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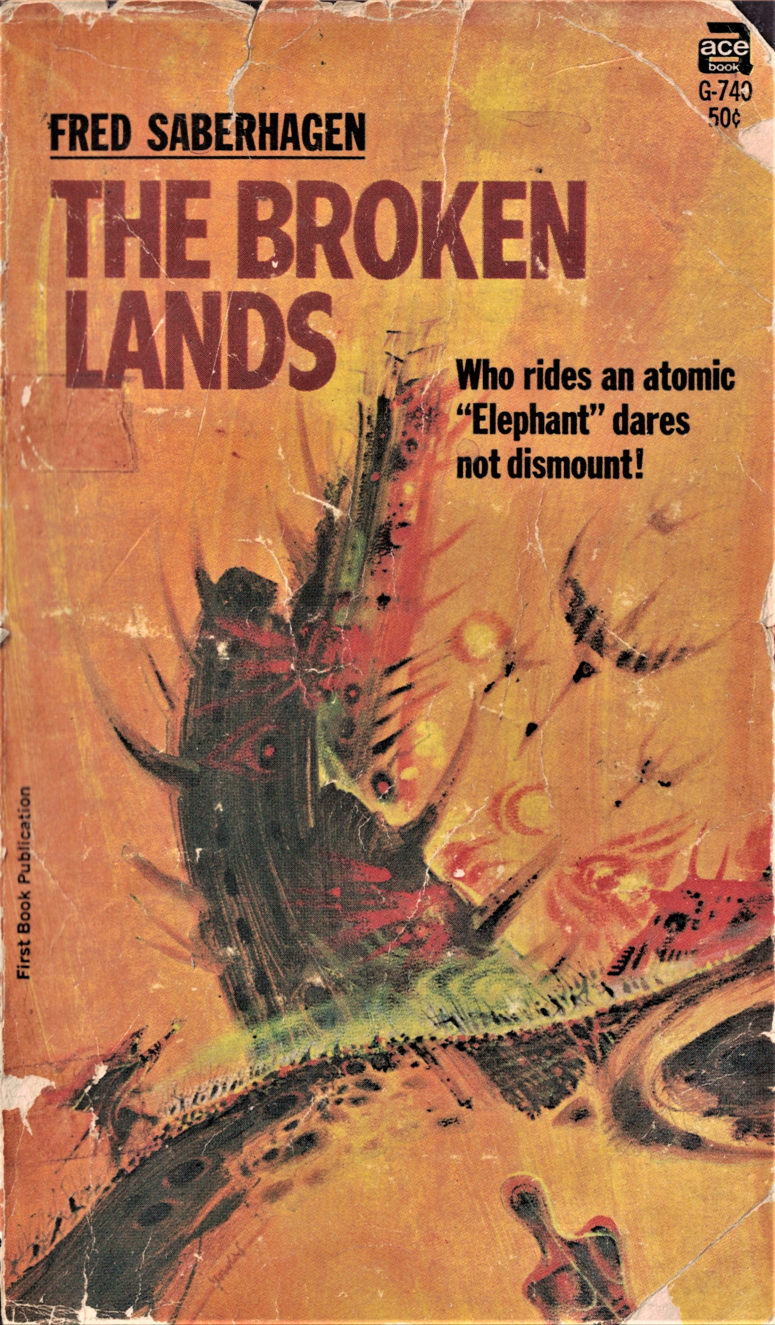
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FRED SABERHAGEN

THE BROKEN LANDS

**Who rides an atomic
"Elephant" dares
not dismount!**

First Book Publication



"Hear me, for I am Ardneh! Ardneh, who rides the Elephant, who wields the lightning, who rends fortifications as the rushing passage of time consumes cheap cloth. You slay me in this avatar, but I live on in other men. I am Ardneh, and in the end I will slay thee, and thou wilt not live on."

Those were the dying words of the Old One, and with his death, the people of the Broken Lands would have to break their own chains—or be content to wear them—unless a new champion could arise who would be able to find the Elephant.

ACE BOOKS by Fred Saberhagen include:

THE GOLDEN PEOPLE (M-103)

THE WATER OF THOUGHT (M-127)

FRED SABERHAGEN

THE BROKEN LANDS



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I

THE OLD MAN was proving to be an almost impossible subject for torture, even for the Satrap Ekuman, even in the Satrap's Castle, with all the facilities he had there at his disposal. It was not that the old man was too fragile a subject, so feeble that he might die from a twinge of pain; no, it was almost incredible, but the opposite was true. He was actually too tough, his powers still protected him. All through the long night under the Castle he not only defended himself from pain but kept trying to hit back, even chained as he was to the wall at the bottom of a pit three meters deep.

The old man's offensive spells were dissipated harmlessly, of course. Ekuman's two wizards, Elslood and Zarf, were far too strong for any lone prisoner to overcome, especially here on their own ground; they were adepts as able as any that Ekuman had ever met with in the world of men.

So it was certain that the old man's pride and stubbornness must eventually go for naught, but yet he still resisted. By doing so, he caused to be arrayed against him powers so enormous, created a tension so great, that in the end his collapse would kill him before he could suffer much.

The deadly intensity of the silent struggle mounted all through the darkest hours of the morning, when human powers are known to wane and others may reach their highest peak. The forces of the West that the old man had to call upon could not be identified exactly by Ekuman and his wizards, but certainly those forces were not trivial. Long before the struggle had mounted to its inevitable end, the air within the buried dungeon seemed to Ekuman to be ringing audibly with powers, and his human eyesight misinformed him that the ancient vaults of the stone ceiling had elongated and receded into some mysterious distance. And tonight, Zarf's toad-familiar, that was wont to jump with glee during the interrogation of stubborn prisoners, had taken refuge in a puddle of torchlight near the foot of the ascending stair. For once it wanted none of the chamber's darker corners. It crouched there solemnly, its goggle eyes following its master as he moved about.

Elslood and Zarf took turns in standing on the rim of the pit, at whose bottom the old man had been chained. There they drew what signs they wished on floor and wall, and were free to use the talismans of their choice. On the level of purely physical action the struggle was very quiet, without yells or dances or great arm-sweeping sawings of the air; such amateurisms were not for wizards of this rank.

While one of Ekuman's magicians took his turn at maintaining the pressure on the prisoner, the other would stand back before the simple throne on which the Satrap sat watching, conferring with him. There was no other living person in the chamber.

Ekuman's wizards were sure that the old man was a leader, perhaps the chief leader, of those who called themselves the Free Folk—the still unsubmissive bands of the native populace, reinforced by a scattering of refugees from other lands, who hid themselves among the hills and coastal swamps of these Broken Lands and carried on an unremitting guerilla warfare against Ekuman.

It was only through a stroke of fortune, it seemed, that a routine search operation in the swamp had resulted in the

old man's capture. Zarf and a troop of forty soldiers had come upon him sleeping in a hut. Ekuman was beginning to believe that if the old man had chanced to be awake, they might not have taken him at all. Even with the prisoner at his present disadvantage, Elslood and Zarf together had not even managed to learn his name.

The guttering torchlight flashed with unusual brightness from the chains which bound the prisoner in the pit; those chains were of course not of ordinary metal. Blood puddled darkly at the old man's feet, but not a drop of it was his. Lifeless in the bottom of the pit lay one of Ekuman's dungeon-wardens. This man had approached the chained wizard incautiously, to be surprised when his own dull crooked torture-knife whipped itself out of its sheath to fly up and bury itself to the hilt in his throat. After that, Ekuman had ordered all his men save the two wizards out of the chamber.

In the later stages of the night, when the prisoner had displayed certain small but unmistakable signs of weakening, Ekuman considered having the wardens in again to try carving him. But the wizards advised against it. They said that the best chance for a cruel prolongation of agony, the best hope that something might possibly be learned from the victim, rested on their finishing by the powers of magic alone the process they had begun. Their pride was stung.

Ekuman assented, though so far the prisoner's face had shown nothing more satisfactory than the strain of long concentration. In this case, who could be sure?—there might be agony behind the mask. The Satrap could be patient. He let his wizards have their way, and he sat attentively through the long hours of the test. He had a high wall of a forehead, and a full and darkish beard; he wore a simple robe of black and bronze; his black boots shifted now and then upon the paving stones before his throne.

Only when the night outside was drawing to its end—though day and night in here were all alike—did the old man break the silence he had kept through all the hours of his captivity. His speech was addressed to Ekuman, and

the words of it evidently formed no spell, for they came clearly enough through the guarded air above the torture-pit. When toward the end of his speech the victim's breath came near failing him, Ekuman stood up from his throne and leaned forward slightly to hear better. On the Satrap's face at that moment was a look of politeness, as if he was showing courtesy to an elder.

"Hear me, Ekuman!"

The toad-familiar crouched, becoming utterly motionless, at the sound of those first words.

"Hear me, for I am Ardneh! Ardneh, who rides the Elephant, who wields the lightning, who rends fortifications as the rushing passage of time consumes cheap cloth. You slay me in this avatar, but I live on in other men. I am Ardneh, and in the end I will slay thee, and thou wilt not live on."

Given the circumstances in which the threat was uttered, Ekuman was not in the least alarmed. And he took care not to *seem* to be alarmed, guarded his face from changing expression. He knew his wizards watched him closely. He glanced at each of them when the word "Elephant" was uttered; Zarf's and Elslod's eyes fell before his, and he quickly returned his full attention to the prisoner.

The pain now showed quite plainly in the old man's face and voice, as his defenses crumbled and his powers failed. Now he was quickly becoming only an old man after all, only a victim about to die. He labored on with croaking speech.

"Hear me, Ekuman. Neither by day nor by night will I slay thee. Neither with the blade nor with the bow. Neither with the edge of the hand . . . nor with the fist. . . . Neither with the wet . . . nor with the dry. . . ."

Ekuman found himself straining his ears to hear more, but the old man's lips had ceased to move. Now it was only the flicker of torchlight that gave an illusion of life to the old man's face, as to the face of the dead torturer at his feet.

The ringing pressure of invisible and inhuman forces faded quickly from the dank air. As Ekuman straightened with a sigh and turned away from the pit, he could not

resist a quick glance upward to make sure the vaulted ceiling had settled back where it belonged.

Zarf, who was slightly the junior of the two wizards, had gone to open a door and call in the wardens who would see to the disposal of the two corpses. As the magician turned back from this errand, Ekuman shot a question at him: "You will examine the old man's body?"

"Yes, Lord." Zarf did not sound optimistic about the results of such an autopsy. His toad-familiar, however, was now grown brave and lively again. It burred shrilly as it hopped onto the chained body in the pit, daring at last to begin its usual routine of pranks.

Stretching and sighing in his weariness, Ekuman began to ascend the worn stone stair. At least something had been accomplished, one of the rebel chieftains had been killed. But that was not enough, not nearly. The information Ekuman required had not been gained.

Halfway up the first long helix of the stair he stopped, turned back his head, and asked, "What make you of that speech the ancient blessed me with before he died?"

Elslood, who had been following at a deferential distance of three steps, nodded his fine gray head in its wizard's cowl once to show that he had heard and was considering the question; Elslood knit his well-creased brows, and pursed his dry lips thoughtfully; but at the moment Elslood had nothing to say.

Shrugging, the Satrap went on up the stair. A hundred and more stone steps, the lower ones old, many of the upper new, raised him from the dungeon to the gray morning air in a courtyard, from courtyard to keep, and from keep to tower. At several places Ekuman acknowledged, without pausing, the salutes of bronze-helmed soldiers standing guard.

Above ground, the stairs curved upward through the Castle's massive, newly strengthened walls. The bulky keep was three tall stories high; rising two more levels above its roof was a broad, squat tower. Most of the lower level of this tower was taken up by a single large room, the Presence

Chamber, wherein Ekuman conducted the greater part of his affairs of state. And at one side of this large round chamber there was space given over to the wizards, covered alcoves where they might keep their implements, benches and tables where they might do their work under their Lord's most watchful eye.

It was straight to this side of the Presence Chamber that Elslood went as soon as he and Ekuman had ascended to the tower. Around him here he had all the sorcerer's impedimenta: masks, and talismans, and charms not easily nameable, all most curiously wrought, piled on stands and tables and depending from the wall. On a stand a single thick brown candle burned, pale of flame now in the cool morning light that filtered through the high narrow windows.

Pausing first to mutter a secret precautionary word, Elslood put out a hand to set aside the arras which concealed an alcove. Within this space the Satrap allowed him to keep to himself certain private volumes and devices. The drapery pulled back revealed an enormous black guardian-spider, temporarily immobilized by the secret word, crouched on a high shelf. The tall wizard reached his long arm past the spider to withdraw a dusty volume.

When it was brought into the light Ekuman saw that it was an Old World book, the paper and binding made of some marvelous materials that had probably already outlasted more than one generation of parchment copies. Technology, thought the Satrap, and despite himself he shivered slightly, inwardly, watching the fair white pages being turned so familiarly by Elslood's searching fingers. It was not easy for a man belonging to a world that thought itself sane and modern and stable to accept the reality of such things without an inward shiver. Not even a man like Ekuman, who had seen and handled the evidences of technology more frequently than most. This book was not the only Old World remnant preserved within his Castle's walls.

And somewhere outside his walls, waiting to be found—the Elephant. Ekuman rubbed his palms together in impatience.

Having taken his book to the window for the light. Elslood had evidently located in it the passage he sought. He was reading silently now, nodding to himself like a man confirming an opinion.

At last he cleared his throat and spoke. "It was a quotation, Lord Ekuman, nearly word for word. From this—which is either a fable or a history of the Old World, I know not which. I will translate." Elslood put back his wizard's hood from his bush of silvery hair, cleared his throat again, and read out in a firm voice:

" 'Said Indra to the demon Namuci, I will slay thee not by day or night, neither with the staff nor with the bow, neither with the palm of the hand nor with the fist, neither with the wet nor with the dry.' "

"Indra?"

"One of the gods, Lord. Of lightning . . ."

"And of Elephants?" Sarcasm bit in Ekuman's voice. *Elephant* was the name of some creature, real or mythical, of the Old World. Here in the Broken Lands depictions of this beast were to be seen in several places: stamped or painted on Old World metal, woven into a surviving scrap of Old World cloth that Ekuman had seen, and carved, probably at some less ancient time, upon a rock cliff in the Broken Mountains.

And now, somehow, the Elephant had come to be the symbol of those who called themselves the Free Folk. Far more important, a referent of this symbol still existed in the form of some real power, hidden somewhere in this land that refused to accept Ekuman as its conqueror—so the Satrap's wizards assured him, and so he believed. By all surface appearances the land was his, the Free Folk were only an outlaw remnant; yet all the divinings of his magicians warned him that without the Elephant under his control his rule was doomed to perish.

Still he was not really expecting the answer that Elslood gave him:

"Possibly, Lord, quite possibly. In at least one image that

I have seen elsewhere, Indra is shown as mounted on what I believe to be an Elephant."

"Then read on."

An ominous tone was plain in his Lord's voice; the wizard read on quickly: " 'But he killed him in the morning twilight, by sprinkling over him the foam of the sea.' The god Indra killed the demon Namuci, that is."

"Hum." Ekuman had just noticed something: Indra—Ardneh. Namuci—Ekuman. Of course a power of magic could reside in words, but hardly in this simple transposition of syllables. The discovery of the apparent verbal trickery brought him relief rather than alarm. The old man, finding himself unable to strike back with effect, had still managed to work some subtlety into a dying threat. Subtlety was hardly substance, even in magic.

Ekuman let himself smile faintly. "Fragile sort of demon, to die of a little sea-spray," he commented.

Seeing that the Satrap was willing now to treat lightly the matter of the threat, Elslood indulged himself in a light laugh. He leafed through a few more pages of his book. "As I recall the story, Lord, this demon Namuci had kept his life, his soul, hidden in the sea-foam. Therefore was he vulnerable to it." Elslood shook his head. "One would have thought it a fairly clever choice for a hiding place."

Ekuman grunted noncommittally. The thought struck him that the men and creatures in these old stories knew at least that they had souls, and had some firm idea of where they were. Whereas, in real life . . . but now his mind filled itself with aching blankness. Always it was so when he tried to recall the precise circumstances of his dedication to the dark powers of the East.

At the sound of a step he turned, to see Zarf entering the Presence Chamber. Zarf was younger and shorter than Elslood and also resembled far less the popular conception of a wizard. Judged by appearance, Zarf might have been a merchant or a prosperous farmer—save for the toad-familiar, which rode now under a fold of cloak at his shoulder, all but invisible save for its lidded eyes.

Ekuman demanded, "You have already finished looking at the old man's body? It told you nothing?"

"There is nothing to be learned from that, Lord." Zarf tried to meet Ekuman's gaze boldly, then looked away. "I can make a further examination later—but there is nothing."

In silent but obvious dissatisfaction Ekuman regarded his two magicians, who awaited his pleasure standing motionless but otherwise quite like children in their fear. It was a continual enjoyment to the Satrap to have power over people as powerful as these. Of course it was not by any innate personal strength or skill that Ekuman could dominate Elslood and Zarf. His command over them had been given to him in the East, and well they knew how effectively he might enforce it. The toad-familiar, beneath any threat of punishment, squealed shrilly in some private mirth.

Having given the wizards time to consider the consequences of his wrath, Ekuman said to them, "Since neither of you can now tell me anything of value, you had better get to your crystals and ink-pools and see what you can learn. Or has either of you some stronger method of clairvoyance to propose?"

"No, Lord," said Elslood, humbly.

"No, Lord." But Zarf, having admitted that, dared then to attempt defense. "Since this Elephant we seek is doubtless not a living creature, but some work of . . . engineering, science . . ." The absurd words still came hard to Zarf. ". . . then to locate it, to find out anything about it more than we know already, that it exists and is important, this may be beyond the skill of any man in divination. . . ." And Zarf's voice trailed off in fear as his glance returned to Ekuman's face.

Ekuman moved wearily across the Presence Chamber, opened a door, and set foot upon the stair that led up to his private apartments in the upper story of the tower. "Find me the Elephant," he ordered, simply and dangerously, ere he began to climb. And while he was going up, his voice came drifting down to them: "Send me the Master of the Troops, and the Master of the Reptiles as well. I will have

my power in this land made secure, and I will have it quickly!"

"The day of his daughter's wedding draws near," Zarf whispered, nodding solemnly at Elslood. Something near despair showed on the junior wizard's face. Both men knew that the Lords and Ladies of all the neighboring Satrapies would be coming for the wedding feast, here in the Castle—Eku-man was grimly determined that his power should be then be perfect.

"I will go down and see if I can learn something from the old one's corpse," said Elslood. "So I will see that the ones he wants are summoned. You must stay here and try again to achieve some vision." Nodding in agreement, Zarf was already hurrying to the alcove where he kept his own devices; he would pour himself a pool of ink and sit and gaze into it.

On the first landing going down from the Presence Chamber, Elslood drew aside on the narrow winding stair and bowed low to the Princess Charmian, who was going up. Her beauty rose through the dim passage like a sun. She wore cloth of bronze and silver and black, and a scarf of red and black for her betrothed. Her serving-women, whom she chose for ugliness, came following after in a nervous file.

Charmian ascended past Elslood without giving him a word or glance. For his part he hardly dared look at her, and yet, as always, he could not keep himself from following her with his eyes until she had passed him like a soft breath and was gone.

He put a hand into a secret pocket of his robe and touched the long strands of her golden hair that he kept there. Those hairs had been obtained at deadly risk, and then twisted, with many a powerful incantation, into an intricate magic knot of love. And then, alas, the love-charm had proved to be useless to him—as he had known all along, in his heart, that it would be. The giving of love, and the taking of it, were among the things he must foreswear, as the price of his great sorcerer's power.

And he thought now that the knot of Charmian's golden hair would most likely be of little use to any man, for one as utterly evil as the Princess could hardly be moved by any charm to anything like love.

II

WHEN HE came to the end of the furrow and swung the rude plow around and raised his eyes, Rolf beheld a sight both expected and terrible—the winged reptiles of the Castle were coming out to scour the countryside once again.

May some demon devour them, if they come near our fowl today! he thought. But since he was no sorcerer to have the ordering of demons, he could do nothing but stand helplessly and watch.

At Rolf's back, the afternoon sun was some four hours above the Western Sea, the shore being several kilometers from where Rolf stood, the land between for the most part low and marshy. Looking ahead, he could see above nearby treetops part of the jagged line of the Broken Mountains, half a day's walk to the east. He could not see the Castle itself, but he knew well where it was, perched on the south side of the central pass that pierced those mountains through from east to west. The reptiles came from the Castle, and there dwelt those who had brought the reptiles to the Broken Lands—men so evil that they seemed themselves inhuman, though they lived in human form.

Spreading westward now from the direction where the Castle lay, in Rolf's eyes disfiguring all the fairness of the springtime sky, came a swarming formation of dots. Rolf had heard that the reptiles' human masters sent them out to search the mixed, half-wooded landscape of the Broken Lands, that there was something hidden that Ekuman most desperately desired to find. Whether that was true or not, the reptiles most certainly ravaged the farmers' lands for food and sport.

Rolf's sixteen year old eyes were sharp enough to pick out now the movement of leathery wings. The flying creatures of the Castle swelled slowly in his vision, the thin and spreading cloud they made came hurtling toward him. Their numbers were in the hundreds. He knew that their eyes were sharper even than his. Almost daily now the reptiles came, picking over the land already so much robbed and torn by the new masters from the East; a land that had now grown hungry despite its richness, with every month more farmers killed or robbed and driven from their soil. With villages turned into prison camps, or emptied out to give the Satrap Ekuman the slave labor that he must have to build his Castle stronger still. . . .

Did the foul grinning things fly ten or only five times faster than a man might run? With a big-boned hand Rolf put back a mop of his black hair, tilting back his head to watch as the vanguard of the reptiles now came nearly straight above him. A belt of rope around Rolf's lean waist held up his trousers of good homespun; his shirt of the same stuff was open in the warmth of spring and work. He was of quite ordinary height, and spare as a knotted rope. His shoulders in their bony flatness looked wider than they were. Only his wrists and callused hands and his bare feet seemed to have been made a size or so too big to fit the rest of him.

In the distance the reptiles had seemed to be flying in a compact formation; doubtless they had started up together, most of them, from their roosting places on the Castle. But now, having flown this distance, they had been scattered widely by their differences of course and speed. Here and there a single flyer, having an area of sky all to himself, would pause, coasting in wide flat circles, to scan something on the earth below. Sometimes after making such an inspection the reptile would straighten out again into effortless speed of flight, having decided that whatever it had seen was not worth dropping for. But sometimes it would dive. Stoop. Plunge wing-folded, like a falling rock—

Above Rolf's home! With a shock at his heart he saw the

winged predator plummeting down to strike. Before it vanished below the level of the trees Rolf was running toward it, toward his home. The clearing and the little house were invisible from here, now, more than a kilometer away over broken, scrub-grown country.

The reptile would be diving after the fowl in their coop, that must be it, though after the last attack Rolf's mother had tried to hide the coop under a net of strings, woven with vines and branches to make a screen. Rolf's father still lay abed with a foot crushed, mangled by a falling stone while he had been doing his stint of forced labor on the Castle. Small Lisa might be running out now as she had run out to challenge the last reptile, to strike with a broom or a hoe at a fanged intelligent killer who was nearly as big as she. . . .

Between the field where he had been working and his home, Rolf's path lay across land that was unplowable with its ravines and rocks. The familiar track wound shallowly uphill and down; it leaped and bounded under him now, with the big strides of his running. Never before had he gone over this path so fast. He kept looking ahead, and his fear kept growing, because of the strange fact that the raiding reptile had not yet risen, with prey or without.

Someone might have defied the Castle's law and slain the thing—but who, and how? Rolf's father could scarcely stand up from his bed. His mother? In obedience to another Castle law, the household had already been stripped of any weapon larger than a short-bladed kitchen knife. Little Lisa—Rolf pictured her, fighting with some garden implement against those teeth and talons, and he tried to run faster yet.

So it did not seem reasonable that the reptile should be dead. Yet neither should it be sitting at ease and unmolested, dining on some slaughtered hen. By now Rolf was close enough to his home to have heard the sounds of fighting or alarm, but there was only ominous silence.

When he ran at last into the clearing and beheld the total ruin of the simple dwelling that had been his home, it seemed

to Rolf that he knew already what he must find, that he had known it from his first sight of the stooping reptile.

And at the same time the truth was becoming unknowable. It was beyond anything that the mind could hold.

Smoke and flames, such as he had seen in the past devouring other houses destroyed by the invader, might have made the truth before him now more credible. But the only home Rolf could remember had been simply kicked apart, knocked to pieces like a child's play-hut, like something not worth burning. It had been a small and simple structure; no great strength had been needed to topple its thatch and poles.

Rolf was scarcely aware of crying out. Or of the reptile, flapping up in heavy alarm from where it had been crouched over a dead fowl—over one of the birds set free by the collapse of the flimsy coop when the flimsy house had been knocked down. The destruction had been done before the reptile came. It had been done by some roving party of the soldiers of the Castle—who else? No one in the Broken Lands knew when the invaders might come to him, or what might be done to him when they did.

Digging wildly in the shabby wreckage of the little house, Rolf uncovered shapes that seemed misplaced as in a dream. He found trivial things. Here was a cooking pot, the worn place on its handle somehow startling in its familiarity. And here . . .

A voice that had been shouting names, Rolf's own voice, now fell silent. He stood looking down at something still and supine, a shape of flesh and hair and unfamiliar nakedness and blood. His mother had looked something like this thing of death. She had resembled this, this shape that now lay here amid all the other ruined things and sharing all their stillness.

Rolf had to go on looking. He very promptly found another body. This one was a man, clothed, with a face very like his father's. His father's eyes, calm and unprotesting now, were opened toward the sky. No more fear and worry and held-in anger. No more answers to give a son. No more

pain and sickness from a crushed foot. No more pain, though there was blood, and Rolf saw now that his father's open shirt revealed red-lipped, curious wounds. *Why yes*, Rolf thought to himself, nodding, *those are the wounds that a sword must make*. He had never seen the like before.

He shouted no longer. He looked around for the reptile but it had gone. After he had searched on through what was left of the house and the few outbuildings, he came to a halt at the edge of the clearing. He realized vaguely that he was standing in an attitude of thoughtfulness, though in fact his mind was almost entirely blank. But he had to think. Lisa was not here. If she had been hiding nearby, surely all his noise would have brought her out by now.

He was distracted by the plodding into the clearing of the workbeast he had been plowing with. The animal had developed the trick of freeing itself from the harness if he left it standing alone in the field for any reason. When it came trotting into the home clearing now it halted at once, to stand shivering and whinnying at the strangeness of what it found. Rolf without thinking spoke to the animal and walked toward it, but it turned and bolted as if thrown into panic by the very ordinariness of his behavior amid this . . . yes, it was strange that he could be so calm.

In another moment his heart gave another leap and he began again a frenzied digging through the wreckage. But no, Lisa's body was not here. He circled around the clearing, staring at everything as if to make sure of what it was. He began coursing in a widening circle through the surrounding woods. His mind now made a motionless corpse of every fallen log. He began in a low voice to call Lisa's name again. Either she had run far away, or else the soldiers had . . .

It was not believable, it was not *possible* that the soldiers could have come here and committed all these horrors, and he, Rolf, had remained out in the fields calmly plowing all the while they were going on. So it had not really happened at all. Because it was not possible. And all the while he knew that it was true.

. . . Or else the soldiers had taken Lisa with them. If the murders were possible, so might that be. Rolf found himself back in the clearing, averting his eyes from the nakedness of the thing that had been his mother. He did not let himself think of how her clothes had been taken from her, or why, though those also were things he knew. The men from the Castle. The soldiers. The invaders. The East.

"Lisa!" He was out in the scrub forest again, calling more loudly for his sister. The afternoon was very warm even here in the shade of the trees. Rolf raised his arm to wipe sweat from his face with his sleeve, and saw that in his hand he was carrying the little kitchen knife, which he must have picked up from amid the ruins of the house.

And then a little later, when his mind with a little inward jump moved another notch on its recovery from the craziness of shock, he found himself walking along the narrow rutted road that passed near what had been his home. The world around him looked strangely normal, as if this were nothing but another day. He was trudging in an easterly direction, taking the way that would bring him to a larger highway and ultimately to the Castle brooding on its height above the pass. Where did he think he was going? What was it he meant to do?

Again a little later, the world became thin and gray before his eyes. He felt that he was fainting, and he sat down quickly in the grass beside the road. He did not faint. He did not rest either, though the muscles of his legs were quivering with exhaustion. He saw that his clothes had recently been torn in several places. He had just been running through the woods, calling Lisa's name. But she was gone, and he was not going to be able to get her back.

Gone. All of them gone.

After a period of sitting there dazedly, he became aware with a slight start that a man was standing near him in the yellow-gray dust of the road. There were sandaled feet and a pair of buskined ankles, and calves masculine with lean muscle and sparse wiry black hair. At first Rolf could think of nothing but that the man must be a soldier, and Rolf

wondered if he might get out his knife and strike with it before the soldier killed him—he had thrust the kitchen knife awkwardly under the rope that was his belt, with his shirt closed over it for concealment.

But when Rolf raised his eyes he saw that the man was no soldier. He appeared to be unarmed, and looked not at all dangerous.

"Is there—something wrong?" The man's voice was precise, and gently accented, one of the few voices Rolf had ever heard that spoke in its tones of far places and strange peoples. The speaker's mild eyes blinked down at Rolf, from a face too woebegone in expression and too ordinary in most of its features for the hawk nose to give it pride.

The man was no peasant. Though his clothes were not the finery of a great and important person, they were better than Rolf's. He was dusty with long walking, and he had a pack on his back. His simple knee-length cloak was half open, and from under it one lean, dark-haired arm extended in a rotating, questioning gesture.

"There is something much wrong, hey?"

Finding an answer for that question was an insurmountable problem at the moment. Rolf soon gave up the effort. He gave up on everything.

The next thing he was clearly aware of was the mouth of a water bottle, being applied to his own mouth. If his mind had forgotten thirst his body had not, and for a few moments he swallowed ravenously. Then in reaction he nearly vomited. Good clean water choked him and stung his nose, but it stayed down at last. The drink shocked him, revived him, lifted him another notch toward rational function. He found himself standing, leaning on the man. He pulled away and looked at him.

The man was a little taller than Rolf, not quite as dark. His face seemed leaner than his body, and somehow finer, as if he had trained his face to show only a part of a great and unrelenting worry—"ascetic" was not a word or concept that Rolf had at his command.

"Oh, my. Something very much wrong?" The mild eyes

blinked rapidly a time or two, and the lean face essayed a tentative smile, as if hoping to be contradicted, to hear that things might prove not so terrible after all. But the smile faded quickly. The stubby-fingered hands recapped the water bottle and reslung it under the cloak, then came up to clasp themselves as if beseeching to be allowed to know the worst.

It took Rolf a little time, but he stammered out the essentials of his story. Before he was through telling it, he and the man were walking along together on the road, now going away from the highway and the Castle, heading back in the direction from which Rolf had come. Rolf noticed this distantly, without feeling that it mattered in the least which way he walked. The shadows of the trees were lengthening now, and all the winding road was cool and gray.

"Ah. Oh. Terrible, terrible!" the man kept murmuring as he listened. He had ceased to wring his hands, and walked with them clasped behind his back. Now and then he hoisted and shifted his pack, as if the weight of it was still unfamiliar after all his travels.

During the pauses in Rolf's story the man asked his name, and told him that his own name was Mewick. And when Rolf ran out of speech the man Mewick kept talking to him, asking idle-sounding questions about the road and the weather that kept Rolf from withdrawing again into a daze. Also Mewick related how he was walking along the coast of the great sea from north to south, offering for sale the finest collection of magical implements, amulets and charms, to be found on the open market anywhere. Mewick smiled sadly as he made this claim, like a man who did not expect to be believed.

"Have you there—" Rolf's voice choked, so he was forced to start over, but then the words came out strong. "Have you there in your pack anything that can be used to track men down and kill them?"

On hearing this question the peddler only looked more gloomy than ever, and at first gave no answer. As he walked

he kept turning his head to shoot glances of apparent concern at Rolf.

"Killing and more killing," the peddler said at last, shaking his head in disgust. "No, no, I carry no such things in my pack. No—but today is not your day for being lectured. No, no, how can I talk to you now?"

They came to a branch in the road, where the right-hand way, a mere fork, led to the clearing where Rolf's home had been. At this fork Rolf stopped suddenly. "I must go back," he said with an effort. "I must see to it that my parents are buried."

Wordlessly, Mewick went with him. Nothing had changed in the clearing except for the lengthening of the shadows. What had to be done did not take the two of them long, digging with shovel and hoe in the soft earth of what had been the garden. When the two graves had been filled and mounded over, Rolf gestured at the pack which Mewick had laid aside, and asked, "Have you anything there that . . . ? I would put some spell of protection on the graves. I could pay you for it later. Sometime."

Frowning bitterly, Mewick shook his head. "No. No matter what I said before, I have nothing here that is worth the giving. Except some food," he added, brightening just slightly. "And that is for the living, not the dead. Could you eat now?"

Rolf could not. He looked around the clearing, for the last time, as he thought. Lisa had not answered to his renewed calling of her name.

Mewick was slowly getting into the harness of his pack again, seemingly hesitant about just what to say or do next. "Then walk with me," he offered at last. "Tonight I think I know a place to stay. Not many kilometers ahead now. A good place to rest."

The sun would soon be setting. "What place?" Rolf asked, though he did not feel any real concern for where he was going to spend the night.

Mewick stood considering the lay of the land, as if he could see for a distance through the woods. He looked to ~

the south and asked a couple of questions about the roads that skirted the swamps in that direction. "It will be shorter, I think, if we do not go around by road," he said at last.

That did not sound true to Rolf—even though he still did not know just exactly where Mewick was headed—but he had no will now to debate or even to think. Mewick had helped him. Through Mewick he was maintaining some hold on life and reason, and he would go along with Mewick. Rolf said, "Yes, we can go cross-country if you like, and come out on the road right near the swamp."

And, true to this prediction, they emerged from the scrub forest to strike the south-going coastal road, just as the sun was redly vanishing behind a low cloudbank on the sea-horizon. From the point where they struck the road, it ran almost perfectly straight south for about a kilometer over the level land ahead of them, and then curved inland to the left to avoid the beginning of the swamps.

The woods having been left behind, there were open fields stretching on either side of the road, all unplowed and untended. In two places Rolf could see houses standing deserted and half-ruined in their gardens. He kept walking on beside Mewick, feeling himself beyond tiredness, feeling floating and unreal. He could generate no surprise when Mewick stopped in the road and turned to him, slipping the pack from his own back and holding it out to Rolf.

"Here, you carry for a little while, hey? Not heavy. You be an apprentice magic-salesman. Just for now, hey?"

"All right." Indifferently he took the pack and slipped it on. Indeed it was not heavy. Geegaws and trash, his father had said, speaking of the things that the smooth-talking magic vendors peddled from farm to farm.

"What is this, hey?" Mewick asked sharply. He had spotted the outline of the handle of the little kitchen knife, made visible now by the pack straps tautening the shirt around Rolf's waist. Before Rolf could make the effort of answering, Mewick had pulled the knife out, exclaimed in disgust, and pitched it far away into the tall roadside weeds.

"No good, no! Very much against the law here in the Broken Country, to carry a weapon concealed."

"The Castle law." The words came in a dead voice through a closed jaw.

"Yes. If Castle soldiers see you have a knife—hal" Apparently anxious to defend his action in throwing away Rolf's property, Mewick seemed to be making an effort to scowl fiercely. But he was not very good at it.

Rolf stood with his shoulders slumped, staring blankly ahead of him. "It doesn't matter. What could I do with a little knife? Maybe kill one. I have to find a way to kill many of them. Many."

"Killing!" Mewick made a disgusted sound. He motioned with his head and they walked on. It was the last of day, just before the beginning of dusk. Mewick mumbled in his throat, as if rehearsing arguments. Like a man forgetful, lost in thought, he lengthened his strides until he was a couple of paces ahead of Rolf.

Rolf heard the trotting hooves at a distance on the road behind him and turned, one hand feeling at his waist for the knife that was no longer there. Three soldiers were approaching at leisurely mounted speed, short black lances pointed up at the deepening clearness of the sky. Rolf's hands moved indecisively to the pack straps; in another moment he might have shucked them from his shoulders and darted from the road in search of cover. But Mewick's hand had taken a solid grip on the back of Rolf's shirt, a grip that held until Rolf relaxed. The barren fields bordering the road here afforded next to no cover anyway, which no doubt explained why just three soldiers came trotting the road so boldly on the verge of twilight.

The troopers all wore uniforms of some black cloth and bronze helmets, and had small round shields of bronze hanging loosely on their saddles. One of them was half-armored as well, wearing greaves and a cuirass of a color that dully approximated that of his helm. He rode the largest steed and was probably, Rolf thought, a sergeant. These days

the Castle-men rarely appeared on duty wearing any insignia of rank.

"Where to, peddler?" the sergeant demanded in a grating voice; he reined in his animal as he caught up with Mewick and Rolf. He was a stocky man whose movements were slow and heavy as he got down from the saddle—he seemed to be dismounting only because of a wish to rest and stretch. The two troopers with him sat their mounts one on each side of the road, looking relaxed and calmly alert, their eyes more on the tufts of tall grass around them and the marsh ahead than on the two unarmed walkers they had overtaken. None of the soldiers paid any attention to Rolf after giving him a first cursory glance. He understood after a moment that they must be taking him for Mewick's servant or bound boy, since he had been walking two paces behind, carrying the load, and he was poorly dressed.

But that thought and others were only on the surface of Rolf's mind, passing in a moment and without reflection. All he could really think of now was that these soldiers might be the ones. These very three.

Mewick had begun to speak at once, and was now blinking and bowing before the dismounted sergeant, explaining how he was hiking on his humble but important business through the Broken Lands from north to south, being welcomed by the valiant soldiers everywhere, because they knew he had most potent charms and amulets for sale, at prices most exceedingly reasonable, sir.

The sergeant had planted himself standing in the middle of the road, and was continuing his process of stretching and relaxing, now rotating his head as if to ease the muscles of his neck. "Take a look in that pack," he ordered, speaking over his shoulder.

One of the two troopers swung down from his saddle and approached Rolf, while the other remained mounted, continuing to scan the countryside alertly. The two dismounted had left their lances in boots fixed to their saddles, but each wore a short sword as well.

The soldier who came to Rolf was young himself, he could have had a little sister of his own somewhere in the East. He did not see Rolf at all except as an object, a burden-carrier upon which a pack was hung. Rolf moved his shoulders to let the pack slide free and the soldier took it from him. At some time when the men of the Broken Lands still worked in the ways of peace, someone had filled and strengthened the road at this low place; under his bare feet Rolf could feel fist-sized rocks amid the sand and clay.

The sergeant was standing leaning his dull gaze on Mewick as if trying to bore through him with it; the soldier took the pack there and dumped it on the ground between them, a cascade of gimcrackery on the damp earth. There fell out rings and bracelets and necklaces, tumbling and bouncing with love-charms of anonymous plaited hair, with amulets of carven wood and bone. Most of the objects were scribbled or shallowly inscribed with unreadable markings, meaningless signs meant to impress the credulous.

The sergeant shifted his weight and looked down, and idly stirred the mess with his toe; while Mewick, blinking and hand-wringing and bowing, waited silently before him.

The young soldier stuck his own foot into the scattered pile and teased out a muddied love-charm, which he then bent to pick up. With his fingers he cleaned mud from the knot of long hair, and then held it up, looking at it thoughtfully. "Why is it," he asked of no one in particular, "we never catch a young girl out here?"

At that moment the mounted man had his head turned away, looking back over his shoulder. Rolf, without an instant's foreknowledge of what he was going to do, moving in a madness that was like calm, bent down and picked up from the roadbed a rock of killing size, and threw it with all his strength at the head of the young dismounted soldier.

The man was young and very quick, and he managed somehow to twist himself out of the way of the missile. It flashed in a grazing blur past the astonishment of his fish-wide eyes and mouth. With a sensation of deep but calm regret at having missed, Rolf bent to pick up another stone.

Without time for surprise, he saw from the corner of his eye that the stocky sergeant was slumping folded to the ground, and that Mewick's arm was drawn back, about to hurl a small bright thing at the man who was still mounted.

The young soldier who had dodged Rolf's first rock had drawn his short sword now, and was charging at Rolf. Rolf had another rock ready to throw, and the tactics he employed with it came from children's play-battles with clods of mud. A faked throw first, a motion of the arm to make the adversary duck and dodge, then the real throw at the instant of the foe's straightening up. This way Rolf could not get full power behind it, but still the rock stopped the soldier, crunching into the lower part of his face. The soldier paused in his attack for just a moment, standing as if in thought, one hand raised toward his bloodied jaw, the other still holding out his short sword. And in that instant Mewick was on him from the side. A looping kick came in an unlikely-looking horizontal blur of speed to smash into the soldier's unprotected groin; and as he doubled, helmet falling free, Mewick's elbow descended at close range upon his neck, with what seemed the impact of an ax.

Two riderless beasts plunged and reared in the little road, and now there were three of them as the last of the troopers finally dismounted, in a delayed slumping fall, clutching at a short knife-handle that was fastened redly to his throat. In another moment the three freed animals were fleeing back along the road to the northeast, in the direction from which they had come.

Rolf was aware of the sudden strident calling of a reptile in alarm, high overhead. Still he could do nothing for the next few seconds but stand watching stupidly while Mewick, his short cloak flying, hopped back and forth across the road, cutting one throat after another with the practiced careful motions of a skillful butcher. The last of the three soldiers to die was the one who had been first to fall, the stocky sergeant who had crumpled with his arms folded

over his belly; he seemed to have been ripped from groin to navel in the first moment of the fight.

Rolf watched Mewick's knife make its last necessary stroke, be wiped clean on the sergeant's sleeve, and then vanish back into some concealed sheath under Mewick's cloak. His mind beginning to function again, Rolf looked about him, noted how one black lance lay useless and unblooded at the side of the road, and then bent to pick up the young soldier's short sword.

With this weapon in his grip Rolf followed Mewick at a run, going south along the road, and then off the road on its western side, pounding across a weed-grown fallow field toward the nearest arm of swamp. Twilight was gathering about them, and the reptile's cries grew fainter.

Even as he and Mewick ran splashing into the first puddles of the bog, Rolf could hear distant hooves and shouts behind them.

The Castle-men made no long pursuit—not at night, not into the swamps. Still the fugitives' way had been anything but easy. Now at midnight, wading through hip-deep water, sliding and staggering amid strange phosphorescent growths, more than half asleep on his feet, ready to fall but for the support of Mewick's arm, Rolf became suddenly aware of an enormous winged shape that drifted over him as silent as a dream. It was certainly no reptile; it was far bigger than any bird that he had ever seen. He thought it questioned him with words in a soft hooting sibilance, and that Mewick whispered something in reply. A moment later as the creature flew behind and above him, Rolf could see its rounded and enormous eyes by their reflection of some sharp new little light.

Yes, on the land ahead there was a tiny tongue of fire. And now the ground rose to become solid underfoot. The winged questioner had vanished into the night, but now from near the fire there stepped forward a huge blond man, surely some warrior chieftain, to speak familiarly with Mewick, to look at Rolf and offer him a greeting.

There was a shelter here, a camp. At last Rolf was able to sit down, to let go. A woman's voice was asking him if he wanted food. . . .

III

Yes, my parents are dead and under the earth—so Rolf told himself in the instant after awakening, before he had so much as opened his eyes to see where he was lying. My mother and father are dead and gone. And my sister—if Lisa is not dead, why she may wish she were.

Having reassured himself that he was capable of coping with these thoughts, Rolf did open his eyes. He found himself looking up through the small chinks in the slant of a lean-to shelter, an arm's reach above his face. The higher side of the low shelter was braced upon some slender living tree trunks, and it seemed to have been made mainly by the weaving together of living branches with their leaves. The interstitial chinks of sky were pure with bright sunlight; the day was well advanced.

He did not remember crawling into this shelter. Maybe someone had put him to bed here, like an infant. But that did not matter. He raised himself upon one elbow, cracking the dead leaves that he had slept on. The movement awakened a dozen aches in his body. His clothing was all rips and mud, and the skin under it felt in not much better shape. His stomach was hollow with hunger.

Lying real and solid on the leaves beside him was the short sword that he had taken yesterday from the dead soldier. He saw again in his mind's eye the thrown stone from his own hand crunching in the soldier's teeth and bringing out blood. He put out a hand and gripped the captured weapon for a moment by the hilt.

Somewhere close by, quite near outside the lean-to, a few voices were murmuring together in a steady businesslike fashion; Rolf could not quite make out the words. In another moment he got up to his hands and knees and, leaving

the sword behind him, crawled out of the shelter. He emerged almost within the group of three people who sat talking around a small smokeless fire.

Mewick was one of the group, sitting cross-legged and at ease, his cloak laid aside. Also at the fire was the big blond man that Rolf remembered seeing the night before, and beside this man a woman who resembled him enough to be his sister. When Rolf appeared all three of them fell silent and turned to look at him. Their faces all showed sympathy but in each it was mixed with a colder look of calculation.

Once outside the lean-to, Rolf got stiffly to his feet. He addressed his first words to Mewick: "I am sorry, for starting that fight yesterday. I could have gotten you killed."

"Yes," Mewick nodded. "So. But you had reason, if not excuse. From now on you will be sane, hey?"

"Yes, I will." Rolf drew in a deep breath. "Will you teach me to fight like you can?"

Mewick had no quick answer to give that question, and it was allowed to drop for the time being.

The woman by the fire was just about old enough to be Rolf's mother; she wore man's clothes, which was natural enough for camping in the swamp, and her long blond hair was pulled back and bound up into a tight knot.

"So, your name is Rolf," she said, hitching herself around to face him more fully. "I am Manka. My husband Loford here and I have had something of your story from Mewick."

The blond man nodded solemnly, and the woman went on: "There's a pool safe to wash in on the other side of the hummock, Rolf. Then come back and have some food, and then we'll talk."

Rolf nodded and turned away, going around the lean-to and the little clump of trees which occupied the center of this island of firm ground, some fifteen or twenty paces across. On the side of the hummock away from the fire a steep short bank dropped down to water which looked deeper and clearer than that of the surrounding swamp.

Only after Rolf had washed, and dressed himself again,

and climbed the bank meaning to rejoin the others, did he see that a living creature was perched high in the biggest of the central trees. Right against the trunk a brownish-gray mass of feathers rested, big as a small man crouching. So dully colored was this form, so motionless, so shapelessly folded upon itself, that Rolf had to look twice to be convinced that it was not a part of the tree. When he thought to look for the giant bird's feet he saw that they were bigger than a reptile's and armed with even more formidable talons—three-toed and motionless, clasping round a big branch. He still could not see how, under all the feathers, the bird's head had been folded down out of sight.

He was still turning his own head to look up into the tree as he rejoined the others around the fire.

"Strijeef is our friend," Loford told Rolf, seeing where Rolf's attention was fixed. "His kind have speech and thought; they call themselves the Silent People. Like our friend Mewick here they have been driven from their own lands. Now they stand here with us, their backs like ours against the sea."

Manka had ladled stew from a cooking-pot into a gourd for Rolf. After thanking her and starting to eat, he motioned with his head toward the bird and asked, "He sleeps now?"

"His folk sleep all day," Loford said. "Or at least they hide. Full sunlight is a great strain on their eyes, so by daylight their enemies the reptiles will find and kill them when they can. By night it is the birds' turn to hunt the leatherwings."

"I'm glad to hear that someone hunts them." Rolf nodded. "I wondered why they went flapping back to the Castle every day at sunset." And then he busied himself with the plentiful good food, meanwhile listening to the others' talk.

Mewick was bringing word to the Free Folk in the swamp from other resistance bands who lived and fought along the coast to the north of the Broken Lands. That portion of the seaboard was now also occupied by men and creatures from the East, under the rule of Ekuman's peer, the Satrap Chup.

This Chup was supposed to be even now on his way south, to marry Ekuman's daughter in the Castle.

And the Satraps of other neighboring lands were said to be coming here, too, for the festivities. Each of them, like Ekuman and Chup, held power in his own region, ruling with the soldiers and under the black banner of the East.

When there was a pause in the talk, Rolf asked, "I've wondered—what is the East? Or who is it? Is there some king over it all?"

"I have heard different things," said Loford slowly, "about those who are Ekuman's overlords; I *know* almost nothing about them. We are in an odd corner of the world here. I don't even know much about the higher powers of the West." Rolf's face must have shown a dozen more questions struggling to be formulated, for Loford smiled at him. "Yes, there is a West, too, and we are part of it, we who are willing to fight for the chance to live like men. The West has been defeated here. But it is not dead. I think Ekuman's masters will be too busy elsewhere to send any great new power to his aid—if we can find a way to bring down the power that he has already."

There was a little silence. Rolf's heart leaped up at the thought of bringing down Ekuman, but he had seen the sobering reality of the Satrap's strength—the long columns of soldiers on parade, meant to overawe, hundreds mounted and thousands more on foot; and the strengthened walls of the great Castle. And every day the flying horde of reptiles came, or some of them at least—Rolf glanced automatically toward the sky, where now there were only a few high clouds crossing.

Loford, having finished some private thought of his own, resumed his speech. "If Ekuman can expect no help, neither can we. The people of the Broken Lands will have to break their own chains or be content to wear them." Shaking his great head sadly, he looked at Mewick. "I had hoped you might bring us word of some free army still in the field in the north. Some prince of the West still surviving there—or

at least some government trying to be neutral. That would have been a good encouragement."

"I do not know that there is a West among humans anymore," said Mewick. "Perhaps somewhere beyond the sea there is a free prince or an independent state." He shrugged very slightly and his mournful mouth gave a tiny twitch upward at the corners. "I am here to help, if that encourages anyone."

"It does indeed," said Loford, quietly sincere. Then with a visibly quick change of thought he turned his head to take a narrow-eyed look at Rolf. "Tell me, lad, what do you know of the Elephant?"

Rolf was taken by surprise. "The Elephant? Why, it's some wizards' symbol. I don't know what it means. I have seen it—maybe six times in all."

"Where and when?"

Seeing that the question was important, Rolf took thought. "Once it was woven into a bit of cloth that I saw at a magic-show in a town. And there is a place up in the Broken Mountains where someone has carved it in the rock—" He went on, enumerating as best he could the other times and places where he had seen the strange image, of the impossible beast with its prehensile nose and swordlike horns or teeth.

Loford listened with close attention. And when Rolf had done, he pressed him further, asking, "Anything else? Any talk you might have heard, even, especially during the last few days?"

Rolf shook his head helplessly. "I spent those days plowing in the fields. Until . . ."

"Aye, of course." Loford let out a groaning sigh. "I grasp at straws, to question you on this matter. But we must try every chance, to find the Elephant before those of the Castle find it."

Rolf supposed the big man was talking about another Elephant-image, one having some magical importance. "Ask help of a wizard?" he suggested.

Loford's jaw dropped. Mewick's eyebrows went up, his

face taking on an expression Rolf had not seen it wear before, and his breath began to come and go in odd choking gasps—it took Rolf another moment to realize that Mewick was laughing. Manka's eyes seemed to flash angrily at first, but then she too had to smile, as if she could not help it.

"Have you ever heard of the Big One, child?" she demanded of Rolf, in a voice half-irritated, half-amused.

A light dawned. Once, long ago, when the invaders from the East had meant no more to him than an exciting threat on the horizon, Rolf had been sitting in a market town on Social Night, resting from his play to listen to the talk of men. The amateur wizards of the countryside had been assembled, discussing the feats of the professionals. The Big One from south of the delta would have done such and such a thing easily, someone had said, using the name as a standard of excellence—the Big One would have accomplished this or that difficult spell or evocation. And the men listening had nodded soberly, their farmer-beards bobbing. Yes, the Big One. The name impressed them all, and so for the little boy Rolf it had for a time afterward called up a mental picture of an enormous and powerful being, nodding benignly over farm and hill and marsh.

"No, it is all right," Loford, now smiling himself, assured Rolf. "You give me good advice. I must keep in mind that I am far from being the greatest wizard in the world." His smile vanished. "I am just the best one we now have available, since the Old One was taken under the Castle to die."

Mewick said to him, "You must take over the Old One's leadership in magic. But who is going to lead in other matters, now that he is gone? I speak plainly. You are not—not too practical, always, I think."

"Yes, yes, I know that I am not." Loford sounded irritated. "Thomas, perhaps. I hope he *will* lead. Oh, he's brave enough, and as much set against the Castle as anyone. But to really *lead*, to seize responsibility, that's something else again."

The talk went on. Manka ladled out more stew for Rolf, and he went on eating and listening. Always the thoughts

and plans of the others came looping back to the mysterious Elephant. Rolf came gradually to understand that they were speaking of something more than an image, that the name meant some thing or creature of the Old World still existing, here somewhere in the Broken Lands. And this creature or thing loomed in the near future with terrible importance for East and West alike. This much—but, maddeningly, no more—could Loford's powers tell him of the Elephant.

Mewick suddenly stopped talking in mid-sentence, his eyes turned skyward, one hand shot out and frozen in a gesture meant to keep the others still. But it was too late, they had been discovered from above, in spite of the trees' shelter.

Overhead there sounded a clangorous shouting of reptiles, meant to terrify—a dozen of the flying creatures were diving to the attack, coming in at an angle under the trees, talons spread, long snouts open to bare their teeth.

Before the first of the enemy struck Rolf had dived into the shelter and jumped out again with his sword. Mewick and Manka had already caught up bows and quivers from their small pile of equipment beside the fire; in another instant one of the attackers was flopping on the ground at Rolf's feet, transfixed by an arrow.

The main target of the attack, Rolf saw, was the bird huddled in the tree. The bird roused itself as the reptiles, momentarily baffled by branches, came whirling around it; but it seemed to be blinded, rendered stupid by the light.

Before the scaly ones could work their way in among the branches, their attack was broken up. Arrow after arrow sang at them, hitting more often than not. And Rolf leaped right in among the trees, sword thrusting and slashing high and wide. He could not be sure that he wounded any of the reptiles, though he harvested leaves and twigs in plenty. But between sword and arrows the leather-wings were forced to retreat, whirling upward in a shrieking swarm of gray-green rage. Arrows had brought down four of them, and these Rolf now had the satisfaction of finishing with his blade. They screamed words at him as they died, half-

comprehensible curses and threats; still the slaughtering meant no more to him than killing beasts.

The surviving reptiles, once having gotten up out of bow-shot, maintained a flying circle directly above the hummock, all of them cawing and screaming mightily.

"When they do that, it means there's soldiers coming," Manka said. She had already slung her bow on her back and was moving speedily to gather up the rest of the camp's scanty equipment. "Quick, young one, go and uncover the canoe."

Rolf had seen the dugout, camouflaged by branches, floating against the bank near the pool where he had washed. He ran now to load things into it. Manka meanwhile was calling to the bird. Following her voice it descended from the tree, impressive talons groping blindly and clumsily as it walked, feeling for the prow of the canoe. With one surprising extension of its wings it mounted there, and there on the prow it perched, crouching motionless again, muffling itself in folded wings so that it resembled some badly stuffed figurehead.

Mewick, a bow still in his hands with an arrow nocked, was trotting anxiously from one side of the hummock to the other, trying to learn from which direction the soldiers were approaching. And the Big One, standing ankle-deep at the water's edge beside the canoe, kept bending and scooping up massive handfuls of grayish swamp-bottom muck. Each time he would mutter over the glob, and then let it dribble back into the water. At last one string of droplets veered from the vertical, went spraying out sideways as if caught by a strong blast of wind.

Loford was quick to point a hand in the same direction. "They come from that way, Mewick," he called out softly.

"Then let us go the other way, quick!" Mewick came running to the canoe.

But Loford was not easily launched. He was now muttering faster than ever, and making odd sweeping motions with his arms, like a man trying to swim backward through the air. His fingertips threw droplets of muck. He kept up

this gesticulating even while Manka was guiding him to take his seat in the dugout, so that he nearly swamped it in his clumsiness, for all the others could do to maintain balance. *And I thought him a warrior!* said Rolf to himself with a pang, looking back impatiently from his position in the foremost seat. Then Rolf's jaw began to drop. He saw ripples growing in the swamp-water, swells that came from no wind or current but seemed to well up from the bottom of the dirty water to stir its scum of plants. Growing in amplitude with each motion of the Big One's steadily sweeping arms, the waves followed the timing of those arms; and they did not spread like ordinary waves but seemed to gather together instead, building higher.

Manka shoved off from shore, and then paddled from the rear seat, while the nexus of disturbed water raised by the Big One's magic followed sluggishly after the canoe. Rolf paddled in the front, his sword in the canoe bottom ready to his hand. Mewick, still holding the bow with a long arrow nocked, was in the second seat, whispering Rolf directions on which way to steer among the rotting tree-stumps and the small overgrown hummocks of firm land. Rolf kept glancing back. In the third seat, Loford still labored to build his spell. He shifted his great weight awkwardly and once more nearly rolled the canoe. Rolf thought that they were going over, but a muddy projection like a sheeted hand bulged up above the surface of the water to hold, briefly but strongly, against the gunwale. Only then did Rolf understand that he was witnessing the raising of an elemental, and his respect for Loford jumped to a new high.

The reptiles had seen the first of the raising too, for one of them now left the circular formation that was holding over the canoe, and flew back over the big hummock the canoe had just left, crying out a warning.

It seemed that the warning might be too late to do the pursuing but still invisible soldiers any good. Urged on by the ever smaller and more precise movements of Loford's air-stroking hands, the disturbance in the shallow water behind the canoe had become a slow fantastic boil, which

mounted higher and higher and now raced away, going faster than a boat, sweeping back around the big hummock, beyond which the enemy must be drawing near.

Now the water around the canoe was grown quite still again. As if by some command, Rolf and Manka had both ceased to paddle. All but the blinded bird sat looking back and waiting. From the other side of the hummock they had just left came the faint dripping of water from many paddles, and the continual cawing of the reptile's warning—not well understood, it seemed, or at least not heeded.

Loford's hands were still, outspread. "Paddle!" he urged, in a sudden fierce whisper. For a moment Rolf was unable to obey—because he saw now, on the other side of the big hummock, and mounting almost instantly to the height of its central trees, a great upwelling structure of mud and slime and water. Shouts greeted the elemental, the startled and fearful voices of men enough to fill many canoes. Rolf could not see those men, but beyond the trees he could see the thing of mud marching among them ponderously. It was gray and black, and shiny as if with grease, and what little shape it had oozed from it as it moved.

Screams rang out that came from no reptilian throats, and then sharp splashing sounded that told of men floundering clear of overturned boats. There followed more confused yelling, and then the rhythmic work of paddles straining in retreat.

"Paddle!" Loford said. "It may turn back now after us."

Rolf paddled, at Mewick's direction entering a channel of sorts that ran between half-formed banks of earth.

"Paddle!" Loford said again, though Rolf and Manka were already hard at work. Rolf's hasty glance over his shoulder showed him that the elemental, shrunken but still tall as a man, had come racing back around the hummock and was in full pursuit of its creator and the boat that bore him. The wave-shape jetted watery, unintelligible sounds in little bursts of spray; it shrank still more as it closed the distance between itself and the canoe. Loford was soothing the thing he had raised up, soothing and destroying it, his voice

whispering to it once more, his hands working with firm, down-pressing gestures.

Such life as the elemental had went ebbing away from it with its volume. What finally came purling under the dug-out was no more than a sluggish wave, roiling the tiny green plants that scummed the water's surface. Only a wave, such as might have been stirred up by the movement of a natural beast. As it passed, lifting him, Rolf saw turning within it the thonged sandal of a Castle soldier. He watched in vain to see if any more satisfying trophy might be displayed.

Screaming in rage, but staying impotently out of bow-shot, the reptiles still followed the canoe. In a little while, trees began to close more thickly over the waterway the craft was following, and a mass of swamp-forest ahead promised almost complete shelter. Now in their frustrated fury a few of the reptiles dared to dive, screeching, at the bird which still perched motionless upon the dugout's prow.

Rolf was quick to drop the paddle and grab his sword again. With Mewick's arrows flying at them and the sword-blade singing past their heads, the leather-wings had to sheer away. They climbed again, and disappeared above what was becoming an almost solid roof of greenery.

Rolf looked gloomily at his sword, unstained in this latest skirmish. "Mewick—teach me to use weapons?"

". . . in self-defense," Mewick muttered, sitting up. He seemed to have thrown himself into the bottom of the canoe to escape the sword's last swipe.

"Oh! I'm sorry." Rolf's ears burned. He took up his paddle and applied himself to its use, looking straight ahead.

After a while Mewick's voice behind him said, "Yes, all right, then I will teach you, when I can. Since the sword is in your hand already."

Rolf looked back. "And other kinds of fighting, too? The way you kicked that Castle-man yesterday . . ."

"Yes, yes, when there is time." Mewick's voice held no

enthusiasm. "These are not things to be learned in a week or a month."

The channel they had been following divided, came together, and then branched again. Manka, now choosing their way from her position in the stern, seldom hesitated over which branch to take, and never about the general direction of their journey. Loford's magic continued to be of help; it opened walls of interlaced vines ahead of the canoe—or at least made them easier to open by hand—and then knitted them once more into a barrier after the craft had passed. Rolf paddled in the direction he was bidden, meanwhile keeping a sharp lookout ahead.

Looking ahead, he was the first to see the young girl gazing down at them from a lookout's seat in a high tree; he rested his paddle and was about to speak when Manka said, "It's all right. She's a sentry of the big camp."

The brown-haired girl in the tree, like Manka dressed in male clothing, also recognized the Big One and his wife. She came sliding down from her observation post and ran along the bank to greet them. To Rolf and Mewick she was introduced as Sarah; Rolf guessed she was about fourteen years old.

And she was obviously anxious about something—about someone, as it turned out. "I don't suppose any of you have any word of Nils?" she asked, looking from one person to another.

Rolf had never heard the name. He learned now that Nils was Sarah's boy friend, seemingly about Rolf's age or a little older. Nils had gone out on some kind of raid or scouting expedition with the other young men of the Free Folk, and they were overdue, though only by a few days as yet. No one in the canoe was able to give Sarah any information, but they all tried to reassure her, and she waved after them cheerfully enough when they paddled on.

Very soon after passing the sentry-post, they came to the shore of an island of firm land, an island much larger than the one they had fled earlier in the day. Here a dozen canoes were already beached at a muddy landing-place,

from which well-worn trails branched up to spread into the woods. Along one of these paths six or eight people came filing to greet the newcomers as they landed.

By now the afternoon was far advanced. Here in the deep shade of the island's trees the bird, Strijeef, began to come out of his lethargy. He raised his head and said a few words in his musical low hooting voice, then spread a good three meters of wing and flew soundlessly up into a stout tree where he settled himself again. This time he did not hide his head but peered out slit-eyed from among puffed feathers. The bird's speech seemed to have been directed at least partly at Rolf, but he had scarcely been able to understand a word of it.

"The bird bids you thanks, for fighting off reptiles," said a tall young man, taking note of Rolf's perplexity.

"He is quite welcome," said Rolf. Then in a bitter tone he added, "I had the chance to kill some of them and I failed."

The man shrugged and said something encouraging. Introducing himself as Thomas, he began to question Rolf about the events of the last two days. Thomas was perhaps ten years Rolf's senior, strongly built and serious of manner. He had greeted the other new arrivals as old friends, and then had questioned them at once about the movements of the enemy.

While Rolf was giving Thomas and others a description of his missing sister, the group walked from the landing place to what was evidently the main camp, where a dozen large shelters had been built under concealing trees. Rolf's story was received with distant sympathy; it was one that all here had heard many times before, and most could have matched it with something from their own lives. The description of Lisa would be circulated, but Thomas warned Rolf there was little reason to be hopeful.

The evening meal of the camp was just ready; there was no shortage of fish and succulent stew. A company that grew gradually to fifteen or twenty people was gathering about the cooking fire.

The food drew most of Rolf's attention, but he heard the word being passed in from a lookout that another canoe was coming. It bore only a lone messenger, who was soon being entertained at fireside. He brought some apparently routine news, and after he had spoken in conference with Loford, Thomas, and several others, another messenger was dispatched. Obviously this camp was some center of command, or at least of communication, in contact with other groups of Free Folk who were on the move or hiding out in scattered places. But while the message brought by the man in the canoe was being discussed, Rolf sensed something strained in the decision-making process here. Many people seemed to be taking part in it, not all of them quite willingly. They spoke with slow hesitance, each weighing his neighbors' reactions as he went on from word to word. No one seemed eager to push himself or his ideas forward.

"If only the Old One were here!" one man lamented, seemingly exasperated by the length of a debate which had sprung up, over whether or not a certain cache of weapons should be moved.

"Well, he's not," another answered. "And he's not coming back."

"He *was* Ardneh, if you ask me," said the first speaker. "And now no one is." The others nodded at this, and went on with their mild argument over the cache.

Rolf had not heard of Ardneh before. And so a little later, when Loford sat down beside him to eat, he asked the wizard what the man had meant.

Loford answered casually at first. "Oh, we've come to use the name as a symbol for our cause. For our hopes of freedom. We seem to be trying to build ourselves a god."

A what? Rolf wondered silently.

Chewing slowly on a morsel of fish, Loford looked squinting into the firelight, which seemed now to brighten rapidly with the fading of the day. Now he spoke more intently.

"In a vision I myself have beheld Ardneh in this guise: the figure of a warrior, armed with the thunderbolt, mounted on the Elephant."

Rolf was much impressed. "But Ardneh is real, then? A living being, some kind of demon or elemental?"

The movement of Loford's massive shoulders might have meant that the question had no answer. "He *was* a god of the Old World, or so we think."

Curiosity left Rolf no choice but to reveal the depth of his ignorance. "What is a god?"

"Oh," said Loford, "we have no gods, these days." He interested himself once more in his food.

"But were gods like demons?" Rolf asked helplessly, when it seemed that no more information was forthcoming. Once he started trying to find out about something he hated to quit.

"They were more than that; but I am only a country wizard and I know little." In the Big One's voice there sounded a momentary weight of sadness. It was the mellowed and long-accumulated kind of sorrow, not fresh grief for something just befallen.

And then Rolf forgot about probing such deep matters, for Sarah came to join the group about the fire, having just been relieved of sentry duty. Rolf talked with her while she ate her evening meal. Her boys' clothes could not disguise the prettiness of her face nor the shapeliness of her tiny body, and he felt not at all inclined to seek out any other company.

She talked with him easily enough, heard his story with sympathy, listened carefully to a description of his sister—then she related almost casually how her family too had been destroyed by the men and creatures of the Castle.

Her mask of calm lifted when another messenger was reported arriving by dugout, and when this man came to the fire she listened with a bright spark of interest—which soon faded. The news had nothing to do with Nils. Rolf thought it would be all right with him if this fellow Nils just deserted, left the expedition he was on and kept right on going, to marry someone else and settle down in some distant land.

The sun had now been down for some time, and Sarah

grew steadily more attractive in the warm glow of firelight. But Rolf's meditations on this subject were interrupted by the arrival of yet another messenger.

This one came by air. Strijeef, who had awakened rapidly and begun to move about as the last light faded from the sky, was the first to see the approaching bird. But Strijeef had only just gotten into the air and uttered his first greeting hoot before the new arrival was down. Stooping with startling speed through the leafy roof above the fires, then braking to a mid-air halt with a sudden spread of long wings that was all the more surprising for its silence, the messenger was on the ground, shivering and gasping rapidly in what seemed near-exhaustion. People gathered around it quickly, shading its eyes from the firelight, offering it water and demanding to hear the news that inspired such effort.

The first words uttered by this bird came out well mixed with gasping hoots and whistles, but they were loud, and plain enough to be understood by even Rolf's unpracticed ears: "I have—found the Elephant."

The bird was a young but full-grown female, whose name Rolf understood as Feathertip. Early last evening she had been prowling near the Castle. That place and its high reptile roosts were now defended, by stretched cords and nets, from any bird's attack, but there was always the chance just after sunset of intercepting some reptile tardily hurrying home.

Last night there had been several stragglers, but Feather-tip had been disappointed in her attempt to catch them; it had simply taken her too long to get near the Castle from the place in the forest where she had hidden during the day. The latest of the leather-wings had gotten himself home safe in the darkness just ahead of her.

So it had occurred to her that it would be an excellent thing to find a place very near the Castle in which to hide during the daylight hours. With this in mind she had turned to fly along the northern side of the pass upon whose southern edge the Castle perched. The pass inter-

rupted the thin line of the Broken Mountains. On the northern side of the break the mountain ended in a jumble of crevices and narrow canyons which promised some concealment. In the moonlight the bird flew there searching for some ledge or cranny so well hidden that the reptiles would not be likely to see it during their daylight patrols, so high and inaccessible that no patrol of soldiers would be able to get near.

The great birds' eyes were at their best by moonglow and in the tricky shadows of the night. Still Feathertip had twice passed by the opening before she paused, on her third flight through a narrow canyon, to investigate what seemed no more than a dark spot on a sheltered face of rock.

The spot turned out to be a hole, the entrance of a cave. And this opening was not only concealed from any but the most careful of winged searches, it was so narrow that Feathertip thought that if worst came to worst, she might even be able to defend it in the light. And so she determined to stay.

Seeking out the inner recesses of the cave, to find what other entrances there might be and also to escape as far as possible the pressure of the morning sun, the bird had made her great discovery. Through a narrow descending shaft—down which one of the heavy wingless people should be able to climb if he took care—Feathertip had reached a cave as smooth as the inside of an egg, and long and wide enough to hold a house. The bird knew the sign of the Elephant, and this sign was on each flank of the enormous creature?—thing? (Feathertip could not decide which word applied) which alone occupied the cave, and which could hardly be anything but the Elephant itself.

Four-legged? No, it had seemed to have no legs at all. Had it a grasping nose, and teeth like swords? No—at least not quite. But never had the bird seen anything like that which waited unmoving in the buried cave.

By now Feathertip had regained her breath, and her composure to a great degree, and was plainly enjoying her telling of a story that made the heavy wingless people

crowd around to question her so impatiently. She was established now with her back to a shaded fire, and for the most part the humans saw her as a dark soft outline, having huge eyes that now and then sparked faintly with the caught reflection of something luminescing out in the swamp.

She stuck stubbornly to her conviction that the thing in the cave could be nothing less than the Elephant itself. No, it had not moved; but it did not seem dead or ruined. On what seemed to be its head it did have several projections, all of them looking stiff as claws. No, Feathertip had not touched the Elephant. But every part of it *looked* very hard, like something made of metal.

Sarah was explaining to Rolf that the birds always had difficulty in describing man-made things; some of them could not distinguish between an ax and a sword. The strength of their minds just did not lie in that direction.

The questioning of the bird had begun to trail off into repetition. The air of hesitancy, of unwillingness to take up the responsibility of leadership, still seemed to dominate the group.

"Well, someone must be sent to see what this thing is," Thomas said, looking about him at the others. "One or more of us heavy wingless ones. And as soon as possible. That much is plain."

A discussion at once began on which of the various bands of Free Folk scattered through the countryside was closest to the cave, and which would have the easiest and safest route to get there.

Thomas, seeming to grow angry, cut the discussion short. "We're only about eighteen kilometers from the cave ourselves—I think it will be fastest after all if one or two of us go from here."

Loford was sitting smiling in silent approval as Thomas began to lead. Thomas turned now to the bird and said, "Feathertip—think carefully now. Is there any possible way for a man to climb to the entrance of this cave of yours?"

"Whoo. No. Unless they made a stairway in the rock, as I have seen men do in other high places."

"How high a stairway would it have to be?"

"Eleven times as high as you." On matters of height the birds were evidently very quick and accurate.

"We are none of us mountain climbers, and we are in a hurry." Thomas began to pace nervously, then quickly stopped. "We do have ropes, of course. Is there some projection in this cave or above it, around which you could drop a loop of rope, to let us climb?"

There was no such projection inside the upper cave, Feathertip said after some thought. On the opposite side of the canyon was a pinnacle where she could hang a rope; but a man climbing there would still have to get across the canyon and in beneath an overhang.

"Could a man jump this chasm? How wide is it?"

The distance of a good running broad jump, it seemed. And it would have to be accomplished from a standing start on precarious footing.

Men argued back and forth, and the rudiment of a plan emerged.

"Look, we know a bird can't lift a man," said Thomas. "But we've two birds here now, both big and strong of their kind."

People interrupted with objections.

"Let me finish. They still can't lift a man cleanly, maybe, but couldn't they help him jump? Swing him, delay his fall, as he jumps from atop this pinnacle of rock to get across the canyon?"

The birds both said they thought that something of the sort might just be possible. And no one was able to think of a better plan for getting a man quickly into the cave; of course the ground would have to be examined first. In any case no large party with ladders and other cumbersome equipment could be sent with any safety to work so near the Castle.

Thomas's enthusiasm was building steadily. "It must be done somehow, and the birds' help may make it possible.

We'll see what way looks best when we get there. And there's no time to waste. If I leave here within the hour, I can be hidden among the rocks on the north side of the pass before dawn. Just lie low during the daylight hours, and then tomorrow night—"

Loford asked him, "You?"

Thomas smiled wryly. "Well, you've been prodding me to assume some kind of leadership."

"This is not a leader's job, it's one for a scout. Why you? You're needed here to make decisions."

Others jumped into the argument. It was soon more or less agreed that two men ought to go, but there was no agreement on who they should be. Every man and woman who was not slow with age, or recovering from a wound, volunteered, Rolf of course, included. "Heights don't scare me at all," he offered.

"Me, neither!" Sarah wanted to go. She claimed that she was lighter than any of the others, certainly, an advantage if it came to a matter of being partially supported by birds.

"Ah!" said Thomas to her, a spark of humor in his eye. "But what if Nils comes back and finds that you've gone off alone with me?"

That quieted Sarah—for a while—but Thomas found the others' squabbling harder to put down. At last he had to nearly shout, "All right, all right! I know the land as well as anyone. I suppose I can decide as well as anyone what to do about the Elephant when I reach it. So I am going. Loford will be the leader here—so far as I have any authority to name one. Mewick—you must stay in the swamps for a while, to talk to others of our people as they come in, tell them about the situation in the north and elsewhere, so they'll all understand we cannot expect any help . . . now, let's see. Will I be light enough to jump into this cave with a boost from two birds?"

He stretched out his arms. Strijef and Feathertip took to the air and hovered above him, and each carefully clenched their feet around one of his wrists. Then their wings beat powerfully, the strokes becoming faintly audible,

their breeze whipping up sparks and ashes from the remnants of a fire. But Thomas's feet did not leave the ground. Only when he jumped up could the two birds hold him in the air, and then only for the barest moment.

"Try it with me!" Sarah now demanded. And since most of the men were now distracted with rehashing all their arguments, she could insist until the birds made the attempt. With great exertion they could lift Sarah just about a meter off the ground, and hold her there while someone might count to three. What jumping she could manage did not help very much.

She was elated, but Thomas kept shaking his head at her. "No, no. We may have to do some fighting, or—"

"I can shoot a bow!"

"I'll not take a girl." He did not say child. He nodded toward Rolf. "Try him next, he seems about the lightest."

The birds rested briefly, then gripped the ends of a piece of rope which Rolf had found and looped around his body under his arms. "At the cave I'll need my hands free to cling and climb," he explained. Then he leaped upward with all the spring in his legs, just as the two birds lifted mightily. He rose till his feet were higher than a tall man's head, from which elevation it took him a count of five to fall to ground again against the birds' continued pull.

"Well." Thomas considered. "That would seem to be about the best that we can do."

"I'm ready to hike," Rolf told him. "I've rested most of the day. Just paddled in the dugout."

Thomas, staring at him thoughtfully, cracked a faint smile. "You call that resting, hey?" He looked across the fire to Mewick.

Mewick said, "I think the young one has got all the madness out of his system."

Thomas, very sober, looked back at Rolf. "Is that true? If I take you, we may have a fight but we're not looking for one."

"I understand that." The madness for revenge was not

gone, far from it. But it had grown into something cold and patient and calculating.

Thomas stared at Rolf a moment longer; then he smiled, quick and businesslike. "Very good. Then let's get started."

IV

THE EARLIEST light of dawn found Rolf and Thomas lying side by side, facing south across the pass, in the mouth of a narrow crevice between towering rocks. The pass before them was not distinguished by any name; it was the only clean break in the Broken Mountains for many kilometers both north and south. At the moment Thomas and Rolf were both silent—they were both of them worn with swamp-paddling and cross-country hiking through the night just past—with their furtive wading crossing of the river Dolles, and their last climb, racing against the coming of dawn, to their present position.

The position they had reached was a commanding one. By moving a meter forward, out of the mouth of the tiny canyon, they might have seen to their right the Dolles winding like a lazy snake along the foot of the mountains from north to south. Beyond the river stretched Rolf's home country of farmlands and lowlands and swamps. And in the distance beyond those, plainly visible from his present modest elevation on the mountain's foot, was the blue vagueness of the western sea.

Straight ahead of the tiny canyon's mouth, the barren land fell downward for some two hundred meters in a gradually decreasing slope to where the east-west highway threaded the bottom of the pass. And south beyond the highway the land rose again in an equivalent slope for another two hundred meters or so, to a foothill of the southern mountain chain; and upon that foothill rose the gray and newly strengthened walls of the Castle; irregularities of the great stones that made that wall showed up now in the slanting eastern light.

To the left of the Castle, from where he lay Rolf could see part of the badlands, the desert country that rolled down from the all-but-rainless inland slopes of the Broken Mountains, and stretched on for perhaps two hundred kilometers to the high and forbidding Black Mountains of the East. The east-west highway that Rolf had never traveled—that few traveled now—went across the badlands, wandering in long easy curves to lose itself in distance and mirage. The desert looked hot already, though the sun was scarcely risen.

"The leather-wings are up betimes," said Thomas quietly, nodding straight ahead. The early sun was bright on the net-protected houses and perches which clustered on the upper parts of the high Castle, showing a gray-green movement of reptile bodies under the nets. Ekuman's flag of black and bronze had evidently flown all night from a pole on the flat roof of the keep, beside the squat tower. Rolf could not keep himself from looking at the other decorations dangling high on wall and parapet; the tiny whitish stick-figures that he knew had once been people, good people, who had displeased the land's new masters and had been lifted up there to be living toys and food for the leather-wings.

The only living men to be seen now on the high places were dots of black and bronze, the movements of their arms and legs barely distinguishable at this distance. They were about the morning routine of furling the protective nets from around the reptiles' roosts. Now the gray-green dots came into plainer view, swelling and contracting. The reptiles would be stretching their wings. Their cawing and whining drifted faintly across the pass. In another moment the first of them were airborne, making room for more and more to appear on the perches, coming from their inner nests and shelters. Soon the air above the Castle grew cloudy with their circling swarm.

"And now we had better make sure to lie low," said Thomas, casting a look around at their hiding place. To their rear, the narrow crevice in which they lay twisted back

into the foot of the mountain, its sandy floor losing itself among huge tumbled boulders and splintered outcroppings of rock. It seemed that a shoulder of the mountain had slumped and fallen here an age ago. Somewhere back in that jumble, this little crevice grown wider had high on one of its walls the hidden cave-entrance. Strijeef and Feather-tip had taken shelter there for the day. Getting at least one of the Heavy People somehow into the cave would have to wait for another night.

Directly above Thomas and Rolf, the rock-bulges of the canyon walls shut out the sky entirely. The reptile swarm centered above the Castle had now spread until its edges reached this far and farther, but still there came no cawing of alarm from overhead, no gathering of faces on the Castle wall. Rolf found it moment by moment easier to believe that he and Thomas would not be seen today if they kept still.

Keeping still was not going to be hard. Though the folk in the swamp had given Rolf sandals, still his feet were sore from the long fast hike. He was tired in every muscle. But still his nerves were too taut to let him even try to sleep.

Lying stretched out in the sand, he let his gaze wander eastward again. In the far distance some peaks of the Black Mountains were visible, looking grayly insubstantial with the morning sunlight almost at their backs. Much nearer, but still well out over the badlands, clouds were forming a high knot of grayness that promised rain. Rolf knew that under those clouds the Oasis of the Two Stones must lie, though some low elevation of the land between kept him from seeing that round fertile patch. Years ago Rolf's father had brought him here to the pass, to show him the Castle—then an innocent and wondrous ruin—and had also pointed out to him where the Oasis lay amid the desert, and had told him of the wonder of its rainfall.

Rolf suddenly realized that something strange was happening to the clouds. Instead of remaining gathered above the one always-favored spot they were moving now, coming roughly toward the pass.

This seemed to him so odd that he called it to Thomas's attention. Thomas slid a few centimeters forward and peeked cautiously out of the canyon mouth to see for himself.

"Something must have gone awry with their magic out there," he said after a little.

"I wonder what their magic is."

Thomas shook his head. The distant knot of vapor had darkened into a thunderstorm already, and was chasing its shadow toward them across the desert, lighting itself from within by a sudden flicker of lightning.

"I suppose the invaders are holding the Oasis too," said Rolf. He thought he could hear the thunder, tiny and distant.

Thomas nodded. "Quite a strong garrison, I understand." He pulled himself back. "See here, we'd better take turns on watch, and each get some sleep while we can."

Rolf maintained that he could not sleep yet, so Thomas agreed to let him take the first watch. Then Thomas opened his pack and took out a marvelous thing. It was an Old World device, he said, that was supposed to have come from beyond the western sea. It had been cherished for generations in the family of a man who now had joined a band of Free Folk.

The device consisted of a pair of metal cylinders, each about the length of a man's hand. The cylinders were clasped side by side with metal joints that fitted and worked with incredible smooth precision, as Rolf saw when Thomas let him take the device carefully into his hands. He had never before had the chance to handle anything of the Old World so freely, and he had never before seen such workmanship in metal. The parts had been shaped with what seemed the ease and freedom of thought itself.

Each end of each cylinder was glass, and looking through them made everything suddenly a dozen times closer. At first Rolf was less impressed by the function of the thing than by the form. But gradually Thomas made him understand that there was no magic involved here; Thomas said that Old World devices never depended upon it. Instead

the illusion of closeness came somehow from what Thomas called pure *technology*; the thing was a tool, like a saw or a spade, but instead of working wood or soil it worked on light, and instead of being driven by the muscles of arms or legs, it needed only whatever power eyes could give it, looking through its double tubes.

No magic needed, to move a man's point of vision out from his body and bring it back again. It was an eerie thought. *Technology* was a word that Rolf had heard perhaps a dozen times in his life before today, and then always in some joking context; but now the truth of what it meant began to gradually impress itself upon him.

"How do you *know* there's no magic in them?"

Thomas shrugged slightly. "No one can feel any. Wizards have tried."

Now Rolf handled the eyeglasses with awe, but also with an eagerly growing fascination as he drew the Castle near him and pushed it away again. He searched for the thunderstorm, but it had dissipated already. He looked at Thomas's face, a mountain-blur of nearness.

"Don't look at the sun through those, your eyes will burn out."

"I won't." Rolf already felt an affinity for technology deeper than any he had ever felt for the things of magic; he had already known enough, he thought, not to look at a sun made a dozen times dazzling.

Something in the satisfaction of the glasses eased the tension that had so far kept him from feeling sleepy; he yawned and felt his eyelids drooping. Thomas announced that he himself had better take the first watch after all.

Rolf rolled against the rock wall of the canyon, put down his head and at once dropped off to sleep, to awaken with a violent start when his arm was touched. He had little sense of time having passed, but he did feel rested and the sun was near the zenith.

Having the Old World glasses to use, Rolf found the time of the afternoon watch passing quickly. At the main gate of the Castle, which faced northwest, there was a more or

less continual coming and going, of both soldiers and people in civilian garb. A few wagonloads of provisions came jolting over the bridge that spanned the Dolles in the midst of what was now a half-deserted village at the foot of the Castle's hill. Other barrels and bales and sacks were carried up on slave-back to the Castle from the barges moored at the village landing-place. Only slaves seemed laboring now in what Rolf remembered as a thriving town standing where the seaboard roads focused on the pass. Dots of bronze and black stood guard with whips that only became visible through the glasses.

Rolf did not watch that for long. He needed no new fuel heaped on his hate. He swung the glasses here and there. But each time a party of soldiers came down from the Castle, or passed below him in either direction on the highway, he watched then tensely, ready to rouse Thomas in an instant should they turn upslope toward these rocks. From a distance these rocks looked like they might contain a hundred good hiding-places, but when you were among them and imagining a body of cavalry coming through, the situation was different.

Thomas had rolled under a bulge of rock as far as a man could get, and there he slept. Now and then he would utter a faint groaning sound and try to make motions with his powerful arms. Rolf could see no insect pests around the sleeping man. Somehow it seemed wrong and discouraging that a man healthy and strong, a successful leader, should have to put up with bad dreams.

Rolf swept the landscape once more with his glasses. Here was something new, coming toward the Castle from the southwest, the general direction of the swamps. In a little while Rolf made out that it was a group of slaves or prisoners being marched along a road. First he had seen only the cloud of dust raised by their slow progress; now through the glasses he could see that they were men and women both, chained or roped together, perhaps fifteen of them. Now he could see the arm of a bronze-helmed guard rise and snap and fall back again. A long time later the

faint pop of the whip came drifting across the intervening valley of the pass.

He did not want to watch this and yet could not keep from watching. The prisoners' faces became visible. More bewildered conscripts for the endless building . . .

Rolf nearly dropped the glasses. He raised them again quickly, and with shaking fingers turned the knurled knob that Thomas had taught him to use for greatest clarity of focus. Still the image wavered before him, until he remembered to rest his elbows once more in the sand.

A little behind the other prisoners, and bound more lightly if at all, was a young girl who looked like Sarah. She was riding, mounted on a huge beast behind a soldier. She looked like Sarah all the more as they came slowly closer. If it was not some terrible trick of these demon-begotten glasses . . . Rolf kept trying to tell himself that it was only that.

He knew he should tear his eyes away and wake Thomas. At last he did. Thomas was instantly alert, but still just too late to see the girl as the Castle's maw swallowed the last of the prisoners and their guard, and snapped the teeth of its portcullis shut behind them.

Thomas put down the glasses he had just raised. "Are you sure it was her?"

"Yes." Rolf stared at a double handful of sand and pebbles, into which he was digging his fingers until they hurt.

"Well." It seemed to Rolf that Thomas was taking the news with an unnatural calm. "Did you recognize anyone else among the prisoners?"

"No. I—I don't think they were all from the swamps. And the soldiers didn't look like they'd been fighting."

"So. I don't think there could have been a battle today. There might have been some word about Nils come into the swamp, and Sarah went out to try to make sure of it—whatever it was. She'd do something like that. And she just got picked up. Those things happen."

"Why was she set apart like that, riding, as if they meant to take good care of her?"

Thomas only grunted. Rolf did not really want to hear an answer to that question anyway. Thomas took another look around through the glasses, then handed them back to Rolf. "You did well to wake me."

"I should have done so sooner, then." Rolf was still grinding the pebbles in his hands.

Thomas hesitated, then said, "If it *was* Sarah, there's nothing we can do about it, except to go on with what we're doing now." When Rolf had nodded, he put a hand on Rolf's shoulder for a moment, then turned away again against the rock. "I should sleep a little longer before night comes. Be sure and rouse me before the sun goes down."

But Thomas could hardly have fallen asleep before Rolf was shaking him again. Once more, people were approaching the Castle. Since they came this time from the northwest, they popped suddenly into Rolf's view when they were already close, their earlier progress having been hidden from him by the mass of rock he sheltered against. And these people came not in chains but in great splendor. A gaily-painted river-barge came descending the Dolles, escorted on each shore by a mounted troop of a hundred men.

This time Thomas looked long before he handed the glasses back to Rolf. "It's the Satrap Chup, coming down from his own robber's roost in the north. Ekuman's son-in-law to be."

There was great scurrying and confusion on the shore, while the barge approached and tied up at the central landing-place. In the center of those who disembarked was a powerful-looking man in black trousers and cuirass trimmed with red, mounted on a magnificent riding-beast. And beside him on a white animal came riding a young girl with blonde hair of marvelous length; so fair was her skin, so beautiful her face, that Rolf wondered again, aloud, if the glasses might not add a shading of magic to the things they showed.

"No, no," Thomas reassured him, dryly. "You'll not have seen her before, because her habit is to stay in the Castle

or very near it. But that's Charmian, Ekuman's daughter. I guess she went halfway to meet her bridegroom, and now comes finishing his journey with him. It might be an interesting wedding; I've heard there's another in the Castle who dotes on her."

"How could you hear that?"

"The servants there are human if the masters are not. They're too frightened to talk much, but sometimes a single word can travel marvelously."

Rolf of course had heard of Charmian's existence, but he had not really thought about her until now. "I thought that Ekuman had no wife."

"He had once, or perhaps she was only a favored concubine. Then he went East, to perfect himself in . . . the ways that he has chosen. And for the knowledge and the reality of power, a man must pay dearly." Thomas looked into the distance blankly for a little time, then shook his head as if to rouse himself from bitter thoughts.

Rolf asked, "He went East?"

"From where he came to begin with I do not know, but he has been to the Black Mountains, to get his power."

Rolf took a turn at thoughtful silence. It was beyond understanding that a fiend like Ekuman should have a lovely daughter, to be given away like some kindly farmer's, with a feast.

Thomas's thoughts were evidently running along the same lines. "I wonder sometimes why such as these even bother to marry. Hardly to pledge their love. I think not even to pledge each other any kind of honest help in life."

"Why, then?" Rolf wanted to busy his mind with anything but speculation on what might be happening to Sarah.

"I suppose to build an alliance, or to found a dynasty." Thomas rubbed tiredly at his eyes. "Those are human reasons . . . it's hard to remember sometimes that Ekuman and those about him *are* still human, that the things they do are human crimes. I've heard Loford say that if the Satraps live for many years, growing stronger in their evil,

it sometimes happens that they are summoned East at last, to stay."

"Why?"

"To become something more or less than human, I think that was the way Loford put it." Thomas yawned. "Loford wasn't sure, and I'm talking in total ignorance. Rambling. You want another nap?"

"No. I don't feel tired." That was a half-truth. Rolf was once more in a state where he thought he would be unable to sleep.

So Thomas did sleep again, but he roused himself well before sunset, and then Rolf was willing enough to take another nap himself. He only dozed, and got up without being wakened as the shadows began to deepen around them.

Like the humans of the Castle, the reptiles had been coming and going in small numbers all through the day, but now they came from all directions in flapping squadrons, in haste to reach their roosts before the coming of the night. Now was the time when Feathertip, if she had been following her original plan, would have come soaring forth. Tonight she would have caught more than one straggler made careless by the Castle's nearness. But with a far greater enterprise hanging in the balance, the birds would not hunt reptiles tonight. The leather-wings came unmolested home, to slowly blacken the rooftops of the Castle with their clusters.

And in the earliest of the true night the two birds came surely and silently down the canyon, following the dim twisting channel of it with scarcely a wing-movement. Or so it seemed to Rolf; their huge shapes were over him before he had more than imagined that he saw them.

Rolf and Thomas were each carrying ropes, long and strong but thin, wound about them under their shirts. Thomas unwound a long rope now from his ribs, and tied one end of it into a loop, of a size the bird Feathertip directed. This was meant to fix and hold on the top of the

preliminary pinnacle, to which a man must climb if he would even see the entrance of the cave.

The two birds then flew back up the canyon. Behind them a trailing end of rope tickled over the sand and over shadowed, broken rocks where human feet must move with caution.

Rolf and Thomas followed. The looped rope had already been hung for climbing when they came up to where the birds were sitting on the canyon floor, waiting.

"Well," said Thomas. He set down his pack, then tugged hard on the rope, to make sure that the loop was holding solidly on the invisible peak, about eleven times his height. Then he hesitated. Thomas was afraid, and not bothering now to make pretense that he was not. At last he said, "If I'm killed or left unconscious, beyond rousing—I've seen men that way after a fall—then you must just go on as best you can. To do what we came for is the important thing."

"I know."

After that Thomas delayed no more but climbed, swiftly and surely; Rolf envied the strength of arm that could swing a big man up like that. For a few moments Thomas's climbing figure was outlined vaguely against the stars. Then he passed out of sight above a convexity of rock; soon after that, the hanging rope's gyrations ceased.

From where he stood waiting at the bottom of the canyon Rolf could see only that loose descending rope, and nothing of what was going on above. He could see where Thomas would come down, if he fell. At that place a hard flat surface would have been bad enough, but the actuality was worse, a jumble of sharp upjutting stony corners, with gaps between them where it seemed a broken body might well jam itself immovably.

The rope hung still, and held time with it. Then the long line started swaying and jogging again, against the rock. Rolf let out his breath in a huge silent puff. The birds were first to settle to the ground, and then the man, who slid the last distance with his sandaled feet clamping the rope between them.

Having got down, Thomas leaned as if for needed support against the face of the rock he had just quitted. Then he wiped at his face with his sleeve and said, "I didn't try it. The only way is with the birds."

Strijef hooted, "Tooo heavy." Feathertip made a nodding motion that she must have adopted from humans.

"Then I'll go." Rolf looked at the birds, telling himself how strong they were, especially now when they had just had a good day's rest. But he could not keep his eye from moving beyond them to mark how the sharp rocks stood in the bottom of the crevice. "That's what I came along for."

"Yes." Thomas now sounded stubbornly angry. Rolf found himself half-wishing that the man might change his mind and, after all, attempt the leap himself—and make it, of course. But Thomas did not change his mind.

Now Rolf divested himself of his pack, and his extra ropes. Such things could be lifted easily to him later, if he—after he had reached the cave. Now he wound around himself the short length of rope for the birds to grip and swing him by.

"Good luck," said Thomas.

Rolf nodded. And then he was climbing the long rope, hauling with his hands and walking with his feet against the rock. He remembered you were not supposed to look down from a high place, so he did not.

And then before he had any time to think about what came next, he had reached the pinnacle. There was just room for him to crouch on the peak of the tall rock. The world looked unreal from here—the stars above, the sparks of torches on the distant Castle, and right around him nothing but other rocks and cliffs. The moon, huge and nearly full, was just starting up across the desert.

The birds were hovering at Rolf's sides. He handed each of them an end of the short rope looped under his arm. They took up the slack. His eyes were searching downward among the deceptive shadows on the cliff-face opposite. "I don't see the cave. Where is it?"

"Hoo. Stand up."

He stood, holding out his arms for balance. With gentle pulls at the rope the birds turned him, evidently facing him in the right direction. They had wound the rope-ends tight in all their talons.

"I still don't see it."

"We will bring you to it. Jump high, jump far, and then grab rock when you can!"

He remembered when he was a child, jumping on a dare from a tree tall enough to offer a frightening drop. Take no time to think, and jump straight out, then you could do it . . . delay, and you might never go . . . and after the bold jump had come the hard triumphant landing . . . don't look down.

"This way?"

"This way." Their wingtips multiplied soft blessings near his head. "Now bend and jump!"

Giving himself to the birds, he leaped, fear adding spring to his legs. The lifting power that he could feel on the ropes was heartening—for a moment. Then he was falling. It was not the sheer empty dropping from the tree, but neither was it flying, or being held. Rolf's arms turned panicky and thrashed ahead of him for something to grip. Impossible for human eyes to judge a distance here at night. The enormous wings worked on above him; their wind and that of his falling whirled against his face, and the horizontal momentum of his leap still carried him toward the wall of stone where the cave must be. That wall was moving upward frighteningly as his fingers scraped it. It bulged toward him, and his fingers were free in the air of a sudden aperture—and then Rolf jolted to a halt, arms thrusting into the cave over its lip which struck him in the chest. His knees banged painfully into the wall below. He clung there seemingly without a grip, held by his extended arms' friction on smooth rock. The supporting pull on the ropes ceased while the birds walked over him and into the cave. Then they pulled again, from in front. With beak and talon they helped him drag his heaviness up and into the safe hole.

Once he had solidity under him he sat without moving, trying to get his hands to loosen their compulsive gripping of whatever came in reach. To the panting, quivering birds he said, "Tell—tell Thomas I made it."

"He has seen youuu did not fall. Hoo. He knows you made it." But after only a moment's rest the birds took to the air and left him. They would be back very soon with his tools and supplies. Rolf swore that by then he would be able to let go the rock and do something useful.

It was a mighty good thing that Thomas had had the guts *not* to attempt the jump. His weighty muscles and his big bones would have pulled him down for sure, down to be broken on the rocks . . . but there was no point in such thoughts now. He forced himself to sit relaxed.

Strijef was back even before Rolf had expected him, dropping a rope-tied pack hastily at Rolf's feet. "Rooolf, big patrol from the Castle is coming on the ground. Thomas will run away, so if he is caught it will not be here. We Silent People must help him, we will come back when we can. Soldiers cannot climb here. Thomas says, find out what you can."

"Yes," Rolf stammered after a moment. "All right. Tell him don't worry. I'll find out." There seemed to be nothing more that needed saying.

The bird waited just a moment longer, gazing at Rolf with its wide wise-seeming eyes, swollen drops of ghostly light here in the dim cave. "Good luck," it said, and brushed him with a wingtip.

"You too."

When Strijef had vanished into the night, Rolf sat in silence listening. After what seemed a long time he heard hooves passing somewhere below him, making muffled sounds in sand and scraping very faintly over rock. For a while the movements seemed to slow down, to pause; then they proceeded at a faster rate that soon took them altogether out of earshot.

Still he waited, straining to hear more. He told himself that Thomas certainly could not have been taken without

a struggle and outcry. The birds would be eyes for him. He must certainly have got away.

Time passed, bringing no further sounds of men. Rolf undid the rope from around the pack. Moonlight reflecting from the rocks opposite the cave lessened his darkness enough to let him see a little. In the pack was food and water, more rope, flint and steel and small waxy torches, and a small chisel wrapped against clinking. With this last tool he was to carve in the rock, near the cave entrance, some sort of notch in which a climbing rope could be anchored. The madness of birds and jumping would not have to be repeated.

Rolf chose a natural wrinkle in the floor of the cave, in from the mouth about a meter and a half, and weighed the chisel in his hand. As had been expected, there were several stones lying about, one of which would serve as a hammer. The trouble was that this work would be noisy.

He thought it over. The soldiers who had passed below were evidently gone now, either back to the Castle or in pursuit of Thomas, or simply continuing their patrol. They would not have left only one or two men here, not at night, and if they had left more than that he should be able to hear something from them. But they might well send men here in the morning. And in the morning the reptiles would be out. All in all, it seemed that now was the best time for stonecutting.

To muffle the sounds he emptied the pack and set the chisel under it. Then he chose a rock for his mallet and got to work, pausing after every tap to listen. The rope he meant to anchor here was already fastened to the middle of a short stout stick, and he needed only to reshape the wrinkle in the floor a bit to have a place where this anchor could be solidly fixed.

So his noisemaking was soon over. He repacked his gear and sat listening for another while. Once he thought the wind brought him some distant cry, whether animal or human he could not say. He shivered slightly. He felt wide

awake. Should he start now on his exploration of the inner cave?

He could make a tentative beginning anyway. He crawled away from the cave mouth, going into utter darkness, groping before him with his hands. He had gone only a few meters when his foremost hand came down on nothingness. He stretched himself out on the brink of a vertical shaft and reached forward as well as he could, but could not touch the other side.

He went back to his pack and got out one of his torches. These were stiff-stemmed wax-rushes from the swamp, dried and dipped in animal fat, then cast by Loford under some kind of fire-spell that was meant to make them burn smokelessly and bright. But at last Rolf decided not to light the torch, to put off further exploration until morning. Daylight would doubtless filter to some extent even into the lower cave, so he might climb down without having to hold a torch. And besides, he kept expecting one of the birds to come back at any moment, bringing him word of what had happened to Thomas. And besides that—he was reluctant to go down to face the Elephant alone at midnight.

He sat down near the cave mouth, and being more tired than he realized, fell easily asleep. Twice he awakened with a start from a dream of falling, to find himself clutching at the hard rock. And each time he woke he worried a little more because the birds had not yet come back. Surely Thomas must have gotten away by now, or been caught? And had the birds been arrowed down too, by luck and by torchlight?

Rolf passed the time dozing and waking, until a more violent start after a period of deeper sleep roused him to the awareness that daylight was at hand. At least he could feel certain that the birds would not come now, not until another evening had arrived.

He had cut his socket into the rock so that it would hold the anchor stick firmly against a pull from either direction. He set it in place now, and from it hung his longest rope

down into the inner shaft. When full light had come he started the descent, pack strapped firmly on his back.

The chimney at its top was perhaps three meters wide; it narrowed irregularly as he went lower. It had the look of a natural fault, some splitting of the hill that perhaps had happened at the same time as the dumping and scattering of the rock-jumble outside.

As Rolf moved further down the daylight lessened, but still for the first twenty meters he did not need a torch. Then, at what he thought was approximately the level of the ground outside, the chimney ended in a hole, through which the rope went vanishing into blackness. Supporting himself on feet braced on opposite sides of the diminished shaft, Rolf freed his hands and struck fire to a rushlight. It burned cleanly. He thought the flame and trace of smoke showed a gentle upward movement of the air around him.

Rolf followed his rope, gripping it between his sandaled feet, keeping one hand free to hold the torch. He was in a huge wide hollow place. After descending only a few meters more, he could set his feet on a floor of smooth and level stone.

The rays of his rushlight fell across the cave, upon a closed pair of enormous doors. Before them stood a motionless rounded shape, twice taller than a man and perhaps a thousand times as bulky. Rolf knew that he had found the Elephant.

V

THOMAS COULD see nothing of Rolf's bird-supported leap across the chasm, and could hear only the faint scrambling noise of his arrival at the cave. But that, at the moment, was quite enough. Thomas allowed himself a single hearty sigh of relief.

It took the birds only a few more moments to put an end to his relief, by coming back to him with the news that a mounted patrol was moving in his direction from the Castle,

was in fact already crossing the highway at the bottom of the pass.

That meant they were not much over two hundred meters away, and Thomas got moving even before he spoke. "If they catch me here they'll keep on poking around in these rocks. I'll have to run. I'll head for the western slope. Tell Rolf to find out what he can in the cave. And make sure no ropes are hanging out in sight."

He was just working his way out of the rocks on the western side, thinking to get back to the swamps if he could and communicate with Rolf for a day or two by bird, when Strijeef came spinning above him again, with word that more men were approaching from the west, coming uphill from the riverbank. "You must go east, Thomas. We will help."

He hated to leave Rolf, but the youngster in the cave seemed to have his share of brains and nerve, and he would just have to depend on them. Thomas got out of the rocks at last on the eastern side, got started moving furtively down the first open slope of the vast desert. He had a water bottle with him, and he could fade out into the wasteland and lie low there for a day. When night fell again he could work north and get back across the mountains somewhere; the Broken Mountains were nowhere high or wide enough to keep an agile man on foot from finding his way through.

He cursed the brightness of the moon as he angled down the long open slope, heading away from pass and Castle both. After going something over a hundred meters he paused. Stooping low and looking back the way he had come, he listened. He thought he could hear the muffled sounds of men in considerable numbers moving in the area he had just left. He would have given much to know whether it was just a routine patrol, or whether they had seen or suspected something. Sarah was in the Castle. If the enemy had the least reason to connect her with the Free Folk, she might easily have been forced by now to tell everything she knew. She shouldn't have known so much.

He supposed that he and the other leaders would have to be more secretive in their planning, hide themselves from their own people half the time, keep the rank and file from knowing anything beyond what they were absolutely required to know. There had to be ways to organize a rebellion properly. To install a rigid command structure and an iron discipline. Such things were probably vital and would have to be used—if Ekuman let the Free Folk survive long enough to learn them.

He decided he had better get on with his retreat. He had gone only a little way further when, looking back, he saw the enemy begin to come out of the rocks, tall wraith-like shapes on riding-beasts emerging in the moonlight. If they once saw him he was done for. Thomas crouched down again and kept on moving slowly away. The enemy troop fanned out as they left the rocks, riding slowly in his general direction. Obviously they hadn't seen him yet, but neither were they ready to go home for the night.

Their apparently random choice of a direction to search further was uncomfortably accurate. With an underhand fling Thomas pitched a pebble way out to the southeast, at right angles to the line of his retreat. They heard it, all right; he saw some of them stop at the sound. They would think it was probably an animal, but it would give them something to do. Now their whole rank of twenty men or thereabouts came to a halt. Thomas continued to pace softly and steadily away from them. When they got underway again they were headed more to the east.

He might have lain still now and let them pass him at a little distance, but there was always the chance that they might turn again, and he didn't want them pinning him against the mountain. So he kept on retreating along his original line, getting a little farther out into the desert and breathing a little easier. He was just congratulating himself that the pebble-tossing had been exactly the right move, when one of the birds came drifting swiftly over his head, hooting to him in the lowest of warning notes. Thomas turned, and what he saw in the moonlight froze him in

midstride. He felt himself suddenly huge and nakedly exposed. The long open slope that a moment before had been so free and sheltering in its distance was now a barren trap.

A vast fan-formation of a hundred riders or more was coming down on him from the north. Their line extended from the side of the mountain, sheer and unclimbable just here, out into the desert farther than a man could see at night from where Thomas stood. It was now all too plain to him that the smaller force which had chased him out of the rocks was intended only to drive the game into the net. It might be only some kind of training exercises they were engaged in, but the trap was very real.

He was one man, and unmounted; they could scarcely have seen him yet. Both birds came over Thomas's head for a moment, but they only turned together there in silence and rose again. There was nothing that needed to be said; they would do what they could, he knew, to help him get away.

He was going to need help, because the trap looked very tight. He had stopped moving now because there was no place to go. If he was taken alive . . . he knew ~~too much~~ to risk that. He drew a long knife, his only weapon, ~~from~~ his belt. It would be utterly foolish to try to dash through the enemy line. As the noose drew tighter he huddled down, making himself as small as possible, in the moon-shadow of a tiny bush. With one hand he scraped up sand, trying to cover his legs sticking out of the shadow. It was foolish, it was not going to be enough, and yet there was nothing better he could do. Unless the birds could create some distraction.

The ghostly-looking line of troopers came on at a walk that looked unhurried but still covered ground. At the point of their line nearest Thomas, they were so close together that a bush-bounder could not have crept unseen between them. The cursed moon seemed growing brighter by the moment. Surely they must all see him now, they were only playing with him. With only a knife he might not even be

able to kill one of them. He ceased trying to cover his legs, and held his breath and waited. The line was almost upon him.

On a sudden the rider nearest Thomas stood up straight in his stirrups. He had grown a monstrous winged helmet, a blot of darkness that dragged and lifted at him, tearing from him a terrible cry of pain and fear. His riding-beast panicked and bucked, and those next in line on either side reared up, their masters struggling to control them. "Birds!" The word was passed in low voices, quickly, to the right and left.

The first man who had been struck drove off his attacker somehow, and those beside him controlled their animals. The line as a whole had continued to move forward, and they managed somehow to nearly keep up with it. There was another flurry of movement a little distance off, and then another. Both birds were now attacking, and making it seem that there were more than two of them. Ranging up and down the line from the spot where the first man had been struck, Strijee and Feathertip spread pain and confusion, dragged one man clean from his saddle, got home on others with beak or talon, veered off from the attack if they found a man ready to meet them with sword or short lance.

There was no telling how long the birds could keep it up. Thomas forced himself to move toward the enemy, and forced his movement to stealthy slowness. Out of the shadow of the bush he slid, flat on his belly. It seemed unbelievable that they did not see him. But the riders were of necessity looking up into the starry air, guarding themselves. If they looked down it was to give attention to their beasts, which were all prancing uncertainly now if not in downright panic. Still the line kept trying to advance.

On his belly Thomas slid forward one meter after another, keeping his face turned down and hidden. A riding-beast snorted almost over his head, and hooves trampled past, almost hitting him. If the beast saw him, the rider did not. Thomas kept moving.

He heard a grunt of triumph from one of the men in the

line that had now drawn past him, and simultaneously a scream whose like he had never heard before from the throat of man or beast. A little scuffle ended in a fluttering sound that he had never before heard made by the wings of the Silent People. And then very quickly the desert was once more almost silent.

Thomas now lay on his face without moving, without trying to look around. The knife-handle was slippery in his hand with sweat. He breathed the dust of the desert floor. His ears told him that the line of troopers was moving on still, going away from him.

When the sounds were far away he rose cautiously to knees and elbows, and turned his head. The line of troopers was many meters distant now and still receding; he could not see that any man carried a feathered trophy on his saddle. He looked this way and that, and crawled, circling as widely as he dared over the area where the birds had fought the men. But he could find no trace, not even a feather.

The birds had saved him, whether they had died for him or not. Dead or wounded, they were gone. He was on his own and far from safe. He crawled out into the desert until he had put sufficient distance between himself and the enemy to feel safe in standing up. Looking back, he saw that the noose had tightened all the way, and that the enemy force once gathered seemed to be breaking up into smaller bands. Still not ready to go home. There was no telling how they might move next to scour the plain. The only course for Thomas was to keep moving away from them, farther and farther out into the desert. Well, so be it, then. He would turn back westward when he could. Maybe it would have to be tomorrow night.

It was good that he did keep going, for one of the bands of cavalry almost caught him up. He had to lie frozen for long moments while their patrolling file passed him by, going in the same direction he had been taking. Now he angled more toward the east, and looked more cautiously

ahead of him as he walked. Let it be the deep desert for a day, then. He had his water bottle.

At dawn he was still walking; by now the Castle and the pass were many kilometers behind him. The Black Mountains ahead were not perceptibly closer. Nearly barren, the land around him undulated to the horizon in all directions, without a sign of men or man-made things.

Daylight of course was liable to bring reptiles. The notch of the pass behind him was too distant for him to see the leather-wings rising above the Castle, but he knew they would be there. He would soon have to hole up for the day.

The scanty vegetation visible around him in the earliest light of dawn offered no really promising place to hide. He would go on a little, looking for a bigger bush. Now in the growing light he began to notice an odd thing. The sand in places had a crusty, pocked, granular look, as if it had recently been rained on. Yes, just a day ago he and Rolf had seen the improbable rainstorm moving over this part of the desert. The Oasis of the Two Stones was in this general area, though Thomas could not see it for the rolling of the land between.

He went on, still searching for a good hiding place, and casting frequent anxious glances up at the brightening sky.

And he did indeed see a reptile, but it was on the ground, and dead—and, like the rain-stippled sand around it, something of a marvel. He stepped over a low dune to find the reptile's body there in the hollow before him. It was quite obviously dead, sprawled and twisted, and gray-green no longer but swollen and black.

The death was not the marvel—reptiles had their diseases and misfortunes, and certainly their enemies—but rather the manner of the death. The body was swelled enough to split the scaly skin, but not with decay, rather as if the creature had been roasted alive. And yet the sand around showed no signs of fire or great heat, only the faint marks of yesterday's rain.

As he came near Thomas saw that this might be a lucky find indeed. Around the swollen body there stretched a

strap that held a pouch—the reptile had been one of Eku-man's couriers. He turned the child-sized body over with his foot. The pouch itself was burned black and torn; the charred fabric crumbled further at his touch. There was no heat left in it now. Inside, his gingerly probing found what had doubtless been a written message, but the paper dissolved into ash-powder at a breath and there was no telling what the words on it might have been.

There was something else in the pouch, however, that did not dissolve. A closed case of some heavy metal. It was of a shape that might contain some precious jewel, but the size of Thomas's two fists. He turned it over carefully in his hands. It was not an Old World thing, he decided, for its shape and joining lacked the incredible precision that distinguished the metalworking of the ancients. It was blackened and battered and to Thomas it seemed to have an air of age. He could not read the signs that were graven on it, but as he weighed it in his hands Thomas felt certain that he held some powerful magic. Of course he was no professional wizard, he might be mistaken on such matters. But the enemy would hardly freight his couriers with mere gimcracks.

So the thing must be taken to Loford. Thomas buried the reptile and its emptied pouch with hasty scrapings of sand, to keep the others of its kind from finding it.

Walking on, he carried the strange case in his hands for a little distance. He shook it lightly and could feel a shifting weight inside. He turned it over and over, and felt the natural temptation to open it. But caution prevailed over curiosity, and he let the case stay shut, and thrust it into his pack.

Looking up again for reptiles, Thomas was pleased to see that the sky was clouding over. If there was to be a peculiar rainy season this year in the desert, well, he would take advantage of it; it would hide him from the reptiles better than any of these scanty bushes could.

As the sun came up a rim of clear sky brightened all around the horizon; but directly overhead a solid low

cloud cover more than a mile in diameter developed. The grayness of it thickened and darkened in swirls and ominous gatherings of vapor, while Thomas mentally cheered it on. A good rain would not only protect him from aerial observation, but could eliminate any chance of his running out of water.

Thomas sat down for a rest. The sun got high enough to extinguish itself behind the mighty disk of cloud. The clouds showed no inclination to blow in any direction today, the air seemed windless. The first grumble of thunder sounded overhead; the first big drops came pelting down. He put out his tongue to taste them.

There was a flare and flicker above, then thunder once again. Sullenness growing in the atmosphere, and an electric pause. And then a high-pitched scream, that brought Thomas leaping to his feet and spinning around. From the same direction that he had come, a young woman was now running toward him, some fifty meters away. She wore a simple farm-girl's dress, and a wide hat such as the folk of the Oasis wore when working their unshaded fields. As she ran toward Thomas she was crying out, "Oh, throw it! Throw it away from you!"

It seemed that some buried part of his mind had been aware already of the danger, for now he did not hesitate an instant. He scooped the blackened thing of power out of his pack and in the same motion of his arm lobbed the weight of it away from him, putting all his strength behind the effort. And then the air seared white around him, and a shock great beyond hearing seemed to tear the world apart.

VI

WITH SLOW and cautious steps Rolf walked twice around the Elephant, keeping his distance from it, holding his little torch high.

Except for the impression that it gave of enormous and

mysterious power, this before him did not much resemble the creature depicted in the symbols. This before him was a flattened metal lozenge of smooth regular curves, built low to the ground for something of its massive size. Here could be seen no fantastically flexible snout, no jutting teeth of horn. There was no real face at all, only some thin hollowed metal shafts projecting all in one direction from the topmost hump. Looking closely Rolf could see that around that hump, or head, were set some tiny glassy-looking things, like the false eyes of some monstrous statue.

Elephant was legless, which only made it all the more impressive by raising the question of how its obvious power was to be unfolded and applied. Bending low with his torch, Rolf could see no folded legs beneath the body. Neither were there any proper wheels, such as a cart or wagon had. Instead Elephant rested on two endless belts of heavy, studded metal plates, whose shielded upper course ran higher than Rolf's head.

On the dull metal of each flank, painted small in size but with all the Old World precision, was the familiar sigil—the animal shape, gray and powerful, some trick of the painter's art telling the viewer that what it represented was gigantic. In its monstrous gripping nose the creature in the painting brandished a sharp-pointed spear, jagged all along its length. Under its feet it trod the symbols:

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—whose meaning, and even language, were strange to Rolf. By now he had approached, step by slow step, to within arm's length of his discovery. And now, holding his breath, he ventured to put out a hand and touch a part of one of the endless belts, a plate of armor too heavy for a man to carry or for a riding-beast to wear into a fight. Nothing seemed to happen from the touch. Rolf dared to lay his hand flat on the featureless surface of the Elephant's metal flank.

Only after that did he step back and take his eyes from

Elephant and look around the rest of the cave. There was not much to see. A few openings in the curving walls, holes too small for men to use as passages. Maybe they were chimneys of a sort; the air in the cave was good. And there were the huge doors set in the wall just ahead of Elephant—if “ahead” was the direction in which the projections on the topmost hump were pointing.

These doors were flat expanses of metal, seemingly covering an opening of just the right size to permit Elephant’s passage. The vertical cracks of imperfect closure at the doors’ edges were noticeably wider at the bottom than at the top, as if the great panels had been slightly warped. Through each widened crack a small heap of pebbly dirt had sometime trickled to lie on the floor below.

Rolf knelt to thoughtfully finger some of this debris. As nearly as he could calculate, the floor here was at approximately the same vertical level as the floor of the canyon outside. The same landslide that had made the rock-jumble out there might easily have buried these doors.

Yes. He closed his eyes for a moment to better visualize the various distances and directions of his movements in coming into the cave. Yes, it seemed so. Let these doors be opened, and some of the house-sized rocks outside them cleared away, and Elephant would be free.

How to accomplish those things would be for Loford and Thomas and others to think about, later. Right now it was up to Rolf to simply learn all he could.

He had been thinking of Elephant as a creature that could somehow be awakened and led out of confinement, and ridden into battle; even now when he saw its metal body he thought of it in those terms. In Rolf’s experience the line between life and non-life, like that between beast and thinking creature, was apt to be blurred in places.

His rush-light had burned down to a finger-searing shortness and he lighted another one from it. The air in the cave seemed as fresh as ever, and what little smoke his torch gave off was rising steadily. It would be far too

much dispersed and faint for anyone to notice at the outer entrance of the cave.

Rolf walked again around Elephant, running his hand along its surface. On this circuit he paid much closer attention to details. This was like handling Thomas's eyeglasses; there was no feeling of magic here, but a sense of other powers that somehow seemed to suit Rolf better than wizardry.

High on one vast armored flank, just above the covered upper level of the endless tread, was a barely perceptible circular line, like the crack of a very close-fitting door. Recessed in the surface of this circle was a handle that might tug it open, if it was indeed a door. And now Rolf saw there were four steps, set small but strong into the solid metal, ascending from floor level to the circle.

He was here to find out all he could. He took a deep breath, gripped his torch precariously between his teeth, and climbed. The handgrip on the door accepted his fingers easily. Deep in his throat he muttered a protective spell, half-forgotten since his childhood—and then he pulled. His first tug was resisted, and his second. Then, when he dared lean all his weight outward from the handle, ancient stiffness yielded with a sudden crack of sound. The door, incredibly thick, swung open on a hinge. In that moment a sharp, straining click sounded somewhere in Elephant's inside, and there was light, striking out of the door like the golden beams of the sun.

Already off balance, Rolf half-leaped, half-fell from Elephant's side, his torch landing on the stone floor beside him. He did not need the torch, with the flood of true illumination washing out of Elephant's opened side. That golden glow was not as bright as sunlight, he saw now, but it was as steady as the sun, without smoke or flames or flickering.

Now Ardneh will appear, Rolf thought, and made himself stand up. He had some idea of how a demon should look, but no ideas at all about a god. He waited, but no

creature of any sort appeared. Elephant was as immobile as ever.

He might take the light as a favorable sign. He chose to do so. He once more climbed the four steps, pausing to marvel at the balance of the heavy door that he had opened. He paused again with his eyes just above the lower rim of the doorway, for the shapes inside were of a bewildering variety and all at first seemed utterly strange. Printed or graven symbols, not one of which Rolf could read, were sprinkled thickly everywhere. Nothing moved; nothing was clearly menacing. The light as steady as the sun came from little panels that glowed like white-hot iron but yet seemed to radiate no warmth.

Pulling himself up gradually until he was halfway into the doorway, Rolf listened. From somewhere deeper inside Elephant came a faint, very faint murmuring sound, a little like running water, a little like soft wind. Wind it was, perhaps, for air was moving faintly out of the doorway, past Rolf's face.

He sat in the doorway a little longer, probing with busy eyes at all the strangeness before him. Actually the open space inside Elephant was not very big. Three or four men would pretty well fill it, and be crowded among all the strange objects that were already there. But now Rolf could see certain indications that men were meant to enter. The door itself had an immensely strong but simple latch that could be worked only from inside. And the narrow clear paths of the metal floor had been roughly surfaced, as if to provide good traction for human feet. And from the fixed furniture of peculiar objects there extended several projections that looked like tool-handles, made to fit the grip of human fingers.

Soon Rolf was crouching entirely inside the doorway, bathing in the heatless light, continuing to marvel. Now he could see more of the interior. Three objects that had puzzled him at first he suddenly understood to be chairs. They were low and stoutly made, faced not toward one another but side by side, turned in what seemed to be

the direction Elephant was facing, toward the huge flat doors.

With gradually increasing boldness, Rolf carefully stood upright—though he was not tall, yet he had little head-room—and made his way step by step, touching things with deliberate caution, to the central chair. This chair was thickly surfaced with stuff that might once have been good padding but was now hard and brittle. It cracked at his touch and sent up a cloud of dust when he at last dared to sit on it. The dust made him sneeze, but soon it was borne away by the mysterious whispering circulation of the air.

Around the three seats and in front of them were ranged many incomprehensible objects, made of metal and glass and substances harder to name. Here were several of the handles that might have been those of tools or weapons; experiments first cautious and then more energetic convinced Rolf that none of these handles were intended to be pulled free to reveal simple tools of some sort on their working ends.

Elephant seemed to be accepting Rolf as some huge placid work-beast might tolerate a baby's prodding; when this comparison occurred to Rolf he smiled. A feeling of possessive power was growing in him. All these wonders were becoming *his*—already they belonged more to him than to any other living man. Suppose Thomas were here now, or Loford. Suppose one of the clever and mighty wizards of the Castle. Would any of them dare do *this*? And Rolf raised a hand, and touched casually one of the light-panels, which gave off only the faintest warmth.

Sitting in the middle chair, he tilted back his head and noticed something that disturbed his rather baseless confidence, by making him think that there was magic involved here after all. Above each seat there hung a mask. Each mask was of the shape to fit a human face, with a strap to hold it on a human head, and two glass rounds for eyes. From each mask's nose there curled away a snout of more than Elephantine length, to fit into a socket in the

wall. When Rolf reached to the mask that rested above his chair, his first touch made the face of it crack dryly, and broke the long snout into a shower of dust and brittle fragments.

Blinking his eyes and brushing powder out of his hair, he looked around him apprehensively. But still nothing happened. Even the murmuring whispering seemed to be smoothing itself down nearer silence.

Rolf sighed out a long shuddering breath and was aware that, for the moment at least, the last of his fear had left him. It was all right, his being here, all right with whatever powers were in charge. He waited. The quiet air seemed pregnant with importance. The movement of the air carried the fresh dust away. A broken mask perhaps did not matter to Ardneh, for Ardneh was not a demon. He was—something more than that. If he was anything at all.

On a sudden impulse Rolf spoke soft words aloud. "Ardneh? You were a god in the Old World, where this Elephant was made. I know that much. I don't know any spells to call you up. Since you're not a demon maybe spells aren't needed—I don't know."

He paused. Encouragement seemed to wrap him, through the softly moving air.

"Loford says that you have come to stand for freedom, and so I . . . I wish that you would work through me. Someone said that the Old One *was* Ardneh, in a way, and in the same way I want to be Ardneh too." For a moment Rolf in his imagination saw himself as the warrior of Loford's vision, mounted on Elephant, armed with the thunderbolt in his hands. And for a moment the dream did not seem at all ridiculous.

Still no voice but the steady fading murmuring answered him. Rolf twisted in his seat, suddenly feeling like a fool kid playing, talking to himself. He sneezed again in the fresh dust raised by his movement. So much for that. It would be nice to have a sorcerer's power, but there was no

point in playing at it like a child. He had no real control of demons, nor of gods either, whatever they might be.

He decided to get on with the job of finding things out. Again he began to test the objects before him and around him with his hands, pulling and prodding and twisting carefully. If there was a magical aspect to Elephant, he was incapable of dealing with it. He would just have to approach it like a farmer confronted with some strange and enormous tool, trying the handles that should make it work—

Rolf grunted in surprise, and snatched his hands away from the table-like thing before him. Within a glassy panel on that table light had suddenly appeared, a series of dots of light, all regular in form and spacing though no two alike in color. Above and around the dots and also limned in pure light were sets of characters, of course unreadable to Rolf. The largest said: CHECKLIST

After contemplating this display for a little time, and reassuring himself that nothing more serious had happened, Rolf was emboldened to put his hand back on the control he had last touched, and push where he had just pulled. The lights in the panel before him obediently died away. He turned them on and off and on again, savoring new power.

The uppermost of the dots on the panel was bright orange. Rolf now noticed that a small knobbed lever at the side of the panel, near his right hand, had also acquired a marking or orange light. He touched this lever now, he pulled on it, nothing happened. He pushed it, and it moved with a click.

NUCLEAR POWER IGNITION sprang out in orange character beneath CHECKLIST on the panel, and at the same moment Elephant grunted.

The grunt was loud, and came sounding up from deep in Elephant's guts. It repeated itself, and turned into a groan like the agony of some deep bellyache. Rolf, stricken suddenly by all old fears redoubled, grabbed at the little lever to reverse what he had done. His shaking finger

missed, as the whole bulk of Elephant lurched beneath him. The groaning divided itself into divers voices, like those of a cage full of demons all in torment and wrestling one against another. Rolf sat paralyzed, afraid to try to stop them now, afraid to let them go. The voices slowly managed harmony in their wrath, their shouting racing faster, blurring into a single shuddering roar.

NUCLEAR POWER ON

Rolf might have leaped up and fled, but for the thought that he could never get out of the cave before Ardneh struck him down. He clutched his dust-exhaling chair and waited. Maybe the world was coming to an end.

The world did not end. Instead, Elephant's shaking gradually diminished. The roaring deepened, becoming smoother and more certain. An exhilarating sense of enormous power being delivered into his hands blended with Rolf's returning confidence, making it stronger than ever.

The orange dot was gone now from beside the NUCLEAR POWER ON legend inside the glass panel, and the markings of orange light were gone from the little lever. The next highest dot in the panel was purple, and now purple markings glowed on another small handle, this one at Rolf's left.

This time he closed his eyes in wincing anticipation as the control clicked under his fingers. When he opened them again he knew another brief spasm of fear. A ring like a giant's collar, nearly a meter in diameter, was descending from above his chair to encircle his head.

The ring came to a halt, not touching him, at the level of his eyes. The inner surface of it was flat and bright, shot with moving patterns of light, the way he supposed a wizard's crystal might look if the visions were uncertain. But soon this confusion cleared away, and Rolf found that by some power he was looking through the surface of the wide ring as if it was a window. This was something more impressive than even Thomas's far-seeing glasses. He could see the cave around him, the big flat doors ahead,

with perfect ease, as if the solid mass of Elephant had become transparent as clear water.

Purple was gone. Now there was a red dot on the panel, and a red-lit control to handle.

ARMAMENT INOPERATIVE

A pair of thin red lines, crossing each other at right angles, had appeared on his vision-ring. Rolf pressed at the red control again, and a spurt of what looked like liquid fire came lashing feebly from one of the projections on Elephant's snout. It was as if Elephant had retched up a mouthful of pure flame, and fouled its own forequarters with its spitting. Only one drop of the flame shot as far as the doors ahead, where it hung heavily, oozing lower like a fire-tear, leaving a blackened trace above it.

Now Rolf sat still for some time, watching the spattering of fire cool and blacken on the door and on Elephant's impervious metal hide. At last he tried again the control that had brought the fire, but this time nothing came. The red dot, unlike the previous ones, stayed on the panel, along with ARMAMENT INOPERATIVE, though he could make the thin red cross-lines on his vision-ring come and go.

He decided that he would go on anyway to the next color, which was a spring-sky blue. He got the blue dot to go out, and went on, testing control after control. There were others that stayed lighted, turning red. Some caused strange rumblings or cracklings around him. Some controls produced no effect that he could see, except for changing the lights on the panel.

When finally the lowest dot in the sequence winked away, the CHECKLIST legend vanished with it. And now for the first time light appeared on the two most prominent handgrips within his reach, outlining them in bright green. These two handles, sturdy enough to have fit a plow, stood one on each side of his chair. He had tried moving them before, without result. Now he tried again.

At his first gentle pressure on the levers, the roaring beneath him, which had gradually been smoothing itself down to a lower level of noise, came swelling up again. Rolf

hesitated, waited, and then stiffened his arms, pushing the two levers forward. Groaning anew, Elephant gave a lurching start and moved. Suddenly the doors were very close ahead. In his startlement, Rolf yanked both the levers back. His great mount bucked, with a sound of studded metal plates laboring like monstrous claws on the stone floor, and then lurched into reverse. It gathered speed. Now the rear wall of the cave was very close behind. Again Rolf overreacted, pushing the levers forward well past their center points. In his haste he moved them unevenly this time, the right farther than the left. Elephant skewed toward his left as he advanced again. His right shoulder touched a door just as Rolf, fighting against panic, once more reversed his two hand controls. Any child could use a pair of reins. You had to let the creature you were driving know that you were boss. The homely thought-pattern helped him get himself under control, and when he had done that he found that the control of Elephant was easy.

Carefully, with the beginning of skill, he eased his great mount forward and backward. There did not seem to be room for a full turn, but he started a turn to the left and stopped and came back and started one to the right. At last he brought Elephant back to somewhere near his original position, standing still and quietly vibrating.

He dared then to let go of the controls, to wipe sweat from his face. He nodded to himself—enough for one day, yes, quite enough. He had probably pushed his luck too far already. He had to find out now if he could put Elephant back to sleep.

Following what seemed to him the commonsense way to accomplish this, Rolf began to return the controls he had moved to their original positions, in the reverse order from that which he had used to wake the Elephant up. The system worked. The colored dots began reappearing on the panel, bottom to top. Soon the vision-ring dimmed, became opaque, rose up away from his head. And soon after that the roar of power mumbled down into silence,

and all the characters and dots of CHECKLIST vanished behind dark glass once more.

Slowly, trembling with a tension he had not fully realized till now, Rolf climbed out of the hole in Elephant's side. At first he left the door open, the light pouring out, while he stood on the stone floor marveling. Yes, it had all really happened. There was a fresh gouge-scar where Elephant's shoulder had touched the surface of the enormous door; there were blackened spots on the door and on Elephant's own surface, where the spattering of fire had fallen—maybe Elephant's thunderbolts had grown feeble with the passing of the many, many years. If that was so, it hardly seemed to matter. The size and power and metallic invulnerability of the Elephant seemed weapons great enough for any battle.

In a moment of imagination he saw himself battering down the Castle walls, rescuing Sarah. But he had no energy left for daydreams. Now he must rest, to be ready for the night, when surely birds would come, and possibly Thomas, and other men as well.

He lighted a rush, then climbed the Elephant's flank again to push shut the massive door, the door's last closure shutting off the light inside. Going up the rope with the torch between his teeth, he thought his main problem might soon be that Loford and Thomas and the other would not believe the truth of all he had to tell.

The upper cave was bright with midday sunlight. He took off his pack, and ate and drank a little. There was only a mouthful of water remaining in the bottle. Probably the birds would bring him more, as soon as darkness fell. Yes, they would certainly be back tonight. They would bring him water and words of good cheer, and they would marvel at what he had to tell.

Excited as he was, Rolf soon fell asleep sitting on hard rock in the high cave, and awoke only as the first darkness was welling up outside. He shook the water in his bottle and then drank down the last of it, for now the birds would surely be here soon.

Full night came, and he looked for them with every passing moment, and yet they did not come. Trying to imagine why they did not, trying in darkness and silence and prolonged aloneness, he found each possibility he thought of to be wilder and more hideous than the last.

Sitting now in the cave's very mouth, he could see some of the sky, and mark the stars that shone in it. Let that bright blue one, he thought, pass from sight behind the pinnacle opposite, and time enough will have passed. I can be sure then that there's something wrong. But surely they'll be here before the heavens have turned the star that far. Surely any moment now . . .

The blue star rode its measured course and vanished. Half-relieved at being forced to action, Rolf stood up, biting his lip. All right, then. Something *was* very wrong. He was going to have to leave the cave and try to get back to the swamp and find his friends. Not only was he out of water, but the information he had gained was too important to be delayed.

Still nothing but the night-wind seemed to be stirring in the dark outside the cave. He anchored his climbing rope again, put on his pack, and then began to lower himself outside. He kept the free length of the rope coiled up, paying it out only as he went down. Looking down now at what the moonlight showed him of the rocks below, he thought he must have been a half-wit or a great hero, to have made that jump that got him into the cave.

His feet touched down at last. Now was the time for the enemy, who had been waiting patiently, to rush out . . . but no rush came. They had never known that he was here.

After several tries he managed to whip his rope free of its anchorage above; he reached as best he could, balanced on the tumbled stones, to catch the anchor-stick as it came falling. But he failed to catch it, so it made a soft clatter when it hit. He crouched down for another lis-

tening pause; but no one came, only the night breeze still whispering softly along the canyon.

He made a quick job of coiling the long rope into his pack. And then he set off for the swamps, working his way cautiously out of the canyon and the rocks to emerge on the western slope of the mountain's foot with the river below him. He angled northward down this slope, heading away from pass and Castle. He had gone only about a hundred meters when the feel of sandy soil under his feet suggested that it might be a good idea for him to bury his pack with all its equipment. He could hardly keep quiet about where he had been if they caught him with all of that, and he would travel lighter and faster without it.

When he had covered up the pack he went on, getting down toward the east back of the Dolles, still half-expecting to be greeted at any moment by the hooting of a bird.

He avoided the places where he and Thomas, on their way up to the pass, had seen soldiers. After a couple of kilometers he got down to the water's edge. Here he knew the river was shallow clear across; he waded in, clothes and all.

He had hardly gotten out of the water onto the eastern bank before the Castle soldiers sprang out of hiding to seize him. He turned at once to flee but before he had taken a full step something that felt incredibly hard and heavy struck him on the side of the head.

He was facedown in the riverside mud. As if through a muffling fog he could hear the voices over him:

"That settled 'im down good." A brief laugh.

"Did this one get t' the barges? See if he's got any loot on 'im."

Hands turned and shook and prodded him. "Naw, nothin'."

"What'll we do, hang 'im in a tree? We haven't hung a thief on this side of the river yet."

"Um. No, they need workers, up at the Castle. This 'un looks healthy enough to be some use. If you didn't scramble his brains."

VII

THOMAS, half-stunned, still dazzled by a dance of luminous afterimages before his eyes, his ears ringing, raised his head and began to try to regather his wits. He was lying on the desert, where a moment ago he had fallen or had been flung. The clouds above were now pouring rain on him; he wiped a hand across his eyes, trying to see more clearly. A little distance off a figure knelt, looking at him. It was the farm-girl in the wide hat, who had run toward him screaming a warning, just in time.

"You are not dead," she was saying. "Oh, I'm glad. You're not one of *them*, are you? Oh no, of course you're not. I'm sorry."

She seemed to mean that she was sorry for having taken him even momentarily for one of *them*—and *they*, if the loathing in her voice was any sign, could only be the Castle-men.

"Of course I'm not." The rain was reviving him; he wiped his face again, and rubbed his hands through his tangled hair. Let the young woman be dried out a little, he thought, and she would be quite good looking. He noticed that there was no wedding ring on her finger. "Why did you yell a warning? How did you know what was going to happen?"

The girl had turned away from him, and was looking around her now, as if for some lost object. "Since I did save your life, will you help me now, please? I've got to find it."

"The thing that was in that case, hey?"

"Yes, where did it go?"

"Into a million pieces, likely, if that lightning hit it."

"No, it wouldn't," the girl said shortly.

"If it was mine I'm not sure I'd ever want to see it again."

"Oh, but I—must." She wanted to find the thing, not talk about it. She stood up, peering this way and that.

"My name is Thomas."

"Oh—I am Olanthe."

"Of the Oasis? I see you wear one of their hats."

"I . . . yes. Now will you help me find the Stone?" She seemed to realize too late that the last word had let slip another bit of information.

"The Stone, hey?" An idea struck him. "The Oasis of the Two Stones; I suppose the name means something. Would this Stone you're looking for be one of those?" He held out his cupped hands as he stood up, thinking he might catch enough water to have a drink.

Soggily dignified, the girl said, "I have a water bottle here, if you are thirsty. Even if you refuse to help me search."

"I have one too, if it wasn't broken. I didn't say I wouldn't help you. I'd just like to know what it was that nearly killed me."

The rain was slowing down. Olanthe turned away from him, searching, walking a widening spiral over the sand.

"Olanthe? I have good reason to be curious, don't you think? I wish you no harm out in your Oasis. I was a farmer once myself. Say, how did you get out past the guards?"

"You were a farmer? What are you now?"

"Now I fight."

She gave him an appraising glance. "I hear the real fighters are in the swamps."

"And I do want to thank you for shouting a warning. You could have done it sooner, though, hey?"

Her eyes turned away, roving distractedly over the nearby dunes and bushes again. "I . . . did see you, bending over the dead reptile. At first I thought you might be only a bandit."

"This Stone of yours draws lightning somehow, and it killed the reptile. You followed me, waiting for the lightning to come again, so you could pick up the Stone from my burned body. And then you couldn't do it."

"I didn't know you, I was afraid," she said in a small

voice. "I can't take any chances with the Stone. Help me find it, please, it's very important."

"I can understand that. Look, you don't have to be frightened of me, farm-girl, if what you say is true. Keep your Stone. We in the swamps don't need its rain." The rain had all but stopped; he looked up at the sky, where rents and gaps of blue were showing through the cloudy mass. "Since you seem to be no better friend than I am of the reptiles, you'd better take shelter under one of these bushes, as I intend to do."

"First I must find the Stone! It can't be far." She began to search more energetically.

"All right, I give up. If they see you running around here they'll find me too. Does the thunderbolt actually hit the Stone? At least you can tell me something about it while we search."

They were both casting over the mounded desert now, eyes on the ground, walking in loops and circles that moved them apart and brought them together again. Olanthe spoke rapidly now. "The bolt always hits the Stone directly, yes, and sometimes throws it for many meters. After that has happened the storm can end." She added what was probably a warning: "You see, whoever formed the Stone meant to make it proof against any one man's greed. Only when possession of it passes from one man or creature to another does its virtue take effect, and summon up a thunderstorm."

Thomas was walking in a slow straight line toward something he had just seen, some twenty meters away. It was the Stone in its case, if he was not mistaken, but picking it up was not going to be easy.

In a moment Olanthe had noticed his fixed attention and was walking at his side, following the direction of his eyes with her own. "Oh!" she said, seeing what he saw. The carved and blackened metal case was lying half-submerged under what appeared to be the flat shimmering surface of a pool of water some eight or ten meters across, filling a small hollow between dunes. "Mirage-plant!"

Thomas nodded. "And about the biggest one I've seen." There was no doubt about what the thing was; reason told a man that any such flourishing pond of real water here was totally improbable. Thinking creatures, unless absolutely crazed by thirst, were not likely to become a mirage-plant's prey. Beasts were a different matter.

In itself, the illusion was flawless. Sunlight sparkled off the seeming surface of the pond (though the abnormal rain, which had now stopped, would have fallen through without splashing and shown the pond to be not water). Small green plants, genuine enough, living on moisture doled out by the quasi-intelligent masterplant below, rimmed around the illusive pool. This camouflage gave an appearance of coolness to the surface of the pond, which was in fact only a plane maintained between layers of air of different temperatures. This surface rippled faintly, like real water, with the wind. Thomas knew that even to one standing as close as two meters the illusion would hold of cool deep water with the play of refracted light on a bottom of clean sand. If one bent to drink and brought his eyes within a meter of the surface, the illusion failed. Man or animal would jump back, once that point was reached; but if they were that close, none lived who could jump fast enough.

Thomas frowned at the sky, where the clouds were still dispersing, not gathering anew. "Did you not tell me that a new storm was summoned up every time the Stone changed hands, and that a bolt must come to strike the Stone itself? If so, we need only wait, and our little pond here will be safely boiled."

They had stopped about ten meters from the mirage. Olanthe shook her head. "A storm comes only when the Stone is taken up by human hands, or by a creature like the reptile that is capable of speech."

The Stone in its case rested in a shallow part of the seeming pool, no more than half under the surface. It would seem to be very easy simply to step forward and pick it up.

"If we had a long stick, we *might* be able to poke it out of there," Thomas thought aloud. But of course there was nothing like a pole to be found here in the middle of the desert. He got some rope out of his pack and made a lasso, with which he had a try at casting around the half-sunken case. The loop sank splashlessly through the surface of the "water," and then at once snapped taut. Thomas dug his heels into the sand; Olanthe came to lend her slender strength to his aid, and they tried for a while to maintain possession of the rope. But shortly it was either let go or be dragged in. From just outside the zone of real danger, the two of them watched with fascination while the rope's tail whipped out of sight like that of a plunging snake. But there was evidently little to the mirage-plant's liking in the rope—a few moments later it was spat out, wound into a knotty ball and looking otherwise the worse for wear, spat or tossed through the air to land a dozen meters away.

At Olanthe's suggestion they next had a try at filling in or smothering the mirage-plant with sand. But the sand was flung back at them faster than they, keeping at a safe distance, could scoop it into the depression. And there were no rocks available to throw.

"If only it would spit out your Stone, as it does sand and rope," Thomas griped. "But no, it must have a taste for magic."

Now that she knew where the Stone was, Olanthe did not seem much worried about retrieving it. She said, "Well, then, one of us must just try to distract the creature, while the other rushes up and grabs the Stone."

"Oh? Just like that? Your life is not too important to you?"

"The Stone is life, to the people at the Oasis." She looked at him haughtily. "Oh, I will be the one to expose myself to danger and create a distraction. It is my property that we are trying to save. And your plan of lassoing it did not work out very well."

The last accusation was undeniable, but he still had not

connected it logically to the new plan when he found himself volunteering insistently to create the distraction himself—though if he gave himself time to think about it, he was not at all sure which of the two roles was the more dangerous. The girl couldn't have maneuvered him into taking the part she wanted him to have, could she? Just that quickly and easily?

Having rehearsed their plan briefly, Thomas and Olanthe separated, then approached the innocent-looking pool from opposite sides. After an exchange of nods, Thomas rushed forward shouting. In one hand he was carrying his knife, in the other the chewed-up rope, which he had partially untangled. He braked to a halt at the last instant, going down on all fours in the sand. He reached forward and lashed with the rope at the surface of the mirage. It seemed that the trick might work, for the creature beneath began grabbing again at the once-rejected fibers.

Olanthe was very quick, and her timing perfect. Unfortunately however she fumbled the Stone in the instant of picking it up, and was forced to reach for it again. Looking across from the other side of the pool, Thomas for the first time saw the deadly tendrils of the mirage-plant as they shot above the surface of the illusion, looping and snapping about the girl's body with marvelous speed. He shouted. He hurled himself around the edge of the pool and plunged into the struggle, slashing with his knife.

Only when he was enmeshed himself did he realize that, incredibly, the deadly network had not been able to hold the girl, that she was backing away quite free. He had no time to wonder about her luck, for his own was not so good. He was gripped around the waist and the head. His blade severed one of the tough, elastic tendrils, but two more snapped around him, their suckers thirsting for his blood. One curled around his right arm, in which he held his knife. His left hand was already caught behind his back. He was sprawled on the sand, only his feet, dug in desperately, keeping him from being dragged to his death. The apparent water-surface had entirely van-

ished now, as the carnivorous plant devoted its full energy to hauling in this stubborn prey. When the pull of it dragged Thomas half upright again he could see down into the hollow, see the nest of writhing mouths and the white animal-bones between them, where the illusion had shown nothing but a sandy bottom.

Energized by the sight. Thomas kicked and fought. He cried out something. He saw the girl, a look of anguish on her face, reaching into her small pack. Her hand emerged holding a grayish, egg-shaped object which she thrust out toward him. "Here!"

He had to drop his useless knife to take the thing she pressed into his clutching fingers. It was hard and heavy in his grasp. Before he could wonder what he was supposed to do with it, he felt the mirage-plant's grip loosening. It was as if his skin and clothing had suddenly developed surfaces of oil and melting ice. He needed no urging to take advantage of this; in a moment he was several meters away. He lay gasping on the sand while he watched the frustrated tendrils wave about disconsolately and then withdraw.

Olanthe, the Thunderstone in its battered case still under her arm, came to kneel beside him; she reached out a tentative hand to take back the small gray Stone that Thomas still held; but instead he shot out his own hand and took her by the wrist.

"One moment, my girl. Bring out yet another Stone and destroy me with it, if you will, but first I will have some explanations."

Still, when she made no answer but only struggled silently to pull away from him, he let her go. When he had done this, she was willing to sit on the sand nearby, looking apologetic. "No," she said. "I—I have no more Stones. There are no more."

"Aha. That's something. Yes, that's good. If it were the Oasis of the Dozen Stones, I don't know what—" He broke off suddenly and looked up. Today he had become preternaturally sensitive to sudden changes in the weath-

er. "The sun is being hidden once again. I take it we may soon expect another thunderbolt?"

She waved a slender hand impatiently. "Oh yes, of course, since the Thunderstone has changed hands again in coming back to me. But that's all right. I'll leave it here on the sand, and we'll just go a little distance off and wait. Then after it's been hit I'll be able to carry it safely."

"May I suggest that you leave it at a safe distance from the mirage-plant? So that we won't have to . . . hey? And while we sit through another rainfall, you might explain to me the virtues of this other Stone." He flipped the one he held into the air, and caught it—then checked himself and looked around, wary of he knew not what.

The clouds were swiftly growing and thickening once more. Thomas and Olanthe, their clothing not yet dried from the previous storm, left the Thunderstone in a gentle hollow between dunes and went a few score paces distant to sit together under the useless shelter of a desert bush.

She blurted out, "I didn't want you to know about the Stone of Freedom too, and that I had it. Otherwise I could have simply walked up to the mirage-plant and taken my property back."

"Yes, I see that. Now."

"I'm sorry. Those suckers didn't draw any blood, did they? Good. Well, now you know our secrets. I must trust you. We need help at the Oasis, all the help that we can get. The invaders are—we can't endure them."

"Who can? We may be able to help each other." The new rain began to fall. Thomas was thoughtful. "Tell me more about these Stones."

There was not much more that she could tell, Olanthe said. The origin of the two Stones was lost in the past. Since the beginnings of the history of the Oasis the farmers there had possessed them both. The folk of the Oasis for the most part lived in harmony with one another, content to stay half-isolated from the rest of the world, though they had been friendly and hospitable to visitors and exhausted travelers who came straying in from the desert.

The secrets of the two Stones had been kept within their own settlement.

The desert soil was rich, lacking only water. And whenever the fields of the Oasis stood in need of rain, he who held the Stone of Thunder at the time would present it to his neighbor; so water came just to suit the farmers' wishes, and drought and flood were alike unknown. The other talisman, called the Stone of Freedom or the Prisoner's Stone, was kept hidden, and only the elders of the Oasis knew of its existence. It was of little use to honest men as long as freedom ruled the land.

Then the foul invaders from the East had come, in force too strong to be resisted. The elders had somehow managed to preserve the secrets of both Stones.

"Alas, it was my own father who broke the pact of secrecy. Oh, he acted not through any wish to help the invaders, no, the very opposite." After saying that Olanthe fell silent for a moment, her eyes downcast, rain dripping from the brim of her wide fieldworker's hat.

"How, then?" Thomas wiped rain from his own eyes. He was thinking that this would shortly be the soggiest desert that man had ever seen. He felt vaguely cheered by the reflection that a certain mirage-plant might be the first of its species ever to drown.

Olanthe was looking down at her hands folded in her lap. "The commander of the invaders' garrison . . . that is . . . he wanted . . ."

Thomas felt something vital move inside him. "Something to do with you?"

"Yes . . . me." She nodded, and looked up. "When I was unwilling, they made threats . . ." She fell silent, and remained so until Thomas reached out and took her hand.

"Afterward—" She had to clear her throat and start over. "Afterward, my father was—he happened to have the Thunderstone in his fields at the time. He unearthed it from its hiding place—"

The latest bolt came smashing down at the Stone forty or fifty meters away, making Thomas jump for all that he

had been expecting it, jarring his teeth and bones anew.

"—and, pretending to curry favor, he gave it to the garrison commander. My father acted as if he was pleased that the pig had taken a fancy to me. My father told him that the Stone had something to do with the Oasis' rain, but of course he never mentioned lightning.

"They—they stood talking inside the invaders' compound, there, what used to be a park. It was at night. My father said later that he could hear the thunder starting overhead while they stood there, and he smiled at his enemy, the man who had . . . and then the commander turned away, with the Thunderstone under his arm, to walk across the parade-ground to his quarters. He never finished his walk."

Thomas nodded. He squeezed Olanthe's hand slightly.

She went on: "Next day a soldier picked the Stone up and brought it right to the one who had been second in command, and was now in charge. They knew it was something of magical importance, but they guessed no more than that. Before another storm could break over their heads they had put the Thunderstone into the pouch of a courier reptile and dispatched it toward the wizards at the Castle. We knew this because we could see the growing storm follow the reptile out over the desert heading west. We knew the storm must catch up before the leather-wings reached the Castle. So. So it was necessary for someone to go out and recover the Stone, before it fell again into the hands of enemies or strangers. Without it, the Oasis would die for lack of water, in a matter of days."

"They sent a girl? I mean, you've done well, but . . ."

"A girl can search as well as a man. And others of the enemy would be—would be after me, now that the old commander is dead. And my father would do something else—and perhaps bring destruction on us all.

"So the elders were willing enough that I should leave, and they gave me the Stone of Freedom, which for its bearer sets fences and guards and all confinements at

naught. Now I must return the Thunderstone to the Oasis somehow, and then—I don't know what I'll do."

"I see." Thomas shifted around, making squelching noises as he moved. The rain was thinning again. The Thunderstone had not been moved far by the latest bolt—he could see it, a small dark lump on the sand, unimpressive at this distance.

He stretched out his hand with the Stone of Freedom in it to Olanthe. "The Stones are both of them yours, as I said, with no dispute from me. But tell me this, what use are they, what use is life itself, to your people, as long as the invaders are there?"

She accepted the Stone from him almost reluctantly, with what seemed signs of hope in her eyes. "What can we do? What are you getting at? I must take back the Thunderstone or all will perish."

"The Oasis can live for a few more days at least without it. Right? And remember this: while it's there, the enemy may find it, and realize what it is, and perfect his power over you."

She asked again, pleading now, "What can we do?"

Thomas smiled. He stood up, just as the sun broke out once more. "I can think of several things. And I know those who will be able to think of more. Come with me to the swamps!"

VIII

DAZED as he was by the blow on his head, Rolf still had wit enough left to feel thankful that he had buried his pack with its load of cave-exploring equipment. And with enough to realize that the soldiers thought him nothing more than a thief, who had been trying to get aboard one of the river-barges. They asked him no questions, and he said nothing at all.

With his feet hobbled by a cord and his hands bound painfully behind him, he was taken to a command-post

concealed in a clump of trees right by the riverbank. There he was tied to a tree, and left to await being taken to the Castle. His head throbbing, he sat on the ground and tried to think of nothing. He was tied too well and watched too closely to think of getting himself loose. He listened and watched as the soldiers went about their routines of duty; they all seemed discouragingly capable, though they were cautious and none of them ever went alone into the dark.

The watch was changed with the earliest daylight. The soldiers who had captured Rolf now tied a leading cord around his neck, freed his legs, and took him with them on the road to the Castle. Like some animal being led to slaughter, he was tied by his tether behind a riding-beast. Now he thought of nothing but possibilities of escape, but he had yet to see the smallest chance. The men leading him had grown more cheerful with daylight and their relief from duty; they seemed to give Rolf very little thought now, but they remained very alert.

The distance to the Castle was not great. The road went down the west bank of the Dolles for a couple of kilometers, joining other roads all converging toward the pass. And then the pass came in sight, with the village and its bridge in the foreground, and the Castle brooding above.

As they started over the high bridge Rolf raised his eyes toward the northeast, looking at the high distant rocks where only a day ago he had been hidden in safety; and looking there now, he saw that which deepened his despair: reptiles clustered on those rocks, and clouded the air above them, thick as flies around dead meat. And marching up the slope toward those rocks was a company of soldiers, like bronze-black ants.

The enemy had found the cave, then. That must be it. Rolf brought his eyes back to the bridge under his feet, hardly aware of his surroundings any longer. He was lost, and all else too.

They came down from the high arching bridge into the half-deserted village on the eastern bank. At the landing-place barges were moored, and slaves worked much as

Rolf had seen them two days past, unloading baskets of grain and bundles of hides. Another barge was low in the water with the weight of stones that would soon be hauled uphill to build the Castle stronger.

Once over the bridge, the soldiers who had Rolf in charge began to relax their vigilance, to talk and joke. In the nearly deserted village square they halted, straightening their uniforms, evidently getting in proper shape for appearance in the Castle. Rolf, his head still aching, stood staring at the rump of the animal he was still tied to.

A movement caught in the corner of his eye made him idly turn his head. The village inn, a two-story timber structure, was still in business, evidently. There were hangers-on of the invader in the village, displaced people with nowhere to go, a traveler or two. Two men were standing now on the inn's porch.

Rolf's heart leaped when he saw Mewick; there was no mistake, the lean figure was the same, though liberal streaks of gray in the dark hair had added twenty years of age—added them credibly, when seen above the lined gravity of Mewick's face. The short cloak and the pack of the magic-peddler were gone—Rolf remembered the gimcracks left piled beside three slaughtered soldiers on the road that rimmed the swamps. Mewick was wearing moderately rich clothing now, putting Rolf in mind of merchants he had once seen, who were said to be from island dominions in the sea.

Rolf looked away, making his face as blank as he could. Let him make one blunder now, and Mewick would be dragged away beside him, and both of them would meet some fate grimmer than that of a mere thief. Desperately Rolf tried to think of some way of passing on to Mewick the knowledge that he had gained of the Elephant. Even if the Elephant itself was lost now to the Free Folk, the knowledge of it could be of terrible importance to them.

The porch where Mewick stood was not ten meters distant, on Rolf's right side. He could hear Mewick talking with a rotund man, probably the keeper of the inn—talking

about problems of trade and shipping, the prevalence of bandits. Mewick sounded gloomy as ever. Let him ask something about the soldiers swarming on yonder hill—let him ask *something* of the innkeeper that I can answer yes or no, thought Rolf, and I will nod my head or shake it, enough for him to see.

But Mewick asked the innkeeper no such thing—dared not, or could not think of a useful question that could be made to sound innocent. Rolf could not think of one either. Tonight when he was in the dungeon they would each think of ten questions Mewick might have asked. Or of some other way of passing knowledge. But at least Rolf knew that Mewick must have seen him—that was something, that his fate was not entirely unknown to his friends. Staring at the riding-beast's rump again, Rolf made one nodding motion of his head.

The soldiers were ready now, and moved on again, Rolf towed behind them on his tether. Once out of the little village, the road at once ascended. It was worn deep here by the daily passage of an army. The mighty stone walls and towers of the Castle swelled with nearness now, just ahead, filling Rolf's vision and his mind. Two days ago lying in hidden safety he had watched other prisoners—Sarah!—tread this road, to be swallowed between the twin towers that guarded the great gate.

That gate was open now, the portcullis suspended above it looking more than ever like the teeth of some vast jaw. Neither the sentries standing by inside, nor the officer to whom Rolf's captors turned him over, bothered to do more than glance at Rolf. He was pulled from the outer courtyard to an inner one, where there were stored carts and harness, and from which the entrance of a stable opened. Here the ropes tying him were taken off, and he was given to guards who wore no bronze helmets and carried no swords, but had only keys and cudgels at their belts. These pushed him into a doorway at the base of the Castle's keep, and led him from thence downward, over worn and damp stairs, to what was likely the most ancient

part of the old Castle. Underground, or nearly so, the passage became level, dark and narrow. It was lighted by a few high windows and lined with cells, these for the most part seeming to have been newly dug. The cells were separated from the corridor by heavy grilles of iron. Some of them were crowded with wretched figures while others waited empty, doubtless for the return of slaves who labored somewhere up above. The smell was worse than that of any animal pen that Rolf had ever visited.

The heavy door of one of the crowded cells was opened by a turnkey. The apathetic bodies sitting and lying inside did not stir. Rolf was sent with an impersonal kick to join them, and the door was made fast behind him.

The morning light that entered so poorly into those upper dungeons had little better success in penetrating the richly curtained windows of the upper tower. It was not the sun that wakened the Satrap Ekuman today, but the sound of someone talking, in a voice of quiet excitement, to the guards stationed just outside his chamber door.

Blinking, he roused himself in his vast bed. When his concubine of the night, who was curled sleeping like some soft beast at her master's feet, made a movement that impeded his stretching, he kicked at her irritably. She awoke but made not a sound nor dared to look at him, but only drew herself away.

Ekuman got up. The voice at the door was going on, though he could not hear the words. He wrapped his lean body in a plain gown, then spent a moment in setting aside the magical defense that guarded the doorway of his bedchamber from within. Then, rubbing sleepily at his face, he called out, wanting to know whose business brought them to him at this hour.

It was the Master of the Reptiles who was passed in by the guards. This Master was a small man, somewhat leathery of skin himself, and usually phlegmatic in his manner. But his face was now aglow with triumph, so that

the sight of him made Ekuman's hopes blaze up before the man had uttered a single word.

His first words indeed were spoken quickly enough: "Sire, sire, we have found the Elephant for you!"

And the Master of the Reptiles rushed quickly on with explanations, as Ekuman's expression bade him do—how he had been zealous to investigate yesterday's reports of a strange rumbling roaring noise, heard by reptiles, that seemed to come from somewhere underground beneath the rocks on the north side of the pass. And then there had been the report of birds attacking troopers, during the massive night maneuvers in that area—

"The Elephant, the Elephant! Have you news of it or not?"

"Yes, Lord!"

At break of dawn today the Master had sent his reptiles in all their numbers to those rocks, under orders to cover them centimeter by centimeter, crawling if need be, to find the cause of the strange noise that had been there yesterday.

And the reptiles had found it. First, the entrance to a huge and artificial cave. There were signs that at least one human had recently been there, and probably birds as well. Someone had carved a notch to hold a climbing rope—

Observing the countenance of his Lord, the Master of the Reptiles swallowed some of his words, hastily condensing his story further. One reptile more daring than the rest had gone down into the dimness of the lower cave. The flying beast had not the skill to describe in much detail what it had seen, but it swore that the Elephant was in that cave—a thing of metal, huge as a house and solid as a rock, with the Elephant-symbol painted on its flanks.

"Good," Ekuman by this time was saying to the Master of the Reptiles. "Very good. You will be well rewarded indeed if all this proves to be the truth." He tossed the man a jeweled ring, in token of more to come. Then the Satrap, half-dressed as he was, descended to the lower level of the

tower. From here a doorway gave onto the broad flat roof of the keep, and from this roof an excellent view could be had of all the country around.

The Master of the Reptiles, basking in his favor, hurried just behind him. His other chief subordinates, he knew, would be gathering around him momentarily, as soon as they heard the tidings of the great discovery. In truth, Ekuman had no more than rested his hands on the northern battlement, and seen that a column of his soldiers were just entering the jumbled rocks across the pass, and that the high places on the rocks and the air above were thick with reptiles, when there came the sound of many climbing feet upon a nearby stair. Turning, he saw the Master of the Troops coming up, with his officers and aides behind him, and yet others following them.

Frowning at the Master of the Troops, a tough graying soldier named Garl, Ekuman demanded, "Just what are all those men doing over there?"

Garl's face, which had been set to join in his Lord's triumph, quickly sobered. "Lord, we are . . . consolidating the position against any possible enemy action. And I am waiting only for your word to send men into the cave itself. We have ladders and climbing equipment ready—"

Ekuman was nodding at him. "You do well to await my word before taking such a step."

Among the men now gathering around Ekuman on the roof was the wizard Zarf, who had come up just in time to hear the last exchange of speech.

"Lord," volunteered Zarf, "it will be best if I am first into this cave." Then he bowed slightly as the older wizard came puffing unimpressively up the stairs. "Or Master Elslood, of course. If he is not required to be busy elsewhere."

Ekuman turned away from his wizards and looked out across the pass again, keeping his face blank. Elslood and Zarf were well and firmly under his thumb, and through them, all the others here. Yet he had heard of other Satraps who doubtless had been as firmly seated and still

had been overthrown by intrigues in their own households—the overlords in the East had not seemed to care, if the usurpers served them with equal or greater dedication.

So Ekuman did not mean to trust a power as great as that of the Elephant under the personal control of anyone except himself. Or at least he meant to reserve that option to himself until he had learned much more about the Elephant than his wizards had yet been able to tell him.

To Garl, the Master of the Troops, Ekuman said, "Signal at once to those across the pass. No man is to enter that cave by any route, until I personally have given permission."

This signaling was promptly attended to. Ekuman, noticing the Master of the Harem hovering in the background, was reminded of another matter to be taken care of. He beckoned to the eunuch and said, "That girl I had last night acted like one half-sick. Dispose of her."

"At once, Lord." The eunuch, tall and heavy, bowed. Then he reached behind him and with a conjurer's motion pulled forward a short slender figure, garbed in a harem gown—the girl had until now been hidden behind his bulk. "This girl I think will be very lively, Lord. She was brought in two days ago, and at my direction has been examined carefully and reserved for you."

"Hm." Engrossed as he was with other matters, Ekuman took time to look at this girl. Dark-haired and very young and certainly attractive. Silent, yet brave enough to scowl openly at him in hate—yes, she was interesting. "Very well. But now is not the time for harem matters." He dismissed the eunuch with a wave.

The Master of the Reptiles stood now at Ekuman's side, and put what seemed to be a new sense of importance into a tiny sound of throat-clearing. "Lord? Is it your wish that I should make ready a courier to send East? With word of our discovery?"

The man was already grown presumptuous, having found

himself in favor. But Ekuman would let him puff a little yet, that correction when it came might be the more precise and salutary. "No, I will send no word of this discovery yet. Not until I am more certain of just what has been discovered yonder." Ekuman looked again toward the north. It crossed his mind as he spoke that if Elephant's power was all that had been hinted, it was just possible that with it under his control he might even be able to face east one day without cringing in utter subservience—but no, he would not let even his inner thoughts follow that line. Not yet.

From the direction of the ascending stair, a loud masculine voice now said, "Well! The prettiest little piece I've seen in about a month!"

Ekuman turned once again, to greet his neighbor and son-in-law to be. The Satrap Chup was just mounting to the roof-terrace, Golden Charmian on his arm. Ekuman knew quite well the signals of his daughter's face, school it though she might; and glancing at her now he felt immediately certain that Chup's thoughtless exclamation of praise for the new young dark-haired slave would cost Chup some future moment's peace if nothing more.

Ekuman's chief sensation as he thought about his daughter's impending marriage was one of relief; her dedication to petty malice was so strong that he felt sure her departure would rid his household of a whole vortex of minor intrigues. He had no illusion that the match was going to form any reliable alliance between himself and Chup. In fact he thought with some approval that Charmian's presence might ultimately weaken Chup, and that would bode well for Ekuman's own ambition. There were recurring whispers on the wind saying that some one of the coastal Satraps might soon be promoted to a position of suzerainty over all the others. These were whispers only, perhaps meant merely to keep them all vying with one another to serve the East, but still . . .

Chup came pacing to Ekuman's side. He leaned his tall warrior's frame, dressed in rich cloth of red and black, upon

the parapet, and looked out at the activity of men and reptiles on the north side of the pass.

Ekuman had not yet discussed the Elephant at all with his visiting peer, but certainly Chup must know a good deal about it by now, through Charmian if by no other means.

Standing at Chup's side, he said conversationally, "I thought, brother, that I might ride forth this afternoon, to oversee this treasure-hunt my men are on among the rocks. No doubt you've heard the tales? If you would care to ride with me, of course, you will be welcome."

Ekuman had phrased the invitation in a style that left quite open to acceptance or polite refusal, and Chup elected to return the latter, saying, "Naturally, elder brother, your company is always a delight. And riding, even poking around among some rocks, would be a form of exercise. But—well, unless you—"

Ekuman let himself suddenly remember something. "In truth it was a rather poor suggestion for amusement. My own attention is so engrossed by this matter, that I have forgotten another concern at hand, much more suited to a true warrior's taste. You might divert yourself and at the same time render me a true service in preparing for the wedding celebration. As you know, I plan some gladiatorial entertainment on that day—nothing professional, just some of these sturdy farm lads—"

"I like to watch amateurs go at it, if they've any spirit."

"Just so, Brother Chup. Well, we face the problem of choosing out some lively ones; would you deign to visit the dungeons with my Master of the Games? I'm sure no one in my employ could pick out fighting men as well as you can. You may even find one or two with real training; if not, I know you'll spot the raw ability . . ."

Chup was nodding agreement, though with little enthusiasm, as Ekuman maneuvered him away toward the stair. The two Satraps were followed in that direction by the mass of aides and attendants who had surrounded them upon the roof. The eunuch Master of the Harem trailed in the rear, holding the arm of the dark-haired slave-girl

firmly in his massive grip. Charmian, her ethereal face disfigured by one of her petty rages, was staring after them. The princess was now being left alone upon the roof-terrace, except for her personal maid—and one other.

Elslood the wizard stood before Charmian and bowed his massive gray head slightly. He was marking the hatred with which her eyes followed the lovely slave-girl. "My Princess?"

Her eyes turned on him, losing their look of hate but remaining as hopelessly distant as ever. "Well?" she demanded. Soon she would be gone, and he unable to follow. While she was yet here, he would take great risks, hoping nothing more than to please her. Such was his doom, and he could do nothing about it but try to conceal it from others; he could not even do that, he knew with a sinking feeling, the very maidservant was now smiling at him openly.

Elslood said, "That new harem-slave, my Princess; there is a circumstance I know of, that I might be able to turn to your amusement—"

Listening, Charmian began to smile.

Chup bent his head to follow the jovial Master of the Games and the sallow chief warden through the low-roofed dungeons. Chup wrinkled his nose and tried to hold his breath against the stench. So far he had had nothing to say about the prospective gladiators but a few terse expressions of scorn. Sturdy farm lads they might once have been, but now they had rotted in their cages overlong. He suspected that all the hale ones were up above, unloading barges or building roads or walls. Faugh! What did it serve, to pen men up like this? It served no aim that Chup could see, but only created a foulness. If the men were objectionable and useless, let them be killed. If good work was to be gotten from them, then at least house them in fresh air and feed them, like draft animals of some value.

Chup had as yet made no pilgrimage to the East, had pledged no allegiance to those dark and mighty and mysterious lords. He supposed he would go, some day soon. All men must serve some master, or so the way of the world

seemed to be. Charmian was already egging him on, to get his wizards to arrange the matter. Charmian . . . *why* did he want to marry her? He had women enough—ah, but none so fair. And the greatest warrior must have the fairest princess, that was one of the things a man fought for. So, once again, was the way of the world.

The warden stopped before yet another dim and noisome cage, and delicately reminded Chup of the fact that no gladiators had as yet been chosen: "We'd best pick out today whatever your Lordship decides should be reserved for the games. I think the foremen of the work-gangs will be down here soon enough, taking all the bodies that can be made to lift and haul." And then the warden fell abruptly silent, having just got a dirty look from the Master of the Games. Probably new work-gangs were going to be sent across the pass to dig, and that business was not something to be discussed before a visitor.

Chup had a fairly good idea of what the Elephant-search was all about, and of course he was keen on learning more. He knew that if he had ridden out with Ekuman, he would not have been taken where there was anything worth the seeing. No, Chup would learn in good time whatever they found. Charmian, who would certainly have her uses, wanted very much to be the full queen of an overlord. Chup's wizards had heard hints that one of the Satraps here along the coast might soon be raised to such an eminence. . .

"This lot here is a bit fresher than the last," said the warden hopefully, looking into the cell.

Chup sniffed. "If no sweeter." The cell was pretty well filled up with ten or a dozen men who at first glance looked like nothing much; but with only a quick look you could never be sure. Chup was inescapably interested in fighting and in fighters, even only in potential. The Master of the Games began to harangue this lot of wretches: brave lads, raise your hands, who will step out and have a chance for glory, and so forth. If Chup had been in a cell he would not have believed a word of it for a moment. Neither did those who were in fact inside; though it stood to reason

that any who were real men in there would seize any real chance to take revenge for their evil fate.

On impulse, Chup took charge. "Open the door," he ordered. He got a startled glance from the warden, whose speech he interrupted, but such was the Satrap's voice and bearing that he did not have to repeat himself.

As the warden was swinging a segment of the grillwork back, Chup drew out his sword and set it on the dirty floor. This was not his prized battle-winning weapon, of course, he would not treat that in such a style. This was a fancier-looking blade that he wore on dress-up days like this—it was serviceable enough, of course.

All were gaping at him. "Now let me borrow this," he said. And he took the cudgel from the startled warden's belt, tried the grip of it in his hand, whipped it once or twice through the air. Then he held it down at his side.

He faced the sullen, unbelieving faces inside the cell. Not one of the men had yet stood up. "You men in there! Or whatever you are. If there be a man among you, let him come out and take this up." He shoved with his elegant toe at the bare sword, moving it a hand's breadth nearer them. "We're at the end of a passage here, and you can set your back against a wall and hack away at me—these two with me will give us room, I doubt not. Well?"

No answer.

"Come, come, you fear to soil my fine garments? Let me tell you, I raped a dozen of your sisters this morning, ere I had my breakfast. Look, the sword is real. D'you think I'd stoop to playing pranks on such as you—well, here's a bantam with some life in him, if we can't get a man full grown."

Putting one foot slowly in front of the other, Rolf was coming out of the cell. Chup's arm kept the warden back, to give Rolf room, till he was out. Then the warden sprang forward and clanged shut the door.

Whether it was the power of Ardneh that possessed Rolf now, or only the power of hate, it left no room in him for fear. Without taking his eyes from Chup's, he squatted and rose up again, the sword's hilt now gripped tight in his

right hand. The weapon felt wonderfully deadly, longer and heavier than the only other sword that he had ever held.

Chup no longer needed to put out an arm to make the warden and the Master of the Games stay well behind him. With cautious outrage they peered around the Satrap at this strange creature, an armed prisoner. At another time Rolf would have laughed at their expressions. The Master of the Games had one hand half-raised, almost but not quite daring to pluck at the Lord Chup's sleeve; and the warden kept muttering, something about calling for a couple of men with pikes.

Chup's eyes were locked with Rolf's, a resonance between them. In the tall Satrap's face there was a life that had not been there before. Without looking around he answered the blithering behind him: "Oh, go away if you like, and stand behind your pikemen. Only let me have a few moments' life at least out of this deadly boring day."

And Chup was thinking: *Mountains of the East! Look how ready this one is to carve me! See in his face how little he values his own skin at this moment. If he but knew how to hold that sword, I'd be looking for pikemen myself. Ah, to lead into battle an army of men who all had something like this one's will to fight!*

The youth was coming forward now, moving slowly at first, convincing himself that there was no hidden trap laid for him here. In a moment he would lunge, or hack. Chup waited, poised, holding the cudgel loosely, waist-high, pointing it horizontally like a dagger for a thrust. In a moment of time he had grown happy, moved into the true intense life of physical danger, so much more real than any other part of life. He was going to have to exert all his powers to win with the short stick of wood against the long keen blade and the earnest clumsy hate behind it.

Rolf's intent to attack showed itself in his face an instant before he lunged, and Chup was very glad to have the warning; he knew the young could move very fast, and utter ignorance could wield a sword with deadly unortho-

doxy. Dodging back as fast as he could shift his weight, Chup made the awkward downcurve of the blade's path miss him by something less than he in his bravest moments would have planned. Chup counterattacked, stepping in with his best speed, first whacking down with the cudgel against the blade to keep a backstroke from coming up into his legs or groin, then dagger-thrusting with the blunt end of the club. He aimed just below the youth's breastbone; he did not want to do this brave one any permanent damage.

Rolf never saw the counterthrust coming. He only felt the murderous impact of it, paralyzing him, knocking out his wind. His hand let go the sword. His knees betrayed him also, so that he fell slumping down onto the dirty stones, seeing through a reddish haze, fighting now for nothing greater than to draw a breath.

The warden and the Master of the Games, in voices loud with relief, clamored their praise for his Lordship's bravery and skill. His Lordship wiped his nose on his sleeve and spat. His toe prodded Rolf, gently. "You there—you'll have another chance in a few days to draw some blood." He handed the cudgel back to the warden, and accepted the sword the man had picked up for him.

"Feed and exercise him," Chup ordered, nodding at Rolf. Then he surveyed for the last time the other prisoners, who were now moving restlessly inside their fetid cage, awake now when it was too late and the door was once more shut upon them. So Chup had expected, knowing men. "Faugh! Pick out what other ones you will!" And with that his Lordship stalked away.

The wardens who came to hoist Rolf back to his feet did not put him back into the cell, but instead led him to a stair and so up into full daylight. He was only beginning to be able to draw all the breath he needed. They had to half carry him through one small courtyard after another, through a surprising warren of walls and sheds and gates. The Castle was even bigger, and far more complex, than it had looked from the outside. By turning his head to look

up at the keep and its tower, he kept his bearings; he was now on the eastern side of the keep, still of course within the mighty outer walls. And just as his breath was coming back strong enough to let him walk unaided, Rolf saw that which made him feel that Chup's club had struck again—he saw a small face, framed in dark hair, in a narrow window high up in the keep.

He tried to delay to look a moment longer, but the guards all unheeding dragged him on. Still out-of-doors, they brought him at last to a cell that stood alone against the wall of a shed, a stone-walled cell just about big enough for a man to stand up in and long enough for him to lie down. It was quite windowless, but the door was an open grillwork of hardwood and iron bars. Rolf stood inside the cell, staring at the clean new wall, hearing the door being locked behind him. The face at the window had been Sarah's. At least she was still alive.

Small as this cell was, it gave him more room than had the crowded one below. And this one was free of filth, being new and open to the air. Looking out through the grillwork of the door into the sunlight, Rolf could not see much more than the wall and corner of the adjacent shed, and more blank walls a few meters distant. The keep and its windows were not within his range of vision.

He had not been sitting long on the straw-littered stone of the floor when a warden came, bringing him a jug of water, and a plate of food surprisingly substantial and clean. Rolf drank and ate, and tried to keep himself from thinking of anything beyond the moment's satisfaction.

He was startled awake from a nervous, twitching doze by the grating of the cell's lock. One man stood at the opened door, a tough-looking soldier with a tanned and lined face, not one of the dungeon wardens. This man wore the bronze helmet of the troops, and under his arm he carried a pair of mock swords, having true handles but blunt wooden shafts instead of blades.

"All right, kid, fall out."

Saying nothing, Rolf got up and went with him. The man led him around a corner into a small closed yard. Along one wall stout butts of timber had been set firmly in the ground; these were much hacked and splintered. There was no one around at the moment.

Facing Rolf, the man held out one of the practice swords to him, hilt first. "Take this and come at me. Let's see what you can do." And when Rolf did not instantly obey him his voice shifted effortlessly into a heavy, threatening tone. "Come on! Or maybe you'd rather go up on the roof instead, and fight the leather-wings? Up there you won't get no sword to use—you'll be strung up by your fingers."

Slowly Rolf reached out and took the proffered weapon. Evidently seeing by Rolf's manner that he was genuinely ignorant and puzzled, the soldier ceased threatening him and explained: "Kid, you're lucky. You're gonna be put into the arena to fight. Do a good job and you'll see no more dungeons. How'd you like a chance to join the army? Have a real man's life?"

"If I get into the arena with Chup," said Rolf, his voice low, "I'll carve his guts out if I can. He'll have to kill me. So either way I won't be in your army after that."

The soldier rubbed his jaw. "The Lord Chup," he said.

"He picked me out. He said I'd have another chance at him, in a few days."

"Yeah. Yeah, well, he's like that. A real man, a real fighter, admires anybody who'll put up a scrap."

As much as he hated the invaders, Rolf had to believe in the honesty of the man who had just beaten him, wooden stick against sword. He had been granted clean air and water and good food, and now, it seemed, one to teach him swording. He was being given a real chance, if a small one, to strike back once more before he was destroyed.

"All right, kid, make up your mind."

Rolf smiled, looking down at the wooden sword in his hand. Maybe he could strike back more than once. He stepped forward suddenly and struck, aiming with his best intent to hit the other's face.

The old soldier's weapon slid easily up into place to block the blow. He returned Rolf's bitter smile. "That's it, hit first and hit hard when you can. Now let me show you how to hold a sword."

IX -

"WE MUST strike first, and strike hard." Thomas spoke the words in a low, heavy voice, knowing their truth and at the same time knowing the grim risks that they implied.

Around him in the huge lean-to were assembled the leaders of the Free Folk, all of them who had been able to respond in time to his summons to a council. Olanthe sat at his left hand, and Loford at his right. The bird Strijeef had a place in the circle, sitting sideways and with his unwounded wing raised to shield his eyes from the fire-light, which was so mild to human sight.

Around the island the night noises of the swamp rose and fell. The two-legged people and the bird were silent, watching Thomas. He went on: "When Ekuman has gotten the Elephant into his hands, and has made himself its master—then it will be too late for us. Too late to attack or to defend, even if we could raise ten thousand men. Is this not true?"

Loford nodded his great head at once. The others in the circle, with nods or low voices, added their agreement. Only one or two were hesitantly silent, and these could not deny what had been said.

Thomas said, "If we are daring enough, we may let Ekuman dig away the mountain first, and then when he has uncovered the treasure, strike to take it from him. But that moment is the very latest to which we can delay attacking, and it lies only a few days in the future."

"The very day of the wedding," said someone.

"Very likely," Thomas agreed.

Another man, the leader of a band from the delta region, shook his head. "You want to attack him on his very door-

step. How many men can we raise in a few days, and march there with any secrecy? Hardly more than two hundred, I think!"

There was some discussion. No one could really dispute that the figure of two hundred must be approximately correct.

"Ekuman will have the Elephant-diggings guarded heavily," the man from the delta predicted. "He must have a thousand men available, in and around the Castle."

"Still, do you see any alternative to attacking?" Thomas asked him. Then Thomas looked around the fire-lit circle, questioning each person with his eyes. None had anything to suggest. Loford's visions, and those of the Old One before him, had convinced them all that the Elephant was the key on which the future rested.

"Then, since we must attack, it only remains to determine how. Don't forget that we now have new powers of magic on our side. The Thunderstone—we've already discussed some plans for that. And we'll find a way to put the Stone of Freedom to work, too. There are plenty of prisoners needing to be freed. One of them, especially, would be important to us now."

"The boy who was in the cave," said Olanthe.

Thomas nodded.

Mewick spoke up; with the gray still painted in his hair he looked like some grave tribal elder. "I think the soldiers who had him knew nothing of his importance, of where he had been. On his clothes was much mud, so likely they took him at the riverbank. And they had tied him most casually behind a beast, and the soldiers are just taking it easy, so-so, looking around, telling jokes. And Rolf was smart, he did not look at me but once. If he stays smart I think they will just be using him as an ordinary slave."

Thomas added, "There are some work-parties going out of the Castle at night now, as well as in the daytime, and the birds are watching for Rolf in the ones that go out at night." He hesitated. "Of course we can't be sure that he really managed to learn anything about the Elephant."

"He nodded to me," Mewick said sadly. "How could he talk? What signal could he give? So I think the nod means he learned something."

Olanthe said, "It might have meant just that he saw you."

"Maybe."

"Well." With a gesture Thomas put the problem of Rolf aside for the moment. "With more knowledge of the Elephant or without it, we must still get the thing out of Ekuman's hands, or else overthrow him before he can put it to use. Now, consider that our friend Ekuman is not stupid, nor are his chief officers. They know that we'll be trying something."

"All the more hopeless, then," said the pessimistic delta-man.

"Not at all," said Thomas firmly. He looked around the fire-lit circle again and saw the faces steady in their support. "For one thing, we'll arrange diversions in other parts of the countryside. We'll draw troops away from the Castle if we can, at least keep any more from being sent there."

"Ekuman will still know that we're coming."

"Then we'll come in a way that he doesn't expect!" Quickly Thomas scratched on the bare earth beside the fire a rough map of the Broken Lands. "Here, and here, are the likely places for us to cross the river, to get near the Castle for an attack. Ekuman will be strengthening the night patrol in those places. But we'll avoid them."

"How?"

"It'll mean a long hike, but we can do it. Go farther south, cross the Dolles in your country, the delta. Move in small groups, mostly at night of course. Get across the mountains there in the south. Reassemble, somewhere on the desert . . ." Thomas's voice slowed, as a new idea took shape within his mind.

Olanthe, at his side, seemed to be reading his thoughts. "That's not far from the Oasis," she said.

Thomas faced her. "Olanthe, how many of the Oasis farmers would be willing to join us, against the odds that

we'll be facing, for an attack to seize the Elephant—maybe to overthrow the Castle itself?"

"How many? Every one of them!" Her face had lighted. "Two hundred and a few more, men and boys. And some of the women will come too. If you once get the invaders off my people's necks, they'll go to the Castle and fight, they'll follow you to the Black Mountains if you like. They'll fight with their pitchforks and reaping-hooks!"

"They'll have swords and shields and arrows for the picking-up, if we can hit the Oasis garrison the way they should be hit!" It was a heady thing for Thomas to see, the hope coming into the faces of these strong people who now depended so much on his words. Across the back of his mind the question danced: Was it some such feeling as this that had started Ekuman on his climb for absolute power?

The objector from the delta was ready and willing to act as an anchor on Thomas's soaring dreams. "Aye, suppose we do attack the Oasis at night! Suppose we win! Then what, next day, when the leather-wings come out from the Castle and see what's happened? We're out there, in the midst of the desert; we'll not get back to the swamp or the mountains before Ekuman's cavalry has gobbled us up." His voice became sarcastic. "Or maybe you think we can raid the Oasis and wipe out the garrison, and march away from it again, all in one night?" The man snorted his scorn. "It would've been done already if it was so simple."

"We've got new powers now, remember?" Thomas pointed again to the Thunderstone, which Olanthe carried with her day and night. "It will bring not only lightning, but sheltering clouds and rain as well. And I mean for us to use every power that it has!"

On his first night within the Castle walls Rolf in his great exhaustion could do nothing but sleep. In the morning he was well fed, and again at noon. And in both morning and afternoon the old soldier came to take him to the practice yard, where they spent an hour or two each time. In

the afternoon they practiced with real shields as well as the mock-swords, and Rolf was given a gladiator's barbut-helm to wear, that he might begin to accustom himself to having it on his head.

His hands were callused by farm work, and he had thought his arms well toughened too, but this new unfamiliar weight of weaponry seemed to discover new muscles and set them aching. His tutor drilled him mainly in endless repetitions of simple lunge and parry, retreat and counterstroke. It was work that soon grew dull; and for all Rolf's sullen urge to hurt his enemies, he could not manage to hit this man, while the old soldier corrected Rolf's technique by jabbing and thwacking him in the ribs, seemingly at will.

As if Rolf's lessons were something semi-secret, the practice sessions were ended whenever other soldiers came to the yard to carve at the timber butts, or spar against one another. Rolf felt some curiosity at this, but there were more demanding burdens on his mind. Escape was in his thoughts as much as ever—more so, now that he was above ground and being nourished and had rested. But the high walls were all around, and only his thoughts could leap them.

Looking up from the practice-yard from time to time during the day, he could not fail to mark the growing preparations for the approaching wedding. Flowers and gay banners were being brought by the wagonload into the Castle, where they were at once made grotesque by their surroundings. At the direction of the Master of the Games, these were displayed on walls and parapets and railings. Rolf wondered if the bleaching human bones hanging beside the high reptile-roosts would be bedecked with flowers as well.

And somewhere not far from his cell, lively music was being rehearsed throughout the day. The Castle was preparing to work at being joyful, but Rolf could see no joy in any face, as he had seen during the preparation of

farmers' weddings. Here even the Master of the Games had a prisoner's face.

On his second night in his privileged cell, Rolf saw the labor-gangs returning just after sunset from their work, being driven stumbling and staggering back to the dungeons from which they had been routed in the early morning. There was rockdust and sand on them tonight, not river-mud—he knew by this that most of them had been working on the north side of the pass, lifting off the mountain from Elephant's resting place.

Leaning against the cell wall beside his door, trying to hear without being obvious about it, Rolf listened as two of the overseers trudged wearily past. One said that today the digging had uncovered the corner of a door, but there was days' work yet remaining. Aye, said the other, not until after the wedding would they be done. Soldiers might be put to work beside the slaves, but the officers were objecting that the men had to be ready to fight. . . .

The voices faded. Rolf threw himself down on his bed of straw. They had begun to uncover one of the great doors. The mount of Ardneh was almost freed—the Elephant, that belonged more to Rolf than to any other living man. Even his coming duel with Chup faded to secondary importance in his thoughts.

During this night a second shift of slaves went out from the dungeons to labor, a column of soldiers at their side, marching as sullenly as they. Rolf heard scraps of orders, soldiers' complaints, sullen soldiers' jokes. The courtyards were ablaze with torches through most of the night. Workers and messengers and all manner of people kept coming and going, and the singing practice went on, so the business of the digging seemed all mixed with that of the wedding. Rolf could sleep but little with the noise and the light, and his worry—he was worried again, for his life no longer seemed valueless. He must not die, not just for a chance of scratching Chup—not when the Free Folk might be facing slaughter for want of knowledge of the Elephant, knowledge that he alone could give them.

When morning came and he was taken as usual from his cell to go to the barracks latrine, Rolf noticed more than one tiny burnt-out stub of torch amid the night's casual litter on the paving stones. The guard who was escorting him today had taken on either too much work or too much wine, or both, last night, so that his eyes were closed as much as they were open. Coming back, Rolf contrived to stoop and fiddle with his sandal-straps. When the door of his cell swung shut on him again, he had a little charcoal-stick closed safe within his sweating hand.

Again he was given water and good food. And again, when the morning was a little advanced, there came the old soldier to take him to practice. Rolf had contrived to hide his piece of charcoal inside a seam of his shirt. And the impulse that had prompted him to pick it up had begun to grow in his mind into something of a scheme.

Today his tutor brought no wooden swords, but metal ones, though dull of edge and blunt of point. During the practice Rolf's mind was kept too busy to elaborate on schemes. He was beginning to appreciate the truth of what Mewick had told him—only a few days ago, though it seemed like months—that the martial arts were not to be learned in a week. At one moment he could feel that his sword arm had finally developed some cunning—and in the next, his teacher's weapon would thump against his ribs once more.

But during the break at noon, and when he was locked once more into his cell at nightfall, he was free to think. The idea had already occurred to him that the birds must certainly come reconnoitering at night, probably every night, above the Castle. He saw that the defensive cords and nets were always carefully spread on the high places after the reptiles had come thronging back at sunset. But there was nothing to stop the birds from passing over, higher still. There would always be some scrap of information that they might gain, using their sharp eyes and their wits. Now, if he could only display some sort of message for them to read. . . .

That night within the Castle walls was quieter than the last; it seemed that the attempt to work a double shift in clearing Elephant's hiding place had been abandoned. Maybe there were not enough slaves still drivable. Tonight there was no prodigality of torches in the courtyards, and Rolf's cell was unobserved, save by the sentry who passed by a few meters away, at reasonably predictable intervals. Rolf had realized that no one could see the roof of his cell. The adjacent shed kept it from being seen from the height of the keep.

Turning his comparatively new shirt inside out gave him a nearly white surface for a slate. After pondering for a while on how to get the most information into the fewest words possible, he set down:

I RODE ELE. IN CAVE

And then he was stuck, for a way to convey what should be said of the power that he had seen and sensed. Finally all he could add was:

SAVE IT FROM EKUMAN ROLF

He thickened and darkened the letters with double strokes of his writing-stick, and worked them into the fabric with fingers and spit. He rolled up the garment and unrolled it again; his message seemed to have a fair degree of permanence.

Now he had only to display it on his cell's flat roof, spread out straight and unwrinkled enough for a bird to read. After a little thought he reached out through the bars at the bottom of his door and gathered in some traces of the recent construction that lay there, small stones and little chunks of dried mortar. Choosing from these several that seemed of proper size, he made shift to attach them as weights to the lower edge of the shirt, loosening threads

from the garment to tie them on. It took some time to make them all secure, but of hours he had plenty.

He rolled up the shirt then like a scroll, and made several practice openings of it, snapping it out to unroll quickly on the floor. One of the weights came loose and had to be retied, but he saw no reason why the scheme should not be successful.

Meanwhile he had been counting silently, roughly timing the passages of the sentry, who had been going by without so much as turning his eyes toward Rolf's shadowed cell. Now Rolf waited until the man had passed once more, then he stood up and went to the door. In one hand he thrust his rolled-up shirt out through the high bars, then using both hands he held it by the shoulders and unrolled it with a backward snap. He heard the little stones strike with tiny clacks on the flat roof above his head.

Leaving the shirt spread out—as he hoped—upon the roof, he went to huddle in the cell's darkest corner, away from the door. So grimly was he forbidding himself to indulge in any hope that when there came another tiny clack on the roof he jumped to his feet, convinced that the sound must somehow mean that his signal had been discovered by the enemy. But no outcry followed. There came no rush of raging men with torches.

He stood there listening, straining to hear. He realized now that the tap on the roof had been like the sound of a tiny pebble, dropped from a great height.

The sentry was nearly due again. He made himself as quiet on the straw until the man had shuffled past. And no sooner had the guard vanished from sight than another pebble came, this one bouncing with a small thud on the pavement before his cell, rising to ping faintly from a bar of the grillwork; Rolf did not see it but there was no doubt at all about the sound. He jumped up and went to the door, reached out and up to grab his shirt and sweep it from side to side, waving it across the roof. Then he pulled the garment quickly into the cell, tore off the stones and threw them away. He rubbed and crumpled the lettering of his

message into unreadable smudges and put the shirt on again.

He had alive and watchful friends. He was not forgotten, not entirely alone. He pulled the shirt around him tightly. Only then did he realize that his sudden shivering was not due to cold, nor to fear, but to a triumph that must be kept in silence.

On the next day Rolf practiced his swording with a will, winning some mild praise from his tutor. On the following night Rolf made no attempt to signal again—it was very dangerous, and he had nothing new to say—but he lay wide awake, listening, until the hour when the exchange of signals had taken place on the previous night.

Click. Click. Click. Evenly matched and spaced, three tiny impacts on his roof. He sat upright with a jerk, then waited, propped on one elbow in the straw. Did the bird expect him to reply? He had no further messages. He went to the door and put his arm out and waved it slowly back and forth, once, twice, thrice. Then he lay awake listening and wondering for a long time, but no further signal came from above.

X

LYING SPRAWLED near the top of the gentle dune, peering over its crest, Thomas could see the dark island-like mass of the Oasis of the Two Stones spread before him in the moonlight, its nearest boundary less than a hundred meters away. The night made the outlines of the great circle of fertile land uncertain, and gave it a half-magical look. Still, since Olanthe had schooled him in the matter, he could pick out where the different areas of the settlement were.

Most of the Oasis' area was in the wide outer ring of cultivated fields. The invaders, Olanthe said, had at first wanted to fence in the whole fertile circle, but fence-building materials were hard to come by here in the desert, and

they needed what they could get to construct their inner works.

On one side of the central area of the Oasis all the farmers' dwellings, semi-permanent structures of wooden frames and stretched hides, had been moved together, crowded close to one another, and a strong fence built around them. In this compound the people of the Oasis could be confined every night at sunset. And by night as well as by day strong mounted and foot patrols of Castle-soldiers roamed the fields and paths around the perimeter of the watered land.

A few people, even without the help of the Prisoner's Stone, had escaped through these barriers and guards and had gotten away from the Oasis. But only a few had made the attempt. Because of their long self-isolation the folk of the Oasis knew little of the outside world. They did know that only desert and the Black Mountains lay to the east, and to north and south more desert lands that were also under the domination of Eastern Satraps.

And to the west was the Castle. Only rumors had until now reached the Oasis regarding the existence of the free bands in the coastal swamps; and Oasis people who might have fled were greatly unsure of how they might be welcomed in the swamps, how they might survive in that alien climate.

Beside Thomas on his dune, and on the dunes immediately to east and west, were the two hundred men—and one woman—of his attacking force. They were all immobile now, like him, resting in silence from their hard march, the hike that had taken the first half of the night, bringing them out here from the mountains. So far, things were on schedule.

Olanthe lay at Thomas's left side—she was usually at his side now. At his right side Mewick stretched out, motionless, looking forward over the top of the dune. Mewick's face, darkened with paint and earth for the night attack, looked like the visage of some carven demon of melancholy.

Beyond Mewick was Loford, the faint wheeze of his breathing carrying in the stillness to Thomas's ears. Loford had borne the long march uncomplainingly, and was being stoical

about the physical exertions yet to come. The wizard was here because it was thought he would be needed later. If all went well tonight, Thomas's power, reinforced by the Oasis-men, would soon be marching from the east to take the Elephant-diggings and the Castle itself by surprise.

Olanthe's hair blew in the night-breeze, touching Thomas on the cheek. She was leaning closer to him to whisper, and stretching out her arm to point. There, she was showing him, set in the Oasis' central area and about two kilometers from their dune, was the defensive compound of the enemy. This was where the bulk of them must be taken by surprise tonight and slaughtered. Two corners of its high palisade were marked now by the sparks of torches. It stood on land that had once been a fair and pleasant park; the trees had gone to make the palisade, and the earth had been pounded bare by marching feet. Olanthe said that the gate of it usually stood open, though of course guarded. In the two corners of the rectangular stockade where the torches now shone were the enclosed roosts of the courier-reptiles, kept to maintain swift communication between the Oasis garrison and the Castle.

There were about a score of birds over the Oasis now, circling invisibly to human or reptile eye. They were marking for Thomas's information the positions and movements of the enemy's night patrols. Once the attack began the birds would hover in readiness to prevent the escape of a single foe, on wing or on foot. For the Castle to learn of this attack tonight, or even tomorrow, would most probably be disastrous; the Free Folk meant to rest in the Oasis for a day and a night before they began the march that would take them straight into the decisive battle for the Elephant. The battle for the Oasis tonight could be decisive certainly—but only if the Free Folk lost it.

"Pass the word again," Thomas whispered now. "There's to be no burning." He turned from left to right. "Remember, no burning." The last reminder went away from him along the line in both directions. Any great fire here tonight would surely be seen by the watch on the battlements of the distant

Castle; the morning then would surely bring suspicious reptiles to investigate; and after them would surely come the cavalry, in force. Ekuman would need no Elephant to win a battle fought by day and in the open.

As for tonight—well, so far things looked good. From Olanthe's estimate and other sources Thomas knew there were about two hundred men in the Oasis garrison. With the birds to help, with surprise, without any calamitous bad luck, the Free Folk must win. Of course just winning this battle in the ordinary sense was not enough—the garrison must be wiped out, to the last man, perfectly and quickly. Well, it was his own plan, he must not doubt it now.

Loford was crawling toward him now; a few moments ago the Big One had gone back down the dune, and now he was coming up again between Thomas and Mewick. The wizard moved with all the stealth of a foundered plowbeast, but he could not make a great deal of noise in sand, so it was all right.

"I have been trying this and that," Loford rumbled softly, collapsing with a grunt to lie at full length beside Thomas. "But things are just not favorable. Things are rarely favorable for magic when swords are out, as now."

"Not even an elemental?" Thomas wanted all the help he could get.

Loford shook his head. "I have a knack for them as you know. I might draw up a good one from the desert. But not at night! The desert is day. The desert is sun, and heat, and a withering wind throwing a blast of sand. Aye, I might fetch up something you'd like! But I can't in the dark." Loford sounded somewhat guilty and defensive. "Fight your next battle in the swamp, and day or night I'll draw some powers to your aid."

"It's all right." Thomas hit Loford's shoulder gently. "I wasn't counting on your powers tonight, you know. We may need that sand-elemental more, to screen us, when we're crossing the desert toward the Castle day after tomorrow. In case the Thunderstone doesn't draw enough rain for us to hide in."

"I am thinking about that march; tossing the Stone ahead of us to keep drawing rain, and dodging the thunderbolts that come. It should be as adventurous as some battles. And you want an elemental to keep us company, too? Hol"

"Sh!" hissed Mewick.

In a very low whisper Thomas said, "And I am thinking that we will fight no more swamp-battles. One way or the other."

Now there came a shadow-shape against the stars; a bird drifting down in ghostly silence from high above the Oasis, descending unerringly to Thomas in the midst of a long line of sprawled and silent figures.

Standing just below Thomas on the dune, wings proudly spread, the bird reported on how many enemy patrols were out, and where. Thomas hurriedly passed orders down the line to his squad leaders, giving each his assignment; one squad he sent to take up a position along the western rim of the Oasis, to be ready to intercept any of the enemy who survived the first onslaught and tried to flee toward the Castle.

"And we are ready in the air, Thomas," the bird assured him. "If the reptiles dare to rise, not one of them will escape."

Acknowledgment of orders came back from his human lieutenants. The long rank of two hundred men began to break up into clusters, and these squads to separate again and drift away, ghostly and half-visible under the moon.

"Go now," Thomas said to the bird, "and bring back word when our squads are in position on the far side of the Oasis." All the enemy patrols must be attacked as nearly simultaneously as possible, at the same time that the entrance to the invaders' inner compound was being seized.

Like something no heavier than air, the bird seemed to drift upward and away, with a single sweep of wings. Now, all the plans were made and set in motion; if anything had been forgotten it was too late to mend. Thomas had taken the burden of responsibility upon himself, and now he felt

it fully. *Well, he thought, at least this gives me no time to worry about my own skin.*

His own was no longer the skin that most concerned him, anyway. There was plenty of time for him to talk with Olanthe, and he did. A few words, and small ones, were enough. When their eyes met, there was no great need for them to speak.

The bird was back before he had really started to expect it. "They are ready on the far side, Thomas. And along the western edge."

"So. Then we are ready too." He drew a deep breath and looked from right to left at the remnant of his force that was still with him. "And we attack!"

With a wave of his arm he motioned forward the dozen who were to accompany him into the fight. Their objective was the seizing of the inner compound's gate, before it could be defended by an alert guard. Another squad of the same size, under Mewick, would be following close behind hopefully to rush through the gate and wreak slaughter on the sleeping invaders in their barracks. As Thomas and his men slid over the top of the dune and down toward the Oasis, Mewick and his squad delayed slightly, waiting to get the proper distance between themselves and Thomas.

The outer boundary of the Oasis was marked by a ditch that, according to Olanthe, served to keep the desert from drifting in. Crossing it now, she whispered to Thomas, "Nearly dry. We must use the Stone for rain while we are here."

After crossing this outer ditch Thomas led his squad between rows of knee-high plants toward the Oasis' center. Then they began to cover the level ground at a crouching run, spread out to stay about ten meters from one another. Thomas counted strides, and when he judged they had covered a kilometer he slowed to a walk, and a little later dropped down to crawl between the rows of plants. His men kept pace. There would be a patrol of eight soldiers not far ahead. The soldiers would also be moving on foot as they went through the planted fields; the crops, being now

of course considered Castle property, were not to be trampled heedlessly by beasts.

Thomas's and Mewick's squads were supposed to sneak past this patrol, leaving it to be ambushed by other Free Folk a little distance further on. When Thomas saw the soldiers ahead, walking slowly in single file on a course that would cross that of his own men, he stopped crawling and crouched silent and still. The moon turned the bronze helms of the oncoming file into ghost's heads. Around Thomas, his own men had melted into the soil and the night.

The enemy passed. Then their leader took an unexpected turn. Thomas, raising his head a few centimeters to watch, saw them now heading straight for where Mewick's squad had gone to earth like Thomas's. *Only let it be silent*, Thomas thought, seeing that the encounter now seemed inevitable.

The leader of the soldiers stopped suddenly, making a startled turning movement. And around the patrol Mewick and his men rose up like dark and silent demons, from the trenches of shadow between the rows of plants. During the first moments following, Thomas, some thirty meters away, could hear only the low sounds that tools of sharp metal made, working flesh and bone. Mewick's men had the advantages of numbers, twelve to eight, and of surprise; it was no wonder that they cut down the Castle-men without loss to themselves. Still, it was too much to expect that they might do so without an outcry being raised—a pair of dismal howls of terror were set drifting in the night. And then the Castle-men were all dead and down, having taken the places of their slayers in the trenches of shadow. Now only the top leaves of a few plants, waving briefly in the moonlight, showed where they were fallen.

Thomas stood up tensely, listening, looking in toward the center of the Oasis, now less than half a kilometer away. Olanthe's hand was on his arm. "That was not very much noise," she said softly. "It may not alarm them, yet, in the central compound. They may think only that some fugitives

are being chased through the fields, or that birds are harassing a patrol. That happens sometimes."

"There may be more noise at any moment." The other outer patrols would not fall without a sound. "We'd better hurry on in." Thomas waved his own squad, rising all around him, forward again. He motioned Mewick to follow closely, and got an acknowledging wave.

Thomas's short sword was in a scabbard strapped against his leg. He saw Olanthe loosening a long knife in its sheath at her hip as she walked.

Now the central area of the Oasis was close enough for things in it to take on substance. Now Thomas could make out the barrier of sharpened stakes, planted half a meter apart, that fenced in the prison compound where the Oasis-folk were penned at night. He could see the clay silos and barns and storage bins. And, straight ahead, the sharpened ends, jutting up, of the logs that formed the invaders' defensive palisade. The torches still burned within. He could see the gate and that it was open. There were no trees growing anywhere; Olanthe had said they had all gone to make the stockade.

For the last fifty meters the attackers crawled again, to another ditch, of doubtful function, that marked the inner boundary of the fields. There was no one to be seen moving on the neat paths and lawns ahead of them.

"Let the two of us go on first," Thomas whispered when his squad had gathered around him. Then he took Olanthe by the hand and rose up and walked with her along the unlighted path that led almost straight from where they were to the open gate of the palisade. The gate was not fifty meters away now; he could see the arm and part of the uniform of a soldier who seemed to be lounging inattentively just inside it. Hopefully the first soldiers who saw Thomas and Olanthe would take them for nothing more dangerous than a young couple trying to sneak in after curfew.

On the right side of the path they were walking on ran the barricade enclosing the houses of the farm folk. The

dwelling inside were dark and silent. On the left side of the path were tall storage bins. From behind one of these a soldier stepped out to block their way, when they were no more than twenty meters from the invitingly open gate ahead. Their starts of surprise pleased the soldier; his grin showed his certainty of power, and at the same time his voice was angry, as if he had been personally affronted. "Looking for a hole under the fence somewhere? I hope your frolicking half the night was worth it, because—" He peered more closely at Olanthe's hand. "What've you got there?"

From somewhere out in the fields there came a yell of fear, agony weakened and purified by distance. The soldier saw Olanthe's long knife, and his mouth was forming for an echoing yell as he started to draw his sword; he meant to step back, but Thomas's blade was already between his ribs.

Thomas heard two dozen feet come shuffle-pounding speedily on the path behind him as he sprinted for the palisade gate. A pair of sentries came into view, alarmed—too late. They had time to yell, but no time more.

The gate taken, Thomas cast one look backward, seeing that Mewick's squad was coming on the run, only a few meters down the path. Then he put Olanthe aside with one arm and turned and ran on into the compound, sprinting for the open doorway of the nearest barracks. On the right as you faced inward from the gate there were stables along the palisade, and then the barracks, a long low timber building that might house nearly a hundred men. On the left side of the compound were similar stables and barracks, and on the side opposite the gate another long low building that Thomas knew housed the officers besides serving as headquarters and providing space for storerooms. All the center of the compound was bare sandy earth, pounded flat by marching feet. Before the headquarters building a flagpole held a limp banner of Ekuman's black and bronze. And in the very center of the parade-ground, upon a sort of cruciform gibbet, there was a man bound living—a naked

man with the wounds of whipping striped across his body, who raised his gray head now to stare at Thomas. Thomas had no time now to even look closely at the victim; his running strides were carrying him on toward the open doorway of the barracks.

A man who had heard enough yelling to alarm him came stepping out of this doorway, half-naked and half-awake, buckling on a sword. He stumbled to a halt, eyes and mouth widening at the sight of Thomas, huge, black all over for the night attack, pounding down on him.

The torches at the palisade's corners gave light enough for killing. Thomas aimed for the middle of the body, drove his short sword nearly to the hilt in guts and muscle, shoved the killed man back into the barracks and went in after him. Right at his back his raiders poured after him through the narrow door, all bellowing now to raise up terror and panic. Before him, only a few of the enemy had roused themselves quickly enough to have weapons already in their hands.

Thomas was no master swordsman, and he knew it. So he used the advantages he did have, his strength and size, for all that they were worth. With two hammering strokes he beat down his next opponent's guard, and with the next stroke cut his arm off near the elbow.

In a moment the raiders controlled the door, and the weapon-rack that stood beside it, from which Thomas grabbed himself a shield; in a few moments more the fight as such was over, and the place was becoming an abattoir. Castle-men were killed in their hammocks, stabbed crawling to hide in corners, died while playing dead, were slaughtered like scrambling, squealing meat-beasts in a pen. Some had the heart to stand and fight with pieces of broken barracks-furniture, but these fell dying amid the cowards.

The killing was still going on when Thomas scrambled over the slippery floor back to the door again. He saw that now more than a score of Free Folk were inside the compound; in front of the other barracks a fierce fight was raging. Mewick was there, thrusting with a long dagger,

swinging a war-hatchet that looked like some peasants' tool save for its swordlike basket-hilt.

Even with one barracks cleaned out, the Free Folk inside the stockade were still outnumbered at the moment. Yelling, Thomas led his own squad charging across the open space to Mewick's aid.

The conquest of the second barracks was not going to be easy. The men in it had been given just a few more moments to rouse themselves than the men in the first barracks had enjoyed, and that made all the difference. These men were just starting to pour out and fight, but when Thomas charged they began retreating into the barracks again, probably not realizing in the confusion of the fight that the advantage of numbers was still temporarily with them. Arrows began to come singing out of the slits in the barracks' timber wall. The barracks was a solid structure, built right against the strong high palisade; the men inside knew just how much mercy they could expect if they were taken alive.

"Remember, no burning!" Thomas shouted. He could see two of his men down already with arrows in them. But welcome reinforcements were now charging in at the palisade's gate, men who had evidently finished their ambush of one of the outer patrols.

Olanthe popped up from somewhere to stand at Thomas's side. "Keep down!" he barked, gripping her protectively. He reached into her pack and took out the Thunderstone, and rolled it in a long underhanded bowling toss toward the barracks. The battered metal case bounced and rolled to a stop just at a corner of the low building.

It would take some little time for the storm to develop. Meanwhile, Thomas disposed some men to discourage those inside the barracks from sallying; that done, he turned the greater part of his attention to the headquarters building. He saw that Mewick had already led men onto the roof of it, where they were fighting with some bronze-helmets who had climbed up from inside. Others were trading spear-thrusts and missiles at the doors and windows.

Yet another squad of Free Folk came pouring into the compound now, and with them the first of the farmers rise in arms—pitchforks and reaping-hooks, as predicted and a raging joyous fury. Thomas ran to meet these, and led them to the headquarters building. By climbing on water cisterns and sheds they reached the roof, where it seemed the chances were best of immediately coming to grips with the enemy.

On the headquarters roof, guards and officers and orderlies in bronze helmets were holding off the Free Folk with pike and sword and mace, protecting one corner of the palace. There one of their number was waving torches to drive off birds, while another tried to pull the protective net away from a reptile-roost; they meant to get a courier away from Ekuman.

The soldier waving torches went down, struck by a pitchfork hurled up from the ground. Thomas skipped quickly over the shingles to kick the flaming brands off the roof before they could set fire to it. The man struggling with the net at last succeeded in getting it out of the reptiles' way, but not one of them ventured out of the doorway of the roost. The night belonged to the birds, and well the reptiles knew it.

Thunder grumbled overhead. Suddenly there was no sound but Free Folk left standing on the roof, though others were still lying there. Blood slicked the shingles underfoot and trickled in the rain-gutters. Someone had taken up a captured pike and was starting to try to prod the reptiles out of their little house. Birds were landing at the doorway, their soft voices vibrant, urging those within who had eaten birds' eggs not to be shy now, but come out and welcome their guests come to return the call.

Men down on the ground at the entrance to the headquarters building were calling for Thomas. He swung over the edge of the roof and dropped down to them to discover that some of Mewick's squad had nabbed the garrison commander, or thought they had. They shoved forward a gray-haired fellow with a thin ropey neck. They had

caught him in a storeroom, putting on a private soldier's uniform.

Rain pattered down, then drummed. Lightning was marching closer. In one sudden white opening of the sky, Thomas looked up and saw Strijeef, old wound still bandaged on one wing, eyes mad and glaring, emerging from a reptile-roost. Leathery eggshell clung to the talons of his upraised foot. His beak and his rain-wet feathers were stained with purplish blood.

"See to the other roost!" Thomas shouted up. Then he took a hand in dragging the gray-haired prisoner to Olanthe, and some of the other Oasis-folk, to make absolutely sure of who he was. Olanthe was out in the center of the parade-ground, in range of arrows from the still-resisting barracks. A couple of farmers were standing by with captured shields, ready to deflect any shafts that came at those working to take the old man down from his scaffold. Olanthe was weeping and carrying on, oblivious of arrows and everything else; Thomas realized that the man on the cross must be her father.

The gray victim was just being lowered when the Thunderstone got the lightning it was calling for. The bolt followed the corner of the barracks from eaves to ground, opening the structure like a great egg carefully topped at table. The rain, pouring now, prevented any fire from catching. Thomas ran to join his men entering the breach, but his leadership was not needed. Those inside the barracks had been stunned; those outside had been waiting poised to attack. They swept in through the riven wall and completed the night's work without further loss to themselves.

And so ended the battle for the Oasis. Olanthe's father and the other wounded freedom fighters were carried out of the compound, through the drenching rain, by men stepping over a litter of sodden corpses, to be cared for in the farmers' homes. From the farmers' compound, a prison no longer, voices began to rise, men and women and children singing in the gladness of their deliverance.

At a touch on his shoulder Thomas turned, to see Lo-

ford standing there, grinning hugely; on the upper part of the wizard's big right arm a small wound was bleeding.

"How was the fighting?" Thomas asked.

"Oh, very good! Oh, excellent! I tell you I was once facing two of them—but I am come to remind you, this time the Thunderstone is yours to pick up."

"That's right." Thomas, grinning, thinking how he would torment Loford by never asking him how he had got his glorious wound, trotted over to the shattered barracks and picked up the graven case from a puddle.

While he was there a bird came down to him, bringing the good report that not a single enemy had escaped the slaughter. Several members of the patrols ambushed in the fields had tried to get away, to reach the Castle, when they saw that the whole Oasis was under attack. All but one of these had been cut down by Thomas's men left along the Oasis' western boundary for the purpose. The one man who had got past them, mounted, had been dragged bloodily from his saddle while at full gallop, by three of the Silent People who had overtaken and fastened on him from above. And now even the terrified beast he had been riding was caught, being brought back to the stables.

Though the fighting was over, neither Thomas nor any other unwounded man could spare more than moments for rest. There was too much to be done before dawn came to return the sky and its advantage to the Castle. The wounded must be moved out of sight and cared for, the dead must be buried and then all traces of their graves effaced. It was likely that at least one courier would fly out from the Castle during the coming day, and such couriers must not be allowed to suspect what had happened—not until they had landed, or at least descended within certain arrow-range.

So the end of the riven barracks was hastily propped up in place, and the gaps mended as well as possible with old wood. At dawn the farmers would go to their fields in the usual numbers to do their ordinary tasks. Men of the Free Folk would put on uniforms of bronze and black for incoming reptiles to see, and would march or ride or stand on

watch. The marks of battle were effaced. The mess of shattered eggs and purplish reptile blood, all drying now with the cessation of the rain, was scraped and scrubbed from the outer porches of the roosts.

"One thing more," said Olanthe, now back at Thomas's side. And she nodded at the empty gibbet in the center of the parade-ground, from which her father had been taken almost too late to save his life. In her voice was a hardness that Thomas had not heard there before.

"A dead man will do," Thomas said. "A gray-haired one." He tried to remember some corpse among those now being buried that would be a fair match for Olanthe's father; it was a hopeless effort. He turned to look over the handful of prisoners who were still alive, awaiting some questioning; there hung the long disheveled locks of the garrison commander.

Thomas nodded at him, and the men who had the prisoners in charge immediately caught his meaning. Grinning, they pulled the waxen-faced officer forward. "We'll mount him for you, Chief! And we'll see to it that his hide's decorated properly first!"

That was exactly right. That was the best thing to do. But Thomas turned away. He saw Mewick, sad-faced as ever, turning also. But Mewick was not the one who bore responsibility. Thomas made himself turn back and watch, and listen to the whipping. He was surprised at the effort it took him—as if he had never seen blood before. Olanthe was watching, with a look of remote satisfaction. Women were a wonder, and this one more than most.

Thomas was afraid. He feared the urgings and the delights of power, that he could feel stirring within himself like the pangs of some glamorous sickness.

The whipping of the garrison commander was useless. All through the next day, while he hung dead on the cross, no couriers from the Castle came. The men of the Free Folk, and the Oasis farmers who were going to march with

them, half-rested through the day, and then relaxed more completely on the following night.

On that night the birds brought word that they had learned Rolf's whereabouts in the Castle, and repeated his message to Thomas. They had tried to alert him that the attack was coming in three nights. If Rolf was ever taken out of doors after dark they would try to put the Prisoner's Stone into his hands.

XI

THREE PEBBLES on Rolf's cell roof one night, and at the same hour on the next night, two. He waved back twice.

On the morning after that, Rolf for the first time was given a genuine keen-edged sword for his practice, with this weapon he spent the morning lunging and hacking at the timber butts. His tutor stood by criticizing, flanked by a pair of pikemen who held their long weapons at the ready all the time that Rolf was truly armed.

In the afternoon Rolf and his tutor were alone again, once more dueling with the dulled and blunt-tipped blades. And during this session the tutor's parries were in several instances too low, and Rolf managed to poke him in the belly or hack him bloodlessly on the arm. Rolf drew small satisfaction from this, being thoroughly suspicious that the soldier was letting him win to build his confidence. If the tutor had but known it, the fact of the two pikemen in the morning had gone a long way to accomplish that.

And on that night there came the signal of a single pebble, which Rolf answered with one wave. Three, two, one, the count had gone, from night to night.

On the morning of the following day, Rolf knew, the wedding would take place. In the afternoon he would face Chup in the arena. Certainly it was neither of these things that the Free Folk were signaling to tell him—therefore something else of great importance was coming, tomorrow or tomorrow night.

He meant to be alive to see it.

He was awakened early on the wedding-day by loud shouts, and by music that sounded like the accompaniment of some bawdy dance. He thought again that today's festivities could not be much like those of the simple pledge-weddings he had seen and attended among the country-folk of the Broken Lands. On those occasions the company maintained at least an effort at solemnity until the middle of the day, until vows had been exchanged and perhaps some amateur wizard of the countryside had tried to put a spell of happiness upon the rings. After that the dancing and the drinking started, and the games, and whatever feasting the people could afford. . . .

The great ones assembled in the Castle for this day could afford feasting and entertainment in plenty. The day wore on. Rolf was given a fresh surcoat of cheap black cloth, and made to put it on over his own clothes. There was no sword practice, no sight of his instructor. He was fed as usual and escorted to the privy. There were more animals than usual about the courtyards, and there were men in liveries that Rolf had not seen before—in each of them the color black was matched with one other, red or green or white or gray. It was true, then, that wedding guests were here from all the Satrapies nearby.

The hours of daylight were nearly past. Rolf began to let himself nurse a faint hope that his part of the entertainment might have been forgotten, or that it would be so long delayed that night would come first—night, and with it that which the birds had signaled him to watch for. He scarce let himself think that it might involve for him a chance of freedom.

But in the late afternoon the Master of the Games came with two wardens to Rolf's cell, and he was hurried out of it. First to the privy once more—he supposed so their Lordships should not be disgusted if fear overcame him utterly in the arena. And then he was led under the keep, though not down to the level of the dungeons. It was a small win-

dowless chamber that his two guards brought him to, with an overhead of oddly slanting timbers. Through the cracks in this ceiling, and around a closed door opposite the one they entered by, sunlight filtered in. Feet tramped overhead, the sound of laughter came from very near above, and Rolf realized that he was already under the seats ringing the arena. His soldier-tutor had given him some description of the place.

A bronze helm and a shield and sword were waiting for him here. While the Master of the Games hurried off on some other errand, Rolf's guards handed him the first of two of these items at once. They eyed him critically while he took the shield on his arm and set the barbut on his head; he supposed they wanted to see whether he was likely to collapse with fear. He wanted to leave them with some brave insult, but he did not fully trust his voice just now. As for his knees—well, they were still holding him erect.

From against the wall they swung out a cunning sort of cagework, meant to hold him against the door leading to the arena. Only after he was thus restrained did they put the naked sword into his hand. Some signal came to them almost at once when that was done, and one man hauled on a chain to make the door in front of Rolf fly open, while the other took up a spear to urge him, if need be, out onto the sand.

The spear was not needed. Rolf's legs carried him out into the glare of the low sun. Through the T of his helmet's opening he had a dazzling glimpse of a ring of faces above him, gay colors, movement; he was greeted with a burst of brutal noise. He stood at one end of a sandy oval, some twenty meters long and proportionately wide, surrounded by a high smooth unscalable wall.

There came another roar of applause, and Rolf saw the tall, black-clad figure of his opponent stalking toward him, coming from the opposite end of the flat little world where now the two of them were alone. A red mask painted on the front of a black barbut-helm concealed Chup's face.

Holding sword and shield ready, he came straight forward; in his gait there was a swaying movement that Rolf could interpret only as some intended mockery.

Rolf put out of his mind everything but: *strike first, and strike hard*. His legs, forgotten, no longer shaking, bore him forward.

His enemy was taller, and longer of reach, and so had the privilege of striking first; an option he chose to exercise. The straight overhand cut seemed a mockery also, for it was slower than some that Rolf had parried from his tutor's blade. Rolf caught the downstroke on his shield, and perhaps he shouted—he had thought earlier that when this moment came he should shout something, so the evil ones who watched would know that he was dying for the cause of freedom.

Later, he did not know whether he had cried out anything at all at this moment. He knew only that he deflected the clumsy downstroke with his shield, as he had been taught to do, and thrust straight in to kill.

His point slid so easily through the black cloth and between his opponent's ribs that for a moment Rolf did not believe it. He retreated a step, thinking only: *What trick is this?*

But the man in black was not shamming. A spurting stain of red spread down his front. His arms dropped with his weapons in them, and with what seemed infinite weariness he went down upon his knees. And then, turning slowly sideways, he toppled out full length upon the sand.

Victory seemed unreal to Rolf, and it was made more unreal by the reaction of the gay throng encircling him above the wall. They cheered. The sound was made even more incredible by the groans that mingled with it—not laments of rage or shock, but whines of mere disappointment, the sounds of watchers cheated by the sudden ending of a show.

Taking off his helmet, Rolf looked up. He saw Chup sitting there, in the first bank of seats, at the middle of one side of the oval. Chup was looking down at Rolf, smiling

lightly and applauding. Beside him was his golden bride; even now Rolf noticed that Charmian was looking across the arena and up, with expectancy in her face.

Rolf turned and looked down again at the figure on the sand. Scarcely did he notice when soldiers came cautiously around him to take his arms away; he was watching two dungeon-wardens approach the fallen man. One of them cautiously kicked the sword away while the other turned the body on its back and pulled off the demon-painted barbut. The face revealed was young, and quite unknown to Rolf.

One of the wardens had begun to raise a heavy maul, to give the quietus. His motion was stopped on the backstroke by a scream—a woman's shriek so sudden and so terrible that it sent reptiles cawing up in startlement from their high perches on the overlooking keep.

And Rolf knew whom he had stabbed; he knew when he looked up and saw that the screaming girl was Sarah.

The Satrap Ekuman was looking at Sarah also, twisting around in his cushioned seat of honor under a bronze-black awning. It was plain that the girl was screeching the name of the man who had just fallen in the oddly unequal bout. Something more than a coincidence, thought Ekuman. With a look he ordered the Master of the Harem and his female assistants to be quick about quieting the girl, getting the nuisance of her shrieks and her contorted face out of the presence of the guests. And then he faced forward again, looking across the arena to where his daughter sat beside her bridegroom. It had become almost a reflex for Ekuman to suspect his daughter, whenever some nasty internal intrigue threatened the peace if not the very security of his household. And the expression she was wearing now, a look of slight aristocratic puzzlement at the disturbance, was quite too good for him to believe in it for a moment.

So.

The Satrap was not, of course, concerned about the bereavement of a harem slave. Nor, really, about the fixing

of a gladiatorial contest, though that was an annoyance. What bit him was the discovery that an intrigue of any kind could be accomplished, in his own Castle and without his knowledge, by one who was departing, who tomorrow would presumably have no power here at all. It meant that there were men in his establishment, in positions of responsibility, whose first loyalty was to his daughter today and would be so tomorrow, when she would be Lady in a rival house, when there would be things of infinitely greater moment at stake.

He would impress his guests. He would find out, today, who those men were, and today he would be rid of them.

Already he was leaning forward, with an outstretched hand staying the wardens in the arena from disposing of the fallen man, who might be saved for questioning. Garl, Master of the Troops, having seen from his Lord's expression that something was seriously amiss, was already at his side. To Garl, Ekuman issued quick orders that both gladiators, and those who had had them in charge, should be brought before him at once. "In my Presence Chamber."

Turning his head, Ekuman said to the Master of the Games, "See that some other entertainment is set before my guests, and then do you attend me also." He shot his glance across the arena, and raised his voice from its confidential level: "My dear daughter and my son, please come with me."

But as Ekuman arose he had to delay, for now the Master of the Reptiles was pressing toward him along the aisle before the lowest tier of seats, creating a fresh wave of puzzled comment among the guests. The Reptile Master's face showed clearly that he thought his errand urgent. In his hands he held a reptile courier's pouch, that had some bulky weight inside.

"Bring it along," Ekuman told him, and strode along the passage that opened for him between courtiers, heading for the keep. He noticed clouds coming with portentous suddenness over the lowering sun, and behind him he heard the Master of the Games call out, "Lords and ladies, I pray

you come inside! The weather conspires with other disturbances against our celebration here. My Lord Ekuman bids you make merry in his hall, where he will join you when he can!"

Once inside the keep, Ekuman drew the Master of the Reptiles aside into an alcove, letting the rest of the throng tramp by, all of them curious and some turning their faces frankly as they passed.

The Master of the Reptiles whispered, "My Lord, this pouch was most likely sent toward us from the Oasis, for it was found in the desert. Most likely it was sent some days ago, for the fallen courier's body was decayed when one of my scouts discovered it during this last hour. The courier may well have fallen in one of those untimely rainstorms that have raged over the desert for the past few days."

"What's in it?"

"There must have been a message, Lord, but—see?—the pouch's lock is broken, from storm or fall, and the desert wind has left no paper. Only this." The Reptile Master let the torn pouch fall away; his hands remained holding up a weighty case of metal, the size of two clenched fists. It looked as if it had come through fire and battle both.

Ekuman took the thing. The graven markings on it tickled his stroking thumbs with power; he knew strong magic when he felt it in his hands. "You did well to bring this straight to me," he said.

Problems were encircling him like armed men, attacking all at once. He would just have to fight them all off as best he could, dealing a stroke here and another there, till he could pin one down and settle it; it was a common predicament for a ruler.

"Summon Elslood to the Presence Chamber too," Ekuman ordered a soldier who was standing by. The man saluted and ran off. Now there came two more passing the alcove, bearing the fallen gladiator between them on a litter. Ekuman let them go by, and then walked himself in the same direction, the usual train of attendants beginning at once

to form behind him. Passing a narrow window that pierced the keep's mighty wall, he marked how sudden a gloom had fallen outside. The Master of the Games had been right to summon the guests into the hall; it was certainly going to rain.

Rolf had been willing enough that the soldiers should disarm him; at the moment he wanted never to touch a sword again. He stood there in the arena, not knowing whether he wanted to live or die, looking up to where a pair of soldiers were taking Sarah from the strange tall fat man who had had her in charge. Only once since Nils had fallen had Sarah looked at Rolf, and that look had stabbed him like a blade.

Rolf could see that Nils still lived—whatever his life was worth. A pair of robed men came to minister to Nils and supervise his being carried off on a litter. Rolf was soon prodded on to follow. The sky, with a strange suddenness, had turned threatening, and now all the gaily appareled spectators were rising from their seats above, starting to file into the keep.

Rolf was taken in the same direction by a lower way, then marched upstairs. His guards' alertness did not slacken for an instant. Gradually he began to understand that something about his fight with Nils was disturbing the great ones of the Castle; the faces around him were newly concerned about something more important than avoiding a rainstorm.

When they had ascended well into the keep, an officer came to search Rolf, and then preceded Rolf and his escort through a large and richly furnished hall. Even now this hall was filling with the same gay-costumed folk who had been spectators at the arena. They kept looking at Rolf and whispering curiously, while the Master of the Games called to interest them in jugglers. Servants were hastening about to light wall-torches and candles against the sudden onslaught of the night.

After Rolf had been taken through the hall there was

one more flight of stairs to climb, and then another short wait, in a sort of antechamber. And then Rolf was brought into a huge circular room, which he realized must be the lower level of the squat tower that crowned the keep. Against a wall sat Ekuman, enthroned on a great chair. In flanking chairs were Chup, and golden Charmian, haughty as a statue. At Ekuman's back the curving wall was hung with many trophies, of war and of the chase. Here and there among them were Old World things—or so Rolf supposed they were, seeing their smooth precise workmanship, like that of the eyeglasses and Elephant.

A throng of busy and nervous attendants milled about. On the floor before Ekuman was set the stretcher with Nil on it, the robed men bending over him to stanch the flow of blood that had left a dribbled trail across the floor of inlaid wood. Standing before Ekuman was the soldier who had taught Rolf his swordplay, standing erect, arms at his sides, quivering under a rigidity of discipline. And there there was Sarah, half-collapsing between two soldiers who gripped her arms to keep her from going to her lover on his pallet.

Rolf had only a moment to look at these others, as he was hurried forward to be confronted by the Satrap himself. Ekuman's baleful eye swung around on him, and the soldiers who held Rolf's arms forced him to kneel down.

Rolf had not heard the Satrap's voice before. It struck him all the more impressively now for seeming mild. "You fought well today, sirrah. What would you have by way of reward?"

"I would have—only what I thought I had. The chance to fight against the one I thought was wearing that devil-painted helmet!" Rolf did not look at Sarah, but he could hope that she heard him and that she might begin to understand.

"And whom did you think you were fighting?" Ekuman asked him calmly.

Rolf turned his head to look at Chup.

It was a moment before the warrior-lord understood just

what the prisoner meant. Then Chup sat up straight in his chair. "Me? You clod of dung! You thought that I had arrayed myself in helm and shield to descend and fight a formal duel with *you*?"

Thinking back, Rolf realized that it had been only his own assumption, to start with, that Chup would fight him—a foolish assumption, he saw now. But others had used his foolishness to lead him on, to make him murder Nils to give them sport.

"Clod of dung?" mused Ekuman. "Yes, a peasant, by all signs—but that stroke was well put that felled the other. Young master, where were you taught to use a sword?"

Intrigue was something utterly foreign to Rolf's experience, but the mutual distrust and malice of all the evil folk around him was so thick that he could feel it very plainly. He could sense divisions arraying each of them against the others. If he had known what lie would be most like to set them on to mutual destruction, he would have tried to tell it. As matters stood, he instinctively chose the truth as his weapon.

"All that I know of swordplay," he said clearly, "I was taught here in the Castle." And he realized the truth had scored, somehow; he would have died in that moment, if Charmian's eyes could kill.

"Taught by whom?" asked Ekuman in his reasonable voice.

"By this one." Rolf leveled a pointing arm at the old soldier. The man did not look at Rolf. Behind his stoic front he seemed to quiver neither more nor less than before.

Lightning came, not far away. An easy ripping crackle at the start, and then a giant tore the sky in two from top to bottom, letting through a momentary blaze that seemed to come from some furnace-glare beyond. The light was strong on Charmian's face, as she raised her eyes with an expression of relief. She was looking over Rolf's shoulder, toward the doorway leading to the inner stair. Rolf turned his own head for a moment; a tall gray figure, wizard if there ever was one, was standing now within the door.

"Face the Satrap!" A guard's fist struck Rolf's face; Rolf turned back. Somehow an afterimage of the gray wizard's hollow eyes came with him, superimposing itself on Ekuman's face.

"And you were well fed?" Ekuman asked, as if all that moved him was some mild concern for Rolf's welfare.

"I was."

One of the robed men by the stretcher turned up his face. Rolf saw with fascinated horror that a creature that was a toad and something more than a toad crouched half-hidden on his shoulder, under his cloak. "Lord, I am sure now, this man who lost was starved and weakened. Deprived of rest. The signs are very plain."

After that Rolf could hear nothing more for a few moments. In the very abyss of his fear and hate he could almost be forced to feel pity for people grown so pettily malignant, to play such games with helpless slaves. But he had believed them—that he would have a chance at Chup—he had wanted to believe. He felt himself swaying on his knees. Just now he could not have turned to face Sarah to save his life—his life? No, that was not worth turning his head to save. If only Nils had killed him, instead!

When he could think again, when his self-disgust was turning wholly outward against those who had so tricked and used him, he saw that his sword-teacher was being made now by two others to kneel at Rolf's side. The man spoke at last, in a muttering voice. "Mercy, Lord." But he did not raise his eyes to look at Ekuman.

"Tell me, my loyal sergeant—who gave the orders for this method of training the two gladiators?"

In answer the old soldier gasped, a most peculiar, unexpected sound. His head twisted around, eyes staring, as if he wanted to see something invisible that had fastened on him from behind. And in the next moment he was toppling forward from his knees, much as Nils had done in the arena. But this man was smitten by no blade, only stiffening and straining in some sort of fit, gone foaming and speechless.

Ekuman was on his feet, barking angry orders. The man with the toad-creature watched the fit, then raised his head frowning as he who had been in the rear of the chamber came forward at a majestic pace, tall and gray.

Ekuman held out to this one a blackened case of metal, and said, "Elslood. Tell me quickly what you can of this."

Frowning, the wizard Elslood took the thing, weighed it in his hand, muttered over it for a moment, then raised the curved lid, while some around shrank back. He stared at the lump of blackened stone that lay inside. "I can tell you nothing quickly, Lord, save that there is some real power here."

"That much I knew. Put the thing in some safe place, then, and attend me here. I mean to get to the bottom of this game that was played in the arena today."

Elslood shut the case with a snap. He looked down once—as if indifferently—at the fallen soldier, who was still writhing feebly on the floor while others tried to minister to him. Elslood looked at Rolf, and again, stronger than before, the image of his eyes burned brilliant and gigantic in Rolf's mind, like a sun-image taken in a wide open eye. Then he handed the case to the man with the toad, at the same time indicating the far side of the chamber with a motion of his head. The man with the toad-creature accepted the case with a subordinate's nod and started across the chamber with it. On the far side was an arras which might hide a closet or a separate apartment.

Through the window nearest him, Rolf heard rain roar suddenly upon the flat roof-terrace just outside. Servants had just finished lighting torches, and the flames smoked fitfully. Rolf had the sensation that the sky, like some great flat coffin-lid, was pressing down upon the tower.

"Now, sirrah!" Ekuman was speaking to him again. But this time the Satrap's voice seemed to be coming and going, issuing from behind a veil and then emerging once more, echoing through an immense distance. Rolf did not seem to be able to answer. The image of Elslood's eyes, growing and swelling, remained like some malignant growth within

his head, clouding thought and vision alike. The tall gray wizard was standing nearby, but Rolf dared not look up at him again.

"Answer me, sirrah!" Ekuman was almost shouting. "Good answers now will save some pains when you are taken down below!"

Whether it was the boldness of utter despair that now settled on Rolf or whether some outside power came to his aid and he managed to put away both the terror that Ekuman wanted to fasten on him and the imposed vision of the wizard's eyes that would compel him to be silent. The Satrap's face grew clear before Rolf and he stood up from his knees.

Ekuman's voice was clear and ordinary once more coming with the drumming of the rain through a heavy silence. "Tell me, master swordsman, whose agent are you?"

Beyond all fear now, Rolf smiled. "I? I am Ardneh—"

The night pressing on the Castle was destroyed. The light that rent it was as sudden as that which had blazed out of Elephant's side, and a thousand times, a million times, as bright. The concussion that came with it was beyond all sound.

Rolf was aware only that something had hit him with force enough to knock him down, nay, turn him inside out as well. Other people had been hit also, for a voice was screaming, over and over. No, it was more than one voice. Some of the women's voices had turned guttural, and there were masculine ones gone high and childish.

By some means that Rolf did not understand at first, the window nearest him had just been widened, so that rain drove in on him where he lay on the floor amid loose stone and broken wood. The noises of human agony went on. Could that be Sarah screaming, Chup stabbing her with his punishing cudgel?

Rolf had been completely senseless for a moment only for when he raised his head a ball of lightning was still adrift in the middle of the room. He watched it dancing

about there, lightly and hesitantly, as if it looked to see whether any chance for destruction had been missed, before it skipped to the wall and vanished up a chimney.

A path of ruin had been plowed straight across the center of the big round room. From the blasted window nearest Rolf to the flaming arras of the distant alcove, human bodies and furniture had been treated like the nestings of mice turned up by a furrowing plow. All across the room the wooden floor was marked now with a blackened path, smoking and smoldering. The incoming rain hissed on this scar where it was near Rolf's head, but could not reach it elsewhere.

The smoke oozing up from the floor was forming a cloud in the higher air, so Rolf did not at once attempt to stand. Crawling would serve, for the moment. Where was Sarah? She was gone, like his sister and his parents. On hands and knees he moved dazedly over wreckage, seeing without emotion the twitching dead and the struggling injured, hearing the lip-licking crackle of the hungry bright young flames.

Not finding Sarah, he went on dazedly following the black burning furrow of the lightning-plow. At the end of the path he came to Zarf's roasted body; Zarf smelled of cooked meat now. In death his face was no longer ordinary, and the dead thing at his shoulder was no longer a toad, but an odd terrible little creature like a bearded human baby. And here was a monstrous spider, sizzled crisp; and none of these were stranger than other things that were strewn across the floor, amid tumbled shelves and fallen, burning draperies.

Not having found Sarah, Rolf turned back again. He saw now that there were new people in the room, moving capably about, and he got himself to his feet. Now soldiers and servants were pouring into the chamber, from the stair and from the roof-terrace.

And Ekuman himself was on his feet. His rich garments were torn, his face begrimed, but the vigor of his movements showed that he had taken no serious hurt. In his

hands he now held one of the Old World things that Rolf had earlier noticed on the wall behind the throne—one of a pair of red cylinders, whose mate still hung there on a strap like an arrow-quiver. At one end of the cylinder was a black nozzle which Ekuman was now aiming at the burning floor. With his other hand he gripped a trigger that reminded Rolf of some of the controls inside the Elephant.

From the black nozzle there shot out a white rope that looked hardly more substantial than smoke, but remained coherent and opaque and was heavy enough to sink to the floor. There it expanded. Like some magic pudding the whiteness spread itself across the burning floor, flame and smoking wood vanishing beneath it. The wounded lying on the floor brought their heads above the white blanket to gasp for air—but they need struggle and cry no longer for fear of being burned. The fire was quickly being put out.

There was Sarah, beside Nils' stretcher of course, holding up his head above the whiteness. The sight of her alive was joy to Rolf, even though a soldier had her in charge, and even though two more of them seized him as he took his first step toward her.

Ekuman worked on, a diligent laborer. From the seemingly inexhaustible device he held there spread out a white carpet to cover all the fire. And his soldiers and his servants took heart from his coolness, and were made confident of the strange white stuff by the sight of their Lord standing calmly unharmed in the midst of it. Soon, at his orders, the wounded were being lifted up, the damage assessed, order reestablished.

Only one voice went keening on in mindless fear, the voice of one who had not been hurt. Rolf saw Chup draw back his hand and coldly slap his smudge-faced wife. The one blow brought her to silence, a silence of astonishment, utter and open-mouthed.

Now there were only the purposeful noises of workers in the chamber. The fire was dead; Ekuman shut off his foam-thrower and set it down. Nils was still alive, and the tall wizard Elslood seemed unhurt.

Out on the terrace the rain was trailing off to nothing, but daylight was not returned. The sun, Rolf thought, must be already down.

It was not light that burst in next at the exploded window. It was a patch of darkness, darkness not black, but gray-green scale. The reptile flapped to a halt in the midst of the white floor, cawing out to Ekuman:

"My Lawrd! M'Lawwrd! The enemy attacks, acraaws the pass!"

XII

THOSE WERE the first words that Rolf had ever heard from one of the leather-wings, but he understood them well. He lunged and twisted in his captor's grip, trying to get a look out through the north window. Peering through the narrow window into the deep dusk he could see a few scattered sparks of distant fires or torches, but nothing more than that before he was wrenched away.

"Take this one back to his cell," an officer was ordering those who held Rolf. "Keep him separated from the others until the Lord Ekuman has time to question him again."

And Rolf's guards hustled him away. They went at a good rate down the stairs, though several times forced to draw to one side to make room for messengers who passed them running up or down. Rolf saw nothing but elation among the soldiers at the news that the Free Folk were attacking in force. The Castle-men had no doubt that they could win a battle in the open, even at night.

Each time he passed a window Rolf tried to catch a look at what was going on outside. Narrow glimpses of the night revealed nothing to him. Three, two, one—so the count had gone, aiming at tonight. Were his friends' signals meant only to tell him of the attack across the pass? No, he told himself, it must be something that involved him more directly. Something was, or would be, expected of him. And now he was going back to his cell, where his friends would expect him to be.

Extra torches were being lit, brightening the courtyards as Rolf's guards brought him out of the keep, into the even greater activity and apparent confusion prevailing in the open air. The numbers of hurrying men and beasts made it impossible for three to go abreast here, so Rolf's guards fell behind him, one of them maintaining a tight grip on his collar.

Three, two, one, the time had come, and he was still alive to see it. Rolf was at a peak of alertness. His ears at once caught the high clear hooting that drifted down to him from above. He did not look up, for on the instant a small object struck the paving stones near his feet and with the hardness of a rock came bouncing up before him. Tied to the missile was a note, a paper—at least a white tail of some kind.

Rolf caught the stone on its first bounce, thinking even as he reached out that the bird above was mad to drop a message to him in this way. He felt his guards' hands grabbing at him, then unaccountably slipping away as the stone came firmly into his grasp. He twisted away from the guards hoping to gain a moment in which to discover what message was on the paper, what words were worth getting him killed in order that he might read them.

"Put that down!" a guard bawled, and followed this urging with the utterance of a string of demons' names, directed at his mate, who for some reason had come blundering awkwardly into him. In the moment it took them to untangle themselves Rolf skipped away farther. He got the paper opened but before he could begin to read the two soldiers were coming at him again, big hands outstretched to grab. Rolf raised the rock, on the point of trying to brain one of them with it, but in that instant a door opened in the wall behind him. The door was left ajar by the soldier who came running through it on some urgent errand; as if he did not see them, he ran right in the way of the two who were coming after Rolf.

Moving on instinct, Rolf seized the offered opportunity. He had just dodged through the door when it slammed

shut of itself behind him, then creaked with the weight of his shouting pursuers.

He was in yet another courtyard of the warren, this one large and nearly filled by a company of soldiers forming up for roll call. There were no more open doors in sight. Rolf darted past a gaping officer and then, since there was nowhere else to run, he went dodging through the ranks, looking frantically about him for some way out. Men stared at him, some cursed, some laughed.

"Seize that man!"

A thicket of arms brushed at him as he ran.

"He's greased!"

"Ensorceled!"

"What's up here? *Seize* that man!"

"It's some slave, kill him and have done."

"No, that's one of those the Satrap wants to question! Take him alive!"

Holding up his arms to shield his face, smarting from the slapping hands that could not hold him, Rolf emerged from the gauntlet—on the wrong side, he saw now. In his confusion he had turned back toward the keep. Aware now that some magic was protecting him from capture, he turned again and ran back.

The company of soldiers had turned into a mob, shouting, roaring, floundering into one another's way. Rolf slipped past and through them. Their fingers lashed him like so many branches, powerless to grab. The disgusted officer, even as he bellowed to his men to form a ring, stepped aside himself, as if absentmindedly letting Rolf run by.

Again the soldiers were all behind him. A low wall loomed ahead, the side of a one-story shed. Rolf sprang atop a barrel sitting near the wall, and from there leaped again without pausing. The springy wood of the barrelhead seemed to add unnaturally to his momentum. Scarcely did his hands need to touch the eaves before his feet were on the gentle slope of the roof; he bounded on across it with running strides, not slowing for an instant. The Stone was

tingling in his fingers. A present from Loford; he should have understood that at once.

As he crossed the roof his eyes and mind went racing unhurriedly ahead. Between him and the Castle's mighty outer wall was one last courtyard, and at this courtyard's farther end the postern gate—a narrow door, now closed, barred heavily, and guarded on the inside by a pair of sentries.

These two looked up in astonishment as Rolf came leaping lightly from the low roof, bounced to his feet and raced toward them. He was trusting utterly in the power of the magic that had been given him. As he ran he heard voices raised behind him crying, "Ho, guards! Stop that fugitive! Kill him if you must but stop him!"

One of the sentries began to draw his sword. Rolf came running on, holding the Stone before him in two hands, as if he charged the gate behind a battering-ram. Indeed, the effect seemed much the same. When Rolf was still five running strides inside the gate, the giant bar that held it shut went flying, spinning high into the air. In the same instant, with a booming sound, the door itself flung wide. Both the sentries were briefly distracted, if not stunned, by these events. Rolf passed between the men as one of them recovered. As Rolf's strides carried him through the gate the corner of his eye showed him a swordstroke coming; he felt only the merest touch across his back, below one shoulder blade, and then he was free, flying safe into the enveloping dark. Outside the Castle walls the ground sloped steeply down, so that for all his eagerness he had to slow his steps to keep from falling where he could not see.

The descending slope soon gentled beneath Rolf's feet. The stars were coming out now, and he very quickly had his bearings. He was on the east side of the Castle. He would have to circle to his left, giving the walls a wide berth, to come to the north side of the pass and the Elephant-cave. Looking that way now, he saw fewer torches than he had seen earlier from the Castle window. Men's shouting,

terrible and vague, drifted to him from that direction. Rolf began to trot, listening each moment for another sound—but the voice of Elephant had not been reawakened yet, for all that he could hear.

Almost at once he was forced to slow down again to a cautious walk. The guarded voices of men were audible, not far ahead of him on the gentle, open slope. As Rolf's eyes adjusted to the night, and the starry sky grew brighter with the clouds' dispersal, he could see some of these men ahead of him. He made out others off to one side. They were all vague and distant shadows, moving in the same general direction as he. He could not see whether they were friends or enemies. Probably the whole valley of the pass was crawling with moving troops belonging to both sides.

"Roolf!" This time the hooting cry was soft, quivering as if with delight, and very near, just above his head. "Well done, well flown, oh heavy egg!"

He looked up at the dark hovering shape. "Strijeef!"

"Yes, yes, it is me. Hurry on, hurry! More to your right. Is Ekuman dead?"

"Not when I saw him last. The lightning missed him, though it did his friends no good. Where's Thomas? Strijeef, you must guide me to the Elephant."

"I have come to guide you there. Run, the way ahead is clear just now! Thomas is busy fighting. He asks if you can wake the Elephant and ride him into battle."

"Tell him yes, yes, yes, if I can get into the cave. And get the Elephant out. Are there men in there now? Is there fighting?"

"Nooo. The fighting has been in front of the big doors; they are still closed. The Stone you carry will help you thrust them open from the inside. Ekuman would trust none of his people to enter the cave without him; so I have been able to fix a rope in the place you carved to hold one. When we get there I will let it down for you to climb."

With the bird to see for him Rolf could move at a swift pace; but several times Strijeef had him detour around

enemy troops, or wait for them to pass. In the intervals when it was safe to talk Strijeef told Rolf much of what had happened; how Feathertip had been killed and himself wounded, helping Thomas, and Rolf therefore left to himself in the cave. How the Thunderstone had been found, and used to cover the Free Folk's passage across the desert today; and when they were hidden at the side of a mountain, how it had been returned, in a captured pouch, to the body of the reptile that had fallen with it, and that body uncovered again for Ekuman's scouts to find.

"And this Stone you dropped to me, Bird. What's this note tied to it? Do you know I was nearly killed trying to get it open to read it?"

"Whoo!" Strijeef thought that was funny. "The note just tells you what the Stone is; you found that out for yourself. Hoo! it was fun to watch the way you flew, over a roof and through a wall!"

Rolf by this time had crossed the road at the bottom of the pass, and now the northern slope was steepening under his feet. He was in an area where there had been fighting. He passed a nearly-burned-out signal torch, still casting brightness on the sand in a little circle which included the dead hand of the soldier who had held it. Rolf would have stopped to grope around the dead man for weapons, but Strijeef chided him to hurry on. The bird said, "The enemy is still holding in front of the big doors. The fighting there has stopped right now and our men have pulled back a little. I'll guide you around them all."

They went on up the northern slope. Once more Rolf had to stop and wait, crouching in silence, listening to a file of the enemy go past him, moving west to east across the slope. They came almost within arm's length of him; he could hear them swallowing and breathing in heavy fear. When the last sound of them had died away, the hovering bird plucked at Rolf's shirt with a silent claw, and he arose and followed Strijeef on up the hill. Now he recognized the high silhouette of the familiar towers of rock, quite clear

against the sky. Now around him in the darkness there rose the pitiful loud moaning of the wounded.

"How has the fighting gone?" Rolf dared to whisper, once when the bird's wing came near enough to brush his face.

"Not too bad, not too good. The Castle-men have no eyes to see for them in the dark, but still they have the greater numbers. Quiet, now."

Strijeef led Rolf by one of the eastern crevices into the complex of tumbled rocks. Rolf groped his way, climbing over boulders and squeezing between them. At last he felt the canyon's familiar sandy floor beneath his feet, and then the jagged rocks that he knew were right below the mouth of the high cave. Strijeef went rising silently ahead of him, and a moment later the climbing rope came hissing and uncoiling down the cliff to strike Rolf in the face.

He gripped the rope and gave a hard precautionary tug, then went up swiftly. From the wound on his back there was a light tugging pain, too small to be worrisome. Once having gained the high cave—with Strijeef fluttering nervously just outside, still urging him on—he quickly pulled up the rope. Leaving the anchor-stick in the notch, he crawled through the blackness to the chimney and let the rope down again. On the descent into the lower cave there was no room for the bird to guide him, but he could easily feel his way.

Very shortly he had traversed the chimney, and was swinging free in the utter blackness of the great hollow egg of Elephant's cave; he slid right on down the rope until the solid flatness of the floor came under his feet. The bird had followed him down the shaft, and flew ahead of him now, loudly and openly calling him to hurry. Rolf followed Strijeef's voice straight through what to human eyes was utter darkness; until he could lay first his hand and then his forehead against the cool solidity of Elephant's flank.

At that moment all exhaustion seemed to drop away; and only as his weariness left him did he realize how great it had become. Now it seemed that some of Ele-

phant's age-old power came flowing into him, the strength of some fantastic metal army descending to his muscles and his hands. His hands, moving caressingly rather than groping over Elephant's cool side, quickly found the recessed steps and grips. Before he tugged open the circular door, he remembered to close his dark-adjusted eyes, and to warn Strijeef to do the same.

The expected shock of light from within came redly through his eyelids. He climbed inside and tugged the door tightly shut behind him, squinting to make sure the massive latch was caught. With an odd feeling of homecoming he made his way to the seat that he had occupied before, meanwhile gradually getting his eyes properly opened. The familiar whisper of air was moving around him. His hands at once began their half-remembered task of goading Elephant up out of his slumber.

Blinking sleepy panel-lights at Rolf, Elephant uttered his first groan. This wakening was not so shuddering and agonized as his last had been—Rolf supposed Elephant had not had time to sink age-deep in sleep again. The CHECKLIST symbols lighted reassuringly, and once more Rolf began the ritual of wiping out the colored dots. The vision-ring descended as before to make a circle around his head. Through it the cave grew visible around him, and Strijeef flying in the cave in anxious circles. The bird's eyes were open wide, black fathomless pupils dilated as Rolf had never before been able to see them; every feather of the bird's spread wings, and the bandage on one wing, were plain. Elephant's night-seeing was evidently as good as any bird's; if Rolf could once burst from the cave, he would need no guidance to find the enemy.

Dot by dot CHECKLIST vanished. This time the process went much faster than before. Elephant's unbreathing voice roared strong and sure. Strijeef said the sound of that voice had led the enemy to the cave. Well, let them hear it now. Let it shake the ground beneath their feet, all across the valley. Let it vibrate in the dungeons of the

Castle, and quiver in the bones of those who stood commanding in the proud tower above!

Suddenly the green tracery of light showed on the two big levers, standing one on each side of Rolf's chair. He reached inside his shirt, to touch again the Stone of Freedom where he had it tucked away. And then he gripped the levers and gently pulled.

Elephant backed up, grumbling, turning at Rolf's direction to aim head-on at the doors that must be opened. Strijee's flying circle in the air blurred with the speed of his excitement. And Rolf shoved the levers both hard forward.

His huge mount shouted out, as if in sudden rage, and like a raging beast it charged. Rolf seemed to feel the Stone he carried twitch inside his shirt. Before Elephant had touched the big doors they were opening, jerking sideways like cloth before the invisible influence of the Stone, opening like a pair of curtains. Elephant's impatient shoulders caught them even as they parted, and Rolf heard the metal barrier give way, like noisy paper tearing.

The boulders that Ekuman's slaves had not yet been able to remove slowed Elephant as he went tilting out upon the open slope. They slowed but could not stop him; they slid or rolled or bounded, making way.

The Castle, startlingly plain, was suddenly in front of Rolf. Elephant's night-piercing vision showed him every detail of the descending and ascending slopes that lay between him and the Castle. Visible to Rolf were all the men of both armies in the field, spread across the valley of the pass in their groping files and squads and ambushes. All of them were still now, waiting for the outcome of this moment, hearing the mighty unseen crashing and bursting out of Elephant, knowing what it was but not what it might mean. Elephant's buried voice had warned them all a little distance from the doors, but still some, both friend and foe, were near enough for Rolf to see their wonderment and fear. All their faces, blind with darkness, were turned straining toward him.

The men in the field would not long be kept in doubt of what Elephant was going to do. Rolf kept his two drive levers pushed well forward. Bellowing out his rage across the valley, Elephant charged down the slope, rapidly picking up speed. Among the thousand men scattered across the landscape, Rolf had selected his first target—a company of enemy cavalry. They were just starting to wall their mounts upslope from the road at the bottom of the pass, coming too late to reinforce their mates in the fighting near the cave.

Rolf steered to hit their file head-on. His mount steadily built up speed on the long downslope; he jounced and bounced but kept his seat. Hearing his charge if not seeing it, the company below him mounted. But in another moment the animals were uncontrollable; they panicked and fled before the roaring earthshaker hurtling at them through the night.

Some galloped off to one side or the other, escaping Elephant, but those who were late to move were overriden, and those who fled straight back could not run fast enough to get away. Beasts and riders alike went under the wide, swift-racing armored treads. Rolf looked back but only once.

He had crossed the highway, and the cavalry company was scattered or destroyed. No longer seeing any of the enemy before him, he pulled back on his left-hand lever guiding Elephant through a thundering, jolting turn that brought him back onto the road. He followed the road westward, passing below the Castle. Now the enemy in the field seemed no more than scattered ants, small targets that were unworthy of his wrath while the anthill itself was standing, arrogant as ever.

He almost turned Elephant straight uphill from the bottom of the pass, charging at the Castle wall by the shortest route—but despite himself he was dissuaded by remembering the awesome thickness of those high gray walls, the hugeness of the slabs of stone that formed the base. In his concentration of fury and joy he scarcely

noticed excited birds come sailing around him and depart again. No, he would take the Castle at its weakest point. He would ride the highway into the village and through it, and turn onto the road that led up to that proud gate, the gate through which he had once been dragged behind an animal.

Let the teeth of that portcullis bite down upon him now!

Thomas, standing halfway down the northern slope of the pass, straining his eyes to see through the night, heard the mighty voice and tread of Elephant go past him, left to right, along the highway below.

"Where's he going now?" Thomas demanded of one of the birds who hovered near. "Tell him to wait, till I can talk with him!" Tonight, naturally, the Silent People were Thomas's eyes and communications system—thanks to them, he held in his mind a picture of the battlefield very nearly as complete as Rolf's view through the vision-ring. To Thomas, accustomed to thinking in tactical terms, it was obvious that Elephant's first charge had outflanked the enemy in the field, cutting them off from the Castle and completing their demoralization, begun by the night itself. The Elephant with its demonstrated night-vision, speed, and invulnerable strength, seemed quite capable of mopping up the enemy, completing their scattering, sending the survivors fleeing in exhaustion and panic into the river or the desert to be hunted down later by Thomas's own rested men. . . .

But Rolf was simply driving along the road.

Strijeeff came dropping out of the sky, crying, "We cannot speak to him! Elephant seems to have no ears, though its eyes must be as good as mine!"

Thomas demanded, "Where's he going? It sounds like he's in the village now."

"He is." Strijeeff rose higher, looked again, cried out, "He turns with the road! He's going up toward the Castle!"

After thinking for a moment, Thomas ordered, "Then you and the other birds gather all our men to me, here, as

nearly as you can. If Rolf can't hear us--well, he who can't take orders must be the leader, if he fights."

Rolf was not yet expert at guiding Elephant through sharp turns; though he passed through the village at a moderate speed, a brush of Elephant's flank still tumbled one deserted-looking house from its standpoint on a corner. He saw no people tumbling with the house; the village seemed already emptied of them. He was soon out of it, on the road that climbed upward to the Castle. Rolf saw that the great gate at the road's end was open, a company of fleeing foot soldiers pouring into it; the last man was barely in before it was pushed shut. Now the bars as thick as tree trunks would be dropping into place to hold it fast. Let them work at making their defenses all secure. Yes, let them think that they were safe.

With the drive levers only half-forward, Elephant came up the ascending road at the pace of a trotting man. The Castle walls grew. Even now, Rolf felt a shadow of his old awe at their size. Now the defensive towers that flanked the great gate seemed to be leaning almost over his head, their height reaching the blind spot that the vision-ring left directly above.

Still, as he halted a little distance from the gate, he could see that there were men atop the towers. Arrows and slung rocks began to spray down over him. Elephant did not notice such things; Rolf could scarcely hear their impacts. He urged Elephant forward, thinking to request admittance, and the men above began to pour some sort of liquid fire; Elephant minded it no more than rain.

There was no room on the small level space before the Castle to build up headlong speed. Still, at Elephant's first knocking, the iron teeth of the portcullis bent in like so many straws, and the great gate itself sagged in with timbers cracked and splintered. Elephant was stopped from pushing through not by the gate's strength but only by its narrowness; the broad bulk of Rolf's mount was caught and held by the towers on either side.

The burning liquid from above came pouring in an orange glow across Elephant's eyes, then dribbled harmlessly away, leaving Rolf's view as good as ever. Rolf pulled his levers back, backing Elephant up. He wondered briefly that the gate should be able to resist him, with the Prisoner's Stone still in his pocket. But it occurred to him that he was a prisoner no longer; he was now trying to break in, not out. Delicately he worked his levers, turning Elephant slightly to the right, aiming him head-on at the tower on that side. He charged again.

The massive tower stopped Elephant, and sent Rolf sliding unsuspecting forward in his seat. His forehead struck against the inner surface of the vision-ring. He was half-stunned for a moment, then roused to a fury of frustrated anger. Growling and muttering, he hauled back the levers. Elephant, quite unhurt, responded; when they had backed up Rolf saw with satisfaction that several of the great stones in the tower's base had been shifted and loosened. The battered gate was now leaning more crookedly than before, and its timbers were beginning to burn from splatterings of liquid fire.

Again Rolf charged, hurling Elephant's brute power against the strength of the gigantic masonry. This time he braced his legs as strongly as he could against the lower part of the panel before him, setting himself to meet the impact. More stones caved in, like teeth before a club, before Elephant was stopped. Working in a cold rage, Rolf again and again drew Elephant back, and again and again rammed him forward. Elephant did not tire or weaken in the least. Parapet-stones, loosened from atop the shaken tower, began to tumble, and now stones fell jumbled with contorted men and bundles of unshot arrows and a spilling cauldron of the liquid fire. *Ekuman, where are you? Hide in a bigger tower than this, or burrow into your deepest dungeon, if you will. Ardneh has come to find you out!*

The impact of the next charge burst in the gate completely, sending burning timbers bounding and spinning with seeming slowness across the deserted yard they had de-

fended. But still the towers stood, narrowing the gap enough to keep Elephant from passing through.

Elephant's last charge at the damaged tower did not come to a sudden stop. Instead it lurched on through a long satisfying yielding grinding thunder of collapse. Elephant's eyes were covered for a time—first by rebounding blocks of stone, and after that by a fog of dust so thick that no bird or machine might see through it. Covering his ears with hands and arms, Rolf bent over in his seat, hearing the tower come falling on his head.

His progress having ground at last to a halt, Elephant stood tilted somewhat on one side, his belly-voice droning on imperturbably. Rolf had just regained a firm seat in his chair, and was reaching for the drive levers, when he was surprised to feel a new current of air come swirling around him. The draft brought with it outside noises and the smell of rock-dust. He turned to look back at the door and saw with utter astonishment that it was open. A warrior stood there. His garments and his helm and shield were black and red; he held his sword out in a half-extended arm, so that the point was scarce a meter from Rolf's heart. The warrior's face was hidden in a barbut-helm, black with a demon-mask outlined on it in red; but Rolf had not a moment's doubt that this was Chup.

Even Chup, entering the Elephant for the first time, must pause for an instant in sheer awe and bewilderment. And in that instant Rolf slid from his chair on the side away from the sword.

The sword came flicking quickly after him, meaning to nail one of his arms to the floor. But the Stone of Freedom was still inside Rolf's pocket, and even now it opened a way out for him. A panel whose existence he had never guessed swung open in the floor beside him. A headfirst dive into the dark space thus revealed took him into a cramped place surrounded by strange heavy machinery. Even as the panel closed itself over his head, the surface on which he was crouching parted, made way for him to exit. He wiggled out, straight through a solid slab of

armor thicker than a man; the metal sealed itself perfectly again behind him.

He was sprawled on one of the foundation stones of the fallen tower, lying half under Elephant's tilted body. Dust still hung thick and choking in the air. There was some light to see by, from wood amid the ruins caught ablaze by the spilled fire.

Here, Elephant's voice was deafeningly loud; but as Rolf slid out from under the tilted bulk he could hear men shouting somewhere in the middle distance. He rose to a crouch, looking this way and that for some kind of weapon; Chup would be on him at any moment. At least there were no other soldiers in sight; Chup's degree of courage seemed unique among the defenders of the Castle.

No, here was one Castle-man who had stuck bravely to his post—or else had simply been too slow in taking flight. He was under some rocks, now. His protruding hand still clutched a sword; Rolf bent to take it and found that he must pry the spasmed fingers loose.

He had just got the weapon for himself when Chup came into sight around Elephant's forequarters, stepping over wreckage. The warrior chief had evidently given up trying to follow Rolf's magical exit and had backed out of Elephant through the ordinary door. Rolf had no time now to puzzle over how Chup had opened that door in the first place.

"There you are, young one!" Chup's voice sounded almost jovial, but he moved carefully as he came toward Rolf. Even Chup was wary of one who had mastered the Elephant's power. "My infant gladiator—a precocious wizard also, it seems. Come now, you have fought well, you have fought like a giant, but you have lost. Give me the spell, the rein, the whip, whatever it is you use to bridle this monster to your will."

Rolf wasted no breath on words, only bent and picked up a rock with his left hand, meanwhile holding his borrowed sword ready in his right. Now some of the shouting voices were coming very close, sounding from just outside

the ruined gap where the gate had been, the gap now half-blocked by the tilted Elephant.

Chup was staying between Elephant and Rolf. Rolf retreated a little deeper into the courtyard, to get his feet on flat ground rather than the rubble of the tower.

Chup was going to tolerate no stalling; he came at Rolf steadily and quickly. There would be no getting away; the light wound on Rolf's back reminded him that the Prisoner's Stone gave no protection against a blade. Rolf threw his rock as best he could left-handed, and lunged straight in behind it with his point. He saw the rock bounce from Chup's raised shield, and then Rolf's sword was knocked from his grip by a short parry of such violence that it numbed his hand. Chup came charging like a human Elephant, and down Rolf went. He knew his life was spared only because his secret must be learned; Chup's demon-masked figure towered over him, Chup's swordpoint rested at Rolf's beltline.

"Now give the secret of this Elephant to me! Or I will slowly—"

The screech of a battle-cry warned Chup, sent him spinning around only just in time as Mewick came leaping at him. Mewick was carrying no shield but matched the short sword in his right hand with a basket-hilted hatchet in his left.

Rolf managed to roll away. He saw Chup somehow weathering the first assault, giving a little ground, then standing and fighting back. Sword and shield, sword and hatchet, rang together in a blur of speed, separated briefly, clashed again on a higher level of violence.

Now there were more of the Free Folk coming in around Elephant's bulk, through the gap that had been the gateway. And bronze-helmeted soldiers from within the Castle were rallying to meet them. Amid the confusion Rolf went crawling and scrambling over the littered earth, trying to get back to Elephant, whose belly-voice droned on beneath the growing clamor of the fight. But he found bronze helmets always in his way. He couldn't fight his way

through to Elephant without a weapon. Where was the sword Chup had knocked from his hand? It seemed that he could never manage to keep a sword.

Dodging and jumping to keep himself alive, Rolf worked his way around the fringe of the melee to a point from which he could see that Elephant's door still hung invitingly open. He tried to shout to some of the Free Folk to enter it, but the din of battle drowned his voice. And none of them had ever even seen Elephant before—small wonder if they did not rush to climb into the noisy cave of its inside.

Rolf at last managed to grab another weapon from another fallen soldier's hand. But then, as for fighting his way through, he had all that he could do to defend himself against the nearest of the soldier's mates. This opponent had nothing like Chup's power and skill, but he was still less of a novice with the sword than Rolf. Rolf found himself being forced further and further from the breached wall and the Elephant.

His duel reached no clean conclusion; he and his opponent were swept apart by the confused, headlong retreat of the soldiers to an inner courtyard. Knocked to the ground again, Rolf played dead while the throng stampeded over him. He had a moment in which to wonder if all battles were as mad and stupidly desperate as this one. When the rush had stopped and he raised his head he found that his friends were in possession of the field around him.

All was not well, though. The last of the Free Folk to come pelting through the ruined gateway were not charging forward, but rather in retreat. Right on their heels there sounded trumpet calls, and a thunder of arriving hooves—cavalry, and in substantial force.

The first few of the riders entered the courtyard, but their mounts stumbled in the ruins of the tower, and shied from the Elephant and from the burning timbers that lay about. Thomas rallied his men to hold back the cavalry at the gate. The enemy dismounted, and with leveled

lances held the breach from their side—held the Elephant, too, though none of them would touch it. The hundred men who had rushed in with Thomas were now effectively trapped inside the Castle. Cheers echoed back and forth, between Ekuman's men at the gate and their mates atop the keep.

The thicket of lances defending Elephant looked impenetrable. "Toward the keep, then!" Thomas shouted, making a quick decision. Before Rolf could reach his side to argue, the Free Folk were charging deeper into the Castle, and Rolf could do nothing but join them. His sword remained unblooded, for the charge met little resistance until it had swept the warren of walls and sheds up to the forbidding mass of the keep itself. At that point the Free Folk met doors as strong as the outer gate had been, closed and barred against them. And missiles began to drop on them from above.

This courtyard held many carts and other objects under which men might shelter. Rolf had just scrambled under a cart, panting, when a big man with sword in hand came crashing down beside him. Turning, Rolf recognized Thomas.

Laboring for breath like Rolf, Thomas demanded, "The Elephant's wrecked? Crippled?"

"No . . ."

"No? Then what demon possessed you that you left it?"

"The demon Chup. He got the door open—I don't know how—"

Thomas groaned. "Never mind how. But the enemy can use the Elephant, then? It'll obey them if they dare to try?"

"It might." Rolf started trying to explain the controls.

"All right, all right. Then we must just get you back into it. Take good care of your life until we do. What's that? The birds! There's a distraction for us, if we can use it!"

A mighty polyphonic shrieking uproar had burst loose around the high places of the Castle. The defensive sys-

tem of nets and cords, probably weakened by the fall of the tower beside the gate, was now under heavy assault by birds, who seemed to be carrying some edged weapons for the work. Sections of severed net came sagging and dangling into the courtyards, brushing Thomas's men as he led them out in another charge against the outer gate.

There was too much fire there for the birds to be of help. And in the light of burning timbers the backs of the Free Folk were exposed to the missiles that now hailed more thickly from the roof of the keep. And the dismounted lancers' long weapons, pointed as thick as hedgethorns into the yard, still formed a wall proof against sword and mace and farmer's pitchfork. "Back! Back inside!" Thomas bawled out, seeing his men dropping with arrows in their backs, and impaling themselves to no effect upon the long shafts that kept them from the Elephant.

Once more they scrambled panting into the relative shelter of the inner court. Now Thomas cried out, "Find a timber! We must break in the door of the keep!" And at last the desperation was plain in his voice for all to hear. This door would sturdily resist the biggest ram that men might lift; and the missiles would keep coming down from above; and, given time, Ekuman could summon more reinforcements.

Rolf felt the weight of the Prisoner's Stone, still inside his shirt. It was no help in breaking *in* a door . . .

There came a sudden flash of understanding. Rolf seized Thomas by the sleeve, at the same time holding up the Stone of Freedom. "It was this that opened the door for Chup, when I was in the Elephant! No doors will hold, that guard whoever holds this Stone!"

Thomas stared at him blankly for just a moment, and then understood. He raised his arm and signaled urgently, calling down a bird.

XIII

SCOWLING, intent on his labors, Elslood stood at a table flanked by torches, at the side of the lightning-blasted Presence Chamber that was opposite the empty throne. The floor around him was still strewn with stones from the riven window, with clots and patches of the durable fire-extinguishing foam, and with other debris of the afternoon's disaster, a corpse or two included. But the bodies of Zarf and Zarf's familiar had been removed; a wizard's corpse was still a thing of power, liable to be disruptive of another man's magic.

Here in his own place, where his closet had once been covered by rich hangings and protected by a spider, Elslood had set up his worktable and reestablished a measure of order. Gesturing and reciting now over the diagrams chalked on the tabletop and the objects placed thereon, Elslood foresaw that his labor was likely to be futile. The subtler arts were hard to use against an enemy in the field, when swords were out and blood a-spilling. Elementals were sometimes employable in such situations, of course—his industrious opponent Loford had quite a knack for raising them, though he was hardly Elslood's match in other ways. But no one could raise an elemental from the worked stones of the Castle, nor from the man-trampled patch of earth the Castle stood on.

Set in the center of one of the diagrams on the table was a flat-sided crystal, which had been darkening steadily as Elslood worked. He could not bring the darkness to fruition, could not summon out of it the dread power that he wanted—but the crystal in its present state did act prosaically as a mirror. The mirror distracted Elslood with its reflection of a tableau set on the far side of the chamber, not far from Ekuman's empty throne. Soldiers were constantly coming and going through the room on various errands, but always one of them stood guard, there, over

the litter holding the prisoner who today had fallen in the arena. And always the dark-haired girl was there, keeping her gentler watch.

Elslood knew that even battle and invasion had not made Ekuman forget the warning of the day's intrigue. Ekuman never forgot. And when Ekuman had won the night's battle, as it seemed now that he would, he would take up the investigation as before.

Elslood had effectively silenced the sergeant by inflicting fits of madness. And the mysterious youth who had called himself Ardneh—or Ardneh's agent—had escaped. The one on the litter, though, might still give testimony that would ultimately involve Elslood. Certainly the one on the litter should be silenced. But there was the soldier on guard, and the dark-haired harem-girl presenting a greater if unconscious obstacle. Her devotion radiated like a torch to keep the dark arts of madness at a distance. Still it should be possible to do *something*, to finish off one who was so gravely hurt. . . .

So it happened that Elslood, distracted from his duty to his Lord, was looking behind him through the crystal's mirror, and in one flat surface of it saw a winged shape enter at the blasted window. Only a glimpse in the dark glass at first, and he thought it was a reptile; then he heard the sharp loud hoot, and he spun around, in time to see the great bird's taloned foot fling into the room an object that looked insanely like an egg. The thing skittered and bounded a short distance over the burned floor, straight to the girl beside the litter. She leaned across the litter and caught it; more, it seemed, to keep it from hitting her beloved, than for any other reason.

The bird was already gone from the window. The girl, standing up like a frightened awkward doe, took a step backward with the unknown object clutched against her breast. She did not want the thing. Elslood saw in her face that she wanted only to get rid of it, to hide it, to get back again unnoticed to her job of nursing.

The soldier standing guard had yelled at the bird, which

was gone again before he could do more. Now he grabbed at the girl. Though she made no attempt to flee, his hands only slid from her arms and clothing as he grabbed again and again, so he seemed to be attempting some sort of frantic caress. Frightened at running into magic, the soldier jumped back just as Elslood came stalking up.

He did not try to restrain the girl by grabbing at her, nor by magic. She did not want to flee, not without her man. The birds had blundered, this time, trying to rescue the wrong prisoner. Towering over the terrified girl, Elslood did nothing but extend his open hand, palm up.

She gave the Stone to him. At that moment a great crash and a burst of wild yelling mounted up from somewhere at the base of the keep. The shock, first of suspicion and then of understanding, hit Elslood's mind. The girl, unnoticed, dropped back on her knees beside the litter. Elslood's skilled fingers swept hastily over the blurred and ancient carvings on the thing that she had given him: *" . . . neither by spell nor by chain, neither by moat nor by cliff, can the holder of this Stone be confined. Not lock nor key nor bar can bind him in. Now powerless be all doors and sentries, all watchers and all walls, that are set to guard him round about. . . ."*

Elslood stood for a moment staring blankly at nothing, then on his face there grew a twisted smile: *So, Loford. I was too contemptuous of you, and you have won after all.*

Out on the roof terrace Ekuman was bellowing in bewildered rage, and on the stairs below the clamor of a panicked retreat already mounted closer. There were not enough soldiers left in the keep to hold it, not with the great doors they had relied upon suddenly burst open.

The thought of Charmian brought all of Elslood's energy back. Ignoring Ekuman's shouts, ignoring everything else, the tall gray wizard ran from the Presence Chamber to the stair. On legs as springy as a youth's he bounded down one flight, passing visiting Satraps who were reeling upward in retreat, grim-faced and bloody in their battle-harness.

Elslood left the stair on the level of the keep just below the roof-terrace. He raced down a corridor that was thick with the smell of dying flowers, and burst without ceremony into Charmian's exquisitely decorated rooms. From the corridor he had heard women already screaming within.

The uproar ceased abruptly on his entrance. The enemy was not here yet; it was only some hair-pulling fight. All the Ladies of the visiting Satraps had been gathered here for safety during the fighting, here amid the mocking gaiety of massed flowers, in the rooms that were to have been tonight a bridal suite. And some of the Ladies and Charmian had fought. She raised her head now in the midst of an ugly wrestling group of them, her own face as near to ugliness as ever it had been in Elslood's eyes. Her long hair had just been pulled into a painful disarray, her face was swollen with her tears and with her rage—none of these things did Elslood wholly see. For he saw that his Princess was, for whatever reason, overjoyed to see him.

"Change them!" she shrieked at him. "Blast these bitches around me with your spells, wither them into hags and crones—"

Elslood had no time to be subservient or soothing. He raised his voice, overriding hers even as his hands held out the Stone of Freedom to her.

"My Lady, take this! The ruler's doom, but the blessing of the fugitive. As you pass from power to wretchedness, its constant effect will change from harm to help. It is all that I can give you now."

Her face softened with fright at his tone. She took the Stone obediently. She asked him: "'Wretchedness'? Then we have lost?"

He had heard her voice sound just like that when she was ten years old. While the other women cowered away from him in terror, he took Charmian by the wrist and led her out of the suite and down the passage and onto the ascending stair. He knew where Ekuman's secret passage of escape began, and how that passage ran, curving dark and

windowless beneath the other stair all through the Castle's wall, to emerge from the underground only when it was kilometers out in the eastern desert. And he knew of the secret cache at the tunnel's end, the water and food and weapons laid by for just such a time as this.

Ekuman was waiting for them on the first curve of the stair above the Presence Chamber, near the entrance to the secret way.

"So," the Satrap said, and not another word, at first. But the golden child-woman and the towering gray man both stood mute and quivering before him.

It was Charmian who broke the silence. "Father?" she pleaded in her frightened child's voice. And when Ekuman, who was staring at Elslood, did not move his eyes or speak, she pulled her hand free of Elslood's grasp and darted forward, past her father, on up the stair and around its curve and out of sight.

"I thought it was you who had betrayed me," said Ekuman. His eyes locked Elslood's. His face was granite. "When the soldier fell in his strangling fit, I thought so. Yet I delayed, wanting to make sure." The Satrap shook his head in wonderment. "You may have destroyed me—for nothing. For an infatuation."

Elslood had long schooled himself, not to bear fear, but to avoid it. So it struck him now as a sudden overburdening weight would hit the muscles of a man grown slack and soft with long neglect of exercise. Looking now at Ekuman, he could see his own certain fate, and he felt the great fear rushing up like vomit from his middle to his head. It could not be that this thing was really going to be done to him, no, not now; there was always one more cranny of escape. . . .

In a defensive reflex Elslood began the casting of a spell of his own, but he could not finish it. Great as his powers were, they were helpless against those that Ekuman had been given, for this one purpose, by the High Lords in the East. Still Elslood could not comprehend that this was really happening. Unbelievably he watched as the Satrap's hand

made the gesture of power, he listened as Ekuman's voice uttered the one necessary word.

Then Elslood's vision left him—for a while. He still remained conscious. It seemed to him that he could feel the water gushing from every pore of his body, the bulk that made him tall and strong rushing away in liquid and in steam to leave him infant-sized. His brain knew that it shrank, keeping in close proportion with his every other organ. More horrible yet, he knew even as it happened that his mind was shrinking with his brain. The intellect was aware, step by step, of its own maiming.

His senses were disorganized then, but they came quickly back to him, to his new-shaped body muffled under the heap of human clothes collapsed upon the floor. The thing that regained sense had forgotten what magic was, and even speech. But its memory still held, and knew that it would always hold, the knowledge that once it had been man.

Ekuman kicked at the creature and it flopped away from him in terror, struggling to master its new webbed feet. It croaked and bounded and hopped again, as if it would flee its very self. The Satrap wasted no more thought on it, for the sounds of violence on the stair below were drawing nearer. He spun around and followed the way his daughter had taken, into the entrance of the secret passage. He took care that the door was tight shut behind him. Charmian's footsteps had already gone ahead out of hearing in the darkness. Ekuman followed, needing no light to descend swiftly along the narrow stair that twisted downward through the walls. But he was scarcely thinking of Charmian. He was not heading for the desert, no, not yet. There was a chance yet of his saving all.

His mind was still fixed on the Elephant. He had been watching from atop the keep when the fearless Chup entered the Elephant and drove out the youth. Then he had watched it standing open, riderless, watched balanced between rage and satisfaction when he realized that none of his men who could reach it dared to enter.

Chances were they still huddled defensively around it, while it droned to itself of power. Ekuman would dare anything now. His secret passage had another door, hard by the ruined gate where Elephant sat.

When someone's hands inside the keep took up the Prisoner's Stone, and its power made the great door of the keep go bursting in, Rolf was one of the first of the Free Folk to enter. In the lower halls of the keep he used his sword—as inconclusively as before. But there were stronger fighters at Rolf's sides. The enemy was rapidly pushed back, cut down, being taken utterly by surprise, being outnumbered now in the stronghold where they had thought themselves finally secure.

The fighting in the lower levels of the keep was brief. Rolf joined others then in pressing up the stairway, fighting now against the last desperate defense of the visiting Satraps and their bodyguards. Chup was not among them. Rolf was reminded that he had not seen Chup, nor Mewick either, since the two of them had begun their duel out in the outer court.

There was no time now to think of anything but the business right at hand. When resistance had failed completely, Rolf, who knew the lay of the land better than anyone else, led the advance into the upper level of the keep. Sword in hand, he was the first of the Free Folk to enter the Presence Chamber, the room from which he had been taken under guard only a few hours earlier. His knees quivered with his relief when he saw that Sarah was alive and unhurt. She was still where Rolf had seen her last, kneeling beside Nils's stretcher—as if all the time between had found her immune to danger and had flowed around her.

She raised her eyes joyfully at the entrance of the first of the Free Folk—but when she recognized Rolf under the blood and grime that masked his face, her eyes turned cold, and her hand reached out halfway over the pall on the floor in an unconscious gesture of protection. No

still breathed; he turned drained but living eyes to his rescuers as they entered.

Thomas swept his glance around the chamber, then faced Sarah. He asked, "Did you see which way our gracious Lord Ekuman retired?"

She could only shake her head, no. The Free Folk spread out, searching. Some went out onto the roof-terrace. Others poked among the hangings on the wall and tested corpses with their blades.

Rolf chose to follow the stairs that went up to the top-most level of the tower. Only a few steps up, a bundle of clothing lay. He lifted the upper garment with his sword. It was a long gray robe. It caught at his memory, but for the moment he could not remember who . . .

A small circlet woven of the sun fell from the robe and dropped upon the stair just at his feet. It flashed across his mind how cold and deadly Sarah's eyes had been just now, looking at him. Her hair was dark, not at all like this. It was Sarah that he loved, so why should he bend swiftly and pick up this yellow charm?

The circlet was soft and flawless and intricately knotted, and he thought he could feel power in it, but why should he put it quickly into the inner pocket of his shirt?

Thomas came up beside him then, and together they went on up the stair. When they saw the surpassing richness of the furnishings in the apartment at the top they felt certain it was Ekuman's. But the Satrap was not there. In a small anteroom two harem girls were cowering; they screamed in terror when Rolf and Thomas came bursting in on them.

"Where is he?" Thomas demanded, but the girls could only shake their heads in fear. Rolf noticed that one of them had red hair, the other brown. It seemed there had been only one girl in the Castle, perhaps in all the land, with hair of the particular golden—

Outside there burst up a roaring cheer, drawing Rolf and Thomas to a window. On the roof-terrace there were torches enough to show them how Ekuman's banner of

in the central chair, cracking and flattening the ancient cushions. He knew who had occupied this seat more powerful than a throne—he had been watching from the roof-terrace when Chup forced Rolf out of the Elephant. He had recognized the same youth, outwardly no more than a peasant, who had been involved in Charmian's petty intrigue—and who, during questioning, had suddenly risen from his knees and looked Ekuman fearlessly in the eye. "I am Ardneh," the boy had said, and then it was as if he had thrown the thunderbolt with his right hand.

But the Satrap Ekuman had survived the bolt, as he had so far survived all of Ardneh's blows. And now the throne of Elephant's power was Ekuman's. Whether Ardneh was only a symbol or something more, Ekuman meant to crush him yet.

He let his weight down, gingerly, into the chair where Rolf had sat. Nothing happened but the rising of a small cloud of dust, prosaic and somehow reassuring. Now he could perceive the vision-ring, and he marveled at it, thinking it the greatest wonder he had yet seen wrought by the arts of the Old World.

And now, cautiously but steadily, he reached to touch the drive levers. They were the obvious places for a man sitting here to put his hands.

Rolf came running out through the open doorway of the deep, jumping over bodies and debris. He was just in time to see Elephant make its first slow tentative movements under the control of its new master. He dodged through the ravaged courtyard, trying to keep the red cylinder as much as possible behind him, so that Ekuman might not see it and know what Rolf intended. Whether Ekuman saw Rolf coming or not, Elephant gave a sudden grinding lurch and freed itself of the ruins of the tower, then with a mumbling roar went backing out of the breach it had created in the wall.

Elephant vanished from Rolf's sight, but the noise of Elephant receded only a little way; and when he had run

up to the debris of the fallen tower he saw the huge vague armored shape standing motionless a little way ahead, as if waiting for him, on the down-sloping road that curved toward the village.

Rolf knew that the new driver could not yet have much sureness of control. He ran straight toward the Elephant, and Ekuman made it roar and lurch toward him. He waited until the mighty circling treads were almost upon him, until they were shaking the ground violently under his feet; then he sprung out of the way and turned and ran in at Elephant's flank.

Before the metal beast could pass him, Rolf's hands and feet had found the tiny inset steps and he was climbing toward its head. Ekuman made a sudden turn off the road and onto the rougher slope. The move came very near throwing Rolf off, but he clung on grimly, the red cylinder dragging on his back. He leaned his weight outward on the door handle when he reached it, but of course Ekuman had latched the door inside—and Ekuman had no Prisoner's Stone with him to betray him now.

When Ekuman reversed his turn, Rolf was able to shift his grip, and with a desperate upward lunge to seize one of the rods projecting from the front of Elephant's head. In another moment he was able to pull himself up onto that head. Sitting on the topmost hump, he contrived to grip the projecting rods with his legs, so that his arms were free to bring around the red cylinder from his back. He gripped the black snout of it and aimed it as he had seen the Satrap do, and the fingers of his right hand found the trigger. He played the jet from the nozzle over the tiny insect-eyes that were spaced around Elephant's head. The foam as it went splattering away was the color of nothingness in the dead light of pre-dawn morning.

The stuff would not cling to Elephant's eyes as Rolf had hoped it would. The metal and unbreakable glass were very smooth, and with Elephant's jouncing motion and the wind of his rush the foam fell quickly away. Still, Elephant's eyes were covered as long as Rolf kept playing the jet on them.

Ekuman would not be able to see where he was going, let alone hunt down running targets; Rolf remembered, from his own time in the saddle, how dust, and falling stones, and liquid fire, had each of them momentarily blinded Elephant.

Ekuman, who could do nothing else till he had thrown Rolf off, kept Elephant stopping, starting, turning, going down the long slope toward the bottom of the pass. The red cylinder kept on spewing out foam at a tremendous rate. Rolf swept the nozzle in a circle, trying to keep foam covering the eyes in the back of Elephant's head as well as those in front. When he took a moment to lift his own eyes, he could see numbers of the Free Folk scattering and streaming away from the Castle. He was giving them a chance to fight again someday—to fight against a Satrap who rode the Elephant, and the forces that such a man could rally to him.

But Rolf had no time now to lament the bitter future. Elephant's turning, twisting run down into the pass continued, with maneuvers that grew more violent as Ekuman gained a better feel of the controls. Several times Rolf was nearly thrown off, had to drop the nozzle of his foam-thrower and use both hands to save himself. But each time he recovered in a moment, and once more covered Ekuman's eyes.

Ekuman suddenly abandoned his weaving tactics, and turned for a straight run west. He must have had a few moments of clear vision, enough to give him some idea of directions, but still he chose a course that would soon bring him through the outskirts of the village and ultimately to the river. Was the Satrap grown so desperate to rid himself of Rolf that he would risk the miring of his heavy mount in mud and water? Why?

The red cylinder gushed on as if it could never empty itself. Now in the first forelightening of dawn the foam covering the great hump of Elephant's head was white, a white hood spreading and streaming continuously down to hide the eyes. And now Rolf noticed a curious thing; at

one small spot, right at the back of Elephant's head, the foam instead of being blown away was rushing inward—as if Elephant's nose was there, and he continually inhaled. And Rolf then remembered the circulation of fresh air inside with the door shut tight.

He twisted around as well as he could on his difficult, bouncing perch, aiming his jet of foam to keep that gasping nostril covered, even if he must let the eyes in front begin to see again.

Rushing at full speed now down the western slope, Elephant raised its bellowing voice to its loudest roar. Though its eyes were now uncovered it still weaved like a blinded beast. Rolf was bounced back and forward and up and down, bruising his lean bones. He chung on, somehow, and kept his foam-nozzle aimed at the little orifice that sucked so greedily for air. When he looked back he saw that Elephant, like some sickened animal, was now leaving a continuous trail of droppings. A line of foam was dribbling like dung from somewhere under its belly.

The riverside village was just ahead. Trees rushed by. Rolf bent, clinging desperately to the rods on Elephant's head, as great branches whipped past just above him. Other trunks were flattened like grass before Elephant's charge. A low retaining wall was trampled under the treads.

No one was running from the village; the battle must have sent them all in flight already. The scrape of Elephant's rushing flanks dragged down the walls of houses. There seemed now to be no hand at all upon the reins.

Rolf saw then that the last steep plunge into the river was unavoidable, and that it was certain to throw him off. Just as Elephant tilted down the bank, he leaped clear. He jumped forward and to one side, as high and wide as he could, hoping for deep water where he came down. The red cylinder was still with him, held by its strap going around his body. His feet were just touching down on the calm surface of the Dolles as the great sheet of Elephant's oceanic splash began to rise behind him.

The sound of Elephant's plunge roared at him while

he was underwater. The cylinder was now so light as to be floatable, and his treading water brought him easily to the surface. It seemed that the whole riverbed was still rocking, sloshing water like a hand-held basin, with the force of Elephant's dive.

Elephant, half submerged in water-foam and waves, had come to a struggling, straining halt. Its forequarters were evidently forced against some underwater rock, some firm, fixed bone of earth. The endless driving treads still spun, like tail-swallowing snakes, flinging up gobs of mud and hurling ribbons of water, digging Elephant deeper into the bottom of the river.

Exhausted, Rolf struggled back toward the shore. In thigh-deep water he took a stand, and set to work again with his red cylinder. Until the cylinder at last ran empty, he kept the narrow gasping throat of Elephant filled with foam.

Not that breathing foam seemed to do metallic Elephant any harm. His voice was still as loud, its treads still spun as rapidly as ever. Rolf, though, was thinking of the inside of the cabin. In there, now, all the cool lights would be glowing still, glowing faintly through the solid insubstantial whiteness that was filling all the space there was, filling eye and ear and nose and lung. . . .

When the cylinder was emptied Rolf dropped it from his deadened arms and let it drift away. He had only just strength enough left to get himself ashore. Once ashore he lay in the mud, hardly able to lift his head at the sound of running feet. He knew his friends as they came in sight. Down the long trail of foam and through the shattered village they had followed him, though Elephant's mad descent had left them far behind. They were gathering around Rolf now in the morning twilight, lifting him up and crying out the triumph that he was too weak to shout.

It was about noon on that day when Elephant suddenly died—or once more fell asleep. At any rate the roaring

droning voice coughed once or twice and ceased, and with it ceased the endless mindless working of the treads. Instantly the gentle river healed over its torn surface, leaving only one ripple-scar bent around the motionless metal hulk. The men who were standing guard first backed away, then crept closer, but still the round door that they were watching never opened.

When Rolf woke up, near to sunset, they told him about Elephant. Rolf was up in the Castle when he awoke. He vaguely remembered being helped back up the hill by men only just less weary than he was; he did not even remember lying down to sleep.

There was other news for Rolf to hear. The troops who had been coming to Ekuman's reinforcement from outposts scattered throughout the Broken Lands had turned and fled when they saw the Castle lost, and heard from their scouts that the Satrap himself was dead. All of Ekuman's high commanders were fled or fallen. More important, not one of the visiting Satraps had escaped; so with today's one blow, all the powers of the East here along the sea-board had been shaken. And here in the Broken Lands, farmers and villagers had seen victory in a sky that was for the first time in years empty of reptiles; and the people were hunting the remnants of Ekuman's army or driving them on into the eastern desert.

After enjoying a meal from what had been meant as Ekuman's festive table, Rolf mounted to the Castle's battlements to take a turn as lookout. The high roofs and walls had been cleaned of the last reptile's corpse, and the last bleaching bones of the reptiles' victims had been removed for burial. Now on all the roosts were birds, beginning to stir with the sunset; Rolf could pick out Strijeeff, stretching his bandaged wing.

Rolf turned in all directions, looking out over the battlements. It seemed to him odd that the new air of freedom should be invisible over distant swamps and farms, villages and roads, the pass, the desert, the Oasis of the Two Stones.

The Thunderstone was safe, though the Prisoner's Stone had not yet been found, nor had Charmian or Elsblood.

Looking from his post on the roof-terrace into what had been the Presence Chamber, Rolf could see that Sarah was still there. There were many wounded now for her and the other women to tend; but still she spent as much time as she could beside one pallet. Nils still lived. And Mewick still lived, and even walked a bit, though he bore five or six wounds and had been drenched in his own blood.

And Chup survived—or half of him, at least. He lay on one of the pallets that had been set in rows in the Presence Chamber. Most of the time he kept his arms raised to cover his face. His legs and all below his waist were dead, unmovable, since Mewick's hatchet had at last come looping around his guard and bitten him through his spine.

Sarah's eyes would not meet Rolf's. He turned away and looked down into the courtyards. Thomas, his broad shouldered figure tirelessly erect, was down there directing the building of a temporary barrier across the breach that Elephant had made in the outer Castle wall. If some surviving band of the enemy should think to take surprise revenge, they would not take the leader of the Free Folk unaware.

Though Thomas was ceaselessly giving orders, still he did not hesitate to stoop and lift a timber himself. A girl Rolf did not know, wearing a wide Oasis farmer's hat, was staying close to Thomas's side. And there was yellow-haired Manka, stewing food in a huge caldron—and there stood huge Loford, displaying a bright bandage around the upper girth of his right arm.

Rolf had a bandage too, over the wound on his back. A dozen smaller hurts all throbbed and nagged. But these discomforts were no burden now; other things, more lasting, had happened to him.

He still had no faintest clue to what had happened to his sister Lisa; he no longer had a real hope that he would ever learn her fate.





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