

repulses any attempt to quell it. Whatever be the truth of it, the tale is that the sea refuses to carry raiders to the city's ports, turning them away as though the very waters were bewitched, and that winds rise suddenly to break masts and dash the vessels upon the rocks."

*A GROUP OF STRANGERS FROM A DISTANT LAND*

Ghembial was slender and his complexion the hue of tanned leather, with a drawn face, curling black hair, and the hint of a lilt to his eyes that gave his features a satyrish appearance. He spoke without trace of foreign accent, and I could not place his country of origin.

He entered behind me and closed the door quietly, before coming forth and bowing deeply at the waist with a declaration of, "Master Haifdoren, I present *my* master, Lord Menalkoric, inheritor of the Crown of Gan-Beshar." Then, turning to a man seated in one of the few chairs standing on either side of a small fireplace, he knelt, stretching his arms out before him on the floor and bending his head low. "This is he, my lord," Ghembial proclaimed, "the master of the raiding ship *Gnar-Vlargil*."

"Welcome, Haifdoren the Vengad," Menalkoric greeted me from his seat. "I am pleased that you have consented to hear the offer I wish to propose for your services."

He clapped his hands, at which Ghembial rose from the floor, removing himself to a corner of the chamber where he might be at hand for his lord's bidding. Then Menalkoric himself stood and stepped forward where the light shone brighter, allowing me to get a better look at him. The man was obviously of the same unfamiliar race as that of his servant, but of a massive build, easily exceeding six feet in height with a staunch, broad frame. He was outfitted not in the rich raiment of a court noble, but in the trappings of a warrior, complete with a full coat of maille, chest plate, pauldrons, vambraces, and greaves, all of blackened steel, and a shining helmet that bore a circle of short, curved iron horns, which he wore with the baring that befitted a diadem. A simple, functional, broad-bladed sword was sheathed at his left hip, and depending from his ample shoulders was a rough cape of bearskin.

"Gan-Beshar," I echoed, musingly. "I've heard tell of it. A land so