

Dean Koontz – Warlock

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[Completely new scan]
[Some original typo's has been left unchanged]

THE FACE OF YESTERDAY . . .

A square of mirror-polished silver supplied the only illumination in the room. It glowed with a soft white warmth that shone on the faces of the Shaker and Gregor. Commander Richter and Bel-mondo stood in the shadows, hardly daring to breathe.

The Shaker said, “We have something.”

The officers moved forward, stared down at the hazy outline of two faces on the plate. There were no discernible features: just dark circles for eyes, slits for mouths, whirls of dark hair. Fine lines began to crisscross the faces, and here and there small plastic squares that the watchers could not have identified as transistors.

The Shaker strained, bearing down with the power of his mind. “There does not seem to be the mind of a man in either of these . . .”

“Demons?” Belmondo asked, squeakily.

“Not demons . . . but something we cannot guess.” There was a puff of incandescent gas and the silver plate held only the reflection of their anxious faces . . .

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WARLOCK

DEAN R. KOONTZ

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WARLOCK

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*for the muse of the
Long Trek and Heroic Quest novel
(one more of you ladies out of my mind)
and to Gerda
(never out of my mind)*

BOOK ONE

The Mountains . . .

1

In his cluttered study on the west end of the house, Sandow sat at a desk which was strewn with archaic texts whose pages had yellowed and cracked with the passage of much time. He had not been reading them, nor did he intend to read them in the near future, since he knew every word by heart. There were always books opened on Shaker Sandow's desk, partly to present the air of industry to visitors and partly because he liked the smell of aged and dying paper. There was a romanticism in that odor which induced moods of reverie: lost times, lost secrets, lost worlds.

Sandow stirred his cup of chocolate, a rare drink in these latitudes, with a spoon whose handle was formed as a drawn, vicious wolf baring its fangs. While he stirred, he looked across the sleepy village of Perdune as the morning fog quietly parted to reveal it to him. The stone houses with their over-slung second stories were not yet abustle with life. The chimneys only breathed lightly with the vaporous residue of banked fires, or they did not smoke at all. In the eaves over the deepset gables, a few birds stirred and poked at their nests, making the sounds of morning. There was not much to see, but it contented Shaker Sandow, a man of simple tastes and much patience.

More would be happening as the day progressed. Now was the time to relax and gain the strength to meet what-ever travails the gods put down.

There was a break in the mist to the west, and the towering Banibal Mountains rose into view as if marching toward Perdune from the sea. The sunlight made them a strange green color, and the emerald peaks made to stab the sky, the second highest range of mountains in this hemisphere.

Behind Perdune, to the east, lay the Cloud Range, the only other peaks to put the Banibal to shame. Fully half their great height was lost in the clouds, and that hidden expanse of ground contained the skeletons of many Perdune adventurers who had thought to scale the giants and see the land beyond, to the east. Only two expeditions had ever succeeded in that undertaking, and even one of them had followed the mountains several hundred miles south to a point where they were somewhat less impressive than here.

As Shaker Sandow considered the beauty of the sun tipping the great Banibal Mountains with dazzling colors, the sound of Mace's feet on the roof broke his moment of peace and made him sit forward in his chair, more intent now. He could hear Mace, that great lum-mox, clumping to the roof trap and nearly falling down the ladder from his lookout post. Next, there was the sound of the great feet slamming along the third floor corridor, then booming down the stairs past the second floor to the first level guest hall. A moment later, one of Mace's huge hands thundered against the door so insistently that the portal looked sure to snap loose of its hinges.

"Enough, enough!" Shaker Sandow called. "Come in, Mace."

The door opened, and the giant young man came into the study, his bluster suddenly replaced with reverence. He gazed at the books on the desk, the tables and racks of paraphernalia behind the Shaker, aware that he would never know the intimate contact of these exotic devices. Mace was not a Shaker and never would be.

"Did you leave your tongue on the stairs?" the Shaker asked, trying not to smile, but finding it difficult to be stern so early in the morning and with one so basically good-humored and comical as Mace.

"No, sir," Mace said, shaking his burly head, his mane of shoulder-length locks flying with each movement. "I have it here, sir."

“Then tell me exactly where on the Banibal ridge the General's men are.”

Mace looked astonished and slapped at his head as if to jar his ears to better reception. “But how do you know they come?” he asked.

“It isn't my magics,” the Shaker said. “Mace, my boy, the sound of your horse's hooves rebounding off the stairs gave me the clue. I suppose you have not charged down from your station merely to say the sun has risen or that the birds start to sing.”

“Of course not!” Mace said, rushing to the desk by the great bay window. He hunkered down, still taller than the seated Shaker, and pointed to Cage's Pass, some three miles south along the great blank face of the ridge. “There they are, Shaker, and what looks to be a hundred of them.”

“Ah,” the Shaker said, catching sight of their visitors. “They are rather brightly liveried for their assignment, don't you think?”

“Had I been an enemy, I would have shafted all of them with but a single blow before they could have de-scended the face.”

Sadow frowned, pulled at his sallow, wizened face as was his habit when in contemplation. “It's a bad sign of their efficiency as escorts. We will not follow their exam-ple of natty dress.”

“You're taking the assignment, then?” Mace asked, looking into his master's face with some concern.

“I suppose,” the Shaker said. “There are things to be gained, mostly knowledge and experience, but things nonetheless.”

The door to the study opened behind them, and Gre-gor entered, his voice mock-serious. “Master Shaker, I fear there must be a funeral today and prayers for the soul of our beloved Mace. I was awakened by the sound of the roof giving in as his weight carried him to the basement. *Oh! There* you are, Mace! Thank the gods that things were not as I assumed!”

Mace grumbled and stood, his head but a foot from the ceiling of the study. “If I had fallen through the roof, you can be sure that I would have calculated a fall through your bedchamber to carry you with me.”

Smiling, Gregor walked to the window and stared at the descending line of the General's troops.

Shaker Sadow regarded the boy fondly. He loved both Mace and Gregor as if they were his own sons, but perhaps he loved Gregor just a bit more. An awful thing to say or think, perhaps, but nonetheless true for it. No matter what qualities he possessed, Mace was not a com-plete Shaker—and the fair, slight young Gregor was. No father or step-father can resist letting a flow of affection pour upon a son who will walk in his same footsteps.

“A bright lot, eh?” Gregor asked.

“I could have got all of them with an odd lot of arrows and a bow, at proper distance,” Mace said.

“I wouldn't if I were you,” Gregor replied. They're our friends.”

“Enough, enough!” Shaker Sadow said, holding up his hands. “Your brotherly jousting will one day lead to fists—but today is not the day for it. There is much to do.”

At that Mace went to prepare the table for guests, and the apprentice, Gregor, went to dress in something more formal than a nightgown.

For the next hour, the Shaker watched the troops mov-ing toward the slim valley where Perdune lay, their ban-ners fluttering before them on four staffs borne by four crimson liveried young men. The fools, he thought. The stupid, ill-prepared fools.

But with his help and his magics, perhaps some of them would live to step foot across the Cloud Range to the east. Perhaps a few of them would see the mysterious lands beyond the mountains where but two parties from the coastal lands had ever penetrated before. Maybe. But he would not wager on that . . .

At precisely two hours until noon, the foot soldiers reached the gate of Shaker Sandow, with all eyes on the street watching them from behind curtained windows or darkened doorways. Though they were a natty lot in yellows and blues and reds, with green boots to mid-thigh and cloaks of purest white falling behind them, they were bedraggled and in need of rest. It had been impossible to bring horses across the Banibals, and it was quite some distance and rough footing without them. The men were perspiring, and their faces were smudged with dirt, as were their cloaks and shirts, their ballooning sleeves torn and deflated.

There were two officers, a captain and a commander, the former quite young and the latter almost as old as the Shaker himself. These detached themselves from the squad and walked stiffly to the Shaker's door. On the third clatter of the iron knocker, Mace swung the portal wide, looked down on them from his six feet seven inches, and said, "The Shaker expects you. Come in."

The two officers hesitated, looked at each other in confusion, then entered past the bulk of the young assistant. Whether they were more surprised by the sight of the giant Mace or by the realization that the Shaker was expecting them, it was difficult to say. But when they were led to the study and seated to wait for the Shaker, they fidgeted like laborers at a king's dance and sipped only lightly at the fine brew which had been supplied them in ceramic mugs.

A moment later, the Shaker entered, with Gregor in tow, both of them dressed impressively. Gregor now wore a gray robe much like a monk's habit, with a silver chain about his neck and another such length belted round his waist. But his garments did not serve to enhance his appearance so much as they pointed up the power and enigma of the Shaker. Sandow was robed in the purest black cloth, so dark that it gleamed with a blue metallic light along its creases. His gray hair and contrasting black beard flowed over a rolled collar decorated with archaic signs stitched to impress the uninitiated as much as anything. The Shaker's hands were gloved in the sheerest silk the color of freshly spilled blood.

The two officers rose and bowed, and seemed relieved when Sandow waved them to their seats again. "As few formalities as possible," the old man said. "I am not one for protocol."

"We appreciate your hospitality, your ale," the commander said. "My name is Solvon Richter, and this is Captain Jan Belmondo who has been with me in General Dark's forces for some months now."

The Shaker introduced Mace and Gregor, completing the few rituals attendant such a situation. "And now," said the Shaker, "what business of General Dark's brings you all this way from the sea?"

"Pardon me if I pry," Richter said, "but I must know why you expected us. Your man, Mace, said that you did."

"I am, you understand, a Shaker," Sandow said, smiling. "A Shaker knows many things."

"But surely your power does not extend beyond the Banibals!" young Belmondo said, leaning forward in his chair.

"At times, it does," Shaker Sandow said. "I test it every day, hoping that the perimeters of my ability will extend through exercise. I found your squad's presence some two days before you reached the nether slopes of Bani-bal ridge."

Old Richter nodded as if this was just what one might have expected. "The General would not choose any but the best of Shakers," he said.

"Unless your ale requires replenishment," Sandow said, "perhaps we could proceed. What does the good General wish of me?"

"But if you could reach us two days from the west of the Banibals," Belmondo said, "you must know our purpose here as well."

The Shaker smiled tolerantly. "As you know, the powers of a Shaker can be, at the same time, both

amazing and limited. I saw your advancing troops, and in the surface of the minds of some of you, I saw that we might soon be crossing the Cloud Range to the east. But that is all. The details escaped me, just as a man without his reading spectacles can obtain the gist of a printed page before him but cannot stay with it long enough to understand its full purpose."

Richter took a long draught of his brew, then set the mug on the table next to his chair. "We will expect, Shaker, the fullest honesty from you and the guarantee of your sealed lips—and the sealed lips of your apprentice and assistant."

"You have those," Shaker Sandow assured him.

"Very well. Here in Perdune, as in few other villages separated from the rest of the country by the Banibals news comes slowly. No doubt, you have not heard of the border incidents between Darklands and our neighboring country to the north, Oragonia. Oragonia tests our strength on the borderlands, but does not launch an actual invasion. A few dozen troops have perished in these insane skirmishes."

"Odd," Shaker Sandow said. "Oragonia has neither the resources nor the population of the Darklands, and she would surely lose a war if that's what she's considering."

"Bear with me," Richter said. "Our spies in Oragonia have reported strange events in recent months. In the streets of the enemy capital, in the darkest moments of the morning, wheeled vehicles have been seen in transport—without benefit of horses."

The room was terribly quiet, except for the shuffling of Mace's large feet. At last, the boy said, "But that's impossible! The legends of horseless carts are only children's tales!"

"Our spies say not," the commander said. "Indeed, there are further reports that the King of Oragonia, Jerry Matabain, has within his palace grounds a flying machine resurrected from the Blank. We have in hand three separate reports of the craft being sighted above the ramparts of the castle, circling the mountainous grounds around Jerry's keep. It is not large, perhaps only big enough for two men. But the Darkland agents in Oragonia say that it is of sleek design, in the shape of an oval, glittering like the purest silver and progressing from one point to another in the sky but with the slightest humming sound as accompaniment."

Shaker Sandow's eyes went to the open books on his desk, and he began to review whole paragraphs which he remembered most well of all those things he had half-believed to be merely legends. The books were scraps from the Blank, pieces of that forgotten age before the earth's crust had shifted and the towering mountains had risen where no mountains were before, before the shape of the seas had changed, before jungles had become deserts and grassy plains had become sea bottoms. If the books could survive, why not other things? And suppose that the tales of flying machines and horseless vehicles were not legends, but the truth? All of what Richter said might be so. The old Shaker felt a thrill run through him that he had not experienced in such intensity for at least twenty years, since the last days of his youth.

"And the General wishes us to go with your party across the Cloud Range to search for more such artifacts."

Richter nodded positively. "We have discovered nothing more than that the Oragonia expeditions crossed the Cloud Range at a point they call High Cut and that some two hundred miles into the unexplored lands to the east, they found the place where these marvels lay intact. We want to cross the mountains here, preferably at Shatoga Falls, and strike north once we reach the far slopes of the mountains. If the Oragonians have a major operation in progress to the north, we should eventually discover some trace of it to lead us. It is, admittedly, a weak plan. But we have a number of Squealers with us, and they are birds known for their efficiency. They should help narrow the search with their aerial reconnaissance."

"And with my magics," the Shaker said, "you expect little if any problems in discovering this cache of ancient devices."

"You must come with us!" Belmondo said emphatically. "If you have any love for Darklands, any pride in nation—"

"I have none of that," the Shaker said. "The gods have mercy on you if your own life is guided by such shallow motivations. But I will ease your mind immediately by accepting your offer. I will cross the

Cloud Range with you, chiefly because the General is a beneficent ruler while Jerry Matabain is known for his dictatorial ways. A Shaker in Oragon, I understand, has no personal freedom as here, but is kept by the King in a state of comfortable slavery. I should not wish to see the ambitious Jerry assume control of my Perdune and me.”

Captain Belmondo seemed perturbed by such un-patriotic talk, but the commander was wiser. “If your own ends are those of the Darklands,” Richter said, “we can hardly care what your motivations are. Can you be prepared to depart Perdune at dawn? My men require a rest today before the beginning of such a trek.”

“Dawn will be fine,” the Shaker said. “But one or two questions first. We could not help but notice the colorful cloaks of your troops. It seemed to us that their clothing was too foppish for the rugged work of climbing and too bright for the dangerous work of traveling through un-known lands.”

Richter seemed suddenly embarrassed. “These are our parade dress uniforms. It was the special wish of the General that we proceed here in them for two reasons. First, we were coming through a gentle pass in the Bani-bals and did not require heavy-duty climbing gear and could thus make a more impressive arrival. Secondly, the General thought that any Oragonian spies within the Darkland capital would be less suspicious of a gayly at-tired squad than one obviously equipped for the Cloud Range. We have supplies and other uniforms in the man-drawn carts and in a number of rucksacks carried by the enlisted men.”

“The Cloud Range is all but insurmountable,” Gregor said, speaking for the first time. “Has the General sent foot soldiers to scale the peaks?”

“Hardly,” Belmondo said. “We are the Banibaleers. You may have heard of us.”

“Indeed,” Shaker Sandow said, not concealing his admiration. “It is said that your climbing skills are below none and that you scale the sheer walls with less energy expended than a normal man walking the steep streets of Perdune.”

“Aye,” Richter said, “but the streets of Perdune are just utter insanity, designed for madmen and goats.”

For the first time since the officers' arrival, the air of tension was broken, and laughter was heard in the lit-tered study of the Shaker.

Later after small talk and a second round of ale, Richter and young Belmondo left to see to the quartering of the troops in the two largest inns of Perdune, and it was agreed, again, to meet at the Shaker's gate at dawn for the hike to the foot of the eastern mountains.

“I am still against your going,” Gregor said when they were alone again. “You are old, and though you are also fit, you will most certainly find this trip a rugged one.”

“Yet your own powers are not nearly so well developed that you could take my place,” Sandow said to the boy. “And, besides, when you grow as old as I, you will not mind risking life and limb for a change of scenery, for the hope of something brighter in the future than working minor magics and watching Perdune wake every morning.”

“Don't worry,” Mace said gruffly. “If the master finds the way difficult, I can carry him with little trouble.”

“I'm sure you can, Mace,” Sandow said. “Though that would lack a certain dignity ascribed to Shakers.” He began unsnapping the seams of his black robe. “Come, Gregor. Let us divest ourselves of these stupid costumes. There's no longer anyone to impress.”

Whether it was a manifestation of his powers or just a peculiarity of his mind, the Shaker was a light sleeper. In the morning, the thin light which made its way between the heavy umber drapes of his chamber was enough to make him open his eyes and rise. At night, the sound of Mace or Gregor tip-toeing to the bath was enough to break his slumber. This night, hours before the start of the great trek, this curse was to become a blessing.

His eyes opened on darkness, and he lay very still as he listened to the sound of feet in the corridor of the second floor. He heard the door to Mace's room open, and shortly after someone was pushing his own door wide. As he sat up in bed, he saw the sparkling of what seemed to be a very spastic and erratic candle flame. Behind this meager light was the silhouette of a man, a stranger. Before the Shaker could call out, the sputtering flame was thrown almost to his bed, and the shadowy figure disappeared into the corridor.

Sandow leaped from the bed, grabbed one of his boots which stood beside the nightstand, and stamped out the flame. Slipping those boots on, he hurried to the doorway—just in time to have his ears tortured by the blast and the wash of flames which erupted from Gregor's room. The door to the boy's chamber was torn from its hinges and crashed resoundingly against the opposite wall of the corridor. Acrid clouds of smoke roiled into the hall and made the Shaker cough uncontrollably.

“Gregor!” he shouted into the pandemonium. He received no reply.

Behind him Mace thundered down the hall, and though he was pleased that the assistant was unhurt, he was grief-stricken that Gregor should be dead.

Mace pushed beyond his master and stormed through the smoldering doorway into Gregor's bed chamber. He called the boy's name, his deep tones cracked in a mixture of fear and anguish. He must surely have expected to find his almost-brother crushed and ruined by the explosion. But as the Shaker reached the doorway, almost exhausted by the effort of extracting oxygen from that fouled air, Mace reappeared, nearly invisible in the thick smoke. “He's not in there,” the giant said. “He wasn't in his room when it happened.”

“Thank the gods!” the Shaker said, meaning it, even though he was not a religious man.

On the stairs from the first floor, there was the thud of feet, and young Gregor broke through the fumes, wild-eyed, his hair in total disarray, blood streaming down from a gash on his forehead. “Are you both all right?” he asked.

“Yes,” the Shaker said, “But you're bleeding.”

“There was a man,” Gregor said. “Earlier in the night, I grew hungry and went downstairs to the kitchen in the back of the house. I was just finishing some pie and a sandwich when the explosion happened. I came for the stairs at a run and collided with him there. Before I could even ascertain if it was you or Mace, he struck me with what could have been the haft of a knife and ran into the street. I didn't give pursuit”

The Shaker examined the wound, pronounced it minor. “Let's open some windows and get this awful stuff out of here,” he said. Then downstairs to the kitchen for some brew and some theorization. I have something in my room which may prove interesting.”

“A tube with a sparkling fuse?”

“Why, yes, Mace, it is a sparkling object I haven't seen its shape yet.”

“And you suppose there was one in Gregor's room which exploded?” the giant asked.

“So it seems.”

Mace looked ill. “There was one thrown into my room as well,” he said. “It wakened me, and I turned on the light and picked it up. I couldn't see what it could be, and the burning tallow seemed to

sputter out an inch or so before it reached the tube. A dud, I suppose. A faulty fuse. But if it had not been, it would have exploded in my face!”

“The tube is packed with highly explosive gun powder, and when the flame of the fuse reaches the capped end and burns through this tightly sealed hole, the result is a controlled explosion.” Sandow and his two step-sons sat at the kitchen table, drinking brew at an ungodly hour and staring at the two deadly, unexploded sticks of dy-namite before them.

“But gun powder is still a lost art. Every few years, someone seems to think they've got it figured out, but none of them ever come up with anything. Even what pre-Blank weapons we have are useless because they have no ammunition.”

“This is so, Gregor,” Sandow said. “But I would think that these ugly things we see before us—and the one which would have killed you—do not come from the Darklands. They come from Oragonia and were im-ported there from the eastern regions beyond the Cloud Range.”

“Spies!” Mace gasped, slamming a big fist into the table so hard that the two sticks of explosives bounced up and down.

“I doubt those things detonate from shock,” Gregor said. “But if you wish to test that theory, please do so on your own, somewhere far from the house.” He turned to his master. “Do you suppose our gorilla here is correct? Spies from Oragonia come to be certain we do not ac-company the expedition to the east?”

“So it appears,” Shaker Sandow said. “Now that we are aware that there is treachery within Commander Richt-er's Banibaleers, we can be more watchful, less sheepish prey. But someone should warn the good commander himself.”

“I will,” Gregor said, pushing his chair back and rising from the table.

Mace grasped his arm and pulled the fair young boy back into his seat. “You will stay right here, with the master,” Mace said. “Ill go to see Commander Richter, for I am much more capable of handling whatever trick-ery and violence may be waiting on the way or at the inns themselves. It is unlikely that our assassin would re-turn here again tonight, since he will know how ready we are for him. Or else he thinks us dead.”

Gregor began to argue, but the Shaker agreed with the giant and put an end to any possible argument. The old man mused on his luck in obtaining both these lads. Not only was Gregor a latent Shaker whose powers were just beginning to come to the fore, but he was possessed of courage and a certain amount of daring on top of his in-tellect. So many Shakers, Sandow knew, were withered, helpless recluses who frowned upon physical bravery. Not so Gregor. And Mace. Aye, there was a blessing too. It was seldom one found a giant like Mace who com-bined those powerful muscles and quick reflexes with a cunning and intelligence the equal of any. Mace might sometimes pretend the buffoon, but beneath that clownish skin lay a calculating, clever man.

“Go now,” the Shaker said. “Every moment you delay may endanger the lives of Commander Richter and his men. The assassin, if he realizes he failed here, may try to wreak havoc on the troops in order to force the rest of them back home for reinforcements.”

Mace got up and started out of the kitchen, stopping only long enough to strap a knife sheath to his belt and drop a wickedly sharp dagger into it. Then he was gone . . .

As Commander Richter had jested earlier in the day, the streets of the mountain village of Perdune were steep. There were two alleyways even barred to horse-drawn vehicles, for there was not an animal in all the world that would make the crest without turning and kit-tering down before it had ascended the halfway mark. The angle was truly rather terrifying. It was one of these more torturous alleys which led to the rear of Stan-ton's Inn, and from the top where Mace stood in the shad-ows of a copse of pine trees,

it seemed the perfect place for a murderer to wait.

Descending the alley, one had to avoid any pace faster than a walk, for a swift descent would help the body build momentum on that sharp decline. The end would be a head-long crash into the hotel wall or a nasty tumble in which arms or legs or both would break. To make matters worse, the morning dew had begun to gather heavily on the cobbles, making the way quite slippery. The stones themselves were worn and smooth, almost like bubbled glass or ice, and they offered no purchase to those who fell and began to roll down the incline. On top of all this, there was but a single lantern to illuminate the entire block. It was placed midway down, on a horizontal stanchion which was bolted to the wall of a house. In the countless shadows on either side of that lamp, half an army might be concealed. Or a lone assassin.

Mace cursed his own frail heart, stepped away from the trees, and began the descent. Even if the assassin did realize that anyone lived at the Shaker's house, and even if he did think someone might come to warn Commander Richter, it was unlikely that he would choose this approach to the hotel to watch.

Indeed, he gained the heavy wooden portal of the inn's rear entrance without encountering anyone with murderous intentions. He was breathing heavily from the tension of the slippery descent, but otherwise unbothered. He pulled open the weighted door and stepped into the back corridor of the place, off the kitchen and the storeroom. It was completely dark here, but lamps glowed far down beyond the half-door in the lobby. He walked down there, swung the door open, and found the inn desk untended. After only a moment's hesitation, he pulled the guest register to him, flipped through the pages until he found Commander Richter's name and room number. He put the book back as it had been and left the public room.

The stairs were lighted by candles in glass bells whose tops were holed to allow a draft for burning. By this flickering illumination, he found the third floor and eventually Commander Richter's room, where he knocked gently but insistently upon the door.

It opened a crack, and the smooth, healthy face of Captain Belmondo looked out, surprised at such a visitor at this hour. "Is Richter here?" Mace asked. He was afraid to stand long in the hall lest he be seen by the wrong party.

"Yes," Belmondo said. "He's asleep. What do you want?"

"To see him, immediately."

"I don't know—" Belmondo began.

Mace pushed him backward, forcing his way through the door. He ripped the panel from the youth's hands and closed it quietly, gently. "No light," he told the captain, "but wake him now."

"This is most irregular," Belmondo said.

"So are Oragonian spies, and you have at least one in your complement" Mace was growing impatient with the young officer's sense of military discipline and routine. His own life with the Shaker had been styled much more loosely, much less regimentally.

"Spies you say?" Belmondo seemed dubious.

"You might as well wake me," Commander Richter said. "That way I won't have to pretend to be asleep while I listen to you."

Mace chuckled deep in his throat, though Belmondo did not seem to see the humor in his commander's words. He was more embarrassed than anything.

"A light," Richter said to the captain.

"No!" Mace insisted. "We can talk as well in darkness. We cannot take the chance of the light being seen out your window—or of someone in the hallway catching glimpse of it under your door."

"You make it all sound quite dire," Richter said.

"And so it is." In the darkness, where they were barely able to see one another, Mace detailed the events of the evening at the Shaker's house. When he was finished with the events and the suppositions the Shaker had made about the dynamite, he said, "The Shaker suggests that the assassin may return here and work his evil on your own men now that his first tact has failed."

"Perhaps he doesn't know it has failed," Richter said. "Perhaps he thinks the Shaker dead."

"He will have listened for three explosions," Mace said. "He will have heard only one, and he will not take chances. If you wish to leave the safety of your men in the balance, then ignore me."

"Of course not," Richter said. He had been dressing all this while, and it was evident that he had not intended to ignore the giant from the beginning. Belmondo, how-ever, was caught in his sleeping gown, still gaping at the talk of traitors and spies. He scurried about, trying to catch up to his commander's state of readiness, but he kept dropping things and getting tangled in his trouser legs in his haste.

"The Shaker might suggest herding your men into three or four separate groups, with three guards to each group—three, at least, in order that the assassin does not accidentally get chosen as a guard where he can murder men in their sleep."

"Sergeant Growler is on the second floor," Richter said. "He has an empathy with the men we can use now. He'll make it all seem less desperate than it is."

"Fine."

They left the room, Mace and Richter in the lead, with Belmondo hurrying after, still buttoning his shirt, one boot on and one boot still back in the room. On the second floor, they walked to the far end of the candle-lit corridor and rapped quietly on the door of the last room until it was finally opened by a heavysset, drooping-jowled man no more than five feet four. He rubbed his eyes, stared at them a second longer, then said, "Com-mander Richter! What has happened?"

"Let us in and close the door," the commander said.

A moment later, they were in another darkened room, four of them now, and Mace was rapidly repeating the story of the assassin and the dynamite.

"Damn! But would I like to find the scoundrel mas-querading among these fine boys! I'd tear the bastard limb from limb and drop him off the edge of Cage Pass, I would!" The sergeant was obviously quite furious, and he balled his fists on his thighs as he considered the story he had been told. Mace had originally thought of Crowler as a fat man, but now he saw that he was the sort of heavysset man who carried hard muscles beneath the layer of lard. As he fisted his hands now, his large, bare arms corded like thick cables drawn taut. His jaw, clenched, made his thick, short neck bulge with other muscles. Yes, Mace decided, Crowler was the sort who might quite literally be capable of ripping a man limb from limb as he said he would.

"He's bound to be too clever for easy discovery," Com-mander Richter said. "The most we can hope for is to keep everyone alive. It's going to be a tedious and nerve-wracking journey across the Cloud Range when one of our number is against us. But if we can't find the man, we'll needs progress as best we can."

Sergeant Crowler slipped into his jacket, the last piece of apparel he had not yet donned. "Let's get our men up and moving. The sooner everyone is together, the safer I'll feel."

There were ten rooms on either side of the corridor, and the first four on either side presented sleepy men reacting to the rise and dress order with a mixture of sur-prise and agitation. The other six rooms on either side, containing a total of twenty-four men, yielded something altogether different and altogether unsettling.

"Commander!" Crowler called as he returned from the fifth room on the right. "Here immediately, sir!"

There was an urgency in the squat man's voice that drew the others back from the end of the hall where they were on their way to wake the men on the third floor of the inn.

"What is it?" Richter asked as they reached the now shaken, pale-faced Crowler.

"In there, sir. Two dead men."

On the beds, two corpses lay wide-eyed, staring sightlessly at the ceiling. In the flickering illumination pro-vided by the lamp which Crowler had lighted, the copious amounts of blood looked strangely black instead of red.

"Throats slit, sir," Crowler said. "Some stinking scum cut them open while they slept!" There was absolute murder in the sergeant's voice. His hands gripped the back of a desk chair so harshly that the spindly wood began to snap and splinter.

"The other rooms," Richter said, returning to the corri-dor.

The four of them split up at that suggestion and checked the remaining eleven rooms on that floor. In every case, there were two dead men in each room, lying in their sheet, gouts of blood spilled across the

mat-tresses, splattered on the walls behind them.

When they regrouped in the corridor, Belmondo was trembling, his face drawn, his mouth loose, on the verge of being terribly ill. The rest of them were angry, but not ready to collapse from such a sight, being harder men by nature. Both Richter and Mace were possessed of a cold and even fury of the kind which is all but invisible on the surface but which spells death to the man against whom it is directed. Sergeant Crowler was of a different nature, loudly furious, the sort of man to rend things, to curse and kick his anger out on inanimate objects. His face was frightfully red.

“But why didn't he kill everyone on this floor?” Richter asked.

“Perhaps he heard you coming,” Crowler said. “Such a man would have a good ear. It comes with his profession.”

“We had better wake those above,” the commander said. “Then we'll find out who has left his room tonight. Surely his mate will know and tell.”

“Not surely,” Mace said. “There were quite obviously two assassins. Needless to say, they will have shared a room and will vow for each other.”

“Why two?” Sergeant Crowler asked.

“All the dead were still in their beds,” Mace said. “One killer could not have knifed one man—in every case—without waking the soldier in the second bed in the process. Two men entered each room and struck simultaneously. They have a fine sense of precision.”

Half an hour later, all the men had been assembled in the public lobby, and each man had vowed for his mate. Richter was furious at such perfidy but finally separated the remaining seventy-six enlisted men into two groups, one to bunk in the lobby and the other in the dining room. Sergeant Crowler and two randomly selected privates were to guard the lobby. Three men whom the commander most trusted were selected for duty in the dining hall

“Thank your master for the warning,” Richter said. “And tell him that we wish to consult with him inside the hour. If he could, perhaps, perform a reading of our troops, he could uncover the villains in this affair.”

“I will tell him, within the hour,” Mace said. “But a word or two with you, privately.”

Richter raised his eyebrows, then excused himself from Belmondo and took Mace to a pantry. Back among the sacks of flour and the boxes of dried fruits, the old officer looked inquiringly at the giant. “What bothers you?”

“If we reject the notion that the assassins did not finish their skullduggery on the second floor because we interrupted them, there is another possibility that arises.”

“Yes?” In the confines of the musty room, the old man's voice seemed abnormally loud, even in a whisper.

“Perhaps the killers did not finish on the second floor, simply because they are roomed there. It would look suspicious, to say the least, to find everyone dead down there but two men.”

“Be damned!” Richter said, cursing himself.

“Are any of the men you put on watch—are any of them from the second floor?”

“One,” Richter said. “I will go relieve him immediately.”

Mace turned to open the door, but was stopped by the commander's thin-fingered hand upon his healthy biceps.

“One thing, Mace,” Richter said. “You play the role of the slow-witted buffoon with some deal of grace and wit. But now that I know it is a role, I shall rely on you steadily for information. You understand?”

Mace nodded. “Now I must go and tell the Shaker that you wish a reading. There are preparations to be made.”

He left the hotel and took a less awkward route home, avoiding the steepest streets, using the pedestrian stairs whenever there was a hill that possessed them. Far off in the sky over the peaks of the Banibals, lightning played in great orange streaks down the velvet backdrop of the sky. The smell of rain was in the air, as if Nature wished to erase the lakes of blood spilled here this night

The night storm raged beyond the house of Shaker San-dow. Great drum rolls of thunder shook the firmament and rattled the study windows in their frames. Lightning bolts seared the fabric of the heavens and bathed the room in a strange, sporadic blue light that outlined the features of the men gathered there in such an eerie man-ner as to make them seem like statues carved in marble. The rain beat insistently against the windows, adding a steady hiss to the sound of the solemn chants performed by the Shaker.

The center of attention was a large, oak table which had been worked into a circle. Its middle was set with a square of mirror-polished silver, and it was that silver which supplied the only illumination from within the room. The candles had long ago been snuffed; the lan-terns remained unlighted. But the silver glowed with a soft white warmth that shone on the faces of the Shaker and of Gregor who were the only two seated round the reading table.

Behind the Shaker and Gregor, respectful and somewhat frightened by these goings on, Richter and Bel-mondo stood in the impenetrable shadows, hardly daring to breathe.

At the door, Mace leaned against the wall, fascinated more by the reaction of the two officers to these wonders than by the wonders themselves. Familiarity breeds boredom, even in the most exotic of professions.

A particularly vicious explosion of thunder slammed down into the valley, like a mallet driven upon Perdune. Richter and Belmonto leaped in surprise—but the Shaker and his apprentice continued with their rituals, oblivious to everything.

“I shall be glad when the lights come on again,” Bel-mondo whispered to Richter, but the commander merely ignored him.

“Step here, Commander Richter,” the Shaker said. “We have something on the plate.”

Both officers went forward, stared down into the glit-tering silver square. The mirror sheen had been replaced by the hazy outlines of two human faces. There were no discernable features to the visages, and they might have been any pair of men out of those who had escaped the killers' blades this night

“That is all?” Richter asked, unable to conceal the bit-ter disappointment in his voice.

“I am working my power to fuller perception,” the Shaker said. “But there is something curious about these two.”

No one spoke, for it was only the Shaker's place to comment now at this penultimate moment of discovery.

It had begun to hail outside, and nut-sized balls of ice pinged off the windows, rattled on the roof, like the feet of hundreds of dwarves performing some fairy dance.

“There seem to be precious few personality traits to grasp. I find the sheen of their conscious minds, but to penetrate them is difficult. And when I do delve within, there seems to be precious little there.”

The images on the silver plate remained indistinct. There were dark circles where eyes should have been, dark slits for mouths, dark holes for nostrils. There were whirls of dark hair, and a haze of mist filmed even this small vision.

“What is that?” Richter asked, pointing to fine lines that had begun to criss-cross the faces on the plate.

“Wires?” Gregor asked. “Copper wires?” He looked at his master uncertainly, then returned his gaze to the faces.

By this time, both visions were woven through with a net of wires; here and there were small plastic squares that were transistors, but which no one in the study could identify.

The Shaker was straining now, bringing all his power to bear on the problem. But only the wires grew more distinct while the features of the two assassins remained unidentifiable. “There does not seem . . . to

be the mind . . . of . . . a man . . . in either . . . of those two . . . we see.”

“Not the mind of a man?” Belmondo asked, peering at the shimmering ghosts.

“Their minds are cold . . . unfeeling . . . but clever . . .”

“Demons you say?” Belmondo asked, his voice rising squeakily.

“Not demons, perhaps . . . but something . . . we cannot guess,” the Shaker said.

Then the silver plate flashed with a puff of incandescent gas, and the images were gone. There was only a silver plate, cut square and set flush in the round oak table, holding the reflections of their anxious faces.

Weary, Shaker Sandow pushed away from the table and slumped in his chair. Immediately, Mace went to the sideboard and poured him a stiff jolt of peach brandy brought it to him and placed it in his weathered, slim magician's hands. Sandow drank greedily of the liquor some color returned to his ashen complexion.

“You are reputed to be one of the most powerful Shak-ers in all of Darkland,” Richter said thoughtfully. “And yet even you could not summon up the nature of our enemy. So we fight demons, not men. But how could the lands beyond the Cloud Range house demons for the Oragonians to make pacts with, when demons live in the bowels of the earth and not on the land itself?”

“The word 'demons' was the choice of your captain,” Sandow corrected. “I have said that our killers are simply something different than men.”

“And what else does that mean but demons?”

“It could mean angels,” Sandow said.

“I would hardly think the beneficent sprites are re-sponsible for the carnage we saw tonight”

“I was only offering an alternative,” Sandow said, “as proof that there could also be a third.”

“What do you suggest?” the commander asked.

“I suggest nothing. I only report what information I obtain and leave the decision to you. It must be so, or I then become the commanding officer. And I do not want nor could I bear such responsibility.”

The room was quiet a long while before Richter said, “We will leave tomorrow at dawn, as planned. If we went back to the Darklands, to the capital, days would be lost that we cannot afford. And the chances of more spies entering our ranks the next time would be no better for us.”

“Then perhaps we should get some sleep,” Sandow said. This night has given us very little rest with which to meet the mountain tomorrow.”

Slipping into their oiled leather coats, the two officers left the house, hurrying through the driving sheets of rain and the occasional stinging pellets of hail which still fell. The Shaker stood by the front door, watching them until they were out of sight down the cobbled slope.

“It will not be easy,” Gregor said. “Not many will cross the Cloud Range.”

“Perhaps,” the master said. “But the commander is more of a man than he even appears. He has that strength which negates the acceptance of defeat. There is a better chance with him than there would be with an-other officer.”

“Such as Belmondo,” Gregor said.

“I wonder at Richter's tolerance of that frightened youth,” the Shaker said. “They are not like men.”

“Good gods!” Mace roared behind them. “Must we stand here all night gossiping of soldiers. We've but two hours on the springs, if that!”

Gregor chuckled. “Better make that an hour and a half Mace. If I know you, the activities of this night will drive you to devour twice your normal horse's breakfast.”

“I may just eat yours as well,” Mace said. “And then without a morning's vittels in that skinny stomach of yours, you'll be blown right off your mount!”

“Enough, enough!” the Shaker said. “Let's get our sleep while we can. The days to come might not provide much time for rest.”

It was some seven miles across the small valley, even by the shortest route, to the foothills of the Cloud Range. Since horses could also be employed for the first three thousand feet of the ascent, where the land was rather gentle and worn through with many paths, Commander Richter had rented enough of the beasts for the party, along with several tenders to feed and water them and bring them back to Perdune when the Banibaleers should find the way too rugged to proceed in any manner but by foot.

With the village streets shrouded in drifting masses of white mist, the expedition set out that autumn morning: seventy-six enlisted men, Sergeant Crowler, the commander and the captain, and Shaker Sandow and his two young assistants: eighty-two in all, if one did not count the four Perdune horse tenders accompanying them on the first leg of their long journey. The horses' hooves clacked hollowly on dewy street stones, and the sounds of men shifting in their saddles to find comfortable positions complemented this to break the otherwise grave-like silence of the town.

Within twenty minutes, they gained the banks of the icy Shatoga River and forded it without incident—though their mounts made great whinnying protests at the near-freezing temperature of those waters. On the other side, they struck south as well as inland, breaking from the thick stands of pines into the rock-strewn foothills, where the going became more difficult.

Some four hours after dawn, Commander Richter called a halt while the horses were watered and given a meal of grain and bruised apples. The Shaker dispatched Mace to speak with the commander and compare notes of observation on the morning's ride. Sandow had seen nothing suspicious, and he rather doubted the commander would have noticed anything that he did not. Even though the commander was certainly a clever man, the Shaker was far cleverer.

Gregor was set the task of checking the condition of the Shaker's magic devices to be certain they remained well-padded and strapped properly in place in the ruck-sacks their horses carried.

Sandow wandered back through the line of riders, noting with approval the businesslike dress that had replaced the foppish, colorful costumes of the previous day. Each man wore tough leather britches which were tucked and banded into rugged boots. They wore coarse, long-sleeved shirts and soft but sufficiently warm neck scarfs. Each man owned an oiled leather artic coat which was folded into a bulky square and strapped over the gear-stuffed rucksack. All in all, they looked the efficient mountaineers they were reported to be.

"You're Shaker Sandow, aren't you?" a blond-haired, blue-eyed man asked, stepping around a horse's rump to intercept the Shaker. He was in his thirties somewhere, not nearly so slim and willowy as his fair skin and hair made him appear. There was a ruggedness beneath the clothes he wore, and a heartiness in those sky-chip eyes.

"That is so," Sandow acknowledged. "But I fear you have the advantage here."

"Aye, and excuse me," the man said. He grinned, and the pleasant smile which split his face seemed the proto-type of the theatrical mask of the comic. His teeth were broad, very white. "My name is Fremlin, and I am the master of the birds—the Squealers who will be our eyes in advance of our feet."

"Squealer masters are always portrayed as dark and mysterious, intense men who actually commune with their charges."

"I commune with them, beyond the verbal level," Fremlin said. "But the similarity ends there."

"Are the birds nearby?" Sandow asked.

"Back here but a few paces, sir. Would you like to have a look at the brooding devils?"

"That I would," the Shaker said. He was not merely being polite, for he had always been curious about the odd feathered creatures man had come to use as advance scouts in war and on hazardous ground.

Fremlin led him to a great chestnut stallion whose rump was slung across with a cargo strap. From each end of the strap hung a wicker cage which was further secured by cord to the saddle to keep it from slapping the beast's flanks as it walked. In each cage, there were two birds. Each was perhaps twice as large as a man's hand, and each stared through the wooden bars of its prison with pitch black, intelligent eyes that seemed to examine Shaker Sandow with speculative interest. They looked much like ravens, except that there was a crimson streak down the center of the small head, fanning intricately across the orange beak. On the center of each breast was a white diamond.

"Handsome, aren't they?" Fremlin asked, obviously proud of his four winged friends.

That they are. And valuable, I would say. We will want to know much about the way ahead once we reach the far side of the Cloud Range."

The smile faded from Fremlin's face, and though he did not allow a scowl to replace it, the evidence of such an unpleasant expression was there, just behind the skin. "Perhaps not so valuable in comparison to a Shaker," the bird master said. "You could do a reading and perhaps see the way more clearly than any Squealer could."

"Perhaps," the Shaker said. "But it requires ritual and energy to perform a reading. There will be instances when we do not have the time for that, or when I will not have the energy."

"I hope you will permit my charges to make their reports first. They are proud creatures, and more clever and understanding than most men give them credit for. If they are merely to be kept in their cages while a Shaker does their work, they will soon become dispirited and ill."

"Have no fear," the Shaker said. "And remember that, even if I should have the energy and time for a reading, the power in me does not always work. Sometimes the picture is unclear. Other times, there is no picture whatsoever."

The bird master seemed to relax a little. "It is with you as all other Shakers, then. I have heard of your power, and feared there would be no limitations on it at all."

Shaker Sandow bent to the cage before him, touched a finger to the wicker bars. "What say you, friends?"

The two creatures inside danced along the perching rungs and came close to him, cocked their heads to engage him with one large black eye each. But neither of them spoke.

"I had hoped to hear them," he said to Fremlin.

"Not on your first meeting," the bird master explained. "They must come to trust you before they will speak. And even then, you would not understand their language."

"I've been given to understand," Sandow said, "that as their trainer picks up the Squealer tongue, they begin to use our tongue."

"That they do. But little of it. Their mouths are not made for complicated tongues. It is more than mimicry, however, for they use the words correctly and with some sense of humor."

"Mounting now!" Commander Richter called back the line. "Mounting now!"

"I hope to see you later and to hear your birds," the Shaker said, nodding to Fremlin and turning for his own horse.

"All is packed well yet," Gregor said from his own horse ahead of the Shaker.

Behind the Shaker, Mace reported: "Commander Richter neither saw nor heard anything suspicious. As we thought."

"As we thought," Shaker Sandow agreed. And then the train was moving forward again.

As they joggled along the hilly countryside, climbing steadily higher on a double-back trail, Sandow carefully considered the bird master, Fremlin. Could he possibly be one of the killers, that rather timid man who went to such care to conceal the size and the power of his musculature beneath ill-fitting garments and also, beneath the air of fragile boyishness he wore? Was his concern for the birds nothing more than a ruse, and would he, before they were finished with this trek, have the blood of more men on his hands?

Or what of the others? Could the deadly pair even be Commander Richter and Belmondo? No, that seemed improbable. If they had lotted the twenty-four soldiers in the hotel, the commander could have used that as an excuse to turn back. Instead, he forged ahead, more determined than ever. Yet . . . yet,

if the two officers were the guilty parties, what would it matter if they went ahead? They could insure the destruction of the party anywhere along the way, or even at the end of the journey, thus wasting more of General Dark's time before a second expedition could be dispatched. Yes, both those men were still suspect.

Sergeant Crowler? His rage at the murders, Mace had said, seemed quite genuine and deep. And yet, wouldn't such a man, such a master of espionage, also be a good actor? And if it was the sergeant, who might his partner be? No, the sergeant must be removed from the list. His partner would have to be an enlisted man or someone who had slept with a mate in the inn, for the sergeant had slept alone—and everyone had vowed for his mate, which meant the killers had roomed together. Unless, perhaps, there were three of them: the sergeant and two enlisted men.

The Shaker gave up on that, for it led nowhere but to paranoia, to seeing killers and demons everywhere. De-mons? Yes, something strange, indeed. What were those two creatures, posing as men, which he had turned up during his reading in the dark hours of the morning?

Overhead, thunder boomed along the low sky, and the shifting masses of gray clouds scudded faster to the west. It seemed as if the night's storm was about to return. And would it bring the night's carnage with it again?

The Shaker decided that, this night, secretly, he and Gregor would again take a reading. They were going to need every scrap of advantage that they could dig up to combat the inhuman assassins loose among the ranks.

By four o'clock in the afternoon, they had reached the middle of Shatoga Falls. Before them, the white eater smashed into a thick, jutting shelf of stone, bounced out-wards, and continued downward for nearly three thousand feet to explode in the origin of the Shatoga River. Above, there was another three thousand feet of tumbling water until the point where the river spilled out of the mountains and began its descent. All that above them would have to be scaled by traditional mountain-eering methods, for the horses could go no further. And even when they reached the top of the waterfall, they would be but a fraction of the way up the Cloud Range toward the cut they wished to use.

It looked impossible.

But no one wanted to think about that.

They stood in the whirling rain, watching the tenders lead the horses down out of the steepest regions where they would tie them up for the night and complete the return to Perdune in the morning. When the last of the swaying beasts was out of sight, everyone was forced to return to the reality of the sheer stone walls ahead of them.

A thousand feet above, the rock face was cleft eighty feet deep and more than a hundred long. A shelf of granite overhung this cleft, providing protection from the storm for the night ahead. Commander Richter had decided to get the party up there, despite the waning light and the driving force of the rain which would make the going more difficult.

Shatoga Falls had been tumbling out of the Cloud Range for some centuries, and it had worn its way deeper and deeper into the rock. It had cut a channel, like a great shaft, some twenty-five feet deep into the face of the mountain. The booming water occupied but ten feet of this depth, leaving open rock walls on either side of its plunge. These walls were shattered and rugged, made so by the constant vibration of the river as it beat its way down the mountain. Indeed, the roar of it was so loud that conversation became impossible, and what orders were given had to be delivered in a loud, forced shout. Close to this roar, and using the nearest of these shaft walls, the party was to ascend to the sheltered cleft a thousand feet overhead.

A group of six men went first, roped together, their oiled leather coats streaming with water. Here, in the draft of the falls, it was impossible to distinguish between the rain and the thick mist splashed outward from the tumbling waters. Fog and mist combined with the slowly growing darkness to make the first party disappear from view when they had ascended some six hundred feet. The sound of their pitons being hammered into the stone to make supports for later teams, was lost in the first two hundred feet, so that now there was no way at all to judge their progress.

Below, the men waited tensely for the sight of flailing, crashing bodies spinning downward, through the shaft, to end up eternities away, at the foot of the falls, crushed by the weight of the water or speared by the stones below or drowned in the vicious, surging currents of the Shatoga River.

But, in time, a good sign came rather than a bad. The climbing rope dangled into view, *sans* its men, but with a red scarf tied to its end. They were all safe on the shelf above.

The inexperienced climbers—the Shaker, Gregor and Mace—were taken up separately, each in the middle of a group of Banibaleers, and all reached the night's lodging place safely. Each man brought his pack on his back, but extra supplies were raised on a second rope which the first team soon established. Despite the fact that he and his step-sons had reached safety, Shaker Sandow did not rest easily until his bags of ritual devices were delivered safely to the ledge and into his slim, white hands.

On the deep shelf, the sound of the falls was muted. The overhang deadened the sound from above, and the platform they rested on did much to blank the booming chaos below. Conversation was again possible, though still uncomfortable. When Commander Richter and Bel-mondo were secure in the cleft,

brought up with the next to the last team, the older officer permitted himself a smile and a few words with Sandow. "It goes better than I hoped," he said.

"None of them dead. It would have been the perfect place for another assassin's game, eh?"

"But there will be many such places," the commander said gloomily. "And demons will be in no hurry to take advantage of them. Okay, okay. Not demons. But I wish you would provide me with some other term to think of them as. Being around young Belmondo all day, one un-consciously picks up the verbalizations of his fears."

The Shaker was about to ask the old man about such a timid officer's presence among such a hearty group as the Banibaleers, but he was interrupted by a piercing chorus of terrified screams that lasted a moment, faded, and then was gone.

"Commander!"

The voice was that of the private named Barrister whose duty it was to monitor the ascension of the climb-ing teams and help the leader of each gain the lip of the cleft more easily. He was a big youth, perhaps none too bright, but a good climber and a conscientious soldier.

"What is it? Who screamed?" Richter demanded as he and the Shaker, accompanied by a number of others, reached the precipice.

"The last team, sir . . . they're gone . . ."

"Gone? What is this 'gone'? Speak up, boy!"

"I was monitoring them," Barrister said, obviously quite shaken, rubbing his face with one hand as if un-able to believe this was not a dream, not something that he could snap himself out of. "Before I could do any-thing about it, the lead piton, here, gave way, pulled rock with it, and was gone over the edge. They must have been relying totally on the anchor, for the scream came almost instantly."

"There were seven in the team," Richter said. He turned to the Shaker. "He's gotten seven more of them, if he happens to be Barrister here."

Sandow looked at the boy who was staring over the edge of the cliff, his face drawn, his entire body wracked with terrible nervous spasms. "He doesn't seem the mur-derous sort. Could it not have been an accident?"

"Perhaps," Richter said. "The edge rock here is prob-ably fractured invisibly inside, from the constant vibra-tion. But it seems it should have given way before this, before all but the last team had been drawn up on it."

"Sir!" Barrister called.

They turned to the boy, saw that he was bent dangerously over the lip of the ledge, staring intently into the darkness and the mists below where seven companions had been lost

"What is it now?" Richter asked.

"There below, coming up!" Barrister called. The ex-pression of utter joy and relief was almost comical. Unless it was merely the clever mask of an actor.

To suspect everyone, the Shaker thought, is what will wear away our nerves most quickly.

Fifteen feet down, the head and shoulders of a climber came into view through the thick fog. He was working carefully from piton to piton, taking no chances now that there was no safety rope to save him, should a foot slip on the icy iron spikes. It was impossible from that angle for the commander to recognize the man, but he wasted no time in ordering a coil of heavy rope, from which a loop was made and passed downward to the struggling mountaineer.

As the group on the cleft watched with a barely re-strained tension and agony of sympathy, the man held to a piton with one hand, his right foot on one below him, and grasped the proffered loop. Doing a balancer's act beyond match, he managed to slip the loop through the jaws of a spring clamp on his belt, making himself safe against a slip.

There was a collective sigh of relief above him. A mo-ment later, he had reached the ledge and collapsed full length in exhaustion: tired, but alive.

"Cartier!" Richter said, bending on one knee next to the man who had just scabbled to safety. "What happened? The rest of them?"

After he had gulped a great many lungfuls of watery air and some color had returned to his face,

Cartier man-aged to sit up, holding to the commander's shoulder, and look about himself in bewildered anger and sorrow. "Gone," he said. "All of them. Tumbled to the bottom of the falls and smashed and drowned."

"What happened?" Richter pressed.

Cartier shook his head as if to clear it of the vision of dying men. "I was the last on the team. When it hap-pened, I was holding onto a spike, which was all that saved me, no doubt to that. I heard Bennings, the top man, scream. Then the second man screamed too, and it was clear what was happening. That moment Bennings fell by me, his face a terrible sight, absolutely horror-stricken. The third man must have been trying to hold tight, but he was ripped loose too. There were two above me yet, Cox and Willard. I heard Cox go and knew Wil-lard would follow immediately. He couldn't hold the weight of all those men himself. I thought fast, and had gods' grace, I tell you. I pulled my knife from its sheath and severed the line between Willard and me. Not a breath later, he went, and all of them dropped by me like stones."

"Get this man to shelter," the commander ordered. "Some hot soup should help his nerves, I daresay."

When Cartier had been helped away, the Shaker leaned close to the rough old officer. "I feel your suspi-cions still negate the possibility of an accident?"

"Not negate, Master Shaker. But they certainly cast dubiety on it." The commander looked at the broken team rope which had been taken from Cartier along with the man's rucksack.

"May I ask why?"

"This."

"Ah, yes, Commander, but then he did say that he cut it, not that it broke."

"It is possible," Richter insisted, "that Cartier waited until Bennings—first man on the team—was not using the team rope for support, until it was slack. At that time, he could have taken the rope in his own hands and pulled it taut. The instant he felt Bennings' weight trans-ferred from a piton to the main line, Cartier could have given the thing a damn healthy yank, tearing the top an-chor piton loose. A team rope, as any competent moun-taineer knows, will take enormous weights at a steady pull—but a sharp and abrupt drag on top of the weight will pull the anchor piton loose five times out of ten: a deadly average."

"And you think that Cartier might have done this thing—and might have cut his connection to the team rope even before that?"

"It's possible. Not likely, mind you, but possible. A man would have to be a fool to take such a risk even if he had cut himself free of the team line. On the bottom of the group, where he was, it was highly likely that one or more of the six falling men above him would strike him and tear him loose of the shaft wall. And he would have gone down there with the rest of them. No, it must have been an accident. It would require a madman to try such a thing on purpose."

"But these may very well be madmen we have aligned against us," the Shaker said.

Richter looked troubled, tired. "I suppose it seems that way." He made the concession reluctantly, just as any man of logic dislikes to think the enemy may not be logi-cal himself.

"Seventy enlisted men remaining," the Shaker mused.

"And I can hardly grill each as if I expected him to be one of our killers. I have a close attachment to these men, Shaker. Some of those boys whose throats were slit had been with me for some time indeed. And on that rope there, the boy Willard . . . Well, he was my nephew, the son of my oldest and favorite sister. Fortu-nately, she's dead now, bless her soul. I'll not have to be reporting his fall to anyone but the General."

"Perhaps double the normal guard tonight," the Shaker suggested.

"I have already decided to order that. And since you are actually our most valuable asset, I should suggest that you detail one of your boys to stand watch over you at all times."

The Shaker nodded and watched Richter move back into the sheltered *cul-de-sac* of the cleft, mingling with his men, stooping to talk to the closest friends of the newly perished Banibaleers. He had a sure way with men, a sense of leadership mixed with a tenderness of human understanding that made him the sort of officer men would follow most anywhere. The Shaker had seen such before, but rarely.

If it's an act, and if he is himself an assassin, the Shaker thought, I shall be certain that he dies most

pain-fully . . .

Gregor appeared at the Shaker's right arm. "I used the excitement to search along the back of the cleft. Up to-ward the north end, clear to the rear, there is a short, tor-turous passage which ends in a chamber perhaps as large as a pantry. No light will escape it, and the sound of the chants should be deafened sufficiently. We can hold the secret reading there."

"After supper," the Shaker said.

"And before our killers claim more victims, let us hope," young Gregor said.

In the darkness of the camp, with the howl of the storm beyond the overhang, the boom of thunder and the crack of Lightning, the Shaker and his assistants reached the passageway Gregor had discovered earlier in the evening. They carried what few bits of magical de-vices they required, but hid them beneath their leather coats lest they be accosted before reaching the den. Sin-gle file, they entered the short tunnel, took four sharp turns, and came out in the room the apprentice Shaker had described. Mace lighted a candle, set it upon a boul-der and stood guard at the entrance, listening for the sound of following footsteps.

In the center of the floor, Gregor placed a silver reading square similar to that contained within the oaken surface of the table in Shaker Sandow's study. It gleamed with the reflected flickering of the candle. From a small tin box, he extracted a short sprig of incense, not enough to carry far out of the cave, and lighted it with care. From a final box, he withdrew two rings set with large sapphires, placed one on his own hand, gave the other to the Shaker.

"What I don't understand," Mace whispered, "is the need for such secrecy."

"You have muscles, but no magic," Gregor said. The power in you is generated by the Clumsy Spirits, the Horse Haunts, but not by the same spirits that produce a Shaker."

"Aye, and you're rattled, not shaken." Both of them were smiling, though they tried to hold the expressions down.

"We must keep it secret, Mace, for we fear that our enemies may have interfered with the first reading we took in the house, during the night past. They may have been aware that Commander Richter had ordered a reading and may have been fighting my powers. They may be minor Shakers themselves. If we come upon them by surprise, we may see their faces this night"

"Well, then begin your chants, Master, for we may be missed in minutes."

The sweet, lilting, quiet voice of the Shaker began, humming like the wind in trees, punctuated now and then by occasional amplifying spell songs in Gregor's deeper, less consistent tones.

"There!" Mace said, leaning forward, pointing at the silver reading plate.

Again, two faces began to appear, slimed over with a film, their features indistinct.

"More concentration!" Gregor gasped.

The Shaker and his apprentice made the spell songs swell, though their voices remained whispered, reserved, in order that those on the cleft beyond might not hear and be drawn.

On the reading plate, the faces began to solidify, though no more completely than they had previously. And even as the three men watched the shimmering im-ages, the strange network of wires and transistors began to spread through the flesh of the two ghost forms, fan-ning downward from their eye sockets, winding through their cheeks, heavily coring their necks and the brain pans within their skulls.

The Shaker relaxed without bothering to put forth more energy. "They remain as they were."

"Then let us move out of here before we draw anyone suspicious. We are in a dead end—a good place to be made dead,"

"Hold a moment, Mace," the Shaker said. "We have one more tact to try. We shall try to summon up the im-ages of various members of this expedition whom we know. If one of them should appear as a wired ghost, we will know we have our man. Rather than move from the general to the specific, we will move from the specific to the general"

"I know none of that," Mace said. "But move swiftly, please."

"Richter and Belmondo first," the Shaker said to Gre-gor. And with the names came concentration

again. Beads of perspiration appeared on the assistant's brow, though his master remained cool and unperturbed.

"Something there," Mace noted.

Indeed, the outlines of Richter and Belmondo shimmered on the silver plate, growing in detail until—
—over both faces a hatchwork of wires spread!

Gregor gasped, partly with surprise and partly in triumph. "It's them!"

The Shaker released control of the surface molecules of the reading plate, and a blank mirror finish returned. The only light now was from the guttering candle which had sent streamers of melted wax running down over the boulder it perched upon.

"What do you propose now?" Gregor asked. "Some-thing should be done quickly, lest they have the opportunity to turn their strength against the men once more."

"I propose a control reading first," the Shaker said, looking somewhat worried. He rubbed at his dark eyes with the tips of his fingers. The whites of those eyes were bloodshot now, both from the exertion of the day and from the tiring energy expansion of this reading.

"Control?" Gregor asked.

"It seems likely that our assassins, if they have the power to block my readings of themselves, may cast some aura which impedes my powers over other minds as well. It would make a fine curtain of deceit."

"But who shall we read?" Gregor asked.

"Mace," the Shaker said, smiling ruefully. "I believe we can at least be certain of Mace, if no one else."

Again, the Shaker and the neophyte-Shaker turned their attention to the smooth sheen of the plate lying on the rocky floor between them. The chants began, sweet and pleasant to the ear, and light returned once again to that magic metal. With the light came the features of Mace, the square, rugged face, the mass of untrained hair—and the core of wires underneath it all.

The picture faded and Gregor spoke immediately it was gone: "Foul! If they use deceit even to black out a Shaker's arts, we will never know just who they are. Quite foul indeed!"

"In games of treachery, there are no fouls. The rules may be bent to the whims of any player," the Shaker said. "In such a thing as espionage, where not even friends and priests are sacrosanct, a Shaker must expect no amenities."

"Someone comes!" Mace said, crouching toward the entrance to the tiny cavern, his hand drawing his dagger from the sheath on his hip. Although he was a big man, he could move with the speed of the slimmest, sleekest killer. Even the Shaker Sandow had not been able to follow the swiftness of the blade's release from its leather sheath.

Into the sputtering yellow glow of the candle, Commander Richter walked, his hands filled with two deadly blades, both longer and more like shortened swords than knives. He looked from each of the three to the other, speculating on his next move. At last, his voice quite firm and quite wicked, he said, "Just what is going on here?"

"A reading," the Shaker said. "We wished to make it secretly so the assassins would not be prepared to blank it. But we did not take them by surprise, it seems."

"Another blank?"

"Exactly," Gregor said.

"I thought perhaps . . . perhaps it was the three of you . . . the assassins." He let his swords drop to his sides as Mace sheathed his own weapon. "So you suspected me as well."

"One can never be too suspicious," the Shaker affirmed.

Mace chuckled, the only one who saw any humor here. "But you suspected us as well," he said. "So the in-sults neatly cancel each other out"

"One of my men reported seeing the three of you acting suspiciously," the commander said. "And when I came to look for you, you were gone. Unless you had leaped from the ledge, there could be but one place else—some cave along the rear wall of the cleft. I found it after some moments."

The Shaker stood and Gregor followed after, gathering the paraphernalia of their magic. "We had

best be re-turning," the Shaker said.

"You don't wear your robes," Richter said. "I have always been under the impression that robes were essential to the exercise of a Shaker's powers."

"Many things that Shakers think are essential are really nothing more than tradition," Sandow said. "Even the reading plate is not essential. A clear pond of water would have done as well, or a regular mirror. Many of the traditional chants can be shortened, though I find even *I* need some of them to put me in the proper frame of mind."

"But magic is an art which requires—"

Sandow interrupted Richter with a raised hand. "Perhaps I am a very unorthodox Shaker indeed," he said. "But I don't believe that what Shakers possess is necessarily a link to the spirit world, to the realms of magic. I believe, instead, that it is merely a random talent distributed by Nature, just as blue eyes and black hair, just as some people have acute hearing and some have olfactory senses beyond the realm of the normal. Further, I think that it was something which happened during the Blank, something from that period of our history which is shrouded in dead memories, which produced this Shaker talent within some families of men."

"There are Shakers who would have you burned for heresy," Commander Richter said.

"Surely, surely," Sandow agreed. "And so it is that I live in a quiet, isolated village like Perdune and never attend conferences of Shakers or write letters to my brothers in the trade. Some day, my own beliefs will be borne out, as we discover more of the Blank and come to understand what took place during those dark centuries."

"And perhaps that is what drove you to accept such a hazardous commission as this?" the commander asked.

"Perhaps," Sandow replied, smiling. "And may I live long enough to see fruit from all this toil."

"By the gods' beards, may you," old man Richter said. "May *all* of us . . ."

With the Shatoga Falls roaring beneath them, plunging over the shattered edge of a cliff not a hundred yards below and to their right, the first phase of the Cloud Range climb was well behind them. Up here the air was not thick with mist and the ears were not threatened with deafness from the ever-present thunder of the plunging water. One could see more than five steps before him, for the crisp breezes were bell-clear and re-freshing.

But not all was good. For the first time, they had encountered frost as the temperatures dropped to the verge of freezing and went but a degree or two beyond. The rocks but a short way farther up were hoary with a thin film of white. Even here the breath of a man turned to steam as it touched the air. In the long run, the cold would be much deadlier than the mist and the waterfall's roar.

For a time, the way was relatively easy, for there was a breakback into the mountain's heart, sloping upward steeply, but not sheerly. They walked in groups of six and eight, roped together by Commander Richter's orders, even though there was little likelihood of anyone taking a fatal spill on such relatively untreacherous ground. Banister, who had been monitoring the ascent of the last group the previous evening, who had seen them plunge to their deaths, was placed in the middle of an eight-man group. In the middle. Likewise, Cartier, the only survivor of the previous night's disaster, was sandwiched between other men, at the commander's discreet suggestion.

Although the commander would have preferred to separate the three inexperienced climbers so that there would be but one drag upon any single climbing team, Mace had insisted upon remaining with Shaker Sandow. It had done no good to argue or to explain in logical terms. Mace had merely drawn the mask of the slow-wit, of the buffoon, down over his wide face, had pretended not to understand any of the things the commander said. Even when the Shaker himself had reluctantly suggested that perhaps it wasn't necessary for the giant to keep such a close watch, Mace remained adamant. Adamantly stupid, as one of the enlisted men said after the argument had ended in Mace's favor.

But Mace was never stupid, except for the benefit of others.

Near noon, they came to a canyon that broke downward in a ragged jumble of broken boulders and shale slides. Its bottom was a sharp vee, with hardly any floor at all. Seven hundred feet down and seven hundred feet up the other side—the descent would be easy, but the ascent difficult. The opposite wall of the chasm bowed outward toward the top until it formed an overhang which climbers would have to broach by climbing upside down for the distance of fifty feet, then swing over the edge onto the solid ground beyond.

Commander Richter called a lunch break, which was accepted with enthusiasm. The Banibaleer mess officer, a man named Daborot, broke out the food cases and used them as a table onto which the cured slabs of beef, the rounds of cheese, and stale rolls of bread were placed. Coffee was brewed in eight separate pots, and soon a line had formed to devour the simple but nourishing meal.

Richter brought his mess tin to the place where the Shaker and his step-sons sat and ate with them. "We'll not all be going down and then up," the officer said. "That overhang is a tough one even for mountaineers, and you three would never make it."

"My prayers have been answered then," Mace said. It was not said with any particular humorous note to it.

"What magic do you intend to use to get us from here to there, then?" Gregor asked, his mouth full of bread and cheese so that his words were somewhat garbled.

"There you have the educated Shaker-to-be," Mace said with scorn. "Note his fine diction and his superb manners. But yes, Commander, just how will we get from here to there?"

"I'll lead a party down, up the other side. I've clambered round greater overhangs than that. We will

leave a length of rope here to be tied down, and carry an un-reeling coil with us as we cross. Once on the other side, we can attach it. It is but three hundred feet across by hand, which—”

“You can't expect the Shaker, a man his age, to crawl three hundred feet on the slender strand of that rope, supported by just his hands!” Gregor had sprayed some amount of crumbs over his lap in his ejaculation.

“I hardly said that,” Commander Richter said. “I doubt even I would wish to try it. It is not nearly the same as mountaineering, but engages an entire other set of muscles.”

“What then?” Mace asked, interested.

The first man to come across will be the one named Zito Tanisha. He is from the Coedone Gypsy tribes and is inclined to acrobatics of various lands. Indeed, the en-tire trick we will use was devised by Zito. He will cross hand over hand, for he is used to that. He will tie a sec-ond length of rope to the cut end of the first before he leaves, paying that one out as he crosses. When he reaches us, the second rope will be made fast to our end of the first. The ropes are thin, but strong, and the knots will be tight but small. On both sides of the gorge, after the knots have been tied, wax will be melted over them to seal them tighter and to guard against slippage. At that point, we will have a great loop of rope stretched across the canyon. Sergeant Crawler will break loose the anchor piton on this side and slip this end of the loop into a pulley system which men are now putting to-gether. The pulley is built on a small platform, upon which four men will stand as anchor. On the other side of the gorge, we will then do the same with a second, matching pulley that we will take across with us. After that, a man need only grasp the lowest rope with both hands and be whisked across by our team of drawers and the team of pullers over here who will work on the upper rope while we pull on the lower. Perhaps three minutes per man to cross. A great time saver and far less chance of disaster.”

“Quite ingenious!” Mace said in obvious admiration.

“This Zito,” the Shaker said. “He can be trusted?”

“We've used the same device three times before,” Commander Richter said.

That is not what I asked.”

If I can't trust Zito,” Richter said, shrugging wearily, “I can trust no one. He has given me his bloodied ker-chief once, and you know what that means among the Coedones.”

“Eternal fidelity,” the Shaker said. “And they have never been known to break such a vow. Well, it is nice to know there is one of your men who is not suspect.”

Richter finished eating and went off to take care of the last of the arrangements. Ten minutes later, he and a party of seven enlisted men had started down this side of the canyon.

“One of us simply must remain with our baggage,” Gregor said firmly. “And they say the luggage must go last, after the men. So I'll just stand here until it's across. They can send me over after it. Then the four men weighting down the pulley platform, and the two on the drawing team can pack up and make the climb down and up like Richter did.”

“Why don't I stay?” Mace asked.

The Shaker will be over there, and that is where the muscle must be, you lummoX. I am small game com-pared to the Shaker. Now, no more arguments.”

“I guess you're right,” Mace said.

“You know I am.”

He gripped the smaller boy's shoulder, looked at Gre-gor with what passed for love between them. “Be cautious. It is a long way down to the bottom of the can-yon and no cushions when you get there.”

“That I see,” Gregor said. “I will be quite careful indeed.”

Gripping the lower rope with both big, thick-fingered hands, Mace looked down at the shattered floor of the canyon seven hundred feet below. He had been told not to look down, but the temptation was too great. He was glad, now, that he had ignored that order, for the whirl-ing, slowly turning spires

of rock below were truly lovely from such an improbable viewpoint. His blood, too, sang with a rare excitement.

Excitement.

Not fear.

For Mace, there truly was no such thing as terror. He had never experienced anything which had brought him to the frazzled ends of his nerves. And that, despite the fact that being the assistant of a Shaker provided a goodly number of hair-raising experiences. And as he was *never* terrified, he was *seldom* even given to fear. It was as if he had been born without that portion of his soul, as if all the fear he had never felt was transformed into extra inches of height, extra pounds of muscle.

Once, Shaker Sandow had explained to Mace just why he was so fearless. "Mace," the Shaker had said, "you are a very small magician. You have within you just the bar-est stirrings of a Shaker's power. That glimmer of power makes you faster on your feet than other men, quicker to react, more clever to understand, more cunning to perceive that which others wish not perceived. But there the power ends. It will never be great, nor even moderate within you. You will never do readings, never tell the future, never read minds. Such is your lot, and there is a danger in it. The minor magician, such as yourself, feels superior to other men and knows he can best them no matter what the odds—and he is only honest. But the minor magician never learns to fear, and that may one day trip him up. The major magician, in his wisdom, understands the value of fear. The major magician sees more deeply into life and realizes that fear is a most expedient emotion at the proper times. So you must always make an effort to know terror, to be afraid when the time requires fear. It is something you must culture, since it does not come naturally to you."

But Mace never had learned it. And culturing it was far too much bother.

Watching the scenery, he made his way happily across the gorge as men toiled on either side to draw him to safety.

Well, Shaker Sandow thought, it has been a good life. I have led sixty years of it, sixty years of sunrises and sunsets, of which I have watched perhaps more than two thirds. Sixty years of thunder and lightning and storms, sixty years without ever knowing want and without ever suffering bodily injury. If I am to die now, so be it. But please, please, make my heart stop before I reach the stones below.

The good Shaker was not making the journey across the canyon with the same stoic good humor that young Mace had possessed. He had often advised Mace to learn how to fear, and he never gave advice that he did not follow himself: he was afraid.

Not terrified, though. A good magician learned that there was a limit to the usefulness of fear. Terror soon turned to panic, and that to foolishness. And so he hung on the ropes, the wind buffeting him in a slow arc, anticipating death in a rather scholarly manner, so that if it should come upon him suddenly, he would not be ill-prepared for it.

A lone, white bird flew by him quite close, screeching at him, its clear blue eyes curious.

Perhaps forty more years of life ahead of me, Sandow thought. "We Shakers live to ripe old ages by routine. And here I am, out on a rope above a deadly canyon— and what for? Why am I risking all those decades of life here on this cold, barren mountain?"

But that was easy enough to understand. He was risking those decades of life for knowledge, the one thing which the Shaker had never been able to resist in his long life. There had been many women, yes, in many beds. But there had never been one who could dictate the course of his life, not one whose breasts and loins could hold him to her vision of the future. Money? Ah, but he always had a great deal of that. No, only knowledge could lead him to extremes, to risk all.

His great curiosity about the Blank and about the nature of the Shakers-and-Movers (who had come, through the centuries, merely to be called Shakers, the import of the ancient saying lost to time) had begun when he learned, as a child, that he had killed his mother. Not with an axe or a garrot, surely. But he found that all Shakers' mothers perished during childbirth, screaming under a tremendous burden of pain that was far worse than normal childbirth. Now, so long a time later, he thought he understood why those deaths happened. Even as a newborn child, he had had the power. And perhaps upon birth,

his mind had transmitted the shock and pain of birth to the mind of his mother while they were still linked by the umbilical. Perhaps clear, vicious images of birth shock had struck deep into his own mother's mind, amplified her own pain, and brought her brain to hemorrhaging. It seemed the only answer.

Forty years ago, he had mentioned the theory to other Shakers. He would never do that again. They had scorned him, had accused him of stupidity and near-heresy. A Shaker's mother died, they said, because she was being rewarded with an immediate place in heaven for the production of such a gifted child. Some few said it was evil spirits that claimed these women, punishing them for delivering a saint into the world. In any case, all their explanations relied on the supernatural, on spir-its and demons and angels and ghosts. Not on hard facts, not on science. When he spoke of a more logical reason, he was ridiculed into flight.

Perhaps, in the east, beyond these mountains, there was evidence of those things he had believed for so long. For this possibility he was risking his life.

"Well shall you hang there all day or are you coming aground?" Mace asked, leaning out to snare him.

Shaker Sandow looked about him, surprised. "Day-dreaming, I guess," he said. "Yes, pull my tired old car-cass in by all means." He reached out for the huge hand that had been offered him.

Mace kept careful watch on each man who came across the canyon on the pulley ropes. It was not that he was so concerned about the lives of strangers and casual acquaintances—but just that each man across meant one less before the cargo and, at last, Gregor. Though the giant could not feel fear for his own well-being, he readily evidenced it for the lives and health of the Shaker and of his step-brother Gregor.

In time, all but two enlisted men had been brought across—and the cargo and Gregor, of course. The next to last private, according to the commander, was a fellow by the name of Hastings. He was slight, but apparently rugged, in his early thirties. He grasped the lower rope firmly and kicked off from the ledge, swung over the chasm and began his journey. He was but half a minute from his side of the gorge when he evidenced weakness. His head drooped between his shoulders, like a man em-barrassed, his chin upon his chest. He shook himself, aware of the danger all about, and he seemed to recover for a short moment—

—before he lost his grip with his left hand and main-tained life only by the tenacity of the right.

"Faster!" Richter ordered the men drawing the rope. They began to pull more quickly, more dedicatedly, reel-ing the exhausted man in. They were as aware as anyone that the fewer of them left alive, the worse each man's chances became.

Hastings was a third of the way across now, batting at the rope with his free hand, trying to obtain a solid grasp of it. But it seemed as if he were seeing double or tri-ple, for he could never quite do more than brush it with his fingertips.

"Hold on!" Commander Richter shouted, cupping his hands about his mouth. "You're almost home, boy! Al-most home, you hear?" His words echoed in the still, clean air.

Then Hastings let go with his right hand as well.

He fell down, down, down into the bottom of the gorge.

He did not even flail, as if he saw that screaming and arm-waving was of no avail to him at this point. He had a curious, slack resignation that made the fall all the more horrible.

He struck the rocks, and he bounced.

When he came down the second time, bloodied and quite dead already, he was speared through on a needle-sharp projection of granite and did not bounce again . . .

The last enlisted man, Commander Richter said, was a twenty-year-old lad named Immanuli, very dark of skin —so dark that from this distance they could see nothing but his white teeth and the white of his eyeballs. He followed Hastings with little more than a moment's hesitation, grabbing the rope and swinging out over nothingness, his hand clenched fiercely around the thin lifeline.

He had been on the pulley a minute when Mace said, "It's happening to him as well. Look there!"

Immanuli was swaying erratically, shaking his head as if fighting off hands that gripped his skull and attempted to drag him into the rocky ravine below.

He was halfway now.

"He's a strong lad," Richter said. "Whatever it is, perhaps he can manage it."

At that moment, the dark Immanuli let go with both hands and fell like a stone into the depths of the gorge, slammed head-first into a thrust of granite and burst like an over-ripe fruit before tumbling along to a final resting spot.

"It's a Shaker doing this!" Richter said. "One of your brothers, Shaker Sandow."

"I have thought of the same possibility, and I have been ranging lightly with a minimal power output. There is no other Shaker. The accidents were not caused by evil magic."

"Well, let us see how the cargo bears. It does not have fingers to become weak or will power to give out under some strange curse." The commander looked gloomily across the divide as the men on the other side attached the first parcels to the pulley lines.

But pessimism turned to optimism again as the bundles began to arrive without disaster. One after another, a steady stream of them crossed the scar in the land, until everything was at last on the eastern edge of the canyon.

"Now that apprentice of yours," Richter said. "And let us all say prayers for his crossing."

"Wait," Mace said. "I require more than prayers."

"What?"

"Certainly," the giant said, "the cargo crossed without incident. But it is not our supplies the assassins want. They too must eat. They are after flesh, after human lives. I do not trust to Gregor's passage."

"He can't very well climb," the commander said. "If he tries to come back with the last foot team—with those men manning the pulley over there—he'll die and take them with him. There is no hope of an amateur climbing under that overhang, even with the help of a professional team. It's the rope or nothing."

"Then I'll test the rope," Mace said. "I'll go over there and back."

"Risk a man already safe?" Richter asked incredulously. "Out of the question!"

"Either that or all of us return," Mace snarled. He towered over the old officer, and his physique and expression did not permit much argument.

"Master Sandow, argue sense to him!" Richter said turning to the Shaker.

Sandow smiled. "Mace here is a minor magician. With quick reactions, quicker than any normal man could hope for—quicker even than Gregor's, for the boy is undeveloped as yet. He will have a greater chance than anyone of seeing what it was that caused those two fall—and he will have a greater chance of returning here alive. Besides, when Mace makes up his mind—well, it remains where he puts it."

"Well . . ."

"There is no time to waste," Mace said. "Signal the far side as to our intentions."

The flagman was brought forth, did his colorful chore. In another minute, Mace was riding toward the far ledge from which he had departed not so terribly long ago. He arrived without incident, checked the pulley system over there and had a short conversation with Gregor to ascertain whether the youth felt fit.

Inside of five minutes, he was on his way back, and he made that trip in good health as well.

“Apparently accidents,” he told the Shaker. “I see no treachery. I felt nothing unusual coming either way. Gre-gor says he feels fine, though he was about to take a swig of brandy to settle his nerves for the crossing.”

“Here he comes,” Richter said. “He's just lifted off the other side there.”

Everyone turned to stare openly at the apprentice who then seemed like a hapless insect out of its season, soon to perish from the cold. He swung gently back and forth on the pulley rope, drawing toward safety at too slow a pace to please anyone on the east of the chasm.

“It's happening!” Belmondo gasped, his voice thin and worried, not at all the competent, cool manner of a trained mountaineer.

And certainly enough, Gregor was losing his grip but a third of the distance along the two hundred-foot ride. He fought desperately to regain that handhold, finally latching fingers around the thin line. But it was evident by the sluggishness of his movements, by the angle of his weary head, that he could not maintain his position for very long.

“Put another man or two on your drawing team,” Mace told Richter. “They're going to be needing extra strength to drag in two of us.”

“You can't go out there!” Belmondo gasped. “The line won't hold that weight. It'll snap against the pulley wheels!”

Mace smiled, but not in a friendly or even tolerant fashion, patted the young officer on the head. “You let me fret about that,” he said. He turned to Richter. “Now!” he shouted.

Without waiting to see if the old man did as he had suggested, Mace stepped from the eastern edge of the canyon, grasped the topmost rope of the double line. Whereas the lower rope was coming toward the east, the upper rope was returning to the west, and it drew Mace inexorably onward toward the apprentice Gregor.

“He won't make it,” Richter told the Shaker. “I'm not one for glorying in bad news, but neither am I one for coloring the truth to make it prettier.”

“Perhaps he won't,” the Shaker said. “Then again, per-haps he will. You do not know Mace as well as I, and if you did you might have more hope than you do.”

Unsatisfied with the rate of progression of the line, Mace added to his speed by going hand-over-hand along the upper-most rope even as it drew him toward Gregor. Before leaving the cliffside, he had shed his gloves, and now his hands took the brutal burning of that moving, jerking rope as he slid along it. The lower rope, taut and speeding the opposite direction, whistled against his leather coat, snapped sharply against him now and then though he seemed hardly to notice it.

Gregor lost his grip with his left hand and hung seven hundred feet above disaster by the power of his right hand alone.

Mace was now little more than fifty feet away from the apprentice, coming fast toward him, trying not to jar the lower rope and thereby add woe to the young man's already perilous situation.

Gregor floundered about ungracefully, swinging more wildly back and forth now as he attempted to reach up and clutch the lost rope with his left hand. He made a valiant effort of it, but his movements seemed improp-erly coordinated, and he could not find the line.

“Hold on!” Mace called urgently. He was no mon than thirty feet from the boy now, his large face strained and flushed, even though most of his abnormal strength and will power was as yet untapped.

Gregor looked up at his step-brother, his face a mask of stupidity. He was, Mace could see, like a drunken man on the verge of stupor. His face was slack, his eyes heavily lidded. His mouth hung open as if his jaw had been unhinged, and curls of steaming breath rose dumbly through his lips, like smoke snakes in the cold air. He shook himself, aware of the danger, but the sleep-iness remained.

Fifteen feet now.

Mace's hands burned with the pain of torn skin.

Ten feet.

At that moment, Mace was suddenly aware of what was happening to the fingers of Gregor's right hand, his last hold on safety: the fingers were loosening their grip uncurling . . .

The apprentice would drop in but an instant, in the blink of an eye, and that would be the end of it.

The giant thought quickly and wasted no time at all in pressing those thoughts into definite action. He released his hold on the highest line as he reached the inward point of his wind-blown arc. Flailing blindly for the bottom, east-bound rope with one arm, he used his other hand to reach out and dig long, strong fingers into the bulky clothing the apprentice wore, found a belt and gripped it.

No sooner had Mace's fingers taken the younger man's weight than Gregor lost consciousness altogether and re-leased his last tenuous hold on the pulley line. But for the larger man, he would have finished his life at that instant of time.

Mace's other arm caught the lower line and wrapped desperately around it. Now the giant hung with the line cutting through the inner crease of his elbow joint. If he had not been wearing a sturdy mountain coat, the rope would have torn his flesh with a vengeance. Even so, it was going to be difficult to maintain such a precarious hold all the way back to the eastern ledge, even though he was more than halfway there by this time.

Or at least he supposed he was.

He dared not turn his head over his shoulder to look, for such an action might send them both plummeting downward. He faced the western side of the gorge, where only six men manned the pulley rope and the platform.

Though it seemed that his leap from the top line to the bottom one and his rescue of Gregor had taken centuries, little more than two or three seconds had transpired. And now as he felt the worst moments had passed, he saw that such was not the case. Calamity struck again.

On the western side of the chasm, the added weight of Mace at the same drag-point as Gregor—combined with the sudden snap of his weight being dropped from the top to the bottom rope—became too much for the four anchor men who were trying to hold the pulley platform down. The device bucked, skidded across granite, ten feet closer to the precipice. One of the anchor men fell struck his head on a pulley stanchion and rolled the last five feet to the brow of the cliff, fell over and away to the hard death below.

"Just fine," Mace muttered. "Just wonderful."

The three remaining anchor men were fighting a losing battle with the rollicking platform. It tossed like a ship on rough seas and began coming apart at its temporary seams. In desperation, the two men on the pulley ropes left their post and flung themselves onto the platform. The device ceased its frantic skittering and was still no more than a yard from the sharp edge of the cliff.

The pulley ropes ceased their thrumming, and some pressure was taken off Mace's tortured arm.

Now there was only one team reeling in the two men suspended near the center of the line, and the pace of the retrieval operation abruptly slowed. A lesser man than Mace might have given up in despair at the feel of that sudden slacking, but the giant clung stubbornly, gripping Gregor below him, and waited it out.

There was no thought in Mace's mind to correspond with: "I may die!" But there was a thought, a deep fear which verbalized as: "Gregor may die!"

There was an almost graveyard silence in the air. He could not hear the voices of the men on the east side; everyone there seemed stunned into silence. He was too far from the west brink to hear the labored breathing of the men there.

It was not many more seconds before he began to feel the pain in his left arm as the lower pulley line's pressure made itself felt even through his bulky coat. A dull ache had spread up his shoulder and as far down his arm as his wrist. His hand and his fingers were totally numb—and that frightened him more than the pain. He could withstand pain, but if he lost all feeling in that arm, he could no longer maintain enough muscle control to keep them safe.

Yet he could not shift and grasp the line with his hand, for his position was so awkward that the slightest relaxation in that clenched arm would spell the end of this adventure. All the spell songs of all Shakers would do nothing for their bloodied corpses.

He could hear the creak of the pulley wheels, which meant the eastern bank could not be terribly far from them.

He wished he could look.

But he couldn't.

The fingers clutching Gregor by the belt of his coat were shot full of needles which were tipped with acid. Or so they seemed. And already, paralysis was affecting his grip.

The lower rope slipped out of the elbow joint crease as he lost some of the pressure he had at first been able to apply. Desperately, he jerked his arm against his body, forced the sliding, tight line back to the nook where it had been.

“Not long, Gregor. Not long at all,” Mace said, but he was speaking for his own benefit, and no one else's.

If they died, what Mace would regret the most was letting Shaker down. The sorcerer had done so much for a small, orphaned child named Mace—so much then and so much in the intervening twenty years. To repay all that kindness and goodwill with failure was despicable.

Suddenly, he felt himself pulled loose of the line, felt his weight slipping. He tried to flail out to save them before he realized that his weight was being taken by two brawny Banibaleers on the eastern ledge. His shoulder and back had grown so numb under the wracking exertion he had forced his body to, that he had not felt the pressure of their hands on him.

He gave himself over to the solicitous rescuers and finally permitted himself to pass out.

When Mace had come around some five minutes after his faint, he loudly proclaimed his fidelity and subser-vience to a variety of gods, major and minor, and he confided to everyone clustered about him that his safety and the safety of the apprentice Gregor was purely the result of an air sprite's whim. He explained that the fairies of the atmosphere favored those who had lived their lives in high elevations, as both he and Gregor had, nestled in the mountainous village of Perdune.

Aside, Commander Richter said, "I was not aware that the great barbarian there was such a religious man."

"The last time I saw him in such a mood was six years ago—when he lit a candle for a dead friend's soul." The Shaker was barely able to suppress a smile, and the lin-gering traces of it curled the corners of his thin mouth.

"Then why does he—" Richter began.

At that moment, a group of five enlisted men returned from the giant. One of them was entertaining the others, and as they passed, he could be heard to say: ". . . how a great, simple lummoX like that could have done it! It was the sheerest luck—unless his air sprites are more substantial than the air from the giant's mouth!" Those around him broke into pleasant laughter.

"I see," Richter said. He looked at Mace with more ad-miration than before. "He plays his role even more completely than I had thought. Or perhaps he plays it so well that I had forgotten his true nature."

"He is a complex lad," the Shaker said. Then he turned from his boys and faced the old officer next to him. "Tell me, how will we discover what caused those accidents? If accidents they were. Two men dead and almost a third—that seems like the carefully planned sort of acci-dent, does it not?"

The commander nodded to the far side of the chasm where the other pulley had by now been dismantled and was being packed away in its component parts. "When those five men reach us, we'll question them. Perhaps they know something, and perhaps—if our two assassins are in that group—the villains will have brought about their own end this time, by narrowing down our field of suspicions."

"There's Gregor as well," the Shaker reminded the commander.

"That there is. When he comes to, perhaps he will be able to shed some light upon this latest mystery."

It was simple enough to trace the source of the treach-ery once everyone had been questioned. To find the man or men who had perpetrated that treachery, however, was nigh onto impossible. The agents of Oragonia worked quietly, cleverly, and without clue; the treason lay in a bottle of brandy without label or mark of owner-ship . . .

Hastings, Immanuli and Gregor had all taken healthy swigs of the potent brew before embarking on the haz-ardous journey across the gulf. A careful taste check and a comparison of odors between this brandy and a bottle of the commander's own, proved that what they had drunk was adulterated, perhaps with some sleeping po-tion of more than a small degree of efficiency.

No one could remember where the bottle had come from. Apparently, someone had given it to Hastings with the suggestion that he drink of it before crossing the gorge, to steel his nerves, for Hastings had been noto-riously terrified by the pulley arrangement, though other rigors of mountain-climbing did not bother him at all. Immanuli, after watching Hastings to go his death on the rocks, might have thought he too required a draw on the liquor before following in deadly footsteps. Likewise, Gregor, after he had witnessed not one but two tragic and violent deaths, wanted something to warm his gut and stop the shuddering spasms that shook his thin body. But Hastings had mentioned no names. And no one would admit, of course, to having possessed the bottle at one time. Finally, no one could even recall having seen

the bottle in anyone else's belongings.

Two more men were dead, and nothing gained for it.

"And we cannot even eliminate the five men on the western cliff," Richter said to the Shaker. "It could as easily have been one of them as someone over here."

"I think it looks like snow," Sandow said, indicating the leaden clouds that scraped by close overhead. Some-times, he knew, the mind welcomed a change from one catastrophe to another, merely to be able to stop think-ing about the first for even a moment.

Richter surveyed the sky. "Aye, and we best be mov-ing. At least we can get in two more hours of march be-fore camp." He snorted in disgust. "I wish we could progress without being afraid to turn our backs on each other. That, more than anything, will sap our strength."

They tied up in groups as before and started off on an-other steep but none too dangerous stretch of ground.

And the snow came . . .

In wintertime in Perdune, the citizens lived in a state of siege, walled from the rest of the world by drifting ramparts of white. The spring, summer, and short au-tumn were employed to store away the necessities of life through the long and bitter winter months. Storehouses were stacked high with fuel wood and blocked, dried mosses from the marshlands by the sea, beyond the Bani-bals. Every housekeeper had a larder packed to the beams, and the merchants made certain that their own salable foodstuffs were well crated to endure until the last month or two of winter—for if the season were longer than usual, they would turn quite a business at a decent enough profit. There were always those who pre-pared for the average winter, without thought to a late thaw.

In Perdune, by mid-winter, the streets were all but im-passable, narrowed to walks by the packed, mounting drifts. Houses at some locations were swept across by snow-bearing winds until, at last, they were completely concealed from the eye, but for the constantly main-tained channel from front door to street. Snowshoed teams of armed men patrolled the drifted town, walking at roof level, looking for wolves. There were always some of them who did not leave the valley for the west-ern slopes of the Banibals during the last weeks of au-tumn. Some stayed behind, their instincts failing them this once, and when they found themselves without food in a cold wasteland, they prowled the drift-packed vil-lage, growing emaciated, shivering with the cold, eyes red and weeping tears. Children were most often kept in-doors during the hardest weeks of winter; in the beginning, when the snow had only begun to fall and mount, they went out to play and enjoy themselves, well aware of the isolation that came with later days; by January, the wolves and the fierce winds confined all but the stoutest citizens to their warm homes.

The residents of Perdune grew accustomed to this pe-riod of the year, and even seemed to look forward to it, despite all the complaints and the jokes about eternal winter and lost spring. It was a time to read, to forget commerce and enjoy leisure. It was a time when warmth and coziness seemed unbelievably precious and wonder-ful, by comparison to the world outside. It was a time for family games, for baking sessions in sweet-smelling kitchens, a time for games of a frosty night, played around a stone fireplace on the warmed bricks of the hearth, a time for quilts and warm chocolate in bed. When it was gone, when the snows began to melt off, a melancholy settled upon the residents, despite their proclamations of relief and joy in seeing spring ap-proach.

But even a resident of Perdune, the Shaker thought, would flee in terror at the fierce weather the climbers had encountered far up the slopes of the Cloud Range. No sooner than half an hour after he had predicted the snow last night, it began: gentle at first, even pretty— later growing harsh and thick and difficult.

They had made camp at the bottom of a sheer wall which they would have to scale the following morning. Sheets of canvas were brought out from the supplies, and specially trained teams set to work driving the iron braces of the windbreakers into the earth. Even where there was ground instead of solid rock, the earth con-tained eighteen inches of frost through which the sharp-ened spikes had to be driven to insure safety. The chore was not a small one, and not without an accompanying rush of curses from every man so employed.

But even when the flapping, whispering breakers had been erected around the close-grouped

climbers, some wind managed to reach them. It tore through the camp, sent columns of fine, dry snowflakes whirling like tor-nadoes. It made them huddle over their hot soup and cured, salted beef, made them suck greedily at their steaming coffee and their private bottles of warming rum and brandy. There was no urge to conversation, and all but the guards were soon drawn deeply into their sleeping bags, scarfs wrapped about their heads, hoods of leather coats drawn up and pulled tight with the tie strings about their necks.

The wind was an ululating lullaby.

The cold dulled the senses.

Soon, they slept.

Morning came too soon, and no one's spirits rose with the dawn, for the storm had increased. The wind was a wild, screaming banshee that howled above them snatched at them with strong fingers, flung them forward when they wished to go right, drove them backward when the only hope of safety was ahead.

It was almost as if the wind and the snow and the cold had aligned themselves with Oragonia.

There was no longer any opportunity for reverie, any chance to spend time in an attempt to discover the identity of the pair of assassins. They not only had to struggle with the killers and the terrain now, but with the weather as well. Every waking moment was another battle in a war that it seemed impossible to win.

The following morning was spent in negotiating eight hundred feet of featureless, icy stone. There was no way around the verticle impediment, for it broke into an even more unmanageable chasm to the right and fell away into nothingness to the left. Once above it, it seemed they could make use of a chimney of stone which would protect them from the elements for another fifteen hundred feet. Yet no one permitted himself to consider such a heavenly possibility, lest it prove false and shatter all the hopes built for it.

They scaled the face in teams of three and four in order to diminish the dimensions of any possible disaster. The ninth group that started up the wall was struck by an almost consciously malicious wind of such a degree of viciousness as to almost insure their deaths. On the top of the cliff, men grabbed for pitons which were jammed into the thick ice crust. At the base, men were blown from their feet, sent tumbling along in the snow until they could find something to grasp and hold to. But out there on the blank face, strung together by a pitiful rope, cringing to the toothpick handholds of their pitons, the four-man climbing team could hardly hope to last for long.

And did not . . .

The second man from the top was ripped loose by the wind, slammed against the stone, then flung outward over nothingness. Yet he was still safe enough, held to his stable comrades by the team line. How long the others could accept his weight and still cope with the storm was a question no man could answer. As it turned out, they did not have to struggle much longer. The last man's foot slipped from his piton, and he dropped, taking up slack in the team line, his sudden jerky slip pulling his upper hand piton loose as well. When the jarring tug of that fall reached the others, the final two men were ripped from their desperate holds to the cliff face, and all four of them went flying outward and down as the wind flung them over the heads of the men below, took them to the left and over the side into the bottom-less cleft in the earth where mists and swirling clouds of snow eventually obscured them and blotted out their faint-hearted screams.

Sixty-four enlisted men, three officers, and the Shaker and his boys. Soon, the killers would be easily found, for there would be no one left but assassins and their last victims. Richter agreed with the Shaker that the four deaths on the wall had not been in the assassins' plans but were genuine accidents. They both voiced hopes that both the killers had been in that party. But neither believed his own wishful thinking.

Indeed, there was a fifteen hundred-foot verticle flue of stone above the cliff, and for a time they were sheltered from the wind, though the loud whistling of it across the top of the chimney almost deafened the men climbing inside.

The afternoon stretched on toward evening.

The snow was up to the knee now, deeper at places where drifts had built up.

Ice packed the coats and britches of the climbers as the wind drove the hard grains of snow against them. Richter had early advised Shaker Sandow, Mace, and Gregor not to break the crusted ice loose from them-selves, for it added a layer of protection against the fierce wind—no matter what its added weight might do to their pace and their sense of comfort. Comfort hardly mattered when even the preservation of life was in doubt.

Everyone wore tightly knitted masks of wool with eye slits and a gash across the mouth for breath to be drawn more easily. Still, it was best to close the eyes as often as possible, even if only for a few seconds at a time. The temperature had dropped so low that tears froze on the skin even beneath the woolen climbing masks. One was also forced to breathe shallowly lest the lungs freeze with the gulping intake of great quantities of sub-zero air. There were fifty-two degrees of frost, Sergeant Crowler said—twenty degrees below zero—and the tender tissue of the lung collapsed under that if it was taken in too heartily. The slower breathing also slowed their pace, but Richter refused to call a halt until he had found some place better than open ground for the mak-ing of camp.

“In the open,” the tough old officer had told Mace, “we will all surely freeze to death this night!” He had given Mace the duty of keeping his eyes open for the sign of a cave which might be all but drifted shut with snow. He trusted the giant’s eyes more than even his own, and he was known for his hawklike vision.

Even under the fur-lined hoods of their coats, their ears grew cold and enflamed.

Even through the thickness of two pair of gloves, their fingers became frost-bitten, and they had to exercise their hands, slap them against their thighs as they walked.

It was almost five-thirty with darkness closing in around them, when young Captain Belmondo died.

Not ten minutes earlier, he had taken half an hour duty in the lead, testing for snow bridges which had now become an ever-present danger. Whistling sheets of snow could drift outward from two opposing cliffs and form a crust across a narrow gorge perhaps as wide as twenty feet in these high winds. The way would appear as safe as any, but the unwary climber would be setting foot on cotton and would plummet through to destruction.

Belmondo walked carefully, almost cowardly. Since he had taken the advance position, the pace had slowed by half, even though the weather had already slowed them considerably. He never moved a foot without first testing for solid ground again and again. That was why it was such a shock to everyone when, suddenly, he found him-self in the middle of a snow bridge that was giving way beneath him.

He turned, scrambling back toward Richter who was reaching for him. But the crust cracked, shivered, fell and he was gone, his face so terror-stricken and his mind so dumbfounded by the realization of his own death, that he had no chance at all to scream.

Immediately, Commander Richter ordered all the Ban-ibaleers onto their hands and knees so as to distribute their weight over four points rather than two. They also eased away from one another, for there was no way of telling how many of them had strayed onto the shaky bridge of snow that was now the only thing barring them from oblivion.

Also on their hands and knees, Richter and Crowler crept forward to the hole Belmondo had made. Looking down, they saw the battered corpse two hundred feet below, wedged in snow-swirled rocks. It was easy to see what had happened. Once the bridge had been formed, the wind had continued to whistle under-neath, packed more and more snow on, blowing harder and harder until the bottom layers began to turn to ice. Perhaps two inches of clear, hard ice bottomed the snow bridge. It was this hard surface which Belmondo had felt with his probe and which he had taken to be solid earth. He had been trained to distinguish the sound of an ice sub-structure, but he had either never learned it properly or had forgotten.

And now he was dead because of it.

“It should be sturdy enough to support the men until they get off, don't you think?” Crowler asked

Richter did not answer.

“Sir?”

Richter stared down the hole.

“Sir, the men?”

Richter stared at the body.

Slowly, his mask pulled back from his face to give him a better view, Richter began to weep. The tears froze on his cheeks . . .

Shaker Sandow sat with Commander Richter, separated from the other members of the Banibaleer party not by geography so much as by mood. The rest of the men were, if not jubilant, at least relieved and pleased that Mace had spotted the mouth of this cave system where they were now spending the night. It was not exactly warm in the caves, but at least the cutting whip of the wind was killed and a man could finally draw his breath in some fashion close to normal. Richter, on the other hand, was morose. He was so dejected and defeated that his face had taken on more deep lines and his flesh had lost most of its color, so that he seemed ten years older than when he had begun this journey but a few days ago.

For an hour, ever since they had settled into this cold-walled place, the Shaker had been trying to tip the heavy urn of the commander's emotions, to spill the sorrow there and get him to talk, to break his dumb silence. He thought it very likely that they might not survive this trip without the leadership of this tough and wizened officer. Thus far, the men had followed him, despite rumors of hideous dimensions, and despite reality of some hideousness itself. They had shrugged off disaster and assassins to follow. No one else in the party had that quality: not Crowler nor Mace nor, gods knew, the Shaker. But talking to Richter now was like speaking to stone rather than to flesh and blood.

He had one more tact. He tried it.

"Commander," Sandow said with more than a trace of loathing and more than a bit of brutality, "I'm sorry that you've deserted your men and that you care so little for them that you would see them die. I'm sorry I took you for a good officer when you were not. But I can't waste more time with you, for I have to help Crowler pull some things together." It was blunt, certainly cruel, but it worked. The Shaker was well aware that the commander looked upon his men with a special fondness and that the old man respected the calling of duty to the enlisted men more, perhaps, than the powers of any god.

"Stay!" Richter said, grasping the Shaker's arm as the magician rose to leave him there in the corner of the second cavern, in shadows and disgrace.

"I have no time to humor old women," Shaker Sandow said, hating himself for his attitude, even while he realized it was the only attitude he had left to use.

"I'm all right now," he said. "I'll take command again. But first, sit with me. Understand me. I must have your trust and confidence in this awful trek, or all will be lost."

The Shaker sat again, though he kept his face an expressionless mask.

"Before I left the capital, back in the Darklands, some three months before this venture, I was given a special duty by General Dark—whom I've known ever since the wars to liberate the southern regions of Oragonia some forty years ago. He entrusted me with his only son; the General has four wives, and but one of them has borne him other than healthy, lovely girls. The General told me I was the only man he could entrust with the job of making his son into a man. I accepted, for more reasons than to please my friend and General."

"I fail to see your point yet, unless . . ."

"Exactly," Commander Richter said. "Jan Belmondo was not his name. Our dead Captain was Jamie Dark, son of the General we both owe our freedom and our limited democracy to."

The Shaker shook his head sadly. Candles flamed up in various drafts in the caverns, sending skittering shadows across the walls. "But he was such a cowardly boy," the Shaker said.

"The General did not wish to admit that to himself," Richter said, "though he knew it deep inside. He thought, perhaps, I could succeed in giving the boy courage where others had failed. And so Jamie came under my auspices under a false name. He would have come as an enlisted man, except he refused that and forced his father into giving him rank."

"And now you will be in trouble for his death?" the Shaker asked.

“No,” Richter said. “The General and I are too close for that. He will know it was inevitable. I will be saddened terribly in reporting this news to the General, for it may mean that he will have no successor to his title. Surely, he cannot live long enough to foster another son and have him grown in time to take the reins of state. It is a bad sign for all of the Darklands, not just for the General.”

“It is a great sadness, yes,” the Shaker said. “But we will survive it, and as we have survived greater moments of tragedy. And, too, one must reason that if the boy would never become a man, it is as well that he has not survived to take those reins.”

“Perhaps,” the commander said. “But there is more and worse to my situation.”

The Shaker waited. A candle guttered out across the cavern, leaving one group of men in darkness. Someone went to pull another tallow from the supplies, and in a moment there was softly shimmering orange light against that wall again. Someone laughed, and the brightly illuminated group huddled over some joke or other.

“Jamie was the son of a woman named Minalwa, a dark and beautiful woman with large eyes, long hair, and high, full breasts, with a laugh like that of birds and a voice that was a whisper. The General and I both were in love with her at one time. Perhaps I should have contested his claim. He never realized how I felt, and I’m certain he would have relinquished her if he had understood. But in those days, I worshipped him—still do—as we all did for delivering us from the string of Oragonian tyrants that had made life so terribly miserable for us all. I could not trespass on his wants. And I lost the woman. In time, however, I discovered that she felt much the same about me, and because our mutual affections led us to foolishness, I got her with child. He was a boy, and his name was Jamie Dark, for his father thought it best to leave the General under the impression Minal-wa’s baby was his own. Besides saving ill blood, I thought my boy would one day rule the Darklands, which was more of a heritage than I could ever give him. But he became what he was, a coward, and my adultery was punished by the gods.

“Now, you see, I must cope with the sadness of my lifelong friend, the General. I must cope with my own sadness over the death of my own son. And I must live with the knowledge that I once sinned and that my sinning led to the death of Jamie in the end.”

“One can blame himself too much for things which are beyond the control of men. Sometimes, simple acceptance is all we have.”

“True enough. But sometimes, acceptance requires a bit of time. Will you stay with me, at least in spirit, until this night has given me that time?”

The Shaker said that he would. In the two great caverns, relatively warm for the first time in days, the Bani-baleers curled and slept, their bellies freshly filled with warm broth, stale bread, and dried beef.

Outside, the storm grew in fury, into impossible peaks of howling, thundering wind and impenetrable curtains of snow . . .

They reached the pass late the next afternoon.

Before making camp, they had descended a good two thousand feet of the eastern slopes. Even standing on the brink of the pass, so far above the valley where Perdune lay, they could not see the tops of the gigantic mountains around them. Clouds obscured the towering peaks and gave the illusion that there really was no stopping place for them. Two thousand feet down, they found an overhang which sheltered a piece of land from the wind and from the worst of the driving sheets of snow which had become so dense as to almost bar their progress.

The cold had been unbelievable for the last several hours, dropping to forty-one degrees below zero, so that frostbite was a constant danger. The commander would have preferred to move down at least another five thousand feet where it might be as much as thirty and surely no less than twenty degrees warmer. But the men, sapped by the day-long battle with the wind and the cold and the snow which nearly blinded them, could not have managed the descent. There would have been more deaths, and no one wanted to risk that. When the overhang was found, the old man made the decision to remain there, using up all their stores of fuel in the hopes of making it far enough down the next day to be able to survive the following night without fuel.

Fires were built, and special duty rosters were established to take care of them. The windbreakers were strung across the front of the overhang, attached to the jutting rock above and driven into the stone below. The heat was held in where the men huddled, but even so it would be a chilly night indeed.

Commander Richter stopped by the spot where the Shaker and his boys sat bundled together, eating the plentiful meal that Daborot had prepared for them. "It seems like the last meal before the execution," the Shaker said.

"I should hope it isn't," the commander said. "How are you? The men complain of great tiredness. Tomorrow may take us down most of the way if we don't despair too much."

"If they let themselves grow weary," Mace said, "I'll carry them. I never despair."

"Yes, a sorrow that we don't all have your foolish cheerfulness in times like this," Gregor said, grinning at his step-brother.

"I'm passing an order that all men will sleep in groups of five or six during the night," the commander said. "Each man in his sleeping bag, and each group further wrapped in a length of canvas. We will need all the warmth we have to pass the night alive."

"The three of us will be all right together," Mace said.

"I had thought you would not want anyone else in your wrappings," Richter said. "It is just as well. I think the other men may be safer this way, since only two of any five or six could be the assassins. And even if they get into the same group, they will be outnumbered."

"You have," the Shaker said, "made plans to separate Cartier from Barrister. And look to Fremlin, the Squealer master, with a sanguine eye as well."

"You have reason—"

"No reason," the Shaker said. "I just trust no one these days."

"Just as well," the commander said. Then he excused himself to take a tour of the men. He walked the length and breadth of the camp, missing no one and speaking to everyone on a first name basis. He stopped by each gathering of men for a few words, maybe to exchange a smile or to inquire into the seriousness of a man's frostbite. He spoke with the dignity of his office, though this was tempered with a sense of friendship and mutual dependency as well. In every case, he came to depressed men not anxious to face the morrow, and he went away leaving men the better for his passage.

He was tired, worn and unhealthy looking. His face was quite drawn, and his lips were ashen. There

was a look of infinite weariness in his eyes, but his lips smiled and his hands were firm as they gripped shoulders and hands in signs of affection and genuine interest and concern. And when he was gone, men were ashamed of their momentary longing for oblivion. If the old man could do it, they could do it. It would be almost sacrilegious to let the old man down after he had brought them all this way. He was risking his life with theirs, and his withered and exhausted frame was no longer young, less able to recuperate than their own bodies. He was tired, worn and unhealthy looking—but he possessed courage that forced his men to live up to the picture he had painted of them.

“He must feel the tons of burden that should be distributed among all of us,” Gregor said. “With every step, he must feel worse.”

“And conversely,” the Shaker said, “he feels mentally lighter with each man he consoles. The commander will be able to go as long as his mind is at ease about his men—even after his own body has failed him.”

As the wind swept over the snug threesome, and as the bitter cold of the earth crept inexorably upward through the outer wrapping of canvas through the sleeping bag and finally through his clothes to chill his flesh, Gregor thought about Shaker Sandow, about Mace, and about the future. But thinking about the future engendered thoughts of the past, and he was drawn down long-vacated avenues of his life, like a spirit returning to watch over living friends it has left behind.

His mother had died in childbirth as the mothers of all Shakers did, her pretty face lined with creases and filmed with tears. It was the one great regret of his short life, thus far, that he had never known his mother. Even in the earliest days of his precocious childhood, he had tried to mollify that emptiness by reading through the diary she had kept every day of her life. The pages were crisp and thin, and you could see the writing of the next through the surface of this one, the sum total being a sense of antiquity and the exotic. Those pages held a fascination for him that most children found only in the discovery of what adults called common place, in the discovery of snow and sunrises and storybooks. But he had accepted the common quite early, before other children even noticed it, and had immediately gone on to the more complex. Through the diary, he came to know and love his mother.

And, sadly, to loathe his father by comparison. Jim, his old man, had early settled on the boy as the cause of his wife's death, and he had not once exhibited a moment of fondness or love for the child. Where other men might have doted on the boy as the last vestige of the dead woman, he looked upon Gregor as a curse.

And when he caught Gregor one day, levitating a pencil from the top of a table, holding it there without hands, he exploded in fury. A demon, he called his boy. A sorcerer who had spelled the mother's death nine months before the birth. He battered the boy severely, knocked him against the kitchen door. In terror, Gregor had lunged for the door, gotten through and outside. Jim had chased him, drunk and cursing, and had presented a spectacle for the entire town.

If they had not chanced across the Shaker Sandow in their mad chase, Gregor might well have been killed. He had always been a frail boy, and his body was now bruised and bleeding from even the light cuffing the old man had given him. But the Shaker had been there, had seen, and somehow had understood. Whether Jim had skidded over the edge of Market Street and into the abyss by accident, or whether the mild Shaker had propelled him with some quick but forceful piece of magic, no one ever knew for certain, though there was a great deal of speculation in the years to come.

And he had gone to the great house of the Shaker, with its books and magic implements. Mace had been there, some six years older than his three, and the strange relationship of brotherhood had built between them, though they were not brothers at all.

Now the mountain. And the east beyond. He had little hope that they would survive the entire trek, but he would never verbalize such thoughts to Shaker Sandow. His life was his master's life, and he would go anywhere the older man deigned they should. His own lust for knowledge from the east was small; but he understood Sandow's lust, and he was willing to help the Shaker gain his understanding.

Nestled between a father and a brother better than any he might really have possessed, Gregor drifted into sleep, to conserve the heat energy in him against the bitter, sapping strength of the Cloud

Range night . . .

Shaker Sandow looked through the slits of his weather mask, at the swirling snow, at the flickering flames of the campfires, at the odd shadows and the odder bright-nesses. He wanted to stay awake all night, though he knew he was no longer young enough for that. He sup-posed Mace would wake Gregor at the proper time to finish the night's watch, although the giant could not be trusted. He might take the entire night's watch upon him-self if he felt fit for it. And that could not be allowed. Tomorrow, Mace would need his strength to survive, for the downward slopes might be every bit as treacherous as the other side they had finally scaled. Snow swept from left to right in a thick sheet; flames danced before it; the shadows changed, moved, as if they were alive, and the brightnesses offered hope that tomorrow would be met with success.

Have I been a fool? the Shaker asked himself. Have I lead myself and my loved ones into a maze of traps, a puzzle of disasters?

And for what?

The wind howled.

The cold had reached his bones, and he shivered a lit-tle with it even while he perspired under the weight of all their coverings.

As he wondered over his foolishness or lack of it, his mind was drawn to what might lie beyond the Cloud Range, out there in the darkness where the Darklands and Oragonia had never extended land claims. Far, far to the east, the ships of the Salamanthe nation had docked on the distant shore of this great continent, to be sure. The Salamanthes, living as they did in a cluster of a thousand islands, had long ago learned the vagaries of the sea well enough to ride it with impunity; where the Salamanthe's sailors had not touched keel to shore, there was a place not worth traveling to; otherwise, they had been everywhere. But being people of the sea, they never ventured far inland. Open land frightened them, just as endless miles of water frightened men of the land. And so the heart of the continent, of the east, lay unex-plored. And somewhere in it was contained a store of knowledge from the Blank. The Oragonians had proved that. Dynamite, aircraft, horseless vehicles . . .

Yet it was not gadgets that the Shaker sought, but un-der-standing. He had not been so fortunate as Gregor; his mother had kept no diary, and all she had left him were the tales other people could tell of her. It was little to go on, little to know her by. And all his life he had won-dered after her, never grasping the illusive ghost of that long dead woman. Perhaps he would not find an under-standing of her in the east; but he might very well come to understand the nature of a Shaker and his heritage, might be at last able to shrug loose of his remaining guilt. He was certain his mother had not died as punish-ment for delivering a Shaker into the world. He believed all such superstitions were absurd. And yet . . . And yet it would help so very much to know a Shaker's heritage was as simple a thing as the heritage of black hair or blue eyes . . .

He heard Mace shift in the sleeping bag next to him.

Gregor was already asleep.

Guards huddled by the campfires, listening to the wind shriek, too puny to compete with its voice.

He slept . . .

Near morning, with light finally tipping the clouds and sending smeared fingers down into their encampment, Mace was wakened—not by Gregor who now posted watch—by a sound he could not immediately identify. The severe cold and the depth of his exhausted sleep had claimed some of his justly renowned speed of reaction. He sat up, listening more alertly for what he had heard.

“You heard it?” Gregor asked.

“Yes. What was it?”

“A scream,” the neophyte Shaker said.

Just then, they heard another: loud, long, terri-fied . . .

The windbreakers had been partially re-positioned, a length of them turned perpendicular to the side of the mountain, and now divided the camp area into two distinct halves. This was done at Mace's suggestion. Also at the giant's insistence, all the men—except himself, Gregor, Shaker Sandow, Commander Richter and the Coedone Gypsy named Zito Tanisha—had been put on the windward side of the canvas. They huddled there now, caught in the malevolent hammer of the wind, in the stinging bite of the furiously whipping snow.

It was not that Mace desired those enlisted men to suffer. He was thinking of their welfare more than any-thing else as he made these arrangements. But to do the work that must be done, all those whose loyalty was not certain must be segregated beyond the canvas, and Mace and these few with him must have the quietest side to work on. In that lot beyond the canvas, the killers waited. Mace was certain of the Shaker and Gregor. The commander did not seem to be a killer—and he could not have possessed the enlisted man's dagger which had done the evil work of this night just passed, the work Blodivar's scream had summoned them to discover. The commander vouched for Zito, and no one would ever question the faithfulness of a Coedone who had given his bloodied kerchief, as the dark Tanisha had given his to Richter. So the enlisted men suffered the cold and the wind—while those on the leeward side of the canvas suffered tension and split nerves.

The scream which had awakened Mace had come from a short, quick-mannered man named Blodivar who had risen to discover that the other four sleeping men in his canvas-wrapped unit were not sleeping at all but were quite dead instead: their throats were slit from ear to ear in a secondary, grinning mouth. As the others woke, more discoveries were made. In five separate sleeping units, the same scene obtained: all dead but one man. Twenty-two corpses, and in each cluster of them, a single man had been spared. When two guards were found, kneeling by their campfires, knifed in the back, it was seen how such slaughter had been achieved.

It was this touch of sadistic ghoulery, though, that made the murders worse. Now a man not only needed to fear death himself, but he must live in terror of spending a night locked in the cold arms of gashed and lifeless comrades, their blank white and sightless faces staring at him when he woke in the morning . . .

And though it seemed like the ploy of a madman, Mace could see that it was not. The psychological weapon the assassins had devised here was more effective than the imminent scythe could ever be. For the first time, the men talked openly and unabashedly about re-turning to the Darklands and abandoning this quest. For the first time, mutual distrust of comrade for comrade was out in the open, manifested in a hundred little signs of fear and hostility. If they did not return but continued on under these circumstances, there would be a mutiny or a bloody siege of in-fighting in the manner of witch hunting.

But the killers—one of them, anyway—had made a mistake, had left a clue. If they were clever enough and quick enough, they might cut the opposition's numbers in half, at least.

"Zito," Commander Richter said, "you will hold a drawn arrow in the notch of my bow, and you will stand eight paces from this spot." He marked an X in the snow. "Mace will be standing behind each man we bring in, five steps behind the X. The moment one of our suspects turns vicious and tries anything, you will attempt to skewer him with an arrow in some spot that is not deadly. If you should miss—hardly a possibility at such a range—Mace will subdue the killer by whatever means he decides best."

"Bu' wa' is it tha' we look fo', commanda?" Zito asked. He looked quite capable, standing there, holding the weapon as if it had been in his hands from the moment he was born.

Richter held up a curled ornament of metal no larger than the nail of his little finger. "This is from the hilt flange of an enlisted man's dagger. There is one to either side of the blade. Mace here discovered this

embedded in the wound of one of Blodivar's mates. Apparently, it snapped off when the assassin drove the blade into the man's throat, and hopefully its absence has not been noted by the guilty' party."

"Ah. An' tha' is why ya' wanted ta' look at ma' knife!"

"And you're safe, Zito. I am sorry if my suspicious mind insulted your heritage."

"Na", na! Ya' must be sure! Ya' ha' na' choice about it!"

Richter slapped the dark gypsy's back, then nodded to Gregor who walked to the slit in the canvas, pulled it open, and called the first of the men in from the other side: Sergeant Crowler.

"May I see your dagger?" Richter asked, holding out his hand for the surrender of the weapon.

"What for?" Crowler asked. He looked carefully around from man to man, licking his lips and steeling himself for something.

Mace stepped closer in behind him.

Zito Tanisha raised the bow and held it level with the burly sergeant's chest

"I am ordering you to surrender it," Richter said.

"What does he have that bow on me for?" Crowler asked, nodding to Zito. "What is all this? You know I been a loyal man of yours for ten years now, and—"

"Zito," Richter said, "if he does not surrender his dagger to me in the next ten seconds, put an arrow in him."

Crowler blanched, drew his knife and placed it in Richter's open palm.

The commander examined it briskly and returned it to the squat non-com. "I'm sorry, Crowler. But we have a clue to the killer, and we aren't trusting anyone. And you were acting mighty suspicious there."

Crowler sheathed the dagger. "Only because I thought maybe you—maybe all of you were the killers!"

"Call the next man," Richter said.

Gregor did the commander's bidding again and again, ushering one potential killer after another through the slit in the canvas where the ritual of the knife examination was repeated.

His name was Cartier, and he had been the last man on that seven-man team which had met with disaster on the first day of their climb. The commander had said that only a madman would have tried to kill the six men above him on a climbing situation like that. Cartier was not a madman, but he was not merely a man, either.

"May I see your dagger?" Richter asked, pronouncing the words in a monotone by this time. Of the forty men who had been waiting on the windward side of the canvas, thirty-two had already been checked. By this time, Richter operated almost like an automaton. In all of them, despair had replaced tension. It was possible, of course, that the killer waited in those last eight to be checked, but doubtful. Instead, it seemed more likely—considering the craftiness of their adversaries—that he had somehow managed to slip by them. This despair was also evident in the commander's tone.

"My dagger?" Cartier asked. As with all the others, he did not know what would be asked him until the words had been spoken.

"Yes," Richter said.

But Cartier made no move for it.

"That's an order," Richter said.

"How am I to know that you're not all—"

"Zito," the commander said. To Cartier, he said: "If you do not surrender your dagger now, Zito will place an arrow in you to make certain you offer no resistance to Mace there."

Cartier looked about himself, at Mace and at the Coe-done who stared back at him with a coolly murderous look that belied the strength in the dark hands that held the bow and arrow. He seemed like a cornered rat, and he hissed between his teeth.

Richter stepped backward. "You have nothing to fear if you aren't the killer. Just hand over your knife—"

In the instant, Cartier had the dagger in his hand and had leaped for the commander, snarling like some mad dog, his face expressionless but for the twisted sneer of his lips.

Zito's arrow twanged. It caught the assassin in the neck and sent him sprawling at Richter's feet,

blood pumping out over the virgin white of the snow, spreading around the gagging, twisting corpse like a bur-ial shroud.

Richter bent to the corpse, went to touch it, then drew back suddenly as snaking lengths of glistening wire rose through the clothes of the man. They waved in the breeze like the seeking lengths of cobras, bending to-ward the body warmth of the men close by, growing longer, dancing, singing in the slight breeze that washed them.

“What is this?” the Shaker asked, moving in to look. Behind him, the other men moved in as well, staring with fascination at the corpse that was not just a corpse.

“Be careful there!” Mace said, drawing the Shaker back. “I think those wires would spear your flesh and make you into another of whatever this Cartier was.”

A murmur of agreement went through the ranks of the Banibaleers who looked on.

Mace kicked the body over with his booted foot, danced backward as the swaying wire tendrils grasped at his leather footwear and sought to breach it in its quest for flesh.

Wires sprouted from the front of the dead Cartier, just as they did from the back, thousands of them. He seemed to be a man covered with a wind-stirred mat of coppery fur.

His eyes were pulped and gone. Wires rose out of them.

His nostrils spewed forth curling lengths of shimmer-ing metal which grew toward his lips like tiny streams of oddly colored blood.

In his mouth: copper.

His lips split open, and pieces of machinery, little tubes and gears, spilled out and down his chin.

Bits of glass glistened inside his throat which hung open to their view.

“Demons,” someone whispered.

“No,” the Shaker said, almost absent-mindedly. “This is something from the Blank, a lost invention.”

“But I knew Cartier since childhood!” someone pro-tested.

“And Oragonian spies reached him and used the sci-ence from gone days, from the Blank, and made him into whatever he is here.”

Cartier's face split open.

Desperately, the living machinery within him at-tempted to find another host.

There was no more blood.

The wires began to tangle with each other, snarled, weaved one another, collapsed, fizzing, dying . . .

Smoke rose from the corpse, as if the machinery had used his blood for oil and was now grating against itself without lubrication.

There was an angry noise as of bees swarming, then a strangled, ugly screech from Cartier's shattered throat as the inhuman machine tried to use his voicebox for some unknown purpose. Then the wires stopped moving and the smoke rose in a gush and the thing that had pos-sessed him was finally dead beyond recall.

They stood for a while, watching the smoke blow away from the corpse, listening to the howl of the wind, unable to cope with what they had seen.

At last, it was Richter who turned the mood to one of determination. That is the sort of thing Oragonian would bring to bear upon the Darklands. If Jerry Matabain had his demonic way, your loved ones, your wives and children would be as those assassins which have stalked us: creations without souls, things more machine than man, with love and emotions gone from them and nothing but obedience to Jerry Matabain as their life's motivation!”

“No!” someone called, furious at such a thought. And it had worked, this call to patriotism and to love of fam-ily, to fear that lies in all men—fear of losing their indi-viduality. Other men began grumbling, angry at the treachery set loose among them and dedicated, as never before, to reaching the east and the stores of Blank era machinery waiting there.

“But,” Richter said, “we are not yet free of this curse. There is another such creature loose among us. Does anyone here remember who Cartier spent his time with? Did he have a buddy, a companion he seemed to share secrets with?”

The men talked among themselves, turned curious faces on each other, and in a few moments, the

word came from several places at once, then was repeated ev-erywhere: “Zito-Zito-Zito. Zito. Zito. Zito. Yes, it was Zito. It was Zito he was with!”

The Coedone Gypsy stood where he had been, the bow in his hand. There had been but one arrow, and that was now embedded in the corpse of what had been Cartier.

“It can't be so,” Richter said, staring at the dark gypsy. “You once gave me your kerchief. You swore eternal fidelity.”

“An' it is na' true, either,” Zito said, approaching the commander with his tough hands spread to either side, as if he were as perplexed by these accusations as the old man was. ‘I wa' with him, tha' is sure. Bu' tha' does na' mean guilt! I am as loyal to tha' commanda' as—”

He was no more than ten feet from the commander when a thrown knife buried itself to the hilt in the center of his chest, ripping cleanly through his bulky coat and spearing flesh. Eyes turned in the direction of the knife, stopped on Mace who stood in the position of a marks-man. “He would have throttled you, Commander, or worse,” Mace said. “It was in his face, believe me.”

Everyone turned to stare at Zito.

The gypsy was looking stupidly down at the blade bur-ied in his chest, swaying back and forth as his pierced heart labored to pretend that death was not present, and the machinery that shared his flesh worked to knit the torn artery inside of him.

Mace spoke again, his voice self-assured, even though the dying man seemed only to be that and no more—cer-tainly not a fiend whose body sheltered an alien life form. “You told him to do no more than wound the guilty man whenever we discovered who it was. Instead, he placed that arrow in Cartier's neck, a deadly shot.” Mace turned to Zito. “Were you frightened that what few traces of humanity remained in Cartier might turn on you and betray you if you only wounded him? Was it necessary to kill him so that he might not say the truth in his last moments?”

“It is na' true,” Zito gasped.

Blood bubbled up on his lips.

He looked beseechingly around the group, and finally a man named Hankins stepped forward and went for the wounded gypsy.

“No!” Mace shouted.

But it was too late. As Hankins touched the dark Coe-done, the gypsy snarled, clasped the man in a death em-brace.

Hankins screamed, fought to break loose.

The Coedone's face split, spewed forth snaking wires which stung into Hankins, threaded his flesh and sought out the core of him, slowly turning him into whatever it was that Zito had been. The living machine shrieked in triumph, using Zito's vocal cords.

From the ranks of the Banibaleers, four men threw their daggers. The weapons wobbled uncertainly, not made for throwing. But two of them found their mark in Hankins' back.

The writhing figures dropped on the snow, rolled against each other like some grotesque pair of unearthly lovers. The wires grew over them both, using their flesh to support extensions, whining, swaying, seeking . . .

In time, the machine was as dead as the men it had killed.

The windbreakers were taken down and packed away.

A party was detailed to scoop out hollows in the snow, while a second party dropped twenty-four human corpses into the depressions and scooped loose snow over them. In time, they would be encased in ice, as fitting a grave for a mountaineer as any.

The huddled, nightmare forms of Cartier, Zito and Hankins were left untouched.

At Daborot's insistence, the men were fed, though no one had much of an appetite that morning. A bit of bread, some coffee, a little cheese, and a healthy dollop of brandy was the average lunch. No one, for some reason only partially understood, wished to partake of the salted beef jerky.

Commander Richter pulled on the tough bread and looked down into the swirling mists and snow through which they must travel in the hours ahead of them.

The Shaker said: "Eternal fidelity cannot exist, of course."

Richter said: "Of course."

The Shaker: "No man is eternal."

Richter: "Sometimes, I feel that I am."

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The Shaker: "And circumstances affect fidelity."

Richter: "Perhaps the knowledge of the Blank—perhaps it was not meant for us."

The Shaker: "For Jerry Matabain, then? You see, nothing matters more than knowledge."

Richter: "Love, family, children, freedom, peace."

The Shaker: "Ah, but all of them fall victim to the man with a little knowledge. With knowledge, he can take your woman from you. With knowledge, he can destroy your family and leave only ashes. With knowledge, your children can become his slaves, your freedom can become the product of his whim, and your peace will be shattered by his lust for war."

Richter: "You make me pessimistic."

The Shaker: "Not I. The world."

And then they went down, hand-over-hand, piton-by-piton, foot-by-foot, into warmer climes where they spent a night without terror. And on the evening of the following day, they passed the frost line and changed into cooler clothes as the mysterious lands of the continent's heart opened to receive them . . .

BOOK TWO

The East . . .

15

Forty-two men and four dark-feathered Squealers constituted all the living creatures within the Darklands expeditionary force as Commander Richter brought them, at last, to the dense jungles which they had observed ever since they had come out of the mists on the eastern side of the Cloud Range. They crossed more than a mile of open, stony ground where rocks thrust up like fragments of broken urns and shattered bottles, and at last they reached the almost impenetrable, steamy richness of the rain forest. All of this was accomplished at double the average marching pace, for the commander feared that the Oragonians might be running patrols of the no-man's land between jungle and mountains in their aircraft. They might have a contingency plan in operation to cover the eventuality of their assassins—Car-tier and Zito Tanisha—meeting with failure. Forty-two men and four birds would be easy targets in open country for men riding in aircraft.

In the winding vines and ropy, exposed roots of the towering, interlocking trees, they huddled in the dense blue shadows and broke open the mess supplies for a meal of chocolate, dried beef and dried fruit, coffee and some brandy.

It was two hours early for supper, but the commander had decided that appetites came second to the safety of his men. The way ahead looked rugged, and he wanted them to be full and energized for the next leg of the trek. Also, he hoped to make a good many miles before camp, even if it meant marching until darkness barred any further progress.

And darkness came early here, in the shadow of the great mountains to the west.

It was not that he was in such a hurry to find the place to the north—two hundred miles east of the Oragonia High Cut—where the enemy was mining the treasures of the Blank, though he certainly did wish to fulfill his mission. No, what plagued him more was the urgency to be gone from this open ground, to be secreted as deeply as possible in these thickly growing trees and ferns, these vines and flowers that barred their way but would part before them. If a patrol plane cruised over their exit point from the Cloud Range, found their path, trackers might be set upon their trail; the more jungle between the Oragonian hunters and themselves, the better their chances of survival.

And now that he had lost more than half his men, now that his own and—figuratively—the General's son had died under his command, only the eventual success of his mission could redeem him. And even that would not erase the screams he had heard these last days. Even that would not erase from his memory the sight of the men falling from that rope across the chasm, the sight of slit throats and dead men whom he had known as friends and almost as sons. Those things would remain with him; he could only accept them and go on if he had eventual success with General Dark's plan.

The world, as Shaker Sandow had said, had made him pessimistic. Maybe he could force it to give him his optimism back.

Shaker Sandow sat down on the cool carpet of ferns before Richter, looked around at the verdant landscape. "A geographic impossibility, wouldn't you say?" he asked.

Richter noticed how the old Shaker's fatigue seemed to have disappeared. Out of the mountains and

the cold, finally in the east where knowledge waited, Sandow was almost young again. "I hadn't noticed," he said.

"Here we are but a short distance from the frost line of the Cloud Range, from a climate of snow and wind and ice. Less than half a day's travel, even by foot. And yet we find ourselves in a tropical world of palm trees and what appear to be orchids. I have only seen pictures in old books and stories about the flowers of the Salamanthe Islands, but I would say this is much like the land about the equator: humid, heavily grown, with its own breed of animals and insects. Geographically, such a closeness of opposite climes is impossible."

"Yet it's here," Richter pointed out.

"Aye, and I've been attempting to discover why."

"And what have you found?"

In the jungle, strange birds called in ululating lullabies to each other while others squealed atonally and rustled in the high branches.

Sandow placed the palm of his hand against the earth after brushing away the ferns that obscured it. Richter followed suit, looked perplexed a moment. "It feels warm. But should that be unusual in a warm place such as this?"

"It is unusual," Sandow said, "when you compare it to the earth only ten feet farther on—there where nothing grows but a few mutant ferns that haven't adapted."

"What is the difference?" Richter asked.

"There," Sandow said, "the earth is cool, almost chilly. I traced the temperature change and found a precise line where the warmth ceases altogether and where the cold begins. There is no melding space at all."

"And what do you make of that?" the commander asked, genuinely interested.

Almost too interested, Sandow thought, in such a minor mystery as this. To the Shaker, the old officer's motives were plainly obvious. In his desperation to forget the dead they had left behind them—the slit-throat boys buried in the snow and all the others back to Stan-ton's Inn where it had begun—Richter grasped at any diversion in order to remove the memories from the fore of his mind. It was a standard method of overcoming grief, of forgetting tragedy. If it should continue more than a day or two, however, it could swiftly become a psychosis that would endanger all the men in the expedition; Richter needed to be awake and alert with no regrets and no sorrows to dull the edge of his normally sharp mind.

"It seems to me," Sandow said, turning his thoughts again to the earth and the jungle, "that there is a heat source of some kind beneath the ground here which supports the tropical plants and animals, even through the winter months—though the top-most branches of the trees probably get frostbitten, wilt and die."

"Artificial?" Richter asked.

"Perhaps. Or maybe natural conditions. One mystery would be as great as the other."

"Do you think it would be of interest to us to attempt to unearth this heat source?" Richter asked, brushing at the rich, black soil beneath the ferns.

"Even if it were possible," Sandow said, "I doubt that it would be worth our time. It was just an incongruity which I thought would—"

At that moment, the Squealer keeper, Fremlin, approached them and interrupted the quiet conversation. He looked keyed-up, his eyes bright, and his slim but powerful hands busy in each other, his fingers locking and unlocking, pulling at one another with his overabundance of nervous energy.

"Yes, Fremlin?" the commander asked.

"The Squealers, sir. I've already eaten, and I've had time to speak with them, to give them their orders. Do you think I could turn them loose now and set them about their work?"

"I suppose they're anxious, eh?"

"Aye, that they are, Commander. They're cursing at me with some of the words they've learned off the men, because they want to be gone."

"Very well," Richter said.

“Thank you, sir!” Fremlin said, turning and walking off toward the cages where the four black mites waited, making strange, low chortling sounds among themselves.

“Wait there!” Shaker Sandow called to the fair, well-muscled bird master. “Could I come along to watch?”

Fremlin was glad for an audience and nodded ap-proval as he continued on toward the birds.

At the cages, the Squealer master knelt and cooed to his charges in soft, pleasant tones that reminded the Shaker of wind blowing against the open ends of bottles or of long, hollow pipes.

“How many will you send?” he asked Fremlin.

“Just two,” Fremlin replied. “I never risk them all at once. Besides, two will do sufficiently.”

He opened the wicker cage to his left, and the two black creatures hopped out, scratched at the earth with their three-toed feet, fluffed their feathers and shook themselves, as if getting accustomed to the world outside the cage. At some unseen and unheard direction from their master, they leaped onto his arms, one perched on each wrist, and clung there as he turned to the jungle and issued some last word of advice. Then they were gone in a flapping, brilliant display of smooth aerody-namics, up, up and over the roof of the rain forest, away from the eyes of the men below.

Fremlin watched even after there was nothing to see, then returned to the two birds in the other cage and spoke with them, consoling them for the necessity of sending only two and not all four.

When he came to the Shaker, he said, “They hate the cages. It worries my heart to keep them there. Yet they were safer there in the mountains than they would have been on their own in those turbulent high altitude air streams. And down here . . . Well, who knows what sort of predator might lurk in those trees? Again, the cage is better. At home, beyond the Banibals in the Darklands, I let them fly loose by the cliffs, along the sea, and that makes them ever so much happier.”

“What will those two do now that you’ve released them?” Sandow asked.

“The commander wants to know how far the jungle ex-tends to the north, how long it will offer cover to our march. They’ll fly over the top of the trees, unless it seems to be too long a stretch. If they do not see some sort of end to it in short order, they’ll fly high enough to look down and make an estimate of its size. Higher than we were when we came out of the mists on the Cloud Range.”

“May I stay to hear them speak of it when they return?” The Shaker had spent some time with Fremlin and the birds on the first leg of the trek, hoping the crea-tures would get to know him and trust him.

“I think so,” Fremlin said. “But we’ll see for certain when they come back. I cannot always tell when they are ready to give their confidence to a stranger.”

The two dark mites returned in short order, not fifteen minutes after their release. “Which means,” Fremlin said as they soared in toward him, “that they could have been back in five minutes. After being cooped as they were, they surely took an extra ten minutes of flight just for the joy of it.” They settled on his arms with the grace and gentleness of two tufts of cotton, pecked at their shiny feathers with their red and orange beaks, their crimson face swaths seeming to ripple as some hidden muscles did some unknown work beneath.

“Will you speak before the Shaker?” he asked them.

Both birds cocked their heads toward Sandow, exam-ined him with small, coal-dust eyes.

“I am a friend,” Sandow said.

“Weewill, weewill,” the Squealers affirmed in a whining imitation of English. “Heees good freeend of feathered peepoleee . . .”

“Tell me then,” Fremlin said, nuzzling them with his face, like another man might nuzzle his lover’s breasts.

The creatures began a warbling, high-pitched con-versation, sometimes speaking at once, sometimes one at a time. Their language was composed of trills and rip-ples, ascensions of the musical scale that stung the ear with their abruptness, descents of the same scale that sounded like the dying cries of animals.

Sandow could see why they had come to be known as Squealers. If one did not listen closely to the fantastic in-tricacy of the sounds they made, one might only hear a high-pitched squeal that sometimes

rose and fell but was no more than the dumb sonorous cry of an animal. But it was not dumb. The intricacy, the complex arrangements of sounds, gave indication of a language every bit as complicated as the one the Shaker spoke or the one the Salamanthe Island people spoke. Perhaps even more complicated, since the combinations of the sounds were not the only things which gave meaning to what was said. As Fremlin had told him, the musical key in which a word was spoken by the Squealers was indication of an altogether different meaning for that word, so that they had a grammar not only of syllables, but of tones.

In time, the birds ceased their discourse and returned to pecking at themselves and to cooing quietly to each other and to the other pair of flyers which had been re-restrained all this while in their cage.

“Quite a strange report,” Fremlin said, his brow fur-rowed.

“How so?”

“They say the jungle is a perfect circle,” Fremlin said.

“Perfect? Have they any conception of that word's meaning in our language?”

“Yes, Shaker. Of course, they speak in generalizations when they use it now. But what they mean is that this jungle before us is, to the eye, as perfect a circle as you or I could imagine. Their sight is far more critical than ours.”

Sandow's heart beat a little faster, and his spine was swept its length with a shivering sense of expectancy. Ahead lay the unknown and the keys to unlock all these secret places. “It fits with what I said to the commander just before you came to us a while ago. This jungle, I am convinced, is artificially contained. For what purpose and by whom, I cannot guess. But this report from your feathered charges goes a long way toward proving my suppositions.”

“There's more yet,” Fremlin said.

The birds chortled.

“They speak of a part of the jungle which is crystal-ized. They speak of trees with leaves like lacy sugar works, with boles like compacted diamonds. They speak of plants the color and the texture of crushed rubies and emeralds. They say the jungle has a diameter of five miles and that the northern mile and a half is all con-structed of the most marvelous gems we might wish to see.”

“They do not lie?” Sandow asked.

Fremlin looked hurt.

“Forgive, please,” Sandow said. “I am foolish. Of course they do not lie. What would they have to gain from it? But we must get this information to the com-mander. And we must get moving. I want to see this marvel by this day's light and not by tomorrow's sun!”

They progressed in an odd and ungainly manner, though none of the trouble they put themselves to was wasted. Rather than use their two machetes immediately and hack their way into the dark heart of the rain forest, they split into five groups and paralleled each other with six feet between the lines. They climbed over the snaking boles that wound across the fertile earth, wriggled through patches of dense ferns and snatching, semi-sentient vines whose green tendrils more than once en-snared a man beyond the point where he could struggle free on his own. They helped one another, moved some thousand feet from the jungle's edge only with a great deal of effort. There, Richter called them together into one group, where they formed a single line and began using the machetes, clearing a path before them. But when they had gone only another thousand feet, the old officer ordered the original five lines formed again, and again they moved out without leaving much if any trail behind them. Even if trackers picked up their path a thousand feet into the forest, they would not be able to follow it and swiftly overtake the Darklands unit.

Once, when Richter was considering abandoning this tack and moving the rest of the way as one group, behind a single cleared trail, his decision to be careful was rein-forced by the flickering sound of something huge and powerful as it made its way over the heavily thatched roof of palms above them.

Everyone stopped, listening. Faces paled, and hands went to daggers.

"It must be one of the aircraft," Richter said, calling back the lines of frightened men. "The ones our spies have told us circle round the castle keep of Jerry Matabain."

"Tis not something that should be in the skies!" one of the men said, shuddering.

"Wrong," Shaker Sandow called. "It was made for the skies. The skies are exactly where it belongs. In the days before the Blank, there were thousands of such vehicles in the heavens, and any one of us—or all of us—might have owned one for traveling."

Fear was replaced, to a small degree, by awe. Then the noise was gone, and there was nothing to do but ad-vance toward the region of the crystal trees.

Slowly, the landscape around them seemed to change. The trees and the plants seemed filmed with something misty which refracted the light and made them glitter. A hand drawn over the leaves, though, felt nothing amiss. Step-by-step, the mist became heavier until, in scattered spots, small, sprouting clusters of jewels seemed to grow directly from the trees, like thumb-sized mushrooms.

The men broke them off, examined them as they marched, stuffed their pockets full of them.

"Could they be real jewels?" Daborot asked the Shaker, turning around from his place before the magi-cian to show a fungus of rubies.

"Perhaps," the Shaker said. "I am no expert of such things. But even if they are priceless, why stuff your clothes with them here? So the birds say, there are more and better wonders ahead."

"Just the same," Daborot said, his broad face flushed and beaded with sweat, "I'll keep 'em. Being so recently near death, the nice things in life seem all the nicer. You know?"

"Indeed," the Shaker said.

Soon, the sound of their feet on the trail rose differently to their ears, with a grinding noise that echoed for a short way through the jungle before the heavy growth impeded all sound and returned silence to them. It was as if they were walking on ground glass, on a thousand shattered store windows. Commander Richter called a halt, and they fell to examining what lay beneath the cut ferns over which they had been moving. When the tight undergrowth was pulled back far enough, they could see that, rather than soil, the land was composed of a powder of diamonds, glittering with all the colors of the spectrum.

"What do you make of it, Shaker?" Richter called, holding up a handful of the powdery soil and

letting it flow brilliantly through his hand.

"I think, at one time, the crystal disease—if disease it was—reached this part of the forest, though it did not attack the larger growths. Whether for reasons of its innate nature or because it was losing potency, I could not say. For a while, however, it crystallized the ferns, the smaller and simpler forms of plant life. And then it lost its hold and real ferns returned, crumbling the diamond plants beneath them."

"Why don't we just load up on this stuff and return to Darklands?" Crowler asked. "We wouldn't have to fight Oragonia then; we could buy the whole damned country!"

"Aye, return and find we've carried nothing but ground glass across the Cloud Range and the Banibals!" someone said, and the laughter at Crowler's remark ceased.

"What about it, Shaker?" Richter asked. "Real gems or glass we walk upon?"

"Real," Fremlin said before the Shaker could make testament to his ignorance on the subject

"And how would you know?" Richter asked.

"I have some small interest in stones myself, Com-ander," the Squealer master said. "My brother is a jew-eler in Dunsamora, back home. I've spent time with him, learning the trade. When I get too old for scaling moun-tains, perhaps I'll take my birds and open some jewelry shop somewhere."

"Aye," Crowler said, "and have them flit around and steal your wares for you. A smart way to build an inven-tory!"

Shaker Sandow desperately wanted to cease this con-versation—or at least to finish it as they walked. But he could see the salutary effect this jocular-ity had upon them, and he was not going to be the one to break the first mood of optimism to pass through the ranks since they had left Perdune. All of them needed to laugh. Even he and Mace and Gregor. But the sun was going to be behind the mountains soon, and the forests of dia-mond trees lay so close ahead . . .

"But real, then?" Richter asked Fremlin.

"Yes, real. Or as near as couldn't tell the difference. But real I think."

"Hear this, then," Richter said, sweeping the men with steady, clear eyes. "I will permit every man to pack upon his person the equivalent of two pounds of the gem stones, though no more than that. This has been a hellish journey, and the very least that all of you deserve is a moderate wealth upon our return to the Darklands!"

There was a rousing cheer delivered there, hands raised in the fisted salute of appreciation for their mas-ter. The troops were positively beaming with good humor.

"But mind you: no more than two pounds. For one thing, a great abundance of gems in the Darklands will only bring the prices down. For another, climbing back across the Cloud Range and then the Banibals will be task enough—without a huge burden of diamonds and emeralds on each man's shoulders."

"Aye, but maybe we are destined to return home by air!" Crowler said, his tone not argumentive, only friendly. He was acting as a bit of comic relief, and he knew it.

The men cheered that thought.

"And maybe not," Richter said, acting as the balancing force of sobriety.

Whether or not they have planned this act and used it before, they are excellent at it, the Shaker thought. One works to raise the men's spirits while the other works to dampen them just enough to add caution to their good nature.

"In any event," Commander Richter said, "two pounds and not a stone more. But I would also advise you that you wait until we find this place which the birds have re-por-ted, for there may be higher quality gems to be found."

In agreement, men began emptying their pockets of the treasures they had stored there, and they picked up the pace of the march again—faster and more jubilant than ever.

The trees around them were shot through with strips of bright jewels, like veins of coal or gold striking through earth, beveled and fractured, casting back amber here like the rustling silk of heavy curtains . . . here crimson as bright as blood . . . here blue like deep waters . . . here blue like a high morning sky . . . now and then catching their images, casting them back in multi-faceted fantasies . . . cold to the touch of a hand, cloying with the evaporation of perspiration from the offending flesh . . . here

orange and shimmering with the stinging beams of filtered sunlight stabbing through the canopy of palm fronds . . . singing with a clear bell note when snapped with the nail of a finger . . . here green, casting back the colors of the forest that were not affected with the jewel disease . . .

“Soon now,” Daborot said, turning to the Shaker, his broad face alight.

“Soon,” Shaker Sandow agreed.

Soon what? he wondered. Just what is all this about and what are we walking into here?

And then the region which the birds had reported was fully upon them. In the space of half a dozen steps, the ratio of gems to living plant flesh grew markedly greater until, abruptly, there was not the least sign that anything here was alive. Everywhere: bright. Everywhere: images of themselves. Everywhere: wealth . . .

Great palms thrust upward in petrified beauty, their boles semi-transparent with millions of tiny facets. The palm fronds overhead were feathery constructions, crys-tallized into the most delicate laces. The sun came through them and was transformed into a rainbow au-rora, making the floor of the forest seem like the inside of a mammoth cathedral with the largest stained glass win-dows in the world. In the uppermost levels, the wind and the rain had taken their toll on the fronds, had shat-tered them completely or had made them ragged. But further down, they remained intact, a spectacle to make the eyes seek darkness and comparative comfort.

Around their feet, glittering ferns stood at brittle attention, their undersides coated with tiny, crystallized spores that each looked like a bead of solidified wine. When a foot touched them, they shattered and sprayed up, went down with a tinkling reverberation that was like the laughter of small children—or of evil spirits.

The orchids and other flowers here had also been transformed, and the smooth petals now stood permanently open, permanently fresh, colored a very slight purple. The stamens and pistils were like the hobby work of a watch-maker, intricately perfect, carved from diamonds by a madman with the eyes of a hawk and the sense of precision of a ballet dancer. Some of the men carefully plucked blooms and tucked them into their lapels. The crystals made the undersides of the men's chins shine with color . . .

It was Shaker Sandow who made the unpleasant dis-covery.

He was prowling along a small lane between the scin-tillating plants, examining the wide variety of forms which had been frozen in detail for eternity. He had no-ticed that rocks and soil had not been affected, only whatever plant life had been about. He had also noticed, here and there, pieces of metal breaking the ground, rusted and eaten through, but impressive nonetheless. It seemed as though they were roofbeams the size of the wooden ones beneath the shingles of his own house back in Perdune, but made of steel. Clearly, here were the re-mains of the buildings that had existed before the Blank, back in times now lost. He felt his pulse quicken as he examined these bits and pieces of ancient times.

But these things were not what made him stand straight, his eyes wide and his spine suddenly cold.

The thing that did that was what appeared to be a tiger.

It was crystallized.

Shaker Sandow took a step backward, his eyes riveted to the beast which did not advance on him, could never advance on anything again.

The tiger stood upon three legs, the fourth foot braced against a tree where it had crystal claws sunk into crystal bark. On its face, there was a look halfway between rage and agony. It seemed that the disease had struck quite suddenly, too fast for the tiger to drop and writhe in its death throes—yet too slow to keep it from expressing its confusion and despair in at least this small manner.

It was striped, as tigers should be. It carried a very slightly orange cast, with darker umber streaks through it, though it was more transparent than anything.

Mace, who had been nearby—as always—had appar-ently seen his master's surprise. He had come along the narrow trail with swift, easy grace. “What is it?” he asked.

Sandow pointed.

Mace looked, grumbled, bent and touched the frozen creature of the jungle. “Can it do this to us?” he asked the Shaker.

“That's what I have been wondering,” Sandow said. “That's the same nasty thought I've just had: we

might all remain here like this tiger if we don't break out quickly . . .”

With amber head and green body, crimson hands ex-pressing his emotions better than his words did, fingers moving in quick flight before him, Commander Richter considered the danger they might all be in, and he tried to weigh it all correctly before taking any action that might be adverse rather than helpful.

Multi-colored, his men listened and watched.

There eyes were kaleidoscopes.

They were still flesh, but the light from the prisms which so gayly colored them made them feel as if the first taint of the crystal blight had already gotten within their blood. Perhaps, already, minims of gem structures swirled through their blood . . .

“But would we not already have changed?” Richter asked the Shaker, hands flitting, face melting honey.

“I have no way of knowing that, But the fact remains that we assumed that only the plants had been trans-formed—when it was the animals, too, that were stricken, all living things.”

They had found a dozen birds perched rigidly and eternally upon the glittering branches of the trees. Their colorful plumage was even brighter in the death than it could ever have been while they lived and flew. They watched the assembled men with hard, shining eyes that saw nothing at all.

There was a snake, too. It had been found alongside the little clearing in which they now stood. It looked like nothing so much as a diamond walking stick.

“If we take the gems with us and manage to escape with our flesh intact,” Richter mused, “will the jewels we carry away be deadly? Will they, at some later time, transmit this disease to us and bring about our destruc-tion? And perhaps the destruction of the Darklands where we will take them when our mission's done?”

“Again,” the Shaker said, “we can only guess.”

“Then we shall not risk it,” Richter said, though he clearly loathed breaking his promise that all the men would know some wealth when they returned across the mountains.

That will not be necessary . . .

They turned, in all different directions, seeking the source of the words all of them had heard. In the fan-tasmagorical fountain of jewels, there was no one but themselves.

“Who spoke?” Mace asked, his hand upon the hilt of his knife, his eyes shifting about through the trees.

I have no name to give you, the voice said. In a thousand years, you see, one loses the need for a name and soon forgets who he was . . .

“There is a real voice,” Richter said. “We are hearing a Shaker's tongue inside our heads.”

“Not a Shaker,” Sandow said. “It is too smooth, too as-sured, too easily performed telepathy for a Shaker. Alas, we are not so well-talented as our visitor.”

“If you have no voice and no name,” Richter said to the air around them, “perhaps you have no form, either. But if you should have features like other men, show them to us so that we may rest easy that we don't speak to demons.”

Above you, the stranger said.

They looked overhead in time to see the face forming on the fronds of the glazed palm trees, spread over an area of six feet, the face of a minor god looking down on them, from some equally minor heaven. It was an indis-tinct face in some ways, chiseled by the sharp edges of the crystalline structures. But they could make out this much about it: the eyes were very blue and deepset be-neath a broad forehead and above a strong, patrician nose; the chin was square and strong and set with a dim-ple; the lips between the nose and the chin were very thin and not the least bit sensuous; it was a man, a young man with a

flowing mane of yellow hair which curled down the nape of his neck and concealed his ears.

His lips did not move as he said: *I hope this is better. I had forgotten that men still of the flesh expect to view those to whom they speak.*

“You said something about the jewels we see around us,” Richter reminded the spectral visage. “Are they safe, or does our fate soon become the equal of the tiger's fate —or of yours?”

The transformation of this part of the forest was completed long ago. Now, all remains in stasis and no further changes can be made, you are safe; the jewels are worth taking with you.

A collective sigh of relief passed through the men, and they seemed to stand easier. One or two of them bent and picked up the stones they had been examining while waiting for the specter's judgment of their safety.

But most of them still watched the face which shimmered overhead, fascinated by the alienness of such a vision.

“What manner of thing caused this change in the jungle?” Shaker Sandow asked the face. “Was it some disease or other?”

First, the specter said, you must understand the nature of this jungle in which you find yourself.

“It is round,” the Shaker said. “And there is some artificial heat source beneath the surface of the ground.”

Perceptive. What more do you know?

“Nothing, really. There has been no time for examination of these interesting facts.”

The face watched them, expressionless, nothing more than a construct for them to direct their attention to. Around them, inside their heads, the voice came again: *At one time, this was a great amusement park. It was surrounded by a force shield which kept its animals within it, and visitors rode through encapsulated in smaller shields, getting first-hand looks at the jungle animals of earth and several other worlds from which animals had been brought back. Do you understand force shields?*

“No,” the Shaker said, rather sadly. “The world of such marvels died some centuries ago.”

The refugees came through, for a while. That was some eight or nine hundred years ago. Telling strange tales of war in space, of traitors in high councils, of the earth shifting and dancing beneath the feet. They said mountains grew where no mountains had been and seas opened beneath cities once built upon rocks. We few who lived here, within the crystals, knew nothing of that. Our jungle was stable and no changes came to us—and we were incapable of going elsewhere to look. The refugees ceased to pass through, and only every few hundred years do we find one such as yourself.

“And you?” Sandow asked. “How came you to be as you are, not flesh but jewel?”

Those who owned the amusement park were always anxious to find new and unique jungle creatures to place here. Within traveling distance of but a day, there were three cities with many people—many prospective patrons. On some distant world, circling an alien sun, they found a small furred creature, much like a mongoose, which lived in a crystal maze which it structured for itself, a sphere of crystal as hard and enduring as any metal. One was anesthetized and returned here at great expense, turned loose to establish itself in its new home. They imagined a new tourist attraction would be added when its crystal home was finished, but they misunderstood the creature (a common thing, this ignorance, as we fled to the stars with more business acumen than scientific knowledge). The mongoose somehow was able to tamper with the very nature of Time itself as concerns living matter. In its panic and confusion, it began to spin this colorful landscape that you see. Before it had been killed, all this large sector of the forest had succumbed to it and has remained this way since.

“But you live, despite what was done to you.”

I was a caretaker here. Four other human beings fell before the crystal change, and all of us live yet, though in a strange way. Our bodies still live, just as the plants live, just as the tiger and the snake live, though that life is invisible to human eyes. It is a life stretched across eternity. We live now. We live at the origin of the uni-verse. We live, too, at the end of the universe a hundred

billion years from now. Our life energies have been captured and spread across the map of eternity like butter over bread. We inhabit the crystal, but we inhabit the very ether of every era in history, recorded and unrecorded.

“Space, you said,” the Shaker reminded the specter. “You spoke of space. The stars?”

Does not man still travel there?

“Man does not even fly his own skies, let alone those of other worlds,” Sandow said.

The specter was quiet a while. *Yes, I can see that now. If I focus my attention in on the years ahead, the immediate, future, I can see that man is still struggling to re-gain civilization. Forgive me for being so stupid; but with all eternity commanding one's attention, the woes of a few thousand years seem as nothing and go unnoticed.*

“Please, a request,” Commander Richter interrupted.

That is?

“Can you see our futures? Can you know if we will meet with success?”

Such is not my province. The sweep of it all, you see, is far too massive to make any single man's destiny stand out, even if he should be a king.

“Of course,” Richter said. But he was disappointed. All of them were, for all of them were not above knowing if the gods were on their side or not. Even an atheist would welcome a burning bush which brought him the word that he was Chosen.

Shaker Sandow returned the specter to the subject at hand. “Will man ever return to the stars? Do you see that in the vista of the future?”

Yes. And he will be greater than ever.

“Permit me a moment,” Richter said again. “The sun is all but gone. Let us make camp, Shaker. Then you can speak with your crystal friend all night if such is your desire.”

“It is mine,” the Shaker said. “But is it the desire of our friend?”

I have time. The only way I can ever converse with a single man, in a single mote of history, is if he comes here among the crystals. Now and then, such a diversion is welcomed. The minuscule, after the eternal, can be quite fascinating.

“A backhanded compliment, that one!” Mace said, roaring with laughter, though no one else seemed so amused.

“Come on, you lummo,” Gregor said. “Let's get our things settled, then scoop up our ration of these jewels. Leave the Shaker to his specter.”

“I would think you would be interested in the apparition as fully as the master,” Mace said.

“That I am. But I fear my presence would dull some of the Shaker's enthusiasm. There are times when a man needs to be alone, even when he desires company. The Shaker understands. He will tell me of it later, in detail and with flourishes that will make it even better than it was.”

And so, though the others slept to conserve their energy for the continuation of the trek in the morning, the Shaker spoke to the face in the diamonds—which had settled from overhead until it appeared on the bole of a palm tree on a level with the seated Shaker's face.

And the night passed.

He held the diamond snake, running slim fingers along its super-hard skin, along the light pattern of colors.

And tales were told.

In the morning, as fresh as he had been that night, he ate his breakfast while listening to the faceted face, and when it was time for them to depart, he asked one last question which he had been saving for such a time as this.

“Good friend,” he addressed the specter, “I have been wondering whether your imprisonment has been hell for you, or heaven. And perhaps—perhaps you would wish me to try to help. These constructs—but for the lacy palm leaves and ferns—are quite solid. But perhaps I could smash the image of your body and free you from torment, if such you are in.”

No, the specter replied. If I sound morose, it is not because I am tortured. Indeed, it was a hell at first, a madness of confusion and anguish. Never to know the breasts of a woman, the taste of

wine or food . . . Well, you could see how the mind would rebel at such a future. But with time, wisdom came. A man cannot be eternal, living across all of time, without gaining wisdom. And with that came acceptance, for a wise man knows never to battle that which is ultimately immovable. And with the acceptance, there was a joy of a sort, though it is a joy far different from any human joy—quite indescribable, I am afraid, good Shaker.

“I imagine so,” Sandow said. “Yet I seek knowledge more than all else. I know the joy of which you speak. It springs from a hunger for understanding, for information, for knowledge. Perhaps I feel it to a much smaller degree than you, but it is there nonetheless.”

And may your hunger be satisfied.

“And may your hunger never be satisfied,” the Shaker said, exhibiting, in that strange well-wishing, his complete understanding of at least one angle of what immortality must be like.

“Forming up here, Shaker Sandow,” the commander called from the front line of the men.

He went to take his place before his assistant, Mace.

They left that forest of glowing, polished trees, of crystal men and crystal tigers. And they walked forth toward the other wonders of this forgotten land . . .

The following three days presented them with a great many strange sights and new fears. The only one of them who seemed not to be frightened of the eerie spectacles they discovered was the Shaker. Indeed, he exhibited the same almost childlike fascination with every new wonder they came upon, without regard to life or limb. After a while, many of the others began to think the old magician had the right attitude, for—though the rest of them feared the land—none of them had died or been wounded. Perhaps their bad luck was behind them and only good fortune waited in the ways ahead.

Though a few of them came close to death and injury, the narrow escapes seemed things to laugh upon, good jokes—especially when they thought of what had happened to less fortunate members of their party on the slopes of the Cloud Range.

They passed out of the jungle and found themselves in fields of stunted grasses where gnarled, rugged trees found footholds in the shallow soil and in the thick strata of rock just beneath. All the copes of trees leaned toward the mountains, in the direction of the wind, and afforded the only shelter from possible aircraft surveys of the land.

Twice, glittering silver circles passed above them, humming slightly like a flight of bees. Both times, they were fortunate enough to be near concealment when the sound first came to them, and they escaped detection.

In time, the fields gave way to a stretch of cold desert, flat sands the color of ashes, gray and barren of life. They skirted this area for a while, striking east some eighty miles along its southern reaches until it became obvious that there was no soon end to the wastes. Here, though, they seemed to be free of the air patrols which searched for them nearer the mountains, and when they finally stepped onto the soft gray sands and began the trek north, it was with a degree of assurance they would not have had closer to the Cloud Range.

Although there was no life upon the desert, it was here that they met the next great hazard of their journey. Suddenly, without warning and—it seemed—without reason, towering geysers of sand would spout upward from the flat surface, a hundred, two hundred, even three hundred feet into the air. The earth would shake with some unknown movement beneath it, and the sun would be obscured by a haze of powdery soil that choked the lungs and made the skin dark and greasy. Several times, the booming ejaculations of earth nearly erupted under their feet, and they were sent in scattering panic to avoid being tossed into the sky and abraided to the bones by the steaming columns of sand. But always they were lucky, missed by miles or inches, and they progressed.

And on the morning of the fourth day, they left the lifeless flats and gained ground where scrubby brush struggled for existence. Here, there were scorpion creatures as large as a man's arm, but the rattle of their claws upon the ground always gave warning of their approach, and no one was bitten, save Crowler, and his bite damaged nothing but his boot.

Here, in the land of scorpions and mutated, scraggly brush that only barely sustained its existence, the first signs of civilization began to appear. At first, there was nothing more than an occasional thrust of refined metal from the bosom of the earth, like a broken blade stabbing the ground. It was always rusted or otherwise pitted with age, as the beams had been which the Shaker had seen in the forest, but it was something, at least, to indicate that they might be on the right track, moving toward areas where pieces of the Blank survived.

Later, they saw the shell of a smashed aircraft, a mammoth thing, circular as the small patrol planes were, but a hundred times as large. There were holes torn in the hull, and the light glinted off strange things concealed in the shadows inside. At the Shaker's insistence, he was permitted to light a torch and enter. Mace went with him, as did Gregor, though no one else felt up to it. Within the damaged structure,

they found a great deal of fungus clinging to the walls and to the shapes of what had once been seats. By counting the metal frames of the seats in an unobscured row, they estimated that the plane had carried some nine hundred passengers. They were staggered by such a discovery, but the proof was indisputable.

There were two skeletons in the passenger's cabin, one of them intertwined with ugly, cancerous fungus that shivered whenever one of the three came close to it. The other skeleton's skull was bashed in, the cause of death obvious. Most of the other passengers had apparently es-caped.

In the control room, which was every bit as large as the entire downstairs of the Shaker's house in Perdune, they found the skeletons of fourteen men. None of the crew, it seemed, had lasted through the grinding impact of the crash. Here, the walls had been stoved in, punc-tured by rock formations. The nose had been crumbled backward, and the floor had been driven up perilously close to the ceiling near the left-hand wall. Some of the crew had been crushed, others had been decapitated by exploding sheets of pressed hull metal. Some were flung about the chamber in an almost gay disarray, while oth-ers remained seated, strapped to the pilot chairs before their instrument clusters, the flesh gone but the spirit ap-parently still willing.

They left the craft no wiser than they had entered it, though their respect for the civilizations of the past was immense. There had been relics in their home lands, beyond the mountains, of course, though nothing so fan-tastic as this. Some said the Darklands and Oragonia had been swept clean of most of what had been there, swept clean by mammoth tidal waves that towered hundreds of feet into the air and crashed across the land with the power of the gods, obliterating history. Since the fossils of sea creatures could often be found a hundred miles in-land and even further, such theories were highly re-garded.

Farther on, they found the wrecked tangle of what might have been several ground vehicles, though rust and corrosion had destroyed the mass too much for any guess to be accurate.

For a time, the struggling masses of metal and shat-tered stone—and unidentifiable plastic casings—grew larger and more distinct, until the party walked between walls of litter, down streets of rubble and debris which seemed to sprout of the earth like weeds.

Abruptly, all of this terminated in a crater more than a mile across. The floor of the depression was a smooth, black glass which was drifted over in most parts with windblown dirt and clumps of dried grass and weeds. Some tremendous heat seemed to have fused the very soil into a hard, glittering, bubbled surface which rang hollowly under their booted feet.

By evening of that fourth day, they had crossed the crater, walked through more rubble and senseless ruin, and had reached open fields again. This place seemed to have once been cultivated, for there were remnants of stone-bottomed irrigation ditches, and the rusted tubes of what might have been irrigating equipment of some complex design. All that grew here was a tall, bamboo-like reed which soared twelve feet into the air. The stuff grew as thickly as normal grass, and it presented an al-most impenetrable wall. The ground beneath it, as the Shaker attested, was warmed like the ground beneath the jungle had been, though this did not seem much like an amusement park so much as a crop.

“But what would they want with such stuff to go to this expense?” Richter asked.

“Who knows. But it must have been precious. To a man who has never seen gold, it might seem valueless too.”

“Well, if it lies in our path,” Richter said, “I'll welcome it. We must be nearing our goal, and I want to be certain we have cover for the last leg of the journey.”

“Shall I send the Squealers aloft?” Fremlin asked, hav-ing set his cages off his shoulders.

“Perhaps it is time for that again,” Richter said.

Two of the black creatures were released, a different two this time. They took to the air with a display of pure joy, dipping and swaying, zooming across the heads of the men before rising over the stalks of bamboo and dis-appearing to the northeast.

Daborot made a warmer supper than they had been used to since the mountains, and a sort of feast was held in celebration of having gotten this far. Some of the lev-ity of the feast was gone when, inside of an hour, the Squealers had not returned.

Half an hour before dark, almost two hours after the ascension of the Squealers, Richter suggested

that the bird master dispatch another of his charges to scout the way and to determine what had happened to the earlier pair.

Fremlin worked with set lips, his face grim, lips blood-less. He spoke to the bird he was about to send aloft, holding it in his hands, cooing to it in a manner that was altogether loving and altogether sober. The bird listened intently, without any of the normal chortlings of good humor which accompanied a chance to fly.

Then Fremlin threw it into the air; it took wing and was gone without acrobatics.

Darkness came too swiftly.

The stars rose.

And the Squealer fell. It dropped from the darkening sky and flapped desperately as it tumbled along the ground. It gained its feet and skittered about somewhat dizzily, making screeching noises that were painful speech.

Fremlin ran to it, calling softly in that inhuman tongue, scooped the bird into his hands and held it to the light.

“What has happened to it?” Richter asked. His own face was tense in the flickering orange of the campfire.

“An arrow in its wing. Through its wing, and grazed its back,” Fremlin said.

“Will it live?”

“It may, it may,” the bird master said, though he did not seem to be the one to administer the proper medicine, for he shook so violently he appeared to be a man fighting a fever.

“Ask it of the others,” Richter said.

And Fremlin and the bird fell to conversation. Every-one was silent as the master elicited information from his charge, and sat forward expectantly as Fremlin turned to deliver the news.

“It says the ramparts of a walled city, partially in ruin, lie to the northeast no more than three miles. The walls are guarded by men in the liverie of Jerry Matabain, so this is the place which we seek.” His voice was hurried, the words stumbling over one another. If he stopped long enough to think, his mind would be swept with emotions, and he knew it.

“The other Squealers?” Richter asked.

“Dead,” Fremlin said.

“How can the bird know for certain?”

“He has seen the men, and he has been shot by them. He surmises that the others were killed, and I reached that same conclusion myself before he spoke his fears.” He pressed the bird to his chest, warming it. It shuddered pathetically, pecked at its bedraggled wing. “But that is not the worst,” he added.

“And what is the worst?” Richter asked.

“The bird thinks the men may have kept him in sight with the idea of dispatching a plane in this direction. He would have taken evasive action to mislead them, but he required all the energy that remained in him to reach us and warn us.”

In the night above them, to the northeast, the curious drone of an aircraft rode the currents of the cool breeze, drawing nearer . . .

“The fire!” Richter called, snapping the mesmerized men into action as the hypnotic hum of the approaching air-craft grew steadily louder.

Mace leaped forward, cursing beneath his breath, and tipped a pot of soup onto the flames, stepped back as the hot coals sputtered, as pungent steam rose into the dark-ness before their faces. A second man, a red-haired youth called Tuk, kicked at the glowing embers, stomped them to death with quick bootheels.

Overhead, the plane broke across the reeds, a blacker circle against the velveteen darkness of the sky, blotting out stars as it swept by. Its almost imperceptible noise set the nerves on edge, though the ears barely heard it.

“Perhaps they didn't see,” Crawler whispered. His voice seemed to carry abnormally far.

“They did,” Mace said.

Five hundred feet away, the oval craft rose, circled, and started back toward them. Suddenly, the night was split open by the thundering sound of a mallet striking a wooden block, again and again, over and over in such close succession that the noise was almost like a drum-mer's music—except it was ugly and unrhythmic.

“Gunshots!” Shaker Sandow said. He had never heard a gun fired in his life. But having seen a few of the in-struments which had survived the Blank, he felt certain that this was just what one of them would sound like.

In front of them, the earth geysered upward under the impact of the slugs. The whine of ricochets which bounced off the flat stones was like the swarming of angry insects on all sides of them. The men farthest from the bamboo turned to make for that scanty cover, and they were struck down so swiftly that only a few of them even had time to manage a scream before embracing death. Blood showered up from them like a fine mist of water, spattered across the faces of men nearby.

The others, moving almost instinctually, without con-scious thought, fell to the ground and rolled into the concealing stand of bamboo. They came quickly to their knees and skittered forward, taking the brunt of the reeds on their faces. Blood sprang up on their cheeks, ran from their foreheads into their eyes, blinding them. When it was impossible to move any farther without col-lapsing with fatigue, they rolled into the gulleed earth and clung to the stones there, praying to whatever gods they had renounced on the mountains only days earlier.

Bullets cut through the reedy growths, but the bam-boo was hardy enough and deflected the shells suffi-ciently to rule out any accuracy on the part of the gun-ner. Canes were severed by slugs, rattled down between their fellows with hollow, musical sounds and were still.

There was only the hum of the aircraft.

And the smell of earth.

And fear.

The pilot of the ancient craft was not finished, how-ever, and he came back a second time, moving low, snapping forty rounds into the edge of the bamboo field, making the reeds sway in his backwash of air. Then he climbed upward and hovered. The sound of his engines was low, but audible as he waited for survivors to stum-ble stupidly into the open land beyond the woody grass.

Shaker Sandow looked around him and there was not another man anywhere nearby. Visibility was no more than six feet about him, but at least no one else seemed sheltered in that radius. Just as well, too. The closer they were, the more deadly a single burst of fire might prove to be.

The night seemed unnaturally quiet, as if all the world were dead, even the wind. The only sound was the ever-present background drone of the silver aircraft.

But as he waited for the attack to be renewed, he realized that the silence was a false picture. It only seemed silent here, because he had been concentrating all of his attention on the enemy vehicle, listening intently for its approach. There were other sounds: dying sounds, wounded sounds. To his left, someone was choking on his own blood. The twisted way his words worked up his shattered throat was evidence that the pilot was soon to have taken another victim. To his right, the sounds of two men talking quietly came to him. One of them was wounded; he could tell that much by the anguished tone of voice, just below the level of a squeal of pain. The other seemed to be trying to help his damaged friend. He could not make out the words, though. Ahead, some-one was whimpering in pain and terror.

Suddenly, he wondered about Gregor and Mace. Were they dead? Or dying? He was fairly certain that they were not among those who had been killed before reaching the perimeter of the bamboo field. But once they had reached concealment, had they been struck down?

"Mace!" he called out, his voice sounding older and more useless than ever. What a fool he had been! What a fool to risk everything to charge blindly into an alien land where the rules by which he was used to playing did not exist! He had risked both their lives as well as his own, and he saw now that the old have no rights whatsoever to ask the young to fight their wars for them.

"Shaker? Where are you?" It was Mace's voice. He was certain of that, and with that certainty, he felt as if twenty years of life had been lifted from his shoulders.

"Stay where you are!" Shaker Sandow shouted. "If you move, the reeds above will move, and they'll have something to shoot at."

"I've already seen that," Mace said.

Of course, he would have, Sandow thought. "Where is Gregor, Mace? Have you seen him?"

"Beside me," Mace said. "He was beside me out there, and I fair carried him in here."

"Fair killed me in the process, too!" Gregor called.

The Shaker realized he was crying, and he wiped the tears from his cheeks and pretended he was too old for such behavior. The best thing was not that Mace and Gregor were alive and unharmed—though that was a godly gift indeed. The best thing was that, even now, they were jousting with words in the same good humor they always had.

When the flesh dies before the spirit, Sandow thought, it is only a sorrow. But when the spirit dies before the flesh and apathy and cowardice set in, then it is a tragedy.

The pilot dived, firing.

Bullets snapped through the bamboo.

Directly before the Shaker, someone screamed, and the reeds parted, admitted a pale, gangling youth with blood smeared all over his face and chest. He looked at Sandow who reached a hand for him. He took the Shaker's slim fingers, made a few inches on his knees, then fell over, his face shoved into the soft earth, and was done.

The silence returned, then the screams and the moans of agony from the wounded and the dying. But one sound did not return: the hum of the aircraft. It had left them, at least for the moment.

"This is the commander!" Richter shouted from somewhere closer the edge of the field. "We may not have much time, so listen carefully. We'll group at the edge of the bamboo, where we entered. If you see a wounded man as you come out, see if you can bring him with you. If you see dead men, note their names until you can tell me who they were. Now, hurry! The devil may be coming back with reinforcements!"

The Shaker pushed to his feet, separated the reeds before himself and struggled through to the open where Richter waited ten feet along the wall of grass. He had not seen any wounded men himself, but others had. In five minutes, a list of dead had been prepared. There were sixteen men who would not continue the journey. Of the twenty-six who remained, five were wounded. Crawler had a shoulder wound that had already begun to clot; the bullet had torn clear through. Three enlisted men suffered varying degrees of injury: Daborot had a creased skull, from which blood poured freely, though it did not appear to be a serious condition; a boy named Halbersly had lost a thumb, but a tourniquet and bandages had already stopped the bleeding; Barrister, the soldier who had monitored the first climbing party that had met with disaster, was in the worst shape of all, for he had three bullets inside him—one in

his right hip, one in his right side which had sliced through a good bit of meat, and the last in the biceps of his right arm. All the wounds bled, and all of them looked ugly. Fortunately, he was unconscious. And the last of the five injured was Gregor. There was a bullet through his left foot, and he could not stand on that leg at all.

Mace seemed in worse condition than the apprentice "There was nothing I could do, Shaker!" he said, almost pitifully, his great, broad face deeply lined, etched with fear and anger.

"I know that Mace."

"Perhaps I should have stretched upon him—"

"And crushed . . . me to death . . . in the bargain," Gregor said, grinning at his brother. They were brothers now, if they had never been by birth. Hardship had re-moved the "step" from their relationship.

"How do you feel?" the Shaker asked the neophyte-Shaker.

"Fine. I'll slow us up some, but otherwise, everything seems normal."

"Pain?"

"Surprisingly little," Gregor said, his arm around Mace's shoulder to support himself.

Sandow knew he was lying. The pain he suffered was there, just beneath the sheen of calm that covered his young face. But the old magician remained silent. There was actually very little they could do for the pain, aside from administering brandy to make the boy less aware of his suffering. If he forced Gregor to admit the extent of his agony, nothing would be gained—and Mace would be made more morose than ever.

"Shaker," Commander Richter said, laying a hand on the magician's shoulder to gain his attention and, per-haps, to indicate the friendship that had grown between them, an unspoken friendship that needed no words. "Would you come with me a moment?"

"The boy here—" Sandow began, indicating Gregor.

"This will take but a moment," Richter said.

He led Shaker Sandow to the slumped bodies of the men who had died outside the shielding bamboo with no chance of reaching cover fast enough. They stopped be-fore one hunched form which was balled up more than most. The tangle of clothes and the film of rich blood which covered the man made an identification from the back impossible.

"Who?" the Shaker asked.

Richter stooped and, very gently, turned over the dead man. It was Fremlin, the bird master. Half a dozen shots had struck home through his torso, and his face was blank and empty and dead, dead—though oddly at rest. Beneath him, a partially crushed wicker cage contained the shattered bodies of his last two Squealers.

"He fell on them to protect them, and they were killed anyway, for the bullets went directly through him."

"I had not yet begun to understand, fully, the relation-ship of the birds and their master to one another," San-dow said. "But it was far more than a man and his pets."

"Legends say the man who loves the Squealers be-comes a black bird himself when he dies."

"Let us hope," Shaker Sandow said. "It would be fitting for him, not such a waste as it stands now."

"You realize that now you will be our only eyes in ad-vance of our eyes? Since we've been spotted, they'll send search parties after us to kill the last. Your powers have become invaluable to help us avoid those hunters. With-out you, we won't make it."

"I had realized that. I'll do what I can."

"Will the wounded boy, your Gregor, make a dif-ference?"

"My powers are strong without him. Indeed, I feel they are now stronger than ever. Perhaps imminent death does something for magic talents that no amount of practice can."

"I'll detail two men to help Gregor."

"No," Sandow said. "I think Mace would rebel at that, He'll want to do it himself."

Richter nodded. "We have to get moving now," he said. "We'll be slowed by the wounded. I had thought of putting young Barrister out of his misery. But I keep thinking that if we hang onto him, even if he slows us, we might reach the city. And reaching the city, we might discover some traces of ancient

medicine that will heal him. If there are such wonders as flying machines . . .”

“Two men and a stretcher can move swiftly,” Sandow said, sensing the commander's need. “You've decided correctly. A mercy killing can sometimes become a murder when salvation shows later.”

“Most of the food is in good shape. All the water containers have been punctured, most more than once. We'll have to hope we have water all along the last part of the journey. It can't be far.”

“The sooner we get moving, the safer,” Sandow said. “And, too, the sight of so many dead in such a brutal fashion cannot help but play upon the nerves of those remaining.”

“Forgive my rambling,” Richter said. He began shouting orders to the men, and in a very little time, they entered the bamboo again, moving while the darkness was on their side.

Later in the night, three aircraft passed over them, streaking for the place they had left behind.

“Search parties,” Mace said. “They'll be putting men on foot to give chase.”

“Perhaps,” the Shaker said.

And they walked faster.

In the morning they were exhausted, and they paused to rest only shortly after first light. The way had been difficult. After only an hour of their march, making less than a third of a mile in all that time, weariness overtook them. In two hours, they were exhausted. In three, they felt incapable of going on. In four, they were zombies. But still they managed to pick feet up and put feet down, over and over in what seemed an endless ritual to some long-dead god. Richter had suggested that movement by day would be even more difficult, for they would have to be especially careful not to disturb the reeds enough to make their movement obvious on the surface of these bamboo stalks. And that was enough of an excuse, even at this early hour, to drop and recover some of the strength which the land had drawn from them.

To make matters worse, they had found no water on their journey thus far. The bamboo stems contained nothing but a damp punk which could not slake the thirst at all. Though they scooped collection pots into the earth, no dampness rose and no water filled them. They were fortunate in having with them some dried fruit which yet contained moisture and which drew saliva from their dried cheeks to wet their throats. But such could not sustain them for long.

Gregor was unconscious. His broken foot had swollen seriously, until his boot had to be cut off. His leg was growing blue, and all of them knew what that meant: rot and death. And they had no facilities for amputation. Death . . .

Mace attempted to force some syrup into the boy's throat, syrup procured by squeezing handfuls of dried fruit into a cup. There were only one or two sips, but Gregor could not even come round long enough to gain interest in those.

The Shaker pretended that all would be well when they reached the city, though he had grave doubts. First, even upon reaching the city, they would have to find some way of taking it. And there were but twenty-one whole men among them. How many would the Orago-nians have on those great battlements? Hundreds? Thou-sands? Too many, in any case. And even, if by some strange quirk of fate, they should capture the city, there might be no medical equipment there. Or if there was, it might be decayed and inoperative. And if it worked— well, to hell with them, none of them really would know what to do with it. It would be alien machinery that would take time to master.

And Gregor did not have time.

Richter settled beside the unconscious boy, next to the Shaker. "How is he?"

"Poisoned," the Shaker said. He peeled back the trouser leg to show the angry welling blue-black in the boy's flesh.

"The city cannot be far," Richter said.

"Perhaps just a bit too far, though," Sandow said.

"No. It is dose," Richter said, refusing to share any-one's pessimism. "I wonder if you could do a reading for us."

To find?"

"Several things," Richter said. He wiped a hand across his grimy face, as if to strip away the exhaustion there. He was ten pounds lighter than he had been, though he had never been a particularly beefy man. He looked gaunt, beaten, but still in there, fighting whatever was thrown at him. His voice, cool and clear, showed no signs of fatigue, and seemed to emanate from the throat of a much younger man. "First, we should know if we are being followed and—if we are—exactly where the pursuers are. We should know whether we are still headed toward the city; these damn plants make it easy to alter course without knowing it. And we should also know exactly where we should come out of the bamboo to give us the best tactical advantage."

"Very well," Shaker Sandow said. "Ill see to it in just a few moments, when I've taken a bite of food

and have had a chance to clear my mind of cobwebs.”

Since the Shaker was not attempting to read the minds of men, the silver reading plate was not necessary, though the chants were. He worked through the words in all the strange tongues of the sorcerers, and at last he was prepared to strike upward with his mind, to sail above the stalks of bamboo and seek out the nature of the landscape to all sides of them.

His eyes remained open.

They saw nothing.

His mouth went slack.

His hands hung uselessly at his sides.

A bead of drool appeared on his lips.

It was as if he had vacated his body. And he had.

And then he was back, blinking his eyes, wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his shirt. He drew a very deep breath and settled his strained nerves with a last relaxa-tive chant that took his voice down through all the regis-ters of the musical range until he was singing a low base that made the words almost unintelligible.

When he was finished, Commander Richter leaned for-ward and said, “What have you seen?”

The city is but a mile ahead,” Sandow affirmed. “We are very close indeed. There are great black ramparts, walls easily eighty foot high. I could see no stone marks, no seams in all that encircling masonry, and odd sub-stance indeed. Upon the walls are stationed soldiers in the colors of the Oragonian Empire, and they are armed with devices which they have mined from the storehouse of the dead city. I did not see any way in which we could breach those walls in our small numbers and with the meager bows and arrows we possess. To complicate matters, I found that they have chosen a much more dangerous method of dealing with us than sending searchers in our path.”

“That is?” Richter asked.

They have encircled the bamboo field with torch-bearers, and they have lighted the dry reeds at the perimeter. Even now, the fires burn in toward us, leaving black ash and little else in their wake. We should soon smell the smoke—and feel the heat.”

“But this stuff will go up like well-cured kindling!” Richter gasped. “When it has finished and the smoke has cleared, they would find nothing but our bones!”

“I doubt they desire to find anything more than that,” Shaker Sandow said, smiling grimly.

Commander Richter was about to speak when his face changed from fury and confusion, slipped on an expres-sion of graveyard humor. “Aye, and you wouldn’t be sitting there so smugly if you expected all of us to die,” the old officer said. “Out with it now, friend. What else did you discover?”

“An escape,” Sandow said. He smiled the same smile that Richter used. “And perhaps a way into the city. Not far from here, but twenty feet ahead, there is the founda-tion of an ancient house which is now filled with dirt Part of the earth filling the ruins has caved in, and there is a pathway into rooms beneath the ground, into what seem to be tunnels. The tunnels, in turn, stretch long dark fingers toward the walls of the city, as if—perhaps and the gods be willing—they go under the mighty black walls which the Oragonians guard.”

Richter grinned with sheer delight now. “I knew that luck must come our way sometime, friend. And now it has!”

“Perhaps, but please speak softly. Luck is a sadistic woman, and she likes nothing more than to see a man brought to ruin after climbing the walls of false hopes.”

The men were summoned quickly to their feet, and the situation was quickly outlined to them. Not worried now about the size and the clarity of the trail left behind them, they hacked their way into the growth, desperately seeking the broken mold of the old house, the cellars that would protect them.

Barrister was almost entirely black and blue, and as they jostled his body through the torturous path, his flesh seemed to grow even darker, his limbs to swell, the veins on his head standing out fiercely as if they would burst in the instant.

Mace had slung Gregor over a shoulder and was mov-ing with the ease he always exhibited. The

boy's leg thumped against Mace's buttocks, and the lad gurgled thickly, painfully in his sick sleep.

Don't let him die, the Shaker thought. Don't let him die, whatever you do, Mace.

He did not know why he should be exhorting Mace to maintain Gregor's well-being. Perhaps it was that, after watching the extremely capable giant, he had ceased to think of him merely as a man, but as some kind of demi-god.

Smoke drifted through the stalks now, though the heat had not reached them and would not for several minutes.

"Here it is!" the red-haired Tuk shouted from his position in the lead. He raised the curved blade of his machete and pointed directly ahead and at the ground.

In another moment, they were standing before a jumbled mass of stones through which the bamboo stalks grew, though not as thickly as elsewhere. Along the northern wall, the earth had parted and dropped down, giving view of darkness beyond.

"In there," Shaker Sandow said.

Richter directed the men through, down a drop of seven or eight feet to a set of stairs. The stairs wound for twelve paces around a stone column and into a chamber where the air was cool and fresh, and where a breeze stirred their hair. The torches showed dark gray walls, some panels of what appeared to be wood—but was not—which still clung to the basic stone beneath. There was no furniture and no ornamentation. No one particularly cared about the crudeness of their haven.

By the time all were safe beneath the blazing land, the heat had become oppressive above, and even reached wispy fingers down to them, though the draft down there tended to carry both heat and smoke out of these rude chambers. They could hear the roar of the fire not far away, and by the time they had located the mouth of the tunnel which led toward the city, the popping, crackling, exploding fury was directly over them, consuming anything that its acidic tongues could possibly devour.

"Single file," Richter said. "Two torches to the front, two to the rear, and one in the middle of the procession, Move quietly, lest there be Oragonians at the other end, The moment you spot light, Tuk, outen your two torches, and everyone else will follow suit."

Holding a dagger ready in his one good hand, the burly Sergeant Growler licked his salt-encrusted lips and said, "The city will be ours, and we will find ourselves returning home by air. I feel it in my bones!"

"And feeling it in your bones is no certain fortune-telling," Richter said.

Again, they had taken the roles of the cheery optimist and the balancing pessimist. The men reacted with a general lifting of spirits, but also with a bit more caution—just as the two officers had wanted them to react

Maybe there is a chance for success, the Shaker thought. Maybe Lady Luck's sadism will be directed toward those who wait so smugly on the ramparts above. Perhaps she has led them to build false hopes. Gods knew, this bunch had never had much hope at all!

He felt a gnawing eagerness to be in the city, to discover the books and the machines that would await them there. Surely, there would be things even more fascinating than war machines. He wondered what the Oragonians might have passed over as useless—and which he might find to be the most priceless artifacts of all.

He dared to allow himself to think that there might be enough in the city to explain to him why his mother had had to die. Even Gregor, whose mother had left a diary, might still feel the guilt of his birth enough to want that answer.

And, too, there might be some way of saving the youth's life in the city. And again, maybe not. They walked down the dark tunnel . . .

BOOK THREE

The City and the Dragon . . .

21

Down the center of the tunnel, there were two rails which were pitted with age, set almost flush with the moss-spattered stones of the floor. It looked very much as if a train had traveled here in centuries past, though the purpose of putting such a vehicle un-derground was one that none of them could fathom. Twice, they found places where stairs lead upward from platforms that jutted out from the tunnel wall. Both of these were blocked by rubble and led nowhere. Since they could not yet have covered the mile to the city, they did not spend much time with these clogged exits but continued on their way.

In time, they found the train. It was on its side, wheels crushed against the left-hand wall, dug into the stone there. The top of the cab was pinned against the right-hand wall, and through the shattered glass of that opera-tor's booth, the white bones of a man looked out at them. The hollow eye sockets of the skull seemed to stare with inordinate interest. They came up to the front of it and set down the stretcher with Barrister slung in it. Mace propped the unconscious neophyte-Shaker, Gregor, against the gutter curb and stretched to get his cramped muscles in order, as if he expected to lift this mammoth obstacle himself.

"Half a mile yet, I'd say," Richter said quietly, turning to Shaker Sandow.

"Perhaps we can go over it," the Shaker said. "There seems to be some four or five feet clearance from its side to the ceiling."

Richter ordered Tuk to scale the cab and scout the way ahead, to ascertain whether or not it was worth the trouble of getting the entire party onto the tilted side of the huge vehicle. Tuk, still holding the long, tar-tipped length of kindling which served as a torch, grasped one of the great wheels, stood on another of them, and swung up. There were repairman's rails all along the train, and he had no trouble reaching the relatively level side of the canted machine. He started off, hunched over to protect his head from the ceiling, and soon was gone from sight, the faint glow of his torch swallowed by the darkness ahead.

"How is the boy?" Richter asked.

"Still unconscious, and turning black from the ankle down. It looks bad."

"The other?"

"Mace?"

"Yes, him. We would all be dead earlier than now if he had not been with us."

"He will hold up, I think," the Shaker said. He looked at the giant where he sat next to Gregor, tending the boy, though there was little that he could do. "Though I can't be sure. I know that he would never succumb to physical exhaustion. Strain and effort mean nothing to him. But I've never seen him this emotionally weary. I had not realized, to be truthful, that he was capable of such deep feelings toward anyone."

"We learn new things about each other on this journey," Richter said. "For instance, I learned that you have more stamina in your frail body than any man could sanely guess."

The Shaker paused, thinking about that, as if it had not occurred to him how much punishment he had dealt to his frame. Then he nodded. "And I have discovered that you are more than a flawless officer and

a wise man. As with the General's woman, you are capable of indiscretions, like any man. Let me tell you, Solvon, I actually rested far easier when I learned, that night in the mountains, that you had given the world a bastard child. Until then, you had seemed too perfect, too cool, too utterly collected and on top of things. I thought you were either one of our assassins, or perhaps such a rigid disciplinarian that you would be useless when we reached the city that was our goal."

"How could my being a rigid disciplinarian affect my command in the city?" the officer asked. He had not taken umbrage at anything the magician had told him.

"We will be coming face to face with things that none of us can hope to envision, wonders stacked upon wonders. If you had no weaknesses, no human streak within you, if you were nothing but the traditionalist I thought you to be at first, you would not be able to cope with such a store of marvels. You would be unable to accept the alien and the unexplainable, and you would lead us to destruction. But inside that shell of serenity, old man, beats a heart like mine."

"Ho, there!" Tuk called from the top of the train, peering over the edge at them.

Richter shook his head, as if to throw out the mood which had settled over him and the Shaker. "What is it, Tuk?"

The way ahead is blocked. Two cars shredded open in the crash, and huge flanges of rolled metal tore up and gouged into the ceiling. I managed, only with difficulty, to get around the first, then saw the second only ten feet further on, sealing the way even more tightly than the first."

Then must we go back?" Richter asked.

"We cannot," Shaker Sandow said. "Once the fields have burned, once the ashes have cooled, they will be scouting for our bones. When they do not find them, they'll discover the foundations of the buildings, the entrance to the tunnel, and they will be upon us."

"No need for going back," Tuk interrupted. "If we can get the men up here, we can enter the train through the cab. The side door here has twisted loose and could be snapped open, I believe. Once inside, we could make our way through the train, from car to car, until we can let ourselves out at the end,"

"Good work, Tuk, you red-haired devil! You have more wits about you when there are not women about!"

Tuk chuckled and blushed while the men on the floor of the tunnel laughed aloud. Apparently, the Shaker thought, our flame-headed Tuk is known for his bedroom manner.

And suddenly, he felt a deep, stirring pang of remorse that he had not gotten to know all these men better than he had. Each had a personality, a life of his own. Each was more than a Banibaleer in the service of General Dark, each as complicated as Mace or as Gregor. To have gone through so much and to have learned so little—that seemed like the worst crime of all. But in the quiet of the city—if they could take it—perhaps he could remedy this oversight and know all those who had passed through Hell with him.

In fifteen minutes, they were all inside the train. The men in the lead were forced to scatter the bones of the dead out of their way, for all the cars had been packed with passengers when the crash had come, passengers who had long ago not given up the spirit but the flesh as well. The way was not easy, for they were forced to walk on the side wall of the cars which had been crumpled against the bottom of the tunnel. When they reached the connecting doorways between the cars, they had to wrestle over the wall, defying gravity, and pull themselves through where they fell down to the "floor" of the next compartment.

Still, in less than an hour, they had gained the final car, had swung out of that last door to the slimy stones of the damp tunnel floor. They stood in the wash of an eerie blue light which emanated from the end of the tube, a circle of it that gave view of a terminal of sorts two hundred feet farther along.

The stretcher was brought down last, and everyone turned for the few feet remaining in this long and tiring journey. No one could know what might lie ahead but at least it would be a form of sanctuary from the land which had taken such a heavy toll of their numbers.

"Commander!" Tuk called. "There by the light, along the side of the tunnel!"

Even as he spoke, the half dozen apelike creatures stepped into the open. They were more than

seven feet tall, coated in a stringy hair which looked blue in that strange light. Their eyes were green, like new leaves, and they sparkled in the gloom as if there were candles behind them, set inside the mammoth skulls.

Every man drew his dagger, and the archers moved quickly to string their bows and to draw arrows forth from the meager quivers they had brought with them.

Tuk went down, gurgling, and stopped making noise altogether.

There had not been a sound.

And now, the Shaker could see, there were other men lying on the floor, motionless.

Ahead, the creatures were holding long, vicious-looking guns, and were slowly fanning the barrels across the group.

Richter crashed to the floor, groaned, sighed, chuckled absurdly, and was gone.

“Shaker! Quickly!” It was Mace, trying to whisk the magician up in one arm while he used the other to hold young Gregor. “To the train again, where they—”

He got a strange look on his face. He reached to his chest and plucked out what seemed to be an overlarge needle which had penetrated his clothes and had pricked no more than half an inch into his skin. He held the needle up to the light where it glinted, looked at it curiously. His large eyes blinked, and he was asleep on his feet. He fell against the Shaker, knocked the old man to the floor and followed him down.

Sadow managed to extricate himself from the tangle of legs and started to stand.

Around him, every other Banibaleer was on the floor. Dead? Dead. Somehow, he didn't think creatures like those apes would play any but the most serious of games.

Something grunted in surprise behind him, and he whirled to see one of the brutish creatures no more than ten feet away. It had seen everyone down and obviously expected everyone to stay there. It raised the weapon it carried, pulled the trigger.

Up close, like this, Sadow could hear what little noise the gun made. It was like air hissing between a man's teeth in the sign of anger.

Nothing more.

Then he was bitten by half a dozen needles, and he went down on the floor with his comrades where darkness took him to its bosom . . .

The eldest of the white-furred creatures was named Ber-larak, and he sat now in a chair too small for him, holding a glass too ridiculously tiny to have been designed for his hands. He was attempting to make Shaker Sandow and Commander Richter feel more at ease. His voice was too thundering, too powerful, too gruff to set a man totally at peace, however. And the sight of that wiz-ened, large-mouthed face peering from the fringe of white fur that encircled it—a human face and yet not a human face—contributed to a sense of unreality and of danger. Danger lay in anything one could not be sure of, and even the Shaker—more eager than most to accept the unknown—did not feel at ease with the towering apelike men.

“It was necessary that we shoot you first and question later,” the creature said. “We could not know for certain whether or not you were with those who command the levels above this one.”

“I assure you that we aren’t—” Commander Richter began.

Berlarak held up a huge hand for silence. “As I have said, we know exactly what your intentions were. We know who each of you is and everything that has happened to you on your way here.”

“The scanner which you mentioned—it told you all of this?” Sandow asked. Only now was he beginning to assimilate what few things the white creature had told him in the first moments of his revival.

“Yes,” Berlarak said. “It told us everything that we wished to know about you and your men. Rather like your own power, Shaker. Except that it must be attached to the skull in order to work, whereas your own powers can work at a distance.”

“And it was from these scanners that you learned how to speak our language?” Shaker Sandow asked.

“We had learned that earlier,” Berlarak said. He frowned, and the expression was truly frightening on that face. “We learned it from one of the first Oragonians we captured some weeks ago. We speak the same tongue ourselves, though with different inflections, with a handful of words you do not have, without some words you have acquired, but essentially the same. From that captured Oragonian, we made a sleep-teach tape on the scanners and learned the types of inflections which you people from beyond the mountains employ.”

They were sitting in a small, wood-paneled room whose walls were lined with what appeared to be books bound in plastic, though the Shaker could not be certain if they were books at all. There was an odd chair in the far right corner of the chamber with a hovering cap of machinery whose purpose was unfathomable. On the desk behind which Berlarak sat, there were dozens of studs and buttons. They had already witnessed that, when Berlarak threw the topmost of the blue toggles, he could talk to others of his kind stationed in other rooms of this lowest level of the city. Wonders stacked on wonders, just as the Shaker had predicted.

“And now you know our circumstances,” Sandow said. “But you have us at an unfair advantage.” He sipped his purple liquor and watched the white-rimmed face, not certain whether he would trust every word that Berlarak told him. The great creature obviously lumped all men from beyond the mountains into one category, whether they were from Oragonia or from the Darklands. Perhaps Berlarak considered them unutterably primitive and looked upon them more with scorn and disdain than with hatred. Either way, though, caution would be the best route to follow.

Berlarak considered for a moment before he spoke. “I can see that it will only antagonize you to leave you in the dark. And since we wish your cooperation in things that I will mention later, it is best that I tell you all I can. In places, that will not be much, for even we are somewhat ignorant of what transpired during the Blank, as you call it.”

“Undoubtedly,” Richter said, “you know more than we. Your land still contains traces and even cities

from that period of time.”

“Sometimes,” Berlarak said, “artifacts only tend to con-fuse the archaeologist further.”

He filled both of their glasses again, poured himself another draught of purple liquor as well, and settled into his tale.

“More than eight hundred years ago,” the creature began, “mankind had traveled into space. He had reached out into a thousand star systems and had settled colonies upon four hundred worlds. He traveled faster than the speed of light itself, and made these journeys in little more than hours.”

Commander Richter made a show of disbelief and looked at the Shaker to see if the old magician had been taken in by the tale or whether he realized the folly behind such claims. But the Shaker seemed perfectly willing to accept even the particulars of what Berlarak had told them. “Remember,” he told Richter, “that our only hope of victory in all of this is to keep an open mind. That little bit of the traditionalist in you—which I warned you about before—has finally come to the surface and is refusing to accept the wonders that, intellectually, you know must be true.”

“I didn't ask for a personality probe,” Richter said, just a little peeved. He turned to Berlarak. “Go on, then. Tell us more.” Though he seemed to want to learn all the white-furred creature could tell them, he was still reluctant to concede that men could speed between the suns in so short a space of time.

Berlarak's story was one of fantasies that had an underlying grit of truth which made itself heard and soon had both listeners convinced of what he told them, even if they often accepted his tales with a degree of doubt and reserve at first. He spoke of experiments to defy gravity that were coming to fruit just before the fall of civilization. He said that the surgery of the day had been able to replace a heart with a manufactured heart if the real one should give out, that plastic livers could replace flesh ones, that a leg which had been severed could be regenerated in a few weeks.

Glasses were filled again.

And were quickly drained.

And Berlarak went on:

The world before the Blank, from what Berlarak's people had re-discovered, was a place where nearly anything was possible. If parents did not wish to give birth to their children, surrogate wombs were available to handle the uncomfortable period of pregnancy. For those who appreciated the beauty of the many alien races mankind had encountered in the universe, and for those who were also somewhat giddy and sated with the pleasures of the planets, there were surgical and genetic engineering chambers where they could have their outward appearance altered to resemble some creature they had seen and admired—and where they could also have their germ plasm radiated and engineered so that their children would be human beings in mind only. Berlarak's people theorized that they were the descendants of one of these cults of race-changers. Their parents had survived the collapse of society and had produced offspring which had survived in the shattered city.

“But with all these miracles within their fingertips,” the Shaker said, “why couldn't they have prevented the destruction of their world? What was it that happened—that not even these gods and goddesses could manipulate to their pleasure and well-being?” He was not being skeptical of what old Berlarak had told them. He believed all of that implicitly now. His tone, instead, was one of anguish at the thought of what mankind had come to after such heights of glory.

According to Berlarak, war had erupted between man and an alien race known as Scopta'-mima on a world that humans called Cramer's Camp and which the Scopta'-mima called something else again, something unpronounceable. It raged from one of the four hundred settled planets to another, until it reached Earth herself. The Scopta'-mimas fought with energy weapons that mankind could not even vaguely understand, and in the end the aliens had applied some fantastic lever to the crust of the earth, causing it to shift, to leap up in places and plunge down in others, to form seas where seas had never been and to gobble up mountains that had once stood tall. In the holocaust, some eight hundred years ago, mankind's world was not the only thing which was fractured: his society tumbled as well, shattered like a glass vase falling down a ladder, rung by rung. And then the Scopta'-mimas had gone away, satisfied in their own way, and had left mankind to struggle back from total destruction.

In the few cities which survived the war even partially intact, the concept “alien” and anything even

remotely associated with it became a cause for anger and righteous indignation. All those citizens who had taken advantage of the surgeons and the genetic engineers to mold themselves into the images of off-Earth races became the scapegoats for all of the fallen society's ills. It did not matter to the "normal" citizens that only one alien race had warred with man. To them, anything different than the standard human form was something set aside for derision, for the bleeding off of rage.

The race-changers were murdered in their beds, executed in public hangings, thrown into pits by the tens of thousands and burned alive to the delighted howls of "normal" men.

But here in this city, there were a large number of the seven-foot, white-furred race-changers. Most of them were the children of parents who had had themselves surgically altered. Because they were born to their mutation, they were stronger than their parents had been in new bodies, more sure of themselves, quicker to use the power their great hulks provided them. Everything the genetic engineers had promised their parents they would be—they were. And they fought back.

More ephemeral strains of race-changers, patterning themselves after ethereal sprites and delicate other-world beings fell to the rage of the normal men. They perished in days, were sought out where they ran to hide and were mutilated horribly.

But the white giants fought back viciously, unsparingly, with a glee that seemed inherent in their form. They won the partially ruined city for their own, only after bringing it to further damage. But at last they drove the surviving "normals" into the open lands to forage for themselves in the shifting crust of the earth where life could not be maintained for long. And even though they trusted to the earth to devour their enemies, the white-furred ones took the precaution of erecting the onyx force walls about the city, a permanent barrier against a well-laid plan from those who had been dispossessed.

And centuries had passed.

The yellow sky, swirling with dust in the high altitudes, settled slowly into green, then blue again.

Birds and animals began to flourish once more, though some were different than before.

The lifespan of a white-furred mutant was nearly a hundred and fifty years, but still they began to relinquish their hold upon science and information. Superstitions grew up around the eternal machinery of the city which never needed attending and which was built into the rock strata far out of sight. True knowledge began to disappear and was soon only a dim memory. Only in the last ten years had attempts been made to re-discover what they had lost.

They reproduced irregularly and with some bad results so that their number was kept near thirty, plus or minus half a dozen from decade to decade. This made for a small force to unearth the knowledge of the past, but they were dedicated and made headway.

Then the Oragonians had come. Berlarak's people had greeted them openly, eagerly—and that had been their gravest error. Their brothers and sisters were killed by the Oragonian marksmen, and the nine who survived that massacre were forced into the lowest level of the city by way of hidden passages. The lowest level was sealed off from the ones above it by rubble and collapsed elevator shafts, so that they knew they would not be bothered there unless the Oragonians discovered their secret way to escape. Here they had remained for some months, hoping for a chance at revenge, even as the Oragonians had swelled their complement to four hundred men within the city.

"Four hundred!" Richter gasped.

"And that is why we require your aid," Berlarak said.

"But you seem confused," Richter said. "You see, there are but thirty-one of us, and five of our number are wounded and useless to such a cause!"

"As I have told you," Berlarak said, "your wounded will be cured by the autodocs we have taken them to."

"Even so," Richter argued, "your people and ours together only equal forty—but a tenth of the forces above us. Forces which now know a good deal about the city and its weaponry."

"But not enough," Berlarak said, smiling. Even the smile was frightening on that face. It approached being a leer. "They know all the superficial things: the aircraft, the guns. But there are far greater weapons in this city than they know of or have even begun to notice. Remember, my people have had ten years to pry through these corridors and vaults, on every level of the city. The upper floors all are larger than this

one. A thousand times more power and weaponry lies above us than even you see down here.”

“I don't know,” Richter said hesitantly.

“I think I favor going in with them,” Shaker Sandow said.

“That is wise,” Berlarak said.

“Here's what I propose,” Richter said, leaning forward in his chair. “A detachment of my men returns to Dark-lands and takes word of our find to General Dark. A regiment of some thousand or two thousand men return and help us take the city. Then, we would outnumber the Dragomans.”

“And then your people would be slaughtered,” Ber-larak said. “They would have spies among them. And air-craft from the city would destroy them before they reached the black walls. Meanwhile, the Oragonians grow more familiar with the city and might, by then, discover some of the greater weapons awaiting their hands.”

Richter twisted his hands together, shook his head. “It's just that so many of my men have died. There were a hundred and two of us that left the capital days ago. And now there are but twenty-eight. Almost three fourths of them dead.”

“I see what you want,” Berlarak said. “And I understand it. I will take the decision out of your hands by delivering the last piece of information I have been holding for such an eventuality as this. When I have told you what I know, you will join my people in my plan for re-occupation of the upper levels, and because you will have no choice, the decision will rest easier on you.” He looked from one of the Darklanders to the other, as if to gauge if they were prepared for what he was about to say. “Your only hope is to take the city swiftly, within the day. The Oragonians, we know, have declared war on your homeland and have taken fully half of your territory inside of four days.”

“You're lying!” Commander Richter shouted, leaping to his feet as if he had sat upon a nail, his face a furious shade of red, his fists balled at his sides.

Shaker Sandow had pushed to the edge of his chair and held his glass somewhat tightly, though he had not stood up. In his years as a sorcerer, working for men of power and wealth, he had learned to accept all sorts of news with an equanimity that some men greatly admired, and which other men thought was nothing more than a sign of apathy. He had early discovered that the body wears better and the mind rests easier when news is handled as something ephemeral. If word comes that the villains triumph today—tomorrow will most assuredly bring news that the heroes have won a battle somewhere else. The world rests most easily upon those who refuse to see it as much of a burden.

“Why should I lie?” Berlarak told him.

“But how could you know what transpires those hundreds of miles from here, across the Cloud Range and the Banibals?” The Shaker could see that Richter did believe, even though he did not wish to. The old man had set his teeth to hear the reply from the white mutant.

“You have seen my radio here. It works within the city only. But there are other, more powerful sets whose signals are received from satellites which orbit our world. The aircraft the Oragonians are using against the Dark-lands have transmitted this news which has eventually reached the enemy who inhabits the upper levels of our city. And we have overheard.”

“So now we have no choice,” Richter said.

“And the weight of the decision has been taken from you,” Berlarak amplified. “Now, your men should be brought to the sleep-teach machines, four at a time, to receive instruction in the handling of the weapons which they will be using upstairs. I have also prepared a tape which will outline the plan that I expect to use.”

“More men will die,” Richter said, his shoulders slumped, his face empty and dead,

“A few,” Berlarak confirmed. “But not many. We will have the advantage of surprise, and of the weapons they do not yet understand.”

“Not much surprise,” Shaker Sandow said, “The fire in the cane field must be out by now. The Oragonians will have discovered that we did not die there.”

Berlarak grinned. “We carried some bones from the wrecked train and deposited them in the cane field while a pall of smoke still covered our movements. We placed bits and pieces of your supplies there as well, smeared everything with ashes. They will be satisfied.”

At the disclosure of this piece of chicanery, Richter seemed to brighten. “Perhaps, Shaker, we have aligned ourselves with winners, though I would have thought not”

“And you are winners too,” Berlarak said. “We will all be rich in more ways than one.”

“Will you open the city to research by Darklanders, by myself?” Shaker Sandow asked.

“It will be opened to you, Shaker. Though the question that haunts you the most can be answered now. Your powers are not magics, just as you have long suspected, but something more common than that. Your powers are hidden within the minds of all men, though only a few are born with the ability to use them. Your abilities were once called 'extrasensory-perception' and were studied on many worlds, in many universities. A thousand years before the Blank, before men had even gone outward to the stars and met the Scopta'-mimas, there was a great war among the nations of the earth. Because of the radiation from that war, the after-effects of the weapons which were used, mutants were born. Some were changed in physical ways, into monsters which men put mercifully to death, while others were changed only inside, where it could not show, in the mind. You are a descendant of one of those whose mind was liberated, enlarged, changed. Yours is an inherited ability, more often than not. Your mother's

death was none of your own doing, but the result of her own and your father's genes, as inevitable as the rising and the setting of the sun. And her death was, as you have surmised, caused by the transmission of your own birth pangs to her mind.”

Though a number of the words were strange to him and he could not fathom what they represented, Shaker Sandow understood the gist of what Berlarak had said. Here, in an almost casual conversation, without fanfare or publicity, the one great question of his life had been answered. The doubt which had driven him to cross the Cloud Range, to risk his life and the life of his boys, this single doubt was erased in but a moment, unexpectedly, miraculously. And to this mutant, the knowledge was no mystery, but a commonly understood bit of business.

The Shaker felt a mixture of sadness and joy that confused him and made him feel the slightest bit dizzy.

“Whom do you cry for?” Commander Richter asked. He sat down once again, drawing his chair close to the Shaker, and took the magician's hand to offer solace.

“I cry for myself,” Sandow said. “I'm crying because of all the years that I have slept so lightly. Did you know that I wake at but the drop of a pin? And the reason, though I would never admit it to myself, was that I feared dreams of my mother. I had such dreams as a boy, nightmares where she came accusingly and took me to task for causing her death, for letting the demons snatch her up to Hell as punishment for her giving birth to a Shaker. And now I know that all of that was worth-less, all of that guilt and doubt.”

“But that's over,” Richter said. “Now is the time to accept the truth and rejoice in it.”

“So it is,” the Shaker said, drying his eyes and smiling, letting the last of sixty years of anguish drain from him.

“And there is much ahead,” Richter promised. “For all of us. More than we ever could have expected.”

But Sandow no longer required reassurances, for he had control of himself once more. “Remember,” he asked, “that I told you how each of us has learned something about the other on this trip? Well, I have also learned something new about myself, I had always thought that I held no claim on any superstition, as other Shakers do, that I was above such childish faiths. Yet, deep inside me somewhere, I had secretly nourished superstitions. Secretly, I half believed my mother had been snatched away by demons or condemned by angels. All the while that I professed to enlightened judgment, I harbored primitive fears. But that thread, at last, has been snapped. And because of this journey, I know myself better than I ever have.”

Berlarak poured more wine.

It was drunk.

“And now,” the white-furred giant said, “we must prepare ourselves for the battles ahead. We will spend the day resting, learning about each other, and planning our attack. When darkness settles over the upper reaches of the city and the lights are automatically lowered in most corridors, it will be time for us to take the holdings of the enemy and to cast him out.”

“To tonight,” Richter said, toasting them with the last droplets of his liquor.

They repeated the toast, and then they fell to serious deliberations.

Berlarak had removed the heavy metal grate which covered the accessway to the air-conditioning system on this lowest floor of the great metropolis. Inside, there was darkness and the almost inaudible hum of powerful machinery; the air was somewhat stale here in the midst of the machines which made it cool everywhere else. They went inside the walls, using electric torches which they had charged on wall outlets earlier. Dark, inscrutable machinery cluttered the walk spaces here, humping up like queer animals, great snails with many appendages. On all sides, gleaming pipes disappeared through partitions, so clean and unpitted that they looked as if they had been installed no earlier than a week ago; wide, hollow ducts which carried fresh, cool air into the chambers and corridors which they had just departed boomed as they accidentally stumbled against them while squeezing through places that had not been well designed to permit passage. The only sign of life here was a single spider which hung before them on a silken thread, halfway finished with the chore of spinning itself a new web; it started at their light and movement, its fat body quivering in the flat air, then scampered up its own silk cord, disappearing in the impenetrable shadows overhead.

“The architects did not design much comfort into the access walks, because they expected the machinery to go on running smoothly for as long as was foreseeable. And they were correct. It still runs as it did in the early days, with but a few exceptions.” Berlarak’s voice was low, whispered, yet contained that rumbling strength the Darklanders had come to expect of it.

In time, they found the stairs which Berlarak said were there. These were not moving risers like those in the main corridors which were now sealed off with rubble, but stairs not unlike those in Shaker Sandow’s own house in Perdune, though constructed of concrete rather than wood. They had been tucked into a dark corner of a dead-end walkway, further proof that the architects had never expected them to be used. Here, there was dust for the first time, half an inch of grayish powder on the stairs, the only proof of the centuries which had passed since their construction. Their feet made senseless patterns on top of the patterns made by the white-furred mutants when they had escaped downward in flight from the Oragonians.

Two landings later, they left the stairs and worked through another level of air-conditioning equipment, of softly thrumming lines of power (and two more spiders), Half an hour after they had begun, they reached another access grill facing a second level corridor.

Berlarak switched on his hip-slung radio and spoke his name.

“Clear,” the voice from the bottom level answered. It was Karstanul, another mutant who had been left behind to monitor the city from the great television network in police headquarters on the lowest level. He had just informed them that the second level still contained no Oragonians.

“Cutting torch forward,” Berlarak whispered.

Two more mutants carried a tank of some combustible gas the Shaker could not identify. The nozzle of the cutting tool was lighted, and in moments the grill was cut loose from inside. They went through and headed quickly for the armory whose position all of them now knew—the sleep-teach machines having worked wonders for their coordination as a unit.

The door to the armory was also cut open, beads of metal falling to the floor, there hardening and glistening like gems. The weapons inside were rifled in search of the most effective devices. Everyone was armed with the strange and deadly artifacts from another era, things designed to kill the Scepta-mimas but also deadly enough when directed against men. Within ten minutes, they had returned to the secret passages of the air-conditioning spaces, and the violated grill had been pulled back into place. It would pass a casual examination from the other side, but not a careful inspection.

But the Oragonians were not going to have time for inspecting anything . . .

Encumbered by their weapons, they found the going even more difficult than before, but they soon reached the stairs and continued their ascent. Four floors later, on the sixth level of the city, the first floor above ground, One Squad was detached and sent off to the grill, there to make their way through and surprise the Oragonians who went about their plundering with little concern.

This first squad consisted of Shaker Sandow, Gregor, Mace and Sergeant Crowler. Two mutants, detailed to cut open the grill for them, accompanied them, burned through the metal latches, then wished the four men luck and returned to the stairs to join the rest of the force for the journey to the higher levels. Since only Crowler was a trained fighter, this group had been given the level which contained the fewest Oragonians. There were but fifteen of the enemy established here, the television monitors reported, and such should be easy game for four men armed as these were.

They were to wait here until word came through from Berlarak, on the radio which Crowler carried on his hip, that all the units were in position and that the strike could begin. That might be as much as an hour from now. In the time that they had to wait, reduced to silence lest they draw the attention of an enemy soldier and expose themselves and the plan they embodied, Shaker Sandow had ample time to consider the men with him and to speculate on them in the light of the new things he had learned on this long trek.

Gregor was healed. The autodocs, those marvelous thinking machines, had swallowed him on a silver tray, had held him for three hours, and had spat him out in perfect health. There was not even a scar where his foot had been punctured, and he swore he felt no pain whatsoever. Yet, physically healed, his mental body was still wounded. He had never been so mortally hurt in his life, not even as his father had chased him with a mind to killing him when he was still a youth. Perhaps, in the years he had spent in the quietude of the Shaker's house, he had come to think of himself too specially. Perhaps he had begun to think that a magician's apprentice, soon to be a magician himself, was not vulnerable to the whims of fate. Now, having nearly perished, he understood differently. The scars of that rude awakening would require time to heal. He might lose some of that boyish streak of his, but he would gain a touch of manhood in its place. And that could only help. An immature Shaker does no one good, but plays pranks with his powers. Sandow had known one or two of those.

He turned his gaze away from the boy and looked at the dimly outlined ruggedness of Mace.

One time, not long ago, the Shaker would have said that he loved both Gregor and Mace but that, in the final analysis, perhaps he loved the young apprentice just a bit more than the hulking giant. He would have felt bad about such an admission, but he would have been honest in the making of it. Now, things had changed. There was no question in his mind that he loved Mace with every bit of his heart, fully as much as he could love Gregor, and perhaps more. In this long journey, Mace's clownishness had taken a back seat, and his manhood, his formidable strength and cunning, had come to the fore. Yet it was not only this show of adulthood and capability which made him more lovable in the Shaker's eyes: it was his obvious emotion and his limitless love for both his master and his step-brother. Though his power was super-human, he had stretched even that to the breaking point to rescue Gregor from the pulley. He had carried his brother on his back for some long while, never once complaining. And when Berlarak had assured him that the autodoc was bound to deliver up a healthy Gregor, he had still refused to go to sleep until his brother was safe before his eyes, laughing again and ready to joust with words as they always had. As a result, the giant had been the last to sleep—and still the first to wake, worried about the enemy above them.

He looked weary, sitting here behind the grill, within minutes of striking at the enemy. But his weariness and his travails on this journey would not change his personality. For the first time, the Shaker realized that Mace had long ago come to understand the meaning of death and the way of the world, unlike Gregor. He had learned nothing new about himself on this trip, unless it was the fantastic limits of his endurance. Mace would always be Mace, weary or rested, a granite resting place for the both of them in times of turmoil.

Crowler's shoulder wound was completely healed, and the feisty sergeant was more eager than any of them to be done with the battle ahead. He had no doubts about their winning it, seemed even more certain of the ultimate outcome than Berlarak was. All afternoon, during the training periods and the

briefings, he was on the move, cajoling a man here, offering a word of praise there, acting as if he commanded the unit instead of Richter. And one day he will, the Shaker thought. He is the sort of man the commander is, just younger. When his day comes, he will be as good an officer as any man can be.

They waited.

The silence seemed interminable.

And then there was a crackling noise on the radio against Crowler's hip, and they strained forward, listen-ing.

“In place,” the radio said. “Move out.”

They proceeded according to Berlarak's plan, lacking open the ventilation grill. It fell backward and crashed loudly against the floor, echoes ringing along the corridors like poorly cast bell resonances. The noise had no sooner settled than voices rose down the hall, growing nearer. When he judged the enemy was as close as he should be permitted to get, Sergeant Crowler rolled out of the air-conditioning crawl space, onto the grate, and brought his weapon to bear.

He wore a harness of heavy black leather which cut him under the arms, across the chest and back. This affair held two light metal braces across his shoulders. Attached to the braces and curved out around his head, leaving the back open but the front enclosed, was a half-cup of some coppery metal whose front curve was studded with three conelike knobs, the narrow ends of these projecting several inches beyond Crowler's fore-head. A flexible metal cord led downward from this coppery section to a small packet which the sergeant held in his left hand. There were two buttons on that controls package: the first fired the strange gun as long as it was depressed; the second stayed down when pushed and kept the gun firing until the first button had been touched again, thus freeing the gunner's hands for close infighting while the braced weapon directed its charge at more distant targets.

Crowler depressed the first button, using his head as a positioning instrument for the shoulder-mounted device.

There was no sound, no light, no show of projectiles having been launched. But Berlarak had called it a vibra-rifle, a sound weapon that worked with directional waves placed above the range of human hearing.

The four men fell, almost as a single creature, groped about them for the invisible enemy that assailed them.

The other three men of One Squad followed Crowler into the corridor, but did not augment his fire with their own weapons. That was clearly not necessary.

The Oragonians were pressing their hands to their ears, but to no avail. The vibra-rifle did not merely affect the eardrum, but cut through every cell of the body, interfering with neural control. That soon became obvious as the enemy floundered about on the floor, jerking spasmodically, legs twitching, flailing at their own bodies, jiggling like puppets on snarled strings.

Crowler kept the weapon bearing on them.

"Gods, why don't they die!" Gregor asked, vocalizing the disgust the others felt at the nature of the weapon and what it had done to healthy men in so short a space of time.

As if in response to this plea, the four soldiers stopped fighting the sound and lay still. Blood ran from their ears. Their bodies were contorted in impossible positions. Dead . . .

A bubble of digestive gases escaped one corpse's stomach, rippled upward through the dead flesh making the ghastly form stir slightly, and erupted in the corridor with a harsh bark, like the croak of some very large frog, a cold and unpleasant sound indeed.

Crowler rose to his feet, all the blood drained from his face at the sight of his victims, his nostrils flared and his eyes widened just a bit. "Please," he said, turning to the others, his tone almost desperate. "If it's at all possible, I pray that you will use your weapons first—so that I don't have to employ this hideous device again."

There were nods of agreement

Crowler wiped beads of sweat from his chalky fore-head.

The hall was quiet again. No one else had come out to investigate the crash of the ventilation grill, and no one had been attracted by the sounds of dying, for that death had been a quiet one.

"Let's move," Mace said, taking charge of the unit in the face of Sergeant Crowler's momentary

indecision.

Almost in the instant, however, the burly officer snapped out of his mood of despondency and was him-self again, capable and ready. "Yes," he said. There are but four men here, leaving eleven others which we must find. According to our last data from the monitoring sys-tem, there should be five men working in a large cham-ber to the far end of this stretch of corridor. We'll take them next."

They moved off, stepped over the corpses and boarded the pedways, the long rubbery belts embedded in the floor which served as a major form of transportation on this as on all other levels.

They were whisked away from the dead men on a pedway that rolled toward their next encounter at ap-proximately ten miles an hour.

The Shaker felt uncomfortable with the burden of the rifle in his arms—like a whore in a cathedral, or like a priest in a brothel. Deadly things were not his metier. Perhaps, though, he could steel his mind to perform things which seemed impossible, just as he had forced his frail body into great endurance on the trek from Perdune.

They stepped from the pedway onto the right-hand walking ledge and crept forward to the front of the shop where the Oragonians worked. A sign above the entrance read WEAPONS FOR PRIVATE DEFENSE: BY GO-DELMEISSER. Inside, the soldiers were collecting handguns to equip their brothers against the armies of the Darklands.

Mace stepped through the door, with Crowler behind in the event his own horrid weapon was required. The giant fired from the hip with the sleek, almost featureless weapon he carried. The three Oragonians there had only time enough to turn, startled, before they were knocked backward, against the racks of displayed weapons. They burst open like ripe fruits, staining the walls and the floor with their fluids, crashed onto the floor, nothing more than sacks of bones. The effect of this rifle had been even worse than that of Crowler's armament. The three dead men were all but unidentifiable as human beings.

Three . . .

Abruptly, the Shaker was struck with the realization that two of the men who should have been in the room —according to their last data report from Karstanul--were gone. Then, to the left, a pair of Oragonian soldiers stepped from the entrance to another shop, talking in-tensely, almost unaware of the presence of the Dark-landers.

Mace and Sergeant Crowler were within the gun shop and could never return in time to handle these two, Shaker Sandow realized that it was up to him and Gre-gor to handle the Oragonians and quickly.

Time . . . seemed . . . suddenly . . . to . . . flow . . . like . . . cold . . . syrup . . .

He had never been a violent man, the Shaker. It was said that the powers of a Shaker permitted long-distance murder if the Shaker was of such a mind and willing to expend the energy necessary for such a major task. Indeed, Sandow knew a sorcerer named Silbonna, a woman of some beauty and wit, who had been employed by one of the rival princes of the Salamanthe Islands to kill his strongest opponent in contention for the throne. It had been necessary for Silbonna to fast, to reach the edge of extreme hunger where all her perceptions were twice as swift, twice as nervously eager as before. Then, she had allowed herself a minimal diet of cheeses and wines and she had engaged in days of ritual chants to draw her powers down to a fine point; like the tip of a needle. And then she had thrust with that needle, had struck into the brain of the rival prince. For three days, with but one three-hour period a day for sleep, she worked that needle deeper, turning and twisting, until at last blood vessels burst inside the prince's head, and he was finished. What had her reward been? He could not remember. He just knew that his own personality would not have permitted such an act, no matter what the size and the quality of the payment.

Except once . . .

Once, he had used some of his Shaker's powers for a murder, when he had poured every ounce of his esp en-ergy into sending Gregor's father over the wall and into the gorge by the streets of Perdune.

But even he had permitted the intervening years to color that incident a bit more pleasant than it truly was. Could it really have been his powers? he had asked him-self. Surely not. A Shaker's powers could not work so quickly, without ritual, merely spurred by emotion and a sense of urgency. And yet . . . And yet he had never subscribed to the "magic" theory, had always insisted it was something more concrete.

He . . . turned . . . and . . . glanced . . . at . . . Gregor . . .

Perhaps it would be best to wait, for the boy was al-ready bringing up his weapon. Let Gregor fire the burst that would take down the two soldiers before them. Let Gregor do it and maybe he would grow a little more into a man than he now was.

He . . . looked . . . back . . . to . . . the . . . sol-diers . . . who . . . were . . . just . . . beginning . . . to . . . notice . . . the . . . Darklanders . . .

No, Shaker Sandow suddenly realized, Gregor must not kill the men. It was he, Shaker Sandow, he could cope with bloody hands most easily. He and Mace could kill and somehow go on, recover. But the fair, fragile ne-ophyte-Shaker was not cut out for it. Only within these last few days had he come to understand the true mean-ing of death and his own mortality. And it was a far larger step to murder another man. A step that might send the boy plunging over too great a drop.

Time suddenly speeded up, faster, faster, until it was moving at such an accelerated pace that it almost took away the sorcerer's breath.

He brought his rifle to bear.

He fired.

The Oragonians were flung backward, slammed against the floor, trembled for a few moments, and were still. Smoke rose from their charred bodies . . .

Well, Shaker Sandow thought, now I have truly come full circle in this life. I started out by killing my mother and have finally returned to death-dealing. I never saw her blood; I see theirs. But in both cases: death. The only difference is that I understand why death was nec-essary in this case, and I know exactly what my responsi-bilities are. And a man can cope with that Much easier than he can with demons and magic powers.

That's nine," Crowler said. "Six to go. Let's hurry be-fore the rest of them get wise."

And they continued on their mission. Wiser? No. More weary? Yes.

Gregor did not kill anyone.

That, the Shaker thought, is at least one consolation from this entire affair. Gregor has killed no one.

Their own level of the city was secured within twenty minutes of their noisy exit through the ventilation grill and the vibra-rifle destruction of the first four Oragonian soldiers. They caught the last six men as unaware as they had caught the first nine, and they were all thankful for the ease with which they had attained their goal.

The upper floors raged with battle for more than two hours as the war party met with stronger Oragonian opposition than they had anticipated. Or perhaps Berlarak had anticipated everything but had glossed it over to be certain the Darklanders would help with the task of driving the enemy from the city. Now and then, there were explosions above which shook the walls even down here, made hairline cracks in the plaster directly below the impact area. Twice, they thought they heard the cries of wounded men echoing down the escalator treads from farther up, though they could not be certain.

Karstanul called them an hour after their own floor had been secured to warn them that a detachment of Oragonians was fleeing down the escalators (the elevators had been shut off from the police headquarters command board) and would soon be upon them if they were not stopped by other squads along the way. But fortunately, they never reached the sixth level.

And then the call came through on the radio, announcing victory. The city had been taken from the invaders, with the help of the super-science of a long-dead society, and had been restored to the mutants. Not long after that, Berlarak, Richter, and all but a mop-up detachment returned to the police complex where One Squad went to wait celebration, or whatever was to come after the short-lived battle.

"We did not have to kill all of them," Berlarak said. "Though I would not have been against such a slaughter. I well remember what they did to our kind."

There was an arrow wound in his left shoulder, and crimson had dribbled down the white fur of that arm in an intricate and rather lovely pattern. He showed no sign that he was bothered by the torn flesh and waved that arm around to amplify his conversation as freely as he used the other.

"Some escaped?" Shaker Sandow asked.

"Aye," Richter affirmed. "About fifty of the devils reached aircraft and scooted out of the city toward the west. They'll be spilling their tales to Jerry Matabain this evening—if not before then, with the help of those infernal radios of theirs. Another fifty escaped by foot, toward the stand of pines to the north of the city. They'll expect to wait salvation when the Oragonians send a counter-force to recapture this place. But I do believe they still underestimate our firing power, even though they've had a taste of it. We won't be routed easily now, I say!"

"Not easily," Berlarak agreed.

"And what of us now?" Shaker Sandow asked. "What can we do about the Darklands? That was your purpose in coming here, Commander."

"True. And I haven't forgotten it. I have mentioned the matter to Berlarak, requesting any aid he can give us in mounting aircraft and other vehicles with the weapons we have used in this battle just passed. But he says he believes that he can deal us a device more potent than any fleet of aircraft."

"And what is that?" Shaker Sandow asked, turning to the giant, white-furred mutant. He had the curious feeling of talking to a snowman built by Perdune children. It was the first such thought he had had, in all the hours he had been around the mutants. Perhaps, he mused, my mind finds the burdens growing lighter and is responding. We have accomplished so much in these last days that there is now even time for amusement.

"I would rather show you than tell you," Berlarak said, "It will have more effect that way."

"Show us, then," Sandow said.

"We must go down again," Berlarak said. "There are installations beneath the city, reachable only by stairs."

Mace, Gregor, Crowler, Richter and Shaker Sandow followed the shuffling mutant through various chambers of the police complex, until they came to a room that appeared to be no more than a storage chamber for reports and directives. There were tape-retaining banks along the walls and shelves of plastic spools that would speak of ancient robberies and murders. Along the far wall, there was a row of filing cabinets, great heavy things which appeared to be bolted in place. Berlarak opened the topmost drawer of the cabinet farthest to the left reached far inside, as if searching for something. He found it, twisted it. The far right cabinet rose four feet into the air, giving view of a black portal in the floor and steps beyond.

Berlarak led the way down the secret passage, urging them to mind their steps as the way got slippery with a film of water mist and lichens which grew from the stones. There was the smell of wet earth and of water, a large quantity of water somewhere near at hand. There were little round lights set into the rugged ceiling at intervals of ten feet, but they had grown so dim with age that they did little to illuminate the way. They could see each other and a short distance ahead, but little more.

They reached the floor after descending more than a hundred feet into the bowels of the earth. It was a rock shelf, cut from the substrata of the land and polished in some unknown fashion to make it safe for human work and for the traffic of small vehicles which sat about at various places, unused for centuries, given over to fungus and rust in this deep place. In one of the little vehicles, large enough to hold four men, there were three skeletons, as if going to some meeting of demons and ghosts. They walked past these to a length of steps which terminated, after a dozen risers, at the edge of an underground lake. The water stretched a hundred yards across before the ragged stone cave wall ended it. The ceiling of the cave was only twenty feet high, dipping lower at some points on the flat surface of the water.

"Just a little further along here," Berlarak assured them.

They followed him, walking on the lowest step beside the water, rounded a bend in the cavern, and saw the thing wallowing in the lake, just alongside the steps, as if it were waiting for them.

It was fully four hundred feet in length and ninety feet wide, too large to fit the other way across the lake. It was like some immense cigar with a neck which thrust up from the very center of its rounded, gray body. Yet the neck was not tipped with a head. Instead, there were thrusting things like wires and an entire exoskeleton of impossible purpose. In the end nearest them, down near the water line but not now under it, there were two eyes. This, then, must be the head. But there was no maw and no breathing apparatus. Only two amber eyes, each four feet in diameter, deep and somehow melancholy as they focused on the men.

"A dragon!" Crowler gasped, taking a step backward and almost crashing into the lake.

He had voiced the fears of every man there, save Berlarak. If Berlarak could be said to be a man. No one wished to venture closer to such an awesome creature, even if it did remain perfectly still as if frightened of them and preparing to flee—or maybe pounce.

"Not a dragon," Berlarak corrected.

"What else lies in the water, of such huge dimensions, waiting—"

"A submarine does," Berlarak said, cutting Sergeant Crowler short. "A submarine."

"What is that?" Crowler asked, looking at the dragon in a new light.

"I know," the Shaker said. "I have read of them in archaic texts. But if there was anything that I would yet consider mythical—even after I've seen the truth of many wonders—it is such a machine. Does it work?"

"Indeed it does!" Berlarak confirmed. He then proceeded to tell the other Darklanders exactly what the marvelous machine could do. He was stopped often by questions and once or twice by scoffing disbelievers who wished to challenge a point or two. But in very little time, he had convinced them. Indeed, there was not much room to argue when the behemoth waited in the lake.

"But why is it here?" Richter asked, examining the hull more closely now, even daring to touch it and

feel that it was cold metal and not skin.

“We supposed certain city officials, or perhaps a wealthy merchant guild, maintained the ship to escape from the city lest the Scopta'-mimas someday carry their war to Earth herself—as they did.”

Richter frowned. “And why didn't they make use of it, then?”

“You saw the bones,” Berlarak said. “There were more of those in the submarine when we found it; we threw them out. We speculate that foul play was involved. In those days, we believe, there were as many petty in-trigues within the dying human culture as there were battles in the exterior war, the confrontation with the al-ians. Guild against guild, race against race, age against age, religious group turned upon religious group. Something of that nature led to the nefarious plots here beneath the city—with the result that neither group of plotters lived to escape.”

Richter turned to Shaker Sandow and his sons. “Your purposes were not the same as mine, sorcerer. You have had your mind settled: the main piece of knowledge has been delivered to you. You will be happy here with this treasurehouse of ancient wisdom. I will not hold it against you if you do not accompany us this last way. There really is no need.”

“Oh, but there is!” Sandow said. “There is a need! It is not your need, nor the need of the Darklands, but my own desire. I have never sailed in a submarine, though I have long been fascinated with them. Aircraft fly like birds, but that does not excite me like this. True, fish have been swimming beneath the surface of the seas ever since man has known water. But this goes faster than the fish. And deeper than most all of them. In this, there will be much to see. In an airplane, there is only air to survey. I don't intend to turn my back upon the most fascinating wonder yet!”

“But can we learn to operate it?” Growler asked.

“Sleep-teach tapes will show you the way. It is mostly self-controlled and needs little guidance anyway. We have prepared the minimal tapes for ourselves, but you may have first chance at the dragon.”

Richter nodded. “Let's hurry, then. The Darklands is already half gobbled by the hungry mouths of Jerry Matabain.”

Thirty-six hours after they put out from the city, they found themselves nearing the homeland of their enemy . . .

They had departed the subterranean vaults of the city at three on the afternoon following the defeat of the Oragonians. They had slept in shifts so that some of them would always be free to continue with launching preparations. A large quantity of hand guns and ammunition had been loaded aboard to make certain that the Dark-landers had more than bows and arrows with which to repel the Oragonian armies. The dragon could, after all, only do so much from its sea-locked battlefield. As for food, the submarine contained a food generation plant which sucked fish and seaweed from the water, broke the sludge to its component molecules, sifted for basic protein and vitamins, rejected what was not required. Little cubes of compressed edibles were delivered to hungry men, highly nutritious if tasteless. This they augmented with ancient canned goods still wholesome enough for consumption, though they did not waste much time on preparing the larder; the Banibaleers were accustomed to stale bread and beef jerky and did not need a fancy table. Seven fresh water storage ballast tanks were filled, and then all was in a state of readiness at last.

They bade the mutants a temporary farewell.

They dipped into the water of the subterranean lake.

And they were gone.

It was necessary to handle all the steerage on their own cognizance, for the computerized auto-pilot that had been built into the submarine was set to guide by a map of a world that was no longer accurate. The continents were far different than once they had been. There were new seas and new rivers, and many of the old ways had been sealed shut as if they had never existed at all. The builders of the dragon had originally intended the escape route to run beneath the Cloud Range by means of a subterranean river which fed from this lake, then into the Shatoga River, from there into a fjord at the bottom of the Banibals, far south and on into the Pacific Ocean (which was now called the Salamanthe Sea). But the Cloud Range had not even existed then. And the Banibals had been smaller and less extensive. Such a route now ceased to exist. Instead, the Darklanders found a water passage from the lake to the Great Inland Sea where the Salamanthe Islanders had once or twice ventured a short distance along the coast. From there, they passed through Bortello Straits into the Northern Sea which eventually flowed into the Salamanthe. Striking south, they eventually reached the coast of Oragonia, moving faster than any of the strange fish they viewed along the way. They handled the huge vessel with ease, the sleep-teach tapes having made sub-surface sailors of them in a short time.

From the moment they had boarded the vessel, Shaker Sandow had been prowling from one end of her to the other. He slept little, unable to rest easily in such a wonder-packed machine. He spent time before the amber portals, looking out upon the sea bottom, watching octopodial creatures half as large as their ship, smaller fish, great kelp beds waving as if in a breeze.

Thirty-six hours after their departure, at three o'clock in the morning, he was busy playing with the garbage disposal unit in the small galley where foods other than the protein cubes were prepared. The disposal unit seemed to sum up the richness of the science of the ancient men who had constructed the dragon. To think that such an ingenious and complicated device had been built for such a mundane problem as trash accumulation was more than a little awe-inspiring.

Four feet above deck level in the galley, against the outside bulkhead, stood a bronze pipe ten or twelve inches in diameter, with a heavy, hinged lid and screw clamps to keep the weighty cover in position. Because the dragon had been meant to remain underwater for months at a time, this had taken the place of nighttime disposal dumps made when the vessel surfaced. The bronze tube went to the

bottom of the submarine. On the lower end, there was a heavy water-tight hatch much like the one in the galley, with inter-connecting controls that made it impossible for both to be open at the same time—and thus flood the ship. The garbage, then, was placed in tough plastic sacks and weighted with stones which were kept for this purpose only. The galley hatch was closed after a few sacks of trash, and the stuff was pumped out under pressure, then the outer door closed again. It was necessary to weight the bags to keep them from floating to the surface and thus give clue to the po-sition of the dragon.

A bag full of nothing but stones had been forced out the tube, and the Shaker was watching the red and green safety lights above the disposal unit with childlike inten-sity, when Tuk appeared in the doorway.

“Ah, there you are, Shaker!” the red-haired youth said swinging through the open hatch.

“Here I am,” Sandow affirmed. “And there are you And do you make a habit of stealing quietly through the corridors trying to scare the wits out of tired old men?”

Tuk smiled. “Aye, that I do. If the tired old men are too frisky yet to hie themselves to bed.”

“I have been to bed,” Sandow said. “And I find it unappealing.”

“That's because you don't take the proper company with you,” Tuk said, grinning.

“Aye, and what would I do with the proper company if I had her longside me 'neath the sheets? I have long since lost my vitality.”

Tuk laughed, then grew more serious as he seemed to remember what he had come for. “The commander sent me with a message, and when I could not find you in your bed, I began a search of the ship.”

“Message?”

“We are off the coast of Oragonía at a point some three miles from the harbor of their capital, Blackmouse. The harbor lanterns are visible, but little else.”

“I suppose the war resumes for us,” Sandow said.

“Aye, Shaker, it does.”

“Let us go then and watch the dragon spit its fire.”

They left the galley and the marvelous garbage dis-posal for the fore quarters of the long ship.

Richter and Crowler and Mace and Gregor, plus half a dozen other Darklanders were waiting on the guidance deck, before the two amber windows of the vessel. They were riding on the surface, the windows just above the slopping darkness of the sea. All lights in the main cabin had been extinguished so that they did not present a display for anyone who might be watching from the docks. The only illumination came from the pulsing scopes of the instruments, the lightly glowing panels of dials and gauges. These threw their features into dark blue bas re-lief and gave them all an other-worldly color that re-minded the Shaker, for a brief moment, of the way they had looked in the jeweled forest in the east.

“And now what?” the Shaker asked, peering through the viewports toward the dock lights of the enemy capi-tal.

“At first,” Richter said, “I had intended to use shells upon the town. Not nuclears. Pray that we can avoid those no matter what transpires. But now I do not be-lieve that shelling the city is necessary either. There on the slopes above the town lies the Matabain castle.”

There were a few lights there, barely enough to out-line the thrusting towers and the hard, high walls of the mad emperor's domain. It seemed so distant and unreal that they might have been fighting a war of the imagina-tion. It was suddenly obvious to the Shaker why the more civilized men of earlier eras had dealt so heavily in war. Long-distance wars, from submarines and aircraft and rocketships, was impersonal or seemed to be. The killer did not think of himself as the killer—but merely as a technician, a cog in the great wheel of things.

“And you plan to shell Matabain's castle in hopes the armies will flounder without him. But remember that an-other man will assume the tiller of state. One man is not responsible for a nation's policy.”

“More than the castle,” Richter said. He turned and looked back to the land. “Up there on the slopes, laid out as nice as you please, are fifty aircraft and many other land vehicles. Perhaps the largest part of the enemy arse-nal lies before us.”

Sandow strained. “I see nothing,” he said at last “Is this wishful thinking that guides you?”

Richter turned and handed the Shaker a pair of heavy, enormous binoculars. "Look upon it with those and see if you do not note what I have told you, friend. Luck in-deed has turned upon us."

The Shaker raised the glasses to his eyes, grunted his surprise. Through some magic mechanism in the instrument, night was driven away and everything seemed as brightly lighted as if the sun shone. He had to remove the binoculars for a moment to check whether this was perhaps the case. But stars were there in blackness, no sun. He looked again, saw the aircraft banked along the slope beneath the towering castle walls. There were lumbering trucks and other ground vehicles, a wide assortment of weapons of war, there for the plucking.

"It will not be all his supply," Sandow said.

"Of course," Richter agreed. "We know that aircraft and ground vehicles now work in the lower colonies of the Darklands. So this is not all, but some, a good many, a large blow to them."

"You speak as if you've heard more word about the way the Darklands fare in all this."

"An hour ago," Richter said, "we intercepted radio reports between the castle and aircraft to the south in our home counties. It is said that only Far Walk, Lingo-mabbo, Jenningsly and Summerdown are still under the reign of General Dark. All other twenty-seven counties have succumbed to the Oragonian forces. There are reports of slave camps in the fallen colonies, of women pressed to service as prostitutes. General Dark and his wives now reside in Summerdown, by the fjord, with nowhere to go if the last perimeters of their defenses fall. Jerry Matabain has ordered the General executed immediately upon capture, his body to be returned to Black-mouse for a public disembowling and burning."

"They are not playing games, then."

"No games."

"Then let us move swiftly," Shaker Sandow said. "Every hour may mean life or death to our master."

Richter turned to Crowler who was manning the armament station. "Have you got the range, Sergeant?"

"Radar identifies it: three and a quarter miles, sir."

"Very well. To protect the citizens in the buildings immediately downslope from the castle, we'll use implosion missiles. That should reduce flying debris considerably."

"Aye, sir!"

"Fire three rounds when ready," Richter directed.

Everyone but Crowler turned to the amber viewports.

There was a slight whoofing noise a bit aft and above them. Air was sheared apart above the submarine, and thin white vapor marked the trail of the first rocket for a hundred feet before darkness swallowed even that. The hissing came twice again in close succession, presenting two more wispy white tentacles that terminated in blackness.

They waited.

Time seemed to slow, almost as it had in the city when the Shaker had realized that he must kill in order to save young Gregor from that harsh burden of guilt

The night remained black.

The night remained quiet

Then it turned white and red and made sounds like a herd of stampeding cattle running across the membrane of a huge drum.

The grounds immediately below the castle walls burst with a bright orange flame as the implosion charges went off. Rapidly, the center of each spot was cored with a black blossom. The blossom spread, eating the fire, and left only the smoldering destruction, the slag of melted aircraft behind. The houses below were not on fire and appeared to be mostly undamaged.

"Fire three," Richter ordered. "And shift your sight fractionally this time, at discretion."

"Aye, sir."

The firing tubes whoofed again.

Again: three white trails; silence in the guidance deck black and silent night; color and noise; the black blossoms, the consumed explosion, the rubble . . .

"Raise your tubes another degree," Richter directed Crowler. "We'll fire two rounds of three shells,

then raise another degree. Then again until we have leveled every-thing on that slope.”

The thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth shells struck the castle of Jerry Matabain, blew through the great stone walls and turned mortar and granite into component atoms which rose upward from the implosion areas in gusts of thick, gray ash. Men had run onto the ramparts, armed with hand guns and grenades, but could not find their enemy. The next three shells turned those men to gray ash, and made the summit of that hill as bare of life as it might have been upon the dawn of creation. If Jerry Matabain was in the castle, as was likely, there was no way he could possibly have escaped that holocaust.

In the guidance deck, cheers rose from the men. They began chanting songs of a patriotic nature, slapping one another upon the back. For the first time since they had begun this long journey, there was genuine belly laughter. Not just chuckles, not just polite titters, but guffawing pleasure in what had suddenly happened to the man whom all of them had come to loathe since their youth, the tyrant Jerry Matabain.

The Shaker rejoiced with the rest of them, although with a deal less heartiness. It had not seemed to occur to them, as it had to the sorcerer, that men had died under their hands just now. And not only men, but the wives and children of the castle staff and soldiers, innocent victims of a war they had not made.

Richter had wine broken out, and goblets were soon filled with the purple fluid.

The Shaker speculated on the impersonal war and what this new way of battle would mean to the world. Killing at long distance made killing so much more acceptable. It dehumanized the enemy, turned them into “things” rather than people, targets rather than men and women and children. Now, the Shaker realized why the Oragonian pilot who had killed so many Darklanders near the bamboo field could slaughter so ruthlessly and still call himself a human being. From his height in the silver craft, he was killing small, scurrying creatures, not other men. How much better for the world if war could be maintained on a personal level, when the soldier wielding only knives and arrows was forced to watch the blood gouting from his victims. If men were made to see the charred skin and the lopped heads, the shattered limbs and ripped bodies of their enemy, there would be fewer men—on every side of the issue—willing to take up arms. But now long-distance death had been resurrected, and the world could look forward to more of this. War would again become impersonal; man would play around with his weapons until he did again what he had done before: involve himself in a battle which he could never win, either against himself or other races in the distant reaches of the stars. How much better to suffer guilt for a lifetime over the indirect death of your mother than to slaughter tens of thousands and never understand the depth of your degeneration!

“Now south!” Richter was saying. “We’ll see what we can do at the Darkland port cities along the way, now occupied by Oragonians. But our chief mission will be to enter the fjord and dock by Summerdown. We can give the General support and help him retake the lands that are ours!”

“And you, Shaker,” Richter said. He gathered Mace and Gregor beside the magician. “Three fine comrades on a terrible journey. We will never lose touch when this is finished, hey?”

“We won’t,” Sandow agreed.

Already, the sorcerer had begun to speculate that the shattered cities beyond the Cloud Range might hold some bit of information, some train of knowledge which would help to stem the tide of war. As of this moment, Sandow saw war stretching infinitely onward, far into the future—until there would be one great war again, followed by another Blank when history would be lost and men would have to work back from disaster with simple tools and simple understanding. But he was no longer as much of a pessimist as he had been even moments ago. Perhaps there was a way to change the course of events this time. He was an esper, after all. Perhaps there was some way to discover how to amplify his power, to enlarge it. If such a force of sorcerers should band together in the cause of peace, all yet could be saved. And in the course of whatever the future held, Solvon Richter might prove to be an invaluable ally. True, now he did not see the horror of this distant murder. But one day he would. And he would remember Shaker Sandow and he would be there, wondering what he might do to help.

“When the tide has turned in this battle and Oragonia is driven back, I’ll see to it that you are returned to the east, to spend your time in the scientific study of those ancient fragments. It should not be long. I think the war can be won in less than weeks now that we have cut off their link to the modern weapons in

the eastern city.”

“I would prefer to rest some months before returning there,” Sandow said to Richter.

“What? You, the sorcerer with the hunger for knowledge that drove him to risk his life? Now that it is safe to study there, you prefer staying home?”

Sandow smiled, thinking of Perdune. The winters between the mountains are magnificent, Commander Richter. The snows eventually sweep across the roofs, and we Perdunians are forced to remain within our houses lest we freeze in the fierce winds of winter. We must amuse ourselves with our families, with games of cards, with the making of jewelry and other such pastimes. Yet there is something to be said for the quietude, something quite unexplainable. You must have lived the winter in Perdune to understand it.” He paused for a moment, as if reluctant to speak the last words, then went on: “And I fear that winters like this, in Perdune, are few. Soon, there will be ways to clear the snow, ways of keeping warm and safe in even those inhospitable months. And we will embrace these things and call them progress and pretend that we are losing nothing.”

Richter looked perplexed. But Mace was smiling sadly. The giant understood exactly what his master had said. Sandow realized that Mace also had grasped the significance of these sophisticated weapons which had been used this night. Gregor's face was partially possessed by a look of incomprehension. But only partially. He too was beginning to understand what the future must be, though he would require a few more weeks of worrying at all he had learned on this trek.

The darkness of ignorance had been speared by light. Knowledge and light lay ahead. But in the background, the forces of darkness built their strength, flexed their muscles and waited for the right moment to strike. In the years to come, the slim sorcerer would have to wage his own war—against war and ignorance. And after him, Gregor too.

“But now,” Shaker Sandow said, taking the arms of his two sons, “let us sleep for just a little while.”

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