

## NOTES ON SETTING AND PRONUNCIATION

This story is set in an entirely fictional universe. The geography my look vaguely familiar, but the author has feely invented cities, mountain ranges, and caves. Do not look for them on any real-world map. Similarly, while city-states in this area may remind one of Sumer or Akkad, those are only two of many influences that have fed the author's imagination. The society depicted here is not based on any that has ever existed on our real-world Earth.

All names except that of Abadur himself are actual Sumerian words, although typically chosen without regard to their original meanings. In the Sumerian language, as transliterated from the original syllabary, there are no silent letters of dipthongs. All letters are pronounced individually. "A" is pronounced as in "father", "e" as in "whey", "i" as in "antique", "o" as in "boat" (or occasionally as in "found"), and "u" as in "Zulu." Thus, Teema is pounounced "tay-ay-mah".

## PROLOGUE

Rich in gold and in the skills of its merchants, the city of Kurgal lies in the Eastern Land, where the great river Edin pours its silt-laden waters into the sea. Not sixty miles south and east, so the geographies say, comfortable villages and carefully tended fields give way to lush, impenetrable jungle—jungle that is home only to shy savages rarely seen save when they trade ivory and bright-colored feathers for iron tools and odd bits of colored glass.

How far the jungle extends, no one knows. To the edge of the earth, some say.

To be sure, there are travelers who claim to have sailed south, and then south again, until land disappeared from their port bow. Then, turning east, they say they come to the land of a people who speak a sing-song language incomprehensible to civilized men and who worship gods other than the familiar, though sometimes terrible, gods of the Four Lands. But scholars consider this but a fable agreed on, and embellished as occasion arises by those who place notoriety above truth.

Kurgal is known far and wide as the great trading port of the East. The seafront docks receive opals from Niru, sesame and dates from the Fertile Land, silver, paper and armor-hides from the Land of the River, and even copper, tin and amber from mines lost in the dim reaches of the northwest. The smaller, more protected docks along the river provide gold, spices and exotic sweetmeats in return.

These goods move through the city on a gridwork of broad, straight thoroughfares. One such is Stonelion Street, otherwise an unremarkable collection of merchants' and artisans' shops and homes. Throughout the day it is crowded with wagons and carts, with heavily laden porters, children playing and women gossiping as they share a buttered pastry, with well-dressed and not-so-well-dressed shoppers, and with more sailors, bargemen, and long-distance waggoneers than anyone cares to count.

But the crowds dwindle as dusk falls. By the end of the first night watch there is little more than an occasional knot of figures returning from a party, or a solitary night worker hurrying home to bed. Some light their way with torches. Others rely on the rising moon, avoiding shadows with a nervousness that bespeaks fear of more than a stumble.

One figure moves down the street with an almost noiseless glide. His silence, the unhurried, graceful casualness with which he moves, attracts little attention from those he passes. But those who do notice him often show a trace of surprise: Few in the uniform and half-armor of the Kurgal City Guard patrol the streets alone.

Yet this is Damkis, who is sometimes called "the Swordsman." His sobriquet is well-earned. None in the City Guard, few in all of Kurgal, can match his skill with a blade. It is this skill, as much as any other, that has earned him a place in the Guard. But if swordsmanship has earned him a place, it has not earned him advancement. Nor will it. Indeed, advancement may be impossible. Who could accept a poor ironmonger's son

as an officer in the elite City Guard? No, that is not strictly true. For one with a sufficiently powerful patron, one with money to spend, much can be done to veil humble origins. In Kurgal society, money and influence are only slightly less important than birth.

But Damkis is no man's client. Indeed, he openly scorns all affiliation, whether with an individual patron or with some faction in the city's increasingly labyrinthine politics. Yet it would not be quite accurate to say that his only loyalty is to himself. To a certain concept of himself, it may be. A concept which has become ever more estranged from conventional morality—that morality which sanctifies established power and position—but rather scorns the lies and subterfuges, the flattery and hypocrisy, that might bring him the rewards he once sought and still, in his heart, desires.

The reaction of his fellow guardsmen has been predictable. All respect his skills. Yet his attitude, his very existence, challenge the foundations upon which they have built their lives. That none can like him, that few even trust him, is a given. If Damkis chooses to patrol alone, his fellows can only welcome the choice.

On this night, as others, he remains alert for evidence of theft or disturbance, for any indication of a threat to the peace and safety of the citizenry. His head swings constantly, eyes searching. A random breeze brings the sweet/salt tang of the near-by docks to his nostrils. Damkis's brain notes the odor, assesses and dismisses it without conscious thought.

Suddenly a cry rings out, shrilly piercing the night air with its message of fear. The guardsman freezes, ears straining. Then the cry sounds again and he is off, running swiftly down Stonelion Street. Without hesitation he turns into a cobblestone byway dipping steeply toward the port. Ahead, sounds of running feet come to his listening ears. A high-pitched, yet recognizably male, voice shouts, "No! No, please! I'm a poor priest. I have nothing!" And a moment later, "Help me Great Abadur!"

From the shadows at the end of the street a slight figure emerges, darts into a patch of moonlight with foreign-cut robes flapping. It stumbles, falls, struggles to get up. Almost instantly, half a dozen shaggy ruffians surround it. Blades flash, rise and fall. An agonized scream rings out, ceases abruptly.

Damkis's sword whispers from its scabbard. Far in the back of his mind, an almost subliminal voice rages at the cowardly attack. But his conscious thought is focused with icy clarity: He must teach these thugs that assassination is not an acceptable sport in Kurgal. Not while he is on duty.

And aware of the six to one odds, he does not scruple to attack without warning. He stills his breathing, moves forward in a noiseless glide. His blade flicks out. One is dead, pierced through the heart, before any are aware of Damkis's approach. But the thug's dying cry alerts the others. They turn towards the guardsman, swords at the ready. The odds are still five to one, and the advantage of surprise is gone. Yet Damkis has chosen the object of his initial attack with care. There is now only one cutthroat on his side of the body. The others must circle or leap over their victim to reach him. Will that few seconds' delay be enough? Damkis throws every ounce of skill he possesses into seeing that it is.

Even as his sword slides from the body of the dying thug, Damkis pounces on his nearest opponent with the fury of an attacking leopard. Before the others can intervene, a quick beat with his sword leaves the

nondescript ruffian's guard open. As if by magic, the assassin's abdomen acquires a second, bloody naval. Shaking his head, long, greasy hair flying, the overgrown tough takes a step backward. Then comprehension spreads across his coarse face. He grabs his stomach, turns, breaks into a staggering run. A trail of blood spatters behind him on the cobblestones.

But the odds are still four to one. If the attackers work together as a team, come at him simultaneously from all sides, even the most outstanding swordsman will have little chance. Yet the speed and effectiveness of Damkis's attack has instilled doubt in their hearts. No matter what the group's success, each wonders at his own chances of surviving the fray. All four hesitate a second, blades quivering nervously. Then, almost as one, they turn and follow the path their fellow has marked with his blood.

Damkis takes a deep breath, wipes and sheaths his sword. There is no need to follow the fleeing assassins. Their faces, one by one, are engraved on his memory. Unless they flee the city, he will surely encounter them again. In the long run, their fate is sealed. But his duty is not over. He must still see to the thugs' victim, administer a guardsman's rough-and-ready first aid if that can help, or prepare the body for final rites if it cannot.

Quickly he kneels by the victim's side. An elderly man with thinning gray hair. Features that possibly suggest someone from up-river. He again notes the unfamiliar design of the robes, finds it hard even to make out their color in the pale, washed-out moonlight. Maybe sky blue, he thinks. But great patches are already stained dark, stained irretrievably with the priest's lifeblood. Then the victim stirs, motions Damkis closer. The guardsman puts his ear to the man's lips. He can just barely make out the words, "Tell them in Kishar... temple of Abadur... the whip..." Then the priest must pause, gasping desperately for air. Seconds drag by. Finally he can continue, "In Agade... house of Adaru..." Once more he must fight for air, for what may be his last breath. Somehow he manages. But the words are confused, indistinct. Only "worship" reaches Damkis's listening ears before a final word, a word that begins "contr...", fades into a dying rattle.

For a moment, the guardsman remains still. He is touched with admiration for the priest's struggle, his determination to deliver his final, dying message. Then Damkis places his hand on the man's throat, feels for a pulse. Finds none. As expected. Gently he closes the dead man's eyes, fingertips lingering on the unfeeling eyelids. And half-straightens, settles back on his haunches. A thoughtful frown ripples across his face. Only after long, still moments does he rise to deal with the bureaucratic ritual that accompanies the passing of a stranger in Kurgal.

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The shadows are cool in the temple of the warrior goddess Ninsuna; cool and quiet. Sunlight penetrates only in the central, open court—the court where smoke from the altar ascends lazily, where it curls and slides past the carven symbols of the goddess: the shield, the spear, the archaic helmet, the serpent. Here priests and worshippers come and go. Some pause to mutter a prayer, to add a small offering to the flames. Others pass through quickly, proceeding about their business. Yet, even so, the atmosphere is one of contemplation and tranquility.

Things are quite different in time of war, when enemies march on the city of Kurgal. Then thousands

crowd the temple, shouting, weeping, praying that the goddess will inspire their leaders to victory. Flames from hundreds of casks of precious oil, from thousands of sacrificial carcasses, ascend through the temple's roof, carrying prayers upward to the goddess. But these are times of near peace. The temple of Ninsuna is quiet, restful, nearly deserted. Well away from the altar, two men sit cross-legged beside a column. One is Damkis, in the nondescript trousers and loose, hip-length kurta he affects off duty. A kurta ending just below the hips offers more freedom of movement than the ones coming to mid-thigh or below that other men often wear. The other is spare and ascetic, his thin, unlined face dominated by a huge beak of a nose. Red-brown hair still untinged with gray frizzes out around his face like a halo, falls in back to touch the russet and gray robes of a priest of Ninsuna.

Emku may be Rokar's only friend. It was the worship of Ninsuna, their frequent attendance at her rituals, that initially drew them together. They grew closer over the years, as Emku delved into increasingly arcane lore (victory-conferring knowledge and wisdom holding an honored place among Ninsuna's attributes) with a fierce dedication only Damkis could understand and appreciate.

Damkis spends many of his off-duty hours here, chatting with his friend about this and that. The temple's quiet interior, the restraint, even severity, of its stone architecture, provides a point of repose from the tensions and contradictions of the guardsman's life. And he appreciates the odd points of lore with which the scholar illuminates the workings of the city—even of the guard!—and the ritual and worship of the austere, rather forbidding, goddess.

But today he is here neither for friendship nor worship. He has come for information, for help and guidance. He continues to feel, for no reason he can clearly identify, that the priest's dying words hold a special message for him. Perhaps, he thinks, they represent an opportunity. Is it possible that some god or goddess has finally taken a hand in his life, offered him a way out of the frustrations and limitations that entangle him here? But if the message is truly for him, he fails to understand it. What is this whip the priest spoke about? It seems to be connected with Abadur, a god he vaguely identifies with traders from Kishar and the north. But what can a Kisharian god have to do with Agade, a city of the Fertile Land hundreds of leagues to the west?

He needs more information. And if knowledge of Abadur and the whip, of Kishar and Agade, is to be had anywhere in Kurgal, then surely Emku can provide it.

"The Whip of Abadur," Emku muses when Damkis has told his tale, asked his question. "Yes, certainly I know of it. You may recall that Abadur is worshipped in Kishar as King of the Sky Demons. In fact, he is probably the most worshipped and feared deity in their entire pantheon." The priest pauses a moment, ruminates. "It's strange, don't you think, that sky demons are known only in Kishar and its environs? I wonder...?" A shake of his head. "There must be some reason. Perhaps I'll make that the subject of the next research I undertake."

Then he continues. "The Whip—the name is spelled with a capital letter, by the way—is the symbol of Abadur's power. The Demon King uses it, so his worshippers say, to keep order in the Second Heaven where his minions live.

"No, perhaps the term 'keep order' is too weak. The Whip is the instrument by which all his commands, all his wishes and desires, are enforced. Thus, it has become the symbol of his total dominion, indeed, of his very godhead. Kisharians rarely swear 'by Abadur.' Instead, their usual oath is 'by the Whip.' You've probably heard travelers from the north using it.

"But that is the real Whip. The god's Great Temple in Kishar has a replica, and I would presume it is the replica your murdered priest was talking about. Although, I must admit, the Great Temple's priests stubbornly contend that what they have is not a replica. In the face of all reasoned argument, they continue to claim that it is the Divine Whip itself. And they say that through its use they can exert the same control over the demons as Abadur himself does—that they can protect the faithful from demonic attack and even, in their own right, launch such attacks against unbelievers."

Very little of this has been really of major interest to Damkis. But the last item seems promising. If the Whip is so important, he thinks, or—what's almost the same thing—if the priests truly believe it is, they should be suitably grateful for a message about it. But he still doesn't fully understand the dying priest's words. What does the Whip have to do with Agade?

He makes a guess, asks a question. "Is the Whip—the replica, I mean—still in Kishar?"

Emku looks mildly surprised. "Strange you should ask. No, it isn't. It was stolen from the Temple over a year ago. The priests sealed the gates tight, then searched every room, every corner, every dog kennel in Kishar. But they never found the Whip. Either it was melted down, or else the thieves got it out of Kishar before it was ever missed."

Now Damkis's attention is firmly caught. The message at last makes sense. He knows where the Whip is. And melted down? "What does the Whip look like," he asks.

Emku hesitates, gets a dreamy look on his face. "I'm trying to remember the description in the Kibrat Erbettim manuscript," he says. I believe it goes something like this: 'The lash i s made entirely of silver, yet so soft and flexible that it might be the finest leather. Close examination shows it is cleverly woven of fine silver wires, wires so small they are almost invisible even in the strongest light. The handle is of solid gold throughout, as is proven by its weight, and is studded over its entire length with stones that may be rubies and sapphires. However, I can state from my own observation that these stones exhibit a fire and brilliance exceeding that of any jewels known to me. Solely on the basis of its metal and gems, many might think the Whip of Abadur an exceedingly valuable object. Yet are they persons of little vision. Its monetary value is as nothing compared to its true worth, its value as an artifact revered by three-quarters of a million people."

As he hears these words, Damkis's heart is singing. Some god—perhaps Abadur himself!—has indeed stepped into his life. The message has told him where to find a stolen artifact, one that Erbettim described as exceedingly valuable for the metal and jewels alone. And something that has been stolen once can be stolen again. Especially, he thinks, from people who must conceal the fact that they have it.

To be sure, he is no thief: He recognizes that the operation will require skills and techniques he has never mastered. But his information is invaluable. Some local Agadean thief, beyond doubt, will be

more than willing to supply the missing skills for a share of a prize worth fabulous sums of gold.

So, with passing regret at parting from Emku, he sets out the very next day for Agade. Visions of riches, of fine wines and soft houris, dance enticingly through his head.

## f...CHAPTER I

The triple hook flew upward from Damkis's hand, rope trailing behind it. Starlight glinted as it reached the top of its trajectory, arced gracefully over the top of the courtyard wall. It hit the other side with a soft but distinctly audible clink.

At the foot of the wall Teema fumed silently. Half the guards in the city probably heard that clatter, she thought. Didn't that bloody damn amateur even know how to throw a hook so it landed on its pads? Why hadn't she thrown the hook herself? For that matter, why in the name of Sarraqum, God of Thieves, did she ever let that guardsman from halfway across the Four Lands come with her?

But she knew very well why: Only Damkis the Swordsman, as he had introduced himself in his strange staccato speech, had known where they were going. And the darkly handsome guardsman-turned-rogue didn't trust his new partner, the best cat-burglar in Agade, enough to tell her where the Whip could be found. Which explained why she found herself standing outside the house of Adaru the merchant, a house that respectable, or even normally cautious, people had taken to avoiding—one where mysterious lights were seen at night, and strange crackling sounds and moaning roars, roars like an animal in pain, were sometimes heard. But it didn't explain why that idiot hadn't respected her professional skills enough to let her throw the hook. Or why, when he picked it up, she didn't grab it out of his clumsy, incompetent hands.

Then she groaned silently. 0 my clever Sarraqum, she thought. Having made all that clatter, he had set the hook and was going up the rope without so much as waiting a blessed minute to see if somebody inside heard it. And who'd ever told him he knew how to climb a rope? Damkis was getting up it all right, she had to admit. But that was just the strength of his brawny arms, cultivated by years of sword-handling; he was putting twice the effort into it that the process should have required. Still, despite his lack of skill, Dmakis's black-clad form—thank Sarraqum that he'd listened to professional advice on his clothing, at least—reached the top of the high stucco wall without incident. Teema watched as he swung his lean, muscular body up onto its foot-broad top.

Then the rough hempen rope was in her hands. She pulled herself up with an easy swinging motion born of long years of practice. Soon she, too, was crouching on top of the wall, the stucco rough under her hands. Silently she gave thanks to Sarraqum that Adaru hadn't had the foresight to strew it with broken glass. A glance down into the courtyard showed the merchant's gate-guards, as she'd hoped, dozing by their fire. Two had put their swords aside; the other, slumped against the gate, had his across his knees. Even had they been more alert, though, they would have had difficulty seeing the two black-clad figures atop the wall against the dark night. Moonless, of course. The moon goddess Nanna, Revealer of Secrets, was the patroness of women who worked the night, but her patronage for female cat burglars was most reflected in her absence.

Then Teema's blood froze. The eerie, moaning roar that had given the house its bad name rose around her, sounding like all the demons of the Heavens and Hells lamenting their fate. For almost a minute it rose and fell. Goosebumps marched up and down Teema's body, congealed into serpentine ridges of horror. Cold terror froze the breath in her lungs, seeped into her bones. Her heartbeat surged, fluctuated, seemed almost to stop. Then, just as she felt herself slipping forward into some endless labyrinth of despair,

the sound died away.

Slowly, Teema pulled her nerves back together, regained some sort of professional composure. it was just the wind, she told herself, just the wind blowing through an oddly shaped hole somewhere.

Somewhere... She couldn't complete the thought. And she tried not to remember that she hadn't felt a breath of air for hours. Then something else caught her attention. Up on the flat roof of the two-story house, the roof by which they intended to enter, a light was flickering. Not firelight or candlelight, though. No, not red or yellow at all. It was pure white, almost bluish. Almost like lightning. And like lightning, too, in the way it flickered and flashed. Never bright, never dying away entirely. It reminded her, ever so strongly, of heat lightning on a summer's night. Had the light been there a minute ago? She hadn't noticed. But maybe it wouldn't have been visible from the ground. She wasn't sure. And she hadn't had time to look as she scrambled atop the wall.

For long minutes she and Damkis crouched motionless, waiting for some change, some indication it was safe to continue—or that they should retreat, give up the effort for now. That strange moaning, with its dreadful intimations of bestial terror, rose and fell once more. But this time there were curious overtones and harmonies, as though two voices paced each other. And still the light continued to flicker.

Then Damkis began moving along the wall. Teema caught her breath, released it with an almost visible effort. Did the crazy fool intend to go ahead with their plan, light or no light? Without even stopping to ask himself what had caused that light or whether someone or... Or some *thing* might be on the roof? It seemed he did. Ahead the wall made a right-angle turn, running back from the road to the corner of the house. With Teema reluctantly following, Damkis rounded the turn, continued on to where the wall of the house rose twelve feet sheer to the roof.

The hook, retrieved following their ascent, was still in his hand. Grasping the rope about five feet from the end, he started the hook swinging back and forth, pendulum fashion. Faster and faster it swung. As the end of one forward swing approached, he gave a final heave and sent the hook soaring onto the roof. Again it landed with a clank. But as Damkis tightened the rope, setting its tines into the two-foot wall around the roof, Teema finally broke her silence. "Don't be a fool," she whispered fiercely. "There's probably somebody up there. And you made enough racket throwing that thing to wake Abadur himself."

"I came here to get that whip," the whisper came back, "and I'm going to do it. If you're scared of a light somebody probably left there hours ago, you don't have to stick around. I wouldn't mind having the Whip all for myself. "

"At least show a little patience," Teema counseled, drawing on her long experience both outside and inside other people's houses. "Sit tight for a while and see what you've stirred up." But, as the minutes ticked by, nothing happened. The only sound was a late-night toper on his way home, singing a song that might have been bawdy had the words been distinguishable. There was no sign of interest from the roof. And the guards, after that second screaming moan, had settled back into their comfortable dozes. They had clearly grown accustomed to hearing weird sounds from the roof.

Yet it still hadn't been long enough to meet Teema's exacting standards when Damkis gripped the

rope and began to pull himself up. She breathed a small prayer to Sarraqum. Another as an incautious movement rasped the amateur burglar's clothes against the wall.

Past the second-floor windows he went. As be reached roof level, he gave one last heave. It brought his head just above the top of the wall, gave him a chance to check out the rooftop before swinging himself over. At that instant, something hazy, something indescribable, reached over the wall. Teema's eyes couldn't seem to focus, her mind couldn't acknowledge what it was seeing as the... the whatever-it-was grabbed Damkis's arm. He gave a strangled half-scream as it yanked him over the wall. Everything was done in an instant. Utter silence descended once again. Shocked to the core, her mind frozen, Teema strained her ears for any indication of what was happening on the roof. And heard nothing. Nothing at all. The silence stretched on. Minutes passed, and more minutes. Miles away a dog barked. His fellow answered him, voice carrying in the night.

What had happened to Damkis? What could have happened? The whole incident had occurred so quickly. Yet why did she feel she couldn't have seen the thing that grabbed Damkis clearly even had there been time? And why was she so sure it had *glowed*? More important, what should she, what could she, do now? From a strictly rational view, there was no question that the only reasonable course was to get out as quickly and silently as possible. But—

But the Whip—and the wealth it represented—remained a powerful attraction. Could she simply turn her back on the prize of many lifetimes? Surely not. But if she tried to return tomorrow night, she'd probably be walking into the face of redoubled security precautions. Ironically enough, if she were ever going to steal the Whip away, right now might be the best time to make the attempt.

After all, cat-burglars usually worked alone. So whoever—whatever—was up there might not be looking for another one at the bottom of the rope. That no one had even glanced over the edge of the wall, that the gate guards, after a minute of staring at the corner of the roof, had settled back down by their fire, suggested as much. With luck, everyone's attention just now would be focussed solely and entirely on Damkis. Maybe, just maybe, that might give her a chance to steal the Whip from under their noses.

Then, like a knife-stroke sliding clean and cold through her, a realization came: It wasn't just the Whip she wanted. She was equally concerned about that clumsy damned amateur Damkis. But that didn't make sense. He wasn't her responsibility. Not just because she'd taken on a partner that didn't know what he was doing. But whether it made sense or not, she was suddenly quite certain: She wasn't going to abandon Damkis. Which brought the question round again: What was up there? What had... What could have grabbed Damkis and pulled him onto the roof? There was no rational answer, yet an answer she had to have. The only way to find out was to go look.

Slowly, cautiously, careful to make no slightest sound, praying no gate guard was alert and sharp-eyed enough to pick out a black-clad thief against the deeper blackness of the night, Teema pulled herself up the rope. She reached window height, then roof height. Cautiously she peered over the edge.

She barely stifled an audible gasp. Damkis, bound hand and foot and struggling futilely, was being carried into what might be a small roof-top chapel. But the ones carrying him were glowing, shimmering

beings whose form... They had no form! They were almost transparent, with shapes that changed and shifted as though they might have been made from air and light itself. Yet in lifting and carrying Damkis they exhibited the qualities of substantial matter.

Silently the beings passed into the interior of the chapel. The roof was now still and empty. Only a few potted shrubs broke the surrounding expanse of rooftop. Yet that queer, flickering, blue-white light still shown through the door of the chapel. And although no windows broke the sweep of its walls, a hint of light in the air above suggested the chapel might be roofless—surely appropriate for the worship of sky demons!

Quickly, noiselessly, Teema pulled herself over the low wall, dropped catlike to the roof. Adrenaline poured through her veins, as it always did on a job. Suddenly she was back in her element, a cat burglar doing the job she was trained for. On soundless feet she flitted to the door. One eye edged around the doorframe, peered inside. The room, roofless only above the altar, had indeed been fitted out as a chapel. The two sky demons—surely that's what they were!—stood over Damkis. Their glow had now modulated into that strange, irregular, blue-white flicker the two thieves had noted before. But there was something peculiar about it. Something Teema couldn't quite place. Then she did. Only one of the demons flickered at a time. It seemed almost as if they were talking to each other!

Beside the demons— Yes, that was Adaru, fleshy, round-faced, not really fat but with the softness of someone whose time is spent in idleness. Or in calculating where the greatest profit was to be had. Tonight he was wearing rich, priestly robes with strange symbols, not the trousers and kurta of a merchant. Another man she didn't recognize, a tall, broad-shouldered man whose vaguely military bearing clashed oddly with the profusion of jewelry he wore—there were even jewels embedded in his short, well-trimmed beard—was just joining the group. At the far end of the room, about five feet in front of the altar, a third demon shimmered (shimmered, she noted, not flickered). And on the altar was the Whip!

Pulling her head back, Teema debated her options. Had it not been for Damkis, she might have considered waiting, hidden among the potted shrubs, until both humans and supernatural beings had left the roof. Snatching the Whip would then be easy—at least, if they didn't take it with them! But that wouldn't take care of Damkis. And it wouldn't really assure her a crack at the Whip, either. What if she...? Did she dare? Yes! If ever there was a time for boldness, this was it. For just a second she thought about the saying that there were no old, bold thieves. And reminded herself she really didn't know what she was going up against, with those sky demons out there. There was a very good chance, a small voice kept repeating, that she would shortly be a dead thief. But there was also a chance that speed and audacity could bring it off before the marks knew what hit them. if so, she would soon be the richest thief in Agade—and Damkis would be safe.

Quickly and silently, Teema put her plan into operation. Noiselessly she crept round to the other end of the chapel, stopped just opposite the altar. If the wall weren't there, she thought, she could almost touch the Whip. Now everything depended on speed, daring, and luck. Backing a few feet from the wall, she crouched, gathered her muscles, took a moment to still her breathing. Then she leaped. Her fingers grasped the top of the wall. Virtually in one continuous motion she swung herself up on top, planted her feet and leaped onto the altar. Seizing the Whip in her left hand, she sprang toward the group around Damkis.

Simultaneously her right hand pulled a throwing knife from her belt, swept back and hurled it toward the nearest sky demon. Horror seized her as she saw it pass straight through! It hit the floor, clattered and spun toward the wall. Somewhere in the back of Teema's mind a voice was saying prayers for the dead. She could not doubt they were for her.

Numb with shock, conscious only of her heartfelt wish that she had never seen a sky demon, that they were all beyond the sphere of the moon, she was hardly aware her left arm was moving. Yet, as the hand holding the Whip swept up, a weird, keening scream filled the room. Instantly, moving with wind-like speed, the two demons in front of her were streaming through the door. A flicker of motion caught her eye as the other streaked through the open roof.

For a moment the tableau remained frozen. Teema, Adaru and the unknown man all were immobilized by surprise and shock. It was the unknown, perhaps with the resilience of one accustomed to the surprises of battle, who recovered first. His dress sword whispered smoothly from its scabbard. And that whisper of danger jarred Teema back to life. Swiftly she went for her other knife. As the man's blade swept up, her knife buried itself in his throat.

Adaru was running now, stumbling out the door. Pausing only a second to grab her knife from the dying man's throat, Teema slashed Damkis's bonds. He stumbled groggily to his feet, checked—from habit, it might be—the long knife, scabbard strapped to his leg, he had worn as his "sword" tonight. With numb, leaden movements he followed Teema toward the rope. Then he shook his head, seemed to clear it. "Something's wrong with my left arm," he gasped. "Can't move it. Haven't been able to since that demon—whatever it was—grabbed me there. I'll never make it down the rope. Go on without me!"

Teema whirled on him. "That's nonsense," she snapped. "We'll get out of this together or not at all. If you can't go down the rope, we'll try the stairs. But for Sarraqum's sake, man, try to hurry. I can already hear Adaru rousing the whole house."

More quickly now, Damkis followed her as she ran to the stairs. But if she'd hoped for a clear passage to escape, a glance down the staircase showed they were too late: Already three people were gathered at the foot, ready to block the thieves' exit. Not guards, thank Sarraqum and Nanna. Just three rather uncertain-looking servants. A big, burly, black-haired man wielded what looked like a broken table leg while an older man, scraggly white hair flying, had somewhere discovered a five-foot metal bar. And a youth barely into his teens, looking scared and determined all at once, had armed himself with a flower pot!

Still the staircase was their only route out, and they rushed headlong down it. Damkis ducked as the flower pot whizzed past him, was hardly aware when it shattered harmlessly on the stairs. He did notice Teema hit the fourth step, launch herself at the white-haired man. Her target tried feebly to swing his bar, found 130 pounds of hurtling womanhood on top of him before he could get it around. The thud as they collided was overshadowed by the whoosh of air as Teema kneed him in the pit of the stomach. He collapsed, gasping, as she rolled away from him, regained her feet in one continuous motion.

Glancing back, she saw the black-haired man backing away, holding a bleeding arm. Damkis, sword still at the ready, kicked the abandoned club toward her. She immediately heaved the useless encumbrance

toward the top of the stairs. Meanwhile, the youth had vanished; Teema supposed he must have taken to his heels as soon as he had thrown his only weapon. A further quick glance showed nothing but a small group of people at the far end of the hall—a group that seemed more interested in staying out of harm's way than in interfering with the thieves' escape. The way to the interior stairs clear now, Teema and Damkis dashed to them, pounded down the steps to the first floor. Here a couple of heads peeked around doors, but no one tried to stop the fugitives as they rushed out into the courtyard. Audacity seemed to be working.

Or was it? Ranged in front of the gate were Adaru's guards, armed with full-length swords and protected by breastplates. Trained professionals, these three were alert and ready to deal with any intruders foolish enough to challenge them. Yet, Teema knew, challenge them they must: Surrender could bring only a more horrible death!

Hardly hesitating, the fleeing intruders approached the gate at a dead run. The guards responded with a standard, obviously well-rehearsed, maneuver: The middle guard, actually the smallest of the three, held his ground in front of Damkis while the other two separated and began to circle. They clearly intended to take their armed, male opponent from all sides at once. An unarmed female could be dealt with at leisure, they thought. And that was their mistake. Thanking whatever gods there were that she had thought to recover her throwing knife, Teema swept her arm back and then forward, stepping into the throw. Clutching the thigh in which a knife had suddenly bloomed, the middle guard stumbled and went down.

But she had made her move too soon. The remaining guards were still closer to the gate than the intruders. One moved to block Damkis. The other, belatedly realizing that the woman, too, was a threat, turned his sword on Teema. Now truly unarmed, she lashed out desperately with the Whip. Maybe, she hoped, she could entangle his weapon. Instead, the tip wrapped around his wrist and hand. With a scream of pain, the swordsman jerked back, the Whip still encircling his arm. Teema was nearly pulled off balance. Then, as she stumbled forward, the Whip loosened its grip, dangled free once more. Yet Teema knew that her opponent would recover in a moment, that her life still hung in the balance. With only one weapon at hand, she drew the Whip back again and, with all her strength, lashed the swordsman across the face.

She would spend the rest of her life trying to forget the blackened, charred streak that sprang up from ear to chin, white bone showing through where the flesh had been thinnest. An agonized scream turned to a moan as, cradling his ruined face in his hands, the guard fell to his knees. Only then did Teema notice the blackened streak spiraling up his hand and wrist.

The guard engaged with Damkis had almost immediately found himself on the defensive. Even with the advantage of a longer blade and a breastplate's protection to go with his greater bulk, he was clearly no match for the Kurgalan. As his second companion lapsed into merciful unconsciousness, he slipped to its right and ran for the house. The way was clear at last! Teema jumped for the gate, pulled up the latch, thrust the doors wide, and burst through. Damkis, thrusting his short "sword" into its scabbard, was right at her heels. Across the street they pounded, then into an alley. Ahead loomed a wooden wall. Teema vaulted it easily. But Damkis, betrayed by his still useless left arm, stuck half way up, nearly fell back. Then, with a heave, he got a leg over and dropped to the ground on the other side.

Trying to still her labored breathing, Teema held up a hand for silence. She listened a moment, then

whispered, "Good. No pursuit. They're probably still too confused to organize one. By the time they do, we'll be well away. But when they do get organized they'll likely start by scouring the main streets. Unfortunately, we're rather recognizable. So is the Whip. We'll follow back ways to the Golden Dagger, just in case." A quick glance around, a jerk of her head. "Come on and stick with me."

Damkis soon became lost in the maze of alleys and back streets. It was even worse as the large, substantial houses of the merchants gave way to ever poorer and meaner buildings. The streets, alleys—whatever they were called—became narrower and more odorous. Soon the buildings were hovels of mud and thatch and streets mere footpaths—a maze in daylight and almost invisible, nearly impossible even to find, in the moonless dark. But, through it all, Teema moved with the certainty and sure-footedness born of long familiarity.

Eventually, though, a few more substantial and well cared-for buildings began to appear among the hovels. This, Damkis knew was the Thieves' Quarter. Although that was a bit of a misnomer. As in the comparable quarter of Kurgal, anyone who had money but didn't want the fact generally known might choose to live here, protected from inconvenient curiosity by districts where guardsmen were rarely seen and no respectable citizen ever quite dared to go.

Soon Damkis was able to pick out a building he recognized. Then another. He had been here once before. They were approaching the Golden Dagger Inn: The inn where Teema had her rooms, and the inn where they had struck their bargain barely 24 hours before. Suddenly, Teema chuckled. "You know, we did it, we really did it!" she whooped. "What a story this will make. At least, what a story it'd make if we could find anyone who'd believe it. We bearded a whole pack of demons in their own temple, beat a cohort of armed guards, and got away with the holiest relic in... Well, at least the holiest one I've ever had my hands on. A relic which is, not so incidentally, worth a fortune. And we got away with whole skins!" She paused an instant. "No, damn it, I'd forgotten about your arm. How is it?"

"Actually, not too bad," Damkis assured her. "I'm beginning to get a bit of feeling back and I can wiggle the fingers. I think it'll be OK in a couple of hours."

"That's good," a sly smile curled around Teema's lips, "because I've never cared for one-armed lovers."

Damkis stopped, stood stock still for a moment. The play of emotions on his face was hard to read in the starlight. Then he laughed loud and clear. "Partner, if that's a proposition, you've got yourself a taker. But I must say I'm surprised. You didn't seem so receptive yesterday. In fact, I thought you referred me to a certain Aga when I suggested something like that yesterday. Didn't you mention her giving excellent value for the money?"

Teema whirled to face him directly, bringing their eyes level even though Damkis was a bit above medium height. Her voice was as stiff as her back. "Well, of course, if you prefer Aga—"

"Oh no, no, no. Please, partner, I was just teasing. My suggestion last night wasn't just a whim. I've wanted you ever since we first met. I just was curious about what had changed."

Teema took a deep breath, tried to sort through her feelings, gave up the attempt. "Yesterday was yesterday," she said. "I'd barely met you. Today... Well, I've just pulled off the biggest haul of my life. It needs celebrating. And not just an ordinary celebration with some joyboy, as though I'd stolen a trader's cashbox or something. This one ought to be special. And the only guy special enough to do it justice is the one who helped me pull the job in the first place. So, how about it? Is tonight special for you, too? Or do I have to find a joyboy good enough to make me forget you?"

She hadn't realized she was holding her breath until she heard Damkis say, "Tonight's special for me, and you're special. I could spend hours telling you just how special. So lead on. It's late, and I'm suddenly quite anxious to get to bed."