

Spiders of the Purple Mage

**Thieves' World -
Tales From the Vulgar Unicorn, #11**

by Philip José Farmer, 1918-2009

Published: 1980



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Editor's Note

THE PERCEPTIVE READER may notice small inconsistencies in the characters appearing in these stories. Their speech patterns, their accounts of certain events, and their observations on the town's pecking order vary from time to time.

These are not inconsistencies!

The reader should consider the contradictions again, bearing three things in mind.

First, each story is told from a different viewpoint, and different people see and hear things differently. Even readily observable facts are influenced by individual perceptions and opinions. Thus, a minstrel narrating a conversation with a magician would give a different account than would a thief witnessing the same exchange.

Second, the citizens of Sanctuary are by necessity more than a little paranoid. They tend to either omit or slightly alter information in conversation. This is done more reflexively than out of premeditation, as it is essential for survival in this community.

Finally, Sanctuary is a fiercely competitive environment. One does not gain employment by admitting to being "the second-best swordsman in town". In addition to exaggerating one's own status, it is commonplace to downgrade or ignore one's closest competitors. As a result, the pecking order of Sanctuary will vary depending on who you talk to... or more importantly, who you believe.

Introduction

MOVING HIS HEAD with minute care to avoid notice, Hakiem the Storyteller studied the room over the untouched rim of his wine cup. This was, of course, done through slitted eyes. It would not do to have anyone suspect he was not truly asleep. What he saw only confirmed his growing feelings of disgust.

The Vulgar Unicorn was definitely going downhill. A drunk was snoring on the floor against the wall, passed out in a puddle of his own vomit, while several beggars made their way from table to table, interrupting the undertoned negotiations and haggings of the tavern's normal clientele.

Though his features never moved, Hakiem grimaced inside. Such goings on were never tolerated when One-Thumb was around. The bartender/owner of the Vulgar Unicorn had always been quick to evict such riffraff as fast as they

appeared. While the tavern had always been shunned by the more law-abiding citizens of Sanctuary, one of the main reasons it was favoured by the rougher element was that here a man could partake of a drink or perhaps a little larcenous conversation uninterrupted. This tradition was rapidly coming to an end.

The fact that he would not be allowed to linger for hours over a cup of the tavern's cheapest wine if One-Thumb were here never entered Hakiem's mind. He had a skill. He was a storyteller, a tale-spinner, a weaver of dreams and nightmares. As such, he considered himself on a measurably better plane than the derelicts who had taken to frequenting the place.

One-Thumb had been missing for a long time now, longer than any of his previous mysterious disappearances. Fear of his return kept the tavern open and the employees honest, but the place was degenerating in his absence. The only way it could sink any lower would be if a Hell Hound took to drinking here.

Despite his guise of slumber, Hakiem found himself smiling at that thought. A Hell Hound in the Vulgar Unicorn! Unlikely at best. Sanctuary still chafed at the occupying force from the Rankan Empire, and the five Hell Hounds were hated second only to the military governor. Prince Kadakithis, whom they guarded. Though it was a close choice between Prince Kitty-Cat with his naive lawmaking and the elite soldiers who enforced his words, the citizens of Sanctuary generally felt the military governor's quest to clean up the worse hellhole in the Empire was stupid, while the Hell Hounds were simply devilishly efficient. In a town where one was forced to live by wit as often as skill, efficiency could be grudgingly admired, while stupidity, particularly stupidity with power, could only be despised.

No, the Hell Hounds weren't stupid. Tough, excellent swordsmen and seasoned veterans, they seldom set foot in the Maze, and never entered the Vulgar Unicorn. On the west side of town, it was said that one only came here if he was seeking death ... or selling it. While the statement was somewhat exaggerated, it was true that most of the people who frequented the Maze either had nothing to lose or were willing to risk everything for what they might gain there. As rational men, the Hell Hounds were unlikely to put in an appearance at the Maze's most notorious tavern.

Still, the point remained that the Vulgar Unicorn sorely needed One-Thumb's presence and that his return was long overdue. In part, that was why Hakiem was spending so much time here of late: hope of acquiring the story of One-Thumb's return and possibly the story of his absence. That alone would be enough to keep the storyteller haunting the tavern, but the stories he gained during his wait were a prize in themselves. Hakiem was a compulsive collector of stories, from habit as well as by profession, and many stories had their beginnings, middles, or ends within these walls. He collected them all, though he knew that most of them could not be repeated, for he knew the value of a story is in its merit, not in its saleability.

Chapter 1

THIS WAS THE week of the great rat hunt in Sanctuary.

The next week, all the cats that could be caught were killed and degutted.

The third week, all dogs were run down and disembowelled.

Masha zil-Ineel was one of the very few people in the city who didn't take part in the rat hunt. She just couldn't believe that any rat, no matter how big, and there were some huge ones in Sanctuary, could swallow a jewel so large.

But when a rumour spread that someone had seen a cat eat a dead rat and that the cat had acted strangely afterwards, she thought it wise to pretend to chase cats. If she hadn't, people might wonder why not. They might think that she knew something they didn't. And then she might be the one run down.

Unlike the animals, however, she'd be tortured until she told where the jewel was.

She didn't know where it was. She wasn't even sure that there was an emerald.

But everybody knew that she'd been told about the jewel by Benna nus-Katarz. Thanks to Masha's blabbermouth drunken husband, Eevroen.

Three weeks ago, on a dark night, Masha had returned late from midwifing in the rich merchants' Eastern quarter. It was well past midnight, but she wasn't sure of the hour because of the cloud-covered sky. The second wife of Shoozh the spice-importer had borne her fourth infant. Masha had attended to the delivery personally while Doctor Nadeesh had sat in the next room, the door only half closed, and listened to her reports. Nadeesh was forbidden to see any part of a female client except for those normally exposed and especially forbidden to see the breasts and genitals. If there was any trouble with the birthing, Masha would inform him, and he would give her instructions.

This angered Masha, since the doctors collected half of the fee, yet were seldom of any use. In fact, they were usually a hindrance.

Still, half a fee was better than none. What if the wives and concubines of the wealthy were as nonchalant and hardy as the poor women, who just squatted down wherever they happened to be when the pangs started and gave birth unassisted? Masha could not have supported herself, her two daughters, her invalid mother, or her lazy alcoholic husband. The money she made from doing the more affluent women's hair and from her tooth-pulling and manufacture of false teeth in the marketplace wasn't enough. But midwifery added the income that kept her and her family just outside hunger's door.

She would have liked to pick up more money by cutting men's hair in the marketplace, but both law and ancient custom forbade that.

Shortly after she had burned the umbilical cord of the new-born to ensure that demons didn't steal it and had ritualistically washed her hands, she left Shoozh's house. His guards, knowing her, let her through the gate without challenge, and the guards of the gate to the eastern quarters also allowed her to pass. Not however without offers from a few to share their beds with her that night.

"I can do much better than that sot of a husband of yours!" one said.

Masha was glad that her hood and the darkness prevented the guards from seeing her burning face by the torchlight. However, if they could have seen that she was blushing with shame, they might have been embarrassed. They would know then that they weren't dealing with a brazen slut of the Maze but with a

woman who had known better days and a higher position in society than she now held. The blush alone would have told them that.

What they didn't know and what she couldn't forget was that she had once lived in this walled area and her father had been an affluent, if not wealthy, merchant.

She passed on silently. It would have made her feel good to have told them her past and then ripped them with the invective she'd learned in the Maze. But to do that would lower her estimate of herself.

Though she had her own torch and the means for lighting it in the cylindrical leather case on her back, she did not use them. It was better to walk unlit and hence unseen into the streets. Though many of the lurkers in the shadows would let her pass unmolested, since they had known her when she was a child, others would not be so kind. They would rob her for the tools of her trade and the clothes she wore and some would rape her. Or try to.

Through the darkness she went swiftly, her steps sure because of long experience. The adobe buildings of the city were a dim whitish bulk ahead. Then the path took a turn, and she saw some small flickers of light here and there. Torches. A little further, and a light became a square. The window of a tavern.

She entered a narrow winding street and strode down its centre. Turning a corner, she saw a torch in a bracket on the wall of a house and two men standing near it. Immediately she crossed to the far side and, hugging the walls, passed the two. Their pipes glowed redly; she caught a whiff of the pungent and sickly smoke of kleetel, the drug used by the poor when they didn't have money for the more expensive krrf. Which was most of the time.

After two or three pipefuls, the smokers would be vomiting. But they would claim that the euphoria would make the upchucking worth it.

There were other odours: garbage piled by the walls, slop-jars of excrement, and puke from kleetel smokers and drunks. The garbage would be shovelled into goat drawn carts by Downwinders whose families had long held this right. The slop jars would be emptied by a Downwinder family that had delivered the contents to farmers for a century and would and had fought fiercely to keep this right. The farmers would use the excrement to feed their soil; the urine would be emptied into the mouth of the WhiteFoalRiver and carried out to sea.

She also heard the rustling and squealing of rats as they searched for edible portions and dogs growling or snarling as they chased the rats or fought each other. And she glimpsed the swift shadows of running cats.

Like a cat, she sped down the street in a half-run, stopping at corners to look around them before venturing farther. When she was about a half-mile from her place, she heard the pounding of feet ahead. She froze and tried to make herself look like part of the wall.

Chapter 2

AT THAT MOMENT the moon broke through the clouds.

It was almost a full moon. The light revealed her to any but a blind person. She darted across the street to the dark side and played wall again.

The slap of feet on the hard-packed dirt of the street came closer. Somewhere above her, a baby began crying.

She pulled a long knife from a scabbard under her cloak and held the blade behind her. Doubtless, the one running was a thief or else someone trying to outrun a thief or mugger or muggers or perhaps a throat-slitter. If it was a thief who was getting away from the site of the crime, she would be safe. He'd be in no position to stop to see what he could get from her. If he was being pursued, the pursuers might shift their attention to her.

If they saw her.

Suddenly, the pound of feet became louder. Around the corner came a tall youth dressed in a ragged tunic and breeches and shod with buskins. He stopped and clutched the corner and looked behind him. His breath rasped like a rusty gate swung back and forth by gusts of wind.

Somebody was after him. Should she wait here? He hadn't seen her, and perhaps whoever was chasing him would be so intent he or they wouldn't detect her either.

The youth turned his face, and she gasped. His face was so swollen that she almost didn't recognize him. But he was Benna nus-Katarz, who had come here from Ilsig two years ago. No one knew why he'd immigrated, and no one, in keeping with the unwritten code of Sanctuary, had asked him why.

Even in the moonlight and across the street, she could see the swellings and dark spots, looking like bruises, on his face. And on his hands. The fingers were rotting bananas.

He turned back to peer around the corner. His breathing became less heavy. Now she could hear the faint slap of feet down the street. His chasers would be here soon.

Benna gave a soft ululation of despair. He staggered down the street towards a mound of garbage and stopped before it. A rat scuttled out but stopped a few feet from him and chattered at him. Bold beasts, the rats of Sanctuary.

Now Masha could hear the loudness of approaching runners and words that sounded like sheets being ripped apart.

Benna moaned. He reached under his tunic with clumsy fingers and drew something out. Masha couldn't see what it was, though she strained. She inched with her back to the wall towards a doorway. Its darkness would make her even more undetectable.

Benna looked at the thing in his hand. He said something which sounded to Masha like a curse. She couldn't be sure; he spoke in the Ilsig dialect.

The baby above had ceased crying; its mother must have given it the nipple or perhaps she'd made it drink water tinctured with a drug.

Now Benna was pulling something else from inside his tunic. Whatever it was, he moulded it around the other thing, and now he had cast it in front of the rat.

The big grey beast ran away as the object arced towards him. A moment later, it approached the little ball, sniffing. Then it darted forwards, still smelling it, touched it with its nose, perhaps tasted it, and was gone with it in its mouth.

Masha watched it squeeze into a crack in the old adobe building at the next corner. No one lived there. It had been crumbling, falling down for years, unrepaired and avoided even by the most desperate of transients and bums. It

was said that the ghost of old Lahboo the Tight-Fisted haunted the place since his murder, and no one cared to test the truth of the stories told about the building.

Benna, still breathing somewhat heavily, trotted after the rat. Masha, hearing that the footsteps were louder, went alongside the wall, still in the shadows. She was curious about what Benna had got rid of, but she didn't want to be associated with him in any way when his hunters caught up with him.

At the corner, the youth stopped and looked around him. He didn't seem able to make up his mind which route to take. He stood, swaying, and then fell to his knees. He groaned, and pitched forwards, softening his fall with outstretched arms.

Masha meant to leave him to his fate. It was the only sensible thing to do. But as she rounded the corner, she heard him moaning. And then she thought she heard him say something about a jewel.

She stopped. Was that what he had put in something, perhaps a bit of cheese, and thrown to the rat? It would be worth more money than she'd earn in a lifetime, and if she could, somehow, get her hands on it ... Her thoughts raced as swiftly as her heart, and now she was breathing heavily. A jewel! A jewel? It would mean release from this terrible place, a good home for her mother and her children. And for herself.

And it might mean release from Eevroen.

But there was also a terrible danger very close. She couldn't hear the sounds of the pursuers now, but that didn't mean they'd left the neighbourhood. They were prowling around, looking into each doorway. Or perhaps one had looked around the corner and seen Benna. He had motioned to the others, and they were just behind the corner, getting ready to make a sudden rush.

She could visualize the knives in their hands.

If she took a chance and lost, she'd die, and her mother and daughters would be without support. They'd have to beg; Eevroen certainly would be of no help. And Handoo and Kheem, three and five years old, would grow up, if they didn't die first, to be child whores. It was almost inevitable.

While she stood undecided, knowing that she had only a few seconds to act and perhaps not that, the clouds slid below the moon again. That made the difference in what she'd do. She ran across the street towards Benna. He was still lying in the dirt of the street, his head only a few inches from some stinking dog turds. She scabbarded her dagger, got down on her knees, and rolled him over. He gasped with terror when he felt her hands upon him.

"It's all right!" she said softly. "Listen! Can you get up if I help you? I'll get you away!"

Sweat poured into her eyes as she looked towards the far corner. She could see nothing, but if the hunters wore black, they wouldn't be visible at this distance.

Benna moaned and then said, "I'm dying, Masha."

Masha gritted her teeth. She had hoped that he'd not recognize her voice, not at least until she'd got him to safety. Now, if the hunters found him alive and got her name from him, they'd come after her. They'd think she had the jewel or whatever it was they wanted.

"Here. Get up," she said, and struggled to help him. She was small, about five feet tall and weighing eighty-two pounds. But she had the muscles of a cat, and

fear was pumping strength into her. She managed to get Benna to his feet. Staggering under his weight, she supported him towards the open doorway of the building on the corner.

Benna reeked of something strange, an odour of rotting meat but unlike any she'd ever smelled. It rode over the stale sweat and urine of his body and clothes.

"No use," Benna mumbled through greatly swollen lips. "I'm dying. The pain is terrible, Masha."

"Keep going!" she said fiercely. "We're almost there!"

Benna raised his head. His eyes were surrounded with puffed-out flesh. Masha had never seen such edema; the blackness and the swelling looked like those of a corpse five days dead in the heat of summer.

"No!" he mumbled. "Not old Lahboo's building!"

Chapter 3

UNDER OTHER CIRCUMSTANCES, Masha would have laughed. Here was a dying man or a man who thought he was dying. And he'd be dead soon if his pursuers caught up with him. (Me, too, she thought.) Yet he was afraid to take the only refuge available because of a ghost.

"You look bad enough to scare even the Tight-Fisted One," she said. "Keep going or I'll drop you right now!"

She got him inside the doorway, though it wasn't easy what with the boards still attached to the lower half of the entrance. The top planks had fallen inside. It was a tribute to the fear people felt for this place that no one had stolen the wood, an expensive item in the desert town.

Just after they'd climbed over, Benna almost falling, she heard a man utter something in the raspy tearing language. He was near by, but he must have just arrived. Otherwise, he would have heard the two.

Masha had thought she'd reached the limits of terror, but she found that she hadn't. The speaker was a Raggah!

Though she couldn't understand the speech—no one in Sanctuary could—she'd heard Raggah a number of times. Every thirty days or so five or six of the cloaked, robed, hooded, and veiled desert men came to the bazaar and the farmers' market. They could speak only their own language, but they used signs and a plentitude of coins to obtain what they wanted. Then they departed on their horses, their mules loaded down with food, wine, vuksibah (the very expensive malt whisky imported from a far north land), goods of various kinds: clothing, bowls, braziers, ropes, camel and horse hides. Their camels bore huge panniers full of feed for chickens, ducks, camels, horses, and hogs. They also purchased steel tools: shovels, picks, drills, hammers, wedges.

They were tall, and though they were very dark, most had blue or green eyes. These looked cold and hard and piercing, and few looked directly into them. It was said that they had the gift, or the curse, of the evil eye.

They were enough, in this dark night, to have made Masha marble with terror. But what was worse, and this galvanized the marble, they were the servants of the

purple mage! Masha guessed at once what had happened. Benna had had the guts and the complete stupidity—to sneak into the underground maze of the mage on the river isle of Shugthee and to steal a jewel. It was amazing that he'd had the courage, astounding that he could get undetected into the caves, an absolute wonder that he'd penetrated the treasurehold, and fantastic that he'd managed to get out. What weird tales he could tell if he survived! Masha could think of no similar event, no analogue, to the adventures he must have had.

“Mofandsf!” she thought. In the thieves' argot of Sanctuary, “Mind-boggling!”

At that moment Benna's knees gave, and it was all she could do to hold him up. Somehow, she got him to the door to the next room and into a closet. If the Raggah came in, they would look here, of course, but she could get him no further.

Benna's odour was even more sickening in the hot confines of the closet, though its door was almost completely open. She eased him down. He mumbled, “Spiders ... spiders.”

She put her mouth close to his ear. “Don't talk loudly, Benna. The Raggah are close by. Benna, what did you say about the spiders?”

“Bites... bites,” he murmured. “Hurt... the... the emerald... rich...!”

“How'd you get in?” she said. She put her hand close to his mouth to clamp down on it if he should start to talk loudly.

“Wha...? Camel's eye... bu...”

He stiffened, the heels of his feet striking the bottom of the closet door. Masha pressed her hand down on his mouth. She was afraid that he might cry out in his death agony. If this were it. And it was. He groaned, and then relaxed. Masha took her hand away. A long sigh came from his open mouth.

She looked around the edge of the closet. Though it was dark outside, it was brighter than the darkness in the house. She should be able to make out anyone standing in the doorway. The noise the heels made could have attracted the hunters. She saw no one, though it was possible that someone had already come in and was against a wall. Listening for more noise.

She felt Benna's pulse. He was dead or so close to it that it didn't matter any more. She rose and slowly pulled her dagger from the scabbard. Then she stepped out, crouching, sure that the thudding of her heart could be heard in this still room.

So unexpectedly and suddenly that a soft cry was forced from her, a whistle sounded outside. Feet pounded in the room—there was someone here!—and the dim rectangle of the doorway showed a bulk plunging through it. But it was going out, not in. The Raggah had heard the whistle of the garrison soldiers—half the city must have heard it—and he was leaving with his fellows.

She turned and bent down and searched under Benna's tunic and in his loincloth. She found nothing except slowly cooling lumpy flesh. Within ten seconds, she was out on the street. Down a block was the advancing light of torches, their holders not yet visible. In the din of shouts and whistles, she fled hoping that she wouldn't run into any laggard Raggah or another body of soldiers.

Later, she found out that she'd been saved because the soldiers were looking for a prisoner who'd escaped from the dungeon. His name was Badniss, but that's another tale.

Chapter 4

MASHA'S TWO-ROOM apartment was on the third floor of a large adobe building which, with two others, occupied an entire block. She entered it on the side of the Street of the Dry Well, but first she had to wake up old Shmurt, the caretaker, by beating on the thick oaken door. Grumbling at the late hour, he unshot the bolt and let her in. She gave him a padpool, a tiny copper coin, for his trouble and to shut him up. He handed her her oil lamp, she lit it, and she went up the three flights of stone steps.

She had to wake up her mother to get in. Wallu, blinking and yawning in the light of an oil lamp in the corner, shot the bolt. Masha entered and at once extinguished her lamp. Oil cost money, and there had been many nights when she had had to do without it.

Wallu, a tall skinny sagging-breasted woman of fifty, with gaunt deeply-lined features, kissed her daughter on the cheek. Her breath was sour with sleep and goat's cheese. But Masha appreciated the peck; her life had few expressions of love in it. And yet she was full of it; she was a bottle close to bursting with pressure.

The light on the rickety table in the corner showed a blank-walled room without rugs. In a far corner the two infants slept on a pile of tattered but clean blankets. Beside them was a small chamberpot of baked clay painted with the black and scarlet rings-within-rings of the Darmek guild.

In another corner was her false-teeth making equipment, wax, moulds, tiny chisels, saws, and expensive wire, hardwood, iron, a block of ivory. She had only recently repaid the money she'd borrowed to purchase these. In the opposite corner was another pile of cloth, Wallu's bed, and beside it another thundermug with the same design. An ancient and wobbly spinning-wheel was near it; Wallu made some money with it, though not much. Her hands were gnarled with arthritis, one eye had a cataract, and the other was beginning to lose its sight for some unknown reason.

Along the adobe wall was a brass charcoal brazier and above it a wooden vent. A bin held charcoal. A big cabinet beside it held grain and some dried meat and plates and knives. Near it was a baked clay vase for water. Next to it was a pile of cloths. Wallu pointed at the curtain in the doorway to the other room. "He came home early. I suppose he couldn't cadge drinks enough from his friends. But he's drunk enough to suit a dozen sailors." Grimacing, Masha strode to the curtain and pulled it aside. "Shewaw!" (A combination of "Whew!", "Ugh!", and "Yech!") The stink was that which greeted her nostrils when she opened the door to the Vulgar Unicorn Tavern. A blend of wine and beer, stale and fresh, sweat, stale and fresh, vomit, urine, frying blood-sausages, krrf, and kleetel.

Eevroen lay on his back, his mouth open, his arms spread out as if he were being crucified. Once, he had been a tall muscular youth, very broad-shouldered, slim waisted, and long-legged. Now he was fat, fat, fat, double-chinned, huge paunched with rings of sagging fat around his waist. The once bright eyes were

red and dark-bagged, and the once-sweet breath was a hellpit of stench. He'd fallen asleep without changing into nightclothes; his tunic was ripped, dirty, and stained with various things, including puke. He wore cast-off sandals, or perhaps he'd stolen them.

Masha was long past weeping over him. She kicked him in the ribs, causing him to grunt and to open one eye. But it closed and he was quickly snoring like a pig again. That, at least, was a blessing. How many nights had she spent in screaming at him while he bellowed at her or in fighting him off when he staggered home and insisted she lie with him? She didn't want to count them.

Masha would have got rid of him long ago if she had been able to. But the law of the empire was that only the man could divorce unless the woman could prove her spouse was too diseased to have children or was impotent.

She whirled and walked towards the wash-basin. As she passed her mother, a hand stopped her.

Wallu, peering at her with one half-good eye, said, "Child! Something has happened to you! What was it?"

"Tell you in a moment," Masha said, and she washed her face and hands and armpits. Later, she regretted very much that she hadn't told Wallu a lie. But how was she to know that Eevroen had come out of his stupor enough to hear what she said? If only she hadn't been so furious that she'd kicked him ... but regrets were a waste of time, though there wasn't a human alive who didn't indulge in them.

She had no sooner finished telling her mother what had happened with Benna when she heard a grunt behind her. She turned to see Eevroen swaying in front of the curtains, a stupid grin on his fat face. The face once so beloved.

Eevroen reeled towards her, his hands out as if he intended to grab her. He spoke thickly but intelligibly enough.

"Why din't you go after the rat? If you caught it, we coulda been rich!"

"Go back to sleep," Masha said. "This has nothing to do with you."

"Nothin do wi' me?" Eevroen bellowed. "Wha' you mean? I'm your husband! Wha'ss yoursh ish mine. I wan' tha' jewel!"

"You damned fool," Masha said, trying to keep from screaming so that the children wouldn't wake and the neighbours wouldn't hear, "I don't have the jewel. There was no way I could get it—if there ever was any."

Eevroen put a finger alongside his nose and winked the left eye. "If there wa' ever any, heh? Masha, you tryna hoi' ou' on me? You go' the jewel, and you lyin' to you' mo... mo... mama."

"No, I'm not lying!" she screamed, all reason for caution having deserted her quite unreasonably. "You fat stinking pig! I've had a terrible time, I almost got killed, and all you can think about is the jewel! Which probably doesn't exist! Benna was dying! He didn't know what he was talking about! I never saw the jewel! And..."

Eevroen snarled, "You tryna keep i' from me!" and he charged her.

She could easily have evaded him, but something swelled up in her and took over, and she seized a baked-clay water jug from a shelf and brought it down hard over his head. The jug didn't break, but Eevroen did. He fell face forwards. Blood welled from his scalp; he snored.

By then the children were awake, sitting up, wide-eyed, but silent. Maze children learned at an early age not to cry easily.

Shaking, Masha got down on her knees and examined the wound. Then she rose and went to the rag rack and returned with some dirty ones, no use wasting clean ones on him, and stanching the wound. She felt his pulse; it was beating steadily enough for a drunkard who'd just been knocked out with a severe blow.

Wallu said, "Is he dead?"

She wasn't concerned about him. She was worrying about herself, the children, and Masha. If her daughter should be executed for killing her husband, however justified she was, then she and the girls would be without support.

"He'll have a hell of a headache in the morning," Masha said. With some difficulty, she rolled Eevroen over so that he would be face down, and she turned his head sideways and then put some rags under the side of his head. Now, if he should vomit during the night, he wouldn't choke to death. For a moment she was tempted to put him back as he had fallen. But the judge might think that she was responsible for his death.

"Let him lie there," she said. "I'm not going to break my back dragging him to our bed. Besides, I wouldn't be able to sleep, he snores so loudly and he stinks so badly."

She should have been frightened of what he'd do in the morning. But, strangely, she felt exuberant. She'd done what she'd wanted to do for several years now, and the deed had discharged much of her anger—for the time being, anyway.

She went to her room and tossed and turned for a while, thinking of how much better life would be if she could get rid of Eevroen.

Her last thoughts were of what life could be if she'd got the jewel that Benna had thrown to the rat.

Chapter 5

SHE AWOKE AN hour or so past dawn, a very late time for her, and smelled bread baking. After she'd sat on the chamberpot, she rose and pushed the curtain aside. She was curious about the lack of noise in the next room. Eevroen was gone. So were the children. Wallu, hearing the little bells on the curtain, turned.

"I sent the children out to play," she said. "Eevroen woke up about dawn. He pretended he didn't know what had happened, but I could tell that he did. He groaned now and then—his head I suppose. He ate some breakfast, and then he got out fast."

Wallu smiled. "I think he's afraid of you."

"Good!" Masha said. "I hope he keeps on being afraid."

She sat down while Wallu, hobbling around, served her a half loaf of bread, a hunk of goat cheese, and an orange. Masha wondered if her husband also remembered what she'd said to her mother about Benna and the jewel.

He had.

When she went to the bazaar, carrying the folding chair in which she put her dental patients, she was immediately surrounded by hundreds of men and women. All wanted to know about the jewel.

Masha thought, "The damn fool!"

Eevroen, it seemed, had procured free drinks with his tale. He'd staggered around everywhere, the taverns, the bazaar, the farmers' market, the waterfront, and he'd spread the news. Apparently, he didn't say anything about Masha's knocking him out. That tale would have earned him only derision, and he still had enough manhood left not to reveal that.

At first, Masha was going to deny the story. But it seemed to her that most people would think she was lying, and they would be sure that she had kept the jewel. Her life would be miserable from then on. Or ended. There were plenty who wouldn't hesitate to drag her off to some secluded place and torture her until she told where the jewel was.

So she described exactly what had happened, omitting how she had tried to brain Eevroen. There was no sense in pushing him too hard. If he was humiliated publicly, he might get desperate enough to try to beat her up.

She got only one patient that day. As fast as those who'd heard her tale ran off to look for rats, others took their place. And then, inevitably, the governor's soldiers came. She was surprised they hadn't appeared sooner. Surely one of their informants had sped to the palace as soon as he had heard her story, and that would have been shortly after she'd come to the bazaar.

The sergeant of the soldiers questioned her first, and then she was marched to the garrison, where a captain interrogated her. Afterwards, a colonel came in, and she had to repeat her tale. And then, after sitting in a room for at least two hours, she was taken to the governor himself. The handsome youth, surprisingly, didn't detain her long. He seemed to have checked out her movements, starting with Doctor Nadeesh. He'd worked out a timetable between the moment she left Shoozh's house and the moment she came home. So, her mother had also been questioned.

A soldier had seen two of the Raggah running away; their presence was verified.

"Well, Masha," the governor said. "You've stirred up a rat's nest," and he smiled at his own joke while the soldiers and courtiers laughed.

"There is no evidence that there was any jewel," he said, "aside from the story this Benna told, and he was dying from venom and in great pain. My doctor has examined his body, and he assures me that the swellings were spider bites. Of course, he doesn't know everything. He's been wrong before.

"But people are going to believe that there was indeed a jewel of great value, and nothing anyone says, including myself, will convince them otherwise.

"However, all their frantic activity will result in one great benefit... We'll be rid of the rats for a while."

He paused, frowning, then said, "It would seem, however, that this fellow Benna might have been foolish enough to steal something from the purple mage. I would think that that is the only reason he'd be pursued by the Raggah. But then there might be another reason. In any event, if there is a jewel, then the finder is going to be in great peril. The mage isn't going to let whoever finds it keep it.

“Or at least I believe so. Actually, I know very little about the mage, and from what I’ve heard about him, I have no desire to meet him.”

Masha thought of asking him why he didn’t send his soldiers out to the isle and summon the mage. But she kept silent. The reason was obvious. No one, not even the governor, wanted to provoke the wrath of a mage. And as long as the mage did nothing to force the governor into action, he would be left strictly alone to conduct his business—whatever that was.

At the end of the questioning, the governor told his treasurer to give a gold shaboozh to Masha.

“That should more than take care of any business you’ve lost by being here,” the governor said.

Thanking him profusely, Masha bowed as she stepped back, and then walked swiftly homewards.

The following week was the great cat hunt. It was also featured, for Masha anyway, by a break-in into her apartment. While she was off helping deliver a baby at the home of the merchant Ahloo shik-Mhanukhee, three masked men knocked old Shmurt the doorkeeper out and broke down the door to her rooms. While the girls and her mother cowered in a corner, the three ransacked the place, even emptying the chamberpots on the floor to determine that nothing was hidden there. They didn’t find what they were looking for, and one of the frustrated interlopers knocked out two of Wallu’s teeth in a rage. Masha was thankful, however, that they did not beat or rape the little girls. That may have been not so much because of their mercifulness as that the doorkeeper regained consciousness sooner than they had expected. He began yelling for help, and the three thugs ran away before the neighbours could gather or the soldiers come.

Eevroen continued to come in drunk late at night. But he spoke very little, just using the place to eat and sleep. He seldom saw Masha when she was awake. In fact, he seemed to be doing his best to avoid her. That was fine with her.

Chapter 6

SEVERAL TIMES, BOTH by day and night, Masha felt someone was following her. She did her best to detect the shadower, but whether she got the feeling by day or night, she failed to do it. She decided that her nervous state was responsible.

Then the great dog hunt began. Masha thought this was the apex of hysteria and silliness. But it worried her. After all the poor dogs were gone, what would next be run down and killed and gutted? To be more precise, who? She hoped that the who wouldn’t be she.

In the middle of the week of the dog hunt, little Kheem became sick. Masha had to go to work, but when she came home after sundown, she found that Kheem was suffering from a high fever. According to her mother, Kheem had also had convulsions. Alarmed, Masha set out at once for Doctor Nadeesh’s house in the Eastern quarter. He admitted her and listened to her describe Kheem’s symptoms. But he refused to accompany her to her house.

“It’s too dangerous to go into the Maze at night,” he said. “And I wouldn’t go there in the day unless I had several bodyguards. Besides, I am having company tonight. You should have brought the child here.”

“She’s too sick to be moved,” Masha said. “I beg you to come.”

Nadeesh was adamant, but he did give her some powders which she could use to cool the child’s fever.

She thanked him audibly and cursed him silently. On the way back, while only a block from her apartment, she heard a sudden thud of footsteps behind her. She jumped to one side and whirled, drawing her dagger at the same time. There was no moon, and the nearest light was from oil lamps shining through some iron barred windows in the second story above her.

By its faintness she saw a dark bulk. It was robed and hooded, a man by its tallness. Then she heard a low hoarse curse and knew it was a man. He had thought to grab or strike her from behind, but Masha’s unexpected leap had saved her. Momentarily, at least. Now the man rushed her, and she glimpsed something long and dark in his uplifted hand. A club.

Instead of standing there frozen with fear or trying to run away, she crouched low and charged him. That took him by surprise. Before he could recover, he was struck in the throat with her blade.

Still, his body knocked her down, and he fell hard upon her. For a moment, the breath was knocked out of her. She was helpless, and when another bulk loomed above her, she knew that she had no chance.

The second man, also robed and hooded, lifted a club to bring it down on her exposed head.

Writhing, pinned down by the corpse, Masha could do nothing but await the blow. She thought briefly of little Kheem, and then she saw the man drop the club. And he was down on his knees, still gripping whatever it was that had closed off his breath.

A moment later, he was face down in the dry dirt, dead or unconscious.

The man standing over the second attacker was short and broad and also robed and hooded. He put something in his pocket, probably the cord he’d used to strangle, her attacker, and he approached her cautiously. His hands seemed to be empty, however.

“Masha?” he said softly.

By then she’d recovered her wind. She wriggled out from under the dead man, jerked the dagger from the windpipe, and started to get up.

The man said, in a foreign accent, “You can put your knife away, my dear. I didn’t save you just to kill you.”

“I thank you, stranger,” she said, “but keep your distance anyway.”

Despite the warning, he took two steps towards her. Then she knew who he was. No one else in Sanctuary stank so of rancid butter.

“Smhee,” she said, equally softly.

He chuckled. “I know you can’t see my face. So, though it’s against my religious convictions, I will have to take a bath and quit smearing my body and hair with butter. I am as silent as a shadow, but what good is that talent when anyone can smell me a block away?”

Keeping her eyes on him, she stopped and cleaned her dagger on the dead man's robe.

"Are you the one who's been following me?" she said. She straightened up.

He hissed with surprise, then said, "You saw me?"

"No. But I knew someone was dogging me."

"Ah! You have a sixth sense. Or a guilty conscience. Come! Let's get away before someone comes along."

"I'd like to know who these men are... were."

"They're Raggah," Smhee said. "There are two others fifty yards from here, lookouts, I suppose. They'll be coming soon to find out why these two haven't shown up with you."

That shocked her even more than the attack.

"You mean the purple mage wants me? Why?"

"I do not know. Perhaps he thinks as so many others do. That is, that Benna told you more than you have said he did. But come! Quickly!"

"Where?"

"To your place. We can talk there, can't we?"

They walked swiftly towards her building. Smhee kept looking back, but the place where they had killed the two men was no longer visible. When they got to the door, however, she stopped.

"If I knock on the door for the keeper, the Raggah might hear it," she whispered. "But I have to get in. My daughter is very sick. She needs the medicine I got from Dr Nadeesh."

"So that's why you were at his home," Smhee said. "Very well. You bang on the door. I'll be the rearguard."

He was suddenly gone, moving astonishingly swift and silently for such a fat man. But his aroma lingered.

She did as he suggested, and presently Shmurt came grumbling to the door and unbolted it. Just as she stepped in she smelled the butter more strongly, and Smhee was inside and pushing the door shut before the startled doorkeeper could protest.

"He's all right," Masha said.

Old Shmurt peered with runny eyes at Smhee by the light of his oil lamp. Even with good vision, however, Shmurt couldn't see Smhee's face. It was covered with a green mask.

Shmurt looked disgusted.

"I know your husband isn't much," he croaked. "But taking up with this foreigner, this tub of rotten butter... shewaw!"

"It's not what you think," she said indignantly.

Smhee said, "I must take a bath. Everyone knows me at once."

"Is Eevroen home?" Masha said.

Shmurt snorted and said, "At this early hour? No, you and your stinking lover will be safe."

"Dammit!" Masha said. "He's here on business!"

"Some business!"

"Mind your tongue, you old fart!" Masha said. "Or I'll cut it out!"—

Shmurt slammed the door to his room behind him. He called, “Whore! Slut! Adulteress!”

Masha shrugged, lit her lamp, and went up the steps with Smhee close behind her. Wallu looked very surprised when the fat man came in with her daughter.

“Who is this?”

“Someone can’t identify me?” Smhee swore. “Does she have a dead nose?”

He removed his mask.

She doesn’t get out much,” Masha said. She hurried to Kheem, who lay sleeping on her rag pile. Smhee took off his cloak, revealing thin arms and legs and a body like a ball of cheese. His shirt and vest, made of some velvety material speckled with glittering sequins, clung tightly to his trunk. A broad leather belt encircled his paunch, and attached to it were two scabbards containing knives, a third from which poked the end of a bamboo pipe, and a leather bag about the size of Masha’s head. Over one shoulder and the side of his neck was coiled a thin rope.

“Tools of the trade,” he said in answer to Masha’s look.

Masha wondered what the trade was, but she didn’t have time for him. She felt Kheem’s forehead and pulse, then went to the water pitcher on the ledge in the corner.

After mixing the powder with the water as Nadeesh had instructed and pouring out some into a large spoon, she turned. Smhee was on his knees by the child and reaching into the bag on his belt.

“I have some talent for doctoring,” he said as she came to his side. “Here. Put that quack’s medicine away and use this.”

He stood up and held out a small leather envelope. She just looked at him.

“Yes, I know you don’t want to take a chance with a stranger. But please believe me. This green powder is a thousand times better than that placebo Nadeesh gave you. If it doesn’t cure the child, I’ll cut my throat. I promise you.”

“Much good that’d do the baby,” Wallu said.

“Is it a magical potion?” Masha said.

“No. Magic might relieve the symptoms, but the disease would still be there, and when the magic wore off, the sickness would return. Here. Take it! I don’t want you two to say a word about it, ever, but I was once trained in the art of medicine. And where I come from, a doctor is twenty times superior to any you’ll find in Sanctuary.”

Masha studied his dark shiny face. He looked as if he might be about forty years old. The high broad forehead, the long straight nose, the well-shaped mouth would have made him handsome if his cheeks weren’t so thick and his jowls so baggy. Despite his fatness, he looked intelligent; the black eyes below the thick bushy eyebrows were keen and lively.

“I can’t afford to experiment with Kheem,” she said.

He smiled, perhaps an acknowledgement that he detected the uncertainty in her voice.

“You can’t afford not to,” he said. “If you don’t use this, your child will die. And the longer you hesitate, the closer she gets to death. Every second counts.”

Masha took the envelope and returned to the water pitcher. She set the spoon down without spilling its contents and began working as Smhee called out to her

his instructions. He stayed with Kheem, one hand on her forehead, the other on her chest. Kheem breathed rapidly and shallowly.

Wallu protested. Masha told her to shut up more harshly than she'd intended. Wallu bit her lip and glared at Smhee.

Kheem was propped up by Smhee, and Masha got her to swallow the greenish water. Ten minutes or so later, the fever began to go down. An hour later, according to the sandglass, she was given another spoonful. By dawn, she seemed to be rid of it, and she was sleeping peacefully.

Chapter 7

MEANTIME, MASHA AND Smhee talked in low tones. Wallu had gone to bed, but not to sleep, shortly before sunrise. Eevroen had not appeared. Probably he was sleeping off his liquor in an empty crate on the wharf or in some doorway. Masha was glad. She had been prepared to break another basin over his head if he made a fuss and disturbed Kheem.

Though she had seen the fat little man a number of times, she did not know much about him. Nobody else did either. It was certain that he had first appeared in Sanctuary six weeks (sixty days) ago. A merchant ship of the Banmalts people had brought him, but this indicated little about his origin since the ship ported at many lands and islands.

Smhee had quickly taken a room on the second floor of a building, the first of which was occupied by the Khabeeber or "Diving Bird" Tavern. (The proprietor had jocularly named it thus because he claimed that his customers dived as deeply into alcohol for surcease as the khabeeber did into the ocean for fish.) He did no work nor was he known to thief or mug. He seemed to have enough money for his purposes, whatever they were, but then he lived frugally. Because he smeared his body and hair with rancid butter, he was called "The Stinking Butterball" or "Old Rotten", though not to his face. He spent time in all the taverns and also was often seen in the farmers' market and the bazaar. As far as was known, he had shown no sexual interest in men or women or children. Or, as one wag put it, "not even in goats".

His religion was unknown though it was rumoured that he kept an idol in a small wooden case in his room.

Now, sitting on the floor by Kheem, making the child drink water every half hour, Masha questioned Smhee. And he in turn questioned her.

"You've been following me around," Masha said. "Why?"

"I've also investigated other women."

"You didn't say why."

"One answer at a time. I have something to do here, and I need a woman to help me. She has to be quick and strong and very brave and intelligent. And desperate."

He looked around the room as if anybody who lived in it had to be desperate indeed.

"I know your history," he said. "You came from a fairly well-to-do family, and as a child you lived in the Eastern quarter. You were not born and bred in the Maze, and you want to get out of it. You've worked hard, but you just are not going to succeed in your ambition. Not unless something unusual comes your way and you have the courage to seize it, no matter what the consequences might be."

"This has to do with Benna and the jewel, doesn't it?" she said.

He studied her face by the flickering light of the lamp.

"Yes."

He paused.

"And the purple mage."

Masha sucked in a deep breath. Her heart thudded far more swiftly than her fatigue could account for. A coldness spread from her toes to the top of her head, a not unpleasant coldness.

"I've watched in the shadows near your building," he said. "Many a night. And two nights ago I saw the Raggah steal into other shadows and watch the same window. Fortunately, you did not go out during that time to midwife. But tonight..."

"Why would the Raggah be interested in me?"

He smiled slowly.

"You're smart enough to guess why. The mage thinks you know more than you let on about the jewel. Or perhaps he thinks Benna told you more than you've repeated."

He paused again, then said, "Did he?"

"Why should I tell you if he did?"

"You owe me for your life. If that isn't enough to make you confide in me, consider this. I have a plan whereby you can not only be free of the Maze, you can be richer than any merchant, perhaps richer than the governor himself. You will even be able to leave Sanctuary, to go to the capital city itself. Or anywhere in the world."

She thought, if Benna could do it, we can. But then Benna had not got away.

She said, "Why do you need a woman? Why not another man?" Smhee was silent for a long time. Evidently, he was wondering just how much he should tell her. Suddenly, he smiled, and something invisible, an unseen weight seemed to fall from him. Somehow, he even looked thinner.

"I've gone this far," he said. "So I must go all the way. No backing out now. The reason I must have a woman is that the mage's sorcery has a weakness. His magical defences will be set up to repel men. He will not have prepared them against women. It would not occur to him that a woman would try to steal his treasure. Or... kill him."

"How do you know that?"

"I don't think it would be wise to tell you that now. You must take my word for it. I do know far more about the purple mage than anyone else in Sanctuary."

"You might, and that still wouldn't be much," she said. "Let me put it another way. I do know much about him. More than enough to make me a great danger to him."

"Does he know much about you?"

Smhee smiled again. "He doesn't know I'm here. If he did, I'd be dead by now."

They talked until dawn, and by then Masha was deeply committed. If she failed, then her fate would be horrible. And the lives of her daughters and her mother would become even worse. Far worse. But if she continued as she had, she would be dooming them anyway. She might die of a fever or be killed, and then they would have no supporter and defender.

Anyway as Smhee pointed out, though he didn't need to, the mage was after her. Her only defence was a quick offence. She had no other choice except to wait like a dumb sheep and be slaughtered. Except that, in this situation, the sheep would be tortured before being killed.

Smhee knew what he was saying when he had said that she was desperate.

Chapter 8

WHEN THE WOLFS tail, the false dawn, came, she rose stiffly and went through to her room and looked out the window. Not surprisingly, the corpses of the Raggah were gone.

Shortly thereafter, Kheem awoke, bright-eyed, and asked for food. Masha covered her with kisses, and, weeping joyfully, prepared breakfast. Smhee left. He would be back before noon. But he gave her five shaboozh and some lesser coin. Masha wakened her mother, gave her the money, and told her that she would be gone for a few days. Wallu wanted to question her, but Masha told her sternly that she would be better off if she knew no more than she did now.

"If Eevroen wants to know where I am, tell him that I have been called to help deliver a rich farmer's baby. If he asks for the man's name, tell him it is Shkeedur sha-Mizl. He lives far out and only comes into town twice a year except on special business. It doesn't matter that it's a lie. By the time I get back it'll be soon—we'll be leaving at once. Have everything we'll need for a long journey packed into that bag. Just clothes and eating utensils and the medicine. If Kheem has a relapse, give her Smhee's powders."

Wallu wailed then, and Masha had to quiet her down.

"Hide the money. No! Leave one shaboozh where Eevroen will find it when he looks for money. Conceal the rest where he can't find it. He'll take the shaboozh and go out to drink, and you won't be bothered with him or his questions."

When the flaming brass bowl of the noon sun had reached its apex, Smhee came. His eyes looked very red, but he didn't act fatigued. He carried a carpet bag from which he produced two dark cloaks, two robes, and the masks which the priests of Shalpa wore in public.

He said, "How did you get rid of your mother and the children?"

"A neighbour is keeping the children until mother gets back from shopping," she said. "Eevroen still hasn't shown up."

"Nor will he for a long time," Smhee said. "I dropped a coin as I passed him staggering this way. He snatched it, of course, and ran off to a tavern."

"The Sailfish will be leaving port in three days. I've arranged for passage on her and also to be hidden aboard her if her departure is delayed. I've been very busy all morning."

“Including taking a bath,” she said.

“You don’t smell too good yourself,” he said. “But you can bathe when we get to the river. Put these on.”

She went into her room, removed her clothes, and donned the priest’s garb. When she came out, Smhee was fully dressed. The bag attached to his belt bulged beneath his cloak.

“Give me your old clothes,” he said. “We’ll cache them outside the city, though I don’t think we’ll be needing them.”

She did so, and he stuffed them into the belt-bag.

“Let’s go,” he said.

She didn’t follow him to the door. He turned and said, “What’s the matter? Your liver getting cold?”

“No,” she said. “Only... mother’s very short-sighted. I’m afraid she’ll be cheated when she buys the food.”

He laughed and said something in a foreign tongue.

“For the sake of Igil! When we return, we’ll have enough to buy out the farmers’ market a thousand times over!”

“If we get back...” she murmured. She wanted to go to Looza’s room and kiss the children goodbye. But that was not wise. Besides, she might lose her determination if she saw them now.

They walked out while old Shmurt stared. He was the weakest point in their alibi, but they hoped they wouldn’t need any. At the moment, he was too dumbfounded at seeing them to say anything. And he would be afraid to go to the soldiers about this. He probably was thinking that two priests had magically entered the house, and it would be indiscreet to interfere in their business.

Thirty minutes later, they mounted the two horses which Smhee had arranged to be tied to a tree outside city limits.

“Weren’t you afraid they’d be stolen?” she said.

“There are two stout fellows hidden in the grass near the river,” he said. He waved towards it, and she saw two men come from it. They waved back and started to walk back to the city.

There was a rough road along the WhiteFoilRiver, sometimes coming near the stream, sometimes bending far away. They rode over it for three hours, and then Smhee said, “There’s an old adobe building a quarter-mile inland. We’ll sleep there for a while. I don’t know about you, but I’m weary.”

She was glad to rest. After hobbling the horses near a stand of the tall brown desert grass, they lay down in the midst of the ruins. Smhee went to sleep at once. She worried about her family for a while, and suddenly she was being shaken by Smhee. Dawn was coming up.

They ate some dried meat and bread and fruit and then mounted again. After watering the horses and themselves at the river, they rode at a canter for three more hours. And then Smhee pulled up on the reins. He pointed at the trees a quarter-mile inland. Beyond, rearing high, were the towering cliffs on the other side of the river. The trees on this side, however, prevented them from seeing the White Foal.

“The boat’s hidden in there,” he said. “Unless someone’s stolen it. That’s not likely, though. Very few people have the courage to go near the Isle of Shugthee.”

“What about the hunters who bring down the furs from the north?”

“They hug the eastern shore, and they only go by in daylight. Fast.”

They crossed the rocky ground, passing some low-growing purplish bushes and some iron trees with grotesquely twisted branches. A rabbit with long ears dashed by them, causing her horse to rear up. She controlled it, though she had not been on a horse since she was eleven. Smhee said that he was glad that it hadn't been his beast. All he knew about riding was the few lessons he'd taken from a farmer after coming to Sanctuary. He'd be happy if he never had to get on another one.

The trees were perhaps fifteen or twenty deep from the river's edge. They dismounted, removed the saddles, and hobbled the beasts again. Then they walked through the tall cane-like plants, brushing away the flies and other pestiferous insects, until they got to the stream itself. Here grew stands of high reeds, and on a hummock of spongy earth was Smhee's boat. It was a dugout which could hold only two.

“Stole it,” Smhee said without offering any details.

She looked through the reeds down the river. About a quarter of a mile away, the river broadened to become a lake about two and a half miles across. In its centre was the Isle of Shugthee, a purplish mass of rock. From this distance, she could not make out its details.

Seeing it, she felt coldness ripple over her.

“I'd like to take a whole day and a night to scout it,” he said. “So you could become familiar with it, too. But we don't have time. However, I can tell you everything I know. I wish I knew more.”

She doffed her clothes and bathed in the river while Smhee unhobbled the horses and took them some distance up to let them drink. When she came back, she found him just returning with them.

“Before dusk comes, we'll have to move them down to a point opposite the isle,” he said. “And we'll saddle them, too.”

They left the horses to go to a big boulder outside the trees but distant from the road. At its base was a hollow large enough for them to lie down in. Here they slept, waking now and then to talk softly or to eat a bite or to go behind the rock and urinate. The insects weren't so numerous here as in the trees, but they were bad enough.

Not once, as far as they knew, did anyone pass on the road.

When they walked the horses down the road, Smhee said, “You've been very good about not asking questions, but I can see you're about to explode with curiosity. You have no idea who the purple mage really is. Not unless you know more than the other Sanctuarians.”

“All I know,” she said, “is that they say that the mage came here about ten years ago. He came with some hired servants, and many boxes, some small, some large. No one knew what his native land was, and he didn't stay long in town. One day he disappeared with the servants and the boxes. It was some time before people found out that he'd moved into the caves of the Isle of Shugthee. Nobody had ever gone there because it was said that it was haunted by the ghosts of the Shugthee. They were a little hairy people who inhabited this land long before the first city of the ancients was built here.”

“How do you know he's a mage?” Smhee said.

"I don't, but everybody says he is. Isn't he?"

"He is," Smhee said, looking grim.

"Anyway, he sent his servants in now and then to buy cattle, goats, pigs, chickens, horses, vegetables, and animal feed and fruit. These were men and women from some distant land. Not from his, though. And then one day they ceased coming in. Instead, the Raggah came. From that day on, no one has seen the servants who came with the mage."

"He probably got rid of them," Smhee said. "He may have found some reason to distrust them. Or no reason at all."

"The fur trappers and hunters who've gone by the isle say they've seen some strange things. Hairy beast-faced dwarfs. Giant spiders." She shuddered.

"Benna died of spider bites," Smhee said. The fat little man reached into his belt-bag and brought out a metal jar. He said, "Before we leave in the boat tonight we'll rub the ointment in this on us. It will repel some of the spiders but not, unfortunately, all."

"How do you know that?"

"I know."

They walked silently for a while. Then he sighed, and said, "We'll get bitten. That is certain. Only ... all the spiders that will bite us—I hope so, anyway—won't be real spiders. They'll be products of the mage's magic. Apparitions. But apparitions that can kill you just as quickly or as slowly and usually as painfully as the real spiders."

He paused, then said, "Benna probably died from their bites."

Masha felt as if she were turning white under her dark skin. She put her hands on his arm.

"But... but...!"

"Yes, I know. If the spiders were not real, then why should they harm him? That is because he thought they were real. His mind did the rest to him."

She didn't like that she couldn't keep her voice from shaking, but she couldn't help it.

"How can you tell which is real and which magical?"

"In the daylight the unreal spiders look a little transparent. By that I mean that if they stand still, you can see dimly through them. But then they don't stand still much. And we'll be in the dark of night. So..."

"Look here, Masha. You have to be strong stuff to go there. You have to overcome your fear. A person who lets fear conquer him or her is going to die even if he knows that the spider is unreal. He'll make the sting of the bite himself and the effects of the venom. And he'll kill himself. I've seen it happen in my native land."

"But you say that we might get bitten by a real spider. How can I tell which is which in the dark?"

"It's a problem."

He added after a few seconds, "The ointment should repulse most of the real spiders. Maybe, if we're lucky. You see, we have an advantage that Benna didn't have. I know what faces us because I come from the mage's land. His true name is Kemren, and he brought with him the real spiders and some other equally dangerous creatures. They would have been in some of the boxes. I am prepared

for them, and so will you be. Benna wasn't, and any of these Sanctuary thieves will get the same fate."

Masha asked why Kemren had come here. Smhee chewed on his lower lip for a while before answering.

"You may as well know it all. Kemren was a priest of the goddess Weda Krizhtawn of the island of Sharranpip. That is far east and south of here, though you may have heard of it. We are a people of the water, of lakes, rivers, and the sea. Weda Krizhtawn is the chief goddess of water, and she has a mighty temple with many treasures near the sea.

"Kemren was one of the higher priests, and he served her well for years. In return, he was admitted into the inner circle of mages and taught both black and white magic. Though, actually, there is little difference between the two branches, the main distinction being whether the magician uses his powers for good or evil.

"And it isn't always easy to tell what is good and what is evil. If a mage makes a mistake, and his use turns out to be for evil, even if he sincerely thought it was for good, then there is a ... backlash. And the mage's character becomes changed for the worse in proportion to the amount of magical energy used."

He stopped walking.

"We're opposite the isle now."

It wasn't visible from the road. The plain sloped upwards from the road, becoming a high ridge near the river. The tall spreading blackish hukharran bush grew on top of it. They walked the horses up the ridge, where they hobbled them near a pool of rainwater. The beasts began cropping the long brownish grass that grew among the bushes.

The isle was in the centre of the lake and seemed to be composed mostly of a purplish rock. It sloped gently from the shore until near the middle, where a series of peculiar formations formed a spine. The highest prominence was a monolith perforated near its top as if a tunnel had been carved through it.

"The camel's eye Benna spoke of," Smhee said. "Over there is the formation known as the ape's head, and at the other end is that which the natives call the dragon's tail."

On the edge of the isle grew some trees, and in the waters by it were the ubiquitous tall reeds.

There was no sight or sound of life on it. Even the birds seemed to shun it.

"But I floated down past it at night several times," he said, "and I could hear the lowing of some cattle and the braying of a donkey. Also, I heard a weird call, but I don't know if it was from a bird or an animal. And I heard a peculiar grunting sound, but it wasn't from pigs."

"That camel's eye looks like a good place for a sentry," she said. "I got the impression from Benna that that is where he entered the caves. It must've been a very dangerous climb, especially during the dark."

"Benna was a good man," Smhee said. "But he wasn't prepared enough. There are eyes watching now. Probably through holes in the rocks. From what I heard, the mage had his servants buy a number of excavating tools. He would have used them to enlarge the caves and to make tunnels to connect the caves. She took a final look in the sunlight at the sinister purple mass and turned away.

Chapter 9

NIGHT HAD COME. The winds had died down. The sky was cloudy, but the covering was thin. The full moon glowed through some of these, and now and then broke through. The nightbirds made crazy startling sounds. The mosquitoes hummed around them in dense masses, and if it hadn't been for Smhee's ointment would have driven them out of the trees within a few minutes. Frogs croaked in vast chorus; things plopped into the water.

They shoved the boat out to the edge of the reeds and climbed in. They wore their cloaks now but would take them off when they got to the isle. Masha's weapons were a dagger and a short thin sword used for thrusting only.

They paddled silently as possible, the current helping their rate of speed, and presently the isle loomed darkly to their right. They landed halfway down the eastern shore and dragged the dugout slowly to the nearest tree.

They put their cloaks in the boat, and Masha placed a coil of rope over her shoulder and neck.

The isle was quiet. Not a sound. Then came a strange grunting cry followed by a half-moaning, half-squalling sound. Her neck iced.

"Whatever that is," Smhee said, "it's no spider."

He chuckled as if he were making a joke.

They'd decided—what else could they do?—that the camel's eye would be too heavily guarded after Benna's entrance through it. But there had to be more accessible places to get in. These would be guarded, too, especially since they must have been made more security-conscious by the young thief.

"What I'd like to find is a secret exit," Smhee said. "Kemren must have one, perhaps more. He knows that there might come a time when he'll be sorely in need of it. He's a crafty bastard."

Before they'd taken the boat, Smhee had revealed that Kemren had fled Sharranpip with many of the temple's treasures. He had also taken along spiders' eggs and some of the temple's animal guardians.

"If he was a high priest," Masha had said, "why would he do that? Didn't he have power and wealth enough?"

"You don't understand our religion," the fat thief had said. "The priests are surrounded by treasures that would pop your eyes out of their sockets if you saw them. But the priests themselves are bound by vows to extreme poverty, to chastity, to a harsh bare life. Their reward is the satisfaction of serving Weda Krizhtawn and her people. It wasn't enough for Kemren. He must have become evil while performing some magic that went wrong. He is the first priest ever to commit such a blasphemy.

"And I, a minor priest, was selected to track him down and to make him pay for his crime. I've been looking for him for thirteen years. During that time, to effect the vengeance of Weda Krizhtawn, I have had to break some of my own vows and to commit crimes which I must pay for when I return to my land."

"Won't she pardon you for these because you have done them in her name?" Masha had said.

“No. She accepts no excuses. She will thank me for completing my mission, but I must still pay. Look at me. When I left Sharranpip, I was as skinny as you. I led a very exemplary life. I ate little, I slept in the cold and rain, I begged for my food, I prayed much. But during the years of my crimes and the crimes of my years, I have eaten too well so that Kemren, hearing of the fat fellow, would not recognize me. I have been reeling drunk, I have gambled—a terrible sin—I have fought with fists and blade, I have taken human lives, I...”

He looked as if he were going to weep.

Masha said, “But you didn’t quit smearing yourself with butter?”

“I should have, I should have!” he cried. “But, apart from lying with women, that is the one thing I could not bring myself to do, though it was the first I should have done! And I’ll pay for that when I get home, even though that is the hardest thing for a priest to do! Even Kemren, I have heard, though he no longer worships Weda Krizhtawn, still butters himself!

“And the only reason I quit doing that is that I’m sure that he’s conditioned his real spiders, and his guardian animals, to attack anyone who’s covered with butter. That way he can make sure or thinks he can make sure, that no hunter of him will ever be able to get close. That is why, though it almost killed me with shame and guilt, I bathed this morning!”

Masha would have laughed if she hadn’t felt so sorry for him. That was why his eyes had looked so red when he’d shown up at her apartment after bathing. It hadn’t been fatigue but tears that had done it.

They drew their weapons, Masha a short sword and Smhee a long dagger. They set out for the base of the ridge of formations that ran down the centre of the isle like serrations on a dragon’s back. Before they’d gone far, Smhee put a restraining hand on her arm.

“There’s a spider’s web just ahead. Between those two bushes. Be careful of it. But look out for other dangers, since one will be obvious enough to distract your attention from others. And don’t forget that the thorns of these bushes are probably poisonous.”

In the dim moonlight she saw the web. It was huge, as wide as the stretch of her arms. She thought, if it’s so big, what about its spinner?

It seemed empty, though. She turned to her left and walked slowly, her head turned to watch it.

Then something big scuttled out from under the bush at her. She stifled her scream and leaped towards the thing instead of following her desire to run away from it. Her sword leaped out as the thing sprang, and it spitted itself. Something soft touched the back of her hand. The end of a waving leg.

Smhee came up behind it as she stood there holding the sword out as far as she could to keep the arachnid away. Her arm got heavy with its weight, and slowly the blade sank towards the ground. The fat man slashed the thing’s back open with his dagger. A foul odour vented from it. He brought his foot down on a leg and whispered, “Pull your sword out! I’ll keep it pinned!”

She did so and then backed away. She was breathing very hard. He jumped up and came down with both feet on the creature.

Its legs waved for a while longer, but it was dying if not already dead. “That was a real spider,” he said, “although I suppose you know that. I suspect that the false spiders will be much smaller.”

“Why?” she said. She wished her heart would quit trying to leap up through her throat.

“Because making them requires energy, and it’s more effective to make a lot of little spiders and costs less energy than to make a few big ones. There are other reasons which I won’t explain just now.”

“Look out!” she cried, far louder than she should have. But it had been so sudden and had taken her off guard.

Smhee whirled and slashed out, though he hadn’t seen the thing. It bounded over the web, its limbs spread out against the dimness, its great round ears profiled. It came down growling, and it fell upon Smhee’s blade. This was no man’s-head sized spider but a thing as big as a large dog and furry and stinking of something—monkey?—and much more vital than the arachnid. It bore Smhee backwards with his weight; he fell on the earth.

Snarling, it tried to bury its fangs in Smhee’s throat. Masha broke from her paralysis and thrust with a fury and strength that only fear could provide. The blade went through its body. She leaped back, drawing it out, and then lunged again. This time the point entered its neck.

Smhee, gasping, rolled it off him and stood up. He said, “By Wishvu’s whiskers! I’ve got blood all over me. A fine mess! Now the others will smell me!”

“What is it?” Masha said shakily.

“A temple guardian ape. Actually, it’s not an ape but a very large tailless monkey. Kemren must have brought some cubs with him.”

Masha got close to the dead beast, which was lying on its back.

The open mouth showed teeth like a leopard’s.

“They eat meat,” he said. “Unlike other monkeys, however, they’re not gregarious. Our word for them, translated, would be the solitary ape.” Masha wondered if one of Smhee’s duties had been teaching. Even under these circumstances, he had to be pedantic.

He looked around.” Solitary or not, there are probably a number on this isle.”

After dragging the two carcasses into the river, they proceeded cautiously. Smhee looked mostly ahead; Masha, behind. Both looked to both sides of them. They came to the base of the ridges of rock. Smhee said, “The animal pens are north. That’s where I heard them as I went by in the boat. I think we should stay away from them. If they scent us and start an uproar, we’ll have the Raggah out and on our asses very quickly.” Smhee stopped suddenly, and said, “Hold it!” Masha looked around quickly. What had he seen or heard? The fat man got down on his knees and pushed against the earth just in front of him.

He rose and said, “There’s a pit under that firm-looking earth. I felt it give way as I put my foot on it. That’s why it pays not to walk swiftly here.”

They circled it, Smhee testing each step before taking another. Masha thought that if they had to go this slowly, they would take all night before they got to the ridge. But then he led her to a rocky place, and she breathed easier. However, he said, “They could carve a pit in the stone and put a pivoting lid over it.”

She said, "Why are we going this way? You said the entrances are on the north end."

"I said that I only observed people entering on the north end. But I also observed something very interesting near here. I want to check it out. It may be nothing for us, but again..."

Still moving slowly but faster than on the earth, they came to a little pool. It was about ten feet in diameter, a dark sheet of water on which bubbles appeared and popped. Smhee crouched down and stared at its sinister-looking surface.

She started to whisper a question, but he said, "Shh!"

Presently, something scuttled with a clatter across the solid rock from the shore. She jumped but uttered no exclamation. The thing looked like a spider in the dark, an enormous one, larger than the one they'd killed. It paid no attention to them or perhaps it wasn't at all aware of them. It leaped into the pool and disappeared. Smhee said, "Let's get behind that boulder."

When they were in back of it, she said, "What's going on?"

"When I was spying, I saw some things going into and coming out of this hole. It was too far away to see what they were, though I suspected they were giant spiders or perhaps crabs."

"So?"

His hand gripped her wrist.

"Wait!"

The minutes oozed by like snails. Mosquitoes hummed around them, birds across the river called, and once she heard, or thought she heard, that peculiar half grunt, half-squall. And once she started when something splashed in the river. A fish. She hoped that was all it was.

Smhee said softly, "Ah!"

He pointed at the pool. She strained her eyes and then saw what looked like a swelling of the water in its centre. The mound moved towards the edge of the pool, and then it left the water. It clacked as it shot towards the river. Soon another thing came and then another, and all of a sudden at least twenty popped up and clattered across the rocks.

Smhee finally relieved her bursting question.

"They look like the bengil crab of Sharranpip. They live in that hole but they must catch fish in the river."

"What is that to us?"

"I think the pool must be an entrance to a cave. Or caves. The crabs are not water-breathers."

"Are they dangerous?"

"Only when in water. On land they'll either run or, if cornered, try to defend themselves. They aren't poisonous, but their claws are very powerful."

He was silent for a moment, then said, "The mage is using them to defend the entrance to a cave, I'm sure. An entrance which is also an exit. For him as well as for the crabs. That pool has to be one of his secret escape routes."

Masha thought, "Oh, no!" and she rolled her eyes. Was this fat fool really thinking about trying to get inside through the pool? "How could the mage get out this way if the crabs would attack him?"

“He would throw poisoned meat to them. He could do any number of things. What matters just now is that he wouldn’t have bothered to bring their eggs along from Sharranpip unless he had a use for them. Nor would he have planted them here unless he needed them to guard this pool. Their flesh is poisonous to all living things except the ghoondah fish.”

He chuckled. “But the mage has outsmarted himself. If I hadn’t noticed the bengil, I would never have considered that pool as an entrance.”

While he had been whispering, another group had emerged and run for the river. He counted them, thirty in all.

“Now is the time to go in,” he said. “They’ll all be feeding. That crab you first saw was their scout. It found a good place for catching fish, determined that there wasn’t any enemy around, and returned with the good news. In some ways, they’re more ant than crab. Fortunately, their nests aren’t as heavily populated as an anthole.”

He said, however, that they should wait a few minutes to make sure that all had left. “By all, I mean all but a few. There are always a few who stay behind to guard the eggs.”

“Smhee, we’ll drown!”

“If other people can get out through the pool, then we can get in.”

“You don’t know for sure that the pool is an escape route!”

“What if the mage put the crabs there for some other reason?”

“What if? What if? I told you this would be very dangerous. But the rewards are worth the risk.”

She stiffened. That strange cry had come again. And it was definitely nearer.

“It may be hunting us,” Smhee said. “It could have smelled the blood of the ape.”

“What is it?” she said, trying to keep her teeth from chattering.

“I don’t know. We’re downwind from it, but it sounds as if it’ll soon be here. Good! That will put some stiffening in our backbone, heat our livers. Let’s go now!”

So, he was scared, too. Somehow, that made her feel a little better.

They stuck their legs down into the chilly water. They found no bottom. Then Smhee ran around to the inland side and bent down. He probed with his hand around the edge.

“The rock goes about a foot down, then curves inward,” he said. “I’ll wager that this was once a pothole of some sort. When Kemren came here, he carved out tunnels to the cave it led to and then somehow filled it with river water.” He stood up.

The low strange cry was definitely closer now. She thought she saw something huge in the darkness to the north, but it could be her imagination.

“Oh, Igil!” she said. “I have to urinate!”

“Do it in the water. If it smells your urine on the land, it’ll know a human’s been here. And it might call others of its kind. Or make such an uproar the Raggah will come.”

He let himself down into the water and clung to the stony edge.

“Get in! It’s cold but not as cold as death!” She let herself down to his side. She had to bite her lip to keep from gasping with shock.

He gave her a few hurried instructions and said, "May Weda Krizhtawn smile upon us!" And he was gone.

Chapter 10

SHE TOOK A deep breath while she was considering getting out of the pool and running like a lizard chased by a fox to the river and swimming across it. But instead she dived, and as Smhee had told her to do, swam close to the ceiling of rock. She was blind here even with her eyes open, and, though she thought mostly about drowning, she had room to think about the crabs. Presently, when her lungs were about to burst and her head rang and the violent urge to get air was about to make her breathe, her flailing hand was grasped by something. The next instant, she was pulled into air.

There was darkness all about. Her gaspings mingled with Smhee's.

He said, between the wheezings, "There's plenty of air-space between the water and the ceiling. I dived down and came up as fast as I could out of the water, and I couldn't touch the rock above."

After they'd recovered their wind, he said, "You tread water while I go back. I want to see how far back this space goes."

She didn't have to wait long. She heard his swimming—she hoped it was his and not something else—and she called out softly when he was near.

He stopped and said, "There's plenty of air until just before the tunnel or cave reaches the pool. Then you have to dive under a downthrust ledge of rock. I didn't go back out, of course, not with that creature out there. But I'm sure my estimate of distance is right."

She followed him in the darkness until he said, "Here's another downthrust."

She felt where he indicated. The stone did not go more than six inches before ceasing.

"Does the rope or your boots bother you any?" he said. "If they're too heavy, get rid of them."

"I'm all right."

"Good. I'll be back soon—if things are as I think they are." She started to call to him to wait for her, but it was too late. She clung to the rough stone with her fingertips, moving her legs now and then. The silence was oppressive; it rang in her ears. And once she gasped when something touched her thigh.

The rope and boots did drag her down, and she was thinking of at least getting rid of the rope when something struck her belly. She grabbed it with one hand to keep it from biting her and with the other reached for her dagger. She went under water of course, and then she realized that she wasn't being attacked. Smhee, diving back, had run into her.

Their heads cleared the surface. Smhee laughed.

"Were you as frightened as I? I thought sure a bengil had me!"

Gasping, she said, "Never mind. What's over there?"

"More of the same. Another air-space for perhaps a hundred feet. Then another downcropping."

He clung to the stone for a moment. Then he said, "Have you noticed how fresh the air is? There's a very slight movement of it, too."

She had noticed but hadn't thought about it. Her experience with watery caves was nil until now.

"I'm sure that each of these caves is connected to a hole which brings in fresh air from above," he said. "Would the mage have gone to all this trouble unless he meant to use this for escape?"

He did something. She heard him breathing heavily, and then there was a splash,

"I pulled myself up the rock and felt around," he said. "There is a hole up there to let air from the next cave into this one. And I'll wager that there is a hole in the ceiling. But it must curve so that light doesn't come in. Or maybe it doesn't curve. If it were day above, we might see the hole."

He dived; Masha followed him. They swam ahead then, putting their right hands out from side to side to feel the wall. When they came to the next downcropping, they went through beneath it at once.

At the end of this cave they felt a rock ledge that sloped gently upward. They crawled out onto it. She heard him fumbling around and then he said, "Don't cry out. I'm lighting a torch."

The light nevertheless startled her. It came from the tip of a slender stick of wood in his hand. By its illumination she saw him apply it to the end of a small pine torch. This caught fire, giving them more area of vision. The fire on the stick went out. He put the stick back into the opened belt-bag.

"We don't want to leave any evidence we've been here," he said softly. "I didn't mention that this bag contains many things, including another waterproof bag. But we must hurry. The torch won't last long, and I've got just one more."

They stood up and moved ahead. A few feet beyond the original area first illuminated by the torch were some dark bulks. Boats. Twelve of them, with light wood frameworks and skin-coverings. Each could hold three people. By them were paddles.

Smhee took out a dagger and began ripping the skins. Masha helped him until only one boat was left undamaged.

He said, "There must be entrances cut into the stone sections dividing the caves we just came through. I'll wager they're on the left-hand side as you come in. Anyone swimming in would naturally keep to the right wall and so wouldn't see the archways. The ledges where the crabs nest must also be on the left. Remember that when we come back. But I'd better find out for sure. We want to know exactly how to get out when the time comes."

He set his torch in a socket in the front of the boat and pushed the boat down the slope and into the water. While Masha held the narrow craft steady, he got into it. She stood on the shore, feeling lonely with all that darkness behind her while she watched him by the light of the brand. Within a few minutes he came back, grinning.

"I was right! There's an opening cut into the stone division. It's just high enough for a boat to pass through if you duck down."

They dragged the boat back up onto the ledge. The cave ended about a hundred feet from the water. To the right was a U-shaped entrance. By its side were piles

of torches and flint and steel and punk boxes. Smhee lit two, gave one to Masha, and then returned to the edge of the ledge to extinguish his little one.

“I think the mage has put all his magic spiders inside the caves,” he said. “They’d require too much energy to maintain on the outside. The further away they are from him, the more energy he has to use to maintain them. The energy required increases according to the square of the distance.”

Masha didn’t ask him what he meant by “square”.

“Stick close to me. Not just for your sake. For mine also. As I said, the mage will not have considered women trying to get into his place, so his powers are directed against men only. At least, I hope they are. That way he doesn’t have to use as much energy on his magic.”

“Do you want me to lead?” she said, hoping he wouldn’t say yes.

“If you had as much experience as I, I wouldn’t hesitate a moment. But you’re still an apprentice. If we get out of here alive, you will be on your way to being a master.”

They went up the steps cut out of the stone. At the top was another archway. Smhee stopped before it and held his torch high to look within it. But he kept his head outside it.

“Ha!”

Chapter 11

HE MOTIONED HER to come to his side. She saw that the interior of the deep doorway was grooved. Above the grooves was the bottom of a slab of stone.

“If the mechanism is triggered, that slab will crash down and block off anyone chasing the mage,” he said. “And it’d crush anyone in the portal. Maybe ...”

He looked at the wall surrounding the archway but could find nothing.

“The release mechanism must be in the other room. A time-delay device.”

He got as near to the entrance as he could without going into it, and he stuck his torch through the opening.

“I can’t see it. It must be just around the corner. But I do see what looks like webs.”

Masha breathed deeply.

“If they’re real spiders, they’ll be intimidated by the torches,” he said. “Unless the mage has conditioned them not to be or uses magic to overcome their natural fear. The magic spiders won’t pay any attention to the flame.”

She thought that it was all very uncertain, but she did not comment.

He bent down and peered at the stone floor just beyond the doorway. He turned. “Here. Your young eyes are better than my old ones. Can you see a thread or anything like it raised above the floor just beyond the door?”

She said, “No, I can’t.”

“Nevertheless.”

He threw his torch through the doorway. At his order, she got down with her cheek against the stone and looked against the flame.

She rose, saying, "I can see a very thin line about an inch above the floor. It could be a cord."

"Just as I thought. An old Sharranpip trick."

He stepped back after asking her to get out of the way. And he leaped through the doorway and came down past the cord. She followed. As they picked up their torches, he said pointing, "There are the mechanisms. One is the time-delay. The other releases the door so it'll fall behind the first who enters and trap him. Anyone following will be crushed by the slab."

After telling her to keep an eye on the rest of the room, he examined the array of wheels, gears, and counterweights and the rope that ran from one device through a hole in the ceiling.

"The rope is probably attached to an alarm system above," he said. "Very well. I know how to actuate both of these. If you should by any foul chance come back alone, all you have to do is to jump through and then throw a torch or something on that cord. The door will come down and block off your pursuers. But get outside as fast as you can because..."

Masha said, "I know why."

"Good woman. Now, the spiders."

The things came before the webs were clearly visible in the lights. She had expected to see the lights reflected redly in their eyes, but they weren't. Their many eyes were huge and purplish and cold. They scuttled forwards, waving the foremost pair of legs, then backed away as Smhee waved his torch at them. Masha walked half-turned away from him so that she could use the brand to scare away any attack from the rear or side.

Suddenly, something leaped from the edge of the darkness and soared towards her. She thrust the brand at it. But the creature seemed to go through the torch.

It landed on her arm and seized the hand that held the torch. She had clenched her teeth to keep from screaming if something like this happened. But she didn't even think of voicing her terror and disgust. She closed her hand on the body of the thing to crush it, and the fingers felt nothing.

The next moment, the spider disappeared.

She told Smhee what had happened.

"Thanks be to Klooshna!" he said. "You are invulnerable to them. If you weren't, you'd be swelling up now!"

"But what if it'd been a real spider?" she said as she kept waving her torch at the monsters that circled them. "I didn't know until my hand closed on it that it was not real."

"Then you'd be dying. But the fact that it ignored the brand showed you what it really was. You realized that even if you didn't think consciously about it."

They came to another archway. While she threw her torch through it and got down to look for another thread, Smhee held off the spiders.

"There doesn't seem to be any," she said.

"Seem isn't good enough," he said. "Hah, back, you creatures of evil! Look closely! Can you see any thin lines in the floor itself? Minute cracks?"

After a few seconds, she said, "Yes. They form a square."

"A trapdoor to drop us into a pit," he said. "You jump past it. And let's hope there isn't another trap just beyond it."

She said that she'd need a little run to clear the line. He charged the spiders, waving his torch furiously, and they backed away. When she called to him that she was safe, he turned and ran and leaped. A hairy, many-legged thing dashed through the entrance after him. Masha stepped up to the line and thrust her brand at it. It stopped. Behind it were masses that moved, shadows of solidity.

Smhee leaped towards the foremost one and jammed the burning red of his brand into the head. The stink of charred flesh assailed their nostrils. It ran backwards but was stopped by those behind it. Then they retreated, and the thing, its eyes burned out, began running around and around, finally disappearing into the darkness. The others were now just beyond the doorway in the other cave. Smhee threw his torch into it.

"That'll keep them from coming through!" he said, panting. "I should have brought some extra torches, but even the greatest mind sometimes slips. Notice how the weight of those spiders didn't make the trapdoor drop? It must have a minimum limit. You only weigh eighty-five pounds. Maybe...?"

"Forget it," she said.

"Right you are," he said, grinning. "But Masha, if you are to be a master thief, you must think of everything."

She thought of reminding him about the extra torches he'd forgotten but decided not to. They went on ahead through an enormous cavern and came to a tunnel. From its dark mouth streamed a stink like a newly opened tomb. And they heard the cry that was half-grunt, half-squall.

Smhee halted. "I hate to go into that tunnel. But we must. You look upward for holes in the ceiling, and I'll look everywhere else."

The stone, however, looked solid. When they were halfway down the bore, they were blasted with a tremendous growling and roaring.

"Lions?" Masha said.

"No. Bears."

Chapter 12

AT THE OPPOSITE end were two gigantic animals, their eyes gleaming redly in the light, their fangs a dull white.

The two intruders advanced after waiting for the bears to charge. But these stayed by the doorway, though they did not cease their thunderous roaring nor their slashes at the air with their paws.

"The bears were making the strange cry," she said. "I've seen dancing bears in the bazaars, but I never heard them make a noise like that. Nor were they near as large."

He said, "They've got chains around their necks. Come on."

When they were within a few feet of the beasts, they stopped. The stench was almost overpowering now, and they were deafened by the uproar in the narrowness of the tunnel.

Smhee told her to hold her torch steady. He opened his belt-bag and pulled out two lengths of bamboo pipe and joined them. Then, from a small wooden case, he cautiously extracted a feathered dart. He inserted it in one and raised the blowpipe almost to his lips.

"There's enough poison on the tip of the dart to kill a dozen men," he said. "However, I doubt that it would do much harm, if any, if the dart sticks in their thick fat. So..."

He waited a long time, the pipe now at his lips. Then, his cheeks swelled, and the dart shot out. The bear to the right, roaring even louder, grabbed at the missile stuck in its left eye. Smhee fitted another dart into the pipe and took a step closer. The monster on the left lunged against the restraining collar and chain. Smhee shot the second dart into its tongue.

The first beast struck fell to one side, its paws waving, and its roars subsided. The other took longer to become quiet, but presently both were snoring away.

"Let's hope they die," Smhee said. "I doubt we'll have time to shoot them again when we come back."

Masha thought that a more immediate concern was that the roaring might have alarmed the mage's servants.

They went through a large cavern, the floor of which was littered with human, cattle, and goat skeletons and bear dung. They breathed through their mouths until they got to an exit. This was a doorway which led to a flight of steps. At the top of the steps was another entrance with a closed massive wooden door. Affixed to one side was a great wooden bar.

"Another hindrance to pursuers," Smhee said. "Which will, in our case, be the Raggah."

After a careful inspection of the door, he gripped its handle and slowly opened it. Freshly oiled, it swung noiselessly. They went out into a very large room illuminated by six great torches at one end.. Here streams of water ran out from holes in the ceiling and down wooden troughs and onto many wooden wheels set between metal uprights.

Against the right-hand side of the far wall was another closed door as massive as the first. It, too, could be barred shut.

Unlike the bare walls of the other caves, these were painted with many strange symbols.

“There’s magic here,” Smhee said. “I smell it.”

He strode to the pool in which were set the wheels. The wheels went around and around impelled by the downpouring water. Masha counted aloud. Twelve.

“A magical number,” Smhee said.

They were set in rows of threes. At one end of the axle of each were attached some gears which in turn were fixed to a shaft that ran into a box under the wheel. Smhee reached out to the nearest wheel from the pool edge and stopped it. Then he released it and opened the lid of the box beneath the wheel. Masha looked past him into the interior of the box. She saw a bewildering array of tiny gears and shafts. The shafts were connected to more gears at the axle end of tiny wheels on uprights.

Smhee stopped the wheel again and spun it against the force of the waterfall. The mechanism inside started working backwards.

Smhee smiled. He closed the box and went to the door and barred it. He walked swiftly to the other side of the pool. There was a large box on the floor by it. He opened it and removed some metal pliers and wrenches.

“Help me get those wheels off their stands,” he said.

“Why?”

“I’ll explain while we work.” He looked around. “Kemren would have done better to have set human guards here. But I suppose he thought that no one would ever get this far. Or, if they did, they’d not have the slightest idea what the wheels are for.”

He told her what she was to do with the wheels, and they waded into the pool. The water only came to their ankles; a wide drain in the centre ensured against overflow.

Masha didn’t like being drenched, but she was sure that it would be worthwhile.

“These boxes contain devices which convert the mechanical power of the water driven wheels to magical power,” he said. “There are said to be some in the temple of Weda Krizhtawn, but I was too lowly to be allowed near them. However, I heard the high priests talking about them. They sometimes got careless in the presence of us lowly ones. Anyway, we were bound by vows to keep silent.

“I don’t know exactly what these particular wheels are for. But they must be providing energy for whatever magic he’s using. Part of the energy, anyway.”

She didn’t really understand what he was talking about, though she had an inkling. She worked steadily, ignoring the wetting and removed a wheel. Then she turned it around and reattached it.

The wheel bore symbols on each of the paddles set along its rims. There were also symbols painted on its side.

Each wheel seemed to have the same symbols but in a different sequence.

When their work was done, Smhee said, “I don’t know what their reversal will do. But I’ll wager that it won’t be for Kemren’s good. We must hurry now. If he’s sensitive to the inflow-outflow of his magic, he’ll know something’s wrong.”

She thought that it would be better not to have aroused the mage. However, Smhee was the master; she, the apprentice.

Smhee started to turn away from the wheels but stopped.

“Look!”

His finger pointed at the wheels.

“Well?”

“Don’t you see something strange?”

It was a moment before she saw what had made her uneasy without realizing why. No water was spilling from the paddles down to the pool. The water just seemed to disappear after striking them. She looked wonderingly from them to him. “I see what you mean.”

He spread out his hands. “I don’t know what’s happening. I’m not a mage or a sorcerer. But... that water has to be going some place.”

They put their boots back on, and he unshot the bar of the door. It led to another flight of steps, ending in another door. They went down a corridor the walls of which were bare stone. But there were also lit torches set in brackets on them.

At the end of the corridor they came to a round room. Light came down from torches; the room was actually a tall shaft. Looking up from the bottom, they could see a black square outlined narrowly by bright light at its top.

Chapter 13

VOICES CAME FROM above.

“It has to be a lift,” Smhee whispered. He said something in his native tongue that sounded like a curse.

“We’re stuck here until the lift comes down.”

He’d no sooner spoken than they heard a squeal as of metal, and the square began descending slowly.

“We’re in luck!” Smhee said. “Unless they’re sending down men to see what’s happened to the wheels.”

They retreated through the door at the other end. Here they waited with their blades ready. Smhee kept the door open a crack.

“There are only two. Both are carrying bags and one has a haunch of meat. They’re going to feed the bears and the spiders!”

Masha wondered how the men intended to get past the bears to the arachnids. But maybe the bears attacked only strangers.

“One man has a torch,” he said.

The door swung open, and a Raggah wearing a red-and-black striped robe stepped through. Smhee drove his dagger into the man’s throat. Masha came out from behind the door and thrust her sword through the other man’s neck.

After dragging the bodies into the room, they took off the robes and put them on.

“It’s too big for me,” she said. “I look ridiculous.”

“Cut off the bottom,” he said, but she had already started doing that.

“What about the blood on the robes?”

“We could wash it out, but then we’d look strange with dripping robes. We’ll just have to take a chance.”

They left the bodies lying on the floor and went back to the lift. This was an open-sided cage built of light (and expensive) imported bamboo. The top was closed, but it had a trap door. A rope descended through it.

They looked up but could see no one looking down.

Smhee pulled on the rope, and a bell clanged. No one was summoned by it, though.

“Whoever pulls this up is gone. No doubt he, or they, are not expecting the two to return so early. Well, we must climb up the pull-ropes. I hope you’re up to it.”

“Better than you, fat one,” Masha said.

He smiled. “We’ll see.”

Masha, however, pulled herself up faster than he. She had to climb up onto the beam to which the wheel was attached and then crawl along it and swing herself down into the entrance. Smhee caught her as she landed on the edge, though she didn’t need his help. They were in a hallway the walls of which were hung with costly rugs and along which was expensive furniture. Oil lamps gave an adequate illumination.

“Now comes the hard part,” he said between deep breaths. “There is a staircase at each end of this hall. Which leads to the mage?”

“I’d take that one,” she said, pointing.

“Why?”

“I don’t exactly know why. I just feel that it’s the right one.” He smiled, saying, “That’s as good a reason as any for me. Let’s go.” Their hands against each other inside their voluminous sleeves, but holding daggers, the hoods pulled out to shadow their faces, they walked up the stairs. These curved to end in another hall, even more luxuriously furnished. There were closed doors along it, but Smhee wouldn’t open them.

“You can wager that the mage will have a guard or guards outside his apartment.”

They went up another flight of steps in time to see the back of a Raggah going down the hall. At the corner, Masha looked around it. No one in sight. She stepped out, and just then a Raggah came around the corner at the right-hand end of the hall. She slowed, imperceptibly, she hoped, then resumed her stride. She heard Smhee behind her saying, “When you get close, within ten feet of her, move quickly to one side.” She did so just as the Raggah, a woman, noticed the blood on the front of her robe. The woman opened her mouth, and Smhee’s thrown knife plunged into her belly. She fell forwards with a thump. The fat man withdrew his knife, wiped it on the robe, and they dragged her through a doorway. The room was unlit. They dropped her near the door and went out, closing it behind them.

They went down to the end of the hall from which the woman had come and looked around the corner. There was a very wide and high-ceilinged corridor there, and from a great doorway halfway down it came much light, many voices, and the odour of cooking. Masha hadn’t realized until then how hungry she was; saliva ran in her mouth.

“The other way,” Smhee said, and he trotted towards the staircase. At its top, Masha looked around the corner. Halfway down the length of this hall a man

holding a spear stood before a door. By his side crouched a huge black wolfish dog on a leash.

She told Smhee what she'd seen.

As excited as she'd ever seen him, he said, "He must be guarding the mage's rooms!"

Then, in a calmer tone, "He isn't aware of what we've done. He must be with a woman or a man. Sexual intercourse, you know, drains more out of a person than just physical energy. Kemren won't be sensitive to the wheels just now."

Masha didn't see any reason to comment on that. She said, "The dog didn't notice me, but we can't get close before he alerts the guard."

Masha looked behind her. The hall was still empty. But what if the mage had ordered a meal to be delivered soon?

She told Smhee what she'd just thought. After a brief consultation, they went back down the stairs to the hall. There they got an exquisitely silver-chased tray and put some small painted dishes and gold pitchers on it. These they covered with a golden cloth, the worth of which was a thousand times more than Masha could make if she worked as dentist and midwife until she was a hundred years old.

With this assemblage, which they hoped would look like a late supper tray, they went to the hall. Masha had said that if the mage was with a sexual partner, it would look more authentic if they carried two trays. But even before Smhee voiced his objections, she had thought that he had to have his hands free. Besides, one tray clattering on the floor was bad enough, though its impact would be softened by the thick rug.

The guard seemed half-asleep, but the dog, rising to its feet and growling, fully awakened him. He turned towards them, though not without a glance at the other end of the hall first. Masha, in front of Smhee, walked as if she had a right to be there. The guard held the spear pointing at them in one hand and said something in his harsh back-of-the-throat speech.

Smhee uttered a string of nonsense syllables in a low but equally harsh voice. The guard said something. And then Masha stepped to one side, dropping the tray. She bent over, muttering something guttural, as if she were apologizing for her clumsiness.

"She couldn't see Smhee, but she knew that he was snatching the blowpipe from his sleeve and applying it to his lips. She came up from her bent position, her sword leaping out of her scabbard, and she ran towards the dog. It bounded towards her, the guard having released the leash. She got the blade out from the leather just in time and rammed it into the dog's open mouth as it sprang soundlessly towards her throat. The blade drove deep into its throat but she went backwards from its weight and fell onto the floor.

The sword had been torn from her grip, but the dog was heavy and unmoving on her chest. She pushed him off though he must have weighed as much as she. She rolled over and got quickly, but trembling, to her feet. The guard was sitting down, his back against the wall. One hand clutched the dart stuck in his cheek. His eyes were open but glazing. In a few seconds the hand fell away. He slumped to one side, and his bowels moved noisily.

The dog lay with the upper length of the sword sticking from its mouth. His tongue extended from the jaws, bloody, seeming almost an independent entity, a stricken worm.

Smhee grabbed the bronze handle of the door.

“Pray for us, Masha! If he’s barred the door on the inside...!”

The door swung open.

Smhee bounded in, the dead man’s spear in his hands. Masha, following, saw a large room the air of which was green and reeking of incense. The walls were covered with tapestries, and the heavy dark furniture was ornately carved with demons’ heads. They paused to listen and heard nothing except a faint burbling noise.

“Get the bodies in quickly!” Smhee said, and they dragged the corpses inside. They expected the dreaded mage to walk in at any time, but he still had not appeared when they shut the door.

Smhee whispered, “Anyone coming by will notice that there is no guard.”

They entered the next room cautiously. This was even larger and was obviously the bedroom. The bed was huge and round and on a platform with three steps. It was covered with a rich scarlet material brocaded in gold.

“He must be working in his laboratory,” Smhee whispered.

They slowly opened the door to the next room.

The burbling became louder then. Masha saw that it proceeded from a great glass vessel shaped like an upside-down cone. A black-green liquid simmered in it, and large bubbles rose from it and passed out the open end. Beneath it was a brazier filled with glowing coals. From the ceiling above a metal vent admitted the fumes.

The floor was mosaic marble in which were set pentagrams and nonagrams. From the centre of one rose a wisp of evil-smelling smoke. A few seconds later, the smoke ceased.

There were many tables holding other mysterious equipment and racks holding long thick rolls of parchment and papyrus. In the middle of the room was a very large desk of some shiny reddish wood. Before it was a chair of the same wood, its arms and back carved with human-headed dragons.

The mage, clad in a purple silk robe which was embroidered with golden centaurs and gryphons, was in the chair. His face was on the desk, and his arms were spread out on it. He stank of rancid butter.

Smhee approached him slowly, then grabbed the thin curly hair of the mage’s topknot and raised the head.

There was water on the desk, and water ran from the dead man’s nose and mouth.

“What happened to him?” she whispered. .

Smhee did not reply at once. He lifted the body from the chair and placed it on the floor. Then he knelt and thumped the mage’s chest.

The fat man rose smiling.

“What happened is that the reversal of the wheels’ motion caused the water which should have fallen off the paddles to go instead to the mage. The conversion of physical energy to magical energy was reversed.”

He paused.

“The water went into the mage’s body. He drowned.”

He raised his eyes and said, “Blessed is Weda Krizhtawn, the goddess of water! She has her revenge through her faithful servant, Rhandhee Ghee!”

He looked at Masha.” That is my true name, Rhandhee Ghee. And I have revenged the goddess and her worshippers. The defiler and thief is dead, and I can go home now. Perhaps she will forgive some of my sins because I have fulfilled her intent. I won’t go to hell, surely. I will suffer in a purgatory for a while and then, cleansed with pain, will go to the lowest heaven. And then, perhaps...”

“You forget that I am to be paid,” she said. “No, I didn’t. Look. He wears golden rings set with jewels of immense value. Take them, and let’s be off.”

She shuddered and said, “No. They would bring misfortune.”

“Very well. The next room should be his treasure chamber.” It was. There were chests and boxes filled with emeralds, diamonds, turquoises, rubies, and many other jewels. There were golden and silver idols and statuettes. There was enough wealth to purchase a dozen of the lesser cities of the empire and all their citizens.

But she could only take what she could carry and not be hampered in the leaving. Exclaiming ecstasies, she reached towards a coffer sparkling with diamonds. At her touch, the jewels faded and were gone.

Chapter 14

SHE CRIED OUT in anguish.

“They’re products of his magic!” Smhee said. “Set here to fool thieves. Benna must have taken one of these, though how he got here and then away I’ve no idea! The jewel did not disappear because the mage was alive and his powers were strong. But I’ll wager that not long after the rat carried the jewel off, it disappeared. That’s why the searchers found no jewel though they turned the city upside down and inside out!”

“There’s plenty of other stuff to take!” she said.

“No, too heavy. But he must have put his real jewels somewhere. The next room!”

But there were no other rooms.

“Don’t you believe it,” Smhee said. He tore down the tapestries and began tapping on the walls, which were of a dense-grained purplish wood erected over the stone. Presently, he said, “Ah!” and he moved his hands swiftly over the area. “Here’s a hole in the wood just big enough to admit my little finger. I put my finger in thus, and I pull thus, and thus...!”

A section of the wood swung out. Masha got a burning lamp and thrust it into the room beyond. The light fell on ten open chests and twenty open coffers. Jewels sparkled.

They entered.

“Take two handfuls,” Smhee said. “That’s all. We aren’t out of here yet.”

Masha untied the little bag attached to her belt, hesitated, then scooped out enough to fill the bag. It almost tore her heart apart to leave the rest, but she

knew that Smhee's advice was wisdom. Perhaps, some day, she could come back for more. No. That would be stupid. She had far more than enough.

On the way out, Smhee stopped. He opened the mage's robe and revealed a smooth shaven chest on which was tattooed a representation of a fearful six-armed four legged being with a glaring long-tusked face. He cut around this and peeled the skin off and put it rolled and folded into a small jar of ointment. Replacing the jar in his bag, he rose, saying, "The goddess knows that I would not lie about his death. But this will be the proof if any is demanded."

"Maybe we should look for the mage's secret exit," she said. "That way, we won't run into the Raggah."

"No. At any moment someone may see that the guard is missing. Besides, the mage will have put traps in his escape route, and we might not elude those."

They made their way back to the corridor of the lift shaft without being observed. But two men stood in front of the entrance to the lift. They were talking excitedly and looking down the shaft. Then one ran down the corridor, away from the corner behind which the two intruders watched.

"Going to get help before they venture down to find out why the two feeders haven't come back," Smhee muttered.

The man who'd stayed was looking down the shaft. Masha and Smhee took him from behind, one cutting the throat, the other stabbing him in the back. They let themselves down on the ropes and then cut them before going down through the open trap door. But as they left the cage, a spear shot through the trap door and thudded point-first into the floor. Men shouted above.

"They'll bring ropes and come down on those," Smhee said. "And they'll send others outside to catch us when we come out of the pool. Run, but remember the traps."

And the spiders, she thought. And the crabs. I hope the bears are dead. They were. The spiders, all real now that the mage was dead, were alive. These were driven back by the torches the two had paused to light, and they got to the skin-boat. They pushed this out and began paddling with desperation. The craft went through the first arch and then through the second. To their right now were some ledges on which were masses of pale-white things with stalked eyes and clacking pincers. The crabs. The two directed their boat away from these, but the writhing masses suddenly became individual figures leaping outwards and splashing into the dark water. Very quickly, the ledges were bare. There was no sign of the monsters, but the two knew that these were swimming towards them.

They paddled even faster, though it had not seemed possible until then. And then the prow of the boat bumped into the wall. "Swim for it!" Smhee bellowed, his voice rebounding from the far walls and high ceilings of the cave.

Masha feared entering the water; she expected to be seized by those huge claws. But she went over, the boat tipping, and dived.

Something did touch her leg as she went under the stone downcropping. Then her head was above the surface of the pool and Smhee's was beside her.

They scrambled out onto the hard stone. Behind them came the clacking, but none of the crabs tried to leave the pool.

The sky was black; thunder bellowed in the north; lightning traced white veins. A wind blew, chilling them in their wet clothes.

They ran towards the dugout but not in a straight line since they had to avoid the bushes with the poisonous thorns. Before they reached it, rain fell. They dragged the craft into the river and got aboard. Above them lightning cracked across the sky. Another bolt struck shortly thereafter, revealing two bears and a number of men behind them.

"They can't catch us now!" Smhee yelled. "But they'll be going back to put their horses on rafts. They'll go all the way into Sanctuary itself to get us!"

Save your breath, Masha thought. I know all that.

The wind-struck river was rough now, but they got through the waves to the opposite shore. They climbed panting up the ridge and found their horses, whinnying from fear of the lightning. When they got to the bottom of the ridge, they sped away, their passage fitfully lit by the dreadful whiteness that seemed to smash all around them. They kept their horses at a gallop for a mile, then eased them up.

"There's no way they can catch us!" Smhee shouted through the thunder. "We've got too much of a headstart!"

Dawn came. The rain stopped. The clouds cleared away; the hot winter sun of the desert rose. They stopped at the hut where they had slept, and the horses rested, and they ate bread and cheese.

"Three more hours will bring us within sight of Sanctuary," the fat man said. "We'll get your family aboard the Sailfish, and the Raggah can search for us in vain."

He paused, then said, "What do you intend to do about Eevroen?"

"Nothing," she said. "If he gets in my way I'll brain him again."

He laughed so much he choked on his bread. When he'd cleared his throat, he said, "You are some woman! Brave as the goddess makes them! And supple in mind, too! If I were not vowed to chastity, I would woo you! I may be forty-five and fat, but..."

He stopped to stare down at his hand. His face froze into an expression of horror.

Masha became equally paralysed.

A small purple spider was on Smhee's hand.

"Move slowly," he said softly through rigid lips. "I dare not move. Slap it when you've got your hand within a few inches of it."

She got up and took a step towards him. Where had the creature come from? There were no webs in the hut. Had it come from outside and crawled upon him?

She took another step, leaned over, and brought her hand slowly down at an angle towards the thing. Its eyes were black and motionless, seemingly unaware of her presence.

Maybe it's not poisonous, she thought.

Suddenly, Smhee screamed, and he crushed the spider with his other hand. He leaped up then, brushing off the tiny body.

"It bit me! It bit me!"

The dark swelling had started.

"It's not one of the mage's creatures," she said. "Its venom may not be deadly."

"It's the mage's," he said. His face was white under the heavy pigment.

“It must have crawled into my bag. It couldn’t have done it when we were on the way to the mage’s rooms. It must have got in when I opened the bag to skin off the tattoo.”

He howled. “The mage has got his revenge!”

“You don’t know that,” she said, but she was certain that it was as Smhee had said. She removed her small belt-bag and carefully poured out the jewels. But that was all it contained.

“It’s beginning to hurt,” Smhee said. “I can make it back to the city. Benna did, and he was bitten many times. But I know these spiders. I will die as surely as he did, though I will take longer. There is no antidote.”

He sat down, and for a while he rocked back and forth, eyes closed, moaning. Then he said, “Masha, there is no sense in my going on with you. But, since I have made it possible for you to be as wealthy as a queen, I beg you to do one favour for me. If it is not too much to ask.”

“What is that?” she said.

“Take the jar containing the tattooed skin to Sharranpip. And there tell our story to the highest priest of Weda Krizhtawn. He will pray for me to her, and a great tombstone will be erected for me in the courtyard of the peacocks, and pilgrims will come from all over Sharranpip and the islands around and will pray for me. But if you don’t want...”

Masha knelt and kissed him on the mouth. He felt cold.

She stood up and said, “I promise you that I will do that. That, as you said, is the least I can do.”

He smiled, though it cost him to do it.

“Good. Then I can die in peace. Go. May Weda Krizhtawn bless you.”

“But the Raggah... they will torture you!”

“No. This bag contains a small vial of poison. They will find only a corpse. If they find me at all.”

Masha burst into tears, but she took the jar, and after kissing Smhee again, she rode off, his horse trotting behind hers. At the top of the hill she stopped to look behind at the hut. Far off, coming swiftly, was a dark mass. The Raggah. She turned away and urged her horse into a gallop.

