

The Seven Geases

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The Lord Ralibar Vooz, high magistrate of Commoriom and third cousin to King Homquat, had gone forth with six-and-twenty of his most valorous retainers in quest of such game as was afforded by the black Eiglophian Mountains. Leaving to lesser sportsmen the great sloths and vampire-bats of the intermediate jungle, as well as the small but noxious dinosauria, Ralibar Vooz and his followers had pushed rapidly ahead and had covered the distance between the Hyperborean capital and their objective in a day's march. The glassy scaurs and grim ramparts of Mount Voormithadreth, highest and most formidable of the Eiglophians, had beetled above them, wedging the sun with dark scoriac peaks at mid-afternoon, and walling the blazonries of sunset wholly from view. They had spent the night beneath its lowermost crags, keeping a ceaseless watch, piling dead branches on their fires, and hearing on the grisly heights above them the wild and dog-like ululations of those subhuman savages, the Voormis for which the mountain was named. Also, they heard the bellowing of an alpine catoblepas pursued by the Voormis, and the mad snarling of a saber-tooth tiger assailed and dragged down; and Ralibar Vooz had deemed that these noises boded well for the morrow's hunting.

He and his men rose betimes; and having breakfasted on their provisions of dried bear-meat and a dark sour wine that was noted for its invigorative qualities, they began immediately the ascent of the mountain, whose upper precipices were hollow with caves occupied by the Voormis. Ralibar Vooz had hunted these creatures before; and a certain room of his house in Commoriom was arrased with their thick and shaggy pelts. They were usually deemed the most dangerous of the Hyperborean fauna; and the mere climbing of Voormithadreth, even without the facing of its inhabitants, would have been a feat attended by more than sufficient peril: but Ralibar Vooz, having tasted of such sport, could now satisfy himself with nothing tamer.

He and his followers were well armed and accoutered. Some of the men bore coils of rope and grapplinghooks to be employed in the escalade of the steeper crags. Some carried heavy crossbows; and many were equipped with long-handled and saber-bladed bills which, from experience, had proved the most effective weapons in close-range fighting with the Voormis. The whole party was variously studded with auxiliary knives, throwing-darts, two-handed simitars, maces, bodkins and saw-toothed axes. The men were all clad in jerkins and hose of dinosaur-leather, and were shod with brazen-spiked buskins. Ralibar Vooz himself wore a light suiting of copper chain-mail, which, flexible as cloth, in no wise impeded his movements. In addition he carried a buckler of mammoth-hide with a long bronze spike in its center that could be used as a thrusting-sword; and, being a man of huge stature and strength, his shoulders and baldric were hung with a whole arsenal of weaponries.

The mountain was of volcanic origin, though its four craters were supposedly all extinct. For hours the climbers toiled upward on the fearsome scarps of black lava and obsidian, seeing the sheerer heights above them recede interminably into a cloudless zenith, as if not to be approached by man. Far faster than they the sun climbed, blazing torridly upon them and heating the rocks till their hands were scorched as if by the walls of a furnace. But Ralibar Vooz, eager to flesh his weapons, would permit no halting in the shady chasms nor under the scant umbrage of rare junipers.

That day, however, it seemed that the Voormis were not abroad upon Mount Voormithadreth. No doubt they had feasted too well during the night, when their hunting cries had been heard by the Commorians. Perhaps it would be necessary to invade the warren of caves in the loftier crags: a procedure none too palatable even for a sportsman of such hardihood as Ralibar Vooz. Few of these caverns could be reached by men without the use of ropes; and the Voormis, who were possessed of quasi-human cunning, would hurl blocks and rubble upon the heads of the assailants. Most of the caves were narrow and darksome, thus putting at a grave disadvantage the hunters who entered them; and the Voormis would fight redoubtably in defense of their young and their females, who dwelt in the inner recesses; and the females were fiercer and more pernicious, if possible, than the males.

Such matters as these were debated by Ralibar Vooz and his henchmen as the escalade became more arduous and hazardous, and they saw far above them the pitted mouths of the lower dens. Tales were told of brave hunters who had gone into those dens and had not returned; and much was said of the vile feeding-habits of the Voormis and the uses to which their captives were put before death and after it. Also, much was said regarding the genesis of the Voormis, who were popularly believed to be the offspring of women and certain atrocious creatures that had come forth in primal days from a tenebrous cavern-world in the bowels of Voormithadreth. Somewhere beneath that four-coned mountain, the sluggish and baleful god Tsathoggua, who had come down from Saturn in years immediately following the Earth's creation, was fabled to reside; and during the rite of

worship at his black altars, the devotees were always careful to orient themselves toward Voormithadreth. Other and more doubtful beings than Tsathoggua slept below the extinct volcanoes, or ranged and ravened throughout that hidden underworld; but of these beings few men other than the more adept or abandoned wizards, professed to know anything at all.

Ralibar Vooz, who had a thoroughly modern disdain of the supernatural, avowed his skepticism in no equivocal terms when he heard his henchmen regaling each other with these antique legendries. He swore with many ribald blasphemies that there were no gods anywhere, above or under Voormithadreth. As for the Voormis themselves, they were indeed a misbegotten species; but it was hardly necessary, in explaining their generation, to go beyond the familiar laws of nature. They were merely the remnant of a low and degraded tribe of aborigines, who, sinking further into bruteness, had sought refuge in those volcanic fastnesses after the coming of the true Hyperboreans.

Certain grizzled veterans of the party shook their heads and muttered at these heresies; but because of their respect for the high rank and prowess of Ralibar Vooz, they did not venture to gainsay him openly.

After several hours of heroic climbing, the hunters came within measurable distance of those nether caves. Below them now, in a vast and dizzying prospect, were the wooded hills and fair, fertile plains of Hyperborea. They were alone in a world of black, raven rock, with innumerable precipices and chasms above, beneath and on all sides. Directly overhead, in the face of an almost perpendicular cliff, were three of the cavern-mouths, which had the aspect of volcanic fumaroles. Much of the cliff was glazed with obsidian, and there were few ledges or hand-grips. It seemed that even the Voormis, agile as apes, could scarcely climb that wall; and Ralibar Vooz, after studying it with a strategic eye, decided that the only feasible approach to the dens was from above. A diagonal crack, running from a shelf just below them to the summit, no doubt afforded ingress and egress to their occupants.

First, however, it was necessary to gain the precipice above: a difficult and precarious feat in itself. At one side of the long talus on which the hunters were standing, there was a chimney that wound upward in the wall, ceasing thirty feet from the top and leaving a sheer, smooth surface. Working along the chimney to its upper end, a good alpinist could hurl his rope and grappling-hook to the summit-edge.

The advisability of bettering their present vantage was now emphasized by a shower of stones and offal from the caverns. They noted certain human relics, well-gnawed and decayed, amid the offal. Ralibar Vooz, animated by wrath against these miscreants, as well as by the fervor of the huntsman, led his six-and-twenty followers in the escalade. He soon reached the chimney's termination, where a slanting ledge offered bare foothold at one side. After the third cast, his rope held; and he went up hand over hand to the precipice.

He found himself on a broad and comparatively level-topped buttress of the lowest cone of Voormithadreth, which still rose for two thousand feet above him like a steep pyramid. Before him on the buttress, the black lava-stone was gnarled into numberless low ridges and strange masses like the pedestals of gigantic columns. Dry, scanty grasses and withered alpine flowers grew here and there in shallow basins of darkish soil; and a few cedars, levin-struck or stunted, had taken root in the fissured rock. Amid the black ridges, and seemingly close at hand, a thread of pale smoke ascended, serpentine oddly in the still air of noon and reaching an unbelievable height ere it vanished. Ralibar Vooz inferred that the buttress was inhabited by some person nearer to civilized humanity than the Voormis, who were quite ignorant of the use of fire. Surprised by this discovery, he did not wait for his men to join him, but started off at once to investigate the source of the curling smoke-thread.

He had deemed it merely a few steps away, behind the first of those grotesque furrows of lava. But evidently he had been deceived in this: for he climbed ridge after ridge and rounded many broad and curious dolmens and great dolomites which rose inexplicably before him where, an instant previous, he had thought there were only ordinary boulders; and still the pale, sinuous wisp went skyward at the same seeming interval.

Ralibar Vooz, high magistrate and redoubtable hunter, was both puzzled and irritated by this behavior of the smoke. Likewise, the aspect of the rocks around him was disconcertingly and unpleasantly deceitful. He was wasting too much time in an exploration idle and quite foreign to the real business of the day; but it was not his nature to abandon any enterprise no matter how trivial, without reaching the set goal. Hallooing loudly to his men, who must have climbed the cliff by now, he went on toward the elusive smoke.

It seemed to him, once or twice, that he heard the answering shouts of his followers, very faint and indistinct, as if across some mile-wide chasm. Again he called lustily, but this time there was no audible reply. Going a little farther, he began

to detect among the rocks beside him a peculiar conversational droning and muttering in which four or five different voices appeared to take part. Seemingly they were much nearer at hand than the smoke, which had now receded like a mirage. One of the voices was clearly that of a Hyperborean; but the others possessed a timbre and accent which Ralibar Vooz, in spite of his varied ethnic knowledge, could not associate with any branch or subdivision of mankind. They affected his ears in a most unpleasant fashion, suggesting by turns the hum of great insects, the murmurs of fire and water, and the rasping of metal.

Ralibar Vooz emitted a hearty and somewhat ireful bellow to announce his coming to whatever persons were convened amid the rocks. His weapons and accouterments clattering loudly, he scrambled over a sharp lava-ridge toward the voices.

Topping the ridge, he looked down on a scene that was both mysterious and unexpected. Below him, in a circular hollow, there stood a rude hut of boulders and stone fragments roofed with cedar boughs. In front of this hovel, on a large flat block of obsidian, a fire burned with flares alternately blue, green and white; and from it rose the pale, thin spiral of smoke whose situation had illuded him so strangely.

An old man, withered and disreputable-looking, in a robe that appeared no less antique and unsavory than himself, was standing near to the fire. He was not engaged in any visible culinary operations; and, in view of the torrid sun, it hardly seemed that he required the warmth given by the queer-colored blaze. Aside from this individual, Ralibar Vooz looked in vain for the participants of the muttered conversation he had just overheard. He thought there was an evanescent fluttering of dim, grotesque, shadows around the obsidian block; but the shadows faded and vanished in an instant; and, since there were no objects or beings that could have cast them, Ralibar Vooz deemed that he had been victimized by another of those highly disagreeable optic illusions in which that part of the mountain Vormithadreth seemed to abound.

The old man eyed the hunter with a fiery gaze and began to curse him in fluent but somewhat archaic diction as he descended into the hollow. At the same time, a lizard-tailed and sooty-feathered bird, which seemed to belong to some night-flying species of archaeopteryx, began to snap its toothed beak and flap its digited wings on the objectionably shapen stela that served it for a perch. This stela, standing on the lee side of the fire and very close to it, had not been perceived by Ralibar Vooz at first glance.

"May the ordure of demons bemire you from heel to crown!" cried the venomous ancient. "O lumbering, bawling idiot! you have ruined a most promising and important evocation. How you came here I cannot imagine. I have surrounded this place with twelve circles of illusion, whose effect is multiplied by their myriad intersections; and the chance that any intruder would ever find his way to my abode was mathematically small and insignificant. Ill was that chance which brought you here: for They that you have frightened away will not return until the high stars repeat a certain rare and quickly passing conjunction; and much wisdom is lost to me in the interim."

"How now, varlet!" said Ralibar Vooz, astonished and angered by this greeting, of which he understood little save that his presence was unwelcome to the old man. "Who are you that speak so churlishly to a magistrate of Commoriom and a cousin to King Homquat? I advise you to curb such insolence: for, if so I wish, it lies in my power to serve you even as I serve the Voormis. Though methinks," he added, "your pelt is far too filthy and verminous to merit room amid my trophies of the chase."

"Know that I am the sorcerer Ezdagor," proclaimed the ancient, his voice echoing among the rocks with dreadful sonority. "By choice I have lived remote from cities and men; nor have the Voormis of the mountain troubled me in my magical seclusion. I care not if you are the magistrate of all swinedom or a cousin to the king of dogs. In retribution for the charm you have shattered, the business you have undone by this oafish trespass, I shall put upon you a most dire and calamitous and bitter geas."

"You speak in terms of outmoded superstition," said Ralibar Vooz, who was impressed against his will by the weighty oratorical style in which Ezdagor had delivered these periods.

The old man seemed not to hear him.

"Harken then to your geas, O Ralibar Vooz," he fulminated. "For this is the geas, that you must cast aside all your weapons and go unarmed into the dens of the Voormis; and fighting bare-handed against the Voormis and against their females and their young, you must win to that secret cave in the bowels of Voormithadreth, beyond the dens, wherein abides from eldermost eons the god Tsathoggua. You shall know Tsathoggua by his great girth and his batlike furriness and the look of a sleepy black toad which he has eternally. He will rise not from his place, even in the ravening of hunger,

but will wait in divine slothfulness for the sacrifice. And, going close to Lord Tsathoggua, you must say to him: "I am the blood-offering sent by the sorcerer Ekdagor." Then, if it be his pleasure, Tsathoggua will avail himself of the offering.

"In order that you may not go astray, the bird Raphtontis, who is my familiar, will guide you in your wanderings on the mountain-side and through the caverns." He indicated with a peculiar gesture the night flying archaeopteryx on the foully symbolic stela, and added as if in afterthought: "Raphtontis will remain with you till the accomplishment of the geas and the end of your journey below Voormithadreth. He knows the secrets of the underworld and the lairing-places of the Old ones. If our Lord Tsathoggua should disdain the blood-offering, or, in his generosity, should send you on to his brethren, Raphtontis will be fully competent to lead the way whithersoever is ordained by the god."

Ralibar Vooz found himself unable to answer this more than outrageous peroration in the style which it manifestly deserved. In fact, he could say nothing at all: for it seemed that a sort of lockjaw had afflicted him. Moreover, to his exceeding terror and bewilderment, this vocal paralysis was accompanied by certain involuntary movements of a most alarming type. With a sense of nightmare compulsion, together with the horror of one who feels that he is going mad, he began to divest himself of the various weapons which he carried. His bladed buckler, his mace, broadsword, hunting-knife, ax and needle-tipped anlace jingled on the ground before the obsidian block.

"I shall permit you to retain your helmet and bodyarmor," said Ekdagor at this juncture. "Otherwise, I fear that you will not reach Tsathoggua in the state of corporeal intactness proper for a sacrifice. The teeth and nails of the Voormis are sharp, even as their appetites."

Muttering certain half-inaudible and doubtful-sounding words, the wizard turned from Ralibar Vooz and began to quench the tri-colored fire with a mixture of dust and blood from a shallow brass basin. Deigning to vouchsafe no farewell or sign of dismissal, he kept his back toward the hunter, but waved his left hand obliquely to the bird Raphtontis. This creature, stretching his murky wings and clacking his saw-like beak, abandoned his perch and hung poised in air with one ember-colored eye malignly fixed on Ralibar Vooz. Then, floating slowly, his long snakish neck reverted and his eye maintaining its vigilance, the bird flew among the lava-ridges toward the pyramidal cone of Voormithadreth; and Ralibar Vooz followed, driven by a compulsion that he could neither understand nor resist.

Evidently the demon fowl knew all the turnings of that maze of delusion with which Ekdagor had environed his abode; for the hunter was led with comparatively little indirection across the enchanted buttress. He heard the far-off shouting of his men as he went; but his own voice was faint and thin as that of a flittermouse when he sought to reply. Soon he found himself at the bottom of a great scrap of the upper mountain, pitted with cavern-mouths. It was a part of Voormithadreth that he had never visited before.

Raphtontis rose toward the lowest cave, and hovered at its entrance while Ralibar Vooz climbed precariously behind him amid a heavy barrage of bones and glassedged flints and other oddments of less mentionable nature hurled by the Voormis. These low, brutal savages, fringing the dark mouths of the dens with their repulsive faces and members, greeted the hunter's progress with ferocious howlings and an inexhaustible supply of garbage. However, they did not molest Raphtontis, and it seemed that they were anxious to avoid hitting him with their missiles; though the presence of this hovering, wide-winged fowl interfered noticeably with their aim as Ralibar Vooz began to near the nethermost den.

Owing to this partial protection, the hunter was able to reach the cavern without serious injury. The entrance was rather strait; and Raphtontis flew upon the Voormis with open beak and flapping wings, compelling them to withdraw into the interior while Ralibar Vooz made firm his position on the threshold-ledge. Some, however, threw themselves on their faces to allow the passage of Raphtontis; and, rising when the bird had gone by, they assailed the Commorian as he followed his guide into the fetid gloom. They stood only half erect, and their shaggy heads were about his thighs and hips, snarling and snapping like dogs; and they clawed him with hook-shaped nails that caught and held in the links of his armor.

Weaponless he fought them in obedience to his geas, striking down their hideous faces with his mailed fist in a veritable madness that was not akin to the ardor of a huntsman. He felt their nails and teeth break on the close-woven links as he hurled them loose; but others took their places when he won onward a little into the murky cavern; and their females struck at his legs like darting serpents; and their young beslavered his ankles with mouths wherein the fangs were as yet ungrown.

Before him, for his guidance, he heard the clanking of the wings of Raphtontis, and the harsh cries, half hiss and half caw, that were emitted by this bird at intervals. The darkness stifled him with a thousand stenches; and his feet slipped in blood

and filth at every step. But anon he knew that the Voormis had ceased to assail him. The cave sloped downward; and he breathed an air that was edged with sharp, acrid mineral odors. Groping for a while through sightless night, and descending a steep incline, he came to a sort of underground hall in which neither day or darkness prevailed. Here the archings of rock were visible by an obscure glow such as hidden moons might yield. Thence, through declivitous grottoes and along perilously skirted gulfs, he was conducted ever downward by Raphtontis into the world beneath the mountain Voormithadreth. Everywhere was that dim, unnatural light whose source he could not ascertain. Wings that were too broad for those of the bat flew vaguely overhead; and at whiles, in the shadowy caverns, he beheld great, fearsome bulks having a likeness to those behemoths and giant reptiles which burdened the Earth in earlier times, but because of the dimness he could not tell if these were living shapes or forms that the stone had taken.

Strong was the compulsion of his geas on Ralibar Vooz; and a numbness had seized his mind; and he felt only a dulled fear and a dazed wonder. It seemed that his will and his thoughts were no longer his own, but were become those of some alien person. He was going down to some obscure but predestined end, by a route that was darksome but foreknown.

At last the bird Raphtontis paused and hovered significantly in a cave distinguished from the others by a most evil potpourri of smells. Ralibar Vooz deemed at first that the cave was empty. Going forward to join Raphtontis, he stumbled over certain attenuated remnants on the Boor, which appeared to be the skin-clad skeletons of men and various animals. Then, following the coal-bright gaze of the demon bird, he discerned in a dark recess the formless bulking of a couchant mass. And the mass stirred a little at his approach, and put forth with infinite slothfulness a huge and toad-shaped head. And the head opened its eyes very slightly, as if half awakened from slumber, so that they were visible as two slits of oozing phosphor in the black, browless face.

Ralibar Vooz perceived an odor of fresh blood amid the many fetors that rose to besiege his nostrils. A horror came upon him therewith; for, looking down, he beheld lying before the shadowy monster the lean husk of a thing that was neither man, beast nor Voormi. He stood hesitant, fearing to go closer yet powerless to retreat. But, admonished by an angry hissing from the archaeopteryx, together with a slashing stroke of its beak between his shoulder-blades, he went forward till he could see the fine dark fur on the dormant body and sleepily corrected head.

With new horror, and a sense of hideous doom, he heard his own voice speaking without volition: "O Lord Tsathoggua, I am the blood-offering sent by the sorcerer Ezdagor."

There was a sluggish inclination of the toad-like head; and the eyes opened a little wider, and light flowed from them in viscous tricklings on the creased underlids. Then Ralibar Vooz seemed to hear a deep, rumbling sound; but he knew not whether it reverberated in the dusky air or in his own mind. And the sound shaped itself, albeit uncouthly, into syllables and words:

"Thanks are due to Ezdagor for this offering. But, since I have fed lately on a well-blooded sacrifice, my hunger is appeased for the present, and I require not the offering. However, it may be that others of the Old Ones are athirst or famished. And, since you came here with a geas upon you, it is not fitting that you should go hence without another. So I place you under this geas, to betake yourself downward through the caverns till you reach, after long descent, that bottomless gulf over which the spider-god Atlach-Nacha weaves his eternal webs. And there, calling to Atlach-Nacha, you must say: 'I am the gift sent by Tsathoggua.'"

So, with Raphtontis leading him, Ralibar Vooz departed from the presence of Tsathoggua by another route than that which had brought him there. The way steepened more and more; and it ran through chambers that were too vast for the searching of sight; and along precipices that fell sheer for an unknown distance to the black, sluggish form and somnolent murmur of underworld seas.

At last, on the verge of a chasm whose farther shore was lost in darkness, the night-flying bird hung motionless with level wings and down-dropping tail. Ralibar Vooz went close to the verge and saw that great webs were attached to it at intervals, seeming to span the gulf with their multiple crossing and reticulations of gray, rope thick strands. Apart from these, the chasm was bridgeless. Far out on one of the webs he discerned a darksome form, big as a crouching man but with long spider-like members. Then, like a dreamer who hears some nightmare sound, he heard his own voice crying loudly: "O Atlach-Nacha, I am the gift sent by Tsathoggua."

The dark form ran toward him with incredible swiftness. When it came near he saw that there was a kind of face on the squat ebon body, low down amid the several-jointed legs. The face peered up with a weird expression of doubt and inquiry; and terror crawled through the veins of the bold huntsman as he met the small, crafty eyes that were circled about

with hair. Thin, shrill, piercing as a sting, there spoke to him the voice of the spider-god Atlach-Nacha: "I am duly grateful for the gift. But, since there is no one else to bridge this chasm, and since eternity is required for the task, I can not spend my time in extracting you from those curious shards of metal. However, it may be that the antehuman sorcerer Haon-Dor, who abides beyond the gulf in his palace of primal enchantments, can somehow find a use for you. The bridge I have just now completed runs to the threshold of his abode; and your weight will serve to test the strength of my weaving. Go then, with this geas upon you, to cross the bridge and present yourself before Haon-Dor, saying: 'Atlach-Nacha has sent me.'"

With these words, the spider-god withdrew his bulk from the web and ran quickly from sight along the chasm-edge, doubtless to begin the construction of a new bridge at some remoter point.

Though the third geas was heavy and compulsive upon him, Ralibar Vooz followed Raptontis none too willingly over the night-bound depths. The weaving of Atlach-Nacha was strong beneath his feet, giving and swaying only a little; but between the strands, in unfathomable space below, he seemed to descry the dim flitting of dragons with claw-tipped wings; and, like a seething of the darkness, fearful hulks without name appeared to heave and sink from moment to moment.

However, he and his guide came presently to the gulf's opposite shore, where the web of Atlach-Nacha was joined to the lowest step of a mighty stairway. The stairs were guarded by a coiled snake whose mottlings were broad as buckles, and whose middle volumes exceeded in girth the body of a stout warrior. The horny tail of this serpent rattled like a sistrum, and he thrust forth an evil head with fangs that were long as billhooks. But, seeing Raptontis, he drew his coils aside and permitted Ralibar Vooz to ascend the steps.

Thus, in fulfilment of the third geas, the hunter entered the thousand-columned palace of Haon-Dor. Strange and silent were those halls hewn from the gray, fundamental rock of Earth. In them were faceless forms of smoke and mist that went uneasily to and fro, and statues representing monsters with myriad heads. In the vaults above, as if hung aloof in night, lamps burned with inverse flames that were like the combustion of ice and stone. A chill spirit of evil, ancient beyond all conception of man, was abroad in those halls; and horror and fear crept throughout them like invisible serpents, unknotted from sleep.

Threading the mazy chambers with the surety of one accustomed to all their windings, Raptontis conducted Ralibar Vooz to a high room whose walls described a circle, broken only by the one portal, through which he entered. The room was empty of furnishment, save for a five-pillared seat rising so far aloft without stairs or other means of approach, that it seemed only a winged being could ever attain thereto. But on the seat was a figure shrouded with thick, sable darkness, and having over its head and features a caul of grisly shadow.

The bird Raptontis hovered ominously before the columned chair. And Ralibar Vooz, in astonishment, heard a voice saying: "O Haon-Dor, Atlach-Nacha has sent me." And not till the voice ceased speaking did he know it for his own.

For a long time the silence seemed infrangible. There was no stirring of the high-seated figure. But Ralibar Vooz, peering trepidantly at the walls about him, beheld their former smoothness embossed with a thousand faces, twisted and awry like those of mad devils. The faces were thrust forward on necks that lengthened; and behind the necks malshapen shoulders and bodies emerged inch by inch from the stone, craning toward the huntsman. And beneath his feet the very floor was now cobbled with other faces, turning and tossing restlessly, and opening ever wider their demoniacal mouths and eyes.

At last the shrouded figure spoke; and though the words were of no mortal tongue, it seemed to the listener that he comprehended them darkly:

"My thanks are due to Atlach-Nacha for this sending. If I appear to hesitate, it is only because I am doubtful regarding what disposition I can make of you. My familiars, who crowd the walls and floors of this chamber, would devour you all too readily; but you would serve only as a morsel amid so many. On the whole, I believe that the best thing I can do is to send you on to my allies, the serpent-people. They are scientists of no ordinary attainment; and perhaps you might provide some special ingredient required in their chemistries. Consider, then, that a geas has been put upon you, and take yourself off to the caverns in which the serpent-people reside."

Obedying this injunction, Ralibar Vooz went down through the darkest strata of that primeval underworld, beneath the palace of Haon-Dor. The guidance of Raptontis never failed him; and he came anon to the spacious caverns in which the serpent-men were busying themselves with a multitude of tasks. They walked lithely and sinuously erect on pre-

mammalian members, their pried and hairless bodies bending with great suppleness. There was a loud and constant hissing of formulae as they went to and fro. Some were smelting the black nether ores; some were blowing molten obsidian into forms of flask and urn; some were measuring chemicals; others were decanting strange liquids and curious colloids. In their intense preoccupation, none of them seemed to notice the arrival of Ralibar Vooz and his guide.

After the hunter had repeated many times the message given him by Haon-Dor, one of the walking reptiles at last perceived his presence. This being eyed him with cold but highly disconcerting curiosity, and then emitted a sonorous hiss that was audible above all the noises of labor and converse. The other serpentmen ceased their toil immediately and began to crowd around Ralibar Vooz. From the tone of their sibilations, it seemed that there was much argument among them. Certain of their number sidled close to the Commorian, touching his face and hands with their chill, scaly digits, and prying beneath his armor. He felt that they were anatomizing him with methodical minuteness. At the same time, he perceived that they paid no attention to Raptontis, who had perched himself on a large alembic.

After a while, some of the chemists went away and returned quickly, bearing among them two great jars of glass filled with a clear liquid. In one of the jars there floated upright a well-developed and mature male Voormi; in the other, a large and equally perfect specimen of Hyperborean manhood, not without a sort of general likeness to Ralibar Vooz himself. The bearers of these specimens deposited their burdens beside the hunter and then each of them delivered what was doubtless a learned dissertation on comparative biology.

This series of lectures, unlike many such, was quite brief. At the end the reptilian chemists returned to their various labors, and the jars were removed. One of the scientists then addressed himself to Ralibar Vooz with a fair though somewhat sibilant approximation of human speech:

"It was thoughtful of Haon-Dor to send you here. However, as you have seen, we are already supplied with an exemplar of your species; and, in the past, we have thoroughly dissected others and have learned all that there is to learn regarding this very uncouth and aberrant life-form.

"Also, since our chemistry is devoted almost wholly to the production of powerful toxic agents, we can find no use in our tests and manufactures for the extremely ordinary matters of which your body is composed. They are without pharmaceutical value. Moreover, we have long abandoned the eating of impure natural foods, and now confine ourselves to synthetic types of aliment. There is, as you must realize, no place for you in our economy.

"However, it may be that the Archetypes can somehow dispose of you. At least you will be a novelty to them, since no example of contemporary human evolution has so far descended to their stratum. Therefore we shall put you under that highly urgent and imperative kind of hypnosis which, in the parlance of warlockry, is known as a geas. And, obeying the hypnosis, you will go down to the Cavern of the Archetypes..."

The region to which the magistrate of Commorion was now conducted lay at some distance below the ophidian laboratories. The air of the gulfs and grottoes along his way began to increase markedly in warmth, and was moist and steamy as that of some equatorial fen. A primordial luminosity, such as might have dawned before the creation of any sun, seemed to surround and pervade everything.

All about him, in this thick and semi-aqueous light, the hunter discerned the rocks and fauna and vegetable forms of a crassly primitive world. These shapes were dim, uncertain, wavering, and were all composed of loosely organized elements. Even in this bizarre and more than doubtful terrain of the under-Earth, Raptontis seemed wholly at home, and he flew on amid the sketchy plants and cloudy-looking boulders as if at no loss whatever in orienting himself. But Ralibar Vooz, in spite of the spell that stimulated and compelled him onward, had begun to feel a fatigue by no means unnatural in view of his prolonged and heroic itinerary. Also, he was much troubled by the elasticity of the ground, which sank beneath him at every step like an oversodded marsh, and seemed insubstantial to a quite alarming degree.

To his further disconcertion, he soon found that he had attracted the attention of a huge foggy monster with the rough outlines of a tyrannosaurus. This creature chased him amid the archetypal ferns and clubmosses; and overtaking him after five or six bounds, it proceeded to ingest him with the celerity of any latter-day saurian of the same species. Luckily, the ingestment was not permanent for the tyrannosaurus' body-plasm, though fairly opaque, was more astral than material; and Ralibar Vooz, protesting stoutly against his confinement in its maw, felt the dark walls give way before him and tumbled out on the ground. After its third attempt to devour him, the monster must have decided that he was inedible. It turned and went away with immense leaping in search of comestibles on its own plane of matter. Ralibar Vooz continued his progress through the Cavern of the Archetypes: a progress often delayed by the alimentary designs of

crude, misty-stomached allosaurs, pterodactyls, pterandons, stegosaurus, and other carnivora of the prime. At last, following his experience with a most persistent megalosaur, he beheld before him two entities of vaguely human outline. They were gigantic, with bodies almost globular in form, and they seemed to float rather than walk. Their features, though shadowy to the point of inchoateness, appeared to express aversion and hostility. They drew near to the Commorian, and he became aware that one of them was addressing him. The language used was wholly a matter of primitive vowel-sounds; but a meaning was forcibly, though indistinctly, conveyed:

"We, the originals of mankind, are dismayed by the sight of a copy so coarse and egregiously perverted from the true model. We disown you with sorrow and indignation. Your presence here is an unwarrantable intrusion; and it is obvious that you are not to be assimilated even by our most esurient dinosaurs. Therefore we put you under a geas: depart without delay from the Cavern of the Archetypes, and seek out the slimy gulf in which Abthoth, father and mother of all cosmic uncleanness, eternally carries on Its repugnant fission. We consider that you are fit only for Abthoth, which will perhaps mistake you for one of Its own progeny and devour you in accordance with the custom which It follows."

The weary hunter was led by the untirable Raptontis to a deep cavern on the same level as that of the Archetypes. Possibly it was a kind of annex to the latter. At any rate, the ground was much firmer there, even though the air was murkier; and Ralibar Vooz might have recovered a little of his customary aplomb, if it had not been for the ungodly and disgusting creatures which he soon began to meet. There were things which he could liken only to monstrous one-legged toads, and immense myriad-tailed worms, and miscreated lizards. They came flopping or crawling through the gloom in a ceaseless procession; and there was no end to the loathsome morphologic variations which they displayed. Unlike the Archetypes, they were formed of all too solid matter, and Ralibar Vooz was both fatigued and nauseated by the constant necessity of kicking them away from his shins. He was somewhat relieved to find, however, that these wretched abortions became steadily smaller as he continued his advance.

The dusk about him thickened with hot, evil steam that left an oozy deposit on his armor and bare face and hands. With every breath he inhaled an odor noisome beyond imagining. He stumbled and slipped on the crawling foulnesses underfoot. Then, in that reeky twilight, he saw the pausing of Raptontis; and below the demoniac bird he descried a sort of pool with a margin of mud that was marled with obscene offal; and in the pool a grayish, horrid mass that nearly choked it from rim to rim.

Here, it seemed, was the ultimate source of all miscreation and abomination. For the gray mass quobbed and quivered, and swelled perpetually; and from it, in manifold fission, were spawned the anatomies that crept away on every side through the grotto. There were things like bodiless legs or arms that flailed in the slime, or heads that rolled, or floundering bellies with fishes' fins; and all manner of things malformed and monstrous, that grew in size as they departed from the neighborhood of Abthoth. And those that swam not swiftly ashore when they fell into the pool from Abthoth, were devoured by mouths that gaped in the parent bulk.

Ralibar Vooz was beyond thought, beyond horror, in his weariness: else he would have known intolerable shame, seeing that he had come to the bourn ordained for him by the Archetypes as most fit and proper. A deadness near to death was upon his faculties; and he heard as if remote and high above him a voice that proclaimed to Abthoth the reason of his coming; and he did not know that the voice was his own.

There was no sound in answer; but out of the lumpy mass there grew a member that stretched and lengthened toward Ralibar Vooz where he stood waiting on the pool's margin. The member divided to a flat, webby hand, soft and slimy, which touched the hunter and went over his person slowly from foot to head. Having done this, it seemed that the thing had served its use: for it dropped quickly away from Abthoth and wriggled into the gloom like a serpent together with the other progeny.

Still waiting, Ralibar Vooz felt in his brain a sensation as of speech heard without words or sound. And the import, rendered in human language, was somewhat as follows:

"I, who am Abthoth, the coeval of the oldest gods, consider that the Archetypes have shown a questionable taste in recommending you to me. After careful inspection, I fail to recognize you as one of my relatives or progeny; though I must admit that I was nearly deceived at first by certain biologic similarities. You are quite alien to my experience; and I do not care to endanger my digestion with untried articles of diet. "

"Who you are, or whence you have come, I can not surmise; nor can I thank the Archetypes for troubling the profound and placid fertility of my existence with a problem so vexatious as the one that you offer. Get hence, I adjure you. There

is a bleak and drear and dreadful limbo, known as the Outer World, of which I have heard dimly; and I think that it might prove a suitable objective for your journeying. I settle an urgent geas upon you: go seek this Outer World with all possible expedition."

Apparently Raptontis realized that it was beyond the physical powers of his charge to fulfill the seventh geas without an interim of repose. He led the hunter to one of the numerous exits of the grotto inhabited by Abthoth: an exit giving on regions altogether unknown, opposite to the Cavern of the Archetypes. There, with significant gestures of his wings and beak, the bird indicated a sort of narrow alcove in the rock. The recess was dry and by no means uncomfortable as a sleeping-place. Ralibar Vooz was glad to lay himself down; and a black tide of slumber rolled upon him with the closing of his eyelids. Raptontis remained on guard before the alcove, discouraging with strokes of his bill the wandering progeny of Abthoth that tried to assail the sleeper.

Since there was neither night nor day in that subterranean world, the term of oblivion enjoyed by Ralibar Vooz was hardly to be measured by the usual method of time-telling. He was aroused by the noise of vigorously flapping wings, and saw beside him the fowl Raptontis, holding in his beak an unsavory object whose anatomy was that of a fish rather than anything else. Where or how he had caught this creature during his constant vigil was a more than dubious matter; but Ralibar Vooz had fasted too long to be squeamish. He accepted and devoured the proffered breakfast without ceremony.

After that, in conformity with the geas laid upon him by Abthoth, he resumed his journey back to the outer Earth. The route chosen by Raptontis was presumably a short-cut. Anyhow, it was remote from the cloudy cave of the Archetypes, and the laboratories in which the serpent-men pursued their arduous toils and toxicological researches. Also, the enchanted palace of Haon-Dor was omitted from the itinerary. But, after long, tedious climbing through a region of desolate crags and over a sort of underground plateau, the traveller came once more to the verge of that farstretching, bottomless chasm which was bridged only by the webs of the spider-god Atlach-Nacha.

For some time past he had hurried his pace because of certain of the progeny of Abthoth, who had followed him from the start and had grown steadily bigger after the fashion of their kind, till they were now large as young tigers or bears. However, when he approached the nearest bridge, he saw that a ponderous and slothlike entity, preceding him, had already begun to cross it. The posteriors of this being was studded with unamiable eyes, and Ralibar Vooz was unsure for a little regarding its exact orientation. Not wishing to tread too closely upon the reverted talons of its heels, he waited till the monster had disappeared in the darkness; and by that time the spawn of Abthoth were hard upon him.

Raptontis, with sharp admonitory cawings, floated before him above the giant web; and he was impelled to a rash haste by the imminently slaving snouts of the dark abnormalities behind. Owing to such precipitancy, he failed to notice that the web had been weakened and some of its strands torn or stretched by the weight of the sloth-like monster. Coming in view of the chasm's opposite verge, he thought only of reaching it, and redoubled his pace. But at this point the web gave way beneath him. He caught wildly at the broken, dangling strands, but could not arrest his fall. With several pieces of Atlach-Nacha's weaving clutched in his fingers, he was precipitated into that gulf which no one had ever voluntarily tried to plumb.

This, unfortunately, was a contingency that had not been provided against by the terms of the seventh geas.