



Lord Endithor's incarceration was brief. By the following morning Lord Count Nalor had sufficiently drawn up all due notes of arrest, statements of witnesses, and legal proposals to present to the high court of civil jurisprudence. When the docket was officially opened that morning, Lord Court Nalor was first to be granted his appearance. His statement was brief and succinct; the nine judges reviewed his papers in the most cursory fashion. It was deemed unnecessary to call Lord Count Endithor himself before the podium to make any statement in his own defense.

When his daughter, Areeel, arrived at the court with a note of appeal signed by some lowly bureaucrat's secretary, the nine judges allowed her her say-but Nalor deftly parried every statement she made, discounted every flaw and miscarriage of justice she perceived in so extraordinarily swift a trial. She was overruled. The judges took their vote; in a unanimous decision, all nine of them showed the black card: death for the accused. Areeel swooned and had to be escorted home by her man-servants.

Notice was sent to the public executioner to prepare the public square for a state execution that very afternoon. Nalor himself, in an uncommon abridgement of the usual procedure, made his way to the royal prison annexed to the courthouse and visited Endithor to give him the word himself.

"Put your affairs of the soul in order, my friend," Nalor hissed, standing before the bars of Endithor's cell.

"The decision was unanimous."

Endithor lifted his head, and from the gray shadows of the corner of his cell his white eyes burned like funereal lamps. "No doubt," he whispered ghostily, "the decision was unanimous, seeing that all those judges are indebted to you in one way or another. They are not fools; they follow your orders and are rewarded. But I, too, did what you said-and now I am to be tortured and slain."

"Still sticking to that story, eh?" Nalor chuckled, though there was none in this cell-block-not even a sleeping guard-to hear him protest Endithor's accusation.

"You know it is the truth. I go to the gods a guiltless man."

"Not entirely guiltless," Nalor reminded him. "You were in the act of performing a sorcerous ceremony, you know. The high gods do not look kindly upon amateurs attempting to so manipulate them."

A long silence. The only noises were the damp hush of Endithor's breath and a slight clanking of his chains. Then: "I will be revenged upon you, Nalor. Know that."

"I think not. You die this afternoon."

"My spirit will follow you and damn you. I will be revenged upon you."

Nalor smiled sceptically.

"You are foul, Nalor. But your evil shall have its own due reward, and the Hells shall have you. "

"Now you speak like those crippled beggars in the streets, who whine for alms and threaten the gullible that good gains and evil fails."

"When you die, Nalor-when you breathe your last-remember me. I go to the torture, but my death will be sweet and painless compared to your own. I see an awful doom awaiting you, Nalor-I see the fires of the Hells reaching upward for your soul-"

"Save your breath, my friend. You will need it for your screams, later this afternoon."

With that, Nalor turned abruptly and strode back down the gloomy corridor.

Endithor sank back against the stone, chains rattling. He was flushed; he trembled. He had made his peace with the gods, but he did not want to die. Over and over he whispered to himself, like a litany: "Remember what I say, Nalor. The Hells will be your reward. When you die, remember me. When you die, you will remember me. . . ."

Nalor was not present at the court when, later that morning, Areel returned with a summons, this time signed by her local magistrate, demanding to see her father one last time before he was taken to be executed. But even with Nalor absent, the nine dark judges did as they knew the nobleman would have wished. They denied Areel her visit.

"You cannot do this!" cried Areel, outraged. "It is against the law you are supposed to uphold! Every prisoner is allowed one visit by his kin before his execution."

The judges huddled together and murmured for a moment; then the chief of them announced: "That is so, save for two instances. Firstly, your father is convicted of a treasonable crime, and a crime against the state or any of its officers disallows any of the usual leniencies. Secondly, no visits are allowed during the final twenty-four hours preceding the execution; we are now within that period."

"This is monstrous!" Areel protested. "He was arrested only last night, and sentenced this morning. He will be dead before a day and a night have elapsed since his arrest. It is mockery!"

"Silence!" The foremost judge stood up, slapping his hands on his podium. "Silence, or you will be escorted from this hall! I advise you to get yourself home and pray to the gods for your father's spirit. He is a wicked man, a sorcerer, and will need your intervention if he is not to be damned to the eternal Hells. Now, get you gone! Our business is pressing, and we have already given too much time and attention to the offspring of a traitor."

Endithor's apartment, in the most exclusive section of Shadizar, overlooking the main offices and buildings of government, gave Areel a clear view of the main square where the execution was to take place. She sat alone in a high chamber, at an open window, watching as the sentence was carried out.

Public bills had been posted all morning; by noon the square was beginning to fill with the throngs of curious, and the merchants' stalls were doing better than they had done all year. Flagons of wine were lifted high, cheeses and cakes devoured, songs sung,

lutes and flutes played. The pickpockets of the city, too, were managing more business in a few hours than most had garnered for the entire past twelvemonth. The skies began clouding around noon; within the hour a light drizzle began to sprinkle upon the city, but did not in the least affect the gathering crowds.

Areel shed no tears. She did not mourn, nor wail her anguish. She was her father's daughter, raised to endure all things with quiet pride. Court life had taught her father to maintain an outward dignity and a strong reliance on one's own self; and Endithor had bequeathed this outlook to his daughter. Areel was stone; she was steel, and fire. Good and bad alike passed before her critical attention to gain only a mute acknowledgement in her expression. Few things brought her to despair, fewer things still lifted her to heights of unrestrained emotion. That sort of existence was for those who had little to lose, little to gain; Areel had been raised in a world of wealth and power and intrigue, and she had everything to protect, herself first of all.

As the horns trumpeted outside, announcing the beginning of the execution, Areel set aside the books she had been examining: her father's diaries and records. They told her everything: Nalor's treachery-her father's fear of Kus, the mysterious nobleman who either controlled Nalor or was controlled by him-the long history of Nalor's gradual attainment of power in court, and his evil use of that power-all of it was in the records her father had kept. The last entry had been recorded yesterday, as dutifully as all the rest; in his spidery Zamoran script Endithor had noted his intended act of sorcery, his decision to sacrifice Lera for the good of the community, and his brief acknowledgement of the gods, along with a prayer for their understanding of his actions.

The trumpets blared again. Areel leaned upon the sill, looked down upon the distant crowds. A government official, dressed in scarlet and gold, rode through the throng on a white steed, then dismounted and climbed the steps of the tall stage erected in the middle of the square.

At that moment, someone knocked on Areel's door. She turned, angry. "I told you that I wished to be left alone!"

"Pardon, mistress." The voice was that of one of her man-servants. "It is important."

"More important than my father's death?" she snarled. But, acquiescing: "Enter!"

The man opened the door and bowed. He was middle-aged and wore the tunic of a head servant. "May I speak, mistress?" he asked.

Areel nodded.

"Mistress, I thought you should know that many of the servants of your household have left the premises." "What do you mean?"

"They are gone. Only six remain-the steward, one stable-boy, two slaves, myself, and the girl." "Lera?"

"She has remained." "And the others?"

The man-servant shrugged. "They must have left this morning. Their personal things are gone from their quarters."

Areel sneered. "Didn't want to serve any longer in the house of a traitor, eh? What about the rest of you, Tirs? Are you going to run, as well?"

The man's head lifted with pride. "We are yours. The slaves must remain, and so long as you pay the remainder of us for our services, we will stay also."

"Very well-" Another trumpet blast sounded from outside. "Leave me now, Tirs."

"Very good, mistress." The man bowed and backed out, shut the door.

Areel returned to the window and watched the square. The official on the stage was making some last announcement about the execution of Lord Count Endithor of Shadizar. Another series of trumpet blasts, and then the crowds cheered as a horse and cart made its way through the square from the direction of the royal prison. Endithor, bound with chains hand and foot, crouched huddled in the cart as missiles thrown by the mob sailed over him. The horse and cart paused at the steps of the platform; two guards unlatched the cart and dragged the prisoner out. Rocks, vegetables and clods of mud struck Endithor and his guards, as well. A troop of soldiers surrounded the stage and warded back the crowds, and Endithor was walked to the center of the platform and shown all around, to the citizens of Shadizar.

More rocks and vegetables flew. Mounted troops pushed the crowds farther back. Then, following the path of the horse and cart, an escort from the palace brought the state executioner into the square. After another announcement, he was led up the stairs—a huge man, naked save for a dark loincloth strapped beneath his large belly by means of a wide leather belt, his identity hidden by a black hood reaching half-way down his chest and back. In his large hands he carried a number of grim-looking tools of torture. Several guards mounted the stage after him. They stripped Endithor naked, attached long chains to the manacles at his ankles, looped these chains to pulleys set in the gallows of the stage. Roughly they hauled the doomed man up, cranking the chains with a windlass. When finally Endithor was hanging upside down by his ankles, his wrists were freed; his arms were stretched apart and attached to large staples in the stage.

The crowd cheered. The city soldiers trooped down the stairs and took up positions with their fellows before the stage, holding back the mob. And then the royal executioner began to apply his trade.

He was master at it—master not only at creating agony in his victims, but also in gauging the response of the crowd. With a showman's instincts the anonymous executioner led them on, building up their interest, drawing blood or wrenching limbs with a subtle, slow build-up of savage artfulness. The screams he drew from Endithor rose in pitch and duration exactly to complement the rising, gleeful excitement of the packed mob.

First came a scourging-nothing drastic-concentrating on Lord Endithor's face and genitals. Then, small cuts were made upon his face, his hands and soles of his feet, followed by deeper cuts down his sides, front and back. This was followed up by hot pincers, applied here and there for maximum pain. More scourging ensued, this time with barbed leather, after which salts and burning spices were rubbed into the wounds. Then, returning to the white-hot pincers, the executioner commenced the joint-by-joint dismemberment of toes and fingers. And finally, serious work upon the face began-slow and careful gouging and cutting that disfigured and blinded without affecting the vocal regions. Countless screams of pain rose to the drizzling skies, together with the mob's wildly enthusiastic cheers.

Areel watched to the last-watched mutely, with fierce hatred boiling within her. She felt the hate growing silently, like another self, as sabers and saws ripped muscles from Endithor's legs and arms and back, as the scalp was ripped from his skull, as- finally-his belly was slashed, his limbs dismembered, his head cut free and mounted on a pole.

That such atrocities could be did not amaze her, for along with all members of her class and race she had witnessed such violent executions many times. It was no worse than what most criminals condemned to death went through.

But this time, it was her father! Though she witnessed it stoically enough, from outward appearances, this was the execution of her father-and he was innocent. Innocent!

While the court which had condemned him went free. While Nalor, the man who owned and controlled that court, went unhampered along his way, concocting new crimes, doing as he pleased.

When the execution was over, Areel closed the shutters of her window and sat there throughout the long, gray afternoon, reliving the agonies in her mind as an incentive to her own already-forming plans of revenge. That her own life was in danger she did not doubt. How long would Nalor allow her, Endithor's daughter, to live, when she provided a constant threat to him?

But Nalor, she knew, would not act immediately. That would arouse suspicion. And so she would have time to form her own plan of retribution.

Yet her mind formed no certain course of action, created no real schedule-until, late that evening, she returned to her room and perused her father's diaries and journals.

For the first time, she opened many strange old books and scrolls she had not suspected he had owned. Then Areel was quietly stunned. For, whatever her father's motivation or goal, these books proved without a doubt that he had indeed practiced sorcery.

Areel began to read the books, and her plan formed. To fight Nalor on his own ground—with lawyers, with legal maneuvers and other such mundane devices—would only invite certain defeat.

But to battle him with sorcery—?

Aye, she would fight him with potions and spells, with influences and evils beyond his own pale, earthly imitation of evil! She would carry on her father's unfinished work. She would utterly destroy Nalor, body and spirit, by means of such things as only damned and desperate souls resort to.

Her eyes blazed with fierce excitement. "I shall!" she cried aloud. "I have no other true choice!"

There was little time; she must act swiftly; she must employ tools of whose efficacy there could be no doubt whatsoever.

"Sorcery!" she muttered.

Sorcery, to destroy the man who had destroyed her father.

She looked to her father's books, lit a few extra oil lamps against the encroaching darkness of her room, and applied herself again to the ancient grimoires.

At the same moment, not far away, Lord Count Nalor ate a late supper in a small private chamber of his apartment. A single lute-player provided accompaniment, strumming a sad tune about parted lovers. Half-way through the song, a slave jangled a bell and entered the room. Nalor looked up.

"Lord Kus, master."

Nalor nodded. The servant side-stepped, somewhat nervously, and Kus entered.

He was a tall, thin-faced man, strikingly pale, dressed in muted purples and golds. His dark, unblinking eyes suggested a touch of sinister humor. Without a word he took his place in a chair opposite Nalor's; the servant who had announced him followed in a moment with a silver tray containing only a stoppered flask and a golden goblet. When the servant bowed low and exited, Kus—under Nalor's watchful eye—unstoppered the flask and poured himself a cup of dark liquid that was too red and thick to be wine. Nalor squirmed slightly and averted his face as Kus raised the goblet to his lips and sipped from it. Kus smiled, wiped his lips with a napkin.

"It distresses you to see me drink that?" "It distresses me, yes."

Kus laughed, a throaty growl. "Why? In your own way, you're certainly as much a blood-sucker as I. Survive on a battlefield sometime, like I did, and live on human blood and flesh for your only sustenance while your body repairs itself. You'll learn to drink blood."

"That was a long time ago."

"I became very used to it." Kus raised the goblet once more. Nalor could not watch him; he set down his fork, reached for his own goblet, then moved his hand away. He turned to his musician and commanded him to play something cheerier. Then, facing Kus again, he commented: "It was done today." "Endithor?"

"Yes. We arrested him last night. The judges posed no problem whatever, and he was executed this afternoon. The crowd loved it."

"No doubt." Kus smiled, a dark gleam in his eye. "Then we are safe. No one else suspects."

"I'm not so sure," said Nalor. "I'm worried about his daughter."

"Oh? And what does she know?"

"Nothing, I'm sure. But she hates me. She fought me in court today, and I know that she returned later to try to see the old man. I'm certain she won't let the matter rest."

Kus shrugged. "It is not of pressing importance." "No, no. But in time, I'd like to see her removed. Just to insure our own safety."

Kus smiled slowly. "Good, my friend. Good. Let her sit for a while; and then, when the time comes-" He raised his goblet to his lips once more.

Nalor shuddered involuntarily, looked Kus in the eyes. They were malignant eyes. Quickly he looked away-and toyed with his food, and ignored his wine goblet. . . .

The Dragon Seed Tavern tonight was in robust good health, swarming with patrons who laughed and talked and spent money, reliving again and again all the fine details of Lord Count Endithor's execution. Stout Obis, the proprietor, stood behind his counter and watched his serving girls hurry with their orders and smiled and smiled. Gold and silver jangled everywhere.

"It was a good show!" commented one rogue, sitting with companions at a shadowed table. "The executioner took his time-put on a good display." He adjusted the headband which covered the loss of one eye, then sipped his beer.

"And a good thing, too, that he took his time," piped up a rat-faced thief next to him, "for it gave me the more time to take my pickings, by Bell!" He pulled out his purse, which was overflowing, and ordered more cups around.

Across from them sat a burly, hairy-bellied rogue whose head was nestled comfortably between the large breasts of the wench standing behind him. "I find it hard to believe,"

he commented, "that Endithor was as guilty of those crimes as the proclamation stated. Now, I'm a seasoned man, by Anu!-experienced in the ways of the world. I can sense the rotten smell of vice and intrigue as the forest animals sense hunters on their trail! Endithor was only a minor noble. My hunch is that he stumbled onto somebody's secret, and that the charges were trumped up to make an example of him.

He got too close to the bones in somebody's boudoir!" The one-eyed man frowned and nodded. "Aye, 'tis very possible. The difference between those upper-crust dogs and us, simply put, is that they're not honest about their dishonesty."

"What has the world come to," wondered the rat-faced man aloud, "when there are more thieves in public office than there are on the city streets?"

The burly rogue guffawed at that and slapped the table; cups danced and beer spilled over their rims. He slurped down the last of his own, then reached up to squeeze the left breast of his wench. "Get us some more, Viona," he growled, handing her a pocketful of coppers.

As the girl passed through the crowded tavern, she could hear at every table similar conversations. Lord Endithor's execution was the news of the hour, and everyone had an opinion.

But at the opposite side of the bar, games were going on. Here the players were much more intent in racking up their points than in reliving the day's past excitement. A small knot of people, those who had fallen out of the competition, surrounded the final two players: a blond-haired man in Corinthian armor and a tall, red-haired woman wearing a sleeveless tunic of chain mail. The man-just one of the many outlanders who had found a home in Shadizar's port of lost souls-gave an eye to his opponent and stepped up to the line. The woman, smirking, stood back and borrowed a sip from a wine cup behind her, then watched quietly.

The blond Corinthian took his time, lifting his knife and holding it poised handle in the air, concentrating on the bull's eye painted on the wall several paces before him. The innumerable cracks and dents patterned on the rings he tried, in his concentration, io congeal into a path that would lead his knife straight to the center. He took in a breath, held it-then, with a sure jerk of his wrist, flip-threw the knife. It spun and struck, straight in the center of the bull's eye.

"Well done, Sendes!" laughed one of his companions, slapping him on the back. "Ten points! You've won!"

"Not yet," countered another. "If Sonja makes the bull's eye, she's got him by three points."

Sendes stepped back, retrieved his beer from his table and swallowed a long draft. He eyed the woman called Sonja, who still stood with arms crossed over her breasts, smiling judiciously.

"Well?" Sendes asked her.

Sonja tilted her head, scratched her hair. "That's pretty good throwing, Sendes. The best you've done tonight. I don't know if I can beat that."

"Oh, be a sport about it!" one of Sendes' friends called.

"Yes, be a sport about it," Sendes urged her. "At least take your last throw."

"I don't know," Sonja said. "Shall we just call it a draw?"

Onlookers laughed.

"No, no, no," Sendes replied, very serious. "Now, I've had a slow start when you were way ahead. You can't just throw away the game, now that I'm on the verge of winning. Be a sport. Take your last throw, and I'll charge you only one cup of beer for losing. How's that?"

Sonja shrugged, glanced at the bull's eye. "But how can I try for the bull's eye when your knife is in the way?" she protested.

"Oh, very well," Sendes acquiesced. "I'll remove it."

He made a step in that direction, but a companion held him back. "No, no, no, no! Rules is rules! The knife stays where it stuck." He looked, scowling, at Sonja.

Sonja shook her head. "Very well. I guess I'll just take my last throw and let that be the end of it." "That's a sport." Sendes smiled, sipping again from his cup.

She was lithe and graceful as she moved forward, with all the smooth coordination of a jungle cat. Her hair fell in deep scarlet waves down her back. Dressed as she was in mail armor, she had seemed an affront to many a proud male in the tavern that night; and no matter how much she had drunk with them, or how well she had thrown, many had looked upon it as a presumption, or some sort of rude jest. A woman in warrior's armor, drinking and throwing knives with men! Well, she'd laughed and drunk and jested and thrown all night, and had even had some luck, but now she was finally going to have her bottle uncorked when Sendes won the bull's eye contest.

She moved with such ease and liveness that she took her small audience by surprise. There was no pause, no display of histrionics. In one fluid movement she had leaned forward, pulled her knife from its sheath at her waist, stepped to the line and pivoted.

The weapon flashed in a blur; wood splintered and metal sang before anyone there had expected the knife to reach the wall.

Sonja smiled and glanced around. Sendes, astonished, dropped his cup.

"Damn me to the Hells!" called out one of his friends.

Her knife had driven home squarely in the bull's eye, cutting straight through Sendes'. The wooden handle of the Corinthian's weapon was split in two-no mean feat, for it was of hard wood imported from Kush-and the metal blade was scarred deeply where Sonja's had slid alongside it.

Sendes ran to the wall, pulled out Sonja's knife and stared at his own ruined weapon. "Impossible," he breathed. Sonja walked up to him, smiling. "Have that back?" Numbly, Sendes let her take the knife. She sheathed it. Sendes shook his head. "Impossible," he breathed again.

"I'll let you pass on the beer," said Sonja, grinning at him. "I think you're going to need your money to buy a new knife."

Silence-astounded silence-and then, in a burst, wild cheers, guffaws, whistles. Sendes' men crowded forward to clap Sonja on the back and offer her drinks.

They sat at their table and laughed. When Sendes came over, Sonja apologized. "I tried to tell you," she purred. "I didn't really think it would happen quite that way."

"Like hell," Sendes growled.

"Oh, cheer up!" urged one of his friends. "It was worth that damned knife to see a throw like that!" Turning to Sonja: "Where did you ever learn to do it? It's remarkable!"

Sonja gestured negatingly. "I wear my armor for a purpose," she said. "I am a free sword, a swordswoman; don't you think it wise for one who wears weapons to know how to use them? I've led many lives-" She stopped speaking, then said no more - feeling, perhaps, that she had said too much already.

Glancing at Sendes, she seemed about to make another comment to him-but saw that Sendes was staring past her, looking toward the center of the tavern. As she and the others at the table turned, too, follow-

ing his gaze, Sonja became aware of a growing silence in the room.

In the center of the tavern was a young woman-tall, dark-haired, dressed in extremely fine clothes and sporting jewelries that marked her as no common inhabitant of this side of town. Yet Sonja got the impression that many of the people in the tavern did, indeed, know her. Certainly Sendes appeared to. He went so far as to stand up and hold out a hand, indicating to the young woman that she should come to the table. She advanced.

As Sonja stared, measuring the woman up and down, the man sitting next to her at the table—a burly man with a big, hairy belly spilling out over his swordbelt—leaned forward and whispered in Sonja's ear: "Endithor's daughter."

Sonja's brows raised.

"Areel," Sendes greeted the woman. He pushed back his chair and reached to get one for her from a neighboring table.

But Areel held up a hand. "I would like to speak with you alone, Sendes, if I might."

Those at the table took the hint. They all stood up, quaffed the last of their cups, straightened belts and swords and bade good-night to Sendes. One or two, perhaps on more familiar terms with Areel, offered her expressions of condolence on her father's death. She accepted these with a proudly raised chin.

Sonja was the last to go. She lingered, watching Sendes, watching Areel. Areel—proud, aloof, with deep black eyes full of intelligence and purpose—lent Sonja a slow gaze. Both women stared at one another for what seemed a long moment, but no word was spoken between them.

Sonja walked off. "Good-night to you, Sendes." "Good-night, Red Sonja."

"We'll throw again, sometime."

"Yes, all right. Yes." He seemed a bit flustered; he smiled nervously at Sonja, then stepped behind Areel to pull out a chair for her.

Sonja walked away, pestered with thoughts. As she crossed the tavern one of Sendes' companions, the burly one, gestured to her. "Have another cup with us?"

"No, I think not. It's getting late."

"Have you some important engagement?" "No."

"Sit a moment."

Curious, Sonja complied; as she sat down, she shot another glance back at Sendes and Areel, who were huddled at their shadowed table paying no attention to anyone else.

"You just met Sendes tonight, did you not?" asked the burly man.

"Yes. What of it?" said Sonja, perplexed.

The man shrugged. "It's strange." He looked back at the table. "I don't like it."

Sonja asked: "Isn't that the daughter of the nobleman who was killed today?"

"Aye. . . ."

"What's she doing with Sendes?"

The man's dark eyes looked into hers. "They've known each other for a time. Sendes never said so, but I think they were lovers, once. He served as a guard at the palace for a time. I think that's where they met." "What's sinister in that?"

"Nothing. But now he's employed by Count Nalor." "So who is Nalor?" asked Sonja.

A grim smile, skewed. "Only the most powerful man in the city. He's a ruthless bastard-controls all the politics and all the politicians. Sendes doesn't like him, but

he pays well for good private soldiers, and I don't think Sendes could make better money anywhere else." Sonja was becoming impatient. "So what does it all matter?"

"To you, maybe it doesn't. I guess you're not involved, except that you know Sendes. But-with Endithor executed. . . . You see, he was a councillor, and Nalor is a councillor. For Endithor to have been killed in public, Nalor would have had to arrest him and sign all the papers. I don't know all the details; but knowing what I do about Nalor, I'd bet a gold pin that Areel suspects something funny is going on. And since she knows Sendes, and since Sendes works for Nalor. . . ." He dropped open hands on the table.

"You may be letting your imagination run away with you," Sonja told him.

"I hope so. I like Sendes. I don't get to see him that often-I pass through Shadizar only a few times a year. I'm with the caravan that pulled in this morning; I'm leaving tomorrow morning. Hopefully I'll see Sendes alive when I return. I look forward to his company when I'm here, and I don't want anything to happen to him."

Sonja stood up. "He'll be all right. He can take care of himself. You're just worried because it's late and you're tired."

"I hope you're right, Red Sonja."

"Take care-" She laughed. "I've forgotten your name. Too many names and faces for one night, in this place."

"Bear Gut." He extended his hand.

"That's right." She smiled at him; big, hairy belly, so his friends called him Bear Gut.

"Good-night, Bear Gut." "Good-night, Sonja."

They shook hands, and Sonja walked on through the tavern. At the door, going out, she took a last glance

back at Sendes and Aree. Something, some uneasiness she could not define, prickled her consciousness. Then she went out.

The night was warm but not muggy. From near and far came the sounds of ribaldry and carousing, for Shadizar came to life after daylight had fled and remained lively till its return. As Sonja walked briskly to her apartment quarters several blocks away, she was alert but not overly concerned for her own safety. Shadizar the Wicked, though a crossroads for all the thieves, murderers, pimps, rogues and renegades of the world, had yet its own sense of protocol. Variety was so common, crime and retribution so frequent, and vice so unnoticed that the figure of a red-haired swordswoman making her way down the streets, passing beneath the torches and oil lamps of various establishments, did not provoke the attention it might have in other places.

Besides, Red Sonja knew how to defend herself and her best defense, she knew, was her own natural walk, sure and confident, plus her mail shirt and the longsword that swung at her hip. In Shadizar, as everywhere else, the strong preyed upon the weak, and Sonja knew the city as well as she knew herself. Only the most drunken, mad or desperate would dare risk death or disfigurement to gain the few coins a lone sword-bearer might be presumed to carry.

The safest route to Sonja's roominghouse was around the farther block and one street over, where the main avenues were somewhat lit with lamps and torches, and where late-comers still passed by or loitered. But the quickest route was through the alley just ahead of her. It was a short passage, wholly unlit, through the garbage and clutter between two tall, old brick buildings. Without hesitation, second thoughts or precautions (save for a reflexive right hand on her sword pommel), Sonja swung down the alley.

She heard squeaks and scamperings ahead of herrats in the garbage. A few pairs of yellow and red eyes slid low to the ground, moving away before her advance. A small breeze trapped by the alley fluttered on scraps of paper; the distant light of oil lamps glinted now and then on broken pieces of glass.

Half-way down on the alley, Sonja heard another noise -a brief cough or a low whisper. She neither hastened nor slowed her pace, but instinctively her fingers gripped her sheathed sword more tightly. Her eyes cast about; she listened for more noise between the sounds of her own footfalls on the litter.

Another noise-slight, but there-and a movement of a shadow. Aye, before her, and behind her. Sonja's nostrils flared; she smiled slightly in tense anticipation. If they-whoever they might be-tried to attack her for her purse, chances were that her own purse would be heavier following the encounter.

She took a breath, slowed her pace just a little-and then the voices rang out.

"We've got her!"-from in front. "Get her!"-from behind.

"Hurry! Now!"-from the front again, only a different voice.

And: "At her, Chost!"-a second voice from behind. Sonja snarled as shadows leaped at her. She threw herself back against the wall of the alley and her sword hissed from its sheath like a rearing cobra, flashing an arc of caught torchlight in the center of the darkness.