

Honnas lay sprawled on the sofa, Shad at his feet, while Denny and I reclined before the fire with our backs against the hassocks. Together we awaited the return of our women, the three having left the hall minutes earlier after a mysterious consultation. Soon they re-entered, and as we rose to greet them we immediately noticed the answer to the puzzle. The eyes of each were tastefully shaded, their lips and fingernails painted a fiery crimson. This makeup greatly enhanced the otherwise plain features of the Ardrudians, who still wore their hair in the severe style, and as for Larra . . . Okay, I'm highly biased, but how can you improve upon perfection? She looked awesome, and she smiled as she noticed my eyes nearly bulging out.

The six of us hurried outside and joined the torchlight procession on the way to the field in the pine forest, where the Dance would soon mark the end of the Festival for another year. But first there was feasting to be done, tons of food and plenty to drink on tables along the edge of the clearing. We ate well beneath the eerie, flickering shadows of the giants that surrounded us, before Honnas diverted our attention elsewhere.

"It's almost time," he said. "Come with me, and I'll make certain that your places are among the best."

He led us across the field to the area around the two skeletal trees, where lots of others had already begun to congregate. But the crowd parted to allow us through, and soon we stood the same distance from either trunk, about fifteen yards away. I was puzzled by the fact that two men now began climbing them, for I thought the games of the day to be over, and I asked Honnas.

"What they do is part of the Dance," he replied. "It is simpler to observe, rather than try and explain in detail. Just watch, Ro-lan, and you'll understand."

I returned my attention to the climbers, each of whom had reached the summit of his respective tree. After removing long coils of thick rope from around their shoulders they threaded the tapered ends through large eyelets, one of two such rings near the top of each defoliated trunk. A secure knot was tied, the other end tossed to many waiting hands below, and once back on the ground the climbers joined them. They then began to pull, and amid a chorus of grunts the trees began to bend, until I was certain that they would snap. But they did not, and before long the two tips, separated by maybe a yard, were only inches above the ground. Others came forth with long, T-shaped metal stakes, and they drove two of each through the heavy rope and into the ground with large mallets. They were pounded again and again, until the top bars pinioned the rope, and when all were in place the Ardrudians eased their hold. A slight groaning noise followed as the incredible tension of the straining trees sought to uproot the stakes; but somehow they held, and the guys, all panting, backed away.

Motioning for us to sit, Honnas stepped forward and stood before the bent trees, which from a distance formed a cursive "M." He raised his hands, and the throng fell silent.

"People of Ardrud," he announced. "If my sole purpose in standing before you was to act as host for the coming of the Dance, then I would be pleased. But there is more on this particular Festival night, so much more! It is my own Eshalda who will initiate the Dance, and she will do so in honor of her beloved Denny, and also for Larra and Ro-lan, our welcome guests, who came to us only two days earlier from the sea!"

The gathering yelled ecstatically, and we were reluctantly urged to our feet by the smiling Nereen. We then sat down, and Honnas again silenced his people.

"It is time!" he cried. "Let the Dance begin!"

Eshalda kissed Denny, and after shrugging off her coat she sprinted to where her father stood. Honnas embraced the girl, and with a wave of his hand to the many musicians there, he rejoined us. The haunting strains of the waltz-like piece that had become so familiar to me filled the clearing, and the barefoot Eshalda, her hands outstretched, began describing a circular step in careful time with the music. Her initial movements seemed stiff, tentative, though this hardly troubled the captivated Denny, whose interest was further heightened when she released the pin that had held her austere bun. The dark-skinned girl's long, glistening hair, now freed, fell below her shoulders, and it fluttered in the gentle night breeze as she casually tossed back her head.

Four Ardrudians suddenly emerged from the shadows behind Eshalda, the foremost two leading a huge, docile wurra. They halted in the small space between the tops of the bent trees, where first the animal's hind legs, then the front, were tightly secured with short lengths of rope. The other ends were threaded and tied

through the eyelets on each tree, and a bit of slack was left, though in spite of this the dull creature found it difficult to maintain footing. With a last glance at their work the four backed away, leaving the bleating wurra, whose sounds of puzzlement clashed with the soft notes of the music, to stumble again and again. But Eshalda, only yards away, did not seem to notice what transpired to her rear as she became more engrossed in her movements.

Somewhat puzzled by this uncharacteristically cruel act on the part of our hosts, I glanced at Denny and whispered, “What do you make of this?”

He shrugged. “Beats me. Like Honnas said before, let’s just watch and see—”

With a loud thrumming of the many stringed instruments the gentle waltz suddenly changed into something raucous and atonal, the haste of this disjointed melody denoting a dark and cryptic urgency, one that sent a numbing chill along my spine. A charged tension emanated from those around us, and their wavering bodies were drawn to the magnet that was Eshalda, whose own actions reflected the stunning metamorphosis that now gripped the field. The soft smile that had lit her face was replaced by a look of sensual yearning as her darting tongue glided across parted lips, and after fumbling for an instant with the catch on her high collar she began peeling off the bulky garment that had previously concealed her fine form. Soon she had thrust it away disdainfully with her toe, and she stood naked in the eerie, flickering light, her body glistening with beads of perspiration, the dark nipples of her full, upturned breasts hardened by her heightening passions. She then whirled about, and with arms waving she undulated in the direction of the bleating animal.

The three of us had been shocked into momentary silence by what transpired before us. But Denny quickly found his tongue, and as he began to get up he exclaimed, “Do you believe this shit? Eshalda—!”

He was immediately checked by Honnas’s firm hand, the ever-present twinkle of the elder now displaced by a piercing hardness as he stated firmly, “Listen to me, all of you. We are basically the people whom you have known since your arrival on Ardrud, those who fed and clothed you, who repaired and outfitted your vessel. But we know, as I’m sure you all do, that in the depths of the most benevolent soul there lies a beast, a wanton, raging force that all too often finds more than its share of handholds as it seeks to draw itself upward and dominate its oftentimes weak-willed host. Our ancestors lived with so many in their midst: murderers, thieves, rapists, all manner of criminally depraved minds, those who could not bar the beast from its designs. Rather than deny it we acknowledge the beast’s existence, and we allow it freedom one night a year, the final night of the Festival. It is for this reason that crimes, perversions, and the like are unknown on Ardrud during the remainder of the year. It’s a sensible alternative, wouldn’t you agree? Now please, my young friends, no more outbursts.”

Barely comprehending what we had just heard, we returned our attention to the scene before us. The swaying Eshalda had neared to within two yards of the wurra before halting on a patch of earth that, in the flickering light, appeared darker than the rest of the field, and she now beckoned suggestively to the helpless beast with her fingers. To the strident, pulsating accompaniment of the musicians a pair of shirtless, well-muscled Ardrudian men emerged from the darkness, each bearing a long-handled ax. They strode to either side of the stumbling animal, where they hovered atop the metal stakes that pinned the tips of the trees to the ground. A taut rolling of drums ensued as the axes were raised high, and upon a discordant beat they were lowered simultaneously with enough force to sever the restraining hemp. The wurra flew skyward as the defoliated trunks whiplashed to their natural positions, and its final mind-wrenching scream was quickly silenced as it was torn in half twenty feet above the ground. A rain of dark blood and uncoiling intestines cascaded down upon the ecstatically moaning Eshalda, while the still spurting halves of the dead creature, after spinning wildly around the tops of the straightening trees, hung like limp pennants from the stained flagpoles.

“*In the name of God, what is happening here?*” Denny shrieked as he scrambled to his feet.

“Honnas, are you insane?” I added, following my friend. “How can you let your own daughter—!”

We were restrained by the powerful arms of those who now surrounded us and were forced to the ground by the many weapons that suddenly appeared from amid the self-proclaimed peaceful Ardrudians. Nereen, herself overcome by the madness, stood menacingly over the helpless Larra, who appeared on the edge of blackness as her tortured mind grudgingly accepted the reality of the horror she witnessed.

“Against my own judgment I allowed outsiders to share in the Festival,” Honnas muttered. “Somehow I sensed that you would find cause to challenge our customs, my reason for seeing to these precautions. Now, we will hear no more from you, is that understood? You will not interfere in the Dance again!”

With the razor-like edges of assorted ax heads and swords already drawing blood, what could we say? Honnas stepped aside, and once again we bore unwilling witness to the continuing scene of depravity before us. Eshalda, every inch of her body drenched in the gore of the wurra, continued to writhe in time to the throbbing music, her fingers describing sinuous paths through the vile layer. A dozen others, men and women alike, swayed rhythmically within yards of her blood-soaked body, their garments long since discarded in their rising lust. With trembling hands extended they engulfed Eshalda, and they melded into a single heaving mound as their eager, darting tongues probed her sensual body. Soon she lay on her back, her long legs spread apart, and she cried out in rapture as the last of the animal’s blood was lapped up from the place where it had inadvertently trickled.

More Ardrudians swarmed about Eshalda, who, after regaining her feet, again swayed sensually in her unquenchable passions, her glistening body the willing recipient of their adulation. The scene was now repeated in numerous quarters of the field as countless people succumbed to the inner “beasts” described by Honnas. But the majority continued to be drawn to the original spot, nor did it appear that they would be denied. The trees were again scaled, the dripping halves of the wurra cut loose and sent plummeting, and minutes later the curved trunks strained against their anchors. Another wurra was led forward, and this time I noticed that a few more stood docilely in the shadows while awaiting their fate. The blood-letting of the Dance had only just begun.