

achievement of mastering the arts of combat would be impossible.

I took my sword from the box of carved sandalwood in which I keep it when I've no need to have it at my side. No ordinary blade of sharpened steel was this weapon, for it had been forged by a master swordsmith for my great uncle when he was named a full Yunei warrior. Its blade was long and straight, for the Yunei fighters seldom used the curved swords favored by mercenaries and soldiers. And though the guard, pommel, and handle were adorned with an intricately-wrought relief of two entwined serpents rearing up and breathing fire around a central jade inlay of the ideogram *twei-na-girai*—meaning "the Fang-and-the-Sword", which was my family crest—the whole of the sword was made for practical use in earnest combat. The smith who wrought this masterwork of bladecraft had named it Shatho Kyer, the "Serpent of Justice".

I slid it smoothly into its wooden scabbard and took up my shortstaff. This was a fine weapon in itself, but lacking the splendid ornamentation and aesthetic grace of the sword. It was a rugged, brutal weapon, about three feet in length covered with steel bands two inches wide running from midhaft to tip. Shattering bones was a matter of a single swing, and beyond a bludgeon it served well as a means of blocking and setting aside an opponent's blows. Thus, the sword and shortstaff were brothers of combat in the hands of a trained Yunei warrior.

Odoohan, another Yunei warrior of a different family, and I had fought side by side in the emperor's service before, and were staunch comrades in battle.

*But strange powers yet more ancient await them . . .*

Leaving the area cautiously, we returned to the halls and made our way to where the main staircase to the third floor would be. But when we reached it we were confronted with yet another unforeseeable impasse.

"They're gone!" Odoohan exclaimed incredulously. Where the steps would surely have been there was now only a large block of rough stone.