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# THE SPACE-TIME JUGGLER

John Brunner



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Andalvar of the planet Argus, king of an interstellar empire, was dead and fear ruled in his absence. The dread of a power struggle between the treacherous Andra, the "Black Witch," and the beautiful Princess Sharla showered panic upon the people and threatened to crumble the starry realm to dust.

But their powers were restricted to the present, and before either could sit on the throne, they would have to come to grips with the man from the future who held the destiny of the universe in his hand.

His name: Kelab the Conjuror—THE SPACE-TIME JUGGLER.

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# **THE SPACE-TIME JUGGLER**

by  
**JOHN BRUNNER**

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THE ASTRONAUTS MUST NOT LAND

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The time-caught off-worlds sired Kelab the Conjuror. He came to Argus to stir his omnipotent brew, to whirl the beautiful Sharla and the darkly seductive Andra in his game with Dark Destiny.

## I

**I**T WAS A wild night. The wind shouted in the bending trees like a giant's child, shrieking its glee at the black, cloud-racing sky, and the rain poured and spattered on the earth, churning even the tough, thin Argus grass from its place, dancing like a cloud of devils across the hard bare roads, whipping the faces of travelers like a myriad of icy needles, soaking and re-soaking the imperial banners over the castle of the kings till they were too heavy to stand out from the staffs at the bidding of the wind, too heavy to reveal that they hung upside-down to signify the passing of a king.

Outside the black castle, people waited, watching. They were gray people, common people, men with the coarse hands of farmers and mechanics, women with lined, careworn faces and eyes like dying coals.

A bell was tolling.

The same storm whipped at the windows of a lone helicopter but a few miles distant in the night. It had not the look of something made with human hands, for it came from one of the mutant worlds beyond the bounds of the Empire, whither the unhuman children of men had been harried by the lash of hatred, and where they had built

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themselves a culture that still retained knowledge lost to the Empire in the Long Night that had swamped the stars ten thousand years before.

The man at the controls handled them with delicacy, for the ship was bucking like a live thing, and half an impatient move might tear the blades from the screaming rotors and toss them a mile to the barren lands below. He had a high bald forehead and sensitive lips, but the nose and eyes of an eagle, and his hands were pale and long. His voice, when he spoke, was low and pleasant.

He glanced for a second over his shoulder and said, "Nice weather, eh, Sharla?"

There were two other people in the cockpit behind him, uncomfortable on seats built for not-men bigger than mere humans. The girl on the left shuddered, and drew her cloak tighter around her, and tried to force herself closer into the corner where she sat. She said, "Landor, is there much further to go?"

Landor risked a quick glance from the wildness outside to the position marker glowing like a firefly in the corner of the control panel. He said, "Not far. Perhaps another ten minutes' flying time will get us there."

The third passenger grunted expressively. He said, "This is the ride of the furies, Ser Landor, and no mistake!"

Landor laughed shortly, without taking his eyes from the storm or shifting hands or body an infinitesimal fraction. He said, "You have the makings of a poet, Ordovic."

"A poet? Not I," Ordovic retorted, his eyes straying from the windows to the pale, set face of Sharla across the seat beside him.

"I'm nothing but a common fighting man, more at home with a spear than a pen and happier with a sword than either."

He dropped his hand to the hilt of his own blade, and the steel rang very softly in its scabbard, and at the noise his dark eyes filled with something that belied his self-deprecation.

He added, putting his hand to the clasp at his neck, "You're cold, my lady. Will you take my cloak?"



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Sharla stopped him with a gesture. "Not now, Ordovic. We have but ten minutes' flying to do, and I have no wish to freeze you for that space of time. There will be warmth at the castle."

Landor said pointedly, "There may be a warm reception for us in more ways than one, Sharla. Ordovic, I'm no fighting man—my swordsmanship went with my youth—and I place our safety in your hands."

Ordovic squared his shoulders and under the coarse brown cloak there was a glint of metal. "But twenty-eight years, Ser Landor," he boasted, "and as strong as a Thanis bull."

Sharla glanced at him very swiftly, and away. Her lovely face was troubled.

The crowd before the castle thinned slowly. Many of them had watched since sundown last evening, and had seen the banners dip and vanish and rise again inverted in the dim red glow of the winter sun, and had raised the Passing Cry for Andalvar of Argus, and watched in the wet chill of the storm in honor of their ruler.

On a bare slab of rock beside the road waited a boy of seven and a crone of sixty, bent and worn, for old age came quickly on this harsh bare world. The boy yawned and huddled against the old woman, trying to share the impact of the blast. Nearby, men stamped and shifted and blew on their hands, and their leather coats dripped water.

Suddenly the old woman closed her eyes, folded her cold hands together, and whispered, "Ronail?"

"Here, granny," the boy said, putting his arm around her wasted shoulders.

"Ronail, I see bad days," the old woman whispered, her voice like the rustle of dry leaves in the wind. "Ronail, I see evil days ahead of Argus, and I pity you."

One of the men nearby turned suddenly, his beard spangled with drops of rain like tiny jewels. He bent low and said urgently to the boy, "What was that?"

The boy said casually, with the inconsequentiality of youth, "'Tis only granny. She's a seeress."

The man's eyes lit, and he bent closer to hear the faint



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words as they fell from her stiff, withered lips. Other men stepped near.

"Ronail—Ronail, where are you?"

"Here, granny," said the boy comfortingly. He pressed up against her.

"Ronail—I see bad times for Argus soon. I see the black witch scheming to oppress us and forget the Empire—the people groaning and the soldiers bought—the Empire become dust."

"Ay!" whispered the bearded man. "The black witch. Andral! This is an evil day for Argus."

"Ssh!" said a man behind him. "There may be more."

"The purging of the fire and the chastening of the whip," recited the old hag in her mumbling tones. "The sores and the wraths of the lords—"

The bearded man signed himself, and the boy, after gazing in wonder for an instant, followed suit.

"Ay, the dark of the Long Night is near to be seen, and ere the black witch be forgotten there are black days for Argus!"

There was another sound than the storm, faintly, in the distance, like the buzzing of a monstrous fly, and the crone opened her eyes and stared unseeing at the castle.

The noise grew. Even the deaf could feel it now, a great steady drone that made the ears ring and the heart falter. They stood, searching the bare black sky.

Then there was a light that shone more brightly than all the moons of Argus—called after the many-eyed god for its nine bright satellites—which flared out of nothing in the sky and grew steadily as the noise grew. Above it there became visible a shimmer like the wings of an insect.

"A devil!" shouted someone, and they threatened to break and run, but the bearded one said scornfully, "What devil would venture near the castle of the kings? No, 'tis a machine, a flying machine. I have seen such in my travels, but I never thought to see one in the air of Argus."

They passed the explanation from mouth to mouth, and they signed themselves and stood fast. Slowly, the light settled, tossed by the wind but driving gently down into

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the bare space that the first drawing-aside had left. The noise was like the drumming of a demon.

It touched the wet ground before the castle, and the light vanished and the noise ceased.

The door of the thing opened and three figures came out, the first two dropping lightly to the ground and turning to aid the third.

Together the new-comers passed through the crowd, who drew back at the air of authority worn by the leader of the three. He was a tall man with a shining helmet and a cloak that stood out behind him like great wings, and he strode through the gale-strong gusts as if the storm had not existed.

Before the mighty iron doors of the castle he paused. Then with sword reversed he hammered on the door till it rang and rang again, and he threw back his head and roared in a bull voice that shook the castle and drowned the storm.

"Open! Open in the name of Andalvar's daughter, the Princess Sharla of Argus!"

Senchan Var raised the drape from the narrow slit in the wall, and glanced through it at the black night outside. He said, "There are quite a few of them left, my lady."

"But naturally, Senchan," said Andra lazily, and there was half a laugh hidden in her voice. "Did you expect less from a people loyal to its kings?"

He dropped the curtain again and turned to lean against the wall beside it, his face thoughtful. "Things have happened, my lady—sooner than we expected. Perhaps too soon. I counted on a month more."

Andra reclined on the yellow silk pillows of her divan like a well-fed cat. She had cat's eyes too—yellow, with heavy lids—and her black hair hung around her shoulders as the night hung around the castle.

"What makes you say that, Senchan?" she said casually, picking grapes from a bowl before her and splitting them with her perfect teeth. "Why should our plans not go through as well now as later?" She tossed one of the fruit to the black Sirian ape chained to the opposite wall of the



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room, and laughed when he caught it and rejected it. His kind were no vegetarians.

Senchan Var followed the movement with his eyes and shuddered. He confessed frankly, "It is not that our plan is not working, my lady. It is working too well. All's going too smoothly. I cannot rid myself of the fear that there will be a flaw."

"Is it the thought of Sharla that makes you afraid, Senchan? A child—forgotten, lost? She hasn't been seen or heard of for seven years, Senchan."

Senchan Var elbowed himself away from the wall and paced restlessly up and down, his bare feet brown and thin on the snow-white fleece of the carpet. He said, "No, my lady. Sharla's the least likely untoward factor to crop up. If she's not dead, she still will not hear of your father's death for long after you're established regent."

"Is it Penda, then, that worries you? Where is he, by the way?"

"Asleep, my lady. He displayed deep feeling earlier—wept, and fell asleep weeping."

"He would," said Andra. " 'Tis natural at his age."

"Naturall" said Senchan Var scornfully, "Your pardon, my lady, but to weep like a girl at his age is shameful. If my son did that, being as he is much of an age with Prince Penda—King Penda, I should say, I suppose—I'd rise from my death-bed and strike him!"

Andra curved her full red lips into a smile, and picked a bloody bone from the floor beside her. At the movement the ape across the room bounded out to the full length of his silver chain and dropped to his knees, his thick lips drawn back from teeth that were like chisels. She laughed again, very softly.

"That's a loyal sentiment, Senchan," she said. "Which reminds me—he brought his hound into the dining hall again today, against his father's commands. Have Dolichek brought, will you? And the whip-master."

Senchan Var's grizzled face turned to meet her gaze in astonishment. He said, "My lady, if you ask me, Dolichek is half the reason Penda is so insolent. If you'll allow me the



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suggestion, Dolichek should be dismissed now, and this practice discontinued."

Andra's fingers folded like a steel trap closing on the bone she held, and the blood from the meat on it welled red between her fingers. She said in a sort of sibilant whisper, "No, Senchan! Think! Spoilt he may be—spoilt he is. But as such he is most suited to our purpose. Fetch Dolichek."

Senchan shrugged, mute rebellion smouldering in his eyes. He said, "Very well, my lady; but it makes my heart ache to see the fruit of a fine stock go rotten."

Andra relaxed, and the ape whined tentatively, extending black hairless paws towards the bone. Impatiently she flung it at him. He seized it out of the air and curled up contentedly to gnaw it on the floor.

Very faintly above the muted roar of the storm, dulled by six feet of stone, there was a buzzing sound like a gigantic fly. Senchan Var noted it and frowned, but since Andra did not comment on it he said nothing, but tugged at the gold-wove bell-rope beside the window. A small brassy bell rang somewhere outside.

A slave with the hot brown skin of a Marzon and the twitching eyes of a man born under a variable star entered silently and stood waiting for orders.

Andra picked more fruit from the silver bowl and said, around a soft Sirenian plum, "Bring Dolichek and the whipmaster, Samsar."

The slave bowed and vanished again, and she said a little peevishly to Senchan Var, "Senchan, what's that row?"

"I don't know, my lady," Senchan Var reported. He was straining his eyes into the blackness beyond the window. "It's dark as a wolf's-throat out there."

"Then drop the curtain," Andra commanded. "It's cold enough in here as it is, in all conscience. And 'twill be this way for days. You know these storms."

The slave stood again, silently, at the far end of the room, three paces from the black ape, grunting over his bone. He said "My lady, Dolichek and the whipmaster wait."

"Bring them in," said Andra, inclining her head. Senchan Var snorted and strode over to the window again. He stood

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with his back to the entrance as the slave ushered in Dolichек and the wielder of the whip.

Dolichек was a boy of perhaps fifteen, with a thin peaked face and a body more bone than flesh and little of that. He brushed back his straggling blond hair, matted with dirt, and essayed a bow to Andra, who smiled slowly and took another fruit.

She said, "Dolichек, Prince Penda—King Penda, now—brought his hound into the dining hall again today, against his father's command." She took a tiny malicious delight in saying it.

Dolichек sighed so slightly that one had to look hard to notice it, and said, "Very well, my lady. That was three strokes last time."

"This time four, then," said Andra casually. "Slave, four lashes!"

The wielder of the whip was black, and seven feet tall. He hailed from Leontis, where under the first King of Argus his ancestors had sweated to mine platinum on a world scant millions of miles from its primary. When he nodded at Andra's bidding, the muscles of his neck rippled down his chest and shoulders like waves in oily water. He spat on his hands and wetted the thong of his silver-mounted whip, flexed it, raised his arm—

Andra stopped him with a gesture. "Listen!" she said. "Senchan, that noise has stopped. Look outside."

Senchan Var needed only take a pace to lift the yellow drape from the window. He peered out into the night, shook his head.

"Too dark after the light in here," he reported. "There seems to be some sort of cart or carriage outside on the road before the castle."

From somewhere below came the crash-crash-crash of smitten iron, and Andra froze as if struck to stone by an enchanter's wand. In utter silence, save for the slobbering of the ape over his bone, they heard a man's voice from below shout, "Open!"

"Open in the name of Andalvar's daughter, the Princess Sharla of Argus!"



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### II

KELAB THE CONJURER looked both ways along the Street of the Morning, surveying the wet gray stones of the cracked paving and the pools of water in the blocked gutter.

A few yards down the road from him an aged crone, one of the many beggars who sat along the Street of the Morning, huddled on a doorstep. He looked her over, from her closed eyes to her stiff hands and bare feet, and noted the mouth, slackly open like that of an idiot. She was dead.

He signed himself, as any vagrant would, and tossed a few coins into the tin cup at her feet. No sweeper would touch those coins, for they were burying money and as such, tainted. She would have her funeral.

He sniffed the air. It had a part-clean smell, made of the new-washed streets and the unwashed thousands of the Low City, and he inhaled it gratefully, his eyes running along the ill-matched roofs of the houses till they fell on the flag-staff over the fortress on the Hill of Kings a mile away.

The banner on it was upside down, the proud golden sun hanging sadly in the bottom quarter instead of the top, the black-lettered motto of the House of Argus inverted above it. Kelab's lips formed the words slowly.

"Be strong; be just; be faithful."

Without taking his eyes from the banner he fumbled in his pouch and pulled a watch from it—a watch that had never come from any forge within the Empire. He looked at it, and his eyes filled with satisfaction and his lips took on the shadow of a smile.

Under a swinging rain-worn sign that had once said, "The House of the Bubbling Spring," he paused and rubbed his clean-shaven chin. He seemed to come to a quick decision, descended the few steps below the sign and pushed open the ill-fitting door.



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Beyond it, the air was thick, twice-breathed; it was laden with the stench of sweat, stale liquor and smoking drugs. At one table a party of thin, shifty-eyed spacemen sat around five empty bottles of tsinamo, playing the endless game called shen fu, and their soft-spoken bids and the click of chips were the only noises in the muggy-hot room.

There was a long bar on the left, littered with empty drink cartons and stained with spilled liquor, and behind it a fat man with thinning sandy hair sat, his back to the room, playing a color-sonata on a Mimosan chromograph.

He didn't turn as Kelab came up to the bar and hitched himself on to a reasonably clean seat, but said only, "What's yours?"

Kelab said, "Water, Finzey. Water from the Bubbling Spring."

Finzey shut off the chromograph and whirled, his fat face splitting in a lavish grin. He said explosively, "Kelab! How long have you been on-world?"

"Since about midnight—and a rough coming I had of it, too. There wasn't so much as a mile of clear weather between here and the Silent Mountains."

"It was pretty bad," said Finzey sagely, reaching below the counter for a bottle and a mug. "But you know what they say—weather bad, trade good."

"Trade looks to have been good," agreed Kelab, glancing around the littered room. He took the mug Finzey filled with the heady potent fuming liquor he laughingly called the water of the Bubbling Spring, sniffed it, and drank a few mouthfuls.

Finzey eased his bulk on to a stool opposite and said eagerly, "Where've you been lately, Kelab—hey? You haven't touched Argus since—must be two years back."

"And two months," Kelab nodded. "I've been out of the Empire, around the fringe. Picking up new tricks among the mutant worlds till I was broke, and then working my way back towards the big money. But I see the banner's inverted over the fortress yonder."

He jerked his head eastwards.

Finzey plucked his lower lip with pudgy fingers. "Ay," he

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agreed. "We had a man in around midnight with the news that Andalvar had passed."

"You have the burying money?" Kelab asked, and Finzey pushed a white pottery bowl toward him. It was more than half full of coins, imperial and outland currencies. Kelab shook it reflectively, added another coin to it, pushed it away.

Finzey's eyes widened, and he touched the coin with his finger to make sure it was real. He said incredulously, "You said you were broke, Kelab!"

The conjurer shrugged. "I *was* broke. Money given in a good cause, they say, is money gained, and I can earn that again in three days. The poor has need of the burying money of the kings.

"There is another outside who will need burying," he added, picking up his drink.

Finzey nodded. "I have been told so. She will stay till noon—the burying money is more, so. I will charge myself with her funeral. But Kelab, you haven't heard?"

"Heard what, fat one?"

"The sight of the banner was the first news you had of Andalvar's passing?"

Kelab nodded, and Finzey rushed on, bubbling like his own liquor with excitement. "Then no one has told you how, found three this morning, a flying machine such as none ever saw on Argus came to land before the castle of the kings where Andalvar lies, bearing, they tell me, a soldier, a counselor, and the Princess Sharla!"

Kelab's hand faltered only for the slightest fraction of a second as he took the mug away from his mouth, and his voice was quite steady when he said, "Sharla, fat one? You speak in riddles. Andalvar's daughter is called Andra."

"No, you do not understand," Finzey struggled to explain. "Princess Sharla is the lost princess, the one who was thought dead."

Thoughtful, Kelab drained his mug and set it down. He said, "I recall stories—but remember, Finzey, I am no Argian, and so much goes on in the Empire that I cannot know all the news. Tell me."

"Well, as you doubtless know, Andalvar was married late



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in life, some twenty-off years ago, and his wife Lora first bore him a daughter, who was named Sharla. Since he was king, he hoped for a son to take his place on the throne in after years, but his wife bore him next another daughter. Andra—her whom they call the black witch, though she's a beauty and no mistake."

Kelab's smoky eyes stared fixedly at the blank screen of the chromograph. He said, "Go on."

"Then, five years later, she bore him a son at last—Penda, who's now officially king—and died in childbed. And Andalvar, fearing lest his time be short, made certain of having a good regent for the time before his son came of age by sending Sharla—then some twelve years old, much Penda's age now, in fact—to study at a school far away from here, where some of the arts of the Golden Age lived on, I'm told.

"After two years she disappeared, and none could be found to trace her. They tore the Empire apart—I'm surprised you heard nothing of it."

Mechanically, Kelab reached for the bottle and refilled his mug. "Seven years ago I was out of the Empire. I heard only rumors," he said.

"I'm amazed, even so," Finzey continued, "However, she was gone, and 'tis credibly reported that the loss drove Andalvar a little crazy. In his ruling he was just, as ever, and in his bargaining as shrewd; but he would not tolerate that the others of his children should come to the slightest harm. For instance he would not let Andra be trained for the regency as Sharla was to be, nor would he suffer his son to be beaten or punished for his transgressions. He kept a slave's son—one Dolicheks—as whipping-post for him, in accordance with a very ancient custom lapsed previously these four hundred years. And they tell me, shorn of the discipline which made Andalvar a firm ruler, Andra has grown spoilt and capricious and self-seeking, and there is no sign in Penda of the quality that will make a good king."

"I see," said Kelab reflectively. "Tell me more—who are considered to be the powers at court?"

Finzey was growing expansive. The spacemen behind Kelab went on making their whispered bets, and the curious



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blue chips changed hands with a soft click-clack. Finzey said, "Why, Andra herself, of course, and Senchan Var, a man they call the Lord Great Chamberlain. They say he has the Council of Six in his pocket—that's the council of the rulers of the vassal worlds, you know?"

Kelab nodded. There were six worlds in the Empire that had nominally equal rights with Argus in ruling the straggling remnants of a union which had once spanned half a galaxy, but they were powerless singly whereas Argus was not, and their wealth, in these days when wealth was measured in ships and fighting men, only balanced Argus's when they stood together. Apart, they were negligible.

"What kind of a man is this Senchan Var?"

"Noble," said Finzey. "Of good descent. And honest too—but if I'm any judge, in love with the black witch. He holds, they say, that Andalvar was more than just in his dealings with his subjects—generous, rather—and would sooner the iron-harsh rule our ancestors knew, saying openly that leniency courts revolution. But he is admired for his feats in war when he was young. His swordsmanship was all but legendary. The people would follow him, I think."

"Why add that, fat one?" Kelab asked.

Finzey shrugged elephantine shoulders. "No reason, but that you asked me who were the powers at court. He is the greatest after Andra—except perhaps for Sabura Mona. No one knows much of her."

"And who is Sabura Mona?"

"That's one I can't answer. She is a woman, fat—fatter than I by far, which is no mean size. There are rumors—but rumors only. They say she has a spoon in every stew cooked in the Empire, that Andalvar trusted her implicitly, that she advised him. But she is very seldom seen in public, she does not appear at palace functions, and if she is served by the castle servants or indeed any servants at all, they do not speak of her."

"Enigmatic," commented Delab.

"In very truth," agreed Finzey emphatically. "And I know no more about her than I've told you, so you don't need to sit there looking as if anquar wouldn't fizz in your mouth."

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Kelab grinned like a boy, flashing white teeth in his dusky face, and swept a lean brown hand through his black sleek hair, knotted behind with a gaudy cloth. There was a tiny gold disk in his left ear-lobe that caught the light from the lamps beyond. He said, "All right, Finzey, but you're the first man I've spoken to on Argus since two years ago, and things change in two years. And the voice of the people—what's it saying now?"

Finzey said shrewdly, "Do you mean the big voice or the small voice?"

"The small voice," said Kelab. He swirled the liquor around the bottom of his mug. "The voice that matters."

Finzey glanced past him at the group of spacemen. Nothing seemed to have changed at first glance, but there was suddenly an abstracted look in their eyes, and they made their bids in a whisper, and the chips shuffled from hand to hand instead of click-clacking as before. He got down from the stool noisily and began busily swabbing the bar.

Kelab smiled very faintly, and a blue shimmer drifted like smoke between the bar and the spacemen at their game. It curled and writhed like a live thing, and remained, a curtain hanging on nothing, a web stirred by intangible winds—and a barrier that no sound would pass. He said, "Finzey, what does the small voice say?"

Cautiously the fat bartender leaned across the bar and nodded at the blue veil. "I'd forgotten that one," he said. "They don't call you The Conjuror for nothing. But you cannot tell these days who is not seeking money as an informer."

"Speak," said Kelab impatiently.

"They say there have been prophecies. At times of doom there are always prophecies. When Sharla disappeared and again last night the voice of the seers was heard. Last night, they say, the word was spoken before the castle of the kings itself. Black days for Argus, my friend, and the Empire dust and forgotten—and the black witch is the cause. Princess Andra. There are those who say her regency could itself end the Empire."

Kelab nodded. His eyes glowed somber-bright, like a lan-



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tern behind a horn shade. "From what you say of her I can well believe it. And the small voice—does it say 'Ay'?"

"It roars like a caged lion," said Finzey flatly.

"Of the coming of Sharla it says—what?"

"As yet, nothing. But there are high hopes . . ."

"I see," said Kelab slowly. "And the burying of Andalvar will be—when and where?"

"On the third day after the passing, as the custom is, at the castle of the kings. The chieftains and the lords attending will be here tomorrow or the next day and will be received by the Princess Sharla, I assume—if she is in truth Sharla."

Kelab halted his mug halfway to his lips and said slowly, "Of course. I hadn't thought of that."

"Decision rests with the Council of Six as to the Regency, of course, but traditionally the eldest daughter of a dead king is chosen Regent if one is needful. But it could be otherwise, in theory."

Kelab tossed down the rest of his drink and said, "How much do I owe you?"

Caught by surprise, Finzey blinked. He said, "So soon? But why? I wanted to hear of your marvelous travels since last we met. Why must you go?"

Kelab grinned and jerked a thumb at the thousand-circle coin he had left in the burying money bowl, while with the other hand he rolled up the blue veil and squeezed it into nothing. "I have to earn my bread. How much?"

"A gift, Kelab," said Finzey, spreading his fat hands. "Call it my share in that coin. But pickings for entertainers will be small until the mourning days are over."

"I'll take that risk," said Kelab the Conjuror.

He went out of the bar, away from the drunken girls and the spacemen playing shen fu and the smell of stale liquor, and he walked for many hours in the Low City, his heels clicking on the paving and his head bent in thought.

Senchan Var said furiously, "This is the sort of thing that should not happen!"

Andra seemed quite composed about it all. She sat blandly



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picking fruit from the silver bowl, as undisturbed as the black ape curled up and snoring very softly against the wall, one paw still clutching the stripped bone. The noon sun shone yellow through the slit windows. Inconsequentially she said, "This is the sort of thing that the common people will take as an omen, I feel—the storm clearing at her arrival, I mean. There is, I take it, small doubt that she is indeed my sister Sharla?"

Senchan Var said bitterly, "None, my lady. You would not know it, my lady, but she looks as did your mother at her age down to the finest detail. And if she is as tender as she looks outside we may say goodbye to the Empire."

Andra laughed. "My dear faithful Senchan, she may prove to be the very leader the Empire needs to hold it together. What does Sabura Mona think?"

Senchan Var whirled on her and said, "My lady, where is Sabura Mona? She came to the bedside of your father but she did not stay and watch with us."

"No more did I, Senchan. It is a woman's weakness."

Senchan Var snorted. "In *you* I am prepared to forgive it, for you are young, my lady, but that Sabura Mona is tougher than a thousand men I could name. She has the heart of a Thanis bull."

"But the looks of a demon," supplied Andra quietly, "And does it matter *who* saves the Empire?"

"By the winds of Argus, *yes!*" said Senchan, driving fist into palm with an explosive slap. "One thing can save the Empire from the downhill path, and one only. A firm hand at the controls! What can this upstart Sharla do? She's been away from the Empire nine years, while you've been here at the heart of affairs. What is to be done must be done now! But the common people already know she is here, and their voice says *she* is the one to save Argus!"

Andra shrugged. "What care I for the common people? What do they know of statecraft? We have the support of the people who matter, Senchan—the rich men and the nobles. How do we stand on the Council of Six?"

"They may vote together or they may split three and three. Lorgis, Draco and Bunagar have little love for you, being from

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the poor pastoral worlds, and may be willing to stake all on a new deal, but Heena, Dolon and Mesa should stay true."

"They better had," said Andra ominously. "I made them, all three, and what I made I can break. But Senchan, there is one thing you have forgotten."

Senchan Var frowned doubtfully. He said, "That the union with Mercator is enough to rescue the Empire? But you forget, my lady—a royal union is effective only when the woman is a ruler in her own right, else she must swear allegiance to her husband and deny her own people. As regent you would have secured a valid union—though really a back marriage would have been required to cement it when Penda came of age."

Andra said lazily, "No, I didn't mean that. Think, Senchan. You and I know that is the best course for the Empire—new strength grafted on the old stock. There is an easy test of whether Sharla does too. Think over the wording of that contract we made."

Puzzled, Senchan began to recite it under his breath, from memory. After a while he understood.

Slowly, he began to smile.

### III

"THAT'S THE DANGEROUS one," whispered Landor.

Sharla, Regent since twenty hours ago on a split vote of the Council of Six, tradition having the deciding say, nodded imperceptibly. She sat, black-robed and veiled, on a black-draped throne at the end of the Hall of State, waiting to receive the lords and chieftains who had come to honor her father at his burial. Landor stood beside her as the new Lord Great Chamberlain, a position that was held for so many years by Senchan Var. Ordovic, standing off to the side, was stiffly uncomfortable in formal uniform as Captain



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of the royal bodyguard. Andra was not present. Ostensibly, Andra wished to attend to the ordering of her father's affairs in the city, but in effect she had ceded her rooms in the castle to Sharla and snubbed her by walking out, and Sharla was much distressed at her attitude.

But it worried Landor not at all.

Immediately after the Council of Six had split their votes three and three, and the precedent of other occasions had decided the course to be followed, Senchan Var had tendered his resignation, and Sharla had promptly appointed Landor in his place, for Landor seemed to have the notables and the history of Argus at his fingers' ends. And certain people were muttering, displeased.

Far down the hall the black-robed trumpeter made the rafters ring behind a man framed in the vast open doorway of the hall; a tall, insolent-faced man with black hair and fiery eyes, polished helm under his left arm, its plume nodding as he turned casually from side to side surveying the rows of courtiers lining the hall, his right hand on his sword-hilt. He wore the brass and leather of a fighting man.

The trumpeter put down his silver horn, and the nomenclator announced, "Barkasch of Mercator, come to pay tribute to Andalvar of Argus!"

The tall man ceased his survey of the hall and began to walk up it with an easy, swinging stride, his sandals padding on the carpeted floor and his counterments making the ghost of a jingling rhythm as he went.

In silence he paused before the throne and faced the black-veiled regent.

Finally he bowed, and in a voice that the shouting of orders had made like a brazen gong said, "Greeting, my lady of Argus."

Ordovic signaled to the company of the bodyguard without taking his eyes from Barkasch, and they stood easy, their shields crashing in unison between their shoulderblades. He was glad that there was still precision and efficiency here, among the soldiers.

"Greeting, my lord of Mercator," said Sharla, and her voice was firm and musical, but she shaped strangely the



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words of a tongue she had not spoken save with an outland accent for seven years.

Barkasch straightened from his bow slowly, and his eyes rested for a moment on the veil before her face. He said, "My lady, I know not that voice! Yet I know well the voice of my lady Andra. Ho! Trickery!" He flung back his head and his voice went rolling among the rafters, while Sharla looked up in dismay. Of course—to be here so soon he must have left Mercator before more than the first news of Andalvar's passing had gone out.

"Let me handle this," whispered Landor, and she nodded.

Stepping forward, he rapped the ground with his staff of office. The courtiers along the hall had shifted like waves breaking when Barkasch had shouted, and a small murmur of resentment had gone up. Now it rose again at Landor's movement, for there were those present who held that Senchan Var had been unjustly displaced, more who had coveted his post for themselves, and some even who held Sharla as all but an imposter.

Now Barkasch, hand on the hilt of his sword, drew his blade to half its length from the scabbard and let it drop back, ringing. He said with a hint of contempt, "And who may you be?"

"I am Landor, Lord Great Chamberlain of Argus, and this is no trickery."

"No trickery?" Barkasch's eyes searched Landor's unlined face suspiciously. "Yet I know that voice is not the voice of my lady Andra."

"Indeed it is not," said Landor composedly. "'Tis that of my lady Sharla."

"Sharla, Ser Landor?" said Barkasch incredulously. "The lost daughter of Andalvar? What tale is this?"

His hand shot out like a striking snake, and Sharla gave a tiny cry of fear as he ripped the black veil from her face. For a long instant he stood there, the shred of cloth held in his strong fingers as in a trap, while he stared at Sharla.

Eventually he relaxed the sternness of his face and began, very slowly, to smile.

"Your pardon, my lady of Argus, but I am a direct man. I

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trust no one's word who is not known to me of old, and that you should be here to stand in your father's place is too strange to take unchecked." His eyes ran over the delicate loveliness of her face, the hair like spun gold that shone beneath her black hood, the curves of her body beneath the mourning robe.

He said, "Indeed, my lady, it is as if your mother were alive again."

Sharla nodded slowly. "Ay, my lord. I have been told I do resemble her."

The courtiers rustled and craned to see past Barkasch, and there was a low murmur of surprise. Since custom decreed that the king's daughters should wear veils in public till the dead ruler was buried, this was the first opportunity many of them had had to see her face, and those who remembered the last Queen of Argus saw the similarity and marveled.

"And," said the lord of Mercator after an interval, "I beg to present the bond for honoring three days hence."

Someone of Andra's retinue among the watchers sniggered very briefly as Sharla looked up in amazement. "Bond, my lord?" he said questioningly. "What bond?"

"*This* bond," said Barkasch, sliding a roll of parchment from one of the pouches at his waist. He held it out. "A marriage bond!"

He stepped back with something that on a less regal face would have been a self-satisfied grin, and Landor whipped open the scroll and began to read. A rustle of amazement and wonder ran among the courtiers, and the member of Andra's retinue who had sniggered, laughed aloud. Ordovic turned toward him and half drew his sword, his face like thunder. The laughter stopped short.

Sharla, without taking her eyes from Barkasch's face, laid one hand on the arm of the throne, and Landor covered it with his own, still scanning the rough, much abbreviated uncial script of the document in his hand. Hastily Sharla rapped out, in the outland finger-code of the bandits of Hin, "Isn't it in Andra's name?"



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Landor rapped back, "Andra's not mentioned by name, though she must have made it."

"What does it say?"

"I'll read it," offered Landor. He nodded to Barkasch, and said aloud, "With your permission, I'll read this out, my lord."

Barkasch showed assent, and Landor began to speak in a firm controlled voice, his accent flawless. Sharla had wondered often in the past days how he, who swore he had never been on Argus in his life, had gained that and his intimate knowledge of Argian affairs.

He read, "Bond of marriage between the lord of Mercator and the Regent of Argus, to be confirmed upon the death of Andalvar and the accession of his daughter as regent in the stead of Prince Penda, being under the age of ruling, which marriage to be royal union between the thrones and crowns of Argus and Mercator, Mercator to have its place on the Council of Six instead of Lorgis of Phaidona—"

A roar of rage went up from among the courtiers, and Lorgis himself, a bull of a man from one of the pastoral worlds, one of the three who had voted in favour of Sharla's election, bounded to his feet. He shouted, "Let them but *try* to take Phaidona's place and they shall pay dearly!"

Landor, who had raised his eyes and waited patiently when Lorgis leaped up, remained silent till he had subsided, muttering threats into his beard, while Barkasch of Mercator looked at him without interest. Then Landor resumed.

"And the lordship of the Empire, in the event of Penda's decease before attaining the age of ruling, or of his death without children, to descent by the joint line of Argus and Mercator."

Amid dead silence, he rolled the parchment up again, and finished baldly, "It is sealed with the royal seals of Argus and Mercator."

Barkasch said, "And so, my lady, after your lamented father's burying, we shall talk again of this." He bowed ironically, turned to go.

A voice said, "Wait."

The single word was spoken no louder than one would



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speak across a table, yet everyone in the hall heard it and turned to see who had said it, and saw, in the arch of the door through which twenty fighting men might pass abreast, a small slender man with dark sleek hair and dusky skin, wearing a tattered suit of brown homespun, high boots, and a gaudy silk cloth on his head.

Ordovic's sword leaped into his hand and in three steps—tramp-tramp-tramp—the men of the bodyguard had turned to face the doorway, their halberds at the ready. Barkasch of Mercator straightened up and raised his eyebrows quizzically as the slender man walked lightly down the hall.

He made a strange contrast to Barkasch, who last had done that, for he was small and wiry where Barkasch was broad and muscular, and he wore worn civilian clothes while Barkasch had the outfit of a soldier, and while Barkasch had borne helmet, sword and knife, he had only a battered brown hat and no weapon at all.

He came up between the leveled halberds of the bodyguard to before the throne and bowed to Sharla with a flourish before he turned to Barkasch and said, "My lord of Mercator!"

Casually Barkasch looked down his nose at the smaller man. He said, "What is it, impudent one?"

"My lord, did you not remark upon a mistake that Ser Lantor made in the reading of the marriage bond?"

Sharla felt Lantor's hand tighten over hers on the arm of the throne.

Barkasch said, his forehead creasing in puzzlement, "Mistake, impudent one? I heard him read it distinctly, as it is written."

"Who is this man?" tapped Sharla, and felt Lantor reply, "I do not know."

"Yes, a mistake," the stranger insisted. "An omission, Ser Lantor," turning, "if it please you, let my lord of Mercator read it out aloud."

Numbly, Lantor passed the scroll. Barkasch snatched it angrily and spread it with a crackle. He began to read in a voice that burned with impatience.

"Bond of marriage between Barkasch, lord of Mercator,

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and Andra, Regent of Argus, to be confirmed upon—”

He broke off, his face showing most undignified astonishment. He began to scrutinize the writing, while Sharla, who had gasped in amazement when he had read out her sister's name, exchanged glances with Landor, who looked as completely taken aback as she was, and as relieved.

“Indeed, you see, my lord,” said the small man, “there was a mistake, an omission. Ser Landor did not read the names of the parties. and since it is specified in the contract that the marriage is between yourself and the Princess Andra, and since the Princess Andra is *not* Regent of Argus, it is in effect void.”

Barkasch struggled to speak for a long time, his hands quivering on the scroll. When he finally succeeded his voice was almost choking with rage. He crumpled the offending parchment into a ball and threw it on the ground, and raised his hand as if to strike the small man, who stepped adroitly out of range.

Finally Barkasch turned to Sharla and forced out, “Your pardon, my lady. It seems I was indeed mistaken. But by the wind that blows over Mercator,” his voice rose to a shout, “Argus has not heard the last of me!”

He turned on his heel and strode out, and everyone seemed to relax at his going. The herald shouted that there were no more chieftains in attendance, and with a wave of her hand Sharla dismissed the watchers and they filed out.

But when she looked for the slender man he was nowhere to be seen.

The bodyguard came to attention as she descended the steps from the throne, but before she hurried out with Landor she said, “Ordovic!”

“My lady?”

“Find that man and bring him to my rooms!”

“My lady,” said Ordovic, clicking his heels.

He turned to the guards and shot out his arm. “Dismiss, and go find the man who was here just now. Report to me with him outside my lady's quarters. At the double!”

They broke ranks, piled their halberds against the wall, and left the hall at a trot.



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Most of the courtiers were already at the far end of the hall, and only a few slaves remained nearby, straightening disarrayed hangings, after holding them aside for Sharla, but a movement at the corner of his eye caught Ordovic's attention. He remained perfectly still, as if watching the departing courtiers.

Someone bending over—picking up something, he could see by straining his eyes to one side. Now he was standing up.

Ordovic whirled. It was a slave with hot brown skin and twitching eyes, and he was trying to stuff something hastily into a pouch. Ordovic knocked him flying with a blow from a fist that had killed men twice the size of him. He stepped up to him as the slave writhed on the carpet. With ungentle fingers he opened the fist that held whatever he had picked up.

Eyes narrowing, he scrutinized it. He spoke Argian badly and read it worse, but he knew this could be only one thing—the marriage contract between Andra and Barkasch. What would a slave want with it?

He said in atrocious Argian, "What's your name, slave?"

"Samsar," said the slave sullenly.

"Why did you pick this up for?" Ordovic continued, shaking the parchment before Samsar's face.

"It is my duty," said the slave, still rubbing his jaw. "It is my duty not to leave litter to make the castle untidy."

"That was not why you tried to *hide* this," insisted Ordovic. He picked up Samsar as if he had been a child, put him on his feet and held him there by one shoulder. "A document bearing seals is not litter." He shook Samsar till his teeth rattled, and lapsing thankfully into thieves' argot which he spoke far better than Argian, and which, if he was any judge of slaves, this man would also understand. He added a phrase descriptive of a very elaborate and uncomfortable form of torture which few people who did not frequent the Low City and talk with thieves would know. Samsar, however, must have understood, for he blanched under his brownness, tore himself away and ran unsteadily from the hall.



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### IV

WHEN ORDOVIC reached Sharla's apartments the guard on duty outside saluted him casually, and his eyes flashed fire. "Do that again," he ordered crisply, his Argian accent even worse than usual.

The guard did it again, more smartly.

Ordovic looked him over. "That's better. Has any of my lady's bodyguards who were on duty in the Hall of Sate come here yet?"

"No, sir," said the guard.

"If one of them does, send him in."

"Yes, sir," said the guard. Ordovic nodded, then rapped on the door with bunched knuckles.

After an instant, a slender girl-slave opened it, and at the same time he heard Sharla's voice from within inquire faintly, "Who is it?"

The slave spoke over her shoulder through a red velvet drape. "The captain of the bodyguard, my lady."

"Let him in," Sharla commanded, and the slave stepped aside, bowing.

Ordovic thrust the hangings apart, took one step through them, and stopped. He tilted his helmet back as he gazed around the room, and finally whistled in amazement as he took in the lavish fittings.

Landor, leaning against the wall opposite the door, laughed briefly. "My lady Andra has elaborate tastes, has she not?"

"Indeed yes," said Ordovic feelingly. His eyes took in the red and yellow velvet drapes, the yellow silk couches and cushions and the silver bowls—some of them containing fruit, some cakes—the candelabra in carved crystal, the white fleeces on the floor, the tapestries and paintings on the wall.

Finally he stepped across to the couch where Andra had sat the previous evening, sat down and helped himself to

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some fruit. Lendor elbowed himself away from the wall and jerked a thumb at a heavy iron stable across the room. "See that? I'm told Andra keeps a Sirian ape—as a pet!"

"Wildcat," grunted Ordovic. He reached into his pouch for the folded parchment he had put there. "Where's my lady, Ser Lendor?"

"Her attendants are readying her for dinner," Lendor answered. "There is a ceremonial meal, I believe." He came over and took a Sirenian plum from the bowl in front of the couch.

Ordovic held out the parchment between two fingers and said, "Here's the bond of marriage or whatever. I caught little of the drift of that scene, but I guessed most of it, so when I spotted a slave named Samsar trying to sneak it away, I knocked him flying and threatened him with—" again the phrase descriptive of a certain protracted torture. He grinned like a boy.

Lendor chuckled without mirth and examined the scroll carefully. After a pause he said, "Ordovic, I don't understand. When I read this the first time it was as I read it and named no names—yet here they stood both, the names of Andra and Barkasch, clear as day."

Ordovic stopped another fruit on the way to his lips and said incredulously, "It's magic, Ser Lendor."

"It looks like it," nodded Lendor.

"Who was the man who came in?" demanded Ordovic, and Lendor shrugged.

"Whoever he was, he worked a miracle and saved much trouble. Why? If we knew who he was, we might guess his motive for aiding us."

The slender girl-slave pushed aside the curtains, and Lendor said, "What is it, Valley?"

Valley said, "There is a guard outside who would speak with Ser Captain Ordovic."

Ordovic rose to his feet, swallowing his fruit in haste. He said, "That'll be one of my men, Ser Lendor. I sent the bodyguard after the stranger on my lady's orders, and I expect one of them is reporting."

He strode to the curtains and disappeared through them.



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A moment later Sharla came from an inner room, her hair fluffy and shining, her face freshly made up, and wearing a blue robe which had certainly not been in her exiguous baggage when she arrived.

Landor looked her over, said finally, "Sharla, I never saw you look lovelier. Where did you get the robe?"

She sat down on one of the couches, frowning. "Thank you, Landor. I'm told it belonged to my mother. But there's a certain amount of business to see to. Did I not hear Ordovic?"

"One of the men he sent after the stranger is reporting. He'll be in in a moment. How did your interview with Penda go? What do you make of him?"

"Of course, he's completely changed since last I saw him. He's no child now, but a youth, and he'd have a tremendous physique if he were less soft. But soft he is, and he made little impression on me. He'll need schooling to be a king, Landor."

Landor nodded soberly. He said, "As I expected. Where is he?"

"In his own apartments. The death of our father had hit him hard, and he said he would not be out till the time of burying."

Landor nodded again and held out the scroll he held in his hand. "Here's the bond Barkasch threw down," he said. "Ordovic caught a slave by the name of Samsar trying to sneak it away—he doesn't know why. And the amazing part of it is—but read it for yourself, remembering how I read it at first."

Sharla ran her eyes down it, studying it for signs of an alteration. Finally she folded it and laid it on her lap, and stared fixedly ahead, shivering.

"It's magic," she said finally. "How could that man have changed it?"

Before Landor could reply, Ordovic pushed through the drapes and halted on seeing Sharla. He bowed, came on.

Landor said, "Well? What did your man report? Who was it?"

"They call him Kelab the Conjurer," said Ordovic. "The sergeant of the guard came to me with a wild tale of him—

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'tis reported, they say, that there is a man whom no bars will hold, who comes and goes where he will, and who has strange powers that surpass the human."

"The last I believe," said Landor grimly. "No human agency changed these words on the parchment."

"I inquired what sort of man he is, and learned that he is an entertainer—a conjurer for display as well as for such strange purposes as the changing of the marriage bond, but the sergeant of the guard insisted with such vehemence that no ordinary hunt would find him that I resolved to let him wander."

Sharla said suddenly, "By the winds of Argus, I recall him now. I have heard of a man named Kelab, and I saw him once perform, doing things that a human never could. He was held in repute as a mutant, and feared, even in the outlands, which was where I saw him."

At the mention of the outlands Ordovic's eyes lifted to her face for an instant and as quickly looked away. Landor said musingly, "But you know of no reason for this action?"

"Not any at all," said Sharla.

"And you never met face to face?"

"Never. But if half the stories current are true, no ordinary spies will trip him, and he will come only if it suits him."

Ordovic said, "By the winds of Argus, my lady—!"

Sharla motioned him silent. She said, "Let that wait. There are two matters that concern us more—Penda, my brother, and Sabura Mona."

"Sabura Mona! Sabura Mona!" said Ordovic fiercely. "Am I never to hear more of Sabura Mona than her name? Who is she or what is she? Does no one know?"

"Sit down Ordovic," invited Sharla. She indicated a place beside her, and Ordovic, after a moment's hesitation, took it.

"Sabura Mona was my father's chief adviser and confidant," said Sharla softly. "He used to say of her, I am told, that she knew everything from the smallest whisper of the beggars on the Street of the Morning to the cry of the mutants beyond the Empire, and that she was never wrong save once—and that she advised him to send me away to



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learn the craft of ruling, and it seems now that she was less wrong than he believed. 'Tis said she planned his dealings with the outlands and the mutants more than he did himself."

But you have not met her?" Landor said.

"I recall her vaguely when I was a child," Sharla answered.

The heavy curtains over the door parted with a swish and Valley stood in the gap her hands folded demurely, her delicate face expressionless save for her big brown eyes. She said, "My lady, there is word from Sabura Mona."

Landor and Sharla exchanged glances, and Landor said, "Speak, Valley."

"She desires that my lady shall come to her apartment tonight at the hour of ten, preferably alone, her messenger says."

Ordovic half rose, said, "Is this Sabura Mona such that she may order the regent?"

Valley remained in the doorway, not understanding him, for he had spoken in his own dialect and she in Argian, and Landor said to Ordovic, "She has ordered kings."

He subsided, and Sharla raised her voice, "Tell the messenger I will attend her."

Valley nodded and disappeared silently, while Ordovic said, "You are going then, my lady?"

Sharla nodded. "Not quite alone. With Landor, I think. My excuse can be that my command of Argian is dimmed with seven years' disuse."

"Now, Landor. About my brother. Strength is his lack. There shall be no more of the whipping-post. He shall be taught statecraft. He will not like it, but you I trust to undertake the task."

A shadow of a smile of pride touched Landor's lips. "I am flattered, Sharla, that you have confidence in me."

"The name of his scapegoat is Dolichek, I believe. He is a slave's son. Find him. And find his father too, if he lives."

Landor nodded and went out, the curtains swaying behind him. Ordovic sat silently staring at nothing. After a while Sharla said gently, "Ordovic."

"My lady?"

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"Call me not *my lady*. We are three strangers together here on Argus, even though I was born here. This coldness is unbecoming." She laid her hand gently on his knee and looked at his hard profile.

He said woodenly, "The fact remains, my lady, that you are Regent of Argus and daughter of a king, and I am but one of your subjects."

"You are an outlander, and no subject of mine!"

"Your subject by adoption," said Ordovic firmly.

"You called me Sharla before, Ordovic."

His face went rigid and he got abruptly to his feet, pacing the room with long, light strides. He said, "Must you taunt me, my lady, with the memory that I took you for a woman of the streets? I can never forgive myself."

"I *was* a woman of the streets, Ordovic! And would have remained so, for who would credit the tale I had to tell? Slavered from the peaceful world where I was schooled, sold into a brothel—who believed I was a princess, of royal birth?"

"Landor did," said Ordovic harshly. "He gave you back your heritage—all this." He gestured at the lavish fittings of the apartment. "He gave you back your honor and your rightful station!"

He whirled and stood before her, towering over her, and his eyes were like chips of granite. "There was only one thing I could give you—my service.

"If you have no further orders for me tonight, my lady, I shall withdraw."

Sharla looked up with parted lips, shaking her head slowly. At last she sighed and said composed, "Very well, Ordovic, if that is the way you wish it. But I have one further task for you tonight."

"At your orders, my lady."

"Find Kelab the Conjuror, and bring him to me. If you can, buy him—if you must, drag him.

Ordovic saluted without expression and turned and walked out, not looking back.

For a long time Sharla sat gazing into vacancy, her face set and white.



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Then the curtains stirred again and Valley stood there, hands folded as before, her eyes big and limpid. Sharla thought, not for the first time, that her younger sister had picked her slaves well for quick obedience and silent service.

Rousing herself, she said, "And what is it, Valley?"

"Dolichek attends my lady's pleasure," Valley said. "The Ser Landor sent him so he affirms."

"Let him enter," Sharla commanded, and as Valley withdrew, arranged her robe and patted straight the cushions of the couch. Then she looked up and saw Dolichek.

He stood there pale and silent, his bony body white with cold, and bowed a little hesitantly towards her. She thought, there is a queer pride in him, somehow—though he is only whipping-post to a prince, there is pride there.

Behind him the whipmaster, who had come assuming the usual purpose for the summons, waited patiently like a basalt statue.

She said, "Come here, Dolichek," and there was no resemblance to the way Andra would have said it in the tender voice she used. He looked puzzled, but obeyed, walking forward with a trace of a limp. There were blue bruises and long weals on his bare legs. In front of her he paused, his eyes asking a mute question.

She looked past him to the whipmaster, "Slave!"

"My lady?" said the giant, his voice a deep rumble.

"Are you of my father's slaves, or a purchase of my sister?"

"I was of the lady Andra's following, my lady."

"Break your whip and go to her," said Sharla casually. "I have no further use for you."

The giant looked at the whip in his hand, snapped its silver-mounted stock without effort, tossed it away and walked out.

In still amazement Dolichek watched him go, and then turned to Sharla, his lip trembling.

Suddenly he was on his knees, his head buried in her lap, sobbing, "My lady! My lady!" while she stroked his matted yellow hair mechanically and stared at nothing.

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Ordovic left Sharla's rooms with his mind in a turmoil and his face set grimly. The passage was dimly lit by high windows, and torches flared at the intersections. Under one of these torches, in the shadow of its sconce, a man stood waiting.

"Who stands yonder?" he challenged.

The man moved from the shadow into the light of the torch and said, "It is I, captain—Tampore, sergeant of the guard."

Ordovic laughed shortly. "Have you come with more fairy-tales of Kelab to tell?"

"No, captain. I have a word or two of advice." Tampore spoke in thieves' argot, a crisp, guttural form of Argian salted with slang which Ordovic comprehended better than the formal tongue.

"Speak on," he invited, his eyes searching Tampore's face.

"It is a good thing for Argus that you and Ser Landor and my lady Sharla came, for you are a soldier, and we understand soldiers well on Argus, and Ser Landor is a statesman of power and the lady is well thought of by the common people from the sheer mention of her name, though few have seen her, and she is reputed tender. The lady Andra is not called the black witch for her kindness."

Ordovic, watching his face, nodded.

"But you are strangers. We admire soldiers, ay—but Ser Senchan Var too is a soldier, and famous within the Empire, which you are not. The lady Andra has filled the high places with her own men. It would seem to us of the guard, who hear the whispers from those same high places, that had she retained the regency and had her marriage to Barkasch of Mercator gone through, she would have broken the last shackle holding her—the even splitting of the Council of Six for and against her. But she sprang that marriage bond upon your mistress unawares. Beware of other hidden pitfalls. And beware of a knife in the dark lest the lady grow impatient."

Ordovic did not move his steady gaze. He said, "What manner of man is Barkasch of Mercator? And what purpose is served by the proposed alliance?"



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"Barkasch is a fighter and a brave man, and he rules an independent kingdom of three harsh worlds whose soldiers are the fiercest in the galaxy. A royal union that united the worlds of Mercator and the Empire could be the first step to a newly glorious empire. It could also be a weapon of unbounded power to further the designs of a ruthless woman."

The designs being—?"

Tampore shrugged. "They are not blown kisses, but who save a wizard can know the heart of a witch?"

Ordovic permitted himself the shadow of a smile. Landor had some inkling of those designs. He said, "While we speak of wizards, where may I find Kelab the Conjurer tonight?"

Tampore plucked his beard, said, "I said he was not to be found if he did not wish it. He could make you forget you found him—they say he can make a man blind to him a foot away, yet still see all but Kelab. But if he chooses to be found he may be found in the Low City if he has no task of entertaining for some noble or rich merchant."

Ordovic said, "What is the Low City?"

"That part of Oppidum west of the fortress on the Hill of Kings where Lady Andra is resident. Oppidum is the greatest city of the planet, and city imperial for ten generations.

"East of the fortress lies the spaceport and the wealthy quarter and the markets. They have a saying at the port—passengers go east, spacemen go west."

Ordovic nodded. He said, "I thank you for your advice, Tampore. I'll follow it."

"Good luck, Captain Ordovic. And here is one last piece of advice worth all the rest." He pressed something hard and cold into Ordovic's hand, turned with a swish of leather sandals and was gone in the darkness. Ordovic fingered what he had been given and laughed with a strangely bitter sound when he found what it was.

The oldest remedy of all. Cold steel.

He tucked the knife in his belt and went on down the passage, thinking of the past few minutes. Landor—Sharla—

The memory of their first meeting was as angry as an old wound broken open.

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### V

ORDOVIC WAS feeling very pleased with himself. He pushed open the swinging gate by the hand-lettered sign that read PIRBRITE'S GARDENS, and walked in with the rolling gait of one just in from a long trip in free fall. He had two thousand circles to spend—good solid Empire currency—and all the time he wanted. And he intended to spend both to his own pleasure.

He paused with one hand on the gate, surveying the garden. There were little tables here and there among the bushes, and there was soft lighting, part artificial, part the glow from the two-foot globes of white and pink luminescence on the birbrak trees that made any night on Loudor glorious. There was a mixed scent of clean fragrant foliage and rich liquors from a dozen worlds, and many men and women sat under the outstretched branches, talking, drinking and making love. And of course the inevitable party of spacemen playing shen fu. They said there was not a drinking-place on any world where you could not find one game in which to lose your money.

As he looked around, a small stout man in pink and green like one of his own birbrak trees came up to him and said, "The best of evenings to you, ser soldier, and your request?"

Ordovic looked down and smiled slowly. "You are Ser Pirbrite?"

"I am."

"Excellent. I wish to get drunk, by degrees—loudly and noisily drunk."

Pirbrite looked anxious, and Ordovic laughed. "Not all here, my friend. I doubt if all the liquor in this place could make me drunk. I shall merely lay the foundations of it. Have me brought a measure of ancinar and a plate of strine, and if there is music I would like it."



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Pirbrite nodded and moved away. Ordovic picked a nearby table in the bay of birbrak tree, where he could see the stars in a great thick band across the moonless sky. A pleasant place, and of higher class than most that he frequented. And—his eye swept appreciatively along a line of girls standing close to the little covered hut that served for bar and kitchen—had a neater line in hostesses.

The girl at the end of the line took a laden tray from the serving hatch and came over to him. He studied her with interest, and began to consider revising his plans for the evening. Blonde hair, delicate face, a figure which was in no need of support.

She set down the tray and waited, looking him over with a brassily insolent stare while he took the brimming mug of fuming red liquor and drank, and after it sent one of the tough balls of strine meat that are so useful for prolonging the process of getting drunk.

He looked up and grinned, and spun a fifty-circle coin with a flip of his thumb. She caught it expertly and turned to go, but his hand closed on her wrist like a steel trap and he said, "Since when has a measure of ancinard and a plate of strine made fifty circles?"

She sat down beside him on the bench, smiling like a child caught stealing sweetmeats, and said, "I like you, soldier. What's your name?"

"Ordovic," he answered, "and yours—thief?"

"Sharla," she said smoothly. "Are you going to spend all your money on yourself, then?"

"Oh, take it, subtle one," said Ordovic in mock disgust. "Or take it in kind."

"A kiss for it," offered Sharla, half-rising, the coin clutched triumphantly in her hand, and she leaned forward to press her lips on his. But a right arm as strong as a steel bar went round her body, and she did not move away.

Ordovic was revising his plans for the evening.

Again the swinging gates beside the hand-painted sign parted, and a thin man with a balding head and a nose like an eagle's beak stood on the threshold, his keen eyes sur-

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veying the garden. The glow of the birbrak trees and the dark green of their foliage made the scene like a paradise, but there was no appreciation in his cold, unsmiling face. He wore a patrician gown like a well-to-do merchant, but there was a short sword belted to his waist.

As usual, Pirbrite himself came bustling over to him and wished him the best of evenings.

"Evening," said the man curtly. "You are the proprietor?"

"At your service," agreed Pirbrite, his eyes anxiously searching the other's face. "You wish, ser—merchant?"

"I am no merchant," said the newcomer briefly. "You have here a girl by the name of Sharla—empire-born?"

Pirbrite's brow cleared. He said doubtfully, "I fear she is engaged with a customer just now, but we have many others just as charming."

The newcomer seemed on the edge of losing his patience. He said with an effort, "You misunderstand me. What is the history of this girl?"

"Really, I hardly know," admitted Pirbrite. "I purchased her at auction three quarter-years since, and she has proved accomplished and attractive in her task as hostess."

The stranger raised his eyes to the sky as if praying for self-control. He said, "And her previous owner?"

"Heneage, master of the Mooncave out of town to the east. He had her from the slaver who picked her from some school on Annanworld, fringewards in the Empire yonder." He jerked a thumb indiscriminately at the galaxy overhead.

"That sounds like the one," muttered the stranger. "Where is she?"

"In shadow of that tree yonder," said Pirbrite, pointing. He cupped his hands around his mouth and gave forth the deep-throated boom of a Loudor moth. Instantly the nearer trees glowed brighter to attract the insect, and the dark bay he had indicated was flooded with a soft pink radiance.

"Ay," said the stranger after a pause. "Her price?"

"Her *price*?" echoed Pirbrite, taken aback. "Well, really—I had never thought of selling her—I mean . . ." He gasped.

"Come now, man!" rapped the other impatiently. "Delay not! Name it!"



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Pirbrite took a deep breath and shut his eyes. "Three thousand circles," he said flatly. It was more than double her worth.

Then he felt something hard and cold pressed into his chubby hand, and he opened his eyes again to see the stranger striding down into the garden with his hand on his sword, and in his own hand—

His eyes grew as round as the coins with wonder, and he picked up one of them—there were three—and turned it over.

A thousand circles!

The newcomer surveyed the soldier coolly. A fighting man plainly, a mercenary who would fulfill his contract or die.

He transferred his attention to Sharla and said, "You are the Princess Sharla Andalvarson of Argus?"

Ordovic said huskily, "Man, you are crazed!"

The stranger said, "I think not. Is it not truth, Sharla?"

She nodded, very slowly, with parted lips, but otherwise made no move.

Ordovic got slowly to his feet, his face bearing an expression of mingled doubt and amazement. He said, "Speak! What is this—a jest?"

"No jest, soldier, but the sober truth. This lady is indeed Sharla of Argus, and elder daughter of King Andalvar. As I read the story she was slavered from a school on Annanworld seven years back and sold into a house of shame on Loudor here—Mooncave by name. In due course she was resold here—a princess of the imperial blood, but who would believe the tale?"

Sharla's eyes were dim and far away, but she said huskily, "Ay. They took it for the tale of a child half crazed when I tried to tell them first, and the slavers never realized they held the Empire's wealth at a swordpoint.

"My father would have bought me, or laid waste the world on which my blood was spilled if I had been slain. And then I learned to shut my mouth, and have kept it shut these seven years, for most of the old courtesans spin such tales—I met one who claimed to have been my father's mistress

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scant ten years before, but she knew nothing of the court of Argus. She was a liar like all the rest—and what was I?”

She sat there hardly moving her lips, telling her tale of shame in a low but tearless voice.

“I had almost forgotten,” she finished.

Ordovic looked bewilderedly from one to the other. He had thought he knew every trick of the trade when it came to parting money and its owner, but this was a new one. There were ways of testing its validity—

He said fiercely, “By the winds of Loudor, stranger, this is no common tale. Who are you that you spin so wild a story?”

“No one that you would know, soldier. And none that you would know either, Sharla. My name is Landor, and I am neither of Loudor nor of Argus, but of Penalpar, half the galaxy away.”

“Well, Landor of Penalpar as you call yourself, what if this tale of yours be true? What is it?”

Landor ignored him and bent his brilliant eyes on Sharla. He said, “Sharla, your father is sick and approaching death. These two months I have sought you, beginning on Annan-world and tracing you hither to Loudor to bring you back.”

Sharla seemed to come to life again slowly. “My father sick?” she echoed. Landor nodded.

She sat up, pulling her costume together, her eyes fixed on nothing. She said, “We must go to him then—at once, quickly.”

Landor said, “Ay, Sharla. You must go to him. It was to that end that I sought you out, for in you stands the future of the Empire. Your sister Andra—”

Sharla blanched and looked at him fiercely. “Andra! My sister! What of her? And what of my brother Penda—a child of three when last I saw him?”

“Well, both of them, but Penda spoilt and Andra known by the name of the black witch—and she it is who will be regent in your father’s place till Penda comes of age. This must not be!”

Ordovic looked from one to the other in puzzlement. He said, “Ser Landor, I do not understand.”



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Impatiently and without looking at him Lendor said, "Soldier, no one cares whether you understand or not. Get you gone in peace and seek another trull—the Princess Sharla must come back to Argus with me. Here—take this purse." He held out a small leather bag which jingled and hung heavy from his fingers.

Ordovic's face went slowly white. He said, "My Lady! Forgive me for what I would have done!"

Sharla's voice was metallic and emotionless. She said, "I forgive you, Ordovic. Take your money and go."

He said, "You wish me to take your money, Ser Lendor?"

Lendor shook it at him in annoyance. "Take it!"

Ordovic snatched it from him and tossed it in his hand. A strange set smile played on his lips. "Right, Ser Lendor!" he said. "Whether you like it or not, you have bought yourself a fighting man. I take no pay without service."

Lendor looked at him with astonishment and then chuckled reluctantly. He said, "Soldier, you are a man of mettle. You are right. The road is grim from here to Argus as I know to my cost—"

"How great a cost?" said Ordovic.

"Some seven thousand circles," said Lendor, his eyebrows rising.

"My price is a fraction of that," said Ordovic. He set his helmet on his head and waited.

Sharla said, "Ser Lendor, there is the matter of my price."

"I bought you, Sharla. You are free—and when should you have been otherwise? Come, put my cloak around you and let us go."

She moved like one in a dream.

Three months, it took. They came by way of Tellantrum, Forbit and Poowadya, and wasted three precious days at the frontier world of Delcadoré because Sharla was without papers and needed an outland visa to enter the Empire. Ordovic rattled his sword under the nose of a frightened bureaucrat, and they obtained clearance in three days instead of three weeks. Then they came to Anfagan and Neranigh, and mercifully found a friend of Lendor's whose private ship

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was heading for Penalpar by way of Mercator, and brought them within hailing distance of Argus. And then by one last of the big slow traders that were now the only ships on the star-routes save the fleet and vessels of the pirates and the navies of the autochthonous worlds, to Oppidum on Argus, and by helicopter to the castle of the kings.

But they had come too late.

And then the knowledge that Sharla was indeed heiress to the regency of the Empire—and a burning shame was in Ordovic at what he had done, not to be quenched till he had given her back what he and his breed had taken from her—honor, dignity, rank and the right to hold up her head in the company of kings.

He slapped his hilt thoughtfully.

After a short while he went to his quarters and was met by three silent slaves who offered to take his harness off and bathe him. He dismissed them angrily.

"Am I a woman, then, that I should need aid in undressing? Out, slaves! Fetch me a meal, and get gone!"

They vanished in a flurry, and he stripped and slid luxuriously into the steaming tub before the log fire that spat and crackled on the hearth. He had learned long ago that sorrows are best forgotten as soon as recalled, and what Sharla had said had faded from his mind.

He was toweling himself lustily when the slaves reappeared with trays of food and drink, and he paused to look at it. He poked the food suspiciously and said, "What is this?"

"The brains of katalabs and the hearts of nugasha fried in pehab oil," said the first slave proudly. "This is honey cake with Thanis garlic, and this frozen breast of quail."

"Faugh! You call that a meal? Fetch me the roast thigh of the katalabs whose brains you would have done better to lend to your own, and three measures of ancinard, and as much fruit as one of you puny children can carry. I wish to eat—not peck!"

A quarter hour later he obtained what he wanted, and he chased the slaves away and, with caution born of long experience, searched the room thoroughly from floor to ceil-



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ing for spy-holes. He found three, and after pushing his sword down each to discourage eavesdroppers, he plugged them with strips torn from a curtain until he could obtain mortar and fill them permanently.

Lastly he called for a swift horse and rode into Oppidum.

The Street of the Morning had seemingly been so named because it was never so alive as at night. There were harsh yellow lights at the eaves of its buildings, and it was thronged with people of all colors and shapes. The beggars clustered in droves around the cheap infra-red lamps at the intersections, claiming a few ring from the passers-by. Occasionally a spaceman or a soldier on a spree was foolish enough to toss one of them a full circle or even more and they flocked after him who was so lavish like bees after honey.

There were the women of easy virtue, too; but most of them were in the cafes and drinking shops, for the night was far spent already when Kelab the Conjuror again came down the Street. There were stars thick in the sky, and six of Argus nine moons hung over this hemisphere, but there were also yellow torches on the battlements of the fortress on the Hill of Kings, and he listened to the talking of the wind and not the noise of the crowds.

He descended the steps and pushed his way into the House of the Bubbling Spring. It was bright and hot and noisy; a good deal of extravagant love-making was going on; there was a three-piece orchestra playing curious outland instruments, one with strings to be bowed, one blown and one struck with little yellow mallets; there was the same party of spacemen playing shen fu, and their low-voiced bids and the click of chips went on unnoticed.

The lid was over the Mimosan chromograph behind the bar, and four attendants moved among the tables. Finzey sat in front of his rows of bottles, grinning like a fat god. At the sight of Kelab he let go a joyous shout and reached for a bottle of the conjurer's choice.

Kelab nodded and leaned on the counter while it was being poured out, his head cocked to one side, the gold disk in his left ear gleaming in the garish light.

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Finzey set the mug before him and said, "So you're back, Kelab! What have you done today? Earned your thousand circles yet?"

The conjurer smiled faintly and nodded. "I think I have earned them again. Your burying money rises well?"

"Seven thousand and ninety circles and a few odd ring at sundown last," said Finzey proudly. "There has not been such a bowlful before in Oppidum, even at the burying of a king."

Kelab nodded. He said, "The poor will feast well if all the cities on Argus give so freely."

Finzey's expression suddenly became drawn and worried. He said, "Kelab, while we speak of burying money, there was one who needed burying above on the street—remember?"

Kelab said, "I recall her. Well?"

"At noon there was but three ring in that cup."

The conjurer looked up. "I put a circle there myself, fat one."

"As I surmised," Finzey said, "Will you divine the thief? Here is her cup." He pushed a little tin mug across the bar, and Kelab picked it up and handled it, his face going strained and his eyes unfocused in the effort to recall.

His hands, if any had watched them, would have seemed to flow like water on and in the mug, as if hands and mug were one, and there was a curious flicker of blue fire when at length he relinquished it. He said, "It is hard to see, for the theft was the act of a moment and the thief thought little of the cup. Where are the three ring he left?"

Finzey picked three tiny coins from a shelf behind him, and passed them to Kelab, who felt them one by one. He said finally, "Two of them were placed there after the theft, but the third remembers. The thief thought very hard about the money."

"His name?" said Finzey eagerly.

"Arcta teh Wolf," said Kelab casually. "You will see to it?"

Finzey nodded. The conjurer said, "It wearies me, that divination. I need rest." He picked up his mug of liquor and walked into the deep shadowed bay at the far end of



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the room among the loving couples, and chose an empty alcove and a bare table. He sat down, and became a shadow among shadows.

Later, Ordovic too came into the Street of the Morning. He had walked the Low City since close on sundown, asking for a dusky man, a conjurer named Kelab, and since his argian was scanty and his thieves' argot scarcely better, his temper had frayed thin.

But one of them had mentioned Finzey, at the sign of the Bubbling Spring, and he had come here, hoping.

Also he wanted a drink.

Finzey came to him, his face expressionless.

"Ancinard," said Ordovic. "A big measure, fat one. And some strine."

Without more expression than a statue Finzey slashed three strips from a side of strine under the bar and folded each into a ball and laid them on a plate. He filled a measure with fuming red ancinard, and pushed both across the counter.

"Seven circles," he said.

Ordovic dropped the coins tinkling on the bar, took the measure and the plate and turned away to seek a table. His eyes swept the room.

And suddenly, as he looked into the darkness at the far end, shadowed with consummate artistry for the lovers using it, the loud noise and the bright lights vanished and there were three birbrak trees, and a sky above powdered with rare stars except where the galaxy lay in a monstrous wheel. There was a pool of darkness facing him—a bay in one of the trees.

Someone, somewhere, gave forth the drone of a Loudor moth.

He took a few steps forward like a man in a dream as the trees brightened. Sharla? *Sharla?*

Then there was a puff of smoke and a great crashing wind—

And nothing before him except a slender man with a dusky face, staring into a mug of liquor cupped between his hands.

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"You?" said Ordovic hoarsely. "You? How did you know?"

Kelab swirled the liquor in the mug and a stream of bubbles fled up from the bottom like a flock of birds rising into clear air. He said, "Be seated, Ordovic."

Ordovic lowered himself by touch on to the seat opposite him in the alcove, his eyes fixed on Kelab's face. He found the forgotten drink and the strine in his hands, and pushed them to one side of the table. There was some kind of blue curtain drawn across the mouth of the alcove, which pulsed as if it were alive and glowed with a quiet light.

Kelab said finally, "It was blazed like a beacon on the surface of your mind, Ordovic. You have met Sharla and you can never be the same again."

"That is truth," said Ordovic. His hand stole out and he took the ancinar and sipped it. The fumes did something to his head, and when he looked at Kelab again, it was with a new clarity.

He said, "I have been seeking you since sundown, here in the Lor City."

Kelab nodded, still gazing into his mug as if it were a divining-bowl. He said, "I knew."

"You knew? And yet you let me tramp on, hunting for you?"

The conjurer nodded again, with the suspicion of a smile. "I am not found unless I choose to be found, Ordovic. There are few men so completely master of their fate as I."

"My lady Sharla sent me to bring you to her," Ordovic said slowly.

"Her words were, to be exact, 'If you can, buy him—if you must, drag him'," agreed Kelab.

Ordovic's mouth fell open and he said, "Can you know *everything* that passes in my mind, wizard?"

"Only that which is close to the surface. But, in answer, tell her I am not to be bought and that the man is not born who could drag me. Besides, she already owes me a thousand circles."

"What for?" demanded Ordovic, aghast.

"For the regulation of the matter of the marriage bond,"



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said Kelab casually. "If she chooses to pay me, I shall be at my ship on the spaceport tomorrow, about the hour of ten. If not, not; but I shall not choose to see you again."

Ordovic bounded to his feet. "Of all the insolence!" he shouted, his hand closing on the hilt of his sword.

Kelab's hand moved like a ripple on water and the sword stuck fast in its sheath. He said, "Sit, Ordovic."

"Coward!" accused Ordovic bitterly. "You dare not fight with a man's weapons!"

"For that," said Kelab evenly, "I am entitled by your standards to kill you. You would kill a man who called you a coward. I, whose powers are immeasurable greater than yours, dare not be so casual. I hold this world in the hollow of my hand, Ordovic. Remember that when you call me a coward.

"You will come tomorrow morning."

He stood up and crumpled the blue curtain over the mouth of the alcove and shook it into nothing. Ordovic said, "Suppose I do not choose to?"

"You will come," said Kelab, and walked away into the brightness beyond.

Ordovic followed him with his eyes, his hand automatically seeking the hilt of his sword. It moved easily in its scabbard again, but now that he had the chance of drawing it he left it, and sat slowly down again behind the table, his hand pulling his ancinar toward him.

## VI

TEN O'CLOCK. Six moons over the castle of the kings, a few flying clouds, a chill wind that rustled the crowns of the trees. In the castle—near silence, for there was no carousing tonight. Andalvar of Argus lay dead in the castle, and tomorrow was the day of burying.

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Sharla had eaten at the table of her guests, and there was a blank space left for the Barkasch of Mercator. But rumor said Barkasch and his company of fighting men had lifted at sundown from Oppidum and bent for Mercator again, Barkasch in a towering rage.

She had eaten in somber silence, bowing to the guests as they arrived and departed, and took the first opportunity of returning to her apartment with Landor. When she did so, Valley and the other quick, quiet maids bathed her in scented water and combed her hair.

Landor sat in the antechamber, thoughtfully sampling the fruit which packed the silver bowls and considering the impending visit to Sabura Mona. An enigma, that one: all-powerful over Andalvar, seeking perhaps to establish the same control over Sharla.

Suddenly a smile touched his lips. A worthy antagonist, perhaps: for Landor held that the man—or woman—who could match him in the game of statecraft was not yet born.

Sharla came through from the inner room, her hair golden and shining around her face, wearing a plain white kirtle without sleeves, that reached to her knees. She was barefoot. Landor surveyed her appreciatively. He said, "Sharla, I don't despair of you. It seems that your childhood schooling in the arts of deception is not entirely lost to you."

Sharla nodded seriously. She said, "The innocent outland girl without much experience—is my disguise."

He nodded back. "If you will put on your least subtle expression, I think it is near the hour."

Sharla turned to the trio of waiting slaves and said, "Valley, Lena, Merшил, I shall not need you again tonight. Call me at the same hour tomorrow. You may go."

They curtsied silently and withdrew.

Then Sharla and Landor called the guard from the door and requested escort to the chambers of Sabura Mona.

The guard led them down echoing stone passages lit only by flickering torches. They passed slaves on errands, who failed to recognize Sharla in her unregal attire and went by



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with a scuffle of bare feet. The passages grew colder and the torches more and more infrequent.

Sharla said in a low voice to Landor, "She doesn't live in state, does she?"

"That's an understatement," said Landor softly. "This is a part of the castle reserved to the slaves, as I recall, apart solely from Sabura Mona's apartment. I do not understand. A woman of power and influence—"

The guard stopped before a plain wooden door set in the stone wall. There was no mat before it and no curtain, no guard stationed outside. Just the plain door.

"This is it," said the guard.

"Strike the door and say the Princess Sharla awaits," commanded Landor, and the guard pounded twice at it with his fist.

A soft voice from within questioned, "Who stands there?"

"The Princess Sharla awaits, Sabura Mona," answered the guard.

There was no sound of bars being withdrawn or bolts shooting into place, but the door began to open gently and the guard turned and strode wordlessly away.

Sharla looked questioningly at Landor, and he nodded. She went in.

The room beyond was bare—quite bare. The walls were unadorned stone and the floor was uncarpeted. There was no fire in the hearth, and two flaring torches were the only lights. There was a rough bed with a coarse cloth spread, a table with half-a-dozen pens and ink and sheets of paper, and wooden chairs.

On one of the chairs sat Sabura Mona.

She wore a homespun robe of brown which did no more than cover her fat body, nothing to decorate it. She was the fattest woman Sharla had ever seen. Her arms were like tree branches and her legs like tree trunks, but soft. Yet, she was not absurd.

No. She was not fat. She was big. She was imposing. There was no shadow of the ludicrous in her monstrous bulk. And Sharla wondered why.

It was her eyes, she thought. They were big and dark

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and there was the sorrow of a world in their depths, as if the wisdom of all the ages hid behind that mask of soft pendulous flesh.

Her voice too was as beautiful and as melancholy as her eyes.

She said, "Welcome, my lady. I fear I cannot offer you the hospitality to which you are accustomed, but I live, as you see, in humble circumstances."

Sharla said, a little uncertainly, "It is of no consequence, Sabura Mona."

The other extended a fat hand and indicated one of the wooden chairs. "Be seated, my lady. And—this is Ser Landor?"

Landor nodded, said smoothly, "My lady Sharla asked me to accompany her, since her Argian is worn with long disuse and I speak it to perfection."

"Really?" Sabura Mona's eyebrows rose on her forehead. "And in which of the outland dialects are you most at home?"

"It is of no consequence," stammered Sharla. "We cannot impose upon you—"

"I speak them all," said Sabura Mona, and there was a finality in her voice that defied further argument. She spoke next in the dialect of Loudor.

"So you see, Ser Landor, your presence as interpreter is really not required."

Landor could not avoid the pointed hint, but there was a curious flicker of unreality about the way he turned and withdrew, leaving Sharla very alone and helpless, as if he had been fighting very hard to control himself, doing consciously what he should have done naturally.

As soon as the door shut behind him, Sabura Mona turned her eyes from following him and looked at Sharla with a curious abstracted expression. Sharla noticed that her sole ornament was a tiny gold ear-clip, and strove to remember where she had last seen one like it.

Sabura Mona said, "I called you hither, my lady, in this way, for two reasons. The ostensible one is that here we cannot be overheard or spied upon. The more pressing is that I am growing old, and am anyway a fat and clumsy



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woman, and I cannot do much walking or attendance at ceremonies."

Sharla said, "But Sabura Mona, you should have more exalted quarters than this. If you do prefer to live here, at least let me order you better furnishings."

"I do not choose to have them," said Sabura Mona.

"But you have no slaves, no attendants;"

"I do not choose to have them," repeated Sabura Mona firmly. "And therefore let us talk no more about them. My comfort or discomfort is a small thing compared to that of the Empire."

"I called you hither to speak of two things—Barkasch of Mercator, and the people of Argus. First—of Barkasch. You would do well to beware of him. He cannot fight the Empire alone, though he would dearly like to, for he is a scheming and ambitious man whom fate has chosen to sit at the head of a trio of the wildest worlds in the galaxy—wild not in terrain but in people."

"His are the fiercest warriors of all. His are the ambitions of a merchant prince magnified a millionfold. It seemed that his alliance with Andra and his seat on the Council of Six would give him the power he sought, but far from that he was made to look a fool before many people, and when his temper cools he will ally himself with Andra's cause and will not rest until she is in your place. Beware of him. He is crafty. Have your adviser Landor see to it."

"And the second thing. The people of Argus. They are fickle. They believe like all the peoples of the Empire in prophecy, and though they welcome you now, someone will one day soon realize that no prophecy is current proclaiming you beneficent and just ruler of the Empire, though many run the crowds with the word that the black witch shall bring about the Empire's ruin. It would be the work of a day, no more, for Andra, your sister, and Barkasch of Mercator to have the crowd howling for your blood on no stronger evidence than that it is not you but your sister who is to ride the Empire to oblivion."

Sharla said after a long silence, "That is all, Sabura Mona?"

"That is all. There will be more. I have spies, my lady,

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and I ordered them to warn me of such rumors as might cause your overthrow. I, who planned so much for your father, have no plan now—yet. What is to come remains inscrutable. But rest assured—I have small love for your sister or for Barkasch of Mercator, and shall guide you—with the assistance, doubtless, of your Lord Great Chamberlain, Landor—” and then added with the air of an afterthought, “as I did your father.

“I shall see you at the burying tomorrow, my lady. Farewell.”

Feeling a little foolish and disappointed, Sharla rose. She said, “Is there a guard nearby that I may summon to escort me to my apartment?”

“No need, my lady. Walk and be assured.”

Sharla gazed at the immense bulk of the woman before her for a while. Eventually she turned and went away.

Though the passages were dark and bare and cold, somehow she felt no apprehension at walking along them alone after Sabura Mona’s words.

When she re-entered her own rooms, Landor was waiting. He greeted her and said, “First, with regard to what you said earlier—Dolichek’s father is dead.”

Sharla brushed it aside, and suddenly weary, sat down on the couch beside him. She said, “I have seen Sabura Mona.”

Landor nodded. He said, “She is a strange woman, is she not? I am intrigued to have met her. She impressed me with an air of power.” She shifted to face her. “Tell me what did she say?”

Sharla told him, in outline. When she came to the part about the prophecies, he snorted. “Faugh! I have no faith in prophecies. The bad guesswork of a few old women, and they follow it because they think it a prophecy, and point to it when they have followed it as true foresight. Go on.”

She finished her tale, and he said, “All? It seems little enough, in faith, to insist on conveying in private.”

Sharla said, yawning, “Landor, yours is the statesman’s brain, not mine. I weary and would sleep. In the morning, if



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Ordovic has found this conjurer, we will see him and find out more from him. Till then, Landor."

Landor rose without speaking and withdrew.

Senchan Var looked gloomily from the narrow slitted window without benefit of a drape, westward over the Low City. He could see the lights along the Street of the Morning and hear the clamor of the city playing.

He said, "Andalvar of Argus dead at the sundown before last, and they still drink and sing in the Low City. A rootless stock—craven and unworthy of Argus."

"While the burying money grows, Senchan," said Andra.

Senchan Var turned angrily on her. "Burying money or no, my lady, it is an insult to the memory of Andalvar, your father, and I am all but ashamed for you, my lady, that you do not take it seriously."

Andra's composure was fraying visibly. She sat on a couch covered with badly cured jatalabs pelts, and the floor was hard and cold and the walls bare, for the fortress on the Hill of Kings was a fortress first and a palace after, and though it was the focus of imperial government and state-owned trading it was still a soldier's barracks rather than a home.

Across the room her ape whined and chattered fretfully.

She snapped, "Senchan, there is no need to lose your temper with me simply because my minx of a sister dismissed Dolichek from whipping-post and told the whip-master to break his whip and come to me again, and you happen to agree with her. She did it out of sentiment and no anxiety for the strength of Penda's moral fiber. Further, she is a weakling and neither she nor the fool whom she put in your place is acquainted with the veriest elements of intrigue."

"No?" said Senchan Var. "It seems to me, my lady, that she is strong and self-possessed, as witness the way she disposed of Barkasch of Mercator and the marriage bond."

Andra spat. "According to Samsar's story? Not at all. Only this conjurer and his fantastic trick saved her. And there is one thing more—"

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A soldier of the fortress company entered and saluted. He said in harshly accented Argian, "A slave below, my lady, demands entrance. Female slave called Valley."

Andra shot a triumphant glance at Senchan Var and said, "Fetch me her, and also the slave Samsar, the wizard Kteunophimi and the black Leontine slave who came hither from the castle of the kings this evening."

The soldier saluted again and went out. Andra said, "See, Senchan? Can anyone be skilled in intrigue who does not have wit enough to chase away spying slaves? She took them all from me, trustingly, and her idiot of an adviser, Landor knew too little to warn her. I tell you, Senchan, a week and we shall have torn this sister of mine to shreds. Ay, and scattered the shreds to the eight winds of Argus."

The door opened again, and the same soldier ushered in Valley, swathed in a thick cloak from head to ankles, but her brown feet were bare, the great black slave who had been whipmaster to Dolichek, Samsar of the hot brown skin and twitching eyes, and a small, nervous man with a withered face like an old apple and a mirthless grin that displayed toothless gums. The soldier himself turned to go out again, but Andra stopped him with a gesture.

"Stay, soldier," she commanded. "There may be need of you."

He closed the door obediently and stood with his back to it.

"Now," said Andra, a gleam in her cat's eyes, leaning forward on the pile of skins that formed her resting-place. "You Samsar!"

Samsar stepped forward sullenly.

"Your tale again, Samsar. Not that part about the entry of Kelab nor the departure of Barkasch, but that about the fate of the bond itself."

"Why—why, my lady, did I not make it clear?" stammered Samsar, his jaw working stiffly, for there was a vast black bruise all across his cheek where Ordovic had hit him.

"I would have recovered it for you and preserved it, but Ordovic, the captain of the royal bodyguard, picked it up



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while it would still have been but foolish to attempt to steal it under the eye of the courtiers."

"Enough!" Andra, holding up her hand. "Step back. Kteunophimi!"

The withered man came forward, mumbling.

"Work the miracle of full memory on the slave Valley," she commanded. Mumbling from the aged wizard.

"Do not waste time in vain attempts to speak!" said Andra. "But a few simple movements are all you need, Kteunophimi."

The wizard turned to face Valley, who stood very straight with her big eyes bright and limpid and the hood of her cloak thrown back on her shoulders, and began to move his hands in a complicated pattern. After a few seconds he stepped hastily aside, and Valley, her eyes wide open but unseeing, walked unhurriedly forward to face Andra.

"Well, Valley? You have heard all that passed in the apartment my sister took from me?"

The slender slave nodded.

"Tell me of what was said concerning Barkasch and the marriage bond," Andra commanded, and sat back on her pile of skins.

Valley began to speak as a machine would speak. In flatly unimaginative terms she described the reactions of Sharla and Landor, and the entry of Ordovic. Senchan Var listened, a frown on his face, marveling at the way Valley copied the very accents of the speakers. Landor and Sharla had talked in Argian, but with the arrival of Ordovic switched to their outland tongue, and since Valley did not herself understand the meaning of what she had heard, but could only repeat it, Andra called for an interpreter and heard the talk with interest. Samsar stood in the background, a faint beading of sweat on his brow.

When Valley repeated Ordovic's version of Samsar's clumsy attempt to steal the marriage bond, Andra raised an imperious hand, "Enough!" she said. "Samsar, step forward."

Samsar did not budge.

"Soldier," said Andra, and the soldier before the door

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caught Samsar's arms and frog-marched him in front of the couch.

There was a gleam in Andra's yellow eyes that was not all due to the torches. She said softly, caressingly, "Samsar, you lied to me."

"My Lady!" stammered the slave, his eyes twitching. "I did my utmost."

"Utmost or not," cut in Senchan Var, "you lied to my lady, Andra! I should rip your false tongue from your throat!"

Andra was regaining her self-confidence and poise. She said, "Hold, Senchan. I have it how this may turn to our advantage even now. What was the meaning of the threat Ordovic used to this man, interpreter?"

Samsar's eyes filled with abject terror, and his mouth trembled, but he could not speak. The interpreter shook his head.

"I know not, my lady. 'Tis not of their dialect, nor of Argian."

With a casual glance at the wretched Samsar, Andra turned. "Senchan, explain its meaning."

The old man blanched. He said, "It is—it is—" Then he turned his back sharply and said with an air of finality, "It is not seemly for you to know, my lady."

"Fool, Senchan! Will none of you tell me? Then I demand it of a common soldier. You before the door! Explain!"

Woodenly, his eyes focused on empty air, the soldier explained.

When he finished, Andra nodded, her lips drawn back from her teeth like a cat's. She said slowly, bright-eyed "Slave!"

The Leontine giant stepped forward.

"Take this Samsar and do to him as you have heard—and stop him wailing!"

A broad hand clapped across Samsar's mouth and he fell to moaning faintly. "Then go into the Low City and spread it abroad that Ordovic threatened this. Let Samsar be found on the streets later—about dawn?"

The giant said, "I hear and obey," and picked up Samsar



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casually under one arm and went out. Senchan Var turned to Andra with an expression of despair on his face and would have spoken, but Andra cut him short.

"Senchan, we cannot afford to be squeamish. We are playing for the glory of an Empire, and one man—or ten thousand—cannot be permitted to stand in the way of it. You're a soldier, Senchan—not a ninny! Kteunophimi, take that soldier and make him forget what he has seen, believing it to be Ordovic's work."

The aged hypnotist nodded and led the soldier into a far corner. After a while the latter departed like a walking doll, and Andra turned to Valley, still standing motionless before the couch.

"Continue," she commanded.

The listened in jubilant silence when she came to the scene between Ordovic and Sharla, and Andra said, "So my precious sister was a woman of the streets in her long absence. How much capital could we make of that, Senchan?"

All the old man's puritanically moral upbringing rose in revolt at that. He said, "That a woman without honor should come to stain the throne of Argus! 'Tis the most shameful thing I ever heard!"

"Agreed," said Andra. "It will be common knowledge three days from now. Continue, Valley."

When she finished her recital, he said, "She is visiting Sabura Mona; that is dangerous, my lady. Sabura Mona is unpredictable and very, very shrewd."

Andra frowned. "Indeed, I do not know whether she will stand to our side or to Sharla's."

"Is there a way to spy on her?"

"None. The walls of her room are stone as thick as you are tall, and she has no slaves to be bribed and never leaves the castle of the kings."

"Then she is too dangerous to be allowed to live."

"True . . . Kteunophimi!"

The wizard came forward.

"Take away your pupil, Valley, send her again to attend to my sister. You will then send up my black Leontine slave when he has dealt with Samsar, the liar."

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The old man bowed and left the room unsteadily, leaning on Valley's arm. After a while Senchan Var said "Word from Barkasch?"

"None. He went off-world in a huff at sundown. I expect his messenger some time. He will not accept being made a fool of lightly."

The door opened. Another soldier stood there, saluted.

He said, "There is a man craving audience who will give no name but is come in connection with the marriage bond of Barkasch of Mercator—my lady," he added hastily.

Andra and Senchan Var exchanged glances.

Andra raised her eyebrows as if to say, "What did I tell you?" and ordered the soldier, "Let him enter."

The soldier stepped aside and a man came from behind him, and both Andra and Senchan Var tensed and began to flush with rage.

Kelab the Conjurer.

## VII

"SER LANDOR! Ser Landor!" A patter of feet, panting, shouting in high feminine voices. Landor struggled from sleep and found a gray rain-washed sky shedding dull light through the windows. His door burst open and Valley came in, her face tear-stained.

"Ser Landor! My lady Sharla has disappeared!"

Instantly Landor tossed the covers off and reached for his clothes. He said, "How? When?"

Valley said, "It must have been early today, Ser Landor. When she went to see Sabura Mona, as you know, she dismissed us and I for my part went into Oppidum. This morning, when we went to awaken her, she was gone from her bed, and there were signs of struggle."

Landor buckled his sword-belt and forced his feet into



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sandals. He said, "Call out the guard! Find Captain Ordovic! Let him see tht none leaves the castle!"

Valley bowed and vanished, and Landor, his face like thunder, went striding down the passage to Sharla's rooms. Here he found Mershil and Lena, her other personal slaves, weeping and wringing their hands. The door to the bedroom was open, and the bed visible beyond was disarranged, as if by a struggle. He ordered harshly, "Peace, you! No one is blaming you—you were dismissed and all is in order. Let me pass!"

He pushed between them and went into the bedroom. They followed, howling, and he rounded on them. "Has anyone touched this bed since it was found so?"

"None," Lena assured him eagerly through her tears.

"Then keep silence. I have a little skill in divination." He turned to the bed, while the slaves ceased their sobbing and watched with interest. He laid his hands caressingly on the covers, his eyes blurring and his fingers seeming to melt and run into the fabric as Kelab's had on the beggar's cup.

At last he shook his head and turned away, as there came a clatter of feet and a jingle of metal, and Ordovic burst into the room, closely followed by Tampore.

He said, "The slave Valley came with a wild tale of Sharla vanishing."

"True enough," said Landor. "You have put guards at the entries of the castle?"

"Ay, though it's by way of locking the ship after the air has blown. When did she go? Did she return from her meeting with Sabura Mona?"

"Ay, for we spoke together after she came back. But her slaves were dismissed, and there was none to see or hear."

Ordovic cursed. "Tampore! Was there no guard before the door?"

"There was one. Where is he?"

"Bought?" suggested Landor, and Tampore flared, "The man who can be bought does not enter the bodyguard. He is dead for certain."

"Who was it?"

"One Elvir."

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"By the winds of Argus!" said Ordovic, and stormed into the passage. There was a squad of guards there. His eyes switched over them, and he shot out a brawny arm and said "Elvir!"

A big man in the second rank stepped out and came up to him. Behind, he heard a furious growl of astonishment from Tampore.

He said in clipped thieves' argot, "Elvir, were you not on guard at the royal apartment—here—last night?"

"I was. I came at midnight and changed places at dawn with my relief."

Landor came out behind Ordovic, bidding Tampore be quiet. He listened. Ordovic said, "Who was your relief?"

"Darbo, captain."

One of the other guards spoke up. "That's so, captain. I went in search of the sergeant when the slave came with the news of the disappearance."

"Elvir, did you let anyone in—anyone at all—last night after you came on duty?"

"As is customary, I let pass Dolichek, the prince's whipping-post, and the whipmaster—the black giant."

Ordovic cursed. "And they came out again?" Landor demanded, striding forward.

"Of a truth, yes!"

"But did you now know that Dolichek is no longer the prince's whipping-post? That my lady told the giant to break his whip and go serve the Princess Andra?"

Elvir's face went ashen. He said, "No, Ser Landor. I swear it. I heard nothing of that. I did merely as usual in letting Dolichek pass to bear the burden of the prince's misdemeanors."

Landor said suddenly, "There is something wrong. I can sense it. Guards, into the inner rooms!"

They filed inside and fell in again in order. Landor said, "With your permission, sergeant?"

Tampore nodded, and he continued, "Search, this apartment! Shift everything. Something is wrong. And Elvir, you are not to be blamed. With the others—to it."

They left no fraction of an inch of all the rooms in the



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suite unsearched, but found nothing to justify Landor's misgivings. At length the latter sat down on the bed with his head in his hands and said, "Still there is something wrong. It is as if there was unreality. . . . Which of you searched beneath the bed?"

Three of the guards signified assent, Elvir among them, and Elvir said, "Ser Landor, I felt strange on doing so, for though there was nothing there I felt there should be. I felt that way too, now I recall, when Dolichek came last night with the whipmaster—worse when they went away again."

"Lift the bed," commanded Landor harshly, and six brawny guards bent to it and tugged and carried it half across the room. The space where it had stood was curiously shifting, as if it were seen through water, and he walked up to it and bent and searched the floor with his fingers, his face drawn and strained.

After a while it changed to a smile of triumph, and he heaved and lifted out of nothing a still, doll-like figure with matted yellow hair.

Sharlal" Ordovic said, but Landor shook his head and stepped out of the shifting unreality.

"Dolichek," he said. "That is how it was done."

He laid the boy on the bed. It was amazing how closely in repose his young-old face resembled Sharla's.

"He lives?" questioned Ordovic.

"Assuredly. But he sleeps."

"How was he hidden?"

"Magic, Ordovic."

"This is the black witch's doing," said Tampore, stepping forward and glowering. "Did I not warn you, Captain Ordovic?"

But Landor shook his head. "I know few wizards and not one witch whose powers are capable of that. Kelab is one of them, of course—wait, Ordovic," holding up his hand as Ordovic was about to speak. "But it were a strange thing to save us from the marriage bond and then to steal Sharla."

Ordovic said fiercely, "Would he take her for himself?"

"He would not dare," Landor said confidently.

Tampore said, "I do not see how it could be done—anyone

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could take my lady Sharla for Dolichek if her hair were dirtied, her face bruised and if she wore a similar garment; but one could not take Kelab for the Leontine giant."

"He is a magician, remember," Ordovic insisted.

"Landor, I think he is likely. When I met him in the Low City this morning he demanded a thousand circles for his regulation of the marriage bond and said he would be at his ship today at ten."

"If he had just stolen Sharla from the castle of the kings, he would not have faced you in the Low City."

Ordovic said, "With his insolence he would dare anything!"

Tampore coughed and put in, "Ser Landor, the lady Andra is in the fortress on the Hill of Kings in Oppidum."

"What of it?"

"I have friends among the guards there. We could find out if Kelab has been to see the lady Andra."

Ordovic said hotly, "You deny that this is the black witch's work, yet can you name any other who would do it? Save Barkasch of Mercator, who is off-world?"

Landor wasn't listening. He said, "Tampore, what were your guards doing to let them leave the castle?"

"The black giant is well enough known to my men, but it is strange that they should have let out Dolichek."

"Then perhaps they did not leave the castle. Tampore, organize searches of every room and hole in and under the castle, and ask all the guards who were on watch last night whom they let pass—without exception."

Tampore nodded and signaled to his men, but Landor stopped Darbo. He said to Ordovic, "Does Sabura Mona know of this?"

"Not that I know of."

"Darbo," said Landor, turning to him, "go down and inform her, and beg her to come to us if she will. In either case, return at once yourself."

The soldier saluted and withdrew.

They waited in silence, Ordovic pacing the room like a caged lion, his face grim and set, Landor struggling to preserve his outward calm. Almost a quarter of an hour passed.



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Finally Ordovic said, "Darbo is slow in returning. It irks me to wait and do nothing. I'll go seek him." He left the room and followed the passage, inquiring at stages where he could find Sabura Mona, and came eventually in to the right corridor. He glanced down it. There indeed was the door to which he had been directed.

And something more.

His heart leaped and his hand closed on the hilt of his sword, and he padded silently up to the embrasure of the door. Darbo lay in it. There was fresh blood all over his face, and his heart had ceased to beat.

Ordovic rolled him over and his face showed his amazement, for the tough metal of the soldier's helmet had been crushed and driven into his skull with a blow like the butt of a Thanis bull.

He flung the body aside, ripped his sword from his scabbard and forced open the door.

The room was dim, but he could make out two figures, two monstrous figures, locked together in the center of the room, struggling; one vast and ebony—the Leontine giant, seven feet tall—the other also huge, but shorter and fatter. A woman. Sabura Mona.

He gaped in amazement at what he saw.

For Sabura Mona had the measure of the giant. He had one enormous hand sunk in the softness of her throat, but she did not appear to notice it. With the other, he was seeking vainly to force her arms from their grip on his waist, constricting the soft organs of his belly as surely as a steel band.

And she laughed. The incredible woman laughed soundlessly, and instead of letting his arm drive back her head and snap her spine as the giant intended, she was forcing it forward—forward—

He snatched his arm away while he still had room to bend it, just an instant before joint and muscle and tendons would have torn apart, bent backwards at the elbow, and her head snapped forward, coming up under his chin.

Then in one huge astounding heave compounded of legs and arms and body and head, in that one instant when he had no grip on her, she flung him bodily at the ceiling.

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He went up like a lifting ship and fell like a mountain, his skull split on the hard stone twelve feet above, and Sabura Mona, without a glance at the corpse, turned to dip her hands in a bowl of water, while Ordovic, sword limply in his hand, gaped.

The incredible woman wiped her hands and turned to him. "You are Ordovic?" she demanded, and he stared at her.

"You are—Sabura Mona?"

She nodded. "Your messenger told me you wished me to come. My lady Sharla, it seems, has disappeared."

Ordovic nodded. He gestured at the body of the giant. "With him, supposedly—if he was whipmaster to Dolichek."

"He was."

"But if he is still in the castle, Sharla—uh, my lady Sharla cannot be far either."

"Possibly," nodded Sabura Mona. "Let us go, then. But first, one small matter. Tell no one about my killing—him." She nodded at the dead man with a quivering of four chins. "Say you slew him, if you like, but tell no one I did. Understood?"

Her eyes were strangely luminous, and he nodded dumbly, then followed her up the bare passages. As they approached Sharla's rooms, he noticed she began to wheeze as if she were exhausted.

Landor met them, nodded and said, "What kept Darbo?"

"Struck down by the Leontine giant, Ser Landor, and if Ser Ordovic had not saved me, that would have been my fate too," said Sabura Mona. She glanced commandingly at Ordovic, who nodded weakly.

"By the winds of Argus, then!" said Landor explosively, "If he was still here, perhaps Sharla—"

A soldier came stumbling down the passage, breathing in great sobbing gasps, as if he had run too far too fast. He said, "Ser Landor!" and saluted with difficulty. "Ser Landor, your flying machine—the one in which you came to the castle of the kings—it's gone!"

"Gone!" said Landor, electrified.

"Yes, gone! And what is more, Sergeant Tampore sent a messenger on a fast horse to the fortress in Oppidum where



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the lady Andra is, and he has signaled by sun and mirror that Kelab the Conjurer visited her last night close to midnight, and stayed half an hour, and departed."

Landor said, "A fast horse—he could have done it in time to be here with the whipmaster by a quarter before one, and left, taking the helicopter and Sharla—by the winds of Argus, soldier! Have horses prepared for us! There is but one wizard on all Argus who could blanket the sound of a helicopter taking off, and that one is Kelab."

The soldier saluted and went back down the passage at a lope. Sabura Mona said, "Is this the doing of my lady Andra?"

Landor said, "Hers and the conjurer Kelab's, I fancy. The Leontine giant took her out under the eyes of the guard, in guise of Dolichek, and doubtless also with some charm against discovery provided by Kelab."

Sabura Mona shook her head sadly, with a vast trembling of chins and pendulous cheeks. Ordovic could not believe her the same woman who had tossed the giant like a Thanis bull. She said, "Ser Landor, I have certain spies."

"Among my lady Andra's slaves?"

"Assuredly!" said Sabura Mona, her eyebrows rising in surprise. "All places."

"I shall need your counsel, then. At this moment the most important thing is to find Sharla, which means going in search of Kelab the Conjurer at once. If we still had the helicopter."

Sabura Mona shrugged her elephantine shoulders.

"I can do no more than sit here in the castle of the kings and weave plots as a red liana weaves its beast-traps. But I shall do what little I can, Ser Landor. Be assured of my aid at all times."

Landor said with an attempt at graciousness, "I am grateful, Sabura Mona, and am sure you will serve Sharla as you served her father. If you will pardon us. . . . Come, Ordovic. Our horses should be ready by now."

There was a gray sky over Oppidum. Toward dawn it had rained, but now it had ceased, though the streets were still deserted in the Low City. The night's gaiety had passed.

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Two bodies lay on the Street of the Morning. One was that of a hungry-looking man with a face like a wolf. His throat was slit in tribute to Kelab's skill in divination, and there was a cross carved on his face to show he was accursed and no burying money should be left for him. The other was Samsar's, but that one was barely recognizable as human.

There was a chill wind, too, but Kelab the Conjuror sat on the balcony of his ship, and sipped a hot brew from Thanis.

Opposite him sat Sharla, her face strangely composed and quite relaxed, and she also was drinking the heart-warming beverage.

Every now and again the conjurer cocked his head on one side as if he was listening, and Sharla's eyes rested on him and saw the glint of gold in his left ear-lobe, and remembered that this was the one of which Sabura Mona's had reminded her. She thought for the first time not how small and slender he was, but that he was vaster than he seemed, like a volcano filled with smouldering fires, as if he was the strongest man in the world and also the most gentle.

He for his part sometimes looked across at her and smiled faintly, and thought how very beautiful she was in her white kirtle, with her pale lovely face and her golden hair.

But he did not need to look. He knew her, directly, as he knew everything near him; and certain things farther away, much farther away.

They had sat out on the balcony in silence for some time, no words being needed, when he glanced at the watch that had come from nowhere in the Empire, and said, "I think they are approaching, dear. Go to the place I showed you."

She rose with a quick smile and went inship, and he cleared away the tray from which they had eaten breakfast and checked that all was in readiness.

Then he sat down to wait.



# THE SPACE-TIME JUGGLER

## VIII

AT THE ENTRY to the spaceport, hostlers came out from the stables, running, and Ordovic and Landor dropped from their mounts, sweating and panting.

Curtly, Landor tossed the men their pay and demanded, "Where is the ship of Kelab the Conjurer?"

One of the hostlers, a big fair man with a red scar from eyebrow to chin, shifted the stick he was chewing to the side of his mouth and said, "She stands most east'ards on the port, Ser Landor. 'Tis Ser Landor, en it?"

Landor nodded curtly and turned to Tampore and the squad of soldiers who had clattered into the yard with them.

He said, "Out of sight till called for men! There's little you can do against this magician, but mayhap we'll need you to bring away his body."

Tampore saluted, and they reined in under the eaves of the gallery around the yard. Ordovic and Landor, swords swinging, stalked out of the yard on to the brown damp concrete of the port beyond.

There was only one ship that could have been Kelab's—a lean black vessel, her sides shiny and wet, that reminded Ordovic uncomfortably of certain fleet pirate crafts he had tangled with in the outlands. He glanced at Landor, but Landor had suddenly withdrawn into himself, and there was a tiny bluing of the air around him. Ordovic looked away quickly. There was a new smell in the air—a smell of powers beyond the human.

They walked across to the lean ship and stopped twenty feet from the nearest fin. Above them, on a balcony built out from the side of the ship, they could see Kelab leaning back in a chair, drinking.

Landor shouted, "Conjurer!"

He put down his mug and glanced at them, and his dark face split in a smile of welcome. He raised a hand in salute.

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"The best of mornings to you, Ordovic and Landor! You are early in bringing me those thousand circles."

"We bring no money, traitor," said Landor harshly. "What have you done with the Princess Sharla?"

Kelab raised his eyebrows. "If I have done nothing with any princesses to my knowledge."

"Liar!" accused Ordovic fiercely. "Who else but you could have stolen her from the castle of the kings?"

"Come down, conjurer!" called Landor. "Come down from that ship!"

Uneasily for the first time, Kelab said with a hint of peevishness, "I will not."

"Come down!" ordered Landor with a bellow, and the bluing of the air around him became stronger. Kelab puckered his brows and staggered; then he turned obediently and went inship. Ordovic looked at Landor with new respect, and fresh hope sprang up in him. It had seemed hopeless to walk out and face the conjurer like this, but maybe Landor had known what he was doing after all.

He was an enigma, Landor. From obscurity to Lord Great Chamberlain of the Empire at a step. Guide to Sharla, yet unknown. A man who, as far as he and Sharla, and even the Empire, were concerned, walked out of nowhere on Loudor three months and a few days ago, after, as he claimed, a two-mouth search for Sharla.

And now he was in a position to wield the powers of the Empire, via Sharla, as Sabura Mona had done with Andalvar. There should be a battle royal betwixt those two.

Save, of course, that it was now Kelab who held the whip.

The lower door of the ship before them opened, and a flight of steps grew from the side of the nearest fin. Kelab the Conjurer came out the door and began to descend the steps, and behind him—

"Sharla!" said Landor. "This liar said he had not seen you."

He stopped suddenly, because Sharla was gazing at him from the topmost step with something that was almost contempt and yet was mixed with pity. Kelab continued to come down undisturbed.



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She said, "I am not Sharla of Argus."

Ordovic's mouth fell open and he gazed in blank astonishment, but Landor rounded on Kelab and said furiously, "This is of your doing, Kelab!"

Kelab nodded quite calmly. He said, "Indeed it is."

Ordovic's sword flew from its scabbard and he made it whistle in the air an inch from the conjurer's chin. He said, "As you value your life, restore her to her senses!"

Kelab made a tiny movement, and the sword blued, flared, melted into nothing. He said, "I have already, Ordovic. This girl is *not* Sharla of Argus."

"Not—Conjurer, you lie!" Ordovic tossed aside the useless sword hilt and made as if to smash Kelab's face with his bunched fist.

"I tell the truth," Kelab insisted, with a glance at Landor. His face was strained, and around him too, the air was beginning to glow blue. Landor was scowling anxiously, and his eyes burned with an inner light. "This girl is no princess, but a puppet, a dupe, a slave."

"Of whom?" demanded Ordovic.

Kelab's face went into a snarl like a tiger's but he forced out with difficulty, "Why, who else but Landor, Ordovic?"

Landor said furiously, "Conjurer, you are mad!"

Kelab relaxed, shrugged easily. He said, "Answer me this question. When did Andalvar fall ill? Five months ago without warning?"

Landor nodded, puzzled.

"Yet," said Kelab devastatingly, "it is a three-month journey from here to Loudor, longer by way of Annanworld, and when you found Sharla you claimed to have been engaged in searching for her two months already. *Three months* before Andalvar fell ill you went in search of Sharla. Why then?"

"There was a—a prophecy," began Landor. "You have said so often. Only last night you said so again. *Why then?*"

There was a sudden crash of thunder, and darkness came, blacker than the depths of space.

For an instant Ordovic feared he had been struck blind. He could feel nothing, hear nothing but the echoes of that tremendous thunderclap, and—

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And there was nothing beneath his feet, no concrete and no cold breeze on his face.

Death?

Then there was a great ripping of the blackness like frozen lightning, and solidity returned to his body. He gulped air and stared around.

No ship. No concrete beneath his feet. No low buildings around the port. No city of Oppidum beyond them. But a lavender sky and a cruel red sun, and a hot blast that tore at his eyes, and bare hard rock beneath his feet. He was alone.

He cried out in terror. There was no fear in him of human weapons, of sword or spear or even the mutants' thing-that-kills-at-a distance, but this was magic, and it was more than human.

The cry went echoing among the rocks around him, and echoed and echoed again, and seemed to grow with distance instead of fading. Twenty miles ahead he saw a mountain like a bleeding finger in the harsh red light split and fountain into the sky without sound save the echo of his cry.

The splitting of the mountain made the earth shudder like a pool of water. He saw the frontal wave of an earthquake flow across the flat bare plain towards the rocks where he hid, parting it into chasms a mile deep and folding it like waves breaking.

Then it reached him, and the ground shook with terrifying silence, and he fell, blinded and nauseated, into a vast crevasse.

Down—down—down—

Then the blackness split again and there was a cool green bower among drooping trees that were not birbrak trees but enough like them to awaken a stir of longing. There was green lush grass before it and a clear still pool with a few pebbles on the bottom. He looked, entranced, into the bower, and saw Sharla.

She sat there on a bank of the cool grass, naked, and stretched out her arms toward him with a glad cry. He made to run forward, embrace her—



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And a voice—her voice—said in his memory, "I am not Sharla of Argus."

Sharla—not Sharla—real or imaginary—

He hesitated, and she called again. Her voice?

Or the voice of Landor, whose puppet she was?

He stopped, planting his feet firmly on the ground, and looked away. She began to weep. He steeled himself not to move.

Then there was a touch on his shoulder, and he half relented, turned to face her—

But it was not Sharla. The green and shading trees had put out their branches like tentacles, to constrict—

Again he screamed, and began to run. On the water's edge he tripped and fell into the pool. It parted before him, and he fell without breaking the surface.

Down—down—down—

Then searing, blistering heat, He stood among rocks that glowed redly, and before a pool of molten metal that bubbled like water, white-hot. Flames flickered and spat around him, and there was a high thin singing in the air, which stank of sulphur and had the hot unsatisfying flatness of a furnace room.

He looked up. There was no sky but a veil of hot, smoky vapors that whirled and scudded and sometimes tore to show, straight overhead, an unbearable white flame that was a sun. And not only straight overhead—eastwards another, dimmer, and southwards another, blue instead of white. Three blazing suns and rocks that were ready to flow down as lava.

The pool before him boiled furiously, bubbling and spitting. One of the red bubbles did not burst, but grew larger. He drew back, but the rock behind him was red-hot. He froze, staring with horrified eyes at the surface of the monstrous bubble. Higher it grew. Taller than himself, its base all but touching his feet. Higher—

He fell forward and it burst, leaving a hollow roundness into which he fell.

Down—down—down—

He crashed into the branches of a thick tree, its leaves

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blue-green and shiny. The heat here was wet, muggy; the air smelled of decayed vegetation and fetid swamps. There was a monstrous roaring noise in the distance.

All around was the tree, obscuring the sky except for the gap straight overhead caused by his fall—a real, physical fall, which had bruised him and torn his clothes and stunned his mind.

He shifted in the crotch where he lay, and something slender and black rustled away, hissing. A serpent!

He stared around wildly in the green-dark shade, and saw more of them, coiled on the branches or sliding without noise up or down the trunk. One of them disturbed a creature which flapped away on many leathern wings, uttering a curious harsh scream.

Then the roaring was nearer, and he saw things coming towards him through the jungle. They were all mouth and great sagging bellies, with many shifting eyes and long whip-like tentacles.

One of them came up to the tree where he was, and a thin long tentacle wrapped round his body and tore him from his perch and held him for an instant above that horrible black maw. The stench of rotten meat from it made him vomit.

Then he was falling again, down—

A bare expanse of snow and a bitter, cutting wind. He lay in the snow for a while, panting, weak in body and mind. Delicious coldness—he could lie here forever and sleep—

He forced himself to stagger to his feet and wrapped his torn garment around his cold body. At once snow drove into his face and a blizzard shut down around him like a wall.

What now? Was this the end? Was his fall from world to world to finish here? Was this even real? His frantic mind beat at the numbed confines of his comprehension, seeking an answer which he could not give.

Someone was coming towards him through the snow. A big figure, larger than life. The Leontine giant?

No, he was dead. He himself had done the killing—

And yet not. That was Sabura Mona's hypnotic condi-



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tioning. *She* had done the killing. And here she was. Walking out of the blizzard—

He turned and stumbled away and fell and lay still in the snow till she came and picked him up as if he had been a child, and walked with him into the whirling whiteness.

Sometimes, as he looked at her, she seemed not to be Sabura Mona, but Kelab, and she spoke with Kelab's voice, soothing him to sleep and he drowsed, warm in her arms, as if she radiated warmth in this sub-zero world. It seemed to last a long time. . . .

The air blued for a moment, then he was suddenly fully awake again, blinking in bright yellow light. Sabura Mona set him down upon a soft couch before a leaping fire, which Kelab was tending. Then she went aside to the wall and stood motionless.

Ordovic sat up and stared at Kelab. The little conjurer was cut and bleeding. His gaudy headscarf was muddy and his brown clothes were torn. But there was a kind of strange contentment on his face.

Ordovic thought, minutes—or years—ago, I hated this man more than I hated anyone in the galaxy. But I cannot hate him any longer because I know who did to me what has been done, and the hatred I feel for *that* man overshadows all else.

Without looking up, the conjurer said, "I owe you an explanation."

Ordovic looked around him. He saw a square room; a stool beside the fire for Kelab, and the walls were bare and featureless. He said grimly, "A small debt beside what Landor owes me."

"You got it pretty badly, no?" said Kelab sympathetically. "I did what I could for you, but Landor is powerful in his way, and it wasn't a lot." He shifted a log, and the flames spat and crackled.

"Explain then," said Ordovic, rising and coming over to spread his hands at the fire. "Where are we?"

"We are no place in any physical sense, Ordovic, since this and all the other places you have been swept through are

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countries of the mind—those, visions from the sick mind of Lander, but this is a creation of mine.”

Ordovic shook his head to clear it. He said, “I owe you my life. Or Sabura Mona. Somehow I have a strange impression that you are the same person. Who is Sabura Mona?”

“You already have an inkling of the truth,” said Kelab. “She is not human. She lives alone, without comforts and without one slave—yet she guides an empire. *The* empire. She is a robot, a mechanical woman.”

Ordovic nodded slowly. He had known, really, since he saw her kill the Leontine giant. He looked at her again, standing with inhuman stillness against the wall, and this time he did not shudder, for she was only a machine.

He said, “But how is she here? Is she too an illusion?”

Kelab shook his head. “Things of the mind are real here, and so she is real. She is as much a thinking being as you or I. She is here in her own right. Also she is my only advantage over Lander.”

“And you? You are no mere man. Are you a robot?”

Kelab shook his head.

“A mutant, then? From one of the outland worlds?”

“I’m no outlander.”

“Then you must be an emissary from the Golden Age.”

“Not what you mean by the Golden Age—the time of the greatness of the Empire—but from a better age than this nonetheless. I’m from the future.”

He accepted it without disbelief. The skepticism was washed out of him. “But Sharla?” he said. “The girl who is not a princess after all?”

Kelab glanced at his watch. He said, “We have a short time before Lander can strike again. I stunned him, with a lucky blow you might say, but it was no physical weapon I used. Next time or never. I’m afraid . . . but your explanation.”

“Lander too is from the future, and it is in the creation of that future that I am engaged now, and that’s why I was so anxious to secure Andra in the regency. I’m going to have a devil of a time putting things to rights even if I do beat Lander.”



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"The history of my time depends on Andra marrying Barkasch and bringing Mercator into the Council of Six—remember? The prophecies about the ruin of the Empire which Landor sealed his doom by affecting to despise, will come to pass, and revolt and rebellion will tear it apart. There will be another Long Night, in which most of the histories and most of the knowledge will be lost. Yet out of that will come the first human society to approach perfection.

"Somewhere in the Long Night a mutation will occur which will give—from my point of view, gave—to men for the first time unbounded power and a standard by which to control their using of it. The power—well, I said I held the planet of Argus in my hand. I did and do. I could crush it like a soft fruit with no other tool than my mind. And all—or nearly all—the men and women of my time have that power. The standard by which they control it—is telepathy. That was the key. It gave men a sense of unity, of belonging to a union rather than fighting for themselves alone.

"The result—peace between man and man. The end of your breed, Ordovic and of all fighters, but the fine fruit of this tangled tree of humanity.

"But not quite the full fruit. The mutation had not yet bred to perfection in my time and one or two individuals lacked the sense of common ground and still craved the feeling of power over their fellow men. Such atavisms must be shunned by us, for their insanity is in part contagious, so we segregate them and watch them.

"Once, one of them vanished. I do not mean died, or went away. Our sense of unity is not dulled by distance, and death is a slow fading after tens of thousands of years to one who controls his environment as completely as do I, for instance. He—whom you call Landor—had taken himself and his pretensions to power to a time and place where he could use them.

"What time? That was the question we had to answer.

"We guessed that the by then almost legendary Empire would have attracted him. We studied the few flimsy records we had for any spot at which he might try to interfere, and posted scouts to watch them, of whom I was one. I knew

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as soon as I was told of the coming of Sharla that something was wrong—and behold: Landor. Ambitious to wield real power over people—imperial power.

“He knew who I was, of course, since I changed the marriage bond. My motive in that was not what you thought, but to prevent Barkasch from being unable to marry Andra later. That was the first move—in the nature of a challenge.

“The girl you know as Sharla is not Sharla. She is much as the real Sharla might have been, but her name is Leueen and she is of middle-class birth and no princess. Landor slipped in between her sale by Heneage at Mooncave on Loudor and her purchase by Pirbrite, took her out of time long enough to give her some resemblance to the real Sharla and construct a complete and detailed hypnotic personality for her. Then he shifted to the time of Andalvar’s death, and planned to use her as a puppet, to front for his ruling of the Empire.

“But there were holes—vast lacunae—in his story, if anyone had looked for them. Did you truly believe that anyone shrewd enough to be a slaver would not have investigated the claims of a child to be Sharla Andalvarson? He could have named his own price to her father—half the galaxy! No, the real Sharla died when one of the holds of the slaver blew into space during takeoff. I’ve met the slaver—he didn’t know even then whom he’d kidnapped. And his pretensions to statecraft! You’re no skilled hand at intrigue, but you knew enough to walk warily and plug the spyholes in your room. He? He did not even expel Andra’s slaves from Sharla’s quarters.

“He played badly, considering they were the highest stakes he could name.”

“Or I,” said Ordovic. “Imperial dominion—it could have made the Empire great again.”

Kelab laughed shortly. He said, “You owe the Empire no allegiance. You’re outland born. Besides, I can name a higher one.”

“Name it.”

“Peace between men.”

Ordovic considered it soberly for a while. Then he said,



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"I lack the sense of unity you say you have. And all my life I've lived by violence. But I can understand, I think. Maybe it is a higher stake."

"Landor has not yet lost," said Kelab. "Ordovic, our time's shortening. Listen to this."

"Remember that what happens to you is illusion as far as you're concerned. If you fall into the trap of believing, you're lost. I cannot protect you always, for Landor has the strength of the insane and I—I say it in all humility—I am more important to the safety of the human race than you. Landor has hidden Sharla as I hid Dolichek when the Leontine giant kidnapped Sharla for me, but his is no mere illusion of warped light as mine was, but a twisting of the mind, of space, even of time. If you want to find her, remember for all you are worth that all is illusion save the spaceport at Oppidum. When we return there, the battle's over."

Ordovic said, "Kelab, once I called you a coward, afraid to fight with a man's weapons. I am ashamed. The weapons you fight with are not a man's. They are the weapons of gods."

"Hush!" said Kelab, his dark face suddenly alert. He put out one hand, and the robot that was called Sabura Mona came to life—

And there was blackness.

## IX

HE WAS AWARE in a strange extra-sensory way of the presence of Kelab and Sabura Mona, casting their minds here and there, searching, and of an atmosphere of struggle beyond ordinary human striving. In the midst of the darkness he clung with all his powers of mind to one bubble of brightness. It framed Kelab's face, set and serious, saying: "If you fall into the trap of believing, you are lost."

*This is illusion!*

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The pounding of his heart was like a trip-hammer, and the rush of blood in his ears like a mighty tide. He felt neither heat nor cold, only an overpowering sense of evil, wrongness, insanity.

*That wasn't illusion.*

Then the darkness began to drift away, like a curtain falling in low gravity, revealing a blank landscape with a ghastly sun setting behind black mountains ahead of him. Stars shone down with the unwinking glare of empty space. There was a bare orange plain before him and around him, and he felt sand soft and dusty between his toes.

*This is illusion!*

But things of the mind had reality here, even as he was real, and as conscious as if he were physically present. What twisted creation of Landor's warped brain might not also be real here? Sabura Mona was real though she was a robot—

In panic, he crouched, stared all around, hardly daring to look from one spot to another lest what he feared should slip his eye. Nothing. Upwards, nothing. Blackness—

It dropped from above like a wet pall, softly, coldly slimy, and folded over him from head to foot, a constricting nothingness. He screamed, kicked, fought—

And still it clung to him, like an engulfing kiss, a wet kiss from a demon, till there was nothing but *it*—

And a bubble which showed Kelab's face, lean, cut and bruised, but oddly content, saying: "If you fall into the trap of believing, you're lost."

He had almost believed!

With a shout he stretched out his arms and tore the illusion apart. The blackness divided with a sigh and beyond he saw a familiar scene. A ship—a lean black ship, her sides shiny and wet. Brown concrete underfoot, a gray sky above. The spaceport at Oppidum!

This was reality, Kelab had said. Then they had won?

Kelab, his face tired but jubilant, nodded. His headscarf was gone and his clothes ripped, but he stood by the fin of his ship and smiled. And beside him, alive and well, Sharla! He cried out in joy and strode forward to take her in his arms. The greatest prize of all—



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And then he heard Kelab's voice say again: "If you fall into the trap of believing—"

Landor was quick, but Ordovic was quicker. He whirled, and saw that there were no low buildings at the port edge, no city of Oppidum beyond. The concrete ended at his feet.

*This is illusion!*

He laughed, and at his laughter the illusion cracked and fell in a thousand shards and there was more blackness.

Even the blackness was not real blackness, for he could sense—more than see—the figure of the conjurer on his left, lean and serious, and behind him the soft cheeks and pendulous jowl of Sabura Mona. They overshadowed the galaxy, and the Nebula In Andromeda floated behind Kelab and was dwarfed by him. He himself was as a shadow beside Kelab.

He knew the reason. This was the true Kelab, who held worlds in the hollow of his hand.

And it was as if he could hear mighty footfalls in the distance, a vastly slow and measured and inevitable tread. Kelab and Sabura Mona looked up expectantly, waiting.

At last Landor was coming face to face with his antagonists, and for the scene of the last battle he had chosen the deeps between the stars.

He came almost casually up to Sabura Mona and Kelab, looked at them, and made as if to pass them by.

Sabura Mona blocked his way.

He flickered like a blue flame, and there was no Sabura Mona, only a vague impression that was nothing more than a change in the outline of empty space. She was there still, Ordovic knew, but she was powerless.

Landor said, in a voice that was more than any mere speech could be, "Kelab, this is between us two."

Kelab nodded, his bright smoky eyes on Landor's face. He was watching, waiting—?

Then Ordovic understood. The fight was on already, a battle of wills, without physical reality. And as soon as he realized that, he saw the weapons they used—

He saw Landor facing a flame from which—impossibly—Kelab looked out. He saw the lightnings that flared and

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flamed and heard the soundless clash of mind on mind. They matched illusions—hot worlds, cold worlds, pseudo-realities scuttered like rabbits through the circle of their minds. Sometimes Ordovic recognized one of the ingredients that made up the worlds he had been through. More often they were greater, more terrifying: some there were almost too big for the mind to hold; they distended the powers of imagination to unveil things from the darkest corners of the brain that made him almost scream aloud in pain.

Kelab engulfed them in bright clean flame and whirled them to nothing—

Then came a formless universe of horror that made him rock and stagger, and Landor was after his advantage like lightning. Kelab recovered and came back, a splendid figure dripping flame at his fingertips, hurling bolts of silent lightning, but Landor seemed like a mountain, untouched by fire. He had made Kelab falter once. He was bent on doing it again.

He did. The flames on Kelab's body died for a moment and he staggered. Landor made one step forward and his right hand swept down like a sword, bearing horror and fear and shapeless insanity—

And Kelab poised for a moment and tumbled headlong into an endless black gulf.

Landor stood for a moment, vast and inscrutable, and then his icy composure shattered and fell apart, and he passed his hand across his forehead wearily, while Ordovic stared in sheer horror. He had not for one second believed that Landor would win. What would become of him now?

Then, as Landor turned slowly, Ordovic felt something in his mind that chilled him with awe. He heard Kelab's voice say quietly: "This is reality, Ordovic."

And suddenly he was not only Ordovic. He was part of a great shining organism among the stars that was the human race, and he towered over the galaxies and over Landor, who froze with his face set in a mask of terror.

Then he was striding after him, and Landor was a tiny black figure running desperately, more afraid than he had



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ever been, a deformity, a blot on the shining beauty of the human race.

And he was lost in a bottomless gulf, turning over and over, while the walls of the past fled by him and he fell beyond space and beyond time into the formless not-being before the universe was, where he would never do harm again—

Then the horizons of the universe closed in around Ordovic, and he suddenly had weight again. There was a lean ship before him, her sides rain-wet and glistening, and brown concrete beneath his feet.

"This too is reality," said a quiet voice. He turned and saw Kelab standing where he had stood before, unmarked save for the content on his face. He found that he himself was also unhurt. But there was a monstrous tiredness in his mind, and a fading memory of a temporary glory that was beyond imagining.

And—his eyes lifted and met hers—Sharla, too, on the top step of the flight leading to the lock. But of Landor not one sign. He said, "So we have won."

Kelab nodded, "He is gone now, and I must be about the setting to rights of the Empire. You, of course, must go, and Leueen whom you know as Sharla, and Andra be installed as regent."

Ordovic said, "But the people had high hopes of Sharla. Will they stand for it?"

"A long time ago," said Kelab, "a poet you would not have heard of said something about making us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of. There you have the people of Argus. Besides, there are rumors that their hopes were unfounded—I and Andra, whom I visited last night, have seen to that. For instance, yesterday you made rather a brutal threat to a slave—one Samsar. Today at dawn that slave was found, mutilated according to your threats, on the Street of the Morning. Andra's doing—not mine. And it is now common knowledge that Leueen-Sharla was a woman of easy virtue, which is itself a bar to the regency. They may regret your passing, but there are still the prophecies, so they will sigh and say it was foreordained."

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"Is it not strange that a conjurer should regulate the destiny of worlds? Why a conjurer, Kelab?"

Kelab's face grew soft. He said, "To put aside my powers would be to me as cutting off my hands would be to you. As a conjurer I can use them, for show 'tis true, but you cannot hide a sun under a dishcover. Thus I use them without exciting comment. Even so," his smoky eyes showed somber regret, "I miss the sense of being part of the human race."

Ordovic was about to speak, recalling that brief moment of splendor when Kelab stepped into his mind. But the conjurer made a tiny gesture with one hand and Ordovic felt a sensation of something tremendous that was forgotten instantly. He shook his head to clear it.

Kelab continued, "I can buy you passage on a ship whose captain will ask no questions. You are an outlander, Ordovic—and so is she."

Ordovic's eyes went up to the blonde girl whom he had called Sharla.

"She is very beautiful even if she is not the regent of an empire," said Kelab, "and I think she is in love with you."

She came down the steps to Ordovic, and put her arm around his waist, smiling. They looked at each other for a long time. Then she turned to Kelab.

"Which is this ship you spoke of?" she said.

"Yonder," said Kelab the Conjurer.



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