



THE THIRD
BOOK OF SWORDS

FRED SABERHAGEN

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OF
SWORDS**

Fred Saberhagen

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(an original invitational anthology edited by Fred Saberhagen)

Up at the unpeopled borderland of cloudy heaven, where unending wind drove eternal snow between and over high gray rocks, the gods and goddesses were gathering.

In the grayness just before dawn, their tall forms came like smoke out of the gray and smoldering wind, to take on solidity and detail. Unperturbed by wind or weather, their garments flapping in the shrieking howl of air, they stood upon the rooftop of the world and waited as their numbers grew. Steadily more powers streaked across the sky, bringing reinforcement.

The shortest of the standing figures was taller than humanity, but from the shortest to tallest, all were indisputably of human shape. The dress of most members of the assembly displayed a more than mortal elegance, running to crowns and jewels and snow-white furs; the attire of a few was, by human standards, almost ordinary; that of many was bizarre.

By an unspoken agreement amounting to tradition the deities stood in a rough circle, symbol of rude equality. It was a mutually enforced equality, meaning only that none of their number was willing to concede pride of place to any other. When graybearded Zeus, a laurel wreath embracing his massive head, moved forward majestically as if after all he intended to occupy the center of the circle, a muttering at once began around him. The sound grew louder, and it did not subside until the Graybearded One, with a frown, had converted his forward movement into a mere circular pacing, then soon brought him back to his old place in the large circle. There he stopped. And only when he stopped did the muttering die down completely.

And still with each passing moment the shape of another god or goddess materialized out of the restless air. By now two dozen or more tall forms were in place around the circle. They eyed one another suspiciously, and exchanged cautious nods and signs of greeting. Neighbor to neighbor they muttered in near-whispers through the wind, trading warily in warnings and backbitings about those who were more distant in the circle, or still absent. The more of them that gathered, the more the diversity was evident. They were dark or fair, old-looking or young-looking. Handsome — as gods — or beautiful — as goddesses — or ugly, as only certain gods and goddesses could be.

Twice more Zeus opened his mouth as if he intended to address them all. Twice more he seemed on the verge of stepping forward, taking the center of the circle, and trying to command the meeting. Each time he did so that warning murmur swelled up into the frozen air, through the blasting wind, giving notice that no such attempt was going to be tolerated. Zeus remained silently at his own station in the ring, stamping his feet now and then and scowling his impatience.

At last the individual gossipings around the ring began to fade toward quiet, give way to silent waiting. There was some general agreement, tacitly attained, that now a quorum had been reached. There was no use trying to wait until all the gods and goddesses were here, all of them never attending a meeting at the same time. Never had they been able to agree unanimously on anything at all, not even on a place or an agenda for their arguments.

But now the assembly was large enough.

It was Mars, spear-armed and helmeted, who broke the silence; Mars speaking in a voice that smoldered and rumbled with old anger. The tones of it were like the sounds of displaced boulders rolling down a glacier.

Mars banged his spear upon his shield to get the attention of the assembly. Then he said to them, “There is news now of the Mindsword. The man that other humans call the Dark King has it. He is, of course, going to use it to try to get the whole world into his hands. What effect this will have on our own Game is something that we must evaluate for ourselves, each according to his or her own position.”

It was not this news he had just announced to the assembly that was really angering Mars. Rather ~~was something else, something that he wanted to keep secret in his own thoughts,~~ that made him almost choke on rage. Mars did not conceal his feelings well. As he finished speaking he used a savage gesture, a blow that almost split the air, simply to signify the fact that he was ready now to relinquish the floor to someone else.

Next to speak was Vulcan — Vulcan the Smith with the twisted leg, the armorer and Sword-forging to the gods.

“I am sorry,” began Vulcan, slyly, “that my so — worthy colleague is unable to continue at this moment. Perhaps he is brooding too much about a certain setback — one might even call it a defeat that he suffered at the hands — or should one say the paws — of a certain mortal opponent, some eight or nine years past?”

The response of Mars to this was more sullen, angry rumbling. There also was a murmuring around the circle, some of it laughter at Mars, some a denunciation of Vulcan for this obvious attempt to start an argument.

Aphrodite asked softly, “Is this what we have come here for, to have another quarrel?” Her tall body, all curves, all essence of the female, was wrapped in nothing but a diaphanous veil that seemed always on the verge of blowing away in the fierce wind but never did. She like the other deities was perfectly indifferent to the arctic cold.

Near her, Apollo’s taller form appeared emphasized for a moment in a lone ray of light from the newly risen sun. The Sun’s bright lance steadily pierced the scudding clouds for just as long as it took the god to speak, and held his body in its light. Apollo demanded, “I take it that we are all agreed upon one thing at least?”

Someone else was cooperative enough to ask Apollo: “What?” The tall god replied, “That Hermes has not come back from his mission to gather up the Swords again. That he is never going to come back.”

“That’s two things,” another member of the group objected.

Apollo took no notice of such carping. “That our divine Messenger, who no doubt thought himself as secure in his immortality as most of us still think we are in ours, has now been for four years *dead!*”

That word, of all words, had power to jolt them all. Many faced it bravely. Some tried to pretend that it had not been spoken, or if spoken certainly not heard. But there was a long moment in which even the wind was voiceless. No other word, surely, could have brought the same quality and duration of silence to this assembly.

It was the relentless voice of Apollo that entered into this new silence and destroyed it, repeating “*For four years dead.*”

The repetition provoked not more silence, but the beginning of an uproar of protest; still the voice of Apollo overrode the tumult even as it swelled.

“Dead!” he roared. “And if Hermes Messenger can be slain by one of the Swords, why so can we. And what have we done about it, during these past four years? Nothing! Nothing at all! Wrangle among ourselves, as always — no more than that!”

When Apollo paused, Mars seized the chance to speak. “And there is the one who forged those Swords!” The God of War pointed with his long war-spear, and aimed an angry stare at the crippled Smith. “I tell you, we must make him melt them down again. I’ve said all along that the Swords are going to destroy us all, unless we are able to destroy them first!”

Leaning awkwardly on his lame leg, Vulcan turned at bay. “Don’t blame me!” Wind whipped at his fur garments, his ornaments of dragon-scale clashing and fluttering in the gale. But his words came through the windstorm plainly, suffering no interference from mere physical air. “The blunder, if the

was one, was not mine. These very faces that I see all about me now spoke urging me, commanding me, to forge the Swords.”

He turned accusingly from one to another of his peers. “We needed the Swords, we had to have them, you all told me, for the Game. The Game was going to be a great delight, something we hadn’t tried before. You said the Swords must be distributed among the humans, who in the Game would be our pawns. Now what kind of pawns have they turned into? But no, you all insisted on it, no matter how I warned you —”

Again an uproar of protest was breaking out, and this time it was too loud for any one voice to overcome. Objectors were shouting that, on the contrary, they had been the ones against the whole idea of the Swords and the Game from the very start.

Naturally this provoked a strong counterreaction from others present. “What you mean is, you’ve been against the Game ever since you started losing in it! As long as you thought that you were winning, it was a great idea!”

One of the graybeard elder gods, not Zeus, put in: “Let’s get back to our immediate problem. You may say that the man they call the Dark King has the Mindsword now. Well, that may be good or bad news for some of us in terms of the Game, but does it matter beyond that? The Game is only a game, and what real difference does it make?”

“You fool! Are you incapable of understanding? This Game, that you’re so proud of winning — got out of hand long ago. Haven’t you been listening? Did you hear nothing that Apollo just said about the death of Hermes?”

“All right. All right. Let’s talk about Hermes Messenger. He had supposedly gone to collect all the Swords again, to get them out of human hands, because some of us were getting worried. But do you think he would really have destroyed the Swords, once he had them all collected? I don’t think so.”

That suggestion was greeted by a thoughtful pause, a general silence.

And that silence broken by a slow and thoughtful voice: “Besides, are we really sure that Hermes is dead? What solid evidence do we have?”

Now even Apollo the reasoner felt compelled to howl his rage at such thickheadedness. “One of the Swords killed Hermes! Farslayer, hurled from the hands of a mere human!”

Apollo got a venomous retort. “How can we be sure that that’s what really happened? Has anyone seen the Sword Farslayer since then? Did any one of us see Hermes fall?”

At this moment, Zeus once more stepped forward. He conveyed the impression of one who had been waiting for the exactly proper instant to take action. And it seemed that he had at last timed his attempt correctly, because for once he was not howled down before he could begin to speak.

“Wisdom comes with experience,” Zeus intoned, “and experience with age. To learn from the past is the surest way to secure the future. In peace and wisdom there is strength. In strength and wisdom there is peace. In wisdom and —”

No one howled him down this time, but after the first dozen words hardly any of his fellow deities were still listening. Instead they resumed their separate conversations around the circle, taking time out from the general debate while they waited for Zeus to be finished. This treatment was even deadlier than the other. Zeus soon realized what was happening. He retreated again to his own place in the ring, and there withdrew into a total, sulky silence.

Now at another place along the ring there was a stirring and a swirling movement among the snow and rocks. Attention became focused on this spot, just as a new member joined the company there. Rather than coming out of the sky as the others had, this god emerged up out of the Earth. The form of Hades was indistinct, all dimness and darkness, a difficult object even for the faculties of another deity to comprehend.

Hades in his formless voice said that yes, Hermes was certainly dead. No, he, Hades, hadn’t

actually seen the Messenger fall, or die. But he had been with Hermes shortly before what must have been the moment of that death, when Hermes was engaged in taking some Swords away from some humans. It was Hades' opinion that Hermes had been acting in good faith in his attempt to collect the Blades, though unfortunately they had been lost again.

Now another side discussion was developing. What about that offending human, the one that had apparently thrown Farslayer at Hermes and brought him down? The awful hubris that could strike a god, any god, to earth cried out to heaven for vengeance. What punishment had been dealt to the culprit? Surely someone had already seen to it that some special and eternal retaliation had been inflicted?

The same thought had already occurred, long ago, to certain other members of the group. Already they had to report now that when they first heard of the offending human he was already beyond the reach of even divine revenge.

"Then we must exact some sort of retribution from humanity in general."

"Aha, now we come to it! Just which part of humanity do you propose to strike at? Those who are your pawns in the Game, or those I claim as mine?"

Apollo's disgust at this argument was beyond all measure. "How can you fools still talk of pawns and games? Do you not see —?" But words failed him for the moment.

Hades spoke up again, this time with his own suggestion for the permanent disposal of the Swords. If all those god-forged weapons could somehow be collected, and delivered to him, he would see to their burial. All the other deities present could permanently cease to worry.

"We might cease doing a lot of things permanently, once *you* had all the Swords! Of *course* you would be willing to accept twelve for yourself — and incidentally to win the Game by doing so! What would that leave us? What kind of fools do you take us for?"

Hades was, or at least pretended to be, affronted by this attitude. "What do I care now about the game? Now, when our very existence is at stake. Haven't you been listening to Apollo?"

"Our very existence, bah! Tell that stuff to someone who'll believe it. Gods are immortal. We all know that. Hermes is playing dead, hiding out somewhere. It's part of a ploy to win the Game. Well, I don't intend to lose, whatever happens. Not to Hermes, and not to Apollo, and particularly not to you."

Aphrodite, murmuring softly, announced to all who would listen that she could think up her own ideas for getting back the Swords. Those who had the Swords, or most of them anyway, were only mere men, were they not?

Apollo spoke again. This time he prefaced his remarks by waving his bow, a gesture that gained him notably greater attention. He said that if the Swords could be regathered, they should then be turned over to him, as the most logical and trustworthy of gods. He would then put an end to the threat the weapons posed, by the simple expedient of shooting them, like so many arrows, clean off the Earth.

Before Apollo had finished his short speech most of his audience were ignoring him, bow and arrow, even as they had ignored Zeus. Meanwhile in the background Mars was rumbling threats against unspecified enemies. Others were laughing, secretly or openly, at Mars.

Vulcan was quietly passing the word around the circle that if others were to gather up the Blades and bring them back to him, and if a majority of his peers were to assure him that that was what they really wanted, he'd do his best to melt all of the Twelve back into harmless iron again.

No one was paying the least attention to Zeus mightily sulking, and he reverted to speech in a last effort to establish some authority. "It seems to me that the Smith here incorporated far too much of humanity into the Swords. Why was it necessary to quench the Blades, when they came from the fire and anvil, in living human blood? And why were so much human sweat and human tears introduced into the process?"

Vulcan bristled defensively at this. “Are you trying to tell me my trade? What do you know about it, anyway?”

Here Mars, gloating to see his rival stung, jumped into the argument. “And then there was that little trick you played at the forging. Taking off the right arm of the human smith who helped you – what was that all about?”

The Smith’s answer — if indeed he gave one — was lost in a new burst of noise. A dozen voices flared up, arguing on several different subjects. The meeting was giving every sign of breaking up despite Apollo’s best thundering efforts to hold it together a little longer. As usual there had been no general agreement on what their common problems were, much less on any course of action. Already the circle of the gods was thinning as the figures that composed it began to vanish into the air. The wind hummed with their departing powers. Hades, eschewing aerial flight as usual, vanished again straight down into the Earth beneath his feet.

But one voice in the council was still roaring on, bellowing with monotonous urgency. Against all odds, its owner was at last able to achieve something like an attentive silence among the handful of deities who remained.

“Look! Look!” was all that voice was saying. And with one mighty arm the roaring god was pointing steadily downslope, indicating a single, simple line of markings in the snow, tracks that the mundane wind was rapidly effacing.

There could be no doubt about those markings. They were a line of departing footprints, heading straight down the mountainside, disappearing behind snow-buried rocks before they had gone more than a few meters. Though they marked strides too long and impressions too broad and deep to have been made by any human being, there was no doubt that they had been left by mortal feet.

The one-armed man came stumbling along through midnight rain, following a twisted cobblestone alley into the lightless heart of the great city of Tashigang. He was suffering with fresh wounds now — one knife-gash bleeding in his side and another one in his knee — besides the old maiming loss of his right arm. Still he was better off than the man who had just attacked him. That blunderer was some meters back along the twisted alley, face down in a puddle.

Now, just when the one-armed man was about on the point of going down himself, he steered toward a wall and leaned against it. Standing with his broad back in his homespun shirt pressed to the stone wall of somebody's house, he squeezed himself in as far as possible under the thin overhang of the roof, until the eaves blocked at least some of the steady rain from hitting him in the face. The man felt frightened by what had happened to his knee. From the way the injured leg felt now when he tried to put his weight on it, he wasn't going to be able to walk much farther.

He hadn't had a chance yet to start worrying about what might have happened when the knife went into his side.

The one-armed man was tall, and strongly built. Still, by definition, he was a cripple, and therefore the robber — if that was all he had been — might have taken it for granted that he'd be easy game. Even had the attacker guessed that his intended victim carried a good oaken cudgel tucked into his belt under his loose shirt, he could hardly have predicted how quickly his quarry would be able to draw that club and with what authority he'd use it.

Now, leaning against the building for support, he had tucked his cudgel away in his belt again, and was pressing his fingers to his side under his shirt. He could feel the blood coming out, a frighteningly fast trickle.

Except for the rain, the city around him was silent. And all the windows he could see through the rain were dark, and most of them were shuttered. No one else in the huge city appeared to have taken the least notice of the brief clash he had just survived.

Or had he survived it, after all? Real walking, he had to admit, was no longer possible on his damaged knee. For the present, at least, he could still stand upright. He thought he must be near his destination now, and it was essential that he reach it. Pushing himself along the wall that he was leaning on, and then the next wall, one stone surface after another, he stumbled on, hobbled on.

He remembered the directions he had been given, and he made progress of a sort. Every time his weight came on the knee at all he had to bite back an outcry of pain. And now dizziness, lightheadedness, came welling up inside his skull. He clenched his will like a fist, gripping the treasure of consciousness, knowing that if that slipped from him now, life itself was likely to drain quickly after it.

His memorized directions told him that at this point he had to cross the alley. Momentarily forsaking the support of walls, divorcing his mind from pain, he somehow managed it.

Leaning on another wall, he rested, and rebuilt his courage. He'd crawl the rest of the way to get there if he had to, or do what crawling he could on one hand and one knee. But once he went down trying crawling he didn't know he'd ever get back up on his feet again.

At last the building that had been described to him as his goal, the House of Courtenay, came in sight, limned by distant lightning. The description had been accurate: four stories tall, flat-roofed half-timbered construction on the upper levels, stone below. The house occupied its own small block with streets or alleys on every side. The seeker's first view was of the front of the building, but the back was where he was supposed to go in order to get in. Gritting his teeth, not letting his imagination try to count up how many steps there might be yet to take, he made the necessary detour. He splashed

through puddles, out of one alley and into an even narrower one. From that he passed to one so narrow it was a mere paved path, running beside the softly gurgling, stone-channeled Corgo. The surface of the river, innocent now of boats, hissed in the heavier bursts of rain.

The man had almost reached the building he wanted when his hurt knee gave way completely. He broke his fall as best he could with his one arm. Then, painfully, dizzily, he dragged himself along on his one arm and his one functioning leg. He could imagine the trail of blood he must be leaving. No matter, the rain would wash it all away.

Presently his slow progress brought him in out of the rain, under the roof of a short, narrow passage that connected directly with the door he wanted. He crawled on and reached the narrow door. It was of course locked shut. He propped himself up in a sitting position against it, and began to pound on the door with the flat of his large hand. The pounding of his calloused hand seemed to the man to be making no noise at all. At first it felt like he was beating uselessly, noiselessly, on some thick solid tree-trunk and then it felt like nothing at all. There was no longer any feeling in his hand.

Maybe no one would hear him. Because he was no longer able to hear anything himself. Not even the rain beating on the flat passage roof. Nor could he see anything through the gathering grayness. Not even his hand before his face ...

* * *

At a little after midnight Denis the Quick was lying awake, listening to the rain. That usually made him sleepy, as long as he knew that he was securely warm and dry indoors. But tonight he was having trouble sleeping. The images of two attractive women were coming and going like provocative dancers in his imagination. If he tried to concentrate on one, then the other intruded as if jealous. He knew both women in real life, but his real-life problem was not that he had to choose between them. No, he was not so fortunate, he told himself, as to have problems of just that kind.

Denis was well accustomed to the normal night sounds of the house. The sound he began to hear now, distracting him from the pleasant torment of waking dreams, was certainly not one of them. Denis got up quickly, pulled on a pair of trousers, and went out of his small bedchamber to investigate.

His room on the ground floor of the house gave almost directly on the main workshop, which was a large chamber now illumined faintly by a sullen smoldering of coals banked in the central forge. Faint ghost-gleams of firelight touched tools around the forge and weapons racked on the walls. Most of the work down here was on some form of weaponry.

Denis paused for a moment beside the fire, intending to light a taper from its coals. But then he changed his mind, and instead reached up to the high wall niche where the Old World light was kept.

The back door leading into the shop from outside ground level was fitted with a special peephole. This was a smooth little bulge of glass, cleverly shaped so that anyone looking through it from inside saw out at a wide angle. Another lens, set into the door near its very top, was there to let the precious flameless torch shine out. Denis now lifted the antique instrument into position there and turned it on. Immediately the narrow passage just outside the door was flooded with clear, brilliant light. And even as Denis did this, the sound that had caught his attention came again, a faint thumping on the door itself. Now through the fish-eye lens he could see the one who made the sound, as a slumped figure somewhat blurred by the imperfect lens. The shape of the fallen figure suggested the absence of an arm.

With the flameless light still glowing in his hand, Denis stepped back from the door. The House of Courtenay generally contained some stock of the goods in which its owners dealt, including the fancy weapons that were the specialty of the house. Also there was usually a considerable supply of coin of

hand. The place was a natural target for thieves, and for any member of the household to open an exterior door to anyone, particularly at night, was no trivial matter. The only thing for Denis to do now was to rouse the household steward, Tarim, and get his orders as to what to do next.

Crossing the workshop, Denis approached the door to the ascending stair that led to the next highest level of the house; Tarim slept up there, along with most of the rest of the resident staff. Denis opened the door — and stopped in his tracks.

Looking down at him from the top of the first flight, holding a candle in her small, pale hand, was one of the characters from his recent waking dream, the Lady Sophie herself, mistress of this house. Denis's surprise was at seeing the lady there at all. Family quarters were located on the upper levels of the house, well above the noise and smoke and smell of the shop when it was busy, and of the daytime streets. Her tiny but shapely body was wrapped in a thick white robe, contrasting sharply with her straight black hair. It was hard to believe that any faint sound at the back door could have roused the lady from her bed.

The mistress called down: "Denis? What is it?" He thought she sounded nervous.

Denis stood there hugging his bare chest. "There's someone at the back door, Mistress. I could see only one man. Looked like he was hurt, but I didn't open."

"Hurt, you say?"

It looked and sounded to Denis almost as if the lady had been expecting someone to arrive tonight. She had been waiting around in readiness to receive them. Denis had heard nothing in particular in the way of business news to make him expect such a visitor, but such a nocturnal arrival in itself would not be very surprising. As the headquarters of a company of traders, the house was accustomed to the comings and goings of odd people at odd hours.

Denis answered, "Yes, Ma'am, hurt. And it looked like he only had one arm. I was just going to arouse Tarim ..."

"No." The mistress was immediately decisive. "Just stand by there for a moment, while I go and wake the master."

"Yes, Ma'am." It was of course the only answer Denis could give, but still it was delayed. It was delivered only to the lady's already retreating back. Denis was puzzled, and a moment later his puzzlement increased, for here, already fully awake and active too, came Master Courtenay himself. Courtenay was a moving mountain of a man, his great bulk wrapped now in a night robe of a rich blue fabric. With a lightness and quickness remarkable for his size, the master came almost skipping down the stairs, his lady just behind him.

Arriving on the ground floor, the master of the house faced Denis directly. The two were almost equal in height, near average, though Courtenay weighed easily twice as much as his lean employee, and was possibly three times as massive as his small wife: Courtenay was not yet thirty, as nearly as Denis could judge, and very little of his bulk was fat, though in his robe he looked that way. Nor could he be described as stupid, as Denis had realized on his own first day here, despite what a first glance at Courtenay's face suggested — of course he could hardly be unintelligent and have prospered as he evidently had.

The master brushed back his almost colorless hair from his uninviting face, a gesture that seemed more one of worry than of sleepiness. In his usual mild voice he said, "We'll let the rest of the household go on sleeping, Denis." Behind the master, his lady was already closing the door to the ascending stair. "The three of us will manage," Courtenay went on. "The man's hurt, you say?"

"Looks like it, sir."

"Still, we'll take no chances more than necessary. Help yourself to a weapon, and stand by."

"Yes sir." In the year and a half that he had been at the House of Courtenay, Denis had learned that there were stretches of time in which life here began to seem dull. But so far those stretches had never

extended for any unbearable length of time.

~~Over on the far side of the shop, the mistress was lighting a couple of oil lamps. And when she~~ brought her hands down from the lamp shelf and faced around again, Denis thought that he saw something trailing from her right hand. He caught only a glimpse of the object before it vanished between folds of her full robe. But, had he not been convinced that Mistress Sophie was only a delicate little thing who loved her luxury, he would have thought that she was holding the leather thongs of a hunter's or a warrior's sling.

The more recent years of Denis's young life had been generally peaceful, first as an acolyte of Ardneh in the White Temple, then here in the House of Courtenay as apprentice trader and general assistant. But he had spent the longer, earlier portion of his existence serving a different kind of apprenticeship. That had been in the slum streets of Tashigang, and it had left him indelibly familiar with the more unpeaceful side of life. So now he was reasonably calm as he moved to the display of decorative weapons that occupied a good part of one side of the large room. There he selected an ornate battle-hatchet, a weapon of antique design but sharp-edged and of a pleasantly balanced weight. With this in hand, Denis nodded that he was ready.

Master Courtenay, already standing by the back door, returned the nod. Then he turned to the door and made use of the peephole and the Old World light. In the next moment Courtenay had unbarred the door and yanked it open. The crumpled body that had been sitting against it on the outside came toppling softly inward.

Denis sprang forward, quickly closed the door and barred it up again. Meanwhile the master of the house had stretched the unconscious man out full length on the floor, and was examining him with the aid of the Old World light.

The mistress, one of the more conventional lamps in her hand, had come forward to look to the man. Quickly she turned to Denis. "He's bleeding badly. You were a servant of Ardneh, see what you can do for him."

Denis was not usually pleased to be asked to administer medical treatment; he knew too well his own great limitations in the art. But his urge to please his mistress would not let him hesitate. And he knew that his years in Ardneh's service had left him almost certainly better qualified than either of his employers. He nodded and moved forward.

The man stretched out on the floor was not young; his unconscious face was weather-beaten over its bloodless pallor, and the hair that fanned out in a wild spread on the flat stones was gray. Standing he would have been tall, with a well-knit, sturdy body marred by the old amputation.

"His right arm is gone." That was the mistress, speaking thoughtfully, as if she were only musing to herself.

Denis heard her only absently; the man's fresh wounds were going to demand a healer's full attention. A lot of blood was visible, darker wetness on the rainsoaked clothing.

Quickly Denis began to peel back clothes. He cut them away, when that was easier, with a keen knife that the master handed him. He also tossed aside a mean-looking cudgel that he found tucked into the victim's belt.

"I'll need water, and bandages," he announced over his shoulder. There were two wounds, and both looked bad. "And whatever medicines we have to stop bleeding." He paused to mumble a minor spell for that purpose, learned in his days as Ardneh's servitor. It was about the best that Denis could do in the way of magic, and it was very little. Perhaps it brought some benefit, but it was not going to be enough.

"I'll bring you what I can find," replied the mistress of the house, and turned away with quiet efficiency. Again Denis was surprised. He had long ago fixed her image in his mind as someone who existed to be pampered ... could that really have been a sling he'd seen her holding?

But now the present task demanded his full attention. “We ought to put him on my bed,” said Denis. And Courtenay, strong as a loadbeast and disdaining help, scooped up the limp heavy form as it had been that of a small child, and held it patiently while Denis maneuvered first the door to his room and then the coverings on his bed.

The hurt man’s eyelids fluttered just as he was being put down on the bed, and he muttered a few words. Denis heard something like: “Ben of Purkinje,” which certainly sounded like a name. That was the victim himself? No use asking. He was out cold again.

Soon the mistress was back, with such useful items as she had been able to lay her hands on so quickly, water and clean cloth. She had also brought along a couple of medicine jars, but nothing that Denis thought was likely to help. While Denis went to work washing and bandaging, the master picked up the sodden clothing that had been stripped away, and went quickly through the pockets. But whatever Courtenay was looking for, he apparently did not find it. With a sigh he threw the garments back on the floor and asked: “Well, Denis, what about him?”

“He’s lost a lot of blood, sir. And, where the wounds are, the bleeding’s going to be hard to stop. I’ve packed this hole in his side as best I can.” As he spoke Denis was still pressing a bandage in place. “We could use spider webs, but I don’t know where to get a bunch of ’em quickly. His knee isn’t bleeding so much now, but it looks nasty. If he lives, he won’t be walking for a while.”

The Old World light had been replaced in its customary wall niche, and the mistress had now brought one of the better ordinary lamps into Denis’s room. By the lamplight she and her husband were staring at each other with what struck Denis as curious expressions.

“Knife wounds, I think,” said Master Courtenay, shifting his gaze at last back to Denis.

“Yes sir, I would say that’s what they are.”

“He couldn’t have come very far in that condition.”

“I’d have to agree with that, sir.”

The master nodded, and turned and walked out of Denis’s room, leaving the door open behind him. He didn’t say where he was going, and nobody asked. The mistress lingered. Denis, observing the direction of her gaze, wondered what it was about the patient’s arm-stump that she found so fascinating.

Having been a member of the household for a year and a half now, Denis was — sometimes almost — treated like one of the family. Now he made bold to ask, “Do you recognize him, Mistress?”

“I’ve never seen him before,” the lady answered, which to Denis sounded like the truth used as an evasion. She added: “Will he live, do you think?”

Before Denis had to try to make a guess sound like an expert opinion, there came again the sound of someone at the back door of the shop. The sounds were different this time: demanding shouts accompanied by a strong and determined hammering.

Following his mistress out into the shop’s main room, Denis shut the door of his own room behind him. The master, Old World light in hand again, was once more approaching the back door. Even as Courtenay turned on the light and peered out through the spy-lens, the pounding came again. This time it was accompanied by a hoarse voice, somewhat muffled by the door’s thickness: “Ho, in the house open for the Watch! In the Lord Mayor’s name, open!”

The master of the house continued to peer out. “Three of ’em,” he reported in a low voice. “No lights of their own. Still, it’s the real Watch — I think.”

“Open!” the smothered roaring voice demanded. “Open or we break it down!” And there came *thump thump thump*. But they were going to have to thump harder than that before this door would take them seriously.

Quietly the mistress said to her husband: “We don’t want to ...” She let the statement trail off there, but Denis listening had the strong impression that her next words would have been: around

suspicion.

Whatever meaning the master read into her half-voiced thought, he nodded his agreement with. Looking at Denis, he ordered: "Say nothing to them about our visitor. We've seen no one tonight."

"If they want to search?"

"Leave that to me. But pick up your hatchet again, just in case."

When all three of the people inside were ready, Courtenay undid the bars and opened the door again. In the very next instant he had to demonstrate extraordinary agility for a man of his weight, leaping back out of the way of a blow from a short sword.

The three men who had come bursting in, dressed though they were in the Lord Mayor's livery of gray and green, were plainly not the Watch. Denis with his hatchet was able to stand off the first rush of one of them, armed with a long knife in each hand. Another of the intruders started toward Lady Sophie. But her right arm rose from her side, drawing into a whirling blur the sling's long leather strands. Whatever missile had been cradled in the leather cup now blasted stone fragments out of the wall beside the man's head, giving him pause, giving her the necessary moment to reload her weapon.

"Ben of Purkinje!" cried out the third invader, hacking again at Master Courtenay with his sword. "Greetings from the Blue Temple!" This attacker was tall, and looked impressively strong.

Master Courtenay, after advising Denis to be armed, had himself been caught embarrassing himself unarmed on the side of the room away from the rack of weapons. He had to improvise, and out of the miscellany of tools around the forge grabbed up a long, iron-handled casting ladle. It was a clumsy thing to try to swing against a sword, but the master of the house had awesome strength, and now demonstrated good nerves as well. For the time being he was holding his own, managing to protect himself.

The man who had started after the Lady Sophie now turned back, indecisively, as if to give the swordsman aid. It was an error. In the next instant the second stone from the sling hit him in the back of the head and knocked him down. The sound of the impact and the way he fell showed that for him the fight was over.

Denis was distracted by the lady's achievement unwisely, for a moment later he felt the point of one of his opponent's long knives catch in the flesh of his forearm. The hatchet fell from Denis's grasp to the stone floor. Scrambling away from the knives, clearing a low bench in a somersaulting dive, Denis the Quick lived up to his nickname well enough to keep himself alive.

He heard one of the bigger workbenches go over with a crash, and now he saw that Master Courtenay had somehow managed to catch his own attacker by the swordarm — maybe the fellow had also been distracted, dodging feints of a slung stone. Anyway it was now going to be a wrestling match — but no, it really wasn't. In another instant the swordsman, bellowing his surprise, had been lifted clean off his feet, and in the instant after that Denis saw him slaughtered like a rabbit, his back broken against the angle of the heavy, tilted table.

The knife-wielder who had wounded Denis had now changed his strategy and was scrambling after the lady. Suddenly bereft of friends, he needed a hostage. Denis, reckless of his own safety, and wounded as he was, threw himself in the attacker's way before the man could come within a knife's thrust of the mistress. Denis had one quick glimpse of the lady, her white robe half undone, scotching successfully on hands and knees to get away.

And now Denis was on his back, and the knife was coming down at him instead — but before it reached him, the arm that held it was knocked aside by a giant's blow from the long ladle. The iron weight brushed aside the barrier of an arm to mash into the knifer's cheekbone, delivering most of its energy there with an effect of devastation. Denis rolled aside, paused to look back, and allowed himself to slow to a panting halt. The fight was definitely over.

In the workshop, only three sets of lungs were breathing still.

The lady, pulling her robe around her properly once more (even amid surrounding blood, terror, and danger, that momentary vision of her body was still with Denis; he thought that it would always be.) Now she let herself slide down slowly until she was sitting on the floor with her back against one of the upset benches. Evidently more angered than terrified by the experience, she said to her husband acidly, "You are quite, quite sure, are you, that they represent the Watch?"

Coutenay, still on his feet, looking stupid, breathing heavily, could only mumble something.

Once more there came the sound of pounding on a door, accompanied by urgent voices. But this time the noise was originating within the house. The door that closed off the ascending stair was being rattled and shaken, while from behind it a man's voice shouted: "Mistress! Master! Denis, are you all right? What's going on?"

The master of the house cast down his long iron ladle. He stood for a moment contemplating his own bloodied hands as if he wondered how they might have got that way. Denis saw an unprecedented tremor in those hands. Then Courtenay drew a deep breath, raised his head, and called back, almost calmly, "It's all right, Tarim. A little problem, but we've solved it. Be patient for a moment and I'll explain."

In an aside he added: "Denis, help me get these ... no, you're hurt yourself. Sit down first and bind that up. Barb, you help me with these visitors. Drag 'em around behind that bench and we'll throw a tarp over 'em."

Denis, in mild shock now with his wound, took a moment to register the unfamiliar name. Barb? Never before had he heard the master, or anyone else, call the lady that ... it wasn't going to be easy, he realized, to bind up his own arm unaided. Anyway, the wound didn't look like it was going to kill him.

Courtenay, while keeping busy himself, was still giving orders. "Now close the street door." He dropped a dead man where he wanted him, and pulled out a heavy tarpaulin from its storage. "Now wait, let Tarim see it standing open. We'll say some brigands got in somehow, and ..."

Tarim and the other awakened staff were presently allowed to come crowding in. Whether they fully believed the vague story about brigands or not, they took their cue from their master's manner and were too wise to question it. The outer door was closed and barred. Tarim himself had to be dissuaded from standing watch in the workshop for the rest of the night, and eventually he and all the others were on their way back to bed.

Alone in the workshop again, the three who had done the fighting exchanged looks. Then they got busy.

Courtenay began a preliminary clean-up, while the mistress applied a bandage to Denis's forearm following his directions. Her small fingers, soft, white, and pampered, did not shrink from blood contact. They managed the bandaging quite well, using some of the cloth that had been brought for the first patient.

When the job was done, her fingers held his arm a moment more. Her dark eyes, for the first time ever (he thought) looked at him with something more than the wish to be pleasant to a servant. She said, very quietly but very seriously, "You saved my life, Denis. Thank you."

It was almost as if no woman had ever touched him or spoken to him before. Denis muttered something. He could feel the blood flowing back into his face. What foolishness, he told himself. He and this lady could never ...

A quick look at the stranger now occupying Denis's bed showed that the fight in the next room had not disturbed him. He was still unconscious, breathing shallowly. Denis, looking at him, came round to the opinion that nothing was likely to disturb this man again. With two wounded men now on hand, the mistress announced that she was going upstairs to search more thoroughly for medical materials.

The master said to his lady, "I'll come up with you, we have to talk. Denis can manage here for

few moments.”

The two of them climbed in thoughtful silence, past the level where Tarim and other workers slept past the next floor also. Reaching the topmost level of the house, they passed through another door and entered a domain of elegance. This began with a wood-paneled hall, lit now by the flame of a single candle in a wall sconce. Here the lady turned in one direction, going to rummage in her private stock for medical materials. The master turned down the hall the other way, heading for a closet where he expected to find a fresh, unbloodied robe.

Before he reached the room that held the closet, he was intercepted by the toddling figure of a knee-high child, an apparition followed almost immediately by that of an apologetic nurse.

“Oh sir, you’re hurt,” the nurse protested. She was a buxom girl, almost a grown woman now. And at the same time the child demanded: “Daddy! Tell story now!” At the age of two and a half, the little girl fortunately already showed much more of her mother’s than her father’s looks. Brazenly wide awake, as if something about this particular night delighted her, she waited in her silken nightdress with a small stuffed toy in hand.

The man spoke to the nursemaid first. “I’m all right, Kuan-yin. The blood is nothing. I’ll put Ben back to bed; you go see if you can help your mistress find what she’s looking for.”

The nurse looked at him for a moment. Then, like the other employees, wise enough to be incurious tonight, she moved away.

The huge man, who for the past four years had been trying to establish an identity as Master Courtenay, wiped drying gore from his huge hands onto a robe already stained. With hands now steady, and almost clean, he bent to carefully pick up the living morsel he had discovered he valued more than his own life.

Carrying his daughter back to the nursery, he passed a window. Through genuine glass and rain that night he had a passing view of the high city walls some hundreds of meters distant. The real walls were keeping a fire burning atop the wall. Another light, smaller and steadier, was visible in a slightly different direction; one of the upper windows glowing in the Lord Mayor’s palace. It looked as if someone was having a busy night there too; the observer could only hope that there was no connection.

Fortune was smiling on the huge man now, for he was able to remember the particular story that his daughter wanted, and to get through the telling of it with reasonable speed. The child had just gone back to sleep, and the father was just on his way out of the nursery, shutting the door with infinite care behind him, when his wife reappeared, still wearing her stained white robe.

“We have a moment,” she whispered, and drew him aside into their own bedroom. When that door too had been softly closed, and they were securely alone, she added: “I’ve already taken the medicine downstairs to Denis. He thinks that the man is probably going to die ... there’s no doubt, is there, that he’s the courier we’re expecting?”

“I don’t suppose there’s much doubt about that, no.”

The lady was slipping out of her bloodied robe now, and throwing it aside. In the very dim light that came in through the barred window from those distant watchfires, her husband beheld her shape and body as a curved warmed silver candlestick, a pale ghost hardly thickened at all by having borne one child. Once he had loved this woman hopelessly, and then another love had come to him, and gone again, dissolved in death. Sometimes he still saw in dreams a cascade of bright red hair ... his love for his darkhaired wife still existed, but it was very different now.

As she dug into a chest to get another robe, she told him calmly, “One of those we killed tonight cried out, something like: ‘Greetings to Ben of Purkinje, from the Blue Temple.’ I’m sure that Denis heard it too.”

“We’re going to have to trust Denis. He’s proved tonight he’s loyal. I think he saved your life.”

“Yes,” the lady agreed, in a remote voice. “Either trust him — or else kill him too. Well.” She dismissed that thought, though not before taking a moment in which to examine it with deliberate care. Then she looked hard at her husband. “And you called me Barb, too, once, down there in his hearing.”

“Did I?” He’d thought he’d broken himself long ago of calling her that. Ben — he never really thought of himself as “of Purkinje” — heaved a great sigh. “So, anyway, the Blue Temple has caught up with me. It probably doesn’t matter what Denis overheard.”

“And they’ve caught up with me, too,” she reminded him sharply. “And with your daughter, whether they were looking for us or not. It looked like they were ready to wipe out the household if they could.” She paused. “I hope they haven’t located Mark.”

Ben thought that over. “There’s no way we can get any word to him quickly. Is there? I’m not sure just where he is.”

“No, I don’t suppose we can.” Barbara, tightening the belt on her clean robe, shook her head thoughtfully. “And they came here right on the heels of the courier — did you notice that? They must have been following him somehow, knowing that he’d lead them to us.” “Too much of a coincidence otherwise.”

“Yes. And the alliance still holds, I suppose, between Blue Temple and the Dark King.”

“Which means the Dark King’s people may know about the courier too. And about what we have in our possession here, that the courier was going to take away, if the rest of the shipment eventually arrives.” He heaved another sigh.

“What do we do, Ben?” His wife spoke softly now, standing close to him and looking up. At average height he towered over her.

“At the moment, we try to keep the courier alive, and see if he can tell us anything. About Denis, we’re just going to have to trust him, as I say. He’s a good man.”

He was about to open the bedroom door, but his wife’s small hand on his arm delayed him. “Your hands,” she reminded him. “Your robe.”

“Right.” He poured water into a basin and quickly washed his hands, then changed his robe. His mind was still down in the workshop, reliving the fight. Already in his memory the living bodies he had just broken were taking on the aspects of creatures in some awful dream. He knew they were going to come back later to assail him. Later perhaps his hands would shake again. It was always like this for him after a fight. He had to try to put it out of his mind for now.

While he was getting into his clean robe, Barbara said, “Ben, as soon as I saw that the man had only one arm, you know what I thought of.”

“Mark’s father. But Mark always told us that his father was dead. He sounded quite sure of it.”

“Yes, I remember. That he’d seen his father struck down in their village street. But just supposed ...”

“Yes. Well, we’ve got enough to worry about as it is.”

In another moment they were quietly making their way downstairs together. The house around them was as quiet now as if everyone were really sleeping. Ben could picture most of his workers lying awake, holding their breaths, waiting for the next crash.

In Denis’s room on the ground floor they found the young man, his face pale under his dark hair, sitting watch over a stranger who still breathed, but barely. The mistress immediately went to work improving on her first effort at bandaging Denis’s arm. Ben thought he could see a little more color coming slowly back into the youth’s cheeks.

And now, for the third time since midnight, a noise at the back door. This time a modest tapping.

Something in Ben wanted to react with laughter. “Gods and demons, what a night. My house has turned into the Hermes Gate to the High Road.”

And now, for the third time, after making sure that his wife and his assistant were armed and ready for trouble as they could get, Ben maneuvered light and lenses to look out into the narrow exterior passage. This time, as he reported to the others in a whisper, there were two human figures to be seen outside. Both appeared to be men, and both were robed in white.

“It looks like two of Ardneh’s people. One’s carrying a big staff that ...” Ben didn’t finish. Barbara caught his meaning.

Those outside, knowing from the light that they were under observation from within, called loudly. “Master Courtenay? We’ve brought the wooden model that you’ve been waiting for.”

“Ah,” said Ben, hearing a code that gave him reassurance. Still he signed to his companions to remain on guard, before he cautiously opened the door once more.

This time the opening admitted neither a toppling body nor an armed rush. There was only the peaceful entry of the two in white, who as Ardneh’s priests saluted courteously first the master of the house and then the people with him. Denis, this time holding his hatchet left-handed, was glad to be able to lower it again.

White robes dripped water on a floor already freshly marked by rain and mud and blood. If the newcomers noticed these signs of preceding visitors, they said nothing about them.

Instead, as soon as Ben had barred up the door again, the older of the two white-clad priests offered him the heavy, ornate wooden staff. It was obviously meant to be a ceremonial object of some kind, too large and unwieldy to be anything but a burden on a march or a hike. Tall as a man, cruciform in its upper part, the staff was beautifully carved out of some lightwood that Denis could not identify. The uppermost portion resembled the hilt of a gigantic wooden sword, with the heads and necks of two carved dragons re-curving upon themselves to form the outsized crosspiece.

“Beautiful,” commented Denis, with a sudden dry suspicion. “But I wonder which of Ardneh’s rites requires such an object? I saw nothing at all like it in the time I spent as acolyte.”

The two white-garbed men looked at Denis. Then they turned in silent appeal to the man they knew as Master Courtenay. He told them tiredly, “You may show us the inside of the wooden model to Denis here is fully in my confidence, as of tonight. He’s going to have to be.”

Denis stared for a moment at his master, who was watching closely what the priests were doing. The younger priest had the staff now, and was pressing carefully with strong fingers on the fanciful carving. In a moment, the wood had opened like a shell, revealing a velvet-lined cavity inside. Hidden there, straight iron hilt within wooden crosspiece, was a great Sword. The plain handle, of what Denis took to be some hard black wood, was marked in white with a small symbol, the outline of an open human hand. The Sword was in a leather sheath, that left only a finger’s-breadth of the blade visible but that small portion of metal caught the eye. It displayed a rich mottling, suggesting centimeters of depth in the thin blade, beneath a surface gleam of perfect smoothness. Only the Old World, or a god, thought Denis, could have made a blade like that ... and Denis had never heard of any Old World swords.

“Behold,” the elder priest of Ardneh said, even as the hand of the younger drew forth the blade out of its sheath. “The Sword of Mercy!”

And still Denis needed another moment — but no more than that — to understand fully what he was being allowed to see. When understanding came, he first caught his breath, and then released it with a long sigh. By now almost everyone in the world had heard of the Twelve Swords, though there were probably those who still doubted their reality, and most had never seen one. The Swords had been forged some twenty years ago, the more reliable stories had it; created, all the versions of the legend agreed, to serve some mysterious role in a divine Game that the gods and goddesses who ruled the world were determined to enjoy among themselves.

And if this wonderous weapon were not one of those twelve Swords, thought Denis ... well, it was

hard to imagine what else it could be. In his time at the House of Courtenay he had seen some elegant and valuable blades, but never before anything like this.

There were twelve of them, all of the stories agreed on that much. Most of them had two names though some had more names than two, and a few had only one. They were called Wayfinder, and Farslayer, and the Tyrant's Blade; there were the Mindsword, and Townsaver, and Stonecutter, called also the Sword of Siege. There were Doomgiver, Sightblinder, Dragonslicer; Coinspinner and Shieldbreaker and the Sword of Love, that last thrice-named, also as Woundhealer and the Sword of Mercy.

And, if any of the tales had truth in them at all, each Sword had its own unique power, capable of overwhelming all lesser magics, bestowing on its owner some chance to rule the world, or at least speak on equal terms with those who did ...

The older priest had carefully accepted the naked Sword from the hands of the younger, and now Denis observed with a start that the old man was now approaching him, Denis, with the heavy weapon held out before him. Half-raised as if in some clumsy system of attack, it wobbled slightly in the elder's hands.

Even in the mild lamplight the steel gleamed breathtakingly. And Denis thought that a sound was coming from it now, a sound like that of human breath.

Whether he was commanded to hold out his wounded arm, or did so automatically, Denis could not afterwards remember. The room was very quiet, except for the faint slow rhythmic hiss that the Sword made, as if it breathed. The old man's thin arms, that looked as if they might never have held a weapon before in all his life, reached out. The blade, looking keener than any razor that Denis had ever seen, steadied itself suddenly. It moved now as if under some finer control than the visibly tremulous grip of the old priest.

And now the broad point had somehow, without even nicking flesh, inserted itself snugly underneath the tight bandage binding Denis's forearm. The bloodstained white cloth, cut neatly, fell away, and the Sword's point touched the wound directly. Denis, expecting pain, felt instead an intense moment of something else, a sensation unique and indescribable. And then the Sword withdrew.

Looking down at his arm, Denis saw dried blood, but no fresh flow. The dried, brownish stuff brushed away readily enough when he rubbed at it with his fingers. Where the dried blood had been he saw now a small, fresh, pink scar. The wound looked healthy, easily a week or ten days healed.

It was at this moment, for some reason, that Denis suddenly remembered something about the man who, the legends said, had been forced to assist Vulcan in the forging of the Swords. The stories said of that human smith that as soon as his work was done he had been deprived of his right arm by the god.

"It is shameful, of course," the elder priest was saying, "that we must keep it hidden so, and sneaked through the night with it like criminals with their plunder. But if we did not take precautions, then those who would put Woundhealer to an evil use would soon have it in their possession."

"We will do our best," the lady of the house assured him, "to keep it from them."

"But at the moment," said the master, "we have a problem even more immediate than that. Sirs, you will, bring the Sword this way with you, and quickly. A man lies dying."

Denis led the way, and quickly opened the door to his own room. The master stepped in past him and indicated the still figure on the bed. "He arrived here not an hour ago, much as you see him. And I fear he is the courier who was to have carried on what you have brought."

The two priests moved quickly to stand beside the bed. The young one murmured a prayer to Draffut, God of Healing. The first quick touch of the Sword was directly on the wound still bleeding

the side of the unconscious man. Denis, despite his own experience of only moments ago, could not keep from wincing involuntarily. It was hard to imagine that that keen, hard point would not draw more blood, do more harm to human flesh already injured. But the slow red ooze from the wound, instead of increasing, dried up immediately. As the Sword moved away, the packing that Denis had put into the wound pulled out with it. The cloth hung there, stuck by dried blood to the skin.

Feeling a sense of unreality, Denis passed his hand over his eyes.

Now the Sword, still in the hands of Ardneh's elder servant, moved down to touch the wound on the exposed knee. This time when the bare metal touched him, the man on the bed drew in his breath sharply, as if with some extreme and exquisite sensation; a moment later he let out a long sigh eloquent of relief. But his eyes did not open.

And now the tip of the Sword was being made to pass back and forth over his whole body, not quite touching him. It paused again, briefly, right above the heart. Denis could see how the arms of the old priest continued to tremble, as if it strained them to hold this heavy weapon — not, Denis supposed, that this Sword ought to be called a weapon. He wondered what would happen if you swung it against an enemy.

The tip of the blade paused just once more, when it reached the scarred stump of the long-lost arm. There it touched, and there, to Denis's fresh surprise, it did draw blood at last, a thready red trickle from the scarred flesh. Again a gasp came from the unconscious man.

The bleeding stopped of itself, almost as quickly as it had started. The old priest now slid the blade back into its sheath, and handed it to his assistant, who enclosed it once again within the staff of wood.

The elder's face was pale now, as if the healing might have taken something out of him. But he did not pause to rest, bending instead to examine the man he had been treating. Then he pulled a blanket up to the patient's chin and straightened.

"He will recover," the elder priest announced, "but he must rest for many days; he was nearly dead before the Sword of Mercy reached him. Here you can provide him with the good food he needs; even so his recovery will take some time."

Master Courtenay told the two priests of Ardneh softly, "We thank you in his name — whatever that may be. Now, will you have some food? And then we'll find you a place to sleep."

The elder declined gravely. "Thank you, but we cannot stay, even for food." He shook his head. "This man was to be the next courier, as you say, I fear you will have to find a replacement for him."

"We will find a way," the lady said.

"Good," said the elder, and paused, frowning. "There is one thing more that I must tell you before we go." He paused again, a longer time, as if what he had to say now required some gathering of forces. "The Mindsword has fallen into the hands of the Dark King."

An exhausted silence fell over the people in the workshop. Denis was trying desperately to recall what the various songs and stories had to say about the weapon called the Mindsword.

There was, of course, the verse that everyone had heard:

*The Mindsword spun in the dawn's gray light
And men and demons knelt down before
The Mindsword flashed in the midday bright
Gods joined the dance, and the march to war
It spun in the twilight dim as well
And gods and men marched off to—*

"Gods and demons!" Master Courtenay swore loudly. His face was grave and gray, with a look that Denis had never seen on it before.

Moments later, having said their last farewells, the two white-robed men were gone.

~~Denis closed and barred the door behind them, and turned round. The master of the house was~~ standing in the middle of the workshop, with one hand on the wooden Sword-case that stood leaning there against the chimney. He was looking it over carefully, as if it were something that he might want to buy.

The lady was back in Denis's room already, looking down at the hurt man on the bed. Denis when he came in saw that the man was now sleeping peacefully and his color was a little better already.

Out in the main room of the shop again, Denis approached his master — whose real name, Denis was already certain, was unlikely to be Courtenay. "What are we going to do with the Sword now, sir? Of course it may be none of my business." It obviously had become his business now; his real question was how they were going to deal with that fact.

His master gave him a look that said this point was appreciated. But all he said was: "Even before we worry about the Sword, there's another little job that needs taking care of. How's your arm?"

Denis fixed it. There was a faint residual soreness. "Good enough."

"Good." And the big man walked around behind the big toppled workbench, and lifted the tarpaulin from that which had been concealed from Ardneh's priests.

It was going to be very convenient, Denis thought, that the house was so near the river, and that the night was dark and rainy.

The chase under the blistering sun had been a long one, but the young man who was its quarry foresaw that it was not going to go on much longer.

Since the ambush some twenty kilometers back had killed his three companions and all the riding beasts, he had been scrambling on foot across the rough, barren country, pausing only at intervals to set an ambush of his own, or when necessary to gasp for breath.

The young man wore a light pack on his back, along with his longbow and quiver. At his belt he carried a small water bottle — it was nearly empty now, one of the reasons why he thought that the chase must soon end in one way or another. His age would have been hard to judge because of his weathered look, but it was actually much closer to twenty than to thirty. His clothes were those of a hunter, or perhaps a guerrilla soldier, and he wore his present trouble as well and fittingly as he wore his clothes. He was a tall and broad-shouldered young man, with blue-gray eyes, and a light, short beard that until a few days ago had been neatly trimmed. The longbow slung across his back looked eminently functional, but at the moment there were only three arrows left in the quiver that rode beside it.

The young man had fallen into a kind of pattern in his movement. This took the form of a trot, a pause to look back over one shoulder, another scramble, a quick walk, and then a look back over the other shoulder without pausing.

According to the best calculation he could make, which he knew might very easily be wrong, he still had one more active enemy behind him than he had arrows. Of course the only way to make absolutely sure of the enemy's numbers would be to let them catch him. They might very well do that anyway. They were still mounted, and would easily have overtaken him long ago, except that his own ambushes set over the past twenty kilometers had instilled some degree of caution in the survivors. These high plains made a good place for ambush, deceptively open-looking but cut by ravines and studded with windcarved hills and giant boulders that looked as if some god had scattered them playfully about.

By this time, having had twenty kilometers in which to think it over, the young man had no real doubt as to who his pursuers were. They had to be agents of the Blue Temple. Any merely military skirmish, he thought, would have been broken off long before this. Any ordinary patrol from the Dark King's army would have been content to return to camp and report a victory, or else proceed with whatever other business they were supposed to be about. They would not have continued to risk their skins in the pursuit of one survivor, not one as demonstrably dangerous as himself, and not through this dangerous terrain.

No, they knew who they were after. They knew what he had done, four years ago. And undoubtedly they were under contract to the Blue Temple to bring back his head.

The young man was finding time in his spare moments, such as they were, to wonder if they were also closing in on Ben, his friend and his companion of four years ago. Or if perhaps they had already found him. But he was not in a position right now to do anything for Ben.

The youth's flight had brought him to the edge of yet another ravine, this one cutting directly across his path. To the left of where the young man halted on the brink, the groove in the earth deepened rapidly, turning into a real canyon that wound its way off to the east, there presumably to join at some point a larger canyon that he had already caught sight of from time to time. In the other direction, to the young man's right, the ravine grew progressively shallower; if he intended to cross it, he should head that way.

From where he was standing now, the country on the other side of the ravine looked if anything

flatter than the plain he had been crossing, which of course ought to give a greater advantage to the mounted men. If he did not cross, he would go down into the ravine and follow it along. He could see that as it deepened some shelter appeared along its bottom, provided by rough free-standing rock formations and by the winding walls themselves. If he went that way he would be going downhill, and for that reason might be able to go faster.

It was the need for water that made his choice a certainty. The big canyon ought to be no more than a few kilometers away at most, and very probably it had water at its bottom.

He was down in the bottom of the ravine, making good time along its deepening trench, before one of his over-the-shoulder looks afforded him another glimpse of the men who were coming after him. Three heads were gazing down over the rocky rim, some distance to his rear. It looked as if they had been expecting him to cross the ravine, not follow it, and had therefore angled their own course a little toward its shallower end. He had therefore gained a little distance on them. The question now was how would they pursue from here? They might all follow him down into the ravine. Or one of them might follow him along the rim, ready to roll down rocks on him when a good chance came. Or, or a man might cross completely, so they could follow him along both walls and down the middle too.

He had doubts that they were going to divide their small remaining force.

Time would tell. He was now committed, anyway, to following the ravine. Much depended on what sort of concealment he could find.

So far, things were looking as good as could be expected. What had been a fairly simple trench at the point where he entered it was rapidly widening and deepening into a complex, steep-sided canyon. Presently, coming to a place where the canyon bent sharply, the young man decided to set up another ambush, behind a convenient outcropping of rock. Lying motionless on stove-like rock, watching small lizards watch him through the vibrating air, he had to fight down the all-too-rational fear that this time his enemies had outguessed him, and a couple of them were really following him along the high rims. At any moment now, the head of one of them ought to appear in his field of vision, just about *there*. From which vantage point it would of course be no trick at all to roll down a dead-end barrage of rocks. If they were lucky his head would still be recognizable when they came down to collect it.

Enough of that.

It was a definite relief when the three men came into sight again, all trailing him directly along the bottom of the canyon. They were walking their mounts now, having to watch their footing carefully on the uneven rock. As their quarry had hoped, at this spot they had no more than half their visual attention to spare in looking out for ambush.

The young man waiting for them already had an arrow nocked. And now he started to draw it, slowly taking up the bowstring's tension. He realized that at the last instant, he'd have to raise himself up into full view to get the shot off properly.

The moment came and he lifted his upper body. The bow twanged in his hands, as if the arrow had made its own decision. The shot was good, but the man who was its target, as if warned by some subtle magic, begun to turn his body away just as the shot was made. The arrow missed. The enemy, alarmed, were all ducking for cover.

The marksman did not delay to see what they might be going to do next. Already he was on his feet and running, scrambling, on down the canyon. Only two arrows left in his quiver now, and still he was not absolutely sure that there were no more than three men in pursuit.

He hurdled a small boulder, and kept on running. At least he'd slowed his pursuers down again, made them move more cautiously. And that ought to let him gain a little distance.

And now, suddenly, unexpectedly, he had good luck in sight. As he rounded a new curve of the canyon there sprang into view ahead of him a view into the bigger cross-canyon that this one joined

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