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Maradek awoke and crept from beneath the blanket of sewn hides. In the yellow glow of the marm-fat flame, seven women, three men, and a child slept in isolated corners of the subterranean cave. The air hung stale and quiet, the lone entrance blocked by the hulk of a gnole lizard skull, opening by means of a single eye socket through which nothing larger than a man might crawl.

Maradek stood tall and lean and naked, his bush of brown hair touching the limestone ceiling. As though drugged by sleep, he staggered from blanket to blanket, but none of the sleeping forms was Afurad, his father. His lips parted in dazed puzzlement as he regarded the oldest among them, a warrior three times his age. Ramil, once a great hunter, but now no more than a baby-sitter, was assigned to guard the pregnant women, the two men crippled by a gnole attack, and the sick child. The girl, Bluet, suffered neither burning nor chills nor was racked by convulsions. Instead her illness had caused her to pale and wither and her eyes to glaze, and sometimes she muttered unknown words in her sleep. It was thought her soul had brushed the skirt of a night demon and that she would recover with the arrival of Spring.

Assistant to the old Ramil, Maradek was approaching the end of his twenty-fifth Umbra, somewhere between his eighteenth and nineteenth years. His exact age was indeterminable now that the darkling appeared more frequently and the normal seasons had vanished from the land.

Once, as Ramil related, there had been two seasons, the first of steaming rain and thunderous skies when the bush grew faster than it decayed, and the second when the air was chill and the land paused to rest but did not die. There was no Umbra then and no darkling to swarm across the sun and devour life down to the roots of the grasslands.

Now there were six seasons, the first three consisting of the Spring (of germination), the Bloom (of the forest undergrowth), and the Advent (of rain, floods, and shifting earth). During this period the women and children never hungered. Then quickly and without warning marched the seasons of death: first came the Terror when shrill cries pierced the air and strange beasts emerged from the forests to roam the plains. This was followed by the Eve, when the winds swept from the west and men hurried to gather food stocks which they hoarded in the limestone caverns. Soon the skies darkened and a buzzing could be heard beyond the horizon. Umbra was on the way. The beasts that had reigned during Terror thundered across the plains, trampling furrows through the grasslands. Like rivers of meat they flowed north and west, some vanishing into the mountains. Those that succumbed from exhaustion or were crushed in the stampede perished quickly. The remainder were left to the whims of the darkling.

Maradek shuddered at the thought of having a purplish satiny form alight and begin to feast while he flailed in agony. Its great trowel beak could even uproot the earth to ravage the roots of small bushes, and when one had gorged until it could not fly, a second more ravenous than itself would drop from above and devour the first.

"Did you have a dream?" came the thin voice of Bluet.

He heard but did not understand. "Go back to sleep."

"I'm hungry," she whimpered. "Bring me something."

Maradek listened for the advice of Afurad but heard nothing. Ramil had told him his father had died, but how could that be? Weren't all dead men buried two spans deep, beneath the level to which a darkling could dig? It had been six months since Afurad had set out across the plain on a journey to the mountains where the tribe of Afran prepared to retire for the duration of Umbra. He had announced that he would secure a bride to replace his second, who had fallen during Terror. His father was a mighty hunter, and it was not right his seeds should shrivel unplanted. At Maradek's birth there had been great rejoicing: "It is Afurad's son," they had whispered. "It must be Him!" In a month, when the majority of births took

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place, the ritual would begin again. Maradek had not been Him.

"I'm hungry," came the plaintive cry. Bluet trembled beneath her covers, her large eyes no longer mirroring the glaze of possession.

"I'll get you something," Maradek said, his voice a weary monotone.

Although six months had passed since his father's departure, only fifty marqs* separated the tribes' Umbral homes. Though strange rites pervaded the world of Afran, there was rarely hostility between their peoples, especially before Umbra when only goodwill abounded. Fedor, elder of Afran, admired Maradek's father and would have given him a good woman, possibly a strong young virgin, if Afurad had merely requested one. There were many more to be had in Afran, so many that each man had two and sometimes three. A virgin of Afran and the hunter Afurad: the combination could be nothing less than special.

"Please," said the girl.

"I hear. I'm going."

Maradek pulled on his leather breeches, side-split for easier movement. He imagined himself to be a great hunter venturing forth to track and capture their next meal. Bluet was still a child, too young to bear children, but in a few years she would be his, since none was closer to his age. She was the obvious choice to become the wife of Maradek, son of Afurad.

He sat down and tugged at the shagfoot gazelle sock-boots, insulated with soft fur lining and soled by thick marm leather. Then he put on the sleeveless leather vest and picked up a fur roll that served on the journeys as pillow, jacket-cape and packsack. In the center were his bow and quiver, presents from

**marq: approximately 1.9 kilometers; the average distance a nomadic tribe journeys over the plain in one twenty-fourth of a day to reach new hunting grounds during pre-Umbral seasons.*

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his father. He drew his finger down the intricately carved wood. Like most members of his tribe, Afurad was an excellent craftsman; there was no question that Maradek would take the bow. Anything might occur during the long hibernation while the guards slept and the wind moaned in unexplored recesses of the caverns.

On his journey along the shadowy corridor, the youth found the marm-fat candles burning low. The guards had not been around recently. Disoriented by the darkness and still sluggish from oversleep, he did not reach the end of the tunnel until long after setting out.

Slinging quiver and bow over his shoulder, he unhooked the rope that extended seven armspans up the shaft, but weakened by lack of exercise, he could not haul himself to the top. The only alternative was to detach the counterweight. He tugged on the rope, drawing a sack of rocks from its perch, and was startled to find himself ascending without effort. As the glow grew overhead, he awakened to his enfeeblement. His skin lay pasted to his ribs, and the effort to hang on stretched his muscles cruelly, threatening to wrench his arms from his shoulders. Once up, he cringed on the edge, rubbing his bare arms and shivering.

Smoke thickened the air, and the musty aroma of shagfoot gazelle tickled his nostrils. The fire in the center of the chamber glimmered redly, revealing two mounds by the wall. One man lay with eyes shut and mouth open, a ponderous moan issuing each time his chest heaved and fell. Creeping forward, the youth shook the old guard.

"Yabin."

"Uh? Who's there?"

"Maradek."

"Mar-ra . . .?"

"Sleep, old man."

"Uh?"

Instantly he was overcome by indignation. It was their duty to remain alert. What if some shadowy presence overtook them and invaded the inner caves? Shouldn't Ramil be informed of their irresponsibility?

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The wind squalled through a crack at the entrance, and in the murk of the cave Maradek felt ashamed. It was not for the security of the tribe he had expected their vigilance, but for his father's return.

One day, if he lived long, he would be a guard, but old men were becoming scarce and even to be a man was rare. Three hunters would rather perish than allow a sauros to overtake a woman and her unborn, lest that infant emerge from the womb destined to regain the lost age. Such a child, with unsurpassed courage, and attuned to the magic forces that ruled during night, would see beyond the mountains and dream the future. Maradek dreamed, but his were visions of ordinary things: food when he was hungry and demons when he was afraid. Sometimes he found himself crying out in the gloom of the cave, only to have Ramil's hand pressed on his shoulder. "Quiet, Maradek. You'll disturb the women." Always when he had awakened, it was to learn that his father had not returned.

Maradek crept to the slate partition and put his ear to the crack. He thought he heard the cry of a beast, but it may have only been the wind. He sniffed. If Spring had come, his nostrils would tell him; but no, the scents were muddled, and he detected neither the pungency of decay nor the aromas of budding plants. Still, it was possible that Umbra was over. The buzz of a million wings and the shrieks of death, once so prevalent, were no longer present.

It was odd that the darkling should perish as Spring began, and odder still how they should decay, their remains melting beneath the sun, their bones disintegrating into powder. The areas over which they decayed became quite fertile, so that whatever germinated in the vicinity soon flourished, and during Advent it was not uncommon for a tribesman to walk by a barren valley stream bank and then a week later, choosing the same path, not to recognize the landscape. All that finally remained of a decomposed darkling was a cluster of ruby beads, no larger than peas. The tribe collected the waxy pebbles and used them in burials and christenings, warding off spirits from the newly dead and newly born. Even if a tribesman was foolhardy enough to camp on the open plains at night, two

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beads contained sufficient magic to keep the forces of darkness at bay. In the morning the beads would be bleached, their power gone.

Maradek fingered an empty pouch hanging from his quiver. If he could find a cluster, he might mold them into a candle, using the narcotic incense to ensure his journey into trance in order to divine the location of his father.

Seizing the rope to which the slate was connected by wooden pulleys, he glanced back to the sleeping guards. Yabin would not permit this. The danger was too great. What if a lone darkling should slip in, bypass the guards, and flutter down the shaft in search of pregnant women? It was strange how they preferred female flesh over male, and how an unborn fetus was especially delicious to them.

Maradek decided to compromise his urge to see the outside and his responsibility to the tribe by opening the partition just a crack, sufficiently wide for a clear view of the land, but not so wide that anything larger than a jumprat could enter.

He tugged on the rope until the slate wall slid smoothly along its hewn track, and when the opening had increased to a fingerspan, he released the rope and put his eye to the slit. The light was so intense that moments passed before he knew what he was looking at. Sturdy pinslip weeds sprouted courageously from between boulders, while others emerged from a ditch of cracked mud. So it had rained recently? That was good news. A few circular depressions appeared in the mud, but their origin was unknown.

While searching for other signs, Maradek saw a mound in the shadow of an overhanging cliff. His first fear was that it was the body of his father -- but no, the mass was too large. A dead sauros, perhaps? That, too, seemed unlikely. The portion that lay beyond the shadow shimmered. There was only one remaining possibility. Maradek gripped the edge of the partition. It had to be a necrominster -- when a darkling feeds on a darkling that has fed on another. Such mounds were not uncommon, though very rare so close to home, and within the loose mass that melted beneath the daylight would be a little

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pool of crimson beads, perhaps enough from which to shape a candle.

Suddenly a voice rose like thunder. "What are you doing?"

Maradek glanced back to see Yabin rubbing his eyes.

"I need your help. I saw something wonderful."

Groggily Yabin fumbled for his spear. Stumbling to the youth, he grasped the rope and the door slid shut.

"Don't you know the vapors of Umbra can enter a crack so small a man's hair might not pass?"

Maradek inspected the door. There were many such cracks. Retiring to the fireside, Yabin explored the ashes, then extracted a flame-scarred bone. He wet his lips and ran his tongue over the morsel.

"What did you see, Maradek?"

"The shadow of Afurad."

Yabin stared. The people of the tribe did not lie, though sometimes their imaginations probed the future.

"Your eyes are keen to see the mountains where your father leaves his footprints."

"The mountains are a long way off. I saw his shadow moving."

"How far?" Yabin said, a glimmer in his eyes as he sucked on the bone.

"As far as a man might throw a rock, then run to pick it up and throw it again."

Yabin dropped the bone. "Do you know what you're saying? Maradek nodded.

"We will see." Yabin prodded the other guard who complained loudly before getting up. After the slate had parted, this time wide enough to let one man pass, Maradek pointed to the overhang.

"It's a good sign," Yabin announced. "In another month when the gloom has ended we'll investigate."

"A month is too long! My father cries for help now!"

Maradek knew his plea was unfair. No one had seen his father die. Nor could Yabin argue that the chances of Afurad's survival were too insignificant to consider. Had he reached Afran, acquired a wife, then started back, the woman would be

five to six months pregnant, and if the darkling had arrived soon after, the travelers would be confined to a cave in the hills. The infant's birth, based on a gestation period of seven to eight months, was no more than a few months away. If the child did not cry when it emerged, then the prophecy of the coming savior would be fulfilled. Had not the legends foretold that the Great One would be born in the midst of evil?

Yabin was silent. He was guardian of the tribe, and their security rested on his shoulders.

"I see other shadows," he said. "Evil lurks behind the rocks."

Maradek stiffened. He had not thought of that. If the necrominster was far too decomposed to be reeaten, darkling could be nearby.

Yabin reached for the rope, but Maradek directed his hand aside. He too, he said, saw other shadows, but of smaller creatures now forced by hunger to venture forth in search of food. There were the jumprats that thrived on the needles of the pinslip weeds, and the sucker-lipped boromboras -- shy, broad-headed rodents as large as boars that fed on organisms below the surface. Maradek pointed to depressions in the mud where the boromboras had explored recently.

Yabin nodded. He knew the sign. But the sky was corpse-gray. Umbra had not ended. If beads lay buried at the foot of the overhang, they would still be there in a month. Why take unnecessary risks now?

He looked deep into the youth's eyes. Beneath Maradek's passive expression was the fire of determination. To quench that fire was to vanquish his spirit.

"Your father calls," Yabin said, speaking rapidly for fear of encountering the hesitation that would change his mind. "Go swiftly and silently to the shadows, but take only the red beads. Don't delay for game. We have provisions for another month. Return at once. Don't look back. If you hear the flap of wings behind, you may expect the cave to be resealed. In that case, hide in the rocks. We'll come for you before nightfall. Do you understand, hunter?"

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Maradek nodded solemnly. "I understand." A younger man would not have seen his vision or called him *hunter*.

The world into which the youth stepped promised life. Though the sky was overcast, Maradek was immersed in light, and the deep draft of fresh air that entered his lungs drove all traces of lethargy from his arteries. It could be nothing but the advance of a new Spring at the end of the ancient Winter.

To the north were the mountains where the tribe had hunted marm bear before the arrival of Umbra. To the southwest, across the hills and grassland, lay the refuge of his neighbors' tribe, two days' journey distant.

Maradek left the shadow of the cavern's mouth, his muscles thrilling to the alert. His inner sight sensed living things up and about, but nothing that posed immediate danger. The darkling though, were deceptive: they lacked souls and did not emit detectable emanations.

Bow in one hand and quiver in the other, Maradek bounded down the slope and jumped over a pool of fetid water, leaving two prints in the mud. Kneeling beside a pinslip, he probed the earth around the roots but found nothing. Even the lip of the water, which was surely poisoned and from which only a darkling could refresh itself, appeared sterile.

Halfway to his goal, Maradek stopped and glanced up sharply. Bluet! He had forgotten to tell Yabin. It was unlikely she was in any great need, but that did not matter; he had failed in his prime duty. Turning to the mouth of the cave, he saw the two old men watching.

"Silently," Yabin had said. Maradek's voice must not break the stillness, nor must he delay by going back. During the moments that followed, while his urge to reach the necrominster struggled with his responsibility to inform them of Bluet's plight, he scanned the rocks above the cavern mouth, his unconscious mind registering a strange shape. It appeared to be a continuation of the rocks, dark and drooping like the folds of an ancient lava flow, but gradually he discerned an unnatural sheen, and as he watched, transfixed, the long reptilian form oozed along the edge above the heads of the guards.

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At first Maradek could not understand why the creature had not attacked as soon as he was in the open, then he realized that the scent of females deep underground was more alluring than a fleet male prey. Instinct prevailed, and the first arrow was barely strung when the stone head gouged a chunk from the slate face, halfway between the target and Yabin. The old guard laughed and jabbed his companion in the ribs, then sternly waved him on. By the time Maradek drew his second arrow, the darkling had made its move, its long neck lashing over the edge, its sharp beak catching the old man in midbreast. With a yell, Maradek sent a second arrow hurtling toward the sinister shape, and the stone head clacked off its skull.

The partition shuddered back into place while the monstrous head shook off the blow. Realizing it had lost its prey, the creature half-slid, half-dropped from its perch and reared on narrow front-jointed hind legs. Its cry was a chill shriek, like a man's laughter transformed to hate. Instead of unfolding its wings and taking to the air, the huge satin-skinned reptile tumbled down the slope and surged through the fetid water.

From Maradek's knowledge of the darkling, this one appeared immense and aged, its body having paled to the point of translucency. Tantalized by the morsel it had wrested from Yabin's breast, it started toward the youth, its arched neck towering above the ground, its trowel beak parting.

Maradek strung a third arrow and took a deep breath, but the arrow deflected off the bony skull. Unaffected, the creature lumbered closer, having some difficulty maneuvering over the earth with its wings unfolded. Poised on its hind legs, the darkling exposed its underside, and as the distance closed between them Maradek again took careful aim. Moments later the whetted stone head fell harmlessly to the creature's feet, leaving the tough leather underbelly unmarked.

With burgeoning rage the darkling folded its wings and approached in strides as Maradek turned and led his pursuer over the rocky ground toward a low-lying bluff. Up he scrambled, barely ahead of the shrieking darkling. Believing it

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could not fly to him and hoping it would be too preoccupied to surmount the other side of the slope, Maradek hurled rocks at its head.

The creature craned its neck and Maradek fell back, seizing a large rock with both hands and lobbing it toward the yawning face. Its eyes retreated into the bony mask and its neck shuddered with the impact, but the beast remained unharmed.

Not wanting to waste more arrows, Maradek chose smaller stones and pelted his tormentor, but the creature merely shook its head, repelling the missiles as though they were bothersome insects. While the darkling waited for him to tire, Maradek unearthed a boulder and rolled it to the edge of the incline. Down it tumbled, crunching the beast's foot and shattering a claw.

The darkling shrieked, fell back, and as it lowered its head to survey the damage, Maradek searched for a safer vantage but saw nothing higher than the scarp above the entrance to the cave. The creature had surmounted that with ease. A steeper incline would be better. As his eyes frantically sought refuge, a pale shadow skimmed the barren rocks, and at a point a few hundred spans above, a broad-winged form circled.

The darkling raised its head, eyes bulging from its skull, and with a challenging squawk, spread its wings.

A glimpse of the future chilled the young hunter. He would be saved, but only momentarily. The invader would alight to conquer its injured brother, but after the first meal it would realize Maradek's presence and he would be next. Only the possible appearance of a third darkling would extend his life, but the outcome was assured: the newcomer could fly.

Maradek knelt and bowed his head. "Father, I'm sorry. I failed you and your newborn. May my half brother be better than I."

Fatefully he pulled an arrow from his quiver and crouched in readiness.

At first the intruder seemed unaware of the activity below, and for a brief moment Maradek thought it might fly away. But the injured darkling continued its display, apparently indignant

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at the implicit challenge, so that even a blind jumprat a marq away could not fail to perceive it.

The invader dropped, and Maradek watched it circle with a grace that appeared impossible for such a creature. Suddenly its aerial acrobatics ceased and it plummeted as though struck. Maradek raised his bow and stretched the twine. What plunged toward him was smaller than a darkling, its body opaque and lusterless. Directly overhead, it leveled off and soared by for a closer inspection. It had a small head with a hooked beak, a short neck, and the broad untapered wings of a thunderhawk. These birds, normally immune to the seasonal invasion since they generally stayed aloft hundreds of spans above the altitude of the darkling, were said to defend their young to the death against the denizens of Umbra.

Grimly aware that whatever the outcome he would ultimately become the meal of one creature or the other, and while the darkling bristled at the sight of the curious stranger, Maradek darted down the side of the hill. Completely preoccupied by the invader, the darkling paused to recall its original prey only after the man's scent had flared up. Reawakened by its insatiable hunger, a more potent drive for its species than competition, it lurched after him, neck stretched and jaws snapping.

In full retreat, Maradek glanced back and saw the thunderhawk furiously beating its wings to hover one span above the striding darkling. Distracted, the youth lost his footing and fell, but was able to get an arrow strung and send it toward the onrushing darkling. Arching its neck, its shadow upon him, it prepared to pinion him with its claws, but the hovering thunderhawk, no longer a spectator, extended its thickly feathered legs and swooped downward, its talons gripping the darkling's head.

The thunderhawk was either the most courageous creature Maradek had ever encountered, or so decrepit it had long ago lost its senses. Flapping furiously, it tried to raise its startled enemy to the skies, but the struggling horror tumbled free. Maradek scrambled away from the thrashing, raging darkling, but instead of running for safety he strung another arrow, dropped to his knees, and aimed pointblank.

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The shaft entered the creature's eye, burying itself into the skull. While maneuvering into a better position so that he might release another arrow, Maradek heard the thunderhawk's cry, and the bird swooped toward the tribesman. He flattened to the ground, talons passing over his head, and the bird landed on the darkling. Gouging into the beast's other eye socket, it tugged furiously, and the socket spurted a pale yellow ooze. Still not content with the damage it had caused, the bird reached for its throat and ripped it open. Running forward, Maradek startled the thunderhawk into the air, and by waving his arms and shouting he was able to keep the bird at bay. It retired to a neighboring outcrop where it could review its conquest and scrape the spume from its talons.

Heart pounding, Maradek glanced to the cavern. Few men had killed a mature darkling; it was only right that his people hear of the accomplishment and see the results firsthand. But he was too far from the cavern, and even if Yabin heard his shout, the old guard would not open the partition for fear of what might enter.

Breathing slowly now, Maradek watched the thunderhawk closely, and the bird regarded him with equal uncertainty. For the first time he did not fear the invader, despite its recent display. Instead he experienced a mixture of relief and perplexity: had the attack been for revenge or purely a savage instinct? It could not have been from hunger, for the thunderhawk had dropped the eye. The bird turned its head this way and that as it evaluated the man, and Maradek opened his mind to its soul but detected nothing more than animal indifference tinged with curiosity. If a tribesman had wings and was known to fly within the thunderhawk's domain, he might be considered a competitor or prey, but the bird appeared to have no knowledge of his position in nature and regarded him merely as a freakish shape.

"If there are friends of the tribe," Maradek said, "I would call you one."

The thunderhawk was restless at the sound of the man's voice but did not fly off.

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"Yabin will hear of your help in the kill. Your courage has spared your brothers from the hunters' arrows."

Wondering whether he should take the time to recover his arrows or approach the carcass and cut out the beads, Maradek looked back to the cave. The partition had not opened, and he did not want to shout to Yabin or the bird might misunderstand and decide to attack. Slowly he backed away from the kill, and when he was halfway to the cavern, the thunderhawk made its move. It leaped to the air, reaching the carcass in an instant. Before the tribesman could chase it away, the bird seized the spoils and beat its wings to gain altitude. Instinctively Maradek drew an arrow from his quiver but did not shoot. The creature had done him no harm, and his reverence for it was greater than his need to preserve the evidence. Confident the weight of the darkling was too much for the bird, he watched for the first sign of fatigue, but his hopes faded as thunderhawk and carcass diminished, until they were no more than a speck.

Maradek shaded his eyes and scoured the heavens. Moments later there was nothing. The thunderhawk had vanished as though it had never been. When Ramil heard of this, there would be silence in the cavern, for creatures who devoured darkling were rare in the world.

He glanced to the necrominster. At least he would have something to show for his efforts, and when he presented his people with the bulging pouch and told them of his plans, all would share his vision.

Alert to the dangers that still surrounded him, Maradek crept toward the necrominster and retrieved one of the huge darkling skulls. Inserting the beak into the loose deposit, he grunted as he ploughed furrows through the barrow, expecting at any moment to reveal the waxy gleam of red. But his first efforts succeeded only in disturbing the foul matter so that odors putrefied the air, and his eyes watered and stomach threatened to convulse. If he didn't conduct the search more carefully, he would be occupied all day and into the evening when he would be vulnerable to the phantoms of darkness.

Attempting to determine the outline of the darkling that had fed last and whose gut sack would contain the prize, he circled

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the heap and discovered depressions in the mass. The dead matter had been compressed by something blunt and heavy. Not round enough to be the work of the sucker-lipped boromboras -- who would not, in any case, feed from such a mephitic deposit -- each oblong imprint had a deep indentation at one end.

Examining one depression to determine what kind of animal it might have been, Maradek found, instead of claw marks, tiny decorations inside each heel. Instantly he was overwhelmed by the sensation of being observed. A quick mental scan of the vicinity revealed nothing.

Hand over nose and mouth to muffle the stench, he peered at the other prints. Inside each was a duplicate impression, as though the visitor had worn footgear. Impossible! Nothing sentient roamed the land during Umbra except the demons of night, but they lacked bodies. The only other creature had to be something arising during the Terror -- some horror so cunning and mystically inclined as to be virtually immune to the dangers of the season.

Maradek returned to the necrominster, but even before he discovered the stomach cavity, he knew the deposit had been pillaged.

Tears welled in his eyes, and the shadow of his father paled. He had risked his life and hopes and those of his tribe for nothing. Never again would he be able to look Yabin in the eye. Both would be in disgrace. No more would a warrior designate him *hunter*. Only one choice remained. He had to bring back a small animal for fresh meat.

Abandoning the site, he followed the path of a poisonous rivulet until he found a bed of rocks. Turning up each stone one by one, he eventually discovered a short, fat lizard and snatched it up by the tail. It writhed sluggishly, an easy mark for a hunter, but for no reason that he could explain Maradek suddenly experienced a pang of despair. By surviving Umbra, the lizard had earned its freedom. Its kind and generations after it would repopulate the stream banks. Knowing he did not have the right to take its life to atone for his own failure, he dropped



the creature and watched it plod along the mud and slide down a crack in the earth.

Wandering beside a stagnant pool, Maradek discovered faint impressions. He knelt to inspect a second set of prints with decorations. Lining them up with the necrominster, he gazed out over the parched northern wasteland. If the creature should die of thirst or lose its charmed life and be caught by a roaming darkling, the ruby beads it had stolen would go to waste, eventually evaporating beneath the sun.

Knowing that to stray farther from the caves than he had intended would only compound his failure, Maradek nevertheless felt a strong urge to see what lay ahead. The visitor's prints were recent; possibly it had come and gone moments before his arrival. He looked back to the cave. There were still several hours before sundown when he would have to be home, and the cave would not be opened before then. Once more the image of his father crystallized, attaining the solidity of a phantom. It turned its bearded head toward him, its eyes enunciating the message far more clearly than words could express: *There is little time. I need you now*

The dry earth puffed around him. Not many darkling would be about. Most had returned south, those that could still fly. Once he thought he saw a speck circling overhead, and when it was gone he breathed in relief, though he convinced himself that it had only been a thunderhawk.

A ravenous jumprat, driven by hunger into a frenzy, was impaled on the thorns of an ancient and giant pinslip. Maradek prodded the hardened carcass but decided it was unfit to cook. Normally the men of his tribe could survive for days without eating, obtaining their only sustenance from the morning dew.

To divert his thoughts from food and water, Maradek opened his mind to the creatures of the world and became one with the land. The ubiquitous pinslips produced mild stabs, unpleasant but reassuring. Deep in the earth, a colony of worms made him feel clammy from head to toe. A gentle fibrous tugging led him to a depression where a borombora had been excavating, and he dug down to uncover a shriveled

yellow root. It was still moist in the center, and he was happy to have this to chew on.

Farther below the surface twinkled the pinpoints of life that would rapidly blossom into next Spring's plants. It was difficult to believe that this barren land could shortly promote the raging vegetation that preempted the Terror.

While rounding a hill, his mind at ease, Maradek was struck by a note of timidity encased in a highly developed mind. He focused on the source and was confronted by a return probe, followed by a sudden urgency. Doubting whether a creature of high intelligence could be the object of his hunt, he moved swiftly and advanced upon an enclosure of hills, the entrance exuding a faint caustic odor of decay. Instantly the foreign mind swelled to the alert, radiating a chaos of emotions that Maradek had not thought possible. Then, nothing! It had switched off.

Maradek swept the mental ranges for the ethereal wavelength, but found nothing and supposed the phenomenon to be an illusion. Once, many years before, his own mind had recoiled from an impenetrable plane and shot back, giving him a far greater shock than when, as a child, he had seen his own reflection in a pool of water. But he knew his own mental structure. This had been totally alien.

Without breaking stride, he ran toward the first hill and entered a small valley.