



A TALE OF WONDERS BY A MASTER SORCERER

The Sorcerer's Ship

Hannes Bok

Introduction by Lin Carter



Sinclair

Journal of the
S. W. Sinclair

"THE SORCERER'S SHIP tells of the adventures of a modern man dropped into another dimension—into a world of swordplay and sorcery; a watery world of all-encompassing ocean broken only occasionally by islands."

—L. Sprague de Camp

He woke on a strange raft in an unknown sea—and he was near to death. Certainly he was not about to question the weird Viking ship that picked him up, nor yet the lovely woman in outlandish dress who salved his burns and nursed him gently.

He knew, however, that he was not of this world—he was the intruder, the alien: but without any way of finding out how he got there, much less any way of getting back to his own time, he was caught up willy-nilly in the fight which was to decide the fate of this dreamlike cosmos.



Adult
Fantasy

The Sorcerer's Ship

Hannes Bok

**Introduction by
Lin Carter**

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About THE SORCERER'S SHIP

and Hannes Bok:

A Voyage to the Isles of Wonder

HANNES BOK was one of the most marvelous people I have ever known: a plump, jolly, excited little elf of a man with a beaming grin, mischievous twinkling blue eyes, and gray tousled hair that fell over his forehead. His friends called him "the hermit of West 109th Street," but his crowded small studio-cum-apartment was more like a wizard's cave. There were books and record albums stacked in orange crates along the walls, tiny Japanese Christmas-tree lights glittered like goblin eyes around the doors, herbs and flowers and plants grew in window boxes on the fire escape, and—of course—there were his paintings. These were framed and hung no more than an inch apart over every unused foot of wall space. Glowing with weird colors, vibrant with slim forms, frozen swirls of drapery, mocking slant-eyed faces, grotesque but comical monsters, and towering palaces of cyclopean design—they were like magic windows opening on strange and wonderful worlds.

When you came up to visit Hannes, he would set a cup of bitter fragrant coffee in front of you and put something on the tape recorder. It might be the sound track of the movie *She* or *King Kong* or *The Thief of Baghdad*. Then he would sit down behind

the big flat-topped desk and take out a card with your name on it from the stack of metal file-boxes. This card would have your horoscope carefully drawn on it, for Hannes was fascinated by astrology and practiced it devoutly (if that's the right word). Then, while the music of Max Steiner or Miklos Rozsa filled the background, Hannes would begin to talk. He was one of the world's great nonstop talkers, a raconteur who had to be heard to be believed. He would go over all the things that had happened to you (according to the stars) since the last time you had been to see him, and then make some predictions about what was coming. This same ritual was followed for every visitor—even for those like me, who could hardly be less interested in astrology.

The stars out of the way, Hannes would go on to other subjects. He had an extraordinary number of things he was interested in and, given the least smidgin of encouragement, could hold forth on them all evening and halfway through the night. He must have been the world's greatest Maxfield Parrish fan, for example. Parrish, an American illustrator and calendar artist enormously popular during the 1920's, was Bok's guru and mentor. As an artist, Bok derived much of his style and most of the romantic richness and color of his paintings from Parrish, whose prints and book illustrations he collected. And he was the world's greatest Max Steiner fan as well, knew every movie Steiner had scored, and could hum their major themes. He was also the world's greatest A. Merritt fan, had corresponded with Merritt's widow, and back in the late 1940's had seized upon the opportunity to complete two fragmentary novels Merritt started but did not live to finish: *The Fox Woman* and *The Black Wheel*. He was also enthusiastically interested in Oriental mythology, lost civilizations

such as Atlantis and Mu, the occult, magic, telepathy and the other Wild Talents, the work of W. T. Benda, the modern master of mask-making, and cats.

When he talked, Hannes literally bubbled with gusto and excitement. The words came pouring out, tumbling all over each other, and he would wriggle and bounce about in his wooden kitchen chair, switching by free association from one subject to another, telling anecdotes about his old and dear friends Ray Bradbury, Emil Petaja, Frank Dietz; telling how he met Boris Dolgov at an art show in Greenwich Village years ago when they were both young and struggling artists; reciting hilarious anecdotes about selling his illustrations to *Weird Tales* and *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*. He was constantly in motion when talking, fiddling with an ever-present cigarette, bouncing up to get more coffee or to change the tape on the recorder.

In short, he was a wonderful guy—boyish, filled with impish good humor and boundless enthusiasm and optimism, a warm and friendly person, and utterly unique.

Hannes was born in Minnesota on July 2, 1914, but much of his early life was spent in Seattle. The science fiction illustrations of pioneer cover artist Frank R. Paul so enthralled him that as a boy he yearned to be an artist. He soon fell in with a group of science fiction fans in Seattle, and the first of his work to be published was a series of illustrations for a small pamphlet of verse by Emil Petaja entitled *Brief Candle*: I own a copy of this rare brochure: mimeographed on colored paper, it is undated. Hannes signed his pictures "HB."

It was Ray Bradbury who first brought Hannes' talents to the attention of the New York magazine editors. Bradbury met Bok in Los Angeles in the

autumn of 1937, when Bradbury was still in high school. He published a Bok cover on each of the four issues of his fanzine, *Futura Fantasia*, and a couple of years later—but, here, let Ray Bradbury tell the story in his own words: “Hannes was one of the great ones. I could have stared at his paintings for days. So manic was my attitude toward Hannes that I felt the world should know of him. When I headed for the first World Science Fiction Convention in New York in July, 1939, I persuaded Hannes to let me be his agent. He sent me a portfolio of paintings, sketches, and ink-drawings from Seattle, which I carried by Greyhound Bus to New York. I arrived proudly at the Convention Hall, happy to represent the best damn artist in the whole damn world!” Bradbury showed Bok’s work to several editors, but the only one to catch fire from Bradbury’s enthusiasm was the great S. Farnsworth Wright, editor of *Weird Tales*, who immediately wanted Bok to illustrate for the magazine.

Bok moved to New York in 1940 and began turning out a wealth of cover paintings and illustrations. Unfortunately, the word “wealth” in this context does not refer to money. Magazines in those days, pulp magazines at least, paid miserable prices for their illustrations—\$5 or \$10, was a typical fee.

Before long, Bok turned to a more lucrative side of the world of fantasy and science fiction—writing. As a boy, he had fallen completely under the spell of A. Merritt, and the Merrittesque word-magic rubbed off on him—possibly because he once copied out in longhand the entire text of *The Ship of Ishtar*. He had borrowed the copies of *Argosy All-Story* in which it was serialized and had to return them, but couldn’t be sure he would ever find a copy of the novel again.

His first published novel was *Starstone World* appearing in *Science Fiction Quarterly*, Summer, 1942, followed very shortly by *Sorcerer's Ship* in *Unknown*, December, 1942. I read *Sorcerer's Ship* when I was about fourteen years old and loved it. Many of the things you read at fourteen turn stale and trite when you go back to them in later years, but happily, *Sorcerer's Ship* is not one of these. It is a beautiful novel, a thrilling and haunting and mysterious adventure story, told in singing prose, studded with richly visual descriptive passages—the sort of description you might well expect from a painter such as Hannes.

Thrust inexplicably into a strange world lying parallel to our own but in an unknown dimension of space, a young man named Gene finds himself hauled dripping from the sea. He is aboard a strange, old-fashioned ship rather like an ornate Venetian galley, a ship bound on a long voyage over a shadowy world of water through isles of wonder and enchantment. Almost at once he is thrust into the middle of a maze of intrigue. Beautiful Siwara, princess of Nanich, is voyaging to the warlike island kingdom of Koph, hoping to avert the coming conflict. But rival factions among her followers struggle to divert her quest. It is a strange and hauntingly beautiful story, this, of a voyage through unknown seas to a mysterious destination . . . with a demigod as a passenger and a weird magic jewel for cargo.

Bok could have made a brilliant career out of writing. But painting was his first and greatest love, and consumed much of his time and energy. He worked with Renaissance techniques of underpainting, slowly building a picture up tone by tone. He might spend six months on a single picture, and that meant six months of exhausting, mind-wearying

work. There was little time left for anything else, much less writing.

He did complete those two Merritt fragments I mentioned earlier. And one more novel was published in his lifetime—*The Blue Flamingo* in *Startling Stories* for January, 1948. While *Flamingo* is a vivid and stunning imaginary-world fantasy, it exists only in a brutally cut form. The original manuscript was over 70,000 words, but the printed version is about 35,000; the editor must have hacked and butchered the novel down to publishable length, throwing out at least half of Hannes' story. A sixth unpublished Bok novel is said to exist in manuscript form, but this may be just a rumor: I inherited the Hannes Bok papers, including manuscripts of some of his stories, poems, and notes, but no novel is among them. However, we are currently hunting down the lost novel-manuscript, and may yet locate it for future publication. . . .

The last time I saw Hannes alive was in the late spring of 1963. Avram Davidson, then editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, wanted to commission some Bok covers for his magazine. Since Bok cherished his privacy, we who were his friends kept his address a closely-guarded secret. I put Avram in touch with Hannes, and Avram and his wife invited us to a picnic in Central Park. I brought along my wife Noël (who was then my fiancée), because she was captivated with Hannes' work and wanted to meet him. It was a raw, blustery day. Munching sandwiches and pickles from a nearby delicatessen we talked, with Hannes dominating the conversation as usual. Noël found him fascinating, and he wanted to paint her portrait, but what with one thing and another nothing came of it.

I never saw him again. He died of a heart attack

there in his wizard's cave on West 109th Street on April 11, 1964. He died alone and quite suddenly and it was some days before the woman who lived next door and was a good friend rapped on his door, got no answer and called the police.

The news hit his friends hard. My wife called me at work and after I hung up I turned and looked out of the window in my office and sat there for an hour before someone came in and asked me what was wrong. In New York, Roger Zelazny put down the story he was working on and spent the rest of the day writing a poem for Hannes. Out on the West Coast, Emil Petaja decided to devote his energy to keeping Hannes' memory alive. He founded The Bokanalia Foundation and has since published several beautiful portfolios of Hannes' paintings and drawings (you can inquire by writing to Bokanalia, Box #14126, San Francisco, California 94114).

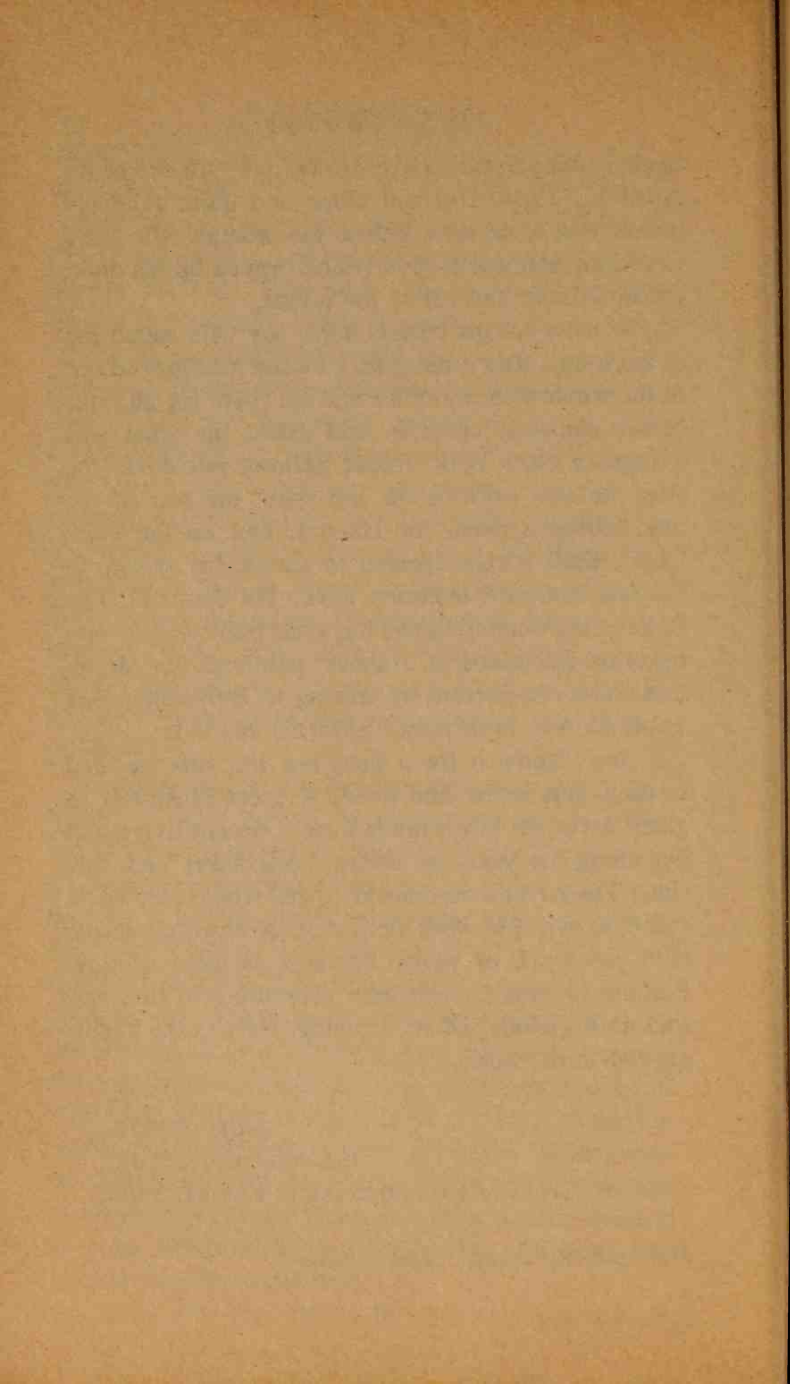
I don't know it for a fact, but I'm sure he died smiling, just as he had lived. A great illustrator, a gifted artist, he never made even a decent living and got along for years on coffee, corn flakes and cole slaw. He never complained, even when publishers failed to pay for work delivered or crooked agents stole the work of years. I'm sure he died smiling, because he was in love with everything in life, and that must include the act of dying. He was the happiest man in the world.

—LIN CARTER

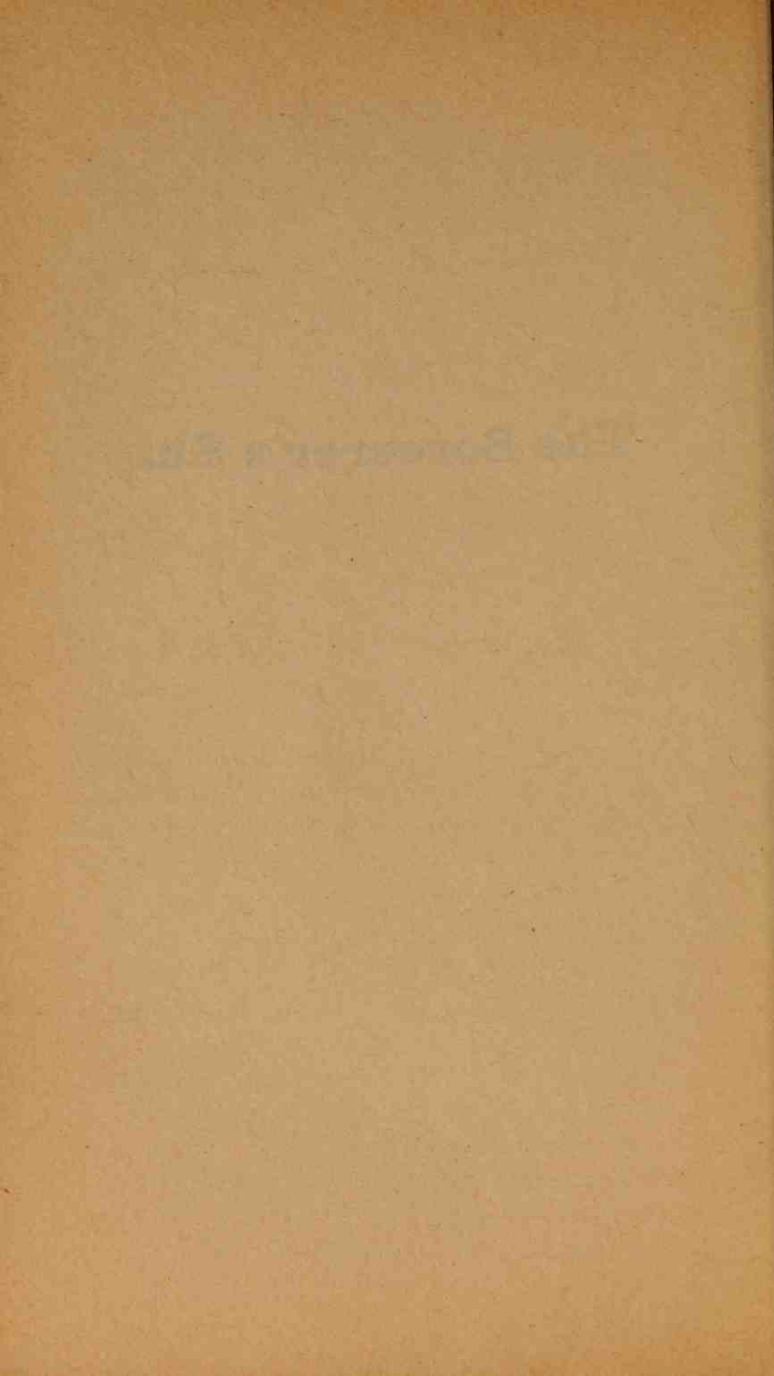
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The Sorcerer's Ship



I

The nightmare ended, but the rocking sensation persisted. There was a curious glassy sound, like the clinking of many bottles.

He was conscious only of intense pain, his body burning as though he had been scalded and whipped. His eyes were closed, but searing light wedged under their inflamed lids. It was an effort to open them. He was as weak as if one of the vampires of his delirium had drained away all his strength and left him dying. He blinked in pain, attempted to lift a feeble hand protectively to his face, could not, and shut his eyes again. Hot sunlight pressed down on him like an incandescent weight. And—where was he?

He opened his eyes again, but cautiously. As his body swayed—he seemed cradled in a giant's arms—one of his hands slipped aside and down into icy water. Unthinkingly he jerked it back, and the quick

movement started blood and a ghost of power through his veins. Water? He struggled to sit up, failed. Groaning with exertion, he forced up his head and squinted around him. There was a curious crackling at the motion.

He was lying on a battered platform of charred wood that was white and sparkling with a coating of salt. His head had been pillowed on a bundle of crisp dry seaweed; that was what had crackled. What had happened to his clothes? He was in swimming trunks, and they were stiff and powdered with salt. All around him, merging into the sky, was lazily stirring water.

What was he doing here on this raftlike wreckage? He frowned, trying to remember, and as his brows pulled together, pain shot through them like the jab of countless needles. He dragged a hand to his forehead; it was raw, blistered and peeling from long exposure to the sun.

Strength was reluctantly returning to him. Clamping his teeth together, he bent an arm, rolled over on it and levered himself up to a sitting posture. He propped his arms behind him and leaned back against their support exhausted, his head drooping. Ripples lapping the raft murmured gently, mockingly, as though from throats of glass.

He lifted his head perplexedly. He had been trying to remember something, but what? It eluded him. Well, no matter—here he was on a bit of driftwood, apparently miles out at sea. He'd better worry about getting back to land, wherever that was.

Perhaps it was his weakness, but he sensed that something was wrong with the sky. It was too blue, and it seemed to flicker here and there, as though it were not air but a sheet of blue lightning. And the sun quivered as though he were looking at its reflection on restless water, or seeing it through shimmering heat.

He folded his legs and leaned over them, his head bent, the sun hot on his back. It was hard to think. He ran his tongue over his cracked lips, tasted salt, and suddenly was very thirsty. Out of the corner of his eye he glanced avidly at the water, but he knew better than to try drinking it.

He stood up, tottering on the swaying raft. There was no sign of land. Only water. He lurched, almost fell, and gingerly seated himself again as though upon broken glass. He exhaled heavily, with a sound that was a blend of sob and sigh. The afternoon limped along toward dusk as though each minute had stretched into an hour. Once a large fish broke water, far away—that was all.

At sundown he was lying on his stomach, staring down into the empty depths of blue-black water. Intuitively he lifted his head. The sun was a scarlet disk on the horizon, with a tremulous red path stretching from it across the water to the raft. But there was a dark speck against the brilliant disk—he made a visor of his hand over his brow and peered at the speck. It was tiny with distance. A ship? His eyes widened with eager hope and he grinned foolishly as he raised himself to hail it. Slowly the dark shape

enlarged, and as slowly the sun became waterlogged and settled into the sea, leaving wavering trails in the blue lightning of the atmosphere to mark its path of descent. Purple twilight rolled in from the east like colored mist, bringing with it a cool wind that was like a soothing salve on his sunburn. The sea lifted drowsily, as though awaking, and slow swells swung the raft up and down, almost upsetting the standing man.

In the deepening dusk the approaching vessel was a silhouette. The man waved his arms and pitifully essayed to leap up and down, but he was still not strong enough; he reeled and nearly toppled over. He opened his mouth but no sound could emerge, only a scraping gust of breath, and he waited impatiently, his hands held high, signaling.

The wind was colder now and hurried. It drove waves before it like cattle, whipping them into a froth of haste. They wrenched the raft as though forcing it out of their path; thrown from his balance, the man dropped to his knees. Stars pushed aside the curtains of sky to look down. The man looked back into the night from which the chilly wind came. The foam-crested waves were tumbling over each other in their rush, grumbling confusedly. The ship was an expanding shadow.

The man's eyes ached from staring; he flailed his arms desperately. The ship cut through the water toward him, no lights glinting from its hulk or rigging. And now he saw that it was a peculiar type of ship—a kind that he had never actually seen on water. Water was sliding over the raft and he clung

to the warped planks, his eyes on the vessel. Where had he seen it? He pressed his lips together, concentrating.

In books! In motion pictures! It seemed to be a viking galley, but that was rather farfetched. A viking galley on the seas today? Impossible! Yet here it was, certainly real enough, very close now. He could discern the striped red-and-yellow sail even in the gloom. The raft jerked, almost throwing him on his face. The ship was hardly a thousand feet away. He waved futilely, considered a moment, and, cupping his palms, lifted them to his face. He gargled the bitter sea water and spat. Now he could shout. He could hardly hear his hoarse voice above the uproar of the waves—and could those on the vessel hear him over the wailing of the wind?

The ship was darting toward him like a charging beast. If it did not strike him it would pass close—very close. The man shouted again. They must have heard him. Abruptly exhausted, he relaxed and waited. The ship was almost abreast of him, only fifty feet away. He leaped to his feet, made a megaphone of his hands at his mouth and shouted. He thought that he glimpsed men on board, but they did not answer. The ship swept past him and onward. He turned after it, waving, yelling, dancing up and down in his excitement.

There was no reply. The ship was dwindling. He slipped and cracked down on the splintered planking, lay half stunned, his head raised, his eyes on the diminishing vessel. A cold wave washed over him, brushing him along with it. He dug his fingers

into the cracks between the planking and hung on. The wind was very cold. His teeth were clattering; chills forked up his spine; his fingers grew numb. The wind did not abate. He was back in a nightmare again, not delirium's surrealistic phantoms, but the brutal reality of violent water and sharp-fanged wind. The stars watched without pity. Even in his torment the man turned up his white face to them and wondered at their great number and nearness. The quivering sky was black now, a limitless tract of living darkness.

His grip was slackening; he could hold on only a little longer. A wave trampled over him, tearing one hand loose. The raft tilted up buoyantly and the man choked and spluttered. He thrust his loosened fingers back between the planks, wincing as he scraped the flesh. The raft bobbed; his head jerked—and he saw a cluster of dim, yellow lights. They were not stars; their glow was steady. A wave twisted the raft. As though dreaming, the man watched the group of lights widen—they seemed to be coming nearer.

The ship! Had they heard him, then, and were coming back for him? He pulled one hand loose, half knelt and waved, shouting. The lights bore down on him. There was a momentary lull in the wind; he shouted again without any definite wording. The ship rushed toward him, was passing him. It was not the same vessel that he had seen before. It was more like an old Venetian galley, two-sailed, and ablaze with colored lanterns. He hailed it again and there was an answering cry. A brilliant light fingered the water and focused on him. There were more

answering calls. A boat was being lowered over the side of the ship.

While the little boat was bobbing over the waves to him, he lay resting on the rough wood, his eyes fascinated by the silken shimmer of the sagging sails, momentarily empty of wind. A voice summoned him; he raised his head to reply. The boat was only a few yards away, and now it was bumping against the raft. He endeavored to scramble aboard, but in the effort collapsed. He was conscious of strong hands pulling him from the raft. He lay in the bottom of the boat, comfortable in his security though the boat's ribs were hard under him, and sandal-shod oarsmen's feet inadvertently kicked him as the rowers pulled on their oars.

There was an interval of lying in the boat, looking up at the swaying heavens and the oarsmen. Then the boat thudded against the ship; ropes were thrown down and made fast; the boat scratched up the side of the ship and was drawn over to the deck. The rowers leaped out, but the rescued man was too weary to move. He glimpsed crowding faces and brilliantly colored robes that were vaguely Oriental. Then a girl's face appeared, soft and sympathetic.

He heard a man's voice, mild and compassionate. "Take him to my cabin." Was that what the man had said? But he had been speaking with a very heavy accent—his words had seemed to be in a foreign language. Now that was odd!

He was lifted again and carried under the wavering sheen of the sails through a squat doorway into a

dimly lighted, narrow hallway that was fragrant with the tang of spice. The walls were minutely carved, garishly painted. Then another door, and a low-ceilinged room lit only by the tremulant flame of a swinging lamp. All that he could see was the dusky drapery over a wide low bed. He was laid down on the soft mattress. His bearers stepped back. He was sinking into the softness as though down into a fleecy cloud—

A tall and very slender old man in a long blue robe approached the bed. He leaned over the rescued person, his kind face concerned. He touched the man's forehead and breast, turned away, his hand lifting in command. "Bring him something to drink—something strong."

The man on the bed heard the clink of glass. There was a rustle of fluttering filmy draperies and a faint feminine perfume. "Here it is," a girl's voice murmured gently. The girl he had seen on the deck was standing beside the man in blue, a decanter and a goblet in her hands.

She appeared to be very tall then, but that was because he was lying down. She was really quite small. She was not beautiful, no, but finely made and very attractive. Her childishly youthful face was pale, her clear brown eyes enormous. She was probably eighteen years old. What was her nationality? She was not much different from any of the girls he had known—somewhere before. There was nothing exotic about her despite the strange manner in which her hair was coiffed, its brown braids piled high and held in place by strands of jewels. In her long,

plum-colored gown with its flowing slit sleeves held to her arms by wide bracelets, she might have been in evening dress. And she was very feminine. Her slightest movements were performed with unconscious grace.

"Here, drink." The man in blue touched the goblet to the other's mouth. "It will strengthen you." The rescued man sipped the liquid. It was aromatic and sweet, replacing his weariness with singing warmth. But he kept his eyes on the girl.

Her hand was on the shoulder of the man in blue. "Look—his skin! See how the sun has burned it! I have a soothing unguent that will soften the bite of pain—I'll get it." She was gone. The man from the sea looked regretfully after her. He was becoming drowsy from the warmth of the wine, and his eyelids seemed very heavy. He lowered them.

Then she was back. He was aware of the soft fragrance that surrounded her like an aura and opened his eyes. She was kneeling beside the bed, unstoppering a small flask of red glass. She poured a thick oil out on the palm of one hand and rubbed it over his face. Her touch was as light as a summer breeze; the oil was cool and soothing. For a moment her eyes met his, and something vibrated in the air between them—what it was, he could not be sure, but it was as pleasant as it was indefinable. Her eyes lowered almost guiltily, and her touch became brisk. She smoothed the oil into his chest and then their eyes met again.

He was very sleepy and hardly knew what he was doing. His hand crept over his chest, found hers and

gripped it gently. Perhaps he was trying to express his gratitude for her kindness, perhaps more. Even he was not sure. She permitted the touch.

Then the man in blue spoke curtly. "Enough, Siwara. Leave us now. I'll take good care of him."

The girl arose at once. The man took the flask from her hands. She slipped back from the bed, toward the door, merged into the shadows and disappeared. The wind was rising again; it howled outside with a maniac's abandon.

His eyes would stay open no longer. The man in blue was rubbing the oil over him.

It was a strange ship, apparently out of another world. He was secure from the sea on it. Where was it going? Who were these people? He did not care very much just now. Except that girl, of course—

He sighed happily, his eyes still shut. Sleep blanketed him in darkness.

II

He awoke feeling well but deliciously lazy. Light, warm coverlets had been drawn over him up to his chin. As he opened his eyes he sensed someone hurrying from the room and turned too late to observe

who the person might be. White daylight seeped over the bed from a row of high little windows and the ship lifted and lowered as gradually as the breast of a sleeping person.

What a strange little cabin it was! Most of its walls were brass-bolted cupboards whose doors had been carved and gilded with bewildering bands of intricate designs. Tapestries depicting fairytale splendors and crusted with gems hung here and there. On the floor were immense wooden chests and backless armchairs with inlaid designs of wood. A somber, deep-piled rug, almost like gray fur, covered the floor.

On one of the chests lay a long bow and a sheaf of arrows; long javelins were clipped to the walls as though part of the ornaments; shields hung under the row of small windows and slid like pendulums at the ship's motion.

The door swung inward and a tall man in red entered. He was a creature of planes, sharp lines and abrupt angles. His long face was like an unfinished wood carving, sharp and very definite before sandpapering had modified its lines of ruthless strength. His robe, too, was severe, its folds falling in stiff vertical lines. His eyes were dark and unpleasant under heavy brows; his graying hair was brushed back from his forehead and hung to the nape of his neck in ragged points.

He stood beside the bed, his eyes calculating. A mask of kindness spread over his face like stretched rubber, barely concealing the coldness beneath. "I am Froar." His voice was harsh and dry, like stones

rubbed together. "I was asleep when they found you. And you . . . who are you?" He sat casually on the edge of the bed, tucking the skirts of his robe around him as though chilled.

The man from the sea sounded uncertain. "I don't really know," he said, apologetically. He frowned, reminiscing. "I can't remember much. Only the water . . . and the wind—"

"Are you from Koph or Nanich?" Froar's eyes needled him, impatient for an answer.

"Koph? Nanich?"

"What is your name?"

"Name?" The rescued man pondered, pressing a palm to his brow. He looked up. "I'm sorry to be so helpless. I just can't think. Gene, I think it is . . . my name." He considered further. "Gene . . . what? I can't think. It just won't come to me."

"Gene," Froar murmured. "How did you come to be out on the sea? Was there a shipwreck? You were a fisher, belike, blown far from shore, and your craft capsized?"

Gene shook his head. "No, I don't think so. I know I wasn't a fisher. I'm pretty confused. All I seem to remember is a great city, and many people—"

"Nanich," Froar interposed, as though naming the place.

"No, not Nanich. New . . . New York." Gene brightened. "Yes, that's it, New York."

"Never heard of it," Froar said.

"One thing puzzles me," Gene said. "The air here—it seems different—as if charged with electricity." But Froar did not comprehend the word. "And you—and

the others—all seem to speak a strange language, something I've never heard before. And yet—I can understand it."

"Your language is equally strange to my ears," Froar said. "It is not the tongue of either Koph or Nanich. But I can understand your meaning. It is as if your tongue is silent and your thought is heard. A few of us here have the power of communicating our thoughts, but only a very few. Perhaps you were of importance in New York." He savored the city's name.

"Importance? I don't think so." Gene dropped his eyes thoughtfully. "I can't remember." He lifted his gaze. "All that I can remember completely is the ocean, and the wind, and that other ship that passed by me."

"Other ship! Another ship passed you?" Froar's semblance of sympathy was fading away. Gene nodded. Froar leaned forward, squinting. "What was this ship like?"

"It came just after sundown. There were no lights on it. The sail was striped with red and yellow."

There was no kindness at all on Froar's rugged face now. He sat upright with a jerk. "You told this to Kaspel . . . to any others?"

Gene shook his head. "No. I was too tired."

"Good. Then don't." Froar leaned forward eagerly. "They would misunderstand you, all those others. They might not even believe—as I believe. You, a stranger from a place named New York—a place that doesn't exist! Here there are only Koph and Nanich and the uncharted isles in the far seas be-

yond. But I believe you." He smiled slyly. "Yes, I do believe you. And I'd help you if you'd trust in me. You might need my help."

He drew back. "Here you are, a lone man, obviously mad—at least in the eyes of the others, prating about a place no one ever heard of. Where will you go at the end of this voyage? What will you do?" He spread his hands eloquently. "But I see something in you—you may be of use to me. And you have the power of speaking by thought and—" He stared about at the embellished walls. "You will let me help you, do as I say?"

"Well, it's really very good of you—"

"First you must kill Kaspel. You saw Kaspel? His color is blue, even as mine is red." Gene recalled the tall old man in blue who had given him wine, and nodded. "While he is on this ship we're all in danger. If he were to learn about that boat you saw he might do some very unpleasant things—scuttle this ship, for instance." His harsh voice was introspective. "While Kaspel lives we're in danger."

"The girl," Gene asked irrelevantly, "who is she?"

Froar's hard eyes scanned him. "Siwara, the princess of Nanich. You're on her ship. We're bound to Koph for State reasons. Koph threatens war on Nanich. Siwara goes under my guidance to make secret peace. We've no escort because we left ostensibly on a pleasure trip along the coast. But Kaspel invited himself along and he means this ship never to arrive in Koph. Why? He's old—and foolish. His thoughts have no more meaning. If he were dead we'd be

safe—you and I and Siwara." He was pleased about something. "So—you saw her."

"She's—lovely. But about killing this Kaspel, this man in blue—" Gene shook his head gravely. "I don't know what to answer—"

"You seem shocked." Froar's smile was condescending. "Of what importance is a life? We kill to eat. We kill the forest beast that threatens us. Kaspel is a mad beast who must be exterminated. You seem interested in Princess Siwara, and you wouldn't like her to die, would you? But she will before we can reach Koph, unless Kaspel is accounted for."

"I saw them for only a few minutes. I was dreadfully tired. They seemed on good terms."

"There's the sadness of it. Kaspel is a hypocrite who fawns on the princess. He's been with her since childhood. But his mind is set against our mission to Koph. He'd rather have Nanich at war with Koph, the fool! He'd sacrifice his country and his princess for his silly ideals!"

"Why don't you kill him yourself?"

"I? Don't you think that I'm watched? His men spy on me, and some of the crew are in his pay. Oh, I, too, have my spies—but I'm not sure that I can trust them. But you are a stranger. You can pretend to want them for friends. They will not be so much on their guard with you as they might be with the others. If they should come in while we are talking"—he raised a warning hand—"you must say that we merely have been discussing the storm and your rescue. Nothing more. You understand?"

"Yes." But Gene's voice was dubious. "I can't say

that I like this idea of—of murder, though. You must give me time. I want to see them, Kaspel and the princess. I want to be sure."

"You fool! Didn't I tell you to trust me? You doubt my word?" Froar squared his shoulders, his eyes blazing, no trace of kindness on his face.

"It's not that I doubt you—only—I'm not the killer sort. I can't do this sort of thing. But if I could see with my own eyes, then I'd be certain."

"I see." Froar arose and peered out of a window, his face cold with thought. The door swung open again and an inconspicuous man in black entered with a tray of food which he carried to the bed.

"I saw that you were awake, and I went to bring food," the man in black murmured, waiting until Gene had dragged himself up into sitting position. He set the tray on Gene's lap and obsequiously patted the pillows behind Gene to make him more comfortable, then began to lift the chased metal lids from the dishes. "Here is bread—and stewed meat, fruits, and wine." He tilted a bulbous bottle over a cup and the red wine gurgled out. The servant glanced anxiously at Froar. "Shall I go?"

Froar nodded without turning. The man in black peered uncertainly at the two men and withdrew.

"One of Kaspel's spies," Froar said. "He was probably beside you all night. I came when I saw him leaving the room. And now he's seen me here. Too bad." He sighed, then abruptly turned. Gene was sampling the round crust of bread. "Have you tasted the meat?"

"No—there doesn't seem to be any fork, any eating implement," Gene explained.

"Use your fingers, of course! Do you like the wine?"

Gene touched the cup to his lips. "It's good, thanks."

"I can make it better," Froar dipped a heavy hand into the breast fold of his red coat and drew out a tiny glass cylinder of golden green liquid. He unscrewed its lid and, leaning over the bed, poured a few drops into Gene's cup. "There, see how you like that. Too bad that Kaspel's man had to come in just then," he added as though to himself, replacing the lid on the vial and restoring it into his robe.

Gene lifted the cup to his mouth. Froar said, "Drink it—drink it all." Gene tasted the wine. It was peculiarly fragrant now, as though scented with decaying flowers. He sipped a little of it, his lips and mouth tingling strangely. "Drink it," Froar repeated. "Drink it all before the effect wears off." His voice was commanding; he stood over Gene, his legs spread, his hands behind his back, his eyes glittering enigmatically.

The sensation in Gene's mouth was the same as that experienced when one's hand or foot falls asleep. He was not quite sure whether he liked it, and coughed, spilling a little of the wine. But Froar's stance was insistent, and he obediently put the cup to his mouth. Then Froar turned quickly toward the door, muttering a soft curse. Voices drifted from the passageway—the girl's and that of the man in blue.

Interested, Gene forgot the drink and lowered the cup. Froar's head snapped in his direction; the man in red pointed forcefully at the wine.

The tingling had spread from his mouth to his throat; Gene set down the cup as Siwara and Kaspel entered. The girl stretched out her hands in greeting to Froar as though he were a dear friend; he gripped her slender fingers briefly and released them.

"I see that our foundling is awake," Kaspel said before the others could speak. His mild voice was querulous with suspicion. "Rather late for your breakfast," he said, and smiled at Gene.

He was anything but sinister. This gentle-faced old man was planning to sink the ship before it reached Koph? It seemed hardly possible. Certainly, Froar with his hard face and voice was potentially dangerous, though the young princess did not appear to think so. She beamed at the red-coated man and moved over to the bed with a motion less walking than floating. Her slim hands touched the dishes. Froar hurried to her side with long, deliberate steps.

"You haven't eaten much," she said shyly. "We shouldn't have disturbed you while you were eating. But I was worried about you ... you were so ill last night! The servant said that you moaned as you slept—"

Gene nodded. The tingling was all over him now, and his lips had become numb. He opened his mouth to speak but his throat had become hoarse. Froar glanced covertly at Kaspel, who was frowning, and lifted Gene's cup.

"Perhaps it's a relapse," he said. "This wine will

clear his throat." As he lifted the cup it slipped from his fingers and clanked down on the rug, the wine soaking into the deep nap. "Careless!" Froar remonstrated with himself, not at all perturbed. "Now I've spilled it!"

The girl's eyes were on Gene, worried; she clasped her hands together and turned to Kaspel. The tingling in Gene's throat was becoming numbness. His muscles had become too loose to control and he sank back—with infinite slowness, he felt—against the pillows.

"You're wanted out on deck," Kaspel said to Froar, who glanced at Gene, nodded at the princess in farewell, and went out. Kaspel watched him go, then whipped a kerchief from his coat and bent down over the spilled wine, sopping it up. The princess turned from her dismayed scrutiny of Gene to watch him.

"Why, Kaspel, what are you doing? One of the servants will clean it—"

Kaspel arose as quickly as age would allow him. He thrust the handkerchief at Siwara's face. "Smell it!" he exclaimed with pallid vindictiveness. "Vyras—poison! I thought I scented it when we came in. Froar's poisoned him!"

She took the handkerchief and dabbed it to her nose. "It does smell like Vyras," she agreed, wonderingly. "But to say that Froar—"

"You never will believe me!" Kaspel muttered angrily, bending over Gene. He shook the man. "He's unconscious. The cup wasn't very empty. He probably didn't drink enough to kill him." He settled

the limp body of the man down under the covers and patted them in place over him.

But Gene was not unconscious; his mind was clear and he could hear everything that the two said. Temporarily, he was paralyzed by the potion that Froar had dropped into the wine.

"I don't see why you must blame Froar for this," Siwara said. "What could be his motive?"

Kaspel turned from the bed to her. "I don't know—but I'd like to find out. I'm going to stay by this man until he recovers, and then I'm going to question him. Evidently he knows something that Froar would rather we didn't."

"Why must you hate Froar so, just because you two can't agree politically? You disappoint me, Kaspel. I thought you were a stronger character than that."

"I live only for the State," Kaspel replied with calm pride. "My life is dedicated to the welfare of Nanich. I am an old man; my wife and children are dead. I am consoled for their loss by the thought of what I can do for others. Siwara, you must not go to Koph! Froar is using you for a tool, I'm certain of it! Turn back before it's too late!"

"No," she said, "I won't. Kaspel, I can't. Do you think I want to go to Koph and bargain with the war lords? But Nanich can't possibly survive another war. I must do everything that I can to maintain peace."

Kaspel groaned softly. "Better for Nanich to give up every last one of its lives than pay tribute to

Koph! Why can't I make you understand that once we submit to Koph, Nanich will lose its identity? It will mean the end of our system—no more schools, no more research, only economic slavery, turning out the products that Koph dictates to us. Our young men will become slaves in the fields. Our women will be taken from us to Koph—"

"It can't be that bad," Siwara protested. "Besides, it won't hurt to try to arrange a treaty. If Koph doesn't keep to it—then we can make war."

Kaspel's voice arose. "Oh, Siwara—you utter child! I thought, when your father died and you took the throne, that here was a princess who was fit to govern her people. Go ahead, then—make your treaty. You think the war lords won't trick you? They'll send men across the water to Nanich ... oh, yes, peaceful traders and the like. And then when you realize that you've been fooled it will be too late—the men from Koph will have seen to that. There'll be no war then, only a small rebellion, crushed by Koph. And for the rest of your life you'll remember what I'm saying now and regret that you didn't do something about it—"

Siwara's small foot tapped impatiently. "But what has all this to do with Froar?"

Kaspel threw his hands up in despair. "Froar loves Koph and all it stands for. He ridicules our schools; he doesn't like the idea of a literate people, because to be literate—at least in Nanich—is to be enlightened. And you can't wring wealth from an enlightened people. Froar wants his pleasures now. He's afraid that he won't live to see the day when Nan-

ich's people have achieved a community wealth. He doesn't want to endure the hardships of our struggle toward a democratic prosperity. Not he!"

Siwara turned away. "You'll never succeed in convincing me. You may as well stop trying."

Kaspel mused over Gene. "This man may hold the argument which will convince you. He must know something of importance—or Froar wouldn't have wanted to be rid of him."

The girl looked down on the man in the bed. "It is strange," she murmured. "I still don't believe that Froar tried to poison him. But someone did. Why? Does someone on board know him and hate him?" She sighed. "I'm tired of being a princess just now. I'm going out in the air—perhaps my maid will sing for me. You stay here and attend to this man, Kaspel. When you have learned his secret, let me know. Then we will see about turning back to Nanich." She touched the old man's shoulder affectionately and drifted out of the room, her scarfs trailing in the air behind her.

Kaspel looked after her, his face sad. He shook his head ruefully then went across the room to pull up a chair beside the bed and wait for Gene's recovery. He sat hunched over, his hands folded on his knees.

The ship swayed gently.

III

"What did Froar say to you?" Gene was awake now, and Kaspel bending over him, questioning. Beyond the little windows daylight was fading to tender rose.

Gene reflected. What should he say? Well—why not tell the truth? "He wanted me to kill you!"

Kaspel smiled wryly. "I expected that. But why did he want you to die?"

"I haven't been asleep," Gene said. "I lay there unable to move or talk, but I heard all that you and Siwara said. Now I know how things are . . . or I think I do. Froar said that you'll sink this ship before it can reach Koph."

Kaspel nodded solemnly. "True. And if I cannot sink the ship, I will kill Siwara, much as I love her. The people of Nanich must never know Koph's power. They have lived free; they must die free. Siwara does not understand."

"Before your men rescued me, another ship passed me by," Gene said. "Froar became very excited when I told him about it. The sail was striped red and

yellow, and there were no lights aboard though it was dark. He told me not to tell you."

"Yet you do tell." Kaspel raised his brows. "You don't know that you're risking your life with every word. Froar wishes my death—half the men on this ship are loyal to him. The other half are probably—note that I only say probably—loyal to Siwara and me. Froar's death would be of no use to me, or I would have him slain. But it would not turn Siwara back: it would make her the more stubborn."

He sat down on the chair, leaning forward, his fingers interlaced. "You've no idea of the hazards of this voyage. There have been so many little accidents—at least, they are explained as accidents—on both sides, mostly mine. Sometimes almost fatal accidents. But my men are watchful. All of us keep our eyes open."

He lifted his head from contemplation of his folded hands and gazed at Gene. "So Froar didn't want me to know about the ship. That's strange. There are always boats going to Nanich from Koph, and from Koph to Nanich. Why should one boat worry Froar? Unless—"

He arose and stalked back and forth across the room, his hands clasped behind him, his sad face chilly with meditation. "Unless we are secretly being followed! There we have it! That explains why the vessel was without lights so that we could not see it!"

He stopped still, staring at the rug. "Froar is afraid that I will persuade Siwara to turn back! He won't let us turn back! If we change the course he will signal to the following ship to attack us. He intends

that Siwara reach Koph at any cost—just as I intend that she shall not! And that is why he wanted to kill you. He was afraid he couldn't trust you—he knew that I'd be suspicious when I'd heard that he'd visited you!"

He shook a warning forefinger at Gene. "Young man, from now on your life is in danger. I hold no rancor against you, who might become an ally of mine. When we reach Koph I don't know what will happen to you unless Siwara can be wheedled into protecting you—and she'll be needing protection herself. Froar's apt to drop in here at any time. If he does, pretend that you haven't awakened. Don't admit that you've talked to me—"

Gene leaned on an elbow. "But you would kill Siwara?"

"Not unless absolutely necessary. Why, I love the child—I love her dearly! Her father was my friend. But hers is only one life—the people of Nanich are many. I am a gentle old man. My heart sickens at the thought of bloodshed, but if I must—yes, I will kill her."

He hurried to the bedside. "But you! Your coming has been most providential! Who you are doesn't matter. Siwara is attracted to you. At least she pities you for your sufferings. Her sympathies are open to you. You're not bad-looking; you're young and look strong. Make her love you! That's her trouble—she's never known love. If she loved you and were afraid for you, she might want to turn back! Yes"—he gestured futilely—"and then we'd have Froar's spy ship to contend with! Well, if nothing else it would be

the clean death of battle and not Koph's slavery. And Siwara would realize then Froar's treachery."

He cocked his head, listening. "Lie back!" he whispered. "Someone's coming!" Gene settled down and closed his eyes. Kaspel stooped over him, deftly tucking in the covers.

Froar entered and sauntered to the bed. "Still asleep?" He clucked his tongue. "Poor lad! The sea was cruel to him."

Kaspel turned. "Let's drop guile, Froar." Their eyes clashed. "I know that you put Vyras into his wine. I could detect its odor. Obviously you wanted to be rid of him—as you'd like to be rid of me."

Froar's hard face softened in a contemptuous smile. "Kaspel, you amaze me with your suspicions! Am I not your friend? Don't we dine together every evening with Siwara in her cabin? And have I once attempted to poison you?" His harsh voice had become almost silken.

"No," Kaspel said, "but you take me for walks about the ship—and a bit of tackle falls from the rigging, or I nearly tumble down the narrow stairway."

Froar's smile subsided. "At least we know where we stand now."

"Yes—we do." They traded glances of dislike.

"Well!" Froar bent over Gene brusquely. "So the young man shows no signs of awaking. How sad!" His tone was jubilant. "When he does awake he may have an interesting story to tell you. I was talking to him just before his . . . ah, unfortunate relapse . . . and the poor fellow was quite delirious. He had

endured so much, you know, that his mind was not quite clear. He seemed to have seen another ship than ours—one without lights in the night." He gazed down almost affectionately at Gene. "In his anxiety he probably mistook a distant cloud for a ship—it's quite plausible! He says that his name is Gene—a peculiar name—and that he comes from a city named New"—he hesitated over the words—"New York. You can see that he's fairly mad. A shame, too, for one so young!" He shook his head in mock sorrow. He stood back and Kaspel approached the bed.

"He'll probably not awake for a long time," Kaspel said. "The Vyras is strong. You were wise in choosing a drug without antidote."

"I didn't want to add an insane man to our troubles," Froar said unctuously. "If he revives I suppose that he will be in your care."

"In Siwara's," Kaspel amended. "You may as well go, Froar. He won't awake for a long time yet."

"You're so certain," Froar purred. "But I will wait for a time. I have nothing of importance to do." He sat down on the chair near the bed. "Why don't you go, Kaspel? I'm sure you're tired from your vigil."

"Thanks, but I'll stay," Kaspel said hastily, and dragged another chair to the bed. "I don't trust you alone with this man, this Gene. He might become violently active after I go—and then of course in subduing him you might accidentally kill him."

"For an old man your perception is acute," Froar smiled. There was a silence. Gene stirred uncomfortably but did not open his eyes.

Froar said, "It would be interesting, now, if this youth were not really as insensible as we think him—if he were listening to everything that we say. But, as you see, he is not aware of us."

He waved toward Gene. "Would it not be interesting if he could hear us talking now, and make his choice. To follow you, or to follow me. Which course would he take? Would he go with you, eager for your rewards of schooling and near-poverty all his life, or would he go with me to greatness and wealth and power over the lives of men? An interesting thought, Kaspel. But, of course, the young man sleeps." He smiled a shade too comprehendingly.

He arose, bundling the rigid folds of his robe around him. "Well, I will go. Poor delirious fellow." There was a threat in his words. "I wonder what will become of him when we reach Koph?" He tossed his head carelessly, the ragged locks of his hair bristling. "Don't stay too long, Kaspel. Remember, Siwara is expecting us to dine with her!" He strode out of the cabin.

Kaspel peered after him, annoyed. Then he turned to the bed. "All right," he said to Gene. "You heard. You can't stay neutral. You've got to make your choice between us. What will you do?"

Gene looked at the door as though Froar were still there. He hesitated. "I'll go with you and Siwara," he said.

"Good!" Kaspel laid a friendly hand on his shoulder. "Come now, get out of bed. Stand up and try to walk. I must see if you are strong enough to be left by yourself. There's no telling what may happen

when I'm gone, even though I leave a man to guard you. Gene, he called you. That's your name? Come Gene; arise and walk."

Gene folded back the coverlets and gazed embarrassed at his nakedness. Kaspel hurried to one of the large chests, forced up its heavy lid and rummaged around in it. He brought out a bundle of blue fabric and tossed it to the bed. "Here's something to wear," he said, closing the chest.

Gene slipped into the robe. "It feels strange," he said, "like an old-fashioned nightgown."

Kaspel thrust out an impatient palm. "Never mind. You'll grow used to it. Come—stand up." Gene deserted the bed. "How do you feel? Well? Let me see you walk."

Gene took a few steps over the deep rug, turned and walked back. "I feel all right, but I'm hungry."

"I'll have food sent in. Yes, you seem able to take care of yourself—but just to be sure, I'll send in two men. One to watch the other, both to watch you." He stroked his chin thoughtfully, the wide sleeve of his robe falling back and disclosing his bony forearm. "You must repay me for these precautions. You must make Siwara love you."

"I don't know if I can do it," Gene said. "I can try. When do I see her?"

"Tomorrow—I'll bring you together out on deck. And now I must go. Be alert!"

Gene nodded, and Kaspel hurried from the little room. Gene stepped over to the windows and peeped out of them. Dusk was flooding the sea. Soon the lamp must be lit. He lifted a bare foot, eyed it with

distaste, and went to the chest from which Kaspel had taken the blue robe. In it, after much searching, he found a pair of sandals and slipped them on, buckling their straps across his insteps. They were a little large, but they would suffice.

He picked up the bow from the top of another chest and slipped its loose end of cord over the horns. He twanged the string, drew an arrow from the sheath, and fitted it, took aim. He nodded in satisfaction. He was not familiar with archery, but this was evidently a very good bow. He'd like to try shooting at something. He pulled on the arrow but did not let it fly.

He was aiming in the direction of the door and two men entered, one with a tray of food. They were in the black livery of the servant who had brought breakfast. They stopped still, gaping. Sheepishly, Gene lowered the bow.

"We mean no harm," the man with the tray said. "Kaspel told us to guard you." He advanced to the bed and set the tray down on it.

Gene laid away the bow and arrow. "I was just trying it out," he explained, approaching the bed. He raised the lids from the dishes. There was warm bread, a fillet of fish garnished with pickled fruits, and wine. Gene sat down and sniffed the dishes. There was no hint of the Vyras odor of decaying flowers, but he ate sparingly and without relish. The men sat in the chairs, silently watching him.

When he was done one of the men carried away the tray and returned. Gene glanced from one expres-

sionless face to the other and shifted uneasily. "How long will this voyage take?" he asked.

"Three or four days more," one of the men replied. "Kaspel would rather that we did not talk to you."

"I know, but it's a strain having to sit here and not say anything," Gene said.

The man nodded, but did not speak. Gene went to one of the windows and peered out. The vibrating sky was purple.

One of the men arose and unhooked the lamp from its bracket. He produced a small pair of tongs from his wide girdle and pressed the ends together. A spark spat from the tongs to the wick of the lamp and the room was yellowed by the glowing flame. He returned the lamp to its support.

Gene watched the first stars take their posts in the sky and then went back to the bed. He lay down, not sleepy, but bored. He stared at the embroidered bed canopy, pondering; the lamp's flare was bright on his face and he closed his eyes to rest them.

Time passed. How much—one hour? Two? He did not know. Drowsily he half opened his eyes. One of the men was nodding in his chair and the other—what had become of the other? As he pushed himself up on an elbow to look, a hand with a knife swept down, driving the knife deep into the bedding where his chest had been. His heart tumbling topsy-turvy, he jerked around. The missing man was behind the bed, his eyes guiltily wide, his mouth sagging with

dismay. He snatched the dagger out of the covers and drew back his arm to strike again. Gene scrambled off the bed, the man hurrying around it to stab him. The knife swept down and Gene ducked. The thrust missed him and he caught the arm with the knife. The other man awoke with a jerk and gaped stupidly.

The fellow with the knife attempted to wrench his hand from Gene's grasp and Gene held on, his teeth gritting at the effort; his hold was none too good and his fingers were slipping. With his free hand the man caught Gene's throat and Gene dipped down, struggling to break away. But by now the second man was awake. He, too, was intent on the dagger; he forcefully twisted the hand that held it and the knife thudded to the floor.

Gene's assailant darted down to retrieve the knife, but the other man's foot was on it. The stooping man straightened. His gaze was arrogant.

"So," said Gene's rescuer, "you're siding with Froar. I think we ought to see Kaspel about this." He jerked a thumb toward the door. "Come along."

The other smiled insolently. "What good will that do? My word's as good as yours."

"This man will testify for me." Kaspel's loyal retainer nodded at Gene.

"And if I don't choose to go?"

Kaspel's man quickly picked up the knife and flourished it significantly. "Oh, you'll come along all right."

The other considered the knife and shrugged. "Very well, I'll go. You're so faithful now—wait until we reach Koph!"

"I'll serve Kaspel and the princess anywhere—especially in Koph!" The man with the knife motioned to the door. "We'll go now." As the other started out he fellowed, beckoning to Gene.

They went out down the narrow passage, Gene in the rear, passing several closed doors of carved and tinted wood. At the end of the hall was another door, on which Kaspel's man knocked. From beyond, Gene heard Siwara's light laughter stilled by the knock. A gnarled old woman in drab costume opened the door and eyed the men wonderingly.

"Come in," Siwara called. She was sitting with Kaspel and Froar on cushions on the floor, a low table before them, its dishes cleared away and a game board on the cloth. "What is it! Why have you brought the sick man here!"

Froar arose, and Kaspel also. The princess toyed with her topaz necklace.

"He tried to kill this man," Kaspel's retainer said, pointing to Gene's attacker.

"Did you?" Kaspel turned to the man, who shook his head.

"It was a personal quarrel," he said. "He was asleep. The sick man crept upon me and tried to choke me. I struck to defend myself."

Gene stepped forward. "That's a lie. Why would I attack you?"

"I told you that he was mad," Froar said, pointing at Gene and turning to the princess.

She scrutinized Gene carefully. "He seems sane enough now. You"—she gestured at the man who was in possession of the knife—"you haven't ex-

plained fully. What happened?" She put up both hands to Froar and Kaspel, who assisted her to rise.

"I was inattentive. I might have been dozing. When I opened my eyes they were scuffling. I broke in and took the knife."

The princess thoughtfully raised her necklace to her lips and pressed it against them. "I don't like any of this. Why cannot we fare to Koph as peacefully as on any other voyage? Kaspel, Froar, I think it would be best to lock up these men for the remainder of the trip." Both men lifted their hands in protest, but she disregarded them, gliding over to Gene and standing very near him, her eyes prying up into his. "I'm sure this man's sane. One of you wants to be rid of him, but which one of you?" She scanned Froar's and Kaspel's faces. "I don't know," she said bewilderedly. "I don't know what to think. We're all friends, and yet we're not. I have reasons to mistrust both of you. And I have known both of you for so long that it's hard to think unkindly of you. But I warn you—leave this man alone. He's done no harm, and he's suffered enough already out on the waves. Or does one of you know something about him? Was his rescue a premeditated thing—"

She flitted her hands despairingly. "You see—I'm at my wits' end. I suspect both of you. Let more men guard him tonight—four men, if two aren't enough—and tomorrow I will speak with him."

She turned to Gene. "Poor lad—you are hardly a man yet—perhaps you wish you were back on the sea. I regret these shameful incidents. My hospitality was never so rude before. Go back to your sleep

without fear." She was not beautiful, perhaps, but her speech and mannerisms were irresistible. Gene stammered as he thanked her; she smiled graciously.

Froar went out with the two men; Kaspel hurriedly joined him, crooking his finger for Gene to follow. Siwara nodded at them, still smiling.

Gene dreamed of her that night.

IV

Golden sunlight rayed through the cabin's windows. Gene wiped his hands on the towel that one of the men held up for him and turned from the basin of water to put on his blue garment. Kaspel hurried in and drew him aside.

"Siwara's on deck," he murmured urgently. "Remember—if she loves you, we're safe. Are you ready to see her?"

"Just a minute—I want to comb my hair." Gene took the comb from the hands of the man who held it. "I wish you had a mirror here." He combed his hair straight back, trusting that luck would make the effect becoming. He returned the comb and started out with Kaspel. "I was rather worried when one of

those fellows started to shave me. I was wondering if he'd cut my throat."

Kaspel's mobile face expressed grim amusement but he did not reply. They went along the passage, opened a door and emerged on deck. For its length the ship was very narrow. There were benches, unoccupied just then, for rowers along the rail. The shimmering sails were bellying in a light wind.

Siwara was seated on an ornate chair near the foremast, her gaunt old maidservant on a cushion at her feet, sewing. The princess was idling through a small but very thick book; she looked up and closed the book with a snap.

"Ah, you've come! Marza, you may go—let the stranger have your pillow." She waved her hand-maiden away. The old woman gathered up her sewing and without glancing at Kaspel and Gene, went into the girl's rooms. "Kaspel, you needn't stay if you've something better to do—I want this man to feel at ease." She shifted her gaze to Gene. "Your name is Gene, they tell me." He remained standing and she pointed to the cushion at her feet. Gene sank down on it; Kaspel waited until he was settled, bowed discreetly and walked away.

"I'm tired of reading," Siwara said petulantly, touching the book. "Only the pictures are interesting."

"May I see it?" Gene raised a hand; she gave him the book. He could not decipher the columns of peculiar scratches that filled its pages. The illustrations were delicate woodcuts. "Printed," Gene commented.

"What did you expect, an illuminated manuscript? From what sort of world do you come? Its arts must be very advanced, if you think us so backward. Perhaps you are from one of the rumored isles far out to sea. Or you may be mad, as Froar claims."

"Siwara ... or should I call you princess ... I don't think that I belong anywhere in this world." Gene held up the book. "I can't read this print, but I can understand what you are saying, though your way of speaking seems different."

"Froar says that you speak with your thoughts," she answered.

"That's telepathy, and I was never able to do it back home, I know," Gene said. "I think there's another explanation. The sky here, the very air, is different than I remember it before. It seems to quiver constantly, as though it's alive with electricity. I've heard somewhere that thoughts are as much a force as electricity. Back home we have machines that can record thought impulses, though they can't record the meaning of the thought itself."

"You can remember now?"

"Yes, quite a lot. It's beginning to come back. For a while I wasn't able to distinguish memories from the things I'd dreamed while I was out on the water. I seem to know my last name now . . . Trivelli, I think it is ... but that doesn't sound right. It sounds Italian, and I'm obviously Irish."

She laughed. "If you are speaking with thought it is not quite clear. Italian, Irish, electricity! Perhaps you are mad!" Her smile was indulgent. "If you can make your thoughts clear by speech, can you not

direct them my way and make them understood without speech?" He raised his brows, uncertain. "Try it."

He frowned a thought at her.

"Were you trying?" she asked. He bent his head assentively. "I heard nothing. Try again." But his efforts were useless.

"No," she said. "Now, I think you're a native of Koph. You dreamed something while you were in torture on the water and you think it was real. You can't read, and everyone in Nanich can read," she said proudly. "Our schools are wonderful. So you must be from Koph, where learning isn't considered important. How did you get out on the water? Try to recall."

He dropped his gaze to the planking. "I was swimming," he said slowly, struggling with memories. "Coney Island—that's it. I went out a little too far; I thought that I could get back, but I couldn't. The undertow dragged me out. I kicked around, trying to get back to the surface, and couldn't. It was horrible, and the water was very cold. Then—suddenly—I was falling through blueness, down to another ocean, very far down. The shock, when I hit, must have stunned me. After that came nightmares—horrible things were chasing me, squeezing my chest with chains and drinking my blood. And then I found myself on the raft. I must have climbed on it without knowing."

Her eyes were fixed on a visionary point. "You fell, you say. There is an old legend of sailors seeing

people falling from the sky, but they were dead when the ships reached them. The bodies were brought to Koph and then buried. One of the bodies had a ring on its fingers—the prince of Koph wears it now. But it was spoken of only as an old tale, and the ring might have been made by one of Koph's artisans—though their jewelers are nowhere as clever as ours," she finished patriotically.

She returned her eyes to him. "Perhaps it was a true tale! It sets me to wondering—what kind of a doorway could you have fallen through? A door through time? Not into the past—for you say you knew nothing of Koph and Nanich. A door which was a flaw in the elements which make your world and this? Who knows? Have you such tales in the place from which you came?"

"A lot of them," he said. "A man named Charles Fort compiled books of them, but I can't remember them much. Everyone's heard of rains of fishes and frogs, and sometimes there are dust storms miles away from desert areas. Several centuries ago a woman appeared in England who spoke a language that no one understood—I think that she was exploited as having come from Mars."

"England—Mars!" she repeated. "Tell me about this world of yours. Are you a prince there? No? But you have princes?"

"After a fashion."

"What are your cities like? Do you live in peace? And the women—are they beautiful? What do they wear?"

When he had answered these questions, she asked, "And what are your weapons of war? Are you proficient with them?"

"We use guns," he said. "An exploding powder propels little pellets of lead through a metal tube. No, I've never shot a gun except at a shooting gallery. We have airships, too—great things that fly like birds through the sky and drop bombs—containers of explosive powder that are capable of great destruction—"

She drew back, her eyes horrified. "Magic?" she asked.

"No, not magic. Science."

She shook her head slowly, the horror lingering in her eyes. "It sounds like magic," she murmured. Then, regretfully, "Ah, if only we had a little of that magic on the side of Nanich! There'd be little need of bargaining with Koph." She leaned down to him, and her face was very lovely with hope. Unconsciously he raised his face a little toward hers, enthralled by another kind of magic—the magic of her femininity. She did not appear aware.

"Could you tell Kaspel how to make one of these weapons! If the forges of Nanich were put to your uses—could you make these weapons?"

Her words startled him out of his trance. He drew back, biting his lip. "I'm afraid not, Siwara. I'm just a very ordinary person. I worked in an office. What chance would I have to know about gun making, unless I made it a hobby? And I didn't," he added mournfully. "When I came home from work, I was so worn out that I spent my time relaxing—seeing

picture shows and visiting friends. I'm no mechanical wizard, just a human being."

She jerked away, her lips compressed in vexation. "Now I think you *are* mad! You come to me with lying tales, reviving my hopes—and what good are you? Only a disappointment. Well, here you are without hope of returning to that place from which you say you came. What will you do here? What purpose can you serve for Nanich? Can you fight? Are you a good bowman? Can you wield a sword."

He gestured helplessly. "No—but I can learn."

She laughed with shrill scorn. "You can learn! And by the time your beard is long and gray, you will be as competent as the average young man of Nanich who has been taught swordplay from babyhood!"

"Perhaps I could teach in your schools?" he asked.

"Teach what? The writing of your country? We have only one language here. We need no other. Diverse languages breed diverse viewpoints—and that ends in war."

"You have a postal system? You have skilled office workers? I know that part of life in and out. I think that I could teach your people something."

"Perhaps. We have a postal system—but it's not run by magic," she said.

"I know the principles of a lot of machines back home. I don't know their actual workings, but if I told some of your wise men, they might be able to fill the gap."

She thought about that. "Yes, that's true—but hardly enough to turn this ship back from Koph: I

don't want to go; I'm frightened. But I must go. How I feel doesn't matter; I must do what I think is right for my people. Kaspel insists that I turn back, and I am beginning to think that he speaks wisely." She shrugged. "Oh, I don't know."

On the upper deck roofing the cabins, Froar had appeared. He leaned on the rail, the breeze rippling his red garment. His hands were folded on the rail, and he was evidently interested only in the sea—but occasionally his hard eyes slipped from the water and down to the mast-foot where Gene and the princess were sitting.

Siwara was interested in the customs of Gene's world, and questioned him at length. Then they delved into history.

"And from what period of your history do you think Koph and Nanich might come?" she asked.

"Five or six hundred years ago," he replied. "Just before the invention of gunpowder. Odd that your people never invented trousers. I don't like this bathrobe." He touched his blue coat.

"Trousers? Oh, yes—you say that even your women wear them; I take it that slacks are the same as trousers?" He dipped his head for answer. "I must have you describe them to Marza, my maid; she will make me a trial set." She reached down with her hand, and he took it, his heart accelerating—but she merely wanted her book. She arose, and he scrambled to his feet.

"I must go within now. Roam the ship as you will. I do not think that further harm will come to you." She smiled slightly in farewell, and headed for

the cabins, her soft gown pressed against her by the wind, limning the slim contours of her lithe body. Gene waited until she had disappeared through the doorway, then seated himself in her chair.

Froar had continued his earnest surveillance of the water until Siwara had gone. Now he turned, frankly staring at Gene, his face mockingly pleasant. He waved to Gene, summoning him, but Gene shook his head.

"Afraid of me?" Froar derided. "Didn't the princess say that no harm could come to you? Why be frightened?"

"I'm not frightened," Gene said, flushing.

"No? Then come up here." Froar beckoned again, and after a second's hesitation, Gene ascended the steep and narrow stairs to the higher deck. Froar turned back to his contemplation of the waves, and Gene approached him.

"So you've decided in favor of Kaspel," Froar murmured without looking back. He sensed Gene's affirmative jerk of the head. "I'm truly sorry that I tried to poison you, but there seemed nothing else to do at the time. Kaspel's man had seen me talking with you—and I hadn't thought of explaining that first ship you saw as the invention of madness. They're not sure of you yet," Froar said, "Kaspel and the princess. Don't trust them too far. You may regret it."

The wind disturbed his graying hair, and he pushed the straying locks firmly back in place.

"Yes, enjoy yourself now," he said. "You have so

little time left for enjoyment. Soon we arrive in Koph—and then—” He flirted a finger across his throat suggestively.

His words held no immediate threat. “When do we reach Koph?” Gene asked.

“In three days more,” Froar said indifferently. Suddenly he stiffened, his eyes wide on the water. What did he see? Gene pressed against the rail, his eyes sweeping the water.

“You noticed it, too?” Froar asked excitedly, pointing straight to the horizon. “I wasn’t sure that my eyes weren’t tricking me!” Gene squinted at the far swells. “Yes, now you see it, don’t you? Straight ahead—”

Then suddenly Froar’s hands had grasped Gene firmly about the waist; he shoved. Gene clutched at the rail, or he would have slipped overboard. At the same time he kicked Froar in the shin. Froar jerked his hands away, his face darkening with pain and frustration. The expression faded away; he was urbane again. He lounged against the rail as though nothing had transpired, but now Gene stood back from the balustrade, alert and indignant.

“Yes, I meant to push you overboard,” Froar remarked with engaging frankness, as Gene turned to go. “Too bad that I didn’t succeed. But maybe I will—later.”

“Or I’ll push *you*,” Gene said, surprised at his own daring. It was the first time that he had actually considered murdering a man. He fancied a change in himself already. What was this strange voyage doing to him? And how was it to end?

V

Kaspel's stateroom was similar to Gene's; its walls were brass-hinged cupboard doors pebbled by tiny carvings. There was the same sort of wide low bed, the backless armchairs and immense carved wooden chests. Shields on the walls pendulated with the ship's swaying, grating over the ornamental reliefs. Spears and bows lay across brackets from which hung quivers of arrows. The windowpanes were rosy squares against the sunset's light.

Kaspel was seated in a chair, his long fingers gripping its arms, his deep face bland with thought. His blue robe sagged from his shoulders as though beneath it his body were a framework of sticks.

Gene stood before him, recounting his conversation on deck with Princess Siwara, and Froar's ruse to push him overboard. "Froar said that we'll land in Koph in three days," he concluded.

Kaspel's eyes lifted to Gene's face and regarded him an instant, then wandered back to the floor. He moistened his lips nervously. "Three days!" He panted a short laugh. "The third day doesn't count—we'll be in sight of Koph all that third day. We can't

turn back then." He shook his head slowly at some thought.

Gene chose a chair and sat down. "It's easy to talk of making Siwara love me, but the time's too short. People can't love each other in just a few days."

Kaspel awoke from his reverie and raised his brows humorously. "No? Young man, I didn't meet my wife until the day we were married, and we lived happily together for thirty years until her death. If you want Siwara to live—get her to love you, and turn back to Nanich. If you can't do that, and she dies—you will be more her murderer than the hand which kills her."

Gene writhed uneasily. "Kaspel, how can you sit there and cold-bloodedly speak of murder? Back where I come from, we didn't kill—we didn't think it was civilized, and we weren't allowed to escape punishment if we did it or even tried."

"We have laws here, too," Kaspel said. "But this is outside any laws made for individuals; this involves the destiny of a nation. Ah, if only you had seen Nanich? Rude, yes, compared to the splendors of Koph—splendors obtained through the miseries of serfdom! But glorious in its freedom, its enlightenment, its will to progress! The longer we wait, fending Koph's advances with treaties that Koph will not observe, anyway, the longer time we allow Koph to prepare. Siwara plans to pay tribute to Koph: she won't suffer for it, but the lives of countless Nanich men and women will be altered for the worse, and the lives of their children. Siwara would stop the building of fortifications on Nanich to demonstrate

her good will—and Koph will attack suddenly—and where will Nanich be?”

He put a hand to his forehead and shook his head pettishly as though it ached. “Siwara’s fate is in your hands! She likes you—she’s a frank person; you’d have known soon enough if she hadn’t found you pleasant. Well—be still more pleasant. She’s invited you to dine with us tonight. That’s a good sign.”

He took his palm from his brow, replacing it on the chair arm as he turned his head to crane out of the little windows.

“Sundown,” he said. “She will be expecting us within a few moments. Shall we go?” He arose, and Gene stood also. “One minute.” He waved for Gene to wait, and stalked over to one of the chests, lifted its heavy lid, and withdrew a short knife from it. He shut the lid and slipped the knife into his girdle. “Perhaps you should be armed, too. Neither of us is safe on this ship until the third day, when Koph is in sight. There Froar will no longer consider us a menace.” He laughed again, unpleasantly. “Little he knows!” But he made no move toward procuring Gene a knife.

Kaspel peered down at his robe critically, smoothed its folds becomingly and motioned for Gene to accompany him. They stepped out into the narrow little hall, proceeded to Siwara’s door. Kaspel knocked, and the maid Marza opened the portal to the two men. Siwara was leaning against the one large window of her suite; its pane was open, and the sea breeze was playing with her hair. The fabric of her

gown was so light that it floated in air at the slightest motion; she might have been wrapped in tendrils of yellow steam.

She turned to greet them. "Good evening, Kaspel. Good evening, Gene." Her eyes were soft on them. "Shall we wait for Froar?" In the center of the room, four large cushions lay about a low table on the floor. The maid Marza crept in and out of an anteroom with dishes for the table, inconspicuous in her black dress.

Siwara pointed out to sea. "Have you seen the sunset? It's glorious. The sky's so clear, so quiet. Look!" She made room for them to peer out. She was on one side, Kaspel on the other, Gene in the middle.

Gene glanced at her from the side of his eye. She had been watching him; she diverted her gaze. He turned his head and frankly stared at her. In the last rosy rays of the sun her skin was luminously pale. How small and delicate she was!

She sensed his ardor. "But you're not looking at the sea," she reproved him gently, then turned from the window. "It's clear now, but I suppose it will be stormy again before we reach Koph. This is no time to be out on the sea. It's *Lakta* season—what you would call winter, the time of storms. No, if this were merely a pleasure voyage, we wouldn't be making it now. Few ships are out to sea at this time of year. I think that even now the wind is strengthening."

Kaspel was as rapt upon the sinking sun as though he were seeing it for the first time. Gene realized that

Kaspel was hinting for him to become amorous. He opened his mouth to speak, but there was such a choice of openings in his mind that he was perplexed about which to utilize. He closed his mouth miserably.

Siwara was bending over the table, rearranging the dishes which her maid had placed upon it. Kaspel seized the opportunity to turn and frown a command at Gene, who swallowed hard and stammered, "Siwara—"

She arose dutifully. "Yes?"

"I've told you all about my country and its customs. Why don't you tell me about yours? How do the people make . . . make love, for instance?"

She seemed slightly annoyed; then her eyes softened. "One of our customs is never to ask about love," she said. "We don't speak of it—it's too sacred. We do it without talk—"

There was a rap on the door, and before they could turn to it, Froar stepped in, resplendent in glossy scarlet silk. He closed the door, folded his arms, and surveyed the company, his lips smiling, but his sharp eyes cold on Gene, who returned the stare defiantly. The maid Marza had appeared at the doorway to the adjoining room at Froar's entrance; she disappeared and returned with a steaming cauldron of soup which she ladled out into small cups, set the cauldron on the table and retired from the chamber.

"Shall we be seated?" Siwara asked, sinking down to her cushion. "You, Froar, on my left, and Kaspel on my right, as usual. And you, Gene, opposite me."

They settled on the cushions. Siwara daintily lifted

her cup and tasted the soup. The men sipped the steaming liquid.

Froar turned his head to the princess. "Did Gene tell you that I announced the end of our voyage. We'll reach Koph in three days."

The princess shook her head. "No. We're making good progress then, aren't we?"

Froar's eyes swung to Gene almost affectionately. "Then he's not a talebearer," he said jestingly.

Toward the end of the meal, the curtains of the window were flapping in the wind, and a corner of the tablecloth lifted and was blown across the dishes.

"Will you shut the window?" the princess asked no one in particular. Both Froar and Gene arose, but Froar was nearest the window; he stared out at the black night sky and its stars before swinging shut the pane. "The wind's rising," he said thoughtfully.

Siwara glanced over her shoulder to him. "I hope that doesn't mean we're going to have another storm," she complained, her soft voice transforming her words into a pretty speech. "I don't want any more delay. I want to reach Koph as soon as possible and get this hateful business finished. Will the wind be with us, do you think, or against us?"

Froar returned to the table. "With us, I think," he said, sitting again. The princess turned her eyes from Gene's shyly ardent scrutiny, and then looked back at him, smiling, amused. He lowered his gaze bashfully, and felt the reproachful nudge of Kaspel's foot against his.

Someone tapped on the door; Marza hurried in to

open it. One of the black-robed crew was outside, the skirt of his long robe drawn into his waistband until its hem hung to his knees.

"Pardon," he gasped, as though the sight of the princess frightened him. "I come for the minister Froar—it is an emergency—" He cowered as though expecting the red-cloaked man to hurl something at him, but Froar merely stood up, bowed in excuse to the princess, and hurried out. Marza closed the door upon them.

Kaspel's serious face brooded on the portal. "Something's wrong," he said. "I'd better go, too." Nodding at the princess, he made his departure.

"More wine?" Siwara bent over the table to fill Gene's glass, the butterfly sleeves of her gown lifting and settling with the movement. Gene lifted a hand to touch her slim wrist, and faltered. Siwara set down the decanter and drew back, smiling. "You would like to make love to me, and you are too shy, is that it?" she asked, her eyes glinting mischievously.

Gene nodded somberly. "The worst of it is, I think I'm really in love with you," he said.

"That's a rather peculiar remark. Don't you wish to love me?" she inquired coquettishly. She colored; her voice became lower. "That wasn't right of me. I ought not have said it. It's best that you don't love me, Gene."

His eyes were puzzled. "Why? Because you're a princess?"

She was earnest. "It's not a question of rank, but of duty. Would you be fit to govern beside me? And you are not from Nanich. I can marry whom I

choose, but the people of Nanich would not trust you. And look at you! You do not know how to fight—at least not our way—”

He interrupted her eagerly. “I can use my fists. I’m not a weakling.”

“Your fists!” Her tone was derisive. “What use are fists against swords, spears and arrows?”

Something in her disdain prompted him to slip around to Froar’s cushion, nearer her.

“I don’t like your world,” she said. “You’re young—but you’re not impetuous. You’ve no confidence in yourself. Your world’s ways have done that to you, even as Koph’s serfdom crushes the spirits of its youth. The man who can claim me must be resourceful—and daring—”

“What can I do to please you, to prove that I’m not as you think—”

She straightened from her cushion, resentfully, and drifted to the window. He hesitated, then joined her.

“Siwara—”

And then he kissed her well and with a strength that was beyond denial. She yielded for a moment and then pushed against his strong embrace, wrenching herself free. Her wide eyes were indignant.

“As if I could love you!” she cried, so loudly that Marza heard and appeared at the doorway, where she hovered, watching anxiously. “I am not like other women. I cannot love. I am only a puppet of my country, reserved for the coldness of another puppet!” She turned away. The gaunt old handmaiden studied them for another moment, then prudently withdrew.

Gene was as angry as she. That had been a wonderful kiss, arousing a hunger in him for another like it. He strode briskly to her, whirled her around. "I'll make you love me!" And then he kissed her again, fervently. She did not resist. Their mouths were pressed together for a long time. Her hands were on his back, holding him.

Then, as before, she thrust him back, her eyes flinching from his. "This is insupportable! When they dragged you in from the sea, I was sorry for you—sorry because of your youth and the pain which you must have endured. If I had known that my pity would have led to this"—and now she smiled, happy with the thought—"I think that I would have had you thrown back into the waves!"

"Siwara—" His hands were reaching toward her again, but the door banged open, and Froar strode in, his face more rugged than ever in wrath. One flick of his eyes absorbed Gene's yearning and Siwara's refutation; he was preoccupied with more important matters. Behind him Kaspel stalked guiltily, his long face blank with apprehension. Siwara hurried to them; Gene dropped his hands and turned.

"The ship's off course!" Froar rasped, his voice clattering like an iron wheel over cobblestones. "Someone's tampered with the lodestone! I've had enough of this ... this meddling! I want Kaspel and everyone serving him to be locked up for the rest of this journey!"

Siwara turned to Kaspel, as though to an erring

child. "Was it your work?" she asked, gently. Kaspel favored her with a fleeting, foolish, frightened smile, and nodded.

She clasped her hands in anger and turned from the two. "Why must we go on like this? Kaspel, why can't you take my answers as final?" The man in blue did not reply. "Froar, I don't blame you for being angry. I'm angry, too, but—" She was obviously about to excuse Kaspel. But Froar cut her short. He pointed to Gene.

"Better put him under lock, too! He's helping Kaspel!"

She whirled furiously on Gene. "Is it true? No, you needn't answer. I might have guessed it." She faced the man in blue. "Kaspel, how could you have done this to me? You told him to love me, didn't you? Had you no consideration for me? Did you think that I would—"

"No consideration at all!" Froar interjected triumphantly. "He'll use any means that he can find to bring an end to this voyage to Koph. Even, my little princess, if it means—killing you!"

She peered up at him now, stamping a small foot in rage. "Froar! Do you know what you're saying?"

His smile was a leer. "Ask him—if you think he'll tell the truth."

She regarded Kaspel, who nodded dumbly, and her mouth parted in horror. She took a step backward, unconsciously toward Gene, then—aware of him—recoiled from him, too. Marza was at the door again, silently observing.

She tilted back her head in hysterical laughter.

"Was ever a woman so meshed in intrigues!" Her laughter thinned away, and she pressed her palms to her face, ashamed at her outburst. All three men stepped forward simultaneously to comfort her, noticed each other and halted, Gene and Kaspel glaring at Froar, his flinty eyes cursing them. At that, Siwara made a gesture of pushing them away. She lowered her hands to her sides and raised her head with dignity.

"I say this to you—from now on all matters concerning the ship are in Froar's hands and the hands of those who serve him." Froar's hardplaned face sharpened with triumph; his smoothing of his coarse gray locks was a gesture of victory. "You, Kaspel"—tears sparkled in her eyes; she brushed them away brusquely—"I can hardly believe that you would want to kill me—not unless I had heard it from your lips. You love me, I know you do. It is not you who would do this, but the demon of your ideals for Nanich. I understand. And what I'm about to say is not from my heart, but from the sense of duty which governs me. For I love you, too, Kaspel. With all my heart. I am grateful for your years of caring for me, of teaching me. But now I am my own mistress."

She paused, panting, as though she was not sure that she could go on. "You must stay in your room, Kaspel. Froar will pick the men who will guard you. If you are not foolish, no harm will come to you—that's so, Froar?"

The man in scarlet nodded.

From without came the faint wailing of wind in the ship's tackle. The floor was beginning to heave

under their feet. Siwara moved to a wall and put her hand on it to steady herself, her yellow draperies swirling flamelike.

"And this man?" Froar indicated Gene.

Her lips twisted contemptuously. "He goes with Kaspel."

"Good!" Froar's face wrinkled with satisfaction. He wheeled, signaling the dim faces of the men out in the hall. As their tread approached, Kaspel hid his face under a hand, his back bending with sorrow. Siwara's light fingers touched his shoulder comfortingly.

"And now, Siwara, I say this for your own good. You, too, must be guarded. We are making Kaspel our prisoner, yes"—he sneered at the man in blue—"but we don't know how long he'll stay our prisoner." The men from the hall were taking hold of Kaspel and Gene. Froar raised his voice for their edification. "We no longer have the assurance that men are loyal to either of us. They may be persuaded by Kaspel to let him free; he may bribe them into mischief. Some of my servants I know are true to me—of the others, I'm not sure. But from now on, anyone guilty of the slightest act against me had better beware! I have your sanction in this?"

She nodded vigorously, also for the benefit of the men.

"So you, Siwara, must remain in your rooms until the voyage is over I will have supplies sent you, so that none can poison you. And you must not leave your rooms."

"I understand," she acceded gravely.

He motioned to his men; they started to draw Kaspel and Gene into the hall. He stepped closer to Siwara, looming over her. "We'd be shorthanded with the crew if we chained the men loyal to Kaspel. If you're wise, you'll ease matters by throwing this Gene overboard from whence he came." His eyes probed hers. She quailed.

"It's not necessary!" She lifted her hands to him, perturbed.

He smiled suavely. "Not unless you're in love with him. Love and politics, Siwara—they don't blend."

Her little face was fierce. "You think I love him! That weakling!" She peered down the hall after Gene, clenching her hands vehemently. "After what Kaspel sent him to do—and he came—you think I care for him?"

"I just wanted to make sure," Froar said, a threat behind his urbanity. He called to his men, "Three of you go with Kaspel into his chamber. He's an old man; he can't hurt you. And the other's like a child. The rest of you stand by the door—I'll have you relieved in a few moments."

He lifted one of Siwara's hands and kissed it. "Good night, my princess."

His manner was so arrogant that Siwara drew back her hand, doubt in her eyes. She motioned to Marza as Froar stepped out; the serving woman closed the door.

The three black-robed men entered Kaspel's stateroom with Gene and the man in blue. Two took posts at the windows; the third stayed by the door. Kaspel shakily sat on the bed.

"No hope of turning back now," he said, while one of Froar's men lit the lamp.

Gene dropped beside him, laying a hand on the man's bent back. "Kaspel, I'm sorry!"

Kaspel coughed feebly. "Poor Nanich!" He shook his head in despair.

The wind was shrill in the rigging outside; waves were drumming on the sides of the ship.

"I hope we sink," said Kaspel.

VI

The little lamp sung to and fro. Gene lay across the bed on his stomach, his shoulders levered up on his elbows, his chin in his hands. Kaspel, hands nervously twitching in their clasp behind his back, paced the room, his eyes downcast, his mouth working. The men at the windows looked on indifferently, stealing occasional glances through the windows at the agitated sea. The guard at the door had drawn a chair before the portal, and was seated comfortably, his arms crossed.

Kaspel's head jerked up as though he had reached some important decision; he went to the men at the window. "You must let us out," he said, his gentle

voice fretful. "We must get to Siwara at least. There's no danger in our seeing her, is there?" He gestured to the men. "You lads—why, I know you all. Some of you have been servants of the princess for years. Yet now you suddenly turn to Froar. Why, in the name of all the powers? Why?"

The two men at the windows interchanged glances—wary and distrustful. One of them spoke. "Kaspel, do not try to alter our views. We will not listen."

The man in blue hurried close to the one who had spoken, and laid a pleading hand on his shoulder. "You, Miskal—surely you will see reason. If we cannot reach Siwara, cannot turn this ship back, it's the end of Nanich! You don't believe me? Or you don't care? Which?"

The man shook Kaspel's hand from his shoulder and drew back. "I told you that I won't listen to you, Kaspel. None of us will. Don't try to argue." He sent his eyes to the other two men, who nodded solemnly.

Kaspel turned away, furious and despairing, his hands clenching into fists. He tottered back and forth, his forehead wrinkling, his teeth gnawing his lips. Once he gazed pleadingly at the man whom he had called Miskal, but the guard shook his head sternly. He resumed his aimless wanderings. Gene lay immobile, his eyes apathetic.

The wind buffeted the ship; it swerved, almost throwing Kaspel off balance. The men standing at the windows clung to the sills for support. Sighing sharply with impatience, Kaspel fell to the bed, leaned huddled, his face almost touching his knees.

Was time passing? It hardly seemed so. Minutes had expanded into drab centuries. There was nothing but the pulsing shadows cast by the rocking lamp, the somber stares of Froar's men, the uncertain tossing of the ship.

They heard voices in the hall outside, raised in protest, but the words were indistinguishable. The voices softened to inaudibility. Then someone tried the door. Gene and Kaspel looked up with hope in their eyes. The guard at the door leaped to his feet and pulled his chair out of the way; he drew a poniard from the sheath at his belt and cautiously opened the portal.

One of the men outside looked in. "The princess sent her maid to see Kaspel. We told her to go back. She gave us this note. I thought it would be all right to give it to Kaspel—Froar didn't say anything against it."

The guard at the door took the note. "You read it?" He unfolded the crisp paper, his eyes running along the columns of ideographs. "I don't know. Maybe we ought to send someone up to ask Froar. But, despite what it says, this writing can't do any harm while we're watching."

He folded the note, nodded to the other man, and closed the door, taking the precaution of replacing the chair against it before he delivered the note to Kaspel. He strode stiffly back to the chair and rested on it.

Kaspel's fingers trembled as he jerked the paper flat. His eyes skimmed the brush strokes, widening with wonder and quick joy.

Gene noted the abrupt change in his expression, and leaned against Kaspel's back, staring over his shoulder. "What does it say?" The men at the windows did not step forward, but their necks craned in their interest.

Kaspel read in a low voice, "I have been thinking. You were right. A ship from Koph is following us. Froar has been signaling it. Now I would like to turn back. Kaspel, forgive me—" The man in blue broke off to shake his head sadly. "She sees now what my words could not make her see!" He resumed reading the note. "I have told Froar that I must turn back. He laughed. I think that he intends to put me aboard the ship that is following us."

"That's all she said?" Gene asked, intent on Kaspel's face.

The man in blue smiled sadly in reply, and slowly tore the note into tiny fragments. He piled them neatly on a corner of the bed. "Siwara understands—too late!" he groaned.

Gene drew back, his eyes darting sharply about the stateroom. He brightened, as though discovering a means of reaching Siwara, then shook his head. Evidently there was a flaw in the plan. He stared down at the silken bedcover, his eyes narrowing. Suddenly he looked up.

"Kaspel, why is Froar going to Koph?"

Kaspel did not recognize the hint. "What do you mean, why is he going to Koph?"

"No—that's not what I'm trying to uncover. Kaspel, why is Froar so anxious to betray Nanich?"

The man in blue frowned irritably. Before he could reply, Gene hurried along. "Because he wants wealth—that's right, isn't it? And why can't he have wealth in Nanich? Because there everyone is free and equal—it's share and share alike. And Froar isn't man enough to put up with what the others are content to suffer." Gene kept his face turned to Kaspel, but from the corners of his eyes he could see that Froar's guards were listening.

He said, "How does Froar expect to get wealth in Koph? By betraying Nanich, by wresting his wealth from the hands of the people whom he's betrayed. That shows that he's unscrupulous, that he's concerned only with himself."

His glance swept the guards. "How will he reward these men? You say they're natives of Nanich. In serving him, they show that they have no love for the country of their birth. By serving him, they are cursing the mother that bore them and made them as strong as they are. If they were born in Koph, would they have had the chance to make this choice—the choice of betraying their country? No. From the very start they'd have been bred to servility; they'd never have dared to assert their manhood by making the choice. They would have no manhood. Koph would have seen to that."

Kaspel nodded silently, comprehending now what was in Gene's mind.

Gene's gaze smirched the guards. "Slaves of Koph they would have been! Spies reporting their every word to police—isn't that right? I wonder how many people in Koph would give their lives to utter just

one word against the tyrants who are crushing them—I wonder?" He paused to allow his words full effect. "And do these men intend to spend the rest of their lives under Koph's regime? They must, for this betrayal of Nanich means the downfall of Nanich. They can't go back there. There will be no Nanich!"

He laughed scornfully. "And so they must spend the rest of their lives in Koph. That's amusing. Why are they serving Froar? Because he's offered them great rewards. Perhaps he's given them money or jewels, and promised more. But when they reach Koph, do you think Froar will care? Froar?" Gene laughed again. "Not he!"

The men were very intent on his words. The two at the windows had stepped unthinkingly from their posts, were nearer the bed. The man at the door sat with his mouth open stupidly.

"He has promised them much," Gene said. "And perhaps given them part payment in advance. They dream of wealth and power in Koph. But Froar also dreams of wealth and power in Koph. Everybody can't be rich. The more rich people, the less money to go around." He was speaking directly to the men, now. "Do you see what I mean? Perhaps Froar is well known in Koph. He will run little risk in his climb to greatness. Are any of you men well known?" The guards passed glances of concern to each other, but did not reply. "No, of course not. You will arrive in Koph, simple sailors, or palace servants, or whatever you are. You will have a few jewels. The invasion of Nanich will begin. You will have to fight your own people, or remain in Koph.

Your reward from Froar won't last forever—and then what will you do?"

The men were standing beside the bed, looking down on him, fascinated. "How do you know that Froar won't have you imprisoned the very minute this ship docks? Why should he care what becomes of you? You'll have served his purpose. You won't be able to help him much in his mixing in the politics of Koph. You'd only be a drag on him. And Froar is too ambitious to tolerate any hindrance. You know that from what he's tried to do to Kaspel and me.

"So go ahead, you poor fools. Laugh at us now—but you'll very likely sit with us in the same prison in Koph and maybe die with us there, if we die. But perhaps you will die, and we won't. Kaspel is too wise in the affairs of Nanich to be killed outright. They'll need his counsel. And so he will have a certain amount of influence, of freedom in Koph—for a while at least.

"And then you, rotting in prison, will think of him, and wonder why you allowed yourselves to be duped by Froar—and nothing can save you then, not even Kaspel!"

He sat back, panting from breathlessness and anger; the men glanced at each other uncertainly.

"He's right," the one called Miskal said.

The man beside him wriggled unhappily as though something were pricking him. "It's true—we've been blind, unthinking—it's true. Well,

Thuir!" He peered over the bed to the man who had been watching the door.

Thuir nodded. "Kaspel, pardon our weakness." He dropped to his knees before the old man. "We'll serve you from now on, Kaspel—and never change."

Kaspel gazed on the eagerly uplifted face. "I wonder," he said slowly. "I wonder."

All three men were kneeling. "No, Kaspel—we'll fight for you—for you and Nanich! We swear it!"

Joy fought with unbelief on Kaspel's visage. He turned to Gene, and tears glinted in his eyes. He patted Gene's shoulder. "Good lad!" He arose. "Stand up, you three!" His tone had become authoritative. "I accept your fealty—but there's much to be done before we can congratulate ourselves. Thuir, how many men are outside the door?"

"Three."

"Is Lal among them?" Thuir nodded. "Good. We won't have to worry about him. He's one man faithful to me, though he seems to be serving Froar." Kaspel beamed with satisfaction. "The other two?"

Thuir named them. Kaspel stroked his chin, perturbed. "We haven't time to reason with them. Koph is too close, and if we turn back, we'll have to outrun the ship that's following us. Two of you stand behind the door. You call the men in, Thuir—and the two behind the door will attend to them."

The men eagerly started for the door, Gene accompanying them. Kaspel lifted an admonitory hand. "Don't kill them. Merely strike them senseless if you can. Bind them. Gene, where are you going?"

"To help them," Gene said eagerly.

"You come back here to the bed! You must sit here with me and look unhappy, or the men from outside may miss you, and suspect something is wrong as they enter the room. Come here, now." Gene returned unwillingly. Kaspel dropped his hand. "All right, you three—and don't fail!"

The men nodded confidently. Kaspel pulled Gene into the semblance of grief. He sagged into the pose of despair. Two men slipped behind the door. Thuir opened the panel. "Chavik—Clor!" His voice rose excitedly. "Come in here—quick!"

Two men pushed through the door. Before they had hardly crossed the threshold, Kaspel's new retainers had leaped at them, knives drawn. The outsiders threw up defensive hands, and kept them aloft as the daggers of the others tickled their throats. The knives coaxed them farther inside the room.

Kaspel left the bed. "Now call in Lal."

Thuir opened the door again; Lal entered. He evaluated the situation in a twinkling; a grin crossed his face.

"Bind the two," Kaspel ordered. Thuir bustled about the room, tearing down the bed canopy, pushing Gene aside to rip blankets from the bed. He hurried to the men, slit the cloths with a knife and jerked them into strips; he began to tie Froar's men.

"How many are guarding Siwara's door?" Kaspel asked.

"None," Lal said. "We were in the hall—none could come past us."

"Good." Kaspel wheeled on Thuir. "Have you

finished with those men? Hurry! Roll them under the bed when you're done. We ought to throw them overboard, but perhaps we can use them later, when we've convinced them of their folly. And I'm not a killer by nature."

The two fettered men, gagged lest they cry out, were tumbled to the floor and shoved under the bed.

"Better give them pillows—make them a little comfortable," Kaspel ordered, his humanity savoring of irony. "So! Now three of you stay out in the hall before the door. If anyone comes, waylay him. If it be Froar himself, bind him and let me know. Miskal, you come with Gene and me to Siwara's cabin."

The men trooped out into the hall, closing the door after them. Thuir, Lal and the third man lingered at the entrance. Kaspel, his hand on Gene's arm, a jerk of his head summoning Miskal, hastened down the hall to Siwara's quarters. He tapped the door with his fingertips.

"Siwara!" he called. "Siwara! Open! It's I—Kaspel!"

There was an instant of waiting; the door flew open, Marza's bright little eyes scanned the men with unbelief. She stepped quickly inside, and they hurried into the room.

Siwara was seated on a heap of cushions below the window, her hair unbound and shimmering in brown tendrils over her shoulders. Her eyes were enormous in her amazement and pleasure. She sped from her cushions across the room to Kaspel and whipped her arms around his neck, kissing him wildly.

"Kaspel! Kaspel, forgive me! I was such a fool—an obstinate, ungrateful fool! Will you ever forgive me?" She was sobbing in her happiness.

Kaspel embarrassedly disengaged her, moisture brightening his eyes. "There, now, little one, I'm not angry with you."

Siwara beamed up at him, her sobs lessening. She glanced beyond him, and saw Gene. She turned away miserably. "But I wish you hadn't brought *him!*" Marza was closing the door.

Kaspel motioned for Gene to approach. "Hush, Siwara, child—it was he who made it possible for us to reach you." Gene thrust out his hands in silent supplication.

Siwara faced them uncertainly. "After the way he ... he kissed me—" she faltered. "I hate him!" But her eyes were less angry than unsure.

Gene stepped up to her, grasping her arms. She did not pull away. He lowered his face to hers. "Siwara, I was sincere about the kiss. I meant it—Kaspel didn't have to send me to make love to you. I couldn't help myself!"

Her mouth parted slightly; she trembled in his grip. He pressed his lips on hers. At first she did not respond; then her hands slipped, weakly, up his arms and to his shoulders. There was an instant of warm darkness, compelling and satisfying.

Then Kaspel cleared his throat. "Come, you two—we've no time for dallying. Siwara, where's that ship that's following us?"

"Come to the window," she said, and reaching to it, opened it.

The curtains lifted straight up, snapping in the frenzied wind. A few drops of rain or spray spattered in. Dark waves tumbled clumsily below. In the sky, a brilliant ball of fire blossomed out from nowhere like a moon, illuminating the water for the briefest moment. It vanished, and there was a hollow boom as though a giant had beaten a prodigious drum.

"What was that?" Gene asked. They stared at him as though the question had been unnecessary.

"Lightning, of course," said Siwara. "Have you never seen it before?"

"Is it always in globes? Like the sun?" Gene asked.

"But of course!" the princess said. "What else?"

He shrugged. "In my world its shape is different."

The girl did not answer. She pointed. "The ship's out there." Her slender forefinger stabbed the night.

They pressed on the ledge of the window, frowning through the darkness. Afar, perhaps a mile, lights twinkled, dipping and rising on the swells. A red glow flashed, dimmed and flashed again, speaking a language of light.

"They're signaling Froar," Kaspel said, as he turned from the window. Gene caught the flapping curtains and held them out of the way while Siwara slid the pane in place.

Kaspel's gaze lingered on the princess. "Siwara, you're sure about turning back?"

"Yes—when Froar left me, I began to reminisce. I had thought that perhaps you had tried to poison Gene," she favored Gene with a swift look. "Oh, I suspected you of much, Kaspel! But when I saw that

ship behind us, and Froar came to me and admitted that it was following us by his orders—then I knew! If we reach Koph, I will never see Nanich again; I know that. It's war with Koph, Kaspel, even as you said—if only we can return to Nanich!"

"We can, I think," Kaspel said. "It depends on you, Siwara. Miskal!" He drew the man to him. "Go up on deck, or wherever Froar may be, and bring him down to us. If you can bring him alone, good. If not—well, do the best you can about bringing him alone." He laid gentle hands on Siwara's shoulders. "My child, I love you now as never before." He drew his knife; held it at his side. "Gene, open the window again. Siwara, stand by that window."

She realized his intention. Paling she went to the window.

Kaspel pointed to the door. "Go now, Miskal—bring Froar."

Gene had not opened the window; he pushed away Siwara's hands on the lock. "What are you going to do!"

"Froar will come," Kaspel said. "We will tell him our intention. If he does not put the ship back in our hands, Siwara will jump. A dead princess is of no use in Koph. Froar will have to admit that he's beaten. And if Siwara's afraid to jump, I will use this knife. Is it not right, Siwara?"

She was white and frightened, but she nodded.

"No!" Gene cried, ripping her hands from the window's lock. "No, Kaspel! You can't do this to her! Siwara, look at me! Tell me that—"

She smiled at him with detached fondness as though he were a yapping pet puppy. "Kaspel is right." She spoke to the man in blue. "If he tries to prevent me, Kaspel, stop him." Kaspel's eyes glittered with comprehension.

"Siwara," Gene said, "if you jump, then I jump, too." He snapped at Kaspel, "I hope that'll give you some satisfaction!"

"It is well," Kaspel replied mildly. To Miskal he said, "Well, why do you stand there? Go for Froar, as I told you!" The handmaiden Marza opened the door; Miskal stepped out into the hall.

Gene hugged Siwara to him. After a few seconds, she loosened his grasp and dragged upon the window. The screaming air dashed into the room. Siwara sat on the sill of the window, Gene gripping her as the ship lurched.

Miskal returned. "There's no need for these preparations," he said. "Lal and Thuir have Froar bound in your room. They stopped him as he was coming down here, doubtless to look in on you."

Kaspel sheathed his knife. "Good! Bring Froar here." Miskal bowed and went out. Kaspel gestured to the princess. "You can come down from the window, Siwara. You'd better close it—the wind's cold."

Gene lifted her to the floor, so weak with relief that he could barely push the glass in place.

Miskal and Thuir led in Froar, his hands tied behind him, a gag over his mouth. His black eyes blazed at them. Kaspel advanced to him and with

exasperating slowness unfastened the gag. "Scream if you like, Froar—I've never heard you raise your voice. It will be rare treat. The ship is ours now."

Froar glowered. "You think so! My men—"

Kaspel rolled the gag into a little ball and airily tossed it into a corner. "Your men!" he scoffed. "They won't do anything while you're our captive with a knife near your heart. What rewards can they expect from a dead master? Miskal, Thuir, go out on deck and tell them that. Say that we are turning back. We'll be with you shortly."

The two men went out. Kaspel called, "Lal!" His black-coated servant plodded in. "Lal, take your knife and stand guard over Froar while we are gone. If he tries to escape, use your blade. If anyone tries to rescue him—kill! We're going out on deck."

Lal thrust the flat of his hand on Froar's back, guiding him to a cushion. "A great pleasure," he said, his teeth glinting in satisfaction, as he bared his dagger. "Nothing could be better than finishing this traitor to his princess, to Nanich—and therefore to me." He kicked Froar down on the cushion. "I hope you do nothing rash," he admonished Froar. "I want you to live until we get back to Nanich. I'm sure that your people will be very glad to see you!"

Froar scowled at him, his face dark, his jaw quivering with wrath. "You're not back in Nanich yet," he sneered. "You'll have to get past that ship out there—if you can! It's smaller, swifter—"

Kaspel went into one of the adjoining chambers, emerged with a heavy fur rug. He hung it over the window. "Cover all the openings. We don't want

that ship to see any lights. Siwara, wrap yourself in something warm and follow me. I want you by my side every minute so I'll know you're safe."

Marza brought out a long coat for the girl and bundled her into it.

"You, Marza," Kaspel said, "go about the ship. See that the windows are covered wherever there are lights burning, then come back and watch with Lal." The gaunt old woman wagged her head happily; before leaving the room she turned to Froar and thrust her tongue out at him!

"Now come, Siwara and Gene," Kaspel said. "There's much to be done. We've got to outrace that ship!"

VII

Kaspel found coats for Gene and himself; muffled in them, they started out on deck with Siwara. Stinging rain and spray lashed their faces; the wind snapped their garments around their legs. An orb of the peculiar lightning burgeoned high overhead, producing momentary daylight, then waned, followed by a hollow concussion and darkness indeed. The sails were down; the ship was riding the storm.

Kaspel shouted something, his voice too frail in the wind to be heard; Gene cupped a hand at his ear. Kaspel put an arm around Siwara and drew Gene's face close to his. "We hardly dare attempt turning in this kind of a sea. It's taking a risk, but we ought to hoist sails and speed ahead. The other ship!" He drew them to the rail; they peered behind them. The spy ship's sail was gorged with wind. Kaspel climbed to the upper deck, disappeared, then returned below.

Siwara's hair was already drenched and slapped her cheeks; she reached under her coat, unfastened the sash of her gown and bound it around her head, Gene holding her against the vessel's lurches. The men on deck were huddled against the cabin walls, out of the wind: Kaspel went to them, shouted orders. The men scattered across the deck to drag upon the yards, hauling up the stern sail. Then the foresail was dragged up. The ship strained ahead.

The princess pressed against the cabin wall where the ship's side touched it; she pushed her head out into the gale to stare at the pursuing vessel, her eyes narrowed. Gene stared with her. Rising waves effaced the following lights, slid down to disclose them, and lifted again.

Kaspel returned to them. "All our lanterns have been extinguished. They can't see us now!" His voice was a whisper in the uproar, though he waved his arms to emphasize his shouting. He had dragged up his robe for more freedom of movement, disclosing spindling legs. "Miskal's at the tiller with two others. The wind's constantly shifting. There's not so much

danger of being blown clear into Koph, as far out into the unknown ocean."

Synchronically, half a dozen spheres of lighting glowed at once all over the sky. They blinked against the fleeting glare; the reverberation rang in their ears.

"Aren't you afraid that the masts will snap?" Gene called, as though Kaspel were very far away.

The other man shrugged. "We'll have to chance it for a while."

Rain was avalanching down. Siwara's sodden garments caught the wind, tugging her. She clung to Gene, shivering. Lightning blinked; thunder cracked. Kaspel scrambled across the tilting deck to some of the crew, mouthed commands at them. Gigantic gusts slapped the ship about as if playing with it.

There was a short scream, shrill, almost human. The foresail writhed, ripped. The wind altered, pulling the ship around abreast of an onrushing wave, which smashed against the side of the vessel, almost tipping it over; the deck was nearly vertical for an instant. Siwara was thrown against the rail, Gene gripping her; Kaspel and some of the men slid clear across the planking. The ship heeled. Gene straightened up. The girl had been stunned. Kaspel and the others were busy loosening the yards.

Lifting Siwara, Gene lurched to the cabinway, clawed the door open and carried the princess through the dark to the little room that had been his; he laid her on the bed. Even in the murk she was very white. He drew off her soaked coat and lifted the covers over her. A hand grasping the head of the bed

to steady himself, he bent over her, his other hand lifting one of hers.

She did not stir. He kneeled beside the bed, massaging her wrist. "Siwara! Siwara!"

Then she opened her eyes. "Gene! This terrible storm! I'm frightened!" She was no princess now, no puppet of her country—only a terrified girl.

He touched his cheek to hers, then stood up. She lifted her head. "Where are you going?"

"To get your servant, and something dry for you. I won't be long."

"Light the lamp."

"I can't—I don't know how it's done." He stumbled across the dim room, groping about until he had found one of the chests. He jerked up the weighty lid, reached until he found cloth, and whipped out the fabric, let the lid fall down.

Siwara sat up weakly. "Are you still here? What was that sound?"

"I was just finding myself something to change into. Lie back, Siwara. I'll be back in a moment."

"Don't go, Gene. I'm afraid to be alone. I'm afraid something will happen while you're away." She pressed her hands to her temples. "This terrible voyage!"

He simulated a not very plausible laugh. "Nonsense. You'll be all right until I come back."

"Hurry, then—hurry." White lightning flared beyond the window, revealing her eyes, the curve of her cheek; thunder obscured his reassuring answer.

He staggered to her quarters, retaining his footing

by pressing his palms against the wall of the narrow corridor. The wind ululated like the cries of a horde of demons on their way to an evil Sabbath. The ship veered as he opened the door to Siwara's rooms, almost flinging him within. In the uncertain glint of the swinging lantern, he saw that Froar was lying lax on his cushions, his face gray with seasickness. Lal, watching beside him, looked up with a cheerful grin. In a corner, Marza, the maid, was huddled, clutching a carved image, perhaps a small idol, to her breast, babbling nonsense born of fear. Gene went to her, bent over her and shook her. She did not glance up at him or acknowledge his presence in any manner, only went on with her gabble. Gene shook her again more vigorously. The veils of her terror lifted slowly; her eyes peeped at him as though from vast distance.

"Siwara's in my room. Take some dry clothing in to her."

She raised her haggard face as though his words were barely audible. Then comprehension came to her. She nodded, thrusting the little statuette into the bosom of her costume, and scrabbled to her feet. She hobbled into the adjacent rooms and returned, garments across her arms. Bending her head to him in a little bow, she tottered down the hall to Siwara.

Gene stripped off his wet clothes and arrayed himself in the coat which he had brought. It was too small, leaving his chest bare. He looked with distaste at the short sleeves and rolled them above his elbows, tucked part of the hem of the robe into the

belt at his side, freeing his legs for quick motion. He strode to the window. The wind wormed around the edges of the glass, disturbing the curtains. Lightning flamed; thunder boomed.

Lal stood with him, peering out into the erratic rags of rain and black night. There was no sign of the other ship's lights. Spume lay like lace on the waves; flying spray filmed the window. Lal shook his head in silent comment of the storm; Gene clapped a friendly hand on his back and returned to Siwara. The lamp was lit, swinging wildly from its bracket, and the shadow of the bed's canopy expanded grotesquely on the wall, contracted and swelled again.

Siwara was still on the bed, but she had changed into the clothing which Marza had brought her. The maid was beside her, hugging the small eidolon to her breast, one of Siwara's arms protectively around her. The girl smiled wanly at Gene.

"Marza's nearly witless with terror. This is her first time out on the sea. Is Froar all right?"

Gene drew up a chair and seated himself, nodding in answer to her question. Siwara stroked her maid's lank hair, then put her hand out to him. He gripped it, saying nothing. Then she shook her head unbelievably.

"And a little while ago I laughed at you! I thought you were weak! But now I know that you are strong. And—I love you, Gene. So will my people."

Kaspel reeled in, panting, his face taut with exhaustion, his dripping coat plastered to his slender frame. Gene gave him the chair; Kaspel's eyes

thanked him as he dropped on the seat, breathing heavily.

"We seem to have lost the spy ship—but I don't know where we're going," he said. "We're being driven into the unknown sea. There's no knowing if we'll ever see Nanich again."

Gene, dragging out a change of apparel for the old man, looked up; Siwara's face was anxious.

"Kaspel!" she cried. "Is there no way of guiding our course!"

He shook his head glumly. "The sails are down. The foremast is cracked. We'll come limping into Nanich, if we ever see it at all."

Gene let drop the lid of the chest and pressed the dry clothing upon Kaspel, who smiled gratefully. "Why do you think we'll never reach Nanich?"

"Don't you understand?" Siwara asked impatiently. "There is so much water. Only Koph and its colonies, and Nanich. The rest"—she waved her hand—"nothing but water. Endless reaches of it. We might sail for years and never come to land." She frowned, musing. "Though there are tales of islands, somewhere—but nobody alive has ever seen them."

The night moved along so slowly that the ship seemed to be keeping pace with its pilgrimage across the world. When day came, the scudding clouds were so dark that at best it was but twilight. Kaspel freed the two men who had been tied in his room; he talked to them, apparently convincing them that it was no use now to serve Froar. There was nothing to be done on deck but watch the tiller.

Froar had been moved to his own quarters, his bonds replaced by iron manacles. Siwara spent most of the time gazing out of the windows with Kaspel and Gene. The storm did not abate, and there was a slow leak below deck that had to be calked. Kaspel laid a game board on Siwara's low table, and attempted to teach Gene the rules of the contest, but their interest was forced. Marza remained out of sight, doubtless mumbling to her little idol.

At last Siwara pushed back the game pieces and sighed. "We might almost be cursed," she said. "From the very start, things have been bad—and look at us now. Kaspel, I can't fix my mind to the game. You two play on, if you like. I can't." She went to the window, gripping its sill as the vessel careened.

The carved pawns toppled over and rolled off the board as quickly as Gene and the old man could set them up. Gene made senseless mistakes as he played, and Kaspel shook his head, smiling indulgently. They tired of the game, and stood by Siwara at the window.

The storm continued through the following night, but when Gene awoke, the sea was calming. Lal, assigned to him by Kaspel, brought him water for washing. Refreshed, he went on deck. Several men were binding the split mast with bands of metal; others were engaged in sewing the rent sail. Mountains of clouds were rolling away, their edges brilliant with sunlight. The wind subsided to the merest breath. The aft sail had been hoisted.

Siwara joined Gene and Kaspel. Her hair was

tightly bound with threaded gems; her brocaded gown was cloaked by a splendid mantle. Her bearing was confidently serene; she was a princess again. But she asked Kaspel, "Where are we now?"

He spread his hands ineffectually. "I have no idea. But we're heading west, back toward Nanich, or where it ought to be."

She rested her slim hands on the rail, gazing at the retreating clouds. "What strange shapes the shadows take on the sea! Look, over there—it almost might be land."

They followed her eyes. "It looks like a plateau of some sort," Gene said. "The atmosphere trembles so that you can't be sure what you're seeing."

"The shadow moves, but that dark spot lies still," Kaspel said. "Land I think it is!" He called to one of the men. "Look over there!" He pointed. The men at work on the torn sail looked up; those concerned with repairing the mast turned their faces.

"It is land!" one of them cried. They flocked to the rail, muttering to each other excitedly.

"Of course it can't be Koph or Nanich," Siwara said. "It's not large enough to be either. What is it then? Kaspel, do you think that it's one of those fabulous islands? Could it really be?"

"We could pass by it," Kaspel said slowly. "It's not far out of our path."

Siwara laid a hand on Gene's arm. "Kaspel—do you recall the legends of the islands? The cities of jewels, the strange arts of their peoples?" Her voice rose excitedly. "Remember the tale of the well in which is the very flame of life itself?"

"And the devil beasts, and the race of torturers," Kaspel added grimly. "Siwara, what's on your mind?"

She deliberated. "We ought to visit that island. Who knows what may be upon it! Treasures—we could buy supplies for Nanich's defense through some of Koph's colonies. They'd sell to us, if we could pay. Maybe there's a people who could help us in the coming war— Kaspel, we must visit that island!"

He put a hand to his chin, uncertain. "I don't know, Siwara. The faster we reach home, the better."

"But it needn't take long," she wheedled. "The sail will be mended soon. And we can use the oars."

"And if the people on the island are cannibals?" Kaspel asked. "Suppose it's a wilderness of wild beasts?"

"We will pass near it," she said with finality. "Very near. We can see if there are any cities. If there are, we will land."

Kaspel speculated on the far shore's possibilities. "If that is what you desire—very well. We'll change tack." He whirled to the clustering seamen, captaining them. "Back to your places. We're altering our course toward the land!"

As they neared the shore, they saw that it was an island of naked rock. Innumerable spires of stone rose sheer into the clouds like rough-hewn pillars, their tapering points thrusting into the mists like spindles impaling scraps of white paper. At their

bases were slopes of fallen debris. The waves slid smoothly to rest over a sandy beach.

It was an awesome sight, that island. Its pinnacles must have been hundreds of feet in height. "It reminds me of the skyline of New York," Gene said, "only higher—twenty or thirty times higher. Like a windowless city of stone."

"A city of giants," Kaspel commented. "It makes this ship nothing but a splinter in a pond. I don't like it. There's something cold about it, and aloof. Are you satisfied now, Siwara? Shall we go on to Nanich?"

"No," she said, gently. "Let us go closer still. And it doesn't look unpleasant to me. If only there were some greenery! I am thinking, Kaspel, that it may be—we have a colony for Nanich."

He stared at her. "Perhaps. Yes, there may be minerals upon it that we can use in Nanich—who knows! We'll go closer." He called out orders.

The island towered above them like the columns of a cyclopean temple. Siwara pointed. "A city!"

They stared. Yes, there was a city, and no small one. It was of the same gray stone as the crags. Its architecture was Egyptian, Gene thought, severe pylons and sheer walls rising in a series of terraces. Three of the huge pillars were welded together, forming a niche, and the city, sheltered in that gigantic nook, was like an ant hill in the shadow of a cathedral.

There was nothing alive about the city, no vestige of verdure. Two stone piers ran out to sea but they sheltered no ships. It was like a place constructed for

the dead, waiting to receive phantom ships and the souls aboard them.

"We'll send out a boat with several men," Kaspel said. "They can look around then tell us if there's any danger. If not, we'll go ashore. But we mustn't waste too much time."

The princess concurred. A boat was lowered over the side and Kaspel chose the delegation that was to proceed to shore. Siwara and Gene watched them rowing off, dwindling with distance until the little craft was hardly a dark speck on the water.

At sundown, while Kaspel and Gene were dining with Siwara, Miskal came to them. "They're coming back!" he said.

Siwara laid down the morsel of bread which she was nibbling and deserted the table, tugging Gene up as she passed him. Kaspel hastily arose. They went out on the deck. The island's spires were warmly red in the dying sunlight. The boat was not far from the ship. Its occupants appeared hale enough.

The princess jerked Gene's sleeve. "Call to them, Gene. Call for me and ask them what they've found."

Gene made a funnel of his hands at his mouth and shouted, "Did you find anything? Were there people?"

They strained forward, waiting for an answer. One of the men stopped rowing and stood up, raising a hand. "We found—this!" he called. He was too far away; the object was too small to see.

"What is it?" Gene cried.

"We're not sure!"

The boat was much closer. The thing in the standing man's hand was visible, sharp edged in the rosy sun glow.

It appeared to be a little clay doll.

VIII

"Only a little doll of clay!" Siwara murmured, the image in one of her hands. "And yet—it is clothed with mystery. Who made it, and why? For a child's toy? Has it a religious significance? I doubt that it could be the portrait of anyone living. Nothing like it can possibly exist!"

Kaspel and Gene were with her in her cabin, seated beside her on long cushions under the large window. They had dined with her and then she had called in the men who had gone ashore. When they had first returned on board, their replies to her queries had been incoherent with excitement. She had allowed them time to eat and to marshal their memories into sequential order.

Night was dropping its burden of darkness over

the sea and the nameless island, wrapping them in storage against the return of day. Stars peeped through the window, shaking as though in mirth.

Siwara examined the effigy wonderingly for perhaps the twentieth time. When it had first reached the ship, its clay had been wet, as though it had been freshly made, but now as it dried it was stiffening. Beautifully modeled, it was human in shape, and yet something more than human. Its hands and feet were webbed, the fingers and toes lengthened into pointed claws, and minute lines cross-hatched the legs and torso, suggesting tiny scales. Its eyes were immense, round and staring, and instead of hair its head bore a finny crest over which Siwara puzzled.

"It looks human," she said, "and yet—it looks like a fish. If it is an idol of some sort, I do not know of the god that it represents. Kaspel, do you?" The old man slowly shook his head, pursing his lips as he referred to his knowledge of things pantheistic.

"What do you think of it?" Her voice softened fondly as she turned to Gene, who shrugged, baffled.

She motioned to the men. "Surely now you can tell your story straight. One of you speak—"

The men glanced to each other, all of them eager to narrate their adventures. One raised a finger to the others, pointing to himself. They nodded agreement. His eyes lighting with pleasure, the man spoke shyly, deferentially.

"Princess, when we left the ship we were afraid, very afraid. The city was so still—and yet we thought that it was like a living thing, watching us as we came, and resenting our intrusion. I know it's

foolish." He reddened, faltering. "I am only your poor servant, and not a poet. I have no poet's words, but I have a poet's heart. And that was the way it seemed to me."

"Not at all foolish," Siwara encouraged warmly, and whispered to Gene, "You see the kind of men we have in Nanich? What man of Koph would be so sensitive as to perceive the mood of that city? I, too, felt something living about it—" She reverted to the other man. "Yes, speak on."

"The others sensed it, too—that the city did not like us. It was so quiet, so watchful—like the cat that crouches motionless before the heedless, playful mouse—and then suddenly sweeps its paw, thus"—he shot out a hand, whipped it back—"and the mouse lies still."

He went on, "The harbor was swept clean by the wind from the water, but not the city, no! Inside its dim halls the dust was thick, thick as though the broom of time had never brushed there. Our feet left long tracks as we plodded through it, through all its endless halls.

"We walked on and on. There was nothing but the gray dust. Here and there lay softly rounded mounds. One of them we disturbed, whisking the dust away and uncovering the bones of an animal that must have died ages ago, for, at our touch, the white skeleton crumbled to powder. The city has not been lived in for who knows how many years—and yet we knew that *it* lived, that its spirit was watching over us. And the bones seemed like an evil omen.

"Light came unwillingly in through narrow slits of

windows high in the lofty walls. Whoever made that city meant it to stand forever. The stones are as smooth today as when first set up. They're not carved or painted after our fashion in Nanich; they are bare, but they do not look unfinished. No." He frowned, reminiscing. "They make our buildings of Nanich look small and ... and petty in comparison."

Siwara stirred restlessly. "Yes, but this doll? Where did you find it?"

The seaman waved her into silence, his eyes rapt. She was no princess then, only a member of his audience. "I'll come to that. There were no tracks in the dust, only ours. We trudged on, leaving clouds of dust whirling in the air behind us like gray smoke. The corridors were endless. We were in a maze, but that did not fret us; we knew that we could get out by retracing our steps, watching our tracks. And after a long, weary walk, we came to a room ... oh, you never dreamed its like!"

He spread his hands as he described it. "It was so wide and so deep that we were barely able to see from one end to another. And the ceiling was so far above us that it was like the gray sky of dusk. What men could have made it, we asked each other. Your palace in Nanich is no small thing, princess, but it would go into that room four times, and still not cover the floor; if you stretched your palace's walls three times their height, still they would not have touched the ceiling.

"The doors to that place were narrow, but tall—ten times the height of a man. They had rotted away

from their hinges, disintegrating into the ever-present dust. Then Gogir here pointed," he nodded at the man whom he named, "and I saw a platform at the far side of the room. It ran across the room from wall to wall. It was not high, only a few feet from the floor. Three or four steps ran up to it."

"Seven," one of the men corrected him. "I counted them—seven."

The narrator shrugged. "Perhaps there were seven. They were very low; they hardly mattered. Then we noticed, for the first time, carving on the walls. At least I think it was carving. There had been no sign of age anywhere in the city, so it could not have resulted by the falling away of weathered stone. No, it must have been carving.

"But why was it there, and what did it represent? It was vast, vast—it covered almost all of that stupendous reach of wall. And it was only an outline, thus." His hand sketched a scalloped contour like the irregular edges of a puddle. "I wish I were an artist, that I might draw it for you. For, although it was only an outline, apparently meaningless, there was something in it that filled us with dread!"

His eyes were rapt again. "It was as though the city's watchful spirit had been condensed into a line. That carving was somehow—alive! Alive and watchful. We were all vaguely worried by it," he ducked his head bashfully. "I didn't want to remain there. I . . . I am not superstitious, but I didn't like that thing. But the others were braver than I, so I did not hang back when they went forward to examine the sculpture.

"On the dais was a slab of stone. We didn't see it until we were nearly upon it—not that it was small. No! But the immensity of the room, the horror that lay in the carving, they dwarfed it into insignificance!

"It was low, reaching only to our knees, but it was long—thirty feet long. Ten feet broad. And upon it, like the glass sheets that sometimes cover our tabletops in Nanich, was a layer of glass six inches thick, with the dust heavy upon it.

"Somehow we knew that we were in a temple, that the carving was its god, the slab an altar. We had profaned it, entering without the prescribed rites. And yet there was worship in our hearts as we looked about its severe magnificence, worship that we hoped the god would perceive and respect.

"We did not tarry there any longer; we were too nervous. We went back through the door and started out. As we plowed through the maze, our eyes on the trail we had left on entering, Thylmin seemed to notice something. He pulled our arms, halting us, and bent down on his hands and knees.

"'What do you see?' Gogir asked, bending down, too. All four of us were crouching in the dust as Thylmin pointed. 'These are our tracks,' he said, 'but look—can't you see tracks within ours?'

"We looked—and he was right. Something had been walking in the path that our feet had made—some little animal. The tracks were blurred; the loose dust had slid down, filling the hollows. But Thylmin found a stretch of the prints that were clear. They were human—the footprints of a human being only six inches tall!

"The footprints"—he pointed dramatically—"of that little clay image in your hand, princess!"

Siwara glanced at the doll, fascinated. The seaman continued his story.

"We didn't know then that they were tracks left by—a doll! We thought that they had been made by a person, and our fear of the shape on the temple wall was displaced by curiosity. From where did the little being come? We went on slowly, our eyes on the floor. We walked far.

"And at last we came to the place where the tiny tracks had joined ours! They led into another section of the maze. We followed, zigzagging through the innumerable turns of the halls. The little thing was just ahead of us, we knew, for the time came when we rounded a bend and crossed our own tracks. We did not care. We were interested in seeing the little being. We crossed our tracks again and again—and suddenly fear gripped my heart!"

He clapped a hand to his chest. "Yes, fear gripped me—for we were lost! How could we find our way out now, with our tracks crossing and recrossing? We were lost in the maze. And then I knew, and told the others. It was the doing of the god whose temple we had profaned! The little man was one of his worshipers and had been sent to confuse us in the maze so that we could never step outside it, but must wander on and on, hopefully, hungering and thirsting—until, like the skeleton that we had found, we were only bones shrouded in dust!

"That thought angered us, all of us. We deter-

mined then that we would find the little creature. Surely it knew its way. We would make it tell! We did not entertain the possibility that though human in shape, the tiny thing might have no more wits than a mouse, and that it had become lost in the maze even as we as it prowled about. For what could have set it to prowling? Was it seeking food? Food, in all that dust? We had seen not even a blade of grass on all the ground around the city—only bald rock that itself had seemed hungry, and wistful for the touch of life.”

He leaned forward eagerly. “There you have it! I’ve expressed the spirit of the city at last! It was as if it had died long ago, but its ghost had lingered on, craving return to life. Waiting for life to return to it, that it might seize it and use it for its own ends! That was why we were afraid!

“And we caught up to the thing at last. Its legs were so short—it could not cover ground as swiftly as we! It was a gray little shape, as though filmed with the dust. It was that little figure in your hand, princess. But it moved—it walked! It was alive! I swear that it was alive!

“It turned around, looked back over its shoulder, started to run! Gogir ran forward and snatched it up, and the instant that it was in his hand it was inert. No life in it. Only a little doll of clay.

“We crowded around Gogir, looking at it, fear returning to our hearts—fear of the awesome carving in the temple. And we lost our heads. We ran—where we went, we did not care, only we must keep moving onward lest that god leave his home in the

carving and overtake us, and snatch our lives that he craved!"

He was still for an instant, his eyes somber as he brooded over the memory. The other men were introspective, too, sitting huddled as though the cold hand of terror had crept around them in another embrace. Then the seaman resumed:

"Gogir stumbled, fell. The little clay doll dropped from his hand. We stopped long enough to help Gogir to his feet—and then stopped in deed! For the little clay image was moving!

"It drew itself up slowly, as though stunned by the fall. It stood staring at us a moment with its blank eyeballs, then turned and scampered off. Gogir cried out to it but it did not halt. Gogir used some bad language"—the man's eyes twinkled humorously—"and he pursued the little figure, scooped it up with a sweep of his hand. And then—it was only a doll again! A little clay doll—nothing else. But its pose was different. When Gogir had first touched it, the doll's legs were straight, its arms at its sides. But now its action was frozen in the pose: its legs were bent, running, its arms drawn up and its fists clenched!

"Gogir did not hurt it, for all that it was only a little doll. He did not squeeze it. And there was no need—it did not move to escape. But we had seen it running, and to us it was still alive, as dolls seem alive to children, to the little girls who cradle their puppet babies and sing to them.

"Gogir said, 'It's magic. The god of the carving has used his magic on us. We think that this little thing lives—but it is only a trick of our minds which

the god has clouded with an enchantment.' For, after all, who could look on the terrible lines of that carving and still go on thinking as before?

"Gogir lifted the image to hurl it on the floor. Thylmin stayed him. 'We must show it to our princess,' he said. Gogir nodded. We started back, searching for the exit.

"Our feet had kicked up much dust. It tortured our lungs. It was bitter. The day wore away—we were afraid of the coming of night. Perhaps the god in the stone did not awake to life until night, and that was why he had sent the clay image—to detain us until he could come for us.

"We went mad again. Gogir thrust the image in his girdle and we ran—ran and ran and ran. Then we found the door and came out. The sun was low. This ship, lying on the water as on a mirror, was never so pleasing to our eyes despite the unpleasantness that has been aboard it—the disappearance of our captain, Froar's meddling with our loyalties to you, princess—despite all these things, we were glad to see this ship.

"We pushed our boat into the water and came back—and that is all."

Siwara glanced at the other explorers. "He has forgotten nothing? You can add something?"

The men shook their heads. One said, "It is all as he has told you, princess. Only his telling is much better than ours would be." The others nodded in approval.

Siwara stood. "Then you may go. Marza!" Her

maid appeared in the doorway. "Give these men a handful of money!" She considered. "No, money is not enough. You were brave. Here." She jerked her necklace from her throat, catching the glinting amethysts before they could slip from the snapped thread. "Here. Divide these among yourselves. Jewels, as jewels, have little value in Nanich, where all share their beauty, but they have been precious to me—my mother gave them to me—and I have worn them on my heart." She pressed them into the palm of the man who had recounted his adventures. "Go, with my thanks." The maid Marza appeared and clinked coins into the men's palms.

They filed out humbly, their eyes adoring the princess. Siwara touched the nakedness of her neck. "Kaspel, it's in my mind to visit that city tomorrow."

Kaspel looked up. "Are you mad? Without considering the import of this man's story?"

She pressed to the window, her eyes combatting the starry darkness as they searched for the black bulk of the island. She turned from the pane, looked down to the old man. "Obviously it's what they said—magic!"

Kaspel lifted a bony hand in horror. "Siwara! After all my teaching! You are as superstitious as they!"

She shrugged and seated herself again, laying a hand on one of Gene's. "What else could it be but magic?"

Kaspel put down his hand, stroked his thigh ruminatively. "The men were frightened. They admitted that they were a little mad. They ran. They found

this little doll. They imagined that they had seen it running, too."

Gene took the image from Siwara. "But the tracks they saw, Kaspel! And the doll is still wet. How did it come to be there in that dust?"

Kaspel pondered. "I'd forgotten about those tracks."

The princess slapped the pillow energetically. "It was magic, Kaspel. There is a god in the city. A strong god who has not been served for long. I will go to him tomorrow and pray to him to help us beat off the warriors of Koph."

"Magic!" Kaspel scoffed. "It's nothing but wishful thinking!"

"Nevertheless, Kaspel, I will go to that city tomorrow. Don't you think I'm right?" the princess appealed to Gene.

He eyed the doll. "Siwara—I don't know. We have no magic back in New York. I'll visit the temple in your place. You must stay here on the ship where you'll be safe."

She laughed shortly in mockery. "Safe? With Froar on board? We never know at just what minute he's apt to do the same thing that you did—convince his watchers to free him and follow him. If you go to the city I go with you. I go regardless of whether you do or not. I must see that god—"

"I will accompany you," Kaspel said. "Of course, it's nothing but the merest idiocy, this mission—but I'll go with you."

"What about Froar?" Gene asked. "You can't

leave him here. We're still not sure that all our men are really faithful."

"Froar can come, too," Siwara said briskly. "There's no danger; he's got his hands in chains. We won't be wasting time if that's what you're about to mention, Kaspel. The men are still binding the split mast." She patted one of Gene's hands and arose. "Then it's definitely settled. We'll leave for the city tomorrow as soon as the sun is up."

She touched her hair. "Oh, I'm sleepy! We'd all of us better get to bed as soon as possible if we want to be rested for the morrow. And you'd better take another look at Froar. I didn't like his attitude when I last saw him. For a man in chains he's remarkably cheerful." Her mouth altered from a kissable thing to a thin line. "He was very satirical in his remarks, playing the gallant, but I suspected that there was something behind it. I wonder what?" Gene had arisen and she kissed him. "Good night, my dear. I rather like you in that robe—it's too small, but it's becoming. I must remember to have Marza work on that costume for me that the women wear in your world—what is it called? Ah, yes—slacks."

"God forbid!" said Gene.

IX

In the yellow dawn light the city was like brass. The sky was free of clouds, and the needling crags lifted up and up until they merged with the atmosphere, like pillars supporting the heavens. The little boat slid over the waters, rowed by four men. At its prow Siwara sat close to Gene. Kaspel and Froar rode in back, Kaspel resplendent in shimmering blue as though he had donned his court dress to impress the forgotten god, Froar in dull maroon wool, the chains on his hands hidden in the folds of his long sleeves. He sat, head erect, shoulders squared, as though he were the real leader of the expedition.

"There are no sea birds—haven't you noticed?" Siwara asked. Gene stroked the sword which he had strapped to his side, stroked it lovingly and with a trace of pleased fear. He was no weakling who had slaved in a dreary New York office; he was a man of Nanich, serving his princess.

The boat grounded on the sandy beach, the rowers pulled in their oars and dragged in the craft. They, too, were armed, and they stole glances at the ominous city, their faces tense with apprehension.

Gene assisted Siwara out of the boat. Kaspel helped Froar ashore. The princess turned to the oarsmen. "You may stay here and wait. I don't think that we'll be long. If we aren't back by noon, come for us. You're not afraid?"

They hurriedly reassured her. She touched Gene's arm. "Come along." They plodded over the sand, the four of them—Siwara, Gene, Kaspel and Froar—to the broad avenue of flagstones that ran from the gate of the city to the stone pier. At the gateway they paused, staring up. There was no gate now; time had nibbled it away, but it must have been prodigious, a hundred feet wide, two hundred high. Whoever had made it had accomplished an architectural marvel.

"Amazing!" Froar's voice grated. They glanced at him, startled—they had been so accustomed to thinking of him with rancor that his fraternizing with them was unexpected. But he smiled at them as though entering into the occasion on an equal footing. They said nothing, started on.

Beyond the gate was a square, perhaps a market place, devoid of stalls and wares. Bare—and as the seaman had said, hungry. Streets forked away from it like the branches of a tree, and rows of squat little houses. They entered one. There was nothing in it but dust. Its small square windows, high in the walls, were without panes.

Ahead the temple loomed, pressing against the precipices. They walked to it, climbing the wide steps. Its entrance, too, was vast; they were like ants going through an ordinary door. They were unimportant, dwindled to paltriness.

Inside the doorway, the dust began.

There was no use following the tracks that the others had made. They walked on, speaking in whispers. Gene stooped frequently to make a cross with his fingertip in the dust. "To show us which trail is our own," he explained.

The halls went on and on. The men had gone straight ahead; then their path had crossed upon itself. Gene led his party to the side, keeping always to the right. Through gray hall into vast chamber, through another hall and another chamber they went—and always there was nothing but dust. As the seaman had said, there were mounds in the dust. Gene paused and gingerly prodded one. He frowned; his hand had encountered something. He picked it up. It was a piece of carved metal, hollow and pyramidal, as though meant to fit over the corner of a wooden chest. It was not very large.

They examined the carvings. "Look!" Siwara said. "Figures like the clay doll—human and still not quite human." She gave the piece of metal to Kaspel to carry and they went on. They stepped from a chamber into a corridor, and stopped. Framed by the doorway beyond, a garden lay brilliant in the sunlight.

They hurried forward to the doorway's threshold. The garden was the temple's courtyard. And what a garden! And within it they saw their first living thing.

The trees stretched on for half a mile, tender, pale golden-green leaves as of early spring spraying out like tents from the poles of purple-black trunks.

Some resembled birches, but their papery bark was pale pink, and tangled clusters of soft blue flowers drooped heavily from their scant boughs. There were matted tiers of yellow azaleas.

Soft grass grew in high clumps, as golden as if blood of sunlight fed the blades. Farther on, banked by soft, deep yellow moss, a dark-green brooklet gurgled, pearly stones gleaming in its depths and little silver fish streaking meteorlike within it.

Something like an antelope, but impossibly slim, minced over the moss, bending its long neck to drink from the stream. It was oblivious to them.

They stepped into the garden. Butterflies with disproportionately large wings fluttered up from the grass, and out of the trees, strange little blue birds flashed, preying on the insects, twittering in flight. Kaspel stumbled, bent down.

He aimed a forefinger into the grass. "I wonder what these are?" They seemed to be apples which had grown on slim stems, become heavy and sagged to the ground. Gene discovered a large yellow fruit on a bush nearby; it resembled a pear.

"This place—why, it's a paradise!" Siwara cried happily.

They rambled along, Gene ahead of them. Suddenly he stopped, lifting a finger to his lips. They listened.

They heard—a voice! Someone was singing! The voice was soft and high, not like a woman's, rather like a child's.

"I can't understand the words," Siwara whispered. She turned to Kaspel inquiringly, but he shook his head.

"That's peculiar," Gene muttered. "They're very clear." He repeated them. "Dance little people, dance for me—who made you from the streamlet's mud. Live and move in ecstasy, my thought your thought, my will your blood—" He frowned at them. "Can't you make those words out?" But Siwara and Kaspel shook their heads; Froar stared.

"It's clear enough—I can distinguish syllables," Kaspel breathed, "but they don't mean anything."

Gene puzzled, "It's odd that I can understand them and you can't. Let's see who's singing them." He crept forward, cautiously lifting the blossom-laden branches out of the way, only his feet making sound as they rustled through the grass.

He stopped. The others emerged from the little thicket and stopped beside him.

The stream had bent. Before them was a stretch of moss and gurgling water. On the moss danced three of the tiny clay figures so human in shape and yet so nonhuman.

Over them bent a man—or was it a man? He, too, was like the figures in his resemblance to humanity. His feet were webbed, the toes projecting into sharp claws. His hands were webbed talons. Scales glinted greenly on his legs and abdomen. He had a decided paunch. His face was like a seal's, the eyes enormous, the nose only a set of nostrils over the crescent slit of his mouth. A spiky crest jutted from his forehead, ran down his nape and dwindled

along his spine. He was not fearsome, merely ludicrous as he crouched above the little clay dolls which danced, reaching out a long paw to caress them, herded them together, his goggling eyes rolling blissfully as he whispered to them—Gene heard the words clearly, "You are happy, my children, so happy! And you love me, me the father who made you. Kneel to me!" The dolls dropped to their knees simultaneously, raising adoring arms in unison. "Now dance again—"

Then he turned from them and the dolls dropped lifeless. "What's the use?" he asked. "What am I doing but talking to myself?"

His eyes touched Gene and the others. With a little cry of surprise he sat back flat on the little dolls, his mouth opening to an enormous circle. He jumped to his feet. "People! People!" Then he looked accusingly up to the sky. "Orcher, is this another one of your jokes?"

If he had expected an answer none was forthcoming. After an instant he hurried to the explorers. "People!" he cried. "People! Impossible—but here you are, really people! I simply can't believe it!" He laid hands on them, pinching them, prodding them, tugging their clothing. At his approach, Siwara had hastily clutched Gene. The fishman blinked his eyes reproachfully at her. "You're afraid of me? Me?" He tilted back his head, laughing. "Ho-ho, that's amusing. Afraid of me!"

Siwara said to Gene, "I can't understand what he's saying. Do you think he's dangerous?" Kaspel had unsheathed his knife.

"Can't you really understand him? I can. He's overjoyed to see us," Gene said.

Siwara eyed the monstrosity dubiously. "I hope he doesn't want to eat us," she said. "What! Can he read my thoughts?"

For abruptly the creature had stopped laughing; he scanned her mournfully. "Of course I mean no harm," he said. But Siwara still did not understand.

"There's something odd about this," Gene told him. "I can grasp your words' meaning, my friends can't. My name's Gene"—he no longer used his last name since it appeared that Siwara, Kaspel and Froar had none. "This is Princess Siwara of Nanich, and this is Kaspel, her minister. And this"—his voice was resentful—"is Froar."

The girl looked up at Gene, amazed. "But you can talk to him! You're introducing us!"

The weird entity placed a hand on his breast. "And I am Yanuk." He moved among them, handling them again. Kaspel was a bit nervous; Froar stood rigid, haughty. Siwara shrank against Gene. "But it's wonderful to have someone with whom to talk again! You're the first humans I've seen in—" He held up his fingers as though counting them. "Centuries, I'm sure it must be. People! And what beautiful clothes! Speaking of clothes"—he glanced at his paunch worriedly—"I'm sorry. I wasn't expecting visitors. Just a minute." He turned hastily, bent over the moss. What did he do to it? To his guests he seemed to be running his hands across it, first one way, then another. He straightened up, and in his

hands was a scarf woven of the yellow moss. He wound it around himself.

"There, that's better. Why is the girl so distrustful?" he asked Gene. "Is she your mate?"

"I think so," Gene answered. "It hasn't been fully decided yet. She's a princess—I'm a nobody. I don't belong in this world at all."

"A mate," Yanuk said, lifting his eyes to the heavens. "That's what I'd like. I've prayed to Orcher, but he says he won't create one for me, that he wants me to be disciplined. I'm terribly lonely."

"Who's Orcher?" Gene asked.

"He built the city. I can see that you're wondering about me. But this is no way for you to be, standing like this! Come along with me." He started off, summoning them with a flip of a claw.

Gene followed, translating the creatures's speeches to the others. Siwara said, "It's queer that you can make sense of what he's saying and we can't. You can't blame that on thought transference and the strange quality of our atmosphere, Gene. There must be another reason."

Yanuk led them from the garden through one of the huge doors and up a stair. The floor had been cleared of dust. The stair was very long. At its top they turned and went up a second flight. Then a third, a fourth, until they were very weary. But Yanuk was unfatigued. He bounced up the steps, his paunch joggling in a Santa Claus manner.

At last they reached his chambers, which were

crammed with fantastic furniture. It was like the interior of a surrealist junk shop. There were five or six rugs on the floor, thrown on without much care; Froar stumbled, his manacles clinking; he jerked up his chin, offended. There were metal chests, high tripods, long tables littered with parched clay images, several structures like models of Gothic cathedrals, shimmering as though composed of mother-of-pearl. Light pried in through a high window.

"My studio," Yanuk waved a hand lightly. He stopped, sniffing. "What's that?" Gene detected the odor of rotting flowers. "Oh, I know." Yanuk hurried to a long, rusty-colored roll. "I had my dolls make me a rug of flowers, and its's withering. Excuse me while I take it away." He lifted it, dragged it to one of the Gothic models and stuffed it into the little edifice. "You might call this thing an incinerator," he said, tapping the structure. "Sit down! Sit down, won't you?" Gene interpreted to the princess and her ministers.

They found chairs, Froar managing to pull up one for himself without his fetters inconveniencing him. They seated themselves. "Now about myself," Yanuk said. "Of course I expect to hear all about you afterward." He lifted a warning forefinger.

He wriggled into a pose of ease. "We sea folk used to dwell in the ocean—oh, ages and ages ago. I've lost track of the time. There were a lot of us. But the water turned cold. So we came on land. This island became our haunt. We lived in the garden,

what few of us hadn't perished from cold, and Orcher happened along. I don't know where he came from, and I don't think Orcher knows either. He's been alive so long that, wise as he is, he couldn't possibly remember.

"Orcher built this city. It was just a whim. My people were superstitious. They thought he was a god and worshiped him. Oh, the rites were awfully nasty—blood, you know, and sacrificing the first-born and that sort of thing." His eyes popped disdainfully. "I thought it was in horrid taste and shied clear of it. And Orcher liked that." He drew himself up proudly.

"Orcher says he respected me because I was skeptical. Just because he was more clever than we—that didn't make him a god. At least not to me. And he liked that. He tutored me for a while until this place tired him. And he made me immortal so that I'd have time to develop myself—a fiend for self-improvement, Orcher is. And here I've been for years and years and years. I amuse myself making little toys and dabbling in what the uninformed might call magic—it's a science of a sort—but now and then I get terribly bored with it.

"Occasionally a ship has been blown in these waters and I have company. But the people grow old and die, and then I'm alone again. Sometimes I think that it'd be a good thing to build a ship and go looking around the world, but I hate to leave this place—I'm afraid that Orcher wouldn't like it. After all, someone's got to look after *The Machine*—"

"The Machine?" Gene asked.

"The Machine by which he can be summoned. It's down in the temple. He leaves it there so he can be called from wherever he is in case some of his—well, relatives drop in. But they never have. You see, although he won't admit it, he's as lonely as I am—and that's why it wounds me when he refuses me a mate," Yanuk said sullenly. "It's his own fault that I'm alone. He could have made one of the others immortal."

Gene translated this to the others and explained about their presence.

"So you're from another world?" Yanuk asked. "Hm-m-m—I wonder. It wasn't an accident, or it'd happen oftener. I imagine that Orcher had a hand in it. Yes, I'm sure. Here," he left his chair and shuffled over to Gene, pushing his face close to the young man's. "Let me look in your eyes. Yes, I thought so. You don't know it, but you're already acquainted with Orcher." He returned to his chair. "That's the reason that you can understand me, and these others can't. In touching you, Orcher did something to you—don't ask me what. For all my centuries I'm only a beginner."

"And what does this Orcher look like?" Gene asked.

"His image is down in the temple," Yanuk said. "Would you like to see it?"

Gene asked Siwara. She nodded to Yanuk. "Come then," he said, starting out of the room.

They went down the stairs. They did not return to

the garden. Yanuk led them into a dusty hall. He clucked his blunt red tongue disapprovingly at the dust. "You'll have to excuse my negligence—I bother to come here so seldom that I don't keep it clean."

They reached the titantic entrance to the temple. It was as huge as the men had described it. Siwara clung close to Gene, and at sight of the weird outline carved above the altar she shivered and her grip tightened. Yanuk slapped her hearteningly—and heartily—on the back. She gulped.

"There's nothing to fear. My people are responsible for that. It took them years to make. I think it's silly." Gene translated.

"Does the—god—dwell within it?" Siwara asked.

"Oh, no! He's too busy elsewhere around the various universes. It's bad enough being cooped up on an island. I can't imagine anything worse than inhabiting a block of stone," Yanuk said. Though Gene conveyed Yanuk's words to Siwara, she was not convinced. At sight of the dread symbol on the wall, Kaspel had kneeled; his eyes were closed; his lips moved without sound as though he were praying. And now Siwara joined him.

"Tell them to get up and not be so infantile," Yanuk said with a touch of impatience. Gene bent over Siwara and laid his hands on her arms to lift her up; she shook his hands away—and then it happened.

They had forgotten Froar. He had not bowed. His sharp eyes indeed were somehow akin to the inex-

pressible cruelty of the grotesque stony outline. He had stared straight ahead, smiling thinly, and now—as Gene bent over Siwara, and Kaspel's attention was absorbed in prayer, he lifted his fettered hands.

There were about six inches of chain between the iron wristlets. Froar held his hands together and swung them down. The chain cracked on Kaspel's head, and the old man toppled over without a sound. Froar's movements were swift. As Gene looked up, Froar bent, snatched Kaspel's knife, then stepped forward, made a hoop of his arms and brought them down around Siwara, prisoning her. He leaped back, dragging the girl up with him before Gene could barely comprehend what was happening.

Blood coursed from Kaspel's head, making black mud of the dust. As Gene's hand found his sword's hilt, Froar stepped back, hauling Siwara with him. He grinned unpleasantly.

"Don't draw your sword. And you"—to Yanuk, who was approaching—"you keep away! If you come closer, I'll knife our little Siwara. And you wouldn't like that, would you?"

Gene's sword flashed out but he handled it awkwardly. Froar drew back, still sneering.

"Careful you don't cut yourself!"

Siwara writhed in Froar's embrace. "Froar! What are you trying to do?"

He touched her breast with the knife. "Careful, little princess! You're going back to the ship with me."

Siwara panted, "The men will kill you!"

Froar laughed. The sound was like pebbles rat-

ting down a hillside. "They won't as long as I have you with me like this."

Gene took a forward step. Froar was edging back through the doorway of the temple, into the hall. "Keep back!" Froar warned.

Gene halted. "Why? If you kill Siwara, you won't be able to get on the ship. All your chances of safety lie in keeping her alive. A dead princess is of no use to you, Froar, as you once confided to me—remember?"

"And a dead sweetheart is of no use to you," Froar countered, still inching back.

It was checkmate. Gene turned to Yanuk, who had been watching with more pleasure than anything else. Yanuk stretched out a hand, his fingers splayed. For a second, nothing happened. Then his fingertips glowed with a bluish light which strengthened, gathered into a little ball, and drifted idly across space toward Froar.

Siwara was wide-eyed, frightened. Froar ducked, jerking the girl with him. The little ball of light followed him, touched his forehead and spread out as though melting on his skin. It sunk into his flesh like water into a blotter.

Froar shot upright. Siwara cried out. Froar stood, his eyes staring vacantly, the knife forgotten, dropping from his hands. Gene rushed to him, lifted the lax hands, pulled Siwara away. He sheathed the sword, held the princess close.

"Siwara!"

She huddled against him, weeping silently. Yanuk surveyed them with a sentimental smile.

"Wonderful thing, love!" his child's voice cooed. "Well, come along. I'll show you The Machine." He bent over Kaspel. "This man's dying."

Gene released Siwara and knelt over the old man, glancing anxiously at Froar.

"He won't hurt you," Yanuk assured, noting the glance. "For convenience's sake we'll say that he's hypnotized." He drew Kaspel back, touching the bloody head. "I wish that I could help your friend. But the blow was forceful—his skull is broken." He wagged his head sorrowfully.

Siwara dropped beside Kaspel, laid her head on his chest. He was still breathing. He did not open his eyes. He lay limp. The blood had stopped flowing. Suddenly he shuddered violently, moved as though to sit up. He seemed to cough. Nothing more. He fell back. "He's dead," Yanuk said.

They were silent a moment. Then Siwara raised her eyes. She had become very pale. "Kaspel's dead," she said. "But he died serving Nanich! He was praying to the one you call Orcher to help us in the coming war with Koph! Ah, if only his prayers are heard! You say that you can summon this Orcher. Then call him! Let me pray to him! Kaspel must not have gone like this"—her voice broke—"for nothing." She flashed to her feet, her hands clutching the handle of Gene's sword. "Froar I will kill, myself! The beast! The ruthless, murderous beast—" But Gene gripped her hands, gravely shaking his head. Yanuk arose, shrugging.

"It will do no good. Let him live and suffer. Now he knows nothing, sees nothing—"

Slowly her fury ebbed. Then she turned to Yanuk. "Call your god!" She glanced at the altar. "Call your god!" she repeated, and started forward.

Yanuk and Gene started after her. Froar stood like a carved and painted manikin, his eyes empty.

They reached the huge slab that was the altar. Yanuk's arm brushed off the dust as he moved around the edge of it. The six-inch layer of glass housed intricate machinery that vaguely resembled the insides of a clock. Having brushed off the dust as far as he could reach, Yanuk climbed on the glass and walked on his knees, sweeping the slab comparatively clean. This done, he dismounted and stood peering at the device. It was ten by thirty feet, six inches thick.

"It has no starting lever," he explained to Gene, softening his voice as the tail of his eye glimpsed Siwara, her face in her hands. "The controlling switch is inside, so no one can accidentally start it. Only I know how to operate it. Thus!"

He pointed. Again the blue luminosity appeared at his fingertips. The sphere of light floated like a bubble from his fingertips and to the glass, sinking through it without difficulty. It touched one of the cogs, and faded away. But the cog whirled with a faint clicking, setting in motion the other wheels. The ticking increased in varying rhythms, spreading like a ripple of sound over the slab's pond of silence as the motion of each wheel started a fresh one

turning. The clicking loudened, running the gamut of audibility, swift and shrill, slow and deep until it seemed that all the clocks that had felt the hand of man had been assembled in that place.

"And is that all?" Gene asked, his arm now around Siwara, who had stopped weeping to watch, cold-eyed.

"It's all that I do," Yanuk said. "But—look."

A blue haze was surrounding The Machine. The whirring wheels seemed to be spinning out threads of light. And as if the tickings were fingers, they pulled on the threads of radiance, weaving them, strand on strand into a complex pattern that strengthened with every revolution of the myriad cogs.

Brighter and brighter grew that pattern of light, suspended an inch or so above the glass-faced machine. Brighter and brighter, until its glory hurt the eyes. Then a little blue spark appeared on the pulsing web, raced over the convolutions like a frenzied spider on a tangled web, swelling larger and larger.

Gene and Siwara gasped. Yanuk folded his arms on his round stomach and beamed with satisfaction. The blue spark became the size of a large star, then a moon, then larger. And as the orb swelled to the size of a human being, Gene stepped back—and Siwara recoiled with him. Still the blue brilliance expanded, its edges irregular scallops that flamed large and small, constantly altering in size. Was it really a globe, or flat? There was no way of determining.

Ah, but it was huge now—and still growing! It quivered all over like a light reflected on perturbed water, its ragged edges keeping time to the multitude

of tickings. It was of light—yet it did not brighten the walls of the temples nor throw shadows behind the watching three. It grew greater and greater still, and as it enlarged, Gene and the princess, and Yanuk, too, drew back until they were again at the threshold of the temple, Froar behind them, still rigid, still unseeing.

The blue glow had become the size of the immense carving on the wall behind the altar. It hung in the air, shaking. One of its streamers lengthened downward, touched the pattern, which vanished. Instantly the ticking was still.

Then a voice pulsed through the vast room. Did they hear it? Or was it in their minds, its import coursing the channels of their brains? It was like the light of countless stars condensed and magnified, like a contrapuntal melody played on an organ which sent light instead of air through pipes made from cylindrical diamonds.

"Yanuk—I have come. And I am displeased. Did I not tell you never to call me except at the command of one of my kind?"

The voice of Orcher!

X

Orcher's musical voice was enlivening, like a psychic wind which fanned the fires of life into a fiercer heat. Though it was tainted by nothing remotely resembling humanity, it was colored with passions, but passions no human could ever hope to know, so intense that at their faintest they would have blasted a mortal's body into atoms. And though the strange entity was only a great splash of light, Gene knew that it had eyes. They were fastened on Yanuk, who lifted an apologetic claw.

"I beg your pardon, Orcher." Was Yanuk speaking, or conversing mentally? The air of the room was rippling, distorting everything, thoughts and actions. Yanuk's claw waved toward the princess. "These people have come to ask your help in a problem confronting them."

Orcher's secret eyes swept Gene and Siwara, dwelt briefly on Froar and the body of Kaspel.

"Yes, I see," he said. A discordant note merged with the harmonies of his voice. "You little nothings, to interrupt me at my work! How did you dare? Do you think that I am interested in your troubles? And

supposing I were? If I helped you what could you give me?" The voice swelled pridefully. "I have desires that you cannot even imagine! I can make a world of people like you in a breath, and crush it with a thought! All that you have to offer was mine until I discarded it. And yet you come to me, to ask a favor of me!"

The temple rocked with his laughter; the air throbbed in gusts that tore at the humans' clothing, disheveled Siwara's hair.

"I am Orcher!" the entity said. "I have seen many suns come and go. I have watched life as it appeared on this earth—first, flaming life that inhabited this molten, newborn planet! And that life died. Then the plant life that walked and thought and built its little cities—and that life passed. I saw a reptile race appear and disappear in the space of millions of years, and watched you little humans climb the ladder of life from the specks of jelly that wriggled in the oceans. And I have been amused by all of you. So little! So puny in all your efforts—and so unthinking! And yet—" The discordance blurred away. "Yet I feel a sympathy for you at times. For some of you have tried so hard to be like—me! You would roam the stars, altering their courses to suit your whims, and you cannot, and doubtless never will. For you are limited by your bodies and the demands of your bodies. Toys of evolution." His attention focused on Yanuk. "I could shift the path of that evolution, Yanuk, as I have done with you. I could wither your body into nothingness and set an armor of light about your soul that it might be free to

traverse space. But I would rather not experiment with you. The doing must be yours. Were I to set you free, the memory of what had been, might torment you with desire for the old way, the small, unthinking easy way—not the way of thought. And what would you do then? Nothing constructive, I'm sure. And you might get in my way, hindering my researches. So it cannot be.

"No, you must alter yourselves by your own efforts if you would be like me. If not, I am not concerned. So soon will you perish and be forgotten! All that I will do for you is teach you, by pointing out the right path.

"You whom they call princess—you come to me for aid in the fighting of a war. Too bad that you did not come to me ages ago, when I was interested in the emotions of humans, but you were not alive then. Now the thought does not much stir me. What do I care for your wars? What good will their outcome spell for me? If you win it does not matter. If you lose—well, you have lost, and that is all. And yet, I'll admit that I am interested. Why? Because this country of yours . . . what do you call it? Nan-ich? This country of yours is following the trail to freedom by education and experiment. In the centuries to come it might eventually produce a mind like mine.

"And the enemy country—Koph. I don't like its motives at all! It would keep the minds of its people in darkness in order to gain material things. And that is retrogression. No, I don't like it! In a small way—oh, infinitely small, I assure you—your country's

aims are akin to mine. You would achieve spiritual greatness, even as I am constantly seeking to better myself. I like that! Yes, I like it very much. But"—the melodic voice darkened into somber chords—"this Koph has nothing about it that pleases me. Rather, its concepts anger me. And I have little time for anger. It conflicts with my principles. Yes, the more I think of it—the more I adjust my views to your perspective—the angrier I become!

"But I am just. I cannot stamp out these enemies of yours. Not all of them. For not all of them can be willing to live as they are living. They are only the slaves of their masters, doing as they have been bid lest life be taken from them.

"So I will promise you this. I will end this war when it begins. But I will do it after my own fashion, which you may find a trifle—drastic. And after that there will be no more wars. You may be certain as to that. No more wars—Koph and Nanich will join hands in peace and fraternity.

"Don't bow to me, princess. I am no god. Fear me and you are walking backward into the darkness of superstition. Endeavor to understand me, and you will be raising yourself toward resemblance to me."

If a blotch of light could lift its forefinger in admonishment, Orcher was doing it. "Mind this! I will answer your call but once! You are not to cry out to me except in your deepest need!" The blue glory sank down on the glass which Yanuk had called *The Machine*. "This device which summons me—it's too ponderous for you to take to your homeland. I'll make you something more compact—

a little token in which I shall center a wisp of my intelligence, a link to me, wherever I may happen to be. You will be able to use it but once. So!"

An invisible wave of force brushed the princess and Gene, Yanuk and Froar and the body of Kaspel back from the temple, out into the hall. The wavering light that was Orcher floated down from the platform, halted in the center of the floor. Did it whirl? Was it standing still? There was no way of knowing. Its ragged edges quivered like restless flames, that was all. But on the floor under it the dust began to crawl, faster and faster, like sluggish gray water swirling around in a vortex, becoming a whirlpool. A column of dust rose like a tiny tornado, and all the dust in the room crept over the floor into the revolving column.

A tendril of Orcher's blue effulgence dipped down, obscuring the tornado—and where it had been lay a jewel large as a man's head. It might have been a sapphire in its clear blue translucence.

It was a miniature replica of Orcher's outlines. A knobbed and spiky gem glittering with starry reflections.

The unseen wave carried the watchers back into the temple.

"My token!" Orcher said. "When you have need of me—break it, and I will come. It may be heavy—you'd better carry it, Yanuk. Which means that you're to accompany these folks to Nanich—it's about time you broadened yourself with a journey away from this island. There will be no one to mind

The Machine while you're away—but you won't be gone long, I promise you. And now I must go back to the universe that I was making. It's an especially difficult one, and I can't leave it for any length of time."

The radiance dimmed, then flashed back into full glory. It peered down on Gene.

"Why, I know this man! Only a little while ago, when I was combing the dimensions for material to use in the building of my universe, I—you might say, stumbled. Yes, I stumbled, and in the act I threw out energies that temporarily upset the laws of both his world and this. It welded them together for an instant, and he slipped through the opening. He was drowning, I believe. I hadn't time to set him back—my needs were urgent—so I touched him with a little of my power, that he might meet the requirements of this world if they differed from those of his. Well!" Orcher's music became the quick, crisp notes of laughter. "And so he has found his way here, back to me! Tell me, little man—do you want to go back to your own place? Decide quickly, but with care—I'll not ask again."

Gene looked down at Siwara's face. Her eyes were wistful. "No," he said. "I'll stay here."

"Excellent!" Orcher approved. "And now I must be going—" But Siwara drew from Gene's embrace, took a forward step, lifting her hand.

"Oh, but wait!" She dropped on her knees, her head drooping in shame. But her voice was determined. "Orcher, forgive me. But there is one thing more that I would ask, something close to my heart.

It is this man here." She pointed to Kaspel's body. "He lies dead, slain by Froar. He was my teacher, even as you have taught Yanuk. And he lies dead. Orcher, have you the power to bring him back to life?"

The glory darkened, as though fading away. Its voice was pensive. "I like you for that, princess. I wonder if Yanuk will pray to a greater power if something should happen to me! But, no. I have told you that I am no god. I cannot give life to what I have not made, only a semblance of life. And that you would not want. To see this man walking and hear his voice, and know that he is without a soul! You would fear and hate him. His soul has been drawn from his body—it is not a matter for my doing—I regret it, but I cannot help you."

Siwara sobbed; there was a film over Gene's eyes. Orcher's radiance quivered, and grew pale. It vanished—there were only his outlines carved on the wall of the temple.

They were immobile, all of them, for a long time. Then Gene stepped over to Siwara and drew her to her feet. Yanuk shuffled over to the blue jewel. He lifted it, and even with his great strength he found it heavy.

"We will bury the body in my garden, beside the brook," Yanuk said. He turned to Froar. Something of the man's self was returning to him; his eyes were alert. But when Yanuk said, "Carry the dead man," to him, Froar strode mechanically over to the corpse and lifted it.

Yanuk went ahead with the jewel, Froar follow-

ing. Gene and Siwara lagged behind, the princess clinging again to Gene, her tearful face against one of his shoulders. They left the temple and went through the halls into the golden sunshine of the garden.

Froar laid the body on the moss beside the stream. While Gene and Yanuk gathered moss and the pearly stones from the brooklet to cover Kaspel, Siwara wandered away from them, disappeared among the tangled masses of flowers. Gene and Yanuk covered the body, and Siwara returned with an armful of silvery blossoms. Silently she laid them on the grave, then knelt beside it, her head bowed to her breast.

She arose. "Now we will go back to the ship," she said without emotion. Gene bent to take up the blue jewel and found that he could not budge it. But Yanuk was able to lift it. Then he set it down.

"I think," he remarked, "that if I am leaving this place, I'd better take along some clay. You may not have anything as good in your Nanich. And I might want to amuse myself. So—one moment."

He went down the mossy bank, walked a little upstream and scooped out great handfuls of clay, patting them into a ball. The others watched. The ball became larger, and still Yanuk added to it. When it was a yard in thickness he straightened. "That ought to do." He cleansed his paws in the stream, walked back to them, lifted the jewel. He looked back at the mass of clay, jerking his head as though it were responsive to his summons. Siwara gasped. The ball stirred, as though someone were

pushing it; swayed and began to roll. It wobbled up the stream's bank and over to Yanuk.

"No," he said. "Go ahead of us." The ball rolled past him weightily and out of the garden. "And now you," Yanuk said to Froar. The man in red strode stiffly after the ball. Then Gene and Siwara proceeded, Yanuk behind them with the gem.

They went through the dim, dusty halls, the rolling clay clearing a path for them, and out into the dead city's streets. They passed through the colossal gateway and down the paved avenue that led to the sea.

The men waiting on the beach hailed them, then fell silent. They saw the ball of clay, the blue gem glittering weirdly in Yanuk's hands. From a distance they thought that Yanuk might be Kaspel. Four had entered the city, and four were leaving it. But what was that round thing bounding toward them, they asked each other.

At the sight of Yanuk, one of them screamed. The fishman widened his mouth in a reassuring grin, but it did not allay their fear of him.

Siwara could understand Yanuk's words since the appearance of Orcher in the temple. She spoke to the cowering seamen, "He will not hurt you. He is our friend. We have secured help for Nanich."

"Princess!" One of them was barely able to speak; the others huddled together, their eyes wide. "Princess, is—that thing—going back with us to the ship?" He traced a cabalistic symbol with his hand in the air, as though to fend off an evil enchantment.

"He won't hurt you," Siwara repeated, aided not at

all by Yanuk's eager murmurs. She stepped into the boat, drawing Gene after her. He glanced at the clay, which halted, trembled, and leaped into the boat with a thud that cracked the small craft's planking.

Yanuk sat on the forward seat, the jewel in his lap, and Froar was normal enough to board the boat without command. He was forced to sit beside Yanuk, but he drew as far away from the creature as possible, his face sullen, his eyes contemptuous. He tucked his chains into the folds of his sleeves, the chains that had killed Kaspel.

"Come aboard," Siwara said to her men. "Push off. We must hurry to Nanich."

The men held a whispered consultation among themselves before obeying. The boat swayed out toward the anchored galley.

Yanuk eyed Siwara's ship with interest. As they neared it, the men aboard called out in welcome—and were silent. As they hauled the boat over the ship's side they stared in horrified fascination at Yanuk, whose face was becoming mournful.

"They don't like me," he confided to Gene. "I'm a freak to them. Now I know that I was wise not to have left my garden before." He gazed at the island in nostalgia. "If Orcher hadn't ordered me to come I'd go back there. I was lonely, yes, but at least nobody feared me."

They stepped out on the planking, Froar standing aloof. The princess held up a hand. "Call everyone out on deck! I wish for them to meet our new friend."

Yanuk raised the blue gem high; the sunlight glinted from it, throwing splashes of blue over the deck and the crowding people.

"I take possession of this ship in Orcher's name!" he cried. "I dedicate it to him and his works for the peace of Nanich!" The crew watched silently.

The princess turned. "Is the sail mended, the mast repaired? Then let us be off for Nanich."

Froar laughed, the sound like bits of stone shaken in a tin box. "Let us be off for Nanich!" he repeated harshly. The men stared at him as he rocked with mirth, glancing at the princess' face, which was set with hatred; they murmured darkly, clenching their hands. Their mumbles arose to threats against Froar. But a shake of the princess' head calmed them.

Froar ceased laughing. "You're a little too late, Siwara. It was arranged that Koph's war fleet would start for Nanich a week after you embarked for Koph! My agents are taking care of your military leaders in Nanich. And your people are without a ruler to guide them—you cannot get back in time."

He laughed again, his chains rattling as he slapped a thigh. "Oh, yes, let's be off for Nanich—if Nanich still exists!"

Siwara's touch designated two men. "Take him to his quarters."

As they led him away, Froar looked over a shoulder. "What use is your sorcerer and his magic?" he gibed. "Do you think that he can help you—now?"

XI

Great cloud cities towered, terrace upon terrace, into the duskening sky. The ship's sails were curved in a smooth breeze; its prow sliced through the dimpling water. The island had dwindled away into the misty horizon, its spires fingering the clouds until they had run together into a splotch of gray whose hard lights and sharp shadows, veiled by the tremulous atmosphere, paled to a blur. The warm light of sundown tinted the domes of the clouds.

Siwara and Gene were dining on the upper deck, the maid Marza serving them. She had pieced together from some old robes an outfit of shirt and trousers for Gene; he wore them proudly. Siwara, sipping pale wine from a slim glass, set the liquid down and touched Gene's chest, her eyes sparkling.

"You look—different! I like you this way! But I'm not so sure that it's the clothing alone which does it. I think"—she mused over him—"that the change is in your face, your bearing. You were so shy, so—boyish—when we took you aboard this ship, Gene. How long ago was it? A week? A little

longer? And yet look at you! You've added years to your age—you're a man now. And you're so certain of yourself. Yes," she said softly, "I like it."

Gene took her hand from his chest, pressed its fingers. "Yes—and if you'd told me not very long ago that I'd be on this ship, in love with someone like you, Siwara, I'd have laughed. It would have seemed fantastic. And here I am. It seems that anything can happen here—and does."

She snatched back her hand, feigning displeasure. "Don't you want to be in love with me?"

He did not need to reply; his eyes were answer enough. "It's not a question of wanting to love you. I just can't help myself," he confessed.

That pleased her. She smiled, returning her hand. "If someone had told me as we left Nanich that I was going to meet you, to love you—I would have been furious! After all, who are you? A nobody from another world. And I am the highest of my people. And yet—you're a man, a real one; what more could a princess want?"

Unexpectedly, Marza laughed. She was loading used dishes on a tray, clearing the table. It was a happy laugh; her eyes admired Gene. Siwara patted her understandingly. "Marza's glad for me, aren't you?" she asked the maid. Marza nodded.

Yanuk climbed up the little stair to them, several of Siwara's books under his arm, a little wooden coffer in his hands. He dropped down heavily on a cushion and crossed his legs, tailor style, making a comfortable nest for his paunch. He was wearing

one of Froar's scarlet robes, and it was evident that he had become quite conceited. He ran a scaly claw over the embroidered silk, his goggling eyes on the princess' face. "You like it?"

"You look wonderful, Yanuk," the princess murmured soothingly.

Yanuk looked at Gene.

"I think so, too," Gene said.

"I've been thinking," Yanuk said. "I never paid much attention to wearing apparel before—I had no reason to, there on that lonesome island. But I want people to like me—I've got to impress them. Siwara, what do you call those jewels hanging from your ears?"

"Earrings," she said.

"Well, I've been thinking. Don't you feel that I'd look better if the back of my robe were cut low, so that my crest would show? It's really a very nice crest—I think I have the best crest that ever existed. The spines are so clearly marked. Most of my people had short spines, and the webbing wasn't as delicate."

He touched his finny ridge with pleasure. "Now if my robe could expose it all, then I could take those jewels—earrings—and hang one on each spine. Don't you think that I'd cut quite a figure?" He was smiling, whether with vanity or sly humor they could not determine. He opened the little wooden box which he had brought, withdrawing a needle and a twist of thread. He started ripping pages out of Siwara's books. "I wish you'd mention it to your

maid, princess. I tried to make myself clear to her, but she isn't able to understand me."

"Yanuk, what are you doing to my books?" Siwara asked in dismay.

"I thought I'd make me a bird," he said, heedless of her concern. "I need the paper." He drew a poniard from his belt and laying a page on the planking, ran the blade over it, cutting the paper into the shape of a leaf.

"A bird?" Gene asked. "Can you make it fly, Yanuk?"

The creature nodded, busy at cutting paper. Then he threaded his needle, squinting one pop eye and sliding his round tongue out of the side of his mouth in concentration. He pulled the thread triumphantly through the needle's eye. "There!" He began to sew the leafy bits of paper together, creating a jumbled mass of scraps loosely linked by the thread.

They watched him for a while, Marza reluctantly carrying away her tray with backward glances. Then Siwara put a hand to her forehead. "I feel guilty. Here we are enjoying ourselves, and Nanich is many lengths away. We must get there soon! On the surface I may seem to be happy, but in my heart, down here"—she touched her breast gravely—"I'm not so very light. Something there keeps saying, 'We must get to Nanich! We must get to Nanich!' And I wish that, like your bird, Yanuk—I could fly."

A thought occurred to Gene, brushing seriousness over his face as though it were a pain-streaked hand. "Yanuk—could you make a bird large enough to carry us to Nanich?"

Yanuk looked up from his sewing. "I'm afraid not. I'm not that great a magician. It will take all my energies to make this little bird fly. The dolls are easy. But I haven't tried many birds. You see, I send my thought out with the bird—it's the intensity of my thought that flaps the wings; once it's in the air, I'll have to keep my mind fixed on it, or else it'll fall into the sea. And it can't go far—it can fly but half a day. I can't keep it up any longer. But it will go swiftly, faster than most birds, and in its head I will put two little eyes of clay. I will see through them. If Nanich lies ahead—the eyes will tell me."

The shape on which he was sewing had become a bird at last, a large white bird which hung limply over one of the fishman's knees, its wings spread laxly like opened fans. Yanuk made it no beak. "It will need no mouth," he said.

He held up the loose figure. It was about the size of a gull, its head drooping on a long neck as though it were a real bird which someone had shot. For there was a look of life in it. Yanuk scraped some of the paper feathers with the poniard's edge, curling them.

"Now it's ready to go," he said. The sun was very low, its red light shimmering on his face. "Now I'll go back to my room and leave the door open. I'll lie on the bed, the bird on my breast—and life will come to it. You'd like to see? Then come along."

Gene arose, reaching his hand to Siwara; she grasped it and he pulled her up. With the sunset glow on her cheeks she was very beautiful. Her large dark eyes were wide with wonder.

Yanuk grunted laboriously as he lumbered erect, the bird in one hand, the ripped books and the box in the other. They descended the narrow stair to the main deck, and entered the cabins. Yanuk occupied the room which had been given Gene after his rescue.

A finger of dying sunlight pried through the windows, spotlighting the low bed and its canopy. Yanuk dropped Siwara's books and the sewing kit on one of the chairs near the door. He lay on the bed, tastefully arranging the folds of his robe around him. He put the bird across his chest.

He cocked his head. "I must warn you—I'll seem to be asleep. Don't disturb me or I may lose control over my bird—it'll drop into the sea, and I can't fly it if it's wet. Stay by me, and listen. I'll tell you what I see. When I can't hold on any longer, I'll awake without help. You watch." He dropped his head on the soft pillows.

Gene found a chair for the princess. She sat down, straining forward to eye the papery bird.

The shaft of sunlight thinned, lifting as the descending sun levered it. The shaft dimmed, turned ruby red and died away as the sun dropped behind the sea. Purple gloom stalked about the chamber, hanging its walls with tapestries of shadow. Yanuk did not stir; he was evidently asleep. The bird lifted and lowered on his chest as he breathed; the slight motion suggested that the bird itself was breathing.

The room darkened. The bird was a white blur. And then it stirred. Its head lifted on the long neck, regarded Gene and the princess intently a moment, then swiveled its head to look down upon Yanuk's

face. It waggled its head from side to side in comic approbation of what it saw, and lifted a wing, thrust the head under the wing as though preening its feathers, producing a dry rustling of paper. It folded the wing, spread it, testing it. Then it unfurled the other wing, lifted it, beat the air with it several times, the paper feathers whispering. The white bird nodded, satisfied.

It flapped the wings and glided off Yanuk's chest, sailing over the princess' head; Gene involuntarily ducked, and the bird liked that. It swept about the room, shot back toward Gene and missed him narrowly as he crouched to avoid it. Then it fluttered to the doorway and through it.

Siwara started out of her chair: she and Gene strode after the bird, which flapped down the passageway, out on the deck. Gene and the princess halted at the door of the passage, staring up.

The bird was wheeling over the ship. It dived, swooped between the round-cheeked sails, lifted and skittered on a slant over the man at the tiller; he cowered and raised his hands to beat it off. Then the paper wings crackled as the flying thing started away from the ship, gliding straight toward the glow that hung above the vanished sun.

Gene and the princess hastened to the side of the vessel, leaned on the rail, watched it go. Smaller and smaller it became, swifter its flight, until it was only a moving mote. It vanished into the afterglow.

They hurried back to Yanuk. In the murky room he lay motionless. Then his half moon of a mouth sagged open. He mumbled softly.

"What's he saying?" Siwara asked.

They bent over him.

"So nice, this flying," Yanuk muttered. "Wish I could try a bigger bird—but I haven't the power. The wind's strong—I hadn't thought of that. Should have weighted this thing with more clay. Now I'm going fast, fast—no real bird could fly like this!"

He was silent a long time.

"How far I'm going! The sun seems to be rising—I'm overtaking it in its march. Like another dawn. This is wonderful! If only I had the strength, I'd be always like this, free in the air, flying, flying, keeping track with the sun, never knowing darkness!"

He spoke again. "Nothing but sea and sky." Gene looked across the scaly body to the small windows. The blackening sky was punctuated by stars. "Like another dawn," Yanuk was murmuring dreamily. "The sun seems higher. I must go faster, faster!" His voice slurred into silence. Then, "What's that? Something off there to the side!" His tone was alarmed; his body twitched as though he was waking. "Ships!"

Gene and Siwara stared at each other. The room was totally dark; they could not possibly see each other, but they sensed each other's surprise. Gene fumbled over the wall for the lamp's bracket, found it; he took a fire tongs from his pocket and touched the ends of it to the wick. Flame sprouted, throwing amber light on the bed, glinting on Siwara's gown and hair. He went back to the princess.

"Ships!" Yanuk breathed sharply. "There seem to be hundreds of them! I'm closer now. Siwara, Gene, can you hear me! You're so far away—back there.

Why, it must be night where you are! Here the sun is only setting. These are odd-looking craft—they're so much bigger than your ship, Siwara. Their sails are up, two to a mast, and men are rowing. There are two banks of oars on some of them.

"I'm weakening—but I'll try to get closer. How strange they are in shape! Here, I mustn't falter so. What's wrong?" Yanuk stirred. "The thread is cutting into the paper—I'm molting!" He laughed shortly. "Yes, their shapes are strange. They're long and lean; the bows lift up in a high curve on each of them, like scimitars. And they glint in the light—why, the curved fronts are plated with sharp metal." Yanuk's voice shuddered. "I don't like that. They're ominous. If one of those prows should strike a ship, it would slice it like a knife cleaving a fruit!

"There go some more feathers. I can't keep myself up. Gene, Siwara back there—ever so far. Hope I can get to them. I'm falling. I don't like this ... this swirling about. It makes me giddy. Looks like the sky and ocean have gone mad. Now I'm in the water. Funny. I can't feel it. I'm floating like a gull. Those ships are coming this way, Siwara. You'll meet them.

"I'm being dragged into the water. My magic won't work in there. The water does something to it—I mustn't let myself be dragged down. I'll have to abandon this bird shape—go back to Siwara. Ah!" He ended in a little wail that grew fainter and fainter as though his voice were being carried away into illimitable distance.

Gene and Siwara huddled over him anxiously. Gene shook the scaly body. Then Yanuk's paws

brushed his hands away; Orcher's creature arose, sat on the bed looking up at them.

"Those ships!" Gene said, his eyes querying Siwara.

"Ships of Koph!" she murmured. "Yanuk—how many were there?"

He shrugged. "Fifty? A hundred? A hundred seems more like it." He looked from one to the other. "It seems strange, being back here with you. I was flying, flying!" He fluttered his hands. "It was wonderful. Siwara, you're pale. You're frightened. What's wrong?"

"Those ships," she said. "Koph's war fleet! It can't be anything else. And you say that they're coming this way!"

"Diagonally, yes," Yanuk answered. "They're a good deal behind and to one side—but they're apt to meet us." He pressed his elbows convulsively to his sides. "I'm thinking of what they'll do if they ram us," he confessed soberly.

"The winds pretty strong," Gene said. "If we set the men to rowing, we may outdistance them. Shall I tell Miskal, Siwara?"

She nodded. "Yes! Oh, yes!"

He started out of the cabin. Yanuk dragged himself from the bed, stood up, stretching. Then he went over to a corner of the room, where his ball of clay was lying. He gouged out a handful.

"What are you going to do?" Siwara asked.

"I'm thinking," he said slowly, "of what might happen if those ships reach us. I'm going to make some little surprises in case we have to fight!"

XII

The sky was black; in the starlight the sails were insubstantial silhouettes. The men were rowing; the ship was hissing over the waves. The rhythmic clang of the hortator's triangle knifed the wind. Gene turned from the rail, started for Siwara's cabin—

He heard a scream! A man had cried out raucously, hoarse with terror. The door to Froar's quarters banged on the wall as it was flung open; banged again. Steps raced down the passageway. The two men in charge of Froar rushed out as if lava were flowing after them, searing their heels. One of them thudded against Gene, throwing him off balance. They crashed to the deck.

Gene scrambled to his feet. The other man had run to the fore of the ship; the rowers' heads jerked up after him.

The other guard lay huddled on the floor, weak with terror. Gene tugged on him, trying to lift him. The man was almost a dead weight. Set on his feet, he clung to Gene, pointing toward the cabins, his face white even in the darkness. He pointed, but he

could not speak. His mouth gaped and shut; his breath slid from his lungs in little jerks.

Gene shook him, then turned to go. The man found his voice. "Devils! Devils in there! Your sorcerer is making magic!" He tore himself from Gene's grasp and raced after the other man to the ship's prow.

Gene strode into the passage. Froar's door was wide open; he could hear no sound within. He gazed in. Three little clay dolls scampered out into the passage, scuttled past him to Yanuk's half-open door.

There was another doll on the floor. It was crushed, as though in their haste, the men had trampled on it. There was little shape left to it now. It was only a wad of clay with a hand, a foot protruding. Yet the wad was alive; it drew itself up like a pygmy that had been melted in blasting heat and was not yet dead. It hobbled gruesomely on the one foot, swinging the smashed body like a second member. It, too, limped past Gene toward Yanuk's quarters.

Where was Froar? Gene stepped into the cabin. In the gentle lamplight the room seemed empty. Was he under the bed—hiding behind its canopy? Gene stepped forward. Perhaps Froar had leaped through one of the windows—

Something cracked down on his head; the blow glanced, but Gene was stunned. Froar, pressed flat against the wall inside the door, had swung his wrist chains down on Gene's head in the same way in which he had killed Kaspel. As Gene tottered, raising a hand dazedly to his head, Froar slipped out into the hall. Linked as his feet were by a short chain, the

prisoner made speed, taking short, quick steps. Gene staggered after him. As he reached the end of the passage, Froar was at the rail of the ship. He leaned over it as though to throw himself into the sea—but two of the oarsmen had seen him, dropped the handles of their sculls and dashed forward. They seized Froar. The ends of the long sweeps which they had let go swung like clubs at the next benchful of oarsmen; they barely drew down in time, or the flying handles would have brained them. But Froar was safe.

Gene called to the two men that had deserted Froar, "Thuir! Scaur! Come back, you cowards!" There was a silence; then the men crept back. "Froar nearly got away. The little clay things wouldn't have hurt you."

Thuir said sullenly, "They were magic. They tried to steal our souls."

"Nonsense!" Gene said coldly. "Yanuk's our friend. He hasn't any use for your souls. Go back and watch Froar."

Scaur said, "The little things climbed down through the windows. They were teasing Froar. We tried to stop them and they turned on us."

"They won't come back," Gene promised. "Now take Froar to his cabin. And don't let him get away. Siwara can use him in Nanich."

"If we get there," Scaur said defiantly. "Miskal says that we're trying to beat Koph's war fleet."

"We won't if all the men are as afraid as you," Gene snapped. "Take Froar back."

Froar had changed. He was no longer assured; he

stood with stooping shoulders, the hard lines of his face broken into lesser lines, like a weathered wood carving. But at the mention of Koph's fleet a spark returned to his eyes; imperceptibly he straightened. He went with the guards without reluctance, seemed almost glad to go back to his cabin.

Gene visited Yanuk. The sorcerer was seated on a chair beside his bed. Three little clay dolls lay on the bed. The fourth—the crushed one—was in his hands; he was molding it back into shape.

Gene said, "Yanuk—I suppose you were being playful. These dolls are probably commonplace things to you. But you frightened the men. You heard their screams, didn't you? Froar nearly got away—he was going to jump overboard."

Yanuk laid down the doll. "Oh! I heard them call out, but I thought that it was Froar. I wanted to worry him a little. He made fun of me, said that I couldn't help the princess. I thought I'd show him!"

Gene turned to go. "Well, in the future confine your magic to directly helping the princess."

Yanuk's eyes saddened; he left the chair, shuffled to Gene, laid a paw on his shoulder. "You're angry with me? I thought that I'd please you. Don't be angry with me. I'm homesick. You're my friend." Yanuk's voice was so worried, his odd face so depressed that Gene mustered a smile for him. He clapped a palm over Yanuk's hand.

"No, I'm not really angry, Yanuk. But don't do it again."

Yanuk shook his head solemnly—and sadly. "All right. I won't."

Gene nodded amiably and went to Siwara's cabin. The princess was seated before her low table, poring over brush marks on a bit of paper. She looked up, reached a hand to Gene, drew him down to her side.

"What's that?" He scanned the paper.

"I've been wondering—and worrying," she said. "Suppose Orcher is too busy with his universe to heed our summons? What can we do then? I believe that he meant it when he promised help to us—but I don't think that we ought to rest easily, putting our trust in him and doing nothing else. So I've been listing some things that we might do when we reach Nanich—if we can get there before Koph's fleet." Her eyes traveled down the columns of writing.

"Where's the jewel?" Gene asked.

She leaned over, lifted a fold of her robe. The nodulated gem twinkled in the yellow lamp glow, cold blue stars serene in its depths. Gene dragged on it, managed to draw it a little closer. He bent over it, gazing into it. What was it but a jewel? Its cold fires suggested nothing of Orcher's vital azure ones. And yet—Orcher had said that it contained part of him which would be freed if the jewel were broken. That part of him would summon the remainder. He would come to them, help them at their greatest need.

Yet it was only a jewel.

Siwara was as doubtful as Gene. "Of course, we saw Orcher make the jewel from the dust on the temple floor," she said. "That ought to convince us. I

don't doubt that Orcher will come if it's broken. At least, I think he means to come. But will he?" She raised her eyes to Gene. "Will he—remember? What is time to him? What are we to him? He called us puny little things, said that we don't really matter. He may have decided to help us on a whim—and he may have forgotten that whim. So—I'm planning."

"Did you hear shouts? Yanuk was playing with his clay toys. He frightened Froar's guards, and Froar got loose. He tried to drop over the rail into the sea."

She looked from her list to his face, startled. "No, I didn't hear. But that's . . . that's bad. We don't want Froar to escape." Her eyes hardened. "Not after what he's done to Kaspel! Drowning in the sea's too good for him! I want him to live—live and repent what he's done." She laid her list down. "We'd better go to Froar."

Gene arose, assisting her up. "Tell me, Siwara—why do you always sit on cushions? Don't you think that chairs would be a little easier to get up from?"

She nodded. "You're quite right. I'd never thought much about it. In the old days, before the people of Nanich were free, it was only the men who sat in chairs, because they were the masters. The women didn't even have cushions, alas. The custom still prevails—but now it's a mark of distinction. The women loll about on soft pillows; the men sit on hard chairs."

They had ambled out of her rooms, down the hall to Froar's door. As they opened it, one of the guards stepped up questioningly, but recognizing them he

drew back, let them pass. Froar lay on his bed, his hands under his head, staring up at the folds of the canopy. At their entrance he quickly slid his legs to the floor, stood stiffly, his mouth twisted unpleasantly. He bowed.

"So pleased to see you, my princess."

Siwara surveyed him scornfully. "So you wanted to kill yourself?"

He bent an assenting head. "Stupid of me, wasn't it? I won't try it again. Not when the war fleet of Koph is so near. I might be rescued—you might be my prisoner again, Siwara. No, I don't want to die."

"I'm glad to hear that, Froar," Siwara said sweetly. "I want you to live. I could have you killed. But I want you to live to see Koph beaten back, to regret your folly. We're not so powerless as you think." She was boasting now. "You probably don't know—Yanuk had you entranced at the time—but the great Orcher gave us something by which we can call him; he's promised to aid us against Koph. Occupy your mind with that for a while. And you men"—she turned to the guards—"watch him closely."

They did not answer, only stared at her. Were they leering? It seemed as if Froar's arrogance was infectious and had tainted them. She eyed them sharply. They wavered, hesitantly dipped in homage to her.

She touched Gene's arm, leaving the room. He followed; the door closed on them. "Now we'll stop in on Yanuk," she said. "If we acquaint him with the fortifications of Nanich, perhaps he can help us. I shouldn't have bragged like that—but the temptation

was too great. Froar was so smug! And to think that once I trusted him!" She shook her head, mystified.

They knocked on Yanuk's door; he did not answer, and they pushed the portal in. Yanuk lay on his bed, writhing and moaning. The coverlets were disordered; as he twitched, he dragged them off the bed to the floor.

"Yanuk! What's wrong?" Gene rushed to the bed.

Yanuk did not answer promptly; only groaned again and turned on his side; a claw clenched on his robe at his chest, dragging on it, tearing it. Gene sniffed the air; it was faintly tinged with the perfume of withering flowers.

"The Vyras poison!"

Siwara put a hand to her cheek. "But we took away the vial of it that Froar carried. Where could he have found it?"

Gene dropped down beside the bed, hauled Yanuk to him, lifted the creature's head. "Yanuk! What's happened? Who gave you the poison?"

Yanuk relaxed in his hold, even attempting a smile. "One of the men," he said plaintively. "I was so happy! I thought they were beginning to like me! He came in and said he had something for me—a delicacy—and he gave me a little cake to eat. It was dampened with a green sirup that made my mouth tingle. I liked it. It ate it all up. And then suddenly I started to hurt. Something inside me wants to go to sleep, but I'm afraid to sleep. I must keep moving! Moving! Because if I fall to sleep, I'm afraid I'll never awake again."

His eyes were filmed; he could barely keep them open. His head lolled, the eyelids lowered: he was asleep.

Gene straightened up. "Luckily he's immortal and—"

"Yes, but how immortal?" Siwara asked. "Surely he's not proof against everything. A sword could kill him, couldn't it? And what about the Vyras? A little of it's enough to kill a man—if he ate the cake and it was sodden with it, has he had enough to kill even him?"

She crossed her arms over her breast, shivering. "Now we'll have to rely upon Orcher's token! Gene, I'm frightened. Terribly frightened. My poor people!"

He held her against him, silent. She lifted her face.

"Who could have poisoned Yanuk? Are all our men so weak that they can be swayed from viewpoint to viewpoint with the wind of a whisper? We should have had Yanuk hypnotize Froar again—that would have put an end to this mischief! Perhaps I've been unwise, letting Froar live. He has no hostage value. Maybe we'd better kill him. I'll do it—and gladly! Poor Kaspel—" She was like a lithe cat, her eyes murderous, frightening. Unconsciously Gene drew away from her.

She lifted her chin at him. "You don't like that! You're afraid of the man! Well, you needn't worry. You won't have to kill him—I'll do that, and with the utmost pleasure!"

He put his hands on her arms. "I'm not afraid of

him, Siwara. But I can't kill a man—at least not like this. It would be different if it were in a fight—”

“What about Kaspel? And Yanuk? Don't you owe them something? It was Kaspel who ordered you picked up from the sea!” Hotly she flung herself away from him, all princess, all hate.

Yanuk's eyes opened; he rolled on his back, his claws tearing at the air. He whispered. “How was I to know that I couldn't trust him? Living alone on the island, I'd forgotten all about such things—” His hands dropped; he was asleep again.

Siwara's hard face had not altered. She looked from Yanuk to Gene. “Froar tried to kill you, too,” she reminded.

Gene tossed his head in annoyance. “Yes, I know, Siwara—but I can't walk in to Froar's room and kill him in cold blood! And you're not going to, either. He should have a trial—it should be done in the proper way—”

“I wonder whether I love you,” she said dully. “If I did, I wouldn't care what you said. And I do care now. A trial! How do you think trials are settled in Nanich? Am I not qualified to judge Froar? Haven't I proof of his deeds? And yet you say—trial.” She was an animal burning for blood.

“And I wonder if I love *you!*” he said curtly. “I think that maybe I was a fool, rejecting Orcher's offer to put me back where I came from!”

She was rigid, like a statue against which words were blown like fallen leaves. How could they affect her? Then her eyes glinted with tears. Her face was

human again, and appealing. She drifted to him, laid a hand on his arm.

"Forgive me," she said. "I had forgotten—you're from another world. Your standards are different. You may have changed on the surface, but at heart you are the same. And I would have you as you are, truly yourself, unswayed by a woman's words." She looked down at Yanuk. "He's moving again. That's a good sign. The Vyras paralyzes first the will, then the involuntary muscles—the lungs, the heart."

Yanuk's weak voice reached them. "Get me a basin. I'm going to be very, very sick—in a minute."

Gene led the princess to the door. "You'd better go to your room, Siwara." She nodded dutifully and went out.

Yanuk retched; it made Gene ill to watch him. He coughed up green liquid, spat, then sank back. "I feel a little better," he sighed. "But the tingling—it's all over me—"

Gene patted him consolingly. "There's no antidote for Vyras, Yanuk, or we'd give it to you. I know what it's like—I had a touch of it once." He moistened his lips. "Yanuk—can you—are you still strong enough to work a little of your magic? Can you cast a spell on Froar, to keep him quiet?"

Yanuk's eyes strayed uncomprehendingly. Then he flopped out of Gene's grasp. "While I'm like this, I can't do anything," he groaned. "I can't put my mind to anything—only the pain, the pain." He dragged up his legs, curling up like a cat, his hands gripping his fat stomach.

"Could you try?" Gene asked.

"No I can't try!" Yanuk exploded pettishly. "Go away! Leave me! Let me die in peace!" He moaned. "Oh! And oh! And oh!" It was just a shade theatrical.

Gene left the bed, headed for the door. Miskal stumbled in. "Lights" he said. "A long line of them behind us. The fleet's gaining on us!" He tugged Gene's arm, drawing him down the hallway, out on deck. He pointed.

A row of lights twinkled on the horizon.

"Well, snap up the rowers!" Gene cried.

"We have! We've just changed the shifts—but the men are exhausted. A few of them are still too weary to row." Miskal's voice was shrill. "I've been serving my turn, too. We can't go any faster. And the breeze is dying down."

He swept a hand, indicating the loosely rippling sails.

Gene did not answer. He hurried to a vacant oarsman's seat, lifted the long sweep, rattled it down to the oarlock. He ripped open his shirt, baring his chest, moving in unison with the other men to the hasty *ting! tang! ting!* of the coxswain's triangle. Miskal took another empty seat on the opposite side of the ship; they dragged desperately on the oars.

One of the men up front fell forward, lay without moving. The handle of his sweep jerked with him, struck the man before him, knocking him from his bench. An oarsman quickly drew in his sweep,

dragged in the other two, laid the unconscious man on the planking, and returned to his post.

Gene's shirt, wet with sweat, was glued to his arms and back; it ripped in his exertions. The ship crawled along. The greenish glow of dawn tinged the eastern sky, lightened to cold gray. The ship crawled forward.

Panting, his breath rasping out in sobs, Gene lurched to his feet, hauled in his oar, and stared over the rail, clinging to it for support. The ships of Koph were nearer, now—hardly a mile away. They made a stripe across the sea, a line of dark hulks and a parallel band of empty sails. And in front of the ship was no line of land.

Miskal put away his oar. The others let their sculls drag, too weary to move, drooped exhausted.

"It's no use," Miskal said, dispiritedly. "We'll have to fight—and what chance have we got? It will be needless bloodshed. We might just as well set the ship on fire and leap into the sea. We haven't a chance. And it'd be far better than falling into the hands of Koph."

A ghastly picture veiled Gene's sight—the ship burning, the men floundering in the water, Siwara sinking into cold green depths, terror and anguish distorting her face as she reached her hands up to the wavering light from the surface, and slowly descended down to dreadful darkness and silence. He shook his head, answering Miskal, throwing the image from his mind.

"We'll fight," he said.

Miskal hailed the men. "All of you! Pull in the sweeps! Arm yourselves—get out the shields, the arrows that carry fire! Rouse the others! Quickly!"

He turned back to Gene as the men roused themselves and stumbled off to do his bidding. "We'll fight," he said, rocking with fatigue, clutching the rail. "If that's how you want it, we'll fight." He took a deep breath, stared at the line of ships.

Gene touched him, unable to speak, then weaved across the deck to the cabinway. He stopped in to see Yanuk. Orcher's servant lay quietly, his eyes bright.

"Feel any better?" Gene asked him. "Well enough to help us with a little magic? The fleet's close—we'll have to fight in a few minutes."

"I'm better," Yanuk said, "but I'm not well enough to work any wonders. I was trying." He lifted his hand; it trembled. "I can't summon the blue fire that should be there. I hope the poison hasn't destroyed my power. Perhaps later—" He was still in pain, but he was trying to hide it; perhaps he was ashamed of his exhibitionistic outburst a while back.

"Well, join us when you can," Gene said, and hurried out to Siwara's cabin.

The princess was lying on her bed, fully clothed, Marza on the floor beside the bed, leaning against it and nodding. Siwara sat upright. "They're close!"

"We'll have to fight," Gene said. "I'm no hand with a sword yet, Siwara—but I'll probably learn a lot this morning. Don't let them get you—"

She answered by touching a knife beside her. "I won't," she said. Her lips sweetened his. "My dear—"

my dear! Forgive me for the way I acted last night! If only I could take back those words. I love you! I love you—"

He gripped her very close. They kissed again, long and desperately. Then he released her, jerking his head toward the deck. "Stay here with Marza. I've got to go up there with the others." He saw the jewel. "I'll take this in to Yanuk."

He still was unable to lift it. He grasped one of its rounded knobs and dragged it over the floor to the door. Siwara rose, the knife in her hand. "Should we break it—now?" she asked.

He stopped, looked up. "Not just yet. Orcher will come only once, remember. Yanuk's a little better—he's going to try his magic if he can. If he can't—then we'll break it."

She sighed. "You know best."

Gene dragged the jewel, panting and cursing, to Yanuk's door. He tumbled it in. Yanuk was sitting up on the bed.

"Look!" he cried. "Blue fire!" On his shaking fingertips the blue glow was gathering. But it was pale, very pale—only the ghost of what had come from his hand in the temple.

"Good!" Gene's face lightened; he clapped his hand so heartily on Yanuk's back that the sorcerer winced, dropping the blue-misted hand to his paunch.

"Oh!" He cried it involuntarily. "Please! I'm not *that* well!"

"I brought the jewel. It's up to you to guard it. I'm sorry, Yanuk, to put so much responsibility on you—but we're in sore need. I hope we'll be able to

repay you—" His voice cracked; his eyes were pained.

Yanuk gestured deprecatingly. "I'm glad if I can help. *If* I can help," he reiterated uncertainly.

"You'd better send Siwara in here to me. If I can't do anything else, at least I can try to protect her."

Gene strode to the door, leaned a hand on its frame as he put his head into the hallway. "Siwara! Come to Yanuk! Bring Marza!" He was jerking spears from their clasps on the wall when Siwara entered with her maid. She eyed him with foreboding.

"Gene! You can't go out to fight like that. Go to Froar's room. He has a coat of chain links. It's in one of the chests."

He went into Froar's quarters. The men snapped up to attention from poses of ease. He jerked his thumb at the door. "Go out on deck. We'll need you in the fight. I'll take care of Froar."

The men went out quickly enough, but he was not satisfied with the backward glance that they turned on the man in red. Had Froar been talking to them, coaxing them to his side? Well, there was no time to find out now. He went to the chair where Froar was sitting. The man in red lifted shaggy brows in ironic question as he came. Gene grasped Froar's robe at the chest, hauled him up to his feet.

"I don't like hitting a defenseless man, Froar—but I haven't an opportunity for anything else." He read the sneer in the tall man's eyes. "And yet—I don't

mind hitting you—like this!" His first smacked Froar's chin; the man staggered back. The blow had been a strong one, but it did not stun him. Gene stepped after him; his fist cracked again. Froar went down heavily, lay huddled.

Gene pried into a chest, tossed out articles of clothing, supplemented Froar's fetters with knotted cloth and a gag. Then he tore through the clothing in the chest, hurling it out in his haste, strewing the floor. There was no coat of mail in that chest. He went to another. Lying atop its neatly folded garments was the protective doublet and a helmet, a sword. He snatched them out, wriggled into the mail. The helmet was too small. He hefted the sword. It was good to have its crescent blade in his hand, even though he was not quite sure how to use it.

Going out, he looked back at Froar. The man was unconscious. He went back to Yanuk's cabin; the sorcerer was sick again, Siwara and her maid attending him. Silently the princess left the bed to hand Gene a bow, and help him slip the quiver-belt over a shoulder. He looked at her for a long second, and hurried out.

He was not used to the weight of mail; he was tired enough already, and its heaviness dragged on him. He straightened his spine, drew his shoulders back as he emerged from the cabinway. The men were swarming over the deck; they had fitted shields along the railing to protect the relief shift of rowers; now they were setting up flat wooden pieces with slits in them for the shooting out of arrows.

The ships from Koph were closer now. *Cling! Clang! Cling!* The hortator's triangle sounded stridently.

Gene took his place behind one of the arrow-flats. The men turned to him; he was evidently expected to lead them. Behind the flats were pots of oil, bundles of cottony waste. Spiked torches had been stuck into the planking; their oily black smoke was acrid in the still air. The men had been wrapping the cottony fibers around the points of their arrows, dipping them into the oil and laying them aside to prepare others. Gene treated some of his arrows, too, glancing up frequently toward the nearing warships.

The sun was rising, golden on the horizon. Two of Koph's ships were speeding out ahead of the others, their three banks of oars twinkling in the light of daybreak. They slipped over the water toward Siwara's vessel as though it were not moving at all.

There was no use in further rowing; the enemy ships meant to pass on each side of Siwara's galley, snapping the oars, probably killing a good many of the rowers. The men would serve better fighting. If the ship turned, it would be rammed and sunk.

There was Orcher's jewel. If it were broken now, and Orcher came, he could destroy the fleet of Koph. But that would not put an end to the menace of Koph, which could send another fleet. No, the jewel must not be let fall—not just yet, anyway.

Gene yelled down, "Stop rowing! Arm yourselves and fight!" The oarsmen dragged in their sweeps as

the coxswain's triangle stopped clanging. They poured down into their quarters.

A small, delicate man had appeared at Gene's side—he was only a lad, dragging about awkwardly, twisting cotton on his arrows, soaking them in oil. He bumped into Gene, who turned upon him angrily.

"Watch what you're doing, will you? Why—Siwara!"

The princess straightened, pathetically frail in her oversized coat of mail. Kaspel's helmet was on her head, and his sword clanked against her side.

"Siwara, get back in with Yanuk! Quick—before it's too late!"

The ships of Koph were driving down upon the galley, their knife-blade prows gleaming. Their decks were crammed with men, sunlight sparkling on armor. Shouts arose from them. Someone shrilled commands.

Siwara raised her chin proudly.

"What kind of a woman do you think I am? The women of Nanich are free to fight beside their men! And I am a woman of Nanich!"

The Koph ships were sliding alongside now. She stared at them, at the men bustling on them. "I know what this means if Yanuk and Orcher fail us. We won't come out of it alive. And when I die, I die beside you, Gene." She gazed levelly at him.

There was no time to remonstrate with her. An arrow whistled across the water, thudding into the wooden flat.

XIII

Arrows were flying on both sides, now. The hostile vessels had drawn in their oars; their sides grated against Siwara's galley as they overtook it. Gene held an oil-dripping arrow over a torch, lifted it flaming, shot it through the slit in the flat as other arrows sang toward the ship. Hurling darts cracked against the flats from the other side, passing over them, striking the men protecting the opposite side of the ship. Several men fell, flaming arrows cutting through their armor, their throats.

Busy as he was, Gene noted that grapples on chains rattled down, gripping the galley's rails, that the men on the lower deck were fighting to unhook them, falling under the whistling javelins, the screaming arrows. There were catapults down by the masts; steel-pointed missiles stabbed into the Koph ship's sides. A bolt hurtled from the throwing engine by the tiller before its men dropped down in a stream of arrows. Others leaped to take their places.

Both sides were screaming battle cries, imprecations in rage and anguish—and sometimes terror. "For Koph! For Koph! Erlikh and Dann!"

"For Siwara! For Nanich!"

Without knowing it, as Gene sped his arrows, he was howling, "Damn you! Damn you!"

His bowstring snapped. He let the bow fall, hurled his spears. From the enemy ship's decks men began to clamber down—and fall between the grinding vessels, pierced by the arrows.

A sail of the ship before him went up in flames—great tongues of fire that roared lustily, licking up, igniting the higher sail, throwing out waves of heat, sickly yellowish smoke. The Koph warriors had succeeded in landing on the galley. It was a clashing of swords now—one of Gene's arms thrusting Siwara back against the shelter of the wooden flat as his blade sang back and forth. He cut through the neck of the man before him, gaped astonished as the fellow went sprawling. Then another was at him. Their swords clanged; a numbing shock jarred his arm. He lunged. The tip of his sword snapped against the other's mail, but the thrust bent the fellow double. Gene struck before he could rise; the man smacked on the floor as though he had fallen from a great height.

He did not know—he who had never needed to fight before—that his lips were drawn back from his teeth in fury and exertion. Siwara's men were dropping under the unequal assault. Three of the Koph men had pressed in front of him now, and Siwara's scimitar was singing beside him. Without thinking, he drew his dagger, swiped with his sword. It broke on the steel of another. A man lunged; he grappled with him, turning him like a shield to fend another's

stroke. It bit into his assailant, cutting the mail, nearly halving the man. He met the rush of a warrior with his blade lifting; its point cut under the man's chin.

He slipped on blood, luckily. A sword whirled over his head. He sprang from his crouch, toppled the man, dragging away the sword from the man's hand, cutting his palm—but he did not know it.

The air was a bedlam of sounds—the ring of metal striking metal, the heavy thud of blades biting bodies, the shouts and war cries. Siwara had felled a man, was engaged with another. He whipped his sword against the man's legs; felled him. Siwara turned to aid one of her men; a stroke caught Gene across the back; he went down with a grunt.

The man straddled him, raising his sword. Gene's knife flashed up; the man dropped the sword behind his back, screamed, clutching his wound. Gene pushed the toppling body aside, scrabbling to his feet. His saber struck the thrust of another, spinning the steel from the man's hands. He drove the blade on an upstroke; it scratched on mail, streaked up the man's face.

A lance skimmed his hair, splitting the wooden flat beyond him. A man jumped him; they tumbled down, rolled over and over. Where was his blade? He had dropped it in the fall. The other's poniard swept toward his throat; he caught the hand, deflecting it. A thrust from a man above, not intended for him, neatly clipped a lock of his hair.

His fingers slipping, he jerked the man's arm, his other hand on the man's face. It, too, slipped—it was

bleeding—pushed off the fellow's helmet. His fingers twisted in the hair while the other hand caught the arm with the knife. He dragged up the head, banged it on the deck again and again, unaware that he was doing it—the arm with the knife fell heavily. He snatched the dagger, crouched, men pressing all around him in combat with each other. He thrust up the knife—

And now he was with Siwara again, beating away the others, a slash down his cheek sending warm blood running under his mail. Siwara had no sword; he wrested one from a fallen man, handed it to her as his own flailed.

What was Yanuk doing? It was strange, this warfare—he was fighting automatically, his thoughts reeling around in drunken disorder. He could see Yanuk down below in the cabin—a sick Yanuk, hurling globes of blue light into the faces of those at his stateroom's door. A good heap of bodies lay in the doorway—ah, but that was no way to fight! The men would recover to make the attempt again, as Froar had recovered from Yanuk's spell. The fishman should kill, kill, kill—

Someone's lunge knocked off Siwara's helmet; her coiled braids slipped down her cheeks as she fell. He stood over her, howling insanely, his blade biting, biting, biting. One of Siwara's men pushed to his side, fended the cuts. What was wrong with him! He knew that the sun was lifting higher into the sky—and yet things were growing dark! And there was a ringing in his ears. Well—perhaps it was smoke. And

he was tired—yes, he was very tired. But that didn't matter. It wasn't he who was fighting. Someone was inside his body, fighting for him.

The jewel! Yanuk's magic wasn't doing much good. Perhaps the fish creature was too sick to do anything much. What good were clay figures now—clay figures and little balls of blue light!

Break the jewel, Yanuk, break that jewel! Get Orcher here! Siwara's fallen, maybe dead—and this ringing in my ears! Why's everything so dark? What's the matter? Is the ship sinking? The deck's tilting—we're turning over!

Yanuk—break that jewel!

He fell—but he did not know it. His hand fumbled out, touched Siwara's braids—but he did not know that, either. Then he lay very still. More and more warriors were dropping to Siwara's galley. One ship was burning, the other sinking from a hole torn in it by the catapult's missiles—there were only a few of Siwara's men alive; mounds of those who had died loyally were around her.

He was oblivious to it all, his thoughts wandering in a dark realm amid screaming music. Music! Orcher! Had he come? Had Yanuk broken the great sapphire at last? Well, it did not matter now—Siwara was dead. He was probably dying. At least he hoped so. There was no use going on now. Siwara was dead—he couldn't get back to his own world and he wouldn't go if he could. Nanich was as good as fallen. If Orcher had come, Nanich was saved. But it would make no difference now to Siwara—to himself.

But Orcher had not come. The jewel was not broken. His head was pillowed on something hard and rough; a soft hand was stroking his hair. Someone was weeping. His thoughts scrambled out of the darkness. Where was his sword? He threw out his hands, searching for it, drew up his legs to spring up and fight—

He blinked at the sunlight. He was lying on the lower deck, his head on Siwara's lap, her braids swinging as she leaned over him sobbing, her fingers touching his hair. Armed men surrounded them, swords ready.

The left side of his face was on fire—that was where someone's steel had cut it. He grinned up at the surprised eyes of Siwara, and her sobs choked into weak laughter.

He lifted his head. The burning ship and sinking ship were gone. Siwara's galley was in the midst of Koph's fleet. Why hadn't she killed herself? He had thought that she was dead. And now she was a captive of Koph—and he wasn't sure that Koph treated its prisoners kindly. What would become of her? How would she finish the rest of her life? He groaned, agonized by the thoughts, and Siwara put a hand to her cheek, worried.

"Where's Yanuk?" He tried to sit up, but could not.

She bent her head aside. Yanuk was in the grasp of two armored men, ghastly in his sickness.

"The jewel?"

She looked straight ahead. His eyes struggled to see. Four men held a sagging bundle of cloth, each

grasping a corner, and from the rounded points pressing through the cloth he knew that there was the jewel.

Froar was standing by them, no longer in manacles, smiling pleasantly, not a scratch on him, his red robes fresh and resplendent. And not far were two others in gold-plated mail—the gold was scratched and worn off in spots, but it was gold for all of that. They must be powers, those men.

Gene endeavored to pull himself up again, felt a stinging pain in his right arm, gritted his teeth and managed to pull himself up. There was a bandage on his arm. He felt his cheek. It was a nasty cut, but blood was congealing in it.

Siwara leaned feebly against him, her laughter still trickling. "Gene! You're alive! But you were lying there, so white! So white!"

He put his good arm around her. The men guarding him did not move. The princess arose. "Can you stand?" He nodded and she tugged on him, hardly able to draw him erect.

The singing was in his ears again, but soft and far away. He swayed, his gaze running from face to face. It was unreal, all of it. It couldn't be happening! But it was real. And somehow funny. His mouth opened to loose a laugh—and then it wasn't so funny. No, not when you had your arm around Siwara—and didn't know what was going to happen to her. Not funny at all.

He turned his head to the princess. "Siwara—what's going to happen to you? Will I ever see you again?"

Her eyes were cold, as though she had never seen him before. "I don't know. But you mustn't worry. We're still alive. And there's the jewel, and Yanuk. There may be hope yet." She whispered it. Her eyes softened. "You were glorious—I'll never forget you!"

Small consolation! Then the guard around them parted. The two men in the golden mail came up to them.

"The tall one's Dann," Siwara murmured. "The other's his brother Erlikh. I've seen them before—they came to Nanich months ago, insolent in their demands. Now if Carill were here—the might of Koph would be before us."

The tall man was blond and pudgy, his face stupid and amiable. The smaller man was dark and slender, his face sharp, like a rodent's, his eyes calculating and deceitful. The two of them stood eying the princess, then turned their gaze to Gene. Froar sidled up to them, whispered. A certain evil understanding smirched the face of Erlikh, the little man. But Dann, the blond fellow, smiled tolerantly, as though whatever Froar had said were nothing unfavorable.

Froar pointed at Yanuk, who was heedless of everything. "*He* says he's immortal. It would be interesting to test his immortality—perhaps with little sharp instruments cutting here and there you might unriddle the secret of his everlasting life. But I don't think so. No matter. You'd best kill him. He's had a strong dose of Vyras poison—and it doesn't seem to have affected him much. He's a sorcerer. He

can make little demons out of clay—they move, are alive!”

Dann stared at him in contempt and disbelief. Erlikh's ratty eyes were doubtful, too—but cunning.

“And that”—Froar pointed to the jewel—“that's something to give them power. I'm not quite sure what's to be done with it, but I'd advise you to throw it into the sea where it can do no harm.”

Burly Dann turned to stare at the jewel. Little Erlikh skulked over to the cradling cloth, peered covetously into it.

“What a jewel!” His voice was a tinny tenor. “And the size of it!” His eyes gloated. “We'll not throw that thing overboard, Froar. It's priceless—it can mean much in Koph.” He smirked at the princess. “Yes, and in Nanich, too, very soon. After we've made it one of our colonies.”

Froar scanned the princess. “What do you intend doing with her?”

Dann's fingers rubbed his stubbly chin. “We'll put her in her cabin temporarily with a guard, until Carill comes—then we'll take counsel and decide.”

“Don't let the man go with her,” Froar said, his eyes sly.

It irked Erlikh. He turned on Froar—more than a head smaller than the man in red, yet with the potentialities of a giant. “You're not directing us, Froar—not yet. The man can't do any harm. He goes with her. And that—thing—that you call a sorcerer.”

He laughed shortly, shrilly. “A sorcerer! You superstitious fool!”

“Well—at least keep the jewel from them.” But

Erlikh's eyes said that there was no need to fear on that score.

Froar pointed to Yanuk. "As long as *he's* alive—I'm not staying on this ship! Laugh at me if you like"—he scowled at Erlikh—"but I've seen the little clay horrors. I'll have no more of them."

Dann scrutinized him disparagingly. "Go wherever you like." He caught Froar's contagious urbanity. "The ships of Koph are all yours, Froar." And his eyes added an afterthought, too. They said: "Nothing of the kind."

Froar's scowl deepened, the planes on his face were very sharp. "You will give me an escort? I'll go fetch Carill."

Erlikh considered the faces of his warriors. He pointed. "You go, and you. Two's enough."

Froar did not like that, either, but he said nothing. He turned, beckoning the men to follow him, strode angrily to one of the ship's boats.

Dann murmured to his brother. Erlikh did not sanction what he heard, but he agreed, fear subtly narrowing his eyes. But the sweep of his arm in command was imperious. "Take this princess and her man within—and the sorcerer." He laughed over the word. "Let them console each other until Carill comes." It was an unnecessary supplement, the reference to Carill. But it was apparent that Erlikh thought the remark highly appropriate.

Gene's flesh crawled as the man grasped his arm, marshaled him and Siwara into the passageway, into the girl's cabin. They pushed the two down on the cushions under the large window and ranged them-

selves about the room, standing in rigid attention. They were soldiers of Koph. Discipline was vital. The two supporting Yanuk walked him in, dropped him beside Gene and the princess. Another brought in the disheveled Marza, her clothing ripped—it was she who had bandaged Gene's arm—her little idol gripped to her bosom. She jerked from the man's hold, rushed across the room to Siwara, sank weeping before her, her face on her knees. Siwara patted her head an instant, then gave the hand to Gene. He gripped it—they looked into each other's eyes. They had no use for words just then.

And so they sat, and time dragged away like a weary blind hag on an endless journey. The sun lowered; the sky's red glow seeped in through the pane. The ship was moving—towed behind another vessel, Siwara finally announced.

Yanuk was torn by recoveries and relapses. The men eyed his attempts to summon his blue fires skeptically.

They brought food for the captives—who had little taste for food. Only Marza really managed to eat; she stuffed great fistfuls into her mouth, all the while bitterly weeping. Gorged, she cowered back against the wall, one of the princess' hands pressed to a cheek, wet with tears. Her head jerked; she let the hand sink gradually lower to the cushions. She slept—and snored.

The cabin was bright with lamplight when Froar entered. Gene's hand was still in Siwara's—the two

of them were staring ahead as though in a dream. Once Siwara turned her face to Gene, and though the sentinels did not move, their eyes flickered. If she had changed her pose, tried to stand, they would have raced to her.

There was something covert, hurried, in Froar's poise. He motioned the guards to the corners of the room as he entered. The men stirred, irresolute, but at a gesture from the other man, they withdrew against the far walls, out of hearing—if words were whispered.

The stranger with Froar wore golden mail, too. He was squat and swarthy, his face somehow similar to that of the man in red, but more crude. He was like a carving in hard dark wood—carving executed with a hatchet.

"Carill," Siwara murmured tonelessly—perhaps calling the man by name, perhaps identifying him to Gene.

No one noticed, but at the edge of Yanuk's hands the blue fire was beginning to glow. He might not have been as ill as he seemed. At a flirt of Froar's hand toward the fish being, dark Carill stepped forward, halted above him. And, meanwhile, one of the guards was edging to the door. Froar could have seen him—but Froar was intent on what Carill was saying to Yanuk. The man slipped out of the room, tiptoed swiftly down the hall.

Carill stooped to Yanuk, bringing his face to Yanuk's level. He muttered—in a voice that creaked like metal scraping metal—"I've heard that you're a magician, that you can operate the blue jewel of

power. If I can get it—you could be of service to me. And it might save you your life.” Froar openly sneered at that. But Carill went on, disregarding him, “I am Carill, one of the three at the head of Koph. I’ll get the jewel. Use it to slay Dann and Erlikh—raising me to dictatorship over all Koph—Koph and its colonies!”

Froar was glancing uneasily over his shoulder. He laid a palm on Carill’s shoulder. “Be quick!”

Carill nodded to him, turned back to Yanuk. “Well—will you help me if I see to it that they let you live?”

Gene grinned at Siwara. “It’s Froar,” he said, as though the man had just come in. “And he’s clinging to his usual policy again—treachery!”

Froar’s eyes blazed; the back of his hand struck Gene on his slashed cheek, cracking the stiffening blood, starting a stream of red down the jaw. But Gene merely stared into Froar’s eyes and laughed without feeling. And Froar’s eyes squinted, puzzled. Siwara spat at him! He lifted a hand to strike her, too—and Yanuk raised a paw.

The misted azure was bright on Yanuk’s fingers. It gathered like drops of quicksilver running together and floated slowly, a wobbling sphere, across the few inches of space into Carill’s face. It soaked into the skin. Carill did not move. Yanuk’s hand swerved toward Froar, and the man in red cursed, sprang up, wheeling to run—and at the same time more men and Dann and his brother hurried over the threshold, swords ready.

Froar cringed from them. He stepped back and farther back, his foot slipping on the cushions where Marza was still snoring; he pressed against the wall. The brothers and their men did not speak. Their swords were held straight ahead—and all of them aimed at Froar—as they inched forward.

There were no planes in Froar's face now, only distorted seams like scars. He lifted and lowered his feet as though he were still walking, miraculously passing through the wall, his calves nudging Siwara, who drew away serenely as though unconscious of all that was occurring, a faint displeasure in her eyes as she glanced up at Froar. Marza's snores stopped; she lifted her head, crawled out of the way. The men were close now—very close. The lamplight ran starily over their steel. A cry writhed in Froar's throat; he was panting. His fingers touched the glass. He crouched, tensing himself to leap—and the blades pressed into him. Someone reached out, dragged Gene and Siwara away as Froar fell, and blood jetted from his wounds. He dropped like a damp cloth and did not twitch. Dann and Erlikh drew back; their men kicked Froar's body, rolling it aside.

Carill had remained squatting in front of Yanuk, impassive. The advancing men had bumped him and he had tumbled over on his side. Now Erlikh and Dann looked down on him.

Erlikh clucked his tongue in unconvincing sympathy. "Poor Carill! He's dead!" He raised his eyes aloft in blasphemous piety. "And we did not kill him, Dann and I—you men can testify as to that."

He turned to them, then put a hand on his brother's back. "Well, Dann—that leaves just you and I—and the power of Koph's army." His eyes searched his brother's stolid face as though he were worried about what might lie behind it.

Carill was not dead, of course—merely enthralled, as Froar had been in Orcher's temple. But evidently Erlikh did not know of that.

"We'll take his body and bury it at sea with all the honors," he said. "It's obvious that we didn't kill him. There's no mark on him." His eyes fixed on Yanuk. "Did you do that? I wonder how! You'd better not try it on me!" But Yanuk seemed to be ill again.

Erlikh thrust a forefinger toward the senseless Carill. "Carry him out. Be gentle with him—we must respect the dead!" Dann's amiability was disappearing; he was eying his brother with a hint of wonder. Erlikh jerked his arm. "Come along, brother. You who were here before, stay here. You'll be relieved shortly—and there'll be rewards for all of you." The men's eyes glinted eagerly.

Carill's spellbound form was borne out. Dann and Erlikh followed. At the door, Erlikh turned. It was impossible for him not to be dramatic.

"Princess, you seem to be wrapped in a vision. But perhaps I can bring you back to our midst. We're nearing Nanich. We'll reach it some time during the morning. You know what that means."

Siwara awoke. She turned passionately to Gene, her eyes crying out to him.

Erlikh's smile was a mental licking of his chops. There was something of Froar in him. He straightened, almost swaggered as he followed his brother down the hall.

The guards were like human dolls, life discernible only in their breathing, their vigilant eyes.

And the stars beamed in through the window with twinklings like laughter translated into light.

XIV

Yanuk revived almost instantly, smiling at Gene and the princess. Marza, the maid, was ripping off a bloodstain on the edge of her dress, after which she relapsed into prayers for her idol. Gene was furious, interrupting something that Siwara was about to say.

"If you'd been half so able while the fight was going on, Yanuk, you'd have broken the sapphire and brought Orcher!"

Yanuk's eyes were grieved. "I was sick then, Gene—truly sick. Don't you believe me?" He thrust out a pleading paw—no blue fire remaining on it.

"You recovered in a hurry!" Gene snapped.

"After the men cornered me they shook me about

so that I think I fainted," Yanuk explained naïvely. "I think that must have shaken the rest of the poison out of me."

Gene snorted derision. The princess leaned over to touch both of them.

"Let's not quarrel," she said, and glanced around at the guards. She lowered her voice. "Yanuk—have you the strength to perform a magic that can take us out of this?"

He nodded. "But what good will it do? We're surrounded by Koph's ships. We can't get to Nanich any faster. Why not travel as far as we can?"

"We could get the jewel, break it, and call Orcher to us." She smiled sadly. "If, of course—he'll come. And why should he?"

Yanuk was as unsure. "If he'll come—you're right in putting it like that, princess. He's been tardy before. I remember one time, when my people were still alive ... oh, it must have been ages ago.... they called him, but he didn't appear. And another time I started *The Machine*—but he stayed away. He has so much more important work to do—at least, it's important to him. We're only troublesome little insects to him. And that is why, princess, that I think we ought to do nothing at all until this ship reaches Nanich. Unless somebody tries to harm us."

Siwara reflected. "You may be right. But I'm so impatient. My people! There's still hope of saving them!" Her great eyes caressed Gene.

"Siwara, I'm sleepy," he said, as though announcing the impossible.

She was practical, "Well, then, sleep. Settle back

against the wall. You can rest against me." Like a child, he obeyed. She patted his head maternally. "You ought to take off that heavy mail—but you might need it later." She frowned at the guards. "I wish these men would stop staring!" She suppressed a yawn. "I'm tired, too. But it doesn't seem right to sleep at a time like this. Still, there's nothing to do—and you've raised my hopes, Yanuk." Her smile was a kiss to him. He brightened pleasurably. "I think that I'll try to sleep, too—if I can." Her eyelids were already half closed. She bumped back against the wall, stirred in weak protest at the jar.

Gene was dozing. Soon the girl was slumbering. Yanuk looked about the room—at the glare of the lamps, the men, Marza mumbling to her statuette. He shook his head at all of them, humped over on his side, exhaled a great breath.

Then he, too, was asleep.

The trampling of feet, outcries, roused them. Gene was stiff, and his arm pained him. He was not a very good thing to look upon, with his face caked with dried blood. Gray morning light sifting through the curtains did not prettify him.

Siwara jerked her shoulders, flexed her arms, fingered her braids. She was concerned about Gene's injuries. "I'm afraid there'll be infection," she murmured.

Yanuk raised a calming hand. "I can stop that." He lightly placed a paw on one of Gene's cuts, his eyes goggling comically as he concentrated. "I'm projecting white light into the wounds," he whispered to

Siwara. "It's antiseptic." He touched each of Gene's hurts, asking, "Do you feel anything?" Gene shook his head. "Well, it's helping you all the same."

Marza had evidently discarded her faith in her idol, for it lay unheeded beside her. She peered toward the door, wondering at the sounds.

"Nanich must be in sight," Siwara said. She called to the guards. "Are we nearing Nanich?"

One man considered the propriety of an answer. He nodded shortly and became an automaton again.

Siwara brooded at Yanuk. "It's time for you to work your magic," she said. "I wish that we were on deck so that I could see what they're doing."

And this was apparently intended to be, since men trooped down the hallway and into the chamber, advancing to the prisoners. They motioned for the princess and the others to stand.

"Where are you taking us?" Gene asked, an arm about the girl.

"Erlikh said to bring you on deck. He wants you to watch the downfall of Nanich," one man said. Aside, to another, he murmured, "*You* know how he is!" It was a shock, this first hint of insubordination.

The captives were led through the passage, led to the galley's upper deck. Siwara grimaced at the dried blood there. Four chairs had been placed near the tiller—more of Erlikh's dramatics. They sat down, the men behind them.

Haze obscured the sun. The galley was still in the center of the fleet, a towline running to a preceding vessel. And Nanich was very close. They were just outside its harbor.

It lay before them, a long green line studded with brown masses that Siwara said were cliffs. White upon it was the city. Siwara sighed, her finger pointing. "There's my city—Jolaise. To the left, just behind that precipice there, lies Shangar. Then there are villages, and far there—where it starts to get misty—that's Alu." She turned to Orcher's pupil. "Yanuk?"

"Yes?" He dragged his eyes from the vista.

The guards were listening. She could not say much. "Remember what we talked about last night?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

He did not answer. He returned his gaze to the shore of Nanich, peering intently as though striving to magnify its details.

One of the guards nudged another. "Look down there." His hand waved. The other man looked. So did Gene and the princess.

Marza started out of her chair, a hand dismayed at her mouth. "Fire! It's fire!" She felt in her gown for her discarded idol.

It was only a little tendril of fire wedging up through the flooring on the deck below. But smoke began to curl upward; the flame sprouted, grew, blossomed with lesser flames. Other tendrils appeared, and a dry, brittle snapping. Some of the guards hurried off the deck, down the stair; the others wavered near the prisoners.

Unconsciously, Siwara clutched Gene's bandaged arm; he flinched, turning his eyes from the fascination

of the growing flames. The princess bent to peer across him at Yanuk, who sat unperturbed, his eyes on Nanich.

The flames spread; the smoke was spurting up in thickening columns. From the cabins below a great tongue lapped. Was it really fire? There was a sensation of heat—perhaps to the Koph soldiers it seemed unendurable, but it did not blister the paint on the decorated cabin walls.

Shouts arose: "Fire! Fire!" The few who were aboard scrambled out on the deck, milled about uncertainly. It was plainly useless to try to quench those avid flames; they were pouring up fiercely from all over the vessel, and the smoke was stinging the Koph men's eyes. Not the eyes of the four in the chairs on the upper deck, however, who sat through it all without evincing anything more than pleased interest.

The last of the guards rushed off the deck. Those below were flinging themselves over the rail, into the sea, striking toward the other ships. From the other vessels, where warriors were clustering at the sides, shouts echoed.

There was no hope for the vessel. It was doomed and would have to be turned loose lest its fire spread to the other ships. Some of the men on the lower deck remembered the captives and started up to get them, but bursts of fire fountained in their path, turning them back. The smoke swirled across their faces; they dashed hands against their eyes, blinded.

It may have been that they felt no heat, no bite of

the smoke at all, that they expected it to the point of believing it. The barricade of flame made it impossible to identify the men moiling around below—and soon there were no men; they had leaped into the sea, abandoning the little lifeboats that they were hurrying to lower to the water, leaving one dangling, one end on a rope, the other resting on the sea.

When the last of them had gone, the flames rolled away from uncharred wood and gathered along the sides of the ship in a spectacular swaying curtain whose folds were edged with coiling smoke. The decks were clear.

Yanuk, his eyes still glazed in the direction of Nanich's coast, reached to Gene, murmuring, "Help me down on deck. Get a boat over the side—look for the jewel."

As they helped him down the steep little stair he peered ahead raptly. He waited for them by one of the masts, a fantastic scaled statue with a bulging hemisphere of a stomach.

Gene and the princess forgot their stiffness and soreness as they bustled from stateroom to stateroom, prying into chests, ripping covers off the beds, searching for Orcher's jewel. In Froar's cabin they came upon the dishes and food of a meal that had been laid out; the men must have been just sitting down to it. In Yanuk's cabin were stacked arms. But no jewel. No jewel anywhere on the ship.

Siwara clung weakly to a wall, her face blank. Gene drew her to him. "Don't give up, Siwara.

Nanich hasn't fallen. What if we have no jewel? We have Yanuk. And at the worst it's only as if we'd never seen the island at all, merely managed to weather the storm, outrun the spy ship—we can get back to Nanich."

And then she was the Siwara of the start of the voyage again, desirable and considerate. She lifted her lips to be kissed. They stood together an instant until Marza emerged from the cabin of the princess, her little idol in one hand; she eyed it as though not sure whether to discard it again or tuck it away in her robe.

They went out to Yanuk. Gene shook him. "Yanuk—we can't find the jewel. Maybe it's on one of the other ships. What do we do now?"

Yanuk's wide mouth chewed words. "Get a boat over the side—we'll row to Nanich."

Gene went to the hedge of flame that still gushed up around the ship. There was no heat. He experimentally thrust a hand into the orange jets, felt nothing, and poked his head over the side and peeped down.

"There's a boat on the water already," he called. "Siwara, come along. And you, Marza. Wait!"

He ran back to the cabins and emerged with arms—swords and daggers for the four of them. He distributed them, Marza accepting hers fearfully, as though taking a white-hot coin, Yanuk's fingers closing over the hilts of the weapons with never a flicker in his eyes.

Gene dragged on the davit rope with his good arm

until the boat below bobbed on the waves. "Siwara, do you think you can slide down the rope? Or should we tie it around you, lower you to the boat?"

She said, "I'll slide down. But you'll have to lower Marza—I don't think there's a spot of intelligence left in her."

Yanuk came to them, walking stiffly, his eyes still rapt. Siwara grasped Gene, slipping her legs over the rail, one hand on the rope. With both she gripped it, tested it. She wriggled over the side, slipped down the rope into the bobbing boat, disregarding the rope burns on her hands. Yanuk went next. Then Gene's knife slashed the other davit rope—the one that already hung slack on the bow of the craft below. He knotted it about Marza, lifted her—she resisted him faintly, not certain as to what was happening to her—and payed out the rope as slowly as possible, crouching, one foot braced against the ship's side; he was grinning with pain and effort. The rope loosened; Marza was in the boat. He slid down the other davit rope, tormented by the cut arm, thudded into the craft. Siwara cut the davit rope; the boat drifted free from her galley. She lifted an oar, wrapped Marza's fingers about its haft.

"You'll have to row with me, Marza." She took another oar for herself. "Gene can't, with his injured arm. Marza!" Her voice rose sharply. "Did you hear me? Row!"

Mechanically, Marza slipped the oar into a lock, tugged on it, Siwara timing her strokes to the maid's, heading for Nanich.

Fire poured like liquid down the galley's side, leaped to the boat, walled it. Gene sat at the bow, a hand on his bandaged arm, which was bleeding, his eyes prying through the flame. Yanuk sat at the stern, meshed in concentration.

The Koph fleet's sails were down. From the harbor of Nanich the little sea army of Siwara was riding. Soon the two would clash. The odds were hopelessly in favor of Koph.

Gene nodded in admiring approval. Hopeless or not—the men of Nanich were determined to protect their country!

They glided through a lane of Koph ships. Little attention was directed on them—it was only a burning lifeboat from Siwara's galley. It did not matter—so long as it didn't set fire to one of the warships. Koph's warriors were busy preparing for the battle.

The burning boat drifted on and on—always toward Nanich's harbor of Jolaise. Siwara was tired, but she would not surrender her oar to Gene. Marza would, though—she allowed him to take it from her, edged aside so that he could fill her place. Fear had made her an idiot. But after several drags upon the sculls, Gene could not continue. Marza returned to rowing as readily as she had ceased.

At last they had left the ranks of Koph ships. The war vessels of Nanich were closer. The burning boat went aside to avoid them.

Then the flame snapped out. Yanuk sighed heavily, took deep breaths, slapping his chest proudly. "Well—I did it. I feel as though my head's about to fly off my shoulders. Siwara, I'll row now."

The princess went to Gene, put her arms about him. The boat continued to crawl toward Nanich's harbor. They peered back.

Siwara's galley was no longer in flames. They could not see it; Koph's ships screened it, but no smoke was rising; there was no glint of flame. The two fleets were close now. Siwara's ships were impressive—what there were of them. If only there were more!

The harbor was not far now, its wharves serried with watching people.

The battle had begun out on the water. There were faint papery cracklings of ships ramming. A red spark of flame crawled over one of Koph's ships—

XV

It was a bedraggled, exhausted princess who was pulled up to the docks of Nanich. She tottered in her ripped coat of mail, an arm around Gene, who was none too steady himself. The crowd walled them—soldiers, all of them—their voices drummed indistinguishably on tired ears. Marza was brought up; she eyed Nanich's warriors without comprehension. And then Yanuk. The crowd pressed close to him, gaping,

goggling; he goggled back, interested though weary.

A tall man bellowed orders. He lifted Siwara, carried her like a child through the throng. A pair of men steadied Gene, following. Marza went next, a walking doll—but not a very pretty one. Then Yanuk. His fatigue was mental rather than physical; he needed no assistance.

They passed through barricades to a water-front street. Jolaise was a white city, its stone structures small, pebbled with cramped sculptures.

A cartload of soldiers was coming down the broad street. It was drawn by what might—or might not—have been horses; they looked a good deal like deer. Siwara's bearer stepped into the street, halting the vehicle, shouting for the men to get out, that here was their princess.

Safe in the cart, Gene, Yanuk and Marza beside her, Siwara asked, "Mordin—are you taking me to my palace?"

He nodded.

She shook her head. "No. I want to go to Kaspel's house; it's high and nearer the water. We can watch from its roof. You've put a man in your place? Good. I want you to come along with us—I have a plan to execute when Koph's men try to set foot in this city. Where's Byely stationed? And Gorm, Raigal?"

The soldier signaled to the driver. The cart rattled over the brick road. "Dead, princess. Gorm and Byely were poisoned. Raigal was found floating in the river."

"Froar's agents," she said aloud to herself. "Mordin, what are you doing about defending the other cities—the coastline?" Gene was leaning on the side of the cart, listening. Marza was playing with her idol as though it were a doll and she a little girl pretending to be its mother. Yanuk was eavesdropping happily.

Mordin sighed. "Messengers have gone to the cities and villages, calling for reinforcements here, leaving skeleton garrisons. There are sizable armies in Alu and Shangar. Some ships are patrolling the coast as far as the Black Mountain."

She bent her head approvingly. "That's about all you can do."

From the roof of Kaspel's dwelling they looked over rows of buildings to the sea. The battle was still being fought. The ships were dark little insects clustered around a speck of food. Fire and smoke dotted them, blended with them, confusing their outlines.

Marza was somewhere below, being cared for. Gene's wounds had been dressed, stitches taken in his cheek. The princess was pretty, though pallid, in a robe brought from her palace. The coats of mail lay handily on a divan.

Yanuk deserted his place beside one of the carved, bedizened shafts that supported the roof's awning, in answer to Siwara's summons. She was leaning over a table, ink beside her, a brush in her hand. Gene and Mordin and other of her chiefs were eying the paper.

"This," the girl told Yanuk, "is a map. A map of

Jolaise. As you see, the river cuts it in half. We're here, on the right side. Across the river are mostly factories. These are the bridges."

Her brush scrabbled over the crisp paper. "On the factory side, Jolaise is walled. Here, and around from the sea to the river, are sharp upthrusts of volcanic rock—Koph's men can't cross them except at one place, and that's guarded.

"So they'll try to land from the sea. We'll burn the piers. The warehouses are flush to the water; they can't land along the water front. So they'll try to come up the river. And there's where you come in, Yanuk, with your magic flame.

"The river's not too wide, as you can see, looking from this roof. Can you hurl your magic across it—create an illusion of burning oil on the water? They'll have to turn back—and, meanwhile, the ships patrolling the coast will have arrived. They'll form a wall out at sea. Koph's ships will be bottled up; we may be able to fire them. There's a chance of our winning—not a strong chance, I'll admit—but a chance all the same. And at least we'll have tried. Can you help us?"

Yanuk put a protesting hand to his brow. "Siwara, you have no idea of the strain that maintaining the effect of fire on your galley cost me. Certainly I can help—but I don't know for what length of time. I'll do what I can."

They did not mention Orcher's jewel, but it was in their minds. Where was it and what had happened to it? Was Erlikh planning to take it to Koph? Had it

been dropped into the sea? Had it been broken—and Orcher heedless?

It was twilight. They stared out to sea, Siwara's arm around Gene. Flaming ships were sullen red stars. And the war vessels of Koph were drawing closer to the harbor.

"They've beaten off my ships," she said tonelessly. "They're coming. Yanuk, it's time for you to make ready."

If it had been green, Yanuk's mail would have seemed part of his scaly body. He stroked it proudly as he nodded. "I'm going down to the river's edge. The closer I am to my fire, the better it will be."

Gene pulled from Siwara. "I'm going, too. My arm's not so bad that I can't fight at all."

But Siwara drew him back to her. "You're staying here."

"No," he said. "Nanich's my country now. And I'm fighting for it. There'll be others with wounds worse than mine, and they won't hang back. I can't watch from this roof, knowing that."

She sighed, kissing him without heeding the presence of the others. "As you will, Gene. But I'll go with you." She faced her generals. "I'll be as safe there as here. If Yanuk's magic fails—there'll be no safety anywhere in Nanich."

She helped Gene on with his mail, was assisted into hers. Someone brought a helmet for the man; she had one already. They left the roof, all of them, went down the stair.

In the street, Siwara gripped their hands in turn.

"You're brave—so brave, all of you," she murmured shyly. Her voice blurred. "I can't say what I would—but you know what I am thinking." She smiled despite the tears in her eyes, sighed, gazing around at the buildings of Jolaise. "Nanich has been wonderful. Let us hope that it will be wonderful again. Good-by—perhaps."

She stepped into the cart that was to take them to the river, Gene and Yanuk joining her. They were followed by a band of men on foot.

They were on the roof of a warehouse whose windowless sides dropped into the river. Across the deep stream were the indistinct white factories. It was night; sputtering torches, winking lamps lighted them.

The Koph ships were in the harbor, slowly moving along its edges, finding no anchorage. The air was blue-fogged and edged with smoke from the burning piers. Gradually the warships crept toward the river. Yanuk let three of them pass. Then his curtain of illusory flame rolled across the water.

Flaming missiles bombarded the snared enemy ships; great stones flying from the catapults splashed the water. The ships could not land; they were beaten off. They went up in flame. Dark heads bobbed in the water and sank, or managed to reach the shore and were driven back. Koph's three ships were finished.

Yanuk's magic flames swept away. The trap was open again. They waited, the fish creature feeling his

head as though something were wrong with it. Another set of three vessels moved up into the river. A fourth started, was turned back by Yanuk's flame. The three ships suffered the destiny of their predecessors.

There was battle along the water front now. Several ships had succeeded in ramming the warehouses, pushing occasionally through the high stretches of mortared stone, smashing themselves, too. But the water was not deep. From the ships which had broken down walls, men leaped, scrambled over the rubble, battling for possession of the warehouses, sometimes winning. Other loads of men joined them. Koph's supply of warriors was apparently inexhaustible.

Hours reluctantly filed along, as though unwilling to leave so interesting a scene. Siwara and Gene drank stimulants, giving a cup to Yanuk during one of his periods of rest. He was weak, his protruding eyes pathetic. And more and more he rubbed a palm on his forehead. Until finally, his veil of fire thinned to a ghostly shimmer of pink, vanished. He dropped down, unconscious.

There was fighting in the streets! Shouts and the ring of steel arose from below. Gene and Siwara worked over the senseless Yanuk, sponging his brow, massaging him. He did not stir.

A battering-ram thumped on the bolted doors below. Gene and the few with him went down the stair, swords ready.

The bar of the metal door rattled; the ram's

thrusts were clangorous. The doors strained inward, dented. Then the bolt broke out of the stone sockets, flew clattering. The doors crashed inward. Men of Koph poured into the entrance.

There was barely time for one sweep of a sword; Gene went down under the rush, was kicked by heedless feet against the wall. The soldiers of Koph flooded in, went up the steps—to Siwara.

Nanich fought bravely. Each house became a fortress, its women and children and old men wielding whatever weapons were at hand. But Koph's men swarmed out of ships which had been grappled together, stretching across the harbor like the pontoons of a bridge. And the ships from Nanich's coast had not arrived.

Koph paid greatly for its victory. But its men took barricade after barricade, successive citadels of dwellings. And in the end, as another twilight fell, gray with thickening clouds, Nanich fell, beaten. The coast ships never arrived. Part of Koph's fleet, expecting them, had gone out for them, and sunk them.

Nanich was beaten. What could be fired was burning. Smoke rolled up in wavering pillars to the clouds. Koph's men patrolled the streets.

Nanich and all that it had meant—Nanich was ended.

XVI

The captives were being paraded through the streets. They dragged along to the shrill wailing of horns, the thudding boom of drums. They went past white houses whose walls, above the doorways and windows were black where flames had spewed forth. They went past silent crowds of unarmed Nanich people and the troops of Koph soldiers, past the high piles of slain. Up the wide street, up the curve of the hill, toward Siwara's palace.

Gene was among them. He tottered along, filthy, dejected, his eyes on the ground. Where was Siwara? He raised his eyes to the stillness of the watchers, but the princess was not among them.

There were several rebellious attempts by the watchers to liberate the captives, quickly subdued by the soldiers of Koph. More corpses were dragged to the heaped slain, and the procession continued.

The gardens of Siwara's palaces had felt fire and trampling feet. Squads of Koph's men darkened the grass. Erlikh sat in judgment in a portico overlooking the ruined gardens. Beside him was Dann, but standing.

The captives were dragged to Erlikh, one by one. He smiled on them benignantly, and as each one came all that he said was, "Death."

But when Gene was brought to him he pushed his face forward, staring through the grime. He beamed with recognition. "Death for this man, too—but make it slow," he said pleasantly.

There were no more prisoners. Erlikh arose. Siwara's jewels—far too many of them to be worn all at once—gleamed dully in the gray light as though their fires had died with the downfall of Nanich. Erlikh lifted a hand, murmured to the men near him. He raised the hand higher, addressing the assemblage.

"Jolaise is ours—the key to Nanich! Nanich is ours, therefore. It will become a colony of Koph." He went on to praise the men for their services, extolling the peculiarly questionable virtues of Koph, his shrill voice almost melodic with happiness. Gene did not listen, stood among the others under the death sentence, waiting.

Erlikh's soldiers brought Siwara out of the palace—and the jewel! The girl's eyes quested among the prisoners, glimpsed Gene, clung sorrowfully to him. Erlikh clutched the girl's shoulder, pushed her in full view of the crowd. He mocked her. So she had thought to fight off Koph! She was a fool! More than that. He dawdled with obscenities. The crowd booed, hissed.

It galvanized Gene. He stirred, his face contorted with anger. A whip caught him just under the eyes. He could not move his injured arm, but his good

hand dragged on the whip. The man wielding it let it go, stepped up. The flat of his sword cracked on Gene's arm—and Gene's fingers dropped the whip.

Siwara faced the jeering men proudly. She tried to speak but she could not be heard. Erlikh pushed her back and ordered his men to raise the jewel. Though there was no sun to wake its fires, Orcher's blue token was starry with light. Erlikh's eyes gloated. A whisper of admiration rippled over the crowd, purely involuntarily as the jewel raised aloft glinted like a netful of azure stars.

Siwara acted. She pleaded with the men holding her. "Let me go! Let me beg mercy of Erlikh!" They released her—what harm could she do? She hurried to Erlikh, dropped on her knees before him, her hands reaching imploringly. The jewel was forgotten; the gathering shouted raileries.

Siwara had not gone to Erlikh for mercy. She was close to the men with the jewel. She whirled to one side suddenly, caught a leg of one of the men raising Orcher's gem. She did not topple him, but she surprised him, drawing his attention to her. He put down a hand to shove her away—and the heavy gem slipped in his grasp. Slipped—the others were thrown off balance; the jewel dropped from their hold. It cracked against the paving.

It did not break into fragments, but it must have split. Guards were running to the princess, hauling her to her feet, jerking her back. Gene took a forward step, was thrown back—

Out of the fissure in the jewel a pale streamer of mist arose. It coiled upward lazily, like a wisp of

luminous blue smoke, unperturbed by the milling men. It climbed up as though drawing itself hand over hand up an invisible ladder, higher and higher, straight up to the clouds.

Erlikh was screeching imprecations for Siwara, commands to his men. He stopped in the middle of an order, cocked his head, eying the rising thread of blue. Silence gusted over the mob. Faces lifted, held to the sky. Gene looked up.

A spark appeared atop the spiraling smoke! A blue spark that grew as it slid down the luminous ribbon. There was no sound, and yet—the silence was melodious, like the stillness that follows the close of masterful music.

He recognized the ragged shape of blue fire that was rapidly enlarging—Orcher! But the men from Koph were panic-stricken. And as the flickering edges of the alien entity reached down, they scattered, terrified, pressing on each other, getting in each other's way, trampling fallen men into bloody rubbish. Siwara was forgotten—and Erlikh, and Dann. Gene could not use his arms, but he forged forward, shoving with his shoulders, until he was at Siwara's side.

Orcher hovered over them, a jerking blotch of fire that seemed to fill the very sky. The symphony of his voice tortured the atmosphere, stirring combative combers of wind.

"Koph—has landed on Nanich! Koph's lords would make war. They are a race of fighters. Good! Now I will teach them something about fighting!"

Orcher's restless outlines altered, subtly, something like a head, arms and legs jutting out, working in, protruding again. The harmonies of his voice were not composed for any human musical scale. Erlikh had run, and Dann. Perhaps they were in the palace. The dispersing mob united in a race for the water, the buildings—anywhere that was not so open as Siwara's gardens. But Gene and Siwara stood, and the girl's arms around the man, her raised eyes worried but not fearful.

"Yes," Orcher said—and he was speaking to them. "I will teach them something about fighting."

His magnitude drifted forward, over the gardens. "Like this!" he said.

The air splintered as a trumpet blared, one that no man could blow. It was possible to see the sound-pulsing ripples of air packed together by the sound's vibration.

All over the fallen city, the mounds of the slain stirred. The bodies rolled, tumbling off each other, lay moving slowly, lifting hands, jerkily, flexing their legs. They clambered to their feet—not alive, but like fleshly puppets jangling on unseen strings. Their closed eyes opened, glazed and without life. And the living in the streets stared in horror.

The bodies arose and took sides. They had no weapons; their hands curved like claws. Those from this mound crept forward to those of that, stealthily, pantherishly, crouched, swaying from side to side, preparing to pounce.

They leaped! It was gruesome, that battle of the dead! They tore at each other, rending garments,

scratching skin, and no blood flowed. They could not die. Bones snapped, eyes were gouged—but the fighters did not fall. The watchers drew back, frantic with fear.

Orcher laughed! The sound was deafening, drumming. His contours wavered, threads of light unraveling, drifting leisurely over the city. They touched the fighting corpses, played over them like a sculptor's fingers pressing clay. He crushed the bodies together, squeezing them, smoothing the flesh.

And now there were giants on the streets—headless giants molded from dead flesh and contending against each other! Orcher's tendrils touched them; some of them merged into each other, producing monstrosities with many arms, many legs.

The giants grappled, tore, thirty and forty feet tall—lurching about the streets, blundering against dwellings as they struggled—and Orcher fingered them again. Those battling in little groups blended, became towering Titans; they stepped on the little houses, crushing them like paper boxes, as they groped about the city, seeking opponents.

The mighty shapes found each other, snatched up handfuls of masonry, hurled them like pebbles, swung myriad fists, tore limbs from each other, cast them through the air.

Orcher laughed! All the giants rushed together; the shock was like the snapping of a drum's taut skin. The giants coalesced into a monster who was not remotely human, a spidery thing all arms and legs. It reared up, flailing its limbs, tangling one in another, unknotted them, and started off toward the

sea, picking its way daintily over the structures, gingerly stepping from street to street. It waded into the harbor, stirring waves that sprayed the shores, and began to toy with the ships from Koph.

It picked up one delicately between two claws, and squeezed! Flinders dropped down into the sea. It lifted two vessels, cracked them together like nuts, smashing them. It moved about from ship to ship, its talons whirring down, shattering the ships on the water.

There were no people on the streets. Only packed crowds huddling in the houses with bloodless faces, staring eyes, dumb with dread. But they heard Orcher's cry:

"I'm sending this agent of mine across the water—to Koph. He will repeat my instructions there!"

Siwara had fallen insensible; Gene lay beside her, his face turned to Orcher. The blue fire drifted away from the palace, hung over the sea.

"I'm not through with you yet." Orcher's blasting music was grim. "I'll teach you to make war!" In his passion his shape was nearly human; a colossus of blue radiance.

He threw up an arm, and the clouds churned as though beaten by a cyclone. Out of them streaked lightning globes. Orcher caught them and juggled them, hurling them thundering over the city, over the hills beyond. He ripped at himself, removing strips of flame. He wove them into a web, cast it up through the clouds, brought down tongues of writhing colored fire. He dragged them one by one, swiftly

shaped them, laying one above the other—building a city of the tortured splendors.

His voice beat down on the captured city like a sledge of sound. "So you would make war, would you—you puny microbes! But can you do this? And this? And this? Then what good are your wars—what good can they accomplish? Some of you wanted power—what are your powers beside mine? Can you fight me? Will one of you—all of you—come forth to try it?"

The city of flame crumbled, fading. Spheres of lightning winked all over the sky. Rain began to beat down, a steady gale to scream. The falling drops broke on the paving around Gene and the princess, throwing up lesser drops, making a restless mist. Their wet garments snapped against them sharply in the gale. It roused them. Orcher was moving across the sea.

In the howling hurricane, Gene rolled over on his knees, raised himself. Siwara revived and climbed to her feet as he crouched against the push of the wind, clinging to him. She called something to him, but he could not hear. She pointed—the wind dashed her hand aside—they wove through the wind's thrusts into the palace. Thunder exploded—it seemed over their very heads.

Men pressed to the walls like human shadows. Erlikh was there. He stumbled over to them. "Cease your magic! Bring the monster back from Koph! We'll grant peace—peace on any terms—"

Gene shook his head. "It's not magic. And we can't stop it."

They were in a bare anteroom. Siwara walked wearily down the hall, into a cavernous chamber, its tiles polished mirrorlike. The high windows had been smashed in by the wind; tapestries fluttered like dancing ghosts. It was murky in there; lightning glared in, dazzling.

In a corner, out of the wind, they could see the water. Orcher was coming back, heedless of the lightning globes. He pushed them aside as though they were buzzing insects. The waters were gray with foam.

"Stop that thing!" Erlikh cried. "Whatever you want—you can have it—only stop that thing of yours!"

Neither Gene nor the princess replied. Erlikh sank to his knees before them, but they did not heed him, their gaze fascinated on the mountainous waves sweeping in toward the city. Erlikh collapsed, his arms over his ears, weeping—

XVII

Orcher was gone; the hurricane had subsided. There was peace in Nanich once again.

The people crept out of their shelters, gazed wordlessly at the wrecked dwellings, the fragments that

had been Koph's fleet floating in the harbor. Siwara's galley drifted untouched; it was impossible that it had been spared from Orcher's vengeful monster and the waves by accident.

Around the city the people wandered, as though all of them had been set down in a strange place and were orientating themselves to it. They gazed at each other in unspoken comment, and their eyes were too eloquent with reminders of what had been. They turned from each other, shuddering.

They were not Nanich's people alone. Some of them were the warriors of Koph.

There were no dead in the streets to be recognized, wept over and buried. All the dead had been molded into Orcher's last mad fleshly creation which had disappeared over the water toward Koph.

The stranded warriors stood on the charred docks, gazing out to sea. Drawn into little groups, they began to prowls about the city, hungry. Some of them pushed into a dwelling, grim, silent—a woman was feeding her children. They snatched up the bread, the fruit and wine, and backed away, eating wolfishly. The children were frightened and drew back behind their mother, clinging to her.

She was not angry with the men. "You could have asked for the food," she said wearily. "We would have shared what we had. After what you have seen—do you still think that you can take what you like?"

They stopped eating, looked down to the floor, worried. Then they edged to the table and laid down

what food they still held. They skulked out of the dwelling, abashed.

In the streets they came upon others from Koph, who had experienced something of the sort. They whispered together, beckoned others. And at last a crowd of them started up the street toward Siwara's palace on the hill.

Nanich people clearing the streets of debris looked up, shook their heads disapprovingly, and continued with the work. But one asked, "Where are you going?"

And a man called back, "To the palace of your princess! To ask for food! We cannot go back home. We must eat!"

The Nanich fellow laughed bitterly. "Curs of Koph! How does it feel to be beaten, eh? Starvel Die! Why should our princess care?"

Some of the Koph soldiers halted, hate in their eyes. A cloud slipped past the sun, dragging a shadow over the street. Unthinkingly they all looked up, the Nanich man, the warriors of Koph. Looked up, dread blanching their faces—but it was only a cloud in the sky, not Orcher.

After a long moment the Nanich man said timidly, "Forgive me. Come to my house—there is some food. I will speak to the others. You will be cared for."

Over a table in Siwara's palace, the princess and Gene conferred with Dann and Erlikh and others. Papers littered the table; there were ink jars and

brushes, with which the group toyed as it talked.

"We could have two kings, one here, one in Koph," Dann said slowly. "They could alternate their rule, a year here, then a year there. Not much chance then for a misunderstanding to start between countries."

"Why kings at all?" Gene asked. "Why not representatives elected by the people for short terms? Then if the power falls into the wrong hands—it's the public's responsibility. And why two kingdoms? Why not—two States of one country?"

They considered that. A servant hurried in to them. "Princess! A number of people are coming up the hill to the gardens! They seem to be Koph men, yelling and waving their arms!"

Siwara arose, frowning. "Have they forgotten Orch-er already?" She beckoned Gene as she went from the room; he followed with the others.

At a wide window overlooking the city they stared down at the approaching mob. As the faces grew nearer, they saw that there was no wrath on them—instead, wild joy. And the shouts were clearer: "Koph has rebelled! Koph has rebelled!"

The throng halted in the gardens. Only three men entered the palace. The princess and her company received them at the paper-strewn table.

"Yes, Koph has rebelled," one of the strangers said. He was a bit crude in his manners, awed by the splendor of the ornate room. "We've just arrived from Koph. A ... a monster appeared over there, wrecking the city, killing, burning—" He shuddered at the memory, lifting a shaking brawny hand to his

mouth. There was a silence as he looked away in introspection. "Your magic monster, princess. And we turned against our lords. Your magic is strong. We would serve you."

Siwara smiled maternally on him, laying a light hand on his arm. "We were discussing the institution of a new scheme of government. You are hungry? Tired? No? Then sit with us and add your thoughts to ours."

The man glanced at the faces, a trace of awe lingering in his eyes. His lips tightened at Erlikh and Dann. "If *they* are to help—" he began, distrustfully.

Dann went to him. "We are no longer as we were," he said awkwardly, moistening his lips. "We do not claim to have power. We are only people like you." He smiled, put out his hand. "Your voice is as good as ours."

The delegate from the new Koph took the hand for an instant, gulping. Then he sat on the edge of the great carved chair that Siwara had indicated, fingering its embellishments reverently.

Dann went back to his own seat. Siwara lifted a paper, pondered over its script. "Shall we continue?"

It was later, night. The city was gay now with lights strung on wires across its streets. People jammed the thoroughfares, flowing in and out of the houses, where signs proclaimed, "Vote here."

Siwara and Gene walked hand in hand among the people—and the others drew away from them, silent, seemingly frightened, no friendship in their

eyes. The princess entered one of the polls with Gene, and all the bustling people stopped still as though the black angel of Death had come in.

Gene and the girl scanned the cold faces. "They fear us!" Siwara mourned. "Gene, it will never be the same again—they'll never love me."

They went out, their presence again stilling the merriment in the streets. They returned to the palace, sought Yanuk. He was in his suite, his robe splotted with mud, his hands busy shaping two immense clay things. Surely these were not intended to move about as had his other clay effigies. They were thirty feet long, and more like bridges than anything else. There were three bases to each of them, and thick spans of clay arched from support to support. But along the clay arcs, mathematically spaced, were—human hands.

Siwara asked, "Yanuk, what are you making?"

The sorcerer looked up, his eyes bleak. "These will row your ship back to my island. I'm sick of Nanich, Siwara. The people hate me. They think that I'm going to hurt them. I had thought that I would be happy, having friends at last! But no one likes me, except you and Gene."

He scraped clay from his fingers. "And why don't you join me? You're a princess no longer, Siwara, not after tonight. Will you live as the others? Keeping house for your man, while he works?"

"I don't see why not," Siwara said.

"The people won't be kind to you. They'll treat you like outcasts."

Gene said. "We can go to some other part of Nanich, where we won't be known."

But Siwara shook her head. "No, Gene. In all Nanich, I am known. We could go to Koph, though." It was clear that she did not like the thought.

They lived on in the palace. Then a group of dignitaries visited them. They bowed stiffly to Siwara, tempering respect for her discarded rank with the knowledge of their own importance.

"We represent the people, princess ... Siwara, that is," one of them said. "You have done much for Nanich. We are grateful. But—now you must do something more." He gestured sweepingly. "Go away!"

Siwara eyed Gene; their eyes conversed.

"Go away!" the representative repeated. "Your presence is no longer an asset. You make us all—shall we say, self-conscious? We mean to rule wisely. Unless you go, there will always be the fear that you will tire of the new conditions, the inevitable hardships, and use your magic against us for your own ends. Only by going can you prove your sincerity."

"They're right," Siwara said to Gene, who was unconsciously fingering his scarred cheek. "Shall we go then with Yanuk? Think of the garden! We'll be happy there." She turned to the others. "You will give me my galley?"

They eyed each other, counseling with glances. Their chief nodded.

Siwara said, "Then as soon as Yanuk is ready—we'll go."

Alone with Gene, she raised her hand. "They were right. We cannot stay. Look!" She raised a hand, its fingers misted by a blue glow.

He did not answer, only lifted one of his own hands. It glimmered with the same tinge.

Her galley was moored to a reconstructed dock. The pier and the streets along which she would pass were packed with people who drew back, silent and fearful, at the sight of Yanuk's two clay bridges, which thudded along, three-legged, down the hill, Yanuk riding a litter, evidently asleep; his eyes were closed in concentration.

Behind him were Siwara and Gene, then men loaded with supplies for the ship; last of all the police of the new regime.

They boarded the ship. Yanuk's bridges settled down along the rowers' benches; the clay hands grotesquely unhooked the oars, held them ready. Gene stood at the tiller with the girl. Yanuk squatted down by the foremast, his thought controlling the movements of his rowing devices.

The rope was cast off. The vessel pushed from the pier, started out of the harbor. There were no cries of farewell, no good wishes, no waving hands among the clustered people. Only silence and grim faces.

Siwara looked back at them, sorrowfully, Gene's arms around her.

"We'll be happy on the island," he said. "It seems

like the end? Well, perhaps it is. The end of human companionship and warmth. But, Siwara—for us it's only the beginning." He held up his hand, summoning the blue fire, and she understood.

"What good?" she sighed. "Years alone, aging, playing with dolls like Yanuk's!"

"No," he said. "Remember what Orcher told us in his temple? If we can learn—everything is ours. And we'll study. Yanuk will teach us; if Orcher is satisfied, *he* will teach us. One day we'll leave that island. But not in a ship, or like this! Unhindered by fleshly bodies—free to roam the Universe on wings of thought. Free to make, to break—like gods!"

She considered; nodded. "Perhaps immortal, like Yanuk. Side by side—forever!" She gazed back at Nanich, her sorrow lessening, fading away.

The ship glided farther out to sea, its oars dipping rhythmically. Farther and farther. To those on the pier its hulk was only a spot of dark on the sea.

The spot dwindled and vanished.

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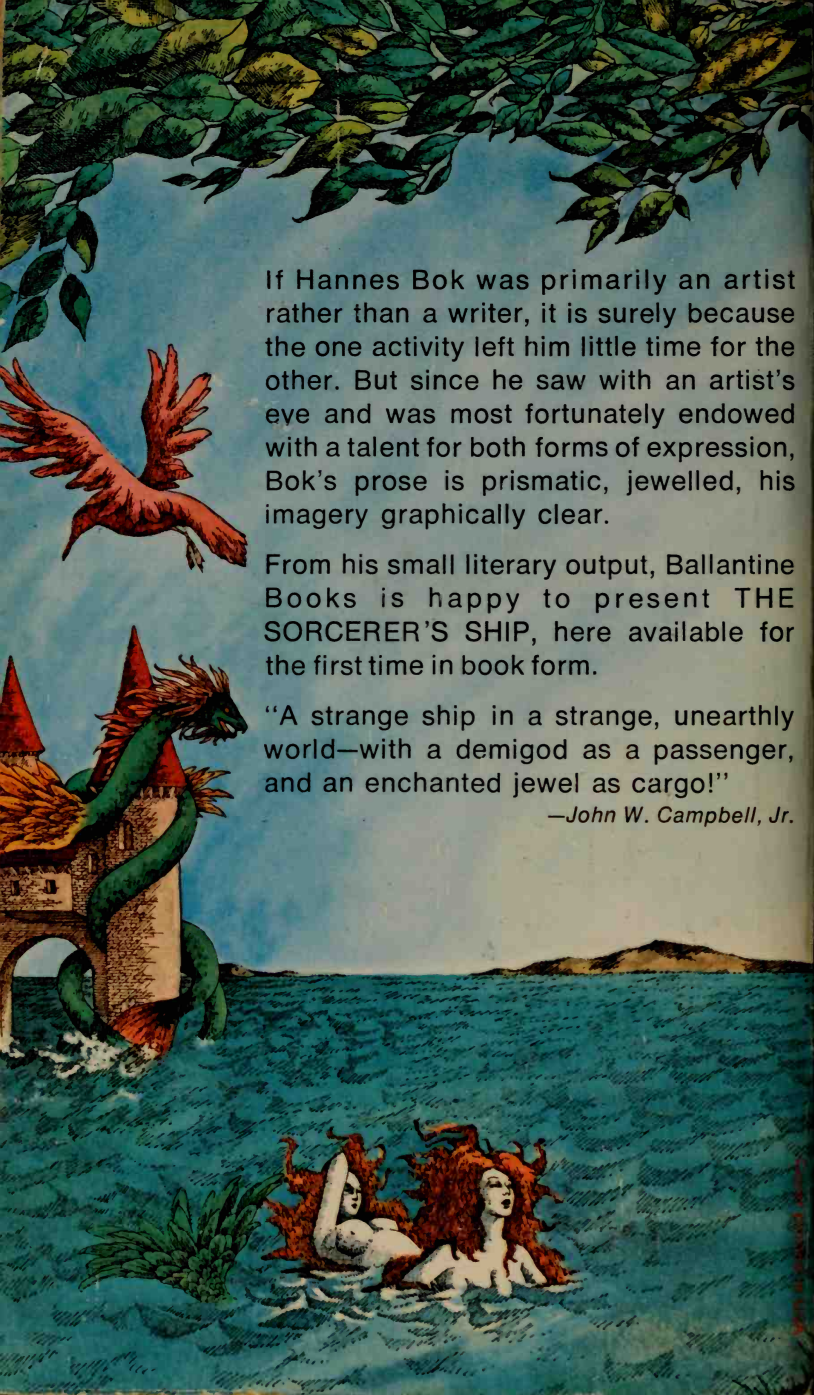
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In Wildness Is the Preservation of the World

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