

# **Godðess**

## **Thieves' World - Tales From the Vulgar Unicorn, #12**

**by David Drake, 1945-**

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“BY SAVANKALA AND the Son!” Regli swore, “why can’t she bear and be done with it? And why does she demand to see her brother but won’t see me?” The young lord’s sweat-stained tunic looked as if it had been slept in. Indeed, Regli would have slept in it if he had slept any during the two days he had paced outside the bedroom, now couching room, of his wife. Regli’s hands repeatedly flexed the shank of his riding crop. There were those—and not all of them

women—who would have said that agitation heightened Regli’s already notably good looks, but he had no mind for such nonsense now. Not with his heir at risk!

“Now, now,” said Doctor Mernorad, patting the silver-worked lapels of his robe. The older man prided himself as much on his ability to see both sides of a question as he did on his skill at physic—though neither ability seemed much valued today in Regli’s townhouse. “One can’t hurry the gods, you know. The child will be born when Sabellia says it should be. Any attempt to hasten matters would be sacrilege as well as foolishness. Why, you know there are some... I don’t know what word to use, practitioners, who use forceps in a delivery? Forceps of metal! It’s disgusting. I tell you. Prince Kadakithis makes a great noise about smugglers and thieves; but if he wanted to clean up a real evil in Sanctuary, he’d start with the so-called doctors who don’t have proper connections with established temples.”

“Well, damn it,” Regli snapped, “you’ve got a “proper connection” to the Temple of Sabellia in Ranke itself, and you can’t tell me why my wife’s been two days in labour. And if any of those bitch-midwives who’ve stood shift in there know”—he gestured towards the closed door—“they sure aren’t telling anybody.” Regli knuckled the fringe of blond whiskers sprouting on his jawbone. His wealth and breeding had made him a person of some importance even in Ranke. Here in Sanctuary, where he served as Master of the Scrolls for the royal governor, he was even less accustomed to being balked. The fact that Fate, in the form of his wife’s abnormally-prolonged labour, was balking him infuriated Regli to the point that he needed to lash out at something. “I can’t imagine why Samlane insists on seeing no one but midwives from the Temple of Heqt,” he continued, snapping his riding crop at specks on the mosaic walls. “That place has no very good reputation, I’m told. Not at all.”

“Well, you have to remember that your wife is from Cirdon,” said Mernorad reasonably, keeping a wary eye on his patron’s lash. “Though they’ve been forty years under the Empire, worship of the Trinity hasn’t really caught on there. I’ve investigated the matter, and these women do have proper midwives’ licences. There’s altogether too much loose talk among laymen about “this priesthood” or “that particular healer” not being competent. I assure you that the medical profession keeps very close watch on itself. The worst to be said on the record—the only place it counts—about the Temple of Heqt here in Sanctuary is that thirty years ago the chief priest disappeared. Unfortunate, of course, but nothing to discredit the temple.”

The doctor paused, absently puffing out one cheek, then the other, so that his curly white sideburns flared. “Though I do think,” he added, “that since you have engaged me anyway, that their midwives might consult with one of my, well, stature.”

The door between the morning room and the hall was ajar. A page in Regli’s livery of red and gold tapped the jamb deferentially. The two Rankans looked up, past the servant to the heavier man beyond in the hall. “My lord,” said the page bowing, “Samlor hil Samt.”

Samlor reached past the servant to swing the door fully open before Regli nodded entry. He had unpinned his dull travelling cloak and draped it over his left arm, close to his body where it almost hid the sheathed fighting knife.

Northern fashion, Samlor wore boots and breeches with a long-sleeved over-tunic gathered at the wrists. The garments were plain and would have been a nondescript brown had they not been covered with white road dust. His sole jewellery was a neck thonged silver medallion stamped with the toad face of the goddess Heqt. Samlor's broad face was deep red, the complexion of a man who will never tan but who is rarely out of the sun. He cleared his throat, rubbed his mouth with the back of his big fist, and said, "My sister sent for me. She's in there, the servant says?" He gestured.

"Why yes," said Regli, looking a little puzzled to find the quirt in his hands. The doctor was getting up from his chair. "Why, you're much older, aren't you?" the lord continued inanely.

"Fourteen years," Samlor agreed sourly, stepping past the two Rankans to the bedroom door. He tossed his cloak over one of the ivory-inlaid tables along the wall. "You'd have thought the folks would have guessed something when the five between us were stillborn, but no. Hell, no... And much luck the bitch ever brought them."

"I say!" Regli gasped at the stocky man's back. "You're speaking of my wife!"

Samlor turned, his knuckles already poised to rap on the door panel. "You had a choice," he said. "I'm the one who was running caravans through the mountains, trying to keep the Noble House of Kodrix afloat long enough to marry its daughter well—and her slutting about so that the folks had to go to Ranke to get offers from anybody but a brothel keeper. No wonder they drink." He hammered on the door.

Mernorad tugged the white-faced Regli back. "Master Samlor," the physician said sharply.

"It's Samlor, dammit!" the Cirdonian was shouting in response to a question from within the bedroom. "I didn't ride 500 miles to stand at a damned doorway, either." He turned to Mernorad. "Yes?" he asked.

The physician pointed. "Your weapon," he said. "The lady Samlane has been distraught. Not an uncommon thing for women in her condition, of course. She, ah, attempted to have her condition, ah, terminated some months ago... Fortunately, we got word before... And even though she has since been watched at all times, she, ah, with a spoon... Well. I'd simply rather that—things like your knife—not be where the Lady could snatch them, lest something untoward occur..."

Within the bedroom, a bronze bar creaked as it was lifted from the door slots. Samlor drew his long dagger and laid it on an intaglio table. Only the edge of the steel winked. The hilt was of a hard, pale wood, smooth but wrapped with a webbing of silver wire for a sure grip. The morning room had been decorated by a former occupant. In its mosaic battle scenes and the weapons crossed on its walls, the room suited Samlor's appearance far better than it did that of the young Rankan lord who now owned it.

The door was opened inwards by a sour, grey-haired woman in temple garb. The air that puffed from the bedroom was warm and cloying like the smell of an overripe peach. Two branches of the sextuple oil lamp within had been lighted, adding to the sunlight seeping through the stained glass separating the room from the inner court.

If the midwife looked harsh, then Samlane herself on the bed looked like Death. All the flesh of her face and her long, white hands seemed to have been drawn into the belly that now mounded her linen wrapper. A silk coverlet lay rumped at the foot of the bed. "Come in, brother dear." A spasm rippled the wrapper. Samlane's face froze, her mouth half open. The spasm passed. "I won't keep you long, Samlor," she added through a false smile. "Leah, wait outside."

Midwife, husband, and doctor all began to protest. "Heqt's face, get out, get out!" Samlane shrieked, her voice rising even higher as a new series of contractions racked her. Her piercing fury cut through all objection. Samlor closed the door behind the midwife. Those in the morning room heard the door latched but not barred. Regli's house had been built for room-by-room defence in the days when bandits or a mob would burst into a dwelling and strip it, in despite of anything the government might attempt.

The midwife stood, stiff and dour, with her back to the door. Regli ignored her and slashed at the wall again. "In the year I've known her, Samlane hasn't mentioned her brother a dozen times—and each of those was a curse!" he said.

"You must remember, this is a trying time for the lady, too," Mernorad said. "With her parents, ah, unable to travel, it's natural that she wants her brother—"

"Natural?" Regli shouted. "It's my child she's bearing! My son, perhaps. What am I doing out here?"

"What would you be doing in there?" the doctor observed, tart himself in response to his patron's anger.

Before either could say more, the door swung open, bumping the midwife. Samlor gestured with his thumb. "She wants you to fix her pillows," he said curtly. He picked up his knife and began walking across the morning room towards the hall. The midwife reeled back into the bedroom, hiding all but a glimpse of Samlane's face. The lampstand beside the bed gave her flesh a yellow cast. The bar thudded back in place almost as soon as the door closed.

Regli grabbed Samlor's arm. "But what did she want?" he demanded.

Samlor shook his arm free. "Ask her, if you think it's any of your business," he said. "I'm in no humour to chatter." Then he was out of the room and already past the servant who should have escorted him down the staircase to the front door.

Mernorad blinked. "Certainly a surly brute," he said. "Not at all fit for polite company."

For once it was Regli who was reasonable. "Oh, that's to be expected," he said. "In Cirdon, the nobility always prided itself on being useless—which is why Cirdon is part of the Rankan Empire and not the reverse. It must have bothered him very much when he had to go into trade himself or starve with the rest of his family." Regli cleared his throat, then patted his left palm with the quirt. "That of course explains his hostility towards Samlane and the absurd—"

"Yes; quite absurd," Mernorad agreed hastily.

"—absurd charges he levelled at her," the young noble continued. "Just bitterness, even though he himself had preserved her from the, oh, as he saw it, lowering to which he had been subjected. Actually, I have considerable mining and trading interests myself, besides my—very real—duties here to the State."

The diversion had settled Regli's mind only briefly. He resumed his pacing, the shuffle of his slippers and his occasional snappish comments being almost the only sounds in the morning room for an hour. "Do you hear something?" Mernorad said suddenly.

Regli froze, then ran to the bedroom door. "Samlane!" he shouted. "Samlane!" He gripped the bronze latch and screamed as his palm seared.

Acting with dreadful realization and more strength than was to be expected of a man of his age, Mernorad ripped a battle-axe from the staples holding it to the wall. He swung it against the door panel. The oak had charred to wafer thinness. The heavy blade splintered through, emitting a jet of oxygen into the superheated bedroom.

The room exploded, blasting the door away in a gout of fire and splinters. The flames hurled Mernorad against the far wall as a blazing husk before they curled up to shatter the plastered ceiling.

The flame sucked back, giving Regli a momentary glimpse into the fully-involved room. The midwife had crawled from the bed almost back to the door before she died. The fire had arched her back so that the knife wound in her throat gaped huge and red.

Samlane may have cut her own jugular as well, but too little remained of her to tell. She had apparently soaked the bedding in lamp oil and then clutched the open flame to her. All Regli really had to see, however, to drive him screaming from his house, was the boot knife. The wooden hilt was burned off, and the bare tang poked upright from Samlane's distended belly.

SAMLOR HAD ASKED a street-boy where the Temple of Heqt was. The child had blinked, then brightened and said, "Oh—the Black Spire!" Sitting on a bench outside a tavern across from the temple, Samlor thought he understood why. The temple had been built of grey limestone, its walls set in a square but roofed with the usual hemispherical dome. The obelisk crowning the dome had originally commemorated the victories of Alar hit Aspar, a mercenary general of Cirdonian birth. Alar had done very well by his adopted city—and well enough for himself in the process to be able to endow public buildings as one form of conspicuous consumption. None of Alar's boasts remained visible through the coating three decades of wood and dung smoke had deposited on the spire. Still, to look at it, the worst that could be said about the Temple of Heqt was that it was ugly, filthy, and in a bad district—all of which were true of most other buildings in Sanctuary, so far as Samlor could tell.

As the caravan-master swigged his mug of blue John, an acolyte emerged from the main doorway of the temple. She waved her censer three times and chanted an evening prayer to the disinterested street before retreating back inside.

The tavern's doorway brightened as the tapster stepped out carrying a lantern. "Move, buddy, these're for customers," he said to the classically handsome young man sitting on the other bench. The youth stood but did not leave. The tapster tugged the bench a foot into the doorway, stepped onto it, and hung the lantern from a hook beneath the tavern's sign. The angle of the lantern limned in shadow a rampant unicorn, its penis engorged and as large as the horn on its head.

Instead of returning to the bench on which he had been sitting, the young man sat down beside Samlor. “Not much to look at, is it?” he said to the Cirdonian, nodding towards the temple.

“Nor popular, it seems,” Samlor agreed. He eyed the local man carefully, wondering how much information he could get from him. “Nobody’s gone in there for an hour.”

“Not surprising,” the other man said with a nod. “They come mostly after dark, you know. And you wouldn’t be able to see them from here anyway.”

“No?” said Samlor, sipping a little more of his clabbered milk. “There’s a back entrance?”

“Not just that,” said the local man. “There’s a network of tunnels beneath the whole area. They—the worshippers—enter from inns or shops or tenements from blocks away. In Sanctuary, those who come to Heqt come secretly.”

Samlor’s left hand toyed with his religious medallion. “I’d heard that before,” he said, “and I don’t figure it. Heqt brings the Spring rains... she’s the genetrix, not only in Cirdon but everywhere she’s worshipped at all—except Sanctuary. What happened here?”

“You’re devout, I suppose?” asked the younger man, eyeing the disk with the face of Heqt.

“Devout, devout,” said Samlor with a grimace. “I run caravans, I’m not a priest. Sure, maybe I spill a little drink to Heqt at meals... without her, there’d be no world but desert, and I see enough desert already.”

The stranger’s skin was so pale that it looked yellow now that most of the light was from the lamp above. “Well, they say there was a shrine to Dyarela here before Alar tore it down to build his temple. There wouldn’t be anything left, of course, except perhaps, the tunnels, and they may have been old when the city was built on top of them. Have you heard there’s supposed to be a demon kept in the lower crypts?”

Samlor nodded curtly. “I heard that.”

“A hairy, long-tailed, fang-snapping demon,” said the younger man with a bright smile. “Pretty much of a joke nowadays, of course. People don’t really believe in that sort of thing. Still, the first priest of Heqt here disappeared... And last year Alciros Foin went into the temple with ten hired bravos to find his wife. Nobody saw the bullies again, but Foin was out on the street the next morning. He was alive, even though every inch of skin had been flayed off him.”

Samlor finished his mug of blue John. “Men could have done that,” he said.

“Would you prefer to meet men like that rather than... a demon?” asked the local, smiling. The two men stared in silence at the temple. “Do you want a drink?” Samlor asked abruptly.

“Not I,” said the other. “You say that fellow was looking for his wife?” the Cirdonian pressed, his eyes on the shadow-hidden temple and not on his companion.

“That’s right. Women often go through the tunnels, they say.

Fertility rites. Some say the priests themselves have more to do with any increase in conceptions than the rites do—but what man can say what women are about?”

“And the demon?”

“Aiding the conceptions?” said the local. Samlor had kept his face turned from the other so that he would not have to see his smile, but the smile freighted the words themselves sickly. “Perhaps, but some people will say anything. That would be a night for the... suppliant, wouldn’t it?”

Samlor turned and smiled back, baring his teeth like a cat eyeing a throat vein. “Quite a night indeed,” he said. “Are there any places known to have entrances to—that?” He gestured across the dark street. “Or is it just rumour? Perhaps this inn itself?”

“There’s a hostel west of here a furlong,” said the youth. “Near the Beef Market—the Man in Motley. They say there’s a network beneath like worm tunnels, not really connected to each other. A man could enter one and walk for days without ever seeing another soul.”

Samlor shrugged. He stood and whistled for attention, then tossed his empty mug to the tapster behind the bar. ‘Just curiosity,” he said to his companion. ‘I’ve never been in Sanctuary before.” Samlor stepped into the street, over a drain which held something long dead. When he glanced back, he saw the local man still seated empty-handed on the bench. In profile against the light, his face had the perfection of an ancient cameo.

SAMLOR WORE BOOTS and he was long familiar with dark nights and bad footing, so he did not bother to hire a linkman. When he passed a detachment of the Watch, the Imperial officer in command stared at the dagger the Cirdonian now carried bare in his hand. Still, Samlor looked to be no more than he was, a sturdy man who would rather warn off robbers than kill them, but who was willing and able to do either. I’ll have to buy another boot knife, Samlor thought; but for the time he’d make do, make do...

The Man in Motley was a floor lower than the four-story tenements around it. The ground level was well lighted. Across the street behind a row of palings, a slave gang worked under lamps scraping dung from the cobbles of the Beef Market. Tomorrow their load would be dried in the sun for fuel. The public room of the inn was occupied by a score of men, mostly drovers in leather and homespun. A barmaid in her fifties was serving a corner booth. As Samlor entered, the host thrust through the hangings behind the bar with a cask on his shoulder.

Samlor had sheathed his knife. He nodded to the brawny innkeeper and ducked beneath the bar himself. ‘Hey!” cried the host.

“It’s all right,” Samlor muttered. He slipped behind the hangings.

A stone staircase, lighted halfway by an oil lamp, led down into the cellars. Samlor followed it, taking the lamp with him. The floor beneath the public room was of dirt. A large trap, now closed and bolted, gave access to deliveries from the street fronting the inn. The walls were lined with racked bottles, small casks, and great forty-gallon fooders set on end. One of the fooders was of wood so time-blackened as to look charred. Samlor rapped it with his knife hilt, then compared the sound to the duller note of the tub beside it.

The stairs creaked as the host descended. He held a bung-starter in one heavy fist. “Didn’t they tell you to go by the side?” he rasped. “D’ye think I want the

name of running a devil's brothel?" He took another step. "By Ils and his sisters, you'll remember the next time!"

Samlor's fingers moved on his knife hilt. He still held the point away from the innkeeper. "We don't have a quarrel," he said.

"Let's leave it at that."

The host spat as he reached the bottom of the stairs. "Sure, I know you hot pants folderols. Well, when I'm done with you, you take my greetings to your pandering psalm-singers and tell them there'll be no more customers through here!"

"The priests share their privileges for a price?" Samlor said in sudden enlightenment. "But I don't come for sex, friend."

Whatever the tavern-keeper thought he understood, it frightened him as sight of the dagger had not. He paused with the bung-starter half raised. First he swallowed. Then, with a guttural sound of pure terror he flung the mallet into the shadows and fled back up the stairs. Samlor frowned, shrugged, and turned again to the fooder.

There was a catch disguised as a knot, obvious enough if one knew something of the sort had to be there. Pressed, the side of the cask swung out to reveal a dry, dark tunnel sloping gently downward. Samlor's tongue touched his lips. It was, after all, what he had been looking for. He picked up the lamp, now burned well down. He stepped into the tunnel, closing the door behind him.

The passage twisted but did not branch. It was carved through dense, yellow clay, shored at intervals with timbers too blackened for Samlor to identify the wood. There were tiny skitterings which seemed to come from just beyond the light. Samlor walked slowly enough not to lose the lampflame, steadily enough not to lose his nerve. Despite the disgrace of his vocation, Samlor was a noble of Cirdon; and there was no one else in his family to whom he could entrust this responsibility.

There was a sound behind him. Without turning, Samlor lashed out with a boot. His hobnails ground into something warm and squealing where his eyes saw nothing at all. He paused for a moment to finger his medallion of Heqt, then continued. The skittering preceded him at a greater distance.

When the tunnel entered a shelf of rock it broadened suddenly into a low ceilinged, circular room. Samlor paused. He held his lamp out at arm's length and a little back of his line of sight so that the glare would not blind him. The room was huge and empty, pierced by a score of doorways. Each but the one at which Samlor stood and one other was closed by an iron grate.

Samlor touched but did not draw his double-edged dagger. "I'll play your silly game," he whispered. Taking short steps, he walked around the circumference of the room and out the other open door. Another empty passage stretched beyond it. Licking his lips again, Samlor followed the new tunnel.

The double clang of gratings behind him was not really unexpected. Samlor waited, poised behind his knife point, but no one came down the stone boring from either direction. No one and no thing. Samlor resumed walking, the tunnel curving and perhaps descending slightly with each step. The stone was beginning to vibrate, a tremor that was too faint to be music.



The passage broadened again. This time the room so formed was not empty. Samlor spun to face what first seemed a man standing beside the doorway. The figure's only movement was the flicker of the lampflame over its metallic lustre. The Cirdonian moved closer and prodded the empty torso. It was a racked suit of mail, topped by a slot-fronted helmet.

Samlor scratched at a link of the armour, urged by a suspicion that he did not consciously credit even as he attempted to prove it. The tightly-woven rings appeared to be of verdigrised copper, but the edge of Samlor's knife could not even mar the apparent corrosion. "Blood and balls," the caravan-master swore under his breath.

He was touching one of the two famed suits of armour forged by the sorcerer Hast-ra-kodi in the fire of a burning diamond. Forged with the help of two demons, legend had it; and if that was open to doubt by a modern rationalist, there could be no doubt at all that the indestructible armour had clothed heroes for three of the five ages of the world.

Then, twelve hundred years ago, the twin brothers Harash and Hakkad had donned the mail and marched against the wizard-prince Sterl. A storm overtook the expedition in the mountains; and in the clear light of dawn, all had disappeared—armour, brothers, and the three thousand men of their armament. Some said the earth had gaped; others, that everything had been swallowed by the still-wider jaws of airy monsters whose teeth flashed in the lightning and whose backs arched high as the thunderheads. Whatever the cause, the armour had vanished in that night. The reappearance of one of the suits in this underground room gave Samlor his first tangible proof of the power that slunk through the skittering passages.

From the opening across the room came the sound of metal scraping stone, scraping and jingling. Samlor backed against the wall, sucking his cheeks hollow.

Into the chamber of living rock stepped the other suit of Hast-ra-kodi's armour. This one fitted snugly about a man whom it utterly covered, creating a figure which had nothing human in it but its shape. The unknown metal glowed green, and the sword the figure bore free in one gauntleted hand blazed like a green torch.

"Do you come to worship Dyareela?" the figure asked in a voice rusty with disuse.

Samlor set his lamp carefully on the flooring and sidled a pace away from it. "I worship Heqt," he said, fingering his medallion with his left hand. "And some others, perhaps. But not Dyareela."

The figure laughed as it took a step forwards. "I worshipped Heqt, too. I was her priest—until I came down into the tunnels to purge them of the evil they held." The tittering laughter ricocheted about the stone walls like the sound caged weasels make. "Dyareela put a penance on me in return for my life, my life, my life... I wear this armour. That will be your penance too, Cirdonian: put on the other suit."

"Let me pass, priest," Samlor said. His hands were trembling. He clutched them together on his bosom. His fighting knife was sheathed.

"No priest," the figure rasped, advancing.

"Man! Let me pass!"

“No man, not man,” said the thing, its blade rising and a flame that dimmed the oil lamp. “They say you keep your knife sharp, suppliant—but did gods forge it? Can it shear the mesh of Hast-ra-kodi?”

Samlor palmed the bodkin-pointed push dagger from his wrist sheath and lunged, his left foot thrusting against the wall of the chamber. Armour or no armour, the priest was not a man of war. Samlor’s left hand blocked the sword arm while his right slammed the edgeless dagger into the figure’s chest. The bodkin slipped through the rings like thread through a needle’s eye. The figure’s mailed fist caught the Cirdonian and tore the skin over his cheek. Samlor had already twisted his steel clear. He punched it home again through armour, ribs, and the spongy lungs within.

The figure staggered back. The sword clanged to the stone flooring. “What—?” it began. Something slopped and gurgled within the indestructible helmet. The dagger hilt was a dark tumour against the glowing mail. The figure groped vainly at the knob hilt with both hands. “What are you?” it asked in a whisper. “You’re not a man, not...” Muscles and sinews loosened as the brain controlling them starved for lack of oxygen. One knee buckled and the figure sprawled headlong on the stone. The green glow seeped out of it like blood from a rag, staining the flooring and dripping through it in turn.

“If you’d been a man in your time,” Samlor said harshly, “I wouldn’t have had to be here now.”

He rolled the figure over to retrieve his bodkin from the bone in which it had lodged. Haemorrhages from mouth and nose had smeared the front of the helmet. To Samlor’s surprise, the suit of mail now gaped open down the front. It was ready to be stripped off and worn by another. The body within was shrivelled, its skin as white as that of the grubs which burrow beneath tree bark.

Samlor wiped his edgeless blade with thumb and forefinger. A tiny streak of blood was the only sign that it had slipped between metal lines to do murder. The Cirdonian left both suits of armour in the room. They had not preserved other wearers. Wizard mail and its tricks were for those who could control it, and Samlor was all too conscious of his own humanity.

The passageway bent, then formed a tee with a narrow corridor a hundred paces long. The corridor was closed at either end by living rock. Its far wall was, by contrast, artificial—basalt hexagons a little more than a foot in diameter across the flats. There was no sign of a doorway. Samlor remembered the iron grates clanging behind him what seemed a lifetime ago. He wiped his right palm absently on his thigh.

The caravan-master walked slowly down and back the length of the corridor, from end to end. The basalt plaques were indistinguishable one from another. They rose ten feet to a bare ceiling which still bore the tool-marks of its cutting. Samlor stared at the basalt from the head of the tee, aware that the oil in his lamp was low and that he had no way of replenishing it.

After a moment he looked down at the floor. Struck by a sudden notion, he opened his fly and urinated at the base of the wall. The stream splashed, then rolled steadily to the right down the invisible trench worn by decades of footsteps. Thirty feet down the corridor the liquid stopped and pooled, slimed with patches of dust that broke up the reflected lamplight.

Samlor examined with particular care the plaques just beyond the pool of urine. The seeming music was louder here. He set his knife-point against one of the hexagons and touched his forehead to the butt-cap. Clearly and triumphantly rolled the notes of a hydraulic organ, played somewhere in the complex of tunnels. Samlor sheathed the knife again and sighted along the stones themselves, holding the light above his head. The polished surface of one waist high plaque had been dulled by sweat and wear. Samlor pressed it and the next hexagon over hinged out of the wall.

The plaque which had lifted was only a hand's breadth thick, but what the lamp showed beyond it was a tunnel rather than a room: the remainder of the wall was of natural basalt columns, twenty feet long and lying on their sides. To go further, Samlor would have to crawl along a hole barely wide enough to pass his shoulders; and the other end was capped as well.

Samlor had spent his working life under an open sky. He had thus far borne the realization of the tons of rock above his head only by resolutely not thinking about it. This rat-hole left him no choice... but he would go through it anyway. A man had to be able to control his mind, or he wasn't a man...

The Cirdonian set the lamp on the floor. It would gutter out in a few minutes anyway. If he had tried to take it into the tunnel with him, it would almost immediately have sucked all the life from the narrow column of air among the hexagons. He drew his fighting knife and, holding both arms out in front of him, wormed through the opening. His body blocked all but the least glimmer of the light behind him, and the black basalt drank even that.

Progress was a matter of groping with boot toes and left palm, fighting the friction of his shoulders and pelvis scraping the rock. Samlor took shallow breaths, but even so before he had crawled his own length the air became stale. It hugged him like a flabby blanket as he inched forwards in the darkness. The music of the water organ was all about him.

The knife-point clinked on the far capstone. Samlor squirmed a little nearer, prayed to Heqt, and thrust outwards with his left hand. The stone swung aside. Breathable air flooded the Cirdonian with the rush of organ music.

Too relieved to be concerned at what besides air might wait beyond the opening, Samlor struggled out. He caught himself on his knuckles and left palm, then scabbled to get his legs back under him. He had crawled through the straight side of a semicircular room. Panels in the arched ceiling fifty feet above his head lighted the room ochre. It was surely not dawn yet. Samlor realized he had no idea of what might be the ultimate source of the clear, rich light.

The hydraulic organ must still be at a distance from this vaulted chamber, but the music made the walls vibrate with its intensity. There was erotic love in the higher notes, and from the lower register came fear as deep and black as that which had settled in Samlor's belly hours before. Lust and mindless hatred lilted, rippling and bubbling through the sanctuary. Samlor's fist squeezed his dagger hilt in frustration. He was only the thickness of the edge short of running amok in this empty room. Then he caught himself, breathed deeply, and sheathed the weapon until he had a use for it.

An archway in the far wall suggested a door. Samlor began walking towards it, aware of the scrapes the basalt had given him and the groin muscle he had pulled

while wrestling with the figure in armour. I'm not as young as I was, he thought. Then he smiled in a way that meshed all too well with the pattern of the music: after all, he was likely through with the problems of ageing very soon.

The sanctuary was strewn with pillows and thick brocades. There was more substantial furniture also. Its patterns were unusual but their function was obvious in context. Samlor had crossed enough of the world to have seen most things, but his personal tastes remained simple. He thought of Samlane; fury lashed him again. This time instead of gripping the knife, he touched the medallion of Heqt. He kicked at a rack of switches. They clattered into a construct of ebony with silken tie-downs. Its three hollow levels could be adjusted towards one another by the pulleys and levers at one end of it.

Well, it wasn't for her, Samlor thought savagely. It was for the house, the honour of the Lords Kodrix of Cirton. And perhaps—perhaps for Heqt. He'd never been a religious man, always figured it'd be best if the gods settled things among themselves... but there were some things that any man—Well, that was a lie. Not any man, just Samlor hil Samt for sure and probably no other fool so damned on the whole continent. Well, so be it then; he was a fool and a fanatic, and before the night finished he'd have spilled the blood of a so-called demon or died trying.

Because the illumination was from above, Samlor had noticed the bas reliefs only as patterns of shadows along the walls. The detail struck him as he approached the archway. He stopped and looked carefully.

The carvings formed a series of panels running in bands across the polished stone. The faces in each tableau were modelled with a precise detail that made it likely they were portraits, though none of the personages were recognizable to Samlor. He peered up the curving walls and saw the bands continuing to the roof vaults. How and when they had been carved was beyond estimation; the caravan-master was not even sure he could identify the stone, creamy and mottled but seemingly much harder than marble.

Time was of indeterminable importance. Knowing that he might have only minutes to live, Samlor began following some of the series of reliefs. One group of carvings made clear the unguessed unity between the "sorcerer" Hast-ra-kodi and the "goddess" Dyareela. Samlor stared at the conclusion of the pattern, swallowing hard but not speaking. He was unutterably glad he had not donned either suit of mail when he might have done so.

The panels reeked of bloodshed and repression. Kings and priests had stamped out the worship of Dyareela a hundred times in a hundred places. The rites had festered in the darkness, then burst out again—cancers metastasizing from the black lump here in the vaults beneath Sanctuary. A shrine in the wasteland before it was a city; and even as a city, a brawling, stinking, leaderless hive where no one looked too hard for Evil's heart since Evil's limbs enveloped all.

Alar hil Aspar—a brash outsider, a reformer flushed with his triumph over brigandage—had at last razed the fane of Dyareela here. Instead of salt, he had sown the ruins with a temple to Heqt, the goddess of his upbringing. Fool that he was. Alar had thought that ended it.

Just above the archway, set off from the courses around it by a border of ivy leaves, was a cameo that caught Samlor's eye as he returned sick and exhausted by what he had been looking at. A file of women led by a piper cavorted through

the halls of a palace. The women carried small animals and icons of obviously more than symbolic significance, but it was to the piper's features that Samlor's gaze was drawn. The Cirdonian swore mildly and reached up to touch the stone. It was smooth and cold to his fingertips.

So much fit. Enough, perhaps.

Samlor stepped through the double-hung doors closing the archway. The crossbowman waiting beyond with his eyes on the staircase screamed and spun around. The patterned screen that would have concealed the ambush from someone descending the stairs was open to the archway—but judging from the bowman's panic, the mere sight of something approaching from the sanctuary would probably have flushed him anyway.

Samlor had survived too many attacks ever to be wholly unprepared for another. He lunged forwards, shouting to further disconcert the bowman. The screen was toppling as the bowman jerked back from the fingers of Samlor's left hand thrusting for his eyes. The bowstring slapped and the quarrel spalled chips from the archway before ricocheting sideways through a swinging door-panel. Samlor, sprawled across his attacker's lower legs, slashed at the other's face with the knife he had finally cleared. The bowman cried out again and parried with the stock of his own weapon. Samlor's edge thudded into the wood like an axe in a firelog. Three of the bowman's fingers flew out into the room.

Unaware of his maiming, the bowman tried to club Samlor with his weapon. It slipped away from him. He saw the blood-spouting stumps of his left hand, the index finger itself half severed. Fright had made the bowman scream; mutilation now choked his voice with a rush of vomit.

Samlor squirmed forwards, pinning his attacker's torso with his own. He wrestled the crossbow out of the unresisting right hand. There was a pouch of iron quarrels at the bowman's belt, but Samlor ignored them: they were on the left side and no longer a threat. The gagging man wore the scarlet and gold livery of Regli's household.

The Cirdonian glanced quickly around the room, seeing nothing but a helical staircase reaching towards more lighted panels a hundred feet above. He waggled his knife a foot from his captive's eyes, then brought the point of it down on the other's nose. "You tried to kill me," he said softly. "Tell me why or you're missing more than some fingers only."

"Sabellia, Sabellia," the maimed retainer moaned. "You've ruined me now, you bastard."

Samlor flicked his blade sideways, knowing that the droplet of blood that sprang out would force the other's eyes to cross on it. They would fill with its red proximity. "Talk to me, little man," the caravan-master said. "Why are you here?"

The injured man swallowed bile. "My lord Regli," he said, closing his eyes to avoid the blood and the dagger point. "He said you'd killed his wife. He sent us all after you."

Samlor laid the dagger point on the other's left eyesocket. "How many?" he demanded.

"A dozen," gabbled the other. "All the guards and us coachmen besides."

"The Watch?"

“Oh, gods, get that away from my eye,” the retainer moaned. “I almost shook—” Samlor raised the blade an inch. “Not the Watch,” the other went on. “My lord wants to handle this himself for the, the scandal.”

“And where are the others?” the point dipped, brushed an eyelash, and rose again harmlessly.

The wounded man was rigid. He breathed through his mouth, quick gasps as if a lungful of air would preserve him in the moment the knife-edge sawed through his windpipe. “They all thought you’d run for Cirdon,” he whispered. “You’d left your cloak behind. I slipped it away, took it to a S’danzo I know. She’s a liar like all of them, but sometimes not... I told her I’d pay her for the truth of where I’d find you, and I’d pay her for nothing; but I’d take a lie out other hide if six of my friends had to hold down her blacksmith buddy. She, she described where I’d meet you. I recognized it, I’d taken the Lady Samlane—”

“Here?” Samlor’s voice and his knife both trembled. Death slid closer to the room than it had been since the first slash and scramble of the fight.

“Lord, lord,” the captive pleaded. “Only this far. I swear by my mother’s bones!”

“Go on, then.” The knife did not move.

The other man swallowed. “That’s all. I waited here—I didn’t tell anybody. Lord Regli put a thousand royals on your head... and... and the S’danzo said I’d live through the meeting. Oh gods, the slut, the slut...”

Samlor smiled. “She hasn’t lied to you yet,” he said. The smile was gone, replaced with a bleakness as cruel as the face of a glacier. “Listen,” he went on, rising to one knee and pinning his prisoner by psychological dominance in the stead of his body weight. “My sister asked me for a knife. I told her I’d leave her one if she gave me a reason to.”

A spasm wracked the Cirdonian’s face. His prisoner winced at the trembling of the dagger point. “She said the child wasn’t Regli’s,” Samlor went on. “Well, who ever thought it would be, the way she sniffed around? But she said a demon had got it on her... and that bothered even her at the last. Being used, she said. Being used. She’d tried to have it aborted after she thought about things for a while, but a priest of Heqt was waiting with Regli in the shop where she’d gone to buy the drugs. After that, she wasn’t without somebody watching her, asleep or awake. The Temple of Heqt wanted the child born. Samlane said she’d use the knife to end the child when they pulled it from her... and I believed that, though I knew she’d be in no shape for knifings just after she’d whelped.

“Seems she knew that too, but she was more determined than even I’d have given her credit for being. She could give a lot of folks points for stubborn, my sister.”

Samlor shook himself, then gripped a handful of the captive’s tunic. He ripped the garment with his knife. “What are you doing?” the retainer asked in concern.

“Tying you up. Somebody’ll find you here in time. I’m going to do what I came here for, and when it’s done I’ll leave Sanctuary. If I’ve got that option still.”

Sweat was washing streaks in the blood-flecks on the captive’s face. “Sweet goddess, don’t do that,” he begged. “Not tied, not—that. You haven’t been here when... others were here. You—” the injured man wiped his lips with his tongue. He closed his eyes. “Kill me yourself, if you must,” he said so softly it was almost a matter for lip-reading to understand him. “Don’t leave me here.”

Samlor stood. His left hand was clenched, his right holding the dagger pointed down at a slight angle. "Stand up," he ordered. Regli's man obeyed, wide-eyed. He braced his back against the wall, holding his left hand at shoulder height but refusing to look at its ruin. The severed arteries had pinched off. Movement had dislodged some of the scabs, but the blood only oozed instead of spurting as it had initially. "Tell Regli that I'm mending my family's honour in my way, as my sister seems to have done in hers," Samlor said. "But don't tell him where you found me—or how. If you want to leave here now, you'll swear that."

"I swear!" the other babbled. "By anything you please!" The caravan-master's smile flickered again. "Did you ever kill anyone, boy?" he asked conversationally.

"I was a coachman," the other said with a nervous frown. "I—I mean... no."

"Once I pulled a man apart with hot pincers," Samlor continued quietly. "He was headman of a tribe that had taken our toll payment but still tried to cut out a couple of horses from the back of our train. I slipped into the village that night, jerked the chief out of his bed, and brought him back to the laager. In the morning I fixed him as a display for the rest." The Cirdonian reached forwards and wiped his dagger clean on the sleeve of the other man's tunic. "Don't go back on your word to me, friend," he said.

Regli's man edged to the helical staircase. As he mounted each of the first dozen steps, he looked back over his shoulder at the Cirdonian. When the pursuit or thrown knife did not come as he had feared or expected, the retainer ran up the next twenty steps without pausing. He looked down from that elevation and said, "One thing, master."

"Say it," responded Samlor.

"They opened the Lady Samlane to give the child separate burial."

"Yes?"

"And it didn't look to be demon spawn, as you say," Regli's man called. "It was a perfect little boy. Except that your knife was through its skull."

Samlor began to climb the steps, ignoring the scrabbling slippers of the man above him on the twisting staircase. The door at the top thudded, leaving nothing of the hapless ambusher but splotches of his blood on the railing. Should have stuck to his horses, Samlor thought. He laughed aloud, well aware that the epitaph probably applied to himself as well. Still, he had a better notion than that poor fool of a coachman of what he was getting into... though the gods all knew how slight were his chances of getting out of it alive. If the fellow he was looking for was a real magician, rather than someone like Samlor himself who had learned a few spells while knocking around the world, it was over for sure.

The door at the top of the stairs pivoted outward. Samlor tested it with a fingertip, then paused to steady his heart and breathing. As he stood there, his left hand sought the toad-faced medallion.

The dagger in his right hand pointed down, threatening nothing at the moment but—ready.

He pushed the door open.

On the other side, the secret opening was only a wall panel. Its frescoes were geometric and in no way different from those of the rest of the temple hallway. To the left, the hall led to an outside door heavily banded with iron. From his livery and the mutilation of his outflung left hand, the coachman could be recognized

where he lay. The rest of the retainer appeared to have been razored into gobbets of flesh and bone, no other one of them as large as what remained of the left hand. Under the circumstances, Samlor had no sympathy to waste on the corpse.

The Cirdonian sighed and turned to the right, stepping through the hangings of brass beads into the sanctuary of Heqt. The figure he expected was waiting for him.

Soft, grey dawnlight crept through hidden slits in the dome. Mirrors had been designed to light the grinning, gilded toad-face of Heqt at the top of the dome beneath the spire. Instead, the light was directed downwards onto the figure on the floral mosaic in the centre of the great room. The hair of the waiting man glowed like burning wire. "Did the night keep you well, friend?" Samlor called as he stepped forwards.

"Well," agreed the other with a nod. There was no sign of the regular priests and acolytes of Heqt. The room brightened as if the light fed on the beauty of the waiting man. "As I see she kept you, Champion of Heqt."—

"No champion," Samlor said, taking another step as casual as the long knife dangling from his right hand. "Just a man looking for the demon who caused his sister's death. I didn't have to look any farther than the bench across the street last night, did I?"

The other's voice was a rich tenor. It had a vibrancy that had been missing when he and Samlor had talked of Heqt and Dyareela the night before. "Heqt keeps sending her champions, and I... I deal with them. You met the first of them, the priest?"

"I came looking for a demon," the Cirdonian said, walking very slowly, "and all it was was a poor madman who had convinced himself that he was a god."

"I am Dyareela."

"You're a man who saw an old carving down below that looked like him," Samlor said. "That worked on your mind, and you worked on other people's minds. ... My sister, now, she was convinced her child would look like a man but be a demon. She killed it in her womb. The only way that she'd have been able to kill it, because they'd never have let her near it, Regli's heir, and her having tried abortion. But such a waste, because it was just a child, only a madman's child."

The sun-crowned man gripped the throat of his white tunic and ripped downwards with unexpected strength. "I am Dyareela," it said. Its right breast was pendulous, noticeably larger than the left. The male genitals were of normal size, flaccid, hiding the vulva that must lie behind them. "The one there," it said, gesturing towards the wall beyond which the coachman lay, "came to my fane to shed blood without my leave." The naked figure giggled. "Perhaps I'll have you wash in his blood. Champion," it said. "Perhaps that will be the start of your penance."

"A mad little hermaphrodite who knows a spell or two," Samlor said. "But there'll be no penance for any again from you, little one. You're fey, and I know a spell for your sort. She wasn't much, but I'll have your heart for what you led my sister to."

"Will you conjure me by Heqt, then. Champion?" asked the other with its arms spread in welcome and laughter in its liquid voice. "Her temple is my temple, her servants are my servants ... the blood other champions is mine for a sacrifice!"



Samlor was twenty feet away, a full turn and half a turn. He clutched his medallion left-handed, hoping it would give him enough time to complete his spell. “Do I look like a priest to talk about gods?” he said. “Watch my dagger, madman.”

The other smiled, waiting as Samlor cocked the heavy blade. It caught a stray beam of sunlight. The double edge flashed black dawn.

*“By the Earth that bore this,” Samlor cried, “and the Mind that gave it shape; By the roun of this hilt and the silver wire that laps it; By the cold iron of this blade and by the white-hot flames it flowed from; By the blood it has drunk and the souls it has eaten*

*—Know thy hour”*

Samlor hurled the dagger. It glinted as it rotated. The blade was point-first and a hand’s breadth from the smiling face when it exploded in a flash and a thunderclap that shook the city. The concussion hurled Samlor backwards, bleeding from the nose and ears. The air was dense with flecks of paint and plaster from the frescoed ceiling. Dyareela stood with the same smile, arms lifting in triumph, lips opening further in throaty laughter. “Mine for a sacrifice!”

A webbing of tiny cracks was spreading from the centre of the dome high above. Samlor staggered to his feet, choking on dust and knowing that if he was lucky he was about to die.

Heqt’s gilded bronze head, backed by the limestone spire, plunged down from the ceiling. It struck Dyareela’s upturned face like a two-hundred-ton crossbow bolt. The floor beneath disintegrated. The limestone column scarcely slowed, hurtling out of sight as the earth itself shuddered to the impact.

Samlor lost his footing in the remains of Regli’s coachman. An earth-shock pitched him forwards against the door panel. It was unlocked. The Cirdonian lunged out into the street as the shattered dome followed its pinnacle into a cavern that gaped with a sound like the lowest note of an organ played by gods.

Samlor sprawled in the muddy street. All around him men were shouting and pointing. The Cirdonian rolled onto his back and looked at the collapsing temple.

Above the ruins rose a pall of shining dust. More than imagination shaped the cloud into the head of a toad.

