

We moved stealthily through the brush toward the voices, the rim of the veldt no more than two yards to our right. They grew louder, and were unmistakably those of women; three, I think. The voices were lilting, and there was occasional laughter, hardly anything that sounded menacing.

Soon they sounded close by, and we inched back toward the perimeter for a look. There, reclining comfortably on a yellow sward about ten yards away, were three young women, all tittering uncontrollably at something that one of their number had just said. Despite the coolness there was not a patch of clothing on their cocoa-skinned bodies, nor did any lay in the grass nearby. They were all stacked, and their dark, protruding nipples were hardened by the chill, or perhaps by their thoughts. Like the women of Mithoa their legs were long, but the curve of their backs was far less severe than any Zammaran we'd yet seen. Curly black locks cascaded without restraint below their shoulders. Their lips and nails, both fingers and toes, were painted a bright red, and there was a hint of azure coloring on their eyelids, this enhancing the classic, though primitive beauty of their exquisitely sculpted faces.

First to regain control, the one in the middle gestured for the others to listen. "And that is what Phoor said to me early this morning, a scant few seconds after we had copulated. Oh, the wit of our beloved Phoor!"

"Especially after—how many times was it, Tayna?" asked the one on her right.

"Seven times, Miris," Tayna replied. "Seven times since moonrise, and each time better than the one before. Our beloved Phoor is wonderful!"

"What about you, Jiveria?" Miris asked. "How many times did you and Phoor copulate on the first night after the Emergence?"

Jiveria pouted. "Only five. I suppose I should be jealous; but yesterday—three times, no less—I touched his leg with one hand while satisfying myself with the other."

"Ooo," Miris sighed.

"To touch our beloved Phoor," Jiveria continued, "to just be near him, is more than enough."

"Oh ye-ss," Tayna said.

"I have a dream thought," Miris announced.

"Tell us, oh please!" Jiveria cried.

Tayna nodded. "Yes, tell us."

"You won't laugh?"

"Of course not!"

Miris smiled. "It is the day of the Descent. Phoor and I are copulating in an open sleep cylinder."

"Yes, yes?"

"The cylinder closes during the outburst. We remain thusly for the duration, and not until the cylinder again opens is it done with."

"Oh, such a dream thought!" Tayna sighed.

Jiveria, beside herself with ecstasy over Miris's fantasy, could not even talk. Her eyes closed, her lips parted, she made a sound of animal pleasure as her fiery-tipped fingers separated her smooth thighs. The name of Phoor was voiced reverently by the others as she satisfied herself, and seconds later, when her shrieking climax came, it was more than either Miris or Tayna could stand. Naori turned away in disgust as they began to writhe in the grass, while the rest of us, for the moment mesmerized, shook it off and gazed at one another.

"They worship this Phoor like some god," Denny said. "He must be one hell of a stud."

"No matter," Gaven stated, "this is none of our concern, and we must not waste any more time here."

"He's right," the scowling Naori said. "We must double back and cross the plain where they cannot see us."

"Why bother with that?" Denny asked. "Those girls are so far gone that they won't be able to sound any kind of alarm, no matter how close their village is. I say we walk right past 'em."

The matter became academic before we could debate it further. Naori first saw our unanticipated attackers, but her cry of warning did not help us, for they had managed to approach undetected and were only yards away. They were all men, about a dozen of them, with similar features: bronze-skinned, tall, heavily muscled, chins squared and determined. Their spinal curvature was slight, like those of the women. They

wore little clothing, just snug-fitting breechcloths cut from a shiny purple material. But their ridiculous garb could not detract from their formidability, for they were armed with unusual, savage-looking weapons.

“Take it easy,” I told the others under my breath. “I don’t think we want to mess with those things.”

The weapons, as best I could figure, were round, fist-sized stones, out of which protruded about ten shiny, serrated blades of three to four inches in length. Each stone was secured at the end of a short wooden handle, and by the way they were wielded I had no doubt that the bronzed dudes knew what to do with the ripper clubs, as we would learn they were called.

After a few seconds one of the men stepped forward, a smile on his face. “You are not among the chosen of Phoor,” he said in a strong, though not unfriendly voice. “You must be strangers.”

“What was your first clue?” Denny mumbled.

“Please, drop your weapons and other things to the ground,” he said.

“What if we refuse?” I asked.

Still smiling, he indicated a tree about twenty yards away. “That small knot, ten feet from the base,” he said to his friends. One of them stepped forward, and with a barely noticeable snap of the wrist he sent the savage weapon flying. It whistled loudly as it rotated through the moist air, and when it lodged in the tree, sending splinters aloft, it blanketed the knot.

Our weapons clattered to the ground as quickly as we could let go of them. They were gathered up, along with our other possessions, and while the rest examined them curiously the leader wove in and out among us, nodding in approval. “Fine specimens, all fine, especially this woman.” He eyed Naori like a piece of meat, while she glared at him. “Our beloved Phoor will be so very pleased. There is no reason why any of you would not one day be accepted among the chosen of Phoor.”