

With silent horriks paralleling our every step, we were marched back across the vast hall to the corridor through which we had first come. On the opposite wall was the entrance to a smaller room that contained lots of weapons. There were swords of varying shapes and sizes, javelins, and knives. In the midst of the formidable arsenal were our own weapons, as the apprentice of Ralzon had said. In the brief time out of our possession they had been polished and were now comparable to the gleaming steel that surrounded them.

“Most of these loathsome things were brought here by the first settlers of Kharith,” Pahmun said, “for the ways of their warlike kin on Eviria still touched them. Others are more native to Boranga, as I’m sure you already perceived. Are your own weapons among them?”

Ignoring his question I said, “Those who were murd— who participated in the arena carried only one weapon each. Is this all that we’re allowed?”

He shook his head. “You may take as many as you want, for it only adds to the Pleasure!”

We gathered up our own weapons, supplementing them with some of the fine steel in the armory. Denny added a barbed Homaru spear, while each of us hefted a long, well-honed Evirian sword. Holding these arms momentarily gave us a feeling of invincibility, and we believed ourselves capable of slashing our way out of this room, out of Kharith itself. But the self-assured warnings of Deklus, coupled with the appearance of a dozen more horriks in the corridor, quickly forced us to cool it, and we were subdued as we rejoined our waiting hosts outside.

“Ah, you have made some fine choices,” the elder said. “Let us hurry now, for the second activity is nearly concluded.”

The twelve horriks lagged behind as we hastened down the corridor, though the pair that had accompanied us from the balcony continued to dog our every step. Finding this odd, I questioned Pahmun.

“Are those horriks back there not part of our guard?”

“Your escort, you mean,” he said. “No, they are specially prepared to participate in the arena activities, like the ones you saw earlier.”

“How many of the devils do we have to face?” Denny asked.

“Why, all of them,” was the matter-of-fact reply.

“*All?*” I roared, my voice resounding through the hallway and startling the horriks. “What—?”

Denny motioned me to silence as we continued to walk. He then glared at Pahmun. “You’re going to pit two against twelve? Tell us now, Pahmun, that our execution hasn’t been ordered! Don’t lie to me or I’ll cut your heart out, and screw whatever happens, considering that we’re going to die anyway!”

Though surprised, the apprentice managed to laugh. “This is not an—execution, did you say? No, it is a Pleasure of the house of Ventoth. It is quite different from the one that you observed. Here, let me explain.

“All but two of those particular horriks are incapable of inflicting injury, unless you choose to stand idly by and allow them to accidentally crush you. In fact, their arms are virtually immobile. The others are well-prepared fighting machines. But they will not immediately reveal themselves, so you must be on guard against every one. Can you not see the intricacies of this Pleasure, one of the most popular ever conceived by the house of Ventoth? Oh, the two of you are indeed fortunate!”

“You people are freaking insane,” I muttered.