

Was their leader a
mistress of science
or a witch of mutants?

THE JEWELS OF APTOR

Samuel R. Delany



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by SAMUEL R. DELANY

The waves flung up against the purple glow of double sleeplessness. Along the piers the ships return; but sailing I would go through double rings of fire, double fears. So therefore let your bright vaults heave the night about with ropes of wind and points of light, and say, as all the rolling stars go, "I have stood my feet on rock and seen the sky."

—These are the opening lines from *The Galactica*, by the one-armed poet Geo, the epic of the conflicts of Leptar and Aptor.

PROLOGUE

Afterwards, she was taken down to the sea.

She didn't feel too well, so she sat on a rock down where the sand was wet and scrunched her bare toes in and out of the cool surface.

She turned away, looked toward the water, and hunched her shoulders a little. "I think it was awful," she said. "I think it was pretty terrible. Why did you show it to me? He was just a little boy. What reason could they have possibly had for doing that to him?"

"It was just a film," he said. "We showed it to you so you would learn."

"But it was a film of something that really happened."

"It happened several years ago, several hundred miles away."

"But it did happen; you used a tight beam to spy on them, and when the image came in on the vision screen, you made a film of it, and—But why did you show it to me?"

"What have we been teaching you?"

But she couldn't think, and only had the picture in her mind, vivid movements, scarlets, and bright agony. "He was just a child," she said. "He couldn't have been more than eleven or twelve."

"You are just a child," he said. "You are not sixteen yet."

"What was I supposed to learn?"

"Look around you," he said. "You should see something."

But the picture in her mind was still too vivid, too bright.

"You should be able to learn it right here on this beach, in the trees back there, in the rocks, in the bleached shells around your feet. You do see it; you just don't recognize it." Suddenly he changed his tone. "Actually you're a

very fine student. You learn quickly. Do you remember anything about telepathy? You studied it months ago."

"By a method similar to radio broadcast and reception," she recited, "the synapse patterns of conscious thoughts are read from one cranial cortex and duplicated in another, resulting in similar sensual impressions experienced —" Suddenly she broke off. "But I can't do it, so it doesn't help me any!"

"What about history, then?" he said. "You did extremely well during the examination. What good does knowing about all the happenings in the world before and after the Great Fire do you?"

"Well, it's ..." she started. "It's just interesting."

"The film you saw," he said, "was, in a way, history. That is, it happened in the past."

"But it was so—" Again she stopped. "—horrible!"

"Does history fascinate you because it's just interesting?" he asked. "Or does it do something else? Don't you ever want to know what the reason is behind some of the things these people do in the pages of the books?"

"Yes, I want to know the reasons," she said. "Like I want to know the reason they nailed that man to the oaken cross. I want to know why they did that to him."

"A good question," he mused. "Which reminds me, at about the same time as they were nailing him to that cross, it was decided in China that the forces of the universe were to be represented by a circle, half black, half white. But to remind themselves that there was no pure force, no purely unique reason, they put a spot of white paint in the black half and a spot of black paint in the white. Isn't that interesting?"

She looked at him and wondered how he had gotten from one to the other. But he was going on.

"And do you remember the goldsmith, the lover, how he recorded in his autobiography that at age four, he and his father saw the Fabulous Salamander on their hearth by the fire; and his father suddenly smacked the boy ten feet across the room into a rack of kettles, saying something to the effect that little Cellini was too young to remember the incident unless some

pain accompanied it."

"I remember that story," she said. "And I remember that Cellini said that he wasn't sure if the smack was the reason he remembered the Salamander, or the Salamander the reason he remembered the smack."

"Yes, yes!" he cried. "That's it. The reason, the reasons ... Don't you see the pattern?"

"Only I don't know what a Salamander is," she told him.

"Well, it's like the blue lizards that sing outside your window sometimes," he explained. "Only it isn't blue, and it doesn't sing."

"Then why should anyone want to remember it?" she grinned. It was an attempt to annoy him, but he was not looking at her, and was talking of something else.

"And the painter," he was saying, "he was a friend of Cellini, you remember, in Florence. He was painting a picture of "La Gioconda." As a matter of fact, he had to take time from the already crumbling picture of "The Last Supper" of the man who was nailed to the cross of oak to paint her. And he put a smile on her face of which men asked for centuries, 'What is the reason she smiles so strangely?' Yes, the reason, don't you see? Just look around."

"What about the Great Fire?" she asked. "When they dropped flames from the skies and the harbors boiled, that was reasonless. That was like what they did to that boy."

"Oh no," he said to her. "Not reasonless. True, when the Great Fire came, people all over the earth screamed, 'Why? Why? How can man do this to man? What is the reason?' But just look around you, right here. On this beach."

"I guess I can't see it yet," she said. "I can just see what they did to him, and it was awful."

"Well," said the man in the dark robe, "perhaps when you stop seeing what they did so vividly, you will start seeing why they did it. I think it's time for us to go back now."

As she slid off the rock and started walking beside him, barefooted in the sand, she asked, "That boy—I wasn't sure, he was all tied up, but he had four

arms, didn't he?"

"He did."

"You know, I can't just go around saying it was awful. I think I'm going to write a poem. Or make something. Or both. I've got to get it out of my head."

"That wouldn't be a bad idea," he mumbled as they approached the trees in front of the river. "Not at all."

And several days later, and several hundred miles away ...

CHAPTER I

Waves flung themselves at the blue evening. Low light burned on the wet hulks of ships that slipped by mossy pilings into the docks as water sloshed at the rotten stone embankment of the city.

Gangplanks, chained from wooden pullies, scraped into place on concrete blocks, and the crew, after the slow captain and the tall mate, descended raffishly along the wooden boards which sagged with the pounding of bare feet. In bawling groups, pairs, or singly they howled into the narrow waterfront streets, into the yellow light from open inn doors, the purple shadowed portals leading to dim rooms full of blue smoke and stench of burnt poppies.

The captain, with eyes the color of sea under fog, touched his sword hilt with his fist and said quietly to the mate, "Well, they're gone. We better start collecting new sailors for the ten we lost at Aptor. Ten good men, Jordde. I'm sick when I think of the bone and broken meat they became."

"Ten for the dead," sneered the mate, "and twenty for the living we'll never see again. Any sailor that would want to continue this trip with us is insane. We'll do well if we only lose that many." He was a tall, wire bound man, which made the green tunic he wore look baggy.

"I'll never forgive her for ordering us to that monstrous island," said the captain.

"I wouldn't speak too loudly," mumbled the mate. "Yours isn't to forgive her. Besides, she went with them, and was in as much danger as they were. It's only luck she came back."

Suddenly the captain asked, "Do you believe the sailor's stories of magic they tell of her?"

"Why, sir?" asked the mate. "Do you?"

"No, I don't," said the captain with a certainty that came too quickly. "Still, with three survivors out of thirteen, that she should be among them, with hardly a robe torn."

"Perhaps they wouldn't touch a woman," suggested the mate, Jordde.

"Perhaps," said the captain.

"And she's been strange," continued Jordde, "ever since then. She walks at night. I've seen her going by the rails, looking from the sea-fire to the stars, and then back."

"Ten good men," mused the captain. "Hacked up, torn in bits. I wouldn't have believed that much barbarity in the world, if I hadn't seen that arm, floating on the water. It gives me chills now, the way the men ran to the rail to see, pointed at it. And it just raised itself up, like a beckoning, a signal, and then sank in a wash of foam and green water."

"Well," said the mate, "we have men to get."

"I wonder if she'll come ashore?"

"She'll come if she wants, Captain. Her doing is no concern of yours. Your job is the ship and to do what she says."

"I have more of a job than that," and he looked back at his still craft.

The mate touched the captain's shoulder. "If you're going to speak things like that, speak them softly, and only to me."

"I have more of a job than that," the captain repeated. Then, suddenly, he started away, and the mate was following him down the darkening dockside street.

The dock was still for a moment. Then a barrel toppled from a pile of barrels, and a figure moved like a bird's shadow across the opening between mounds of cargo set about the pier.

At the same time two men approached down a narrow street filled with the day's last light. The bigger one threw a great shadow that aped his gesticulating arms behind him on the greenish faces of the buildings. Bare feet like halved hams, shins bound with thongs and pelts, he waved one hand in explanation, while he rubbed the back of the other on his short, mahogany

beard.

"You're going to ship out, eh friend? You think they'll take your rhymes and jingles instead of muscles and rope pulling?"

The smaller, in a white tunic looped with a thick leather belt, laughed beneath his friend's rantings. "Fifteen minutes ago you thought it was a fine idea; said it would make me a man."

"Oh, it's a life to make," his hand went up, "and it's a life to break men," and it fell.

The slighter one pushed back black hair from his forehead, stopped, and looked at the ships. "You still haven't told me why no ship has taken you on in the past three months," he said absently, following the rope rigging against the sky like black knife slashes on blue silk. "A year ago I'd never see you in for more than three days at once."

The gesticulating arm suddenly encircled the smaller man's waist and lifted a leather pouch from the wide belt. "Are you sure, friend Geo," began the giant, "that we couldn't use up some of this silver on wine before we go. If you want to do this right, then right is how it should be done. When you sign up on a ship you're supposed to be broke and a little tight. It shows that you're capable of getting along without the inconvenience of money and can hold your liquor, too."

"Urson, get your paw off that." Geo snatched the purse away.

"Now here," countered Urson, reaching for it once more, "you don't have to grab."

"Look, I've kept you drunk five nights now, and it's time to sober up. And suppose they don't take us, who's going—" But Urson, the idea having taken the glow of a game, made another swipe with his big hand.

Geo leapt back with the purse. "Now cut that out," he began; but in leaping, his feet struck the fallen barrel, and he fell backwards to the wet cobbles. The pouch splattered away, jingling.

Both of them scrambled.

Then the bird's shadow moved in the opening between the cargo piles, a slight figure bounded forward, swept the purse up with one hand, pushed

himself away from the pile of cargo with another, and there were two more fists pumping at his side as he ran.

"What the devil," began Urson, and then, "What the *devil!*"

"Hey you," called Geo, lurching to his feet. "Come back!" And Urson had already loped a couple of steps after the fleeting mutant, now halfway down the block.

Suddenly, from behind them, like a wine-glass stem snapping, only twenty times as loud, a voice called, "Stop, little thief. Stop."

The running form stopped as though it had hit a wall.

"Come back, now! Come back!"

The figure turned, and docilely started back, the movements so lithe and swift a moment ago, now mechanical.

"It's just a kid," Urson said.

He was a dark-haired boy, naked except for a ragged breech. He approached staring fixedly beyond them toward the boats. And he had four arms.

Now they turned and looked also.

She stood at the base of the ship's gangplank, against what sun still washed the horizon. One hand held something close at her throat, and wind, caught in a veil, held the purple gauze against the red swath at the world's edge, and then dropped it.

The boy, like an automaton, approached her.

"Give that to me, little thief," she said.

He handed her the purse. She took it, and then suddenly dropped her other hand from her neck. The moment she did so, the boy staggered backwards, turned, and ran straight into Urson, who said, "Ooof," and then, "God damn little spider."

The boy struggled to get away like a hydra in furious silence. But Urson held. "You stick around ... Owwww!... to get yourself thrashed.... There." The boy got turned, his back to the giant; one arm locked across his neck, and the other hand, holding all four wrists, lifted up hard enough so that the body shook like wires jerked taut, but he was still silent.

Now the woman came across the dock. "This belongs to you, gentlemen?" she asked, extending the purse.

"Thank you, ma'am," grunted Urson, reaching forward.

"I'll take it, ma'am," said Geo, intercepting. Then he recited:

"Shadows melt in light of sacred laughter. Hands and houses shall be one hereafter."

"Many thanks," he added.

Beneath the veil, on her shadowed face, her eyebrows raised. "You have been schooled in courtly rites?" She observed him. "Are you perhaps a student at the university?"

Geo smiled. "I was, until a short time ago. But funds are low and I have to get through the summer somehow. I'm going to sea."

"Honorable, but perhaps foolish."

"I am a poet, ma'am; they say poets are fools. Besides, my friend here says the sea will make a man of me. To be a good poet, one must be a good man."

"More honorable, less foolish. What sort of a man is your friend?"

"My name is Urson," said the giant, stepping up. "I've been the best hand on any ship I've sailed on."

"Urson?" said the woman, musing. "The Bear? I thought bears did not like water. Except polar bears. It makes them mad. I believe there was an old spell, in antiquity, for taming angry bears...."

"Calmly brother bear," Geo began to recite. *"calm the winter sleep. Fire shall not harm, water not alarm. While the current grows, amber honey flaws, golden salmon leap."*

"Hey," said Urson. "I'm not a bear."

"Your name means bear," Geo said. Then to the lady, "You see, I have been well trained."

"I'm afraid I have not," she replied. "Poetry and rituals were a hobby of a year's passing interest when I was younger. But that was all." Now she looked down at the boy whom Urson still held. "You two look alike. Dark eyes, dark hair." She laughed. "Are there other things in common between

poets and thieves?"

"Well," complained Urson with a jerk of his chin, "this one here won't spare a few silvers for a drink of good wine to wet his best friend's throat, and that's a sort of thievery, if you ask me."

"I did not ask," said the woman, quietly.

Urson huffed.

"Little thief," the woman said. "Little four arms. What is your name?"

Silence, and the dark eyes narrowed.

"I can make you tell me," and she raised her hand to her throat again.

Now the eyes opened wide, and the boy pushed back against Urson's belly.

Geo reached toward the boy's neck where a ceramic disk hung from a leather thong. Glazed on the white enamel was a wriggle of black with a small dot of green for an eye at one end. "This will do for a name," Geo said. "No need to harm him. Snake is his symbol; Snake shall be his name."

"Little Snake," she said, dropping her threatening hand, "how good a thief are you?" She looked at Urson. "Let him go."

"And miss thrashing his backside?" objected Urson.

"He will not run away."

Urson released him, and four hands came from behind the boy's back and began massaging one another's wrists. But the dark eyes watched her until she repeated, "How good a thief are you?"

With only a second's indecision, he reached into his clout and drew out what seemed another leather thong similar to the one around his neck. He held up the fist from which it dangled, and the fingers opened slowly to a cage.

"What is it?" Urson asked, peering over Snake's shoulder.

The woman gazed forward, then suddenly stood straight. "You ..." she began. Snake's fist closed like a sea-polyp.

"You are a fine thief, indeed."

"What is it?" Urson asked. "I didn't see anything."

"Show them," she said.

Snake opened his hand, and on the dirty palm, in coiled leather, held by a clumsy wire cage, was a milky sphere the size of a man's eye, lucent through the shadow.

"A very fine thief indeed," repeated the woman in a low voice tautened strangely from its previous brittle clarity. She had pulled her veil aside now, and Geo saw, where her hand had again raised to her throat, the tips of her slim fingers held an identical jewel, only this one in a platinum claw, hung from a wrought gold chain.

Her eyes, unveiled, black as obsidian, raised to meet Geo's. A slight smile lifted her pale mouth and then fell again. "No," she said. "Not quite so clever as I thought. At first I believed he had taken mine. But clever enough. Clever enough. You, schooled in the antiquity of Leptar's rituals, are you clever enough to tell me what these baubles mean?"

Geo shook his head.

A breath passed her pale mouth now, and though her eyes still fixed his, she seemed to draw away, blown into some past shadow by her own sigh. "No," she said. "It has all been lost, or destroyed by the old priests and priestesses, the old poets.

"Freeze the drop in the hand and break the earth with singing. Hail the height of a man and also the height of a woman.

The eyes have imprisoned a vision ..."

She spoke the lines almost reverently. "Do you recognize any of this? Can you tell me where they are from?"

"Only one stanza of it," said Geo. "And that in a slightly different form." He recited:

"Burn the grain speck in the hand and batter the stars with singing. Hail the height of a man, and also the height of a woman."

"Well," said the woman. "You have done better than all the priests and priestesses of Leptar. What about this fragment? Where is it from?"

"It is a stanza of the discarded rituals of the Goddess Argo, the ones banned and destroyed five hundred years ago. The rest of the poem is completely lost," explained Geo. "I found that stanza when I peeled away the binding

paper of an ancient tome that I found in the Antiquity Collection in the Temple Library at Acedia. Apparently a page from an even older book had been used in the binding of this one. I assume these are fragments of the rituals before Leptar purged her litanies. I know at least my variant stanza belongs to that period. Perhaps you have received a misquoted rendition; for I will vouch for the authenticity of mine."

"No," she said, almost regretfully. "Mine is the authentic version. So, you too, are not that clever." She turned back to the boy. "But I have need of a good thief. Will you come with me? And you, poet, I have need of one who thinks so meticulously and who delves into places where even my priests and priestesses do not go. Will you come with me?"

"Where are we going?"

"Aboard that ship," she said, smiling toward the vessel.

"That's a good boat," said Urson. "I'd be proud to sail on her, Geo."

"The captain is in my service," the woman told Geo. "He will take you on. Perhaps you will get a chance to see the world, and become the man you wish to be."

Geo saw that Urson was beginning to look uneasy, and said, "My friend goes on whatever ship I do. This we've promised each other. Besides, he is a good sailor, while I have no knowledge of the sea."

"On our last journey," the woman explained, "we lost men. I do not think your friend will have trouble getting a berth."

"Then we'll be honored to come," said Geo. "Under whose service shall we be, then, for we still don't know who you are?"

Now the veil fell across her face again. "I am a high priestess of the Goddess Argo. Now, who are you?"

"My name is Geo," Geo told her.

"Of the Earth, then, your name," she said. "And you, Urson, the bear. And Lamio, the little Snake. I welcome you aboard our ship."

Just then, from down the street, came the captain and the mate, Jordde. They emerged from the diagonal of shadow that lanced over the cobbles, slowly, heavily. The captain squinted out across the ships toward the horizon, the

copper light filling his deepening wrinkles and burnishing the planes of flesh around his gray eyes. As they approached, the priestess turned to them. "Captain, I have three men as a token replacement at least for the ones my folly helped lose."

Urson, Geo, and Snake looked at each other, and then toward the captain.

Jordde looked at all three.

"You seem strong," the captain said to Urson, "a sea-bred man. But this one," and he looked at Snake now, "one of the Strange Ones...."

"They're bad luck on a ship," interrupted the mate. "Most ships won't take them at all, ma'am. This one's just a boy, and for all his spindles there, couldn't haul rope or reef sails. Ma'am, he'd be no good to us at all. And we've had too much bad luck already."

"He's not for rope pulling," laughed the priestess. "The little Snake is my guest. The others you can put to ship's work. I know you are short of men. But I have my own plans for this one."

"As you say, ma'am," said the captain.

"But Priestess," began Jordde.

"As you say," repeated the captain, and the mate stepped back, quieted. The captain turned to Geo now. "And who are you?" he asked.

"I'm Geo, before and still a poet. But I'll do what work you set me, sir."

"And you?" Jordde asked Urson.

"I'm a good sea-son of the waves, can stand triple watch without flagging, and I believe I'm already hired." He looked to the captain.

"But what do they call you?" Jordde asked. "You have a familiar look, like one I've had under me before."

"They call me the handsome sailor, the fastest rope reeler, the quickest line hauler, the speediest sheaf reefer...."

"Your name, man, your name," Jordde demanded.

"Some call me Urson."

"That's the name I knew you by before! Do you think I'd sail with you again,

when I myself put it in black and white and sent it to every captain and mate in the dock? For three months now you've had no berth, and if you had none for three hundred years it would be too soon."

Jordde turned to the captain now. "He's a troublemaker, sir, a fight-starter. Though he's as wild as waves and with the strength of mizzen spars, spirit in a man is one thing, and a fight or two the same; but good sailor though he be, I've sworn not to have him on ship with me, sir. He's nearly murdered half a dozen men and probably has murdered half a dozen more. No mate who knows the men of this harbor will take him on."

The Priestess of Argo laughed. "Captain, take him." Now she looked at Geo. "The words for calming the angry bear have been recited before him. Now, Geo, we will see how good a poet you are, and if the spell works." At last she turned toward Urson. "Have you ever killed a man."

Urson was silent a moment. "I have."

"Had you told me that," said the Priestess, "I would have chosen you first. I have need of you also. Captain, you must take him. If he is a good sailor, then we cannot spare him. I will channel what special talents he may have. Geo, since you said the spell, and are his friend, I charge you with his control. Also, I wish to talk with you, poet, student of rituals. Come, you all may stay on board ship tonight."

CHAPTER II

An oil lamp leaked yellow light on the wooden walls of the ship's forecandle. Geo wrinkled his nose, then shrugged.

"Well," said Urson, "this is a pleasant enough hole." He climbed one of the tiers of bunked beds and pounded the ticking with the flat of his hand. "Here, I'll take this one. Little wriggly arms, you look like you have a strong stomach, so you take the middle. And Geo, sling yourself down in the bottom there." He clumped to the floor again. "The lower down you are," he explained, "the better you sleep, because of the rocking. Well, what do you think of your first forecandle, Geo?"

The poet was silent. As he turned his head, double pins of light struck yellow dots in his dark eyes, and then went out as he turned from the lamp.

"I put you in the bottom because a little rough weather can unseat your belly pretty fast if you're up near the ceiling and not used to it," Urson expanded, dropping his hand heavily on Geo's shoulder. "I told you I'd look out for you, didn't I, friend?"

But Geo turned away and seemed to examine something else.

Urson looked at Snake now, who was watching him from against one wall. Urson's glance was puzzled. Snake's only silent.

"Hey." Urson spoke to Geo once more. "Let's you and me take a run around this ship and see what's tied down where. A good sailor does that first thing—unless he's too drunk. But that lets the captain and the mate know he's got an alert eye out, and sometimes he can learn something that will ease some back-bending later on. What do you say?"

"Not now, Urson," interrupted Geo. "You go."

"And would you please tell me why my company suddenly isn't good enough for you. This sudden silence is a bilgy way to treat somebody who's sworn

himself to see that you make the best first voyage that a man could have. Why, I think ..."

"When did you kill a man?" Geo suddenly turned.

The giant stood still, his hands twisting into double knots of bone and muscle. Then they opened. "Maybe it was a year ago," he said softly. "And maybe it was a year, two months, and five days, on a Thursday morning at eight o'clock in the brig of a heaving ship. Which would make it about five days and ten hours."

"How could you kill a man?" Geo asked. "How could you go for a year and not tell me about it, and then admit it to a stranger just like that? You were my friend, we've slept under the same blanket, drank from the same wineskin. But what sort of a person are you?"

"And what sort of a person are you?" said the giant. "A nosy bastard that I'd break in seven pieces if ..." he heaved in a breath. "If I hadn't promised I'd make no trouble. I've never broken a promise to anyone, alive or dead." The fists formed, relaxed again.

Suddenly he raised one hand, flung it away, and spat on the floor. Then he turned toward the steps to the door.

Then the noise hit them. They both turned toward Snake. The boy's black eyes darted under twin spots of light from the lamp, to Urson, to Geo, then back.

The noise came again, quieter this time, and recognizable as the word *Help*, only it was no sound, but like the fading hum of a tuning fork inside their skulls, immediate, yet fuzzy.

... You ... help ... me ... together ... came the words once more, indistinct and blurring into one another.

"Hey," Urson said, "is that you?"

... Do ... not ... angry ... came the words.

"We're not angry," Geo said. "What are you doing?"

I ... thinking ... were the words that seemed to generate from the boy now.

"What sort of a way to think is that if everyone can hear it?" demanded

Urson.

Snake tried to explain. *Not ... everyone ... Just ... you ... You ... think ... I ... hear ...* came the sound again. *I ... think ... You ... hear.*

"I know we hear," Urson said. "It's just like you were talking."

"That's not what he means," Geo said. "He means he hears what we think just like we hear him. Is that right, Snake?"

When ... you ... think ... loud ... I ... hear.

"I may just have been doing some pretty loud thinking," Urson said. "And if I thought something I wasn't supposed to, well, I apologize."

Snake didn't seem interested in the apology, but asked again, *You ... help ... me ... together.*

"What sort of help do you want?" Geo asked.

"And what sort of trouble are you in that you need help out of it?" added Urson.

You ... don't ... have ... good ... minds, Snake said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Urson asked. "Our minds are as good as any in Leptar. You heard the way the priestess talked to my friend the poet, here."

"I think he means we don't hear very well," said Geo.

Snake nodded.

"Oh," Urson said. "Well, then you'll just have to go slow and be patient with us."

Snake shook his head. *Get ... hoarse ... when ... shout ... so ... loud.* Suddenly he went over to the bunks. *You ... hear ... better ... see ... too if ... sleep.*

"Sleep is sort of far from me," Urson said, rubbing his beard with the back of his wrist.

"Me too," Geo admitted. "Can't you tell us something more?"

Sleep, Snake said.

"What about talking like an ordinary human being?" suggested Urson, still somewhat perplexed.

Once ... speak, Snake told them.

"You say you could speak once?" asked Geo. "What happened?"

Here the boy opened his mouth and pointed.

Geo stepped forward, held the boy's chin in his hand and examined the face and peered into the mouth. "By the Goddess!" he exclaimed.

"What is it?" Urson asked.

Geo came away now, his face lined in a sickly frown. "His tongue has been hacked out," he told the giant. "And not too neatly, either."

"Who on the seven seas and six continents did a thing like that to you, boy?" Urson demanded.

Snake shook his head.

"Now come on, Snake," he urged. "You can't keep secrets like that from friends and expect them to rescue you from I don't know what. Now who was it hacked your voice away?"

What ... man ... you ... kill ... came the sound.

Urson stopped, and then he laughed. "All right," he said. "I see." His voice rose once more. "But if you can hear thoughts, you know the man already. And you know the reason. And this is what we'd find out of you, and only for help and friendship's sake."

You ... know ... the ... man, Snake said.

Geo and Urson exchanged puzzled frowns.

Sleep, said Snake. *You ... sleep ... now*.

"Maybe we ought to try," said Geo, "and find out what's going on." He crossed to his bunk and slipped in. Urson followed and hoisted himself onto the upper berth, dangling his feet against the wooden support. "It's going to be a long time before sleep gets to me tonight," he said. "You know the rituals and about magic. Aren't the Strange Ones some sort of magic?"

"The only mention of them in rituals says that they are ashes of the Great Fire. The Great Fire was back before the purges, the ones I spoke to the priestess about, so I don't know anything more about them."

"Sailors have stories of the Great Fire," Urson said. "They say the sea boiled, great birds spat fire from the sky, and beasts rose up from the waves and destroyed the harbors. But what were the purges you mentioned?"

"About five hundred years ago," Geo explained, "all the rituals of the Goddess Argo were destroyed. A completely new set were initiated into the temple practices. All references to them were destroyed also, and with them, much of Leptar's history. Stories have it that the rituals and incantations were too powerful. But this is just a guess, and most priests are very uncomfortable about speculating."

"That was after the Great Fire?" Urson asked.

"Nearly a thousand years after," Geo said.

"It must have been a Great Fire indeed if ashes from it are still falling from the wombs of healthy women." He looked down at Snake. "Is it true that a drop of your blood in vinegar will cure gout? If one of you kisses a female baby, will she have only girl children?" He laughed.

"You know those are only tales," Geo said.

"There used to be a one with two heads that sat outside the Blue Tavern and spun a top all day. It was an idiot, though. But the dwarfs and the legless ones that wheel about the city and do tricks, they are clever. But strange, and quiet, usually."

"You oaf," chided Geo, "you could be one too. How many men do you know who reach your size and strength by normal means?"

"You're a crazy liar," said Urson. Then he scrunched his eyebrows together in thought, and at last shrugged. "Well anyway, I never heard of one who could hear what you thought. It would make me uncomfortable walking down the street." He looked down at Snake between his legs. "Can you all do that?"

Snake, from the middle bunk, shook his head. Urson stretched out on his back, but then suddenly looked over the edge of the berth toward Geo. "Hey, Geo, what about those little baubles she had. Do you know what they are?"

"No, I don't," Geo said. "But she was concerned over them enough." He looked up over the bunk bottom between himself and Urson. "Snake, will you give me another look at that thing?"