned to look him in the eye. "If you must know, she made my skin crawl. I'm not afraid of very much, but I was terrified of her. Of course she's dead, but she radiated such intensity, along with so much nastiness, all as smooth as ice, that she, well, she still makes me nervous, that's all. Karimbale died a month after she did. They said it was disease," she added with seeming inconsequence.

"Well," her husband said soothingly, "we all have a few people who get our backs up. And speaking of getting backs up, I had better see to that inspection of the guard detachment, or the southern traders' delegation will have theirs up when I'm late to receive them in audience with your father. See you back here at dress-up-and-be-a-fool time."

She threw a pillow at him as he went out the door.

The ball was indeed a thing of splendor and color such as Hiero could never have imagined. The Great Hall was lighted with lanterns and cressets and filled with a thousand fragrances. His azure and gold robes and hood were drab compared with most of the costumes. The king was all in purple and white, with a blaze of great gems. Luchare was sheathed in emerald green, almost without jewels, save for the great bracelet of the tree women flashing on one bare, dark arm; a green half-mask accentuated her lovely face. The priests of the Church Universal attended in their magnificent robes, since this was a state occasion to be blessed. And clad, masked, and jeweled in the colors of the rainbow, the nobility of the realm spun and wheeled to the beat of the drums and horns playing the exotic southern music. The women were no more colorful than the men.

Hiero had little opportunity to do more than gain a general impression. He was leaning against a marble pillar, studying the scene in real wonder, when an upper servant touched his arm.

"Pardon, your Highness, but there is an urgent message. You are wanted in the hall at once. It's from one of your guardsmen, I gather."

Wondering what this might mean, Hiero followed the man, whose face was vaguely familiar. As he left the vast ballroom, he sent a thought to Luchare. She was out in the middle of the floor, apparently being dutifully attentive to some well-connected idiot whose family controlled something important.

A message from some guard, my love, supposed to be urgent. Back soon,

There was a sense of laughter and warm love in her answer. *Take your time, but not too long, love. There are five fat ladies you must dance with before you can really leave — all for the honor of the kingdom!*

He grinned and followed the man through a door into a small side room off the main hall, his mind still on Luchare. He was suddenly conscious of quick movement to his right, but he had no time to turn. Then the blow struck his head, and his consciousness departed.

II

A man alone

For a long time, there was no real waking period, but there were impressions—impressions which Hiero knew were real and not the stuff of nightmares.

Faces swam before his blurred vision. There was the face of Joseato peering down at him, while he lay strapped to a bench in some dim room in the rabbit warren of the palace vaults, a place half-glimpsed through pain and the agony of his aching head. The face was no longer that of the harassed functionary, but something older and colder, the eyes gleaming with mockery and triumph. Hiero realized that he had never really seen Joseato's eyes before and cursed himself in some far corner of his mind. Out of the familiar face glared the gaze of the Unclean!

Hiero writhed frantically against the bonds which held him fast. The movement brought another face into view, and horror stilled his struggles. It was the face of Amibale Aeo, and from the young eyes came the same blaze of pure evil, with something else added to it; Amibale was quite mad, the madness mixed with the malign blasphemy which was the essence of the Unclean. Memory flickered across Hiero's tormented mind. *She was a witch*, the dulled memory said, fighting the constant pain. *She took him on trips to the jungle*.

He felt a fresh stab in his arm and saw that Joseato held a glass tube capped with a bloody needle aloft.

"We can kill him later," came a harsh whisper. "Not now. The chances are that the princess would know and act. They are sure in the North that he can talk to her mind. But if she feels no death, only silence, that gives us time. They say this kills the mind powers, but they warn us to be wary; he is strange and powerful. He must die, but away—far away. Distance lowers the mind touch. Even he cannot reach over long distances—not yet. He must stay drugged. Then he will be silent until he dies. Do you understand?"

"Oh, yes. Quite well." The beardless face grimaced, and the ghastly eyes still shone from the young, unlined face. "I will get him away. Go back to the ball. I will follow shortly. Both of us should not be away. Leave this to me. One of my caravans leaves for the west at dawn and . . ."

Then the pain became too great to fight, and Hiero fainted.

During the following hours, he woke at random intervals, sometimes hot, sometimes chilled with unnatural cold. Tightly bound with dirty cloths, he lay in some strange thing that creaked, swayed, and stank. He wondered idly if he were on a ship, but it did not seem important. He tried weakly to use the mind touch, but nothing happened, and he knew without conscious consideration that he had lost it. Just as he had been robbed of his physical freedom, his mental strength had been despoiled. All sense of time and distance seemed lacking, too, and he had no idea of where or when this was. He dimly remembered being fed some vile broth. He dimly knew it was drugged, but he had no power to resist; he swallowed

whatever they gave him, half in a coma. The strange, savage faces he glimpsed at times meant no more to him than any other elements of a seemingly endless nightmare. At times it seemed dark, at others light, but that did not seem important.

Then there was a sudden, hideous chorus of shrieks, followed by a wild discordance of meaningless cries, vibrations, and movements. The thing which carried him lurched violently, and a vast weight fell upon him. Some of his wrappings were torn in the convulsive motions of the weight. For seconds, pain shot through his legs. Instinctively, he kicked as hard as he could, some faint surge of adrenaline coming to his aid, and he found himself almost free of the weight. His eyes were covered, and he could see nothing. His hands were bound, but he could loose them . . .

Don't loose them! Lie quiet, the inmost voice of his being warned. *It is death to move.*

He heard quick, almost furtive movements and the sounds of metal scraping and leather creaking. A voice muttered nearby and was answered by another farther off. There was a thudding as of beasts moving fast, then silence. Still he lay motionless, his tired mind intent only on making no sound. Presently, without knowing he had done so, he fell asleep.

When he awakened, he was hungry and thirsty, but not unreasonably so. His legs seemed free, though not his hands, and some cloth binding still covered his eyes. It was an easy matter to pull away the rag with which his eyes had been shrouded, even with bound hands. He gazed about, blinking in the light of the afternoon sun. He was lying in a hollow, under some low, scrubby bushes. Some large object pressed against his face, looming high over him and obscuring his vision. An already strong smell of decomposition informed him that it had been some animal. He was also tangled in a mesh of what seemed to be canvas and leather.

He lay quiet for a bit and listened. There was a light breeze playing through the bush above him, but the only other sound he could hear was a cackling, gabbling noise which came and went, sometimes rising to a squawk, then dying down again. He had no difficulty in identifying the voices of scavenger birds and he realized he must be lying in a place of death.

His mind was clearing rapidly now. He examined his hands. They were not bound with chains or leather thongs, as he had feared, but only with strips of cotton rag. Evidently his captors had feared no serious effort to escape.

It was no trouble to free himself. Then he pulled himself up over the dead beast whose body had sheltered him.

Five dead, gray kaws, the common beast of burden of D'alwah and the far South, lay about a small clearing. He was peering over the corpse of a sixth, and the broken-off shaft of an arrow an inch from his face was sufficient explanation of its death. Four absolutely naked men, their bodies in contorted attitudes, lay mingled with the dead cattle. Everything had been stripped from the dead, save for the battered harness of his own mount—for such he realized it must have been. He had been carried in some kind of crude canvas and leather litter on its broad back.

A flock of small, black vultures with oily, naked heads were tearing at the dead men. They looked up alertly as his head appeared, then took wing to settle in nearby bushes. Nothing else moved, and the only sound was the muted cackle of the scavengers.

Forcing his mind to throw off its dullness, he tried to reason out what must have happened.

The four men, and perhaps others, were taking him somewhere, walking alongside the kaws. They were ambushed, probably at dusk or even at night. His beast had died instantly, almost, but luckily had not fallen quite on top of him. The attackers' hasty search had missed him, sheltered in the wreckage of his litter and almost covered by the kaw's body. The ambushers had been in a hurry, probably afraid of discovery and pursuit, and they had decamped hastily after stripping the dead of everything they could find and use.

Hiero's legs were as long unused as his head, but he staggered to the middle of the clearing. The croaking of the birds had grown louder, but they did not take wing as he surveyed the scene at closer range.

The dead men were unknown to him. He did not like what he saw of them, particularly since he was now sure they had been his late captors or guards. Even allowing for the agonies of death, they were unprepossessing, being small and of a sallow white color. Their long hair was also pale, and they were clean-shaven, with narrow eyes and protuberant jaws. They somehow did not appear to be creatures of daylight. He wondered who they were and where they had been taking him.

Staring at the landscape of thorn scrub about him in the waning afternoon sun, he forced his dormant training to come back to him, despite his spinning head. Slowly at first, he began to search for anything which might be useful. No weapons lay about, though he was sure there had been plenty of them when the attack came. Indeed, nothing lay about except the corpses. Aside from missing him, the attackers had done a most complete job of plunder. Even the arrows had been retrieved, save for the stub buried in his kaw. There was nothing he could use and no clue to either his captors or those who had slain them.

Other than worn leather shorts and sandals in which he found himself dressed, he had absolutely nothing.

He was just beginning to examine the tracks which littered the clearing, finding only the rough marks of booted feet and some hoof prints of kaws, when the carrion birds fell silent, then lifted from the bushes. From, a remote distance to the east, there came the faint note of a questing horn.

Hiero stood frozen. The birds had flown off low over the thorny scrub, not high in a flock, for which he was grateful. He did not know who had sounded that horn, but as far as he was concerned, this empty waste held nothing but foes. And they might have marked the birds rising.

Again the horn sounded, a solitary call. This time it was answered from the south and the north, though both calls were far off and still well to the east of his position. There had been at least four horns, he estimated, well spaced, signaling position and future movement. Someone had been driving in a long line, looking for something. For what, if not for him?

Hardly thinking, his reflexes taking over, aided by years of training, the Metz stooped and seized a dead branch of thorn bush that was covered with small leaves. Quickly he erased all traces of his presence from the dry earth. Then he began to run slowly to the west, keeping to gravel where he could; when that was not possible, he brushed the ground gently to blot his tracks.

He ran for what he estimated was half an hour, maintaining constant awareness of where he trod. Behind him, the horns still called. The distance seemed the same as when he had first heard them, indicating that the pursuit was moving at roughly the same speed as he was.

The sun was now sinking fast ahead of him, and it showed him that the scrub was thinning out. There were more patches of sand and pebble underfoot now, and both the bush and the sparse, wiry grass had almost disappeared. The color of the earth itself had changed from a sandy brown to a bluish gray.

Later, the sound of the horns changed. At least two of them pealed out in short, summoning notes. Hiero knew they had come upon the dead and were signaling a rally. He trudged grimly on. It was agonizing to think that they might be friends, perhaps sent by Luchare to rescue him, but the chances were too small; he had no idea where he was or how far he had come since being kidnapped, but it must be a long way. If he were right, the blueness of the ground and the increasing absence of vegetation meant that he was heading into fresh and unknown dangers. He had seen this thinning scrub far to the north and knew that it portended the approach of a desert. In the latitude of D'alwah, there was only one kind of desert marked on the map—one of the Deserts of The Death.

Soon he knew he was right. The last bushes died away; there before him, glittering with fragments of mica and blue, siliceous sands, stretched the desert, unbroken to the western horizon. Behind him, the horns sounded again with their original, questing notes.

Hiero had no choice of action. Waterless, foodless, and without weapons, he set out into the waste, determined that he would not be taken again. Anything was better than his late captivity.

As night came on, the horns fell silent. But he plodded on and on, his face fixed toward the west. By now, his pace was slow and uneven, and he stumbled at intervals. Once he fell to his knees. Rising took most of his energy.

He limped across a shallow basin and reached a patch of naked rock, where the going was easier than on the soft sand. Here he rested, his breath coming in short gasps. He worked a small pebble over his dry tongue; it was better than nothing, but he needed water badly. His disciplined body could go without food, but he must have water.

He raised his head and surveyed the arid landscape that was revealed by the light of the half-moon. Broad patches of sand stretched south as far as his gaze could reach. To the east, the sands ran to the distant horizon; and the north held more sand, mingled with patches of pebbles and broken rock. But to the west, black spires showed against the stars—perhaps pinnacles of a range or buttresses of a line of low, jagged cliffs.

With a supreme effort, he rose to his feet. If there were any place of safety, those western peaks might hold it. There could be caves or at least crannies in which he could shelter through the heat of the coming day. There might even be sources of water and food, if he were clever enough to find them.

As he braced himself to continue, there came a faint, distant sound out of the south. Hiero listened intently, trying for the hundredth time to focus the powers of his mind for mental search, as he had painstakingly taught himself in the last year. His whole frame tensed with an almost physical effort as he tried to probe the night. At last, he subsided with a silent curse. Whatever had been done to him must have been permanent. He was *blind* in the use of his mental powers. Somehow, his talents had been stolen from him by drugs, and now he was helpless, without either physical or mental weapons on this plain. He cursed himself again, then rebuked himself. He made the sign of the cross on his naked breast and murmured a brief prayer of remorse. He had forgotten he was a priest and that a priest thanked God for his blessings—such as being alive at all!

He set out for the distant hills at a slow, steady trot, trying to ignore his fatigue and the ever-increasing thirst. As he went, he listened intently. No sound broke the silence, save the shuffle and scrape of his sandals, but he was not to be misled. His ability to probe for the minds of other beings might be gone; but, dormant in his brain, some of the synapses that had guarded him for so long still stirred and flickered, if in a dim and half-useless way. There was evil in the night! He knew it as if it were written in letters of

fire on the sands. Someone or something hunted, and, since he had no defenses of any kind, he must find shelter or die in the attempt. He forced himself to plod on, concentrating on simply placing one foot in front of the other. He had no illusions about his present predicament. He was in a place of hideous danger, one from which few of the rare travelers who ventured had ever returned, one of the Deserts of The Death.

Thousands of years in the past, the hell fires of the atom had totally blighted many places. The worst of these still shone with the bale glow of radiation and were utterly lethal. Yet this was not one of those. Like all the Metz of the far North, Hiero had an inbred sensitivity, as well as some tolerance to radiation. He could sense that this was one of the barren patches from which most, if not all, of the killing gamma rays had long since evaporated. That did not mean his peril was less; perhaps it was only longer delayed.

For though no blue witch fires danced upon the sand and broken scree around him, still the area seemed lifeless and waterless. No plants grew, not even lichens, at least not in the stretch he had traversed since the previous dawn. Yet the fading radiation had left its mark in other ways. Strange life had come to be, bred from horrid mutation; all over the world, and in these deserts it was deemed strangest of all. The landscape might appear empty in the wan light but there was life, of a sort. Despite the loss of his mind-search abilities, he could feel it. There was a growing menace which throbbed in his already aching skull. Doggedly, he trudged on, his gaze fixed on the dark towers of rock which rose out of the west to meet him.

Again he paused to catch his breath, but this time went only to one knee, fearful that he would not be able to rise if he squatted. And once more out of the south came the sound. This time it was clearer, a strange, high, wavering noise, as if somehow in the night a monstrous sheep blethered on an impossibly high note. Priest and Killman, soldier and ranger that he was, Hiero felt a finger of ice trace the length of his spine. Whatever made that noise was not something he wanted to meet. Again he crossed himself and then rose and set off once more into the west. He was numb with exhaustion, but he continued on. The cry was surely that of a hunter, and it must be a hunter on his trail. How it had been summoned, whence it had come to place itself on his track, he could not guess. But he *knew* that it was.

Despite his condition, he kept moving steadily along. When he next looked up, he saw that the hills had risen before him and that slopes and ridges of rock were already rising to the left and right from the drifted sand and erg which had been his companions for so many weary hours. He caught a distant glimpse of a spiky thing jutting from a crevice off to his left and recognized it as some sort of plant, though of a strange and unpleasant kind. Perhaps he could find water after all, if he persisted. On and yet on he went, the last moisture in his body coating him in a crackled film of grit and perspiration.

Behind him, the evil cry quavered out under the sky once more, far louder than when last heard, alien and rife with menace, trailing off into that impossibly high note which almost physically hurt the inner fibers of his being. He did not stop this time, but drew on his last stores of energy to lope over the rising ground to his front.

Had the night been dark, he might have been totally helpless, forced to move at a crawl. But the half-moon showed him that a small canyon sloped up into the higher rock ahead of him, black and menacing, yet a haven of refuge to him. If he could only hold out long enough to get into the hills!

He reached the mouth of the ravine and lurched into it, straining at every muscle. The moonlight entered only in patches, but he could see sufficiently for his needs. The floor under his sandals was shale, worn and slippery, but he managed to keep his feet while he sought on either side for the shadow of a cave or other place of refuge. There was no further sound behind him, but he was not deceived. Whatever followed was close upon him. If he found no hiding place in the next few minutes, he was doomed.

For a second a face filled his mind, the face of a lovely woman, dark and mysterious, with masses of tight curls, soft, full lips, and dark, lustrous eyes. Luchare! Was he to perish alone and lost, never to see her smile again? Frantically, clumsily, he clambered up the narrowing gully, his soldier's gaze never ceasing to search for some place that would at least give him a fighting chance to live. Yet no cranny broke the smooth rock walls, which had now closed in until they were no more than the length of his body away on either hand. In desperation, he looked up and then saw it.

Ahead some small distance, the winding passage bent both upward and to his left. As it did so, a narrow buttress towered up from the southern wall, like a rough and broken turret, narrowing at the top to a tiny platform. But the side of the pinnacle, as it abutted the gorge, was cracked and broken! To a skilled climber, it presented an ascent of no great difficulty. Weary though he was, Hiero felt a thrill of energy course through his veins. In a second he had reached the base of the craglet and had begun his climb, placing his hands and feet swiftly and surely as he swarmed upward.

The spike of crumbling stone was not high, perhaps a little more than five times his own height, and he was soon at the top. With a gasp of effort, he pulled himself up and over the rim and flopped down on the more or less level ledge which crowned it.

But he dared not rest for a second. He did not know what followed, nor its powers, and he knew it was coming hard upon his track. To something which could climb, his new shelter might become a trap of a most terrible kind. His eyes swept the narrow top of the crumbling monolith, and a fierce gleam lit them. At arms' length there lay several massive chunks of broken stone, the products of weather and erosion in the distant past. As quietly as he could, he gathered two of the larger ones close to his chest, trying not to grunt with the effort of his fading strength. Then he sought to relax, while he peered back down the black ravine, watching as steadily as possible for the pursuer he knew to be coming, willing his body to snatch even a few seconds of rest for the ordeal to follow.

And then he heard it. At first it was simply a muffled noise in the silent night, the sound of a heavy movement, then another and another. He was listening to the soft tread of some massive body advancing up the same path he had followed only moments before, a body trying to move as quietly as possible in the hope of coming upon its prey unawares. His eyes narrowed in pure rage. At least he was not taken by surprise. The hunter would learn that a Metz Kiliman was not to be chivied across the sand like a hunted deer. After days of helplessness, here was something at which he could strike!

Closer and closer came the sounds. Once he heard a faint rattle on the shale, as if a monstrous claw had touched upon a fragment of loose rock. Now he could detect the sounds of breathing, deep and hoarse. And then around a corner below, it came.

Veteran though he was of strange combats, hardened to the monstrous life forms spawned by The Death, Hiero nevertheless drew a deep gulp of air as he stared down at what had been drawn out of the southern wastes to seek his blood.

In the flickering and uncertain moonlight, there appeared a shifting bulk of a strange blue tint, as if the blue poison fires of the great desert had left their awful legacy in the color of this, their spawn. The great tailless trunk, the size of along-extinct horse, was carried on four massive legs, ending in mighty three-curved hooves which were more like vast talons. The long neck, mottled with the bluish glaze, ended in a head also not unlike that of a horse, but hideous tusks protruded from the blubber lips. And from the great, earless head there rose twin spires of bone, each pointed with a needle spike.

But the most dreadful feature, one which set the monster apart from all normal life, was its *eyes*. Hollow

orbs of lambent flame, they were pupilless and ablaze with cold light. And the man, frozen on his ledge, knew at what he looked.

This was the Death Hart, of which he had read in the ancient records of D'alwah. Far in the remote past, these monsters had been common and had preyed on the scattered humans of the South in packs, emerging from their desert lairs to slaughter and pull down any living meat they could find, ravaging the lands which bordered the desert until the few scattered tribes that lived there had fled in anguish and despair. Not for many lives now had the creatures been seen, and they had become only a matter of awful legend, at least in the minds of men.

As he looked at the slavering jaws, Hiero knew that whatever creature had given rise to this abomination in the lost ages, it was now no eater of grass! Of a size scarcely less than Klootz, this thing was yet a carnivore, designed to rend and tear living flesh, to shatter bone and sinew to feed its incredible maw.

As he stared, his mind racing at the embodied sight of the horrific past come to life before him, it looked up and saw him. Once more, that horrid, yammering call rang through the clear night air, this time in a volume of sheer noise that left the senses numb as it resounded and echoed off the rock walls. Hiero closed his eyes for a second as the vibrations of that frightful call pierced through his body to the very marrow of his bones.

As the echoes of that ghastly cry died into silence, he opened his eyes, just in time to see the demon of the desert hurl itself upward at him, the hideous mouth open to expose both the rows of fangs and the massive tusks set at the corners of the colossal gape. Then it sprang.

Braced though he was for the attack, the Metz priest was still taken by surprise. The enormous haunches had a strength he would not have believed, and the leap carried the great body almost to his own level in one incredible bound. For an awful instant, he stared into the oily light of the brute's eyes from no more than a sword's length away, while its filthy breath spume poured over him in a wave of hot loathsomeness. Then it was gone and he heard a colossal thud as it fell back to the base of the rock.

His heart pounding, Hiero peered over the lip of the monolith, hoping against hope that the atrocity had done itself some injury in that mighty fall, only to see it crouched below, unharmed and glaring upward with the same avid lust. Not by any short slip or fall could that strange body be injured. Hiero remembered that the ancient scrolls had emphasized the invulnerability of the beasts, claiming they could tear down the heavy timbers of village walls like so many jackstraws. This thing would never fail through any efforts of its own. If he were to survive, he must carry the battle to the enemy, hopeless though that might appear.

As he watched, the monster reared up again, but this time slowly, until the great hoof-claws of the forelimbs were stretched to their fullest limits. As the three great talons of each leg clamped into the rock of the cliff, they bit in, the wirelike sinews contracting, crunching in at almost beyond a believable rate. As Hiero stared, aghast, the rock up which he had clambered ground and crumbled. Below, he could hear the terrible rear limbs crush the eroded stone in the same way. The hideous eyes stared up at him, unwinking. Even as he recoiled, the mighty hindquarters drew *up*. Before his unbelieving stare, the abortion out of vanished memory was actually clinging and grinding its way *into* the rock. It was a feat almost beyond belief, even after his sight of its capabilities in that initial leap. Next, he knew, the great forearms would extend once more, and this time they would be *over* the ledge of his shelter! And a remote, still corner of his mind said that would be all!

The dreadful orbs froze his blood as he crouched on the summit. As in a dream, he saw the talons of the right forepaw begin to extend upward for the last time.

He rose to his feet in one lithe, flowing movement and, high above his head, he balanced the bigger of the two chunks of scree which he had hoarded against such a moment. It was a great, jagged thing, barely within his powers to lift.

The monster gaped, the vast, fang-lined jaws open, as it once more drew breath for that appalling sound. The rock came down with all the strength in Hiero's tired body. Between the foam-flecked lips, past the cruel ranks of fang and tusk, it tore with the weight and speed of an avalanche, deep into the yawning gullet, a projectile of both murderous force and certainty. There was a sound as if some incredible axe had bitten into a vast, half-rotted log. A horrid, choked scream welled up, bubbling through ripped tissue and foul blood. Again came the thump of a tremendous fall, and then a flopping, scrabbling noise, punctuated by the thrashing and beating of giant limbs. Then there was silence, and the exhausted man felt a faint breeze stir his hair and the beat of life in his veins.

Slowly and painfully, Hiero inched his way forward once more and looked down at the base of the crag. His gaze was swimming and he knew he could not hold on to consciousness much longer, but one glance was sufficient.

The great bulk which lay below, limp and awful, could certainly never move again. The long neck writhed outward in the last agony, and a black stream of its life's blood trickled and dripped over the ravine's floor from the shattered skull, down into darkness. Hiero's crude weapon had driven deep into the malformed head and had torn into the brain and the seat of the central nervous system. Unused to any opposition from its prey, the beast had succumbed to desperation, courage, and plain gravity.

The man tried to mouth a prayer, but got no further than the word "God." Then he sank back into a drugged exhaustion. It was not true sleep, but the reaction of a totally overstrained mind and body, a sort of trance in which he knew himself to be alive, but was unable to do more than simply breathe. His eyes shut and his body slowly curled into a fetal position, while his brain reeled and spun through emptiness and nullity. Eventually he really slept, his soul adrift in the cosmos.

He awoke suddenly, all senses alert. His body felt as if it were aflame, and his tongue felt like a dry stick as he tried to run it over his cracked and broken lips.

Glancing up, he saw the fiery sun at zenith and knew that he had slept for many long hours. No more than half the night had gone before his encounter with the unholy Death Hart, and now it was once again noon. He felt faint and still utterly weary, but he forced himself to think, though even thought called for an almost physical effort. Water! Water and some cover. He could not survive another day in the appalling heat of this empty waste without liquid and shelter. He had to start at once while some faint energy remained in his flagging muscles, while he could still reason, and even search for help.

A quick look and the simultaneous realization of a noisome stench showed him the bloated carcass of his late enemy sprawled at the base of his refuge; rot had set in with blinding speed. Around the huge corpse, he caught small, flickering movements. Light glinted off lithe bodies as a horde of some scavenging vermin tore and burrowed into the foul meat of that huge decay. Focusing as well as he could and squinting in the desert glare, he could make out pointed heads, glittering green scales, and short legs, as well as the red glitter of many beady eyes. The things seemed to be some vile combination of rat and lizard, well suited to their home and as alien as the dead monster to the rest of life.

Looking about, the Metz selected yet another loose fragment of the rock on which he lay, this one a narrow splinter as long as his forearm, not unlike a crude stalactite. It was not much of a weapon, but it might be enough, should the things below be more than scavengers. In any case, he reminded himself

grimly, he had no choice. He had to leave now.

He tucked the crude stone knife in his waist, where a thong supported his ragged leather shorts, and began to climb cautiously down. As he went, he watched the creatures carefully, alert for any signs that they might attack,

He was more than halfway down when they saw him, and then all movement ceased. At least a score of sharp muzzles pointed up, and the red eyes stared unblinkingly, the shimmering bodies frozen, as they watched him descend. Short-legged and no bigger than house cats, there was nevertheless enough of them to menace an exhausted and almost weaponless man. He stared at them for a moment, wondering if the needle claws and fangs he could now see could be poisoned. It would fit with everything else he had seen in this sun-blistered hell. It made no difference. There was still no choice but to go down. He did so, slowly and steadily, one hand ready to snatch the weapon from his side, should it be needed.

For one instant, as his foot touched the rock floor of the gully, he seemed to feel a wave of hate in his mind. Then, like an explosion of greenish light, the creatures were gone, and the stinking, torn bulk of the dead beast was the only other tenant of the place. Hiero leaned against the wall of the spire, limp with reaction. Apparently the things found him as alien as he them, and they had doubts enough about his powers not to challenge them.

Choking in the foetor billowing from the pile of carrion beside him, he set off up the canyon, moving at a walk, which was all he could manage. It was a relief to round the base of the rock at last and move up into cleaner air, but such relief was only momentary. He could die from the terrible sunfire as easily as from the fangs of any beast. The lizard-rats might have the last word in the end.

An hour later, he was again almost at the limit of his strength. He had reached the top of the ravine and found himself on the rim of a low plateau. The top of this mesa ran only a short distance to the north, but its broken, eroded surface stretched as far south as he could see, a brooding emptiness of umber and ebon minerals.

Short and weather-worn peaks rose here and there, and now and again shadows betrayed the presence of pits and cratered openings, as well as those of more jagged coulees and ravines, like that from which he had just emerged. The air was still under the blue vault above, and the heat of the sun burned down like a furnace on the grim and empty wastes.

He looked to the west and saw that the plateau, the worn surface of some ancient range of hills, extended for perhaps a kilometer in front of him. Raising his gaze, he noted that even more naked desert swept from the western edge almost to the horizon, but at the very limit of his sight, there to the southwest, was another faint, dark line. Could this be the end of the barrens and the recommencement of the great southern forest? He sighed. It made little difference, really. He would be helpless in a few hours if he could not find water and shelter.

Hiero looked hard at the foreground and presently noted something which caused his spirits to rise. Some distance off to his right front, there ran a low ridge which made him stare in speculation. It was hazy, wavering to a man's height above the heated stones. There was no breeze, so it could not be either blown sand or dust. If his tired eyes were not playing him false, somewhere over there was moisture!

He set off again at the same patient walk, husbanding the last of his strength. He did not allow himself to hope too much. If moisture it were, it could well be some foul pool of reeking poisons, metallic compounds, and mineral salts, of a type whose very vapor could slay him. That such things were common enough in desert regions he knew from his studies, both in D'alwah and, farther back in time, in

the northern Abbeys.

There was, of course, no option save to continue, and this he did. Soon he found himself at the base of the ridge over which the strange thickening of the atmosphere had appeared. The slope was neither very high nor difficult, but he moved with great care. His bones felt so brittle and weak that it was hard to believe that they could support him at all, while the thirst in his body was held off from stark madness only by a last effort of will.

Slowly, he drew himself to the top of the ridge and peered over. A faint thrill of hope came to him as he watched, but he still held his weak body under rigid control.

Below lay a large, rounded pit, or crater, with walls which had once been steep, but which were now gashed and scarred with falls of rubble and seamed with numerous cracks and crevices. The floor of the pit was smooth and sand-covered in places, in others broken and tumbled. Here and there around the edges of the place were the irregular mouths of caves and the shadows of overhangs. And there was life.

Growing in patches and sometimes even dense clumps about the bottom were living plants. They resembled nothing Hiero had ever seen or heard of before, but they seemed to come in several types. There was a maroon and purple thing, like a vast barrel, with long, pendulous fronds drooping from its top and trailing about on the ground below. Another type looked somewhat like a huge starfish, set atop a fleshy, brown stalk. This type grew in clumps, as if distorted and ragged umbrellas were somehow grouped in bunches. Smaller growths, as if of some bristling, spiked grasses of yellowish green, waist-high, sprang from patches of sand. Nowhere was there a hint of movement. Nor was there a sign of water. Save for the strange plants, the natural arena appeared as arid as the rock to which he clung.

But it was there! His trained body, sensitive to many influences unknown by his ancestors, could *feel* it. His whole system knew there was water somewhere down below. That it was out of sight meant nothing. It was there and it was close, drinkable, lifesaving water!

Once more he swept the pit with his eyes. Worn though he was, the savage training of the Abbey schools still governed him. If there was water here, and he knew there was, and if there was life, even so strange as these plants, then there was danger. In an oasis, near water holes, there lurked the hunters. He glared over the crater floor again, step by step, trying his best to see into the shadows, past the cave openings, and under the ledges. Nothing moved; the place might have been some strange sculpture, the dream of an unknown artist.

He could wait no longer. He moved over a bit to his right, where one of the broken slides of shale reached almost to the rim, and started slowly down it, never taking his vision from the silent pit. As he drew closer to the bottom, he searched even harder for some sign of life other than the enigmatic plants. Surely there must be insects, even in a place as bizarre as this? Yes, there was something! just below him rose a low mound, knee-high, with many small openings into and from which tiny things came and went on incomprehensible errands. The anthill gave him a sense of comfort, the first familiar sight from his own world he had seen since his escape. He watched, entranced, as a column of the little things marched by a few meters distant. He noticed that they seemed to have paths which avoided any of the vegetation by a wide margin, but his wits were now so dazed with tiredness that he simply recorded the fact without drawing any conclusions from it.

Then he drew some conclusions with great rapidity. The edge of the column overran an invisible barrier near one of the solitary purple barrels. The reaction was rapid. The nearest of the trailing fronds whipped up and down like a flail. The intrusive edge of the column was gone. The frond folded itself over, and Hiero saw that an opening had appeared in the top of the barrel plant. The opening *sucked*, as a child

licks its fingers. Then the frond, now cleansed, drooped and once more lay idle and seemingly harmless on the white sand.

Hiero stared hard at the barrel. This one was small, not up to his knee; but farther out in the pit, there were some which towered over his head and were as thick around as an Abbey tun of wine. Once again he turned his gaze on the ants that continued on their business, apparently undisturbed. But he saw now that they avoided all the plants, no matter of what variety, not simply the purple barrels. No doubt they had reason.

He put one foot on the floor of the strange pit, then another. No plants were close. He turned around and then surveyed the place from the ground level. Down here, the heat was not so strong, the air ever so slightly damp. *Where is that damned water?*

Even the mild blasphemy was enough to make him correct himself. He fell naturally into a kneeling position, arms outthrust, and let the spirit move him as it had in the past. His splayed arms pointed vaguely to the northeast. Rising slowly and carefully, he set out in that direction, carefully steering clear of any plants along the way.

Hiero limped and tottered on, some inner guide keeping him away from the vegetation. He had now reached the point of no return in terms of response, and his subconscious alone saw the quaver of the various things he came near. If a barrel plant shook as he approached or a clump of the spike grass wavered and leaned toward him, he saw it not. Along a mystic line of safety, he weaved between one danger and another, fell sidewise in one place, lurched back in another, but always kept to one direction.

In a moderately short time, he found himself under one of the overhanging cliffs he had noted from the rim. The heat, to a stranger, would have still been terrific. To him, fresh from the glow of the desert sun, it was like stepping out of a furnace into an ice palace. One moment he was in a place of raging heat; the next, he was shaded and cool. The light was dimmed and he found it hard to see. Above him, a great shelf of rock cut off the sunlight and most of the heat. He strove to peer ahead through the dimness and found himself on the edge of a still pool of clear water.

It reached as far as he could see to the left and right and back into the shadows before him. The smooth rock under his sandaled feet felt pleasantly cool. Without further ado, he collapsed on his face, falling with a splash across the margin of the pool.

Some vestige of the training he had spent his life receiving saved him from death. He took one gulp of the water, then turned on his back and allowed the coolness to soak into his skin. A man or woman of less iron will would have died on the spot, drinking to repletion. His background saved him. Something told him, even in extremity, that he was close to death, and he restrained his water-starved body. After a long while, he took another drink, less in size than the first, and after a longer period, another, this one less still. All the while he lay on the rock shelf, barely afloat.

The water tasted slightly acid, but was cool and pure. His body, trained in the detection and rejection of poisons, would have told him, had there been something wrong, even in the last extremity. It was simply water, filtered through strange rock perhaps, but nothing more. The delight of feeling it come through, or appearing to come through, his very skin held him in thrall. He floated in a sea of appreciation, reveling in the idea of wetness.

Eventually, after about the eighth cautious drink, sanity began to return. He suddenly saw the damp roof of the shelf above him and, with a great surge of emotion, realized that he was alive once more and that further plans could be made. Also, he felt a new want, one he had not permitted for a long time. He was

hungry.

He took another drink, still measured. He did not want to become waterlogged.

He shot a glance at the roof of the stone above his head and another down at the pool on whose brink he had been lying. This must be a catchment basin, where the rare rains were collected and saved by nature, and where the whole ecosystem combined to create the oasis of the strange little pocket in which he found himself. Or into which he had stumbled. Or, said a side corner of his mind, into which he had been led. He examined this latter idea as calmly as he could and dismissed it. With the loss of his mental abilities, there had come a concomitant reliance on those of the body. He did not believe he could be led anywhere.

Eventually, he had absorbed all the water he could take and began to feel the first traces of a chill. This was enough warning, and he got out of the pool at once. Sitting on the bank—or rather, slope, for it was a very gentle gradient—he stared out at the rock-rimmed little valley which made up the pocket. Evening was coming, and he realized bemusedly that he had been lying in the shallows for most of the afternoon. The warmth of the sun was still strong, however, and he no longer felt any chill, despite the lengthening shadows.

As the dark of evening grew upon the landscape, he watched the strange plants of the crater; and now, refreshed and with his faculties alert, he saw other things. There was a delicate movement among the bushes, almost as if a breath of wind were moving them in the utterly windless air, and he watched them as they put themselves to sleep. The barrel plants tucked their long fronds tightly about themselves like ladies' cloaks, and the spike grasses withdrew into the ground, leaving only horny sheaths of dull brown on the surface, less than one-third of the original length. The starfish plants somehow withdrew into their own stalks, until nothing was left except a thing like a fat stump, devoid of adornment. The whole appearance of the little pocket changed, becoming even more still and silent.

As the long shadows crept across the basin floor before him, he continued watching, utterly motionless, but now from his belt he drew the narrow fragment of rock, hoarded since his descent from the crag far down the outer slope. His ears strained as the swift night of the desert fell like a mantle upon the crater. Soon he heard what he had been hoping to hear.

There were squeaks and scratching noises in the night. Hiero's eyes, trained to the dark, saw small shadows darting here and there across the sands. Close to the rock on which he crouched stood the cone-stump into which a starfish plant had withdrawn. Now something the size of a small dog, with stumpy legs and a dragging tail, waddled around the base of the plant and sat up on its rump. It began to gnaw the plant-thing, its teeth making a grinding noise. Hiero surmised that it would never have dared to do so in the light of day. At night, the metabolism of the plants forced them to withdraw in nocturnal hibernation. Then they could be made into victims.

The animal was hardly more than arm's length away and the priest struck like lightning. There was a crunch as the broad skull cracked, and the body fell before him, barely twitching. Holding it close, he gave it a careful examination. Despite the dim light, for the moon had not yet risen, he could see enough for his purpose.

The creature was not all that ill-looking, actually, though not much like anything he had seen before. In some ways, its pale-furred body rather resembled that of a squat rodent, and it had similar chisel teeth. Its round tail appeared overlong for its body, and he wondered if it might not be prehensile. There were no external ears, and its eyes were small and buried deep in the head.

It seemed clearly mammalian, and the blood which stained its fur smelled no more alien than his own. In short, it was food.

What followed would no doubt appall a person used to life under conditions of civilization. Hiero could either take or leave civilized habits; he had been raised on a frontier of strife and savage warfare, under conditions so bitter that only the toughest survived. When you were hungry, in his lexicon, you ate. What you ate and how depended on what was around. If you had no fire, you ate raw meat.

He got enough of the fur off with his stone pick to sink his strong teeth through the tough hide. It was not easy chewing, but he had eaten worse and no doubt would again, he thought to himself. After a dozen rending bites, he stopped long enough to say a rude grace, then went back to hacking and chewing once more. The stringy meat, rank and strong, went down with no particular difficulty. Any alien element, anything like a poison, would have caused him to regurgitate as soon as his body had detected it. There was nothing, though, and after a while his body felt replete. He wrapped the remnant of the carcass in the scraps of hide he had ripped off and looked about for shelter. He had drunk and he had eaten. Now his overtaxed frame needed rest more than anything else.

His eyes swept the sands and the hillocks of dormant vegetation which dotted the moonlit arena, becoming fixed on one spot off to the right. Several round holes, black circles in the paler rock of the wall, showed in the wan light. Small things still moved and rustled out on the floor of the pit. His killing of the hapless plant eater had passed unnoticed. No doubt other predators existed and fed at night also. He would have to be careful of them, as well. He rose quietly, holding the meat in one hand, his crude weapon poised in the other, and moved off toward the openings he had marked down. In forty meters, the water of the pool came to an end; at the same time, the roof of the vault which shielded it tapered back into the inner slope. He passed quietly out under the stars and the half circle of the risen moon. Still the small night sounds continued without a break around him. The oasis pursued the doubtless ancient tenor of its circumscribed life, unconscious that a new killer had come, one far more dangerous than any ever before encountered.

The killer himself felt weary, but also, despite his fatigue, he had a strange sense of peace. For the first time in days—was it only days?—he had lost the feeling of being hunted, of being the helpless prey of powers and enemies with whom he could not contend. Alone he had fought and conquered the demon of the dark; alone he had found water, food, and shelter. Alone he had survived. His God had not turned away His face, and Hiero was grateful and humble. But deep inside, he felt a thrill of pride. The Abbey training could not make a man, but it could find one; and having done so, it could teach him to help himself. That was what God wanted, as did the Church Universal—for men and women to help themselves, to struggle to the end, never to give up. It was a simple lesson and, like so many simple lessons, not really easy to learn.

He paused by the first of the openings and took a careful look at it. Too shallow, no more than a niche in the stone face. The next was barely a scrape, the third too narrow. The fourth opening, however, was something more useful. An entrance barely large enough to permit passage gave onto a rounded chamber, in which he could crouch or lie down, but was no larger than he needed. Further, a pile of rubble partially filled one end—dead sticks and small stones, with some ancient bone fragments. The place had doubtless been the lair of some creature before, but the former owner was long gone, and not even an odor remained. Hiero hastened to block the entrance with as much of the litter as he could sweep up, and soon only a small opening admitted the night air. The floor of the little cave was sand, and he saved some of the softer twigs and bark fragments, as they appeared to be, for a pillow. He dug holes for his hips and shoulders and curled up to get some badly needed rest. If some creature should menace him, he felt his senses were alert enough now to give him the instant's warning which could mean the difference between life and death. He could do no more.

Though his body relaxed and his sinews loosened for the first time in many hours, sleep did not come. He did not try to force it. Any rest, even with open eyes, was still priceless. If his body was exhausted, his mind and his nervous system apparently were not. So be it. If his mind was awake, he could make use of it. He could afford to neglect no assets at this juncture. He would try once again to regain the skills he had somehow lost in the nightmare of the past few days and nights.

He willed his mind to sweep outward, gently at first, trying to build the once mighty powers he had possessed so short a time before. He was very, very cautious now, trying only to shut his ears to the small life forms which scurried about the basin and, instead, to sense them with his brain, to catch their tiny auras the impulses that distinguished them from not-life, the minute sparks of individuality which made them different each from another.

Supposing he should be able to recapture his vanished ability, or even part of it? Would he also recapture the web of hard-taught defenses? If his unguided thought roamed the night, perhaps partially in use, haltingly effective, could it not lead other minds, other powers, to his present location? And should the Unclean find him once more, the most hated of their foes, how could he protect himself? He had no answer. Yet it must be attempted. He had, once again, no choice.

Eventually, he stopped. The blockage was still intact. He could hear and see, smell and taste, but the years of Abbey training, the genetic ability of the telepath with which he had been endowed at birth, all were gone. So too were the far, far greater powers he had learned on his own during the last year, the strengths which had enabled him to defy and even overthrow certain of the great adepts of the enemy, Masters of the Circles of the Unclean. He could not repress a moan, choking it back in his throat even as it came. Unfair! It was unfair that a man should be reft so, unfair that he could be torn asunder from his greatest weapons, trapped without the force which alone might enable him to go to war! Unfair! Curse the Unclean and their foul science!

With an almost physical effort, he beat back the self-pity. He had lost his mental powers, but not the strength based on moral fiber. Had not Abbot Demero long ago warned of the curse of whining, the sin of believing oneself an object of special care from the Almighty? The thought of the stern old face of his master came into Hiero's mind, and a reluctant smile crossed his sunblackened face. *Yes, Reverend Father*, he thought, *I am a man again*.

True, his hard-won mental powers were gone, but in many ways he had been incredibly lucky. Drugged, bound, and helpless, he had yet escaped his enemies. Though no longer telepathic, his brain was clear and he could think and plan ahead. He could reason, puzzle out what had happened to him, and take action for the future—action and revenge. His black eyes narrowed into burning slits. His enemies would pay for this—pay dearly!

Eventually, Hiero slept, his thoughts still and the memories of recent days mercifully forgotten for the time being.

The little hollow went on about the business of the night. The strange plants were dormant, while the small lives about them pursued their own midget dramas of life and death. Once the stars above were blotted out by something large and dark, passing high and far into the north. But the night shielded the hollow, and the man slumbered on, free of distressing dreams.

III

Summoned—and Followed

A gleam of light, reflected off a piece of shiny rock, glanced into the tiny cave, striking the worn, unshaven face of the silent human. With a faint sigh, Hiero awoke and peered out of his refuge through the screen of rubble he had built up the night before.

The hollow lay under the morning sun as he had first seen it the day before. The strange plants had unfolded again and were soaking up the warm blaze. A few of them looked gnawed, but none seemed seriously injured. At the moment, however, his own needs were paramount. He inspected the remains of last night's dinner with no great longing, but started to tear at the high-smelling flesh. He must have food, and this was all there was available.

His brief meal over, he wrapped the now scanty remains of the animal in its scrap of hide and walked over to the pool to have a long, filling drink. Then, crouched on his haunches, he looked about.

The first thing he noticed was that the remains of the animal had been stripped of any scrap of meat by the foraging ants. But the skin was intact, as were the white bones. He eyed the surrounding rocks. Sharp flakes of stone lay here and there, and he noted some with the greasy sheen and flaked appearance of some flintlike material. He stirred himself and became busy. Less than an hour later by his inner clock, he prepared to leave the oasis, but in far better guise than when he had stumbled into it.

On his head was an odd hat, contrived from the slender bones of the beast, with leaves of some of the small plants woven over them. From his shoulders hung two crude bags made from the same hide, one filled with water from the pool and leaking only a little, the other containing the remains of the meat, some crude bone needles, and a number of sharp pieces of flint. He was clean and had even managed a rough shave with a bit of fat and some sharp shards of flint. Best of all, his bag held a small, heavy pebble of some massive, iron-bearing mineral which he had tested with the flint to form sparks. Should he find suitable fuel, he now had fire!

On the western rim of the strange little bowl, he paused and looked down the gentle slope. He felt an odd pang. When he was lost and helpless, the oasis had succored him. Again, he bowed his head in prayer, then turned and topped the rise, to set off down the gentle slope of the bowl's western edge. He moved at a steady lope. In his right hand was the stone fragment he had picked up where he slew the Death Hart. Now it had a crudely chipped-away grip and looked not unlike a rude sword, though the thing was all point and no edge.

He found himself back in the full glare of the desert heat once more. The light struck off the blue sand and broken black rock of the surface. But there was an encouraging change now. Tufts of scrubby weed, brown and even greenish in hue, sprouted from shaded crevices. Here and there, barrel-shaped cacti had begun to appear. They contained moisture which could be squeezed from the spiny pulp at need. The land was definitely improving. He jogged on while trying once more to draw a rough idea of his present location.

The stars he had seen the previous evening appeared only a little different from those of D'alwah, so he was probably not very much north or south of the palace. But he had come a long way on that damned kaw litter. Joseato's murmur to Amibale was easy to recall. They wanted Hiero far off and deep in drugs before his throat was to be cut! They had known that the shock of his physical death might well reach one as attuned to him as Luchare. The fact of his disappearance would frighten and wound her, but she would retain hope. So again—where was he now?

West. He must have been brought almost due west, to the very borders of the kingdom or beyond. He

recalled the maps he had studied of the realm and its borders, then concentrated once more on his memory of last night's stars. He had come somewhat south, he was sure. Not much, perhaps, but enough to throw his directional sense off a bit. Should he turn north now, he would probably find himself in plains of some length. There he might find men, maybe friendly, maybe not. It was too big a risk to take.

Further, he had to assume that Joseato and Amibale, plus whatever Unclean minds gave them orders or advice, were very careful; their meticulous plot proved they could be just that. Would they assume he was dead when the pallid dwarfs who had conducted him west did not report? Those bodies had not been found by the folk who blew the hunting horns. Even now, the enemy might be issuing new orders to track him down, if they had not already done so.

Where would they look for him? Why, toward the North, from which he had come originally and to which he could be expected to return for aid. Unarmed, he dared not go south or east into the waiting nets of the Unclean. He had to go north!

Well, he would return to the North—but not by the route they might be watching. He must strike even farther west, into the country off the map. Then he could turn north, becoming lost to his foes, to reappear when and where they could not expect him.

He was leaving Luchare behind, and his inner soul winced at the thought. She was not dead, he knew, despite his loss of mental strength; they were linked forever and he would know if she were dead, just as she would know if he were to perish. She had Mitrash of the guard and the hidden help of the Eleveners to protect her. She had Kloutz, who would obey her when Hiero was not there. She had her royal father, who had been told enough to alert him. The mad young duke and the cunning priest would not find it easy to outwit her.

Trouble was coming to D'alwah—indeed, was already there. As prince and heir, he had tried to rally the southern kingdom against the Unclean peril. He had been interrupted, his plans broken and set aside, if not destroyed. But he was the sole emissary of the Metz Republic in this strange world of the far South. It was his duty to go on, to find new weapons, to keep up the fight. His lost mental powers might be reborn someday, but if not—so be it. Something else, other weapons, would have to do instead. While life lasted, he must go on, ignoring all personal calls in the interest of the greater task the Abbey Fathers and Brother Aldo had laid on him.

All day, under the burning sky, the bronzed figure trotted patiently along. His sharp eyes missed nothing of his surroundings as he ate up the miles. Small, dun-colored birds appeared, peering at him from rocky outcroppings, and the different types of cacti and desert shrubs increased. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the bluish tint was fading from the soil. A colony of little striped rodents chattered at him from an assemblage of holes in a sandy bank, but did not seem really concerned at his passing. Looking back, he could see them return to their own affairs while he was still within easy vision. This was an attitude on the part of the locals that he welcomed; it meant that men were little known in this land and hence not feared.

What he wanted at the moment was anonymity. Each league put behind him took him deeper into country where he would be lost to his foes. There would be time enough later to look for allies. This was a time to hide, to vanish utterly from human knowledge.

As the day drew to a close, he began to look for shelter. Food was no longer a problem. In his pouch, along with the rancid meat, he had a dozen cactus fruits, their needled fuzz carefully rubbed off. There were cacti of a different, smaller sort far to the north in the Kandan woods, and he knew them to be highly nutritious. Further, he had found a hollowed-out nest of some fairly large bird or reptile and had cracked the four hen-sized eggs and gulped them down on the spot. Metz Rovers were past masters at

living off the country, and he had no fear of starving, especially since the land before him grew more benign with the waning of the desert. He sensed more life all about him. With the coming of night, there would also appear prowlers. It was a time to seek shelter again. Presently, in the red glow of sunset, he thought he saw what he sought.

An hour later, he felt he could relax, at least as much as anyone could relax in an unknown wilderness. He had found a low hillock of rock with one steep side. Halfway up this face was a shallow ledge, shallow but deep enough in the rock for him to lie down under the small overhang. There was also a little hollow in the ledge itself, well back from the lip. In this cavity, protected from most of the rare desert rains, Hiero found the remains of ancient ashes. The sides of the shelf curled around to enclose him as he sat over his tiny fire, made with a bundle of easily gathered twigs from the dry soil below. Only from the south and very near could his small light have been seen. The smear of ash looked incredibly old, made from fires created Heaven only knew how far back in time.

As he stirred his tiny glow with a twig, Hiero could have posed for the figure of some Apache hunter of the immemorial past, only the black mustache testifying to the mixed ancestry of the Metz. He had finished the meat, now charred into something resembling palatability by the fire, and a half dozen of the sweet and fully ripe red cactus fruits. Half his water, foul from its skin container, was untouched. He did not need it, but it would be saved; nasty as it was, it was still water. Beside him on the rock lay several long, dead cactus branches, their dried spines burned off with care. Thrust into the tiny fire, they would become instant torches, a potent weapon should any wild creature try to clamber up to Hiero's perch and use him for its own repast.

Half-turning his body to gather a few more sticks from the pile behind him, he saw something which he had missed on his first exploration of the ledge. Faintly etched into the rock behind and above his head were pictures, revealed by the glow of the fire striking up at them. They were worn, old beyond reckoning, and he could read little of them. There were stick figures of men and four-legged beasts, though what they were was impossible to say. He felt strangely cheered by this fresh proof that men had used this place, however long ago.

He looked out over the flat landscape before him, stretching out under moon and stars until it was lost in the dimness of the South. The stars burned far and bright. The black of scrub and rock made the shadowed country seem a monochrome illusion, a sharply limned mirror image of the bright world he had traversed under the azure sky of the day.

A howl rang out from the middle distance, to be answered by a chorus of similar yells farther off. From the sounds, the Metz judged the makers to be pack hunters of some size. He hoped they were not on his track, though he had protected himself as well as he could. The calls were not unlike those of the wolves of his own Northland, though higher in pitch, and he smiled reminiscently. Whatever the creatures sought, however, it was not he, and he listened with only part of his attention as the hunt swept away south out of earshot. As the sound died, he allowed his minute fire to do the same, leaving only a bed of glowing coals. He would wake, he knew, at frequent enough intervals to renew it.

Not for the first time, he wondered what lay ahead of him. It was useless to speculate, he knew. His Forty Symbols, the precognition markers he had been trained to use since childhood, and the crystal globe that accompanied them were far back with his other belongings in D'alwah City. Even had they not been, his ability to use them was gone, and they would have been so much useless trash. He would have to face the future as most other humans of this day and age did and take what came as God and His Son sent.

Presently he fell into a light slumber, knowing his senses would awaken him at need. At first his sleep

was dreamless. After a while, his fist clenched and his jaw tightened. His slumber remained unbroken and his breath still came evenly. Nothing moved out in the plain below him, save for the ordinary life of the waste places of the earth. No menacing sound broke the silence of the night.

Yet deep in the mind of the warrior, a faint alert flickered. Perhaps not all of his former powers had quite been silenced and suppressed. Some minute synapse had been started up or impinged upon, some blanketed circuit half-alerted. Into his mind came a thought of hills—smoky, purple hills, with mist rising from folded valleys, their rounded tops a mixture of forest and steep meadow. Strange hills, never seen in life, far lower than the mighty Stonies, the great Shining Mountains of his far-off home, but—hills! He sighed in his sleep and threw one brown arm across his face. In his dream the hills receded, but not altogether. Somewhere deep in his subconscious, their memory lingered. He would see those hills. They were very beautiful.

He awoke before dawn the next day and went hunting. The faint coolness of the desert morning dissipated quickly, and he was warm in a few seconds as he searched for tracks. Soon, under some flat-topped trees, a new sign of better ground, he found a slot, the mark of some dainty, hoofed mammal. The tracks were fresh, and his fine nose could even catch a faint musky warmth where the beast had rubbed itself against a scraggy trunk and left a few brown hairs. He followed cautiously, noting that the animal was not afraid, but lazing along, snatching a mouthful of leaf here and there. The faint breeze blowing came from its direction to him. Soon he saw it moving ahead in the dawn light, a lone antelope of small breed, with lyrate horns and brindle hair.

Now he readied a new weapon, made the day before as he trudged across the scrubland and finished to reasonable perfection before he ate on the ledge he had found. It was a new weapon to him, or rather, for him, one he had only read about in Abbey books. Yet to humanity and throughout history, it was so old that it had no age. Three cords hung from his right hand; at the end of each was a rounded stone, tightly secured to its own cord of leather. The three strips of hide were joined at the base where his hand gripped them.

Suddenly, having stolen as close as he could in safety, he rose from a bush and hurled the device in a whirling motion at the startled animal's legs.

He was amazed at his easy success, but not so much that he did not leap forward and brain the poor brute as it struggled to escape the twisted thongs which held the forelegs fast. His stone spike, reversed, was more than equal to the job. As he began the butchery, he stole more than one respectful glance at the crude bolas which lay beside him on the ground. Nor did he forget to give thanks to God.

Minutes later, he was loping back to his little hill, a full load of meat slung over his shoulder in the beast's own hide. He had buried the remainder to avoid drawing scavengers, though he had little fear of daytime hunters in this remote wilderness.

The Metz priest relighted his small fire and, cutting as much of the meat as he could carry with ease into strips, began to smoke it. Meanwhile, he ate hugely, strength pouring into his wiry frame with each swallow. As he did, he contemplated the two curved, black horns he had dug free from the skull. They weighed little and he had no doubt he would find uses for them as well, though each was no longer than his forearm. Finishing his meal, he packed the meat in a new hide bag, swallowed the last of the murky water, and brushed out traces of his passing as best as he could. He also examined his sandals with care. Though scratched and scuffed, they were still very sound and had no need yet of patching or mending. Soon he was on his way again, threading a path through the bushes and scrub, once more with his face set to the distant West.

For four days the land rolled past him. The bush gave way slowly but surely to denser and taller vegetation, so that, though the terrain was still flat and open, it had now become a prairie interspersed with groves of trees and no longer even semi-desert. Water appeared, first in the form of rare pools, then as shallow, muddy streams, winding here and there in sandy beds. The land was rising too, hardly more than an inch a mile, but steadily and constantly.

Hiero saw no sign whatsoever of any human activity. The camp on the tiny ledge was the only sign that human beings had ever been in the land at all. It was hard to realize the truth of his teachings in the Republic's classrooms and remember that all of this vast country had teemed with people millennia ago—so many people that his whole nation would have been lost and unnoticed among them. Not for the first time, he mused on the mighty past and the awful changes brought by The Death. Whatever its sins thousands of years before, humanity had paid an awful price; the fires of the atom and the scourges of the plagues had exacted a toll beyond conception. And this was what the Unclean wanted restored! He tightened his lips and vowed yet again that he would do whatever was possible to see that they did not succeed.

If human life was absent, animal life was certainly not. The Metz could have eaten at fresh kills three times a day, had he chosen. He could also have served as meat himself, had he not been constantly wary.

Antelope of many kinds now appeared, roaming in vast herds, some so large that he felt it wiser to skirt them. It seemed to be calving time for many varieties, and he had no wish to challenge the forests of horns, either those of the mothers or of the great males who guarded the rim of the herds. There were deer too, and they were in herds as well, though he saw only antlerless bucks at this season.

But there were other beasts totally unfamiliar to him. Some were small, but others were so huge that he gave them the widest berth possible. One gathering of giants recalled the great thing that had blundered through his jungle camp on the journey south, months before. They had great trunks sprouting from their huge brown heads, vast pillarlike legs, and mouths with great, curving, ivory tusks. Along the increasing streams he saw other beasts, smooth-skinned, with heads prolonged into enormous snouts, in bulk no less than the other kind, though with shorter legs. All seemed to be more or less peaceful plant eaters, and he took care to disturb none of them. Once in the distance he saw a group of animals leaping with tremendous bounds of their long hind legs and realized they must be some variety of hopper, perhaps the ancestral type of his lost mount, Segi. He thought sadly of Segi and Klootz, then put the thought behind him. He could not bear to think of Luchare and he needed all his strength of purpose to proceed, knowing that every league took her and her country farther and farther away.

Around and about these thousands of plant eaters, there prowled and lurked the carnivores. Again and again, Hiero had to take to a handy tree and, on one occasion, to fight for his perch on the tree itself. This was when a tawny, catlike beast, as big as he was, followed him into the branches in one flowing bound. A smashing blow with the stone spike, glancing off its flat skull, left it half-stunned and bleeding at the tree's foot. From thence it limped off, snarling, in search of easier prey.

In this encounter he had been lucky, however. Some of the meat eaters were of a bulk far beyond his strength to battle. There was a far larger cat, with a short bobtail and striped spine of black and gold, so huge it could attack all but the most enormous of the herbivores. It had gigantic fangs, protruding well below the lower jaw, and seemed to haunt the watercourses. Hiero grew very wary indeed about drinking and filling his water bag. There were also wolves, big beasts very much like those of the Northland, but lighter and ruddier in color, and a host of smaller, jackal-like hunters as well. These and most of the other killers were, fortunately, nocturnal to a degree; though they made the night ring with their wild screams and roars, by then Hiero was careful to be high in a tree fork, selected well in advance by sunset.

It was true that he could have stopped and made himself better weapons than he now carried, but somehow he did not want to stop at all. Some compulsion, very faint at first and growing only by almost imperceptible degrees, made him want to travel as fast as he could, stopping only when absolutely necessary. He killed such small beasts as were on his line of march and lighted fires only to smoke the barest minimum of parched meat. He had commenced moving more to the south than he had planned, but he seemed to brush the thought aside, when it occurred to him, as being somehow unimportant. Ever so faintly, beyond his blurred abilities to recognize, a control had been set on his movements. Yet it never interfered with day-to-day business, and he was in no other way less alert and ready for what came.

On the sixth day after leaving the hillock where he had seen the ash, he topped a ridge somewhat more lofty than any he had observed in the days before. There, far to the southwest, was a distant line of blue. It could only be hills, and the sight sent a thrill through him. These were the hills of his dream a week back, though he did not consciously recall either them or the dream itself. How beautiful they looked and how desirable! He must go there and see them, must walk their slopes and forested heights. This wish, now imbedded in his mind, was no bar to his ultimate purpose. The fact that he was, in truth, straying away from the line to the west and north he had planned for himself days earlier simply did not register in his conscious thoughts at all. Lightly and delicately, the fisher had laid the lure, and the fish swam forward, unknowing.

The next thing that came to his notice was far different and an entirely practical and down-to-earth matter. He was being followed!

Several times during the day he had felt that something was on his trail. It was now late afternoon again, with the sun hovering over the far lands before him, yet he knew the thing was still there. Twice during the past hours he had noted birds rising in the distance behind him, and the notice had been filed in his memory. He had not seen or heard any other sign of whatever it was, but he sensed its presence still coming. The powers of his mind, the telepathic networks, might be dead, yet he had no doubt. The skills and feelings of a lifelong hunter had not been dulled, and he knew, as an animal knows, that he was being tracked.

He wondered if it were one of the giant wolves. The members of the cat family were not scent hunters; they never had been, and this faculty had not changed since the beginning of time. But there were many other possibilities. He did not discount the chance of something entirely new, some creature he had never seen before. The wilderness of what had once been called North America was full of strange life, as he had only too-good cause to remember.

Still, he was puzzled. Whatever it was did not seem to be moving on at any great pace; indeed, there were times when the feeling that it was there at all grew very faint in his awareness. It was as if the thing had turned aside or simply stopped. Then the feeling would recur with renewed strength, as if what followed had picked up his marks and was advancing again at an increased speed. This dallying was not the hallmark of the wolf or dog family. Could it be another human? He had seen no smoke of any fires, but the thing or person might have lighted as few and as small ones as he had.

He decided there was nothing he could do at present, save to be even more wary and to see that his march stayed closer to useful trees. Whatever, or whoever, was tracking him down would at some point draw near enough for him to get a look, hopefully from some safe position. He continued on his way toward the southwest and the distant hills, but his eyes roved in search of good ambush locations as he went.

That night, secure in the fork of a lofty oak, he spent a good part of the dark hours awake and listening.

But the cacophony of the savanna and the teeming night seemed much the same as ever. The howls and shrieks of the hunters and their prey were no different from what they had been for recent nights past. Once a group of the great, trunked giants meandered near his tree, on their way to some water hole, no doubt, and he stayed very still as the vast bulks drifted by. His tree was tall and sturdy, but he had no wish to see what those titanic shoulders could do if aroused. Presently, with soft squeals from their huge calves, each three times the size of the man, the monsters passed on. Long afterward, Hiero roused to a concerted bellowing of fury which, distant though it was, made the earth tremble. He guessed that some carnivore, possibly a great saberfang, had tried for a calf and that he was hearing the herd in response. Otherwise the night was normal, and he slept at last, undisturbed by any other sounds, however furious.

With dawn, he was on his way again toward the hills, one eye cocked for signs of pursuit, the other scanning the route ahead, so that he was never too far from a tall tree or a great termite mound. The latter, some many times steeper than the surrounding bushes, had begun to appear more and more frequently, and they provided useful places of quick safety and good lookout points.

He took position on one of these at noon, pausing both to rest and to eat his frugal meal of dried meat and berries. Much of the lower scrub was full of the latter, and he had found many of them edible and tasty.

A sudden uprush of a flock of birds, calling and piping in alarm, came suddenly from a few meters off, back on the track by which he had come. Laying down his meat carefully, he crouched just below the far side of the termite hill and watched keenly along the line of his previous march. He had no doubt that his mysterious tracker was close upon him and he was determined to get a look. He had a clump of tall trees at his back, picked out well in advance, should the sunbaked anthill prove inadequate as a defense.

Presently he saw some dense bushes move. Something large was pushing slowly through them. His legs tensed, ready to spring into instant flight. The bulk of whatever was advancing seemed formidable.

Then a glint of something bright and flashing caught his eye, and the next moment the thing moved into the open. A grin of mingled joy and pure amazement broke over Hiero's features, and he could hardly restrain himself from yelling aloud.

Hopping sedately toward the mound, as if wanting to gain the shelter of his comfortable stable, came the shape of a giant hopper. On his back was strapped the owner's saddle, stirrup-boots lashed to their girth so as not to swing loose. Various articles of gear hung on the harness as well, also securely fastened in place. Segi had come to seek his master.

There was no mistaking the great brute. Hiero knew his own harness. If more evidence were needed, the sharp point of his beloved spear, once a part of Klootz' saddle in the North, thrust up along the hopper's withers, tied so as not to catch on branches as the animal moved.

Hiero rose and then slid slowly down the face of the mound, calling to the hopper as he came. Segi put one ear back in mild surprise at the sight of the man but seemed in no way disconcerted or inclined to flee. When Hiero came close, he lowered his great head and sniffed the man thoroughly. Satisfied, he raised himself to his full height again and leaned back on his great tail, looking proudly and haughtily about, as if to say, "Well, I've done *my* job. The rest is up to others."

For a long time, Hiero stood with his face buried in the hopper's great tan shoulder, a prey to raw emotion. That out of the empty wastes such a thing could happen! He had to control himself for a number of minutes. Segi stood patiently, his long ears twitching at flies, but otherwise quite content to wait and see what his owner wanted next.

At length, the man got himself in hand and, patting the great flanks, began to inspect what the hopper had brought him.

First there was the short spear, its broad, steel head and crossbars catching the light, a copy of the medieval boar spears of far-off and forgotten Europe. He freed it from its wrapping and laid it handily by on the ground. Next, also strapped to the saddle, he found something else and again almost whooped with delight. There, leather sheath and all, was the pick of all his weapons, the terrible short sword of the North, the ancient weapon given him at graduation from the Metz Academy. As long as his forearm, curved on one side and straight and edgeless on its back, the bolo of the lost empire gleamed with oily sheen in the sun. The worn badge of the circle with its flaming top and the faded "U.S.A." marks seemed to him a pledge from the past of future victory to come. When he had strapped the shoulder belt on and the heavy weight had settled across his back, hilt ready to his hand over his left shoulder, then indeed did he feel complete.

Spear and sword—yes, here was his dagger, the six-inch, two-edged blade with buckhorn handle—all complete. Next he found a broad leather belt, and then a leather box, heavy though small. His casting pieces and crystal! There were two packs of dried meat, sealed for long journeys. His excitement blazed. He knew who had sent this!

Where was her message? His fingers fumbled as he went over the saddle again like a squirrel going through a pile of nuts. Here was a leather water bottle, a small one, wisely chosen for use on foot and also when mounted. Damn it, where was that message? He knew it was there as well he knew the sender's scent and the feel of her skin!

He forced himself to stop and think finally, while the patient Segi leaned down and snooted at his black hair. *Use your head, stupid! Suppose Segi had been killed? Would she leave a note pinned to his right ear for anyone, including the enemy, to read? Think, the way she did for you, you oaf!*

Eventually, he found it by sheer patience. It was wrapped in a tiny packet of fine, oiled leather, no bigger than his finger joint and jammed up into the far side of the saddle horn itself.

With trembling fingers, he unwrapped it and, with the sun beating down on his head, began to read. Above him, the hopper's nostrils flared at intervals, picking up the varied smells eddying past in the light breeze. But none seemed to convey any danger, and the towering figure stayed relaxed on his great haunches while his master read and reread the parchment message from his far-off mate.

"My Love," it began, "I know you are not dead. Where you are, what they have done, I know not. The Unclean have done something, somehow. If you are not dead and I cannot reach your mind, they must be the ones. I would have sent this by Klootz, but he is gone. The stablemen said he went mad in the night, rearing and bellowing in his stall. When they tried to calm him, he broke the stall gates as if they were matchwood and fled through the stable yards into the night. Some guards say he tore through the northern gate at the hour before dawn, and he has not been seen since. He may follow you, so be alert. An assassin tried to kill Danyale at the end of the ball. The man has not yet spoken. The king is hurt but will live. My cousin Amibale has vanished also, and none can or will say where. The priest Joseato is missing too. The high priest says he knows nothing. The troops seem loyal, and Mitrash is with me. He says to tell you that he has sent messages. God help you, my love. Segi has my message planted in his simple mind. If he can find you, he will. Come back to me." It was unsigned, save for a single sweeping "L."

Hiero was glad that none but Segi could see him now. Whoever heard of a Metz Senior Killman, the

pick of the woodrunners of the North, with two runnels of water flowing down his sweaty face?

After a while he could see again, and he marveled at the wonder of his wife. Hardly out of girlhood, but what a woman! She had never lost her head for a second. Hiero was *not* dead, so send a message. Klootz was gone, so send the next best thing, Segi, the pick of hopperdom and a beast who had already learned to know and love him. He shook his head in admiration. He would be willing to bet that she had issued all the right orders to the guards as well and that she and Danyale and the kingdom were in as good a state of defense as could be managed. And she had found the sudden departure of Duke Amibale and the priest suspicious, that too was clear. They would not find it easier to surprise her, even with her mate gone.

Mitrash had sent messages, had he? A good man. The messages had gone to the Brotherhood of the Eleventh Commandment, Hiero was sure. Even now, a long way off somewhere, Brother Aldo and his fellow councilors might well know what had happened and be moving in their turn. The Metz felt a tremendous sense of relief. Luchare and her father were safe, as safe as anyone these days, and the kingdom was alerted. He had all the help she could send, and now the rest was up to him. Only Klootz's fate puzzled him. Where could the morse have gotten to?

He patted Segi again and talked soothingly to him. The big hopper had really done wonders. Hampered by his saddle and harness, he had come hundreds upon hundreds of leagues, somehow patiently following his vanished master. He looked fine, too, hardly gaunted at all. Despite all that Hiero had been taught about the hopper's capabilities, he was still amazed. Segi must have crossed the dreadful desert, too, going without water for days; and when through it, he had come unflinchingly on, dodging predators, snatching bits of leaf as he hopped, and never ceasing until Hiero was found. *How many men, Hiero mused to himself, would have done as much, would have persevered into an unknown wilderness out of pure affection? Do I, does any man, deserve such devotion?*

In a few seconds, he had run up the termite mound and secured his few possessions. In another, he freed the stirrup-boots and mounted. His head behind but on a level with his steed's, he gently urged the hopper on, south and west, their heads pointed into the sunset and at the distant blue line. The calling hills still held Hiero in their grip; unthinking, he urged his strange mount forward to whatever fate lay hidden in their distant folds.

IV

Dark Perils, Dark Counsels

In an underground place, a large screen covered one end of a room. Blue bulbs set in the bleak stone walls shed a pallid light upon a great table of polished black marble. Around the table and under the screen were arranged four black chairs with legs carved into contorted shapes and bearing strange arabesques and flourishes along their broad arms and backs. Pulled away from the head of the table was a fifth chair, larger than the others and more ornate. It alone was unoccupied.

In the four chairs in use sat or lounged four gray-robed men. A stranger entering the room might have thought that he had encountered four offspring of a single birth, so alike were the seated men to one another. All were bald, or with heads and faces so shaven that no hair appeared. All had pale ivory skin. At sight of those faces, a child would have screamed in instant horror. The eyes were dead, gray pools of nothingness, in which there yet glowed a baleful fire. The faces were expressionless, carved in a sickly marble, set in grim lines and yet smooth, seeming ageless and yet old beyond memory. Only the flickering of the awful pairs of eyes to the great screen and back toward each other seemed to betray life, together

with the writhing and uncoiling of the long white hands when they rested on the smooth surface of the table. The men's attentions were fixed on the screen, but occasionally one would mutter to another or inscribe some notes on one or another small square of writing material laid before him. The Great Council of the Unclean, those who called themselves the Chosen Masters, was in session.

Though the men appeared identical at first glance, a further look would have discerned differences. Each bore upon the gray of his breast an embroidered symbol, worked in threads of metallic, glittering stuff. Each had a different color, one being red, one yellow, one blue, and the last of all green. None of the colors seemed normal somehow, being oily and iridescent, at once too pale and too dark, changing constantly but always sickly and abhorrent. The livid green of the fourth man's mark seemed the worst of all, a ghastly parody of the fresh and limpid hue of spring in the ordinary world. But that world was what these monsters were sworn to destroy or, as they put it, to bring to order. The symbols were spirals and coils worked into mind-bending twists which the eye could not follow, as if they faded in some impossible way into some other and fouler dimension.

The screen itself was covered with a maze of fine metallic wire which, like the symbols of the robed men, was worked into impossible bendings and anglings, back and forth in a weird pattern which changed by the moment. It contorted itself each instant into something new and even more peculiar. Here and there on the wires glowed tiny lights of different colors, like minute bulbs. Yet if they were bulbs, they were as strange as their background, for they also moved, appearing and reappearing at what looked like random, but was not. It was clear that the four could read the board and understand it, as one would read a printed page. None but they and one other could have done so, however. For this was the Great Screen, and all the lore and memory of the Unclean was embedded in it, as were all their plans and contingencies of the future. It would have taken the life of a normal human to learn the basic elements necessary for the interpretation of its easiest and most accessible secrets.

At length, the one who wore the hellish green turned away from the screen and examined his fellows thoughtfully. Just as the one who wore the blue seemed in some indefinable way the youngest, so did the creature of the green seem older than the others, though exactly why, no one could have said.

"I will speak, according to the rules of the Great Council, where no mind can be deemed safe and thoughts cannot be trusted with our deliberations."

It was clear that this was a formula being recited, a formal opening of the meeting. The voice of the speaker was thin yet resonant, toneless and yet vibrant. It was also chill, the timbre gelid and ringing like the slow grinding of ancient glacial ice.

"As the Senior among you, I call on the Lord S'duna, First among the Brotherhood of the Blue Circle. Upon him mainly has fallen the brunt of the most recent events. He and his bear much of the responsibility for them. This is said not in blame, but only in strict accountability. This is also said," he added as S'duna stirred and shrugged, "under orders."

As the others looked up in sudden interest, the green-symbolled man touched his brow and inclined his head toward the large and empty chair at the head of the table.

"Yes," he went on, "to me, S'lorn, First of the Green, in my fortress in the South there came in the night, on the One Circuit, a message. The Unknown One, That Which Is Not To Be Named, that which *is* not, but was and will be, sent a message. Any of us could have received it. Why I was chosen, save for age, I know not, but can perhaps guess." He paused. "I think, and I have spent much thought on this matter as I journeyed, that I received the message to summon the Council because I am the farthest away in the body. My thought, and it is no more, reads thus: In many, many lives of the outer world, we four, or they

who taught and preceded us, have seldom found it necessary to meet in the flesh. Now, I think, the matter grows urgent, and thus the importance is stressed that I who live the farthest off should summon us together. The Nameless One, the Chosen of the Chosen, has many secrets. There may be other explanations, but I think mine will suffice." He folded the pale hands in the lap of his robe. "Let the Lord S'duna speak to us and unfold his reading of the recent past."

The Master of the Blue Circle did not flinch. While he was not on trial, still the others were watching and judging. All were equals, the Great Council having been devised to still the ceaseless internecine warfare which had so long crippled the Unclean plans in the past. All were equal, but it was not in the nature of such beings to spare another pain, nor was it the way they had all been taught since birth. The troubles of the recent past had involved S'duna far more than the others. So they would watch, not being hostile, but if there were any sign of weakness, or indecision . . .

And then there was the Nameless One, their unknown ruler, who had sent instructions. Could those instructions have to do with the failures of this time, and might they also carry orders on dealing with faulty leadership?

If a shudder ran through the Blue Master's frame, it was not detectable. He began. "First, we had warning that all was not well from the death of S'nerg of the Red Circle. For long, his body was not found, though we knew that he must be dead or somehow taken, for his self-seeker was moving away from us. We loosed followers, mere animals, on the track. They too were slain. That was the second warning, though the death of a high Brother was more than that, surely." No one said anything, no features moved, but the point had been taken. The Blue Circle was not the first to be struck.

"Next, the creature or creatures vanished into the Palood, the great marsh where even we do not go. Yet we alerted something which had dwelt there from time out of mind, a thing we feared and scarcely understood, yet thought could be used for our purposes. And it too was slain." The level voice paused. Another point made.

"Now we began somewhat to worry. The thing or things had entered the area. I control. It or they had managed to pass through the marsh, no mean feat in itself, as all here know. I estimated the track it might take, for it had discovered and destroyed the self-seeker it bore and we could no longer follow it. And, as all know, I trapped it.

"Surprise upon surprise and wonder upon wonder! What had we caught but one of the despised Abbey priests of the soft religion of the past, the cross worshippers. One of the vagabond pack of woodsrunners, half soldier, half hunter, whom they send about on their stupid errands. For allies, it had two animals and a slave girl, the latter seized from savages on the coast as they were about to eat her. And this motley crew was what had shaken the North and frightened our Councils to their depths!" He stared at each of the others in turn, as if weighing his next words before continuing.

"And there I erred, I freely admit. And if the Great Plan has suffered for it since, I accept *my* full share of responsibility. For I simply could not believe that this very ordinary human, however brave and skilled in the combat of the forests, could be the thing he was. I felt, as did all who studied the matter, that the Abbeyes, or perhaps this man alone, had found a secret in a Dead City of the past, something to enhance the mind powers, some machine, perhaps, or even some strange drug. This secret we would extract at leisure on Manoon, the Dead Isle, whence none had ever gone, save at our bidding and direction. We completely ignored the escape of the slave girl and the two animals; let them perish in the wastes, we thought. They meant nothing." His ivory skull wagged slowly as he shook his head.

"Mistake upon mistake, error upon error. The man had inborn or somehow *inbred* powers locked in his

skull, some of which, with training, might have brought him here, into this chamber, my Brothers, even as we. That was the sum of our greatest error—not (to realize the appalling strength that this seeming woodsrunner, this half priest, masked and kept hidden in the inner part of his mind!" The emphasis, even the passion which had crept into his voice, drew a faint hiss of incredulity from S'lorn, but the older man suppressed it when he saw the expressions of the Masters of the Red and Yellow Circles. For they seemed in total agreement.

"What occurred next, alas, is too well known," S'duna went on. "He escaped. Escaped from the Dead Isle, taking his weapons and slaying still another Brother! A dumb brute, the captain of my Howler pack, sensed the escape on some level we could not and he too was slain, though a doughty fighter trained by me for many years. Now, think on this matter, Brothers, and think hard. We have not yet discovered *how* or by what powers this was done! All of our science, all of our records, which we thought the entire sum of knowledge here today—all of these tell us nothing useful. Oh, yes, the man used his *mind*. He slew the Brother with it. That was obvious. But without weapons or machines and hardly even with them, could *we* do the same? No, you all know we could not.

"What next? More by guesswork than by anything concrete, we traced him again, this stupid priest-assassin, this Per Hiero Desteen, of whom we now know so much. And what occurred this time to the band of ragged wanderers? For he had found the girl and the animals by mind touch, though again we do not know how. What next? This time a whole *shipload*, one of the very few new ships, driven by the powers of The Death itself, ship, crew, and yet another high Brother, S'carn, third under me in rank and no weak foe, all vanished!" This time his pause was both unstudied and longer. Nor was he taking such trouble to conceal his rage and bafflement. The others listened soberly, their own faces now eager as they digested all the meaning of his words. S'lorn of the Green was as attentive as any.

"We did what we could. We issued as many of the hand-wrought, personal mind screens as we had and warned all those that had dealings with us or were under our control on or near the Inland Sea. We alerted our Brothers of the Yellow Circle to the south. And now, too, I went southward myself. For I was convinced at last of our terrible danger from this man who had such strength that he could throw his mental force about like careless bolts of lightning, Oh, yes, by now I had become thoroughly convinced!

"What follows next is not certain, but we have some clues, painfully assembled and collated. The reading seems thus;

"Somehow, the priest crossed the Inland Sea. During this crossing, he again fought, having a ship and crew under his command, found how and where we know not. He fought a pirate long under our control, slew him in personal combat, and with him a Glith, newest and most powerful of what the enemy call Leemutes, the animal slaves we long have bred as our servants. The pirate crew surrendered. Not even fear of us could break their Sea Law, that to the victor goes the spoil. We have interrogated such as we could catch since and have learned a good deal, but gaining information has been slow and tedious.

"This battle," he said, "caused mental storm. Also, there were self-seekers taken. We detected the area, plotted a course, and again sent one of the new ships, this time from a hidden harbor of the sea, near Neeyana on the south coast. It found the enemy and destroyed his ship, homed in on the self-seekers, the mind screens he had captured and forgotten. But we were too late! We gained nothing but the ashes of the paltry boat. All those aboard escaped into the deep forest, a place we go not and know little of. So now, at last, we know, from the sea scum we captured later, much we did not and could not know then.

"Listen well, Brothers!" His voice, never pleasant, had become a susurrations, a hissing of pure venom. "Eleveners! Into this comes the so-called Brotherhood of the Eleventh Commandment, our most ancient enemies, the animal and plant lovers, the grubbers in the dirt, the beast minders, the midwives of all that

creep and crawl, the adorers of useless life, the pitiers of the weak, the tenders of the helpless and soft! Arrgh! Eleveners!" His rage seemed almost to choke him for a moment, but he mastered himself.

"One of these vermin was on that ship with the priest, his woman, and the two animals. He was seen. An old man, he must have been one of weight in their rotted hierarchy, for he could control the great sea beasts. Mayhap he had something to do with the lost ship in the North.

"I was in Neeyana then and I called upon Brother S'ryath, my fellow and Master of the Yellow Circle here, for aid and counsel. And since I had abandoned direct control to him, I would that he tell of what we devised and what transpired as a result of it."

S'duna leaned back, as if glad to be done with his part. His anger had brought unaccustomed beads of sweat to his pallid brow.

S'ryath, on S'duna's left, hesitated for a moment, as if wondering where to begin or, perhaps, how. But he took up the tale readily enough.

"We tried, S'duna and I, something which should have been done far earlier, if only there had been time, which there had *not* been." He looked about, as one would do if perceiving a challenge, but he seemed to see none and went on.

"Our thoughts ran thus: Why had the priest been sent, or why was he going to the South, far beyond the borders of his barbarous land? Indeed, had he been sent at all, or was this all his own venturing? We thought not, we two. S'duna had indeed made it plain to me that this was no false alarm but a grave and sudden danger to us and to all the Great Plan. What did he seek, this priest? Remember, we knew nothing of any Eleveners then. That knowledge came much later.

"We assembled such knowledge as we had. This Rover had S'nerg's maps; that we knew or guessed. On those were the locations of many places of the Great Dead, the masters of the world before The Death. Could this creature be in search of one such, for some purpose of his own? It seemed a good chance, and we had little other information. S'duna's spies were ransacking the North and so were those of Brother S'tarn across from me, the Master of the Red Circle. But spies, even such as we have in the North, take time to gather news, and we were and are stretched to the limit. We had to guess and meanwhile assemble forces for any eventuality. This we did at great speed—men, our animal slaves of all kinds, all we had at hand. It was a powerful force, and there were a half-dozen Brothers in command. And then we had a message, though undesigned by the sender!

"On the eastern edge of the great wood, this priest and his pack used their minds, having some apparent struggle with the strange life of that area. We knew that grim things laired there, bred by the atom and yet not of us. It was an unknown place to us, save for dark rumor. Many had disappeared in that country without trace, both of us and of the ordinary human scum, traders and such.

"We studied our maps, and there was a pre-Death site there, one, moreover, with an entrance marked, one we ourselves could open. It was but one of many marked for future research. We have hundreds of such, some being treasure troves, but most are useless. This is all well known." He looked about again, an expression of defiance on his face, the control slipping as he tried to justify what came next.

"No, S'duna and I did not accompany the army. Perhaps we should have done so, in the light of hindsight. I do not apologize, though. Why do we breed and train servants and inferiors, if not for such tasks? I ask if any here question our courage, before I continue." Seeing no disposition to do as he asked on any of the other faces, he continued, his voice lowered as if in involuntary awe.

"There was a destruction brought upon the army such as we have never seen or dreamed of in our entire history. We received messages from our Brothers of the Robe, mind messages, that they had found the place, just as the maps showed, and that they would enter. Then—nothing! All mind voices ceased, as they went underground, presumably. And there fell a great silence, one still unbroken.

"Many days later, one of our scouts, reconnoitering with all caution, found a vast area of blight and rot, full of foul growth, all of it dying and giving forth a stench which rose to the clouds above. Where the lost cavern of the Mighty Dead had lain was a smoking, tumbled waste, which still gave off heat and reeks of horrid vapor from beneath. Not the atom, not the forces of The Death, for those we can detect, but something else, perhaps older still, some great secret of the ancients, we deem, had been unloosed. And we have learned no more of what befell. My tale ends here." He fell silent and stared at the table.

The silence continued, as if none cared to break it. The sheer magnitude of what they had heard, even though all knew the body of it in advance, seemed to have cast a spell. When a voice finally did speak, the actual sound appeared to have no place there.

"But Jean add to the tale, Brothers, and in a way that will give us a new strength." S'lorn of the Green was actually smiling, a nasty rictus of no humor but of immense satisfaction. "Take heart, Brothers, while I unfold news from the South, from my own distant lands. Much of it came to hand only today, from my own trusted messengers. But it makes a pretty picture."

He leaned forward as he spoke, and his long white fingers arched and touched each other upon the cold smoothness of the table.

"We all have been told that the priest arrived in D'alwah, throwing years of patient work by our minions and allies into confusion. For lo, as we could never have guessed, the ragged slave woman this woods rat had found in the distant North was the lost princess, daughter of D'alwah's stupid king, one thought by us to be dead in the jungle long ago. The priest knew this, nurtured her, and finally *married* her by their absurd rites. Thus in one incredible stroke, he had himself made the *de facto* ruler of the kingdom.

"I had ascribed much of this creature's past success to sheer luck and, I honestly confess it, to complaisance and bad planning in the North." He looked around, meeting every eye firmly before going on. "I offer my profound apologies to any here who may have thought me somewhat disdainful of their efforts in the past. This stroke of genius, this mating with the seat of power, changed my views of Per Desteen overnight. If he was a mere Abbey servant—and I know little of them, save what is passed to me from your realms—who and what are *they* in turn? Yet if, as I suspected, he was a strange mutant, a spontaneous appearance, as it were, unplanned and unplanning, then some opportunity might present itself.

"I too took counsel and devised a plan. We have powerful allies in that kingdom, even among what they call royal blood, and their strange church is rotted with our servants, who are deep in its secrets. A new drug was under experiment in our hidden centers, a drug which kills the mind powers, even of the most powerful. We have experimented on such." That the experiments probably had involved the death of at least one Brother of the Order who had merited Slorn's displeasure seemed obvious to all there. It meant nothing to them. Thus was power attained and kept.

"I met with our allies far from their city," S'lorn went on. "For I allowed no mind work near this priest creature at all. I wanted him to find nothing to suspect, and that is what he found—nothing!

"Now listen to this good cheer, Brothers. Today I have the following to tell. Per Hiero Desteen—this

prince of D'alwah, this titan who has so shaken our great Order—is dead!"

There was at least one gasp. It did not come from S'duna of the Blue, whose cold face was unchanged.

"This prince-priest, this vagabond ruffian, this mental giant, was simply struck on the head, drugged with the new drug I spoke of, and spirited far away into the wilderness. He was not killed at once, lest his wife, the royal slut, sense his passing and attack our allies before they were ready. But that is the real and inescapable fact. He is *dead*, finally, totally, completely dead. He is gone from the gaming board, Brothers, and we can once again plan as in the past, this random and ruinous factor forever disposed of!"

This time the silence was not brief. The purring voice of S'duna cut in, and there was no pleasure in it, only coldness.

"Before we rejoice, Elder Brother, I, the youngest of you, but nevertheless the one who knows this man best, indeed the only one of us ever to see him and live, have some small questions. Who saw the body? Yes, and also, how and where was he slain? Do your allies have the body in their possession? And if so, what was done with it? When I hear answers to these humble questions, I too shall perhaps rejoice."

A faint hint of red colored the pale cheeks of the Green Master. It was obvious that S'lorn was both angry and unaccustomed to be so taken to task. There was a noticeable rasp as he answered.

"Our chief ally in the kingdom was trained under me as a child. He sent the drugged priest under guard far to the west, by hidden paths known to none but himself. He sent trusted men, childhood servants, in two parties. This proved wise. For the second party found the bodies of the first. All, I repeat, *all* were reported dead and still warm. I see no reason to doubt any of this. Who slew them all is not known, but is thought to be local outlaws who haunt the western marshes. Are you answered?"

"Yes," S'duna said slowly, "I am answered. But I warn all here, with due respect to yourself, Eldest Brother, that this man is very hard to kill. I would a Brother, and a high one at that, had seen the corpse. I shall be honest, if nothing more. I like it not. Yet I may be wrong, and none hopes this more than I. That, at least, you may believe."

"Should it prove in error, then I will answer for it," the other snapped, annoyed by the doubt thrown on his triumph. "But we have wasted far too long on this matter already. The fact that the priest was what he was and did what he did is part of a much larger scheme. We have an organization, Brothers, now plotting against us, moving actively to challenge *us*, who have always been unknown to our enemies. Seldom even has an enemy ever glimpsed a Brother and lived to speak of it in the past. None knew of us, save the Eleveners, curse them, and them we scorned. Their creed of nurturing all life, of harming nothing—that, we thought, was sufficient protection from their lurking and prying. Let them skulk about, we thought, until the Great Plan comes to pass, and then let them be swept away, along with all the other vermin of no use to us!

"But now . . ." His voice hardened. "What do we learn? At least in part, they have abandoned their foolishness at last. They are actively helping our foes. And this is bad, could not be worse. They know much of us, and only the fact that they were passive and stupid held our hand in the past, for they have studied us a long time, longer maybe than we know. Their mere knowledge, imparted to others more prone to violence, could be a deadly weapon against us." He paused, then went on.

"The priest is dead. But what sent him is not. He came from the North, from your Abbeys that were thought under control, Brothers. Two states of the North, both under Abbey rule or guidance—the Metz Republic to the west and the League of Otawah in the east—are the source of this one deadly

troublemaker. Whence came he and—more to the point—are there more like him? We must plan quickly. This peril must be crushed at its roots—at once! It is for this, I know in my inner being, that I was told to summon this Council."

The other three leaned forward and listened as he began to expound his plan.

In another place, far from the dark and gloomy tunnels of the Unclean, stood a grove of mighty pines or related conifers. Of vast size, their immense boles were stained with lichen and hoary with age. In the heart of the grove lay a ring, bare to the rising moon and padded with many layers of fallen needles. Nothing grew in the ring, though the bed of needles was always fresh and clean.

No sound broke the silence of the night, save for the faraway hooting of a hunting owl and the sough of the soft wind in the lofty branches. Yet the glade was not empty. Here, too, there was a meeting. Shadowy, ursine shapes lay about the ring, only their glowing eyes proclaiming life. Great, furry sides heaved as the bear people kept their attention on the smaller figure of Gorm in the center.

Deep thoughts moved through mental circuits that others in the wild could not follow. Patiently, these Wise Ones of their people studied the new information brought to them. They had long remained hidden from the other sentient races of the world. Now they were not to be hurried in any decision which might affect their future.

The night passed slowly as thoughts moved from one reflective mind to another. The moon waned. After a time, it vanished behind a large drift of cloud. When the white light illumined the clearing once again, the smaller figure of Gorm was gone from the center, but the outer ring of bodies remained, fur-covered sides heaving gently.

A still pool lay deep in the jungle, as far from the tunnels of the Unclean or the grove of the bear people as those places were from each other. Here the trees which arched over the brown water were of such size as to make the great conifers look like saplings by comparison. Their incredible branches did not start to leave the main trunks until they were almost out of sight from the ground below. Vast cables of liana and veritable forests of parasitic plants clung to the towering sides of the giant trees. In the noon warmth, insects buzzed busily and bird calls rang out.

From down a well-trodden game trail, a great, black beast came quietly to the pool. He paused and surveyed the surroundings, his wide, flaring nostrils testing the air. Upon one shining haunch lay the still-bleeding marks of some savage claw. The mighty palmate antlers which crowned his huge head were stained and smeared with caked blood. Yet he did not look fearful in any way, only alert.

Eventually, he decided that the area was safe and slowly slid into the small pool until only his head protruded, the eyes always watching, the huge ears and blubber lips twitching at the slightest sound.

At length, with antlers and hide now clean and glistening, Klootz heaved his bulk from the far bank of the pool where the game trail continued on. As silently as he had come, he vanished down it—going north.

Hiero awoke and looked about him, then stretched and yawned. Another day had come. From his tree fork, he could see far over the savanna, his vision obscured only by other clumps of towering trees like his own. With each day of travel, the ground rose, and the trees grew thicker, but there were still wide spaces between them. He could see many drifting herds of game filtering here and there down the lanes. Most were antelope and related beasts which would spend the day in the bush, avoiding both insects and the runners who preyed upon them in the open. Others were returning to the grasslands after a visit to a water hole and a night of peril, the prey of grim hunters who struck them down as they drank.

Hiero leaned down from the branches and gave a low, echoing call. He had scanned the neighborhood and seen no sign of inimical life.

Presently an inquiring head peered over a tall bush; then the great hopper bounded into sight, as perky as if he had spent a night in his straw-filled stall.

The man climbed down and dug the saddle and other gear out of a thicket where he had cached them the evening before. He was always relieved that Segi was still alive when morning came.

"The fact is, my boy," Hiero said, scratching between the long ears as the hopper leaned down and nuzzled him, "you are something of a problem. In fact, I wish you weren't here at all. How's that for gratitude, after all you've done for me, eh?" A long pink tongue swept over his face, and he spluttered and then laughed.

But he was only half-jesting. Segi's safety was something that indeed did worry him, and he could see nothing much that he could do about it. It was all very well for the man to climb into a tree at night, but Segi, bred for the great plains, had no such defense during the dark hours. There was still a good deal of open ground around them, but with each dawn it grew less as they neared the hills. With the encroachment of the forest, it was going to be harder and harder for Segi to look after himself at night, with the wood alive with hungry maws. A hopper's only defense lay in his nose, ears, and huge hind legs. For the last, he needed room, room to leap and dodge, to spring and evade. And this sort of room was becoming increasingly scarce.

All that Hiero could think of was to take off every bit of the harness at evening, so that Segi had at least the total use of his freedom. The Metz hoped with half his mind that each morning would find the animal gone, drawn to his distant home and at least possible safety. Fully girt with saddle and weapons, he had found his way to his master through trackless country alive with predators. He would have had a fair chance, then, with nothing on, of making his way back alive to the distant East.

But Segi would not leave. Whatever Luchare had impressed on his simple mind, allied to plain love for Hiero, was too strong a bond. He had found his man and he proposed to stay with him. No amount of slaps and orders could make him take the trail back. When Hiero crept from the tree one night and, risking his life all the while, tried to steal away, he found the big brute hopping along in his tracks, thereby doubling the risk. It was the last time he tried that maneuver. Had Hiero's mind power been intact, he could have sent the hopper away in an instant. As it was ... He sighed and patted the warm, brown flank absently. He had come to love the big animal a great deal in the last few days. Before, back in D'alwah, Segi had been a cherished and interesting pet, but nothing beyond that. Now there was much more, a deep, mutual affection. It was not the same as it had been with Klootz, of course. Hiero and the great morse had been raised together, and Klootz' mind, after centuries of Abbey breeding, was far superior to Segi's. Indeed, the Abbey men were uncertain just how clever the morses were becoming. As he ate his simple breakfast, Hiero wondered if Klootz were alive. He stilled the thought for Luchare which came next; he had no time for vain regrets.

Some hours later, he reined in Segi and peered under his hand at the heights in the west. They were in a long ride of the forest, and the trees were very tall. Hiero knew without being told that he was coming to a tip of the great jungle again, the forest of the South. The trees around him now, which would have been considered well grown in his northern home, were but the scrub and the outliers of the incredible growth of the *real* forest, the greatest jungle Earth had ever known. The strange life of the atom fires, spawned by the horrors of The Death, had, among its many effects, the vast increase in bulk of many of the plants. Above all, the great trees of what were now the northern tropics, aided perhaps by what the ancients

called the Greenhouse Effect, had reached a size and majesty never known in the planet's past.

And beyond those trees, no more than a good day's march, he thought, there loomed the purple hills. He ached in his bones to be among them, and only his native kindness and good sense restrained him from spurring his mount on at too fast a pace.

Had the Metz even a third of his former powers, he would have known at once that he was being drawn and not acting under his own volition at all, though the thought that had pulled him gently but inexorably to the southwest for days was clever and subtle. But Hiero knew that he had lost all his skills—the thought reading, the shields, the forelooking, and the sheer force of his once mighty mind—weeks in the past. He had tried, over and over again, to reach out, to listen, somehow, somewhere to detect the presence of another intelligence. Every attempt had met with failure. The foul drug of Joseato's administering had done its work only too well. Mentally he was as blind as a newborn baby, and maybe more so if the baby possessed innate powers.

Being this mentally blind himself, he had the feeling that he was a blank to those outside, as well. He was right, but only in part. The drug had been effective, horribly so. To most of the outer world, and certainly to the Unclean, Hiero was a mental nullity, a blank. Not even Luchare could have detected him. The hopper had followed him by scent, his fine-tuned nose able to pick up the man's tracks even after several days. Dogs, some of them, could do as much.

But there were minds other than the Unclean's, also sprung from The Death. Hiero knew this well, none better. But it had never occurred to him that he might still be *reached*, be tapped and beckoned on a hitherto unused level of his brain, one which had lain dormant all his life and which he had not, even in the last year, realized was there at all. Yet so it was.

All day he and Segi moved steadily if slowly into the uplands, using great care to avoid dense clumps of foliage and timber. With each mile, this became harder and harder. The land itself was no longer a help but a hindrance. Folds of ground appeared, at first shallow, but then growing deeper and more precipitous. These ravines were no strong barrier at first, but Hiero knew them to be fingers thrust out from the heights ahead, the channels from which the tropic rains rushed down to the plains below.

Many of the ravines had water in their bottoms, though it was the dry season. At nightfall Hiero made camp on the lip of a sizable gorge, down which sped a small river, flowing fast over boulders and beds of gravel. He found a pocket in the stone, well above the river, and this he blocked, after penning Segi in with him, by dragging all the heavy, fallen timber he could find to barricade the entrance, making it at least partially secure. There were trees in abundance all about, but he could not leave the hopper alone on the ground overnight with no defense in this thick country.

Segi did not care for the small enclosure at first and grew restless, but settled down when Hiero lighted a small fire. There was good herbage, and succulent vines grew down the walls of the place. The big beast finally lay down after feeding, to chew his cud.

The moon was not out, but the stars were bright, and Hiero passed much of the night awake, studying the black outline of the hills, which now actually loomed high above him. They were old mountains, he surmised, worn and rounded, not like his great, sharp Stonies, which towered in white-capped chains in the distant Northwest. Forest reached to the tops wherever the soil was dense enough. He had already seen rock faces, though, bare of trees but hung with matted ranks of moss and fern. He could guess that there would be plenty of cliffs as well, making for hard climbing. As he had done for the last few days, he pondered the problem of the poor hopper. How could he make Segi leave him? As long as they were together in this steep, wooded country, the danger to himself was doubled. He had to care for both his

mount and himself at all times, for Segi no longer had space to use his limbs in the colossal bounds which were his only defense.

Twice during the night they were disturbed. Once a sharp, feral reek told them of an intruder, and the hopper snorted and crouched away to the back of the little bay, eyes rolling in fear. He made no effort to flee, relying on his master for defense, thereby showing good sense. Had he bucked or struggled, their shelter would have become a nightmare.

Hiero watched from a crouch, weapons at the ready. Presently, with no sound, a great paw, covered with scarlet fur and ending in huge yellow claws, came gently over the log barrier and felt cautiously about for a hold. This, the man decided, was quite far enough!

Scooping a few red-hot coals from the dormant fire with his broad spear blade, Hiero carefully emptied them over the wide, groping paw. There was a second of silence; then the paw was snatched back, and a hideous roar, almost deafening the Metz, crashed in turn over the barricade. It was followed by equally deafening snarls and growls and the crashing of brush and timber as the paw's owner blundered about in pain and rage. While Hiero grinned hugely and the hopper still froze in panic, the noises died away downhill; the creature, whatever it was, sought distance and possibly the river to quench its burns.

For long afterward there was relative peace, and Hiero dozed, like his mount, crouched on his haunches, stirring only to renew the tiny fire at intervals. That the surrounding foothills were full of life needed no further emphasis. The night about them rang with howls and screams, as hunters and hunted fought through the dark hours. Sometimes the sound of great padded feet came from close by, and the man tensed, coming wide awake automatically. But most of the meat eaters seemed deterred by the fire, the barrier of wood, and perhaps the unfamiliar, mingled scent of man and hopper.

It did not pay to relax completely, and Hiero never did. This was just as well, for the next attack was unfamiliar and might have succeeded by its very strangeness.

The Metz had been conscious of an odd sound for quite a while before he grew alert. It was a soft, fluttering noise, like the flapping of a large fan waved with great speed, and seemed to come from out over the gorge to his left. Sometimes it went away and sometimes came quite near, so that the purling of the small river in the depths of the gorge was almost silenced. He only heard the noise when the chorus of the jungle had momentarily died down; but though it vanished at times, it always returned. Segi, if he noticed it at all, paid no attention, but drowsed, eyes half-shut, staring at the fireglow.

In the dark, just before the first coming of dawn, Hiero heard the soft flutter drifting toward their nook once more, and something impelled him to throw a few more sticks on the dying coals.

The sound grew suddenly louder, and the beat of monster wings forced a blast of wind into the little angle in which Hiero and Segi crouched, causing the fire to flare and the man to start to his feet, his gaze widening in amazement and horror.

Poised in the air before him hung a demon's face, great fangs bared below glowing eyes, wrinkled snout, and ears carved as if in oiled leather. A naked body was held aloft by the roaring beat of the vast, leathery wings. The nightmare head alone was the size of a small wine keg.

As the savage jaws snapped at him, Hiero shrank back, his spear raised in defense. Again the thing wavered in at him, the giant fans of its finger wingers flapping the fire into yet brighter flame. The hopper gave a squeal of utter terror at the sight. But this time, the Metz warrior was ready.

His spear licked out in a short, vicious arc. Despite the ability of the giant bat-thing to change direction, the sharp edge cut deep, not in the face, but in one shoulder, where a great wing joined the hideous body. Screaming on an impossibly high note, the haunter of the night winds fell off and away, down into the misty canyon from whence it had flown in the first place. It was all over in seconds, leaving man and mount staring into the void. Then, even as they stared, Hiero saw the first paling in the east. The long night was over.

Limp with relief, yet not losing his grip on his spear, he slowly sank back to his knees. As the sky gradually brightened around him and the volume of noise shrank with the coming of day, he remained there, eyes shut and giving heartfelt thanks to the Almighty for his delivery from the perils of the dark. Crossbarred spear held before him, the priest prayed for the future, not only of himself but of all mankind and of the world of beasts and the untamed beauty of the land. He asked for strength in future trials and aid for his loved ones. At last, his orisons done, he fell asleep with the sun's first rays just touching the cliff above his head.

Segi, all terrors forgotten with the approach of daylight, flicked his ears and reached for a tender weed. He would keep watch.

V

The Spinner and the Web

When Hiero awoke, his head ached. He did not feel tired, exactly, but a bit sluggish and stiff. He wondered if it was due to the damp; the day was not cold—indeed it was quite hot—but a thin, light rain was falling. It was this which had finally awakened him, though he had slept in the rain, and heavy rain at that, many times before. Perhaps some miasma had risen from the river spray during the night. He enjoyed superb health as a rule. There was little disease in the old sense abroad in the world these days. Some of the ancient places of The Death still harbored plagues of horrid sorts, so the tales said, and all such were sedulously avoided when known to exist. But other than a cold or two and a broken leg, the hardy Metz had never known a day's illness. Still, his head ached!

He shook it angrily, as if to drive the aching away by sheer force. It was not all that bad, just a dull throb, but he was unused to such things and resented it all the more for that reason. He would have to do something, he supposed, if it persisted. That an ache might come from his subconscious as it battled on his behalf with an outside force never occurred to him. In his state of mental stasis, as far as his innate and taught powers were concerned, there was no way it could.

Meanwhile, he fed himself, thinking gloomily about Segi and the hours before as he did. A few more nights like that would put paid to both of them! Segi was strictly diurnal, and though Hiero could travel in the dark, it was a terribly dangerous thing to do in this unknown land. He thought of the flying horror of the night and whistled to himself. Never before had he been attacked from the air, unless he counted the great birds from whom he had saved Luchare. But that had been an artificial situation, the creatures being lured by human torturers to their prey.

That devil bat was under no one's control but its own, of that he was sure. What a place the world was, with things like that in it, unknown until they struck at one!

He eyed the gorge as he saddled Segi, but nothing flew there save some small birds resembling swallows, seeking insects in the drizzle and fog. The chorus of the night had gone too, only an occasional distant howl or roar attesting to the presence of the hungry bellies of their owners as they slunk back to

their lairs. Strange birds sang sweetly or called in mocking echoes from the slopes above, the thin patter of the falling water hardly muffling the sound.

Nevertheless, Hiero was very cautious as he dismantled his barricade and led Segi out. But, save for some torn bushes, no trace remained of the brute which had clawed at the barrier. The man mounted, and the big hopper obediently set off down a narrow alley in the towering trees which gave promise of leading to a gentler slope upward.

A long time later, the two were deep in the folds and ravines of the rising hills. Hiero could not have said where he was going and, indeed, seemed to be proceeding at random. His headache had increased, but he paid it no outward attention. Had an observer been there to note what transpired, there would have seemed a strange look in the man's eyes, one of puzzled concentration, as if some thought were being explained. Or imposed.

It was the beast and not the man who was growing uneasy. Long since, the last bird calls had died away behind them. The thin rain no longer fell, but swirls of increasing fog curled about their bodies now, and visibility had dropped to a few yards in front and to the sides. Great moss-covered stones loomed out of the mist at them and then fell away as they passed. The trees had been largely replaced by monstrous arums and broad-leafed plants like vast rhubarbs. Ferns were everywhere, some with trunks many feet thick and with heads far out of sight in the gray mist overhead. The footing was spongy, and the hopper's pads made a flat squelching sound each time his weight hit the damp soil underfoot. His eyes rolled nervously and his long mule ears flickered constantly as he sought for some sound over the drip and plash of the water, the noise of laden rivulets trickling into their path from the surrounding gullies and heights far above.

Even a normal man without Hiero's skills as a woodsman would have been nervous by now, whether or not he possessed any added powers of the mind. But Hiero seemed caught up in a trance. One part of his brain noted absently that they were in the bottom of a deep ravine or canyon which was leading them upward on a slow incline. Yet the fact was simply recorded as having no relevance of any kind. Segi's snorts and fidgets were firmly but gently controlled, and the big beast, trembling yet obedient, went on at the man's behest. His mingled affection and years of constant training mastered his fears and his animal awareness that all was not well.

For some hours more, they went on in this manner. The ground underfoot, or rather the mixture of moss and mud, began to level off. The upward incline ceased and now took, after a while, an equally shallow downturn. The dribbles of water through which they splashed began to run gently in the way that they themselves were going.

The silence was not oppressive. Save for their own breathing, the creak of leather, and the splash of Segi's feet, nothing stirred in the mist about them. Only the lonely fall of water from heights above and the drip from the leaves surrounded them. It was as if they were lost in some strange world of silent fog, some place where active life never came, but which, since the beginning of time, had been given over to the pearl gray of the mists and the silent, watching plants. It did not seem a place that wanted or would endure movement and the bustle of everyday sounds and stirrings. Here there was only the still life of water and plant, moss and stone. Yet they continued, over marsh and boggy stretches, broken by reaches of smooth, wet rock where even the carpets of omnipresent moss could find no rooting. The mist, light in one place and darker in another, curled in ever-thicker coils around them, deadening even the sounds they made, as if trying to blanket them with its own silence.

Presently, Hiero knew, they were to come to a wider place. The pale fog was no thinner, but his inner knowledge was sure, They were no longer in a narrow ravine, but in some opening, a bowl of some sort

in the heart of the hills. Here something waited for them, as it had waited for countless others. Here they had been drawn over vast and empty leagues for some purpose by that which ruled this land of mist. All thinking suspended, all purpose stilled, Hiero reined Segi to a halt and looked about him in idle wonder. The mists lifted slowly as he did so, and he saw the water.

Before them, black and smooth, a tarn stretched out of sight until the fog rolled in upon it and hid its farther shores. They were on a low bank, a sort of reef which projected out into the silent water, its basis something firmer than the moss and ooze through which they had come for so long. It was not rock, but mass upon mass of something white and rounded, with here and there a sharp projection rising above the other rotting matter. Stretching out around them as far as they could see was a shore of bones, moss-covered and old, with a few whiter and newer additions. They had come upon a graveyard of a strange and horrible kind.

How many generations, how many lives of the world outside, must have been spent to create that vast and moldering wrack of skeletons, not even the inhabitant of the lake could have said.

There was no discrimination among the relics of the past. Skulls of the giants, with crumbling tusks many yards in length, were piled in heaps, mingled with the slender crania of the hoofed runners on the grass. Savage fangs, half-buried under the lichen and mildew, showed that meat eaters were not exempt. The femurs and hoofs, the occipitals and astragali of hordes of smaller beasts were inextricably entwined through and over the huge ribs and metacarpals of the greatest brutes. From dead eye sockets, the ghosts of reptiles stared in empty equality at the mammals. All of evolution had met in the common fate of their mortality. The only conquerors were the dampness, the mold, and the swirling mist. The only epitaph was silence.

As quiet now as the dead around them, man and hopper waited. Even Segi had stopped his nervous trembling and had lapsed into a cowed stillness. Hiero simply sat, a copper statue on a bronzed steed. The two heads stared before them at the dark lake, seemingly as patient as the hills which held them captive. The mist dripped unregarded from the leather headband of the Metz. He had discarded his now useless hat days before. His dark eyes looked fixedly forward at the water, never wavering, with no emotion stirring in their depths. He was waiting for a summons. Yet when it came, it came so strangely that his body trembled with the shock. For it came in his mind.

Welcome, Two-Legs! You have been a long time upon your journey, as you and yours count time. That which bears you has helped to bring you to me. Leave the animal now. It has served its purpose, or part of its purpose. It has no further use in our dealings together. Follow the shore around to the right and you will be more comfortable. We have much to discuss, we two.

As the voice entered his mind, Hiero became a changed man. Outwardly, he remained what in fact he had been for a long time, a prisoner of his own body, obedient to the will of that which had summoned him. But the strange voice in his brain had alerted all the long-silenced circuits that had been killed by the drug of the Unclean. They were not operating under his control, but they were activated. He could feel all his emotions again, sense the brain of that which addressed him, plan on the future with his full mentality, review the damage done by the drug, and, above all, feel that he was no longer a prisoner in his own skull. Yet he must obey.

He dismounted as he had been told. The hopper remained squatting on his haunches, as immobile as a statue, his great, gentle eyes fixed in a blank stare, as if he were seeing nothing. The man began to walk along the edge of the dark water, picking his way over the slippery masses of the crumbling bones with care. All the while, his brain was still captive, but racing furiously, considering the voice in his mind and the implications thereof.

It was no human voice, this mental alert. In some ways, it was not unlike the House, that amalgam of fungoid intelligence he had slain in the cavern to the north. The resemblance lay in a sense of coldness and of great age. But there it ended. The House had been all furious malignancy, hating and despising all that was not of its own foul nature, determined to swallow the whole world in its sporadic growth. This mind was quite different, being as placid as the mountain tarn before him. It was remote, non-caring. It envied and despised nothing, too aloof and withdrawn from the scheme of things for such pettiness. If it had any deep emotions, it hid them well.

While Hiero was considering the voice and trying to sort out the burst of galloping thoughts created by the sudden awakening of his mind, he was still clambering over the moss and lichen-strewn bones. Presently, he came to the end and found himself in a little bay on the shore of the black lake. Over the water, the mist still clung to the damp air, wreaths and swathes of it folding and refolding in gauzy tendrils. The light was growing brighter as the sun once more began to make its appearance, and shades of pearly opalescence colored the fog.

Hiero seated himself on a convenient bank of thick, green moss and stared at a narrow ridge of grayish rock which had become revealed some yards from the shore as the mist cleared a little. The voice had been silent for some minutes now, and his brain registered nothing. Yet he was well aware that his summoner was not gone and also that he could make no move save with permission. Far back down the shore, whence he had just come, he heard the sound of a heavy splash. There was no other sound, and he wondered at the noise. While he sat in silent puzzlement, the voice came again to his mind.

So, Two-Legs, you are at rest. I feel in your mind that you do not hunger, nor do you thirst. Good. Very good. We can have speech with each other.

The strange voice was not speaking in words, but rather in instantaneous images. Moreover, the images were halting and somewhat labored, not at all like the clear mind speech Hiero could use with Gorm, the absent bear, his mutant comrade. It was as if the being had developed little or no skill in what it was doing. It had plenty of ability, but the ability was theoretic, not practiced.

You can speak to me, Two-Legs. Not to anyone else, at least not in this manner. And there is no one to speak to with sounds, as you do with your own sort. Here, in my place, there is none other. You must speak with me or with none.

Hiero tensed as he received this, then attempted to use mind speech. As he did so, he tried to throw up a guard as well, so that whatever addressed him could not read his hidden, innermost thoughts.

Who are you? he sent. *What do you want? Why cannot I see you? What is this place?*

He could swear he had felt amusement or at least irony from the voice. But there seemed to be no malice, no feeling of evil, directed toward him. Yet he knew the creature was right. He was sending to it alone. His powers had been restored only on this one "channel." Aside from his unseen interlocutor, he was still cut off from the world of the mind.

Many, many questions, came the reply. *There is no need for so much at once. But I will try to answer. You will see me in due course. I have my own reasons for waiting. You are most impatient — as are, I guess, all those like you?* It ignored its own half question and went on. *This is my place, the only place I have ever known. And perhaps ever will. I have brought you here, as I see you perceive, by pulling on your mind slowly at first and then with more power, increasing the pull by degrees. For I could see that your mind was not such as I have ever encountered before. Many w*

anings and waxings of the moon have come and gone since one of your two-legged kind was brought here. It has been so long that I have lost count. It did not seem important. Very few ever came, and their minds were blind and foolish, unthinking and so full of terror. In the end, when I could not reach them and their minds, I gave them peace. What passed for their brains was full of blood, full of fear, and yet cruel also, in a way that the simple beasts who come are not. So— like these others, they passed.

Hiero was made conscious of the sea of mossy bones. He felt a sudden chill. How long had this invisible presence been here, and was this damp charnel house what it meant by "giving them peace" and "passing"?

But the thing which spoke to him detected his fear at once, and he knew that in his present state no mind screen he erected could bar it from any of his thoughts.

Do not be afraid! it said with surprising emphasis. *You are no use to me if you panic like the other things of your species. I mean you no harm. When I felt the strength of your thoughts, which burned in the atmosphere—for even though your mind is bent and silenced, I can still perceive its lost power — I tried to draw you here. You were very far away, Two-Legs, so far I could barely detect you at all. I had to strain my own senses to the uttermost even to reach you. It exhausted me, the first time such a thing ever happened. And then, when I found your brain, I found it blocked, sealed off from all thought outside, even mine.* There was a pause, as if the voice were trying to assemble thought and concepts unused or never used before.

But the ones who shut your mind from the rest of the world—for I see that it was done to you, and not for your benefit— did not know of me. There was a note of actual pride in the message, Hiero noted in turn. The voice had accomplished quite a feat, and it knew it.

I found a small place that the blockage did not cover, a hole, you would think. And into this hole I sent my own thought, calling you to me. It took much energy. I was always hungry. Even now, after just feeding, I am hungry still. I must summon more food before we talk again. You also, Two-Legs, are ready to eat and rest. Go back to where you came from first and get the food that you have brought with you, then return here to eat and rest. Later we can have speech together. Fear nothing. I alone rule here, and no enemy or beast can enter or leave unless I desire it. None has ever left.

There was silence in his mind, Hiero realized. The voice was gone. He thought of the message and shuddered inwardly. "None has ever left." Was this to be his fate as well, trapped by some nameless being in the far mountains, to perish alone and unknown in this lake of fogs, his quest undone, and Luchare and all who loved him never even to know? He crossed himself. If he ever needed the Lord's protection, this was the time. It was not fear or even the loneliness of his plight which unnerved him. Rather, it was the thought that he had surmounted, so much, only to come to this obscure and hopeless end.

Then, as he thought of the past, both recent and more remote, his spirits began to rise. He recalled the thousands of leagues he had come from his home in the North, the successes he had achieved, the foes he had overcome, and, above all, the woman he had saved and won. It was enough. He was still a human, and one bred to battle since youth. A warrior knows when to fight and when to wait upon events. This was a time to wait. The being whose shape he had not seen had not harmed him, only withdrawn somewhere. It had bidden him to eat and rest. Very well, he would do so. Then, refreshed, he would see what came next.

He began to retrace his steps to where he had left Segi entranced, as he had been himself a while back, staring out into the mists. Even with the increase of pallid light and the cessation of the rain, he had the same trouble picking his way over the pavement of bones, cracked, broken, and beslimed.

He saw a brown heap on the foreshore in front of him and decided that Segi was lying down, though the hopper looked curiously fore-shortened through the mist. Then, with a thrill of horror, he realized that the animal was not there at all. He broke into a run, careless of his footing, and arrived, panting, at the object he had glimpsed so mistakenly. There at his feet lay the saddle and bridle, all complete, with reins, boots, socketed spear, and saddlebags. But of the brave creature who had followed and carried him for so long, there was no trace. The hopper was totally, completely, gone, as if he had doffed his own well-laced and buckled gear and gone for a cooling swim. Over all the gear was a smear of glutinous slime, clear and odorless!

Hiero drew the great sword-knife from his back and whirled to face the black lake. He remembered now the heavy splash he had heard while seating himself in the mossy bay to which he had been directed. He knew now what had caused it!

Damn you! he raged in his mind, sending the signal as savagely as he could. *Come and get me! Leave off hiding and skulking wherever you are! Here's someone ready to fight, not a poor, dumb animal that did you no harm! Let's see you fight a man, you foul spawn of whatever!* "Come on, I'm waiting for you!"

So enraged was he that he brandished his sword at the lake and shouted the last words aloud. His fury at the sly murder of the helpless Segi—for he was sure that not only was the beast dead but that it had had no chance to defend itself—made him shake with baffled anger.

From the still water there came no reply. No ripples arose on the calm surface; the colored mist, now gray and pearl, now pink and shot with faint golds, swirled as silently as before. The far shore of the tarn remained hidden from view, and nothing moved save for the eternal drip of the trickling droplets from the rocks and leaves, running through the moss channels and lichens until they merged with the substrate and entered the lake far below.

Hiero was trembling with silent rage, though he made a strong effort to master himself. He had been gulled with smooth words to take him off guard, while Segi had been dragged, helpless, to some horrid den to serve as a feast for God knew what atrocity. It made him wild. Soon, however, a new mood of cold anger replaced the hot fury. What was done was done. They had been lured here by some power which had boasted that it never let go of its prey. His hapless mount had trusted him to the death—and had followed him to that death. His memory working at full throttle now, Hiero had no trouble remembering how Segi had tried to warn him on the long route up the mountain's throat, checking and snorting in a last attempt to make his master see the peril and take action. But, insensate, befooled, his brain under the spell of what laired here, Hiero had simply urged the poor brute on. And this was the result!

Well, then, he would take the being's advice, just as he had done earlier. He took dried meat and some edible roots from the saddlebags and ate, watching the water while he did so. He did not really expect anything to materialize from the silent mere; it was simply that he knew that what had taken Segi came from there. The shore of bones was enough clue to that without any other evidence. Over the centuries, whatever had spoken to him had collected prey, and it was no accident that the lake was the epicenter of its activity. There was no way he could reach it now, but he could at least be ready when *it* came again. For it would come, he felt sure.

Arriving at the mossy bank, he selected the driest section with care. In the dying light—for he could feel the sun setting through the cloudy reek—he laid himself down. His spear was across his breasts and his sword to hand. Not that, having overcome his first wrath, he felt material weapons were going to be much use to him. They were a symbol of readiness, nothing more. And the crossbar of the spear, forming a cross with the blade, gave him the added security of his faith. He was suddenly drowsy, though not suspiciously so. He remembered, just before full dark fell, to say his prayers and he silently mentioned the good beast who had served to the end and done his master's bidding to the last.

Out in the dark waters of the lake, something listened to the prayer—something both alien and lonely.

When Hiero awoke, it was mid-morning, according to the built-in clock in his head. The mists were far thinner than yesterday, and he could see the lake shore stretching much farther in both directions. Overhead, the sky was still hidden, but the light that came down was golden with the sun, even though strained through the coiling vapors.

He stretched and yawned, then remembered the previous evening, and once more the anger returned. He drew his knees up, cradling the spear across his arms, and stared malevolently at the water before him, now a silver gray in the glow of the morning. His blast of mental rage received an answer at once.

I have done you a wrong, I perceive, the voice said in his head. I have seen somewhat of your mind as you rested. This I cannot do with the same ease as when you are awake. Yet when your brain was at rest, I saw in the dark hours great anger against me. That I slew the animal that carried you here is a fact. That I knew that this would anger you is not. Somehow, in some way hidden from me, this creature and you were linked. Yet it was not your mate, not of the same kind at all. It was something that bore you as a burden, a matter which cannot have been agreeable to it, though useful to yourself. It carried you as a larger animal carries a smaller which sucks its blood. Yet you got no sustenance from it, nothing beyond a slight increase in speed and ease. There was a brief pause, as if the thing were trying to formulate some new thought. At last it said, or sent, I do not understand the cause of your anger, but I will do what I can to make amends if you will explain.

A good deal of Hiero's anger evaporated on the instant, for reasons hard for a non-telepath to understand. He *knew* at the very moment that he took the message in that whatever spoke to his mind was telling the truth. His mind had been too well schooled over the years, and particularly in the recent past, for him to be mistaken. The invisible being which addressed him was not lying. Everything that it had stated was true in the context of the creature's understanding. It was honestly puzzled. The relationship between man and mount was a complete mystery to it. The old, cool—why did he think of *that* adjective?—brain which questioned him was quite genuinely baffled. It was seeking an honest answer! He dropped the spear, almost without thinking, and then stood up, his own thoughts all askew.

Then he saw that, by the long rock offshore, the water was moving. The invisible voice had an owner. And, as the voice had promised, the owner was going to reveal itself at last.

A round, shiny surface, dull brown and glistening, broke the surface first. It was the top of an enormous head, several yards across. The eyes came next, large and round, with brown pupils and yellow rims. Above the eyes were two lumps of matter which extended slowly; as they rose, they became long tentacle horns with the same skin as the head. This in turn was smooth and yet grainy, all in mottled shades of brown. There was no nose, and the mouth was only a slit under the chinless head. Ears were also absent.

As the eyes steadily gazed at the fascinated man, the great head rose higher and higher on a smooth, columnar neck. Still the mighty neck rose, and now the head was inclined and looking down at him. The

water moved before it as it advanced slowly and majestically. When it reached the rock, the neck lifted farther still, and the thickening of a giant body began to follow. When its body was partly out of the liquid, it stopped and came no farther. Runnels of lake water were pouring from its sides as it finally came to rest.

Now you see me, Two-Legs, with your own eyes and not in fear, as all the others, the countless others of the past, have done.

Hiero stared up at the titan. Whatever its mental powers, which he knew to be great, the colossal thing before him could have smothered a buffer bull like an ant. That its greatest bulk still lay below the surface was obvious. It was simply resting its forepart on the rock so that he could converse with it at ease. There seemed to be no limbs of any sort, unless one counted the two great pseudo-pods that extended and contracted over the eyes. For a moment there was a pause as the two beings examined each other.

It was the man who sent the next message. It was a somewhat confused one.

Who are you? What are you? The thing you killed was my friend. It trusted me and came here at my bidding, though it did not wish to. Do you know what a friend is? Even as he spoke to the mighty brain before him, he realized that of course he had answered his own last question.

Many, many questions again from the little Two-Legs. Now that Hiero could see the actual possessor of the mental "sound," it seemed to boom and echo in his head, though this was only illusion,

I have never thought of who I am, the giant of the lake went on. I have always been alone. I perceive that if there are many of one kind, then there must be ways of distinguishing. But there are none like me. Call me what you will. I shall know who is meant. It seemed to pause.

As to what I am, I cannot be sure. My memory goes back far, Two-Legs, so far that I had not even begun thinking. Back in the time of my beginning, I could not think, I could only feel! I was, I must have been, as one with the dumb beasts, my food of now, whose bones cover the land.

Hiero wondered how long it must have taken to pile up the countless skeletons he had seen and had stumbled over.

The lake creature caught his thought. *Yes, it took long. And longer than you think! For these bones that you have seen are but the latest. The whole shore on which you stand and all around and out of your sight, that too is bone, bone under the moss and the plants. When I began to feed, there was naught here but naked rock!*

Hiero stood, silent and awed. How much time had there been, to have allowed the creation of the very shore of the lake from the detritus of this thing!

So much time, it went on, catching his thought again, that I, who have never had the skill or the need to measure time, cannot tell how long. But I can dimly recall something. And that something was fear! Even I, the One, I too have known fear. There was a great light in the sky, and lesser lights passed across it. The earth trembled and the mountains fell. And there came a heat and a burning in the air. And the heat was strange and not of the normal kind, which comes from the sky in quickness when there is a storm. That heat I know well. But this other, this heat of long ago, it made the waters hot in turn. I had to leave the lake and burrow deep under hidden rocks. At last, I dared to come above and seek the light again and the cool waters. Now, all this my body remembers, but not my brain. Do you understand, Two-Legs? It was only then that I thought, "I

am. "And I was not as large as you, not then, and I bore something with me, something which grew from me and which I needed for my own defense. Long, long ago that was. And as I learned to find food, for I suddenly needed much more, I discarded that which I bore. I grew too large to carry it. Yet I saved it, for it was all I had to remember the ancient days, the days of fear, when I too trembled as the mountains shook. I have it yet, for I keep it safe in my body. Perhaps this will tell you in turn of my age and the ages gone before.

A ripple seemed to pass down the giant neck. Then there came another and another, almost as if the vast body were somehow stretching. As the Metz watched closely, a bulge appeared—not large, but projecting upward from the mottled brown of the smooth, slimy hide. From the place where the body merged with the water, the bulge traveled upward until it was at a level with Hiero's eyes. Then the skin simply split, and that which had caused the bulge was extruded to the surface. It lay on the great body, gleaming in the soft light filtered down through the mist, a lovely golden snail shell, no bigger than a small melon.

As the priest watched, the skin opened again, and the thing was gone. He could almost have smiled, had he not been struck with such wonder. A snail! This deity of the hills, this titan older than memory, was a snail!

He sobered quickly. Whatever the thing was, whatever it had been, it was certainly not to be despised now. And what had it not seen! Why, it was itself an actual, living child of The Death! For what were the fires and the heat, the passing lights and the shaken mountains, but a living memory of what had destroyed the Earth countless years in the past? Ever since that time, this creature had stayed here in the hills, growing and growing, accumulating wisdom as it grew in size, teaching itself by experience, wondering, studying, groping for knowledge. And always it was alone! What must it have been, that life of millennia, always alone? Hiero's pity was stirred, even as he considered that incredible existence. Here was living proof of the thesis of Brother Aldo and those of his fellow Eleveners that ail life had purpose. But yet what purpose was there to this?

All the while he thought, the great amber eyes, lidless and lashless, stared down, considering him in turn. And the brain of the giant was still logical, its memory of recent events still functioning.

I have tried, Two-Legs, to tell of what I am. I see that you have understood, as I had hoped you might. But there is yet the matter of the animal which bore you on its back. I took it for food. I removed the things it carried, for those I deemed to be of you and necessary to you. Then I drew it into the water. It felt no pain, but fell asleep. And I fed. Thus have I done since I first knew that I was. I meant you no harm, nor do I now. If I could restore the animal to life, I would do so gladly. I wish you contented, Two-Legs, for I did not bring you here to do you harm. I wish speech, the first speech I have ever had with a fellow mind, and that is my sole purpose in trapping you, as in ages past I learned to lure my food hither.

Not without an ache for Segi, Hiero dismissed all thoughts of vengeance. The tragedy of the hopper's death was no one's fault. The mind of the giant mollusc could not lie to him on this, if indeed on any matter. It had no training in lying, anyway. Why should it mask its purposes? The ages it had lived were enough evidence of its statements in themselves. Emotions had been foreign to this being that had lived without companionship for many thousands of years. In all that stretch of lonely time, it had possessed only one thing to keep it from going mad with boredom. This was its desire to gain knowledge of the world outside, to know what else there was to existence besides its lonely mere, lost and forgotten in the far reaches of the hills. A seeker after knowledge all his life, Hiero could not but sympathize with the desire of the titan for new learning. It had not meant harm, but only to bring to itself the brain it sensed for the first time in its history.

He thought rapidly, *You tell me that without knowing you slew my beast, who was dear to me in a way that you cannot know. I think I believe you. But in addition to this deed, and I will admit that you were ignorant, you spoke also of repairing the harm that you have done. You may have done more harm than you know, even now. For I am on a mission, a journey. There is great need for haste so that my enemies, the enemies of all that is good, will not achieve what they plan. From this path you have diverted me, for you have drawn me countless leagues from my true path, which lies in the far North. Both this and the death of my hopper stand against you, if your mind is honest.*

The reply was instantaneous. *I have told you the truth, if truth is what I believe. I have no way of measuring the truth, as you call it, though I perceive that you have and that so do others. Attend, then.* The creature paused once more, in what Hiero now knew to be its way of marshaling its thoughts in order. It did not like disorder, this solitary mind! And as he thought this, a name came to his lips almost involuntarily. "Solitaire."

The great, cool voice again reverberated in the endless corridors of his mind. *So—you have given me a name in your sounds! I, who have never had or needed a name, accept it. Solitaire!* To the man's continued amazement, the actual letters of the word were formed, in good Metz writing, in his brain! The titan was still sending a message, however.

I have learned much, so much from your mind already! I took such knowledge as your brain would release easily while you slept. I feel—and that is new in itself—that you understand what this means to me. I have new thoughts, new concepts, thousands of them!

The burst of enthusiasm was almost like the shout of a giant in the man's head.

Now listen to what I have found out while you lay in sleep. Hiero. Again, the actual name floated in formed letters in the astonished human head. But the thought went on, unheeding his marvel. *There is a risk, but I think a small one. With much to gain for you, if you are willing to make the attempt. If you have the strength and will continue to trust me, to believe I mean no harm but only that which is to your benefit, then perhaps, but not certainly, for I do not know all that I should, I can help your mind.*

The Metz was seated again, comfortably lounging back on a mound of deep moss while he stared up into the soup-bowl eyes looming over him. But his brain was racing as soon as the last statement registered.

Help my mind? His black eyes flickered away, out over the vapors of the lake and then back again. *My mind, if you mean my powers of thought, my ability to see far off, to communicate with others, is dead. My enemies killed the power with a drug. This is the main reason I am a fugitive in this wilderness and not leading my people in more open battle. And, Solitaire, you yourself have told me that you found only one small gap, with much effort, by which you could reach my thoughts. What, exactly, do you mean?*

The great, calm voice was reassuring. *I mean this, my —* There was an almost shy hesitation—: *friend. In the endless time since what you call The Death, the terrible fires that your folk once loosed—for I know now that it was you, small and feeble though you seem.— I have had much time to learn. I did not simply draw the lower animals to me for food, though at first that was the only reason. I did other things with them, as I did also with the plants.*

Your name for what I did is—study! And once more the fiery letters formed.

With your bones inside and your hot blood, your furry coat and your quick movements, you are not so unlike the beast which carried you. Yes, and the hordes of others which have come before. I have looked into their minds, Hiero, and I have learned much. I can do things you have not seen as yet, things with my own body, things I have taught myself. For when I began to grow in size, my mind was not so strong. When the fires stopped and life returned to the hills, there came many great beasts as well, some no doubt quickened to new life, even as I. I was not alone in the heart of the hills then! There came things then which hungered also for food, even as when I was small and bore my only defense upon my back. I had to hide often then, so far back in time! But I studied my own body and I learned a great truth concerning that body. I learned that such as I can mold the basic units of life, what you call cells! Yes! Even as the smallest and lowest of the tiny things that swarm in the waters about me, so too can I!

Riveted to his seat, Hiero watched what followed in new wonder. That such things were possible was beyond his dreams.

From the mighty neck, if Solitaire possessed a true neck, there began yet another bulge, such as had heralded the shell. But this one was much larger. It continued to grow and reach, as thick at the base as a great tree. Soon the huge tentacle or pseudopod was as long as the trunk of such a tree. It waved in the air above the man's head, its end a tapered point no bigger than his hand, dripping cool water on him as it did so. Then, with a movement that took his literal breath away, it swept down.

He felt a cold circle about his waist, and the next moment he was high in the air, suspended in front of the great, round head and only inches away from it. Before he had time to draw in fresh air, he had been lowered with the same lightning speed and replaced on his moss bed, while again the colossal limb waved back and forth overhead. The pressure had been as gentle as a lover's embrace.

Next the incredible "arm" shot off down the shore whence he had come, so short a time before. In a split second, it was back, but now in its serpent grasp was the yellowed skull of some long-dead beast, three times Hiero's size. With a casual flick, it released the thing as if from some enormous catapult. Moments later, from far beyond the range of Hiero's vision, there came back the echo of a great splash. The voice of Solitaire rumbled in the man's mind, and this time there was no doubt about it—there *was* humor in it, and satisfaction, too.

Even if the great beasts could resist my mind now, Hiero, I have a few other ways of keeping myself from being eaten! Now pay yet more attention to what I show you.

The mighty, brown pseudopod came gently down. It stopped no more than a foot from the bronzed, aquiline nose. Then slowly the tip began to narrow and grow smaller and smaller, even more slender and pointed. Soon it was needle-tipped, finer than the smallest surgeon's probe the Metz had ever seen. This was not the end of its marvels, however.

When it had become so thin that Hiero could barely define it with his eyes, it moved closer to his face, so close that his quickened breath could have warmed the end. From the bare tip now sprouted wirelike tendrils, so fine in texture that the man had to squint to focus on them. They waved before his eyes, so ethereal it was hard to be sure he was seeing them at all. Each one had independent movement, though; each one was under the control of its colossal owner, as much as the sensitive horns or any other part of the titanic mollusc body. A wild idea began to form in Hiero's mind, an idea so impossible that he tried to dismiss it before it could take full shape. The mighty message in his brain told him that he was wrong to do so.

Yes. You have grasped what I propose. Far back over the lost years, I made these from my own body. I, who have no hands, no limbs such as yours, must perforce grow my own! It took many of your lives, Hiero, so many that I will not weary you with the account. Bit by bit, effort by effort, I learned to use these tools, fashioned from my own flesh. Look again, now!

The threadlike tendrils seemed to vanish. But where they had danced, there was still a faint haze, something the eye could not quite catch, a flicker almost at the bare edge of visibility.

You cannot see them now, or perhaps you can just do so. But they are still there, still under my command, made so small that there is almost nothing, save the very smoothest and hardest of stones, that they cannot pass into.

Hiero waited for what he now knew was coming.

Through the small, ever-so-small openings in your body, those of what you call your skin, through the bone underneath as well, these can easily go. With your consent, Hiero, my first friend, my first mind partner, I will go into your mind with these! I will study what has been done to you by your enemies. And perhaps, though I cannot be sure, I can do something to right this terrible desecration.

Hiero sensed something new in the mind of this strange ally, something he had not noted before. It was anger, pure and simple. The calm, vast brain of the great mutant was infuriated that anyone could tamper with the mind! This was the ultimate outrage! In all the countless centuries it had devoted to pure thought, waiting and hoping for another mentality to contact, it had never imagined such a thing as possible. Why should I? But now it knew such things not only were possible but were done. It was as close to fury as it could be, and the Metz warmed to his newfound friend.

You make an extraordinary offer, Solitaire, he sent. Had I not seen what you are capable of, I should never have dreamed such abilities could exist in the world. But, he added cautiously, I have a few questions to ask. I do not any longer doubt your good will toward me. But can you be sure that what you do will not harm me further? Better, far better to be blind as I am, with at least the physical senses of an animal, than to endure a fate of mindless, total idiocy!

The response was encouraging. *lean be sure. Even with my long practice, I may not be able to repair the hurt. But you will be no less than you are at this moment. Thai I — promise!* Solitaire wrote the word in Hiero's mind, seemingly intrigued by its implications. *What are your other doubts? You had questions.*

Have you no conditions of your own? the man replied. *You brought me here, after all, to gain knowledge. Surely you have other demands?*

The mind speech was now innocently eager, if such a word could be used about any of Solitaire's mental processes. *I have no demands, no conditions. Some requests I have, but only if you choose. I too have a few questions. If you would answer those, I would be more than repaid!*

I certainly can answer a few questions, Hiero thought. *If that's all, go ahead and ask them. I'll do my best to give you honest answers, although I hope the questions are not too hard. What are they?*

I would know all about your human affections, came the reply. *Also, the complete history of your*

race, its physical and mental accomplishments and, above all, its past. I would know of your own mental abilities and how they came upon you. I would learn of the other minds with which you have spoken, both of your kind and others, those that have grown like my own since the coming of The Death. Then there is The Death itself and its workings and how it came. Next there are the wars of your people and the one in which you are engaged now. I would learn also of your enemies, those you call the Unclean, and of your allies in those places whence you came. What else you can think of that I have not mentioned, I should like to learn as well. And then, too, I must learn whatever you know of the most important question of all.

The stunned human rallied at this last point, long enough to interject a question of his own. *What on earth is that question?*

It is not on Earth, the answer came. *At least, from what I sensed in your mind when you — prayed — before you slept, I don't think it is. I want to know the nature and meaning of God.*

"Oh, well," Hiero said aloud to himself, "I guess I asked for that!"

Then, when I am finished with your mind, we shall talk, Solitaire sent. *And after that, you must be gone on your urgent journey.*

VI

Runners in the Night

A week's journey northward from Solitaire's lake, Hiero leaned on his spear and looked back up the long pass down which he had just come. He rested and relaxed as much as anyone could and still stay alive in the wilds. A few small birds twittered in the dense green scrub, and a hawk almost the size of an eagle peered suspiciously down from its nest in a cranny of the rock wall to his left. Small rodents and lizards skipped among the undergrowth. But there were no dangerous animals near him.

Hiero *knew*. He was no longer mentally blind. His stolen powers were back and he could once more see with his mind! He could penetrate the small, wild minds around him and actually see, with some effort, through the eyes of the scurrying wildlife.

He polished his shield absently on his arm as he stood in the sunlight of the morning. He had much to be thankful for, and the shield was further evidence of the gratitude he owed, for it was a present from a very new friend—but one whom he had been sorry to leave.

I give you this, Hiero, Solitaire had said at their parting. *You have pictured your battles for me in your mind. In them, you have used things such as this. Long ago, perhaps when your kind ruled the world, a large chunk of this matter fell deep into my lake. I found it, also long ago, and kept it because I knew not what it was. But now you may need it, so during the dark when you rested, I shaped it for you. Carry it and may it guard you, as my own shield once did for me when the world was younger and the fires had not come.*

The Metz eyed the small shield fondly. It was round and very light, only about two feet and a bit across. Its color was a dull hue, between gray and brown, and it reflected little light. He knew what it was, and he tried to explain it to the great mollusc, who was deeply interested. Bits of plastic were always turning up when ground was broken, mostly brittle and useless, but sometimes in good shape. Hiero's dead mother had once owned such a plate, with a strange creature, a flat-billed bird in human costume, figured

upon it.

Even in the vanished past, however, few would have seen plastic this hard and dense. An experimental piece from some lost forgotten laboratory, it had now been put to a new and unforeseen use. The giant brain had even remembered to shape holes in arches on the back for the leather arm straps Hiero needed. And in the center of the boss, Solitaire had somehow set a sharp stone of dull, glinting black. *This is the hardest, densest thing I have ever found*, he told the man. *Had your head been made of this material, we would have had no success in bringing back the lost strength to your mind!*

Hiero had seen a few diamonds, always sparkling in women's hair or on their hands or wrists. This big piece of industrial bort was something unknown to him. But he did not care. He would have happily taken anything that the great master of the lake cared to give him. For the greatest gift of all had been to have most of his mind power and senses back.

Not all, regretfully. When he had awakened the morning after the operation, he found that Solitaire felt it had been done badly. The giant persistently interrupted Hiero's thanks with apologetic remarks. *I failed to understand all of the connections, the purposes of each and every one. Those which I could not understand I dared not meddle with. I am deeply aware that I did less than I should or than I promised.* Nothing the man could tell him made the great creature feel better, though what had been accomplished was well-nigh incredible.

Solitaire had put the man into a deep sleep, using the hypnotic power of his great eyes, with Hiero unresisting and doing his best to relax. Through the whole night, starting at sunset and going well into the following day, the strange surgeon labored, his microtools the minute extensions of his huge body. Knitting, splicing, mending, and operating only by memory and tactile sensation, Solitaire had labored on and on. At last, convinced that all possible had been done and daring no more, the titan aroused his patient.

In growing delight, Hiero found that his lost powers were restored. The mental blindness was gone and his awareness of other life was again intact. When Solitaire lured a young buck from far down the slope, the Metz was first able to sense it and then to feel inside its mind as it drew nearer. After that, he could not let the giant eat it. When Solitaire mentioned with some illness of ease that he was hungry and must eat *something*, Hiero went out of sight down the lake shore. What came in answer to the giant's call, the priest never knew, but he hoped that it was both large and foul-tempered.

When Hiero returned, Solitaire still seemed to be worrying over the fact that there was one power that he had been unable to restore to the man. This was the newest of the skills Hiero had won, the ability to seize another mind and compel it to his will. He could "see" and communicate as well as in the past, or perhaps even better. But he could not do mental battle. The medicine of the Unclean had damaged that ability beyond even Solitaire's skill to repair it.

Then it was question-and-answer time, and Hiero found himself hard-pressed to satisfy the giant's need to know. His Abbey school training was put to undreamed-of tests. *What was everything and how did it get there?* That, in essence, was what the mutant snail wanted to know. Hiero writhed inwardly at what his preceptors in the church would have said about his statements on the nature of the Almighty. Still, he did his honest best, beyond which no one could do more.

It was not as hard as he had thought it might be, either. Solitaire could pick up a clue from any of a dozen angles. That incredible brain, stuffed with five thousand years of memory and thought, needed few aids in following an explanation.

It was while they were discussing some of the nature of the Unclean that Hiero learned of what Solitaire called "the Other Mind."

It comes rarely, this sending, Solitaire said. *It is not as old as I, or at least I never detected it until recently.* By the last word, Hiero gathered, Solitaire might mean a thousand years or so; the mutant snail had little idea of lapsed time.

It seems to change somewhat, this power, at long intervals— at least, by what you and your kind would think of as long. It stays the same, this force, and yet changes as well. What exactly was meant, Solitaire could not explain, but about other aspects of the strange force, he was very emphatic.

Whenever I felt its presence, I hid my own mind. For it had something I feared about it. Now that you have taught me what rage and evil are, I know what I feared. For I have never felt its presence free of anger. It has black anger against all and everything. And it is strong! You have given me much knowledge of your enemies, the Unclean. This is like them, I feel, but far, far more powerful. It may be of them, for what you tell me makes them seem one and the same. I felt it last not long ago, shortly before you came to my calling. It was very quick, like the bolt of fire from the sky in a storm. I regret that my skill could not have given you back the power to kill with your mind. You will need it. The worry in the great brain was very real.

Solitaire was quite amazing. Hiero had discovered that the giant, like most snails, was bisexual, capable of producing both eggs and sperm. On learning this fact, the man had suggested that an obvious thing to do was to raise some young, for company if not for anything else. This was surely not beyond its amazing biological powers, was it?

The reaction to this idea both surprised and amused Hiero. *It was not right, not a pleasant thought. It was not — proper!* The colossus of the hills was a prude! The more one learned about life, Hiero decided, the more one was amazed.

The last message from Solitaire came when Hiero was already far from the lake into which the giant had again retired.

Farewell for now, Hiero, new friend. Remember the direction of the men which I placed in your mind. I cannot reach them, but I know they are there. I can sense them at intervals, though they are not skilled with their minds as you are. Be careful!

And do not forget the Other Mind, the message went on, *the one I have felt over the greatest distance from somewhere far to the south. What it is I cannot tell. But you have taught me well, and I know now that it is a great mind, even greater than mine, I think. Yet it is utterly, horribly wrong. It is evil. It means evil. Beware of it!*

Farewell, once more. I have much to think about. We may meet again, sooner than either of us plans or imagines. I feel it!

Then the link was dissolved and the final contact was broken. Again, Hiero was alone. But now his mind was alert, and he was well armed, ready for any eventuality, as this last week of travel had proved.

Now fully rested, Hiero set off northward again at a steady lope, his gear swinging as he ran. The new shield was hooked firmly over the sword scabbard on his back. In addition to the spear in his hand and his belt knife, he bore the small canteen of leather. The bag slung over his shoulder held firestones, his seeing crystal, and the Forty Symbols, all wrapped in oiled leather. It also held a small supply of freshly

dried meat and some roots, but they were for emergencies. In this game-filled country, he should feed well. Leather breeches, sandals, and a headband completed his possessions.

He sped along, his broad chest rising and falling easily. As the miles were eaten up by his steady pace, he rethought what little he had learned about this northward road he was following. He was rapidly leaving all trace of the heights behind, coming down the last gradients to another of the wide savannas once more. Dense clumps of heavy jungle broke the rolling waves of high grasses. Livid scars of green in the distance betrayed patches of marsh—or he had never seen their like before. He knew that he would find lazy rivers trailing here and there across the land as well. He hoped none would be too difficult to cross if one barred his path. The heat was bringing the sweat to his brow, used to the cool of the hills.

If possible, the animals were even thicker here than in the eastward country he had traversed weeks before. There were great red wolves and spotted cats of various sizes. The stripe-backed saberfang was here, its thunders drowning out all lesser feline noises. The mighty-trunked herbivores were also present in quantity, and the kinds and sheer numbers of antelope and grazing varieties of deer simply defied any coherent description. Hiero saw new things often, his active mind doing its best to catalogue each and every one.

There were herds, for want of a better word, of monstrous *shelled* creatures, their armored backs higher than his head. But they had ears and three-toed hooves and were warm-blooded. He entered their dull minds as they grazed and found them mere mountains of sluggish flesh. They saw nothing his size as even a menace. Once for pure fun, he ran up and down over the backs or a whole group of them. They hardly noticed.

Thousands of birds fluttered and sang. Many kinds followed the herds, feasting on stirred-up insects, while yet others perched on the animals' backs, searching for ticks and lice. But not all avian life was so harmless.

His first encounter with another kind of bird nearly ended in disaster. It must have been watching him for some time; when it burst from a clump of tall bushes, it caught him almost off guard. It was twice his height, with a savage, hook-beaked head surmounted by a fan of lurid purple plumes. Its tiny, useless wings beat furiously as its clawed feet pounded down upon him. He parried one furious slash of the beak with his hastily whipped-off shield and then, dodging like a hare, fled for the nearest stand of tall trees. Behind him, overtaking fast, came the bird, now screaming raucously.

Fortunately for him, the closest tree had a mat of trailing vines, and he swarmed up them like one of his simian ancestors, the last stroke of the awful beak missing his sandaled heels by a hairs-breadth.

Breathing hard, he looked down at the angry monster, which was still screeching and venting its anger by tearing up large chunks of ground at the base of his refuge. He realized what must have happened and firmly resolved that lack of caution would not occur again. The great bird thought on another wavelength from that of the mammalian predators he had been guarding against. As a result, he had almost been betrayed by carelessness. He decided to monitor not only the mammals in the future but the birds and reptiles as well. In a world filled with mutant life, some of it unrelated to anything coherent or recognizable, all precautions were in order. He remembered that dead horror, the Dweller in the Mist, only too well, and the way it too had stolen on him unperceived.

After a long while, during which he composed himself in the tree with all the patience he could, the bird wandered away. When he could see, with his mind, that its presence was far off, he descended and resumed his journey. There were no more ambushes during that day. He stayed close to the trees, or to the tall termite mounds, which had also reappeared. This plan had its own hazards, since many of the

carnivores lay up in the tree borders, but with his mind alert, he could usually make wide enough arcs to avoid any such. And he always selected a good crotch in some wide-limbed giant well before sunset loosed the main packs of night prowlers on the land. Still, he spent a lot of time in hiding.

Without his mental alerts, crossing this land on foot might have been impossible, except for an army.

As the days passed, sunny and clear with occasional violent thunderstorms, he fixed his mind on the area to the north. There, if Solitaire could be trusted, were human beings of some sort, though of what kind the titan had not known, beyond a vague feeling that they were not like Hiero. Each evening, then, the Metz first said his prayers and next tried to reach out with his mind, seeking contact. He was very, very careful. He had no real idea what he was searching for, and the last thing that he wanted was an unlooked-for encounter with the Unclean.

Hiero had deliberately not tried to use the crystal, which would perhaps enable him. to see far ahead in a purely physical sense. By staring into it and concentrating, he often could enter the brain of some bird, miles aloft in the blue heavens. Using that creature's own vision, it was possible to spy out the land beneath. But in this strange country, he simply dared not. The process was too random and sweeping. Who knew what other mind he might encounter? Once before, in the distant North, he had tried this kind of viewing and had ended up in the brain of an Unclean adept, aloft in a winged craft in the sky! Once was enough. It was simply too risky at this time.

There were the Forty Symbols, though, each carved with a different sign. Although he had not used them for many months, and though they were not one of his own special talents, they had been some help in the past. The workings of the tiny precognition markers were not entirely understood, even by the Abbey servants, since their origin was lost in the past. Using them with any certitude was a highly individual skill, and it was not something that Hiero had ever excelled in. Still, there was no harm in an attempt.

One evening, therefore, a week after quitting the southern foothills, he arranged the little things in a loose pile on a slab of bark in his lap. He had previously strapped himself high in the branches of a forest lord, so that he could not fall, even if disturbed in a trance state. He had not seen his priest's stole for months, but that was merely an external and not a vital element in what followed. He prayed for guidance and for help in discerning the future. Then he threw himself into a self-induced cataleptic state, now oblivious to all externals. His mental guard still protected him and, in this condition, no one could either read or control his mind. Before blanking himself out, he laid his open left hand on the pile of wooden markers.

It was fully dark when he awoke, stiff and cramped. The moon shone down on the savannas below, and the night was hideous with the sounds of both hunters and prey.

As he had expected and hoped, his left fist was clenched tight around a number of the little symbols. He freed himself from the thongs which held his body to the branch and, putting the remainder away, moved out into the full moonlight on an open limb. Only there did he open his palm and examine the three tiny pieces of ebony wood.

The Spear he knew well. It meant battle or hunting, sometimes both. Nothing new there. The next was another old friend, the tiny, stylized Boots. This too was familiar to him from the past. It meant a *long* journey ahead, another thing he had no trouble anticipating without aid. The last one was a bit of a puzzle, though. It was a leaf, and across it was superimposed a sword! Moreover, as he looked closely, he saw that the sword actually pierced the leaf, in and out again, as a pin does a robe.

He put the little things away and sat for a long time, trying to remember the possible meanings of the last marker. They each had several alternates and, when taken in conjunction with others, each could assume

still newer meanings. What a pity he was not better at this! He had once had a classmate who could draw as many as twelve and get really complicated predictions from them.

Peace and war! That was it. But since the two signs were interwoven, it seemed there must be a choice. Peace or war, journeys and battles, or maybe hunts. He laughed quietly. When had his life contained much else? At least it seemed that things would go on as usual. In some distant future, perhaps he would awaken from the trance to discover signs which meant only peace and quiet. What a hope! He laughed again and then made his preparations for slumber, still chuckling. The nightly uproar all about and below he simply shut out of his mind, and he fell happily asleep, eager for what tomorrow would bring.

In a lamplit chamber, somewhere in Sask City, capital of the Metz Republic, two old men sat on oak benches and eyed each other alertly across a narrow wooden table. Each held a large foaming mug in his gnarled fist and each was robed and bearded. There the outer resemblance ended.

Abbot Demero's aged face was the color of burnished copper, and the white beard and mustache under the hawk nose were straight and wiry. Over his angular frame, he wore a snowy robe, and on his chest was a heavy cross of hammered silver, suspended from a chain of massive silver links. On his left ring finger, he wore a great ring of plain gold. His dark eyes, over high cheekbones, were lit with intelligence and an air of command.

Brother Aldo had a longer beard; it and the mustache which flowed into it were curled, rippling and waving down over his plain brown robe. He wore no jewelry or mark of any kind. His nose, though not snub, was rounded at the tip, and his skin was far darker, almost the color of the oak slab on which his elbows rested. Wisdom and a dancing humor sparkled in his every glance.

Both men had the lines of many strenuous years engraved on their brows, but their strength had not been sapped, and the vigor of their movements, while not that of youth, was neither that of senescence.

Now the Most Reverend Father Demero spoke, a smile lifting the corners of his mouth. "A health, your Majesty, and welcome once again to the North. I only wish this meeting didn't have to be held in secret. I'm tired of this damned skulking around."

"Demero, you old fool, I curse the sorry day I ever told you what I once had been. So they lost a king in D'alwah a few generations back. They long ago forgot the crazy creature. Quit calling me that, will you, Most Reverend Abbot?"

"As you wish, Brother Aldo. Perhaps a republic always likes kings, having got rid of its own. We had a king here once, you know, before The Death. I don't remember who he was, or even if he lived here. I have a feeling that he lived far away and only visited now and again. The Abbey archivists could probably tell you."

The sage in the brown robe laughed. "That's the way kings, or queens for that matter, ought to be, frequently absent." His face sobered at another thought, and he straightened on his backless bench.

"We should be talking about a prince, not a king, Demero. We have a lot to go through. I have to be on my way tomorrow, you know. So let's get to present business. I have bad news from the South, and you won't be happy."

Abbot Kulase Demero, Senior Priest of the Abbeys of the Metz Republic, Hierarch, First Gonfalonier of the Church Universal, and leader of the Republic's Upper House, bent a piercing gaze on his friend, "It's Hiero, isn't it? I've been uneasy all week. He's so far away and so alone. What's the news? Out with it,

man!"

"He's gone. Maybe missing, maybe—worse!" Brother Aldo, who had once borne a very different name and title, had lost all the humor in his voice. "The Order sent me the news only this morning, filtered through many strange routes from the South. I gather there has been a rebellion, led by a young hellion of a duke with a fair claim to the throne, if Luchare and her father were dead. That sounds like old D'alwahn history so far. But there's more. The pretender has Unclean help. Danyale is badly wounded, but alive. Luchare is running things, and her husband has simply disappeared from the face of the earth!"

There was nothing slow about the Father Abbot. "If he were dead, she would know, right?"

"Ye-es," Aldo said slowly. "She swears he isn't. That's our best hope, as far as he is concerned. I pray to God she is right. I'm fond of him. But we have other things to think about. I trust Luchare. She'll hold D'alwah, if it's humanly possible. Danyale can help, if he gets better in a hurry. He's not so dumb that he can't see through a blanket. But the Order says the Unclean are moving fast, too. And they seem to be heading in your direction, toward the Republic. We, the Council of the Order, think you need help fast. How is the work coming on what we brought you from the underground place?" Despite himself, he glanced at one corner, where a small, ivory pendulum hung motionless from wooden crossbars.

Demero followed his glance. "That warding device hasn't failed us yet, and I trust it. Any Unclean mental probe would set it off, so we can talk in confidence. As for the computer, it is showing progress. At first, when we studied the books you brought, it seemed impossible to create the tiny devices—chips, they're called—on which it is based." For a moment, a smile came to his face. "Then one of our brighter young men realized that many of the pieces in our archives, recovered from the sites of the ancients, were really parts of the thing described in the books. We think now there must have been millions of computers around before The Death. But even with the books and the parts, it takes time. We have to re-create a whole new way of thinking. And when finished, the computer is going to need what is called programming. My young men say they can do the job—but again, it takes time. The same old story."

He leaned across the rough table. "How many years ago was it,

Aldo, when we first met and determined, even as young men—or youngish men, I should say—that the church and the Order ought to be allies? And even then, we knew that time was working always in every way against us. Well, it hasn't changed. Here you are, high in the Council of the Eleventh Brotherhood, and you know where I am. But it's still time, with them ahead and us behind. Nevertheless, we must get ready, as well as we can. That bear creature, now, the one you call Gorm. Is he really going to be of any use?"

"Very great use—I hope," was the prompt answer. "But he has to get the backing of his people. I gather they have rulers, too, these new bear people. We know of them, though they have never contacted us directly. And before you ask, let me read your mind, dear fellow. Yes, they are as intelligent as we, though also different. On *how* different hangs their willingness to help. And that will, as you have already guessed, take more time."

"Red tape with bears!" the old Metz snorted. "That's all we need! And I've had no reply from the Dam People either, speaking of odd allies. But they never budge without months of fumbling around. The bears will be fast by comparison."

"I hate to bring this up, since you must be sensitive," Brother Aldo said, "but what about your personal problem on the Council? The two—ugh!" He hesitated.

"Don't mind my nicer feelings," Demero snapped. "The two *traitors*. Well, I have almost enough evidence to hang them. A week or so should do it. And meanwhile, they don't blow their snotty noses without my knowledge."

"I suppose they can't just, well, disappear?"

"No, they can't, you peace-loving Elevener! This is not your barbarous ex-kingdom in the swamps of the South! We'll get them, but they have to be tried. Fairly!"

"Too bad. The rough old days had their points. I find in retrospect. A symptom of advanced age, no doubt. Well, what next? How many regiments can you field and in what order? And the new ships you have been building? And, above all, what of the Otawah League? They have traitors, too, you know."

The discussion continued, growing both acrimonious and technical. And when, in the small hours of the morning, two old men said their separate prayers, Hiero would have been comforted to know how largely he figured in both sets.

The prince-priest, the exile from everywhere, as it sometimes seemed to him, had other things to think about. He was currently atop the tallest tree he could find, studying the distant prospect and trying to figure out exactly what he was seeing. The scene in the distance before him was in some ways an odd one, and he wanted to study it carefully before venturing closer.

He had sent out his cautious probes the night before as usual. This time, he had very quickly picked up a human response, the aura of an awake man. Then, widening his search, he had found many others. There were the minds of women and children too, and he sensed as well the massed presence of domestic animals, probably some variety of kaw, such as he had known in D'alwah. There must be villages ahead, or some sort of settlements. He resolved to probe yet further and to see what, if anything, he could learn from one individual mind.

He picked one at random, that of a man who seemed to be slightly closer than others. He settled down and very carefully inserted his thoughts into the brain of his specimen, watching with all his trained ability at the same time in case the man was somehow alerted. The mind was one of a very stupid fellow, indeed. Moreover, it was so full of fear that there was almost no room for anything else. Intrigued, Hiero sought for the source of the fear, which was so overpowering that it seemed a constant condition.

At first he thought that it was a simple fear of the dark. In this savage land, the night with its terrible beasts would be a logical thing to fear. But following the traces through the peasant mind, he found that the situation was more complex. The man knew of the beasts, of course, and was well aware of their danger to himself. But he equated them with other natural terrors, such as lightning, floods, and forest fires. They were to be guarded against, but only that. What he really feared, to the point of acute psychosis, was—ghosts!

Searching the simpleton's memories, the Metz tried to learn about the ghosts, but he was largely unsuccessful. The fear was most deeply ingrained in the man's system but also suppressed to a degree. The fellow couldn't bear to think consciously about his fears. On the surface, he simply feared the night. All would be well for those who lived until dawn. Night was an evil to be endured. The good would survive until another day brought safety. This was the sum of his surface thought.

Hiero dug deeper. There were clues, but ones hard to find. Real though the terror was, the man actually knew very little in the way of fact to bolster his nighttime state of constant panic. He had never seen a ghost. No one he knew had, either. Ghosts came in the dark. No walls, no huts, could exclude them.

They took what they wanted. If they were annoyed for any reason, the person who annoyed them disappeared. They were wandering ghosts, for they were not always around. The priest of the community knew much more about them, and the priest said they were not always bad to have as neighbors, these ghosts. They kept away dangerous animals, if they were treated properly. Thus it made sense for the man and his fellows to sacrifice an animal of the herds once in a while when the ghosts wanted one. There was a smoldering resentment in the mind, Hiero noted, at this particular thought. One of the man's own animals had been taken recently. This made the ghosts seem even worse!

The Metz withdrew, puzzled and rather annoyed. A crowd of superstitious cowherds was going to be no help to him at all. He had learned other and perhaps more useful facts from the dull mind, however. The southern fringes of the great jungle, the incredible forest of the South, lay no more than two days' march to the north. Hiero had no idea how far to the west of D'alwah he had come in the last weeks. But north of the jungle, at some distance, of course, must lie the Inland Sea. The brain he had examined had never heard of it, but the lummo had never heard of anything beyond his horizon. Apparently traders never called in this remote area at all. Maybe, Hiero thought, they had heard, of the ghosts! He smiled ironically as he fell asleep.

He did not sleep as well as usual and, when he awoke, he felt strained and stiff. His dreams had been full of running and leaping, wild dreams full of excitement. Through his mind ran the thought of a hunt, for some reason. It must be the memory of his cast of the symbols and the little Spear. He stretched himself vigorously and did a few simple exercises to limber up before descending to start a hearty breakfast of yesterday's kill.

At noon, he was staring at what must be the village of his mind search on the previous night. He could see for at least three miles, barring the blanks caused by other tall groves of timber. Then the heat haze closed in. But the sight before him was not half a mile away.

There was a stockade, a good, strong one, with sharpened timbers planted facing out as a *chevaux-de-frise*. Even the great, tusked beasts would have found that hard to penetrate. Inside the stockade rose the smoke of small fires, and he could see the shapes of rounded huts, seemingly thatched. There were corrals for the kaws, and several small herds of these grazed not far from the village, watched by the tiny figures of men. One great tree grew in the heart of the village, but there were no others near at all. A small river lazed over the plain only a short distance on the far side of the village, and he guessed that this would provide all the water they needed, save for times of extreme drought, which was a rare occurrence in the well-watered land. The last one in D'alwah had been over a hundred years in the past.

It was a peaceful scene and one that he had no desire to interrupt. But he needed information badly. This priest of whom his unwitting informant of the night had thought might be able to provide it. Hiero sent out his mind probe again, but soon learned that the man he wanted was away on some errand to another village just over the edge of sight on his left.

He brooded for a while and then decided that he had little to risk by showing himself. He could see some small but well-tended fields on the outskirts of the village, and his keen nose had long since detected the smell of baking. He had not tasted bread for a long time and he needed salt as well. These simple folk with their fear of the night would find little to affright them in the appearance of one man alone in the heat of the day. They would be able to see quite clearly that he was not a ghost! In this supposition he was one hundred percent correct.

Long before he was anywhere near the village, he saw men swarming out of the one great gate. Now that he was closer, he could see a small platform high in the big tree in the village and he realized that

these people were not as unprepared as he had thought. They had seen him and taken action accordingly, and now a line of the men was slowly advancing on him.

As they drew near, he laid his spear carefully down so that they could see it. Then he raised both empty arms, in the oldest gesture of amity. At the same time, he searched their minds for any trace of hostility. He found wariness and surprise at his appearance, but no anger. They were, as he had assumed, not afraid of one man.

They were a short, swarthy people, heavy rather than graceful, but sturdy and not ill-looking. They wore simple leather kilts and sandals not unlike his own and also carried spears, though they seemed to have no shields. The spears were mostly stone-tipped, but here and there he saw the light catch a metal point. They had lowered them now and seemed to be waiting for him to make the first overture.

He selected an older, gray-bearded man and addressed him in *batwah*, the trade language used over thousands of leagues. The man jabbered an answer, though in a different tongue. But Hiero had noted a look of surprise in his eyes and caught the fact from the fellow's brain that *batwah* had been heard before. He listened carefully as the man spoke again and this time he heard a few words that sounded familiar. While on the deck of the *Foam Girl*, a year back on the Inland Sea, he had spoken with her mongrel crew, culled by her owner, Captain Gimp, from all over the known world. Later, in the forest, he had gotten to know them all even better. This speech recalled a dialect he had picked up from an escaped slave who had become one of his especial admirers. In a few minutes, using the enhanced ability of his mind to read the fellow's thoughts, he was chattering away with enough skill to make himself easily understood.

They were perfectly friendly and more than willing to give him any information that they possessed. Yes, they had bread, and he was welcome to take all he could carry. But he had better hurry. It was past noon now, and he didn't have much time.

"Time for what?" Hiero asked. "I planned to get some sleep in your village tonight. I'm not in that big a hurry."

The elder, whose name was something like Grilparzer, with a grunt in the middle, looked first baffled, then sad, and finally thoughtful.

"I was afraid of this," he said. "You're like the others, the ones who came when I was a child. Come along and walk to the village. You cannot stay with us. I'm sorry, but it is not permitted. Only those born to us may live inside our walls. I'll send one of the boys along to get the bread, and it will be waiting when we get there. Then, Hiero, you have to go. For your sake, I hope you're a good runner." Several of the others, trudging along close by, shook their shaggy heads in agreement.

"Why?" the Metz asked. "Is there some danger? Why can't I stay in your village? I don't eat babies." He was tempted to add that he certainly bathed more frequently than most of his new acquaintances, but decided against it.

"No, no," Gril-grunt-parzer said. "You don't understand. We won't hurt you. But you have to go. You can't stay in the village. That is the law. And if you're found outside when it's dark" He shuddered, and Hiero caught the very real fear in the simple mind.

"I can climb pretty well." He pointed with his spear to a distant herd of game. "Nothing that kills those things has been able to catch me yet. If you have some taboo about strangers, why don't I camp under your walls or in a tall tree over there in one of those groves? Then I can come and have a talk with your

priest in the morning."

This time, those walking close by suddenly picked up their feet and went on ahead at a faster pace. It was obvious that the conversation was one they chose to avoid.

Grilparzer was made of sterner material. He was unhappy, but he felt he had a duty to this pleasant-spoken foreigner and he was going to do his best. He halted and put his hand on Hiero's chest, to make the Metz halt.

"When I was a little lad, other men came. Not like you, but they spoke the way you did at first. They wanted to trade things with us. For hides and fur, they had metal and cloth such as we almost never see. When we do, well, we get it the way we got theirs." He was obviously wrestling with a concept of utter horror to him, and again Hiero felt the sweat of mental fear. In fact, the man was sweating physically! But he persevered.

"We tried in every way we could to get them to leave. They were well armed and laughed at us. They camped by the gate and lighted many fires. They put out guards and we locked and barred the gate." He paused again. "In the morning they were gone. All of them, as we knew they would be. A great company, two tens of strong men and all their beasts of burden. Most of their gear was left. After a while, we went out and took it and covered the ashes of their burned-out fires." He tapped the bronze hilt of a dagger thrust into his belt. "I got this knife then when we shared their goods among us."

Hiero was silent as he thought. Whatever drove these people, there was no doubt of their sincerity. That could not be concealed. Ghosts! He still stood poised in thought, however. The ugly story he had heard must have had some basis in fact. Whatever had happened to the unfortunate traders of long ago, it appeared to have something besides irrational fright behind it.

"All right," he said at length. "I see that you fear the night and what may come in the dark hours." Some stray thought stirred in his subconscious and he added, not quite sure why, "I do not fear that which runs in the night."

The man who stood before him shrank back as if lashed over the face. Spinning on his heel, he ran for the village gate, bawling something as he went. An approaching youth hastily deposited some burden he carried on the earth and also turned and fled. All the other men were running full out, too, as if Hiero were some demon who would devour them on the instant.

The gate, which was only a few hundred yards away, began to close as the last of the running men passed through it. Hiero heard it thud heavily shut behind them. He walked slowly forward and stooped to examine the parcel that the youngster had dropped so quickly. As he had thought, it was two loaves of the promised bread, still hot from some crude oven and wrapped in a piece of hide.

He stood up and looked about him. The distant herdsman also were gone, and so were their herds. The westerling sun was now slanting down with the light of late afternoon. Hiero looked curiously at the palisade and the sharpened stakes of the village. Neither there nor on the platform in the great tree was any head visible. Some distant antelope raised a small cloud of dust far off in the path of the red sun. Aside from these, nothing moved, save for a few vultures, black dots in the high sky.

His mind went out and he sought to probe the village. All he could get was an amorphous mass of stark terror, even for him almost impossible to penetrate and pick out individual minds. The strength of the fear amazed him. *Why, it's as if it were ingrained, hereditary or something*, he thought.

Picking up the bundle of bread, he shouldered his spear and set off at a walk for the nearest trees, perhaps half a mile away. *Be damned if I'll run*, was his last thought.

VII

Hunters and Their Prey

Hiero lay stretched along a great fork, far up on the outer limb of the tree. In the distance, the roar of the saberfang rumbled, to be followed by silence. It was a cloudy night, and the moon came and went fitfully from gaps in the racing clouds. He was staring in the direction of the distant village, but he could see only its outline, a black and lightless mound in the intermittent moon gleams. No sound had come from it since he had found his present perch, save for the occasional restless mooing of a kaw somewhere in a pen.

He lay at seeming ease, but his spear was firmly held in his right fist, and his shield was strapped on the other arm. In need, he could drop the haft of the spear and draw the ancient short sword from over his shoulder in a second. There was no way he could get into a better position for defense. Now he could only wait and see what the night brought.

The tree had been reached and his site selected well before the last light faded in the west. He had eaten, and the coarse bread tasted fine, after many weeks deprived of grain. With the coming of dark, he had cautiously begun to probe with his mind, sending out his thoughts on an ever-widening sweep. And it was then that the surprises had commenced. Almost instantly he had touch with another mind!

As soon as his own feather caress struck it, the strange mind withdrew, flinching away and out of reach like a snake whipping back into a coil. There was no communication, only the instant retreat. He felt that it had neither known what had touched it nor sought to know. It had simply used a trigger reflex, one as good as his own, an automatic cutoff, so to speak. Whatever the mind was, it had a built-in safety factor, which snapped it out of any contact almost before the contact had been established. This gave one to think. His own abilities along those lines had been patiently learned under pressure, the pressure of the Unclean. But he had a feeling that this mind needed no such training, but was born the way it was.

In the coolness of the night, with a fine, fresh breeze rustling the leaves all about him, he set about trying to find the mind again. And this time he received a fresh surprise. His muscles tensed in reaction as he felt the new contacts. There was a whole group of similar minds, perhaps as many as a dozen!

Again came the trigger reaction as they evaded him, hiding behind mental shields so tight he could gain no opening. This time, though, he felt that at least one of the strangers had sensed him, but only fleetingly. He caught the shadow of awareness as it vanished. It might not know what had touched it, but it knew something had done so. He decided to lie quiet for a bit and try nothing further. Perhaps he could learn something by different methods. His mind stayed open, receptive to any outside thoughts at all. If he waited thus, the elusive creatures he had detected might come to him, hunting for contacts in their own way.

For a long time thereafter, nothing happened. When something finally did, it seemed to have nothing" to do with him. His first notice of it was a physical one. Far out on the savanna, to the northeast of both the Metz and the silent walls of the village, he heard the squeal of a frightened animal. Hiero had idly wondered earlier at the absence of the larger animals from the vicinity of the village. Earlier, there had been plenty of them about, but only in the middle distance. Now in the dark hours, there seemed to be none at all of either predators or those they hunted. All the life about him was small in size. There were snakes and lizards, rodents and weasels, plus a few foxlike beasts. The cry from far out in the dark was

that of something large, something hunted and terrified. He felt for it with his mind and also listened with his ears. Presently, he detected it with both. He could hear, though only faintly, the drum of racing hoofbeats, and in his brain came the panic of a big herbivore of some kind, running at its hardest, running until its heart was bursting. He could feel the direction and knew the animal was coming closer rapidly.

The moon broke through the flying clouds and he now actually saw the chase, etched in black and grays. The figure of a big buck with tall lyrate horns was galloping for its life. Behind it, the hunters came—and they were an amazing sight.

They were bipedal and they were running at a speed the man would not have believed possible. The fastest Mu'aman racer of Luchare's kingdom would have been left far behind such runners. Hiero knew well what a pace one of the big antelopes could set, and these things were hauling it down!

Straining his eyes, he could see that there were perhaps a half dozen of the pursuers and that they were very thin and tall. Whatever they were, he decided not to try to probe their minds at this time. The hunt was rapidly drawing close to his clump of trees. If they were the elusive minds he had tried to track earlier, and he was quite certain that they were, this did not seem the time to call their attention to him. Then he realized that he was to have little choice in the matter. He saw suddenly that the hunted beast was not trying to reach his area at all! Being a creature of the open, it was attempting to flee to the outer savannas. It was coming toward his trees because it had no choice. The incredible runners were driving it there.

As he watched, Hiero saw the big antelope try repeatedly to check and break away. Each time, one of the tall bipeds increased its own already fantastic speed and closed the gap, forcing the prey back on the track they had chosen for it. Moreover, it was not being herded to the clump of trees, the Metz realized in a hurry. It was being chased specifically to *his* tree!

Still as a stone, he watched the end. The buck turned at bay, its back to the trunk of his own refuge. He could have dropped a stick on the heaving sides or the lowered horns.

The end came very quickly. One of the shadowy hunters charged straight at the horns and then, with a movement so rapid that the man could hardly follow it, darted away at right angles, no more than the thickness of a knife blade from being impaled on the points. This was all the opportunity needed by the others. At the same incredible pace, another one darted in from the side and merged with the neck of the buck. There was a flash of light, glittering under the moon, and the second killer sped on, hardly seeming to pause.

The antelope shook its head and tried to brace its forelegs. A dark stream was pouring from its throat. With one final shudder, it collapsed, kicked once or twice, and then was still. Hiero thought he had never seen a neater, quicker kill. He looked quickly away from the body to see what the alien bipeds would do next and got another surprise. They had vanished.

One moment there were six tall, lean shapes in a semicircle around his tree; the next, the night was empty. It was as if they had never been. Were it not for the corpse of the antelope, Hiero might have thought he was dreaming.

He waited warily. It hardly seemed likely that a mere accident had caused the strange chase to be led so unerringly to his hiding place. No, something else was coming, and he had better be ready for it.

What came was nothing physical. He simply began to feel a sensation of fear growing in his mind. It was not a thought of any kind, nothing so clear and identifiable. Rather, it was more like a feeling of

oppression, a sensation produced when the barometer was dropping and the air was hushed and heavy with the presence of an oncoming storm. Only in this case, he felt afraid!

Something was coming, something was stalking him, and he was helpless to defend himself. The shadows were full of yellow or orange eyes, all piercing the dark and all concentrated on him alone. A whiff of a curious odor came to him on the night wind, musky, fetid, and also vaguely familiar. The scent seemed to heighten the fear, and his hand even loosened the grip on his spear for an instant.

The movement of his hand served as a bracer. His brain cleared, and he realized that he was falling under a spell of a kind he had never before encountered. He, who had hunted all his life, was now being hunted. Worse, he was being treated as if he were already a helpless victim! He rallied himself and began to trace the strange glamour which was falling over him.

It was not his mind that was under attack. That type of assault he could easily guard against, and no warnings of such a thing had occurred. What, then? His body? Save for the acrid and feral odor, he had detected nothing physical at all. Yet he knew beyond the shadow of any doubt that he was the focusing point of a planned attack. The sensation of great fear was still there, but now he had mastered it, and it no longer had the power to make him do anything he did not choose.

The eyes were an illusion, created by fear. He could not actually see them. The bile rising in his mouth and the sweat starting on his skin were also products of fear, the irrational fear which his brain could control, but which seemed to have nothing to do with any ratiocination. Incredible as it appeared, he was under attack on his will by *chemical* methods aided by a mental assault on his emotions. His eyes narrowed in thought as he began to break down the course of this biological onslaught. At the same time, he mentally apologized to the villagers whom he had thought so stupid. If this was a sample of what they had to live with, he had much maligned them in his previous views on the subject!

Somehow, these runners in the night could take aim at: the deep animal levels of the psyche. The scent, probably a natural weapon, was the second weapon, used to enhance the fear started by concentrated will. Intellectual ability was no defense at all against such an animal barrage. It totally bypassed the brain and struck at the root of feelings, the same basic emotions that made a child cry or a dog salivate. By the time these creatures had got a good hold on the emotional centers of their prey's inner self, he was doomed. He was literally frightened to death, long before the actual kill took place. The dead buck could probably have been reduced to utter helplessness, had the hunters chosen, so that it would have been able to make no defense at all.

Now, why had they not so chosen? Hiero thought he knew the answer. For the first time since he had felt their presence directed at his own, a grim smile crossed his lips.

The hunters were growing impatient now. He could feel the irritation coming to him almost as a palpable wave. Why did he not come down from his perch and offer his naked throat? The irritation was growing into anger, and Hiero could feel the heat of the frustrated rage rising from below. There would be some action soon. These beings were not patient at all when thwarted. So be it. He had the fear under perfect control now, holding it in easy check even while he examined the effects on his nerves and body chemistry. He was angry himself now, but in a cold state of anger. Somebody was going to get a sharp lesson in very short order.

He slid down the branch and climbed carefully to a lower fork, the breeze ruffling his hair as he did so. This was far enough. He had not forgotten the unbelievable speed he had witnessed. Yet if his guesses were correct, he would only have to deal with one adversary at a time, at least to begin with.

A rack of clouds began to cover the moon again, and he braced himself. He had mentally measured all the distances to every branch. His sword was drawn and the spear leaned on the main trunk at his back. This ought to be close work. That was what the attackers liked, if he were not mistaken.

As the moon vanished, the faint scrape of claws gave the alert. The dark figure swarmed up the tree like a flitting shadow, scarcely a whit slower than its pace on the ground, but he was quite ready for it. With great care, he used the flat of his sword on the round skull, even as it whipped up to his own level. The dull noise of the impact was followed by a long, slithering, scrambling fall as the half-stunned thing tried to catch itself on the way to ground at the bottom. He heard the thump as it hit, and this time he laughed aloud, deliberately and contemptuously. He knew that this gesture would reach attentive and enraged ears and got ready for the next rush. The fury from around the base of the tree beat up on his senses almost as if it were something tangible.

The next foe came more slowly, though still at a very fast rate of climb. This one was really hopeful; as Hiero struck with the blade's flat again, he saw that in one arm there was a rope or leather lasso of some sort. They wanted him alive, did they? The same crashing, scrabbling fall followed, but there was a cry as well, a high, squalling sound. The fall sounded heavier this time, too. Hiero laughed again, the derisory sound calculated to induce a mad outburst of insane rage in those who were meant to hear it. The reaction was as prompt as he had thought it might be. They had swallowed their pride a little, though, because this time their attack was doubled.

Lightning-fast they might be on the plain; but, with his feet firmly set in the broad tree crotch, Hiero could move his arms and body with equal speed. The first one got the shield in its face and fell back, half-stunned, as had the others. The second, coming up the opposite side of the bole, managed to gain the crotch before getting the flat of the sword behind one ear. A knife tinkled on wood as the hand which held it opened and fell limp. This particular hunter was going to stay in the tree for a bit!

At the same time, the moon burst from behind the clouds, and the warrior-priest was able for the first time to see what lay at his feet. In the light filtering through the tossing branches and leaves, she was a lovely thing.

As tall or taller than Hiero, she was covered with a fine, close fur, a mixture of small spots and blotches on a lighter background. The tips of her small breasts were bare skin, and so was the nose, which was very blunt, with wide nostrils flaring back and sideways. The forehead was broad and shallow, with a black bar of darker pelage running across it; the chin was slightly receding and also shallow. The closed eyes were large under the heavy brow ridges, and the delicately pointed ears were set higher on the skull than a human's. The narrow skull had plenty of occipital room for brains.

Listening intently for any new movements below, Hiero examined the long, slender limbs. The feet and hands were very human, save for the fur, but no human had sharp, retractile claws rather than nails! She was quite nude, save for a broad leather belt which held a small pouch and an empty dagger sheath. Hiero stood up, his suspicions confirmed.

Cats! Since the first faint reek of the hunting odor and the elusive mind touches, all his memories, all his knowledge of the world of animal life, studied since birth, had screamed one thing at him—cats! This was a mutation he had never before encountered or even guessed at. He was sure there was no record of it in the Abbey files. These night runners were something new to most human experience. Probably only the lost villages out on the plain had ever encountered them and lived to tell of it! Hiero remembered the elder's tale of the traders who had so silently disappeared. He could easily imagine the scene around the fires as the fear and the musk wafted down on the unsuspecting men. This, then, was the source of the herder's inbred night fear. Eyes in the dark, growing terror, and finally—death!

Now, from the foot of the tree, he could hear very faint movements. If enough of them attacked when the moon was next hidden, they could almost certainly overwhelm him. A lot of them would die, but the end would be an inevitable one. It was time to try something new and quickly.

He reached out with his mind, one foot resting on the body of his captive, feeling the faint rise and fall of her breath through his sandal. This time, on their odd wavelength, he got a mind which did not flinch, a very angry and aroused mind. It was already reaching out, not for him, but for the she, who had so suddenly disappeared. This was the leader, a male mind that had not been challenged so in all its life. Hiero could almost see the blazing amber eyes and the ruff on the back of the neck, the bared canines and the flattened ears.

The reaction to Hiero's sudden appearance on the private mental band that the cat people used was first startled, then furious. But—there was a brain there, down below. The link was not broken.

Where is the young she? Come down from that monkey's perch or we will kill you slowly! The message was quite clear to one with Hiero's training. These beings were used to mental speech among themselves, and their Images were fast and well formed. The contempt in the words "monkey's perch" was also plain.

Killing me is not so easy, the man sent. *Some of your folk have sore limbs and heads to prove it. I could have killed them very easily. Yet I sheathed my claws.* Why not use their own images? *Think about that. And remember this. I have your she up here in my power. Beyond another sore head, she is unharmed, but only as long as I choose!* He made his defiance flat and unequivocal. These creatures had had things their own way for far too long!

The mental link snapped off, in the way he had come to associate with these cats. But he could hear a purring murmur far below. They were not stupid. He could hardly eavesdrop in their spoken language, and they had no idea what else he could do. So they were being careful with a new discovery. This mouse had teeth! Best to wait and consider for a while.

Meanwhile, Hiero could feel the first stirring of awareness in the body under his heel. Bending swiftly, he unhooked the catch on his belt and tied her arms behind her back at the elbows. With a short length of thong from his pouch, he lashed her feet together at the ankles. If an attack came, he wanted no interference from an enraged wildcat of this frantic race.

After a time, the ruling mind below suddenly sent another message. *Send the young she down. If no harm is done her, we will think again. If not, we will come and kill you.*

In the wan light of the cloud-flecked moon, the Metz considered. Was this simply an arrogant bluff? The creature below had promised nothing. With the young female back in their hands, they could still attack and would have gained rather than lost. He, on the other hand, would have lost a hostage whom they obviously valued. His mind raced, balancing what he knew and had guessed about these folk, above all considering their ancestry and the probable way they would react to any new situation. There had been a merciless confidence in the mind of his menacer, but something else as well, or rather, two somethings. One was a feeling of integrity, as if the mind had never needed to lie. The other, and perhaps the more reliable, was something the man had been hoping for all along. Curiosity, that was it. It might not kill these cats, but it could help. Not for the first time in his turbulent life, Hiero decided to take a chance.

His captive was awake now, and the oval eyes, a third again as large as his own, glared defiantly up at him, the slitted pupils contracting in fury.

The wide, almost lipless mouth bared its sharp-looking teeth in a mute threat of what she would do to him, given the chance. Absently, he noted the fine whiskers on the upper lip and along the slender muzzle. It really was more than a nose, he decided.

*Peace, little sister. I mean no harm. I release you to those down on the ground. Your leader—*He sent a picture of the dominant male mind—*has asked for you back safely.* He slowly unfastened her feet, next the elbows, and all the time kept his reflexes tense for any sudden moves. He had no real fear of being caught in unarmed combat by this slender thing, but those teeth and claws were no mere ornaments.

She rose equally carefully, watching him all the while. The wide eyes were now baffled rather than enraged. When he handed her the long knife he had earlier picked up from the tree crotch, the eyes widened further. But she thrust it into the sheath at the refastened belt and slid out of the fork and down in one easy motion. He settled back on his haunches and waited. He had a feeling that it might be a long wait.

The night waned and the moon sank until it disappeared. A few jackals barked in the distance, and a large owl flitted into Hiero's tree, noted the silent man, and flew away, hooting mournfully in disgust. But Hiero knew that he was not alone. He had no intention of leaving his so-called monkey's perch to see how many eyes glared up into the dark. The individual minds were closed to him, but he could feel a group aura growing as more and more of the night people arrived and went into conclave. The ground below must be thick with them by now. He wondered if he were going to die bloodily this night and said his prayers with especial emphasis on the virtues of charity and forgiveness. He was not thinking of his own efforts along those lines, but of others who might possess them!

The summons came as abruptly as all the other reactions he had observed from the catfolk. *If you don't want to be harmed, come down at once,* came the leader's message. *We are leaving and will take you with us.* Grudgingly, it added, *You may keep your weapons. Do not try to use them.*

As he clambered thoughtfully down the tree, Hiero exulted deep inside. It had worked! So far, at least, his guesses were paying off. The next few moments would see whether his throat would gape. He had no illusions about being able to handle a swarm of these extraordinary mutants on the ground. He said a last prayer and touched earth with his feet.

It was dark at the base of the tree, but not so dark that he could not see the ring of tall figures around him and the open anger blazing from the fiery eyes. He wondered how many humans in the past had seen such a group as their last sight, before dying as they knelt paralyzed with terror and incapable of defense. His hand tightened on his spear. He was not kneeling, at least, nor was he in any way paralyzed.

Come! It was the mind of the ruling male who gave orders. *You can go at your own speed. We will go slowly, as slowly as your kind of plodding thing out there.* The contemptuous thought was directed at the silent village.

I am not from out there, Hiero sent, *as perhaps you have learned tonight.* He felt the renewed anger at his open defiance. These people were totally unused to being countered in any way, and certainly not by mere humans.

The tali chieftain kept his temper, however. He was leaning over Hiero now, at least seven feet of him, if the estimate in the poor light were correct. *No, you are certainly not as they. You can speak the way only the* (Hiero translated the strange vocal image as "Eer'owear;" he could get no closer) *can do. This*

is unheard of You resist our killing thoughts and even the Wind of Death, This was obviously the terrible scent, the pheromone, which sapped the will to resist.

No, the catman continued, you are not of those out there. You may be of another kind altogether. Perhaps you are something much worse! We have certain legends of the past of such as you may be. Our elder folk, some of them, remember these as I do only dimly. If you are what I think you may be, you had better have died in your tree!

They were moving off now, over the tall grass of the open plain, headed east under the dark clouds. Hiero was in the center of a loose ring, and they moved at a gentle lope that in no way stretched his running ability. He decided not to mention this. It might just come in handy.

The leader spoke again in the man's mind, and Hiero could feel the doubt.

Personally, I hope that you are not what we all suspect. There was a pause, almost a reluctant one. You have courage. You came down on my word alone. Also, even those you struck with that big knife admit that you could have easily killed them and did not. Another pause. The young she likes you, even though her head is sore. She is a Keeper of the Wind. Hiero gathered the title or honorific was important.

Young shes, even Keepers, will play with anything. They steal the cubs of those apes back in the wooden wall and try to make pets of them! They always die, though. Hiero said a silent prayer for God knew how many lost babies of the unfortunate villagers.

Say your name aloud, in your own speech, he suddenly shot at the chief. The answer was a rumbling, purring, grunting sound that no human could really hope to approximate. Hiero tried, nevertheless, and finally achieved something like "B'uorgh." He could feel the amusement at his attempt in the other's mind. Any small gain of that sort might pay off in a handsome way later on.

A mile or so farther on, B'uorgh's thoughts came again. *You are a hunter, like us, stranger.* The term really meant "odddity/enigma." *Those creatures back in the wall, they hunt with traps and covered pits. Can you hunt, as we do, in the dark?*

Yes, Hiero thought. *I hunt more slowly, though. I cannot see at night as your people do. Nor can I run thus. I have never seen such running,* he added quite honestly.

None can match us, B'uorgh's thought ran, full of pride. *We are the Children of the Night Wind. Still,* he added, *there are good hunters among the lesser folk, some of whom lie in wait. At times we hunt them! And at such times, some of us may not return.*

Hiero realized that the catman was rationalizing an attempt to accept a mere human, however odd, as a kind of equal or at least something only slightly inferior. This was a necessity to the arrogant chief. There was another factor as well, and this was one the Metz had been counting on all along, one he had figured out long before. The chief was curious. He found the new puzzle most intriguing and wanted it to continue. The kitten had found a new ball of string! Not only the young shes liked to play with new objects, it seemed. Hiero stifled a smile in the dark at the thought of the lean giant padding beside him ever having been a kitten.

We do not like the apes in the walls, living off plants and their tame beasts. Though the milk of the beasts is good, and we take what we want of it. You have met a young she, the one whose head you almost cracked. Soon you will meet another kind of she. Perhaps you will learn why we

do not like the creatures which are far more like you than like us. I am beginning to remember bad things, things of long ago. We will speak no more until we come to the home place/lair. The last thought tones were not at all encouraging.

A darker shadow had been rising to meet them for some time. They were approaching another grove, such as the one Hiero had taken shelter in. It was larger, though, and the Metz could feel that it was not empty. The catfolk could silence their individual minds to him; but in a group, they gave off a sort of cloudy miasma, a mental mist which he was finding easy to recognize. This, then, was the home place. He hoped firmly that it would not be his final place!

In a few moments they were in the shadow of the great boughs and plunged into a narrow path through the undergrowth at the edge of the wood. It twisted and turned like a demented corkscrew but, after a short while, emerged into a densely shaded clearing. Hiero's night sight was good enough to see narrow ladders leading up into the trees. Toward one of these, he was gently but firmly urged.

The ladder was quite steep and led a long way up. Eventually, he found that he and B'uorgh were alone at the outer edge of a large platform made, from the feel of it, of woven vines and slender withes. Alone? No. There was another watching, brooding presence there, crouched under a mat of branches at the far side. From the gloom, orange gleams studied them, then an arm was waved. *Sit!*

Side by side, the catman and the human squatted, while the being in front of them stared in silence. There was no attempt to touch his mind, Hiero knew, or to communicate in any way with the chief. He had the feeling that the person before him was simply ruminating, remembering and estimating, considering and rejecting. She took her time. Finally, she rose from her mat of branches and moved forward into the dim light until she could crouch only a small distance from them.

She was old, the Metz saw, old and worn. But she was vibrant with life, her mind and spirit burning, even as her body slackened and her sinews loosened. B'uorgh was no doubt a fine fighter and the capable leader of a hunting or war band. But this was the real ruler!

I have no name, even in our own tongue, Strange One. Her mental voice was fine-timbred and steely, with no age in it. Her great eyes were lighted with an inner fire, but there was no loss of control and no impatience, such as he had noted even with B'uorgh. *I am the Speaker and the One Who Remembers. Since the vanished time when we became free, such a one as I must force the Folk to recall that which was past. They must never forget the Bad Time, which was in another place far away and happened before my mother many times away saw the sun rise and the moon set. Now you come, mayhap for the first time since a Speaker was trained and named, and you may be, in your single body, the sole reason that I and all those other Speakers who are now gone into the Wind ever existed.* She reseated herself in one fluid motion even closer before them. Hiero felt that it was incumbent on him to answer. A vague idea of this race's past was coming to him, but he concealed it and sent a bland concept.

At least I am no enemy of your people. I have told the chief here that I am not of the people out on the plains, the village dwellers. I think he believes me.

The response was quick and cold. *It is not what he believes, Furless One! It is what I believe! That is why I am here.* Her mental pitch lowered and calmed, the challenge having been met. She changed her tack.

We are not, as you seem to think, the foes of those creatures who herd together out in their sties, less alive than the beasts that feed them. No! We use them! And they have another purpose, which

directly concerns you, for you are far closer to them than you are to us. Can you guess that other purpose?

The priest thought both rapidly and privately. This was a loaded and horribly dangerous question. He was standing on the edge of a figurative precipice. He might be dead in seconds if he gave the wrong response! Yet he had to do something fast. He chose to gamble.

Those people out in the open land, who are of my kind, though simple and harmless in themselves, they serve as an— example. They help us to remember times long ago. Times when others, who looked like them in the body, at least, werenot harmless! He held his breath, his eyes locked on the vertical pupils of the Speaker.

She drew in her own breath with a faint hiss, a sound of mingled appreciation and recognition. *You know, then? And if you know, how much do you know? And, most of all, if you do indeed know, whence does your knowledge come?*

Hiero framed the concepts in his mind with exquisite care. He was still balanced on a knife edge. One wrong move and the big chief, so silent beside him, would attempt to rend him limb from limb before he could move. All the aged female would have to do was nod.

Believe that I know nothing, he sent. *Still, I have traveled far in my life. I have fought and journeyed in many lands, with stranger a llies than you could begin to imagine. Against us have been pitted even stranger foes, some like me in appearance, some not. The worst of these evil beings, my greatest and most terrible enemies, are outwardly of my race.* He paused for effect. *Only outwardly. And even then, they have no trace of hair, being truly furless, on their heads and bodies.* Was there a momentary contraction of the barred pupils? He continued. *In secret places, usually far from the light of the sun, they breed slaves, many of them of other races, whom they would warp and change into servants of evil. Such as these:* He formed an image of one of the Hairy Howlers, the monkey Leemutes, and when she had had time to absorb it, another of a scowling Manrat, one of the giant, intelligent rodents. Ever so slightly, the Speaker relaxed, her posture slumping a little. But her eyes never left his.

Her next thought had something of supplication in it. The anger was gone, at least from his direction. *So—if you do not know, then you can guess at least at the shame that we, the freest of the free, still bear?*

I hold it no shame to be kept captive and tortured against my will by the servants of all that is bad. I have been so held and tortured. And I escaped! Indeed, I am fleeing even now, to join my own folk far to the north. As once, long and far in the distant past, the Children of the Wind fled also, seeking the open sky and the fresh air of freedom. Hiero was now fairly relaxed. His shrewd postulates, buoyed by hints dropped all evening, were being proved correct. The Speaker's next thought confirmed him in his assurance.

Show me an enemy in your mind! One of those who command the others!

This was easy for the man. The hated face of S'duna, the Unclean Master, his inveterate and deadly foe, was often in his head. The pale, hairless face, the almost pupilless eyes, burning with a dead fire, the whole aura of malign purpose, were displayed for the cat-woman's view.

She hissed again, and the chief beside him did also, a susurrations of venomous rage, an anger that many generations of freedom could not kill, the hatred of the proudest and most independent of the mammalian

breeds for those who had once presumed to chain them!

It is they! May they burn in the fires of the lightning! Death to them in their caves, death to them who brought the pain, who slew the cubs and the old, who worked with their cunning tools and their sharp knives! For they held us helpless with their minds, frozen in place, and they laughed as we suffered! They would make us useful, they said. We would be good servants when our wills were broken to their taste. Listen, Strange One, you who hate them also. I, the Remembrancer, the Speaker of the Eastern Pride, will tell you of that time, as my mother told me, having learned it from hers in turn! Learn the tale, as all our cubs must. For if you hate them, and I sense that you do not lie, then you are our friend and I offer you the help of the Pride!

Now, at last, Hiero could lounge back and allow all tension to leave his body. The Unclean, who would have writhed at the very idea, had found him new allies!

As the night finally faded and the dawn came in the east, he heard of the capture of the cat people in another land, many hundreds of leagues away in the southwest somewhere. He guessed, but did not say, that the Unclean had bred them for enhanced brain power as well as for physical stamina, feeling that they had acquired a splendid race of warriors.

What a mistake! With the increased brain power had come increased self-will. The catfolk learned that they were slaves, mere chattels, considered no more than tools of the Great Plan. From their enforced captivity, they learned cooperation. From their pain and loss, they learned patience. From their captors' lies and cunning, they learned deception. They organized.

There was a night of blood. They broke from the caverns and buried laboratories, suffering and inflicting much loss. They had so taken their overlords by surprise that those who survived were hardly pursued. And they ran, the proud ones, the free, ran until their hearts almost broke, ran with their shes carrying the cubs. At last they were beyond the mental reach, the invisible chains, of their former masters, but still they went on, until one day they reached a new land. Here they stayed, but never forgot what had passed. They would never be taken so again. Their grim history was taught to every young one until it became a permanent scar on his racial memory.

When a wandering group of human settlers appeared in the area with their cattle, slitted eyes watched in the shadows. The only men the cat people had ever known were the Unclean. Almost, the decision was taken to kill them all out of hand. Wiser counsels prevailed. They studied the loathed creatures and decided that these men were in essence harmless. The milk and, when wanted, the flesh of their beasts were useful. Let the settlers stay in their villages. They would be taxed—and ruled.

The rule was not onerous, but it had a few strict laws. Any human being who saw one of the Children of the Wind, except at very long range, died. There were no exceptions. Among the ruling elders of the cat people, the thought was that the humans would serve a variety of purposes. Aside from the food easily taken, they would be a living reminder of the past. Also, if the Unclean or their allies should ever reappear, the villagers would mask the presence of the catfolk, thus allowing them time to plan. And so affairs had continued for what Hiero estimated was perhaps some two hundred years of his time.

The villagers were invariably inside their stockade by dusk. Then the People of the Dark, naturally nocturnal, emerged and took over the land. Their skilled hunting kept the area largely free of dangerous animals, thus benefiting the three villages. And the catfolk separated into three packs, or Prides, one for each village. It was cruel in a way, but the villagers did not live too badly. They soon learned the rules. One lived with the ghosts and put out food and milk at certain hours and in certain ways. Any who simply disappeared or vanished after dark had seen a ghost. Their fear kept them in their villages and

discouraged exploration. Once in a while, a man trapped by night in a tree would see the hunt sweeping far away over the savanna and know that the racing figures he had seen were the gods of his tribe, thus reinforcing both awe and the observation of the law.

Hiero philosophically reflected that he had seen plenty of people who lived worse, in what they called freedom. One day in the future perhaps, he or others would be able to take thought to this odd, disparate set of cultures and attempt to modify things and bring some changes.

Eventually, her tale done, the Speaker allowed the man to be led away to a branch-shaded platform to sleep with the coming of day. This was their own sleep time, though they needed less sleep than humans and interrupted their drowsing with minor tasks, such as leather work and the making of rude pottery and baskets.

The next afternoon, B'uorgh awakened the man. All of the Pride were assembled in an open space, and Hiero was formally introduced to all of them, down to the smallest cubs. A messenger was sent to the other two Prides, telling them what had been done and why. After this, Hiero had the freedom of the land and began to enjoy himself hugely.

They were a simple folk in terms of physical culture, at about the level of the ancient aborigines of far Australia. They used no weapons save for long knives, of metal when they could obtain them, but otherwise of sharpened flint. These they took from the villages. In truth, as the Metz had witnessed, they needed nothing else. Their incredible agility plus the Wind of Death made hunting almost too easy! Everything they needed was at hand, and they lived very well, wanting no more than they had. They used fire, but only for warmth and light, preferring their flesh raw. They ate certain tubers and berries when they felt they needed them, and they knew which plants were useful in their rude pharmacopeia.

Two cubs were the normal birth, and Hiero found them enchanting. They decided the new, furless person was a fine toy; as he strolled through the encampment of an evening, he usually had a bouncing, wiggling, furry bail in the crook of each arm. Behind tagged a trail of older children and shy adolescents, racking him with so many questions at once that his head ached from trying to sort out the thoughts and answer them. He was welcome at every hearth and tried to eat at different places every day.

In the evenings, he always paid a formal call—for the catpeople were very formal—on the Speaker, where he chatted for an hour or so with her, B'uorgh, and the young Speaker-to-be, she whom he had clubbed on his first encounter. Her name, as close as he could form it, was M'reen, and she bade fair, in his opinion, to being as smart as her teacher.

The personal relations of the catfolk were subtle and often hard to understand. There were pair bonds and also deep affection between couples, but sex seemed to be indiscriminate. Any mother's cubs were hers, but some shes stayed always with the same male and others changed mates. He gathered there were festivals when all rules were abrogated for brief periods. At such times they burned the leaves of a certain herb and grew wildly excited, if not actually intoxicated.

The Speakership was selective and took long training; but, as Hiero might have guessed, B'uorgh had fought his way to his position as hunting and war chief and would someday be challenged again by one of the younger males. Should he survive all such combat, as sometimes occurred, he would become one of an honored circle of elder males who advised the Speaker and helped to preserve tradition.

On certain nights, the Pride held group sings, for want of a better word. These were mixtures of poetry, chanting, and, Hiero thought privately, just plain yowling. Sometimes the massed rumbling and purring was soothing and at others made his ears ache, though he always gravely expressed vast appreciation.

During the week he spent with the Pride, they held several in honor of his arrival and alliance.

Hiero found the catfolk delightful. He was even able to help with a problem that had been concerning the elders, that of a slowly declining birth rate. He discovered that the Pride, being so group-minded, had more or less stopped intermating with the other two Prides. There were obvious results in terms of inbreeding. He politely told the Speaker and her council of old males that this simply had to stop and that the younger folk of the three Prides should be made to meet more often. Outmating should be strongly encouraged, and the reasons for it should be thoroughly gone into and explained to all the folk. He was solemnly thanked for the advice and told it would be adhered to in the fullest way possible with personal independence! He wondered about this, but M'reen told him privately that it would happen, though probably slowly. One did not give Pride members orders, only veiled and delicate suggestions. This would result in the idea's seeming to be of their own origination.

Every other night or so, those able to do so hunted. Of course, the new friend had to be taken along, not that he needed any urging. He could not run at their pace, so the game came to him. The Wind of Death was not used, since the adults of both sexes preferred not to utilize it unless they were in a hurry or at war. Hiero never found out what it was made from, but he strongly suspected a natural secretion of the glands, enhanced by the juices of a rare plant. It was a secret held by certain of the females, who alone could release it. It had been discovered long ago and had been used to help them escape from the horror of the Unclean.

Their favorite game was becoming scarce in the neighborhood, but they located a specimen and took the Metz out one night under a bright moon to see how he felt about it. He was positioned in a certain place, not too far from the trees, which he thought tactful, and told to get ready. He understood that the honor of the kill was to be his and wondered what it might be and if, indeed, he were capable of holding up his end. The catfolk would not tell him what it was. Knowing their whimsical humor, he wondered if one of the trunked giants were being herded in his direction.

He was therefore considerably relieved when he heard the drumming of hooves and the angry snorts of a fast-running herbi-vore. However, when the moon gleams showed him the prey, he was not so sure.

From the head down, the form was that of a giant buck. Over the deep-socketed eyes grew two long, straight horns, mighty enough weapons in themselves. But on the broad muzzle rose another, a straight stem which forked into two more evil-looking points. As the enraged animal twisted and darted at the tormentors who were herding it in his direction, the man wondered how they escaped, even with their speed, from the vicious and lethal lunges. When at length it sighted him, a solitary and fixed target, he had no more time to think. Meeting those terrible horns head-on would obviously be insane. As the brute charged, he hurled the heavy spear straight at the broad chest and then dodged, whipping out his long dagger and poisoning it.

The broad spear sank to the socket, for a brief moment bringing the great beast up standing. In that moment, he aimed and threw the knife from no more than ten feet away, not at the body, but at the nearest bulging, bloodshot eye. The blade sank to the hilt. With a final bellow, the animal fell over, its brain pierced instantaneously. The other hunters let out a wild, squalling cry of triumph, and Hiero felt that his knees were somewhat weak.

On examining the kill while they cut it up to carry back, Hiero thought his knees felt even weaker. The animal's eyes were surrounded by rings of heavy bone, and a very slight miss would have proved useless! He thanked his Creator silently for the good shot.

You did very well with old Four-Horns, came B'uorgh's jovial thought. *We could not have helped,*

not at that range. One reason we like him so much is that he frequently gets the hunter. Always good sport when we meet him.

Hiero formally thanked all the hunters for the wonderful opportunity they had provided. They did not need to know his private feelings, which was just as well!

VIII

Any Port in a Storm

The hoppers, even the picked beasts of the royal Guard, were very tired. All the interminable day, they had sped from one end of the battle line to the other as the guard followed its royal mistress. The princess had been everywhere, her gilded mail and bright plumes shining like an oriflamme of war as she rallied lagging spearmen here and sent fresh lancers there. Each threatened point had seen her, cheered her to the marrow, and then fought the harder as a result.

But the day was lost, nonetheless. The royal army, outnumbered and with its flanks turned, had been forced to withdraw. The rebel duke, or one of his advisors, had planned shrewdly and moved far more quickly than either Luchare or the king had believed possible. Also, the cunning Amibale had used several unexpected tricks, either through his own sharp wits or through Unclean guidance. Joseato was in it somewhere, but Amibale, Luchare reflected glumly, was quite clever enough on his own. A revolt of the beggars and thieves, allied with disgruntled petty shopkeepers, had erupted in the city as the army was setting out. It had been put down quickly and the ringleaders promptly hanged, but this cost both time and lives. As a result, when the two armies finally met, twenty miles south of D'alwah City, the royal troops were already tired from street fighting and had sustained losses.

Amibale, who to do him justice was brave, had brought not only the troops of his dukedom but also hordes of savages, some of unknown races, to assist. A particular menace was the swarm of small, pallid men used as skirmishers, who fired clouds of poisoned arrows from both bows and blowguns. And there was worse. The Unclean wizards were coming out into the open at last. A regiment of the ape mutants, the Hairy Howlers, stormed against one wing, while a mob of shrieking, chattering Man-rats assaulted the other.

Moreover, so quickly had Amibale moved that the full resources available to the royal army simply had not been there on time. The Mu'aman infantry, summoned from their western plains, had not arrived. Would they come late or not at all? Had they, too, been rotted with treason? The village militia and the frontier guards had not had time to draw back, either, nor had most of the hardy boatmen of the bays on the Lantik, stern fighters and badly needed.

So the battle had been fought and lost with the household troops, plus the personal armies of the loyal nobility who lived near the capital. Indeed, at one point the center had almost broken under a heavy onslaught, and only the unexpected arrival of Count Ghiftah Hamili, charging in person at the head of his two lancer squadrons, had saved the stricken field. Any doubts that Luchare might have had about the silent count were cleared on the spot as, fighting like a demon at the front of his hoppers, he drove back Amibale's infantry.

But it was not enough. Sullenly, unbroken but unable to maintain the fight, the royal army fell back, covering its flanks and snapping at the enemy as it did so. There was no choice. By nightfall, Luchare was conferring with her commanders while the battered troops were being entrenched on the outskirts of D'alwah City itself. There was still no word from the outlying districts, and rumors of a new and dreadful

attack from within had started in the city. There was little talk and no laughter at all in the tired ranks that night.

Around a tiny fire, four silent figures crouched. The fire was burning in the mammoth crotch of a tree so vast it could have shaded a small town unaided. A fifth person, posted as a sentinel, peered from a branch a little higher up. Far below, out of sight even in the daylight, hidden by innumerable leaves, vines, and limbs, lay the nighted swamp from which the tree had sprung, ages in the past.

Hiero was conferring with M'reen, B'uorgh, and Za'reekh, a powerful young warrior. On watch above them, Ch'uirsh, the other youngster, could join in the mingled thoughts when he chose. Usually the two young males were silent when their elders spoke, but they sometimes disagreed and they had the right to be heard. There was a mental silence now, for they were all listening to the sounds of the morass many hundreds of feet below.

A hideous bellow erupted upward, croaking and guttural, but so enormous in sheer volume as to make the very perfumed air of the trees seem to shiver. All the myriad forest noises appeared to hush at the terrible cry.

What is it, Hiero? B'uorgh had learned as had the others, that their new friend could tap the minds of many other beings, while the catfolk were restricted to those of their own species. Above the man's head a great, scented blossom waved, giving off a wonderful aroma as he concentrated. Once more the monstrous, raging grunt reverberated up through the foliage. At length, the Metz relaxed again and smiled.

I don't know. An Elevener, one of our friends whom I have told you of, well, one of them might be able to find out. They specialize in all life, everything that breathes, you know. I can't distinguish between lots of the lower types, the ones with little or no brain. This may be a reptile, like a snake or lizard. But I rather think it's an amphibian, something like a frog or a salamander. They have even less brain than the reptiles. I get a feeling of blind, fumbling anger on a very low level. I met something like that once before, up in the Palood, the great marshes of the North. Their intelligence is so sluggish you can't detect them at all. At least, I can't.

A frog! If that's a frog, it could jump up here. The thought came down from Ch'uirsh.

Nothing that makes that much noise could jump anywhere, M'reen retorted. *It might just push the tree over, though.* She shuddered appreciatively, the firelight catching the smooth muscles under her dappled coat. *I'm glad we can travel up here and not in that muck down there.*

Hiero decided not to mention that some of the incredible frog monsters of the Palood could jump very well. Anyway, he felt that it was not one of them, making the night hideous, but some vast, crawling thing that lurked in the mud and water at the bases of the great trees.

The little party had been on its way north for over two weeks now, and the past two days had been spent traversing the swamp. The jungle at the foot of the giant tree boles was quite dangerous enough, so much so that they had always to be on the alert, by day or night. But when they encountered the beginnings of this huge bog, it was an obvious impossibility to continue. They had seen tracks on its edge which made any such idea unthinkable. The catfolk were runners of the open plains, and they knew nothing of this shrouded murk and its inhabitants. The trees went on as if the dark water at their feet were simply a new form of soil, so the travelers simply did the logical thing. They went aloft. They lost time, of course. Sometimes the vined highways and the mighty limbs came to a dead end, and they all had to backtrack. But Hiero always knew where his home lay, his built-in compass never ceasing to function.

He could get a rude sighting on the sun through the leaves as well, and thus their course, to the north, stayed pretty constant.

There were other advantages. The cat people and Hiero were good climbers. Then, too, the really monstrous things, such as whatever wallowed far below at the moment, were not apt to be climbers at all. The air was cool and fresh, and there was plenty of game, in the form of unwary birds and mammals. Only that afternoon, B'uorgh had scurried up a nearby trunk and neatly cut the throat of a large nesting bird. It and its half-grown young had made an excellent dinner, with plenty left over for the morrow.

Nothing in this life was completely safe, of course. Once they had been forced to scamper for their lives when a nest of tree vipers had all leaped or slithered at them. At another point a colony of malignant-looking apes, far too much like the Hairy Howlers for Hiero's liking, had followed them a long way, obviously nerving themselves up to an open attack. They were big, stump-tailed brutes, glossy black and with savage, naked, green faces and horrendous fangs. But just as Hiero had been about to kill one and risk losing his spear, the whole gibbering crew reached the end of some obscure and invisible boundary.

Hiero's group hastened away, leaving behind the barking and chattering mob in the sea of verdant leaves. The two young males were furious at being chivied along in this manner and pleaded to be allowed to go back and wipe out the horde, but B'uorgh's coughed orders put an end to that nonsense at once, and they subsided.

The man realized how lucky he was. He certainly had not been looking forward to his lonely but inevitable journey through the incredibly dangerous southern wood. For one thing, he had to sleep at times; for another, he had been there before, though in another part, and had some idea of the perils which lay hidden in the depths of the giant trees. He had been taken wholly by surprise, therefore, when the old Speaker called him to a sudden meeting and blandly informed him that four of her people would go with him. The war chief, the young Speaker-to-be, and the two younger warriors were all volunteers, but also came with her full consent and approval.

You go into great peril, as great as any you have been through, we think. Hiero had informed the tribe, through necessity, of some of his recent adventures and had not even been sure that they believed him. The art of telling tall tales was well developed among this strange people.

The soft-furred hand laid its naked palm on his as the Speaker continued. *Hiero, you go to fight the ancient enemy of us all. Your she fights for you far away, and so do others. You are our friend. If the defilers, the cub-killers, the naked-faced mind-warper, if they should be the victors, how long would we be safe, we whom they have forgotten, perhaps? Not long, we all think. We are few in number, and none outside knows of us as yet, save only you. But how long would that last if the enemy with the terrible machines you tell of were to conquer all who now oppose them? No, we must help, for your errand, even though we do not fully comprehend it, is of the utmost importance. It must be so, for you do not lie and you have shown us how they hate you and have tried to kill you, not once but many times. You must be one of their chiefest foes, if not the most important. Friends are for help, and you shall have ours. This chewed-up, old scar-fur of a B'uorgh can be replaced easily enough.* The doughty individual in question simply purred; he knew what condition he was in, moreover, looked it.

The Speaker sighed mentally. *I would come myself to see new things and learn much of the outer world I will never know. But I can send M'reen. She will be my eyes and ears. I can train another, should she be lost, though she is a good mind. The two young males are idiots, like all males, both the young and the older. Still, they are among the best hunters in the pack. They can help guard*

you. And M'reen has the secret of the Wind of Death!

It had been hard to thank them all, especially since he alone knew, or at least had some idea, of what they were getting into. And they had done another thing without being asked, which made him feel even more warmly about them. They had sworn, quite simply, to leave the humans out in the villages alone and, while remaining secret, to kill no more of them for any reason. No more babies would be removed as pets, nor would solitary hunters be hounded to a terrified doom. This was a great concession.

Now here they were, Hiero mused, watching the blunt faces with their brows black-barred and lively, lambent eyes, the rippling muscles, and the ivory claws stretching as their owners eased their limbs. Who would have thought this only two weeks ago? For indeed they had been a fantastic help. It was very hard to winnow out thoughts in this life-infested jungle; though he did his best, not all inimical creatures were detectable in time. The great ape-things were very intelligent, and he, concentrating on lower carnivores and other predacious forms of existence, had missed them completely. It was the young Za'reekh who had heard the rustle of branches, unswayed by treetop breezes, and thus had warned them in time to turn from the ambush. The catfolk had no noses worth speaking of; indeed, Hiero's was far better. But their eyes and ears were fantastic and, in the often dim light, invaluable. It was M'reen who had heard the whispering rush of the oncoming brood of vipers and thus had turned them back, fortunately to a series of broad, flat limbs.

Their aid was well worth having, and they were good company too, though Ch'uirsh was going to get nailed one of these days for his practical jokes! Finding a giant worm from a bromeliad growth on one's chest in the small hours of the night was a bit much. The priest-warrior grinned to himself. He had flung the supposed serpent off with a yelp of horror before even getting a good look at it. B'uorgh, also awakened, had wanted to scalp the young hunter, but M'reen had given him a good talking-to instead. A Speaker-to-be, even a young one, in a female rage, had made Ch'uirsh's ears go back in instant regret for his folly. Hiero contented himself with a very brief lecture on the idiocy of frightening people who had a lot of real dangers on their minds. And that was that. It *had* been funny, though.

I wonder where we are, B'uorgh sent, after a companionable silence, while they listened to the monster in the slime below, now retreating noisily. *Can this sea, this mighty water, be far off, do you think, Hiero? I have viewed it in your mind, but frankly, I find it hard to believe, even so. So much water in one place!*

Oh, it's there, the man answered. *We have to cross it somehow. I simply have to get back to the real war, to find out what my own people are doing, to say nothing of the Unclean. I don't know if the weapon that I found, the machine that thinks for all—this was as close to describing the computer idea as he could get—ever ar-r ived in my country. I don't know if my country is even still defending itself I don't know if any messages have come from the South, from, my she and her country. The only thing I do know is that going all the way around the edge of the Inland Sea would take many months, assuming that we ever got there at all. We have to cross it and cross it fast.*

There was a silence again as the cat minds considered yet once more all the marvelous new ideas. The great waters alone were wild enough in conception for folk who only knew the lazy little rivers of the savannas. But the idea of going on things that floated, like sticks on a rivulet! It was frightening, yes, but also wonderful.

These boats, these ships, I understand, I think, M'reen sent. *But the way they move! I can understand that if many people put sticks in the water that push, the boat-thing moves forward. But that the wind itself can make the boat move, that is almost beyond any belief* For perhaps the

fiftieth time, Hiero tried to explain what sails were and what it was that they did. The real joke, which he could not share, was that he was sure that the cat people would make marvelous sailors! They had no fear at all of heights and moved up and down smooth branches, well—like cats. He felt sure that a crew of trained catmen would rival the finest human sailors in existence. Probably they would need little or no training, either, once the principles were understood. Of course, there was a possible problem of seasickness, but he doubted that such a small thing would stop his friends for very long. As they fell into a drowsy slumber, he was still chuckling to himself at the thought of a great barque, such as *The Ravished Bride*, her rigging full of flitting, dancing figures, like spotted sprites.

The following day brought Hiero to a sudden halt. It was midaf-ternoon and they were moving rapidly along a highway of the world aloft, a series of interlaced branches of great size, almost as easy to run on as a town street. The man suddenly held up one hand, and the others stopped in their tracks as the message penetrated,

Hiero's mind had gone roving ahead in its usual manner, but he had been pushing it a bit harder and farther than he normally did. Then he realized they were already near the Inland Sea. There could be no other explanation for the void in the life auras he was accustomed to gathering into his head. The vast, teeming mass of sheer life which made up the collective biota of the titanic forest suddenly halted. There was a clear limit beyond which, with sharp finality, all surface life ceased. All *normal* surface life, that was!

Motioning the others to stillness, he crouched on the branch and listened with all his mental ability, for he was operating his power at extreme range. He was sensing men, men of so-called civilization, for the first time in months. And they were very much the wrong kind of men!

He was detecting the crew of an Unclean ship! No other explanation made any sense. They were closely grouped physically; that he could tell with ease. And they were out in the emptiness that he knew from the past, which could only mean the sea. The sea had many forms of life, but they did not as a rule operate on its surface, certainly not on bands of mental energy used by humans. And none of the natural forms of the great freshwater ocean would be likely to own an Unclean mind shield! One assortment of people, of whatever stock he could not tell, had such. He had learned in his flight from the North to detect these things when they were being used to send messages. In their closed or defensive condition, they revealed nothing. But the creature of the enemy was using this one to send. This left him open to detection by Hiero and, more than that, enabled the Metz to read the message. What was being sent was most interesting.

None of our ships have been sighted. Not even a trader of the common scum. It is as if the coast west of Neeyana had been swept clean somehow. I have received messages only from yourself. Suggest that a Brother be sent in one of the secret ships to investigate. We are two days' sail from Neeyana, but we are hampered by bad winds. There is a strong feeling among both the officers and the crew that something very funny is going on. We should have sighted the front-runners of the spring trade by now, but have seen nothing. We return to port unless I receive further orders. Message ends. Sulkas.

Hiero listened intently with every fiber of his senses, but could detect no answer. If there were one, it must be coming on some wavelength too attenuated, possibly by distance, for him to reach. But he rather thought not. Whoever Sulkas was, he was no member of the Unclean Brotherhood. The mind, though intelligent, was not of the same caliber, nor was it of the same "feel." This was some trusted servant, a pirate, perhaps, like the late Bald Roke, whom Hiero and Gimp had killed. While the catfolk chatted quietly among themselves, the priest settled down to try to analyze what he had heard.

The message had probably been sent at a fixed time. No reply was thought necessary for the present. Clearly, the Unclean, whom he knew controlled the port of Neeyana on the southern coast of the sea, were uneasy about something. This vessel, which had a crew of no more than a dozen, was sent out as a scout. The crew had found nothing save an empty ocean, and this made them in turn uneasy, for it should not have been so, not at this time of the year. The report had gone to home base, to Neeyana, for further action. A suggestion had been made that one of the Brothers, a robed wizard of the Unclean, should be sent on one of the "secret ships."

Hiero had no trouble guessing what was meant. He had been a prisoner on one of those secret ships, powered by some force he did not as yet understand, but of which he had many suspicions. He was reasonably sure, as was Brother Aldo of the Eleventh Brotherhood, that the Unclean had atomics! Both men felt that the metal vessels they had encountered were driven by the powers of the atom, the shunned, the abhorred, the unspeakable! In their hidden laboratories, the scientists of the Unclean had wrought many horrors. They had bred mutated animals as slaves, as they had tried to do with the cat people. But this was the Ultimate Crime. This was the final horror of The Death, something so awful that normal humanity shrank from even contemplating it.

Hiero remembered their group thrill of nausea when he, Lu-chare, Aldo, and the bear Gorm had first glimpsed the buried cavern of the past, where the great, plastic-shrouded machines had lain, the dispatchers of the ancient terror throughout the world. Aldo, the lover of all life, had almost fainted.

As Hiero sat now, brooding over what he had learned, his determination hardened. The Unclean were going to perish, root and branch, down to the last serf, the merest acolyte in the most minor degree. This was his mission, and he would not fail.

At length, he turned to his fellow venturers. He knew what he wanted to do, but it might prove a trifle hard to explain. Yet he must make the attempt.

We must be just south of the main road from the west to a city held by our enemies. One old road runs from the southeast to the northwest, springing from many other roads far away in the South. We must have been moving roughly parallel to it, though a goodish way off. It is the only way from the east to the port of Neeyana, at least through the forest. West of Neeyana there are other roads and eventually, I think, also more open country, at least in part, but I have never been there or examined detailed maps of that region, except in the most casual way. The shores are very dangerous, and most traffic goes by ship.

He explained further what he had just been doing. There was an enemy vessel present out on the waters, and they must all be very, very careful from now on. If the Unclean ship were no more than two days' sail from the harbor of the foe, then there would soon be contact with someone, probably a someone they had no wish to meet unawares.

We must guard our minds, he went on. Use your speech aloud to one another and talk with me only if urgent. You people use an odd mental band and not one likely to be constantly watched, which is good. But the Unclean have many servants who are not human and with whom they must speak, so be careful! Also, the nonhumans watch and listen, as well as send messages on their own account. We must go like shadows from here on. Something strange out on the sea seems to have disturbed our enemies. I have no idea what it is, but anything that bothers them is likely to be in our favor.

The catfolk had no trouble understanding him, though they grew wildly excited at the thought of actually coming into contact with the legendary wizard lords, whose crimes had been instilled into each of them in

their youth. When Hiero explained that he had no real plans other than somehow to steal a small vessel and escape with it, they seemed to feel that this would prove easy—a simple matter of overpowering whoever stood in their way.

I will loose the Wind of Death on them. Then we will cut their throats! This was M'reen, tapping the pouch which hung at her belt. It took a while for Hiero to quiet them down, to explain the numbers of the Unclean and their servants, and to make sure they would do nothing rash, but would follow his orders. After a while, he felt sure of them. The first rush of hatred would not make them behave in an irresponsible way.

They continued on for the remainder of the day with redoubled caution, using hand signals when they wanted to tell Hiero something and conversing in their own purring murmur among themselves.

That night they camped on another natural platform. After Hiero had grilled his share of the meat, they put out the fire, remote though the chance was that it might be observed. Water had never been a problem to date; not only did the tree crotches often hold it in quantity, but many of the large, epiphytic plants contained small pools as well.

As the catfolk dozed through the dark hours, the man continued to reach out with his thoughts into the night, not only in the direction they were moving but on either side as well. He was beginning, if his senses were operating in a correct manner, to feel what he thought was the town of Neeyana, a way off to the north and east of their present position. He could not read any individual minds, but the sensation of grouped humanity gave off a feeling almost of heat in his head. He was fairly sure he was right.

It was not in his original plans to approach the place at all, at least not closely. There was far too much danger of Unclean detection. He now realized that it might prove to be the only sensible course, especially if they were to steal a small boat. He knew of no other towns to the east; Captain Gimp, on the previous voyage, had mentioned none, though they must exist somewhere along the coast. But he knew nothing at all of the western and southwestern coasts, either. There was a port, known to and used on occasion by the Abbeyes, but it lay a thousand leagues to the northwest. He had been warned to avoid it by his superiors when he had set out a year before, for it was full of spies, and only a few of the traders could be really trusted. This was the brawling port of Namcush. A river led down to it from far up near the borders of the territories of the Republic, a river along which trade ran in both directions, though uncertain and often interrupted. In any case, it was of no present use to him, though it might prove a place to steer for in an emergency.

Eventually he slept, but the guard on his mind never relaxed. In the morning he felt there would be much to do.

They had not been on the march for more than a few hours when the road he had been seeking appeared below them. On Hiero's orders, the group had been traveling through the lowest level of the arboreal highway, though even that was far above the ground. The bog had come to an unheralded end sometime during the day before, and firm ground now lay at the base of the mighty trees.

It was M'reen, taking a turn to scout ahead, who signaled the break in the trees. The others joined her to peer down at what lay below.

The trade route was well trampled and wide, though circuitous, for the tremendous task of felling the forest giants had never been attempted, at least not in these parts. The track simply wound about among their bases, back and forth, but always holding a rough course from east to west. Hiero had never before seen it, since he had left it leagues off to his right on his previous venture south. He knew, however, that it

connected after Neeyana through a maze of other paths and roads with distant D'alwah, and that goods passed along it of every sort, ranging from fabrics and furs to dried fruit and spices, and not excluding slaves. It was most probably along the eastern part of this route that his wife had been taken as a slave to Neeyana. At least, from her description, it had sounded like this way.

The trail lay empty and silent under the green shadows of the giant trees, with dappled sunbeams illuminating patches of it here and there. While the others waited patiently, the Metz scanned the immediate surroundings with his mind, using the utmost care. The Unclean would be sure to have a watch on this route, a main artery of trade to both east and west, and the last thing the little party needed now was to stumble on some outpost or other. He could detect nothing, however, in either direction, and this puzzled him. The distant mass of mental activity which he felt sure was Neeyana had grown increasingly stronger throughout the morning, but why was there nothing nearer? Surely some traders or one of the Unclean patrols ought to be within detection range,

He considered. The mental shields that the Unclean had begun to issue when last he was in the North might account for the silence all about. This seemed implausible, though. He knew the shields were rare and probably very costly in both time and skilled workmanship. He felt sure such shields would be issued to only key personnel—commanders, members of the Unclean Brotherhood, and others in high authority. A simple unit of watchers on the trails would be most unlikely to have one; or, if the captain possessed one, then Hiero ought to be able to pick up the thoughts of the other, humbler members of the group. It was most perplexing.

Keeping his thoughts to the catfolk on the lowest energy level, undetectable save at close range, he issued his orders. They would scout along on either side of the path, moving east and going very slowly and with the utmost care. His allies would signal in their own speech, which was highly unlikely to be sorted out from the myriad forest noises around them, if they found anything worthy of reporting. Meanwhile, he would bring up to the rear and screen everything in a circle with his own mental nets, M'reen would stay close to him on the left side of the trail with B'uorgh, while the other two would take the right. So it was decided and they set out, descending a mighty tangle of lianas and interwoven aerial roots until within a few feet of the earth. Then they dropped and separated.

Their progress was slow, but they covered the ground nonetheless. Every cluster of the widespread roots and great base flanges of the colossal trees had to be scouted and then circled after investigation. Since many of them were enormous in circumference, making the redwoods of the past look like saplings by comparison, this took time. They tried never to lose sight of the trail, while remaining invisible from any eyes that they might somehow have overlooked. Hiero had warned them to be especially wary of any attack from overhead, and he was soon proved right, even though they were not attacked.

A faint yowling call from Ch'uirsh on the far side of the trail brought them up short. Following B'uorgh's hand signals, the three crept closer, until they were on the edge of the broad path and could see the spotted forms of the two young warriors on the other side. Ch'uirsh and Za'reekh were pointing upward along the route, to something in the fork of a great tree, overgrown with cable-sized vines and even bushes. Straining his eyes, Hiero finally picked out something alien in the mass of tangled foliage, some darker and more structured shape.

They spent five more minutes scouting the neighborhood before climbing cautiously upward. In another minute, they were in the neatly concealed watchtower of the enemy. It was a roofed platform of logs, cleverly bound about with living plants of all kinds and providing a clear view of the path below in both directions—and it was completely empty. That it had not been empty long was obvious. There was a pile of ripe but not yet rotten fruit in one corner; a rude cabinet in another held dried meat and even some hard biscuit. A perfectly good belt of heavy leather, with a brass buckle and studs, had been dropped

under a half-full wineskin near the leaf-covered entrance. Smelling the wine, Hiero found it perfectly drinkable.

Over all the place hung a faint, sour odor, and it was one the man had no trouble identifying. *Man-rats*, he sent, using the lowest energy level of brain waves. *The enemy has had a garrison of the foul things they bred here. There was at least one human as well, since they do not drink this stuff in the leather bag. They have been called away suddenly, and I would badly like to know why.* He thought hard and came to a decision.

The other four crouched on their haunches, and, very carefully,

Hiero sent a probe out in the direction of the Inland Sea. It could not lie more than a few miles to the north of their present position, and he wanted to know what was going on off their flank as they continued. Presently, he found a thing of interest, although exactly what he had found, he was not sure. There was something out there or a number of somethings, maybe, but the whole embodiment of whatever it was lay under a mental blanket, a cover concealing the nature and identity of what was hidden therein. All Hiero could detect was a mass like a huge mental cloud, an inchoate something which he could not pierce. Beyond all shadow of a doubt, the thing was moving; and it was moving, though not fast, in his direction.

He had felt nothing like this in his mind since the year before, when the Unclean ship with the lightning gun mounted forward had caught them all in the drowned city of the northern shore. After a while, he gave up on the area. He could do nothing more, and the mysterious, cloaked patch of energy could not be penetrated. He switched his attention instead, if possible using even more care, to the direction of what he felt sure was Neeyana. This was a real change!

Neeyana was boiling, in the sense of turbulent mental energy. It was as if an ants' nest had been stirred with a stick, so violent and numerous were the thoughts he detected. His group must be even closer than he had thought, no more than a few miles out of the town boundaries. Now the empty trails and the missing guards made sense. From the various minds that he tapped, Hiero quickly learned that the place was under or about to come under attack! Everyone who could be mustered was being sent to the sea, to man defenses along the waterfront. The threat which had so galvanized the Unclean was coming from the water, and it took little deduction to identify it with the strange mass of sealed-off minds that he had just been searching out. What on earth could all this mean?

He managed to isolate one mind at length, that of a man, a thoroughly nasty man at that, who seemed to be some kind of under-officer of the town garrison. The man was directing a group of underlings who were putting up barricades of logs and sandbags on a street near the water's edge, and they were working frantically. From the fellow's brain, the Metz picked up the image of a great fleet, as many as thirty ships, coming from the North. Further, he learned that the Unclean wizards had not been able either to detect or to penetrate in any way the minds of the people on board those ships. This fact had become generally known pretty quickly, and the ordinary soldiers didn't like it one bit! They were used to having things all their own way, casually killing anyone who disagreed, protected by their Dark Masters' corrupted science and weapons, both mental and physical. Something had gone wrong, and the Unclean Lords had let the fact that they were taken by surprise become public knowledge a little too fast. Hiero probed further, his excitement growing as he did so.

The man whose skull he was ransacking had not lost all confidence, despite his evident worry. Two of the secret ships were coming. The strange fleet would see what would happen then, when the lightning guns began to speak.

Sitting back and closing his mind to all externals, Hiero made his head stop aching with the effort he had been using and simply tried to reason out what he and the others should be doing next. It was not easy. Yet with all this excitement and the attack coming from those who must somehow be his friends, a better opportunity to escape to the North might never reoccur. If his group could not get to the strange fleet, they might at least be able to steal a decent boat and flee during the confusion of battle. It had to be risked.

Quickly he informed the others of what was taking place ahead of them. *We have to get into the town, near the great water somehow, while they are all concentrating on the sea. They must have had a bad scare, because I'm sure that they have pulled out all the landward patrols and guards to reinforce the town defenses. They may have left some small body of troops on this side, but there can't be many of them. Kill if you have to — quietly. Don't hurt shes or young; stun them or silence them only.*

They now moved off at a much faster pace, with Hiero leading on one side of the trail, while B'uorgh took the point on the other.

As they passed along like shadows, in and out of the tree gloom and through the patches of mottled sunlight, Hiero concentrated on the road immediately ahead. He wanted no encounters with anyone and he was desperately afraid of running into someone or something protected by one of the Unclean mind shields, the locket of bluish metal he remembered from the past. At his strongest, when he had possessed the power of mental compulsion and even the ability to kill with his mind alone, he had not been able to penetrate one of these mechanisms; he was sure he could not do so now. At the same time, in the back of his mind some half-remembered thing, also from the past, was stirring. He had forgotten something, and it was something he needed right now, this instant. What the devil was it? He shrugged mentally. It would not come, whatever it was, and he would have to wait until it surfaced of its own accord.

They loped along for a mile or so. Then B'uorgh suddenly raised one long, spotted arm and signaled a halt. The catman turned and sped across the trail and took Hiero urgently by the arm, at the same time holding his other hand to a furry ear. They all stopped, and Hiero listened for the sound that the catman's better hearing had detected. Presently he caught it also, a distant surge and roar, with an occasional higher, more piercing note at intervals. It was the sound of a battle, or he had never heard one. Occasionally there came a heavy crash through the other noises, as if a building or a great tree had fallen. All animal sounds around them seemed hushed now, as if the forest were stilling itself in fright at the unaccustomed uproar in the distance.

Hiero signaled for more speed, and they began this time really to run, though still avoiding the trail's center. It was a risk, but, Hiero thought, not much of one. All mental activity was enmeshed in the swirl of combat ahead of them, and he could pick up individuals more clearly with every step. The thoughts of frightened women and children were coming through now, as well as those of men who were not fighting and who were baffled by what was happening. The Unclean Masters of Neeyana had stayed pretty well hidden in the past, and the sudden surge of fighting men and Leemutes had come as a shock to a lot of traders and townsfolk who had never known—or preferred not to investigate—who actually ran the whole place. Now these neutrals or noncombatants were panicking, terrified by the fighting and running about trying to get out of the danger zone.

As they drew nearer and nearer, Hiero could pick out with his ears the screams of the unfortunate population whose world had suddenly been overturned. What he could not pick out were any thoughts of the Unclean Masters of Neeyana. He knew the reason was that they were shielded by their mechanisms. Any hope of learning anything from them of what went on was useless. He tried again to reach the

attacking forces, whoever they were, but they too remained shrouded by their large, protective shield. He could feel the weight of them out there, but that was all.

Trying to keep watch on his own immediate way was growing wearisome, and he could not scan everything continually without exhausting himself. The physical drain of constant mental search was a very real one.

The roar of battle was now loud in the ears of his group. As the forest drew to an end in front of them, they began to smell smoke, acrid and greasy. Veils of it were sifting through the last trees, and it grew constantly thicker, cutting off much of the sunlight and making the catfolk choke and sneeze. They were skulking and running through brush now, with Hiero in the lead, his sword in hand, his spear and shield slung on his back. Killing would be close work, but he hoped to escape without fighting at all. Through the shouts and yells ahead of them came the roaring of fire and another noise, the echo-crashing sounds he had caught earlier. At times these were regular, but at others seemed to be spaced irregularly. Mixed with the burning wood smoke was another unfamiliar smell, sharp and bitter, a reek of something he had never scented before.

Almost before they knew it, they were in the town itself. One moment found them in a sea of low bush, and the next they were in a narrow lane between rows of shabby huts, half-blanketed in the heavy smoke. The smell of filth and ordure was strong enough to contest with the burning wood.

B'uorgh hissed, and they all tensed as several shapes loomed out of the murk ahead. At the same time, a gust of wind, driven down the alley from the sea, revealed the two parties to each other.

Two of the great Man-rats, hung with weapons and carrying sacks filled with either loot or supplies, stood blinking in amazement at the blade of the man and the four scowling masks of the first Children of the Wind they had ever seen—or ever would see. Before the great ears could twitch or the greasy paws even loosen their hold on whatever they carried, they were dead, throats cut and naked-tailed bodies jerking on the grass in death agony. The incredible speed of his allies once again left Hiero gasping. Za'reekh and Ch'uirsh had moved so fast that they were back on guard, daggers ready for a fresh assault, even as the two loathsome were still falling to earth!

Kill anyone armed, Hiero sent. We must get on and try to find a place from which we can see. Look for something tall. There will be no trees, but these folks build tall huts, many times our height. There are too many minds here and too much excitement for me to listen with my own. We must use our eyes and ears instead.

He was trying to remember what Gimp and Brother Aldo had told him long ago about Neeyana. Luchare, too, had been there, on her way to be sold as a slave. What had they told him? It was a very old town, so old that it might even have existed in some form before The Death. The Unclean were everywhere in the town, but usually hidden. And there were some old churches, decayed-looking, with no priests about. These were stone-built and had towers. Such towers would probably have an Unclean garrison, if only for purposes of observation. Still, something had to be tried. Everything was a risk in this smoky maze full of foul odors and the panic of the inhabitants.

Even as he weighed various chances, another of those explosive crashes came from ahead of him. Something heavy fell to the ground, making it shake beneath his feet. Farther off, he heard other booming noises. What could they be? He had to find some place from which he could see. He glanced at the catfolk. They stood silently behind him, then ears laid back and their neck ruffs bristling. It must, he mused remotely, be terrifying to be brought from the clean forest air into this stench and murk, filled with horrid sounds and unknown dangers. But they were not flinching and were ready to fight. He found the

trust heartening, though he wished, not for the first time, that he did not have the responsibility for them on his shoul-

Slowly and carefully, they began to grope their way through the dirty clouds of smoke, testing each comer before they crossed it, straining every sense to locate any possible foe before they themselves were discovered. A particularly heavy wave of black fog engulfed them all, and Hiero signaled, though he was increasingly nervous of using telepathy. *Link hands with me and stay close. B'uorgh, you bring up the rear. Kill any not of us.*

The flat command made him regretful, but he could take no chances in this foul dark. The enemy had held Neeyana for too long, and their only hope was to remain unseen and unsuspected. He felt his way along a wooden fence of palings, now shutting out the multifarious cries, both in his mind and in his ears, trying only to locate some more substantial structure. He could feel the trembling of the hand, a delicate one, clasping his, and he tried to send strength down his arm to the Speaker-to-be. M'reen had never anticipated all of this, or indeed any of it.

He halted in one moment as his left hand, outstretched, encountered something new. He was touching smooth, greasy stone, worn and slippery in a way that only age can create. He paused and he knew the others down the line were also halting, feeling his excitement and the hesitation.

None of the yells and cries were nearby, though the overall noise was a constant. The hot blanket of fumes and dirty vapor covered him and his friends, but what else might it cover? He tried to guess the hour and decided that it must be around mid-afternoon. How much time did that leave them and what were they to do with it? He shook involuntarily as one of the explosions shattered something he guessed was only a few streets away. The series of reverberations that had more or less gone on continuously while they advanced seemed to be dying off. The next one he heard was much farther off, probably in the direction of the waterfront.

He hand-signaled for a slow advance and, with the smoke stinging his half-opened eyes, felt his way farther along the stonework he had touched a minute back. For perhaps twenty feet, the wall remained unbroken and featureless as high up as he could reach, save for minute gaps in the aged mortar. The large stones held by this cement seemed irregular and not cut or beveled in any way.

A new wave of smoke blew down on them, and he choked and gagged, still creeping along the wall. Then he paused. He was tracing with his hand the edge of a massive doorpost, of heavy and polished wood. He stooped and made sure. It was not a window, but an open door. Blinking in the dirty haze, he listened both with his ears and with his mind.

IX

Winds of Change, Winds of Chance

There was no one nearby, unless shielded by a mental block or guard of some sort, as Hiero could tell with ease. He and the others were now in the lower room of some high building, almost certainly one of the abandoned churches that Luchare had described. There were minds, alien and inimical, below and above them, in the vaults and what must be the tower. But there did not seem to be more than three or four in either place. Making up his mind, the man began to feel his way through the gloom and smoke to where a faint gleam of light showed the beginning of a narrow stair. Behind him came the others, quivering with excitement.

I have to see, he sent. B'uorgh, you stand guard at the bottom of this tower. If one or two come, slay them. If more, send a warning and follow us up. He knew the big chief would probably resent being left, but would also have enough discipline to understand why the best warrior ought to stay as a rear guard.

With the others in his wake, sword at point, he began to climb the narrow steps, which wound upward in a tight spiral. The steps were cracked and greasy, as well as being worn with great age. The smoke was drawn up past their heads, and they had to fight to keep from coughing at each cautious step. They passed the first Sanding in silence and went on. Hiero could detect no sign of life on that floor, though a battered door yawned open. It grew lighter as they climbed, and the smoke thinned. Another apparently vacant floor was passed in silence, and Hiero sent a hand signal along to get ready. The roof lay ahead, and daylight was visible through the last door. At his nod, they burst out onto the platform of the ancient spire, perhaps once the bell tower of the long-abandoned church. Now, however, it was a watchtower, and whatever the occupants had expected, it was not this sudden onslaught from the depths of the building.

There were four beings on the small square of the turret, and all had been gazing north to the waters of the Inland Sea, visible even through the smoke and haze which enveloped the lower parts of the town. The two Man-rats and one of the humans died, their throats cut before they could take in the fact that they were attacked. The fourth human fell limp as the iron edge of Hiero's left hand chopped at his neck below the base of his metal helmet. In seconds, the place was taken. Telling the two young males to watch the stunned man, Hiero strode to the wooden rail of the tower, which surmounted the ancient stones of an even older wall, and peered eagerly out. Below and before him lay an amazing sight.

He already knew that large portions of Neeyana were on fire, the aged wooden structures which made up the larger part of the town having the quality of tinder. The fires raged, whole blocks and streets spurting flame where wooden sidewalks passed the fire from house to house. Here and there, stone structures, probably older by far, resisted the heat and thrust up through the smoke. The wind was constantly shifting from east to west and back again, a light wind, but fluky and varying in force.

Down the narrow streets ran companies of Unclean troops, battling to reach the waterfront and being forced back by barriers of fire and by mobs of the civil populace, who seemed to have given in to complete panic and were struggling to get away in the opposite direction, to the south. There had obviously never been any plans for the defense of the place from a serious attack. The conceit of the Unclean Masters had not envisaged any such happening. Now they were having to improvise, with the usual results of such attempts. Appalled, the Metz saw a pack of Hairy Howlers hew their way with swords through a band of ragged humans who disputed a path with them, sending the bloodied survivors shrieking in renewed terror off into side streets and alleys. The cries and screams were nightmarish from all over the city.

It was toward the Inland Sea that Hiero's attention turned, the rest being observed only in passing. The entire waterfront was under attack, and most of the ancient warehouses and crumbling docks were on fire, with only a wall of stone or some ruined jetty of the same material resisting the heat. But it was the water and what was on it that fascinated the man.

Five rectangular shapes lay out off the town, clearly visible through the veils of smoke. From their sloping sides belched fire at intervals as ports opened and closed. They had no sails, but carried squat twin funnels and one short mast at the stern. It was these masts and what flew upon them that brought Hiero's heart into his mouth. Out there, green upon white background, waved the Sword and the Cross of the Abbeys! The Metz Republic was at long last taking the war to the enemy!

His mind racing, Hiero noted the many anchored sailing vessels out beyond the five strange warships. This was no mere raid; this was an invasion fleet. He spared hardly a thought for the black muzzles whose projectiles were exploding in the town. There had to be a source of the continual crashing that he had heard in the last half hour. How the weapons operated was of small concern to him. They seemed larger variants of his long-lost thrower, the hand-carried rocket propeller which S'duna had taken from him in the North.

Vainly, his hands clenched against the railing, he tried to contact someone out in the fleet. It was useless. A powerfully held mind shield, as good as anything the Unclean had ever managed, kept all the ships under a mass shroud, one that his thoughts simply could not penetrate.

And he had knowledge that they needed out there, he knew something vital, concerning which they ought to be warned! He beat upon the railing in his despair.

A furry hand timidly touched his shoulder and brought him back with a rush to the personal situation. It was M'reen. *B'uorgh has come from his post. He says that many of the evil ones have come up from down below, under the earth, and then gone away outside. They did not see him. Unless more come now, we are alone in this place.* Behind her, the tall shape of the chief loomed through the thinning smoke.

Almost absently, Hiero noted that the wind was rising and also backing, blowing with increasing strength from the south, from the forest and out to sea. What to do now?

He looked out at the attacking fleet again. From the mind talk he had caught the day before, he knew that there were at least two of the Unclean warships in the neighborhood, the metal-hulled craft driven by what he felt certain was the fury of the atom. And they had on their decks the dreaded gun which fired electric bolts, the weapon he called the lightning gun. If they appeared, could the Abbey fleet withstand them? The new ships, formidable though they were, appeared clumsy, like waddling turtles. He noticed that they were anchored in a line, bow to stern, and he shrewdly guessed that, although there was almost no sea running, they needed all the stability they could get in order to fire with any accuracy.

He turned and looked down at the prisoner, who was now squatting and rubbing his neck while he stared with frightened eyes at Hiero and the People of the Wind. He was a nasty-looking specimen, but he wore good clothes, and his boots and helmet were excellent in fit. Also, he was clean in his person. Around his neck hung a metal replica of the yellow spiral the Unclean Lords bore on their robes. He was an officer, then, and one of some rank in the enemy hierarchy. Hiero probed the man's mind and, not to his surprise, met blankness, an impenetrable barrier.

Strip him! hesent on the mind wave of the catblk. In a moment, the keen claws had left the man's body bare to the waist. The sealed locket on the bluish metal chain contained the mechanical mind shield the Unclean used to protect their servants and allies. In another second, Hiero had whipped it off and thrown the device over the parapet. Now he addressed the man aloud, using *batwah*, the almost universal trade language.

"Speak the truth and only the truth and you may yet live. Lie, and I give you to my friends here." He saw the shudder as the other took in' the avid, yellow eyes. "Where are the secret ships? How many of them are there? What strength of troops is in the town? Are there more on the way and how many? Where are your Masters and how many of them are here?" As he fired the rapid questions, hardly waiting for the answers, he listened to the now unguarded brain as well, a technique in which he had grown so practiced that his ease, compared with that of the previous year, was automatic. He could not *compel* his prisoner to do anything; that power was gone. But he could sense his thoughts.

The man was not a coward and he was indeed of some rank, the equivalent of a Metz regimental commander. His name was Ablom Gord, and he knew a great deal, all of it interesting. He tried to lie, but it made no difference to Hiero, though the Metz masked his face and never indicated when what his ears heard was not the truth.

It seemed that no more than two of the deadly gun ships were anywhere nearby, but those two had been summoned and were close at hand. The garrison of the town still was holding but might crack if and when the invasion took place and the Abbey warships were not successfully challenged. No lightning guns were in the town itself, only on the ships. The Unclean forces were rallying in great strength, having been summoned from far and wide; they were not mustering at Neeyana, but rather at a secret base many leagues to the east. More forces were coalescing in the north on the far side of the Inland Sea, and a mighty assault had been planned. But this sudden attack on Neeyana had been totally unexpected. No help could be summoned in time unless the ships with the lightning guns could alter the balance of forces.

Hiero stared coldly at the officer when he had learned all he thought useful. "You have lied to each question," he said finally. "You were warned." His signal to B'uorgh was sent so swiftly that the knife was in the man's throat before the mind could realize a death sentence had been passed. Hiero dismissed the matter. He had read enough in the fellow's past to sentence him to death a dozen times over, murder of helpless women being only one of the charges.

He stepped over the twitching body, realizing with distaste that his sandals were slippery with blood, and once more stared out at the Abbey war fleet, still engaged in softening up the waterfront with methodical, well-aimed fire. Behind him, the wind rose in increasing strength, ruffling his hair as it blew—steadily now and, aside from small gusts, always to the north, to the sea. The wind, he thought idly, now why was the wind on his mind? The enemy was undoubtedly coming fast; their grim, speedy ships, driven by silent motors in the sleek metal hulls, must even now be close upon the town.

Why on earth was the wind so much in the foreground of his thoughts? Then his thoughts clarified. *That* was the answer!

He wheeled and began to rap out orders, punctuating them with an occasional question. In no more than a minute, so rapid was the mental interchange on the catfolk's mental band, the decision was made and the little party was groping its way down the stairs.

The lower part of the building still seemed silent and deserted. Smoke fumes swirled in through the ancient door. The shrieks and cries, the crackle of flames, and the roar of the bombs and shells outside, all came from a distance. The impetus of the attack, Hiero thought, seemed to have shifted a bit and was coming more from the west, as if the Metz fleet had moved in that direction. So much the better for his purpose.

As silently as so many ghosts, the five departed from the old building and darted off down the narrow street, all senses tensed to the uttermost. Hiero led, along with B'uorgh, for his human abilities were more needed here in this human-built maze than the more finely attuned nerves of his allies. Soon they came to a small square and shrank back against reeking walls as a mob of shouting people crossed in front of them. Its members seemed to be some of the bewildered and terrified human populace, running with no clear aim in view, and soon disappeared in the smoke off to the east. Hiero signaled, and the five ran swiftly across the square and vanished into the gloom of a smoldering building on the far side. They were heading, insofar as the man could tell, on a slight downward slant. If his judgment, backed by a view from the tower, was at all accurate, they would strike the water in a fairly short time. Once a running figure, shapeless in the murk, loomed up in front of them; but one sight of the five grim shapes, their size

magnified by the poor light, was enough to send the runner shrieking away down a side alley.

We must be even more careful now, the Metz sent. *The main body of their troops will be down here near the water. We have to get through them and find a boat.*

M'reen answered. *The water is not far. I can smell it. Even through this dirty air and smoke, it smells clean.*

Suddenly, more quickly than the man had thought possible, they were there. They had been slinking down a narrow runway, lined with cracked brick underfoot, when it came abruptly to an end. Before them lay a tangle of ancient piers, some half-rotted and leaning drunkenly in the mud of the shore's edge, while others burned sluggishly, ignited either by the shells of the strange fleet or by chance-caught sparks. The wind still blew from behind the group's backs, and the wreaths of smoke wafted straight out before them to the open sea beyond.

Hiero scanned the scene, his eyes intent for one purpose. There were no Unclean about, at least not near. He could sense them on either side in strength, but none were close. He knew that if the catfolk had seen or sensed why, he would be told at once. He listened intently, but the gunfire was still off to the left, down toward the west. Here where he stood, due to some trick of acoustics, it was even quite quiet, and he could actually hear the lapping of tiny waves on the muddy foreshore at the foot of the street.

Then his roving gaze fixed on a small, pointed shape, half-hidden under one of the crumbling docks, moving gently to the action of the water. It was this slight movement that had caught his eye. He stared harder and again checked the immediate neighborhood for other movement. He could see nothing, yet instinct now began to warn him. There was another presence somewhere near, something watching!

It made no difference, he told himself. Time was too important for these vague fears. The decision had to be taken.

Wait here and keep watch on all sides, he sent. *If that thing out under the wood, that thing which sits on the water, is what we need, I will signal.* Without waiting for assent, he darted out into the open and sped across and down to the mud and the lapping, oily tide. In a second, he was over the side of the small boat and staring at its sole occupant—doubtless some local fisherman.

The man must have been trying to flee, for there were both oars and a net in the skiff. He was unarmed save for a belt knife and was clad only in a leather vest and a loincloth. Either in the act of fleeing or earlier, he had been shot, and the vanes of a crossbow quarrel thrust up from the center of his back. The oars were still bundled, and it looked to Hiero as if he had been carrying them to the boat when he had suddenly taken leave of life, one more unnumbered casualty of the war.

The Metz breathed a quick prayer, in case the man should have been honest and not one of the Unclean, then tipped the body over the side into the shallows. He turned and waved once, a beckoning gesture, then seated himself on the central thwart and began to cut the leather painter which held the boat to a cleat on one of the crumbling pilings. Seconds later, the other four were wading alongside and clambering aboard, to huddle excitedly on the bottom. In another instant, Hiero had the oars between the crude rowlocks and was easing the little craft out under the pilings toward the open sea.

Behind him, eyes glared in impotent rage from the narrow slit of a window set high on a ruined wall. A white hand fumbled with a neck chain of bluish metal; then, a decision taken, it dropped again. A hooded shape whirled and departed in haste on an urgent errand.

The little boat was about three times Hiero's length, high of prow and with a pointed stern. She rode the water sweetly as the Metz pulled hard away from the shore. The People of the Wind, nervous and yet stoic, crouched silently, two in the bow and two in front of the man and aft. All four were trembling with excitement and the newness of the experience, but they would have died rather than admit it. As the waves increased in strength, they simply laid back their ears and waited for whatever their new friend had to tell them.

Hiero was constantly checking the wind while calculating the course. His scheme was so filled with holes that he could only hope that it had a bare chance of succeeding. If only the wind would keep blowing from the south! Meanwhile, he watched over his shoulder for what the thinning smoke and reek of the burning town would reveal.

Ah! Sure enough, there was the Metz fleet! The five warships, looking more than ever like turtles or even the roofs of barns come adrift, were slowly steaming back to the east in his direction, firing as steadily as ever. If the offshore breeze obscured their targets, they gave no sign of it. Gaps in the smoke probably afforded them all the aiming points they needed. Farther out, the armada of sailing craft still moved sluggishly under light sail, waiting for a signal to close in. The offshore breeze held steady over the brown water.

Hiero rested on his oars and stared as hard as he could to the east, using his mind at its utmost, as well as his eyes. Was there something there? On the edge of his mind, that something came, then went, then came again and steadied. It was like a cloud, a moving shroud in his mind. He could detect no thoughts, nor did he need to do so. Once before, on the far side of the Inland Sea, he had felt this sensation. Ships were coming from the east, faster than anything driven by either sail or the engines of the new vessels of his country. The secret ships of the enemy were coming to the rescue of Neeyana, summoned by the devices of the Masters of the Unclean. The lightning guns were going to be opposed to the crude armor of the Metz warships.

Hiero had no hope in his own mind as to which would be the victor. The Metz ships were powerful and had taken Neeyana by surprise. But he did not for one moment think his people could stand up against the forces of the Unclean ships. That Abbot Demero and the Abbey Council were the source of the new war fleet, he never doubted. But he felt that, in the short time the Abbeyes had had at their disposal, they could hardly have matched the strength and speed of the Unclean warships. Wonderful as it was to see a Metz battle squadron, those crude floating forts would be horribly outclassed by what was speeding from the east!

M'reen, he sent in haste, get ready with your preparations. Hurry! The enemy comes! We must all lie down so that this craft appears empty. If our foes see nothing but a drifting skiff, they may pass before us to attack our friends.

It was B'uorgh who answered. *She is working. And I can see our enemy. How fast they come!*

Hiero could see them now himself, two dots rushing at tremendous speed from down the coast to the east, growing larger by the minute. He almost wrung his hands. If only he could break the mental shield of his friends and tell them what was going on! He ducked below the gunwale with the others and tried to free his mind from worry. At the same time, he felt a sudden wave of fear come over him and secretly rejoiced. For M'reen's bag of hide was open and her hands were stirring, mixing, and blending. The fear was coming *back* from her, ignored by the cat people but acting on his human body chemistry! The Wind of Death was churning and drifting out over the open sea to their front. The veils of smoke from the burning port had something far more lethal than a throat irritant mixed in with their dark shroud.

Hiero stole a look to the west, then ducked back hastily. So far all was well. The Abbey fleet had formed a line well down the coast and was preparing to receive the Unclean forces. The ships were no longer firing at the town, and the sailing vessels had moved even farther down in order to take shelter behind them.

They come, B'uorgh sent. Now we will see.

Hiero shut his eyes and began to pray. He had done all he could, and only God could help now. Perhaps the Unclean wizards had learned long in the past how to nullify this awful weapon, back in the days when the catfolk had broken free and fled from their bondage of torture and enslavement.

As he prayed silently, he heard the sound he had been waiting for and dreading, the hissing crackle of the enemy weapon which had once struck him down—the lightning gun! Was it aimed at their little vessel? One blast could incinerate them in seconds. He could no longer restrain himself and peered over the side of the boat. So did the others, and all five beings watched the panorama of a sea battle in silent awe.

The Unclean ships, sharp-prowed and slender, had no tactics for pitched battle on anything like an equal basis. They had never had to learn any, since their mysterious craft so far outclassed any possible foe. As a result, they simply charged at the Metz fleet, bows on, the weapons on their foredecks firing as fast as they could. The two ships were quite close to each other, as if racing to be first for what they thought was the inevitable kill. They apparently never even noticed the drifting boat which floated on the oily sea a quarter of a mile to their south and well out of their path. And they were scoring hits. As the Metz priest had feared, the strange weapon on their bows, which somehow fired sheets of static electricity, outranged the crude cannon of the Metz fleet. Already one of the clumsy vessels was smoking from a great rent in its sloping hull, although it held its line along with the other four. None of the Abbey ships were firing now, and Hiero knew they were holding back until their outranged weapons could bear. He prayed again for the miracle he had tried so hard to conjure up, his eyes smarting both from the smoke and with unshed tears for the discipline that held his countrymen in their silent line.

And, as miracles sometimes do, especially when backed by courage and forethought, it happened.

The two slender Unclean war craft were well past the drifting boat, still pointing at the enemy fleet, when they seemed to go mad. Hiero suddenly saw one of them yaw wildly and head at full speed for its consort's unprotected flank. At the same time, the crackle of the lightning guns ceased abruptly, and the group in the boat could hear a screaming outcry come over the now silent waters. Black dots, which spilled and sprang from the metal hulls like demented fleas, showed where the crews of the stricken ships fled in sheer madness from their hitherto unconquered craft. And then came the final act. With no one—or perhaps a fright-driven lunatic—at the helm, the ship nearest the shore drove at full speed into the side of her racing neighbor, the sharp prow cutting like a gigantic plow, two-thirds of the way back from the peak.

There was first a small puff of smoke as the locked hulls drifted to a halt, then a blaze of white light which made the five cover their eyes. The roar of a tremendous explosion followed the light, and all ducked once more under the shelter of the gunwale. A whistling noise in the overcast air made them try to flatten themselves on the bottom even further. As they crouched in terror, splashes of water all around them sent a spray over their flinching bodies.

Fighting his panic, Hiero looked up and was in time to see the wave coming. He sprang to the central thwart and, in one motion, shipped the oars and turned the boat bows on to the wail of water sweeping down upon them. They rose high on the crest and rushed deep into the valley beyond, but the Metz had

acted in the bare nick of time, and hardly a drop of water was taken in. The second and third waves were far smaller, and he had no trouble meeting them. Only then did he once more rest on his oars and wave the cat people up so that all could see the results of their work.

Where the Unclean ships had met in their final and horrific tangle, now a vast and greasy circle lay on the water, widening as the south wind sent the gentle waves to spread it yet farther out. Bits of wood and rubbish floated here and there, none of them large. Of life, there was no sign whatever. The grim vessels, which for so long had haunted the south shore of the Inland Sea, were totally gone. With them went their adept commanders of the Dark Brotherhood, their crews of ghastly mutants, and the human scum which served on them..

In the bow of Hiero's fishing boat, M'reen sat smiling, her leather bag on her lap, her furry ears cocked, and a broad and sharp-toothed smile on her expressive face. The Wind of Death had triumphed over the enemies of her race in a total victory, one on a scale of which she and her folk had never conceived. There would be songs around the hearth fires of her clan for countless generations over this! A keening purr of triumph rose from four lipless mouths, a wild rhythm of exaltation, as the freest of the free rejoiced at the death of their sometime masters.

Hiero smiled as he watched the swelling throat muscles and the blazing eyes. He would have liked to join in, had his vocal chords been capable of so doing. He had already remembered to give thanks to his Deity in his own way, silently, but no less heartfelt. He had no illusions about their luck. They had been lucky indeed! The timing, the weapon, and the wind had all been just exactly right. One could not count on such things forever, or even more than once. And there was still a lot to be done. This was only the first skirmish of what promised to be a terrible war, one extending far into the future and over many thousands of leagues.

Reluctantly, he called the catfolk back from their paean of joy and brutally brought them to the present.

Friends, he sent, the war is over. We have much to do, and first we must meet my other comrades. This is what I have come so many weary paces out of the South to do. He pointed with one bronzed hand at the Metz fleet, which was milling in some disorder, shaken by the totally unexpected end to the battle. Sit quietly now, and I will row us out there. And pray to your wind gods my o wn folk don't turn their thunder weapons on us before I can tell them who we are!

Actually, it was not that hard, The Metz warships were steaming slowly east once more, and an alert lookout spotted the little craft rowing toward them almost at once. The lead vessel slowed as Hiero and his party approached, the smoke from its twin stacks dying down as it did so. From a wheelhouse set forward, a group of figures emerged to gaze down at them. Noticing that several of the round muzzles set in the slanting hull were also pointing downward in their direction, Hiero shipped his oars and stood up, arms over his head. Then he lowered them and slowly began to cross himself with his right hand, moving it over his broad chest so that all could see his action clearly.

There was a moment of silence as he stood there and the fishing boat drifted closer. Then, over the narrowing gap, came a bull's bellow of a voice. "Look at that sword! Look at that dirty face! Look at that dung-eating grin! I told everyone they couldn't hang the worst priest and the most useless bum in the Metz Republic! He's alive!"

Hiero laughed with relief. "What are you doing on that hulk, you big moron? I didn't know they let you near water. You never bathed in your life and you're not smart enough to learn to swim!"

The big man smiled down at him with a weary benevolence. Per Edard Maluin was a head taller than

Hiero and twice his weight. He had the thews of a bull morse and the chubby face of an innocent child, vastly enlarged. He was a veteran of the Frontier Guards, a murderous killer at need, and one of Hiero's best friends, having roomed with him in the Abbey Academy when they were only in their teens.

"Who are your friends, Shorty? And are you lucky! Did you see what we just dealt with? This ship, which I command, please note, and the others?"

Hiero took one oar and sculled over to the hull of the big vessel. Then he looked up, his face incredulous, at the small group above.

"*You* dealt with? You'd be so much garbage at the bottom of the sea, my friend, if it weren't for me and these four chums of mine. What do you think made the Unclean go crazy, then ram each other? The distant sight of your ugly face?"

Per Edard's eyes narrowed. Behind his broad forehead lurked a very good mind, and he was suddenly thinking hard. "So that was you, was it? I might have known. You always were the king of the dirty tricks league. And thank God for it! Now listen, come aboard quickly. We have a war to finish and we have to clean out that rats' nest. We have new mind shields and they're being held tight, so I can't talk to your pals. Come up on the bridge with me, and we'll get back to work."

In an instant, the five had leaped aboard, abandoning the little boat, and passed through a narrow entry port on the side of the sloping hull. Moments later, they stood, while Per Edard rapped out orders, peering through narrow slits at the smoke-covered town they had just left. And moments after that, the roar of the big cannon below and the trembling of the ship in response made them all wince in reaction. Between commands to the helmsmen, the gunners below, his signalmen, and many others, Per Edard threw questions and snatches of talk over his huge shoulders. He wore the leather breeches and shirt of the Frontier Guards, but on his head was a leather band with a short visor in front. Above the visor was an insignie the Metz had never seen before, picked out in silver. Looking closely, Hiero saw that it was a square-sailed ship, shown head-on, as if coming at the viewer, and that behind it again, as a background, was a slanted anchor with a twist of rope around it.

"Oh, that? We all wear them. Demero found it in some old book as usual. Lot of nonsense, I suppose, but the men like it. The admiral is Colonel Berain from over on the Beesee coast. His is *gold*, if you please. Lower ranks wear it in copper. I'll try to get you one in lead. We're a *navy* now, Hiero." He rambled on while all of them watched the shells burst in the distant town. No answering fire of any kind was coming out.

"We had a hell of a time getting enough metal for the guns. It's a bronze alloy from some old city, I guess. No, the hull's not metal, just wood. But it's got thin plates of some ceramic fitted over it. Damned good protection against most things, though not those bloody electrics. I must admit, I think you saved our necks there, my boy.

"The ships? Steer small, you copper-plated numbskulls! Think this is a canoe? How can they aim below with you barging around that way? Oh, yes, the ships. Well, Demero started moving seamen from the Beesee area over to a lake northwest of Namcush. A fair-sized lake, and the Dam People helped dredge a big outlet. They're working with us now, you know. Lot been happening since you went off" gypsying down south." He aimed an affectionate cuff at Hiero's head, which would have stunned him if it had landed, then went back to bellowing at the men who manned the twin steering wheels. In a moment he was talking to Hiero again.

"None of this stuff is new. God alone knows where the knowledge got dredged up from, but it was

pretty complete. All we had to do was ask a question and the answers came quickly. The Abbey files, I suppose. They gave us everything. How to build the damned things, how to build the engines. They call them 'high-compression steam engines,' and we blew up a couple before we got the hang of it. No one got killed, though. The old ships, the ones we copied, were built the same way, but with iron sheathing. We had no way of getting all that iron, at least not fast. But we got the formula for this ceramic, like a pottery dish but twenty times as hard, and it works fine. Now that I think of it, I'm kind of glad we didn't have the iron. That lousy electric thing on those Unclean ships would have fried us all, maybe.

"Anyway, we got five of them built, the Dam People opened their sluices, and down the river to Namcush we came, early one morning, let's see, about three weeks ago. We towed two regiments in barges along behind and we had that town in one half hour. Not one ship got away. Not too many of the Unclean were there, but a lot of crooked traders, frontier scum, and some just plain pirates. We threw everyone into a prison and interrogated the hell out of all of them. We hanged the pirates and locked up all the ships of the others. No way the Unclean were going to get warned. Then we began to move down the coast to this place. We couldn't tow all those sailing ships, so we had to move fairly slowly for the others to keep up. And here we are. What's that, son?"

A teen-aged boy had appeared from aft and stood at the salute.

"Signal from the admiral, sir. Move slowly in toward the town and conform to his movements. He is going to pass the troops through our line and start them landing while we give any cover needed."

"Right. Cease fire and wait for commands below there." He straightened from the voice tube and for the first time stared hard at the Children of the Wind. "Your friends are going to have front-row seats, old buddy. One big tough, two young toughs, and a real cutie. Now, where did you find them? Never saw or heard of anything remotely like them, and I know more than most about Leemutes—sorry, aliens."

His admiration as his twinkling black eyes roved over M'reen's supple shape was so obvious that it transcended the barrier of species. The young priestess bridled.

"Down, boy," Hiero said. "The young lady you are leering at was solely in charge and responsible for ruining those two loads of Unclean, who otherwise would have happily blown your little toy boat here completely out of existence. Shall I turn her loose on you instead?"

Per Edard's eyes widened at this astounding comment, but he knew Hiero too well to doubt a word of it. Instead, he bowed and addressed the four catfolk formally.

"I am honored to meet such brave warriors, the friends of my old companion. Please accept the thanks of all of us for your destruction of our mutual foes. You will receive more formal thanks later from our chiefs and wise ones. In the meantime, you are our honored guests and allies. Anything that we can do for you will be done at once. You have only to ask."

Hiero translated and waited to see who would answer. It was B'uorgh, which made sense. The big war chief was the senior, despite M'reen's rank in the Pride structure.

We thank you in turn. We have come far to help our friend Hiero and his people. We wish to be led to battle against those you call the Unclean. Our name for them is worse. May we soon talk to you with our minds in true friendship. Meanwhile, is there any way we can breathe clean air? These stinks from that town and this floating thing are choking us. We ask only if this is possible. If not, we can endure. We will eat and drink when you do, go where you go, fight when you fight, and, if necessary, die when you die.

As he translated the answer, Hiero could see that Edard was impressed in spite of himself.

"Please tell them, Hiero, that I'll get them on one of the outer picket ships as soon as I can. The air should be clean out on the sound, and those are sailing craft, so they won't have the engine-room coal dust and oil to contend with. We have plenty of lignite coal, but even I think it stinks. Eight now I have to cover this landing. Here come the Guards going ashore."

While Hiero spoke again to his friends, they all watched as the Metz Frontier Guards sailed through the armored steamships and cautiously approached the rotting wharves in front of them. There was no talking now; all stood silent, waiting to see if there were any counterattack coming. Hiero tried to reach out: with his mind and learned something new. The mind shield that the Abbeyes were using to guard their war fleet blanketed his own powers as well. He could neither send nor receive on any mental band beyond the limits of the ship! He mentioned this to Per Maluin in a low voice.

"Yeah, that's right. Abbot Demero told me about you, Hiero. I sort of gathered you had become the grand champion of the world at this sort of thing in the last year or so. Well, we have a lot of people trying to do the same trick now ourselves. And, man, are they going to be glad to have you back! But that's by the by. When we got these shields for the fleet, the top people, which means the Council, of course, decided that we might just have one or two nasties in our own ranks. As a result, this thing clamps down on everyone, so no one has a chance to pass any little leaks which might get us killed in an emergency. Get it?"

Hiero nodded, and they returned to watching the disciplined ranks of the Abbey infantry disembark and scatter out through the smoke-laden streets toward the inner part of Neeyana. Aside from distant screams which came dimly to them through the haze and the crackle of fires burning nearby, there was no sound. No evidence of any enemy action, organized or otherwise, was apparent. A second sailing ship, a two-masted coaster like the first, appeared and unloaded troops. Officers, several of whom Hiero recognized, gave quiet orders on the foreshore and then followed their men inland. One ship after another disembarked its human cargo, until Hiero estimated that at least two full regiments, perhaps four thousand men, had gone ashore. He watched, somewhat jealously, as they passed. He had the rank of Major (Reserve) in the Scouts, the elite of all the Abbey forces; hence he found himself wishing—childishly, as he reminded himself—that he were going in with them. Part of this feeling, he knew, was simply the trained reaction of a professional soldier on seeing others going into battle. But he was wise enough to know that there was more to it than that. For more than a year now he had been alone, in the sense that none of his own people had been with him. He had journeyed thousands of leagues and found new friends, a mate, new rank, new everything. But all had been *new*, and what he really was feeling now was simple homesickness. As the bronzed files padded down the narrow gangplanks and vanished into the murk, he simply wanted to be one of them, to be a part of the master unit that he had been trained to serve—the hive, the swarm, the legion, the corps. His feeling was as old as mankind, and he had no way of knowing that a legionary of the Imperial Tenth, stuck at Vindobonum, watching his cohort cross the Danube to take on a swarm of Gothic horse, had felt the same sensation.

However, he was not simply a soldier. He was a priest. He made a silent orison of thanks to God and also silently confessed to pride and ingratitude for the many blessings he had received. He knew that the discontent which had welled up in his soul was unjust and based on pride. He had been blessed in many ways, far more than he deserved, and he admitted that he had less than no right to his feelings. But—oh, how he longed to be with those silent files!

His reverie was interrupted by a stiffening of all those on the bridge. Someone had entered by the rear companionway—in fact, several persons. But the man who came first riveted all eyes. He was not young

and he was almost bald, a rare thing for a Metz. He might have been an old fifty or a young sixty and was clean-shaven. He wore no band and visor, but on his left breast was a badge with the fouled anchor and the sailing ship, only this time in gold. His iron face, seamed with scars, acknowledged Maluin's palm-up salute with a nod. He wore the same simple leather they all did, and a short hanger hung by his side. No one had any doubt that the Man had arrived. He turned quickly to Hiero and answered the salute with his own at once.

"Per Desteen? Congratulations on being here at all. Justus Berain, for my sins, the commander of this squadron. I have heard strange things about you—" He paused. "—and your friends here. Do I understand that the Unclean vermin destroyed themselves through your efforts? Let's have the story."

It took a while. After Hiero had formally introduced the Children of the Wind and all the mutual compliments were over, the admiral began to pick their brains. While he did so, messengers and couriers came and went, interrupting the interrogation at spasmodic intervals.

Hiero listened as they reported and formed his own opinion of what was going on. There seemed, from what he could gather, to be little fighting. The town had emptied itself in a very short time and in what appeared to have been a panic-stricken rout. The Abbey troops were all reporting in with no trouble. A few of the enemy Leemutes had shown fight and had been disposed of in short order. None of the Unclean wizards, the Masters of the Circles, had been glimpsed, but there were many corpses and hundreds of terrified civilians of both sexes. Some looting had been going on but was being put down with a firm hand.

"If I may suggest it, sir," Hiero said, "have the officers interrogate for headquarters locations and also personnel. This was a pretty big base, and they can't have had much time to destroy things. There aren't that many of the real top scum altogether, you know. They had to have lots of clerks and lower staff types. We could learn a lot. But they'll probably be underground, so for God's sake, tell our men to be careful if they go down to look."

Berain looked at him in silence for a moment. He was not used to junior officers who spoke quite so firmly. Hiero hardly noticed. He was the prince of D'alwah, and what he had been through in the last year made him the equal of anyone. Already he had turned away to look at the burning town. Per Maluin noticed and held his breath, waiting for an explosion. But Justus Berain was not the admiral for nothing. A slight smile touched the corners of the iron mouth; that was all.

"Quite right, Per Desteen. Should have thought of it myself. Are you in good enough shape to go ashore? I can give you a squad, and you might have a better idea where to look than most of us."

In minutes it was arranged, and Hiero eagerly led ashore, the four Children of the Wind padding behind him, ten Metz borderers and an NCO in turn following them. Led through the smoke by a young lieutenant, they were at the central square of Neeyana in no time, despite the smoke and confusion all about. Over a hundred prisoners were huddled under guard in the middle of the square. As soon as Hiero had identified himself, he began to look them over, both with his eyes and with his probing mind.

He suddenly pointed to one figure, a tall man who seemed to be trying to shield himself behind some others. *Get that one and strip him. He is trying to hide and he wears one of the metal things around his neck.*

Before the fascinated gaze of the Metz soldiers, the four catfolk fell upon the cringing shape and shredded its leather harness in seconds. One more of the blue-metaled pendants and its chain were handed to Hiero, who crushed the thing underfoot, his gaze fixed on the Unclean officer as he did so. He

spoke in *batwah*.

"Tell me no lies, Master of the Second Level. You have one chance for life and one only. Where is the Central Vault? Where are the records kept? You have only a second between yourself and eternity."

The Unclean officer might have fought in open combat. He was evil but not a complete craven. But being suddenly assaulted by the awful catfolk, being stripped, and having his disguise and his shield removed in public—all this was too much. With a sob, he prostrated himself at the feet of Hiero.

"Mercy!" He embraced Hiero's sandals until the priest spumed him away.

"You shall have life as long as not one lie crosses your dirty lips. Answer my questions."

It was better than might have been hoped. Though no adept, the wretched man had been third in command of the city's military force and he knew much. With a rope around his neck, he led the squad, Hiero, and the catfolk to a small door, sunk in the side of a nearby stone tower. They had to force the lock. Then, as Hiero had expected, they found themselves at the top of a winding stair. Worn and slippery steps led down into darkness.

The party waited for a moment while torches were procured, and then, with the prisoner in the lead, they began to file downward, weapons held at the ready. Down wound the stairs and down. There were landings, but no doors issued off them. Down, until Hiero knew they were far below ground level. Now bluish fluors appeared, and they crushed out the smoking torches. They had emerged in a damp stone corridor which ran in both directions, off into shadowed distances. The dim blue light of the fluors, set in the ceiling at long intervals, revealed nothing. No one had to be told to keep silence. Hiero prodded the prisoner with his spear point. The gesture was enough, and the man turned to the left and marched numbly off. Silently except for an occasional clink of metal and the faint scrape of leather, the others followed.

They had come a long way and found nothing save emptiness before them when Hiero suddenly halted everyone by raising his left hand. His mind could touch something. With a grimace of disgust, he realized what it was. He led off again at a run, prodding the captive before him ruthlessly. They burst suddenly into a larger room, a great oval, around which were set many barred doors. And the doors were all open. From them came a stench of death and decay which made the entire party retch. One quick glance in each cell was enough. Men, women, even children—here were the choicest captives of the Unclean. All were chained and all were dead. The savage blows and sword cuts which had so recently killed them were in all probability the kindest death they could have asked for after their torment. Hiero had caught the last flicker of a dying brain back down the buried corridor.

"Fresh wounds, sir," the NCO said. "They must have just got it."

"Yes, and we'll follow. Look sharp, now. The tunnel goes straight out the other side. This scum here says that their main Council Chambers are just ahead, so—watch it!"

The few pale chiefs of the Unclean, no more than three in number, who had not been able to flee on the surface, had waited just a little too long to try the secret exit tunnels. Had they not paused in one last spasm of sadistic cruelty to slay the helpless captives in their chains, they might have gotten away. When Hiero and his pack burst into the great room at their heels, they had not yet opened the far door, which was hidden behind an arras. Instead, they were engaged in trying to destroy the great wire screen. Though its moving lights were all dark now, that nerve center of the Yellow Circle was an obsession with them, and they had not realized that a foe so deadly might follow them so soon. Their gray robes dabbled

with the blood of their victims, they turned to fight. Their weapons were hardly raised when the Children of the Wind were upon them. Then three limp shapes lay-in their own filthy gore, while Hiero looked about him and tried to imagine what he had found.

X

Of Musterings in the North

The Most Reverend Kulase Demero, Abbot Supreme of the Metz Republic and General-in-Chief of its armies, was a busy man. His lean, bronzed face was worn with care, and he slept little. His temper, never all that equable, was now tinder-dry, and woe betide any hapless subordinate who wasted his time.

At the moment, he was in council and he was having difficulties, both in keeping his temper and in understanding what he simply had to understand. Not for the first nor for the fiftieth time, he wished that Brother Aldo, the Elevener chief and his secret friend and ally for years, were present. The abbot had a fine mind, and so, no doubt, did this being before him, but one was human and the other was not! The abbot could use his mental powers and exchange thoughts as well as any man in the Republic. But only with men!

He sighed and once more tried to grasp what the other was telling him. Charoo, the chief engineer—for want of a better phrase—of the Dam People, was not all that easy to understand.

Charoo was as tall as the old human, even crouching on his haunches, and far vaster in bulk. His blunt, chisel-toothed head was keglike, and the small, short-furred ears were laid back tight against the long skull. He wore no clothes and needed none, being clothed in dark brown, rippling fur from his head to the base of the great, naked, paddle-shaped tail. He waved his clawed hands now, curiously delicate for the great bulk of his body, and his bright, beady eyes glittered as he tried once more to explain his thought to the man. A wave of pungent musk eddied from his body, and Demero managed to avoid coughing only with difficulty. The scent of castor filled the small room as it would have one of Charoo's own lodges out on a distant lake.

Cannot—indescribable—make evil things go away if not—unknown thought—improbable image—water. Water people not—negative something movement—we must—thought of a specific place—negative again—cannot leave. Must be HERE—positive thought now. Silence.

The great, mutated beavers had appeared like many other creatures, soon after The Death. Shy and unaggressive, they had steadily spread over the remote, northern lakes. Slowly, as they occasionally helped stranded hunters or returned lost infants, the people of the Metz learned to respect them, and a system of silent barter had existed in areas where the two cohabited for many years. No Metz would have dreamed of harming one of the Dam People, but they were not exactly friends, either. Each kept to its kind. Humans avoided their lakes out of courtesy, and the great rodents did not frequent the Metz towns. They traded timber and roots for knives, tools, and vegetables, but that was all. That they were highly intelligent was well known, though only recently had it been realized that they had a written language.

It was Abbot Demero, prompted by his Elevener friend, who had made the first overtures and had been well received, since the Brotherhood of the Eleventh Commandment had laid the groundwork. The Unclean had taken to raiding the Dam People in the recent past, and the great creatures had only two things the Dark Brotherhood and their allies wanted. Meat and fur! This made the Dam People natural allies of decent humanity, but the alliance was not easy. They were simply not warlike by nature, and it

was very difficult to explain to them what was needed.

They had willingly helped dig the dams and channels to bring the new Republic fleet down to Namcush, but the abbot wanted much more. And he was not getting through. The hierarchical system of the Dam People was a mystery, for one thing. Charoo appeared to have authority of some kind, but how much authority was a question. Could he speak for many of his people or only for his own village?

Sighing mentally, the abbot leaned forward and prepared to try once more. He was interrupted by a low laugh from the door of his chamber and whirled in a rage, to blast the presumptuous fool who had dared to break in upon him. His fury turned to joy in an instant.

"Hiero!" He embraced the younger man heartily, patting him on the back over and over again. "I knew you were coming, but I had no idea it would be this quick. But listen. You can perhaps help me. I am having the greatest of difficulty in understanding what this worthy person wants to say. Do you suppose . . . ?" He stopped talking, for Hiero had freed himself and was standing before Charoo in utter silence. Then his hands began to move in certain complex gestures.

Charoo in turn began to move his own hands, and his round eyes were now sparkling even more brightly. In the silent room, the old man felt the pulse of thought, moving on an alien level and far faster than he could grasp. The four hands continued their strange movements; now they were touching and interweaving in a queer way as they did so, as if an invisible cat's cradle were being formed. For another moment this went on; then both stepped backward and stared at each other.

"Chirrup," the great beaver said. Dropping to all fours, he scuttled past the two men and out the half-open door. They heard his claws in the passage, and then he was gone into the night.

"Well," the abbot said at length. "I hope you got more out of that than I did. And how, may I ask, did you know what it was that *I* wanted to say?"

Hiero dropped into a chair and laughed. "Because, Reverend Sir, as soon as Maluin brought me here to Namcush, I started looking for you. And I have, I regret to add, been eavesdropping as I came to this house from well down the street."

"I see," his superior said slowly. "That means you got Berain to send you on ahead of the fleet in one of his precious warships. Not an easy man to persuade, Berain. And your powers really are quite extraordinary. I have been hearing things, my boy. I only hope you keep the fear of God in your heart. No man, no decent man and Christian soul, has ever had the mental strength you seem to have picked up, Hiero. You make me wonder. Do you realize what your mind would be, should it be allied to the power of evil?" He glared down at his former pupil.

Hiero met his gaze frankly. "You can hear my confession just as soon as you like, Most Reverend Father," he said flatly. "But first, wouldn't you like to know what Charoo and I said to each other?"

It was touch and go for a moment, and then the old man chuck- led. He seated himself in another wooden chair and laughed, rubbing his eyes.

"Yes, you insolent, I would like to very much. I can deal with your sins later and I'm sure there were plenty of them in a year away. Tell me what that damned old water hog wanted, because I certainly couldn't grasp it."

"Well, first, they have a rather complex sign language to augment their mind speech. I was siphoning

some of that out of his brain while we were talking on another level mentally. It's an odd band they think on, but not so odd as that of some other friends of mine you will meet presently. First, he wants to help, but is not sure how. His people are no good away from water, which is pretty obvious. What isn't so obvious, unfortunately, is how parochial they are. Except for the young males and shes in the spring of the year, they don't like being away from their own particular lake. They have a fantastic bond of affection for what might be called the home territory. I guess it's ancestral, but that's what he was trying to tell you. They have a council of sorts, and he has a lot of clout on it. They visit from village to village and from lake to lake, but—here's the catch—not for very long at a time. He was trying to tell you that they can't be counted on for any extended trips or journeys. They'd go crazy,"

"I see. That is certainly worth knowing. It means if there is a big fight and we want them in on it, it had better be somehow staged near where they are in the first place or it's no go."

"Exactly," Hiero agreed. "And well have to think about that at length later. But just now, Father Abbot, I need some help. Is there any news of the South? Have you heard anything from Brother Aldo? No one in the fleet has heard of my wife, but you must have by this time. What news from the East? Have you heard anything—anything at all?"

Hiero had contained himself for a long time, but he was close to the breaking point. Only by rigorously shutting Luchare from his mind totally by the exercise of mental discipline had he been able to hold himself in so long. Abbot Demero saw the agony on the younger face and wished himself anywhere but in the same room.

"I suppose you learned nothing from any prisoners you took?" he asked at length. It was an answer of sorts, but not what he wished he could say.

"Nothing," Hiero said in a dull voice, looking at the floor. "None but their adepts would have been likely to know, in any case. We saw only three of those, and they were taken in the act of murder and killed on the spot." The room seemed darker, though the small lamp had not dimmed.

"You deserve the truth," Demero admitted. "At least all the truth I have to give. Brother Aldo and I are far older friends than you imagine. For many years, unknown to the rest of the High Council of the Republic, I have been in contact with him. He has sought to warn me of the Unclean designs, and I have tried to spur his group to assume a more active part in our struggle. I sent messages to him when you first went south, and it was because of these that he was able to seek you out. Long ago, before your birth, he was of very high rank in your kingdom in the South.

"He brought back the books you found, and we have used them. It was only because of them that we were able to create and learn to use the computers. Without those, we could never have built the new ships so quickly, using and correlating knowledge from the old records. Those computers have saved us many months, and each day they save still more.

"But you want to hear of your princess. Aldo was here not too long ago. He had news of D'alwah—word that was passed over thousands of leagues. There is civil war. It is not good—such evil news that he left in the night to go south, where he could learn more."

The younger man turned away. Evil word from the South, so bad that Brother Aldo had left in haste! Yet Luchare had known of the rebellion. Her father had been alive, and she had been able to send the faithful hopper to Hiero. She was forewarned. What could have happened? Whatever it was, he was helpless to do anything to aid her, lodged a thousand leagues and more to the north. There was nothing left but the soldier's creed: Endure!

His face was masklike as he turned once more to Demero. "I know you'll try to learn more and keep me informed, Father," he said. "I can't do anything to help D'alwah up here, except indirectly. Let's drop the subject. Have I told you we took one of the Unclean Council Chambers undamaged? They had a thing like a great metal screen, set with hundreds of tiny lights, but there was no power source. At least, none that we could find. I had it dismantled as best I could. I have a strange feeling about the thing. It ought to go to the top Abbey mind-psychs at once, but I also want you to put your top computer men on it. I think it may be a computer of some strange sort, but powered by mental energy, and so . . ."

Listening to the iron control in the flat tones, the abbot had to make an effort to compose his own face and to pay attention. Under the disciplined voice, he heard the terrible muted passion. Yet he could do nothing to help.

From an opening in the green forest wall, there came a great black beast. Klootz strode into a broad clearing, his heavy dewlap hanging under his mighty neck. In the center of the clearing, he raised his head and sniffed the breeze, seeking any news that the wind might bring either his broad nostrils or his mule's ears. His head bore only buds where the great antlers would come in the months ahead. He sniffed again, winnowing the airs of the great conifers and mighty oaks. Then, raising his head, he called, a far-echoing "Bah-oh." Three times the nasal bugle rang through the woods. He seemed to listen in silence for an answer, but if one came, it would not have been audible to human ears.

Farther away, at the remote edge of the call's carrying power, another animal abruptly checked his movement. Gorm stopped and sat up on his furry haunches, listening. His ears and nose twitched, and his eyes took on a look of mental strain. Then he grunted in satisfaction and set off in the direction of the bugling.

Klootz lowered his muzzle and suddenly lurched ponderously forward across the clearing and vanished into the woods, moving without a sound, his entry into the trees like that of a shadow—but a determined shadow.

The royal army of D'alwah was in retreat. What was left of it was moving as rapidly as utter exhaustion would permit. Many men and animals bore dreadful wounds. Every so often, tired bodies simply collapsed, the energy to continue no longer there. It was easy to lose the men and beasts that fell, for it was night and none had the time or strength to help a neighbor. The few baggage wains that remained were lagging badly, though the kaws that pulled them were being goaded until blood ran to keep them moving at all. The king was already far behind. Many of the cavalry were without mounts, trudging dumbly forward on foot. The surviving hoppers were limping and footsore. It was the remnant of a beaten host, held together by loyalty and discipline. But both were eroding fast.

Occasionally, the tired men glanced back toward the south, where a red glare lighted the sky. D'alwah City was burning. Many of the troops were natives of the city and had families there.

They closed their eyes and tried not to look, or even to think of the horrors which must be going on behind them.

The Princess Royal of the kingdom rode in the van, her hopper still surrounded by a clump of mounted troopers. At her side, his right arm in a sling, Count Ghiftah Hamili commanded, his aquiline, dark face a mask of exhaustion. The army had no goal except safety and a place to rest. They were all, man and beast, utterly fought out. That there would be pursuit in the morning, all were keenly aware.

They had fallen back into the city two days before, defeated in the first battle, but still a strong and

confident force. They felt they could rest and hold the walls until the levies of east and west, the marshmen and sailors of the coast and the Mu'aman infantry of the great plains, came to join them. When that happened, then they would sally out against the rebel duke and his foul allies and cut him and them to pieces.

That was not the way it happened. What happened was terrible. The conspiracy of beggars and street rabble they had put down a week, earlier had been the merest sham of an uprising, mounted only to catch them off guard. No sooner had the city gates been shut than the *real* uprising started. The stone barriers of the barred sewers and the access ports to the canals were burst open in some cases, unlocked by treachery in others. Out of the slimy waters erupted all the horrid life of the deeps, the things D'alwah had guarded against for centuries. While fresh attacks from without assaulted the walls of the city, within it the army was faced with the terrified civil populace and hordes of great reptiles, ravenous for blood. Nor was this all. At intervals, strange, manlike shapes, hard to see and hideous when one did, were actually marshaling the onslaught of savage reptilian life and leading it in some fashion against the rear of the embattled troops.

As the reports came in, Luchare took counsel with her few remaining advisors. As best they could, they gave orders to fight their way to the northern gates. Some of the troops made it, but many stayed behind forever. When Luchare tried to assemble what was left outside the north walls, it was clear that the army had no more than a quarter of its original strength remaining, and that in frightful shape. There was no alternative except retreat—really flight. Duke Amibale and his friends, the Unclean and their allies, had been grossly underestimated. Unless she could rally the rest of the country quickly, the kingdom was lost to all intents and purposes.

As she rode in a daze through the steaming night of the South, Luchare tried to form coherent thoughts. She was so tired! None of them had had more than a catnap for over three days.

She wondered where Hiero was. Her faith that he was alive, she knew at times, might prove unreal. But they were so closely linked that she simply could not believe he was gone forever. Somewhere, somehow, he would come back to her. She had to keep on believing. As she slumped lower in the high-cantled saddle of her hopper, she never noticed that Count Hamili had taken the beast's reins from her limp fingers and transferred them to one of the guards. Numb with exhaustion, she allowed herself to be led on into the darkness.

Hiero awoke all of an instant. His narrow bed on the third floor of the new fort by the Namcush piers creaked as he sat up. Instinctively, he reached for his sword. What had wakened him? He peered at the open window, through which faint moonbeams glimmered. Listening, he heard the challenge of a sentry and the reply. The faint sound of lapping water came to him, along with other small noises of the night. There seemed to be nothing, but—he had learned to trust his instincts. Somewhere deep in his mind, a tiny warning bell had rung. Then, outside in the corridor, he heard the very faint scrape of movement, hardly more than a rustle of muted sound.

As noiseless as the night itself, he rose, sword in hand, and padded over to the door of the bedchamber, listening intently and probing with his mind as he did. Nothing, no mind, no feeling of one at all. But there had been the sound, and he knew that on the other side of the plank door was a presence! Something had stolen upon him. In this place of friends, there should be no such shielded thought!

His doubts were dramatically resolved. From deep in the wooden fort, far below his sleeping quarters, a horn sounded the alarm call, and the blast of the horn was echoed by others, all giving warning that some enemy was there.

At the same time, his door burst open with a crash, and a bulky form hurtled into the small room, arm overhead and a weapon glinting as it charged toward his now empty cot.

The assassin never had time to learn his mistake. Hiero's heavy, short sword, sweeping from behind and one side, struck the juncture of neck and shoulder with awful force. There was a single, choked grunt of agony as the razor-sharp edge went home, and a fountain of blood spurted in the dim light. Then the shape fell forward, struck dead on the spot by that one blow.

Hiero whirled to face the dark shape of the door, but the assailant had apparently been alone. He could detect no presence outside. Yet he remained crouching and ready until the light of torches and the sound of men came down the corridor. Only then did he step out and hail the patrol guards.

Ten minutes later, after the room was cleared of all but himself and the abbot, he was staring down at what had come in the night to slay him.

"Aldo mentioned them, I recall," Demero said. "I gather you had a previous encounter with one, out on the Inland Sea. A foul thing, even for a Leemute—and all of them are foul. What do you call it again?"

"A Glith. That was what Roke the pirate called it before we killed it and him." He stared down at the gray skull, earless and noseless, the fanged jaws agape in death and the mighty limbs, covered with fine scales, all asprawl. The thing wore the harness of a Metz soldier, but it could not have passed for a human in any kind of light. The heavy axe it had borne lay half under Hiero's bed.

"How did it get in here?" the old priest mused. "The alarm was given by one of those pendulum devices our scientists cooked up. I showed you one before you went off south, remember?"

"It may have been given, but it was way late," was the answer as Hiero knelt to examine the corpse further. Already a foul stench was in the room, despite the open window. "Look here. It wears the mind shield. I expected that. God knows what warned me. I guess I'm becoming attuned to the presence of the enemy somehow. But I had only a few seconds to spare."

He crushed the small box and crumpled the chain before going on. "What I'd really like to know is, if that shield was working—and it was—how did your pendulum thing work at all?"

"I don't think the scientists themselves altogether understand that device," Demero said. "The warning was late, as you say. Still, there *was* a warning. Perhaps it also works, though more slowly, on a level of emotion somehow. A pretty puzzle to set before the big brains when I get time to do so. But what *I* want to know is, how did this Glith pass the sentries at all?"

"I see what you mean. And I think I know the answer or can guess at it. Have the sentries examined as fast as you can by a psychmedic, one who knows the human brain. One of these things almost hypnotized me once. They have strong mesmeric powers. I'd be willing to bet that there is an unexplained lapse in the memory of some guard, maybe more than one. The damned brutes are probably bred for it. Anything else occur to you, Father?"

"Oh, yes. I'm not quite senile, not yet at any rate. It wanted *you*. It took a big risk to locate this chamber, son. And that means two things. I'll have to have the garrison mind-probed in depth. Though I think you may be right, and it could have got its information by mental compulsion. But I see further, and so do you. It came looking for you, so that means it was sent. The Unclean know you are here or at least suspect it. Others may have been sent to other places. The important thing is that they know you are alive, and that is something we hoped was not so. I wonder how?"

"I don't know. But only one thing makes sense. Someone or some *thing* saw me in Neeyana. No other way it could have happened. They move fast, don't they?" Hiero's eyes slitted as he stared down at the repulsive corpse on the floor. "It makes me feel proud in a funny way. They certainly hate me."

The abbot smiled. "You were never very good at your classic studies, Hiero. Many, many thousands of years ago, far across the sea, there was a mighty king with a personal motto. Can't recall much about the man, whether he was good or bad. But I recall the motto. It ran, *Oderint dum Metuant*. Let them hate me so that they fear me, that is, in Latin. You see, my boy, there's the answer. As I told you yesterday, I worry about your powers. But you terrify the enemy. I think they would trade several regiments of our Guards if they could get you instead. I had hoped to use you as a secret weapon. Now I'll just settle for weapon, period. Do you have any ideas?"

"I think so," Hiero said slowly. "I think we have to keep them off balance. If you can spare me a few good men, the best of the bushrangers, I'll take my cats and go hunting. North of the Palood and east of the Otwah League boundary. Somewhere in there I think the enemy may be gathering. The way I see it is this: We dealt them a bad blow at Neeyana. We couldn't hold it, but we certainly wrecked it for them. We stole their records, broke up and brought back their Great Screen, sank two of their best ships, and killed three Masters of the Yellow Circle. Nothing like that ever happened to them before. If I'm right, we only have two main packs to worry about—the Blue, and that's S'duna, and the Red, both north of the Inland Sea. I think I know where S'duna's main base is—the isle of Manoon. Where the others are, I have no idea. But I think a hunting expedition is in order, something between a probe and a raid. I have never drought they had many of those ships, you know. Even with their powers, that much metal and technology must be very rare. I doubt if there are more than two or three left on the whole Inland Sea. Brother Aldo got one and my cats got two. I don't think there are that many left."

He began to pace the small room, and the older man watched and listened with veiled amusement as the younger continued to expound his plan.

"Surely some of the levies must be coming in from the Otwah League by now? They promised aid before I went south."

"They have a long way to travel, and the fact that the Unclean have hit them only lightly so far has made them cautious. They are afraid to strip themselves of troops. Also, remember that they are not quite the same as we, Hiero. They have a far higher proportion of the old white stock and they have other mixtures as well. We are homogeneous in population to a much greater extent. Not so many nerves to soothe, not so many little patches of local divergency that have to be kept feeling they are part of the whole. But they are coming. I have had word from their Council."

"Well," Hiero said, "tell them to stay well north of the sea, and I mean well north of the roads anywhere near the Palood. The less the enemy knows about them, the better."

"Anyway," he went on, "I ought to start as soon as possible. I want no more than six men and my furry friends from the South. We'll go on foot, not mounted, though the Children of the Wind could leave Klootz standing, I think." A look of pain crossed his face as he thought of his lost mount, but the emotion was suppressed as he continued. "On foot is better. We don't know that terrain well and I have no idea what we'll be getting into,"

A heavy tread shook the corridor, and the tall shape of Per Edard Malum loomed in the doorway. He was welcomed and the conversation resumed. It had not progressed very far when the newcomer interrupted loudly. "Hey there, hold up. Are you off again on some crazy trip, while I float around on that

stink barge? Not on your life! Father Abbot, I appeal to you. This helpless shrimp needs protection. I resign from the navy here and now. I'm going along, that's what!" He stared defiantly at both of them.

Demero laughed quietly. "I don't know what Justus Berain will say, but I suppose I can quiet him down. It won't really be desertion if I have you seconded to special duties. I presume that you have an executive officer who can handle the ship?" It was an idle question. Maluin's noise and bulk had never disguised his keen mind. He would have had all his officers trained to a hair, and all three knew it.

Hiero was delighted. He knew his old friend's value. They had trodden many strange trails in the past. The thought of that stout arm and strong mind at his side was a real comfort. The old abbot also felt relieved. He had guessed at Hiero's loneliness and knew what the man must be feeling, with his wife's fate unknown and his mind torn with divergent emotions. A tried and true comrade could be a great help.

"I think Malum has a good idea, Hiero. And though I don't want to pick your men for you, I have another one. There's a junior priest, just been made deacon, as a matter of fact, whom I'd like to send with you. He's here in the garrison, and I'd like to have him up. See what you make of him, and then I'll tell you why I think you should have him along."

The abbot called to a guard stationed in the passage. In a short time, a young man stood at salute in the doorway. He was no larger than Hiero and quite slender. He wore the standard garb of leather and, like all the others, a silver pendant of the Cross and the Sword on his breast. He was clean-shaven and seemed hardly out of his teens at first appearance, but Hiero was not fooled. The man's black eyes were dreaming and remote, as if he looked beyond things, rather than at them. Under the painted yellow leaf and the green caduceus on his forehead, they seemed to gaze far beyond the little, smoky room and out into vastness. Hiero felt a wave of power such as he had seldom encountered before, and not of his own kind, for that was primarily mental. This man's power came from the spirit. Once in a while the Church Universal threw up a great leader, a healer of souls; priest though he himself was, Hiero felt humbled in the presence of the youth who stood before them. If this priest lived, the church would have a prophet and a reformer such as had been rarely known, even in ages past. He radiated calm and inner power so strongly that it was almost an aura. Hiero knew without being told that he was a celibate. No earthly ties could ever bind such a spirit.

"This is Per Cart Sagenay, Hiero. Sit down, my son, and listen to what we have to tell you. You have heard of Per Desteen, who has done mighty works for us in the South. Per Maluin you also know. I have asked them, especially Per Desteen, to look you over. While we toil back here, building our strength for the onslaught of the enemy, Per Desteen will lead a scouting party to spy out the enemy strength. I wish them to say whether you should accompany them on their journey. I know that you, of all the sons of the church I have ever known, will obey any orders given you. But it is for Per Desteen to say whether I have chosen rightly."

Hiero had no hesitation at all. "Anyone you chose, Father, would be welcome. But I should like to hear from Per Sagenay's lips exactly what he himself thinks."

The young man inclined his head gracefully. His voice was soft and pleasant, but in no way weak. Indeed, it seemed to hum and ring in the room, even after the man had fallen silent. *An orator, too*, Hiero thought. *Well, that would follow.*

"Reverend Father, noble Pers of the church, I am not the world's greatest warrior. Such small gifts as God has given me lie rather with things of the spirit. I have a small talent for the Forty Symbols—"

Demero interrupted. "He sometimes can get *twelve* at a time. The Abbey schools have never produced

anything like him!"

Hiero's only response to that was a mental "Wow!" Casting the Forty, the tiny, wooden, carved symbols, and trying to see the future with them was an art taught in all the Abbey senior classes. Hiero could get two or at most three and use those only uncertainly. He was about average. He had never heard of anyone who could cast and still make sense out of more than six. Any expedition which had this man as a member would be strong indeed and, he could not help feeling, blessed as well.

Giving the abbot a pained look, Per Sagenay continued. "I am greatly honored by this suggestion. If it be an order, I am more honored still, since I am young and without much experience of the world outside the Abbey walls. I can only wait upon your decision, sirs."

The decision was unanimous. They talked and discussed plans until the dawn came stealing through the narrow window, then separated for a much-needed rest. The scouting party would leave quietly and as unobtrusively as possible on the following evening.

S'duna was raging, but it was a cold rage, as everything about him was cold. "Namcush totally gone, not that it was ever entirely and completely ours. But we had no warning! The two secret ships which guarded the south sea—gone! Neeyana taken and sacked. Only two Brothers escaped of the five who were there. Do you realize, my friends, that S'ryath, the ruler of the Yellow Circle, is a fugitive in the wilderness, barely able even to communicate with us? We are almost cut off from the South, the source of our strength! S'tarn and I, the Masters of the Red and the Blue, we are alone to all intents and purposes. All of our strength now is here in the North."

The Blue Council of the Dark Brotherhood was silent. Then one of them, raised a pale hand. "Surely there is *some* good news from the South, Elder Brother. The savages of D'alwah have been broken. The starveling slut who calls herself a princess is destroyed. Our allies hold the kingdom under our rule, do they not?"

S'duna withered him, with a glance. In the cavernous chamber, before the great screen of lights and wires, his pupilless gaze was baleful. "Oh, yes, my Brother of the Green, Slorn, has accomplished great works. He has the southern kingdom under his yoke." The gelid eyes glowed with a light that came from the Ultimate Pit. "And what of his profound assurance about our deadliest enemy? What about Per Hiero Desteen, the *prince* of D'alwah? The only being ever to escape from dead Manoon? He lives, Brothers, he lives! So much for assurances in the South!"

His voice sank to a hiss. "What wots it that the barbarian kingdom of the South is felled? What does that mean for *us*, here and now? It is our rule of the *North*, steadily over the years increasing, spreading and ready to overwhelm the weaklings who call themselves the *true* church, that is threatened; that is what is in deadly peril. The kingdom of D'alwah may be destroyed. Their wretched king may be in our hands, the slut, as you rightly call her, may be ruined. But what of us, here in the North?"

With rising anger, he paced about the long oval table, a smaller simulacrum of the table of the Great Council. At length he paused and contained himself with an almost visible effort. "In the last year, too many unlooked-for things we never expected have happened. Item, the Eleveners have openly come out against us; only a fool would think they have no powers; they have forsaken peace, as they call it, and are for the first time in their stupid history on the other side, actively on the *other* side. Consider that!"

The four shining heads, the four pallid, impassive faces, moved with him as he went on. "And S'ryath saw *him* as he fled the wreck of Neeyana. Whatever may be said, it was *he* who destroyed those ships! I have heard reports from our spies of the crude things the Metz have put on the waters. They could not

have done so, I swear it. No, it was Per Desteen, who will hang on my torture racks before he dies slowly. Curse him! He himself is a mutation and does not even know it. How could he leave the distant South a drugged prisoner, helpless, utterly doomed, and then appear many hundreds of leagues to the north at exactly the right time? Perhaps those accursed Eleveners know something about this. One thing is certain—he had help and help that we know nothing about. There are currents working against us; I grow more sure of it daily. Something impalpable, something that lurks and pries and frustrates our plans in ways we cannot prevent. I shall root it or them out! Exterminate them!"

He ceased pacing and turned to face the others again. With another almost visible effort, he controlled his fury, and the faint flush over the pale cheekbones disappeared. He began to give orders, seek out information, and formulate plans. His colleagues leaned forward, their styluses ready, and proceeded to make notes as he spoke.

There were no horn calls, no salutes, and no ceremony as the patrol went forth from Namcush Fort. It was the cloudy dark just before the coming of dawn. Hiero wanted no eyes to spy out his leaving. He had bidden farewell to the Father Abbot in his chambers earlier, and that was sufficient. The little party left by a small postern, not by the main gate. Its members loped along the back alleys of the port, avoiding even the few Metz guard details until they came to the edge of the small town. Here they left the path entirely and at once plunged into the fringing bush which the inhabitants burned yearly to clear their garden patches. In less than a half hour, the last trace of civilization was behind them, and they were deep in the southern borders of the Taig, the mighty forest which spanned the continent, heading north.

Hiero led, his garb no different from that of the others, except that he no longer wore the painted leaf and caduceus, the looped snakes and rod, on his forehead.

"I'm no longer ail Abbey, Father," he had said bluntly to Demero, who had noted its absence. "Now I fight for two realms. I hope you'll forgive me. It was you who sent me south. I *am* the prince of D'alwah! I cannot wear the badge of the northern armies any longer."

The old man had looked hard at him, then laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. "My son, you are still a priest, and that is what counts to God. I have no fears for your faith. And it is the work of the Faith to reclaim our brothers in every land. You still wear the Cross and the Sword and you got new insignia as soon as you went on our ships. You are still ours. If we share you with another land, the church can but approve. You are a missionary, Hiero. Wear what you will and take my blessings,"

Musing on this conversation as he paced along under the great pines, Hiero wondered. *Was he still a priest?* He was certainly not the same priest. When he compared himself with Per Sagenay, he wondered if he were a priest at all. Even old Demero, much as Hiero loved and respected him, was more soldier and politician than saint or preacher.

Hiero sighed. Well, they all loved God, they all called themselves Christian, and that was about all one could say. The Lord presumably needed all kinds of help, even that of non-saints. He turned his thoughts aside and looked back at his command. He thought he might have a good one, man for man perhaps the best in the whole northern array.

Right behind him came Per Maluin, shield on his arm and his favorite weapon, one he preferred to any spear, over his brawny shoulders. This was a colossal billhook, one of the oldest weapons in the world, the peasants' tool of ancient, lost Europe and their last argument against the tyranny of their masters. On a curved axe handle, four feet long, was set a thin, brush-cutting, hooked blade like a deformed axehead. This tool, the ancestor of all later pole arms, was a dreadful implement in the hands of a master, and Per Edard was such. As Hiero looked back, the giant winked at him, his face alight with delight. A born

woodsrunner, Maluin reveled in tasks such as this.

Behind him came B'uorgh and M'reen, and with them Per Sagenay. To Hiero's amazement, the quiet young priest and the catfolk had taken to one another at once. Moreover, Sagenay was learning, with amazing speed, to tune in on the odd wavelength the Children of the Wind used for mind speech. Already he could communicate better with them than anyone save Hiero. This would not have surprised Hiero in an Elevener, but the average Metz had little contact with alien minds, while the Eleventh Brotherhood was trained for it.

The younger man bore a longbow as well as a sword and dagger; he had said modestly that he had some skill with it.

The two young warriors of the cat people, Ch'uirsh and Za'reekh, were out on opposing flanks, out of sight but keeping mind touch.

In the rear came two more humans, but they were not priests, though they were legends along the border and far beyond. These were the twins, Reyn and Geor Mantan. Dark, lean men, identical in appearance, their age was unknown. Hiero guessed they might be in their fifties, but it was only a guess. Years before, they had come back to their small forest stading and found the mangled and tortured bodies of their wives and children in the ashes of their cabins. From then on, they had but one purpose, to seek out and slay the Unclean wherever they found them. Veterans of a hundred grim battles in the shadows of the woods, they spoke little but did much. Many thousands of lives had been saved by their sudden appearance, warning of a Leemute raid or ambush.

They did not serve the Church Universal or any other organized body. They appeared like shadows at intervals, always together, and got what supplies they needed, then vanished once more into the darkness, on the trail of their unending vengeance. They were known from the Otwah League to the Beesee coast, and none would deny them anything they sought in the way of food or help. They were, Hiero thought, like two grim hounds, silent and relentless. Abbot Demero had found them through some personal, arcane method and persuaded them not only to volunteer for this expedition but even to accept Hiero's orders, a feat that made Hiero, no soft citizen himself, wonder in amazement.

These two bore weapons of their own, used by almost no one else in the North, six-foot tubes of some strange, dark wood—blowguns which fired darts tipped with deadly poison, a secret brew of their own devising, said to slay on the instant. They carried the darts in slung pouches and also wore long knives and belt-axes, whose heads were tipped on one side with a long spike. Grim and fell they looked, like messengers of Fate in their stained leather. Hiero knew that woodsmen and hunters such as these were worth more than a host of ordinary men. Even the catfolk drew back as they passed to change positions, so dread was the sight of their sunken eyes.

Down the long aisles of the great pines and spruces and between clumps of the sprawling palmettos, silent as ghosts, the little company flitted. As it went along, the dawn came pink in the east, and the chirping and warbling of countless birds began to greet the coming day. Tiny, dark figures, moving between the shaggy boles of the trees, never stopping, never keeping to a straight path, they were in view for but a brief instant—then they were gone, and it was as if they had never been.

XI

In the Taig

It was late summer noon again in the north. Clouds of tiny gnats and midges swirled in the shafts of sunlight slanting down through the great trees. Here and there, blankets of leaf shadow fell, where the multitudes of conifers had yielded to some deciduous giant, a mutated maple or poplar, creating an even deeper shade than that cast by the needles of the mighty pines. In favored places, huge thickets sprouted among outcroppings of lichen-dolomite or granite; blueberries, myrtles, and countless other plants sprang up to grasp at the sunlight wherever the trees could not find sufficient soil to root.

In the leaf mold under one such shaded place, the camp had been pitched, and an argument was in process. The two Mantans were not there, being out on the perimeters on watch. Hiero was confronting his brother priests, and the four catfolks were off to one side, considering this matter none of their business. They played with their knives and watched the three humans with slitted eyes, content to wait on events.

"Look, Hiero," Maluin said earnestly, "we've seen nothing. Not one sign of anything. Not one trace, not one piece of evidence that there is any movement in these parts. We are well south of any trail used by our people. We apparently are also well to the west of the area where you first encountered the enemy last year. This country is simply empty! There is nothing here. So I'll ask you again, why are we hanging around? I don't want to leave, I don't want to go home. I want to *move*, go somewhere where we can be useful, *do* something. You know I will follow anywhere you say. But what is the reason for this dawdling, this staying here in one area, and a damned small area at that? You say this is the proper place, and God knows, I'm not disputing your experience. But could you please give me a reason! Per Sagenay feels the same way. Neither of us is new to the enemy or life up here. Why treat us as if we were new-joined recruits and dumb ones to boot?" He leaned back and lighted his short clay pipe again. He was the only one who smoked; as he held the spark lighter in his huge fist, he looked like the epitome of casual strength, relaxed and yet forceful. He watched Hiero narrowly over the pipe bowl, and Hiero had some trouble in meeting his eyes.

"I gather you feel the same, Per Sagenay?"

"No-oh," was the answer, given in equable tones. "Yet you have not asked me to try to read the symbols. This is one of my small talents, and while I will, as Per Maluin has been careful to point out, obey any and all instructions that you care to give us, still I am a little puzzled. No forelooking and no sign that some of the greatest foresters of the North can discern. But you feel that we should linger in this precise spot, as if we awaited something. Perhaps if you shared some of your thoughts with us, we might be able to help." The soft, clear voice fell silent, and, like Maluin, Sagenay lounged back on the bank of moss which shrouded the upthrust of rock behind them.

Hiero stood and stretched, then reseated himself. In the silence that followed, he seemed to be listening to the bird song which welled around them, his eyes for the nonce cast down. Finally he spoke.

"I could tell you all sorts of things, bring up the past, mention that I am a sensitive, and still tell you nothing. I'll be honest and say I simply don't *know* anything. We have been on the trail for almost three weeks. Two days ago, I felt—no other word for it—felt that this area we are in was crucial, that we ought to stay here. I can't tell you why. I don't know why. There is inimical life here somewhere; I feel it, I sense it, in some way I can't explain. There is also something else, Something is coming here. The catfolk don't see it, you two don't, nor do the Mantans, who excel all of us combined in woodcraft. But I do! We are at some sort of meeting place. I know it. For years, all of this area has been a blank to the Abbeyes. We operate west of it and north of it. To the southeast lies the Palood and the Inland Sea. This angle is unknown. You know all that. I tell you, something is building here. I won't permit your talent, Per Sagenay, for one reason. The enemy has learned what I could do. We don't know what they can do, what they could have taught themselves in the past year. One of the things about the talent for forelooking

that almost got me killed in the past is that it leaves one's own mind open. I won't have it! We are on the verge, the border, of some vast movement. Our business here is to probe it, not to let it know of us at all. I have sensed out and over a wide area. This forest about us is a blank indeed. A mental blank! No such thing should occur. Oh, the younger life, the Grokon, the deer, the hares, all are here. But they are muted, quiescent, and in far fewer numbers than they should be. Only the tiny, innocuous creatures—the birds, the mice, the insects—are in normal numbers." He leaned back and rested on one elbow. Then he added, "You will, I fear, have to take me on trust. Something is going to happen here, and we must wait for it."

It was Sagenay who finished the argument. "Per Desteen, you are the leader. All else is unimportant. Those who spread evil are all about us, and you are not only our commander but our chief warning signal. I have no more to say. Your thoughts are the only ones that matter."

The quiet voice left an empty space behind it. Maluin grunted several times and then waved one finger at Hiero in mock warning. He, too, settled back, and the three lay silent, staring over the ashes of their tiny fire. Yet all were alert, waiting for anything that would disturb the ether, any trace of trouble, any hint that they were not alone in the seemingly innocent depths of the great continent-wide wood.

All of them were travel-stained and travel-worn. They had marched, a very long way north and east of Namcush to reach this unknown land. Not even the Mantans, veterans of a multitude of journeys in the untracked wilds, had ever roamed these parts. Their only guide now was the instinct of their leader.

Hiero had warned his comrades that they must always stay under the cloak of the trees. He remembered well that not too far to the east, he had first glimpsed and then contacted the flying device which lifted an enemy adept far aloft *in* the heavens. Since his reports, passed through Brother Aldo, had arrived at the central command post of the Abbeys, much thought and research had been devoted to his warning. As a result, he had some tentative information at his disposal. The thing he had seen was deemed to be an unpowered glider, a concept long lost but recorded in the central files. While its maneuverings in the air were nothing unknown in theory, no one had ever thought of a method of getting such a thing launched and up into the higher atmosphere. This was now being eagerly pursued, but as yet only the foe possessed the secret. And only Hiero had ever seen such a machine, which might mean that it was both rare and difficult to handle.

The afternoon waned. The four cat people groomed themselves and rested, and the men engaged in desultory talk. It was perhaps three hours until sundown, and still nothing disturbed the outward peace of the forest.

The interruption was sudden and silent. Reyn Mantan, his gaunt, swarthy face impassive, stood before them, looking as furtive and stealthy as some silent predator of the wood. His words, as always, were blunt and terse.

"I left Geor alone and circled camp in patrol at noon. I went east to have a scout, widen our range a little." No one commented that this was not exactly what his orders had been. The Mantan brothers took orders as they found them and interpreted them as they chose. They were proven allies, yet not soldiers, and their experience was too great and too valuable for them to be treated as if they needed constant discipline.

Now, brushing a bed of pine needles aside, Reyn crouched and drew a crude map with his dagger point.

"We're here, see? I went east and a bit north." He drew a wavy line. "Here is broken rock mixed with swamp. There's something in that area, hard to get at. Like a bad smell. I seen something like it once

over to the coast." He meant the Beesee area bordering the great western ocean, far away over the mighty mountains, the Shinies.

"It moves around, something does, in there. I can feel it shifting. Maybe more than one thing. But it don't seem to come this way at all, only north and south, like it moves up and down in a line. Some kind of border, maybe, and some kind of guard. Want to go have a look?"

The others were on their feet now, and the catfolk had drawn closer, attracted by the excitement.

"What was the place on the coast like?" Maluin rapped. "Why do you think this is the same or at least similar?"

"Hard to tell. The place over west was more like a circle, a blotch, but there's the same feel to it here. Like a stink you can't smell. Bad feeling. We didn't go into it then, me and Geor. Only a few Inyan camps in that area, and *they* didn't go nowhere near the place. Too scared. If we hadn't been in a hurry then, we might have tried. Up to you folks what you want done. I only tell what I seen."

Hiero thought hard. One of the greatest forest rangers of the North had found something inexplicable and was conveying his dislike of it. The man might not be a telepath of any kind, but his countless forays against the Unclean must have honed every sense he possessed to a razor's edge in the process. *Like a stink you can't smell!* What better way of describing some emanation of the enemy? Perhaps even a mental evil which the untutored but alert woodsrunner could only dimly detect. Hiero made up his mind quickly.

"Call your brother in and well march. Make it slow. Reyn, you lead out. No one use the mind touch at all!" He explained in a few thoughts to the Children of the Wind what he wanted, and they moved off in moments. All that had to be done was to don the light packs and adjust weapons more comfortably. This was a group which was never off guard or unready for an instant alert.

For an hour, they drifted like shadows of the wilderness through the forest giants. Reyn, soon joined by his brother Geor, stayed in front, and there were no flankers. The others were in a small, loose clump to the rear. Suddenly their guide checked and held up one arm. At Hiero's signal, they spread out and lay prone in the nearest cover. He positioned himself behind a huge, rotten tree stump and shut his eyes.

Ever so carefully, his mind began to reach out before them into the region which Reyn Mantan had described and which they could now see with their own eyes.

It was a type of country all of them had crossed before and was not uncommon in the North. Acid soil and low-lying ground surrounded outcrops of rotting stone, the latter often crowned with scrub. Broad patches of oily-looking, dark water glistened here and there in the light of the sun of late afternoon. Trees were few and those often dead and leafless, but many clumps of tall cattails and other reedy grasses obscured the view where the waters lay.

All of them noticed something else. The belt of marsh and scrub was curiously silent. No waterfowl, such as herons, duck, or rail, called from the reeds, and only a slight wind sighed through them. The wind was from, the north and, though gentle, made a faint, hissing rustle as it bent the tall stems. The group had come to a silent land.

Out and out, Hiero reached with his mind, concentrating on holding the most delicate touch possible, so that his mental probe would appear as no more than a feather in the wind—more of a caress than a stroke, more of a stray current of air than anything solid. As he did so, he scanned all the various

wavelengths he had memorized in the past, shifting up and down from those of the lowest insects to those possessing the highest of intelligence. Out and out, infinitely slowly, holding the probe to a close range and concentrating only on the immediate area to their front.

Contact! He drew back at once and then carefully advanced again, his thought now targeted on a certain place. The contact moved; as the hunter had reported, that movement was neither toward them nor away, but following some invisible line which lay athwart their own course from east to west. He felt a sense of disgust, almost physical, and knew at once he had found the source of the "stink you can't smell."

He was not actually in touch with a mind, but rather with a presence, almost a shifting *id*, an emotional center of some foul kind. Whatever it was, its mind was guarded, but the guard was not that of the mechanical shields used by the Unclean upper ranks. This was natural to it and was perhaps a weapon against prey which might be mentally sensitive.

Still, an impression came through—a very ugly one. There was intense rage there, rage at some kind of control which the thing-could not overcome. There was also malice and ferocity combined, cunning and deception, and above all—hunger! The feel of what he had sensed made Hiero wince. Not since his encounter with the vampire fungus he had named the House had he felt such avid desire for prey of some kind. This entity wanted to feed, to rend, to break and shatter, to shred some helpless life from its physical body and then to absorb it, bloodily and obscenely. It made the man think of an intelligent hyena in its self-absorption with death and the consequences of sating itself with the slain. But it was not being allowed to do what it wished, and therein lay the source of its rage. It had to stay within certain boundaries and it could not go where it wanted. Was it a barrier guardian of a strange and awful kind?

Hiero considered; while he did so, he used the lesser bands of small birds and insects to try to learn a little more about the area. The mixture of swamp and scrub-strewn rock and shale seemed to extend a very long way to the north and south. Probably trying to circle and bypass it would prove little and would take a lot of time. He was worried about time. The Republic's leaders needed hard information, and so far his group had not been able to provide any.

At length his mind was made up, and he signaled the others to withdraw, back the way they had come. After fifteen minutes of marching, he gathered them around him in a circle and explained what he had found. He also sketched his plans for dealing with it and gave orders.

The three soldier-priests remained where they were, occasionally speaking in low tones. The catfolk and the two Mantan brothers had vanished in the wood to their rear, and there was nothing to do except watch the light wane in the west and listen with all of their senses.

"It is—or perhaps they are—hungry, ravenous," Hiero said. "I suspect this is some kind of Unclean boundary that holds them, or it, in place. I think the thing has eaten out the area and is not thinking too clearly, if it has a mind capable of thinking. The two brothers know all the game of the North better than any other living men. They can show B'uorgh and his cats what to drive when they find it. There's not much in the area, but there must be something: if there is, they'll get it."

After what seemed an interminable time, Hiero picked up the mental wave he sought: and breathed a sigh of relief. "Hide yourselves. They've got something, and it's being chased this way. I just hope the trees don't check the Children too much. They are really plains hunters."

Concealing themselves, the other two waited tensely. Soon they also could hear the crashing of undergrowth and the beat of hooves in the distance. The frightened herbivore which Hiero had detected

was indeed being herded in their direction. The Children of the Wind were not using the Wind of Death, but only their own speed, moving in a line, showing themselves where needed, stopping any gaps when the quarry tried to leave its line and check back. It was now panic-stricken, dreading both the hunters behind and the region it was being forced to enter in front. It did *not* want to go forward! Following the chase with his mind, Hiero marveled anew at the skill of the cat people as they headed the beast off again and again. Behind them, the two human hunters made the best speed they could, racing to try to keep up and be in. at the climax.

Then the three priests saw it, bolting across a lane of sunlight under a clump of towering pines and into the shadows on the other side. They all knew the animal well—a great, striped buck, not unlike the extinct wapiti, the American elk of the lost ages, but with two-pronged antlers, now only soft stubs. Hiero suppressed his pity for the hapless prey. It was bait, and they rose as one man and followed on its slot, knowing the catfolk would wait for them on the border of the sinister marsh.

Panting, the two Mantans arrived in time to join them as they caught up with their furry allies. All crouched to listen and peer over the bog and brush tangle before them. The big deer had given up, and its tracks were plain in the mud before them where it had charged into the uncanny wilderness, the terror of those behind driving it to risk whatever lay in front.

Hiero listened with his mind. The onslaught of whatever lurked out there suddenly blended in his brain with an audible cry of agony as the killer struck. Now they could all hear the threshing uproar of the death throes; mingled with that was a new sound, a chuckling growl, vast and ominous, through which ran a purring note as well, a menacing evil to human audition. Even the proud felines laid back their ears at that noise.

All had their weapons ready, and the Mantans now had caught their breath. No further signal was needed. As one body, they all ran for the marsh, moving as silently as they could, leaping over patches of mud, avoiding the shallow pools, and utilizing the out-croppings of rock wherever possible. Ahead of them, the struggle had ceased, but the snarling was now replaced by a new sound—the crunch and snap of mighty jaws, clearly audible through the hush of early evening.

The little band was very close. Suddenly the sounds ceased, and they knew they had been detected. They ran for their lives, hoping for a clear space in the mixture of mud, rock, and thicket, careless of what noise they made. As they ran, they spread out automatically. Almost simultaneously, they arrived at their target and abruptly halted at the sight before them.

The marsh opened here and formed a small swale, treeless and covered with some rank, brown grass, rooted in ankle-deep water. In the middle of this watery meadow lay the bloody, dismembered carcass of the stag, and over that reared its killer, glaring at them from mad eyes.

It vaguely resembled a colossal bear in general shape as it stood, swaying on columnar hind legs; but if the bear family had ever played any remote part in its ancestry, the horrid transmutation of the atom had long since changed the pattern out of resemblance. It was almost hairless, the leathery hide a dirty, mottled gray. The huge head was short-muzzled, and the naked ears were minute, lying flat against the skull. Long bunches of wiry bristle sprouted above and on either side of the gaping jaws, which were packed with monstrous, shearing teeth, blood-flecked and dripping. The bulging, reddish eyes glittered with insane fury, but there was also intelligence under the lowering brow. The proof of this lay in the torn-off club of broken wood, a man's height in length, which the thing gripped in one mighty paw; the forelimbs, though they bore great claws, carried these on crooked *hands*, five-fingered and with working thumbs!

In the brief second while the monster and the hunters took each other in, Hiero remembered the Abbey lessons of long ago. The notes had been few and those scanty indeed in detail, for those who glimpsed this horror of the Taig seldom lived to tell of it. This was the Were-bear, the grim night gaunt of the dark, known mostly by its ghastly after-trail, the haunter of the shades, the invisible death whom none could overcome. It lived by ambush and stealth; the ruins of some small cabin or the shredded remains of a hunting party, found long after the slaughter, were its usual traces. Fortunately, the deadly things were very rare and thought to be solitary in nature. All this flashed through Hiero's mind in the mere flicker of an instant as battle was joined.

Three missiles flashed across the air as one. The Mantans fired their blowguns at the same time that Sagenay loosed a slender arrow. The two small darts buried themselves in the bloody snout while the shaft from the longbow sank deep in the belly hide.

The horror screamed, a piercing shriek, high and yet mind-shattering in its sheer volume. Clutching the club and still erect, it shambled toward them, water and mud flying from the strides of the great, flat hind feet as it came. Its speed was deceptively fast. It was aiming straight for Per Edard Maluin, perhaps because he was the largest and at the center of their ragged line.

The Children of the Wind raced for the creature's flanks, two to a side, the shallow, splashing water hardly slowing their speed at all. Hiero saw M'reen swerve like lightning to avoid the stroke of the tree limb aimed at her. The next instant, all four were slashing at the brute's haunches with their long knives, drawing blood at every stroke, dipping and darting like hornets, as it checked itself and tried to deal with them.

The Mantans and Sagenay fired again, and once more the arrow sank deep and the darts feathered themselves in the frightful head. Hiero was close now and he hurled his heavy, crossbarred spear into the middle of the muddy, twisting paunch. The hoarse grunting of the Were-bear again rose in an awful coughing scream as the broad spearhead drank deep. He saw a rolling, crimson eye, distended with pain and fury, turn down at him and he ducked, splashing away in the sedge and liquid mud the fury had churned up. Another arrow drove into the center of the wild orb. *God, hut Sagenay was a great archer! Would the damned thing never die?*

It towered up, dropping the useless club and clutching at its tormented face, to let out one last choking howl. Then it fell forward, splashing them all with a sea of water and filth, mingled with its own gore. It died. There was not even a twitch of rigor, just the vast corpse, prone in a wallow of muck and torn plant stems, while nine panting entities stood, weapons still poised, and looked at one another.

"You are an amazing shot, Per Sagenay," Hiero said to the younger man. "And you, too, gentlemen," he added, nodding to the Mantans. "I think that your venom slowed the brute down. It was more confused than I had been led to believe these monsters were supposed to be."

He sent his own message of praise to the Children of the Wind, using their mental channel, and he could feel the pride in their response.

"I never got close enough," Maluin grumbled, lowering the billhook.

"It was aimed right at you when my friends halted it, you big oaf," Hiero said. "Another second and you would have had plenty to do. Now everyone be silent while I use mind search."

He was none too soon! Almost at once, the expression on his face and the tenseness of his body had all the others alerted, their weapons lifted anew.

A voice he had not heard for many months beat into his brain like a hammer on an anvil. *Watch out, Hiero! Another one comes fast from the north! We are following, hut beware . . . I*

At the same time, the Metz caught the wave of black anger and killing rate which he had noted from the monstrous brute, only half an hour before. *Its mate!* He spun, cursing the dying light and facing to his left. The rest of his troop whirled also, and thus the second attack did not catch them totally off their guard.

The new menace burst from the screen of brush and charged, fangs agape, down upon them. It ran on its hind legs, and the vast, lumbering strides brought it on at a pace a racing hopper might have envied. Each of the giant arms bore a mighty burden. As the ghoul-thing came, it hurled a great rock from one of them with deadly aim.

Perhaps the onset of age had begun to stiffen B'uorgh's sinews; perhaps one of his lightning shifts, by plain bad luck, was in the wrong direction. The boulder—for it was nothing less—struck the catman chief with a sickening crunch and hurled him aside like a castoff doll, useless and discarded. M'reen's high scream of rage and sorrow rose above the triumphant bellow of the enemy.

Once more, one of Sagenay's bronze-tipped shafts sank home, though this time he struck an arm. The darts of the brothers Mantan hissed again; at this range, they could not miss. But their poison, so lethal to normal life, seemed to work very slowly on this alien flesh. Hiero had wrenched the spear from the corpse of his late foe and now stood erect upon the giant body itself, waiting to meet this fresh attack, trying to free his limbs of weariness in the seconds remaining before it closed. The gray light of dusk made the appearance of the demon hard to discern, and he knew that it was a creature of the shadows, the vague outline not the least of its weapons. Beside him, but lower down and braced for battle, his strong legs slightly bent, Maluin also awaited the onslaught, his fell weapon held two-handedly and cocked over his left shoulder. Then the monster was upon them, and they ceased to think.

The second rock the creature clutched was a long slab of granite; it did not hurl this, but used it like a club, as its mate had wielded the shattered tree limb. Hiero flung his spear but heard it ring on stone, even as the monster struck at him. He tried to duck, holding his shield high, but the grazing touch of the great rock swept him off his feet, left arm numbed to the shoulder, and pitched him down the side of the dead beast and into the marsh below.

Again he heard the bellow of triumph start; but as he tried to stagger erect and free his sword, he heard the awful cry rise to an impossible pitch of pain. On his feet once more, he saw what had happened.

As the second Were-bear stooped to crush Hiero's life away, Edard Maluin had seen his chance and leaped in. The huge billhook scythed down in a terrible stroke upon the left arm of the monster. The vast, deformed hand, severed at the wrist, flew away into the haze and murk, and a gout of blackish blood spouted and spat red through the evening air.

As the titan turned on Maluin, Hiero struck at its haunch with his heavy short sword, but his aim was off, and it seemed to him the stroke was slow and feeble. He tried to recover, noting almost absently that another of Sagenay's arrows had driven home in the gray hide. *It will kill us all before it dies*, a remote part of his mind decided. Half in a dream, he watched as the ghastly head, turned back to him; he saw the yellow fangs, crusted with dried foam, as the monster moved forward and down to crush the pigmy who had defied it.

He was spun aside like a top and hurled yards away on his back, the sword flying out of his grip as he went. Helpless and with his eyes full of muddy liquid, he did not see what the others saw and thus missed

the final event.

A great, black beast cut through the sedges with the speed of a pike darting through waterweed. Driven by a bulk not much less than that of the Were-bear and brushing Hiero aside in the process with its shoulder, the new arrival smashed into the enemy with the precision and force of a battering ram. The last, frantic bound carried two great, razor-edged feet smack into the space between the eyes of the northern horror. As they went home, the awful cracking noise cut off the gross snarling of the monster, ending its evil life instantly.

Frantically trying to get up on his feet, brush the mud from his eyes, and rejoin the battle, Hiero became conscious of a vast foreleg on which he seemed to be leaning. As he tried to deal with this most familiar but long-absent concept, an enormous tongue swept over his face and a wave of sweet breath enveloped his head. Then he knew!

"Klootz, you miserable, slab-sided piece of worthless dog meat! What do you mean by frightening me like that?" He pounded softly on the great barrel, his eyes shut to keep the ready tears locked within. How many thousand leagues had the great beast come, to home in on him and find him in the midst of a life-or-death struggle? He blinked at length and saw the long neck turn round and down again; once more the morse's tongue care-washed his face in a mighty swipe.

He wiped his eyes and managed to stagger away from his friend's side and stare about him, Maluin leaned on his bill a few yards off, covered with mud, but seemingly otherwise undamaged. He winked at Hiero, then began to brush himself and his weapon clean as best he could, whistling softly to himself. The Mantans and Sagenay were plucking their darts and arrows from the hides of the dead terrors, cleansing them in the marsh water and restoring them tidily to their quivers. Then Hiero saw the three young catfolk gathered around something silent in the sedges and he remembered that B'uorgh was dead. He was about to go to them when suddenly a very irritated voice burst into his mind, and he halted in his tracks, so that Klootz, who was following behind, almost ran over him.

Hiero, if all that mess is cleaned up, I would appreciate your telling your friends that I am not a target for all those things they shoot. Then I will be able to come out from behind this rock. As Hiero reeled with the realization of what and *whom* he was hearing, the mind voice went on, somehow conveying an acid tone. *Klootz didn't do it all, you know!*

Breathlessly, Hiero spoke. "All of you, listen. A new friend of ours is here. Don't shoot, for God's sake! He helped bring Klootz to us."

They all turned and looked with keen interest at the burly, rolling shape, coated in dark brown fur, which now emerged from a thicket to the north and ambled down their way. None looked with more interest than Hiero. It had been a long time since they had parted, far away in the South, after the destruction of both the House and the buried city of the ancients.

He saw that Gorn had changed and he wondered what changes the young bear saw in him. Gorn was perceptibly larger and also leaner, indeed almost drawn-looking. He had nowhere near the bulk he would attain someday—of that the Metz was sure—but he was a powerful animal now and he radiated a surety and inner strength which had not been there before.

The bear reached Hiero 'sside and rose on his hind legs until his small eyes were higher than the man's. His tongue barely touched Hiero's nose, and then he dropped back to all fours again and woofed gently. *A nice sort of thing you go about looking for, I must say,* his thought came. *Lucky that Klootz scented you somehow and told me. We've been trying to cross this area for days now, but we knew*

there were two of them and we couldn't risk it. You lost a friend over there, Hiero. Better go see what you can do. They need some comfort. Then we have to get out of here fast.

Marveling at the speed and accuracy of Gorm's mental images, Hiero walked over to where the silent catfolk stood over the fallen chief. B'uorgh must have been killed instantly, for his whole rib cage was crushed. His fierce visage was unmarred, though, and he seemed to be smiling grimly, as if his death and indeed the whole universe were only one more bitter jest.

Hiero put his arm over M'reen's drooping shoulders and addressed the three on their own private wavelength.

He was a great warrior. He died as he would have wished, in the fight against our ancient foes, yours and mine. When you return to the Pride— and when I return also—we will sing a song for him that all will learn as cubs and remember as long as the Pride shall live. Now, let us put aside our grief. M'reen, you are the leader now. You will tell us what to do to send him to his rest. But we must hurry. He would not have wished us to delay on his account. The enemy is moving.

They lifted the body between them and bore it to dry land where, with all helping, they excavated a grave under a large stone. M'reen sang a short wailing song alone, and then Per Sagenay asked them if he might speak with his own God on behalf of the fallen warrior. Shyly, after a moment's talk among themselves, the catfolk agreed that this would be entirely fitting. *After all, Ch'uirsh sent to Hiero, we are far from the night winds over the southern plains. Your god up here can help send his spirit back down to our land, where it can finally rest.*

Hiero agreed solemnly that this was a perfectly sound piece of reasoning. *And, God,* he added silently, *You could do worse. He fell in Your battle, and I know You'll help.* He said a quiet prayer of his own, and the thing was done.

As they turned away from the lonely grave, Hiero became conscious that Gorm was growing impatient. He knew that the bear was not much of a deist and, indeed, considered all appeals to the Unknown as a waste of time. Agnosticism was not unheard of among humans, but, the man thought, it was a fresh puzzle for the Faith if it occurred among the newer breeds. He chuckled to himself, for he knew that he had a young priest in the group who would have to learn this for himself in a fairly brief time.

In a short while, they were all lounging in a circle around a tiny fire, Hiero had led them back along their previous trail and through the shrouded night for over an hour, until he deemed they were out of immediate danger and could take a rest. Outside the circle, Klootz stood silently, his vast, drooping nose flexing and sniffing, his mule ears twitching as he sought the scents and sounds carried by the wind. Already the buds of his antlers were two feet long. He looked thin, as did the bear, but he was obviously fit for anything, as the recent encounter had abundantly proved.

Gorm lay in the center, obviously enjoying the warmth of the fire, the light flickering on his thick, brown pelt. When he spoke, his speech in the minds of its recipients was so clear that ail—even, to Hiero's intense surprise, the cat people—could understand him easily. Hiero threw a protective mind shield over the whole group with no trouble, observing with amusement that the stoic and impassive Mantan twins were frankly gaping for the first time in his experience and craning their necks to study first Gorm and then, in complete astonishment, each other. Maluin actually laughed, and a quiet smile stole over the face of Cart Sagenay.

First, I am but the forerunner of my people. The bears are coming, but it takes time. We do not live in tribes or villages, but in families. Thus, the incoming of all able to fight is not quick. The

Elders have ordered it, and we are moving. We are not fast marchers and we must come far to the north and then swing south to join the human forces. We have to stay well away from the zones of the Unclean where I first met Hiero, lest we be detected and even stopped.

I was sent on ahead to carry the word to the Abbeys. As I journeyed, I heard a strange sound in the forest. He sent the mental image of a helpless fawn, calling for its mother. It was this great lump of a weed eater, bawling his head off for Hiero. Fortunately, I remembered what he sounded like and was able to contact him. He is not as stupid as he looks and told me much.

Here, Klootz snorted indignantly. Obviously, he too could understand at least some of the bear's sarcasm. Hiero looked on, his mind more at ease than it had been for a long time. While the bear paused, considering the next thought, a vagrant message entered Hiero's mind that was not from Gorm at all! *Lazy*—unknown concept—*carried on my back when tired*—unknown—*-fight! Where (/)???* *needed by HIM!* To his delight, Hiero realized that Klootz understood just what he was hearing and wanted his master to know it. The giant deer knew well what he was worth and was not about to be put down by his nimble-witted cohort.

Gorm continued, the silence broken only by the hiss of the little flames. Behind them, the forest wall reared up, dark and deep, a wall of black shadows. The stars blazed overhead through the gaps in the forest roof, icy-white in the night sky.

Here is what is important. I have learned, through the morse and from messengers from Brother Aldo, what has happened in the South, far away. The news is not good. We can do nothing about it, however. Our task is here. The enemy is on the march. They are moving as we sit here. They follow an arc, as do my folk, the bear people, from east to west and then south. But they move on an inner circle and have less far to go. They are no more than two easy marches behind us right now.

Maluin spoke. "Hiero, I can understand him, but I can't talk to him. How many are coming? What does he know of their battle order?"

The answer was not encouraging. *All! They bring every unit, every creature that can fight! We know many of their hidden forts and their buried places. We think they have left little but shes and young. If they be beaten, we can cleanse the North. If they are beaten! The Man-rats, the monkey-things you call the Hairy Howlers, the Devil-dogs, all will be with them. It is a great host. Can you match it?* His silence then hung, pregnant with doubt, in all of their minds.

What of machines? This was Hiero. *Have you any news of their powered ships? Any news of the lightning guns? Recall that thing that struck me down on the shore last year. And what of the sky? The flier that we saw long ago. Have any of those been seen and, if so, where and when?*

We have watched for all of those, Gorm sent. *The ship was seen once, but far to the east and some months back, not recently. We do not know how many they have. We ourselves cannot watch the sea and the islands. The Eleveners are trying, but we have no recent news. The flying thing has never been seen, save by us two on that one occasion. Perhaps they had only one and it was destroyed.* The bear's mental tone grew reflective. *The Elders feel that the sky is not to their liking, perhaps, or why do they not do more with it? Why not rear broods of evil fliers of some kind? No, they like night and stealth and burrowing in the dark more than the clear air and sun. They can fight in the blaze of day, but — it is not natural to such things. They are like those two Deaths-in-the-Dark whom you slew back there in the swamp. Ambush and the stroke from behind, the unseen terror of the lightless hours, the cruel and stealthy murder of the helpless, the old and*

the young— those are their chosen methods!

I hope they cannot all be persuaded to fight like the enemies of God whom we just encountered!
This was the limpid, clear mind of Cart Sagenay. Hiero guessed that it would take little training to make the young priest as good a mental linguist as he was. He saw Gorm look appraisingly at the younger man.

Those, I think, were allies, and unwilling ones at that. I consider that, if we had the time, Hiero, we would find some Unclean devices, like those things they block thoughts with that they wear around their necks. Maybe they buried some such devices to hold those creatures where they had, to stay and keep watch. But we have no time for idle thoughts such as these. The enemy moves, and they are coming, direct and fast, for the main body of your forces. You know where those are. I do not. Too, there may be some good news, though vague and unclear. The Elders and the Eleveners, too, all feel the enemy is moving in haste, not along ordered lines. Something has upset them badly, and the thought is that they are striking out in reaction and not in the carefully planned way they would prefer. This may be encouraging, not so?

Hiero thought of the destruction of Neeyana and the two deadly ships and smiled. Yes, that *would* have upset the Unclean!

Gorm continued, addressing Hiero directly. *I think you and I can guess who leads them. There may be others in the command of their troops, but you and I know who hates and fears you the most, the mind that will never rest while you live . . .*

S'duna! Hiero stared into the orange glow of the dying fire. He could see the pale face and hairless skull of the Master of the Blue Circle, the pupilless eye-pits of evil. There might indeed be others in the high Councils of the enemy—Unclean adepts, mental wizards of dark arts, foes of all that was decent. But he knew Gorm was right. His greatest antagonist was coming with all the enormous power at his command. The Unclean had come out in the open at last, hoping to crush the Metz Republic in one brutal stroke before it could build its young strength. If the bear was right, they just could be making a mistake. Decades of raids, stealthy ambushes, plottings, and assassins in the night might not be the best preparation for open warfare. It was a cheering thought. Still, the other comment was right, too. Time was short.

Put out the fire and let's go, he sent. We march southeast for the lakes. That's where we'll meet them. The Abbeys need to be told.

And may God defend the right, was the thought of Per Sagenay.

XII

Battle Morning

The mist lay cool and curtained over the lake. It was the body of water, perhaps twenty miles in extent, that the Metz called the Lake of Weeping. Some women had died there long ago, supposedly of unrequited love. More important, Hiero thought, was the fact that the lake had a connection through the River of Rains with distant Namcush. The connection was by still another lake, this one called Falling Leaves, a long, slender lake. The Lake of Weeping was deep and shaped like a boomerang, the elbow pointing northeast, though the left arm, which faced almost due north, was the longer.

There were a few small islands in view, some mere stubs of rock and others crowned with trees, whose

spires and branches pierced the shifting fogs over the dark water. There was movement out there, Hiero saw. Small craft rowed briskly from one islet to another. The rising mist, burned away by the sun's coming, revealed the dark shapes of several large sailing vessels. On a number of islands, smoke rose in the morning air. Activity, but not too much activity . . .

Hiero was sitting astride Klootz on the end of a low promontory which jutted into the Lake of Weeping almost at the angle of the elbow. It was a handy place to be, and he had picked it himself. He was the Commander of the Center under Demero, and the old man had brushed aside any complaints about seniority before they got started. "Who knows the enemy better than you do? No one. Who has encountered more of them than anyone else and still survived? Same answer. Justus Berain says he'll be glad to serve under you, anywhere, any time. Like to argue with *him*? I'm giving you Maluin and Sagenay as staff. The two Mantans won't serve under anyone else, insubordinate devils. The whole army has word of your cats, and they can serve as runners to carry written messages. Maluin has already got a bunch of juniors to handle routine. What's left? Nothing. Get to work, boy. I'm busy."

Now Hiero smiled wryly as he watched through his far-looker, the small telescope he carried clipped to his saddle. He could, hear low voices among the group of young officers and NCOs behind him. He was finally beginning to realize that being a living legend was not an unmixed blessing. The awe in the eyes of the young men and women who served under him was annoying, but there was nothing he could do about it. He concentrated once more on the dispositions to his front. He had to use his eyes and those of others, for the Abbey machines had clamped an intense shield over the minds of all in the area. Presumably the Unclean had done the same for their own forces. Time would tell who possessed the most effective mental protection.

His scouting group had fled southwest at an incredible pace after Gorm had alerted them. They had actually cut off four days on their time going out, and they had been moving very fast indeed then. They needed every minute that they could get, and Hiero had driven them all unmercifully, using Klootz's broad back to carry those who were the most tired. This was usually Per Sagenay, whose young body was not as tough as the others' and who resented it but could only comply. But three days out from their front lines, Geor Mantan had sprained an ankle and, cursing horribly, had been made to ride as well. Otherwise they would have left him.

They had bought the Republic and its allies a week. In this struggle, that might be much. For the Otawah League's troops were still far off and already meeting some resistance as they came. Not all of S'duna's force had been sent west, and there was apparently a good deal wrong with security in the upper ranks of the League! *just because I loathe S'duna 's filthy guts, I shouldn't make the mistake of underrating his slimy brain*, Hiero thought to himself. *The bastard can think, and he knows enough to try and bleed off any help we might get, if he learns about it first. Let's hope there's some coming he doesn't know about.*

He looked down and saw a young lieutenant at salute. He eyed her approvingly. Save for the short leather skirt, her uniform was identical to his, and he knew his women could use their weapons and brains as well as or better than the men. Besides, she was pretty.

"Message from the Abbot-General, sir. Very hard fighting has started in the deep woods about twenty kilometers north and east. Our screens are giving back slowly, trying to see what's behind the enemy front. The morse troops have been ordered back because the country is too broken for them. He will keep you informed as he gets more data."

Hiero grinned down at the snapping black eyes, returned the salute and thanked her, then forgot her immediately.

It made sense to get the cavalry out. One or two might serve as couriers in the depths of the forest, but they couldn't maneuver as a unit. Demero had stripped the North to get those two mounted regiments, and they must not be wasted.

"Per Sagenay," he threw over his shoulder. "Bring me the map quadrant that shows the land opposite us and to the west, if you please."

Together, they examined it. It was bog and drowned land, but not deep in water, containing only shallow, slow-moving streams which kept it somewhat drained. There were few trees, but mostly grasses and rank growths of reed. The whole section eventually sprawled down to the low-lying shore of the lake they were on, over to their left and on the longer of the two arms of the V. The shore simply became the marsh, or vice versa, for a kilometer of total distance. A bad place to put troops, it seemed, but useful for the passive resistance it made, guarding a flank, like a broad, muddy moat. Now the question was, might this fact be too obvious to another keen mind?

Hiero spoke for a few minutes with Cart Sagenay, then sent the young priest back to his own group. He scrawled something on a small belt pad of reed paper and called M'reen over to his side. The sun had cleared the last of the dawn mist off the water now, and the blue sparkle against the green foliage was almost dazzling.

Take this to our old chief the Wise One. Then hurry back. There will be much to do this day.

She was gone like her native wind, all eyes on the slender form until it vanished. Ch'uirsh and Za'reekh waited impatiently in the rear, ready for their own summons.

Edard Maluin strode over and patted Klootz absently. The blade of his billhook tapped the ground as he balanced the huge weapon in his other hand like a wand.

"What do we know about the two flanks, Hiero? The left doesn't bother me too much. The arm of the lake there bends away from us and can be held pretty easily. The right, now, that's different. Fallig Leaves Lake is not especially wide and it tapers into Bowstring Creek and the River of Rains. A long line to guard, all the way down to the Inland Sea."

"The Abbot knows it, you know it, and I know it. Pretty soon, if they don't already, the enemy will know it. We have four full regiments of Frontier Guards and two mixed regiments of militia whose women are as well trained as the men—not Guards standard, but pretty good. About seven thousand, if you count the auxiliaries, baggage, ammunition carriers, and so on. Two regiments of morse. A strong battalion of Scouts, now falling back in front of the Unclean. Certain aquatic allies, whose performance is still untested. Also what you both see and do not see out on the lake and similarly to east and west. Forget the League. They started too late and are well behind the enemy now. Maybe they'll get here in a week or so and maybe not. What they find when they do get here is something else. There *may* be other help closer to hand. I don't know; nobody knows. Gorm has gone to try and find out, but hell have to go around the fighting and the enemy flanks to do it. All very problematical. And that, my friend, is *it*. We have nothing else, no reserve, except a small tactical one, taken from the above. This is our first *army*, just as what you served in was the first navy. We've never moved or fought on this scale before. No one in the North has—not the Unclean, either."

He shifted in his saddle and stared out over the water. Armies had fought in the South, if not here. He suppressed the wish for Luchare, leading a division of lancers on their hoppers, emerging from the southern wood to the rescue. *Might as well ask for a flight of angels.*

The morning wore on. Reports came in sporadically—estimates of Unclean strength and movements, losses of the Republic's forces, and whatever seemed of interest. One item was of great interest. Many, many light boats were being brought up. Some were large enough for ten men, others mere kayaks, but big enough for a single person. All the Unclean units seemed to have lots of them, and they were carried well to the fore.

"They must have a pretty good idea of where we are with all that stuff," he said to Per Sagenay. "Of course, the whole area is full of lakes and streams, but I think this was thought out more carefully. This is no baggage train, but something meant for quick assault. I want the information sent to Berain and the others at once. In fact, tell it to all units."

M'reen, who had long since returned, came up with her two warriors. The grim faces of the Mantans were just behind.

We can hear the fighting, Hiero. Can you not do so? These two, the men with the dark souls, they can hear it too. They told us with signs.

"That's right, Per," Reyn admitted. "Them cats caught it first, but just listen yourself now."

Hiero listened. There were calls from out on the lake, horns blowing, and the shuffle of moving feet behind him. Even a distant splash of oars from some guard boat came through. The he caught it. It was a hum, a buzzing in the distance. He listened harder. Now he could pick out higher and lower tones like the shrills of far-off insects. There came a very faint series of thuds, no more than vibratory disturbances of the air. It was enough.

"Take charge, Edard," he said to Maluin. "Sagenay's your second or what you choose. Remember what I said. No movement until the crucial time. This is going to be a close one." He turned and looked speculatively at the twins, whose cold, set faces stared back.

"Can you two handle morses? If I can find any? Otherwise you'd be better off staying here."

Geor spoke for both. "We can. We've ridden double, too, case there's only one. Take us."

"All right. We're crossing the lake, down there on the left. I'll walk Klootz until we get aboard a boat." He signaled the catfolk to follow. He had no worries about their ability to keep up with mounted troops, and they would have been miserable away from him. He waved to the salutes of the staff and rode slowly down the twisting trail to the west, off the bluff and onto the path along the shore. The five others loped behind him.

In twenty minutes, they came to a tiny bay in which a small rowing barge lay concealed. He led the big morse aboard, and the others clambered after. At a word to the NCO in charge, the ten long sweeps began to move the clumsy vessel out into the lake on a long slant, north and west, to where the marsh and the cleaner fluid of the deep water began to mingle.

All the while, the sounds of the battle had been growing in their ears. Clanging noises of metal came now, and the metallic, piercing sounds of enemy trumpets mixed with the sonorous Metz horns. Screams came as well, and chorused cheering. Hiero knew the orders had been sent and he knew the defense was thickening on orders as the Abbey forces drew near the Lake of Weeping. Yet the sounds of conflict were raging closer at a tremendous rate. The Unclean must be piling in all their strength, heedless of casualties, in order to make such speed. He cocked one eye at the bright sun and consulted his built-in

mental clock. It was near eleven, and the timetable had not quite allowed for this burst of enemy speed. He watched the oarsmen strain at the great sweeps as they passed under the lee of a small island. They were three-quarters of the way across now and in plain view of the elbow of the lake, the curve of the northern shore stretching out of sight in both directions.

The din grew as he watched, and he saw the first Metz troops break from the forest and reach the long lines of boats drawn up on the shore. The skeleton crews who manned them began to help the wounded aboard. The movement was swift and disciplined, and he smiled. No panic here! As each boat pulled out, oar-propelled on this windless day, more men appeared and took their places in the next. He could see through the far-looker that no boat left the shore with an empty place or without orders.

Now he could begin to glimpse the fighting for himself. He saw a rank of veteran archers halt, fire a volley, then run easily back and turn for another. Men fell in their ranks as they fought, but the others closed up. As he watched intently, an eruption of the enemy burst from the forest wall, a small pack of the Plague Hounds, with Leemutes riders screaming on their bony backs. These were Hairy Howlers, apelike brutes, brandishing clubs and axes and hurling long javelins with devilish aim. The hideous dog mutants were man-high at the shoulder and had naked hides, blotched and mottled in shades of orange and red. Their ears drooped, and they had heavy jaws and gaping maws, filled with great teeth.

The archer troop slew more than half of them with one more volley, then dropped their bows as the survivors came on, unchecked. It was close-in fighting now, and the Plague Hounds raged in the Metz ranks, shaking men like so many jackstraws when they secured a grip. The Howlers fought like furies, seeking only to kill and not minding their own safety as they hacked and stabbed. Then it was suddenly over, and a sadly diminished troop fell back again from the heap of reeking corpses. They carried some wounded, but not many.

The battle was fierce all along the shore now, and many of the boats were not rowing, but lying off and giving covering fire. A sheet of arrows flew, and then another. The last Scouts of the defense were scrambling aboard, some having to fight as they did so. Now there were few left. The guard boats, with stocks of ready arrows, redoubled their fire. A pack of the great, scaly-tailed Man-rats, caught in one such blast, went down in heaps.

The boats pulled away from the shore. Many places were empty in these, Hiero noted sadly. The thin metal notes of the Unclean trumpets sounded over and over, and their creatures began to draw back to the shelter of the wood. As they vanished, the guard boats ceased their fire and began slowly to follow the rear of those who had passed on through. Now there was a widening gap and an empty shore, full of dead and wounded.

Hiero realized that his own craft was touching the mud of the shore, and he scrambled aboard Kloodz and ran him over the blunt bow. The mud here was a man's thigh deep, but the big morse made nothing of it. His spreading hooves were designed for this element.

"Hold on to my stirrups," he told the Mantans. "You'll get a bit wet, but I can't help that. You would come!"

The cat people had been wet before this. They didn't like it, but it was no real problem. As they began to march inland through the tussocks of grass and the sloughs in which they grew, the warrior-priest looked back. The height given by his perch on the morse enabled him still to look down along the shore for some distance.

The Metz rear guard—what remained of it—was rowing away steadily, if slowly. A few other boats, not

many, had come out from the chain of wooded islands and were helping the craft which either carried too many wounded or were hampered by lack of men to row. A couple of thin lines of soldiers were visible on the south shore. And a flag waved here and there, showing the green on white of the Republic.

But now the scene changed. The Unclean army, silent and intent once more, poured out of the trees on the north bank. This time they came prepared. Save for the officers, each man or Leemute carried either a small canoe or part of a larger one. Man-rats took to the water like the natural swimmers they were, needing no transportation and carrying their weapons. This, too, was a disciplined move and showed long hours spent in practice. Hiero glimpsed a group of sinuous, brown shapes slide into the lake and remembered the great water weasels he had fought long ago. The Uncleans were indeed using everything they had. Would it be enough?

His view of the battle scene faded, obscured by trees and distance. His little troops were moving deeper into the shallow waters and much of the drowned land. There would be no help from using his mind. He had tried testing his ability continuously. The shields held by both the Unclean and the Abbeys were functioning too well for anything to break through. He could talk to his cat-people at close range, but that was all.

Ahead, he glimpsed a line of black things moving and whipped up the far-looker. This was what he had come to find. Klootz lifted his dripping muzzle and bawled a greeting. In a few more moments, he had reached a mound rising out of the grass and water, and Hiero could greet his new troops.

The two regiments of morse and riders were in line, but loosely picketed. Hiero knew the two colonels, though both men were older. In fact, in the past he had even served under Colonel Saclare and been taught by Colonel Lejus at the Academy. They were typical Metz and could have passed for his own close relations; stocky, bronzed men in their forties riding with the ease of a lifetime in the saddle. With their aides behind, they reined up and saluted. Hiero acknowledged the salute and masked a feeling of some awkwardness.

Saclare disabused him promptly. "We axe delighted to have you in charge. Lejus and I know your past training." One sardonic black eye drooped in what only those close by could have told was a wink. It was enough. All three broke into broad grins and gripped hands. Command was established and they were as one.

"Yes, I can find a couple of remounts, though we don't have many," Lejus said, staring at the Mantan twins with interest. "We all have heard of these two. Who hasn't? Thought they always fought alone, though. I expect you'll want to keep them with you. Heard of your cats, too, and what beauties they are. I gather they can look after themselves. But come along, sir. We're rigging something over there you might want to use. Saclare thought of it."

A little distance off on the mound, the place an ancient German would have called a *Feldherrnhugel*, or "general's observation hill," men and morses in harness were straining to raise a triangle of extremely long poles. As they locked into place, others lifted a long ladder and began with speed to lash down a rude platform. Ail the material had been precut and dragged through the wide marsh to this point.

Moments later, Hiero and the two colonels had a fresh view of the conflict and were glued to their far-lookers. They could see far along the northern shores, as well as across the Lake of Weeping, and they were barely in time to see another crux of the battle.

The Unclean troops, human and otherwise, still poured from the wood. At least a thousand boats, large and small, all of light weight, seemingly made of hide braced with wood stripping, were beating out in

pursuit of the Metz rear guard. These, moving slowly, were still some distance from the southern bank and safety, though many seemed close. Hiero noted that those that *were* close seemed to contain the wounded, while those which were the most sluggish had none. *So far so good*, he thought, *but, God above, how many of the enemy were still pouring from the forest to the attack! And they still produced more and more boats!* The hideous, giant dogs were swimming out in packs also, some with Howler riders to guide the others. Most of the Howlers were in boats, but fresh swarms of the Man-rats still rushed from under the trees and flung themselves into the lake. The water weasels showed here and there as they dived and porpoised in the front of the van. When *would* the signal be given?

"Put these on, sir," Saclare said. He was holding a bundle of the laquered battle armor of the morse riders, surmounted by a bronze, visored helmet. He and all the others were already wearing theirs.

Hiero struggled absently with the cuirass, half-sleeves, and greaves, not even noting that the two colonels were lacing them on for him and that his helmet bore the white heron plume of a general. His gaze was locked on the water. The main body of the apparently endless Unclean horde was now at the level of the larger islands, whose tree branches drooped over the lake.

A sudden blare of echoing horn calls rang out over the cries and yelps of the Unclean hordes. Branches fell into the lake, and even some of the great trees were thrown down. Out from their hidden island anchorages swept a flock of ships, the five armored Metz steamboats in the van, belching clouds of smoke as they charged the enemy. Justus Berain was not a man to be hurried; he struck only when he felt the exact time had come! The gun ports of the steamers had been widened and lowered, allowing for point-blank fire. From the great muzzle-loaders burst not solid shot, but masses of broken ceramic tile, mixed with rock and metal scraps, causing instant havoc. Behind the steamers came a fleet of stout rowing barges, wooden mantlets and wicker screens protecting both the complement of archers and the rowers. Volley-fired only by orders, sheets of arrows swept over the enemy, adding to the carnage.

It was not all one-sided. Though blasted and torn, shredded by the crude language, the blasting rubble of the war steamers, and devastated by the arrow storm, the enemy fought back. Their metallic trumpets signaled anew from the forest, and fresh masses swept out and into the confusion on the waters.

Here and there in the swarming ranks of the foe, Hiero now caught glimpses of gray-cloaked figures hurrying from one point to the other. The Unclean adepts might be new to open warfare, he realized, but they had come in strength and were fast learners!

He tore his eyes away and looked down at what lay below the observation platform. It made him feel easier. Unconcerned by the uproar in the distance, just under four thousand troopers of the Metz cavalry waited by their mighty steeds, all in four broken lines, stretching across the marsh. The great lances were planted in line, one at the head of each morse, with the troopers lounging in place. The two Mantans, impassive as always, waited patiently at the ladder foot; the three Children of the Wind were beside them. Kloutz stood, silent, next to the two morses requisitioned for the hunters.

"Won't be much longer, gentlemen," he said to the two colonels. "It looks good here. Downstream on the lower lake, it may be something else. We only have one steamer, the newest, there. But we have other surprises. We should know shortly."

They all continued to watch the lake even as Hiero spoke. As far away as they could see, until the angle of the lake cut them off, the battle raged, the screams and cries of men and beasts mingling under the veils of smoke with the roar of the guns.

"By the Lord God, I think they are turning," Saclare muttered. "Even they have had enough. I thought

they were never going to stop coming out of the woods. But—look!"

They could all see it now, and Hiero sent a heartfelt prayer up to Heaven. The frightful slaughter had turned back the swimmers and the Unclean boats. The frail craft they had borne so many leagues were no match for the keen arrows and the great guns. The armored ships went where they would, spewing destruction on all sides and grinding any smaller vessels under their angled snouts. Repeatedly, the enemy swarms tried to board and close in, only to be beaten back with heavy losses. The arrow boats followed in the wake of the big five, and the guard boats, which had fled so slowly to the other shore, wheeled and re-entered the fight. Many others darted from the southern shore to join them.

Here and there, some of the great mink mutants sprang aboard a smaller boat or a load of Howlers tried to board. Man-rats also tried the same tactic, but the wicker and plank screens kept most of them out, and the others were quickly slaughtered. The main body of Unclean human infantry was not one of great watermen, and the horrible dogs were completely helpless. There were so many bodies of all kinds floating on the waters of the lake that it almost seemed that one could walk across on them. The massed wreckage of the invasion boats made larger lumps here and there in the sea of corpses.

The Unclean trumpets back on shore rose to a screaming pitch, incessant and shrill. By boat and in the water, the enemy fled for the northern banks. They had begun to do so even before the signal to retreat had rung out. Beaten and demoralized, yet still in great numbers, they swam and paddled for their lives. Not one had come near to setting foot on the farther shore.

The war boats of the Republic moved in behind them, the terrible fire taking a continuous toll. Blasts from the guns swept the shore, and arrows flew through the smoke. Looking at the sun over the reeking clouds, Hiero realized that it was noon and that hardly an hour had passed since the enemy had launched its craft upon the lake. He wondered how the battle to the east was coming. The foe still mustered great strength and would fight hard if given a chance to rally. Would the interpretation of what came next be accurate?

"To your posts, gentlemen," he said quietly, "I want this tower struck at once. The enemy could see it if they came now."

They went down the long ladder like men possessed. In moments, the tower was disassembled and the three ranking officers were riding slowly along the lines. Saclare dropped off to command the right flank, and Hiero halted in the center; Lejus went on to take over the left. Listening hard, Hiero could hear a slackening of the gunfire from the lake. He could think of no reason for it but one—lack of targets of opportunity. Now only an occasional rumble came from the smoke bank in the southeast.

He turned to the catfolk, who stood waiting by his saddle. *I have a task of great danger for you, he sent. We must know if the enemy comes and how fast. Ch 'uirsh, go to the left. Za 'reekh, you go to the right Try to reach me with your minds, but come back if you cannot. Do not be seen if you can possibly help it. Kill none unless i t is death not to do otherwise. I seek knowledge, not bodies. Will you go? M'reen, you will go to my front, but not as far as the others. You can perhaps relay their thoughts.*

They did not even answer, but were gone like three marsh sprites, skimming grass clumps and knee-deep water as if they were not there.

"If this were dry ground, I'd send you two on a scout," he said to the twins. "But I don't want the enemy to see a single morse, and you can't move in this muck like those three." They nodded bleakly and settled themselves at rest in their saddles.

Waiting was not easy. Hiero tried to think about the future; when he found this too depressing, he narrowed it to the immediate future. He had two tasks before him, and they might come quickly, even together. *One — break the enemy flank to pieces. Come and be broken, damn you! Two— find and kill S'duna. You 're out there, you filth, I know it. Too many of your dirty renegade humans, too many louse-bitten Leemutes. You threw everything you had into this one and you couldn't stay behind on Manoon, polluting the sun with your amusements this time!*

Behind his back, the long lines shifted and swayed. All the riders were mounted, simply waiting for a word. Where were the cats?

M'reen's thought came like lightning as he slapped at a cloud of hungry gnats and mosquitoes. *We are coming back! My males have found them! They come from the trees, many, many! Be warned!*

Hiero hand-signaled as previously arranged, and the ripple of readiness welled away from him in both directions along the ranks.

The Children of the Wind appeared in a clump, running and dodging like the racers they were. Missiles fell around them, but none hit.

The general bore no lance. His white plume dipped as he bent and drew the long, straight sword from its sheath on Klootz's saddle. The two Mantan brothers ranged up, one on each side, their slender war axes across their saddlebows. The front of the enemy appeared, Leemutes and humans completely intermingled.

Hiero raised his sword high in his gauntleted right hand, then drove it down, and they were off. *Come on, big boy*, he sent. *This is what it's all about!* Beside the three leading morses, the light pads of the cat people spurned the sedges.

Hiero's fist clenched inside the basket hilt of the cavalry saber as he held it straight forward like a spear. As Klootz gathered speed, his rider could hear the rising splash and thunder of the charging lines behind. He stole a glance to either side. *Good!* They had learned the orders!

The left wing, the northern line of the morse riders, was swinging slowly past him, never breaking ranks. The right wing was holding back, so that the line was beginning to show an arc. The left would strike first and then roll the enemy up, cutting them off at the edge of the swamp and driving them into the open, away from any cover.

Now there was no time to think at all, and he concentrated on what lay in front. The days and weeks of planning were over, and he was a killing machine and nothing more. Klootz bellowed with battle rage, and his kin answered from behind, a rolling, swelling roar which rumbled from one end of the line to the other.

The Unclean halted, milling in confusion. The Man-rats and the Plague Hounds, those that were left, had made little of the swamp, which hardly slowed them at all. But the men, though disciplined and deadly fighters on solid ground, were floundering, tripping over tussocks and slipping in the pools and mud. A great number of the Howlers were dismounted, and they liked this bog no better than their human allies. As the line of antlered heads and the glitter of the lance points and armor rose before them, many turned to flee. Others, of sterner stuff or with better officers, tried to form a line or at least a shield wall. The result was confusion! Order, counterorder—disorder!

From far left to far right, the terrible cavalry of the North charged home!

Hiero's sword point split the face of a giant Howler, and he withdrew it as Kloodtz lunged on. Every lance, seemingly, skewered one of the enemy, front or back, and then, butt lifted high, was withdrawn and leveled once more, seeking fresh prey.

It made no difference whether the Unclean fled or tried to stand. If the riders missed, their mighty steeds did the work, slashing and trampling, pounding the enemy underfoot with their giant hooves, seizing them in their teeth and shaking them off like bits of tattered bark until they fell away, mangled and lifeless.

A monstrous Hound, jaws agape, sprang at Hiero's bridle hand. Without thinking, he dropped the reins and raised the unbreakable shield, the gift of his strangest friend, to dash the brute aside. A long-handled hatchet swept past his side, and Reyn Mantan's blow split the creature's skull.

The impetus of the charge was slowing, but not very much. As all the riders angled to the right, never stopping or allowing the Unclean to form and make a stand, the edge of the deep woods loomed up in front. It was hard fighting now, for the compressed masses of the broken foe were trying desperately to reach that shelter. Enemy crossbowmen and javelin throwers, human and otherwise, shot and hurled their missiles from the trees in a last effort to hold the mounted men back from their quarry. Saddles were being emptied, but the mutated giant moose were no scared beasts when bereft of their riders! They fought on with empty saddles, keeping the lines intact, as they had been taught. If one of the gallant animals fell, the others, with men in the saddle or not, closed the line and kept on to the attack. The extreme left took the heaviest losses, but narrowed in without letup, herding the squalling Leemutes and their fragmented masters out and away from the refuge of the trees.

Hiero was unscathed so far, but his right arm was growing very tired. The beloved creature who bore him bled from a dozen light wounds, of which Kloodtz took no note at all. His eyes were red with blood lust and he felt no pain. Reyn Mantan and M'reen, her long knife bloody, watched Hiero's left while the two male cats and Geor Mantan protected his right. The Mantans had produced light oval shields of laminated bark from some pack or other and deftly deflected the missiles of any sort which menaced their leader.

Hiero never noticed, intently only on coldly killing anything that stood before him. He struck and stabbed, hacked and slew, with no compunction at all. Here was the enemy at last, where he could be reached! Here was revenge for the empty months, the loss of his mate, the treachery, and the pain! Death to them! Kill them all in their vileness, until the decent earth was empty of them forever!

It took a strong hand on his bridle to check his pace and a strong voice to penetrate the madness of battle. His lifted sword dropped, and he finally realized that a friend was trying to get his attention. Breathing in great gulps, he saw that Kloodtz had stopped and was trembling with the aftershock of the melee. Hiero managed to break the fog in his brain and rest, though it was an awful wrench.

"Stop fighting, General! Look, we've beaten them. Maybe a quarter got into the woods, no more than that, sir. Look at what is happening now!"

Almost against his will, the Metz turned his head. It was Colonel Lejus who had reined him up, Hiero stared at where the man was pointing, half in disbelief.

The Unclean, beaten back and decimated on the waters of the Lake of Weeping, had been rallied, once they were back on shore and behind the screen of the forest. They were still a hideous and mighty host, and their leaders had turned them into the apparently empty marsh on their right. Here they were

supposed to sweep around the defenses of the Republic, turn the long arm of the lake, and strike in the rear of their hated foe.

What had happened was just a little bit different. The wise old Abbot-General and Hiero himself had led the Unclean to conceive of this maneuver, and were waiting with the only cavalry in all the world's history that could fight in a swamp even better than on dry land! The result lay before Hiero's sight and was hard to take in, even though he had helped plan it.

Cut off from their rallying places in the woods, harried and shocked by the lances of the morse riders, what remained of the Unclean who had assaulted the marsh was being driven in a grim battle toward the waters of the lake. Stumbling, lurching, and screaming as it was ridden down, the ragged and broken crowd was herded toward the waters. The lines of morse and men had no gaps. The Republic had lost perhaps an eighth of its mounted force, but what remained was more than sufficient. A thin line guarded their backs, but no fresh eruption came from the silent trees to the east.

Out on the waters lay the final death. Silent and watchful, the five steamships waited. Extending their line out of sight, the arrow barges also waited. The late noon sun beat down from overhead on total destruction. Horns blew, and the Metz mounted troops halted and dressed ranks, tightening their formations. They now were a shallow half-moon; within its crescent, the Unclean, a shrieking mob of foul men and foul brutes, were driven inexorably to the place where the shifting foothold of the marsh became no foothold at all.

His lids half-lowered against the glare, Hiero watched, well content. The orders were "No Quarter." What the enemy would have done in its place was well known. This at least was a clean death. For long years, the attempt of normal and reviving humanity, who wished only to live in peace and happiness, had been frustrated and constricted by these creatures who had been spawned by the Ultimate Dark. This was their reward. They had embraced the Darkness, and that to which they had given their souls was now upon them. Under the high, golden glow of the sun, let them perish. Forever!

The horns of the mounted men of the Republic sounded the charge for the last time. Lances in place, the crescent went in for the kill. It was slaughter. Pierced and ground underfoot in the marsh, the Unclean died if they took to the water. Should any manage to escape by diving under the line of waiting ships, a second and even more alert line of smaller craft waited for them. There were no survivors. Nor were there meant to be any.

Hiero had turned away when the end became inevitable. He looked now both around him and also at the line of morse riders who watched their backs and fronted the green wall of the forest.

He remembered to return his long sword to the saddle sheath. Both of his colonels were now beside him and looking at him in a way he found disconcerting. *Why should they look at me this way? These men both taught me!* At his stirrup, M'reen tied a piece of rag around the forearm of Za'reekh, while Ch'uirsh tried to scrape mud off his pelt. They looked at him the same way. The brothers Mantan, apparently unharmed, sat their mounts in their usual stolid fashion at the rear, but their eyes were also aglow!

I did nothing, he told himself. *A little planning, but it was mostly Kulase Demero. Maybe I helped a little. But I didn't earn this adulation!* He fell back on prayer, looking off into the distance.

Father, preserve the least of Thy servants from the dreadful sin of pride! Besides, he added in a lower key, *I really don't deserve it!*

God, or someone deputizing, brought a most welcome interruption. A mud-spattered morse rider pulled

up beside them and handed a dispatch to Saclare. He wasted no time in tearing it apart.

"Hah! What is left of those scum is fighting for its life in the forest. They are being driven—driven, mark you—back on our lines! Your plans, sir, are working beyond all belief. I congratulate you. Who else would have had troops that no one knew about waiting to pounce, once they were beaten back? Do you realize, General, we have won *everywhere*?" His native emotion took over. "By the blood of Christ, Hiero, there are none of them left. We have blotted them out!" He withdrew at once, conscious of a gaffe. "Your pardon, General. I forgot myself in the excitement."

"Troops that no one knew about," Hiero said in low tones, almost to himself. "We met the main attack here, but what of the lower lake and the eastern, rivers down to Namcush? What of them, Colonel?"

"I have dispatches, sir." This was a young man, one of Saclare's mounted aides. Hiero noted that the boy had one arm in a sling. He had been to the wars.

"Let's hear it, lad." The Metz hated to see that glow in the boy's eyes. How many had died for the cause this morning?

"Sir, the lower crossings were hurled back completely. Our ships and the Dam People stopped every attempt to pass. We had one big warship there. It was enough. The Dam People killed the rest. The enemy sent no more than a light wing in that direction."

"So none crossed. Good news." Hiero was physically exhausted, but the second task was unfinished. The Unclean mind shields ought to have been either taken or dispersed. Then where was *S'duna*?

He brought himself back to what the young officer had said. The Dam People! How many of Charoo's young males and females had died? The lower lake and the upper reaches of the outflow rivers had cost lives. Which kittens would not see their father or mother come back to the lodge? He wept inwardly, then swept the feeling aside.

Something else, something more important, had been told to him! "Troops no one knew about." Least of all himself! But he could guess.

"Colonels! Parade the troops!" His voice blared, and he could see the faces wince as he yelled. He tried to become calmer, new allies are coming from the north. I want them received with all courtesy, all honors. The Unclean scum are driven into the water. I want *all* the troops available in line to receive our guests."

Funny, The Unclean mind shields were gone, totally gone. He would have thought S'duna would have guarded himself. No, was nothing of the kind. It was nice to know Gorm was coming, though. Even nicer to feel that emptiness in the rear!

The Metz lances, many still bloody, dipped in salute as three figures came out of the forest and advanced in Hiero's direction. M'reen knelt, her furry arms outthrust, and her two males followed suit. The Children of the Wind had never done this for Hiero, but he didn't blame them.

Gorm was barely visible behind the other two presences. Huge and ambling, the two emissaries of the bear people who led were larger even than ancient Kodiak or Kamchatkan brown bears.

Only the high foreheads and the longer, more egg-shaped skulls behind the small, furry ears might have set them apart. Their ambling, rolling gait carried them through the muck of the swamp at an amazing

pace.

The leader—there was no mistaking his importance—reared up on his hind legs at Klootz' side. Absently, Hiero noted that the morse showed not the slightest sign of disturbance at the titanic proximity. A rank scent came from his silver fur. *I have no name, the huge creature sent. At least until I see more of you men-things. The men you call the Eleventh brothers brought us to war, those creatures of peace. What is peace? Being let alone. Yet we came to fight, and I think not mistakenly.*

His fellow Brobdingnagian had simply lain down in a wallow and was rolling. Hiero carefully avoided looking at the smallest of the trio. The Metz cavalry still stood at salute, lances raised.

I gather, the ponderous but powerful mind which lowered down at him went on, that these mentalities are standing thus to do us honor? Such is not necessary. You are the one who took our little cousin to the South. We are in your debt. Your march coincides with that of the Great Dens. What we can bring to the mutual contest, that we shall Produce the gift, little one.

Gorm moved forward. Around his neck and slung over his back had been a sack of some bark derivative. Now he spilled out the contents.

The two shining skins, the two bald pates, the two hating faces, rolled through the surface of the wet grass to Klootz's feet. One was unknown, but the other could never be forgotten. Obviously torn roughly from the torso, S'duna's head lay before Hiero, the lips drawn back in the agony of death.

The leader of the bear people was still sending. *We thought such vermin should be removed from the world. And we owed you a debt. These are the leaders you sought, Red and Blue. Their Circles are both destroyed. We think you had much to do with that, and our young and, unlicked cub agrees. Someday he may attain wisdom. That is up to him and to you.* The enormous head swiveled down to stare at him again. *You are flighty by our standards. Never mind. You may be the first of your kind to find enlightenment.*

'When Hiero could concentrate next, the two great bodies were vanishing into the woods. He looked down, and Gorm was still there.

They said I could stay, the young bear sent. This is not over. Hiero, where is Luchare?

The unexpected question cut through all Hiero's fatigue, crumbling the barriers he had forced himself to erect. His brain seemed to gather itself, then to launch a single, explosive thought.

Luchare!

Epilogue

Under her, Luchare felt the exhausted hopper stumble and come to a halt, unable to continue. For a moment, she sat there numbly, before forcing herself to dismount. Her legs were shaking with fatigue, and she; had to lean against the heaving sides of the beast for support. Vaguely, she was aware that one of the three men of her guard was offering help. She shook him off and stood there, trying to gather her energy to survey her surroundings.

Three men—only three now! How long had it been since the count took the others and turned back to protect her rear? Time was a jumble of confusion in her head. How long since they had turned into the

forest, trying to lose themselves in its vastness? And to what end? What had all the weeks of endless flight gained them?

She forced her mind back to the present and looked about. Before her, the little trail they had been following came to an end, and the colossal trees of the forest gave way to a moss-floored clearing. The day must be ending, with the sun already far down in the west; but after the dimness under the great trees, the light from the open sky seemed glaringly bright. She stared about her, suddenly conscious of a curious sense of familiarity. It was as if she had been here before in some other, far happier life.

She saw that the weary men were trying to make camp for the night, gathering moss for their beds and wood to build a fire. Supper, she knew, would be what remained of yesterday's kill. One man was working with flint and steel to kindle a small mound of twigs. Under him, the ground was blackened with evidence of some previous campfire. Again, familiarity tugged at her mind.

As she stood there, a feeling of something wrong grew in her. Then she realized that the forest had become strangely silent. Even the cries and chattering of the birds were stilled. She strained her ears to listen and her senses to reach out . . .

Luchare!

Faintly, at the very edge of her awareness, the call came through to her, demanding the answer that welled up in her mind. Then it was gone.

Night had fallen hours before, but torchlight showed a bustle of activity around the dock where the warship lay. Inside the captain's cabin, a single candle revealed two white-bearded men sitting at a small table. They looked up as the door opened to admit a younger man.

"They said I'd find you here, Father Abbot," Hiero began. Then he stopped, and a surprised smile crossed his face as Brother Aldo rose to greet him.

"I've been hearing about your winning the battle," the Elevenner said. "Too bad I was just too late to witness it. Hiero, you look as if you need a week of sleep!"

"Later. I don't have time now," Hiero told him.

Demero indicated a third chair. "Sit down, my boy. Aldo has returned with news from the South—terrible news, but I swore you should have the truth. D'alwah City is lost, the army has been totally beaten. Luchare and the king fled, nobody knows where. And no one knows whether she lives ..."

"She's alive," Hiero stated. "And I'm pretty sure I know where."

"She is near enough for you to contact?" Aldo's voice was filled with doubt.

Hiero shook his head slowly. "No, she's impossibly far away. Yet for one instant, I *know* I made contact with her mind. That's why I've come here to find you, Father Demero—to ask your permission to leave and go south to find her. Klootz, Gorm, and the cat people will come with me. And a few others have volunteered. They also ask permission."

"How far south will you go?" Aldo asked, before Demero had a chance to reply. "After you find your Luchare—if you do, as I pray you will—are you willing to go on to where only a man of your proven ability to defy the Unclean can go? Will you go far south of D'alwah into the reeking jungles where

Amibale's accursed witch of a mother took that young traitor and Unclean ally to learn his evil? Because it is there, from the slender bits of evidence we have, that my Brotherhood and I believe the evil source of the Unclean may lie."

Hiero considered, remembering that Solitaire had also warned of a great and evil mind far to the south. But there was only one possible decision. "If I have permission, I will go."

"Very well." Abbot Demero stood up, as if the meeting were ended. "You shall have permission—but only after I see you tucked firmly in bed and about to get the sleep you need."

"There isn't time!" Hiero protested. "The trip around the Inland Sea may take too long, even if we have nothing but good luck—which seems improbable. We should leave at once."

Aldo began, chuckling, and the abbot was smiling as he laid one around Hiero's shoulder.

"My boy," Demero asked, "did you really think I wouldn't know what was going on when you went around making preparations? Or did you think it an idle whim of mine to refuel this ship and load it with supplies for you?" He snorted with mock indignation. "Hiero, ships can be used for better purposes than destruction. Now give me the names of your volunteers, in case I missed one. Then well put you to bed in a cabin here. When you awake, you and your band will already be well on the way to your princess."

The princess was lying on a bed of moss, far to the southeast, but she was not asleep. There was too much on her mind.

Hiero was alive and well and free! All the doubts that had come to haunt her were gone, erased by the certainty of her brief contact with his mind. He would come for her. And she would be here, waiting for him.

She let her eyes rove about the clearing, now lighted by the nearly full moon above. She knew it now—this place where they had all camped on the long road south, just before they met the strange women who lived in these giant trees. She listened to the silence of the forest, remembering that the same silence had first heralded the coming of Vilah-ree and the others. They would remember her and provide a haven of safety for her and for the three men—most certainly for the men!—in their tree nests.

She turned on her side, smiling. And finally, she slept.

Glossary

Abbeys, the: Theocratic structure of the Kandan Confederacy, comprising the Metz republic in the west and the Otwah League in the east. Each Abbey has a military-political infrastructure, and the Abbey Council functions much as the House of Lords in eighteenth-century England, with all science and religion also as its prerogatives.

Batwah: Trade *Lingua franca*; an artificial language used throughout the areas bordering the Inland Sea, and well beyond in some places.

Buffer:Giant bovines, probably mutated bison, which migrate in vast herds through the western Kandan regions on an annual basis.

Chespek:Small kingdom on the Lantik Sea, often allied to D'alwah and equally often at war with its immediate neighbor.

Children of the Night Wind:An intelligent, bipedal species of mutated, man-sized feline; runners of unbelievable speed. Bred by the Unclean for warfare, they managed to escape their masters and establish themselves in a far country. Proud and volatile, they are in *no* sense Leemutes.

Circles:Administrative areas, named by color, of the Unclean and its Masters of the Dark Brotherhood. Hiero passed through three, the Red, Blue, and Yellow, as he went south and east. Until his journey, their existence was unknown.

D'alwah:Largest and most developed of the east coast states on the Lantik Sea. A kingdom, organized as a benevolent despotism, but where commoners have few rights. A debased branch of the Universal Church exists.

Dam People:Aquatic rodents of human intelligence and more than human bulk, who live on artificial lakes in the Metz Republic, under terms of mutual toleration; probably mutated beaver.

Dark Brotherhood:Their own name for the Masters of the Unclean. The fact that they use the word "dark" indicates that they sought universal conquest and, more important, gloried in it and realized that they were, in fact, basically evil. Modern Satanism, in its real sense, is a parallel. (See Circles; Unclean.)

Davids:Similar to the Mu'amans in that they follow a quite different monotheism from that taught by the church and one which they claim to be far older. Found in D'alwah, Chespek, and perhaps elsewhere, they occupy positions in all levels of society. (See Mu'amans.)

Death, The:The atomic and biologic blight which destroyed the major population centers and most of humanity some thousand years in the past. Still a name of dread and ultimate menace in Hiero's day. "All evil came with The Death" is a proverb.

Deserts of The Death: Patches of ancient atomic blight where there is little or no water and scant or no vegetation. Yet life exists in these horrible places, though most of it is inimical and strange, bred from hard radiation and a ferocious struggle to survive. Some of the Deserts are hundreds of square miles in size and, in Hiero's day, are avoided like The Death itself. They are rare in Kanda, but many exist in the South. Blue, radioactive glows mark the worst of them at night.

Eleveners: The Brotherhood of the Eleventh Commandment. ("Thou shalt not destroy the Earth nor the life thereon.") A group of social scientists who banded together after The Death to preserve human culture, love for *all* life, and knowledge thereof. This group permeates all human societal life and, though opposing violence, battles the Unclean, often in hidden ways.

Forty Symbols: The tiny wooden signs that a trained priest-exorcist carries on his person. By putting himself (or herself; there are priestesses of great power) in a trance state, the priest can forelock, or to some extent see the future, using the symbols.

Frontier Guards: The army or embodied forces of the Metz Republic. The Otwah League has a similar group. There are sixteen legions, self-contained units, in the Metz Republic. They are under, *not* the Republic's orders, but those of the Abbey Council, which, in turn, reports to the Lower House (Assembly) on its decisions, which are always approved. Priests usually lead and direct the Frontier Guards.

Glith: A recent form of Leemute, possibly bred from a reptile by the Unclean. A humanoid, scaled and very strong physically, utterly the slave of the Dark Masters.

Grokon: Giant descendants of our present-day hogs, which roam the northern forests. They are much-sought-for as meat but are very dangerous to hunt, being clever and the size of extant oxen when adult.

Hairy Howlers: One of the commonest and most dangerous varieties of Leemute. They are great, fur-covered, tailless primates, highly intelligent and used as soldiery by the Unclean. They hate all humans, save their Dark Masters. They resemble huge, upright baboons as much as anything.

Death Hart: A monster found, though rarely, in the southern Deserts of the Death. The ancestry of this foul mutation is unknown, but it is carnivorous and bears both claws and horns.

Hoppers: Giant marsupials, closely resembling the kangaroo of the present, save for greater size. They were no doubt bred from mutated survivors of The Death. They are the riding animals of D'alwah and adjacent areas.

Inland Sea, the: The great freshwater sea formed by the ancient merger of the Great Lakes and covering roughly an area of all their present outermost boundaries. Many islands exist, and much of the Inland Sea is uncharted. Ruins of ancient cities dot the shores, and much commerce, interrupted by piracy, moves on the waters.

Kanda: The area of the ancient Dominion of Canada has kept its old name, almost unchanged, though much of it is unknown in Hiero's day, save for the central parts of the Metz Republic and the Otwah League, in west and east, respectively.

Kandan Universal Church: The state religion of the Metz Republic and the Otwah League. An amalgam of most current Christian beliefs, with a strong core of traditional Roman Catholicism, though there has been no contact with Rome for millennia. Celibacy is long gone, as are many other beliefs and attitudes held by the ancient churches. A related sect, though much corrupted and debased, is the state religion of the east coast kingdoms and states, such as D'alwah,

Kaw: A beast of burden used south of the Inland Sea, both for agriculture and raising, as is the Korean ox of today. A large bovine, probably an almost unaltered member of some ancient stock of domestic cattle.

Killman: A highly trained warrior of the Metz Republic, who has taken intensive training, much of it psychological, in warfare and the use of all known weapons. Killmen are officers of the Frontier Guards automatically, but also rangers of the forest and special agents of the Abbey hierarchy. Hiero is unusual, though not exceptional, in also being a priest and exorcist. This combination of talents is highly approved but rare.

Lantik Sea, the: The Atlantic Ocean, though with a much-altered western shoreline. No records exist of any trans-Atlantic contacts for over three thousand years.

Leemute: A word meaning an animal, or other nonhuman creature of human intelligence, which serves the Unclean. Gorm, the bear, would never be described as a Leemute, nor would the Dam People. The word is a corruption of the phrase "lethal mutation," meaning an animal which cannot survive to replicate under natural conditions, but its meaning is now altered to mean "inimical to normal humanity," and even

normal life of all kinds. New varieties (such as the frog creatures Hiero found) are continually appearing as discoveries spread. Not all such new finds are Leemutes, however.

Lowan:A species of incredibly large, flightless water birds, fish eaters and divers, which are found in remote areas of the Inland Sea. Though very shy, Lowan have few enemies, since an adult can reach eighty feet in length, with weight in proportion. They are uncommon, and thought by many to be a legend.

Lucinoge:An Abbey drug, used to enhance the spiritual powers of its adepts and priests, especially when they are seeking mind contact. Also a relaxant and, in small amounts, sleep-inducing.

Manoon (the Dead Isle):A rocky island in the north-central Inland Sea, the place of Hiero's captivity. One of the main headquarters of the Dark Brotherhood's Blue Circle.

Man-rats:Giant, man-sized rodents of high intelligence, a ferocious type of Leemute, much used as warriors by the Unclean. Probably mutated *Mattus norvegicus*, which they resemble in all but brains and bulk.

Metz:The dominant race of Kanda. A corruption of the ancient word *Metis*, a term used for a racial stock of mixed Caucasian and Amerindian strains. The Spanish word *mestizo* has the same root and means the same thing. The Metz survived The Death in an undue proportion to other races, mainly due to rural isolation and the fact that they existed in small, somewhat isolated groups, in more remote areas. Atomic and bacteriological blights thus slew relatively few. The Otawah League Metz tend to be lighter in color, due to more Caucasian genes.

Morse:The basic riding and plow animal (though only scrub stock is used for the latter) of the Metz Republic, which first bred them, and, to a lesser degree, of the Otawah League. A very large and intelligent variety of the present-day moose, the largest member of the deer family. (Moose have been tamed For riding and carriage pulling in modern Scandinavia, though not often.)

Mu'amans:Non-Christian, non-church-linked followers of a separate form of monotheism. Apparently confined to the kingdom of D'alwah; in the main, stockbreeders, who live on the western plains of the kingdom. (See Davids.)

Namcush:Port on the western border of the Inland Sea. Much trade passes through it, but it is full of rogues as well, slavers and pirates seeking a place to dispose of loot. Both the Abbeys and the Unclean

use it to spy on one another.

Neeyana: The largest port in the southeastern area of the Inland Sea. Though legitimate trade passes through it, the Unclean actually rule, through a merchants' council dominated by their appointees. In fact, the main headquarters of the Yellow Circle of the Dark Brotherhood is buried *under* the town. No one untouched by evil lingers in Neeyana. (Possibly a corruption of "Indiana.")

Otwah League: The eastern sister state of the Metz Republic. The League, which takes its name from ancient Ottawa, is smaller than the Republic, from which it is separated by a vast expanse of wild land and Taig, through which run few roads. Hut close contact is maintained as well as possible, and the Abbeys are a unified structure in both, serving the League government in the same capacity as in the Republic,

Palood, the; Greatest of all the northern marshes, the Palood stretches for hundreds of miles along the northern edge of the Inland Sea. It is avoided even by the Unclean, and many strange forms of life not found elsewhere exist in its trackless vastnesses. Terrible fevers often wrack those who venture in, and its boundaries are largely uncharted.

Per: Corruption of "Father." Title of respect for a priest of the Kandan Universal Church.

Poros: Monstrous, four-tusked herbivore of the great southern forest, perhaps twenty feet tall at the shoulder. Its ancestry is unknown.

Snakeheads: Giant, omnivorous reptiles, found in small herds in the depths of the southern forests. Primarily eaters of soft herbage and fruit, they will also devour carrion and anything else slow enough to be caught. Something very like a bipedal dinosaur, though bred from some smaller reptile of the pre-Death days.

Snapper: Seemingly the living snapping turtle, grown to the size of a small car. A universal pest of any large body of water, being ferocious and almost invulnerable.

Taig, the: The great coniferous forest of Kanda, not too unlike that of today, but containing many more deciduous trees and even a few palms. The trees run larger on the average than those of today, though nowhere near the size of those in the far South.

Unclean, the: A general term meaning the Dark Brotherhood and all its servants and allies, as well as other life which seeks, through intelligent direction, to destroy normal humanity and to subvert natural law for evil purposes.

Were-bears: A little-known variety of Leemute. Not truly a bear at all, but a sort of grisly, night-prowling monster, short-furred and possessed of strange mental powers by which it lures victims to their doom. The things have been glimpsed only once or twice. Though *of* the Unclean, they seem to be allies rather than servants. Their origin is unknown. Fortunately, they seem rare.

About the Author

Sterling E. Lanier, born in 1927, graduated from Harvard in 1951. When he was an editor at Chilton in the '60s he published Frank Herbert's *Dune*, which went on to become one of the greatest sf bestsellers of all time. Lanier was trained as an anthropologist-archeologist. He is also a well-known sculptor whose work is on exhibit in several museums, including the Smithsonian. He lives in Maryland.

Version History

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