



The man stumbled painfully through the shadows of the night-darkened forest. The night was warm, and mosquitoes sang in a cloud about him, attracted by the drying blood of his recent wounds. He paid them no heed. His pain was too great to allow him to notice the bites of a few insects, and even greater than the ache of his physical wounds was the pain of the hatred and humiliation that burned within him. Hate, humiliation and purpose. Though the blackness beneath the forest canopy was almost utter, the man limped on, unhesitating, as if guided by some unnatural sixth sense.

But, then, he had come this way many times. For he alone of all who dwelt upon this accursed prison-isle had dared to seek out this region. He alone had heard of its secret . . .

Suddenly he emerged from the forest into a large clearing. The sound of a waterfall, heard but dimly before, was now loud in his ears. Under the light of the full moon he could see the water spilling, a narrow band from the lip of a low cliff, to thunder into a pool below. A brief thrill of fear passed through him, despite the hate and the pain and his previous knowledge of the place. The face of the cliff bore an uncanny resemblance to the face of a skull.

Swordskull, they called it, and for centuries beyond

memory it had been a place of evil legendry, so that now the whole southwest quarter of Os Harku was shunned because of it. Doubtless, too, that was why the entire island of Os Harku had originally been made a place of banishment for criminals.

The man stood silently, hesitating, while the dark blood dried on his limbs. He was a rather short man, yet stocky and powerfully built. His right hand hung limply, awkwardly; he knew it was at least sprained, if not broken. Blood dripped from his thick black beard, for he had lost several teeth. Yet for the moment, fear made him forget his pain. It was uncanny, the way those caves and ledges resembled the eyes, nose and lineaments of a skull, how those great boulders down by the pool resembled its teeth. The narrow waterfall, a silver ribbon in the moonlight, spilled over the right eye from a notch in the rounded brink of the cliff-a notch like that from a great sword-stroke.

Perhaps another time ...

Yet even as the thought crossed his mind, he knew it was now or never. Tonight happened to be the full moon nearest the summer solstice-a night of great sorcerous potency. Perhaps the monstrous Primal Gods had willed it so-had guided the events leading up to his humiliation.

His lips drew back in a snarl at the remembrance of that humiliation; his dark eyes glinted with hatred under the shining moon. Hesitating no longer, he advanced to the pool's edge and raised high his arms.

"Ordru!" he cried out in a deep, powerful voice. "Ordru-I come!"

Then he dove into the pool, hearing the thunder of the water as he swam beneath the surface. His right hand pained him severely with each stroke, yet he kept doggedly on. Now he was at the base of the boulders, feeling for the tunnel he knew was there. He found it, and swam inward.

The sound of water diminished. Now a new fear

began to creep over the man as he groped forward, for he had never been beyond this point before. Suppose there was no air-space above-or suppose some guardian lurked here ...

But even as these fears grew within him, he felt the roof of the tunnel slope upward, and in another moment his head emerged above the water's surface. An instant later he felt what seemed to be a low ledge, and climbed upon it. For a time he crouched there, breathing as quietly as he could, listening.

He knew this place, and knew that his was the first human foot to tread here since the great cataclysm that had destroyed the Primal Lands. He knew, too, that the cliff's resemblance to a skull was deliberate. The darkness and the silence were absolute; he would have given much for a torch, yet knew that one would seal his death. Light had never been allowed in this place, not since the pre-human lords of men had built it. Here, light was blasphemy.

The man slowly stood up, and his voice trembled slightly as he muttered: "Ordru . . ."

Silence.

Then, he felt a faint vibration-a low-pitched tremor, though the man could not tell whether it was in the air, the rock or his flesh. Gradually it grew in intensity. Who comes?

The voice, if such it was, seemed to tremble within the bones of his skull, as if it vibrated from the very fabric of space.

Who comes to the fane of Ordru?

"I-I am Athu," the man stammered, "-a sorcerer of Shem, now banished to this prison-isle. I seek your aid, O Ordru, and offer you my service in return."

Again there was silence. The man called Athu felt the hair prickle on the back of his neck. Though there was no sound, he somehow sensed something monstrous and alien stirring in the blackness-something he knew had not stirred for thousands of years.

This isle? the voice said finally after a long pause. My temple was established upon a great eminence of land, far from water.

"Aye-by your worshipers, after they fled the foundering of the Primal Continent and came here. That was long ago. Few humans know now of your worship, Great Ordru, save a handful of sages and sorcerers learned in the lore of Acheron and Atlantis. I read of it many years ago--in The Book of Wisdom by Damar Eltek, of Sei."

Sei-that was a city of Neria, a nation of the Primal Continent. But Atlantis-Acheron-these names I know not.

"You have slept long, O Ordru," said Athu. "These lands, now of ancient memory, were yet unborn when cataclysm destroyed the nations you knew. Atlantis has sunk beneath the ocean, even as did the Primal Land, and Acheron fell many centuries ago. Now the Hyborian nations rule the earth, dominating the land of Shem where my people dwell.

"Long have I fought these Hyborians with sorcery and subterfuge, O Ordru—first in the courts of Koth, that land which holds my own in subjugation, and finally in Aquilonia itself, mightiest of all the nations. Great were the ills I helped to bring upon them by sorcery and intrigue-war, sicknesses and crop-failures—yet never was my power more than a pin-prick to their arrogant empire. And at last I was discovered, convicted of sorcery and sent to this barbaric prison isle to die. That was many months ago. "Therefore I am here, O Ordru—offering you my service."

Again there was silence for a space.

You would have vengeance. I read it in your soul. "Vengeance!" muttered Athu; then, more vehemently, "Aye—vengeance on the Kothians who sacked my homeland—on the Aquilonians who banished me to this prison-isle—but above all, on the barbarian who tonight

laid violent hands on me, reviled me, humiliated me—" The Shemite's voice choked off in the intensity of his rage. Had there been any light in that place, his eyes would have reflected a glare of madness.

You shall serve me, human. Step forward, and hold out your left hand.

Athu took a deep breath and did so, one step, two . . . Suddenly he gasped as a sharp pain stung him—as if his left wrist had been cut with a sharp knife. Involuntarily he drew back. He could feel blood rilling warmly down his upraised forearm, dripping off his elbow. Holdout your hand.

He forced himself to do so. For a moment it sounded like the blood from his cut wrist was dripping into a shallow container. Then he began to see the faintest tinge of a red glow forming near the floor, outlining the interior of a small, square receptacle. A ringing began to grow in his ears.

You will sleep now, the weird voice droned on. Your blood will bring me strength, and my strength will bring you healing. Your soul is mine forever. When you awaken you will have new powers and your body will be renewed. And one day, you will have a body greater than any human one, the better to serve me—and at the last, to serve my Master.

Athu had sunk to his knees; the ringing in his ears was very loud now. The redness in the square container seemed brighter, and by its glow ... was it his dizziness, or a swarm of red eyes ... ?

"Your Master," he muttered weakly. "I know his name—aye, Arkatu, that primal god who fled the foundering First Lands."

For an instant the rock floor seemed to shudder, but whether or not this was due to his growing dizziness, Athu could not tell.

Speak not again His name, until the time when you shall with sorcery draw new souls to my feast and His, said the voice of Ordru. Sleep now, and I will renew your strength,

that you may work to gather even greater strength unto me. I will grant you vengeance upon your enemies, that in the fullness of time I may work my far greater vengeance.

"I hear, O Ordru," muttered the Shemite wizard as his mind slowly dissolved into unconsciousness. "Vengeance-vengeance. . . "

Urdus, the giant red-maned Vanir, sat with his tribe on the shelf of rock that rose above the treetops of the isle. Absently he fingered the haft of his knife. Evening was coming, warm and muggy. Urdus' band of sixty-odd comrades crowded around fires, chewing on roast fowl and fruit and arguing over portions of sour wine which they had themselves made from wild grapes. Urdus was in a foul mood. His blackness had come to visit him again-his longing to be gone from this damned isle and return to Aquilonia and kill the scoundrel who had banished him.

The island was situated in the middle of the wide Shirki River. If it had ever been dubbed with an official name, that was long ago forgotten by the Aquilonian scribes, for now it was known all along the coast by its most common and descriptive appellation: Os Harku, the Isle of Ill Harbor-or, more simply, the Isle. It was not visited by pleasure ships or cruising trade vessels, but galleasses from the Aquilonian forts on the shore patrolled the waters about it. For Os Harku was populated, not by voluntary settlers or emigrants, but by criminals.

Murders, political rebels, men and women with personal histories steeped in crime and violence, necessarily or expediently banished from home soil to the forests and cliffs and swamps of the Isle-such were the five or six hundred criminals living upon Os Harku. Neither the Aquilonian throne nor the border forts kept any census. That would have been useless, as the population rose and fell daily, depending upon the tempers of its exiles and the vicissitudes of their daily struggles. Once a month an Aquilonian galley, crowded with swordsmen and archers of the state army, would drop anchor at the shore of the Isle and ferry across the latest troop of ostracized unwanted. From time to time a sally of ambitious criminals would attack the longboats in a desperate attempt for freedom. Such attempts had always failed. The archers, poised, ready and eager for target practice, would unleash their arrows and feather as many of the rogues as they could, till the surviving criminals would howl in rage and pain and retreat to the protection of the thick foliage.

A few hardy souls had, however, escaped from the Isle. This was known. Accident or design or fate had guided them safely across the river and onto home soil. The throne, disturbed by such escapades, had always thereafter increased the patrols for a time

and resigned the current commandants to replace them with fresher men, vigilant and eager for advancement. In any event, escapees usually returned to their old haunts-if they were fortunate enough to survive life in the wild-where they were almost always rediscovered and then executed.

The criminals of the Isle were a hard lot, and their life was as difficult and tempestuous and sordid as the struggle ever has been for society's outcasts. Upon Os Harku, strength, quickness, and temper created the hierarchy. Men far outnumbered the women, and only the fiercest and most brutal of men had gained the women-if the women allowed themselves to be had, for more than one renegade had screamed out in the night and run weeping through the forest, hugging his bloody trousers, after trying to force his attentions upon some woman in a less than amorous mood.

Tribes had formed upon the island, and territory. Certain stretches of Os Harku were but swampland, and here lived the outcasts of the outcast-those who, intimidated and fearful for their lives, or for other reasons known only to themselves, inhabited the wastelands in solitude, apart from their comrades. Other portions of the island offered small pools or fresh streams, and the protection of deep woods; and still other territories evolved upon the high cliffs, the rocky faces being pocked with shallow caves both defensible and advantageous for perception.

The woods and the cliffs were marked off by rude boundaries: northeast of the Great Oak was the land of Obgur and his tribe; Central Lake belonged to Shihur the Demoness, and her band. Newcomers to the island not only had to forage for themselves and defend themselves against attack from members of the various tribes, but also to seek inclusion into one or another of the territories. Deftness with knife, sword or fists decided one's rank in the hierarchy.

The cliffs which guarded Old Lake and the surrounding forest of wild apple trees and berry thorns belonged to Urdus, the brawny Vanir, half a head taller than most big men, who swore he had spent half his life upon the Isle and had never lost a hand-to-hand with anyone there. The Vanir commanded a certain amount of respect among the veterans of Os Harku; and in the rude society which had developed under his hand, men at odds with one another had often taken their grievances to him for arbitration rather than decide them bloodily in the forest. Urdus was not old-he was barely past thirty-three summers, and he had remained trim and muscular and quick. Yet, for all that he had spent half his years upon the Isle, never had he given up the ambition to one day return to Aquilonia and slay a certain nobleman in the capital-the man who had had him sent to Os Harku.

But Urdus was also patient, with the patience of the intelligent and the conniving. Several times Urdus had broached his escape to comrades, then feigned illness as the time approached; thus, when the others inevitably attempted their escape without him, he was able to study the practical applications of his plottings. Once he had planned escape through the southwestern swamps; the death-screams of his friends that night had warned Urdus against that route. Another time he had considered building a raft

and sailing across to the eastern shore; but the laboriousness of that conveyance had led to its capture by the trim Aquilonian galleasses.

Urdus was no fool. Yet, plans of escape-and revenge -still whispered in the caverns of his mind.

Sitting on his rock ledge, playing with the knife in his hand, he burped and scowled and stared upon his crew with vulture-eyes. Beside him sat Aleil, the slatternly woman who had decided to be Urdus' mate. But this night her presence suffocated the giant Vanir. He knew that her temperament was as his own-morose one moment, brilliant the next, with the untrusting selfishness the gods give to some at birth. Aleil was no comfort to him, no friend with whom to muse or share confidences.

For that matter, no one was a friend; no one was trustworthy.

Urdus listened to the calls of the night birds, and he wondered that they stayed on Os Harku, when they could soar easily over the waters and alight in freedom on shore.

But they were birds, with wings. Any land on earth was free to them, so long as they remained out of range of the bolt and the arrow. They stayed because they were birds, and stupid; Urdus stayed because he had never known of a man who could grow wings and fly.

"Did you see the galleass today?" asked one lean, bronze skinned rogue, hunched before a fire and chewing carefully at the roasted thigh of a water-rodent.

Heads nodded; voices grunted in the shimmering firelight.

"Not as many men as usual," replied one.

"If it's that small a force tomorrow, we might swim out and take our chances," commented another. "Fools!" snorted a third. "They're waiting for us. Can you walk on the water? Is there a tree anywhere tall enough to fell and use as a bridge? It'll take stealth and luck to get us off this island."

"And why leave?" said another, an old man who lived simply by the protection of his more brawny fellows. They called him Veljo, the old man, though he had been born with a different name. "Our life here is the same as at home. It's all a bother, no matter where you live, or how."

Urdus grunted with impatience. Veljo looked up at him and their eyes met-the old man's bright with the firelight, Urdus' shadowed like deep holes, sullen and masked.

"You enjoy your cage?" Urdus asked.

"Where is the cage, Urdus?" said Veljo. "Perhaps we are free, and those on the mainland are caged. There are no prison bars. We pay no taxes. We forage freely for food, or grow it like any gardener."

A few nearby, overhearing, laughed at Veljo. It seemed obvious that his years upon the Isle had shrivelled his brain.

"Freedom is freedom," Veljo said, hunching forward and grabbing a rodent-thigh from the spit. "We are free here to do as we please."

"Except return to the mainland," said a man close to him.

Veljo shrugged. He stood up, munching on the greasy thigh, and walked off into the darkness.

"Fool," Urdus muttered.

"Leave him to his birds and flowers," said another man. "The spark has gone out of him. The swamp-mists have rotted his brain."

Urdus shifted his position. "Throw me some meat, Betos," he growled.

The man nodded, smiling grimly. His gnarled left hand, missing two fingers, plucked a leg from the spit and tossed it steaming through the air. Urdus caught it and brought it to his mouth in one motion.

Aleil nudged closer to the giant Vanir and looked up at him, but Urdus paid her no mind.

Footsteps sounded on the brittle mulch just beyond the range of the fires. Urdus looked up, only mildly curious. A few faces at the fire turned around, some already guessing who the intruder must be. One man, seated on a rock and burnishing his boots with greasedrippings collected from supper, moved aside to let the newcomer approach.

It was Athu, the Shemite.

The few Shemites on the Isle were objects of scorn and derision, prejudice. Athu himself, the day before, had suffered a brutal humiliation at Urdus' hands for having dared to approach Aleil-as the bruises on his body still testified.

But Athu, as most there already knew, was more than a simple Shemite. He was a sorcerer--or so he claimed. He took a seat on a warm log by one of the fires, not far from Urdus and Aleil. A number of rogues deliberately left, sensing impending trouble. Athu paid them no heed. He reached for a roasted breast of fowl and began to munch at it. His several strange amulets and chains jangled and clanked as he moved on his log. Urdus studied the man minutely, as he often had before, with an impassive mixture of distaste and mistrust. A sorcerer, indeed. Urdus' sorcery lay in his sword, and he knew that the Shemite prattler could never hope to match that wizardry.

"You are thinking of escape," Athu said suddenly, speaking to Urdus but not looking at him, and never missing a bite or chew of his cooked fowl.

Aleil looked at Athu, then to Urdus.

"Am IT' Urdus' voice was as gruff and husky as the surrounding shadows. There was not enough humility in Athu's tone to suit him.

"I will aid you."

"Don't do me any favors, Shemite."

Athu smiled obscurely. "You believe my sorcery is a lie."

Urdus' teeth worked within his mouth as his anger stirred. "I believe you'll be found dead one night if you keep joking about escape."

"Every day you think of escape," Athu replied. "Every day every damned soul on this isle dreams of escape. Their musings create a fog. I can hardly breathe, sometimes, trying to fight through the fog of your dreams." "Don't you dream of escape?" Aleil asked him tersely. Athu eyed her. "Aye-I do."

"Has it aught to do with that secret work of yours within the swamp?"

Athu paused in his eating. "And what do you know of what I do there?"

"Is it a sorcery to help you escape?"

"My plans for escape are very different from your lover's plans, O Aleil. If Urdus escaped tonight, he could leave me behind. My plans require no man's aid."

Urdus threw his stripped meat bone into the fire. "Careful, Shemite. Have you forgotten who's leader here? You try me, and this time I'll gut you."

Athu grinned. Uneasily, Urdus noticed a strange, new light in the man's eyes. The wizard not only seemed less injured than he should have been after the beating he had received from Urdus, he also seemed more confident than he should have.

"Why do you hate me, Urdus? After all, I intend to help you. Why should you hate me?" Urdus sneered.

"Listen," Athu told him. "I have conjured a storm. It will arrive in a day or two-an immense storm. Such a tempest cannot be called with a snap of the fingers-but it will arrive. And by this storm, you may plan your escape."

Aleil leaned forward a bit, intrigued. All the men at the fire had turned toward the Shemite, their senses alert to talk of escape. Aleil's shimmering black eyes devoured Athu's broad features. "Is this true?"

"A day or two will prove the truth of what I say." Aleil looked up at Urdus. "Whether he causes the

storm or not, Urdus, won't it give us a chance of escape?"

Urdus sniffed the air and looked up at the sky above the hilltop precipices. "There will be no storm." "Have you magic to counter my own?" Athu asked casually.

Urdus glared at him. "The wind is low. The stars shine clear. The air is unscented. There will be no storm."

"It will storm in one day, no more than two. You have my word. I have done my magic." Finishing his supper, Athu stood up with a clanking and jangling of chains, amulets and bone necklaces; saying no more, he trod off towards the swamps.

Aleil turned to Urdus; as did all the faces ringing the campfires.

"What if-T' began Aleil.

Bur Urdus only grunted and pulled himself erect, to his full height, huge and awesome. "You lie, wizard!" he cried out through the night; his voice carried distinctly across the woods and down the slopes.

No sound answered him from the dark forest. Disgusted, Urdus turned on his heel and went into his cave. Aleil, sensing his anger, did not follow.

The giant Vanir lay down on his cot of old grasses and animal skins.
What if-?

What if it stormed in a day or two?

Such a storm might, indeed, provide an avenue of escape. Yet . . .

Despite himself, Urdus began to picture it, and ponder it, and plan it.

What if . . .?

Far out on the waters of the broad Shirki River, a woman slept in her cabin on shipboard-and dreamed. Her name was Red Sonja and she was a mercenary, a swordswoman. Seldom did she dream, but this night she tossed and turned in the grip of a familiar, recurring nightmare.

Flames-her home in distant Hyrkania, burning. Blood-her family slain. The lean, grinning, taunting face that had brought the fire and the blood-the captain of the soldiers who had killed her father and mother and brothers before her eyes

The soldiers who had beaten her, humiliated her, raped her.

She tossed on her bed, whimpering. In her mind she was running through the Hyrkanian forest, her soul afire with a pain that submerged all her bodily hurts, still not fully

comprehending what had happened to her. She had lost all, but life, and could not bear the anguish of that life. She was hardly more than a girl; now she was suddenly alone in the forest, in the world-alone with a shock too great to comprehend, fearful of every shadow, fearful of pursuit ...

She was among great stones-stones that might once have formed the walls of ancient, pre-Hyborian walls and temples, but now tumbled randomly, half-hidden by moss and grass and great tree roots. She had played here often as a child

A voice! She looked up. Something towering, glowing

"You have suffered deeply, Sonja. Know now that there is strength born in suffering." A God? A vision?

"You may use your strength to make the world your home. You may become a wanderer, the equal of any man or woman you meet."

She sensed a sword in her hand-her father's sword. Suddenly she felt almost invincible. "But first you must make a vow to me, Sonja. You must never allow yourself to be loved by another man, unless he has defeated you in fair battle-something no man is likely to do after this day."

Anger and vengeance-lust welled within her young heart.

"Yes! With all my heart-with all my so, ul-I do so vow!"

A sound in the brush-one of the mercenaries, coming after her. His panting, cold face appeared through the tangle of growth. He laughed.

She lifted her father's sword as if it weighed no more than a twig. The mercenary noticed. "Take care, wench."

"Pig! Tarim will damn your soul!"

She leapt at him. He drew blade and fought, but he was no match for her-for this girl who had scarcely lifted a sword in her life. Her skill was incredible. Fear grew in the mercenary's eyes.

She thrust savagely. Was it a move learned by watching her father and later practiced secretly? Or a skill given her by the strange vision?

The mercenary stood there, blood spouting from the great wound in his chest, too surprised to realize that he was already a slain man. He stared at Sonja a moment; then his knees buckled and he flopped face-down into the wet grass.

And Sonja felt-exhilaration.

Suddenly she sat up in the darkness. The soft rocking of the ship, the sound of wavelets against the hull, reminded her of where she was.

"Erlik!" she gasped. "Again, the dream!"

But although she tried to banish the vision from her mind and compose herself for sleep, she knew it was not just a nightmare.

It was also a memory.