



Sonja stepped ahead cautiously a few more paces and paused again in her advance. Behind her a dozen soldiers paused as well, the light from their torches highlighting her flame-red hair. Then her sword was out, and she waved her free arm behind her, gesturing for those following to advance.

"Daron!" she whispered.

A young, dark-haired warrior stepped close to her. Without speaking, she motioned for him to thrust forward his torch so that she and the others might see more clearly.

The flaring orange torchlight showed them only an empty corridor ahead, at least for the next few rods. But Sonja noticed a vertical shadow along the right-hand wall.

"A corner," she whispered to Daron.

All was silence in that corridor. Sonja and Daron and the men behind them stood in tense silence. They had advanced farther than Bo-ugan's men had the day before, and that made Sonja doubly suspicious.

"Shine your light there," she whispered again to Daron. "My instinct tells me--"

But Daron had stepped ahead even as she spoke, wary, one hand holding aloft the torch, the other resting ready on the pommel of his scabbarded blade. The light wavered along the brick wall and the tamped-earth floor and picked out a few hazy details behind that corner....

"Move!" Sonja yelled suddenly, pushing Daron aside as she lunged forward.

The thing behind the corner lurched into view-tall, hulking, groping out of the dark shadows. It lifted its arms and stumbled forward, opening its jaws slackly as if emitting a silent scream. Its glassy eyes burned yellow with the sorcerous energy that infused it: an animated corpse-one of the men lost in this corridor yesterday....

A clatter of blades pulled free of scabbards sounded behind Sonja-the sounds of men pressing forward, eager for action. With the supple ease of a sword-adept, the red-haired Hyrkanian lifted her blade in time to meet the corpse's advance, skewering it deftly through the chest, then ripping sidewise.

Her movement tilted the thing off balance, throwing it off its course. The arms lifted, the back bent and the head smashed against the wall. Sonja's blade, ripping free, left a trail of dried blood and dessicated flesh hanging momentarily in the air.

"The torch, Daron!" she yelled. "Give it the torch!" But again he had anticipated her, hurling the fire against the thing and completing his motion with the drawing of his sword from its sheath. Sluggishly trying to push itself free of the wall, the corpse staggered under the impact. The resinous torch clung to its withered flesh and clothes, engulfing the thing swiftly in a licking red blaze. Unscraming, it twisted away from the wall and, guided by the perverse instincts given it by its sorcerous masters, strove to throw itself into the knot of warriors that blocked the corridor.

Sonja and Daron, following the strategy they had used more than once already, moved to either side of the corridor and let the men behind advance. Those armed with long oak poles thrust ahead, caught the walking, blazing corpse and heaved it back.

Their defense was well-timed, for just as the cadaver was heaved backward, one of its masters stepped into view behind it—a slender man, eyes blazing, blue robe highlighted by the flames that enveloped his monster.

"Dogs!" the young priest shouted, lifting his arms in the prelude to a magical gesture.

The corpse fell against him, and he shrieked as the flames spread to him, catching his robe afire. The stench of burning flesh choked the passageway.

Another priest stepped quickly from behind the protection of the corner, his form seen dimly through the oily smoke, his arms already extended, rings glistening on his fingers, his eyes blazing with wrath.

"Imthu!" he screamed. "Na'a ba-aba sui suthuth!" A blast of magical power issued in a hissing roar from his hands. Sonja and Daron, still on either side of the corridor, barely escaped that withering stream but felt its diabolic heat. Two behind them fell, one with his head blackened to ash, the second with his arm charred to the bone. That one had time to scream as he fell to the floor.

Sonja desperately threw herself forward, hoping the wizard could not unleash a second bolt of power before she could reach him. Howling with hatred, she whipped her blade upward and slashed. The priest faced her and brought his fisted hands up—and they were sheared from their wrists in a blur of steel.

Screaming, he fell back, the ends of his arms spouting blood. Sonja followed him, slowing her advance only slightly to glance sidelong and judge whether more danger awaited behind that corner. As the priest dropped against the entrance of the arched side corridor, she swung her blade again and caught him at the neck. His head fell onto his shoulder, connected to the spurting neck only by a flap of skin and sinew.

Sonja gained her balance and braced herself against the wall, staring, red blade up, into the side corridor. Daron was beside her already, torch out, but all they saw at the end of the brief hall was a closed iron door. Then from beyond it came the sound of another iron door being slammed shut. Whoever else had been waiting behind the first door had witnessed the slaughter of two priests and one corpse, and retreated.

Bo-ugan's men came forward, eager to kill. But seeing that the battle had been a short one and that its victory had fallen to Sonja, they applauded her skill and, for the time being, made their way back down the corridor.

"They'll return," one of them said. "But it appears we hold this corridor now. We'll brace it this afternoon and start through that door and down the other hall. Well done, Red Sonja!"

She nodded shortly, saying nothing to them but muttering to Daron, "Good aim with your torch."

"Good aim with your blade!" He smiled at her. They stepped over their dead on the way back through the corridor. Sonja shook her head at them and tallied the count of

casualties she had witnessed since her and Daron's arrival: forty in less than ten days. 'Too high a price,' she thought to herself, 'no matter what lay within this temple.'

But it was not her battle. She only wished to keep her stomach satisfied, and if her sword could do that for her, she had no wish to play general.

When he awoke he felt pain in his right arm and remembered that it had been blasted with sorcerous fire. He pushed himself to one side, then felt more pain coursing in his shoulder. He seemed to sense something-something immaterial, something far above him in the temple-something unseen, nonhuman, that fed on fear and pain....

Weak, _shuddering, he dragged himself in the darkness until he bumped into something warm and soft, and knew it for a body. Terrified by the darkness and by the knowledge that he was alive, he screamed for his comrades. While something, high above, fed on his agony.

Far away, as if in answer to his hoarse pleas, a heavy door grated open, and he heard distant footsteps. He seemed to wheel dizzily in the darkness. He pushed himself back, and his head struck stone. He rested there for a moment and fell into a swoon-but awoke an instant later when another metal door, this one much closer, opened with the grating of hinges.

He opened his eyes and looked into the dazzling brilliance of torches. Behind that light he saw floating, yellow eyes.

"One of them lives, Master Thotas."

He saw a heavy, fork-bearded face beneath a bald cranium and intense dark eyes that scowled at him. The face was seamed with many wrinkles that somehow gave it an aura of corruption rather than of age.

"Take him," rasped a grim voice. "We will use him." He blacked out momentarily, then felt rough hands lift him up. He screamed in terror and anguish and struggled weakly, aware that he was being carried like a limp, broken doll.

Yet he still sensed the evil thing above him.

Then painful darkness took him again; as he fell into a pit of nightmare, he was dimly aware that a heavy iron door was closing behind him.

"Brace it well!" Thamir told the men as they moved off, carrying their weapons and heavy bags. "Pour salt all around it and brace that iron strongly on the wall."

"And incense," a man beside him reminded, "to ward off demons."

"Oh, hell, and incense, too," Thamir agreed, coughing in the lingering smoke. "And hang the head of one of the bastards from the ceiling. That seems to work better against them than salt anyway."

A dozen soldiers moved out into the corridor to do as he had ordered. Thamir turned his attention to Sonja, Daron and a handful of others.

"You've been in here three days," he said to them, looking at the list an assistant handed him. "Bo-ugan says no one is to spend more than three days in here at a stretch. Get your gear and head back to the village for a day. Get some rest and some good food in your bellies."

Sonja nodded to him and took a moment to adjust the straps on her boots, which were twisted and digging into her calves. To Daron she said, "Let's go. We've earned it."

They made their way out of Thamir's makeshift office, exiting by the short corridor that led into the main corridor of the ziggurat's first floor. Room after room stood empty and guarded by Bo-ugan's troops. Some, however, were furnished with cots, supplies, extra food and clothes and water jugs. The army had made its home here. There were even a few icons lying about, names scratched on walls; a few personal objects hung above cots.

As they made their way down the torchlit corridor, Sonja and Daron passed a few men seated at a low round table, playing cards. One of them hissed at Daron. He paused, but Sonja walked on, calling to him that she'd see him back at the village. Appreciative eyes followed her tall, shapely form as she continued down the hallway, some leg showing between her boots and pliant mail tunic.

"What do you think?" asked the man who'd stopped Daron, showing him his hand of cards.

"I think she's really-" said the man across from him. "Not you, jackass!" laughed the other, while the man in the middle, seated against the wall, leaned his head back and pretended to snore. "What do you think, lad? Has he got me?"

Daron brushed back his straight dark hair and scratched his head. "I can't very well tell you that." "Sure you can! Just nudge my foot or something." "Leave him alone," drawled the man against the wall, his eyes still closed.

"Nice pair of tits under that mail," said the man at the far end.

Daron grinned at him. "If she heard you say that, she'd probably slice your tongue out."

"Oh, hell, every woman likes a compliment now and then."

"That was a compliment?" Daron asked, still smiling. The other shrugged as if irritated, and looked away.

The man with the cards asked Daron, "But is she as good as she looks?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Come on, lad! We're all holed up in this stinking pit together. Give us something to think about."

"She's as much a soldier as any of you."

"Look, you came riding in here with her three weeks ago from across the plains. Those plains get cold at night, don't they, boys? They get cold at night, damn it, and a man and a woman, being a man and a woman-" "You want my advice on your cards or not?"

"What? Sure. Yeah, you want to tell me-" "Fold 'em," said Daron.

The one in the middle opened his eyes and straightened up. Sonja's admirer, on the end, seated himself more comfortably, alert for anything Daron might give away.

"Take your hand," Daron told the player, slapping him on the shoulder, "and fold it in your lap. Then fold your other hand in your lap, and think of those cold nights out on the plain with Red Sonja." He winked at the other two, turned on his heel and continued down the hallway.

It took a moment, but guffaws of laughter followed him down the hall, while the cardplayer looked after Daron and screwed up his face, then chuckled good-naturedly.

Daron shook his head and wandered on, admitting to himself that their talk had gotten his imagination working. He and Sonja had, indeed, spent many a cold night out on those plains together-had spent the entire last month together, pushing their horses and scraping together what sustenance they could. She'd been a welcome sword at the defense of Daron's village, but the plains-raiders had taken the huts at last. No matter. Daron had left no fond memories behind-his parents had long since vanished, leaving him little but bitterness, and he was close to no one. Like Sonja, he had been a wanderer since his youth. He was still a young man, as Sonja was a young woman, but the bitterness rankled in him and belied his years. He and Sonja riding together on the plains had formed a strong friendship, but no deep love. What exactly did she feel for him, Daron sometimes wondered? If Sonja did feel anything, she hid her heart well.

But he hid his also. It had become necessary for survival.

And no doubt that was true of the swordswoman, as well.

Sonja had not got very far ahead of Daron. She was waiting to exit the temple, having been held back, along with a few others, because monitors in the field outside the underground door had noticed figures on the wall high above. The robed men had not attempted to cast any sorcery over the wall in quite some time, but there was always

that possibility. That first quick dash on horseback from the main entrance of the ziggurat to the first stone hut in the field was always made with the knowledge that some sorcerous missile might fall from one of the windows high above.

Finally the guards at the exit decided to chance it. Sonja and Daron and five others mounted steeds and walked them out into the field under a heavy awning. Catching the signal from men stationed in trenches farther on, they kneed their horses and charged into the open, galloping until they neared the first stone hut, then calmed their mounts to a walk.

"Nothing's ever happened," Daron remarked to Sonja, "but every time we ride out of there or back in to the temple I always feel it will."

"Don't fool yourself," she told him. "Those sorcerous dogs watch us every moment. They could send something against us whenever they want to. We know it, and they know it. I reckon, Daron, it's been a long ten years for some of these people."

"Aye. I can't imagine it. I can't imagine what could keep them fighting on and on, year after year..... Daron was younger than Sonja by only a year or two, but sometimes he expressed himself with a naivete that made him seem much younger. Sonja had remarked that. At first it had bothered her and she had wondered how much she could depend on him. Later, she sensed that this trait was a mask he had developed to hide behind, that much of his personality was so complex and hidden that parts of it surfaced only in exaggerated tendencies-like his naivete or his sudden outbursts of temper or his falling into deep moods of depression. There was more to Daron than there was to many old men who had lived eventful lives. Yet, even so, he usually seemed to be only a young swordsman, a traveler, with snippets of book-learning picked up here and there.

But, Sonja imagined, there must be strange aspects to her own personality as well, for she had spent nearly two months with Daron now and had not tired of his company.

To his question she replied, "What keeps them at it, you ask?"

"Aye.... >,"

"Fear-revenge-lust for rumored gold. But more than all this, Daron, probably habit. Merely habit. They have almost forgotten any other way. Since the star fell."

They were trotting a slight distance ahead of the three village warriors who accompanied them. Sonja guessed that it was perhaps just as well that those warriors could not hear the low-voiced speculations of two outsiders such as herself and Daron.

Daron grunted. "I can understand that. But, nothere must be more. Are they after the star?"

Sonja shrugged. "Every man is after something different. That's always the way it is with battle. It begins with some cause, noble or ignoble, but very quickly it becomes mired in a swamp of personal grievances and greed and vengeance."

"Strange for you to say that. You're a hired sword." "But I've been careful about selling my sword for a cause. When I have, I've seen it through-but quickly. Noble causes usually come down to mere pretense, any-

way. Self-survival or greed, that's all most noble causes turn out to be."

It was afternoon; the sun was dipping toward the low hills far to the west. Sonja slapped flies and mosquitoes away and said, "I talk too much. I'm tired, I'm hungry, so everything seems sour."

But Daron was thinking; he fell very quiet, so quiet that Sonja noticed. Looking at him, she saw that the naive young man was gone; a dismal, brooding cloud was cloaking him. The hardened observer of life, the harbinger of inner secrets, now rode beside her.

"They've done something to the land, haven't they?" He put it as a question-not out of uncertainty, Sonja felt, but thinking aloud.

"Have they, Daron?"

He turned in his saddle, looking behind him, at the ziggurat, at the plain, at the scattered stone huts and the three warriors who rode behind them talking among themselves.

"They've done something to the land. A subtle sorcery."

"You mean the temple-priests?" Sonja asked. "But, what?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. Something.... To affect crops, or soldiers' minds....."

They rode on, not speaking, and presently came to the wide bridge that had been erected years ago. It was summer; the river was low, and the pylons of the bridge were thickly encrusted with dried mud that housed wasp nests and crawling vermin. A frog or fish plopped in the water as their horses' hoofs thumped on the wooden planks.

At the crest of the bridge they saw the village spread before them-still called a village although it was now a town walled with strong timbers and stonework. The evening breezes carried the smell of cooking fires, the aromas of fish and vegetables and beef. Sonja's stomach growled.

"Mitra!" she moaned, shifting in her saddle. "Do I need food and some rest!"

They approached the village, and the doors were

pulled open to let them in. As Sonja rode past the troops in the small courtyard, the man in charge of them said to her, "Bo-ugan would like to speak with you."

"Do I have time for a bath and a meal first?"

"I think he'd rather see you immediately. My orders were, as soon as you returned."

Sonja sighed and dismounted, stretching her long legs. "See you later," she said to Daron, then walked off with the soldier.

"Later," Daron said, looking up at the darkening sky. Bo-ugan was in his house, sitting at his table. With him were a few young warriors and the Elder Agthorthe only surviving headman, other than Bo-ugan himself, from the days of the five villages. Bo-ugan motioned to Sonja to sit across from him. There was a plate of freshly cooked fowl and a jug of wine on the table. "Help yourself, Red Sonja," said Bo-ugan. She nodded and dug in, appreciative of the lack of ceremony.

Ten years of warfare, tension and generalship of the expanding village army had made Bo-ugan, once a hottempered, careless man of middle years, into a selfcontrolled, reflective old warrior. His long white hair, unshorn since that day he first led his men across the river to the ziggurat, was braided and corded behind his neck. His beard was trimmed short, as was his mustache; the deep gullies of wrinkles around his eyes and in his cheeks were from hard thought rather than age. His expression, his posture, his manner, all revealed him as a master of men, but a man whose life might have gone unrecorded or unrecognized but for the events which had thrust him suddenly forward. The brashness and temper of youth and middle age were gone.

As Sonja ate and drank, Bo-ugan's stern, careful gaze measured and studied her. He allowed her to quell the pangs of hunger and waited until she had quaffed a final swallow of the sweet red wine before addressing her.

"I won't detain you long," he assured her in his deep, melancholy voice. "I know you're exhausted and would like nothing more than a bath and some sleep. But from what I have learned of you since you first came here, Red Sonja, I think it would be good for my retainers and me to solicit your opinion on some matters regarding the siege."

"And what have you learned of me?"

His words, as his actions, were controlled and deliberate.

"They say you are a sword-adept of unusual skilland, more, that you have served in many campaigns." "I haven't been here long," Sonja replied, matching Bo-ugan's steady gaze. "I'll tell you what I can-offer whatever opinion I can."

"Give this siege some thought," Bo-ugan told her. "You needn't answer us immediately. Perhaps tomorrow or the next day something might come to you. Feel free to mention it to me at any time."

Sonja sat back, feeling stronger and more awake for the food in her belly. She wiped her lips with her hand, asking Bo-ugan, "What exactly is your problem?"

"This siege has continued unabated for ten years," he said. "After the first year's assault it became apparent to me that the sorcerers in the temple had withdrawn, that they would put up defenses within and fight to hold them, but otherwise were more or less content to let us exhaust ourselves. Seeing that, I developed strategies to move my men at the least cost to ourselves. I have even occasionally hired my own sorcerers and diviners, hoping that they might gain me something that my swords could not. From them I learned that the man who controls that citadel is a wizard named Thotas, who is known as High Master of the Order of the Crimson Sun. You have traveled widely and fought sorcery before, Red Sonja. Have you heard of this man?"

"I have fought sorcery, true-but never have I heard of Thotas."

"The sorcerers that I hired helped me little. I know the man's name, but that is all. If he is a powerful sorcerer, then I presume his place is well-guarded. Thus the length of my siege. The only other thing I learned was speculation concerning the fallen star." "Then that legend is true?"

"It is no legend. I myself, and some of the men in this room, saw it crash into the mountain ten years ago. My hired sorcerers told me that it may be an evil that Thotas and his Order called down from the gods. Its secrets have taken long to uncover, if Thotas has uncovered them at all. It may even have mastered Thotas himself and, in its own way, is spreading evil. I do not know. I presume it is as the sorcerers told me-something from the gods or demons. But in the ten years of this siege I have seen changes in my land: the fields are slowly dying; our animals are dying; my warriors are growing weaker, and their women fall ill. Worse, more and more of our children are born dead, or diseased, or crippled. I've discovered that water from the springs and ponds closest to the temple are poisoned; for men who drink too regularly from them weaken and die a lingering death. I have seen this. Thotas, or the star, is responsible-I am sure of it. And I know that my people cannot afford another ten years of siege."

"Then you want this war ended?"

"Aye, and as quickly as possible. My retainers and I have attempted every device and strategy that we've thought of. Now we are asking for the opinions of hired veterans, casting about for a certain way to end this war quickly."

Sonja understood his dilemma; a dozen possible strategies rose to her mind, but just as quickly she discarded them, knowing that Bo-ugan must have already attempted them all.

"I'll need time to consider this," she said.

"Of course. But I know you're intelligent and you've fought in many campaigns. If you can think of something, even a new variation of something we've already tried, let me know. I want this battle ended. I want Thotas's head on my sword and that evil star removed from my land."

"That seems reasonable enough." Sonja nodded to Bo-ugan and rose to her feet. "If you'll excuse me-"

Bo-ugan leaned forward, offering her his gloved hand. Sonja took it. There was strength on both sides. "Take your rest," Bo-ugan told her. "Come to me tomorrow if even the simplest idea occurs to you. We will discuss it, my retainers and I"

"Of course." Sonja bade him farewell and left his hut. When she had gone, Bo-ugan felt the eyes of his men upon him. Looking at none of them in particular, he said, "She is a strong warrior. She works at one thing at a time, does not advance an opinion on what she does not know, assumes nothing that can't be relied upon, learns what she needs to know."

He stretched, tired of the worry and the work, and reached for his cup of wine. Then he pulled toward him that piece of parchment which had on it a map of the temple-the little that was absolutely known, the much that was only guesswork-and, as he had for many weeks and months and years on end, he studied it and tried to out-scheme the temple.

The sun was down. Oil lamps and torches lit up the streets and buildings of the village. Sounds carried-of men working, of mothers scolding children, of dogs barking in alleys. Having decided to push Bo-ugan's request to the back of her mind until she had slept on it, Sonja made her way to her but-the long but she shared with a score of other hired swords and mercenaries.

Out of deference to her sex, lest the sight of a naked woman in the same room with a dozen or more men lead to havoc, Sonja's cot was placed in a remote corner of the hut. She had refused domicile in a private residence, urging Bo-ugan and his men to regard her as a warrior like the rest; at the same time, she had been the first to suggest some sort of curtain to shield her from the others.

She found men at a table in the center of the room, talking and drinking and playing cards. They nodded to her, used to her presence by this time. Daron was lying on his cot, near Sonja's own. He did not sit up as he asked her, "How did it go with Bo-ugan?"

She shrugged, undoing her sword belt, stripping off her sleeveless tunic of light mail and depositing them at the side of her bed against the wall. "He merely interviewed me. He's discussing strategies with his men and wanted my opinion. I didn't have any for him."

"Ten years is a long time," Daron commented, staring at the ceiling.

"Aye," Sonja agreed absently-and her thoughts slipped back ten years into her own past, to when she had been a stripling girl on her father's farm in Hyrkania. . . .

She needed a bath but was too exhausted; she would wash in the morning.

Daron turned his head and stared at her. "Well?" "What?" Sonja asked, removing her sword from its scabbard and examining it. It would need to be oiled and polished on the morrow.

"He wants to end this war, doesn't he? His land is suffering."

Sonja's brow knit. "Aye, that's true.... "

"There could be a way," Daron confided to her, keeping his voice low, although the other men in the room were absorbed in talk and cardplaying.

"And what would that be, Daron?" "Sorcery. Fight magic with magic."

"He's hired sorcerers; they've done him no good. That temple is strong."

Daron turned his face away.

Sonja sheathed her blade with a loud clang. "Unless you have something more specific in mind."

Daron did not reply. "Daron?"

He sat up, looked at her and swung his legs to the floor. "Nothing specific," he said. "Just ... a thought." "Damn it, Daron, spit it out if you've got something." He shook his head. "Nothing. Just a thought." He smiled crookedly at her, as if he were a naive boy again, a naive boy not comprehending what was happening. Then he excused himself with, "I need some fresh air. See you in the morning."

Too tired to start an argument, Sonja grunted at him, swallowed her frustration and watched the young man exit the hut. Then she crossed the room to light a tarred straw at one of the lamps at the table.

"Good night, gentlemen."

"Good night, Red Sonja. Kill any today?" "Two of 'em," she replied, walking away.

"Sight more than Doth-odo has for a while," the man grinned.

"Oh, shut the hell up," Doth-odo told him.

Sonja lit the small lamp which stood on a crate by her cot and pulled the drape around her bed. It was the signal for all the men at the table to glance at that corner of the room. It was small entertainment for them, discreet, but something they'd come to count on. For, that small lamp in Sonja's corner cast her silhouette upon the curtain as she undressed. First her soft leather tunic came off, her arms lifting high above her head to

pull it free, her full breasts first jutting out, then dropping suddenly as the garment slipped free of them. Then, standing, she bent to slip off her boots, and the men at the table had a fine profile of her breasts swaying forward, then of her hips and buttocks and long legs as she kicked the boots free. Finally she turned her back to the curtain, and the men were given a good view of her entire figure just before she capped the lamp and her silhouette vanished into darkness. Then came the rustling of her lying down on her cot and pulling up the coverlet, and soon her gentle breathing as she slept. It was not a heavy sleep but one that altered its rhythm whenever a footfall sounded too near her cot-but it was sleep.

The men at the table returned to their cards and talk with an increasing din. There was little lust in their admiration of Sonja's silhouette, merely appreciation and perhaps nostalgia-romantic memories of wives or lovers no longer alive; appreciation for an attractive woman with a fine figure. Women could be had; whores could be had. Perhaps it was just acknowledgment that Sonja, as good a warrior as any man there-all admitted it-was, in fact, a splendid woman as well. There was irony and humor in it. Sonja was something unique, whether in silhouette or in temper or in battle.

If she suspected that her shadow on that curtain was watched and admired it never bothered her. Daron had never mentioned it to her, nor had any of the other men. Always, as soon as Sonja's sighs of sleep were heard, attention turned from her to cards and wine and speculation about who would be called up next day to ride across the river and make war with sorcery.

"Don't kill him," Thotas warned the priest as the screams of the wounded warrior filled the room. "We don't want him dead. If we can learn nothing from him, then release him."

"Aye, Master. He's at his limit, I think."

The captive one-armed soldier shivered and moaned under the glare of the torches as he was bent back on the wheel. Blood drooled from his mouth, tears fell down his cheeks.

Thotas stepped near, placing a clawlike hand on the man's matted wet hair. For a moment he stood erect, then closed his eyes and shuddered. Finally he removed his hand and sneered.

"I sense nothing ... nothing! This man is no one. He can tell us nothing."

"Shall I release him, Master?"

"Release him slowly, then feed him drink and boil chot leaves. That will revive him for a while. I want him to be strong enough to return to his fellows." "Return?"

"Aye. We will send him back to the others. He won't live long, and he can't tell them anything. Scar him with a light brand. That will inspire some fear in them." "Aye, Master Thotas."

Gradually, the priest relaxed the soldier's bonds, and Thotas moved out of the chamber and up the stairs, beneath the tall shadows and the whisper of orangeglowing torches.