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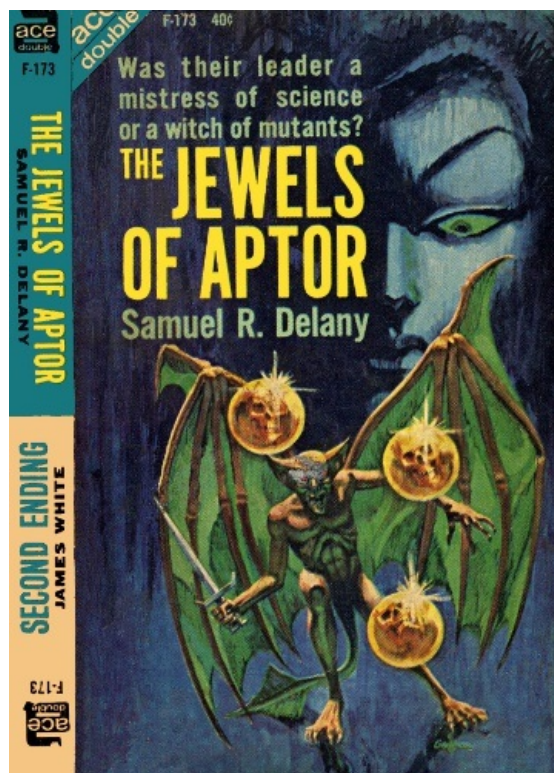
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## ***THE JEWELS OF APTOR***

by **SAMUEL R. DELANY**

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The waves flung up against the purple glow  
of double sleeplessness. Along the piers  
the ships return; but sailing I would go

through double rings of fire, double fears.  
So therefore let your bright vaults heave the night  
about with ropes of wind and points of light,  
and say, as all the rolling stars go, "I  
have stood my feet on rock and seen the sky."

—These are the opening lines from *The Galactica*, by the one-armed poet Geo, the epic of the conflicts of Leptar and Aptor.

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## PROLOGUE

Afterwards, she was taken down to the sea.

She didn't feel too well, so she sat on a rock down where the sand was wet and scrunched her bare toes in and out of the cool surface.

She turned away, looked toward the water, and hunched her shoulders a little. "I think it was awful," she said. "I think it was pretty terrible. Why did you show it to me? He was just a little boy. What reason could they have possibly had for doing that to him?"

"It was just a film," he said. "We showed it to you so you would learn."

"But it was a film of something that really happened."

"It happened several years ago, several hundred miles away."

"But it did happen; you used a tight beam to spy on them, and when the image came in on the vision screen, you made a film of it, and—But why did you show it to me?"

"What have we been teaching you?"

But she couldn't think, and only had the picture in her mind, vivid movements, scarlets, and bright agony. "He was just a child," she said. "He couldn't have been more than eleven or twelve."

"You are just a child," he said. "You are not sixteen yet."

"What was I supposed to learn?"

"Look around you," he said. "You should see something."

But the picture in her mind was still too vivid, too bright.

"You should be able to learn it right here on this beach, in the trees back there, in the rocks, in the bleached shells around your feet. You do see it; you just don't recognize it." Suddenly he changed his tone. "Actually you're a very fine student. You learn quickly. Do you remember anything about telepathy? You studied it months ago."

"By a method similar to radio broadcast and reception," she recited, "the synapse patterns of conscious thoughts are read from one cranial cortex and duplicated in another, resulting in similar sensual impressions experienced—" Suddenly she broke off. "But I can't do it, so it doesn't help me any!"

"What about history, then?" he said. "You did extremely well during the examination. What good does knowing about all the happenings in the world before and after the Great Fire do you?"

"Well, it's ..." she started. "It's just interesting."

"The film you saw," he said, "was, in a way, history. That is, it happened in the past."

"But it was so—" Again she stopped. "—horrible!"

"Does history fascinate you because it's just interesting?" he asked. "Or does it do something else? Don't you ever want to know what the reason is behind some of the things these people do in the pages of the books?"

"Yes, I want to know the reasons," she said. "Like I want to know the reason they nailed that man to the oaken cross. I want to know why they did that to him."

"A good question," he mused. "Which reminds me, at about the same time as they were nailing him to that cross, it was decided in China that the forces of the universe were to be represented by a circle, half black, half white. But to remind themselves that there was no pure force, no purely unique reason, they put a spot of white paint in the black half and a spot of black paint in the white. Isn't that interesting?"

She looked at him and wondered how he had gotten from one to the other. But he was going on.

"And do you remember the goldsmith, the lover, how he recorded in his autobiography that at age four, he and his father saw the Fabulous Salamander on their hearth by the fire; and his father suddenly smacked the boy ten feet across the room into a rack of kettles, saying something

to the effect that little Cellini was too young to remember the incident unless some pain accompanied it."

"I remember that story," she said. "And I remember that Cellini said that he wasn't sure if the smack was the reason he remembered the Salamander, or the Salamander the reason he remembered the smack."

"Yes, yes!" he cried. "That's it. The reason, the reasons ... Don't you see the pattern?"

"Only I don't know what a Salamander is," she told him.

"Well, it's like the blue lizards that sing outside your window sometimes," he explained. "Only it isn't blue, and it doesn't sing."

"Then why should anyone want to remember it?" she grinned. It was an attempt to annoy him, but he was not looking at her, and was talking of something else.

"And the painter," he was saying, "he was a friend of Cellini, you remember, in Florence. He was painting a picture of "La Gioconda." As a matter of fact, he had to take time from the already crumbling picture of "The Last Supper" of the man who was nailed to the cross of oak to paint her. And he put a smile on her face of which men asked for centuries, 'What is the reason she smiles so strangely?' Yes, the reason, don't you see? Just look around."

"What about the Great Fire?" she asked. "When they dropped flames from the skies and the harbors boiled, that was reasonless. That was like what they did to that boy."

"Oh no," he said to her. "Not reasonless. True, when the Great Fire came, people all over the earth screamed, 'Why? Why? How can man do this to man? What is the reason?' But just look around you, right here. On this beach."

"I guess I can't see it yet," she said. "I can just see what they did to him, and it was awful."

"Well," said the man in the dark robe, "perhaps when you stop seeing what they did so vividly, you will start seeing why they did it. I think it's time for us to go back now."

As she slid off the rock and started walking beside him, barefooted in the sand, she asked, "That boy—I wasn't sure, he was all tied up, but he had four arms, didn't he?"

"He did."

"You know, I can't just go around saying it was awful. I think I'm going to write a poem. Or make something. Or both. I've got to get it out of my head."

"That wouldn't be a bad idea," he mumbled as they approached the trees in front of the river. "Not at all."

And several days later, and several hundred miles away ...

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## CHAPTER I

Waves flung themselves at the blue evening. Low light burned on the wet hulks of ships that slipped by mossy pilings into the docks as water sloshed at the rotten stone embankment of the city.

Gangplanks, chained from wooden pulleys, scraped into place on concrete blocks, and the crew, after the slow captain and the tall mate, descended raffishly along the wooden boards which sagged with the pounding of bare feet. In bawling groups, pairs, or singly they howled into the narrow waterfront streets, into the yellow light from open inn doors, the purple shadowed portals leading to dim rooms full of blue smoke and stench of burnt poppies.

The captain, with eyes the color of sea under fog, touched his sword hilt with his fist and said quietly to the mate, "Well, they're gone. We better start collecting new sailors for the ten we lost at Aptor. Ten good men, Jordde. I'm sick when I think of the bone and broken meat they became."

"Ten for the dead," sneered the mate, "and twenty for the living we'll never see again. Any sailor that would want to continue this trip with us is insane. We'll do well if we only lose that many." He was a tall, wire bound man, which made the green tunic he wore look baggy.

"I'll never forgive her for ordering us to that monstrous island," said the captain.

"I wouldn't speak too loudly," mumbled the mate. "Yours isn't to forgive her. Besides, she went with them, and was in as much danger as they were. It's only luck she came back."

Suddenly the captain asked, "Do you believe the sailor's stories of magic they tell of her?"

"Why, sir?" asked the mate. "Do you?"

"No, I don't," said the captain with a certainty that came too quickly. "Still, with three survivors out of thirteen, that she should be among them, with hardly a robe torn."

"Perhaps they wouldn't touch a woman," suggested the mate, Jordde.

"Perhaps," said the captain.

"And she's been strange," continued Jordde, "ever since then. She walks at night. I've seen her going by the rails, looking from the sea-fire to the stars, and then back."

"Ten good men," mused the captain. "Hacked up, torn in bits. I wouldn't have believed that much barbarity in the world, if I hadn't seen that arm, floating on the water. It gives me chills now, the way the men ran to the rail to see, pointed at it. And it just raised itself up, like a beckoning, a signal, and then sank in a wash of foam and green water."

"Well," said the mate, "we have men to get."

"I wonder if she'll come ashore?"

"She'll come if she wants, Captain. Her doing is no concern of yours. Your job is the ship and to do what she says."

"I have more of a job than that," and he looked back at his still craft.

The mate touched the captain's shoulder. "If you're going to speak things like that, speak them softly, and only to me."

"I have more of a job than that," the captain repeated. Then, suddenly, he started away, and the mate was following him down the darkening dockside street.

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The dock was still for a moment. Then a barrel toppled from a pile of barrels, and a figure moved like a bird's shadow across the opening between mounds of cargo set about the pier.

At the same time two men approached down a narrow street filled with the day's last light. The bigger one threw a great shadow that aped his gesticulating arms behind him on the greenish faces of the buildings. Bare feet like halved hams, shins bound with thongs and pelts, he waved one hand in explanation, while he rubbed the back of the other on his short, mahogany beard.

"You're going to ship out, eh friend? You think they'll take your rhymes and jingles instead of muscles and rope pulling?"

The smaller, in a white tunic looped with a thick leather belt, laughed beneath his friend's rantings. "Fifteen minutes ago you thought it was a fine idea; said it would make me a man."

"Oh, it's a life to make," his hand went up, "and it's a life to break men," and it fell.

The slighter one pushed back black hair from his forehead, stopped, and looked at the ships. "You still haven't told me why no ship has taken you on in the past three months," he said absently, following the rope rigging against the sky like black knife slashes on blue silk. "A year ago I'd never see you in for more than three days at once."

The gesticulating arm suddenly encircled the smaller man's waist and lifted a leather pouch from the wide belt. "Are you sure, friend Geo," began the giant, "that we couldn't use up some of this silver on wine before we go. If you want to do this right, then right is how it should be done. When you sign up on a ship you're supposed to be broke and a little tight. It shows that you're capable of getting along without the inconvenience of money and can hold your liquor, too."

"Urson, get your paw off that." Geo snatched the purse away.

"Now here," countered Urson, reaching for it once more, "you don't have to grab."

"Look, I've kept you drunk five nights now, and it's time to sober up. And suppose they don't take us, who's going—" But Urson, the idea having taken the glow of a game, made another swipe with his big hand.

Geo leapt back with the purse. "Now cut that out," he began; but in leaping, his feet struck the fallen barrel, and he fell backwards to the wet cobbles. The pouch splattered away, jingling.

Both of them scrambled.

Then the bird's shadow moved in the opening between the cargo piles, a slight figure bounded forward, swept the purse up with one hand, pushed himself away from the pile of cargo with another, and there were two more fists pumping at his side as he ran.

"What the devil," began Urson, and then, "What the *devil!*"

"Hey you," called Geo, lurching to his feet. "Come back!" And Urson had already loped a couple of steps after the fleeting mutant, now halfway down the block.

Suddenly, from behind them, like a wine-glass stem snapping, only twenty times as loud, a voice called, "Stop, little thief. Stop."

The running form stopped as though it had hit a wall.

"Come back, now! Come back!"

The figure turned, and docilely started back, the movements so lithe and swift a moment ago, now mechanical.

"It's just a kid," Urson said.

He was a dark-haired boy, naked except for a ragged breech. He approached staring fixedly beyond them toward the boats. And he had four arms.

Now they turned and looked also.

She stood at the base of the ship's gangplank, against what sun still washed the horizon. One hand held something close at her throat, and wind, caught in a veil, held the purple gauze against the red swath at the world's edge, and then dropped it.

The boy, like an automaton, approached her.

"Give that to me, little thief," she said.

He handed her the purse. She took it, and then suddenly dropped her other hand from her neck. The moment she did so, the boy staggered backwards, turned, and ran straight into Urson, who said, "Ooof," and then, "God damn little spider."

The boy struggled to get away like a hydra in furious silence. But Urson held. "You stick around ... Owwww!... to get yourself thrashed.... There." The boy got turned, his back to the giant; one arm locked across his neck, and the other hand, holding all four wrists, lifted up hard enough so that the body shook like wires jerked taut, but he was still silent.

Now the woman came across the dock. "This belongs to you, gentlemen?" she asked, extending the purse.

"Thank you, ma'am," grunted Urson, reaching forward.

"I'll take it, ma'am," said Geo, intercepting. Then he recited:

*"Shadows melt in light of sacred laughter.  
Hands and houses shall be one hereafter."*

"Many thanks," he added.

Beneath the veil, on her shadowed face, her eyebrows raised. "You have been schooled in courtly rites?" She observed him. "Are you perhaps a student at the university?"

Geo smiled. "I was, until a short time ago. But funds are low and I have to get through the summer somehow. I'm going to sea."

"Honorable, but perhaps foolish."

"I am a poet, ma'am; they say poets are fools. Besides, my friend here says the sea will make a man of me. To be a good poet, one must be a good man."

"More honorable, less foolish. What sort of a man is your friend?"

"My name is Urson," said the giant, stepping up. "I've been the best hand on any ship I've sailed on."

"Urson?" said the woman, musing. "The Bear? I thought bears did not like water. Except polar bears. It makes them mad. I believe there was an old spell, in antiquity, for taming angry bears...."

*"Calmly brother bear,"* Geo began to recite.  
*"calm the winter sleep.  
Fire shall not harm,  
water not alarm.  
While the current grows,  
amber honey flaws,  
golden salmon leap."*

"Hey," said Urson. "I'm not a bear."

"Your name means bear," Geo said. Then to the lady, "You see, I have been well trained."

"I'm afraid I have not," she replied. "Poetry and rituals were a hobby of a year's passing interest when I was younger. But that was all." Now she looked down at the boy whom Urson still held. "You two look alike. Dark eyes, dark hair." She laughed. "Are there other things in common between poets and thieves?"

"Well," complained Urson with a jerk of his chin, "this one here won't spare a few silvers for a drink of good wine to wet his best friend's throat, and that's a sort of thievery, if you ask me."

"I did not ask," said the woman, quietly.

Urson huffed.

"Little thief," the woman said. "Little four arms. What is your name?"

Silence, and the dark eyes narrowed.

"I can make you tell me," and she raised her hand to her throat again.

Now the eyes opened wide, and the boy pushed back against Urson's belly.

Geo reached toward the boy's neck where a ceramic disk hung from a leather thong. Glazed on the white enamel was a wriggle of black with a small dot of green for an eye at one end. "This will do for a name," Geo said. "No need to harm him. Snake is his symbol; Snake shall be his name."

"Little Snake," she said, dropping her threatening hand, "how good a thief are you?" She looked at Urson. "Let him go."

"And miss thrashing his backside?" objected Urson.

"He will not run away."

Urson released him, and four hands came from behind the boy's back and began massaging one another's wrists. But the dark eyes watched her until she repeated, "How good a thief are you?"

With only a second's indecision, he reached into his clout and drew out what seemed another leather thong similar to the one around his neck. He held up the fist from which it dangled, and the fingers opened slowly to a cage.

"What is it?" Urson asked, peering over Snake's shoulder.

The woman gazed forward, then suddenly stood straight. "You ..." she began.

Snake's fist closed like a sea-polyp.

"You are a fine thief, indeed."

"What is it?" Urson asked. "I didn't see anything."

"Show them," she said.

Snake opened his hand, and on the dirty palm, in coiled leather, held by a clumsy wire cage, was a milky sphere the size of a man's eye, lucent through the shadow.

"A very fine thief indeed," repeated the woman in a low voice tautened strangely from its previous brittle clarity. She had pulled her veil aside now, and Geo saw, where her hand had again raised to her throat, the tips of her slim fingers held an identical jewel, only this one in a platinum claw, hung from a wrought gold chain.

Her eyes, unveiled, black as obsidian, raised to meet Geo's. A slight smile lifted her pale mouth and then fell again. "No," she said. "Not quite so clever as I thought. At first I believed he had taken mine. But clever enough. Clever enough. You, schooled in the antiquity of Leptar's rituals, are you clever enough to tell me what these baubles mean?"

Geo shook his head.

A breath passed her pale mouth now, and though her eyes still fixed his, she seemed to draw away, blown into some past shadow by her own sigh. "No," she said. "It has all been lost, or destroyed by the old priests and priestesses, the old poets.

*"Freeze the drop in the hand  
and break the earth with singing.  
Hail the height of a man  
and also the height of a woman.*

*The eyes have imprisoned a vision ..."*

She spoke the lines almost reverently. "Do you recognize any of this? Can you tell me where they are from?"

"Only one stanza of it," said Geo. "And that in a slightly different form." He recited:

*"Burn the grain speck in the hand  
and batter the stars with singing.  
Hail the height of a man,  
and also the height of a woman."*

"Well," said the woman. "You have done better than all the priests and priestesses of Leptar. What about this fragment? Where is it from?"

"It is a stanza of the discarded rituals of the Goddess Argo, the ones banned and destroyed five hundred years ago. The rest of the poem is completely lost," explained Geo. "I found that stanza when I peeled away the binding paper of an ancient tome that I found in the Antiquity Collection in the Temple Library at Acedia. Apparently a page from an even older book had been used in the binding of this one. I assume these are fragments of the rituals before Leptar purged her litanies. I know at least my variant stanza belongs to that period. Perhaps you have received a misquoted rendition; for I will vouch for the authenticity of mine."

"No," she said, almost regretfully. "Mine is the authentic version. So, you too, are not that clever." She turned back to the boy. "But I have need of a good thief. Will you come with me? And you, poet, I have need of one who thinks so meticulously and who delves into places where even my priests and priestesses do not go. Will you come with me?"

"Where are we going?"

"Aboard that ship," she said, smiling toward the vessel.

"That's a good boat," said Urson. "I'd be proud to sail on her, Geo."

"The captain is in my service," the woman told Geo. "He will take you on. Perhaps you will get a chance to see the world, and become the man you wish to be."

Geo saw that Urson was beginning to look uneasy, and said, "My friend goes on whatever ship I do. This we've promised each other. Besides, he is a good sailor, while I have no knowledge of the sea."

"On our last journey," the woman explained, "we lost men. I do not think your friend will have trouble getting a berth."

"Then we'll be honored to come," said Geo. "Under whose service shall we be, then, for we still don't know who you are?"

Now the veil fell across her face again. "I am a high priestess of the Goddess Argo. Now, who are you?"

"My name is Geo," Geo told her.

"Of the Earth, then, your name," she said. "And you, Urson, the bear. And Lamio, the little Snake. I welcome you aboard our ship."

Just then, from down the street, came the captain and the mate, Jordde. They emerged from the diagonal of shadow that lanced over the cobbles, slowly, heavily. The captain squinted out across the ships toward the horizon, the copper light filling his deepening wrinkles and burnishing the planes of flesh around his gray eyes. As they approached, the priestess turned to them. "Captain, I have three men as a token replacement at least for the ones my folly helped lose."

Urson, Geo, and Snake looked at each other, and then toward the captain.

Jordde looked at all three.

"You seem strong," the captain said to Urson, "a sea-bred man. But this one," and he looked at Snake now, "one of the Strange Ones...."

"They're bad luck on a ship," interrupted the mate. "Most ships won't take them at all, ma'am. This one's just a boy, and for all his spindles there, couldn't haul rope or reef sails. Ma'am, he'd be no good to us at all. And we've had too much bad luck already."

"He's not for rope pulling," laughed the priestess. "The little Snake is my guest. The others you can put to ship's work. I know you are short of men. But I have my own plans for this one."

"As you say, ma'am," said the captain.

"But Priestess," began Jordde.

"As you say," repeated the captain, and the mate stepped back, quieted. The captain turned to Geo now. "And who are you?" he asked.

"I'm Geo, before and still a poet. But I'll do what work you set me, sir."

"And you?" Jordde asked Urson.

"I'm a good sea-son of the waves, can stand triple watch without flagging, and I believe I'm already hired." He looked to the captain.

"But what do they call you?" Jordde asked. "You have a familiar look, like one I've had under me before."

"They call me the handsome sailor, the fastest rope reeler, the quickest line hauler, the speediest sheaf reefer...."

"Your name, man, your name," Jordde demanded.

"Some call me Urson."

"That's the name I knew you by before! Do you think I'd sail with you again, when I myself put it in black and white and sent it to every captain and mate in the dock? For three months now you've had no berth, and if you had none for three hundred years it would be too soon."

Jordde turned to the captain now. "He's a troublemaker, sir, a fight-starter. Though he's as wild as waves and with the strength of mizzen spars, spirit in a man is one thing, and a fight or two the same; but good sailor though he be, I've sworn not to have him on ship with me, sir. He's nearly murdered half a dozen men and probably has murdered half a dozen more. No mate who knows the men of this harbor will take him on."

The Priestess of Argo laughed. "Captain, take him." Now she looked at Geo. "The words for calming the angry bear have been recited before him. Now, Geo, we will see how good a poet you are, and if the spell works." At last she turned toward Urson. "Have you ever killed a man?"

Urson was silent a moment. "I have."

"Had you told me that," said the Priestess, "I would have chosen you first. I have need of you also. Captain, you must take him. If he is a good sailor, then we cannot spare him. I will channel what special talents he may have. Geo, since you said the spell, and are his friend, I charge you with his control. Also, I wish to talk with you, poet, student of rituals. Come, you all may stay on board ship tonight."

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## CHAPTER II

An oil lamp leaked yellow light on the wooden walls of the ship's forecabin. Geo wrinkled his nose, then shrugged.

"Well," said Urson, "this is a pleasant enough hole." He climbed one of the tiers of bunked beds and pounded the ticking with the flat of his hand. "Here, I'll take this one. Little wriggly arms, you look like you have a strong stomach, so you take the middle. And Geo, sling yourself down in the bottom there." He clumped to the floor again. "The lower down you are," he explained, "the better you sleep, because of the rocking. Well, what do you think of your first forecabin, Geo?"

The poet was silent. As he turned his head, double pins of light struck yellow dots in his dark eyes, and then went out as he turned from the lamp.

"I put you in the bottom because a little rough weather can unseat your belly pretty fast if you're up near the ceiling and not used to it," Urson expanded, dropping his hand heavily on Geo's shoulder. "I told you I'd look out for you, didn't I, friend?"

But Geo turned away and seemed to examine something else.

Urson looked at Snake now, who was watching him from against one wall. Urson's glance was puzzled. Snake's only silent.

"Hey." Urson spoke to Geo once more. "Let's you and me take a run around this ship and see what's tied down where. A good sailor does that first thing—unless he's too drunk. But that lets the captain and the mate know he's got an alert eye out, and sometimes he can learn something that will ease some back-bending later on. What do you say?"

"Not now, Urson," interrupted Geo. "You go."

"And would you please tell me why my company suddenly isn't good enough for you. This sudden silence is a bilgy way to treat somebody who's sworn himself to see that you make the best first voyage that a man could have. Why, I think ..."

"When did you kill a man?" Geo suddenly turned.

The giant stood still, his hands twisting into double knots of bone and muscle. Then they opened. "Maybe it was a year ago," he said softly. "And maybe it was a year, two months, and five days, on a Thursday morning at eight o'clock in the brig of a heaving ship. Which would make it about five days and ten hours."

"How could you kill a man?" Geo asked. "How could you go for a year and not tell me about it, and then admit it to a stranger just like that? You were my friend, we've slept under the same blanket, drank from the same wineskin. But what sort of a person are you?"

"And what sort of a person are you?" said the giant. "A nosy bastard that I'd break in seven pieces if ..." he heaved in a breath. "If I hadn't promised I'd make no trouble. I've never broken a promise to anyone, alive or dead." The fists formed, relaxed again.

Suddenly he raised one hand, flung it away, and spat on the floor. Then he turned toward the steps to the door.

Then the noise hit them. They both turned toward Snake. The boy's black eyes darted under twin spots of light from the lamp, to Urson, to Geo, then back.

The noise came again, quieter this time, and recognizable as the word *Help*, only it was no sound, but like the fading hum of a tuning fork inside their skulls, immediate, yet fuzzy.

*... You ... help ... me ... together ...* came the words once more, indistinct and blurring into one another.

"Hey," Urson said, "is that you?"

*... Do ... not ... angry ...* came the words.

"We're not angry," Geo said. "What are you doing?"

*I ... thinking ...* were the words that seemed to generate from the boy now.



"What sort of a way to think is that if everyone can hear it?" demanded Urson.

Snake tried to explain. *Not ... everyone ... Just ... you ... You ... think ... I ... hear ...* came the sound again. *I ... think ... You ... hear.*

"I know we hear," Urson said. "It's just like you were talking."

"That's not what he means," Geo said. "He means he hears what we think just like we hear him. Is that right, Snake?"

*When ... you ... think ... loud ... I ... hear.*

"I may just have been doing some pretty loud thinking," Urson said. "And if I thought something I wasn't supposed to, well, I apologize."

Snake didn't seem interested in the apology, but asked again, *You ... help ... me ... together.*

"What sort of help do you want?" Geo asked.

"And what sort of trouble are you in that you need help out of it?" added Urson.

*You ... don't ... have ... good ... minds,* Snake said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Urson asked. "Our minds are as good as any in Leptar. You heard the way the priestess talked to my friend the poet, here."

"I think he means we don't hear very well," said Geo.

Snake nodded.

"Oh," Urson said. "Well, then you'll just have to go slow and be patient with us."

Snake shook his head. *Get ... hoarse ... when ... shout ... so ... loud.* Suddenly he went over to the bunks. *You ... hear ... better ... see ... too if ... sleep.*

"Sleep is sort of far from me," Urson said, rubbing his beard with the back of his wrist.

"Me too," Geo admitted. "Can't you tell us something more?"

*Sleep,* Snake said.

"What about talking like an ordinary human being?" suggested Urson, still somewhat perplexed.

*Once ... speak,* Snake told them.

"You say you could speak once?" asked Geo. "What happened?"

Here the boy opened his mouth and pointed.

Geo stepped forward, held the boy's chin in his hand and examined the face and peered into the mouth. "By the Goddess!" he exclaimed.

"What is it?" Urson asked.

Geo came away now, his face lined in a sickly frown. "His tongue has been hacked out," he told the giant. "And not too neatly, either."

"Who on the seven seas and six continents did a thing like that to you, boy?" Urson demanded.

Snake shook his head.

"Now come on, Snake," he urged. "You can't keep secrets like that from friends and expect them to rescue you from I don't know what. Now who was it hacked your voice away?"

*What ... man ... you ... kill ...* came the sound.

Urson stopped, and then he laughed. "All right," he said. "I see." His voice rose once more. "But if you can hear thoughts, you know the man already. And you know the reason. And this is what we'd find out of you, and only for help and friendship's sake."

*You ... know ... the ... man,* Snake said.

Geo and Urson exchanged puzzled frowns.

*Sleep,* said Snake. *You ... sleep ... now.*

"Maybe we ought to try," said Geo, "and find out what's going on." He crossed to his bunk and slipped in. Urson followed and hoisted himself onto the upper berth, dangling his feet against the wooden support. "It's going to be a long time before sleep gets to me tonight," he said. "You know the rituals and about magic. Aren't the Strange Ones some sort of magic?"

"The only mention of them in rituals says that they are ashes of the Great Fire. The Great Fire was back before the purges, the ones I spoke to the priestess about, so I don't know anything more about them."

"Sailors have stories of the Great Fire," Urson said. "They say the sea boiled, great birds spat fire from the sky, and beasts rose up from the waves and destroyed the harbors. But what were the

purges you mentioned?"

"About five hundred years ago," Geo explained, "all the rituals of the Goddess Argo were destroyed. A completely new set were initiated into the temple practices. All references to them were destroyed also, and with them, much of Leptar's history. Stories have it that the rituals and incantations were too powerful. But this is just a guess, and most priests are very uncomfortable about speculating."

"That was after the Great Fire?" Urson asked.

"Nearly a thousand years after," Geo said.

"It must have been a Great Fire indeed if ashes from it are still falling from the wombs of healthy women." He looked down at Snake. "Is it true that a drop of your blood in vinegar will cure gout? If one of you kisses a female baby, will she have only girl children?" He laughed.

"You know those are only tales," Geo said.

"There used to be a one with two heads that sat outside the Blue Tavern and spun a top all day. It was an idiot, though. But the dwarfs and the legless ones that wheel about the city and do tricks, they are clever. But strange, and quiet, usually."

"You oaf," chided Geo, "you could be one too. How many men do you know who reach your size and strength by normal means?"

"You're a crazy liar," said Urson. Then he scrunched his eyebrows together in thought, and at last shrugged. "Well anyway, I never heard of one who could hear what you thought. It would make me uncomfortable walking down the street." He looked down at Snake between his legs. "Can you all do that?"

Snake, from the middle bunk, shook his head. Urson stretched out on his back, but then suddenly looked over the edge of the berth toward Geo. "Hey, Geo, what about those little baubles she had. Do you know what they are?"

"No, I don't," Geo said. "But she was concerned over them enough." He looked up over the bunk bottom between himself and Urson. "Snake, will you give me another look at that thing?"

Snake held out the thong and the jewel.

"Where did you get it?" Urson asked. "Oh, never mind. I guess we learn that when we go to sleep."

Geo reached for it, but Snake's one hand closed and three others sprang around it. "I wasn't going to take it," explained Geo. "I just wanted to see."

Suddenly the door of the forecastle opened, and the tall mate was silhouetted against the brighter light behind him. "Poet," he called. "She wants to see you." Then he was gone.

Geo looked at the other two, shrugged, and then swung off the berth, made his way up the steps and into the hall.

On deck it was completely dark. As he walked, a door before him opened and a blade of illumination sliced the deck. He jumped.

"Come in," summoned the Priestess of Argo, and he turned into a windowless cabin and stopped one step beyond the threshold. The walls rippled tapestries, lucent green, scarlet. Golden braziers perched on tapering legged tripods beneath plumes of pale blue smoke that lent thin incense in the room, pierced faintly but cleanly into his nostrils like knives. Light lashed the polished wooden newels of a great bed on which sat swirls of silk, damasked satin, brocade. A huge desk, cornered with wooden eagles, was spread with papers, meticulous instruments of cartography, sextants, rules, compasses, and great shabby books were piled on one corner. Above, from the beamed ceiling, hung by thick chains, swayed a branching candelabra of oil cups, some in the hands of demons, the mouths of monkeys, burning in the bellies of nymphs, or between the horns of satyrs' heads—red, clear green, or yellow-white.

"Come in," repeated the priestess. "Close the door."

Geo obeyed.

She walked behind her desk, sat down, and folded her hands in front of her veiled face. "What do you know of the real world, outside Leptar?"

"That there is much water, some land, and mostly ignorance."

"What tales have you heard from your bear friend, Urson? He is a traveled man and should know some of what there is of the earth."

"The stories of sailors," said Geo, "are menageries of beasts that no one has ever seen, of lands for which no maps exist, and of peoples whom no man has met."

She smiled. "Since I boarded this ship I have heard many tales from sailors, and I have learned more from them than from all my priests. You, on the docks there, this evening, have been the only man to give me another scrap of the puzzle except a few drunken seamen, misremembering

old fantasies." She paused. "What do you know of the jewels you saw tonight?"

"Nothing, ma'am."

"A common thief hiding on the docks had one; I, a priestess of Argo, possess another; and if you had one, you would probably exchange it for a kiss with some tavern maid. What do you know of the god Hama?"

"I know of no such god."

"You," she said, "who can spout all the rituals and incantations of the white goddess Argo, you do not even know the name of the dark god Hama. What do you know of the Island of Aptor?"

"Nothing, ma'am."

"This boat has been to Aptor once and now will return again. Ask your ignorant friend the Bear to tell you tales of Aptor; and blind, wise poet, you will laugh, and probably he will, too. But I will tell you: his tales, his legends, and his fantasies are not a tithe of the truth, not a tithe. Perhaps you will be no help after all. I am thinking of dismissing you."

"But, ma'am ..." Geo began.

The priestess looked up, having been about to begin some work.

Geo regained himself. "Ma'am, what can you tell me about these things? You have scattered only crumbs. I have extensive knowledge of incantation, poetry, magic, and I know these concern your problem. Give me what information you have, and I will be able to render mine in full. I am familiar with many sailors' tales. True, none of Aptor, or Hama, but I may be able to collate fragments. I have learned the legends and jargon of thieves through a broad life; this is more than your priests have, I'll wager. I have had teachers who were afraid to touch books I have opened. And I fear no secret you might hold."

"No, you are not afraid," admitted the priestess. "You are honorable, and foolish—and a poet. I hope the first and last will wipe out the middle one in time. Nevertheless, I will tell you some." She stood up now, and drew out a map.

"Here is Leptar," she pointed to one island. Then her finger moved over water to another. "This is Aptor. Now you know as much about it as any ordinary person in Leptar might. Aptor is a barbaric land, uncivilized. Yet they occasionally show some insidious organization. Tell me, what legends of the Great Fire have you heard?"

"I know that beasts are supposed to have come from the sea and destroyed the world's harbors, and that birds spat fire from the sky."

"The older sailors," said the priestess, "will tell you that these were beasts and birds of Aptor. Of course, there is fifteen hundred years of retelling and distortion in a tradition never written down, and perhaps Aptor has simply become a synonym for everything evil, but these stories still give you some idea. Chronicles, which only three or four people have had access to, tell me that once five hundred years ago, the forces of Aptor actually attempted to invade Leptar. The references to it are vague. I do not know how far it went nor how successful it was, but its methods were insidious and very unlike any invasion you may have read of in history. So unlike, that records of it were destroyed, and no mention of it is made in the histories given to school children.

"Only recently have I had a chance to learn how strange and inhuman they were. And I have good reason to believe that the forces of Aptor are congealing once more, a sluggish but huge amoeba of horror. Once fully awake, once launched, it will be irrevocable. Tendrils have reached into us for the past few years, probed, and then withdrawn before they were recognized. Sometimes they dealt catastrophic blows to the center of Leptar's government and religion. All this has been assiduously kept from the people. I have been sent to clear perhaps just one more veil from our ignorance. And if you can help me in that, you are welcome."

"What of the jewels, and of Hama?" inquired Geo. "Is he a god of Aptor under whom these forces are being marshaled? And are these jewels sacred to him in some way?"

"Both are true, and both are not true enough," replied the priestess.

"And one more thing. You say the last attempted invasion by Aptor into Leptar was five hundred years ago? It was five hundred years ago that the religion of Argo in Leptar purged all her rituals and instituted new ones. Was there some connection between the invasion and the purge?"

"I am sure of it," declared the priestess. "But I do not know what it is. However, let me now tell you the story of the jewels. The one I wear at my neck was captured, somehow, from Aptor during that first invasion. That we captured it may well be the reason that we are still a free nation today. Since then it has been guarded carefully in the temple of the Goddess Argo, its secrets well protected, along with those few chronicles which mention the invasion, which ended, incidentally, only a month before the purges. Then, about a year ago, a small hoard of horror reached our shore from Aptor. I cannot describe it. I did not see any of what transpired. But they made their way inland, and managed to kidnap Argo herself."

"You mean Argo incarnate? The highest priestess?"

"Yes. Each generation, as you know, the youngest daughter of the past generation's highest priestess is chosen as the living incarnation of the white Goddess Argo. She is reared and taught by the wisest priests and priestesses. Her youngest daughter, when she dies, becomes Argo. At any rate, she was kidnaped. One of the assailants was hacked down; instantly it decayed, rotted on the floor of the convent corridor. But from the putrescent mass of flesh, we salvaged a second jewel from Aptor. And before it died, it was heard to utter the lines I quoted to you before. So, I have been sent then, to find what I can of the enemy, and to rescue or to find the fate of my sister."

"I will do whatever I can," said Geo, "to help save Leptar and to discover the whereabouts of your sister priestess."

"More than my sister priestess," said the woman softly, "my sister in blood. I am the other daughter of the last Argo: that is why this task fell to me. And until she is found dead, or returned alive ..." here she rose from her bench, "... I am the White Goddess Argo Incarnate."

Geo dropped his eyes as Argo lifted her veil. Once more that evening she held forth the jewel. "There are three of these," she said. "Hama's sign is a black disk with three white eyes. Each eye represents a jewel. With the first invasion, they probably carried all three jewels, for they are the center of their power. Without them, they would have been turned back immediately. With them, they thought themselves invincible. But we captured one, and very soon unlocked its secrets. I have no guards with me. With this jewel I need none. I am as safe as I would be with an army, and capable of nearly as much destruction. When they came to kidnap my sister a year ago, I am convinced they carried both of their remaining jewels, thinking that we had either lost, or did not know the power of the first. Anyway, they reasoned, they had two to our one. But now, we have two, and they are left with only one. Through some complete carelessness, your little thief stole one from me as I was about to board when we first departed two months ago. Today he probably recognized me and intended to exact some fee for its return. But now, he will be put to a true thief's task. He must steal for me the third and final jewel from Hama for me. Then we shall have Aptor, and be rid of their evil."

"And where is this third jewel?" asked Geo.

"Perhaps," said the woman, "perhaps it is lodged in the forehead of the statue of the dark god Hama that sits in the guarded palace somewhere in the center of the jungles of Aptor. Do you think your thief will find himself challenged enough?"

"I think so," answered Geo.

"Somewhere in that same palace is my sister, or her remains. You are to find them, and if she is alive, bring her back with you."

"And what of the jewels?" asked Geo. "When will you show us their power so that we may use them to penetrate the palace of Hama?"

"I will show you their power," said Argo, smiling. With one hand she held up the map over which she had spoken. With the other she tapped the white jewel with her pale fingernail. The map suddenly blackened at one edge, and then flared. Argo walked to a brazier and deposited the flaming paper. Then she turned again to Geo. "I can fog the brain of a single person, as I did with Snake; or I can bewilder a hundred men. As easily as I can fire a dried, worn map, I can raze a city."

"With those to help," smiled Geo, "I think we have a fair chance to reach this Hama, and return."

But the smile with which she answered his was strange, and then suddenly it was completely gone. "Do you think," she said, "that I would put such temptation in your hands? You might be captured, and if so, then the jewels would be in the hands of Aptor once more."

"But with them we would be so powerful...."

"They have been captured once; we cannot take the chance that they be captured again. If you reach the palace, if you can steal the third jewel, if my sister is alive, and if you can rescue her, then she will know how to employ its power to manipulate your escape. However, if you and your friends do not accomplish *all* these things, the trip will be useless; and so perhaps death would be better than a return to watch the wrath of Argo in her dying struggle, for you would feel it more horribly than even the most malicious torture of Aptor's evil."

Geo did not speak.

"Why do you look so strangely?" asked Argo. "You have your poetry, your spells, your scholarship. Don't you believe in their power? Go back to your berth, and send the thief to me." The last words were a sharp order, and Geo turned from the room into the night's darkness.

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## CHAPTER III

Geo walked down into the forecastle, still deserted except for Urson and Snake. "Well?" asked Urson, sitting up on the edge of his berth. "What did she tell you?"

"Why aren't you asleep?" Geo said heavily. He touched Snake on the shoulder. "She wants to see you now."

Snake stood up, started for the door, but then turned around.

"What is it?" Geo asked.

Snake dug into his clout again and pulled out the thong with the jewel. He walked over to Geo, hesitated, and then placed the thong around the older boy's neck.

"You want me to keep it for you?" Geo asked.

But Snake turned around and was gone.

"I wonder what they do?" said Urson. "Or did you find out. Come on, Geo, give up what she told you."

"Did Snake say anything to you while I was gone?"

"Not a peep," answered Urson. "I came no nearer sleep than I came to the moon. Now come on, what's this about?"

Geo told him.

When he finished, Urson said, "You're crazy. Both you and her."

"I don't think so," Geo said. He concluded his story by recounting Argo's demonstration of the jewel's power.

Urson fingered the stone on Geo's chest. "All that in this little thing? Tell me, do you think you can figure out how it works?"

"I don't know if I want to," Geo said. "It doesn't sound right."

"You're damn straight it doesn't sound right," Urson reiterated. "What's the point of sending us in there with no protection to do something that would be crazy with a whole army. What's she got against us?"

"I don't think she has anything against us," Geo said. "Urson, what stories do you know about Aptor? She said you might be able to tell me something."

"I know that no one trades with it, everyone curses by it, and the rest is a lot of rubbish not worth saying."

"What rubbish?"

"Believe me, it's just bilge water," insisted Urson. "Do you think you could figure out that little stone there, if you had long enough, I mean? She said that the priests five hundred years ago could, and she seems to think you're as smart as some of them. I wouldn't doubt if you could work it."

"You tell me some stories first," said Geo.

"Oh, they talk about cannibals, women who drink blood, things neither man nor animal, and cities inhabited only by death. Sailors avoid it, save to curse by."

"Do you know anything more than that?"

"There's nothing more to know," shrugged Urson.

"She said the stories you'd tell would not be one tenth of the truth."

"She must have meant that there wasn't even a tenth part of the truth in them. And I'm sure she's right. You just misunderstood."

"No, I heard her correctly," Geo assured him.

"Then I just don't believe it. There are half a dozen things that don't match up in all this. First, how that little four-armed fellow happened to be at the pier after two months just when she was coming in. And to have the jewel still, not have traded it, or sold it already...."

"Maybe," suggested Geo, "he read her mind too, when he first stole it, the same way he read ours."

"And if he did, maybe he knows how to work the things. I say let's find out when he comes back. And I wonder who cut his tongue out. Strange one or not, that makes me sick," said the big man.

"About that," Geo started. "Don't you remember? He said you knew the man it was."

"I know many men," said Urson, "but which one of the many I know is it?"

"You really don't know?" Geo asked, quietly.

"You say that in a strange way," Urson said, frowning.

"I'll say the same thing he said," went on Geo. "What man did you kill?"

Urson looked at his hands for a moment, stretched the fingers, turned them over in his lap like meat he was examining. Then, without looking up, he said, "It was a long time ago, friend, but the closeness of it shivers in my eyes. I should have told you, yes. But it comes to me, sometimes, not like a memory, but something I can feel, as hard as metal, taste as sharp as salt, and the wind brings back my voice, his words, so clearly that I shake like a mirror where the figure on the inside pounds his fists on the fists of the man outside, each one trying to break free.

"We were reefing sails in a flesh-blistering rain, when it began. His name was Cat. The two of us were the two biggest men aboard, and that we had been put on the reefing team together meant that this was an important job and one to be done well and right. Water washed our eyes, our hands slipped on wet ropes. It was no wonder my cloth suddenly flung away from me in a gust, billowing down in the rain, flapping against half a dozen ropes and breaking two small stays. 'You clumsy thing' bawled the mate from the deck. 'What sort of fish-fingered sailor, are you?'

"And through the rain I heard Cat laugh from his own spar. 'That's the way luck goes,' he cried, catching at his own cloth that threatened to pull loose. I pulled mine in and bound her tight. The competition that goes rightly between two fine sailors drove a seed of fury into my flesh that should have bloomed as a curse or a returned jibe, but the rain rained too hard, and the wind was too strong; so I bound my sail with silence.

"I was last down, of course, and with only a few lads below on deck, when I saw why my sail had come loose. A worn mast ring had broken, caused a main rope to fly and my canvas to come tumbling. But the ring also had held the nearly broken aft mast together, and in the wind, a split twice the length of my arm pulled open and snapped to again and again like a child's noise clapper. There was a rope near, and inch thick line coiled on a spike. Holding myself to a rat line by not much more than my toes, I secured the rope and bound the base of the broken pole. Each time it snapped to, I looped it once around and pulled the wet line tight. They call this whipping a mast, and I whipped it till the collar of rope was three feet long to the top of the cleft and she couldn't snap any more. Then I hung the broken ring on a peg near by so I could point it out to the ship's smith and get him to replace the rope with a metal band.

"That evening at mess, with the day's incidents out of my mind and hot soup in my mouth, I was laughing over some sailor's tale about another sailor and another sailor's woman, when the mate strode into the hall. 'Hey, you sea scoundrels,' he bellowed. There was silence. 'Which of you bound up that broken mast aft?'

"I was about to call out, 'Aye, it was me,' when another man beat me by bawling, 'It was the Big Sailor, sir!' That was a name both Cat and I were often hailed by.

"'Well,' snarled the mate, 'the captain says that such good thinking in times so hard as these should be rewarded. He's seen the job and approved.' He took a gold coin from his pocket and tossed it on the table in front of Cat. 'There you go, Big Sailor. But I think it's as much as any man should do.' And then he turned and clomped from the mess hall. A cheer went up for Cat as he pocketed the coin; I couldn't see his face.

"The anger in me started now, but without direction. Should it go to the sailor who'd called out the name of the hero? Naw, for he had been down on deck, and through rain and darkness probably he could not have told me from my rival anyway at that distance. At Cat? But he was already getting up to leave the table. And the first mate, the same first mate of this ship here, friend, that we're on now, he was out stomping somewhere on deck.

"Perhaps it was this that caused my anger to break out the next morning when we were in calmer weather. A careless salt jarred me in a passage way, and suddenly I was all fists and fire. We scuffled, we banged, we cursed, we rolled. In fact, we rolled right under the feet of the mate who was coming down the steps at the time. He sent a boot into us and eight different curses, and when he recognized me, he sneered, 'Oh, the clumsy one.'

"Now I'd had a fiery record before. Fights on ship are a breach few captains will allow. This was my third, and one too many. And the mate, prompted by his own opinion of me, got the captain to order me flogged.

"So, like a carcass to be sliced and bid on, I was lead out before the assembled sailors at the next sunrise and bound to the main mast. I thought my wrath went all toward the first mate now. But black turned white in my head, into something that I could bite into, when he flung the whip to Cat and cried, 'Here, Big Sailor, you've done your ship one good turn. Now rub sleep off your face and do it another. I want ten stripes on that one's back deep enough to count easily with a finger dipped in salt.'

"They fell, and I didn't breathe the whole time. Ten lashes is a whipping a man can recover from in a week. Most go down to their knees with the first one, if their rope is slack enough. I didn't fall until they finally cut the ropes from my wrists. Nor was it till I heard a second gold coin rattle down on the deck from the first mate's hand and the words to the crew, 'See how a good sailor gets rich,' that I made a sound. And it was lost in the cheer which sprung from the other men.

"Cat and one other lugged me to the brig. As I fell forward, hands scudding into straw, I heard Cat's voice come, 'Well, brother, that's the way the luck goes.'

"Then the pain made me faint.

"A day later, when I could pull myself up to the window and look out on the back of the ship, we

caught the worst storm I'd ever seen, and the slices in my back made it no easier on me. Pegs threatened to pull from their holes, boards to part themselves; one wave washed four men overboard; and while others ran to save them, another came and swept off six more. It had come so suddenly that not a sail had been raised, and now the remaining men were swarming to the ratlines.

"From my place at the brig's window I saw it start to go and I howled like an animal, tried to pull the bars away. But legs passed my window running, and none stopped. I screamed at them, and I screamed again. The ship's smith had not yet gotten to fix my makeshift repair on the aft mast with another metal band. Nor, with my anger, had I yet even pointed it out to him as I had intended. It didn't hold a quarter of an hour. When it gave there was a snap like thunder. Under the tugging of half furlled sails, ropes popped like threads. Men were whipped off like drops of water shaken from a wet hand. The mast raked across the sky above me like a claw, and then fell against the high mizzen, snapping more ropes and scraping men from their perches as you'd scrape ants from a tree.

"The crew's number was halved, and when somehow we crawled from under the sheets of rain, one mast fallen and one more ruined, the broken bodies with still some life numbered eleven. A ship's infirmary holds ten, and the overflow goes to the brig. The choice of who became my mate was between the man most likely to live, figuring that he could take the harder situation more easily than the others, and the man most likely to die, figuring that it would probably make no difference to some one that far gone. The choice was made, the latter choice, and the next morning they carried Cat in and laid him beside me on the straw while I slept. His spine had been crushed at the pelvis and a spar had pierced his side with a hole big enough to put your hand into.

"When he came to, all he did was cry—not with the agonized howls I had given the day before when I watched the mast topple, but with a little sound that escaped from clenched teeth, like a child who doesn't want to show the pain. It didn't stop for hours, and such a soft sound, it burned into my gut and my tongue deeper than any animal wailing would.

"The next dawn stretched copper foil across the window and reddish light fell on the straw, the board floor, and the filthy, crumpled blanket they had laid him in. The crying had stopped and was replaced now by a gasped breath, sharp every few seconds, irregular, loud. I thought he must be unconscious, but when I kneeled to look, his eyes were opened and he stared straight into my face. 'You ...' he said to me with the next gasp. 'It hurts ... You ...'

"Be still,' I said. 'Here, be still.'

"The next word I thought I heard was water, but there wasn't any in the cell. I should have realized that the ship's supplies had probably gone for the most part overboard. But by now, hungry and thirsty myself, I could see it as nothing less than a stupendous joke when one slice of bread and a single tin cup of water were finally brought and embarrassedly and silently handed in to us about seven that morning.

"Nevertheless, I opened his mouth and tried to pour some of it down his throat. They say a man's mouth and tongue turn black from fever and thirst after a while. It's not true. The color is the deep purple of rotten, shriveled meat. And every taste bud on the dead flesh was tipped with that white stuff that gets in your mouth when your bowels are upset. He couldn't swallow the water. It just dribbled over the side of his mouth that was scabbed with purple crust.

"He blinked his eyes and once more got out, 'You ... you please ...' and then he began to cry again.

"What is it?' I asked.

"Suddenly he began to struggle and got his hand into the breast of his torn tunic and pulled out a fist. He held it out toward me and said, 'Please ... please ...'

"The fingers opened and I saw three gold coins, two of whose histories suddenly leapt into my mind like stories of living men.

"I moved back as if burned; then I leaned forward again. 'What do you want?' I asked.

"Please ...' he said, moving his hand toward me. 'Kill ... kill ...' and then he was crying once more. 'It hurts so bad ...'

"I got up. I walked across to the other side of the cell. I came back. Then I broke his neck with my knee and my two hands.

"I took my pay up. Later I ate the bread and drank the rest of the water. Then I went to sleep. They took him away without question. And two days later, when the next food came, I realized, sort of absently, that without all of that first bread and water I would have starved to death. They finally let me out because they needed the muscle, what was left of it. And the only thing I sometimes think about, the only thing I let myself think about, is whether or not I earned my pay. I guess two of them were mine anyway. But sometimes I take them out and look at them, and wonder where he got the third one from."

Urson put his hand in his tunic and brought out three gold coins. "Never been able to spend them, though," he said. He tossed the little pile into the air, and then whipped them back into his

fist again, and laughed. "Never was able to spend them on anything."

"I'm sorry," Geo said after a moment.

Urson looked up. "Why? I guess these are my jewels, huh? Maybe everyone has theirs some place. You think it was old Cat, maybe, sometimes when I was in the brig, perhaps, earning that third coin, slicing out that little four-armed monster's tongue? Somehow I doubt it."

"Look, I said I was sorry, Urson."

"I know," Urson said. "I know. I guess I've met a hell full of people in my short, wet life, and it could be any one of them." He sighed. "Though I wish I knew which. But I don't think that's the answer." He lifted his hand to his mouth now and gnawed at his thumb nail. "I hope that kid doesn't get as nervous as I do," he laughed. "He'll have such a hell of a lot of nails to bite."

Then their skulls nearly split apart.

"Hey," said Geo, "that's Snake."

"And he's in trouble too," said Urson. He leaped onto the floor and started up the passageway. Geo came after him.

"Let me go first," Geo said, "I know where he is."

They reached the deck, raced along the side of the cabins, until they reached the door.

"Move," ordered Urson. Then he rammed against the door and it flew open.

Inside, behind her desk, Argo whirled, her hand on her jewel. "What is the ..."

But the moment her concentration turned, Snake, who had been immobile against the opposite wall, suddenly vaulted across the table toward Geo. Geo grabbed the boy to steady him, and immediately one of Snake's hands was at Geo's chest where the jewel hung.

"You fools!" hissed Argo. "Don't you understand? He's a spy for Aptor."

There was a sudden silence.

Then Argo said, "Close the door."

Urson closed it. Snake still held Geo and the jewel.

"Well," she said. "It is too late now."

"What do you mean?" asked Geo.

"That had you not come blundering in, one more of Aptor's spies would have yielded up his secrets and then been reduced to ashes." She breathed deeply. "But he has his jewel now, and I have mine. Well, little thief, there's a stalemate. The forces are balanced now." She looked at Geo. "How do you think he came so easily by the jewel? How do you think he knew when I would be at the shore? Oh, he's a clever one, with all the intelligence of Aptor working behind him. He probably even had you planted without your knowing it to interrupt us at just that time."

"No, he ..." began Urson.

"We were walking by your door," Geo interrupted, "when we heard a noise and thought there might be trouble."

"Your concern may have cost us all our lives."

"If he's a spy, I gather that means he knows how this thing works," said Geo. "Let Urson and I take him ..."

"Take him anywhere you wish!" hissed Argo. "Get out!"

Just then the door opened. "I heard a sound, Priestess Argo, and I thought you might be in danger." It was the first mate.

The Goddess Incarnate breathed deeply. "I am in no danger," she said evenly. "Will you please leave me alone, all of you."

"What's the Snake doing here?" Jordde suddenly asked, seeing Geo still holding the boy.

"I said, leave me!"

Geo turned, away from Jordde, and stepped past him onto the deck, and Urson followed him. Ten steps farther on, he glanced back, and seeing that Jordde had emerged from the cabin and was walking in the other direction, he set Snake down on his feet. "All right, Little One. March!"

In the passage to the forecastle, Urson asked, "Hey, what's going on?"

"Well, for one thing, our little friend here is no spy," said Geo.

"How do you know?" asked Urson.

"Because she doesn't know he can read minds."



"How do you mean?" Urson asked.

"First of all, I was beginning to think something was wrong when I came back from talking to the priestess. You were too, and it lay in the same vein you were talking about. Why would our task be completely useless unless we accomplished all parts of her mission? Wouldn't there be some value in just returning her sister, the rightful head of Leptar, to her former position? And I'm sure her sister may well have collected some useful information that could be used against Aptor, so that would be some value even if we didn't find the jewel. It doesn't sound too sisterly a thing to me to forsake the young priestess if there is no jewel in it for her. And her tone, the way she refers to the jewel as *hers*. There's an old saying, from before the Great Fire even: Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. And I think she has not a little of the un-goddess-like desire for power first, peace afterwards."

"But that doesn't mean this one isn't an Aptor spy," said Urson.

"Wait a minute. I'm getting there. At first I thought he was too. The idea occurred to me first when I was talking to the priestess and she first mentioned that there were spies from Aptor. The coincidence of his appearance, that he had even managed to steal the jewel in the first place, that he would present it to her the way he did; all this hinted something so strange, that spy was the first thing I thought of, and I'm sure it was the first thing she thought as well. And she especially would think this if she did not know that Snake could read minds and broadcast mentally, because ignorance of his telepathy removes the one other possible explanation of the coincidences. But, Urson, why did he leave the jewel with us before he went to see her?"

"Because he thought she was going to try and take it away from him."

"Exactly. When she told me to send him up to her, I was fairly sure that was the main reason she wanted him. But if he was a spy, and knew how to work the jewel, then why not take it with him, present himself to Argo with the jewel, showing himself as an equal force, and then come calmly back, leaving her in silence and us still on his side, especially since he would be revealing to her something of which she was nine-tenths aware of already, and would watch him no more carefully than she would were it not confirmed."

"All right," said Urson, "why not?"

"Because he was not a spy, and didn't know how to work the jewel. Yes, he had felt its power once. Perhaps he was going to pretend he had it hidden on his person. But he did not want her to get her hands on it for reasons that were strong, but not selfish."

"Here, Snake," said Geo. "You know how to work the jewel now, don't you; but you learned from Argo just now."

The boy nodded.

"Here, then, why don't you take it?" Geo lifted the jewel from his neck and held it out to him.

Snake drew back and shook his head violently.

Urson looked puzzled.

"Snake has seen into human minds, Urson. He's seen things directly which the rest of us only learn from a sort of second hand observation. He knows that the power of this little bead is more dangerous to the mind of the person who wields it than it is to the cities it may destroy."

"Well," said Urson, "as long as she thinks he's a spy, at least we'll have one of them little beads and someone who knows how to use it. I mean if we have to."

"I don't think she thinks he's a spy any more, Urson."

"Huh?"

"I give her credit for being able to reason at least as well as I can. Once she found out he had no jewel on him, she knew that he was as innocent as you and I are. But her only thought was to get it in any way she could. When we came in, just when she was going to put Snake under the jewel's control, guilt made her leap backwards to her first and seemingly logical accusation for our benefit. Evil likes to cloak itself as good."

They stepped down into the forecabin. By now a handful of sailors had come into the room, mostly drunk and snoring on berths around the walls. One had wrapped himself completely up in a blanket in the middle berth of the tier that Urson had chosen for the three. "Well," said Urson to Snake, "it looks like you'll have to move."

Snake scrambled to the top bunk.

"Now look, that one was mine."

Snake motioned him up.

"Huh? Two of us in one of those?" demanded Urson. "Look, if you want someone to keep warm against, go down and sleep with Geo there. It's more room and you won't get squashed against the wall. I'm a thrasher when I sleep."

Snake didn't move.

"Maybe you better do what he says," Geo said. "I have an idea that ..."

"You've got another idea now?" asked Urson, "Oh, damn, I'm too tired to argue." He vaulted up to the top bunk. "Now move over and be very small." He stretched out, and Snake's slight body was completely hidden. "Hey, get your elbows out of there," Geo heard Urson mutter before there was only a gentle thundering of his snore.

---

*Silver mist suffused the deck of the ship and wet lines glowed a phosphorescent silver; the sky was pale as ice; pricks of stars dotted over the whole bowl. The sea, once green, seemed bleached to blowing clouds of white powder. The door of a cabin opened and white veils flung forward from the form of Argo who emerged like silver from the bone-colored door. The whole movement of the scene made it look like a picture imagination fastens in the slow ripples of gauze under breeze. One dark spot was at her throat, pulsing darkly, like a heart, like a black flame. She walked to the railing, peered over. In the white washing a skeletal hand appeared. It raised on a beckoning arm, then fell forward in the water. Another arm raised now, a few feet away, beckoning, gesturing. Then three at once; then two more.*

*A voice as pale as the vision spoke "I am coming. We sail in a hour. The mate has been ordered to put the ship out before dawn. You must tell me now, creatures of the water."*

*Two glowing arms raised up, and then an almost featureless face. Chest high in the water, it listed backwards and sank again.*

*"Are you of Aptom or Leptar?" spoke the apparitional figure of Argo again in the thinned voice. "Are your allegiances to Argo or Hama? I have followed thus far. You must tell me before I follow farther."*

*There was a whirling of sound which seemed to be the wind attempting to say, "The sea ... the sea ... the sea ..."*

*But Argo did not hear, for she turned away and walked from the rail, back to her cabin.*

*Now the scene moved, turned toward the door of the forecabin. It opened, moved through the hall, the walls, more like polished steel than weathered wood, and went on. In the forecabin, the yellow oil lamp seemed a white flaring of magnesium.*

*The movement stopped in front of a tier of three berths; on the bottom one lay a young man with a starved, pallid face. His mop of hair was bleached white. On his chest was a pulsing darkness, a black flame, a dark heart, shimmering with the indistinctness of absolute shadow. On the top bunk a great form like a bloated corpse lay. One huge arm hung over the bunk, flabby, puffy, without muscle.*

*In the center berth was an anonymous bundle of blankets completely covering the figure inside. On this the scene fixed, drew closer ... and the paleness suddenly faded before darkness, into shadow, into nothing.*

---

Geo sat up and knuckled his eyes.

The dark forecabin was relieved by the yellow glow of the lamp. The gaunt mate stood across the room. "Hey, you," he was saying to a man in one of the bunks, "up and out. We're sailing."

The figure roused itself from the tangle of bedding.

The mate moved to another. "Up, you dog face. Up, you fish fodder. We're sailing." Turning around, he saw Geo watching him. "And what's wrong with you?" he demanded. "We're sailing, didn't you hear? Naw, you go back to sleep. Your turn will come, but we need experienced ones now." He grinned briefly, and then went on to one more. "Eh, you stink like an old wine cask. Raise yourself out of your fumes. We're sailing!"

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## CHAPTER IV

"That dream," Geo said to Urson a moment after the mate left. Urson looked down from his bunk.

"You had it too?"

Both turned to Snake.

"I guess that was your doing, eh?" Urson said.

Snake scrambled down from the upper bunk.

"Did you go wandering around the deck last night and do some spying?" Geo asked.

By now most of the other sailors had risen, and one suddenly stepped between Urson and Geo. "Scuse me, mate," he said and shook the figure in the second berth. "Hey, Whitey, come on. You can't be that soused from last night. Get up or you'll miss mess." The young sailor shook the figure again. "Hey, Whitey." The figure in the blankets was unresponsive. The sailor gave him one more good shake, and as he rolled over, the blanket fell away from the blond head. The eyes were wide and dull, the mouth half open. "Hey, Whitey," the black sailor said again, and then he stepped back, slowly.

---

Mist enveloped the ship three hours out from port. Urson was called for duty right after breakfast, but no one bothered either Snake or Geo that first morning. Snake would slip off somewhere and Geo would be left to wander the ship alone. He was walking beneath the dories when the heavy slap of bare feet on the wet deck materialized in Urson. "Hey," greeted his friend. "What are you doing under here?"

"Nothing much," Geo said.

Urson was carrying a coil of rope about his shoulder. Now he slung it down into his hand and leaned against the support shaft and looked out toward the fog. "It's a bad beginning this trip has had," he said. "What few sailors I've talked to don't like it at all."

"Urson," said Geo, "have you any idea what actually happened this morning?"

"Maybe I have and maybe I haven't," Urson said. "What ones have you?"

"Do you remember the dream?" he asked.

Urson scrunched his shoulders as if suddenly cold. "I do," he said.

"It was like we were seeing through somebody else's eyes, almost."

"Our little four-armed friend sees things in a strange way if that's the case."

"Urson, that wasn't Snake's eyes we saw through. I asked him, just before he went off exploring the ship. It was somebody else. All he did was get the pictures and relay them into our minds. And what was the last thing you saw?"

"As a matter of fact," Urson said, turning, "I think he was looking at poor Whitey's bunk."

"And who was supposed to be sleeping in poor Whitey's bunk?"

"Snake?"

"Exactly. Do you think perhaps White was killed?"

"Could be, I guess. But how, and why, and who?"

"Somebody who wanted Snake killed. Maybe the same person who cut his tongue out a year and a half ago."

"I thought we decided that we didn't know who that was."

"A man you know, Urson," Geo said. "What man on this ship have you sailed with before?"

"Don't you think I've been looking?" Urson asked. "There's not a familiar face on deck, other than maybe one I've seen in a dockside bar, but never one whose name I've known."

"Think, Urson, who on this ship you've sailed with before," Geo asked again, more intently.

Suddenly Urson turned. "You mean the mate?"

"That's just who I mean," said Geo.

"And you think he tried to kill Snake. Why didn't Snake tell us?"

"Because he thought if we knew, we'd get in trouble with it. And he may be right."

"How come?" asked Urson.

"Look, we know something is fishy about Argo. The more I think about it, the less I can put my hands on it. But if something is fishy about the mate too, then perhaps he's in cahoots with her. What about when he came into Argo's cabin last night when we were there?"

"Maybe he was just doing what we said we were; walking by when he heard a noise. If it was his eyes we were seeing through, then he sees things awfully funny, then."

"Maybe he's a strange one too, like Snake who 'hears' things funny. Not all strangeness shows," Geo reminded him.

"You could be right," said Urson. "You could be right." He stood up from where he had leaned against a lifeboat support. "Well, you think some more friend, and I'll listen. I'll see you later." He hauled up his rope again and started off in the mist.

Geo decided to search for Snake. A ladder led to the upper deck, and climbing it, he saw across

the deck a tall, fog-shrouded figure. He paused, and then started forward. "Hello," he said.

The captain turned from the railing and looked at him.

"Good morning sir," Geo said. "I thought you might be the mate."

The captain was silent for a while, and then said, "Good morning. What do you want?"

"I didn't mean to disturb you if you were ..."

"No disturbance," said the captain.

"How long will it take us to get to Aptor?"

"Another three weeks. Shorter if this wind keeps up."

"I see," said Geo. "Have you any idea of the geography of Aptor?"

"The mate is the only one on board that has ever set foot on Aptor and come off it alive. Except Priestess Argo."

"The mate, sir? When?"

"On a previous voyage he was wrecked there. He made a raft and drifted into the open sea where he had the good fortune to be picked up by a ship."

"Then he will lead whatever party goes to the place?"

"Not him," said the captain. "He's sworn never to set foot on the place again. Don't even ask him to talk about it. Imagine what sort of a place it must be if probable death on the open sea is better than struggling on its land. No, he'll pilot us through the bay to the river's estuary, but other than that, he will have nothing to do with the place."

"Two other men we had on board who'd been there and returned. They went with the Priestess Argo in a boat of thirteen. Ten were dismembered and the pieces of their bodies were thrown in the water. Two survived to row the Priestess back to the boat. One was the sailor who died in the forecabin this morning. Not half an hour ago, I received news that the other one went overboard from the rigging and was lost in the sea. This is not a good trip. Men are not to be lost like coins in a game. Life is too valuable."

"I see," said Geo. "Thank you for your information and time, sir."

"You are welcome," the captain said. Then he turned away.

Geo descended the ladder again and walked slowly forward. Something touched him on the shoulder and he whirled.

"Snake, God damn it, don't do that!"

The boy looked embarrassed.

"I didn't mean to yell," Geo said, putting his arm around the boy's shoulder. "Come on, though. What did you find? I'll trade you what I know for what you do."

*You ... sleep*, came from Snake.

"I'm sorry, friend," laughed Geo. "But I couldn't take a nap now if you paid me. Now tell me, whose eyes were we seeing through last night? The captain's?"

Snake shook his head.

"The mate's?"

Snake nodded.

"I thought so. Now, did he want to kill ... wait a minute," said Geo. "Can the mate read minds, too? Is that why you're keeping things from us?"

Snake shrugged.

"Come on now," Geo said. "Do a little yelling and explain."

*Don't ... know*, Snake thought out loud. *Can ... see ... what ... he ... sees ... hear ... what ... he ... hears. But ... no ... hear ... thoughts ...*

"I see. Look, take a chance that he can't read minds and tell me, did he kill the man in the bed you should have been in."

Snake paused for a minute. Then nodded.

"Do you think he was trying to kill you?"

Snake nodded again.

"Did you know that the man killed this morning in your place was one of the two men who came back from Aptor with the Priestess?"

Snake looked surprised.

"And that the other one drowned this morning, fell overboard, and was lost?"

Snake nearly jumped.

"What is it?"

*Look ... for ... him ... all ... morning. He ... not ... dead ... hear ... thoughts ... dim ... low.*

"Who's not dead?" Geo asked. "Which one?"

*Second ... man.*

"Did you find him?" Geo asked.

*Can't ... find, Snake said. But ... alive ... I ... know.*

"One other question," Geo raised the jewel from where it hung against his chest. "How do you work this silly thing?"

*Think ... through ... it, said Snake.*

Geo frowned. "What do you mean? Can you tell me how it works?"

*You ... have ... no ... words, Snake said. Radio ... electricity ... diode ...*

"Radio, electricity, diode?" repeated Geo, the sounds coming unfamiliarly to his tongue. "What are they?"

Snake shrugged.

---

Geo got a chance to report his findings to Urson that evening and the big man was puzzled.

"Can you add anything?" Geo asked.

"All I've had a chance to do is work," grumbled Urson. They were standing by the edge of the rail beyond which the mist steeped thickly, making sky and water indistinguishable and grave. "Hey, Four-arms," Urson suddenly asked. "What are you looking at?"

Snake stared at the water but said nothing.

"Maybe he's listening to something," suggested Geo.

"You'd think there were better things to eavesdrop on than fishes," said Urson. "I guess Argo's given special orders that you two get no work. Some people! Let's go eat." As they started toward the convergence of sailors at the entrance of the mess hall, Urson said, "Oh, guess what?" He turned to Geo and picked up the jewel from the boy's chest. "All you people are going around with such finery, I took my coins to the smithy and had him put chains on them. Now I'll strut with the best of you." He laughed, and then went through the narrow way, crowding with the other sailors into the wide hall.

---

For two weeks, nights without dreams left them early, and the boat rolled from beneath the fog. Dawn was gray, but clear; then, by one breakfast time the ragged slip of Aptor's beach hemmed the horizon.

On the wheel deck the sailors clustered to the rail, and before them rocks struck like broken teeth from the water. Urson, in his new, triple neckchain, joined Snake and Geo at the rail. "Whew," he said. "Getting through them is going to be fun."

Suddenly heads turned. Behind them now, Argo's dark veils, bloated with the breeze, filled about her as she mounted the steps to the wheel deck. The sailors moved away from her. Then, one hand on a stay rope, she stared across the gray water to the dark tongue of land.

From the wheel the captain spoke, "Jordde, disperse the men and take over the wheel."

"Aye, sir," said the mate. "You, you, and you to the tops." He pointed among the men. "You also, and you. Hey, didn't you hear me?"

"Me, sir?" Geo turned around.

"Yes, you, up to the top spar there."

"You can't send him up," Urson called out. "He's never been topside at all before. It's too choppy for any lad's first time up. He doesn't even know ..."

"And who asked you?" demanded the mate.

"Nobody asked me, sir," said Urson, "but—"

"Then you get below before I have you brigged for insubordination and fine you your three gold baubles. Don't you think I recognize dead man's gold?"

"Now look here," Urson roared.

Geo glanced from Argo to the captain. The bewilderment that flooded the face of the Priestess shocked him.

Jordde suddenly seized up a marlin pin, raised it, and shouted at Urson, "Get down below before I break your skull open."

Urson's fists sprang up.

"Calmly, brother bear," Geo began.

"In a bitch's ass," snarled Urson and swung his huge arm forward. Something leaped on Jordde from behind—Snake! The marlin pin veered inches away from Urson's shoulder. The flung fist sunk into the mate's stomach and he reeled forward, passing Urson, with Snake still clawing at his back. He reached the rail, bent double over it, and Snake's legs flipped up. When Jordde rose, he was free of encumbrance.

Geo rushed to the edge and saw Snake's head emerge in the churning water. Behind him, Urson yelled, "Look out!" Jordde's marlin made an inch of splinters in the length of wood against which he had been leaning.

"Not him!" cried Argo. "No, no! Not him!"

But Jordde had seized Geo's shoulder and whirled him back against the rail. Geo saw Urson grab a loose rope behind them and suddenly swing forward, intending to knock Jordde away with his feet. But suddenly Argo moved in the way of his flying body, turned, saw him, and raised her hands to push him aside so that he swung wide of them and landed on the railing a yard from where they struggled.

Geo's feet slipped on the wet boards, and he felt his body suddenly hurled backwards onto the air. Then his back slapped water. As he broke surface, Urson, still on the rail called to him, "Hang on, friend Geo, I'm coming!" Urson's arms swung back, and then forward as he dove into the sea.

Now Geo could see only Argo and Jordde at the rail. But they were struggling. Urson and Snake were near him in the water. The last thing he saw was Jordde suddenly wrest something from Argo's neck and then fling it out into the sea. The Priestess' hands reached for the flying jewel, followed its arc as she screamed toward the water.

Then hands were at his body. Geo turned in the water as Snake disappeared from beside him and Urson suddenly cried out. Hands were pulling him down.

Roughness of sand beneath one of his sides and the flare of sun on the other. His eyes were hot and his lids were orange over them. Then there was a breeze. He opened his eyes, and shut them quick, because of the light. Then he turned over, thought about pillows and stiff new sheets. Reaching out, he grabbed sand.

He opened his eyes and pushed himself up from the beach with both hands spread in warm, soft crumbings. Over there were rocks, and thick vegetation behind them. He swayed to his knees, the sand grating under his kneecaps. He looked at his arm in the sun, flecked with grains. Then he touched his chest.

His hand came to one bead, moved on, and came to another! He looked down. Both the chain with the platinum claw and the thong with the wire cage hung around his neck. Bewildered, he heaved to his feet, and immediately sat down again as the beach went red with the wash of blood behind his eyeballs. He got up again, slowly.

Carefully Geo started down the beach, looking toward the land. When he turned to look at the water, he stopped.

At the horizon, beyond the rocks, was a boat with lowered sails. So they hadn't left yet. He swung his eyes back to the beach: fifty feet away was another figure lying in the sun.

He ran forward, now, the sand splashing around his feet, sinking under his toes, so that it was like the slow motion running of dreams. Ten feet from the figure he stopped.

It was a young black, very dark, skin the color of richly humused soil. The long skull was shaved. Like Geo, he was almost naked. There was a clot of seaweed at his wrist, and the soles of his feet and one up-turned palm were grayish and shriveled.

Geo frowned and stood for a full minute. He looked up and down the beach once more. There was no one else. Just then the man's arm shifted across the sand.

Immediately Geo fell to his knees beside the figure, rolled him over and lifted his head. The eyes opened, squinted in the light, and the man said, "Who are you?"

"My name is Geo."

The man sat up, and caught himself from falling forward by jamming his hands into the sand. He shook his head, and then looked up at Geo again. "Yes," he said. "I remember you. What

happened? Did we founder? Did the ship go down?"

"Remember me from where?" Geo asked.

"From the ship. You were on the ship, weren't you?"

"I was on the ship," Geo said. "And I got thrown overboard by that damned first mate in a fight. But nothing happened to the ship. It's still out there, you can see it." Suddenly Geo stopped. Then he said, "You're the guy who discovered Whitey's body that morning!"

"That's right." He shook his head again. "My name is Iimmi." Now he looked out to the horizon. "I see them," he said. "There's the ship. But where are we?"

"On the beach of Aptor," Geo told him.

Iimmi screwed his face up into a mask of dark horror. "No," he said softly. "We couldn't be. We were days away from her...."

"How did you fall in?"

"It was blowing up a little," Iimmi explained. "I was in the rig when suddenly something struck me from behind and I went toppling. In all the mist, they didn't see me, and the current was too strong for me, and ..." He looked around.

"You've been on this beach once before, haven't you?" Geo asked.

"Once," said Iimmi. "Yes, once."

"Do you realize how long you've been in the water?" Geo asked.

Iimmi looked up.

"Over two weeks," Geo said. "Come on, see if you can walk. I've got a lot of things to explain, if I can, and we've got some hunting to do."

Iimmi steadied himself once more, and together they started up the beach.

"What are you looking for?" Iimmi asked.

"Friends," Geo said.

Two hundred feet up, the rocks and torpid vegetation came down to the water, cutting off the beach. Scrambling over boulders and through vines, they emerged on a rock embankment that dropped fifteen feet into the wide estuary of a ribbon of water that wound back into the jungle. Twenty feet further, the bank dropped to the river's surface, and they both fell flat at the edge of a wet table of rock and sucked in cool liquid, watching blue stones and the white and red pebbles shivering six feet below clear ripples.

There was a sound. Both sprang back from the water, turned, and crouched on the rock.

"Hey," Urson said, through leaves. "I was wondering when I'd find you."

Light through branches lay on the gold coins hung against his hairy chest. "Have you seen Snake?"

"I was hoping he was with you," said Geo. "Oh, Urson, this is Iimmi, the other sailor who died two weeks ago."

Both Iimmi and Urson looked puzzled. "Have a drink of water," Geo said, "and I'll explain as best I can."

"Don't mind if I do," said Urson.

While the bear man lay down to drink, Geo began the story of Aptor and Leptar for Iimmi. When he finished, Iimmi asked, "You mean those fish things in the water carried us here? Whose side are they on?"

"Apparently Argo isn't sure either," Geo said. "Perhaps they're neutral."

"And the mate?" asked Iimmi. "You think he pushed me overboard after he killed Whitey?"

"I thought you said he was trying to kill Snake," said Urson, who had finished drinking.

"He was," explained Geo. "He wanted to get rid of all three. Probably Snake first, and then Whitey and Iimmi. He wasn't counting on our fishy friends, though. I think it was just luck that it was Whitey he got rather than Snake. If he can't read minds, which I'm pretty sure he can't, he probably overheard you assigning the bunks for us to sleep in, Urson. When he found out he had killed Whitey instead, it just urged him to get Iimmi out of the way more quickly."

"I could easily have been pushed," Iimmi agreed. "But I still don't see why."

"If there is a spy from Aptor on the ship, then Jordde is it," said Geo. "The captain told me he had been to Aptor once before. It must have been then that he was enjoined into their forces. Iimmi, both you and Whitey had also been on Aptor's shore, if only for a few hours. There must be something that Jordde learned from the island that he was afraid you might learn, something you might see. Something dangerous, dangerous for Aptor, something you might see just from being

on the beach. Probably it was something you wouldn't even recognize, something you'd maybe not see the significance of until much later. But probably something very obvious."

Now Urson spoke. "What did happen when you were on Aptor? How were those ten men killed?"

Though the sun was warm, Iimmi shivered. He waited for a moment, and then he began. "We took a skiff out from the ship and managed to get through the rocks somehow. It was evening when we started and the moon, I remember, had risen just above the horizon, though the sky was still deep blue. 'This light of the full moon is propitious to the White Goddess Argo,' she said from her place at the bow of the boat. By the time we landed, the sky was black behind her, and the beach was all silvered by the light, up and down. Whitey and I were left to guard the skiff at the water's edge, and sitting on the gunwales, shoulders hunched in the slight chill, we watched the others go up the beach, five and five, with Argo behind them.

"Suddenly there was a scream, and the first man fell. They came from the air like vultures. The moon was overhead by now, and a cloud of them darkened the white disk with their wings. They scurried after the fleeing men, over the sand. All we could really make out was a dark battling against the silver. There were swords raised in the white light, screams, and howls that nearly sent us back into the ocean. But Argo and a handful of those men left began to run toward the boat. They followed them down to the edge of the water, loping behind them, half flying, half running, hacking one after another down with swords. I saw one man fall forward and his head roll from his body while blood squirted ten feet along the sand, crimson under the moon. One actually caught at her veils, but she screamed and slipped from it into the water now, and climbed back into the boat, panting. You would think a woman would collapse, but no. She stood in the bow while we rowed our arms off. They would not come over the water, apparently, and somehow we managed to get the skiff back to the ship without foundering against the rocks."

"Our aquatic friends may have had something to do with that," said Geo. "Iimmi, you say her veils were pulled off. Tell me, do you remember if she were wearing any jewelry or not?"

"She certainly wasn't," Iimmi said. "She stood there in only her dark robe, her throat as bare as ivory."

"She wasn't going to bring the jewel to Aptor where those monsters could get their hands on it again," said Urson. "But Geo, if Jordde's the spy, why did he throw the jewel in the sea?"

"Whatever reason he had," said Geo, "our friends have given it to me now."

"You said Argo didn't know whose side these sea creatures were on, Leptar's or Aptor's," said Iimmi. "But perhaps Jordde knows, and that's why he threw it to them." He paused for a moment. "Friend, I think you have made an error; you tell me you are a poet, and it is a poet's error. The hinge in your argument that Snake is no spy is that Argo must have dubious motives to send you on such an impossible task, without protection, saying that it would be meaningful only if all its goals were accomplished. You reasoned, how could an honest woman place the life of her sister below the value of a jewel ..."

"Not just her sister," interrupted Geo, "but *the* Goddess Argo Incarnate."

"Be patient," said Iimmi. "Only if she wished to make permanent her temporary condition, you thought, could she set such an impossible task. There may be some truth in what you say. But she herself would not bring the jewel to the shores of Aptor, though it was for her own protection. Thanks to you, all three jewels are now in Aptor, and if any part of her story is true, Leptar is now in more danger than it has been in five hundred years. You have the jewels, two of them, and you cannot use them. Where is your friend Snake who can? Both Snake and Jordde could easily be spies and the enmity between them feigned, so that while you focused on one, you could be misled by the other. You say he can move into men's minds? Perhaps he clouded yours."

They sat silent for the lapsing of a minute.

"Argo may be torn by many things," continued Iimmi. "But you, in watching some, may have been deluded by others."

Light from the river quivered on the undersides of leaves. Urson spoke now. "I think his story is better than yours, Geo."

"Then what shall we do now?" asked Geo, softly.

"Do what the Goddess requests as best we can," said Iimmi. "Find the Temple of Hama, secure the stone, rescue the young Goddess, and die before we let the jewels fall into hands of Aptor."

"From the way you describe this place," muttered Urson, "that may not be far off."

"Still," mused Geo, "there are things that don't mesh. Like why were you saved too, Iimmi? Why were we brought here at all? And why did Jordde want to kill you and the other sailor?"

"Perhaps," said Iimmi, "the god Hama has a strange sense of humor and we shall be allowed to carry the jewels up to the temple door before we are slaughtered, dropping them at his feet." He smiled. "Then again, perhaps your theory is the correct one, Geo, and I am the spy, sent to sway your reason."

Urson and Geo glanced at each other.



"There are an infinite number of theories for every set of facts," said the Negro. "Rule number one: assume the simplest; that includes all the known conditions to be true until more conditions arise for which your theory no longer holds. Rule number two: then, and not until, change it."

"Then we go on into the jungle," Geo said.

"I guess we do," said Urson.

"Since we've got this job, we've got to trust ourselves and do it right. Let's see if we can put one more of those things around your neck before we're through." He pointed to the two jewels hanging at Geo's chest. Then he laughed. "One more and you'll be all the way up to me," and he rattled his own triple necklace.

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## CHAPTER V

Light lowered in the sky as they walked beside the river, keeping close to the rocky edge and brushing away vines that strung into the water from hanging limbs. Urson broke down a branch as thick as his wrist and as tall as himself and smote the water with it, playfully. "That should put a welt on anyone's head who wants to bother us." He raised the stick from the water and drops ran along the bark, moving sparks at the ends of dark lines.

"We'll have to turn into the woods for food soon," said Iimmi, "unless we wait for animals who come down to drink."

Urson tugged at another branch, and it twisted loose from fibrous white pulp. "Here," he handed it to Iimmi. "I'll have one for you in a moment, Geo."

"And maybe we could explore a little, before it gets dark," Geo suggested.

Urson handed him the third staff. "There's not much here I want to see," he muttered.

"Well, we can't sleep on the bank. We've got to find a place hidden in the trees."

"Can you see what that is through there?" Iimmi asked.

"Where?" asked Geo. "Huh...?" Through the thick growth was a rising shadow. "A rock or a cliff?" he suggested.

"Maybe," mused Urson, "but it's awfully regular."

Geo started off into the underbrush, and the others followed. Their goal was further and larger than it had looked from the river. Once they passed across a section of ten or twelve stones, rectangular and side by side, like paving. Small trees had pushed up between some of them, but for thirty feet, before the edge sank beneath the soft jungle floor it was easier going. Suddenly the growth became thin again and they were at the edge of a relatively clear area. Before them loomed the ruins of a great building. Six girders cleared the highest wall, implying an original height of eighteen or twenty stories. One wall was completely sheared away and fragments of it chunked the ground. The revealed dark caves of broken rooms and cubicles suggested an injured granite hive. They approached slowly.

To one side a great metal cylinder lay askew a heap of rubbish. A flat blade of metal transversed it, one side twisting into the ground where skeletal girders shown beneath ripped plating. A row of windows like dark eyes lined the body, and a door gaped in an idiotic oval halfway along its length.

Fascinated, they turned toward the injured wreck. As they neared, a sound came from inside the door. They stopped, and their staves leapt a protective inch from the ground. In the shadow of the door, ten feet from the ground, another shadow moved, resolving itself into an animal head, long, muzzled, gray. Then they could see the forelegs. It looked like an immense dog, and it was carrying a smaller animal, obviously dead, in its mouth. It saw them, watched them, was still.

"Dinner," Urson said softly. "Come on." They moved forward again. Then they stopped.

Suddenly the beast sprang from the doorway. Shadow and distance had made them completely underestimate its size. Along the sprung arc flowed a canine body nearly five feet long. Urson struck up at it and knocked it from its flight with his stick. As it fell, Iimmi and Geo were upon it with theirs, clubbing its chest and head. For six blows it staggered and could not gain its feet. Then, as it threatened to heave to standing, Urson rushed forward and brought his stave straight down on the chest: bones snapped and tore through the brown pelt, only to have their blue sheen covered a moment later by a well of blood. It howled, kicked its hind feet at the stake with which Urson held it to the ground, and then stretched out its limbs and quivered. The front legs stretched, and stretched, while the torso seemed to pull in on itself, shrinking in the death agonies. The long mouth, which had dropped its prey, gaped open as the head flopped from side to side, the pink tongue lolling, shrinking.

"My God," said Geo.

The sharp muzzle blunted now and the claws in the padded paw stretched, opened into human

fingers and a thumb. The hairlessness of the under-belly had spread to the entire carcass. Hind legs lengthened, joints reversed themselves, and bare knees bent as human feet dragged themselves through fragments of brown leaves over the ground and a human thigh gave a final contraction, stilled, and then one leg fell out straight again. A shaggy, black-haired man lay still on the ground, his chest caved and bloody. In one last throw, he flung his hands up to grasp the stake and pull it from his chest, but too weak, they slipped down as his lips curled back from his mouth revealing a row of perfectly white, blunt teeth.

Urson stepped back, and then back again. The stake fell, pulled loose with a sucking explosion from the ruined mess of lung. The bear man had raised his hand to his own chest and seized his triple, gold token. "In the name of the Goddess," he finally said.

Iimmi walked forward now, picked up the carcass of the smaller animal that had been dropped, and turned away. "Well," he said, "I guess dinner isn't going to be as big as we thought."

"I guess not," Geo said.

They walked back to the ruined building, away from the corpse.

"Hey, Urson," Geo said at last to the big man who was still holding his coins, "Snap out of it. What's the matter?"

"The only man I've ever seen whose body was that broken in that way," he said slowly, "was one whose side struck into by a ship's spar."

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They decided to settle that evening at the corner of one of the building's ruined walls. They produced fire with a rock against a section of slightly rusted girder. And after much sawing on a jagged metal blade protruding from a pile of rubble, they managed to quarter the animal and rip most of the pelt from its red body. With thin branches to hold the meat, they did a passable job of roasting. Although partially burned, partially raw, and without seasoning, they ate it, and their hunger ceased. As they sat huddled by the wall, ripping red juicy fibers from the last bones with their teeth, night swelled through the jungle, imprisoning them in the shell of orange flicking from their fire.

"Shall we leave it going?" asked Urson.

"Fire keeps animals away," Iimmi said.

On leaves piled together now they stretched out by the wall of the broken building. There was quiet—an insect hum, no un-namable chitterings, except for the comforting rush of the river's water.

Geo was first to awake, his eyes filled with silver. The entire clearing had been flooded by white light from the huge disk of the moon that sat on the rim of the trees. Iimmi and Urson beside him looked uncomfortably corpse-like, and he was about to reach over and touch Iimmi's outstretched arm when there was a noise behind him, like beaten cloth. He jerked his head around, and was staring at the gray wall by which they had camped. He looked up at the spreading plane that tore off raggedly against the night. Fatigue had washed into something unpleasant and hard in his belly that had little to do with tiredness. He stretched his arm in the leaves once more and put his cheek down on the cool flesh of his shoulder.

The beating sound came again and continued for a few seconds. He rolled his face up and stared at the sky. Something crossed on the moon. It seemed to expand a moment, spread its wings, and draw them in again.

He reached out, his arm over the leaves like thunder, and grabbed Iimmi's black shoulder. Iimmi grunted, started, then rolled over on his back, and opened his eyes. Geo saw the black chest drop with expelled breath, the only recognition given. A few seconds later the chest rose again. Iimmi turned his face to Geo and raised his finger to his lips. Then he turned his face back up to the night. Three more times the flapping sounded behind them, behind the wall, Geo realized. Once he glanced down again and saw that Iimmi had raised his arm and put it over his eyes.

They passed years that way. Then a flock suddenly leapt from the wall. Some of them fell twenty feet before their wings filled with air and they rose again. They circled wider and before they returned, another flock dropped off into the night.

As they fell this time, Geo suddenly grabbed Iimmi's arm and pulled it down from his eyes. The figures dropped through the dark like kites, sixty feet above them, forty feet, thirty; then there was a thin, piercing shriek. Iimmi was up on his feet in a second, and Geo beside him, their staffs in hand.

"Here it comes," breathed Iimmi. He kicked at Urson, but the big man was already on his knees, and then feet. The wings beat insistently and darkly before them as they stood against the wall. The figures flew toward them and at the terrifying distance of five feet, reversed. "I don't think they can get in at the wall," said Iimmi.

"I hope the hell they can't," Urson said.

The figures dropped to the ground, black wings crumpling to their bodies in the moonlight. In the growing hoard of shadow in front of them, light snagged on a metal blade.

Then two of the creatures detached from the others and hurled themselves forward, swords arcing suddenly above their heads.

They swung their staffs as hard as they could, catching both beasts on the chest. They fell backwards in a sudden expansion of rubbery wings, as though they had stumbled into billowing dark canvas.

Three more now leapt over the fallen ones, shrieking. As they came, Urson looked up and jammed his staff into the belly of a fourth monster who was about to fall on them from above. One got past Iimmi's whistling staff and Geo had to stop swinging and grab a furry arm. He pulled it to the side, overbalancing the huge, sailed creature. It dropped its sword as it lay for a moment, struggling on its back. Geo grabbed the blade and brought it straight from the ground up into the gut of another of the creatures who spread open its wings and staggered back. He wrested the blade free, and then turned it down into the body of the fallen one; it made a thick sound like a crushed sponge. As the blade came out again and he hacked into a shadow on his left, a voice suddenly sounded, but inside his head.

*The ... jewels ...*

"Snake!" bawled Geo. "Where the hell are you?" He was still holding his staff, and now he flung it forward, spear-like, into the face of an advancing beast. Struck, it opened up like a black parachute, knocking away three of its companions, before it fell.

In the view, cleared for an instant, Geo saw a slight, spidery form, dart from the jungle edge into the clearing. With his free hand Geo ripped the jewels from his neck and flung the confused handful of thong and chain over the heads of the shrieking beasts. The beads made a double eye in the light at the top of their arc before they fell on the leaves beyond. Snake picked them up and held them above his head.

Fire leapt from the boy's hands in a double bolt that converged in the center of the dark bodies. A red flair silhouetted the jagged edge of a wing. A wing flamed, waved flame, and the burning beast tried to take air before it fell, splashing fire about it. Orange light caught sharp on brown faces chiseled with shadow, caught in the terrified red bead of an eye or along double fangs behind dark lips.

Burning wings withered on the ground; dead leaves had sparked now, and whips of light ran on the clearing floor. The beasts retreated and the three men stood against the wall, panting.

"Watch out!" Iimmi suddenly called.

Snake looked up as the great wings tented over him, hiding him momentarily. Red flared beneath them, and suddenly the beasts fell away, their sails sweeping over the dead leaves, moved by wind or life, Geo couldn't tell. Dark flappings rose on the moon, grew further away, and were gone.

Away from the wall, they saw the fire had blown up against the wall and was dying. They ran quickly toward the edge of the forest. "Snake," said Geo when they stopped. "This is Iimmi, this is Snake. We told you about him."

Iimmi extended his hand. "Glad to meet you."

"Look," said Geo, "he can read your mind, so if you still think he's a spy ..."

Iimmi grinned. "Remember the general rule? If he is a spy, it's going to get much too complicated trying to figure why he saved us like that."

Urson scratched his head. "If it's a choice between Snake and nothing, we better take Snake. Hey, Four Arms, I owe you a thrashing." He paused, then laughed. "I hope some day I get a chance to give it to you."

"Where have you been, anyway?" Geo asked. He put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "You're wet."

"Our water friends again?" suggested Urson.

"Probably," said Geo.

Snake now held one hand toward Geo.

"What's that? Oh, you don't want to keep them?"

Snake shook his head.

"All right," said Geo. He took one jewel and put it around his neck.

Geo took the wrought chain with the platinum claw from his neck and hung it around Iimmi's. The white eye shown on his dark chest in the moonlight. Now Snake beckoned them to follow him back across the clearing. They came, stopping to pick up swords from the shriveled darknesses on the ground about the clearing. As they passed around the edge of the broken building, Geo looked for the corpse they had left there, but it was gone.

"Where are we going?" asked Urson.

Snake only motioned them onward. They neared the broken cylinder and Snake scrambled up the rubble under the dark hole through which the man-wolf had leaped earlier that evening.

At the door, Snake turned and lifted the jewel from Geo's neck, and held it aloft. The jewel glowed now, with a blue-green light that seeped into the corners and crevices of the ruined entrance. Shreds of cloth hung at the windows, most of which were broken. Twigs and rubbish littered the metal floor. They walked between double seats toward a door at the far end. Effaced signs still hung on the walls.

N .. SM .. K .. G

The door at the end was ajar, and Snake opened it all the way. Something scattered through a cracked window. The jewel's light showed two seats broken from their fixtures. Vines covered the front window in which only a few splinters of glass hung on the rim. Draped in rotten fabric, a few metal rings about wrists and ankles, two skeletons with silver helmets had fallen from the seats. Snake pointed to a row of smashed glass disks in front of the broken seats.

*Radio ... they heard in their minds.*

Now he reached down into the mess on the floor and dislodged a chunk of rusted metal. *Gun*, he said, showing it to Geo.

The three men examined it. "What's it good for?" asked Urson.

Snake shrugged.

"Are there any electricities, or diodes around?" asked Geo, remembering the words from before.

Snake shrugged again.

"Why did you want to show us all this?" Geo asked.

The boy only turned and started back toward the door. When they were standing in the oval entrance, about to climb down, Iimmi pointed to the ruins of the building ahead of them. "Do you know what that building was called?"

*Barracks*, Snake said.

"I know that word," said Geo.

"So do I," said Iimmi. "It means a place where they used to keep soldiers all together. It's from one of the old languages."

"Where to now?" Urson asked Snake.

The boy climbed back down into the clearing and they followed him into the denser wood where only pearls of light scattered through the trees. They emerged at a broad ribbon of silver, the river, broken by rocks.

"We were right the first time," Geo said. "We should have stayed here."

The sound of rippling, sloshing, the full whisper of leaves and foliage along the edges of the forest—these accompanied them as they lay down on the dried moss behind the larger rocks. And with the heaviness of release on them, they dropped, like stones down a well, the bright pool of sleep.

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*The bright pool of silver grew and spread and wrinkled into the familiar shapes of mast, the rail of the deck, and the whiteness of the sea beyond the ship. The scene moved down the deck, until another gaunt figure approached from the other direction. The features, though strangely distorted by whiteness and pulled to grotesquerie, were recognizable as those of the captain as he drew near.*

*"Oh, mate," said the captain.*

*Silence, while the mate gave an answer they couldn't hear.*

*"Yes," answered the captain. "I wonder what she wants, too." His voice was hollow, etiolated like a flower grown in darkness. The captain turned and knocked on Argo's cabin door. It opened, and they stepped in.*

*The hand that opened the door for them was thin as winter twigs. The walls of the room seemed draped in spider webs and hangings insubstantial as layered dust. The great desk seemed spindly, grotesque, and the papers on top of it were tissue thin, threatening to scutter and crumble with a breath. The chandelier above gave more languishing white smoke than light, and the arms, branches, and complexed array of oil cups looked like a convocation of spiders.*

*Argo spoke in a pale white voice that sounded like the whisper of thin fingers tearing webs.*

*"So," she said. "We will stay at least another seven days."*

*"But why?" asked the captain.*

*"I have received a sign from the sea."*

*"I do not wish to question your authority, Priestess," began the captain.*

*"Then do not," interrupted Argo.*

*"My mate has raised the objection that ..."*

*"Your mate has raised his hand to me once," stated the Priestess. "It is only in my benevolence ..."* Here she paused, and her voice became more unsure, *"... that I do not destroy him where he stands." Beneath, her veil, a face could be made out that might have belonged to a dried skull.*

*"But," began the captain.*

*"We wait here by the island of Aptom another seven days," commanded Argo. She looked away from the captain now, in a direction that must have been straight into the eyes of the mate. From behind the veil, hate welled like living liquid from the seemingly empty sockets. They turned to go, and once more on deck, they stopped to watch the sea. Near the indistinct horizon, a sharp tongue of land outlined itself with mountains. The cliffs were chalky on one side, then streaked with red and blue clays on the other. There was a reddish glow beyond one mountain, like the shimmering of a volcano. And dark as most of it was, it was a distinct darkness, backed with purple, or broken by the warm, differing grays of individual rocks. Even through the night, at this distance, beyond the silver crescent of the beach, the jungle looked rich, green even in the darkness, redolently full and quiveringly heavy with life.*

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And then the thin screams ...

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## CHAPTER VI

Geo rolled over and out of sleep, stones and moss beneath his shoulder. He grabbed his sword and was on his feet instantly. Iimmi was also standing with raised blade. The river sloshed coldly behind them.

The thin screaming came again, like a hot wire drawn down the gelid morning. Snake and Urson were also up, now. The sounds came from the direction of the ruined barracks. Geo started forward, cautiously, curiosity drawing him toward the sound, fear sending him from the relatively unprotected bank and into the woods. The others followed him.

Abruptly they reached the edge of the forest's wall, beyond which was the clear space before the broken building. They crouched now, behind the trees, watching, fascinated.

Between ape and man, it hovered at the edge of the forest in the shadow. It was Snake's height, but more of Urson's build. An animal pelt wrapped its middle and went over its shoulder, clothing it more fully than either of the four humans were clothed. Thick-footed, great-handed, it loped four steps into the clearing, uttered its piercing shriek, and fell on a hunk of flesh that last night's beasts had dropped from the sky. Its head rocked back and forth as it tore at its food. Once it raised its head and a sliver of flesh shook from its teeth before the face dropped again to devour.

They watched the huge fingers upon broad flat palms, tipped with bronze-colored claws, convulse again and again, reflexively, into the gray, fibrous meat while the fanged mouth ripped.

Whether it was a shift of breeze, or a final reflex, Geo couldn't tell, but one of the membranous sails raised darkly and beat about the oblivious animal that fed on its corpse.

"Come on," Urson said. "Let's go."

A thin scream sounded behind them, and they whirled.

It crouched apishly, the bronze-clawed fingers opened and closed like breathing, and the shaggy head was knotted with dirt and twigs. The breath hissed from the faintly moving, full lips.

Urson reached for his sword, but Iimmi saw him and whispered, "No, don't."

The Negro extended his hand and moved slowly forward. The hulking form took a step back, and mewed.

Geo suddenly caught the idea. Coming up beside Iimmi, he made a quick series of snaps with his fingers and said in a coaxing, baby voice. "Come, come, come." He laughed softly to Urson back over his shoulder. "It won't hurt us," he said.

"If we don't hurt it," added Iimmi. "It's some sort of necrophage."

"A what?" asked Urson.

"It only eats dead things," Geo explained. "They're mentioned in some of the old legends."

Apparently, after the Great Fire, so the story goes, there were more of these things around than anything else. In Leptar, though, they became extinct."

"Come here, cutie," said Iimmi. "Nice little, sweet little, pretty little thing."

It mewed again, bowed its head, came over and rubbed against Iimmi's hip. "Smells like hell," the Negro observed, scratching behind its ear. "Watch out there, big boy!" The beast gave a particularly affectionate rub that almost upset Iimmi's balance.

"Leave your pet alone," said Urson, "and let's get going."

Geo patted the ape-like skull. "So long, beautiful," he said. They turned toward the river again.

As they emerged on the rocky bank, Geo said, "Well, at least we know we have seven days to get to the Temple of Hama and out again."

"What do you mean?" asked Iimmi.

"Don't you remember the dream, back on the ship?"

"Who was thinking that?" asked Iimmi.

"Jordde, the first mate."

"He makes everybody look dead. I thought I was having a nightmare. I could hardly recognize the captain."

"You see one reason for believing he's a spy?"

"Because of the way he sees things?" Again he smiled. "A poet's reason, I'm afraid. But I see."

The thin shriek sounded behind them, and they turned to see the hulking form crouched on the rocks above them.

"Uh-oh," said Urson, "there's your cute friend."

"I hope we haven't picked up a tag-a-long for the rest of the trip," said Geo.

It loped down over the rocks and stopped just before them.

"What's it got?" Iimmi asked.

"I can't tell," said Geo.

Reaching into the bib of its animal skin, it brought out a gray hunk of meat and held it toward them.

Iimmi laughed. "Breakfast," he said.

"That!" demanded Urson.

"Can you suggest anything better?" Geo asked. He took the meat from the beast's claws. "Thanks, gorgeous."

It turned, looked back, and bounded up the bank and into the forest again.

With fire from the jewels, and wooden spits from the woods, they soon had the meat crackling and brown and the grease bubbling down its sides and hissing onto the hot stones they had used to rim the flame. Urson sat apart, sniffed, and then moved closer, and finally scratched his big fingers through his hairy stomach and said, "Damn it, I'm hungry." They made room for him at the fire without comment.

Sun struck the tops of the trees for the first time that morning and a moment later splashed copper in concentric curves on the water by the rock's edge, staining it further with dull gold.

"You seem to know your way around awfully well. Have you ever been on Aptor before?" Iimmi asked Snake suddenly.

Snake paused for a moment. Then he nodded, slowly.

They were all silent now.

Finally Geo asked, "What made you ask that?"

"Something in your first theory," Iimmi said. "I've been thinking it for some time, and I guess you knew I was thinking it too, Four Arms. You thought Jordde wanted to get rid of me, Whitey, and Snake, and that it was just an accident that he caught Whitey first instead of Snake. You thought he wanted to get rid of Whitey and me because of something we'd seen, or might have seen, when we were on Aptor with Argo. I just thought perhaps he wanted to get rid of Snake for the same reason. Which meant he might have been on Aptor before, too."

"Jordde was on Aptor before," said Urson. "You said that's when he became a spy for them."

They all turned to Snake who stood quietly.

"I don't think we ought to ask him any more questions," said Iimmi. "The answers aren't going to do us any good, and no matter what we find out, we've got a job to do, and seven, no—six and a

half days to do it in."

Snake quietly handed the metal chain with the pendant jewel back to Iimmi. The dark man put it around his neck once more and they turned up the river.

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By twelve, the sun had parched the sky. Once they stopped to swim and cool themselves. Chill water gave before reaching arms and lowered faces. They even dove in search of their aquatic helpers, but grubbed the pebbly bottom of the river with blind fingers instead, coming up with dripping twigs and smooth wet stones. Soon, they were in a splashing match, of which it is fair to say, Snake won—hands down.

Hunger thrust its sharp finger into their abdomens once more, only a mile on. "Maybe we should have saved some of that stuff from breakfast," muttered Urson.

Iimmi suddenly broke away from the bank toward the forest.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get some food."

The building they suddenly came upon had tongues of moss licking twenty to fifty feet up the loosely mortared stones. A hundred yards from the water, the jungle came right to its edges. The whole edifice had sunk a bit to one side in the boggy soil. It was a far more stolid and primitive structure than the barracks. They scraped and hacked in front of the entrance where two great columns of stone, six feet across at the base, rose fifty feet to a supported arch. The stones of the building were rough and unfinished.

"It's a temple," Geo suddenly said.

And again they fell back to work. What spots of light spilled through the twisted net of jungle stopped at the total shadow beneath the great arch. A line of blackness up one side of the basalt door showed that it was ajar. Now they mounted the steps, moving aside a fallen branch which chattered leaves at them. Geo, Iimmi, then Snake, and at last Urson, squeezed through the door.

Ceiling blocks had fallen from the high vault so that three shafts of sun struck through the continual shift of dust to the littered floor.

"Do you think it's Hama's temple?" Urson asked. His voice came back in the stone room, small and hollow.

"I doubt it," said Iimmi. "At least not the one we're supposed to find."

"Maybe it's an abandoned one," said Geo, "and we can find out something useful from it."

Something large and dark suddenly flapped through a far shaft of sun. They stepped back. After a moment of silence, Geo handed his jewel to Snake. "Make some light in here," he said.

The blue green glow flowed from the up-raised jewel in Snake's hand. As the light flared, and flared brighter, they saw that the flapping had come from a medium-sized bird that was perched harmlessly on an arch that ran between two columns. It ducked its head at them, cawed harshly, and then flapped from its perch and out one of the apertures in the ceiling, the sound of its wings still thrumming in echo seconds after it was gone.

There were doors between the columns, and one far wall had not withstood time's sledge. A gaping rent was nearly blocked with vines except for a dim, green-tinted shimmer that broke in here and there through the uneven foliage.

Behind a twisted metal rail and raised on steps of stone, the ruins of a huge statue sat. Carved from black rock, it represented a man seated cross-legged on a dais. An arm and shoulder had broken off and lay in pieces on the altar steps. The hand, its fingers as thick as Urson's thigh, lay just behind the altar rail. The head was completely missing. Both the hand still on the statue and the one in front of them on the steps looked as though they had once held something, but whatever it was had been removed.

Iimmi was moving along the rail to where a set of stone boxes were placed like foot stones along the side of the altar. "Here, Snake," he called. "Bring a light over here." Snake obeyed, and with Geo's and Urson's help, he loosened one of the lids.

"What's in there?" Urson asked.

"Books," said Iimmi, lifting out one dusty volume. Geo peered over his shoulder while the dark fingers turned the pages. "Old rituals," Iimmi said. "Look here," and he pointed to one of them. "You can still read them."

"Let me see," Geo said. "You know I studied with Eadnu at the University of Olcse Olwnh."

Iimmi looked up and laughed. "I thought some of your ideas sounded familiar. I was a pupil of Welis."

"You were at Olcse Olwnh too?" Geo asked.

"Um-hm," said Iimmi turning the pages. "I signed aboard this ship as a summer job. If I'd known

where we'd end up, I don't think I'd have gone, though."

Stomach pangs were forgotten.

"These rituals are not at all like those of the Goddess," Iimmi observed.

"Apparently not," agreed Geo. "Wait!" Iimmi had been turning pages at random. "Look there!" Geo pointed.

"What is it?" Iimmi asked.

"The lines," Geo said. "The ones Argo recited." He read out loud:

*"Forked in the heart of the dark oak  
the circlet of his sash  
rimmed where the eye of Hama broke  
with fire, smoke, and ash.*

*Freeze the drop in the hand  
and break the earth with singing.  
Hail the height of a man  
and also the height of a woman.*

*The eyes have imprisoned a vision.  
The ash tree dribbles with blood.  
Thrust from the gates of the prison  
smear the yew tree with mud."*

"It's the other version of the poem I found in the pre-purge rituals of Argo. I wonder if there were any more poems in the old rituals of Leptar that parallel those of Aptor and Hama?"

"Probably," Iimmi said. "Especially if the first invasion from Aptor took place just before, and probably caused, the purges."

"What about food?" Urson suddenly asked from where he now sat on the altar steps. "You two scholars have the rest of time to argue. But we may starve before you can enjoy the leisure."

"He's right," said Iimmi. "Besides, we have to get going."

"Would you two consider it an imposition to set your minds to procuring us some food?" Urson asked.

"Wait a minute," Iimmi said. "Here's a section on the burial of the dead. Yes, I thought so." He read out loud now:

*"Sink the bright dead with misgiving  
from the half-light of the living ..."*

"What does that mean?" asked Urson.

"It means that the dead are buried with all the accoutrements of the living. That means that they put food in the graves."

"Over here," cried Iimmi. With Snake following, they came to the row of sealed doors behind the columns along the wall. Iimmi looked at the inscription. "Tombs," he reported. He turned the handles, a double set of rings, which he twisted in opposite directions. "In an old, uncared-for temple like this, the lock mechanisms must have rusted by now if they're at all like the ancient tombs of Leptar."

"Have you studied the ancient tombs?" asked Geo excitedly. "Professor Eadnu always considered them a waste of time."

"That's all Welis ever talked about," laughed Iimmi. "Here, Urson, you set your back to this a moment."

Grumbling, Urson came forward, took the rings, and twisted. One snapped off in his hand. The other gave, with a crumbling sound inside the door.

"I think that does it," Iimmi said.

They all helped pull now, and suddenly the door gave an inch, and then, on the next tug, swung free.

Snake proceeded them into the tiny stone cell.

On a rock table, lying on its side, was a bald, shriveled, sexless body. Around the floor were a few sealed jars, heaps of parchment, and a few piles of ornaments.

Iimmi moved among the jars. "This one has grain," he said. "Give me a hand." Geo helped him lug the big pottery vessel to the door.

Suddenly a thin shriek scarred the dusty air, and both boys stumbled. The jar hit the ground, split, and grain heaped over the floor. The shriek came again.



Geo saw, there on the edge of the broken wall across the temple from them five of the ape-like figures crouched before the thickly shingled leaves, just visible in the uneven light. One leapt from the wall now and ran wailing across the littered temple floor, straight for the door of the tomb. Two others followed, and then two others. More had mounted the broken ridge of stone.

Only a greenish rectangle of light fell through the tomb's door as the loping forms burst into the room, one, and then its two companions. Claws and teeth closed on the shriveled skin. The body rolled beneath the ripping hands and mouths, for one arm swept into the air above their lowered heads and humped backs. It fell on the edge of the rock table, broke at the mid-forearm, and the skeletal hand fell to the floor, shattering like china, into a dozen pieces.

They backed to the temple door. Then they turned and ran down the temple steps. The sunlight on the broad rocks touched them; they became still, breathed deeply. They walked quietly. Hunger returned slowly after that, and occasionally one would look aside into the faces of the others in attempt to identify the horror that still pulsed behind their eyes.

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## CHAPTER VII

It was Urson who first pointed it out. "Look at the far bank," he said.

Across from them, they could make out an obviously man-made stone embankment.

A few hundred feet further on, Iimmi sighted the spires above the trees, still across the river from them. They could figure nothing for an explanation, till suddenly the trees ceased on the opposite bank and the buildings and towers of a great city broke the sky. Elevated highways looped tower after tower, many of them broken, their ends dangling colossally to the streets. The docks of the city just across from them were completely deserted.

It was Geo who suggested, "Perhaps Hama's temple is in there. After all, Argo's largest temple is in Leptar's biggest city."

"And what city in Leptar is *that* big?" breathed Urson, awfully.

"How do we get across?" asked Iimmi.

But Snake had already started down to the water.

"I guess we follow him," said Geo, climbing down over the rocks.

Snake dove into the water. Iimmi, Geo, and Urson followed. Before he had taken two strokes, Geo felt familiar hands suddenly grasp his body from below. This time he did not fight, and there was a sudden sense of speed, of sinking through consciousness.

Then he was bobbing up through chill water with the rising embankment of stones to one side and the broad river to the other. He switched from skulling into a crawl now, wondering how to scale the stones when he saw the rusted metal ladder leading into the water. He caught hold of the sides and pulled himself up.

Snake came up now, and then Urson. And, at last Iimmi joined them on the broad ridge of concrete that walled the flowing river. Together now on the wharf, they turned to the city.

Near them, piles of debris lay between two taller buildings. After a few minutes' walk the building walls had reached canyon size. "Now, how are you going to go about looking for the temple?" Urson asked.

"Maybe we can take a look from the top of one of these buildings," Geo suggested.

They turned toward a random building. A slab of metal had torn away from the wall, and stepping through, they found themselves in a huge hollow room. Dim light came from a number of white tubes set around the wall. Only a quarter of them were lit, and one was flickering. Hung from the center of the room was a metal sign which read:

NEW EDISON ELECTRIC COMPANY

and beneath it, in smaller letters:

"LIGHT DOWN THE AGES"

One of the huge cylinders, across the floor, was buzzing.

As they mounted a spiral staircase to the next floor the great room turned about them, sinking. At last they stepped up into a dark corridor. A red light glowed at the end which said: EXIT.

Doors outlined themselves along the hall in a red haze. Geo moved to one at random and opened it. Natural light fell in on them as the others came to see. They entered a room whose outer wall was torn away. The floor broke off irregularly over thrusting girders.

"What could have happened to it?" Urson asked.

"See," Iimmi explained. "That roadway must have crashed into the wall and knocked it away."

A twenty-foot ribbon of road veered into the room at an insane angle. The railing was twisted, but there were the stalks of street lights still intact along the edges.

"Do you think we could climb that?" asked Geo. "It doesn't look too steep."

"For what?" Urson wanted to know.

"To get some place high enough to see if there's anything that looks like a temple."

"Oh," said Urson in a reconciled voice.

In general the walk was in good shape. Occasional sections of railing had twisted away, but the road itself mounted surely between the sheering faces of the buildings on either side of them through advancing sunset.

It branched before them and they went left. It branched again and again they avoided the right-handed road. A sign, half the length of a three masted ship, hung lopsidedly above them on a building to one side.

## WMTH

### THE HUB OF WORLD NEWS, COMMUNICATION, & ENTERTAINMENT

As they rounded the corner of the building, Snake suddenly stopped and put his hand to his head.

"What is it?" asked Geo.

Snake took a step backward. Then he pointed to WMTH. *It ... hurts.*

"What hurts?" asked Iimmi.

Snake pointed to the building again.

"Is there someone in there thinking too loud?"

*Thinking ... machine,* Snake said. *Radio ...*

"A radio is a thinking machine and there's one in there that's hurting your head?" interpreted Iimmi, tentatively, and with a question mark.

Snake nodded.

"How come the one he showed us before didn't hurt him?" Urson wanted to know.

Iimmi looked up at the imposing housing of WMTH. "Maybe this one's a lot bigger."

"Look," Geo said to Snake, "you stay here, and if we see anything, we'll come back and report, all right?"

"Maybe it stops later on," Urson said, "and if he ran forward, he could get out the other side. It may just stop after a hundred feet or so."

"Why so anxious?" asked Iimmi.

"The jewels," said Urson. "Who's going to get us out of trouble if we should meet up with anything else?"

They were silent then. Their shadows faded over the pavement as the yellow tinge in the sky turned blue. "I guess it's up to Snake," Geo said. "Do you think you can make it?"

Snake paused for a moment, then shook his head.

"Well," Geo said to the others, "come on then."

Around them was a sudden click, and lights flickered all along the edges of the road.

"Come on," Geo said again, and once more they started, passing the lights which wheeled double and triple shadows about them over the road and the opposite railing. When they reached the next turn off that led to a still higher ramp, Geo looked back. Snake's miniature figure sat on the edge of the road's railing, his feet on the lower rung, one pair of arms folded, one pair of elbows on his knees. The light above him.

"Keep track of the turns," said Geo.

"I'm keeping," Iimmi assured him.

"By the time we get to the top of whatever we're trying to get to the top of," rumbled Urson, "we won't be able to see anything. It'll be too dark."

"Then let's hurry," Geo admonished.

Sunset stained one side of the towers copper while blue shadows hugged the other. By way of a plastic-domed stairway, they mounted another eighty feet to a broader highway where they could look down on the band of lights which was the one they had just left. They were beginning to clear the roofs of the lower buildings now.

On this road fewer lights were working. They were just about to enter a dark section when a

figure appeared in silhouette at the other end.

They stopped, but the figure was suddenly gone. A little farther, Geo suddenly halted and said, "There!"

Two hundred feet ahead of them, what may have been a naked woman rose from the ground, and began to walk backwards until she disappeared into the next dark length of road.

"Do you think she was running away from us?" Iimmi asked.

Urson reached out and touched Iimmi's jewel. "I wish we have some more light around here."

"Yeah," Iimmi agreed. They continued.

The skeleton lay at the twilight edge of the next stretch of functioning lights. The rib cage marked sharp lines on the pavement with shadow from the lamps' glare.

"Do we turn back now?" Urson asked.

"A skeleton can't hurt you," Iimmi said.

"But what about the live one we saw?" countered Urson.

"... and here she comes now," Geo whispered in a cynical stage voice.

In fact two figures approached them through the shadow. As Urson, Geo and Iimmi moved closer, one stopped, and then the other a few steps before the first. Then they dropped. Geo couldn't tell if they fell, or lay down quickly on the roadway. But they seemed to have disappeared.

"Go on?" asked Urson.

"Go on," said Geo.

Pause. "Go on," from Geo.

Two more skeletons lay on the road where the figures had disappeared a minute before. "They don't seem dangerous," Geo said. "But what do they do? Die every time they see us?"

"Hey," Iimmi said. "What's that? Listen."

It was a sickly liquid sound, like mud dropping into itself. Something was falling from the sky. No, not the sky, but from the roadway that crossed fifty feet above them. Looking down again, they saw that a blob of something was growing on the pavement ten feet from them.

"Come on," Geo said, and they skirted the mess dripping from above them, and continued up the road, passing four more skeletons. The sound behind them turned into a wet sloshing. Turning, they saw it emerge into the light—shapeless and jelly-green under the white flare. Impaling its membrane on the skeletons, the mass flowed around them, faster, covering them, molding to them. There was a final surge, a shrinking, and its shapelessness contracted into limbs, a head, feet. The naked man-thing pushed itself to its knees and then stood straight, the flesh by now opaque. Eye sockets caved into the face. A mouth ripped apart on the skull, and the chest began to move with a wet steamy sound in irregular gasps.

It began to walk toward them, raising its hands from its sides. Then, behind it in the darkness, they saw more coming.

"*Damn*," said Urson. "What do they...?"

"One, or both, of two things," Iimmi answered, backing away. "More meat, or more bones."

"Whoops," Geo said. "Look back there!"

They whirled and saw seven more figures standing quietly behind them, while the ones in front advanced.

A covered flight of stairs had its entrance nearby, leading to the next level of highway. They ducked into it and fled up the steps. Geo glanced back once; one of the forms had reached the entrance and had started to climb. He was also, he realized, high enough to get some idea of the city, which stretched, beyond the transparent covering of the steps, away in a web of lighted roadways, rising, looping, descending. Two glows caught him: one, beyond the river, a red haze that flickered behind the trees and was reflected on the water itself. The other was within the city itself, orange white, nested among the buildings.

He turned back up the steps. A gurgling sound neared them as they reached the top entrance. Geo had only gotten half clear of the entrance when he yelled, "Yikes," and then, "Duck!"

They slipped from the doorway and nearly fell, avoiding a mass of jelly the size of a two-story house which flopped against the entrance. They edged by its pulsing, transparent sides. The lamp light pierced into it a yard, and once a skull swirled toward the surface and then sank again.

Suddenly it sucked away from the entrance and shivered ponderously toward them. Something was happening at the front. Figures, three or four of them, were detaching themselves from the mother mass and preceding it.

They turned and ran along the road, plunging suddenly into an extended darkened section. A

moment later there was a glow in front of them and suddenly Urson yelled, "Watch it!"

Abruptly the road sheered off in front of them; they halted, and then approached the edge slowly. The surface of the road tore away and the girders descended, webbing toward the ruined stump of a building from which the orange-white glow rose. The glow came from the heart of the edifice. "What do you think it is?" asked Geo.

"I don't know," said Immi.

They looked, and in the shadow, numberless figures were marching after them. Suddenly the figures fell to the ground, and flesh rolled forward from bone, congealed, and rose quivering into the edge of the light.

Immi started out first on the skeletal, twisted structure that descended to the glowing pit. "You're crazy," Geo said. The thing flopped forward another yard with a sick sound. "Hurry up," Geo added. With Urson in the middle, they started out along the twenty-inch wide girder. Lit from beneath, their bodies were in the shadow of the girder. Only their outstretched arms burned in the pale orange light as they balanced themselves.

Before them, faintly legible on the broken building into which they were descending was the sign: ATOMIC ENERGY FOR THE BETTERMENT OF MAN

It was flanked by two purple trefoils. The beam twisted sideways, and then dropped. Immi made the turn, dropped to his knees and hands, and then started to let himself down the four feet to the next small section of concrete. Once he saw something, let out a low whistle, but continued to lower himself to the straightened girder. Urson made the turn next, while Geo knelt in front of him. When Urson saw what Immi had seen, his hand shot to Geo's chest and grabbed the jewel. Geo took his wrist. "That won't help us now," he said.

Urson expelled a breath, and then continued down, slowly. Quickly Geo turned to drop now.

The entire beam structure over which they had just come was coated with a trembling thickness of the stuff. Globbs dripped from the steel shafts, glowing in the light from below, quivering, smoking, splashing off into the darkness. Here and there something half human would rise either to look around or to pull the collective mass further on, but then it would fall back and dissolve. It bulged forward, smoking now, bits of it shriveling off and falling away. Geo was about to descend, but suddenly he called, "Wait a minute." The others stayed still.

It wasn't making progress. It rolled to a certain point in the pale, sherbert-colored light, globbed up, smoked, and fell away. And smoked. And dripped.

"Can't it get any farther?" Urson asked.

"It doesn't look it," said Geo.

A skeleton stood up, flesh-covered in the orange light. It tottered, its surface steaming, and then fell with a sucking noise, down into the hundreds of feet of shadow. Geo was holding tight onto the girder in front of him.

The pale light fell cleanly over his hand, wrist, and midway up his forearm.

What happened now made him squeeze until sweat came: the entire Gargantuan mass, which had only extended tentacles till now, pulsed to the edge of the jagged road, draped itself over the web of girders, and flung itself forward on the spindly metal threads. It careened toward them, and the three jerked themselves back.

Then it stopped, quivering. It boiled, it burned, it writhed, sinking, smoking through the spaces in the naked girder work. It tried to crawl backwards. Human figures leaped from its mass toward the edge of the road, missed, and plummeted like smoking bullets. It hurled a great pseudopod back toward the safety of the road; it fell short, flopped downward, and the whole mass shook beneath the smoke that rose from it. It pulled free of the support, tentacles sliding across steel, whipping into the air. Then it dropped into the shadows, breaking into a half dozen pieces before they lost sight of it below.

Geo released his hand. "My arm hurts," he said, shaking it.

They climbed up to the road again, carefully. "Any ideas what happened?" asked Immi.

"What ever it was, I'm glad it did," said Urson.

Something clattered before them in the darkness.

"What was that?" asked Urson, stopping.

"My foot hit something," Geo said.

"What was it?" asked Urson.

"Never mind," said Geo. "Come on."

Fifteen minutes brought them to the stairway that went to the lower highway. Immi's memory proved good, and for an hour they went quickly, Immi making no hesitation at turnings.

"God," Geo said, rubbing his forearm with his other hand. "I must have pulled hell out of it back

there. It hurts like the devil."

Urson looked at his hand and rubbed them together.

"My hands feel sort of funny too," Iimmi said. "Like they've been wind-burned."

"Wind-burned nothing," said Geo. "This hurts."

Twenty minutes later, Iimmi said, "Well, this should be about it."

"Hey," said Urson. "There's Snake." As they ran forward, now, the boy jumped off the rail, grabbed their shoulders, and grinned. Then he began to tug them forward.

"You lucky little so and so," said Urson. "I wish you'd been with us."

"He probably was, in spirit, if not in body," Geo laughed.

Snake nodded.

"What are you pulling for?" Urson asked. "Say, if you're going to get headaches like that, you'd better teach us what to do with them beads there." He pointed to the jewel at Iimmi's and Geo's necks.

Snake nodded and tugged forward again.

"He wants us to hurry," Geo said. "We better get going."

The road finally tore completely away, and four feet below them, over the twisted rail, was the mouth of a street that led into the waterfront. Snake, Iimmi and then Urson vaulted over. Urson shook his hands painfully when he landed.

"Give me a hand, will you?" Geo asked. "My arm is really shot." Urson helped his friend over.

Almost as though it had been in wait, thick liquid gurgling sounded behind them. Like a wounded thing it emerged from behind the broken highway, bulging up into the light which shone on the ripples in its shriveled membrane.

"Run it!" bawled Urson, and they took off down the street. In the moonlight, the ruined piers spread along the waterfront to either side of them, some even slanting into the silvered water.

Turning once, they saw it bloat the entrance of the street, fill it, and then pour across the broken stones, slipping across the rubble of the smashed wharf.

When Geo hit water, he was aware of two things immediately as the hands reached for his body. First, the thong was yanked from around his neck. Second, pain seared his arm as if the bones and ligaments were suddenly replaced by white-hot cords of steel, and every vein and capillary had become part of a webbing of red fire.

It was a long time before consciousness. Once he was lifted. And when he opened his eyes, the white moon was moving incredibly fast above him toward the dark shapes of leaves. Was he being carried? And his arm hurt. There was more drowsy half consciousness, and once a great deal of pain. When he opened his mouth to scream, however, darkness flowed in, swathed his tongue, and he swallowed the darkness down into his body and into his head, and called it sleep

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*A spool of copper wire unrolled over the black tile floor. Scoop it up quick. Damn, let me get out of here. I run past the black columns, glimpsing the cavernous room, and the black statue at the other end, huge, and rising into shadows. Men in dark robes are walking around. (Not only could they see, this time; they could hear the thinking.) Just don't feel up to praying this afternoon. I am before the door, and above it, a black disk with three white eyes on it. Through the door, up black stone steps. Wonder if anyone will be up there now. Just my luck I'll find the Old Man himself. Another door with a black circle above it. Push it open slowly, cool on my hands. A man is standing inside, looking into a large screen of glass. Figures moving on it. Can't make them out, he's in the way. Oh, there's another one.*

*"I don't know whether to call it success or failure," one says.*

*"The jewels are ... safe or lost?"*

*"What do you call it?" the first one asks. "I don't know any more." He sighs. "I don't think I've taken my eyes off this thing for more than two hours since they got to the beach. Every mile they've come closer has made my blood run colder."*

*"What do we report to Hama Incarnate?"*

*"It would be silly to say anything now. We just don't know."*

*"Well," says the other, "at least we can do something with the City of New Hope since they got rid of that super-amoeba."*

*"Are you sure they really got it?"*

*"After the burning it received over that naked atom pile? It was all it could do to get to the waterfront. It's just about fried up and blown away already."*

*"And how safe would you call them?" the other asks.*

*"Right now? I wouldn't call them anything."*

*Something glitters on the table by the door. Yes, there it is. In the pile of strange equipment is a U-shaped scrap of metal. Just what I need. Hot damn, adhesive tape too. Quick, there, before they see. Fine. Now, let the door close, real slow. Ooops. It clicked. Now come on, look innocent, in case they come out. I hope the Old Man isn't watching. Guess they're not coming. And down the stairs again, the black stone walls moving past. Out another door, into the garden, dark flowers, purple, deep red, some with blue in them, and big stone urns. Some priests are coming down the path. Ooops again, there's old Dunderhead. He'll want me inside praying. Duck down behind that urn. Here we go. What'll I do if he catches me? Really sir, I have nothing under my choir robe. Peek out.*

*Very, very small sigh of relief, now. Can't afford to be too loud around here. They're gone. Let's examine the loot. The black stone urn has one handle above. It's about eight feet tall. One, two, three: jump, and ... hold ... on ... and ... pull. And try to get to the top. There we go. Cold stone between my toes. And over the edge, where it's filled with dirt. Pant. Pant. Pant.*

*Should be just over here, if I remember right. Dig, dig, dig. Damp earth feels good in your hands. Ow! my finger. There it is. A brown paper bag under granules of black earth. Lift it out. Is it all there? Open it up, peer in. Down at the bottom, beyond the folds of the edges where the top had been twisted tightly together, are the tiny scraps of copper, a few long pieces of dark metal, a piece of board, some brads. To this my grubby little hand adds the spool of copper wire and the U-shaped scrap of metal. Now, slip it into my robe and—once you get up here, how the hell do you get down? I always forget. Turn around, climb over the edge, like this, and let yourself down. Damn, my robe's caught on the handle.*

*And drop.*

*Skinned my shin again. Some day I'll learn.*

*Now let's see if we can figure this thing out. Gotta crouch down and get to work. Here we go. Open the bag, and turn the contents out in the lap of the dark-colored robe, grubby hands poking.*

*The U-shaped metal, the copper wire, fine. Hold the end of the wire to the metal, and maneuver the spool around the end of the wire to the metal, and maneuver the spool around the end of the rod. Around. And around. And around. Here we go round the mulberry bush, the mulberry bush, the mulberry bush. Here we go round the mulberry bush; I'll have me a coil by the morning.*

*Suddenly a harsh voice in the distance: "And what do you think you're doing?"*

*Dunderhead rides again. "Nothing, sir," as metal and scraps and wires fly frantically into the paper bag.*

*The voice: "All novices under twenty must report to afternoon services without fail!"*

*"Yes, sir. Coming right along, sir." Paper bag jammed equally frantically into the folds of my robe. Not a moment's peace. Not a moment's! Through the garden with lowered eyes, past a dour-looking priest with a small paunch. There are mirrors along the vestibule, huge slabs of glass that rise thirty feet, reflecting the blue and yellow light back and forth from the colored windows of the temple. In the mirror I see pass: a dour-looking priest, proceeded by a smaller figure with short red hair and a spray of freckles over a flattish nose. And as we pass into prayer, there is the maddening, almost inaudible jingling of metal scraps, muffled by the dark robe.*

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Geo woke up, and almost everything was white.

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## CHAPTER VIII

The pale woman with the tiny eyes rose from over him. Her hair dropped like white silk threads over her shoulders. "You are awake?" she asked. "Do you understand me?"

"Am I at—at Hama's temple?" he asked, the remnants of the dream still blowing in at the edges of his mind, like shredding cloth. "My friends, where are they?"

The woman laughed. "Your friends are all right. You came out the worst." Another laugh. "You ask if this is Hama's temple? But you can see, can you not? You have eyes. Don't you recognize the color of the White Goddess Argo?"

Geo looked around the room. It was white marble, and there was no direct source of light. The walls simply glowed.

"My friends...." Geo said again.

"They are fine. We were able to completely restore their flesh to health. They must have exposed their hands to the direct beam of the radiation for only a few seconds. But the whole first half of your arm had apparently lain in the deadly rays for some minutes. You were not as lucky as they."

Another thought rushed Geo's mind now. "The jewels ..." he started to say, but instead of sounding the words, he reached to his throat with both hands. One fell on his naked chest. And there was something very wrong with the other. He sat up in the bed quickly, and looked down. "My arm," he said.

Swathed in white bandages, the limb ended some foot and a half short of where it should have.

"My arm...?" he asked again, with a child's bewilderment. "What happened to my arm?"

"I tried to tell you," the woman said, softly. "We had to amputate half of your arm. If we had not, you would have died."

"My arm," Geo said again, and lay back in the bed.

"It is difficult," the woman said. "It is only a little consolation, I know, but we are blind here. What burned your arm away, took our sight from us when it was much stronger, generations ago. We learned how to battle many of its effects, and had we not rescued you from the river, all of you would have died. You are men who know the religion of Argo, and adhere to it. This another of your party has told us. Be thankful then that you have come under the wing of the Mother Goddess again, for this is a hostile country." She paused. "Do you wish to talk?"

Geo shook his head.

"I hear the sheets rustle," the woman said, smiling, "which means you either shook or nodded your head. I know from my study of the old customs that one means 'yes' and the other 'no.' But you must have patience with us who cannot see. We are not used to your people. Do you wish to talk?" she repeated.

"Oh," said Geo. "No. No, I don't."

"Very well," the woman said. She rose, still smiling. "I will return later." She walked to a wall in which a door slipped open, and then it closed again, behind her.

He lay still on the bed for a long time. Then he turned over on his stomach. Once he brought the stump under his chest and held the clean bandages in his other hand. Very quickly he let go, and stretched the limb sideways, as far as possible away from him. That didn't work either, so he moved it back down to his side, and let it lay by him under the white sheet.

After a long while, he got up, sat on the edge of the bed, and looked around the room. It was completely bare, with neither windows nor visible doors. He went to the spot through which she had exited, but could find not seam or crack. His tunic, he saw, had been washed, pressed, and laid on the foot of the bed. He slipped it over his head, fumbling with only one arm. Getting the belt together started out to be a problem, but he hooked the buckle around one finger and maneuvered the strap through with the other. He adjusted his leather purse, now empty, on his side. Then he saw that the sword was gone.

An unreal feeling, white like the walls of the room, was beginning to fill him up like a pale mixture of milk and water. He walked around the edge of the room once more, looking for some break.

There was a sound behind him and the tiny-eyed woman in her white robe stood in a triangular doorway. "You're dressed," she smiled. "Good. Are you too tired to come with me? You will eat and see your friends if you feel well enough. Or, I can have the food brought."

"I'll come," Geo said.

She turned, and he followed her into a hall of the same luminous substance. Her heels touched the back of her white robe with each step, but she was silent. His own bare feet on the cool stones seemed louder than those of the blind woman before him. Suddenly he was in a larger room, with benches. It was a chapel, obviously of Argo because of the altar at the far end, but its detail was strange. Everything was arranged with the white simplicity that one would expect of a people to whom visual adornment meant nothing. He sat down on a bench as the woman said, "Wait here." She disappeared down another hall.

Suddenly the woman returned from the other hallway, followed by Snake. Geo and the four-armed boy looked at each other, silently, as the woman disappeared again. A wish, like a living thing, suddenly writhed into a knot in Geo's stomach, that the boy would say something. He himself could not.

Again she returned, this time with Urson. The big man stepped into the chapel, saw Geo, and exclaimed, "Friend, what happened?" He came to him quickly and placed his warm hands on Geo's shoulders. "What ..." he began, and shook his head.

Geo grinned suddenly, and patted his stump with his good hand. "I guess jelly-belly got something from me after all."

Urson held his own forearm next to Geo's and compared them. There was paleness in both. "I guess none of us got out completely all right. I woke up once while they were taking the scabs off. It was pretty bad, and I went to sleep again fast."

Iimmi came in now. "Well, I was wondering ..." He stopped, and let out a low whistle. "I guess it really got you, brother." His own arms looked as though they had been dipped in bleach up to the mid forearms.

"How did this happen?" Urson asked.

"When we were back doing our tightrope act on those damn girders," explained Iimmi, "our bodies were in the shadow of the girders and the rays only got to our arms. I've got something you'll be interested in too, Geo."

"Just tell me where the hell we are," Urson said.

"We're in a monastery sacred to Argo," Iimmi told him. "It's across the river from the City of New Hope, which is where we were."

"That name sounds familiar; in the ..." began Urson. Snake gave him a quick glance, and he stopped, and then frowned.

"We knew of your presence in the City of New Hope," explained the blind Priestess, "and we found you by the riverside after you swam across. You managed to cling to life long enough for us to get you back to the monastery and apply what art we could to sooth the burns from the deadly fire."

Geo suddenly saw that there was no jewel around Iimmi's neck either. He could almost feel the hands ripping it from his neck in the water. Iimmi must have made the same discovery, because his pale hand raised to his own chest.

The Priestess beckoned and started down another hall, and again they followed. They arrived at an even larger room, this one set with white marble benches and long white tables. "This is the main dining room of the monastery," their guide explained. "One table has been set up for you. You will not eat with the other priestesses, of course."

"Why not?" asked Iimmi.

Surprise flowed across the blind face. "You are men," she told them, matter of factly. Then she led them to a table where wine, meat, and bowls piled with strange fruit were placed. As they sat down, she disappeared once more.

Geo reached for a knife. For a moment there was silence at the table as the nub of the arm jutted over food. "I guess I just have to learn," he said after the pause.

Halfway through the meal, Urson said, "What about the jewels? Did the Priestess take them from you?"

"They came off in the water," said Iimmi.

Geo nodded corroboration.

"Well, now we really have a problem," said Urson. "Here we are, at a temple of Argo's where we could return the jewels and maybe even get back to the Priestess on the ship, and out of the silly mess, and the jewels are gone."

"I guess that also means our river friends are working for Hama," said Geo.

"Well," Iimmi said, "Hama's got his jewel then, and we're out of the way. Perhaps he delivered us into Argo's hands as a reward for bringing them this far?"

"Since we would have died anyway," said Geo, "I guess he was doing us a favor."

"And you know what that means," Iimmi said, looking at Snake now.

"Huh?" asked Urson. Then he said, "Oh, let the boy speak for himself. All right, Four Arms, are you or are you not a spy for Hama?"

A pained expression came over Snake's face, and he shook his head not in denial but bewilderment. Suddenly he got up from the table, and ran from the room. Urson looked at the others. "Now don't tell me I hurt his feelings by asking."

"You didn't," said Iimmi, "but I may have. I keep on forgetting that he can read minds."

"What do you mean?" Urson asked.

"Just when you asked him that, a lot of things came together in my mind that would be pretty vicious for him if any of it were true."

"Huh?" asked Urson.

"I think I know what you mean," said Geo.

"I still—"



"It means that he is a spy," explained Iimmi, "and among other things, he was probably lying about the radio back at the city. And that cost Geo his arm."

"Why the—" began Urson, and then looked down the hall where Snake had disappeared.

They didn't eat much more. When they got up, Urson felt sleepy and was shown back to his room.

"May I show my friend what you showed me?" Iimmi asked the Priestess when she returned. "He is also a student of rituals."

"Of course you may," smiled the Priestess.

A door opened and they entered another room similar to the one in which Geo had awakened. As she was about to leave, Iimmi asked, "Wait. Can you tell us how to leave the room ourselves?"

"Why would you want to leave?" she asked.

"For exercise," offered Geo, "and to observe the working of the monastery. Believe us, we are true students of Argo's religion."

"Simply press the wall with your hand, level at your waist, and the door will open. But you must not wander about the monastery. Rites which are not for your eyes are being carried out. Not for your eyes," she repeated. "Strange, this is a phrase that has never left our language. Suddenly, confronted by people who can see, it makes me feel somehow ..." she paused. "Well, that is how to leave the room."

She stepped out, and the door closed behind her.

"Here," said Iimmi, "this is what I wanted to show you." On his bed were a pile of books, old, but legible. Geo flipped through a few pages. Suddenly he looked up at Iimmi.

"Hey, what are they doing with *printed* books?"

"Question number one," said Iimmi. "Now, for question number two. Look here." He reached over Geo's shoulder and hastened him to one page.

"Why it's the ..." began Geo.

"You're darn right it is," said Iimmi.

#### HYMN TO THE GODDESS ARGO

*Forked in the eye of the bright ash  
there the heart of Argo broke  
and the hand of the goddess would dash  
through the head of flame, and the smoke.*

*Burn the grain speck in the hand  
and batter the stars with singing.  
Hail the height of a man,  
and also the height of a woman.*

*The eyes have imprisoned a vision,  
the ash-tree dribbles with blood.  
Thrust from the gates of the prison,  
smear the yew-tree with mud.*

"That must be the full version of the poem I found the missing stanza to back in the library at Leptar."

"As I was saying," said Iimmi, "Question number two: what is the relation between the rituals of Hama and the old rituals of Argo. Apparently this particular branch of the religion of the Goddess underwent no purge. And no one at Olcse Olwnh was supposed to know about them."

"I wonder why?" Geo asked.

"That is question number three."

"How did you get a hold of them?"

"Well," said Iimmi, "I sort of suspected they might be here. So I just asked for them. And I think I've got some answers to those questions."

"Fine. Go ahead."

"We'll start from three, go back to one, and then on to two. Nice and orderly," said Iimmi. "Why wasn't anybody supposed to know about the rituals? Simply because they were so similar to the rituals of Hama. You remember some of the others we found in the abandoned temple? If you don't, you can refresh your memory right here. The two sets of rituals run almost parallel, except for a name changed here, a color switched from black to white, a switch in the vegetative symbolism. I guess what happened was that when Hama's forces invaded Leptar five hundred years ago, it didn't take Leptar long to find out the similarity. From the looks of the City of New Hope, I think it's safe to assume that at one time or another, say five hundred years ago, Aptor's

civilization was far higher than Leptar's, and probably wouldn't have had too hard a time beating her in an invasion. So when Leptar captured the first jewel, and somehow did manage to repel Aptor, the priests of Leptar assumed that the safest way to avoid infiltration by Hama and Aptor again would be to make the rituals of the two as different as possible from the ones of their enemy, Hama.

"The ghouls, the bats, they parallel the stories I've heard other sailors tell too closely to be accidents. How many people do you think have been shipwrecked on Aptor and gotten far enough into the place to see what we've seen, and then gotten off again to tell about it?"

"I can think of two," said Geo.

"Huh?" said Iimmi.

"Snake and Jordde," answered Geo. "Remember that Argo said there had been spies from Aptor before. And Jordde is definitely one, and I guess so is Snake."

"True enough," said Iimmi. "I guess that fits into Rule Number One." He got up from the bed. "Come on. Let's take a walk. I want to see some sunlight." They went to the wall. Geo pressed it and a triangular panel slipped back.

When they had rounded four or five turns of hallway, Geo said, "I hope you can remember where we've been."

"I've got a more or less perfect memory for directions," Iimmi said.

Suddenly the passage opened onto steps, and they were looking out upon a huge, unrelieved white chamber. Down a set of thirty marble steps priestesses filed below them in rows, their heads fixed blindly forward.

At the far end was a raised dais with a mammoth statue of a kneeling woman, sculptured of the same effulgent, agate material. "Where do these women come from?" whispered Geo. "And where do they keep the men?"

Iimmi shrugged.

Suddenly, the figure of the blind Priestess was beside them.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Iimmi said, sensing her disapproval of their presence, "we didn't mean to be disrespectful, but we are creatures who are used to natural day and night. We are used to fresh air, green things. This underground whiteness is oppressive to us and makes us restless. Is there any way that you could show us a way into the open?"

"There is not," returned the blind Priestess quietly and motioned them to follow her from the chamber. "Besides, night is coming on and you are not creatures who relish darkness."

"The night air and the quiet of evening is refreshing to us," countered Iimmi.

"What do you know of the night," answered the priestess with faint cynicism in her low voice. Now they reached the chapel where the friends had first met after their rescue.

"What can you tell us about the Dark God Hama?" Geo asked.

The blind Priestess shrugged, and sat down on one of the benches. "There is little to say. Today he is a fiction, he does not exist. There is only Argo, the One White Goddess."

"But we've heard—" Geo began.

"You were at his abandoned temple," said the Priestess. "You saw yourselves. That is all that is left of Hama. Ghouls prey on the dust of his dead saints. Perhaps, somewhere behind the burning mountain a few of his disciples are left. But Hama is dead in Aptor. You have seen the remains of his city, the City of New Hope. You have also been the first ones to go in and return in nearly five hundred years."

"Is that how long the city has been in ruin?" asked Geo.

"It is."

"What can you tell us about the city?" Iimmi said.

The Priestess sighed again. "There was a time," she began, "generations ago, when Hama was a high God in Aptor. He had many temples, monasteries, and convents devoted to him. We had few. Except for these religious sanctuaries, the land was barbaric, wild, uninhabitable for the most part. There had once been cities in Aptor, but these had been destroyed even earlier by the Great Fire. All that we had was a fantastic record of an unbelievable time before the rain of flame of tremendous power, vast science, and a towering, though degenerate, civilization. These records were extensive, and entirely housed within the monasteries. Outside the monasteries, there was only chaos, where half the children were born dead, and the other half deformed. And with the monstrous races that sprang up over the island now as a reminder to us, we declared that the magic contained in these chronicles was evil, and must never be released to the world again. But the priests of Hama, decided to use the information in these chronicles, spread it to the people, and declared they would not commit the same mistakes that had brought the Great Fire. They opened the books, and the City of New Hope grew on the far shore of the river. They made giant

machines that flew through the air. They constructed immense boats which could sink into the sea and emerge hundreds of miles away in another harbor in another land. They even harnessed for beneficial use the fire metal, uranium, which had brought such terror to the world before and had brought down the flames."

"But they made the same mistake as the people before the Great Fire made?" suggested Iimmi.

"Not exactly," said the Priestess. "That is, they were not so stupid as to misuse the fire metal which ravaged the world so harshly before. History is cyclic, not repetitive. A new power was discovered that dwarfed the significance of the fire metal. It could do all that the fire metal could do, and more efficiently: destroy cities, or warm chilly huts in winter; but, it could also work on men's minds. They say, that before the Great Fire, men wandered the streets of the cities terrified that flames would descend on them any moment and destroy them. They panicked, bought flimsy useless contraptions to guard themselves from the fire. Geo, Iimmi, have you any idea how terrifying it would be to know that while walking the streets, at any moment, your mind might be snatched from you, raped, violated, and left broken in your own skull?"

"Only three of these instruments were constructed. But the moment their existence was made known by a few fantastic demonstrations, the City of New Hope began the swerve down the arc of its own self-destruction. It lasted for a year, and ended with the broken wreck you escaped from last night. During that year invasions were launched on the backward nations across the sea with whom months before there had been friendly trade. Civil wars broke out and internal struggles caused the invasions to fall back to the homeland. The instruments were hopelessly lost, but not before the bird machines had even dropped bombs on the City of New Hope itself. The house of the fire metal was broken open to release its death once more. For a hundred years after the end, say our records, the city flamed with light from the destroyed power house. During the first hundred years more and more of our number were born blind because of the sinking fire in the city. At last we moved underground, but it was too late." She rose from her seat. "And so you see, Hama destroyed himself. Today, loyal to Argo, are all the beasts of the air, of the land ... and of the water."

"What about the—the three instruments?" Geo asked. "What happened to them?"

The blind Priestess turned to him. "Your guess," she said, smiling, "is as good as mine." She turned again and glided softly from the room.

When she left, Iimmi said, "Something is fishy."

"But what is it?" said Geo.

"Well, for one thing," said Iimmi, "we know there is a Hama. From the dream I would say that it's just about the size and organization of this place."

"Just how big is this place anyway?" Geo asked.

"Want to do some more exploring?"

"Sure," he answered. "Do you think she does know about Hama but was just pretending?"

"Could be," said Iimmi. They started off down another corridor. "That bit about going into men's minds with the jewels," Iimmi went on. "It gives me the creeps."

"It's a creepy thing to watch," said Geo. "Argo used it on Snake the first time we saw her. It just turns you into an automaton."

"Then it really is our jewels she was talking about."

Stairs cut a white tunnel into the wall before them, and they mounted upward, coming finally to another corridor. They turned down it and for the first time saw recognizable doors in the wall. "Hey," said Iimmi, "maybe one of these goes outside."

"Fine," said Geo. "This place is beginning to get me." He pushed open a door and stepped in. Except for the flowing white walls, it duplicated in miniature the basement of the New Edison building. Twin dynamos whirred and the walls were laced with pipes.

"Nothing in here," said Iimmi.

They tried a door across the hall now. In this one sat a white porcelain table and floor to ceiling cases of glittering instruments. "I bet this is the room your arm came off in," Iimmi said.

"Probably," replied Geo.

They came out and continued even farther. In the next room the glow was dimmer, and there was dust on the walls. Iimmi ran his finger over it and looked at the gray crescent left on the bleached flesh.

Two huge screens leaned out from the face of a metal machine. A few dials and a glass meter hung beneath each two yard rounded-rectangle of opaque glass. In front of each was a stand which held something like a set of binoculars and what looked like a pair of ear muffs.

"I bet this place hasn't been used since before these girls went blind," said Geo.

"It looks it," Iimmi said. He stepped up to one of the screens, the one with the fewer dials on it,

and turned a switch.

"What did you do that for?" Geo asked.

"Why not?" said Iimmi. Suddenly a flickering of colored lights ran over the screen, swellings of blue, green, shiny scarlets. They blinked. "That's the first color I've seen since I've been here," Iimmi said. The colors grayed, dimmed, congealed into forms, and in a moment they were looking at a bare white room in which stood two barefoot young men. One was a dark Negro with pale hands. The other had an unruly shock of black hair and only one arm.

"Hey," gestured Iimmi, and the figure on the screen gestured too. "That's us." He walked forward and the corresponding figure advanced on the screen. He flicked a dial and the figures exploded into colors and then focused again. "What's that?" asked Iimmi.

In a room stood three of the blind women. On one wall was a smaller screen similar to the one in their own room. The women, of course, were oblivious to the picture on it, but it was the picture on the screen that had stopped Geo. It was a face. A man's face.

One of the women had on an ear muff apparatus and was talking into a small metal rod which she carried with her as she paced.

"But the picture! Don't you recognize him?" demanded Geo.

"It's Jordde!" exclaimed Iimmi. "They must have gotten in contact with our ship and are arranging to send us back."

"I wish I could hear what they're saying," said Geo.

Iimmi looked around and then picked up the metal ear muffs from the stand in front of the screen. "That's what she seems to be listening through," said Iimmi, referring to the Priestess in the picture. "Try them. Go on." He helped Geo fit them over his ears. "Hear anything?"

Geo listened.

"Yes, of course," the Priestess was saying.

"She is set upon staying in the harbor for three more days, to wait out the week," reported Jordde. "I am sure she will not remain any longer. She is still bewildered by me, and the men have become uneasy and may well mutiny if she stays longer."

"We will dispose of the prisoners this evening. There is no chance of their returning," stated the Priestess.

"Detain them for three days, and I do not care what you do with them," said Jordde. "She does not have the jewels, she does not know my—our power; she will be sure to leave at the end of the week."

"It's a pity we have no jewels for all our trouble," said the Priestess. "But at least all three are back in Aptor, and potentially within our grasp."

Jordde laughed. "And Hama never seems to be able to keep hold of them for more than ten minutes before they slip from him again."

"Yours is not to judge either Hama or Argo," stated the Priestess. "You are kept on by us only to do your job. Do it, report, and do not trouble either us or yourself with opinions. They are not appreciated."

"Yes, mistress," returned Jordde.

"Then farewell until next report." She flipped a switch and the picture on the little screen went gray.

Geo turned from the big screen now, and was just about to remove the hearing apparatus when he heard the Priestess say, "Go, prepare the prisoners for the sacrifice of the rising moon. They have seen enough." The woman left the room, Geo finished removing the phones, and Iimmi looked at him.

"What's the matter?"

Geo turned the switch that darkened the screen.

"When are they coming to get us?" Iimmi asked excitedly.

"Right now, probably," Geo said. Then, as best he could, he repeated the conversation he had overheard to Iimmi, whose expression grew more and more bewildered as Geo went on.

At the end the bewilderment suddenly flared into frayed indignation. "Why?" demanded Iimmi. "Why should we be sacrificed? What is it we've seen too much of, what is it we know? This is the second time it's come close to getting me killed, and I wish to hell I knew what I was supposed to know?"

"We've got to find Urson and get out of here," said Geo. "Hey, what's wrong?"

The indignation had turned into something else. Now Iimmi stood with his eyes shut tight and his face screwed up. Suddenly he relaxed. "I just thought out a message as loud as I could for Snake

to get up here and to bring Urson if he's anywhere around."

"But Snake's a spy for ..."

"... for Hama," said Iimmi. "And you know something? I don't care." He closed his eyes again. After a few moments, he opened them. "Well, if he's coming, he's coming. Let's get going."

"But why...?" began Geo, following Iimmi out the door.

"Because I have a poet's feeling that some fancy mind reading may come in handy."

They hurried down the hall, found the stairs, ducked down, and ran along the lower hall. Rounding a second corner, they emerged into the little chapel simultaneously with Urson and Snake.

"I guess I got through," said Iimmi. "Which way do we go?"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," came a voice from behind them.

Snake took off down one of the passages, and they followed, Urson looking particularly bewildered.

The Priestess glided behind them, calling softly, "Please, my friends, come back. Return with me."

"Find out from her how the hell to get out of this place!" Iimmi bawled up to Snake. The four-armed boy suddenly darted up a flight of stairs, turned a corner, and darted up another. They came out on a hall and followed Snake to the end.

All four of the boy's hands flew at the door handle, turning it carefully, this way, and back.

Two, three seconds.

Geo glanced back and saw the Priestess mount the top of the stairs and begin to come toward them. She seemed to float, her white robes flaring out from her, brushing at the walls.

The door came open, they broke through leaves, and were momentarily standing in a huge field of grass, surrounded by woods. The night was fully lit by the moon.

As they ran through the silver-washed grass, Geo turned to look behind him. The blind Priestess had slowed, her white face turned to the moon. Her hands went to her throat, she unclasped her robe, and the first layer fell away behind her. As she came on, the second layer began to unfold, wet, deathly white, spreading, growing to her arms, articulating itself along the white spines; then, with a horribly familiar shriek, she leapt from the ground and soared upward, her white wings hammering the air.

They fled.

And other dark forms were shadowing the moon. The priestesses across the field joined her aloft in the moon-bleached sky. She overtook the running figures, turned above them, and swooped. The moon lanced white along bared fangs. The night breeze touched pale furry breasts, filled the bellying wings. Only the tiny, darting, blind eyes were red, rubied in a whirl of white.

They crashed into the protective bushes where the winged things could not follow. Branches raked his face as he ran behind the sound the others made. Once he thought he had lost them, but a second later he bumped against Iimmi, who had stopped behind Snake and Urson, in the darkness. Above the trees was a sound like beaten cloth, diminishing, growing, but constant as once more they began to trod through the tangled darkness.

"What the hell ..." Iimmi finally breathed softly, after a minute of walking.

"You know it's beginning to make sense," Geo said, his hand on Iimmi's shoulder. "Remember that man-wolf we met, and that blob in the city? The only thing we've met on this place that can't change shape is the ghouls. I think most animals on this island undergo some sort of metamorphosis."

"What about those first flying things we met?" whispered Urson. "They didn't change into anything."

"We have probably just been guests of the female of the species," said Geo.

"You mean those others could have changed into men too if they wanted?" Urson asked.

"If they wanted," answered Geo.

In front of them now appeared faint shiftings of silver light. Five minutes later, they were crouching at the edge of the forest, looking down over the rocks at the white shimmerings over the river.

"Into the water?" Geo asked.

Snake shook his head. *Wait ...* came the familiar sound in their heads.

Suddenly a hand raised from the water. Wet and green, it stood a foot or so from the shore in the silver ripples. The chain and the leather thong dangled down the wrist, and swaying there were

two bright beads of light.

Iimmi and Geo froze. Urson said, "The jewels...."

Suddenly, crouched low like an animal, the big man sprang onto the rocks and ran toward the river's edge.

Three shadows, one white, two dark, converged above him, cutting the moonlight away from him. If he saw them, he did not stop.

Iimmi and Geo stood up from their crouched positions.

Urson reached the shore, threw himself along the rock, and swiped at the hand. Instantly he was covered by flailing wings. The membranous sails splashed in the water. Two seconds later, Urson rolled from beneath the layers of membrane that still struggled half on land and half in the water. He started forward up the rocks. He slipped, regained his footing, and then came on, nearly falling into Geo's and Iimmi's waiting arms.

"The jewels," Urson breathed.

The struggle continued a minute longer on the water. Something was holding them down, twisting at them. Then suddenly, the creatures stilled, and like great leaves, the three forms drifted apart, caught quietly in the current, and floated away from the rocks.

Then two more forms bobbed to the surface, faces down, rocking gently, backs slicked wet and green, shiny under the moonlight.

"But those were the ones who—" Geo began. "Are they dead?" His face suddenly hurt a little, with something like the pain of verging tears.

Snake nodded.

"Are you sure?" asked Iimmi. His voice came slowly.

*Their ... thoughts ... have ... stopped,* Snake said.

Crouched down in front of them, Urson opened his great hands. The globes blazed even in the dim light through the leaves, and the chain and the wet thong hung over his palm to the ground. "I have them," he said, "... the jewels!"

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## CHAPTER IX

Snake reached down, picked the beads up from Urson's hand. The sound of wings had stopped.

"Where do we go now?" Urson asked.

"Follow the general rule, I guess," said Iimmi. "Since we know Hama does have a temple somewhere, we try to find it, get the third jewel, and rescue Argo Incarnate. Then get back to the ship."

"In three days?" asked Urson. They had related the rest of what they had found to him by now. "Well, where do we start looking?"

"The Priestess said something about a band of Hama's disciples behind the fire mountain. That must mean the volcano we saw from the steps in the City of New Hope." Iimmi turned to Snake. "Did you read her mind enough to know if she was telling the truth?"

Snake nodded.

Iimmi paused for a moment. "Well, since the river is that way, we should head," he turned and pointed, "... in that direction."

They fixed their stride now and started through the moon-brushed foliage.

"I still don't understand what was going on back at the monastery," Geo said. "Were they really priestesses of Argo? And what was Jordde doing?"

"I'd say yes on the first question, and guess that Jordde was a spy for them for an answer to the second."

"But what about Argo—I mean Argo on the ship?" asked Geo. "And what about Snake here?"

"Argo on the ship apparently doesn't know about Argo on Aptor," said Iimmi. "That's what Jordde meant when he reported to the priestesses that she was bewildered. She probably thinks just like we did, that he's Hama's spy. And this one here," he gestured to Snake, "I don't know. I just don't know."

In the distance was a red glow in which they could make out the faint lines of the volcano's cone. Snake made lights with the jewels, and once more they began to pick their way over the terrain, barer and barer of vegetation. The earth became cindery and the air bore the acrid smell of old ashes.

Soon the rim of the crater hung close above them.

Iimmi gazed up at the red haze above them. "I wonder what it's like to look into that thing in the middle of the night?" Twenty feet later Snake's light struck a lava cliff that sheered up into the darkness. Going on beside it, they found a ledge that made an eighteen-inch footpath diagonally up the face.

"We're not going to climb that in the dark, are we?" asked Geo.

"Better than in the light," said Urson. "This way you can't see how far you have to fall."

Thirty feet on, instead of petering out and forcing them to go back, the lip of rock broadened into a level stretch of ground and again they could go straight forward toward the red light above them.

"This is changeable country," Urson muttered.

"Men change into animals," said Geo, "jungles turn to mountains." He reached around and felt the stub of his arm in the dark. "I've changed too, I guess."

Iimmi recited:

*"Change is neither merciful nor just.  
They say Leonard of Vinci put his trust  
in faulty paints: Christ's Supper turned to dust."*

"What's that from?" Geo asked.

"That's one of my bits of original research," Iimmi explained. "It comes from a poem dating back before the Great Fire."

"Who was Leonard of Vinci?" Geo asked.

"An artist, another poet or painter, I suppose," said Iimmi. "But I'm not really sure."

"Who's Christ?" Urson asked.

"Another god."

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There were more rocks now, and Geo had to brace his stub against the walls of fissures and hoist himself up with his good hand. The igneous structures were sharp in his palm.

Through the night the glowing rim dropped toward them. With it came a breeze that pushed sulfa powder through their hair and made the edges of their nostrils sting.

The earth became scaly and rotten under their feet. Fatigue tied tiny knots high in their guts so that their stomachs hung like stones.

"I didn't realize how big the crater was," Iimmi said. The red glow cut off at the bottom and took up a quarter of the sky.

"Maybe it'll erupt on us," Urson muttered. He added, "I'm thirsty."

They climbed on. Once Urson looked back and saw Geo had stopped some twenty feet behind them at a niche in the ledge. He turned around and dropped back himself. There was sweat on the boy's up-turned face as the big man came toward him. He could see it in the red haze from the rim.

"Here," Urson said. "Give me a hand."

"I can't," Geo said softly, "or I'll fall."

Urson reached down, now, caught the boy around the chest, and hoisted him over the cropping of rock. "Take it easy," Urson instructed. "You don't have to race with anybody." Together they made their way after the others.

Iimmi and Snake cleared the crater rim first; then Urson and Geo joined them on the pitted ledge. Together they looked into the volcano as red and yellow light fell over their chests and faces.

Gold dribbled the internal slope. Tongues of red rock lapped the sides, and the swirling white basin belched brown blobs of smoke which rose up the far rocks and spilled over the brim a radion away. Light leapt in wavering pylons of blue flame, then sank back into the pit. Winding trails of light webbed the crater's walls, and at places ebon cavities jeweled among the light.

Wind fingered the watchers' hair.

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Iimmi saw her first, two hundred feet along the rim. Her drapes, died red and orange in the

flame, blew about her as she walked toward them. Immi pointed to her, and the others looked up.

As she neared, Geo saw that though she stood very straight, she was old. Her short white hair snapped at the side of her head in the warm breeze. Firelight and shadow fell deeply into the wrinkles of her face. As she approached them, light running like liquid down the side of her winded robe, she smiled and held out her hand.

"Who are you?" Geo suddenly asked.

*"Shadows melt in light of sacred laughter,  
Hands and houses shall be one hereafter."*

recited the woman in a calm, low voice.

She paused. "I am Argo Incarnate, of Leptar."

"But I thought ..." Immi started.

"What did you think?" inquired the elderly woman, gently.

"Nothing," said Immi.

"He thought you were a lot younger," Urson said. "We're supposed to take you home." Suddenly he pointed in to the volcano. "Say, this isn't any of that funny light like back in the city that burned our hands, only this time it made you old?"

She glanced at the pool of light. "This is natural fire," she assured them, "a severed artery of the earth's burning blood. But wounds are natural enough."

Geo shifted his feet and rubbed his stump.

"We were supposed to take the younger sister of the present Argo Incarnate and return with her to Leptar," Immi explained.

"There are many Argos," smiled the woman. "The Goddess has many faces. You have seen quite a few since you arrived in this land."

"I guess we have," Urson said.

"Are you a prisoner of Hama?" asked Immi.

"I am with Hama," said the woman.

"We are supposed to secure the third jewel and bring it back to the ship. We don't have much time...."

"Yes," said Argo.

"Hey, what about that nest of vampires down there," Urson said, thumbing viciously toward the black behind them. "They said they worshiped Argo. What have you got to do with them? I don't trust anything on this place very much."

"The nature of the Goddess is change," said the woman, looking sadly toward the slope, "from birth, through life, to death," she looked back up at them, "to birth again. As I said, Argo has many faces. You must be very tired."

"Yes," said Geo.

"Then come with me. Please." She turned, and began to walk back along the rim. Snake and Immi started after her, and then came Geo and Urson.

"I don't like any of this," the big man whispered to Geo as they came along. "Argo doesn't mean the same thing in this land like she means on Leptar. There's nothing but more evil to come out of this. She's leading us into a trap, I tell you. I say the best thing to do is take the jewels we have, turn around, and get the hell out of here. I tell you, Geo...."

"Urson," Geo said.

"Huh?" the big man asked.

"Urson, I'm very tired."

They walked silently for a few steps more. Then Urson heaved up a half disgusted breath, and put his arm around Geo's shoulder. "Come on," he grunted, supporting Geo against his own great form as they progressed along the rocky ledge, following the new Argo.

At last she turned down a trail that dropped into the crater. "Walk carefully here," she said as they turned into the huge pit.

"Something is not right," Urson said softly. "It's a trap I tell you. How does that thing go? I could use it now. *Calmly brother bear ...*"

*"Calm the winter sleep,  
Fire shall not harm,"*



continued Geo.

"Says who," mumbled Urson glancing into the bowl of flame. Geo went on:

*"water not alarm.  
While the current grows,  
amber honey flows,  
golden salmon leap."*

"Like I once said before," mused Urson, "In a ..."

"In here," came the voice of Argo. They turned into the dark mouth of one of the caves which pocked the crater's inside wall. "No," she said to Snake, who was about to use the jewels for illumination. "They have been used too much already."

With a small stick taken from a pocket in her robe, she struck a flame against the rock, then raised it to an ornate, branching candelabra that hung from the stone ceiling by brass chains. Flame leapt from cast oil cup to oil cup, from the hand of a demon to a monkey's mouth, from a nymph's belly to the horns of a satyr's head. Chemicals in the cups caused each flame to burn a different color; green, red, blue, and orange white light filled the small chapel and played across the tops of the benches. On the altar sitting on one side of the room were two statues of equal height: a man sitting, and a woman kneeling. Iimmi looked at the altar. Geo and Urson stared at the candelabra.

"What is it?" Iimmi asked when he saw where their eyes were fixed.

"There's one of those things in Argo's cabin on board the ship," Geo said. "And look over there. Where did we see one of those before?" It was a machine with an opaque glass screen, identical to the one in the monastery of Argo.

"Sit down," Argo said. "Sit down."

They sank to the benches; the climb, once halted, knotting their calves and the low muscles on their backs.

"Hama has allowed you the privilege of a chapel even in captivity," commented Iimmi, "but I see you have to share your altar with him."

"But I am Hama's mother," smiled Argo.

Geo and Urson frowned.

"The rituals say that Argo is the mother of all things, the begetter and bearer of all life. I am the mother of all gods as well."

"Those blind women down in the ground," asked Urson, "they aren't really your priestesses, are they? They wanted to kill us. I bet they were really dupes of Hama."

"It isn't so simple," replied Argo. "They are really worshipers of Argo, but as I said, I have many faces. Death as well as life is my province. The dwellers in that convent from which you escaped are a—how shall I say, a degenerate branch of the religion. They were truly blinded by the fall of the City of New Hope. To them, Argo is only death, the dominator of men. For not only is Argo the mother of Hama, she is his wife and daughter."

"Then it's like we figured," said Iimmi. "Jordde isn't a spy for Hama. He's working for the renegade priestesses of Argo."

"Yes," returned Argo, "except that renegade is perhaps the wrong word. They believe that their way is correct, and a respect for belief is essential to the understanding of Man. And it is through understanding that the mysteries that still remain in your mind will be solved."

"Then they must be responsible for all that was going on in Leptar, only somehow blaming it on Hama," said Iimmi. "They were probably just after the jewels, too. You don't look like a prisoner. That must be the whole thing. You're here in league with Hama to prevent the priestesses of Argo from taking over Leptar."

"Nothing could be simpler," said the Goddess. "Unfortunately you are wrong in nearly every other point."

"But then why did Jordde throw the jewel after us when he tore it from Argo's—I mean the other Argo's throat?"

"When he snatched the jewel from around my daughter's neck," added Argo, "he threw it to the creatures of the sea because he knew they would take it back to Aptor. With it once again in the island, the priestesses would have a better chance of getting it; my daughter, acting Argo Incarnate in my absence and her sister's, does not know that what she is fighting is another face of Argo. As far as she is concerned, all her efforts are against the mischief Hama has caused, and truly caused, in Leptar. This ignorance is far greater than you imagine, for beyond these blind creatures is a far greater enemy that she must vanquish."

"Hama...?" began Iimmi.

"Greater than Hama," said old Argo. "It is herself. It is hard for me to watch her and not

occasionally call out a word of guidance. With the science here in Aptor it would not be difficult. But I must refrain. I suppose she has actually done well. But there is so much more to do. She has directed you well, and assigned your tasks properly. And until now you have carried them out well."

"She said we were to steal the final jewel from Hama and return with you to the ship," said Geo. "Can you help us with either of these things?"

"The moment I compliment you," laughed Argo, "you completely confuse your mission. Once the jewel is stolen, whom are you supposed to take back to Leptar?"

"Argo Incarnate," Urson said.

"You said that Argo back in the ship was your daughter," said Geo, "but she said you were her younger sister."

"She said nothing of the sort," Argo corrected. "I have two daughters. You have already met one. Now you must rescue the other. When my youngest daughter was ... kidnaped here to Aptor, I was already here, waiting for her. Look."

She turned a dial beneath the screen and lights flickered over the glass until they formed a sleeping figure. She had short red hair, a splash of freckles over a blunt nose, and her hand lay curled in a loose fist near her mouth. A white sheet covered the gentle push of adolescent breasts, and on the table beside her bed was a contraption made of a U-shaped piece of metal mounted on a board, an incomplete coil of wire, and a few more bits of metal, all sitting on top of a crumpled paper bag.

"That is my youngest daughter," Argo said, switching off the picture. "She is the one you must take back to the ship."

"How shall we steal the jewel?" asked Geo.

Argo turned to Snake. "I believe that was your task." Then she looked around at the other three. "You will need rest. After that you can see about the jewel and my daughter. Come with me, now. Pallets have been set up for you in the far room where you may sleep." She rose and led them to a further chamber. The blankets over the loose boughs seemed to pull them down. Argo pointed to a trickle of water that ran from a basin carved in the rock wall. "This stream is pure. You may drink from it." She pointed to a cloth sack in the corner. "There is fruit in there if you become hungry."

"Sleep!" said Urson, jammed his two fists in the air, and yawned.

As they settled, Argo said, "Poet?"

"Yes?" answered Geo.

"I know you are the tireddest, but I must talk to you alone for a moment or two."

As Geo raised himself, Urson stood up too. "Look," he said to Argo, "he needs the rest more than any of us. If you want to question him about rituals and spells, take Immi. He knows just as much as Geo."

"I need a poet," smiled Argo, "not a student. I need one who has suffered as he has. Come."

"Wait," Urson said. He picked the jewel from Geo's chest where Snake had returned it when they entered the chapel. "You better leave this with me."

Geo frowned.

"It still may be a trap," said Urson.

"Leave it with him," suggested Argo, "if it eases him."

Geo let the great hand lift the thong from his neck.

"Now come with me," said Argo.

They left the room and walked back through the chapel to the door. Argo stood in the entrance, looking down at the molten rock. The light sifted through her robe, leaving the darker outline of her body. Without turning, she began to speak. "The fire is a splendid symbol for life, do you agree?"

"And for death," said Geo. "One of Aptor's fires burned my arm away."

"Yes," she turned now. "You and Snake have had the hardest time. Both of you have left your flesh to rot in Aptor. I guess that gives you a closeness to the land." She paused. "You know, he had a great deal more pain than you. Do you know how he lost his tongue? I watched it all from this same screen inside the chapel, and could not help. They jammed their knuckles in his jaws and when the mouth came open, Jordde caught the red flesh with pincers that closed all the way through, and stretched it out as far as it would go. Then he looped the tongue with a thin wire, and then he threw a switch. You do not know what electricity is, do you?"

"I have heard the word."

"Let me just say that when a great deal of it is passed through a thin wire, the wire becomes very hot, white hot. And the white hot loop was tautened until the rope of muscle seared away and just the roasted stump was left. But the child had fainted already. I wonder if the young can really bear more pain than older people."

"Jordde and the blind priestess did that to him?"

"Jordde and some men on the boat that picked up the two of them from the raft on which they had left Aptor."

"Who is Jordde?" Geo asked. "Urson knew him before this as a first mate. But Urson's story told me nothing."

"I know the story," Argo said, "and it tells you something, but something you would perhaps rather not know." She sighed. "Poet, how well do you know yourself?"

"What do you mean?" Geo asked.

"How well do you know the workings of a man, how he manages to function? That is what you will sing of if your songs are to become great."

"I still don't ..."

"I have a question for you, a poetic riddle. Will you try to answer it?"

"If you will answer a not too poetic riddle for me."

"Will you do your best to answer mine?" Argo asked.

"Yes."

"Then I will do my best to answer yours. What is your question?"

"Who is Jordde and why is he doing what he's doing?"

"He was at one time," Argo explained, "a very promising novice for the priesthood of Argo in Leptar, as well as a scholar of myths and rituals like Immi and yourself. He also took to the sea to learn of the world, but his boat was wrecked, and he and a few others were cast on Aptor's shore. They strove with Aptor's terrors as you did, and many succumbed. Two, however, a four-armed cabin boy whom you call Snake, and Jordde were each exposed to the forces of Argo and Hama as you have been. One, in his strangeness, could see into men's minds. The other could not. Silently, one swore allegiance to one force, while one swore allegiance to the other. The second part of your question was *why*. Perhaps if you can answer my riddle, you can answer that part yourself. I do know that they were the only two who escaped. I do know that Snake would not tell Jordde his choice, and that Jordde tried to convince the child to follow him. When they were rescued, I know that the argument continued, and that Snake held back with childish tenacity both his decision and his ability to read minds, even under the hot wire and the pincers. The hot wire, incidentally, was something Jordde brought with him from the blind priestesses, according to him, to help the people of Leptar with. It could have been a great use. But recently all he has done with the electricity is construct a larger weapon with it. However, Jordde became a staunch first mate in a year's time. Snake became a waterfront thief. Both waited. Then, when the opportunity arose, both acted. Why? Perhaps you can tell me, poet."

"Thank you for telling me what you know," Geo said. "What is your question?"

She glanced at the flame through the door once more and then recited:

*By the dark chamber sits its twin,  
where the body's floods begin;  
and the two are twinned again,  
turning out and turning in.*

*In the bright chamber runs the line  
of the division, silver, fine,  
diminishing along the lanes  
of memory to an inward sign.*

*Fear floods in the turning room;  
Love breaks in the burning dome."*

"It is not one that I have heard before," Geo said. "I'm not even sure I know what the question is. I'm familiar with neither its diction nor style."

"I doubted very much that you would recognize it," smiled Argo.

"Is it part of the pre-purge rituals of Argo?"

"It was written by my youngest daughter," Argo said. "The question is, can you explain it?"

"Oh," said Geo. "I didn't realize...." He paused. "By the dark chamber sits its twin, moving in and out; and that's where the floods of the body begin. And it's twinned again. The heart?" he suggested. "The four-chambered human heart? That's where the body's flood begins."

"I think that will do for part of the answer."

"The bright chamber," mused Geo. "The burning dome. The human mind, I guess. The line of division, running down the lane of memory—I'm not sure."

"You seem to be doing fairly well."

"Could it refer to something like 'the two sides of every question'?" Geo asked. "Or something similar?"

"It could," Argo said, "though I must confess I hadn't thought of it in that way. But it is the last two lines that puzzle me."

"*Fear floods in the turning room,*" repeated Geo; "*Love breaks in the burning dome.* I guess that's the mind and the heart again. You usually think of love with the heart, and fear with the mind. Maybe she meant that they both, the heart and the mind, have control over both love and fear."

"Perhaps she did," Argo smiled. "You must ask her—when you rescue her from the clutches of Hama."

Before turning back to the room with his companions, he looked once more out at the fires of the volcano. Light whirled white and red. Blue tongues licked at black rock siding. He turned away now and went back into the darkness.

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## CHAPTER X

Dawn light lay a-slant the crater's ridge. Argo pointed down the opposite slope. A black temple was visible at the bottom among trees and lawns. "There is Hama's temple," Argo said. "You have your task. Good luck."

They started down the incline of cinders. It took them an hour to reach the first trees that surrounded the dark buildings and the great gardens. Entering on the first lip of grass, they heard a sudden cluster of notes from one of the trees.

"A bird," Iimmi said. "I haven't heard one of those since I left Leptar."

Suddenly, bright blue and the length of a man's forefinger, a lizard ran halfway down the trunk of the tree. Its sapphire belly heaved in the early light with indrawn breath; then it opened its red mouth, its throat warbled, and there was another burst of music.

"Oh well," said Iimmi. "I was close."

They walked further, until Iimmi mused, "I wonder why you always think things are going to turn out like you expect."

"Because when something sounds like that," declared Urson, "it usually is a bird!" Suddenly he gave a little shiver. "Lizards," he said.

"It was a pretty lizard," said Iimmi.

"Going around expecting things to be what they seem can get you in trouble—especially on this island," Geo commented.

The angle at which they walked made one of the clumps of tree before them seem to fall apart. A man standing in the center raised his hand and said briskly, "Stop!"

They stopped.

He wore dark robes, and his short white hair made a close helmet above his brown face.

Urson's hand was on his sword. Snake stood with his feet wide, his hands out from his sides.

"Who are you?" the dark man declared.

"Who are you?" Urson parried.

"I am Hama Incarnate."

They were silent. Finally Geo said, "We are travelers in Aptor. We don't mean any harm."

As the man moved forward, splotches of light from the trees slipped across his robe. "Come with me," Hama said. He turned and proceeded among the trees. They followed.

They passed into the temple garden. It was early enough in the morning so that the sunlight lapped pink tongues over the giant black urns that sat along the edges of the path. Now they passed into the temple.

As they passed, Hama turned, looked at the jewels on Iimmi's and Geo's necks, and then looked up at the gazing eye of the statue at the end of the altar. He made no other sign, but turned again and continued. "The morning rites have not yet started," he said. "They will begin in a half an hour. By then I hope to have divined your purpose in coming here."

At the other side of the stairway they mounted a stairway, and then entered a door above which was a black circle dotted with three eyes. Just as they were about to go in, Geo looked around, frowned, and caught Iimmi's eye. "Snake?" he mouthed.

Iimmi looked around and shrugged.

The man turned and faced them, apparently unaware of Snake's departure. As he closed the door, now, he said, "You have come to oppose the forces of Aptor, am I right? You come to steal the jewel of Hama. You have come to kidnap the Incarnate Argo. Is that not your purpose. Keep your hand off your sword, Urson! I can kill you in a moment. You are defenseless."

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"Damn! I'm sleepy." She rolled over and cuddled the pillow. Then she opened her eyes, one at a time, and lay watching the nearly completed motor of metal bars and copper wire that sat on the table beside her bed. She stood up.

Then she collapsed on the bed and jammed her feet under the covers again. With thirty feet of one and a half inch brass pipe, she mused sleepily, I could carry heat from the main hot-water line under the floor which I would estimate to be about the proper surface area to keep these stones warm; let me see, thirty feet of one and a half inch pipe have a surface area of  $22/7$  times  $3/2$  times 30 which is 990 divided by 7 which is ... Then she caught herself. Damn, you're thinking this to avoid thinking about getting up. She opened her eyes once more, put feet on the stone, and held them there while she scratched vigorously at her uneven mop of red hair.

She looked at the clock. "Yikes!" she said softly, and ran out the door, and slammed it behind her—almost. She whirled around, caught it on her palms before it banged shut, and then closed it with gingerly care the final centimeter and a half of the arc. Are you trying to get caught? she asked herself as she tiptoed to the next door.

She opened it and looked in. Dunderhead looks cute when he's asleep, she thought. There was a cord on the floor that ran from under the table by the priest's bed, over the stones, carefully following the zigzag of the crevices between them, and at last the end lay in the corner of the door sill. You really couldn't see it if you weren't looking for it, which had more or less been the idea when she had put it there last night before the priests had come back from vespers. The far end was tied in a knot of her own invention to the electric plug of his alarm clock. Dunderhead had an annoying habit of re-setting his clock every evening making sure that the red second hand was still sweeping away the minutes. (In her plans for this morning she had catalogued his every habitual action, and had observed this one for three nights running, hanging upside down from the bulky stone portcullis above and outside his window.)

Tugging on the string, she saw it leap from the crevices into a straight line and then lift from the floor as she drew it tauter, and then go slack as the plug blipped quietly onto the floor.

Next she pulled the string again until the slack left and raised her end a few inches from the floor. With her free hand now she gave the string a small twit and watched the vibration run up and down the string twice. The knot's invention was an ingenious one. At the vibration, two opposed loops shook away from a third, and a four millimeter length of rubber band that had been sewn in tautened and released a fourth loop from around a small length of number four gauge wire with a holding tonsure of three quarters of a gram, and the opposing vibration returning up the thread loosed a similar apparatus on the other side of the plug. The knot fell away, and she wound it quickly around her hand. She stood up, closed the door, and the oiled lock was perfectly silent. The door knob was just the slightest bit greasy, she noted. Careless.

Back in her room, it was standing on the table. Sunlight from the high window fell red across the board. It was very early in the morning. She took the parts of the motor up in her hands. "I guess we try you out today? No?" She answered herself, "Yes." Finally she put the parts in the paper bag, strode out of the room, and slammed the ... whirled around and caught it once more. "Gnnnnnnn," she said. "Do you want to get caught?" For the second time she answered herself, "Yes. And remember that too. Or you'll never get through it."

As she walked down the hall, she heard through one of the windows the chirp of a blue lizard from the garden. "The sound I wanted to hear," she smiled to herself. "A good sign."

Turning into the temple, she started down the side aisle. The great black columns passed before her. Something moved between the columns along the other side, swift and indistinct as a bird's shadow. At least she thought she saw something. "Remember," she reminded herself, "you have guilt feelings about this whole thing, and you could very easily be manufacturing delusions to scare yourself out of going through with it." She went on, passed two more columns, and saw it again. "Or," she went on with her monologue, "you could be purposefully ignoring the very obvious fact that there is somebody over there who is going to see you. So watch it." There were mirrors somewhere in the temple, but they weren't on the opposite wall, so she couldn't be seeing herself. In fact the mirrors were out in the vestibule through which she had come and maybe this other person had come, so maybe it was seeing her as a reflection of ... "Unscramble that syntax," she told herself. "You think like that and you'll never make it."

But there was somebody, with no clothes on (for all practical purposes) sneaking between the pillars. And he had four arms. That made her start to think of something else, but the thought as

it arrowed into the past, suddenly got deflected, turned completely about, and jammed into her brain again, because he was staring directly at her.

*If he starts walking toward me, she thought, I'm going to be scared out of my ears. So I better start walking toward him. Besides, I want to see what he looks like.* She started out from the columns. Glancing quickly both ways, she saw that the temple was deserted save for them.

*He's a kid, she thought, three quarters of the way across. My age, she added, and again a foreign thought attempted to intrude itself on her but never made it, because he was coming toward her now. At last he stopped before her, silent, muscles like tight wire under the brown skin, black hair massing low on his forehead, his eyes deep beneath the black shrub of brows.*

She gulped and asked him, "What are you doing here? Do you know somebody could catch you in here and get mad as hell? I know I couldn't possibly have, but I think I've seen you before some place; if somebody comes along, they might even think you were trying to steal Hama's eye." *I shouldn't have said that, she thought, because he moved funny.* "You better get out of here because everybody will be up here in a half an hour for morning services."

At that news, he suddenly darted forward, passed her, and sprinted down toward the altar.

"Hey!" she called and ran after him.

Snake vaulted over the brass altar rail.

"Wait a minute," she called, catching up. "Wait, will you!"

Snake turned as she slung her leg across the brass bar. "Look, I realize I gave away my hand. But that was only guilt feelings. You gave yours away too, though. And if you don't think you've got guilt feelings, boy, you're crazy."

Snake frowned, tilted his head, and then grinned.

"So we'll help each other see," she said. "You want it too, don't you." She pointed up to the head of the statue towering above them. "So let's co-operate. I'll get it for a little while. Then you can have it." He was listening, she saw, so she guessed her strategy was working. *Play it by ear now, she thought.* "We'll help each other. Shake on it, huh?" She stuck out her hand.

All four hands reached forward.

*Whoops, she thought, I hope he's not offended.*

But the four hands grasped hers, and she added her second to the juncture. "All right," she said. "Come on. Now I had all this figured out last night. And we don't have much time. Let's go around ..." But he walked over to where the stalks of wheat spired from the altar base up through Hama's fist, and grabbed a stalk with the three hands, and hand, over hand, over hand, began to hoist himself up to where the first broad sheets of metal leaves leaned out to form a small platform. At first his dirty feet swung out frog-like, but then he caught the stem with his toes and at last hoisted himself to the front and looked down at her.

"I can't climb up there," she said, "I don't have your elevation power."

Snake looked down and shrugged.

"Oh damn," she said. "I'll do it my way." She ran across the altar to the great foot of the statue. Sitting cross-legged, Hama's foot was on his side. Using the ridges made by the toes as steps, she clattered up to the dark bulge of the deity's godlike bunion. She made her way across the ankle, up the slanting shin, back down the black thigh, until she stood at the crevice where the leg and torso met.

Out beyond the great knee, Snake regarded her from his perch in the groin of yellow leaf. They were about equal height.

"Yoo-hoo," she waved. "Meet you at the clavicle." Then she stuck her tongue out. The bulges in the belly of the god made a treacherous ledge along which she inched until she arrived at the cavernous naval, leaving wet handprints on the black stone.

The god's belly button from this intimate distance revealed itself as a circular door about five feet in diameter and controlled by a combination lock. She missed the first number twice, dried her hands off, and began again. According to the plans in the main safe of the temple (on which she had first practiced combination breaking) there was a ladder behind this door which led up into the statue. She remembered it clearly; and saved her life by doing so.

Because when she caught the second number, reversed the direction and felt the telltale click of the third, she pulled on the handle and was almost pushed from the ledge by the swinging circular door. She grabbed at a handle that she hardly saw on the door's inside, just as the stone slipped from beneath her feet. Then she was hanging five feet out in the air over the sacred groin some fifty feet below.

The first thing she tried, after closing her eyes and mumbling a few laws of motion, was to swing the door to. When she swung out, however, the door swung closed; and when she swung in, the door swung opened. After a while, she just hung. She gave small thanks that she had dried her hands. When her arms began to ache, she wished that she hadn't, because then it would be over

by now. She went over what she knew about taking judo falls.

Then the door swung closed, and someone grabbed her around the waist. She didn't open her eyes, but felt her body pressed against the tilting stone. Her arms fell tingling to her sides. The ligaments flamed with pain. Then the pain dulled to throbbing, and she opened her eyes. "How the hell did you get down here?" she asked Snake. With his help she staggered through the open door and stopped to rub her arms. "How did you know about the ladder?"

They were standing in the shaft now, with the ladder beside them running up into the darkness.

He looked at her with a puzzled expression.

"What is it?" she asked. "Oh, I'll be able to climb up there, never you worry. Hey, can you speak?"

Snake shook his head.

"Oh," she said. Something started at the edge of her mind again, a picture of something unpleasant. Snake had started up the ladder, which he had come down so quickly a minute ago. She glanced out the door, saw that the temple was empty, pulled the door to, and followed.

They ascended into complete darkness. Her arms were beginning to ache again, just slightly. She reached up for the next rung, and found it in its proper place. Then the next. And then again the next.

She started counting steps now, and when seventy-four, seventy-five, and seventy-six dropped below her, there was a missing rung. She reached above it, but there was none. She ran her hand up the edge of the ladder and found that it suddenly curved into the wall. "Hey, you," she said in the darkness.

Something touched her waist. "Gnnnnngggg," she said. "Don't *do* that." It touched her on the leg, took hold of her ankle, and pulled. "Watch out," she said.

It pulled again. She raised her foot, and it was tugged sideways a good foot and a half and set on solid flooring. Then a hand (her foot was not released) took her arm, and another held her waist, and tugged. She stiffened for one instant before she remembered the number of limbs her companion had. Then she came off the ladder, sideways into the dark, afraid to put her other foot down lest she step headlong into the seventy-five foot plus shaft.

But he tugged again, and in losing her balance, her foot came down on cool, solid stone. Holding her arm now, he led her along the tunnel. They passed into a steep incline. Now down the upper arm, she recalled.

"I feel like Eurydice," she said aloud.

*You ... funny ...* an echoing voice sounded in her skull.

"Hey," she said. "What was that?" But the voice was silent. The wall turned abruptly and the floor leveled out. They were in a section of the passage now that corresponded roughly to the statue's radial artery. At the wrist, there was a light. They mounted a stairway, came out a trap door, and found themselves standing high in the temple. Below them the great room spread, vastly deep, and still empty. Beside them, the stems of the bronze wheat stalks rose up through the fist and spired another fifty feet before breaking into clusters of golden grain and leaves. Across from them, over the dark curve of Gargantuan chest, in the statue's other hand, the shaft of the scythe leaned away into shadow.

"Look," she said. "You follow me now." She started back along the top of the forearm and then began the tedious climb over the rippling biceps, till at last they reached the broad shoulder. They walked across the hollow above the collar bone until they stood just below the great scooping shell of the ear.

She took the paper bag she had stuffed into her belt, tied one end of the string around the neck, and then, holding the other, she heaved the bag up and over the ear. She got the other end of the string, knotted it as high as she could reach, and gave it a tug. "I hope this works," she said. "I had it all figured out yesterday. The tensile strength of this stuff is about two hundred and fifty pounds, which ought to do for you and me." She planted her foot on the swell of the neck tendon, and in seven leaps she made it to the lobe of the ear. She swung around into the hollow, using the frontal wing as a pivot. Crouching in the hollow trumpet, she looked down at Snake. "Come up," she said. "Hurry up."

Snake joined her a moment later.

The ear was hollow, too. It led back into a cylindrical chamber which went up through the head of the god. The architect who had designed the statue had conveniently left the god's lid flipped. They climbed the ladder and emerged amid the tangle of pipes which represented the hair of the god. They made their way forward through the mass of pipes to where the forehead sloped dangerously forward. They could see the foreshortened nose and the rim of the statue's middle eye above that. There wasn't much of anything after that for the next thousand feet until the base of the altar. "Now you can really be some help," she told him. "Hold on to my wrist and let me down. I'll get the jewel."

They grabbed wrists, and Snake's three other hands, as well as the joints of his knees, locked around the base of five pipes that sprouted around them.

Slowly she slid forward, until her free hand slipped on the stone and she dropped the length of their two arms and swung just above the statue's nose. The eye opened in front of her. The lid arched above her, and the white of either side of the ebony iris shone faintly in the half darkness. At the center of the iris, in a small hollow, sitting on the top of a metal support, was the jewel.

She reached her free hand toward it as she swung.

From somewhere a gong suddenly sounded. Light flooded over her. Looking up, she saw white sockets of light shining down into her own eyes. Panicking, she almost released Snake's wrist. But a voice in her head (hers or someone else's, she couldn't tell) rang out. *Hold ... on ... damn ... it ...*

Then she grabbed the jewel. The metal shaft in which the jewel had stood was not steady, and tilted as her hand came away from it. The tilting must have set off some clockwork mechanism, because the great eyelid was slowly lowering over the ivory and ebony eye. She swung again at the end of the rope of bone and flesh; half blinded by the lights above her, she looked over her shoulder, into the temple below. There was singing, the beginning of a processional hymn. The morning rites had started!

Light glinted on the stone limbs of the god. Figures were pouring into the temple. They must have seen her, but the hymn, sonorous and gigantic, rose like flood water, and she suddenly thought that if she fell, she would drown in the sound of it.

Snake was pulling her up. Stone against her arm, against her cheek. She clenched her other fist tightly at her side. Another hand came down and helped pull her. Then another. Then she was lying among the metal pipes, and he was loosening her fingers from his wrist. He tugged her to her feet, and for a moment she was looking out over the now filled temple.

Nervous energy contracted coldly along her body, and the sudden sight of the great drop filled her eyes and her head, and she staggered. Snake caught her and at last helped her back to the ladder. "We've got it," she said to him before they started down. She breathed deeply. Then she checked in her palm to see if it was still there; it was, and again she looked out over the people below. Light on the up-turned faces made them look like scattered pearls on the dark floor. An exaltation suddenly burst in her shoulders, flooded her legs and arms and for a moment washed the pain away. Snake, with one hand on her shoulder, was grinning also. "We've got it!" she said again.

They went down the ladder into the statue's skull. Snake preceded her out the hollow ear. He reached around, caught the cord, and let himself down to the shoulder.

She hesitated for a moment, then put the jewel in her mouth, and followed him. Standing beside him once more, she removed it, and then rubbed her shoulders. "Boy, am I going to have some Charley horse by tomorrow," she said. "Do me a favor and untie my bag for me?"

Snake untied the parcel from the end of the cord, and together now they climbed down the bicep and back over the forearm to the trap door in the wrist.

She glanced down at the faces of the worshipers just before they disappeared into the tunnel. Snake was taking the jewel from her hand. She let him have it, and watched him raise it up above his head.

Immediately, when he raised the jewel, the pearls of faces went out like extinguished flames as heads bent all through the temple.

"That's the ticket," grinned Argo. "Come on." But Snake did not go into the tunnel. Instead he walked around the fist, took hold of one of the bronze wheat stems, and slid down through an opening between the thumb and forefinger. "That way?" asked Argo. "Oh well, I guess so. You know I'm going to write an epic about this."

But Snake had already gone. She followed him, clutching her feet around a great bunch of stems. He was waiting for her at the plateau of leaves, and nestled there, they gazed out once more at the fascinated congregation.

Again Snake held aloft the jewel, and again heads bowed. The hymn began to repeat itself, the individual words lost in the sonority of the hall. They started down the last length of stems now, coming quickly. When they stood at last on the base, she put her hand on his shoulder and looked across the brass altar rail. The congregation pressed close, although she did not recognize an individual face. Yet a mass of people stood there, enormous and familiar. As Snake started forward, holding up the jewel, the people fell back from the rail. Snake climbed over the altar rail, and then helped her over.

Her shoulders were beginning to hurt now, and the enormity of the theft ran chills up and down, up and down her spine. The black marble altar step as she put her foot down was awfully cold.

They started forward again, and the last note of the hymn echoed to silence, filling the hall with the roaring quiet of the hushed breathing of hundreds.

Simultaneously, both she and Snake got the urge to look back at the great diminishing height of Hama behind them. All three eyes were shut firmly now. A quiet composed of the rustling of a hundred dark robes upon another hundred hissed about them as they started forward again.



There was a spotlight on them, she suddenly realized. That was why the people, hovering back from the circular effulgence over the floor around them seemed so dim. Her heart had become a pulse at the bottom of her tongue. They kept on going forward, into the shadowed faces, into the parting sea of dark cloaks and hoods.

Then the last of the figures stepped aside from the temple door, and she could see the sunlight out in the garden. They stood still for a moment, Snake holding high the jewel; then they burst forward, out through the door and down over the bright steps.

Instantly the hymn began again behind them, as if their departure had been a signal. The music flooded after them, and when they reached the bottom step, they both whirled, crouching like animals, expecting the congregation to come welling darkly out after them. But there was only the music, flowing into the light, washing around them, a transparent river, a sea.

*"Freeze the drop in the hand,  
and break the earth with singing.  
Hail the height of a man,  
and also the height of a woman."*

Over the music came a brittle chirping from the trees. Fixed with fear, they watched the temple door as the hymn progressed. Then Snake suddenly stood up straight and grinned.

She scratched her red hair, shifted her weight, and looked at Snake. "I guess they're not coming," she said, sounding almost disappointed. Then she giggled. "Well, I guess we got it."

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"Don't move," repeated Hama Incarnate.

"Now look—" began Urson.

"You are perfectly safe," the god continued, "unless you do anything foolish. You have shown great wisdom. Continue to show it. I have a lot to explain to you."

"Like what?" asked Geo.

"I'll start with the lizards," smiled the god.

"The what?" asked Iimmi.

"The singing lizards," said Hama. "You walked through a grove of trees just a few minutes ago. You had just been through a series of happenings that was probably the most frightening in your life. Suddenly you heard a singing in the trees. What was it?"

"I thought it was a bird," Iimmi said.

"But why a bird?" asked the god.

"Because that's what a bird sounds like," stated Urson impatiently. "Who needs an old lizard singing to them on a morning like this?"

"Your second point is much better than your first," said the god. "You do not need a lizard, but you did need a bird. A bird means spring, life, good luck, cheerfulness. You think of a bird singing and you think of thoughts that men have been thinking for thousands upon thousands of years. Poets have written of it in every language, Catullus in Latin, Keats in English, Li Po in Chinese, Darnel X24 in New English. You expected a bird because after what you had been through, you needed to hear a bird. Lizards run from under wet rocks, scurry over gravestones. A lizard is not what you needed."

"So what do lizards have to do with why we're here?" demanded Urson.

"Why are you here?" repeated the god, subtly changing Urson's question. "There are many reasons, I am sure. You tell me some of them."

"You have done wrongs to Argo—at least to Argo of Leptar," Geo explained. "We have come to undo them. You have kidnaped the young Argo, as well as her mother apparently. We have come to take her back. You have misused the jewels. We have come to take the last one from you."

Hama smiled. "Only a poet could see the wisdom in such honesty. I thought I might have to wheedle to get that much out of you."

"I guess it was pretty certain that you knew that much already," Geo said.

"True," answered Hama. Then his tone changed. "Do you know how the jewels work?"

They shook their heads.

"They are basically very simple mechanical contrivances which are difficult in execution, but simple in concept. I will explain. Human thoughts, it was discovered after the Great Fire during the first glorious years of the City of New Hope, did not produce waves similar to radio waves, but the electrical synapse pattern, it was found, can be read by radio waves, in the same way a mine detector reads the existence of metal."

"Radio?" Geo said.

"That's right," Hama said. "Oh, I forgot, you don't know anything about that at all. Well, I can't go through the whole thing now. Suffice it to say that each of the jewels contains a carefully honed crystal which is constantly sending out beams which can read these thought patterns. Also the crystal acts like a magnifying glass or a mirror, and reflects and magnifies the energy from the brain into heat or light or any other kind of electromagnetic radiation—there I go again—so that you can send great bolts of heat with them, as you have seen done.

"But the actual workings of them are not important. And their ability to send heat out is only their secondary power. Their primary importance is that they can be used to penetrate the mind. Now we come to the lizards."

"Wait a minute," Geo said. "Before we get to the lizards. Do you mean go into minds like Snake does?" Suddenly he remembered that the boy was not there.

But the god went on. "Like Snake," he said. "But different. Snake was born with the ability to transmute the brain patterns of his thoughts to others; in that he has a power something like the jewels, but nowhere as strong. But with the jewels, you can jam a person's thoughts...."

"Just go into his mind and stop him from thinking?" asked Immi.

"No," said the god. "Conscious thought is too powerful. Otherwise, you would stop thinking every time Snake spoke to you. It works another way. How many reasons does a man have for any single action?"

They looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"Why, for example, does a man pull his hand from a fire?"

"Because it hurts," said Urson. "Why else?"

"Yes, why else?" asked Hama.

"I think I see what you mean," said Immi. "He also pulls it out because he knows that outside the fire his hand isn't going to hurt. Like the bird, I mean the lizard. One reason we reacted like we did was because it sounded like a bird. The other reason was because we wanted to hear a bird just then. The man pulls his hand out because the fire hurts, and because he wants it not to hurt."

"In other words," Geo summarized, "there are at least two reasons for everything."

"Exactly," explained Hama. "And notice that one of these reasons is unconscious. But with the jewel, you can jam the unconscious reason; so that if a man has his hand in a fire, you can jam his unconscious reason of wanting it to stop hurting. Completely bewildered, and in no less pain, he will stand there until his wrist is a smoking nub."

Geo reached over and felt his severed arm.

"Dictators during the entire history of this planet have used similar techniques. By not letting the people of their country know what conditions existed outside their boundaries, they could get the people to fight to stay in those conditions. It was the old adage, convince a slave that he's free, and he will fight to maintain his slavery. Why does a poet sing? Because he likes music; and because silence frightens him. Why does a thief steal? To get the goods from his victim; also to prove that his victim cannot get him."

"That's how Argo got Snake back," Geo said to Urson. "I see now. He was just thinking of running away, and she jammed his desire not to get caught; so he had nothing to direct him in which direction to run. So he ran where she told him, straight back to her."

"That's right," Hama said. "But something else was learned when these jewels were invented. Or rather a lesson which history should have taught us thousands of years ago was finally driven home. No man can wield absolute power over other men and still retain his own mind. For no matter how good his intentions are when he takes up the power, his alternate reason is that freedom, the freedom of the people and ultimately his own, terrifies him. Only a man afraid of freedom would want this power, would conceive of wielding it. And that fear of freedom will turn him into a slave of this power. For this reason, the jewels are evil. That is why we have summoned you to steal them from us."

"To steal them from you?" asked Geo. "Why couldn't you have simply destroyed them when you had them."

"We have already been infected," smiled the god. "We are a small band here on Aptor. To reach the state of organization, to collect the scattered scientific knowledge of the times before the Great Fire, was not easy. Too often the jewels have been used, and abused, and now we cannot destroy it. We would have to destroy ourselves first. We kidnaped Argo and left you the second jewel, hoping that you would come after the third and last one. Now you have come, and now the jewel is being stolen."

"Snake?" asked Geo.

"That's right," replied Hama.

"But I thought he was your spy," Geo said.

"That he is our spy is his unconscious reason for his actions," explained Hama. "He is aware only that he is working against the evil he has seen in Jordde. Spy is too harsh a word for him. Say, rather, little thief. He became a spy for us quite unwittingly when he was on the island as a child with Jordde. I have explained something to you of how the mind works. We have machines that can duplicate what Snake does in a similar way that the jewels work. This is how the blind priestesses contacted Jordde and made him their spy. This is how we reached Snake. But he never saw us, never even really talked to us. It was mainly because of something he saw, something he saw when he first got here."

"Wait a minute," Iimmi said. "Jordde wanted to kill me, and did kill Whitey because of something we might have seen. I bet this was the same thing. Now, what was it?"

Hama smiled. "My telling you would do no good. Perhaps you can find out from Snake, or my daughter, Argo Incarnate."

"But what do we do now?" Geo interrupted. "Take the jewels back to Argo, I mean Argo on the ship? She's already used the jewels to control minds, at least Snake's, so that means she's infected, too."

"Once you guessed the reason for her infection," said Hama. "We have been watching you on our screens since you landed. Do you remember what the reason was?"

"Do you mean her being jealous of her sister?" Geo asked.

"Yes. On one side her motives were truly patriotic for Leptar. On the other hand they were selfish ones of power seeking. But without the selfish ones, she would have never gotten so far as she did. You must bring young Argo back and give the infection a chance to work itself out."

"But what about the jewels?" asked Geo. "All three of them will be together. Isn't that a huge temptation?"

"Someone must meet this temptation, and overcome it," said Hama. "You do not know how much danger they are in while they are here on Aptor. Even if the final danger is only delayed, that delay will make it safer to bring them to Leptar."

Suddenly Hama turned to the screens and pushed a switch to on position. The opaque glass was filled with a picture of the interior of the temple. On the huge statue, a spotlight was following two microscopic figures over the statue's shoulder. They were climbing over the statue's elbow.

Hama increased the size. It was two people, not bugs, climbing down the gigantic sculptured figure. They made their way along the statue's forearm now, to the golden stalks of wheat in the god's black fist. One, and then the other began to shimmy down the stems. They arrived at the base and climbed over the rail. The screen enlarged again.

"It's Snake," said Geo.

"And he's got the jewel," Urson added.

"That's Argo with him," Iimmi put in. "I mean—one of the Argos." They clustered around the screen, watching the congregation give way before the two fearful children. The red-haired girl in the short white tunic was holding onto Snake's shoulder.

Suddenly Hama turned the picture off, and they looked away from the screen now, puzzled. "So you see," said the god, "the jewel has already been stolen. For the sake of Argo, and of Hama, carry the jewels back to Leptar. Young Argo will help you. Though her mother and I are pained to see her go, she is as prepared for the journey as you are, if not more. Will you do it?"

"I will," Iimmi said.

"Me too," said Geo.

"I guess so," Urson said.

"Good," smiled Hama. "Then come with me." He turned from the screen and walked through the door. They followed him down the long stairway, past the stone walls, into the hall, and along the back of the church. He walked slowly, and smiled like a man who had waited long for something finally arrived. They turned out of the temple and descended the bright steps.

"I wonder where the kids are?" Urson asked.

But Hama led them on, across the broad garden to where the great black urns sat in a row close to a wall of shrubbery. A woman—old Argo—suddenly joined them. She had apparently been waiting for them. She gave them a silent smile of recognition, and they continued across the garden path.

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Light fell through the shrubbery across her white tunic and Snake's bare back as they crouched over the contraption of coils and metal. She twisted two pieces of wire together in a final connection as Snake placed the jewel on an improvised thermocouple. Then they bent over it and both concentrated their thoughts on the bead. The thermocouple glowed red, and electricity

jumped in the copper veins, turning the metal bone into a magnet. The armature tugged once around its pivot, and then tugged around once more. Finally it was whipping around steadily, the brushes on its shaft reversing the magnetic poles with each half circle of the arc. It gained speed until it whirred into an invisible copper haze between them. "Hey," she breathed, "look at it go, will you! Just look at it go." And the young thieves crouched over the humming motor, oblivious to the eyes of the elder gods that smiled at them from the edge of the green shift of shadow and sunlight, by the side of the marble urn.

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## CHAPTER XI

Under the trees, she raised up on tiptoe and kissed the balding forehead of a tall, dark-robed priest. "Dunderhead," she said, "I think you're cute." Then she blinked very rapidly and knuckled beneath her eye. "Oh," she added, remembering, "I was making yogurt in the biology laboratory yesterday. There's two gallons of it fermenting under the tarantula cage. Remember to take it out. And take care of the hamsters. Please don't forget the hamsters."

Finally, they started once more around the slope of the volcano, and the temple and grove fell black and green away behind them.

"Two days to get to the ship," said Geo, squinting at the pale sky.

"Perhaps we had better put the jewels together," said Urson. "Keep them out of harm's way, since we know their power."

"What do you mean?" Iimmi asked.

Urson took Geo's leather purse from his belt. Then he took the jewel from Geo's neck and dropped it in the purse. Then he held the purse out for Iimmi to do the same.

"I guess it can't hurt," Iimmi said, dropping his chain into the pouch.

"Here's mine too," Argo said. Urson pulled the purse string closed and tucked the pouch in at his waist.

"Well," said Geo, "I guess we head for the river, so we can get back to your sister and Jordde."

"Jordde?" asked Argo. "Who's he?"

"He's a spy for the blind priestesses. He's also the one who cut Snake's tongue out."

"Cut his—?" Suddenly she stopped. "That's right: four arms, his tongue—I remember now, in the film!"

"In the what?" asked Iimmi. "What do you remember?"

Argo turned to Snake. "I remember where I saw you before!"

"You know Snake?" Urson asked.

"No, I never met him. But about a month ago I saw a movie of what happened. It was horrible what they did to him."

"What's a movie?" asked Iimmi.

"Huh?" said Argo. "Oh, it's sort of like the vision screens, only you can see things that happened in the past. Anyway, Dunderhead showed me this film about a month ago. Then he took me down to the beach and said I should have seen something there, because of what I'd learned."

"See something?" Iimmi almost yelled. "What was it?" He took her shoulder and shook it. "What was it you were supposed to see?"

"Why...?" began the girl, startled.

"Because a friend of mine was murdered and I almost was too because of something we saw on that beach. Only I don't know what it was."

"But ..." began Argo. "But I don't either. I couldn't see it, so Dunderhead took me back to the temple."

"Snake?" Geo asked. "Do you know what they were supposed to see? Or why Argo was taken to see it after she was shown what happened to you?"

The boy shrugged.

Iimmi turned on Snake. "Do you know, or are you just not telling? Come on now. That's the only reason I stuck with this so far, and I want to know what's going on!"

Snake shook his head.

"I want to know why I was nearly killed," shouted the Negro. "You know and I want you to tell me!" Iimmi raised his hand.

Snake screamed. The sound tore over the distended vocal cords. Then he whirled and ran.

Urson caught him and brought the boy crashing down among leaves. "No you don't," the giant growled. "You're not going to get away from me this time. You won't get away from me again."

"Watch it," said Argo. "You're hurting him. Urson, let go!"

"Hey, ease up," said Iimmi. "Snake, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell. But I do want you to tell me. Very much."

Urson let the boy up, still mumbling, "Well, he's not going to get away again."

"When did he get away from you the first time?" Geo said, coming over to the boy. "Let him go. Look, Snake, do you know what there was about the beach that was so important?"

Snake nodded.

"Can you tell?"

Now the boy shook his head and glanced at Urson.

"You don't have to be afraid of him," Geo said, puzzled. "Urson won't hurt you."

But Snake shook his head again.

"Well," said Geo, "we can't make you. Let's get going."

"I bet I could make him," the giant mumbled.

"No," said Argo. "I don't think you could. I watched the last time somebody tried. And I don't think you could."

Late morning flopped over hotly in the sky and turned into afternoon. The jungle became damp, and bright insects plunged like tiny knives of blue or scarlet through leaves. Wet foliage brushed against their chests, faces, and shoulders.

"Why would they show you a film of something awful before taking you to the beach." Iimmi asked.

"Maybe it was supposed to have made me more receptive to what we saw," said Argo.

"If horror makes you receptive to what ever it was," said Iimmi, "I should have been about as receptive as possible."

"What do you mean?" asked Geo.

"I just watched ten guys get hacked to pieces all over the sand, remember?"

They walked silently for a time.

"We'll come out at the head of the river. It's a huge marsh that drains off into the main channel," said Argo presently.

Late afternoon darkened quickly.

"I was wondering about something," Geo said, after a little while.

"What?" asked Argo.

"Hama said that once the jewels had been used to control minds, the person who used them was infected—"

"Rather the infection was already there," corrected Argo. "That just brought it out."

"Yes," said Geo. "Anyway, Hama also said that he was infected. When did he have to use the jewels?"

"Lots of times," Argo said. "Too many. The last time was when I was kidnaped. He used the jewel to control pieces of that thing you all killed in the City of New Hope to come and kidnap me and then leave the jewel in Leptar."

"A piece of that monster?" Geo exclaimed. "No wonder it decayed so rapidly when it was killed."

"Huh?" asked Iimmi.

"Argo, I mean your sister, told me they had managed to kill one of the kidnapers, and it melted the moment it died."

"We couldn't control the whole mass," she explained. "It really doesn't have a mind. But, like everything alive, it has, or had, the double impulse."

"But what did kidnaping you accomplish, anyway?" Iimmi asked.

Argo grinned. "It brought you here. And now you're taking the jewels away."

"Is that all?" asked Iimmi.

"Well," said Argo, "Isn't that enough?" She paused for an instant. "You know I wrote a poem

about all this once, the double impulse and everything."

Geo recited:

*"By the dark chamber sits its twin,  
where the body's floods begin,  
and the two are twinned again,  
turning out and turning in."*

"How did you know?" she asked.

"The dark chamber is Hama's temple," Geo said. "Am I right?"

"And it's twin is Argo's," she went on. "They should be twins, really. And then the twins again are the children. The force of age in each one opposed to the young force. See?"

"I see," Geo smiled. "And the body's floods, turning in and out?"

"That's sort of everything man does, his going and coming, his great ideas, his achievements, his little ideas too. It all comes from the interplay of those four forces."

"Four?" said Urson. "I thought it was just two."

"But it's thousands," Argo explained.

The air was drenching. The leaves had been shiny before. Now they dripped water on the loose ground. Pale light lapsed through the branches, shimmered, reflected from leaf to the wet underside of leaf. The ground became mud.

Twice they heard a sloshing a few feet away, and then the scuttling of an unseen animal. "I hope I don't step on something that decides to take a chunk out of my foot."

"I'm pretty good at first aid," Argo said. "It's getting chilly," she added.

Just then Geo slipped and sank knee-deep in a muddy pool. Urson raced to the edge of the quicksand bog and grabbed Geo by his good arm. He pulled till Geo emerged, coated to the thigh with gray mud.

"You all right?" Urson asked. "You sure you're all right?"

Geo nodded, rubbing the stump of his arm with his good hand. "I'm all right," he said. The trees had almost completely given out. Geo suddenly saw the whole swamp sinking in front of him. He splashed a step backwards, but Urson caught his shoulder. The swamp wasn't sinking, though. But ripples had begun to appear over the water, spreading, crossing, webbing the whole surface with a net of tiny waves.

Then they began to rise up. Green backs broke the surface, wet and slippery. They were standing now, torrents cascading their green faces, green chests. Three of them, now a fourth. Four more, and then more, and then many more. They stood, now, these naked, green, mottled bodies.

Geo felt a sudden tugging in his head, at his mind. Looking around he saw that the others felt it too.

"Them ..." Urson started.

"They're the ones who carried us ..." Geo began. The tug came again, and they stepped forward.

Immi put his hand on his head. "They want us to go with them...." And suddenly they were going forward, slipping into the familiar state of half-consciousness which had come when they had crossed the river, to the City of New Hope, or when they had first fallen into the sea.

Wet hands fell on their bodies as they were guided through the swamp. They were being carried through deeper water. Now they were walking over dry land where the vegetation was thicker, and slimy boulders caught shards of sunset on their wet flanks, blood leaking on the gray, the wet gray, and the green.

Through a rip in the arras of vegetation, they saw the moon push through the clouds, staining them silver. A rock rose in silhouette against the moon. On the rock a naked man stood, staring at the white disk. White highlighted one side of his body. As they passed, he howled (or anyway, opened his mouth and threw his head back. But their ears were full of night and could not hear.) and dropped to all fours. A breeze blew momentarily in the sudden plume of his tail, in the scraggly hair of the under-belly, and light lay white on the points of his ears, his lengthened muzzle, his thinned hind legs. The animal turned its head once, and then scampered down the rock and into the darkness as a curtain of trees swung across the opened sky.

Eyes of flame whipped ahead of them as water swirled their knees once more. Then the water went down and sand washed back under the soles of their feet on the dark beach. The beating of the sea, the rush of the river, and the odor of the wet leaves that fingered their cheeks, prodded their shins, and slapped against their bellies as they moved forward, all this fell away. Red eyes wavered into flaming tongues, and the tongues showed themselves housed in the mouths of a dozen caves.

Light flickered on the wet rocks and they entered the largest one. Their eyes suddenly focused

once more. Foam washed back and forth over the sand floor, and black chains of weeds, caught in crevices on the rock, lengthened over the sand with the inrush of water. Webbed hands released them.

Brown rocks rose around in the firelight. They raised their eyes to where the Old One sat. The long spines were strung with shrunken membrane. His eyes, gray and indistinct, were close to the surface of his broad nostriled face. A film of water trickled over the rock where he sat. Others stood about him, on various levels of the rock.

The tugging left them, and they glanced at one another now. Outside the cave it was raining hard. Geo saw that Argo's hair had wet to dark auburn and hugged her head now, making little streaks down her neck.

Suddenly a voice boomed at them, like an echo, more than the reverberation that the cave would give. "Carriers of the jewels," it began, and suddenly Geo realized that it was the same hollowness that accompanied Snake's soundless messages. "We have brought you here to give a warning. We are the oldest forms of intelligence on this planet," continued the Old One from the throne. "We have watched from the delta of the Nile the rise of the pyramids; we have seen the murder of Caesar from the banks of the Tiber. We watched the Spanish Armada destroyed by English, and we followed Man's great metal fish through the ocean before the Great Fire. We have never aligned ourselves with either Argo or Hama, but rise in the sexless swell of the ocean. We can warn you, as we have warned man before. As before, some will listen, some will not. Your minds are your own, now. That I pledge you. Now, I warn you; cast the jewels into the sea.

"Nothing is ever lost in the sea, and when the evil has been washed from them with time and brine, they will be returned to man. For then time and brine will have washed away his imperfections also.

"No living intelligence is free from their infection, nothing with the double impulse of life. But we are old, and can hold them for a million years before we will be so infected as you are. Your young race is too condensed in its living to tolerate such power at its fingers now. Again I say: cast these into the sea.

"The knowledge which man needs to alleviate hunger and pain from the world of men is contained in two monasteries on this island. Both have the science to put the jewels to use, to the good use which is possible with them. Both have been infected. In Leptar, however, where you carry these jewels, there is no way at all to utilize them for anything but evil. There will only be the temptation to destroy."

"What about me?" Argo suddenly piped up. "I can teach them all sorts of things in Leptar." She took one of Snake's hands. "We used one for our motor."

"You will find something else to make your motor turn," came the voice. "You still have to see something that you have not yet seen?"

"At the beach?" demanded Iimmi.

"Yes," nodded the Old One, with something like a sigh, "at the beach. We have a science that allows us to do things which to you seem impossibilities, as when we carried you in the sea for weeks without your body decaying. We can enter your mind as Snake does. And we can do much else. We have a wisdom which far surpasses even Argo's and Hama's on Aptor. Will you then cast the jewels into the sea and trust them with us?"

Here Urson interrupted. "How can we give you the jewels?" he said. "How can we be sure you're not going to use them against Argo and Hama once you get them. You say nobody is impervious to them. And we've only got your say so on how long it would take you to fall victim. You can already influence minds. That's how you got us here. And according to Hama, that's what corrupts. And you've already done it."

"Besides," Geo said. "There's something else. We've nearly messed this thing up a dozen times trying to figure out motives and counter motives. And it always comes back to the same thing: we've got a job to do, and we ought to do it. We're suppose to return Argo and the jewels to the ship, and that's what we're doing."

"He's right," said Iimmi. "It's the general rule again. Act on the simplest theory that holds all the information."

The Old One sighed again. "Once, fifteen hundred years ago, a man who was to maneuver one of the metal birds walked and pondered by the sea. He had been given a job to do. We tried to warn him, as we tried to warn you. But he jammed his hands into the pockets of his khaki uniform, and uttered to the waves the words you just uttered, and the warning was shut out of his mind. He scrambled up over the dunes on the beach, never taking his hands out of his pockets. The next morning, at five o'clock, when the sun slanted red across the air field, he climbed into his metal bird, took off, flew for some time over the sea, looking down on the water like crinkled foil under the heightening sun, until he reached land again. Then he did his job: he pressed a button which released two shards of fire metal in a housing of cobalt. The land flamed. The sea boiled in the harbors. And two weeks later he was also dead. That which burned your arm away, poet, burned away his whole face, boiled his lungs in his chest and his brain in his skull."

There was a pause. And then, "Yes, we can control minds. We could have relieved the tiredness,

immobilized the fear, the terror, immobilized all his unconscious reasons for doing what he did, just as man can now do with the jewels. But had we, we would have also immobilized the—the honor which he clung to. Yes, we can control minds, but we do not." Now the voice swelled. "But never, since that day on the shore before the Great Fire, has the temptation to do so been as great as now." Again the voice returned to normal. "Perhaps," and there was almost humor in it now, "the temptation is too great, even for us. Perhaps we have reached the place where the jewels would push us just across the line where we have never before gone, make us do those things that we have never done. You have heard our warning now. The choice, I swear to you, is yours."

They stood silent in the high cave, the fire on their faces weaving brightness and shadow. Geo turned to look at the rain-blurred darkness outside the cave's entrance.

"Out there is the sea," said the voice again. "Your decision quickly. The tide is coming in...."

It was snatched from their minds before they could articulate it. Two children saw a bright motor turning in the shadow. Geo and Iimmi saw the temples of Argo in Leptar. Then there was something darker. And for a moment, they all saw all the pictures at once.

A wave splashed across the floor, like twisted glass before the rock on which the fire stood. Then it flopped wetly across the burning driftwood which hissed into darkness. Charred sticks turned, glowing in the water, and were extinguished.

Rain was buffeting them; hands held them once more, pulling them into the warm sea, the darkness, and then nothing....

Snake was thinking again, and this time through the captain's eyes.

*The cabin door burst open in the rain. Wind whipped her wet veils about her in the door as lightning made them transparent, blackening her body's outline. Jordde rose from his seat. She closed the door on thunder.*

*"I have received the signal from the sea," she said. "Tomorrow you pilot the ship into the estuary."*

*The captain's voice: "But Priestess Argo, I cannot take the ship into Aptor. We already have lost ten men; I cannot sacrifice ..."*

*"And the storm," smiled Jordde. "If it is like this tomorrow, how can I take her through the rocks?"*

*Her nostrils flared as her lips compressed to a chalky line. She was regarding Jordde.*

*The captain's thoughts: What is between them, this confused tension. It upsets me deeply, and I am tired.*

*"You will pilot the boat to shore tomorrow," Argo nearly hissed. "They have returned, with the jewels!"*

*The captain's thoughts: They speak to each other in a code I don't understand. I am so tired, now. I have to protect my ship, my men, that is my job, my responsibility.*

*But Argo turned to the captain. "I hired you to obey me. I order you to pilot this ship to Aptor's shore tomorrow morning."*

*The captain's thoughts; Yes, yes. The fatigue and the unknowing. But I must fulfill, must complete. "Jordde," he began.*

*"Yes, captain," answered the mate, anticipating. "If the weather is permitting, sir, I will take the ship as close as I can get." He smiled now, a thin curve over his face, and turned toward Argo.*

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## CHAPTER XII

Roughness of sand beneath one of his sides, and the flare of the sun on the other. His eyes were hot and his lids were orange over them. He turned over, and reached out to dig his fingers into the sand. Only one hand closed; then he remembered. Opening his eyes, he rolled to his knees. The sand grated under his knee caps. Looking out toward the water, he saw that the sun hung only seeming inches above the horizon. Then he saw the ship.

From its course, he gathered it was heading toward the estuary of the river down the beach. He began to run toward where the rocks and vegetation cut off the end of the beach. The sand under his feet was cool.

A moment later he saw Iimmi's dark figure come from the jungle. He was heading for the same place. Geo hailed him, and panting, they joined each other. Then, together they continued toward the rocks.

As they broke through the first sheet of foliage, they bumped into the red-haired girl who stood, knuckling her eyes in the shadow of the broad palm fronds. When she recognized them, she



joined them silently. Finally they reached the outcropping of rock a few hundred feet up the river bank.

The rain had swelled the river's mouth to tremendous violence. It vomited surges of brown water into the ocean, frothed against rocks, and boiled opaquely below them. It was nearly half again as wide as Geo remembered it.

Although the sky was clear, beyond the brown bile of the river, the sea snarled viciously and bared white teeth in the sun. It took another fifteen minutes for the boat to maneuver through the granite spikes toward the rocky embankment a hundred yards away.

Glancing down into the turbulence, Argo breathed, "Gee." But that was the only human sound against the water's roaring.

The boat's prow doffed in the swell, and then at last her plank swung out and bumped unsteadily on the rocky bank. Figures were gathering on deck.

"Hey," Argo said, pointing toward one. "That's Sis!"

"Where the hell are Snake and Urson?" Iimmi asked.

"That's Snake down there," Geo said. "Look!" He pointed with his nub.

They could see Snake crouched near the gangplank itself. He was behind a ledge of rock, invisible to the people on the ship, apparently, but plain to Geo and his companions.

"Watch it," Geo said. "I'm going down there. You stay here." He ducked off through the vines, keeping in sight of the rocks' edge and the boiling foam. The ship grew before him, and at last he reached a sheltered rise, just ten feet above the nest of rock in which the four-armed boy was crouching.

Geo looked out at the boat. Jordde stood at the head of the gangplank. The eighteen feet of board was unsteady with the roll of the ship. Jordde held something like a black whip in his hand, only the end went to a box-like contraption strapped to his back. With the lash raised, he stepped onto the shifting plank.

Geo wondered what the whip contrivance was. The answer came with the hollow sound of Snake's thoughts. *That ... is ... machine ... he ... use ... to ... cut ... tongue ... with ... only ... on ... whip ... now ... not ... wire ...* So Snake knew he was just behind him. As he was trying to figure exactly the implications of what Snake had said, suddenly, with the speed of a bird's shadow, Snake leaped from his hiding place and landed on the shore end of the plank. He recovered from his crouch, and rushed down the plank toward Jordde, apparently intending to knock him from the board.

Jordde raised the lash and it fell across the boy's shoulder. It didn't land hard; it just dropped. But Snake suddenly reeled, and went down on one knee, grabbing the sides of the plank. Geo was close enough to hear the boy scream.

"I cut your tongue out once with this thing," Jordde said, matter of factly. "Now I'm going to cut the rest of you to pieces." He adjusted a control at his belt and raised the lash again.

Geo leapt for the plank. He faced Jordde over the crouching boy, he wondered how wise it had been. Then he had to stop wondering and try to duck the falling lash. He couldn't.

It landed with only the weight of gravity, brushing his cheek, then dropping across his shoulder and down his back. He screamed; the whole side of his face seemed seared away, and an inch crevice burned into his shoulder and back the length it touched him. He bit into white fire, trying not to leap aside into the foaming chasm between rocks and boat. As the lash rasped over his shoulder, sweat flooded his eyes. His good arm, which held the edge of the plank, was shaking like a plucked string on a loose guitar. Snake lunged back against him, almost knocking him over. When Geo blinked the tears out of his eyes, he saw two bright welts over Snake's shoulder. He also saw that Jordde had stepped out upon the plank and was smiling.

When the line fell again, he wasn't sure just what happened. He leaned in one direction, and suddenly Snake was a dive of legs in the other. Now Snake was just four sets of fingers on the edge of the plank. Geo screamed again and shook.

Two sets of fingers disappeared from one side of the board and reappeared on the other. As Jordde raised the lash a fourth time to rid the plank of this last one-armed nuisance, the fingers worked rapidly forward toward Jordde's feet, until suddenly an arm raised from beneath the plank, grabbed Jordde's foot, and tugged. The lash fell far from Geo who was still trembling, trying to move backwards off the unsteady plank, and keep from vomiting at the same time.

Jordde tripped, but turned in time to grab the edge of the ship's gate and steady himself. At the same time, one leg, and then another, came up the other side of the plank, and then Snake rolled to a crouching position on the board's top.

Geo got his feet under him now, and stumbled backwards, off the plank, and then sat down hard a few feet back on the rocks. He clutched his good arm across his stomach, and without lowering his eyes, leaned forward to cool his back.

Jordde, half-seated on the board now, lashed the whip sideways. Snake leaped a foot from the

plank as the line swung beneath his feet. All four arms went spidering out to regain equilibrium. The whip struck the side of the boat, left a burn along the hull, and came swinging back again. Snake leapt once more and made it.

Suddenly there was a shadow over him, and Geo saw Urson stride up to the end of the plank. His back to Geo, he crouched bear-like at the plank's head. "All right, now try someone a little bigger than you. Come on, kid, get off there. I want my turn." Urson's sword was drawn.

Snake turned, grabbed at something on Urson, but the big man knocked him away as he leapt diagonally onto the shore. Urson laughed over his shoulder. "You don't want the ones around my neck," he called back. "Here, keep these for me." He tossed the leather purse from his belt back to the shore. Snake landed just as Jordde flung the lash out again. Urson must have caught the line across his chest, because they saw his back suddenly stiffen. Then he leapt forward and came down with his sword so hard that had Jordde still been there, his leg would have come off. Jordde leapt back onto the edge of the ship, and the sword sliced three inches into the plank. As Urson tried to pull the blade out once more, Jordde sent his whip singing again. It wrapped Urson's mid-section like a black serpent, and it didn't come loose.

Urson howled. He flung his sword forward, which probably only by accident thwunked seventeen inches through Jordde's abdomen. He bent forward, grabbed the line with both hands, and tugged backwards, screaming.

Jordde took two steps onto the plank, his mouth open, his eyes closed, and fell over the side.

Urson heaved backwards, and toppled from the other side. For a moment they hung with the whip between them over the board. The ship heaved, rolled to. The plank swiveled, came loose; and with the board on top of them, they crashed into the water.

Geo and Snake were at the rocks' edge. Iimmi and Argo were coming up behind them.

Below them, limbs and board bobbed through the foam once. The line had somehow looped around Urson's neck, and the plank had turned up almost on end. Then they went under again.

With nothing between it and the rock wall of shore, the boat began to roll in. With each swell, it came in six feet, and then leaned out three. Then it came back another six. It took four swells, the time of four very deep breaths, until the side of the boat was grating up against the rocks. Geo could hear the plank splintering down in the water. But the sound of the water blanketed anything else that was breaking down there.

Geo took two steps backwards, clutched at his stubbed arm, and threw up.

Somebody, the captain, was calling, "Get her away from the rocks. Away from the rocks, before she goes to pieces!"

Iimmi took Geo's arm. "Come on, boy," he said, and managed to haul him onto the ship. Argo and Snake leapt on behind them, as the boat floundered away from the shore.

Geo leaned against the rail. Below him the water turned on itself in the rocks, thrashed along the river's side, and then, as he raised his eyes, stretched out along the bright blade of the beach. The long sand that rimmed the island dropped away from them, a stately and austere arc gathering in its curve all the sun's glare, and throwing it back on wave, and on wave. His back hurt, his stomach was shriveled and shaken like an old man's palsied fist, his arm was gone, and Urson....

And then Argo said, "Look at the beach!"

Geo flung his eyes up and tried in one moment to envelop whatever he saw, whatever it would be. Beneath the roar was a tide of quiet. The sand along the naked crescent was dull at depressions, mirror bright at rises. At the jungle's edge, leaves and fronds sped multi-textured rippling along the foliage. Each single fragment in that green carpet hung up in the sun was one leaf, he reflected, with two sides, and an entire system of skeleton and veins, as his hand and arm had been. And maybe one day would drop off, too. He looked from rock to rock now. Each was different, shaped and lined distinctly, but losing detail as the ship floated out, as the memory of his entire adventure was losing detail. That one there was like a bull's head half submerged; those two flat ones together on the sand looked like the stretched wings of eagles. The waves, measured and magnificent, followed one another onto the sand, like the varying, never duplicated rhythm of a good poem, peaceful, ordered, and calm. He tried to pour the chaos of Urson drowning from his mind onto the water. It flowed into each glass-green wave's trough in which it rode, suddenly quiet, up to the beach. He spread the pain in his own body over the web of foam and green shimmering, and was surprised because it fit easily, hung there well, quieted, very much quieted. Somewhere at the foot of his brain, an understanding was beginning to effloresce with the sea's water, under the sun.

Geo turned away from the rail, and with the wet deck slipping under his bare feet, he walked toward the forecabin. He released his broken limb, and his hand hung at his side.

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When Snake came down that evening, Geo was lying on his back in the bunk, following the grain of the wood on the bottom of the bed above his. He had his good arm behind his neck now. Snake

touched his shoulder.

"What is it?" Geo asked, turning on his side and sitting out from under the bunk.

Snake held out the leather purse to Geo.

"Huh?" Geo asked. "Didn't you give them to Argo yet?"

Snake nodded.

"Well, why didn't she take them. Look, I don't want to see them again."

Snake pushed the purse toward him again, and added, *Look ...*

Geo took the purse, opened the draw string, and turned the contents out in his hand: there were three chains, on each of which was a gold coin fastened by a hole near the edge. Geo frowned.

"How come these are in here?" he asked. "I thought—where are the jewels?"

*In ... ocean, Snake said. Urson ... switched ... them.*

"What are you talking about?" demanded Geo. "What is it?"

*Don't ... want ... tell ... you ...*

"I don't care what you want, you little thief." Geo grabbed him by the shoulder. "Tell me!"

*Know ... from ... back ... with ... blind ... priestesses, Snake explained rapidly. He ... ask ... me ... how ... to ... use ... jewels.. when ... you ... and ... Iimmi ... exploring ... and ... after ... that ... no ... listen ... to ... thoughts ... bad ... thoughts ... bad ...*

"But he—" Geo started. "He saved your life!"

*But ... what ... is ... reason, Snake said. At ... end ...*

"You saw his thoughts at the end?" asked Geo. "What did he think?"

*You ... sleep ... please, Snake said. Lot ... of ... hate ... lot ... of ... bad ... hate ...* There was a pause in the voice in his head *... and ... love ...*

Geo began to cry. A bubble of sound in the back of his throat burst, and he turned onto the pillow and tried to bite through the sound with his teeth, the tiredness, the fear, for Urson, for his arm, and the change which hurt. His whole body ached, his back hurt in two sharp lines, and he couldn't stop crying.

---

Iimmi, who had now decided to take the bunk above Geo, came back a few minutes after mess. Geo had just awakened.

Geo laughed. "I found out what it was we saw on the beach that made us so dangerous."

"How?" asked Iimmi. "When? What was it?"

"Same time you did," Geo said. "I just looked. And then Snake explained the details of it to me later."

"When?" Iimmi repeated.

"I just took a nap, and he went through the whole thing with me."

"Then what was it you saw, we saw?"

"Well, first of all; do you remember what Jordde was before he was shipwrecked on Aptor?"

"Didn't Argo say he was studying to be a priest. Old Argo, I mean."

"Right," said Geo. "Now, do you remember what my theory was about what we saw?"

"Did you have a theory?" Iimmi asked.

"About horror and pain making you receptive to whatever it was."

"Oh, that," Iimmi said. "I remember. Yes."

"I was also right about that. Now add to all this some theory from Hama's lecture on the double impulse of life. It wasn't a thing we saw, it was a situation, or rather an experience we had. Also, it didn't have to be on the beach. It could have happened anywhere. Man, and his constantly diametric motivations, is always trying to reconcile opposites. In fact, you can say that an action *is* a reconciliation of the duality of his motivation. Now, take all that we've been through, the confusion, the pain, the disorder; then reconcile that with the great order obvious in something like the sea, with its rhythm, its tides and waves, its overpowering calm, or the ordering of cells in a leaf, or a constellation of stars. If you can do it, something happens to you: you grow. You become a bigger person, able to understand, or reconcile, more."

"All right," said Iimmi.

"And that's what we saw, or the experience we had when we looked at the beach from the ship this morning; chaos caught in order, the order defining chaos."

"All right again," Iimmi said. "And I'll even assume that Jordde knew that the two impulses of this experience were one—something terrible and confused, like seeing ten men hacked to pieces by vampires, or seeing a film of a little boy getting his tongue pulled out, or coming through what we came through since we landed on Aptor; and two—something calm and ordered, like the beach and the sea. Now, why would he want to kill someone simply because they might have gone through what amounts, I guess, to the basic religious experience?"

"You picked just the right word," Geo smiled. "Now, Jordde was a novice in the not too liberal religion of Argo. Jordde and Snake had been through nearly as much on Aptor as we had. And they survived. And they also emerged from that jungle of horror onto that great arcing rhythm of waves and sand. And they went through just what you and I and Argo went through. Little Argo, I mean. And it was just at that point when the blind priestesses of Argo made contact with Jordde. They did so by means of those vision screens we saw them with, which can receive sound and pictures from just about any place, but can also project, at least sound, to just about anywhere too. In other words, right in the middle of this religious, or mystic, or whatever you want to call it, experience, a voice materialized out of thin air that claimed to be the voice of The Goddess. Have you any idea what this did to his mind?"

"I imagine it took all the real significance out of the whole thing," Iimmi said. "It would for me."

"It did," said Geo. "Jordde wasn't what you'd call stable before that. If anything, this made him more so. It also stopped his mental functioning from working in the normal way. And Snake who was reading his mind at the time, suddenly saw himself watching the terrifying sealing up process of an active and competent, if not healthy, mind. He saw it again in Urson. It's apparently a pretty stiff thing to watch. That's why he stopped reading Urson's thoughts. The idea of stealing the jewels for himself was slowly eating away Urson's balance, the understanding, the ability to reconcile disparities, like the incident with the blue lizard, things like that, all of which were signs we didn't get. Snake contacted Hama by telepathy, almost accidentally. And Hama was something to hold onto for the boy."

"Still, why did Jordde want to kill anybody who had experienced this, voice of God and all?"

"Because Jordde had by now managed to do what a static mind always does. The situation, the beach, the whole thing suddenly meant for him the revelation of a concrete God. Now, he knew that Snake had contacted something also, something which the blind priestesses told him was thoroughly evil, an enemy, a devil. On the raft, on the boat, he religiously tried to 'convert' Snake, till at last, in evangelical fury, he cut the boy's tongue out with the electric generator and the hot wire which the blind priestesses had given him before he left. Why did he want to get rid of anybody who had seen his beach, a sacred place to him by now? One, because the devils were too strong and he didn't want anybody else possessed by them; Snake had been too much trouble resisting conversion. And two, because he was jealous that someone else might have that moment of exaltation and hear the voice of The Goddess also."

"In other words," summarized Iimmi, "he thought what happened to him and Snake was something supernatural, actually connected with the beach itself, and didn't want it to happen to anybody else."

"That's right," said Geo, lying back in his bunk. "Which is sort of understandable. They didn't come in contact with any of the technology of Aptor, and so it might well have seemed that way."

Iimmi leaned back also. "Yeah," he said. "I can see how the same thing almost—almost might have happened to me. If everything had been the same."

Geo closed his eyes. Snake came down and took the top bunk; and when he slept, Snake told him of Urson, of his last thoughts, and surprisingly, things he mostly knew.

---

Emerging from the forecandle the next morning, he felt bright sunlight slice across his face. He had to squint, and when he did so, he saw her sitting cross-legged on the stretched canvas topping of a suspended lifeboat.

"Hi, up there," he called.

"Hello," she called down. "How are you feeling?"

Geo shrugged.

Argo slipped her feet over the gunwale and with paper bag in hand, dropped to the deck. She bobbed up next to his shoulder, grinned, and said, "Hey, come on back with me. I want to show you something."

"Sure." He followed her.

Suddenly she looked serious. "Your arm is worrying you. Why?"

Geo shrugged. "You don't feel like a whole person. I guess you're not really a whole person."

"Don't be silly," said Argo. "Besides, maybe Snake will let you have one of his. How are the medical facilities in Leptar?"

"I don't think they're up to anything like that."

"We did grafting of limbs back in Aptor," Argo said. "A most interesting way we got around the antibody problem, too. You see—"

"But that was back in Aptor," Geo said. "This is the real world we're going into now."

"Maybe I can get a doctor from the temple to come over," she shrugged. "And then, maybe I won't be able to."

"It's a pleasant thought," Geo said.

When they reached the back of the ship, Argo took out a contraption from the paper bag. "I salvaged this in my tunic. Hope I dried it off well enough last night."

"It's your motor," Geo said.

"Um-hm," said Argo. She put it on a low set of lockers by the cabin's back wall.

"How are you going to work it?" he asked. "It's got to have that stuff, electricity."

"There is more than one way to shoe a centipede," Argo assured him. She reached behind the locker and pulled up a strange gizmo of glass and wire. "I got the lens from Sis," she explained. "She's awfully nice, really. She says I can have my own laboratory all to myself. And I said she could have all the politics, which I think was wise of me, considering. Don't you?" She bent over the contraption. "Now, this lens here focuses the sunlight—isn't it a beautiful day—on these thermocouples. I got the extra metal from the ship's smith. He's sweet. Hey, we're going to have to compare poems from now on. I mean I'm sure you're going to write a whole handful about all of this. I certainly am. Anyway, you connect it up here."

She fastened two wires to two other wires, adjusted the lens, and the tips of the thermocouple glowed red. The armature tugged once around its pivot, and then tugged around once more. Geo glanced up and saw Snake and Immi standing above them, looking over the rail on the cabin's roof. They grinned at each other, and then Geo looked back at the motor. It whipped around steadily, gaining speed until it whirred into an invisible copper haze. "Look at that thing go," breathed Argo. "Will you just look at that thing go!"

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## QUEST AMID FUTURITY'S RUINS

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