

FILED TEETH

Glen Cook

I

Our first glimpse of the plain was one of Heaven. The snow and treacherous passes had claimed two men and five animals.

Two days later we all wished we were back in the mountains.

The ice storm came by night. An inch covered the ground. And still it came down, stinging my face, frosting the heads and shoulders of my companions. The footing was impossible. We had to finish two broken-legged mules before noon.

Lord Hammer remained unperturbed, unvanquishable. He remained stiffly upright on that red-eyed stallion, implacably drawing us northeastward. Ice clung to his cowl, shoulders, and the tail of his robe where it lay across his beast's rump. Seldom did even Nature break the total blackness of his apparel.

The wind hurtled against us, biting and clawing like a million mocking imps. It burned sliding into the lungs.

The inalterable, horizon-to-horizon bleakness of the world gnawed the roots of our souls. Even Fetch and irrepressible Chenyith dogged Lord Hammer in a desperate silence.

"We're becoming an army of ghosts," I muttered at my brother. "Hammer is rubbing off on us. How're the Harish taking this?" I didn't glance back. My concentration was devoted to taking each next step forward.

Chenyith muttered something I didn't hear. The kid was starting to understand that adventures were more fun when you were looking back and telling tall tales.

A mule slipped. She went down kicking and braying. She caught old Toamas a couple of good ones. He skittered across the ice and down an embankment into a shallow pool not yet frozen.

Lord Hammer stopped. He didn't look back, but he knew exactly what had happened. Fetch fluttered round him nervously. Then she scooted toward Toamas.

"Better help, Will," Chenyith muttered.

I was after him already.

Why Toamas joined Lord Hammer's expedition I don't know. He was over sixty. Men his age are supposed to spend winter telling the grandkids lies about the El Murid, Civil, and Great Eastern Wars. But Toamas was telling us his stories and trying to prove something to himself.

He was a tough buzzard. He had taken the Dragon's Teeth more easily than most, and those are the roughest mountains the gods ever raised.

"Toamas. You okay?" I asked. Chenyith hunkered down beside me. Fetch scooted up, laid a hand on each of our shoulders. Brandy and Russ and the other Kaveliners came over too. Our little army clumped itself into national groups.

"Think it's my ribs, Will. She got me in the ribs." He spoke in little gasps. I checked his mouth.

"No blood. Good. Lungs should be okay."

"You clowns going to talk about it all week?" Fetch snapped. "Help the man, Will."

"You got such a sweet-talking way, Fetch. We should get married. Let's get him up, Chenyith. Maybe he's just winded."

"It's my ribs, Will. They're broke, sure."

"Maybe. Come on, you old woods-runner. Let's try."

"Lord Hammer says carry him if you have to. We've still got to cover eight miles today. More, if the circle isn't alive." Fetch's voice went squeaky and dull, like an old iron hinge that hadn't been oiled for a lifetime. She scurried back to her master.

"I think I'm in love," Chenyith chirped.

"Eight miles," Brandy grumbled. "What the hell? Bastard's trying to kill us."

Chenyith laughed. It was a ghost of his normal tinkle. "You didn't have to sign up, Brandy. He warned us it would be tough."

Brandy wandered away.

"Go easy, Chenyith. He's the kind of guy you got to worry when he stops bitching."

"Wish he'd give it a rest, Will. I haven't heard him say one good word since we met him."

"You meet all kinds in this business. Okay, Toamas?" I asked. We had the old man on his feet.

Chenyith brushed water off him. It froze on his hand.

"I'll manage. We got to get moving. I'll freeze." He stumbled toward the column. Chenyith stayed close, ready to catch him if he fell.

The non-Kaveliners watched apathetically. Not that they didn't care. Toamas was a favorite, a confidant, adviser, and teacher to most. They were just too tired to move except when they had to.

Men and animals looked vague and slumped through the ice rain. Brandy gave Toamas a spear to lean on. We lined up. Fetch took her place at Lord Hammer's left stirrup. Our ragged little army of thirty-eight homeless bits of war-flotsam started moving again.

II

Lord Hammer was a little spooky... What am I saying? He scared hell out of us. He was damned near seven feet tall. His stallion was a monster. He never spoke. He had Fetch do all his talking. The stallion was jet. Even its hooves were black. Lord Hammer dressed to match. His hands remained gloved all the time. None of us ever saw an inch of skin. He wore no trinkets. His very colorlessness inspired dread.

Even his face he kept concealed. Or, perhaps, especially his face...

He always rode point, staring ahead. Opportunities to peek into his cowl were scant. All you would see, anyway, was a blackened iron mask resembling a handsome man with strong features. For all we knew, there was no one inside. The mask had almost imperceptible eye, nose, and mouth slits. You couldn't see a thing through them.

Sometimes the mask broke the colorless boredom of Lord Hammer. Some mornings, before leaving his tent, he or Fetch decorated it. The few designs I saw were never repeated.

Lord Hammer was a mystery. We knew nothing of his origins and were ignorant of his goals. He wouldn't talk, and Fetch wouldn't say. But he paid well, and a lot up front. He took care of us. Our real bitch was the time of year chosen for his journey.

Fetch said winter was the best time. She wouldn't expand.

She claimed Lord Hammer was a mighty, famous sorcerer.

So why hadn't any of us heard of him?

Fetch was a curiosity herself. She was small, cranky, longhaired, homely. She walked more mannish than a man. She was totally devoted to Hammer despite being inclined to curse him constantly. Guessing her age was impossible. For all I could tell, she could have been anywhere between twenty and two hundred.

She wouldn't mess with the men.

By then that little gnome was looking good.

Sigurd Ormson, our half-tame Trolledyngjan, was the only guy who had had nerve enough to really go after her. The rest of us followed his suit with a mixture of shame and hope.

The night Ormson tried his big move Lord Hammer strolled from his tent and just stood behind Fetch. Sigurd seemed to shrivel to about half normal size.

You couldn't see Lord Hammer's eyes, but when his gaze turned your way the whole universe ground to a halt. You felt whole new dimensions of cold. They made winter seem balmy.

Trudge. Trudge. Trudge. The wind giggled and bit. Chenyith and I supported Toamas between us. He kept muttering, "It's my ribs, boys. My ribs." Maybe the mule had scrambled his head, too.

"Holy Hagard's Golden Turds!" Sigurd bellowed. The northman had ice in his hair and beard. He looked like one of the frost giants of his native legends.

He thrust an arm eastward.

The rainfall masked them momentarily. But they were coming closer. Nearly two hundred horsemen. The nearer they got, the nastier they looked. They carried heads on lances. They wore necklaces of human fingerbones. They had rings in their ears and noses. Their faces were painted. They looked grimy and mean.

They weren't planning a friendly visit.

Lord Hammer faced them. For the first time that morning I glimpsed his mask paint.

White. Stylized. Undeniably the skullface of Death.

He stared. Then, slowly, his stallion paced toward the nomads.

Bellweather, the Itaskian commanding us, started yelling. We grabbed weapons and shields and formed a ragged-assed line. The nomads probably laughed. We were scruffier than they were.

"Gonna go through us like salts through a goose," Toamas complained. He couldn't get his shield up. His spear seemed too heavy. But he took his place in the line.

Fetch and the Harish collected the animals behind us.

Lord Hammer plodded toward the nomads, head high, as if there were nothing in the universe he feared. He lifted his left hand, palm toward the riders.

A nimbus formed round him. It was like a shadow cast every way at once.

The nomads reined in abruptly.

I had seen high sorcery during the Great Eastern Wars. I had witnessed both the thaumaturgies of the Brotherhood and the Tervola of Shinsan. Most of us had. Lord Hammer's act didn't overwhelm us. But it did dispel doubts about his being what Fetch claimed.

"Oh!" Chenyth gasped. "Will. Look."

"I see."

Chenyth was disappointed by my reaction. But he was only seventeen. He had spent the Great Eastern Wars with our mother, hiding in the forests while the legions of the Dread Empire rolled across our land. This was his first venture at arms.

The nomads decided not to bother us after all. They milled around briefly, then rode away.

Soon Chenyth asked, "Will, if he can do that, why'd he bring us?"

"Been wondering myself. But you can't do everything with the Power."

We were helping Toamas again. He was getting weaker. He croaked, "Don't get no wrong notions, Chenyth lad. They didn't have to leave. They could've took us slicker than greased owl shit. They just didn't want to pay the price Lord Hammer would've made them pay."

III

Lord Hammer stopped.

We had come to a forest. Scattered, ice-rimed trees stood across our path. They were gnarled, stunted things that looked a little like old apple trees.

Fetch came down the line, speaking to each little band in its own language. She told us Kaveliners, "Don't ever leave the trail once we pass the first tree. It could be worth your life. This's a fey, fell land." Her dusky little face was as somber as ever I had seen it.

"Why? Where are we? What's happening?" Chenyth asked.

She frowned. Then a smile broke through. "Don't you ever stop asking?" She was almost pretty when she smiled.

"Give him a break," I said. "He's a kid."

She smiled a little at me, then, before turning back to Chenyth. I think she liked the kid.

Everybody did. Even the Harish tolerated him. They hardly acknowledged the existence of anyone else but Fetch, and she only as the mouth of the man who paid them.

Fetch was a sorceress in her own right. She knew how to use the magic of her smiles. The genuine article just sort of melted you inside.

"The forest isn't what it seems," she explained. "Those trees haven't died for the winter. They're alive, Chenyth. They're wicked, and they're waiting for you to make a mistake. All you have to do is wander past one and you'll be lost. Unless Lord Hammer can save you. He might let you go. As an object lesson."

"Come on, Fetch. How'd you get that name, anyway? That's not a real name. Look. The trees are fifty feet apart..."

"Chenyth." I tapped his shoulder. He subsided. Lord Hammer was always right. When Fetch gave us a glimmer of fact, we listened.

"Bellweather named me Fetch. Because I run for Lord Hammer. And maybe because he thinks I'm a little spooky. He's clever that way. You couldn't pronounce my real name, anyway."

"Which you'd never reveal," I remarked.

She smiled. "That's right. One man with a hold on me is enough."

"What about Lord Hammer?" Chenyth demanded. When one of his questions was answered, he always found another.

"Oh, he chose his own name. It's a joke. But you'll never understand it. You're too young." She moved on down the line.

Chenyth smiled to himself. He had won a little more.

His value to us all was his ability to charm Fetch into revealing just a little more than she had been instructed. Maybe Chenyth could have gotten into her.

His charm came of youth and innocence. He was fourteen years younger than Jamal, child of the Harish and youngest veteran. We were all into our thirties and forties. Soldiering had been our way of life for so long we had forgotten there were others. Some of us had been enemies back when. The Harish bore their defeat like the banner of a holy martyr...

Chenyth had come after the wars. Chenyth was a baby. He had no hatreds, no prejudices. He retained that bubbling, youthful optimism that had been burned from the rest of us in the crucible of war. We both loved and envied him for it, and tried to get a little to rub off. Chenyth was a talisman. One last hope that the world wasn't inalterably cruel.

Fetch returned to Lord Hammer's stirrup. The man in black proceeded.

I studied the trees.

There was something repulsive about them. Something frightening. They were so widely spaced it seemed they couldn't stand one another. There were no saplings. Most were half dead, hollow, or down and rotting. They were arranged in neat, long rows, a stark orchard of death...

The day was about to die without a whimper when Lord Hammer halted again. It hadn't seemed possible that our morale could sink. Not after the mountains and the ice storm. But that weird forest depressed us till we scarcely cared if we lived or died. The band would have disintegrated had it not become so much an extension of Lord Hammer's will. We massed behind our fell captain. Before him lay a meadow circumscribed by a tumbled wall of field stone. The wall hadn't been mended in ages. And yet... It still performed its function. "Sorcery!" Brandy hissed. Others took it up. "What'd you expect?" Chenyith countered. He nodded toward Lord Hammer. It took no training to sense the wizardry. Ice-free, lush grass crowded the circle of stone. Wildflowers fluttered their petals in the breeze. We Kaveliners crowded Fetch. Chenyith tickled her sides. She yelped. "Stop it!" She was extremely ticklish. Anyone else she would have slapped silly. She told him, "It's still alive. Lord Hammer was afraid it might have died." Remarkable. She said nothing conversational to anyone else, ever. Lord Hammer turned slightly. Fetch devoted her attention to him. He moved an elbow, twitched a finger. I didn't see anything else pass between them. Fetch turned to us. "Listen up! These are the rules for guys who want to stay healthy. Follow Lord Hammer like his shadow. Don't climb over the wall. Don't even touch it. You'll get dead if you do." The black horseman circled the ragged wall to a gap where a gate might once have stood. He turned in and rode to the heart of the meadow. Fetch scampered after him, her big brown eyes locked on him. How Lord Hammer communicated with her I don't know. A finger-twitch, a slight movement of hand or head, and she would talk-talk-talk. We didn't speculate much aloud. He was a sorcerer. You avoid things that might irritate his kind. She proclaimed, "We need a tent behind each fire pit. Five on the outer circle, five on the inner. The rest here in the middle. Keep your fires burning all night. Sentinels will be posted." "Yeah?" Brandy grumbled. "What the hell do we do for wood? Plant acorns and wait?" "Out there are two trees that are down. Take wood off them. Pick up any fallen branches this side of the others. It'll be wet, but it's the best we can do. Do not go past a live tree. Lord Hammer isn't sure he can project his protection that far." I didn't pay much attention. Nobody did. It was warm there. I shed my pack and flung myself to the ground. I rolled around on the grass, grabbing handfuls and inhaling the newly mown hay scent. There had to be some dread sorceries animating that circle. Nobody cared. The place was as cozy as journey's end. There is always a price. That's how magic works. Old Toamas lay back on his pack and smiled in pure joy. He closed his eyes and slept. Even Brandy said nothing about making him do his share. Lord Hammer let the euphoria bubble for ten minutes. Fetch started round the troop. "Brandy. You and Russ and Little, put your tent on that point. Will, Chenyith, Toamas, yours goes here. Kelpie..." And so on. When everyone was assigned, she erected her master's black tent. All the while Lord Hammer sat his ruby-eyed stallion and stared northeastward. He showed the intensity of deep concentration. Was he reading the trail? Nothing seemed to catch him off guard. Where was he leading us? Why? What for? We didn't know. Not a whit. Maybe even Fetch didn't. Chenyith couldn't charm a hint from her. We knew two things. Lord Hammer paid well. And, within restrictions known only to himself, he took care of his followers. In a way I can't articulate, he had won our loyalties. His being what he was was ample proof we faced something grim, yet he had won us to the point where we felt we had a stake in it too. We wanted him to succeed. We wanted to help him succeed. Odd. Very odd. I have taken his gold, I thought, briefly remembering a man I had known a long time ago. He had been a member of the White Company of the Mercenaries Guild. They were a monastic order of soldiers with what, then, I had thought of as the strangest concept of honor... What made me think of Mikhail? I wondered.

Lord Hammer suddenly dismounted and strode toward Chenyth and me. I thought, thunderhead! Huge, black, irresistible.

I'm no coward. I endured the slaughterhouse battles of the Great Eastern Wars without flinching. I stood fast at Second Baxendala while the Tervola sent the savan dalage ravening amongst us night after night. I maintained my courage after Dichiarra, which was our worst defeat. And I persevered at Palmisano, though the bodies piled into little mountains and so many men died that the savants later declared there could be no more war for generations. For three years I had faced the majestic, terrible hammer of Shinsan's might without quelling.

But when Lord Hammer bore down on me, that grim death mask coming like an arrowhead engraved with my name, I slunk aside like a whipped dog.

He had that air. You knew he was as mighty as any force of Nature, as cruel as Death Herself. Cowering was instinctive.

He looked me in the eye. I couldn't see anything through his mask. But a coldness hit me. It made the cold of that land seem summery.

He looked at Chenyth, too. Baby brother didn't flinch.

I guess he was too innocent. He didn't know when to be scared.

Lord Hammer dropped to one knee beside Toamas.

Gloved hands probed the old man's ribs. Toamas cringed. Then his terror gave way to a beatific smile.

Lord Hammer strode back to where Fetch pursued her regular evening ritual of battling to erect their tent.

"You're a damned idiot, girl," she muttered. "You could've picked something you could handle. But no, you had to have a canvas palace. You knew the boys would just fall in love and stumble all over themselves to help. Then you hired lunks with the chivalry of tomcats. You're a real genius, you are, girl."

The euphoria had reached her too. Usually she was louder and crustier.

Chenyth volunteered. Leaving me to battle with ours.

That little woman could shame or cajole a man into doing anything.

I checked Toamas. He was sleeping. His smile said he was feeling no pain. "Thanks," I threw Lord Hammer's way, softly. No one heard, but he probably knew. Nothing escaped him.

When the tents were up Fetch chose wood-gathers. I was one of the losers.

"Goddamned, ain't fair, Brandy," I muttered as we hit the ice. "Them sumbitches get to sit on their asses back there..."

He laughed at me. He was that kind of guy. No empathy. And no sympathy even for himself.

Some lessons have to be learned the hard way.

The circle had turned me lazy. Malingering is a fine art among veterans. I decided to get the wood-gathering over with.

What I did was go after a prime-looking dead branch laying just past the first standing tree. I mean, how hard could it be to find your way back when all you had to do was turn around?

I whacked and hacked the branch out of the ice. All the while Brandy and the others were cussing and fussing behind me as they wooled a dead tree.

I turned to go back.

Nothing.

I couldn't see a damned thing but ice, those gnarled old trees, and more ice. No circle. No woodcutters.

The only sound was the ice cracking on branches as the wind teased through the forest.

I yelled.

Chips of ice tinkled off the nearest tree. The damned thing was laughing! I could feel it. It was telling me that it had me, but it was going to play with me a while.

I even felt the envy of neighboring trees, the hatred of a brother, who had scored...

I didn't panic. I whirled this way and that, moving a few steps each direction, without surrendering to terror. Once a man has faced the legions of the Dread Empire, and has survived nights haunted by the unkillable savan dalage, there isn't much left to fear.

I could hear the others perfectly when I turned my back. They were yelling at me, each other, and Lord Hammer. They thought I had gone crazy.

"Will," Brandy called. "How come you're jumping around like that?"

"Tree," I said, "you're going to lose this round."

It laughed in my mind.

I started backing up. Dragging my branch. Feeling for any trace of footsteps I had left coming here.

Good thinking. But not good enough. The tree hadn't exhausted its arsenal. A branch fell. A big one. I dodged. My feet slipped on the ice. I cracked my head good. I wasn't thinking when I got up. I started walking. Probably the wrong way. I heard Brandy yelling. "Will, you stupid bastard, stand still!" And Russ, "Get a rope, somebody. We'll lasso him." I didn't understand. My feet kept shuffling. Then came the crackle of flames and stench of oily smoke. It caught my attention. I stopped, turned. My captor had become a pillar of fire. It screamed in my mind. Nothing should burn that fast, that hot. Not in that weather. But the damned thing went up like an explosion. The smell of sorcery fouled the air. The flames peaked, began dying. I could see through. The circle and my friends glimmered before me. Facing the tree, a few yards beyond, stood Lord Hammer. He held one arm outstretched, fingers in a King's X. He stared at me. I peered into his eye slots and felt him calling. I took a step. It was a long, long journey. I had to round some kink in the corridor of time before I got my feet onto the straight line path to safety. I made it. Still dragging that damned branch. I stumbled. Lord Hammer's arm fell. He caught me. His touch was as gentle as a lover's caress, yet I felt it to my bones. I had the feeling that there was nothing more absolute. I got hold of myself. He released me. His shoulders slumped slightly as he wheeled and stalked back to the circle. It was the first sign of weariness he had ever shown. I glanced back. That damned tree stood there looking like it hadn't been touched. I felt its bitterness, its rage, its loss.. .And its siren call. I scooted back inside the circle like a kid running home after getting caught pulling a prank.

V

"Chenyth, it was on fire. I saw it with my own eyes."
"I saw what happened, Will. Lord Hammer just stood there with his arm out. You stopped acting goofy and came back."
The campfires cast enough light to limn the nearest trees. I glanced at the one that had had me. I shuddered. "Chenyth, I couldn't get back."
"Will..."
"You listen to me. When Lord Hammer says do something, do it. Mom would kill me if I didn't bring you home."
She was going to get nasty anyway. I had taken Chenyth off after she had sworn seven ways from Sunday that he wasn't going to go. It had been a brutal scene. Chenyth pleading, Mom screaming, me ducking epithets and pots.
My mother had had a husband and eight sons. When the dust of the Great Eastern Wars settled, she had me and little Chenyth, and she hadn't seen me but once since then.
Then I came back with my story about signing on with Lord Hammer. And Chenyth, who had been feeding on her stories about Dad and the rest of us being heroes in the wars, decided he wanted to go too.
She told him no, and meant it. It was too late to do anything about me, but her last child wasn't going to be a soldier.
Sometimes I was ashamed of sneaking him out. She would be dying still, in tiny bits each day. But Chenyth had to grow up sometime...
"Hey! Listen up!" Fetch yelled. "Hey! I said knock off the tongue music. Got a little proclamation from the boss."
"Here it comes. All time ass-chewing for doing a stupid," I said.
She used Itaskian first. Most of us understood it. She changed languages for the Harish and a few others who didn't. We drifted toward the black tent.
From the heart of the meadow I could see the pattern of the fire pits. Each lay in one of the angles of a five-pointed star.
A pentagram. This meadow was a live magical symbol.
"It'll only be a couple days till we get where we're heading. Maybe sooner. The boss says it's

time to let you know what's happening. Just so you'll stay on your toes. The name of the place is Kammengarn." She grinned, exposing dirty teeth.

It took a while. The legend was old, and didn't get much notice outside Itaskia's northern provinces, where Rainheart is a folk hero.

Bellweather popped first. "You mean like the Kammengarn in the story about Rainheart slaying the Kammengarn Dragon?"

"You got it, Captain."

Most of us just put on stupid looks, the southerners more so than those of us who shared cultural roots with Itaskia. I don't think the Harish ever understood.

"Why? What's there?" Bellweather asked.

Fetch laughed. The sound was hard to describe. A little bit of cackle, of bray, and of tinkle all rolled into one astonishing noise. "The Kammengarn Dragon, idiot. Silcroscuar. Father of All Dragons. The big guy of the dragon world. The one who makes the ones you saw in the wars look like crippled chickens beside eagles."

"You're not making sense," Chenyth responded. "What's there? Bones? Rainheart killed the monster three or four hundred years ago."

Lord Hammer came from his tent. He stood behind Fetch, his arms folded. He remained as still, as lifeless, as a statue in clothes. We became less restive.

He was one spooky character. I felt my arm where he had caught me. It still tingled.

"Rainheart's successes were exaggerated," Fetch told us. She used her sarcastic tone. The one that blistered obstinate rocks and mules. "Mostly by Rainheart. The dragon lives. No mortal man can kill it. The gods willed that it be. It shall be, so long as the world endures. It is the Father of All Dragons. If it perishes, dragons perish. The world must have its dragons."

It was weird, the way she changed while she was talking. All of a sudden she wasn't Fetch anymore. I think we all sneaked peeks at Lord Hammer to see if he were doing some ventriloquist trick.

Maybe he was. He could be doing anything behind that iron mask.

I wasn't sure Lord Hammer was human anymore. He might be some unbanished devil left over from the great thaumaturgic confrontations of the wars.

"Lord Hammer is going to Kammengarn to obtain a cup of the immortal Dragon's blood."

Hammer ducked into his tent. Fetch was right behind him.

"What the hell?" Brandy demanded. "What kind of crap is this?"

"Hammer don't lie," I replied.

"Not that we know of," Chenyth said.

"He's a plainspoken man, even if Fetch does his talking. He says the Kammengarn Dragon is alive, I believe him. He says we're going to kype a cup of its blood, there it is. I reckon we're going to try."

"Will..."

I went and squatted by our fire. I needed a little more warming. The dead wood of the forest burned pretty ordinarily.

The men were quiet for a long time.

What was there to say?

We had taken Hammer's gold.

Even professional griper Brandy didn't say much by way of complaint.

Mikhail had been right. You went on even when the cause was a loser. It became a matter of honor.

Ormsen killed the silence. His action was a minor thing, characteristic of his race, but it divided the journey into different phases, now and then, and inspired the resolution of the rest of us.

He drew his sword, began whetting it.

The stone made a shing-shing sound along his blade. For an instant it was the only sound to be heard.

We were old warriors. That sound spoke eloquently of battles beyond the dawn. I drew my sword...

I had taken the gold. I was Lord Hammer's man.

VI

A metallic symphony played as stones sharpened swords and spearheads. Men tested bowstrings and thumped weathered shields. Old greaves clanked. Leather armor, too long uncoiled, squeaked.

Lord Hammer stepped from his tent. His mask bore no paint now. Only chance flickers of firelight revealed the existence of anything within his cowl.

When his gaze met mine I felt I was looking at a man who was smiling.

Chenyth fidgeted with his gear. Then, "I'm going to see what Jamal's doing."

He sheathed the battered sword I had given him and wandered off. He didn't cut much of a figure as a warrior. He was just a skinny blond kid who looked like a gust of wind would blow him away, or a willing woman turn him to jelly.

Eyes followed him. Pain filled some. We had all been there once. Now we were here.

He was our talisman against our mortality.

I started wondering what the Harish were up to myself. I followed Chenyith. They were almost civil while he was around.

They were ships without compasses, those four, more lost than the rest of us. They were religious fanatics who had sworn themselves to a dead cause. They were El Murid's Chosen Ones, his most devoted followers, a dedicated cult of assassins. The Great Eastern Wars had thrown their master into eclipse. His once vast empire had collapsed. Now, according to rumor, El Murid was nothing but a fat, decrepit opium addict commanding a few bandits in the south desert hills of Hammad al Nakir. He spent his days pulling on his pipe and dreaming about an impossible restoration. These four brother assassins were refugees from the vengeance of the new order...

Defeat had left them with nothing but one another and their blades. About what victory had given us.

Harish took no wives. They devoted themselves totally to the mysteries of their brotherhood, and to fulfilling the commands of their master.

No one gave them orders anymore. Yet they had sworn to devote their lives to their master's needs. They were waiting. And while they waited, they survived by selling what they had given El Murid freely.

Like the rest of us, they were what history had made them. Bladesmen.

They formed a cross, facing their fire. Chenyith knelt beside Jamal. They talked in low tones. The others watched with stony faces partially concealed by thin veils and long, heavy black beards. Foud, the oldest, dyed his to keep the color. They were all solid, tough men. Killers unfamiliar with remorse.

All four held ornate silver daggers.

I stopped, amazed.

They were permitting Chenyith to watch the consecration of Harish kill-daggers. It was one of the high mysteries of their cult.

They sensed my presence, but went on removing the enameled names of their last victims from amidst the engraved symbols on the flats of their blades. Those blades were a quarter inch thick near the hilt. The flat ran half the twelve inch length. Each blade was an inch wide at its base.

They seemed heavy, clumsy, but the Harish used them with terrifying efficiency.

One by one, oldest to youngest, they thrust their daggers into the fire to extinguish the last gossamer of past victims' souls still clinging to the deadly engraving. Then they laid their blades across their hearts, beneath the palms of their left hand. Foud spoke a word.

Chenyith later told me the ritual was coached in the language of ancient Ilkazar. It was an odd tongue they used, like nothing else I've heard.

Foud chanted. The others answered.

Fifteen minutes passed. When they finished even a dullard like myself could feel the Power hovering round the Harish fire.

Lord Hammer came out of his tent. He peered our way briefly, then returned.

The four plunged their blades into the fire again.

Then they joined the ritual everyone else had been pursuing. They produced their whetstones.

I considered Foud's blade. Nearly two inches were missing from its length. It had been honed till it had narrowed a quarter. The engraving was almost invisible. He had served El Murid long and effectively.

His gaze met mine. For an instant a smile flickered behind his veil.

That was the first any of them had even admitted my existence.

A moment later Jamal said something to Chenyith. The younger Harish was the only one who admitted to understanding Itaskian, though we all knew the others did too. Chenyith nodded and rose.

"They're going to name their daggers. We have to go."

Times change. Only a few years ago men like these had tried to kill Ravelin's Queen. Now we were allies.

The glint in Foud's eye told me that things might be different now if he had been the man sent then.

The Harish believed. In their master, in themselves. Every assassin who consecrated blade was as sure of himself as was Foud.

"What're they doing here?" I muttered at Chenyith. I knew. The same as me. Doing what they knew. Surviving the only way they knew. Still... The Harish revered their Cause, even though it was

lost.

They wanted to bring The Disciple's salvation to the whole world, using every means at their disposal.

Toamas was awake and chipper when we got back. "I ever tell about the time I was with King Bragi, during the El Murid Wars, when he was just another blank shield? It was a town in Altea..." I guess that kept us going, too. Maybe one mercenary in fifty thousand made it big. I guess we all had some core of hope, or belief in ourselves, too.

VII

"All right, you goat-lovers! Drag your dead asses out. We got some hiking to do today." Fetch had a way with words like no lady I've ever known. I slithered out of my blankets, scuttled to the fire, tumbled some wood on, and slid back into the wool. That circle may have been springish, but there was a nip in the air.

Chenyth rolled over. He muttered something about eyes in the night.

"Come on. Roll out. We got a long walk ahead."

Chenyth sat up. "Phew! One of these days we've got to take time off for baths. Hey. Toamas. Wake up." He shook the old man. "Oh!"

"What's the matter?"

"I think he's dead, Will."

"Toamas? Nah. He just don't want to get up." I shook him.

Chenyth was right.

I jumped out of there so fast I knocked the tent down on Chenyth. "Fetch. The old man's dead. Toamas."

She kicked a foot sticking out of another tent, gave me a puzzled look. Then she scurried into the black tent.

I tried to get a look inside. But there were inside flaps too.

Lord Hammer appeared a moment later. His mask was paintless. His gaze swept the horizon, then the camp. Fetch popped out as he started toward our tent.

Chenyth came up cussing. "Damn it, Will, what the hell you..." His jaw drooped. He scrambled out of Lord Hammer's path.

Fetch whipped past and started hauling tent away. Lord Hammer knelt, hand over Toamas's heart. He moved it to the grass. Then he walked to the gap we thought of as a gate.

"What's he doing?" Chenyth asked.

"Wait," Fetch told him.

Lord Hammer halted, faced left, began pacing the perimeter. He paused several times. We resumed our morning chores. Brandy cursed the gods both on Toamas's behalf and because he faced another miserable breakfast. You couldn't tell which mattered more to him. Brandy bitched about everything equally.

His true feelings surfaced when he was the first to volunteer to dig the old man's grave.

Toamas had saved his life in the mountains.

"We Kaveliners got to stick together," he muttered to me. "Way it's always been. Way it'll always be."

"Yeah."

His family and Toamas's lived in the same area. They had been on opposite sides in the civil war with which Kavelin had amused itself in the interim between the El Murid and Great Eastern Wars. It was one of the few serious remarks I had ever heard from Brandy.

Lord Hammer chose the grave site. It butted against the wall. Toamas went down sitting upright, facing the forest.

"That's where I saw the thing last night," Chenyth told me.

"What thing?"

"When I had guard duty. All I could see was its eyes." He dropped a handful of dirt into the old man's lap. The others did the same. Except Foud. The Harish Elder lowered himself to his belly, placed a small silver dagger under Toamas's folded hands.

We Kaveliners bowed to Foud. This was a major gesture by the Harish. Their second highest honor, given a man who had been their enemy all his life.

I wondered why Foud had done it.

"Why did he die?" Chenyth asked Fetch. "I thought Lord Hammer fixed him."

"He did. Chenyth, the circle took Toamas."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I."

I wondered some more. Ignorance and Lord Hammer seemed poles apart. Maybe he had known. But I couldn't hate him. The way Fetch talked, thirty-seven of us were alive because Toamas had died. The circle certainly was more merciful than the forest. Lord Hammer gestured. Fetch ran to him. Then he ducked into his tent while she talked. "Get with it. We've got a long way to go. We'll have to travel fast. Lord Hammer doesn't want to spend any more lives. He wants to leave the forest before nightfall." We moved. Our packs were trailing odds and ends when we started. Our stomachs weren't full. But those were considerations less important than enduring the protection of another circle. As we were leaving I noticed a flower blooming in the soft earth where we had put Toamas down. There were dozens of flowers along the wall. The few places where they were missing were the spots where Lord Hammer had paused in his circuit of the wall. What would happen when all the grave sites were full? Maybe Lord Hammer knew. But Hammer didn't have much to say. We passed another circle about noon. It was dead. The day was warmer, the sky clear. The ice began melting. We made good time. Lord Hammer seemed pleased. I stared straight ahead, at Russ's back, all morning. If I looked at a tree I could hear it calling. The pull was terrifying. Chenyth seized my arm. "Stop!" I almost trampled Russ. "What's up?" Lord Hammer had stopped. "I don't know." Fetch was dancing around like a barefoot burglar on a floor covered with tacks. Lord Hammer and his steed might have been some parkland pigeon roost, so still were they. We shuffled round so we could see without leaving the safety of the trail. We had come to a clearing. It was a quarter mile across. What looked like a mud-dauber's nest, the kind with just one hole, lay at the middle of the clearing. It was big. Like two hundred yards long, fifty feet wide, and thirty feet high. A sense of immense menace radiated from it. "What is it?" we asked one another. Neither Lord Hammer nor Fetch answered us. Lord Hammer slowly raised his left arm till it thrust straight out from his shoulder. He lifted his forearm vertically, turning the edge of a stiffened hand toward the structure. Then he raised his right arm, laying his forearm parallel with his eyeslits. Again he stiffened his hand, facing the structure with its edge. "Let's go!" Fetch snapped. "Follow me." She started running. We whipped the mules into a trot, ran. We weren't gentle with the balky ones. We had to go right along the side of that thing. As we approached, I glanced back. Lord Hammer was coming, his mount pacing slowly. Hammer himself remained frozen in the position he had assumed. He was almost indiscernible inside a black nimbus. His mask glowed like the sun. The face of an animal seemed to peep through the golden light. I glanced into the dark entry to that mound. Menace, backed by rage and frustration, slammed into me. Lord Hammer halted directly in front of the hole. The rest of us raced for the forest behind the barrow. Fetch was scared, but not scared enough to pass the first tree. She stopped. We waited. And Lord Hammer came. Never have I seen a horse run as beautifully, or as fast. It may have been my imagination, or the way the sun hit its breath in the cold, but fire seemed to play round its nostrils. Lord Hammer rode as if he were part of the beast. The earth shuddered. A basso profundo rumble came from the mound. Lord Hammer swept past, slowing, and we pursued him. No one thought to look back, to see what the earth brought forth. It was too late once we passed that first tree. "Will," Chenyth panted. "Did you see that horse run? What kind of horse runs like that, Will?" What could I tell him? "Sorcerer's horse, Chenyth. Hell horse. But we knew that already, didn't we?" Some of us did. Chenyth never really believed it till then. He figured we were giving him more war stories. He never understood that we couldn't exaggerate what had happened during the Great Eastern Wars. That we told toned-down stories because there was so much we wanted to forget. Chenyth couldn't take anything at face value. He worked his way up the column so he could pump Fetch. He didn't get anything from her, either. Lord Hammer led. We followed. For Fetch that was the natural order of life.

VIII

We passed another dead circle in the afternoon. Lord Hammer glanced at the sun and increased the pace.

An hour later Fetch passed the word that we would have to stop at the next circle-unless it were dead.

Dread sandpapered the ends of our nerves. The men who had stood sentry last night had seen too much of the things that roamed the forest by dark. And Hammer's reluctance to face the night... It made the price of a circle almost attractive.

Even thirty-seven to one aren't good odds when my life is on the line. I've been risking it since I was Chenyith's age, but I like having some choice, some control...

The next circle was alive.

Darkness was close when we reached it. We could hear big things moving behind us, beyond the trees. Hungry things. We zipped into the circle and pitched camp in record time.

I stood sentry that night. I saw what Chenyith had seen. It didn't bother me much. I was a veteran of the Great Eastern Wars.

I kept reminding myself.

Lord Hammer didn't sleep at all. He spent the night pacing the perimeter. He paused frequently to make cabalistic passes. Sometimes the air glowed where his fingers passed.

He took care of us. Not a man perished. Instead, the circle took a mule.

"Butcher it up," Fetch growled. "Save the good cuts. Couple of you guys dig a hole over there where I left the shovel."

So we had mule for breakfast. It was tough, but good, our first fresh meat in weeks.

We were about to march when Fetch announced, "We'll be there tomorrow. That means goof-off time's over. Respond to orders instantly if you know what's good for you."

Brandy mumbled and cussed. Chenyith wasn't any happier. "I swear, I'm going to smack him, Will."

"Take it easy. He was in the Breidenbacher Light. I owe him."

"So? They got you out at Lake Turntine. That was then. What's that got to do with today?"

"What it's got to do with is, he'll kick your ass up around your ears."

"Kid wants to duke it out, let him, Will. He's getting on my nerves too."

"Stow it," Fetch snarled. "Save it for the other guys. It's time to start worrying about getting out alive."

"What? Then we'd have to walk all the way back." Brandy cackled.

"Fetch, what's this all about?" Chenyith asked.

"I already told you, question man."

"Not why."

She scowled, shook her head. I asked, "Weren't you ever young, Fetch? Hey! Whoa! I didn't mean it like that."

She settled for the one shin-kick. Everybody laughed. I winked. She grinned nastily.

Brandy and Chenyith had forgotten their quarrel.

Chenyith hadn't forgotten his question. He pressed.

"All I know is, he wants the blood of the Father of Dragons. We came now because the monster is sluggish during the winter. Now why the hell don't you just jingle the money in your pocket and do what you're told?"

"Where'd you meet him, Fetch? When?"

She shook her head again. "You don't hear so good, do you? Long ago and far away. He's been like a father. Now get your ass ready to hike." She tramped off to her position beside Lord Hammer's stallion.

The woman had the least feminine walk I've ever seen. She took long, rolling steps, and kind of leaned into them.

"You ask too many questions, Chenyith."

"Can it, will you?"

We were getting close. Not knowing, except that we were going to go up against a dragon, frayed tempers. Chenyith's trouble was that he hadn't had enough practice at keeping his mouth shut.

Noon. Another barrow blocked our trail. We repeated our previous performance. The feeling of menace wasn't as strong. The thing in the earth let us pass with only token protest.

The weather grew warmer. The ice melted quickly, turning the trail to mud.

Occasionally, from ridgetops, we saw the land beyond the forest. Mountains lay ahead. Brandy moaned his heart out till Fetch told him our destination lay at their feet. Then he bitched about everything happening too fast.

Several of those peaks trailed dark smoke. There wasn't much snow on their flanks.

"Funny," I remarked to Chenyith. "Heading north into warmer country."

We passed a living circle. It called to us the way the trees called to me.

An end to the weird, wide forest came. We entered grasslands that, within a few hours, gave way to rapidly steepening hills. The peaks loomed higher. The air grew warmer. The hills became taller and more barren. Shadows gathered in the valleys as the sun settled toward the Dragon's Teeth.

Lord Hammer ordered us to pitch camp. He doubled the sentries.

We weren't bothered, but still it was a disturbing night. The earth shuddered. The mountains rumbled. I couldn't help but envision some gargantuan monster resting uneasily beneath the range.

IX

The dawn gods were heaving buckets of blood up over the eastern horizon. Fetch formed us up for a pep talk. "Queen of the dwarves," Brandy mumbled. She was comical, so tiny was she when standing before a mounted Lord Hammer.

"Lord Hammer believes we are about three miles from the Gate of Kammengarn. The valley behind me will lead us there.

From the Gate those who accompany Lord Hammer will descend into the earth almost a mile. Captain Bell weather and thirty men will stay at the Gate. Six men will accompany Lord Hammer and myself." Her style had changed radically. I had never seen her so subdued.

Fetch was scared.

"Bellweather, your job will be the hardest. It's almost certain that you will be attacked. The people of these hills believe Kammengarn to be a holy place. They know we're here. They suspect our mission. They'll try to destroy us once we prove we intend to profane their shrine. You'll have to hold them most of the day, without Lord Hammer's help."

"Now we know," Brandy muttered. "Needed us to fight his battles for him."

"Why the hell else did he hire us?" Chenyith demanded.

"Knock it off back there!" Fetch yelled.

Lord Hammer's steed pranced impatiently. Hammer's gaze swept over us. It quelled all emotion.

"Lord Hammer has appointed the following men to accompany him. Foud, of the Harish. Aboud, of the Harish. Sigurd Ormson, the Trolledyngjan. Dunklin Hanneker, the Itaskian. Willem Clarig Potter, of Kavelin. Pavlo della Contini-Mar-cusco, of Dunno Scuttari." She made a small motion with her fingers, like someone folding a piece of paper.

"Fetch!..."

"Shut up, Chenyith!" I growled.

Fetch responded, "Lord Hammer has spoken. The men named, please come to the head of the column." I hoisted my pack, patted Chenyith's shoulder, said, "Do a good job. And stay healthy. I've got to take you back to Mom."

"Will..."

"Hey. You wanted to be a soldier. Be a soldier."

He stared at the ground, kicked a pebble.

"Good luck, Will." Brandy extended a hand. I shook. "We'll look out for him."

"All right. Thanks. Russ. Aral. You guys take care." It was a ritual of parting undertaken before times got tough.

The red-eyed horse started moving. We followed in single file. Fetch walked with Bellweather for a while. After half an hour she scampered forward to her place beside Lord Hammer. She was nervous. She couldn't keep her head or hands still.

I glanced back, past Ormson. "Fight coming," I told the Trolledyngjan. Bellweather was getting ready right now.

"Did you ever doubt it?"

"No. Not really."

The mountains crowded in. The valley narrowed till it became a steep-sided canyon. That led to a place where two canyons collided and became one. It had a flat bottom perhaps fifty yards across. It was the most barren place I had ever seen. The boulders were dark browns. The little soil came in lighter browns. A few tufts of dessicated grass added sere browns. Even the sky took on an ochre hue...

The blackness of a crack in the mountainside ahead relieved the monochromism.

It was a natural cleft, but there were tailings everywhere, several feet deep, as if the cleft had been mined. The tailings had filled the canyon bottom, creating the little flat.

I searched the hillsides. It seemed I could feel eyes boring holes in my back. I looked everywhere but at that cavern mouth.

The darkness it contained seemed the deepest I had ever known.

Lord Hammer rode directly to it.

"Packs off," Fetch ordered. "Weapons ready." She twitched and scratched nervously. "We're going down. Do exactly as I do."

Bellweather brought the others onto the flat. He searched the mountainsides too. "They're here," he announced.

War howls responded immediately. Here, there, a painted face flashed amongst the rocks.

Arrows and spears wobbled through the air.

There were a lot of them, I reflected as I got myself between my shield and a boulder. The odds didn't look good at all.

Bellweather shouted. His men vanished behind their shields...

All but my baby brother, who just stood there with a stupefied look.

"Chenyth!" I started toward him.

"Will!" Fetch snapped. She grabbed my arm. "Stay here."

Brandy and Russ took care of him. They exploded from behind their shields, tackled the kid, covered him before he got hurt. That got his attention. He started doing the things I had been teaching the past several months.

An arrow hummed close to me, clattered on rock. Then another. I had been chosen somebody's favorite target. Time to worry about me.

The savages concentrated on Lord Hammer. Their luck was poor. Missiles found him repulsive. In fact, they seemed to loath making contact with any of us.

Not so the arrows of Bellweather's Itaskian bows.

The Itaskian bow and Bowman are the best in the world. Bellweather's men wasted no arrows.

Virtually every shaft brought a cry of pain.

Then Lord Hammer reached up and caught an arrow in flight.

The canyon fell silent in sheer awe.

Lord Hammer extended an arm. A falling spear became a streak of smoke.

The hillmen didn't give up. Instead, they started rolling boulders down the slopes.

"Eyes down!" Fetch screamed. "Stare at the ground."

Lord Hammer swept first his right hand, then his left, round himself. He clapped them together once.

A sheet of fire, of lightning, obscured the sky. Thunder tortured my ears. My hearing recovered only to be tormented anew by the screams of men in pain.

It had been much nastier above. Dozens of savages were staggering around with hands clasped over their eyes or ears. Several fell down the slope.

Bellweather's archers went to work.

"Let's go," Fetch said. "Remember. Do exactly what I do." The little woman was scared pale. She didn't want to enter that cavern. But she took her place beside Lord Hammer, who laid a hand atop her disheveled head.

His touch seemed fond. His fingers toyed with her stringy hair. She shivered, looked at the ground, then stalked into that black crack.

He only touched the rest of us for a second. The feeling was similar to that when he had caught me after my run-in with the siren tree. But this time the tingle coursed through my whole body.

He finished with Foud. Once more he swept hands round the mountainsides, clapped. Lightning flashed. Thunder rolled. Bellweather's archers plied their bows.

The savages were determined not to be intimidated.

Lord Hammer dismounted, strode into the darkness. The red-eyed stallion turned round, backed in after us, stopping only when its bulk nearly blocked the narrow passage. Hammer wound his way through our press, proceeded into darkness.

Fetch followed. Single file, we did the same.

X

"Holy Hagard's Golden Turds!" Sigurd exploded. "They're on fire."

Lord Hammer and Fetch glowed. They shed enough light to reveal the crack's walls.

"So are you," I told him.

"Eh. You too."

I couldn't see it in myself. Sigurd said he couldn't, either. I glanced back. The others glowed too. They became quite bright once they got away from the cavern mouth. It was spooky.

The Harish didn't like it. They were unusually vocal, and what I caught of their gabble made it sound like they were mad because a heresy had been practiced upon them.

The light seemed to come from way down inside the body. I could see Sigurd's bones. And Fetch's,

and the others' when I glanced back. But Lord Hammer remained an enigma. An absence. Once more I wondered if he were truly human, or if anything at all inhabited that black clothing. After a hundred yards the walls became shaped stone set with mortar. That explained the tailings above. The blocks had been shaped in situ.

"Why would they do that?" I asked Sigurd.

He shrugged. "Don't try to understand a man's religion, Kaveliner. Just drive you crazy."

A hundred yards farther along the masons had narrowed the passage to little more than a foot. A man had to go through sideways.

Fetch stopped us. Lord Hammer started doing something with his fingers.

I told Sigurd, "Looks like the dragon god isn't too popular with the people who worship him."

"Eh?"

"The tunnel. It's zig-zagged. And the narrow place looks like it was built to keep the dragon in."

"They don't worship the dragon," Fetch said. "They worship Kammengarn, the Hidden City.

Silcroscuar is blocking their path to their shrines. So they blocked him in in hopes he would starve."

"Didn't it work, eh?"

"No. Silcroscuar subsists. On visitors. He has guardians. Descendants of the people who lived in. Kammengarn. They hunt for him."

"What's happening?"

Lord Hammer had a ball of fire in his hands. It was nearly a foot in diameter. He shifted it to his right hand, rolled it along the tunnel floor, through the narrow passage.

"Let's go!" Fetch shrieked. "Will! Sigurd! Get in there!"

I charged ahead without thinking. The passage was twenty feet long. I was halfway through when the screams started.

Such pain and terror I hadn't heard since the wars. I froze.

Sigurd plowed into me. "Go, man."

An instant later we broke into wider tunnel.

A dozen savages awaited us. Half were down, burning like torches. The stench of charred flesh fouled the air. The others flitted about trying to extinguish themselves or their comrades.

We took them before the Harish got through.

Panting, I asked Sigurd, "How did he know?"

Sigurd shrugged. "He always knows. Almost. That first barrow..."

"He smelled their torches," Foud said. The Harish elder wore a sarcastic smile.

"You're killing the mystery."

"There is no mystery to Lord Hammer."

"Maybe not to you." I turned to Sigurd. "Hope he's on his toes. We don't need any surprises down here."

Lord Hammer stepped in. He surveyed the carnage. He seemed satisfied.

Several of the savages still burned.

Fetch lost her breakfast.

I think that startled all of us. Perhaps even Lord Hammer. It seemed so out of character. And yet... What did we know about Fetch? Only what we had seen. And most of that had been show. This might be the first time she had witnessed the grim side of her master's profession.

I don't think, despite her apparent agelessness, that she was much older than Chenyth. Say twenty. She might have missed the Great Eastern Wars too.

We went on, warriors in the lead. The tunnel's slope steepened. Twice we descended spiraling stairs hanging in the sides of wide shafts. Twice we encountered narrow places with ambushes like that we had already faced. We broke through each. Sigurd took our only wound, a slight cut on his forearm. We left a lot of dead men on our backtrail.

The final attack was more cunning. It came from behind, from a side tunnel, and took us by surprise. Even Lord Hammer was taken off guard.

His mystique just cracked a little more, I thought as I whirled.

There was sorcery in it this time.

The hillmen witch-doctors had saved themselves for the final defense. They had used their command of the Power passively, to conceal themselves and their men. Our only warning was a premature warwhoop.

Lord Hammer whirled. His hands flew in frenetic passes. The rest of us struggled to interpose ourselves between the attackers and Lord Hammer and Fetch.

Sorceries scarred the tunnel walls. The shamen threw everything they had at the man in black. Their success was a wan one. They devoured Lord Hammer's complete attention for no more than a minute.

We soldiers fought. Sigurd and I locked shields with Con-tini-Marcusco and the Itaskian. The Harish, who disdained and reviled shields, remained behind us. They rained scimitar strokes over our heads.

The savages forced us back by sheer weight. But we held the wall even against suicide charges. They hadn't the training to handle professional soldiers who couldn't be flanked. We crouched behind our shields and let them come to their deaths.

But they did get their licks in before Lord Hammer finished their witch-doctors and turned on them.

It lasted no longer than three minutes. We beat them again. But when the clang and screaming faded, we had little reason to cheer.

Hanneker was mortally wounded. Contini-Marcusco had a spearhead in his thigh. Sigurd had taken a deep cut on his left shoulder.

Fetch was down.

Me and Harish, we were fine. Tired and drained, but unharmed.

I dropped to my knees beside Fetch's still little form. Tears filled my eyes. She had become one of my favorite people.

She had been last in line, walking behind Lord Hammer. We hadn't been able to get to her.

She was alive. She opened her eyes once, when I touched her, and bravely tried one of her smiles.

Lord Hammer knelt opposite me. He touched her cheeks, her hair, tenderly. The tension in him proclaimed his feeling. His gaze crossed mine. For an instant I could feel his pain.

Lord, I thought, your mystique is dying. You care.

Fetch opened her eyes again. She lifted a feeble hand, clasped Lord Hammer's for an instant. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Don't be," he said, and it felt like an order from a god. The fingers of his left hand twitched.

I gasped, so startling was his voice, so suddenly did the Power gather. He did something to Fetch's wounds, then to Sigurd's, then to Contini-Marcusco's. Hanneker was beyond help.

He turned, faced downhill, stared. He started walking.

We who could do so followed.

"What did he do?" I whispered to Sigurd.

The big man shrugged. "It don't hurt anymore."

"Did you hear him? He talked. To Fetch."

"No."

Had I imagined it?

I glanced back. The Harish were two steps behind us. They came with the same self-certainty they always showed. Only a tiny tick at the corner of Aboud's eye betrayed any internal feeling.

Foud smiled his little smile. Once again I wondered what they were doing here.

And I wondered about Lord Hammer, whose long process of creating a mythic image seemed to be unraveling.

A mile down into the earth is one hell of a long way. Ignoring the problem of surviving the dragon, I worried about climbing back out. And about my little brother, up there getting his bleeding...

I should have stayed with Chenyith. Somebody had to look out for him...

"I have taken the gold," I muttered, and turned to thoughts of poor Fetch.

Now I would never learn what had brought her here. I was sure we wouldn't find her alive when we returned.

If we returned.

Then I worried about how we would know what Lord Hammer wanted of us.

I needn't have.

XI

The home hall of the Father of All Dragons was more vast than any stadium. It was one of the great caverns that, before Silcroscuar's coming, had housed the eldritch city Kammengarn.

The cavern's walls glowed. The ruins of the homes of Kammengarn lay in mounds across the floor. As legends proclaimed, that floor was strewn with gold and jewels. The great dragon snored atop a precious hillock.

The place was just as Rainheart had described. With one exception.

The dragon lived.

We heard the monster's stentorian snores long before we reached his den. Our spines had become jelly before we came to that cavern.

Lord Hammer paused before we got there. He spoke.

"There are guardians."

"I wasn't wrong," I whispered.

The others seemed petrified.

The voice came from everywhere at once. It was in keeping with Lord Hammer's style. Deep. Loud. Terrifying. Like the crash of icebergs breaking off glaciers into arctic seas. Huge. Bottomless. Cold.

Something stepped into the tunnel ahead. It was tall, lean, and awkward in appearance. Its skin had the pallor of death. It glistened with an ichorous fluid. It had the form of a man, but I don't think it was human.

Fetch had said there would be guardians who were the descendants of the people of Kammengarn. Had the Kammengarners been human? I didn't know.

The guardian bore a long, wicked sword.

An identical twin appeared behind it. Then another. And another.

Lord Hammer raised his hands in one of those mystic signs. The things halted. But they would not retreat.

For a moment I feared Lord Hammer had no power over them.

I didn't want to fight. Something told me there would be no contest. I am good. Sigurd was good.

The Harish were superb. But I knew they would slaughter us as if we were children.

"Salt," Lord Hammer said.

"What the hell?" Sigurd muttered. "Who carries salt around?..."

He shut up. Because Foud had leaned past him to drop a small leather bag into the palm of Lord Hammer's glove.

"Ah!" I murmured. "Sigurd, salt is precious in Hammad al Nakir. It's a measure of wealth. El Murid's true devotees always carry some. Because the Disciple's father was a salt caravaner." Foud smiled the smile and nodded at Sigurd. Proving he wasn't ignorant of Itaskian, he added, "El Murid received his revelation after bandits attacked his father's caravan. They left the child Micah al Rhami to die of thirst in the desert. But the love of the Lord descended, a glorious angel, and the child was saved, and made whole, and given to look upon the earth. And, Lo! The womb of the desert brought forth not Death, but the Son of Heaven, El Murid, whom you call the Disciple."

For a moment Foud seemed almost as embarrassed as Sigurd and I. Like sex, faith was a force not to be mocked.

Lord Hammer emptied the bag into his hand.

Foud flinched, but did not protest. Aboud leaned past Sigurd and me, offering his own salt should it be needed.

Lord Hammer said no more. The guardians flinched, but did not withdraw.

Hammer flung the salt with quick little jerks of his hand, a few grains this way, a few that. Liverish, mottled cankers appeared on the slimy skin of the guardians. Their mouths yawned in silent screams.

They melted. Like slugs in a garden, salted.

Like slugs, they had no bones.

It took minutes. We watched in true fascination, unable to look away, while the four puddled, pooled, became lost in one lake of twitching slime.

Foud and Aboud shared out the remaining salt.

Lord Hammer went forward, avoiding the remains of the guardians. We followed.

I looked down once.

Eyes stared back from the lake. Knowledgeable, hating eyes. I shuddered.

They were the final barrier. We went into the Place of the Dragon, the glowing hall that once had been a cavern of the city Kammengarn.

I began to think that, despite the barriers, it was too easy.

I don't know why. It couldn't have been accomplished without Lord Hammer. Mortal men would never have reached Kammengarn.

"Gods preserve us," I muttered.

The Kammengarn Dragon was the hugest living thing I've ever seen. I had seen Shinsan's dragons during the wars. I had seen whales beached on the coast...

The dragons I had seen were like chicks compared to roosters. The flesh of a whale might have made up Silcroscuar's tail. His head alone massed as much as an elephant.

"Reckon he'd miss a cup of blood?" Sigurd whispered.

The northmen and their gallows humor. A strange race.

The dragon kept on snoring.

We had come in winter, according to Fetch, because that was the best time of year. I suppose she

meant that dragons were more sluggish then, or even hibernated. But at that depth the chill of winter meant nothing. The place was as hot as an August noon in the desert.

We flanked Lord Hammer, Sigurd and I to his right, the Harish to his left. Hammer started toward the dragon.

The monster opened an eye. Its snakelike tongue speared toward Lord Hammer. I interposed my shield, chopped with my sword. The tongue caroomed away. My blade cut nothing but air.

A mighty laugh surrounded us. It came from no detectable source.

"You made it, fugitive. Ah. Yes. I know you, Lord Hammer. I know who you are. I know what you are. I know more than you know. All tidings come to me here. There are no secrets from me. Even the future is mine to behold. And yours is a cosmic jest."

Lord Hammer reacted only by beginning a series of gestures, the first of which was the arm cross he had used at the barrows in the forest.

The dragon chuckled. "You'll have your way. And be the poorer for it." It yawned.

My jaw sagged. The teeth in that cavernous mouth! Like the waving scimitars of a horde of desert horsemen...

Laughter assailed the air. "I have been intimate with the future, refugee. I know the vanity of the course you have chosen. Your hope is futile. I know the joke the Fates have prepared. But come. Take what you want. I'll not thwart you, nor deny the Fates their amusement."

The dragon closed his eye. He shifted his bulk slightly, as if into a more comfortable position. Lord Hammer advanced.

We stayed with him.

And again I thought it was too easy. The monster wasn't making even a token attempt to stop us. That matter about the Fates and a cosmic joke. It reminded me of all those tales in which men achieved their goals only to discover that the price of success was more dear than that of failure.

Lord Hammer clambered up the mound of gold and jewels, boldly seizing a gargantuan canine to maintain his balance.

My stomach flipped.

The dragon snored on.

Sigurd started grabbing things small enough to carry away. I selected a few souvenirs myself. Then I saw the contempt in Foud's eyes.

He seemed to be thinking that there were issues at stake far greater than greed. It was an unguarded thought, breaking through onto his face. It put me on guard.

"Sigurd," I hissed. "Be ready. It's not over."

"I know," he whispered. "Just grabbing while I can."

Lord Hammer beckoned. I scrambled across the treacherous pile. "Cut here." He tapped the dragon's lip where scaly armor gave way to the soft flesh of the mouth. "Gently."

Terror froze me. He wanted me to cut that monster? When it might wake up? What chance would we have?...

"Cut!"

Lord Hammer's command made the cavern walls shudder. I could not deny it. I drew the tip of my blade across dragon flesh.

Blood welled up, dribbled down the monster's jaw.

It was as red as any man's. I saw nothing remarkable about it, save that men had died for it. Slowly, drop by drop, it filled the ebony container Lord Hammer held.

We waited tensely, anticipating an explosion from the monster. Dragons had foul and cunning reputations, and that of the Kammengarn Dragon outstripped them all.

I caught a smile toying with Aboud's lips. It was gone in an instant, but it left me more disturbed, more uncertain than ever.

I searched the cavern, wondering if more guardians might not be creeping our way. I saw nothing. Sigurd bent to secure one more prize jewel...

And Lord Hammer screwed a top onto his container, satisfied.

Foud and Aboud surged toward him. Silver Harish kill-daggers whined through the air.

I managed to skewer Aboud and kick Foud in one wild movement. Then my impetus carried me down the mountain of treasure to the cavern floor. Golden baubles gnawed at my flesh.

Sigurd roared as he hurled himself at Foud, who was after Lord Hammer again. I regained my feet and charged up the pile.

A gargantuan laughter filled the caverns of Kammengarn.

Foud struck Lord Hammer's left arm, and killed Sigurd, before he perished, strangling in the grip of Lord Hammer's right hand.

Aboud, though dying, regained his feet. Again he tried to plant his kill-dagger in Lord Hammer's back.

I reached him in time. We tumbled back down the pile.

Lord Hammer flung Foud after us.

Aboud sat up. He had lost his dagger. I saw it lying about five feet behind him. Tears filled his eyes as he awaited the doom descending upon him.

"Why?" I asked.

"For the Master. For the blood of the dragon that would have made him immortal, that would have given him time to carry the truth. And for what was done to him during the wars."

"I don't understand, Aboud."

"You wouldn't. You haven't recognized him as your enemy."

Lord Hammer loomed over us. His left arm hung slackly. The kill-dagger had had that much success.

Lord Hammer reached with his right, seizing Aboud's throat.

The Harish fought back. Vainly.

I recovered his dagger during the struggle. Quietly, carefully, I concealed it inside my shirt. Why I don't know, except that the genuine article was more valuable than anything in the dragon's hoard.

"Come," Lord Hammer told me. Almost conversationally, he added, "The dragon will be pleased. He's hungry. These three will repay him for his blood." He strode to the gap where the guardians had perished. Their hating eyes watched us pass.

I had to strain to keep pace with him. By the time we reached Fetch I was exhausted. Hanneker had expired in our absence.

"We rest here," Lord Hammer told me. "We will carry these two, and there may be ambushes." He sat down with his back against one wall. He massaged his lifeless arm.

The image had slipped even more. He seemed quite human at that moment.

"Who are you?" I asked after a while.

The iron mask turned my way. I couldn't meet his gaze. The power was still there.

"Better that you don't know, soldier. For both our sakes."

"I have taken the gold," I replied.

I expect he understood. Maybe he didn't. He said nothing more till he decided to go.

"It's time. Carry Fetch. Be wary."

I hoisted the little woman. She seemed awfully heavy. My strength had suffered. The mountains. The forest. The fighting. The tension, always. They had ground me down.

We met no resistance. Only once did we hear what might have been men. They avoided us.

We rested often. Lord Hammer seemed to be weakening faster than I, though his resources were more vast. Maybe the Harish kill-dagger had bitten more deeply than he let on.

"Stop," he gasped. We were close to the end of the tunnel. I dropped Fetch.

Men's voices, muted, echoed along the shaft. "Chenyth." I started on.

"Stay." The command in Hammer's voice was weak, but compelling.

He moved slowly, had trouble keeping his feet. But he negated the spells that made us glow. "We must rest here."

"My brother..."

"We will rest, Willem Potter."

We rested.

XIII

Outside ambushed us.

The sun had set. No moon had risen. The stars didn't cast much light. Bell weather had lighted no fires. We were suddenly there, beside Lord Hammer's stallion.

The last dozen yards we had to step over and around the dead and wounded. There were a lot of them. I kept whispering Chenyth's name. The only man I could find was Brandy. The griper had been dead for hours.

"They've killed or captured most of the animals," Bellweather reported. Lord Hammer grunted noncommittally. "We've killed hundreds of them, but they keep coming. They'll finish us in the morning. This's serious business to them."

"Chenyth!" I called.

"Will? Will! Over here."

I hurried over. He was doing sentry duty. His post was an open-topped bunker built of the corpses

of savages.

"You all right?" I demanded.

"So far. Brandy and Russ and Aral are dead, Will. I'm sorry I came. I'm tired. So tired, Will."

"Yeah. I know."

"What happened down there?"

"It was bad." I told him the story.

"The other Harish. Will they?..."

"I'm sure their daggers are consecrated to the same name."

"Then they'll try again?"

"They made it? Then we'd better warn..."

A shriek ripped the air.

I hurled myself back toward Lord Hammer. I arrived at the same time as the Harish. Blades flashed. Men screamed. Lord Hammer slew one. I took the other. Bellweather and the others watched in dull-eyed disbelief.

Before Jamal died he cursed me. "You have given the Hammer his life," he croaked. "May that sin haunt you all the ages of earth. May his return be quickened, and fall upon you heavily. I speak it in the Name of the Disciple."

"What did he mean, Will?" Chenyth asked.

"I don't know." I was too tired to think. "They knew him. They knew his mission. They came to abort it. And to capture the dragon's blood for El Murid." I glanced at Lord Hammer. He had begun a sorcery. His voice sounded terribly weak. He seemed the least superhuman of us all. My awe of him had evaporated completely.

He was but a man.

"Maybe they were right," Chenyth suggested. "Maybe the world would be better without him. Without his kind."

"I don't know. His kind are like the dragon. And we have taken the gold, Chenyth. It doesn't matter who or what he is."

Sleep soon ambushed me. The last thing I saw was a ball of blue light drifting into the rocks where the savages lurked. I think there were screams, but they might have come in my dreams. They took me back to the wars. To the screams of entire kingdoms crushed beneath the boots of legions led by men of Lord Hammer's profession. Those had been brutal, bitter days, and the saddest part of it was that we hadn't won, we had merely stopped it for a while.

My subconscious mind added the clues my conscious mind had overlooked.

I awakened understanding the Harish.

"His name is a joke," Fetch had said.

It wasn't a funny one. It was pure arrogance.

One of the arch-villians of the Great Eastern Wars had been a sorcerer named Ko Feng. He had commanded the legions of the Dread Empire briefly. But his fellow wizards on the Council of Tervola had ousted him because of his unsubtle, straightforward, expensive, pounding military tactics. For reasons no one understood he had been ordered into exile.

His nickname, on both sides of the battle line, had been The Hammer.

Aboud had told me he was my enemy...

The savages bothered us no more. Lord Hammer's sorcery had sufficed.

Only a dozen men were fit to travel. Chenyth and I were the only surviving Kaveliners...

Kavelin had borne the brunt of the Great Eastern Wars. The legions of the Dread Empire knew no mercy. The nation might never recover...

I was sitting on a rock, fighting my conscience. Chenyth came to me. "Want something to eat?"

"I don't think so."

"What's that?"

"Kill-dagger. Aboud's." I had been staring at it, and had hidden it at his approach. I showed him.

What's the matter, Will?"

"I think I know who he is. What he's doing. Why."

"Who?"

"Lord Hammer."

"I meant, who is he?"

"Lord Ko Feng. The Tervola. The one we called The Hammer during the wars. They banished him from Shinsan after it was over. They took his immortality and drove him into exile. He came for the dragon's blood to win the immortality back. To get the time he needed to make his return."

"Oh, Gods. Will, we've got to do something."

"What? What's the right thing? I don't know that he's really Ko Feng. I do know that we've taken his gold. He's treated us honorably. He even saved my life when there was no demand that he do so."

I know that Fetch thinks the world of him, and I think well enough of Fetch for that to matter. So. You see what's eating me."

My life wasn't usually that complicated. A soldier takes his orders, does what he must, and doesn't much worry about tomorrow or vast issues. He takes from life what he can when he can, for there may be no future opportunity. He seldom moralizes, or becomes caught in a crisis of conscience.

"Will, we can't turn an evil like Ko Feng loose on the world again. Not if it's in our power to stop it."

"Chenyth. Chenyth. Who said he was evil? His real sin is that he was the enemy. Some of our own were as violent and bloody."

I glanced toward the split in the mountain. The giant black stallion stood within a yard of where Lord Hammer had posted him yesterday. Hammer slept on the ground beneath the animal.

Easy pickings, I thought. Walk over, slip the dagger in him, and have done.

If the horse would let me. He was a factor I couldn't fathom. But somehow I knew he would block me.

My own well-being wasn't a matter of concern. Like the Harish, it hadn't occurred to me to worry about whether or not I got out alive.

I saw no way any of us could get home without Lord Hammer's protection.

Fetch dragged herself to a sitting position.

"Come with me," I told Chenyth.

We went to her. She greeted us with a weak smile. "I wasn't good for much down there, was I?"

"How you feeling?" I asked.

"Better."

"Good. I'd hate to think I lugged you all the way up here for nothing."

"It was you?"

"Lord Hammer carried the Scuttarian."

"The others?"

"Still down there. Love."

"It was bad?"

"Worse than anybody expected. Except the dragon."

"You got the blood?"

"We did. Was it worth it?"

She glanced at me sharply. "You knew there would be risks. You were paid to take them."

"I know. I wonder if that's enough."

"What?"

"I know who Lord Hammer is, Fetch. The Harish knew all along. It's why they came. I killed two of them. Lord Hammer slew two. Foud killed Sigurd. That's five of the company gone fighting one another. I want to know what reason there might be for me not to make it six and have the world rid of an old evil."

Fetch wasn't herself. Healthy she would have screeched and argued like a whole flock of hens at feeding time. Instead she just glanced at Lord Hammer and shrugged. "I'm too tired and sick to care much, Will. But don't. It won't change the past. It won't change the future, either. He's chasing a dead dream. And it won't do you any good now." She leaned back and closed her eyes. "I hated him for a while, too. I lost people in the wars."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. He lost people, too, you know. Friends and relatives. All the pain and dying weren't on our side. And he lost everything he had, except his knowledge."

"Oh." I saw what she was trying to say. Lord Hammer was no different than the rest of us leftovers, going on being what he had learned to be.

"Is there anything to eat?"

"Chenyth. See if you can get her something. Fetch, I know all the arguments. I've been wrestling them all morning. And I can't make up my mind. I was hoping you'd help me figure where I've got to stand."

"Don't put it on me, Willem Potter. It's a thing between you and Lord Hammer."

Chenyth brought soup that was mostly mule. He spooned it into Fetch's mouth. She ate it like it was good.

I decided, but on the basis of none of the arguments that had gone before.

I had promised myself that I would take my little brother home to his mother. To do that I needed Lord Hammer's protection.

I often wonder, now, if many of the most fateful decisions aren't made in response to similarly oblique considerations.

XIII

I need not have put myself through the misery. The Fates had their own plans. When Lord Hammer woke, I went to him. He was weak. He barely had the strength to sit up. I squatted on my hams, facing him, intimidated by the stallion's baleful stare. Carefully, I drew the Harish kill-dagger from within my shirt. I offered it to him atop my open palms. The earth shook. There was a suggestion of gargantuan mirth in it.

"The Dragon mocks us." Lord Hammer took the dagger. "Thank you, Willem Potter. I'd say there are no debts between us now."

"There are, Lord. Old ones. I lost a father and several brothers in the wars."

"And I lost sons and friends. Will we fight old battles here in the cupped hands of doom? Will we cross swords even as the filed teeth of Fate rip at us? I lost my homeland, and more than any non-Tervola could comprehend. I have nothing left but hope, and that too wan to credit. The Dragon laughs with cause, Willem Potter. Summon Bellweather. A journey looms before us."

"As you say, Lord."

I think we left too soon, with too many wounded. Some survived the forest. Some survived the plains. Some survived the snows and precipices of the Dragon's Teeth. But we left men's bones beside the way. Only eight of us lived to see the plains of Shara, west of the mountains, and even then we were a long way from home.

It was in Shara that Lord Hammer's saga ended. We were riding ponies he had bought from a Sharan tribe. Our faces were south, bent into a spring rain.

Lord Hammer's big stallion stumbled. The sorcerer fell.

He had been weakening steadily. Fetch claimed only his will was driving him toward the laboratories where he would make use of the dragon's blood...

He lay in the mud and grass of a foreign land, dying, and there was nothing any of us could do. The Harish dagger still gnawed at his soul.

Immortality rested in his saddlebags, in that black jar, and we couldn't do a thing. We didn't know how. Even Fetch was ignorant of the secret.

He was a strong man, Lord Hammer, but in the end no different than any other. He died, and we buried him in alien soil. The once mightiest man on earth had come to no more than the least of the soldiers who had followed him in his prime.

I was sad. It's painful to watch something magnificent and mighty brought low, even when you loath what it stands for.

He went holding Fetch's hand.

She removed the iron mask before we put him into the earth. "He should wear his own." She obtained a Tervola mask from his gear. It was golden and hideous, and at one time had terrorized half a world. I'm not sure what it represented. An animal head of some sort. Its eyes were rubies that glowed like the eyes of Lord Hammer's stallion. But their inner light was fading.

A very old man lay behind the iron mask. The last of his mystique perished when I finally saw his wizened face.

And yet I did him honor as we replaced the soil above him.

I had taken his gold. He had been my captain.

"You can come with us, Fetch," Chenyth said. And I agreed. There would be a place for her with the Potters.

Chenyth kept the iron mask. It hangs in my mother's house even now. Nobody believes him when he tells the story of Lord Hammer and the Kammengarn Dragon. They prefer Rainheart's heroics. No matter. The world goes on whether geared by truth or fiction.

The last shovelful of earth fell on Lord Hammer's resting place. And Chenyth, as always, had a question. "Will, what happened to his horse?"

The great fire-eyed stallion had vanished.

Even Fetch didn't know the answer to that one.