

Spider World

the epic visionary fiction series

THE MAGICIAN

Colin Wilson

Introduction

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Introduction

In the waterless desert of North Khaybad, a small family of humans lives in an underground cave. At this time, the earth is dominated by giant telepathic spiders who breed human beings for food. They scour the skies in spider balloons, seeking to bring under their control the few human beings who remain at large. These include Niall, a youth who daydreams of one day finding a way to destroy the spiders and restore men to freedom.

A hundred miles to the west is the country known as the Great Delta, perhaps the most dangerous place in the world. And it is on a trip to the Delta, in search of healing drugs, that Niall's uncle and cousin are killed by one of the man-eating plants.

Ingeld, the dead man's widow, longs to return to her family home in the underground city of Dira, near the great inland lake, and Niall and his father, Ulf, agree to escort her there. It is in Dira that Niall loses his heart to the beautiful Princess Merlew, daughter of King Kazak, and is tempted to remain in the underground city. But when he overhears Merlew describing him as "that skinny boy," he is disillusioned, and decides to return home with his father.

It is during the journey home, driven to take refuge from a sandstorm in a ruined city, that Niall kills a giant spider, and unintentionally seals the fate of Dira, which is overrun by the spiders soon after. And while Niall is away from home, his own father is killed and his family taken captive by spiders.

Niall sets out to follow them, but is himself soon taken prisoner.

On a sea journey to the spider city, Niall is instrumental in saving the life of one of the spiders, which has been washed overboard in a storm. The result is that on his arrival in the spider city, he and his family are treated with a certain consideration, and are assigned to live in the palace of King Kazak, who has become an ally and accomplice of the spiders. It is there that Niall learns that the spiders are engaged in a breeding experiment to reduce human intelligence and to prevent men from ever again becoming a challenge to the spiders.

It is when Niall discovers that Kazak is betraying his own people that he runs away, and takes refuge in the mysterious white tower that dominates the center of the spider city. This proves to be a time capsule, built by earlier men to inform their descendants of how they fled from the Earth to avoid a strike by the radioactive comet Opik.

Inside the white tower, in a sleep-learning machine, Niall is taught about the history of mankind before the Opik catastrophe. He also learns that the center of the living force that created giant insects lies in the Delta; the spiders worship this force as the goddess Nuada.

When he leaves the white tower, Niall takes refuge in the slave quarter, most of whose inhabitants have been turned into imbeciles by selective breeding.

Appointed overseer to a squad of slaves, Niall finds his way to the nearby city of the bombardier beetles, and renews his acquaintance with the explosives expert Bill Doggins. The beetles adore explosions, and Doggins has been appointed to satisfy their immense appetite for this form of entertainment.

Niall has arrived on "Boomday," when Doggins is Master of Ceremonies at an immense firework display. But an accident results in a tremendous blast that destroys the whole remaining stock of explosives. Doggins decides that he has no alternative but to lead an expedition to the spider city, seeking a legendary stockpile of explosives in the abandoned barracks known as the Fortress.

They are successful beyond their most optimistic dreams, discovering crates full of "reapers," an atomic blaster which is one of the most awesome weapons ever invented. Surprised by the spiders, they shoot their way out of trouble, steal spider balloons, and return to the city of the bombardier beetles, which is already being besieged by spiders. Again, the reapers save the day. But when Niall is ordered by the Master of the bombardier beetles to destroy the reapers, he decides to disobey, and to travel instead to the Delta, in a bid to destroy the force that has created the giant insects.

Niall quickly discovers that the Delta deserves its reputation as the most dangerous place on Earth. One by one, their party is reduced, until Niall and Doggins are the only ones to reach the foot of the great hill that they have identified as the center of the force. But it is Niall who finally scales the hill alone -- to learn that the "goddess Nuada" is actually a giant plant, which has been carried to Earth from another galaxy in the tail of the comet Opik.

On his return to the city of the beetles, Niall is placed under arrest, and handed over to the spiders. In a horrific encounter with the Spider Lord, he comes close to being destroyed, both physically and mentally. But at this point, the goddess herself intervenes, filling the room with her strange blue light. Now convinced that Niall is the chosen of the goddess, the Spider Lord accedes to his demand that human beings should be set free. And Niall, to his own bewilderment, suddenly finds himself appointed ruler of the spider city.

Part One

The Assassins

Shortly before dawn he was awakened by a cold so intense that it reminded him of the desert night. He lay there, the bedclothes pulled around his face, and his breath formed moisture on the blanket as he exhaled. He had chosen this room because it faced east, and he liked to be awakened by the sun. Today there was no sunlight; the dawn came like gray mist until the room was filled with a cold, even light. No birds sang.

Something about the strange silence disturbed him. He crossed to the window, treading on the soft woolen rugs, and found himself looking out on a white landscape. White rooftops seemed to blend in the pearl-gray sky, and the great square was carpeted in the same featureless whiteness. It had even found its way into the corners of the window frames, and a few fine flakes had frozen onto the outside of the glass.

Niall had heard about snow and read about it, but this was the first time he had ever seen it. Nothing had prepared him for this cold, beautiful whiteness that seemed to blanket the universe. He was suddenly filled with a magical excitement which, although he was unaware of it, had filled thousands of generations of children at the first sight of the winter snow.

Possessed by a longing to touch this strange substance, he pulled on a sheepskin mantle over his tunic, thrust his feet into shoes lined with rabbit fur, and hurried out of the room. The palace was silent and its corridors empty; Niall was usually the first awake. He mounted the staircase to the top floor, passing the sleeping chamber shared by his cousin Dona and his sisters Runa and Mara, then climbed the narrow stairs that led up to the roof. As soon as he opened the door, a rampart of snow tumbled in and deluged his bare legs. He jumped back with an exclamation; he had not realized snow would be so cold. Then he took off his shoes one by one -- the snow had fallen into them -- and shook them out; the fur now felt cold and wet to his ankles. Yet the morning air seemed surprisingly warm; this was because there was not the faintest breath of wind. The space between the parapet and the steep roof was deep in snow; it crunched underfoot as he trod in it. He picked up a double handful and molded it into a ball; but it froze his fingers, so he threw it away. With the sleeve of his mantle he carefully brushed the snow from the parapet, then stood leaning on it, gazing out over the milky whiteness that extended as far as the distant hills. In the center of the parkland on the far side of the square, the white tower rose like a finger of ivory, but now that the surrounding grass was white, it was no longer the most striking feature in the landscape. This distinction belonged to the river, whose blackness split the cold plain like a current of ink; it made him feel colder merely to look at it.

The city seemed empty; there was not a living thing in sight. Then, as he turned to go indoors, his attention was caught by a movement in the square below. Something black was lying in its northeastern corner. From this distance it might have been an uprooted bush. Then he looked more closely, and saw the red stains in the snow; at the same time, another faint movement made him aware that he was looking at a badly injured spider.

He hurried back down the stairs, holding the balustrade because the snow on his shoes made the marble treacherous. For a moment he was tempted to return to his room to put on warmer clothes; but his sense of urgency overruled the discomfort. He pulled back the bar that locked the main door, and tramped out into the deep snow, ignoring the cold wetness that ran down inside his shoes. The snow

had turned the steps into a smooth ramp, so that he had to tread with extreme care; at one point he fell and plunged in up to his elbows. But as he struggled to his feet and waded unevenly across the square choosing a route where the snow lay thin, his mind was obsessed by a single problem: how a death spider could have met with serious injury in such a wide open space.

As he approached, the spider saw him, and it made a convulsive attempt to rise; but its jointed legs were not strong enough, and buckled under its weight. The black, hairy body was covered in snow; evidently it had been lying there for some time. Niall found this puzzling; spiders are telepathic, and can send an instant distress call to others of their kind. And since this one lay within a few hundred yards of the headquarters of the ruling directorate, on the far side of the square, its presence should have been sensed the moment it was injured.

When he came close enough to see the far side of its body he saw why it had been unable to rise. Three of its legs had been smashed to a pulp; the bottom joint of one of them, with its black claw, was almost completely detached. A trail of blood smears, partly obliterated by snow, showed that the spider had dragged itself for about fifty feet before it collapsed. It was obviously dying.

"What happened to you?" Niall spoke the words aloud, but knew that his meaning would be carried directly to the spider's brain.

The reply that sounded inside his chest made him wince; it was a blur of pain, and the directness of the communication made Niall experience its misery and exhaustion, so that he himself felt drained and nauseated. It was impossible to distinguish what the spider was saying, but the "voice" was one that Niall instantly recognized. It was Skorbo, the captain of the guard. Now Niall understood why its communication was an incomprehensible chaos of feeling. The ability to communicate with human beings was a difficult art -- the equivalent of a human being learning to read. In spider terms Skorbo was an illiterate peasant, a creature whose chief value to his masters was a certain brutal strength and the ability to dominate others. Niall had always found him repellent; yet now that Skorbo was injured and dying, he felt overwhelmed with pity.

He said: "I'll go and get help."

It was impossible to hurry through the snow; each step plunged him in up to the knee, and if he tried to withdraw the foot too quickly, he left his shoe behind. To avoid discouragement, he deliberately averted his eyes from the expanse of snow that stretched in front of him, and treated each step as an individual effort. It was a pleasant surprise to find himself suddenly at the foot of the steps in front of the headquarters building. Two wolf spiders would normally have been on guard outside its great double doors; the cold had evidently driven them inside. Niall beat on the door with his fists, not because it was locked, but because he knew he would risk being attacked if he rushed in without warning. There was a movement inside and the door opened; Niall found himself looking up into the enormous black eyes of a brown wolf spider, whose height was at least two feet greater than his own. The chelicerae (or pincers) were extended, so he could see the folded fangs. A moment later, the spider recognized him, and sank down in a gesture of homage, lowering its belly to the floor.

Niall turned and pointed. "Quick. Skorbo has been injured. Go and fetch him." Again, the words conveyed his message direct to the spider's brain. Followed by the second guard, it loped across the square toward Skorbo, its enormous strength unaffected by a mere foot of snow. Niall knew there was no point in trying to follow; his whole body felt drained. Instead, he sank down on a bench outside the door, and watched as the guards gently lifted the injured spider. As they approached, he observed the way the legs dragged in the snow, and knew that Skorbo was dead.

They placed the body on the floor, scattering snow on the black marble. Skorbo was still bleeding; his blood was thicker, more viscous, than human blood, and it spread slowly, like a pool of oil. It was running from the spider's head, which lay sideways on the floor, and now Niall was able to see that there was a hole in the skull, about a foot above the single row of eyes that extended in a band around its head. Unlike human beings, spiders have no internal bone structure; the armored shell is itself an external skeleton. Skorbo's skull had been shattered by a blow. What puzzled Niall was that there seemed to be fragments of broken armor in the hole, as might have been expected if some tremendous blow had been delivered from above. A large segment seemed to be missing. Blood oozed from the hole as from the socket from which a tooth has been pulled.

The wolf spiders were standing there, too respectful to ask questions. Niall said: "Please notify Draviv of what has happened. Tell him I shall be at home."

But as he plodded back through the snow, curiosity overcame his weariness. What had happened struck him as completely incomprehensible. The hole in the skull made it look as if Skorbo had been attacked. By whom? Another spider? That seemed unlikely. Unlike human beings, spiders seldom fought among themselves. Yet it was equally difficult to envisage some accident that might have caused the damage.

The obvious way to find out was to go and look. Niall retraced his steps, and took the diagonal route across the plaza, where the forward rush of the wolf spiders had churned up the snow like some enormous plough. When he came to the place where the injured spider had lain, he realized that Skorbo had lost a great deal of blood; his life had oozed away into the snow as he lay there, his brain too damaged to send the signal that would have brought help. In front of Niall, along the eastern side of the square, there were a number of empty houses in various states of disrepair. The city was full of such houses; spiders often made their homes in the upper stories. But they preferred houses on either side of the street, so they could weave their webs between them; this is why the houses bordering the square had remained empty.

The trail of blood had been obliterated by falling snow; but by bending until his face was within a few inches of the surface, he was able to make out the darker patches. These, he could now see, led back toward the second house from the corner, a tall building whose rusty balconies suggested that it had once been a hotel. Like the others, its windows had been boarded up and its door was closed -- all houses in this square had been forbidden to human beings. Niall tried the door; it seemed to be locked. Yet when he brushed aside the snow on the doorstep with his shoe, a damp bloodstain told him that this was the house in which Skorbo had met his injury. He rammed the door with his shoulder; it seemed completely immovable. But a sheet of plywood covering a window proved to be less solid, and caved inward when he pushed it with both hands.

He leaned in with caution. If something -- or someone -- powerful enough to kill a spider was lurking inside, he was going to take no risks. In fact, he found himself looking into a bare hallway whose wooden floor was covered with plaster and rubble; it smelled of decay and damp. Recognizing that his tension was blocking his perceptions, he deliberately relaxed, exhaling deeply and closing his eyes; then, as he achieved inner stillness, concentrated intently. A point of light glowed inside his skull, and the silence seemed to deepen. In that moment, he knew with absolute certainty that no concealed enemies were lying in wait; the building was deserted. Yet this deeper perception also made him aware of another odor, musky and slightly sweet. It was familiar, yet its significance escaped him.

He pushed the plywood violently; the nails that held it to the window frame tore loose, and it fell into the building. Niall clambered inside. By now he was regretting that he was not wearing warmer

clothes; his hands and feet were frozen. But since he was here, it seemed pointless not to explore. The light from the window gave him a clearer view of the hallway. He observed rat droppings among the dust and plaster on the floor. That indicated clearly that no spiders used the building; they regarded rats as particularly appetizing delicacies, and would wait for hours in the hope of catching one.

As he expected, there were more bloodstains on the floor, and clear signs in the dust and rubble that a wounded spider had dragged itself across the floor. The marks continued across the hallway to an open door beyond a collapsing staircase; this admitted light and a draft of air. Beyond this, a corridor led down to an open space that had once been a garden; there were more bloodstains on the floor. The door at the end, which stood half open, had obviously been forced; its lock had been smashed, and marks on the outside woodwork made by a chisel or a crowbar looked fresh.

Niall peeped cautiously into the weed-grown garden, then looked upward at the wall above the door; rose vertical and windowless to the roof, where the guttering was still intact. This disposed of his theory that the spider had been struck by some heavy object -- perhaps a piece of masonry -- dropped from above. Yet when he brushed aside the snow on the threshold, he saw signs of blood. This garden clearly held the secret of the spider's death.

To Niall's untrained eye there were no obvious clues. The layer of snow on the ground had covered all footprints. The garden, which extended as far as the rear wall of the next building, was divided from the gardens to the right and left by high walls. A dozen feet from the door stood a young palm tree; beyond this, there was a tangle of weeds and shrubbery which offered a great deal of concealment. When Niall studied this more closely, he observed a number of freshly broken twigs which indicated that someone had been there recently. But the hard ground had retained no other indications.

He penetrated the shrubbery as far as the rear wall; here the overgrown grass convinced him that no one else had been here for months. But as he was about to turn back, he noticed something that made him pause. In a corner of the garden wall there lay a heap of palm leaves, some of them spreading out from a common center. They looked so natural in that setting that he almost failed to notice them. But why should there be palm leaves lying in a corner? Then he looked up and saw that the young palm tree had no leaves. In fact, someone had hacked off its top, leaving a bare trunk. And within a foot of the top of the truncated palm, there was a length of rope.

Now at last he understood. The tree was about twice the height of a man -- precisely the distance from the foot of the tree to the rear door of the building. A further search of the shrubbery revealed the stunted tree to whose base the other end of the rope had been tied. The young palm had been bent backwards like a catapult. When the spider had stepped out of the doorway, hesitating as it faced the dark garden, someone had cut the rope, and the tree had snapped over like an immense spring. Skorbo had evidently been standing slightly to one side, or had started to move at the last moment; the tree had smashed his legs and battered him to the ground. . .

Niall returned to the doorway and looked down at the bloodstains. They showed clearly that his reconstruction was correct. The blow had caused blood splashes which were some distance from the original stain, and other splashes had struck the wall at an angle so they were elongated, with tadpole-like tails. And a few feet away, half-buried in the snow, there was a triangular fragment of the spider's skull, with brain fragments still adhering to its underside. But the original blow had shattered the leg, not the skull. This could mean only one thing: that while the spider was stunned, someone had deliberately smashed the top of his skull, with the intention of penetrating the brain and destroying his capacity to send out a distress signal.

Niall shivered. He had no liking for Skorbo, but the sheer savagery of the attack horrified him; he felt

as if he had been there to witness it.

His shiver reminded him of how cold he was; his facial muscles had lost all feeling and his eyelids felt as if they were frozen. He retraced his steps back through the empty building. The front door had been wedged shut with a balk of timber. He heaved it loose and went out into the square.

As he plodded back through the snow, walking in the deep footprints he had left earlier, he recalled his excitement on first seeing the snow from his bedroom window. It had made the world look like fairyland. Now it was merely cold and uncomfortable, and somehow too real.

Someone had lit a fire in the great fireplace that faced the main door; the sight of flames leaping up the chimney brought a glow of delight, and made him realize why the men of old had regarded fire as a god. But as he stood before the blazing logs, watching the snow melt from his garments, he was surprised by the pain in his limbs as the blood began to circulate again.

In the chamber adjoining his bedroom, his personal servant Jarita had lit the stove and laid out his breakfast on a low table: cold meats, preserved fruits, honey, sweetened milk, and newly baked bread. Before he ate, he changed into dry clothes: a baggy woolen suit, in which he felt comfortable, and slippers lined with down. Then he sat cross-legged on the silken cushions, tore a crust from the hot loaf, and spread it with butter and honey. This was usually the time of day that he enjoyed most, the hour before work began, when he could eat good food, and reflect on the incredible twists of fortune that had brought him from a cave in the desert, and made him the ruler of fifty thousand human beings. It was an important hour of the day, for he was still stunned by the swiftness of the change, and his unconscious mind needed time to absorb it; he still woke up in the middle of the night and imagined that he was in the underground den surrounded by his family.

But this morning he was unable to relax or to enjoy the food. He could only brood on the problem of why Skorbo had been killed, and who had carried it out. Both questions left him baffled. It was true that the city was full of human beings who loathed the captain of the guard and would be delighted with the news of his death. But none of them possessed the kind of courage or determination to lure him into a trap. They had been the slaves of the spiders for so long that they no longer had any will of their own; they were conditioned into total obedience. And there would have been no point in harboring thoughts of hatred or revenge, for the spiders could read their minds more easily than Niall could read a book.

The men who had been captured from Kazak's underground city were a different matter. Their minds were still unviolated, and they had a long tradition of hostility to spiders. But now that they were no longer slaves, they had no motive for killing a spider. Most of them were now overseers and supervisors, and contented with their lot. They were delighted to be living in the open air, instead of in an underground fortress. Besides, even they lacked the kind of cunning and ruthlessness necessary to have set the trap. . .

There was a light tap on the door, and a tall, dark-haired girl looked in. This was Nephtys, the commander of Niall's personal guard; because she knew he hated to be disturbed at breakfast, she spoke with her eyes averted.

"The Lord Dravig is here."

"Ask him to come in." He smiled at her, wishing that his servants were not so afraid of him. But they had all been trained to fear and respect those who were above them. Their fear of the spiders was like that of a slave for some ruthless tyrant. So they found it awe-inspiring that Niall should speak on equal

terms with the tyrants. The point was reinforced when Dravig entered the room, and Nephtys prostrated herself in front of the spider at the same time that Dravig made a ritual gesture of obeisance before Niall.

Dravig was probably the oldest spider in the land, with the exception of the ancient female spider who presided over the ruling council of the city. He stood more than seven feet tall, but was thin and gaunt and the hairs on his body were turning gray. Insofar as it was possible for a spider to understand a human being, and for a human being to understand a spider, these two understood one another.

Niall moved away from the table and sat on a cushion on the dais. It would have been impolite to continue his breakfast. For some reason, the spiders were profoundly disturbed by the sight of human beings eating or drinking -- perhaps in the same way that a human being would be disturbed at the sight of a spider eating a fly or a rat.

He wasted no time on preliminaries. "Do you know that Skorbo is dead?"

"Yes."

"Have you any idea who did it?"

"No."

During this dialogue, Niall spoke aloud while Dravig communicated telepathically. Niall was also communicating telepathically -- spiders were unable to understand human language -- but he found it easier to speak his words aloud; it seemed to give his thought an added precision.

"Is the Spider Lord very angry?" Although the ruler was a female, she was known to human beings as the Spider Lord.

"Of course. But she will abide by the agreement." Dravig understood the question that Niall had in mind -- this was the advantage of speaking telepathically. While human beings had been slaves, the death of a single spider had been punished with appalling ferocity -- sometimes with the torture and execution of a hundred humans. When the slaves became free, the Spider Lord had agreed that there should be no more killing.

Niall said: "Nevertheless, if the murderers can be found, they must be punished."

"That is your decision. We shall abide by the agreement."

There was a silence between them, but it was the silence of understanding. Intelligence had bridged the gap between their two species, so that it was as if both were human or both were spiders.

Dravig said: "But I cannot understand how human beings could kill a spider."

Niall stood up. "Come with me and I will show you."

On the spot where the injured spider had collapsed, a platoon of slaves was shoveling the snow into handcarts and washing away the blood with buckets of warm water. It would have been regarded as a kind of sacrilege to leave the spider's blood staining the ground. As Niall and Dravig went past, the overseer cracked his whip and made the slaves stand to attention. Niall averted his gaze; the blank eyes and drooling mouths of the slaves always made him feel uncomfortable.

The door stood half open, exactly as Niall had left it. As they entered the rubble-strewn hallway, the spider paused and his chelicerae unfolded; Niall was aware that something had galvanized him into sudden alertness. But the spider said nothing. After a moment, he followed Niall down the passageway and out into the garden.

Niall pointed at the truncated palm tree. "That was what killed Skorbo."

Dravig failed to understand. Spiders were completely lacking in mechanical aptitude. Niall had to transmit a mental picture before Dravig could understand how a tree could be used as a murder weapon. Even then, he seemed skeptical. Niall had to point out the rope still tied to the top of the tree and to the bloodspots on the wall, before the spider was convinced.

Niall also pointed out the shape of the blood splashes, with their tadpole-like tails, indicating that they had flown upwards due to the force of the blow. Dravig said with astonishment: "The human mind is amazingly subtle."

Niall pointed to the fragment of bone lying in the snow.

"The blow failed to kill him because it struck him to one side, breaking his legs. While he was still stunned, someone attacked him with some heavy weapon -- probably an ax -- and shattered his skull. That is why he failed to send out a distress signal."

Dravig said: "Whoever is responsible will pay for this." The force of his anger was so great that it struck Niall like a blow, causing him to step backward. He realized then that he had underestimated the strength of Dravig's feelings. For a human being, the murder of a spider could be regarded with detachment. For Dravig, it was the slaughter of a fellow creature, and it filled him with rage and a desire for revenge.

Dravig was instantly aware of the effect produced by his anger on Niall; he made a mental gesture of abasement and apology, to which Niall replied with a similar gesture indicating that apology was unnecessary. In human language the exchange would have been expressed: "I am sorry. I did not mean to upset (or shock or startle) you;" "Please do not apologize, I understand perfectly." Instead, these meanings were conveyed instantaneously, and with a precision beyond the power of language. It made Niall aware of the crudity and clumsiness of human speech.

Dravig advanced toward the palm tree, and gripped it with his pincers and with his four front legs. Niall looked on with a perplexity that changed to embarrassment; surely Dravig realized that it would take far more than the strength of a single spider to uproot a tree? His embarrassment changed to astonishment as he watched the spider's legs brace and strain, and heard the tearing sound as the roots began to loosen. This was not merely physical strength; it was will power intensified by rage. The spider staggered for a moment as the earth under his feet heaved upwards; he regained his balance and again braced himself. A moment later, the tree was ripped out of the earth. With a gesture of contempt, Dravig threw it away from him, and it crashed down onto the bushes.

Dravig said nothing, but Niall could sense that the effort had relieved some of his rage and frustration.

Niall stepped forward and looked down into the hole, with its torn roots protruding from loose brown earth. The two main roots had been snapped in two; the strength required must have been tremendous. Yet Dravig showed no sign of effort; he was not even breathing heavily. Niall realized that he had used his immense will-force -- the will-force that could knock a human being unconscious -- to galvanize his muscles into this unbelievable effort. And, as so often since he had been in contact with the death spiders, Niall caught a glimpse of the great secret forces of the will.

Something caught his eye in the loose earth. He bent down and picked up a gray-colored object that lay between the roots. It was a disc, about four inches in diameter, and its weight surprised him. Niall had heard of lead, although he had never seen it; now he guessed that this was what he was holding.

When he brushed off the earth, he saw that a simple design had been carved into one of the surfaces;

this consisted of four curved lines.

Dravig asked: "What is it?" Niall held out the disc, and the spider took it in his claw.

Niall said: "It was in the hole. It must have been there when the tree was planted."

"Does it mean anything to you?"

"No."

The spider dropped it; Niall picked it up. "I'll take it with me. I'd like to find out what it is."

It was too heavy for the pocket of his mantle, so he placed it beside the doorway.

Dravig was looking among the bushes. Niall pointed to the rope tied round the base of the stunted tree.

"This is the other end of the rope they used. Someone must have cut it as Skorbo came out of the doorway."

Whatever had been used to cut the rope -- either an ax or a knife -- had been razor-sharp; there were no frayed ends.

Dravig asked: "Have you any more observations?"

Niall considered. He allowed himself to remain silent for a long time, aware that the patience of spiders is far greater than that of human beings. He said finally: "Whoever did this planned it carefully. In my opinion there must have been at least three of them. And for some reason they hated Skorbo."

"You believe that Skorbo was the intended victim?"

"I am inclined to think so." Niall decided against explaining why Skorbo was disliked; it would have seemed discourtesy toward the dead. And Dravig, who sensed that Niall had more to say, was too tactful to press him.

Niall said: "They probably entered by the front door. But they did not leave by it. They had propped it closed with a balk of timber. That means they must have climbed over the wall. . . Ah yes."

He had pushed himself through the gap between the bushes and the left-hand wall, and now found a low gate in the wall. It was made of iron, and was rusted. Yet when he pushed it, the gate swung upon its hinges without a creak. A glance at these hinges showed that they had been greased.

The gate led into a narrow lane, which ran between two garden walls. It had obviously been constructed to afford entrance into the gardens, and a few yards from the gate, it terminated in the wall of the house. In the other direction, it ran on for about a hundred yards before it was blocked with rubble where a wall had collapsed.

Dravig had found it easier to step over the wall than to squeeze his bulk through the gate; now he stood beside Niall in the snow-covered lane. Any footprints that had been left behind had been obliterated by the more recent snowfall. Both stood there silently; Niall had discovered that being with a spider placed him in a calm and contemplative frame of mind, and that this sharpened his powers of intuition. So far his mind had been full of questions and observations, and this made him abnormally aware of his physical surroundings, as if they were thrusting themselves insistently against his senses. Now, quite suddenly, he relaxed, and it was as if the physical world had receded. The discomfort of his cold hands and feet became irrelevant, as if they belonged to someone else. In this new silence, he experienced a kind of awakening of attention, as if some unusual sound or smell was hovering on the

edge of his perceptions. As he stood there, totally relaxed, it became stronger. There was something unpleasant about it, something distinctly menacing.

Dravig also stood motionless, without a hint of impatience; yet Niall's contact with his mind told him that the spider was completely oblivious to this sense of unpleasantness. It had often struck him as curious that, in spite of their telepathic powers, spiders seemed oddly lacking in intuition. Perhaps it was because they had so little to fear.

Niall walked on slowly, his head averted as if listening. Because his eyes were on the ground, he noticed the footprints close to the left-hand wall. There were half a dozen of them, and they were pointing in the opposite direction; whoever made them had wandered to one side of the path for a few steps, then returned to the center. Because the breeze had been blowing from the north, the footprints had been protected by the wall, and were covered with only a light powdering of the snow that had fallen later. Now Niall paused and examined them closely, kneeling down in the snow. The first thing that struck him was that they had been made by sandals -- or shoes -- of excellent workmanship. Most of the sandals worn by the workmen of this city were poorly made; thick leather soles held on to the foot by leather thongs or strips of reinforced cloth, which were threaded through holes in the leather. In order to prevent these thongs from becoming worn where they made contact with the ground, holes were countersunk in the sole to minimize the friction. So a footprint made by a workman or a slave was quite distinctive, with its three pairs of holes. On the other hand, the human beings captured from Kazak's underground city wore more elaborate footwear. Having far more time at their disposal, the shoemakers of Dira took pride in their craft, and sewed broad leather straps to the sole with waxed thread. The soles themselves were shaped to correspond exactly to the outline of the human foot. It seemed likely, then, that these footprints in the snow had been made by a man of Dira.

Dravig asked: "These are the footprints of one of the assassins?"

"Yes."

"They seem to interest you."

"I am puzzled. If you look at my own footprints, you will see that they have been made with an even pressure -- the heel and the sole are of equal depth. In these, the heel is far deeper than the sole."

"I see that." Dravig's tone was polite, but Niall sensed that the spider found his interest incomprehensible. The spider mentality seemed averse to mathematical logic. "And what do you infer?"

Niall straightened up, shaking his head. "That he was carrying something heavy." But he was far from convinced by his own reasoning.

Fifty paces further on, the path was partly blocked with rubble where the left-hand wall had collapsed. On the other side of it there was an overgrown garden; the house to which it belonged had once been large, but had now fallen into ruin. Niall paused and stood looking at the house. Once again he had the sense that something was hovering on the edge of his perceptions, like a movement glimpsed out of the corner of his eye. Stepping carefully, he made his way over the fallen stones and into the garden. Instinct told him to turn left and make his way toward a gap in the shrubbery. It was only when he was there that he noticed that there was less snow on these bushes than on the surrounding ones, and that somebody had probably brushed past them, shaking the snow onto the ground.

A dozen yards from the house, he found his path blocked by an empty swimming pool. Its plastic material had long ago become cracked and coated with black mildew; only in places were there

glimpses of its original blue color. The bottom was covered with rubbish: dead leaves, fallen slates, and broken glass. But what immediately attracted Niall's attention was the pile of more recent rubbish on the side nearest the house. In the corner of the pool, at the foot of an aluminum ladder that was still firmly attached to the side, there were dead branches, pieces of rotten timber, and a quantity of fallen leaves mixed with snow.

Dravig was standing silently behind him. Niall asked: "Do you notice anything?"

"No." The spider's antennae were directed toward the pool.

"There's almost no snow on that lawn. Somebody has gone to the trouble of gathering all the dead leaves" -- he pointed down into the pool -- "and throwing them in there."

He went around the pool and clambered down the ladder; as he did so he noted that the steps were almost free of snow. Standing at the bottom, he reached out and grabbed the end of a length of decaying timber that looked as if it had once been the frame of a door. As he heaved it free, and a dead bush also came away with it, he saw what he had been half-expecting: a human leg protruding from the wet leaves.

A moment later, Dravig was beside him, clearing away the dead branches. The corpse that was exposed was naked; it was a man, and his head and limbs were swollen to almost balloon-like proportions. The face had turned black, and looked as if it was made of shiny leather. Niall felt the energies drain from his heart; it reminded him of his father's corpse as it lay across the threshold of their underground home in the desert.

Dravig said with satisfaction: "Skorbo managed to kill one of them before he died."

Niall leaned forward cautiously until his nostrils assured him that, in spite of its bloated appearance, the corpse had not yet started to decay. He took hold of the foot and pulled the body clear of the dead leaves. The eyes were open and the lips drawn back from the teeth; he had obviously died in agony. The knees were bent grotesquely in rigor mortis.

Dravig asked: "Do you know him?"

"No." The swelling made recognition impossible.

Niall turned away; the staring eyes and exposed teeth made him feel sick. He climbed the ladder back to the lawn; suddenly he was glad it was cold. On a hot day the corpse would already have been surrounded by bluebottles. And since bluebottles were the size of small birds, the corpse would soon have been devoured.

Niall stood staring at the lawn. Only a few hours earlier, men had worked in the darkness, gathering armfuls of snow and dead leaves to conceal the corpse; they should have left behind some clue to the identity. But the recent snow had buried all the clues. But why should they take so much trouble to hide the body? Did they mean to return later to give it a decent burial? Niall dismissed that idea. The man's clothes had been removed because they might afford a clue to his identity; the body had probably been concealed for the same reason. But that suggested that the killers were men who belonged to this city. And Niall found such an idea almost unbelievable.

Dravig had been waiting patiently while Niall stood there, lost in thought. As Niall shook his head and sighed, Dravig asked: "Do you have any idea who might be responsible?"

"None. The whole thing is completely baffling."

From over the rooftops came the sound of a gong. In the days when men were enslaved, it had been

used to announce the evening curfew; anyone found abroad after that time was subject to instant execution. Now it was used in the mornings to announce the beginning of the working day.

Niall said: "I must go back. There is a meeting of the Council in half an hour." Its full title was the Council of Free Men, but Niall shortened it in order to avoid the risk of causing offense.

As they walked back through the bushes, Niall observed something that had caught on a twig. It was a fine, thin chain made of a gold-colored metal; suspended on it there was a medallion of the same color. One side was blank; on the other was the symbol that he had already seen once that morning. Niall held it out on the palm of his hand. But Dravig stared at it blankly. The spider mentality, for all its intelligence, found symbols incomprehensible.

Niall said: "It is the same sign we found on the lead disc under the tree."

"But what does it mean?"

"I don't know. But I shall try to find out."

As they returned along the path between the walls, Niall stopped and pointed to the footprints.

"Now I understand why the heel is deeper than the toes. He was walking backwards, helping to carry the body."

"But why did they not leave the body where it was?"

"By removing it, they thought they were leaving no clues behind. If the snow had been heavier, we would never have discovered how Skorbo died."

Dravig said: "The snow was their ally."

"And also their enemy."

In the damp-smelling hallway, with its dust and rubble, Niall paused again to look around. This time he was able to find the prints of two sets of sandals in the dust. He said: "There is still one thing I cannot understand. How did they lure Skorbo into the building?"

"I can tell you that." Niall stared at him in surprise. "They used the scent of a female spider in season."

"Of course!" It was the smell that had intrigued Niall when he first stepped into the hallway. When he had returned with Dravig, it had gone. But the spider's more acute senses had detected it.

Dravig said: "What do you wish me to say to the Death Lord?"

The question took Niall by surprise. After all, he had nothing to do with Skorbo's death. Now, suddenly, he realized that his attitude revealed a lack of maturity and understanding. He was the ruler of all the human beings in this city. Therefore, the murder was his responsibility, whether he liked it or not.

He said: "Please tell the Death Lord that I shall do everything in my power to find the criminals. When they are found, they shall be handed over to you for punishment."

"Thank you." Their minds made momentary contact; it was the equivalent of a human handshake. Then Dravig turned away and went out into the square. When he and Niall were alone, he omitted the ritual gestures of homage, knowing that Niall found them embarrassing. Dravig would have preferred to make the gestures; like all spiders, he found them natural and satisfying to his sense of order. That he omitted them now was a sign of friendship and respect.

About to follow Dravig into the square, Niall remembered the leaden disc, which he had left outside

the door that led into the garden. He went back down the corridor. The disc was gone. Niall could remember the exact spot where he had left it; in fact the indentation was still in the snow, with some faint earth marks.

The slaves were now clearing the snow from the pavement in front of the house. The overseer, a powerfully built man whose face looked as if it had been carved out of wood, snapped to attention as Niall approached.

Niall asked: "What is your name?"

"Dion, sir."

"Have you seen anyone go into that house in the last ten minutes?"

"No, sir."

Niall was probing his mind as he spoke, and could see he was telling the truth.

"None of the slaves has been in there?"

"No, sir." This time, Niall sensed his hesitation. It was understandable enough. Watching slaves shoveling snow was scarcely a demanding job; what could be more natural than turning his back and gazing into the distance?

Niall looked thoughtfully at the slaves. It seemed inconceivable that any of these pathetic creatures could have taken the disc. To begin with, it would be too heavy for the pockets of their garments. Slaves weren't notoriously inclined to steal, but they were usually interested in food, or attractive shining objects. Niall scanned the minds of those who were closest to him. It was as he had expected. Slaves seemed to live in a permanent mental fog, a perpetual present without past or future; their minds were little more than a reflection of their environment. By comparison, even the overseer was an intellectual prodigy. Niall always found it depressing to probe the minds of slaves; they took their emptiness so completely for granted that it was contagious, like a disease.

Niall said: "Listen to me, Dion. Behind this house there is a garden with a gate in the wall. Follow my footprints along the lane. They will lead you to an empty swimming pool, in which you will find the body of a man. Have him carried to my palace. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." If the man was surprised, his face showed no sign of it. Under the spiders, the overseers had been trained to obey like machines.

Ashe retraced his footsteps through the snow, Niall was lost in thought. The events of the past few hours had left him baffled. Yet he found them irritating and puzzling rather than alarming -- a tiresome interruption of more important affairs.

The past six months had been the most absorbing and exciting of his life. Since the spiders had granted men their freedom, life had become a continuous adventure. In the days of slavery, men had not been allowed to use their minds. Children had been raised in strictly supervised nurseries; any who showed signs of unusual intelligence were destroyed. Books had been forbidden; so had any form of mechanical device. Even the servants of the bombardier beetles, who had always enjoyed relative freedom, had been forbidden to construct any kind of machine on pain of death.

In practice, the beetle servants had ignored the prohibition; for generations, their children had secretly learned to read. But the men of the spider city had been allowed no such latitude. Ever since birth, their minds had been systematically violated by their masters; even their most secret thoughts had

been open to inspection by the spiders. Most of them had never even dreamed of the possibility of freedom.

The men of Dira were a different matter. Until their capture by the spiders less than a year ago, they had always been free. But their minds had been cramped by generations of confinement in an underground fortress, and by the need for the strictest obedience if they were to avoid the vigilance of spider patrols. In order to guarantee their safety, their rulers -- like the late King Kazak -- had demanded total submission and loyalty. Even the women of Dira were treated by Kazak as his private harem. So the men of Dira were almost as ill equipped as the men of the spider city to deal with the experience of self-determination.

It had not taken Niall long to realize that men need to be taught to exercise their freedom. Too much freedom bewildered them and made them lazy. So the men of the spider city continued to go to work daily under the supervision of the female commanders. But these commanders were now -- theoretically at least -- under the orders of the Council of Free Men. In fact, they continued to work closely with their old masters; they regarded the spiders with a loyalty that had been instilled into them since childhood. As far as they were concerned, Niall was merely an overseer who had been appointed by the spiders. They had no desire for "freedom."

Yet humans differed from spiders in one basic respect: their craving for novelty. Niall had soon recognized that this could be used to increase their capacity for freedom. The beetle servants were now manufacturing all kinds of novelties: pressure lamps, clocks, kitchen appliances, mechanical toys, electric torches, children's picture books, even bicycles. When the first examples of these things were seen in the spider city, they created a sensation. Mechanical toys were in such demand that grown men would barter their food and clothing for them. But the men of the spider city possessed few goods that could be used for barter -- one man had been known to offer a hundred hours of manual labor in exchange for a pressure lamp. Recognizing their frustration, Niall decided to offer them the most startling novelty so far: money. In exchange for their daily work, men were paid in brass coins, cast in the newly built mint. They could use these coins to purchase food, clothing, and "novelties."

The results surpassed all Niall's expectations. Within weeks, all the men were working longer hours to accumulate more money to buy the novelties. After dark, the windows of the city glowed with the lights of pressure lamps. Manufacturers of clothing and footwear began to produce "luxury" goods that could command higher prices. Bakers began to create cakes and tarts and sweetmeats, and the coarse gray bread that had been the staple diet of human beings for as long as they could remember gave way to a fine white bread that was baked daily. The use of dyes spread from the city of the bombardier beetles; soon all the women of the spider city were wearing brightly colored garments and necklaces of glass beads. As men and women were once again allowed to live together -- the spiders had kept them segregated -- they ceased to live communally in basements, and began taking over empty buildings. Nearly all the windows in the spider city had been broken; now the beetle servants taught the art of glass manufacture, and men and women spent their free time repairing and decorating their new homes. After nightfall, the spider city had once been dark and silent; now its streets were more crowded in the evening than during the day. And the men and women who walked the streets had a new sense of confidence and responsibility; Niall could see it in their eyes, and it filled him with satisfaction. He had no illusions; he knew that most of them were little better than innocent and greedy children. Nevertheless, it was a beginning. In a few generations -- perhaps after Niall's death -- they would be capable of shaping their own destiny.

This is why Niall was so excited at the thought of the Council meeting. Every meeting was a landmark. Four of the twenty members were from the city of the bombardier beetles, and during the

early meetings, they had dominated the proceedings with their suggestions and advice; now it would take a very perceptive observer to guess which of the members were beetle servants. At the last meeting, one man had suggested that the darker streets should be lighted by large pressure lamps, which should be paid for jointly by all the inhabitants of the street; only Niall realized that the streets of ancient cities had been illuminated by municipal lighting. Another man, a cook who had once prepared a nightly meal for a hundred men, and who now lived with his wife and child, had asked permission to convert an empty room into a dining hall, where men and women could come and buy the meals that he and his wife would cook; only Niall knew that restaurants were almost as old as civilization. And the charioteers, who had once worked exclusively for the commanders, and spent most of their days waiting for their masters, were now suggesting banding together to create a public transport system. It was exciting to realize that all these people -- Niall thought of them as his people -- were embarking on an adventure of self-development, and that one day their story would occupy an important place in the history books.

And now, just as men were beginning to understand the meaning of freedom, this murder threatened to undermine everything they had accomplished. Niall was aware that many of the spiders resented this new situation; they regarded human beings as slaves whose lives were as unimportant as those of the lowest kind of insect. Now they had been told that these human vermin were under the special protection of Nuada, the Goddess of the Delta, and that the Spider Lord had ordered that they were to be treated as equals under the Law. That was, of course, preposterous. Nothing could make a spider regard a human being as his equal. But because they were accustomed to obedience, they observed the letter of the Law, and ceased to treat human beings as slaves. They continued to regard them with contempt, but they no longer showed it openly. And because human beings continued to regard the spiders with fear and respect, there was no open friction.

But if these human lice could murder a spider, then the whole situation had become outrageous. It would surely deserve the utmost severity -- as in the old days, when rebels had been tortured and executed in batches of a hundred at a time.

Dravig had said that the Spider Lord would stick to the agreement; human life would continue to be respected. But since spiders were telepathic, they were far more aware of one another's feelings than human beings were. If the feeling became too strong, even the despotic old Spider Lord might feel obliged to change her policy. . .

Niall was aroused from these disquieting reflections by the sight of two charioteers who were laboring breathlessly through the deep snow; behind them in the cart sat a big, fleshy man, who was shaking his head with visible impatience. Niall recognized him as an overseer named Broadus, a prominent member of the Council of Free Men. When he saw Niall, the expression of irritation dissolved into an ingratiating smile. He made a bow from a sitting position.

"Good morning, highness. I'm sorry I'm late."

"Good morning, Broadus." (Broadus's smile changed into something like a smirk; he loved hearing his name spoken aloud.) "I'm afraid we're all late. Would you tell the Council I'll be with them in a few minutes?"

"Certainly, highness." He shot a wrathful glance at the charioteers as he clambered out into the snow.

As Niall started to mount the stairs, Nephtys came hurrying down to meet him. She said in a whisper "The Princess Merlew is waiting to see you."

"Oh no! I've got a Council meeting."

"I've told her that."

"All right. Thank you, Nephtys."

As he approached his chamber, the door opened and Merlew came out; she must have been waiting behind it.

"Good morning, Niall."

"Good morning, princess." He deliberately used the formal title.

She was looking dazzlingly beautiful in a short dress of red spider silk which clung to the curves of her body; her red-gold hair was combed straight down her back.

"You must be cold." She took his hands in both of hers. "Oh yes, you're frozen! So is your face." She had placed her hands on his cheeks; they felt pleasantly warm. He felt his impatience melting away; he had never been able to maintain an attitude of coolness toward Merlew.

"I've got a Council meeting. . ."

"I know. You can keep them waiting. That's your prerogative."

"Punctuality is the politeness of kings."

She laughed. "That's clever! I must remember that."

He was tempted to tell her that he had found it in an old book, but she interrupted him.

"I've got a present for you."

He grunted noncommittally; he was pulling off his boots, and the thick woolen socks.

"It's a new servant girl. Her name is Savitri. I've trained her myself."

He was buckling his sandal, and was glad his face was averted. "Thank you, but I can't accept her."

"Why not?"

"This house is run by women -- it might cause problems."

"I'm sure it wouldn't. I'll speak to your mother."

"I'd rather you didn't. Why don't you give her to my brother?"

"Because Veig ..." She lowered her voice. "Because Veig already has enough body servants." She laid a delicate emphasis on the word "body." Veig was notorious for his susceptibility to attractive girls.

"So have I."

She sighed. "I wish you weren't so hard to please." She took from his hands the belt with the ceremonial shortsword, and passed it round his waist. For a moment, her pointed breasts pressed against his chest, and her lips came close. In that moment he realized how easy it would be to relent and say yes. All that restrained him was the knowledge that his womenfolk would regard the new girl as a spy, and resent her accordingly. As Merlew finished buckling his belt he said: "I have to go."

"There's something else I have to tell you."

"Yes?" He hesitated at the door.

She stepped back and lowered her eyes; it was a reaction that always made him suspicious.

"I've heard a rumor. . . The Council intends to ask you to get married."

"Married!" He was genuinely taken aback.

She said quickly: "It's nothing to do with me. I only heard it secondhand." She reached up and made an adjustment to the front of his tunic.

He looked down at her quizzically. "And what do you think?"

"I quite agree, of course." She colored. "I'm not suggesting you should marry me. There are plenty of nice girls among the commanders." He made a movement of impatience. "But you do need someone to help you."

He should have known from past experience that she could exert an almost hypnotic power of attraction. Yet it never failed to take him by surprise. He was aware that she had put on this red dress for his benefit, and that she wore a perfume distilled from gorse flowers because she knew it was his favorite. But she exuded a magic that made these things unimportant; it was urging him to take hold of her bare shoulders and kiss her mouth. He looked away from her with an effort.

"I'm afraid we shan't be discussing marriage this morning."

She looked up quickly. "Why not?"

"There's something more important. Have you heard about Skorbo?"

She shook her head.

"He's been murdered."

"Oh no!" Her surprise was genuine; he was able to see into her mind as she spoke, and he could register her sense of shock. That came as a relief. Merlew had detested Skorbo, and it had crossed Niall's mind that she might be behind the murder.

Merlew was also intelligent enough to understand the implications of the killing, and they worried her. She was Kazak's daughter, and she knew how the spiders would react. "Who can have done it?"

"I have no idea."

"Surely not a human? Are you sure it wasn't another spider?"

"No. It was a human all right. But now I have to go."

This time she made no attempt to detain him. Yet it cost him an effort to leave her. As he hurried along the corridor, he shook his head with amusement. He had caught himself feeling a flash of gratitude to Skorbo's assassins for distracting Merlew.

The Council of Free Men met in the main dining hall of the palace. (In fact, Niall's researches had revealed that the "palace" had once been the Royal Insurance Building, and that the council chamber had been its board room.) Now, as he crossed the main hall toward its great double doors, someone waved to him from a curtained recess. From the shabby green tunic, the color of dying moss, Niall recognized Simeon, the chief physician of the city of the bombardier beetles. Since the days of freedom, Simeon had founded a college of medicine. He was also one of the most active members of the Council. At the moment, it was obvious that he was anxious not to be seen. As Niall approached, he disappeared behind the curtain. Niall followed.

Simeon said quickly: "A word in your ear. The Council has got some plan to marry you off."

"I know."

"Who told you?"

"Merlew."

Simeon grunted sarcastically. "She's behind it."

"Who proposed it?"

"Corbin."

"I should have guessed." Corbin was also a member of the stadion, the council of the city of the beetles; he and Merlew had always been friendly.

"I thought I'd better warn you anyway."

"Thanks. Now we'd better go -- we're late."

Simeon said: "Let me go first and give me two minutes. I don't want them to realize we've been speaking."

Niall smiled ironically as he watched him go; it seemed absurd that being a ruler of men involved so much plotting and counterplotting.

There was a knock on the main door; since there were no servants nearby, Niall went and opened it himself. The overseer Dion was standing there; behind him stood half a dozen slaves, carrying the corpse on an improvised stretcher made of planks.

"Where shall we put him, sir?"

"On the table there."

Dion shook his head. "I wouldn't advise putting him too near a fire, sir. He'll start to pong."

"No, of course. Have the table carried out into the courtyard and put him on it."

Dion beckoned for more slaves. Niall hurried into the council chamber.

The members were talking earnestly among themselves, and at first failed to notice his entrance. They all jumped to their feet, and raised both arms to chest level in a ritual salute.

"Please sit down, gentlemen. I'm sorry I'm late." He drew up his chair at the head of the table. "We have some important business. . ."

Broadus, whose seat was next to Niall, jumped to his feet with a deferential smile.

"Very important business, if I may say so, highness. Perhaps I may. . ."

Niall raised his hand. "One moment please, Councilor Broadus. Gentlemen, I would like you all to look out the window."

All turned and looked outside. The door into the courtyard had opened, and four slaves carried out the table into the snow. There were sharp intakes of breath as the others followed with the corpse, and lifted it onto the tabletop.

Simeon was the first to speak. "Who is that?" He was so surprised that he forgot to address Niall as "sire," a formality he always observed at Council meetings.

"I don't know. I was hoping one of you might be able to tell me. Would you mind stepping outside?"

A door from the chamber led directly into the courtyard. They all followed Niall into the cold air. Th

face of the dead man was blacker and more swollen than when Niall had last seen it. The Council of Free Men looked at him with distaste, but without revulsion; this was not the first time they had seen the body of a man killed by spider venom.

"Does anyone recognize him?"

Some moved to get a better view; one by one, all shook their heads.

"Simeon, could he be from your city?"

"No. I know every man there. This isn't one of them."

As they looked at the corpse, Niall watched them carefully, his mind receptive to impressions. It was obvious to him that none of them knew anything about Skorbo's death.

Simeon was peering closely at the feet. He asked Niall: "Notice anything?"

Niall studied them closely. "They're unusually hairy." The man's legs, and the upper portions of his feet, were covered with dark hairs.

"Not that." Simeon took hold of two of the dead man's toes, and pulled them apart. "Look. He was born with webbed feet, like a duck. The webs were severed later."

Mastering his revulsion, Niall looked more closely, and was able to see the flaps of loose skin between the big toe and its companion. He shook his head. "What does it mean?"

"Just a birth defect -- I've seen it once or twice. But it proves that he wasn't born in this city."

Some of the others looked puzzled. But Niall understood his meaning. The spiders bred human beings for physical perfection; those who had the slightest defect were killed at birth.

Niall turned to Dion. "Cover him over with a sheet. Then have the body removed to the mortuary."

He led them back inside again; they were all looking shaken. Simeon said: "Does anyone know what happened?"

"Yes. He was killed by Skorbo." There were some angry murmurs. Niall said: "But it was understandable. He was responsible for Skorbo's death."

That shocked them, as he had known it would. Someone said incredulously: "A lone man killed a spider?"

"There were three of them. It was an ingenious booby trap. They cut off the fronds of a young palm, then bent it down like a spring. As Skorbo approached, they cut the rope. . ."

There was no need to elaborate; Niall's words, reinforced by mental images, conveyed his meaning direct to their minds.

Niall took the pendant on its gold chain from his pocket and handed it to Broadus. "Has anyone seen this before?"

As it was passed around the table there was a shaking of heads.

Simeon asked: "It belonged to the dead man?"

Niall nodded. "It is of ancient workmanship. No modern jeweler would have the skill to make this chain."

"Have you any ideas about that symbol on it?"

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