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The Chariots of Ra

THEY DROVE THEIR
CHARIOTS THROUGH THE
DIMENSIONS OF DEATH

Kenneth Bulmer



The chariots came on at great speed and there was no mistaking their purpose. Tulley wondered if they were using this place as a base. . . . Then an arrow plunked into the parapet of his chariot. Oolou lashed the reins. The nageres sprang forward. With suicidal speed the two chariot groups closed on each other.

Tulley swallowed down, feeling the dryness in his throat, loosed a shaft at the oncoming mass. There must be twenty chariots out there. . . .

He glanced at Oolou, shouting. She stared back at him with a ghastly grin, the blood pouring from her neck above the corselet where an arrow stood, stark and brutal.

Science-fictioneer Kenneth Bulmer has written many books for Ace, including ROLLER COASTER WORLD, #73438, 75¢; THE ELECTRIC SWORD-SWALLOWERS, #05595, 75¢; and THE HUNTERS OF JUNDAGAI, #68310, 75¢.

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I

When the wipers gave up and squealed across the windshield for the last time the blacktop and the bordering telephone posts disappeared behind a silver-writhing curtain of rain. Roy Tulley pulled the brand new Cadillac across onto the shoulder and cut the motor. He blinked his eyes. Through the side window reflections of the four headlights jumped and whirled in the unceasing downpour.

"Now what?" asked Graham Pike from the passenger seat.

"It was your idea to push on past KC tonight," pointed out Tulley without heat.

"If we deliver this heap to the west coast ahead of schedule we catch a bonus," said Pike.

Thunder and lightning boomed and sizzled.

"And," went on Tulley, calmly, "it was your idea to take this godsforsaken route through the back of nowhere."

"That guy swore it was the best route. He told me we'd save ten percent on gas."

"That's your trouble, Gray. You're too credulous. You'd believe anything."

"You're the electronics expert, Roy. You could fix the wipers in nothing flat."

"Great!" Tulley's cool began to warm. "Like most credulous people you're unscrupulous with it. There's a mean streak in you, Gray Pike. You're as much an expert as I am! You get wet fixing the wipers."

They glared at each other with the old comradeship of rivalry that had been with them since grade school. They had sat in the same classrooms, listened to the same teacher, played on the same team, taken from

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their university tutors, each in his different way, joined the same computer corporation on the same day and been fired on the same day last week. The rain still hissed down.

"Stalemate, then," said Pike, with a yawn.

Tulley looked at him, at the rain, at the back seat.

"At least they gave us a Caddy."

"You won't get all that wet, Roy."

"Wet enough. It's going to be a long night."

"Toss for it."

"Hah!" Tulley snorted with the contempt of long and painful experience. "With you—the twistiest trickster this side of the Rockies?"

"Can I help it if I know a trick or three?"

They were both large loose-limbed young men with an easy air about them that redundancy from a position they had assumed secure could not quell. Somewhere on the fabled west coast, they felt sure, lay a fresh start and a new life. Their parents back in Sharon had been tolerant enough to know when to let youthful high spirits—that's how the oldsters phrased it—burgeon. Time enough, they'd said, to settle down. Both Pike and Tulley were mature enough to be thankful for their parents' attitude. The times were enough out of joint without added foul-ups like that in a guy's life.

"All right." Roy Tulley decided he'd make a fresh fool of himself and risk it with Graham Pike. They couldn't sit here all night. Their mutual stubbornness made that a not unlikely outcome. "But if you twist me, Gray, so help me—"

"Now would I do a thing like that to a pal?"

"You, Graham Pike, being you, would and you damn well know it!"

Pike chuckled and tossed. The coin flashed once in the headlights' rain-soaked reflections, fell, was trapped.

"Heads," said Tulley, knowing as soon as he spoke he'd chosen wrong.

"Yep, Roy," nodded Pike with sorrowful satisfaction.

"You've gone and done it again. Out you go."

Tulley pulled his collar up and got out. The rain hit him with a personal affront. He lifted the hood. "At that, the engine is still there," he grunted. "That's something."

Powerful headlights blossomed through the lines of rain and a large articulated truck pulled up with hissing of brakes and squealing of tyres. A thick beefy voice called.

"In trouble? Want any help?"

Tulley looked up with the rain bouncing off his face. His surprise was complete.

In the rain-soaked darkness the driver was invisible; but Tulley wondered if he wore his halo at a slant.

"Just the wipers," he shouted back. "Nothing serious."

The driver opened his cab door and stepped down. Tall, he topped Tulley's height by three inches, and the breadth of shoulder beneath a short coat emphasised the bent-gorilla strength in him. "Let's take a look."

A flashlight beam cut across Tulley, swung to the Cadillac, picked out Pike's white face at the window.

"Just the two of you?"

A breeze tickled Tulley's spine.

He heard the truck's gate fall with a crash. Shadows moved. He couldn't make out the exact size and shape of the people back there; but they looked strange.

Pike let out a yell, flung open his door and hared off down the blacktop.

Something rippled past Tulley, going like a greyhound, making a slobbering sucking noise as it went.

Tulley yelled.

The things were all over him.

In fragmentary glimpses as clubs crunched down he saw round and slimy bodies as big as bullocks moving with deceptive speed on twin bunches of tendrils coiling across the ground. Other tendrils sprouted from the things' top sections, some tentacles sprouting eyes at their tips, others ears, others mouths serrated with buzz-

saw teeth. Other tentacles brandished the clubs that beat down and put out the lights for Roy Tulley.

He came around to a swaying motion and a feeling that someone—or something—had taken his head off and sewn it back upside down and back to front. He opened his eyes blearily and looked at the interior of a truck, the aluminum corrugations bare and stark. He was lying on the bed of the truck, his hands looped together by some silky netlike rope. He could hear groans and curses and a woman was screaming on a high falsetto that added to his own feeling of hysteria. He was stark naked.

The—things—sat back on their tentacular lower coils, quiescent, the skin a flushed pink, wide pores oozing a fluid that, Tulley guessed, enabled them to slide over the ground like snails. But their speed matched that of greyhounds, not snails: he remembered the way that thing had galloped past him after Pike.

There were eight people in the truck, all naked, all roped to one another, all, like him, evidently under the impression that they shared a nightmare.

Pike had been roped to a burly man whose stomach sagged and whose chest frizz of hair was greying. His once florid face looked now just like a chunk of misshapen putty. Next to him two girls, young and, without their clothes, just ordinary girls, sobbed bitterly, holding each other like baby monkeys.

"You all right, Gray?" he managed to choke out.

Pike rolled an eye at him. The other was green, mauve, black, magenta, already shut and promising to be the mother and father of all shiners.

"Ask a tomfool question—" Pike said, huffily.

"Have we flipped?"

"No. This is real. And so are they." He nodded at the five monsters.

Of the three other people in the truck, two looked like husband and wife. They just sat together, holding each other, their heads down, bodies pressed together, not saying a word. The last woman was the one doing

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the screaming. A big busty blonde whose wig had slipped and whose mascara was streaking her plump cheeks in the runnels of her tears, she rocked backwards and forwards hardly caring how her freed anatomy betrayed her, groaning and screaming and barking by turn.

Tulley summed them all up, said: "Not a lot of strength in the back line, Gray."

"Interference." Pike said succinctly. "We'll carry the ball." As was to be expected, he had adjusted to the situation and what would be required.

The truck stopped. The monsters herded the people out. Roped together they stumbled and fell down the tail gate. It had not been uncomfortably cold inside; now the chilly rain hit them, the wind flicked around their flanks, the cold struck them cruelly. Through the rain-lashed darkness all Tulley could see were wide-open expanses of nothing. The truck ran off the blacktop, jolting over the shoulder and along a rough track, muddy and swilling with water. The monsters clubbed the humans into following.

Pike jerked at the silvery netlike ropes around his wrists.

"This stuff is strong. I can't break it."

"If you could they wouldn't have used it."

In the middle of wet muddy nothingness the truck stopped. Two men alighted from the cab. One of them, the driver, became momentarily visible as he walked through the headlights' beams. There was something odd about him. He wore a black slouched hat pulled low over his forehead. The other man wore some sort of flying helmet of an old-fashioned kind, like a Balaclava, in leather. Metal glinted from it.

They vanished. Moments later they appeared at the side of the truck and the driver climbed in. The other man stood away and made motioning movements with his arms. The truck ground forward in low gear.

The blackness beyond the truck's hood seemed to Tulley to be even blacker than the rest of the black rain-

battered night. It seemed to him, standing there naked and frozen and roped to other naked and freezing humans, that the truck moved forward into a jet pit of emptiness. Then Tulley gasped. No rain slanted in the space before the truck. It ground slowly on and the fender vanished. The hood followed. The wheels disappeared. Now the long corrugated aluminum flank of the articulated truck vanished as though being swallowed up by some gigantic inhuman mouth. The hysterical woman stopped screaming. Everyone looked and no one believed.

The truck moved forward in that emptiness and vanished as though entering a tunnel to hell.

The man shouted something and the monsters rippled their tendrils over the rain-drenched earth. They forced the humans to walk after the truck. Now Tulley could see there indeed was an impalpable blackness there that cut off the rain, a solid darkness of reality, a tunnel, an opening from this earth into—into somewhere.

With a blow from a cudgel across his back Roy Tulley stepped into the portal of darkness.

II

"It's no good saying you don't believe it," said Pike crossly to the two young girls. "It's happening. We're here, wherever here is. You've got to believe it."

They stood huddled together. Tulley stared about him. He agreed with what Graham had said; but it was darned hard to comply.

Although the sky remained dark and overcast with no stars visible, the rain had stopped. That, at the least, was something positive to be grateful for. A gentle night wind whispered about them, the sussuration broken as the truck's engine barroomed. Herded onto the road again the people lined up waiting. They had to help themselves climb aboard, a painful business of naked skin scraping hard steel and wood, banging on the alumi-

num treads. The plump blonde had given over screaming now and she even pushed her wig straight and wriggled here fat shoulders, getting comfortable against one of the few burlap sacks. "Strange," Pike said to Tulley as they flopped down. "There always seems to be a scared blonde floating about a scene like this."

Tulley had recognised the attitude Graham would take up, an attitude similar to his own and one stemming from a certain kind of hard-edged, independent, open-eyed childhood. So long as they had their health and strength they'd keep their wits about them, take anything that offered, thump the wrong-uns when the opportunity offered, seek always for the giggle in face of disaster, and, in short, live life like men.

"Scared blonds of fiction," he said. "Well, anyone's a right to be off track in a scene like this."

The truck started up. Tulley looked back. The road was not as firmly metalled as the good old U.S. road they had left; the truck jounced. They whistled past a vehicle. Tulley stared. The body curved like a shell, four spindly wheels towered, seeming to wobble as the thing spun along emitting sparks and steam from a tall chimney over the trunk. He could see all this by virtue of the glowing golden lamp suspended from a fishing-rod-like support above the car. The conveyance looked delicate, feminine, yet genially capable.

"What the hell is that?" demanded Pike. He looked offended that such a fine-spun piece of mechanism should run so smoothly over a road where an example of American trucking engineering bounced and jounced.

Before Tulley could answer the truck swerved, cranking the articulation to block the progress of the shell-like car. Monsters boiled over the gate, swarmed up over the vehicle smashing three of its spidery wheels, and brought back two fresh captives. They were efficiently stripped. They fought and thrashed until a bludgeon laid them out. One, the young man, looked healthy and fresh-faced. The other, the girl, looked a real dish and both Tulley

and Pike whistled in sympathetic and angry admiration as her figure was revealed. Her dark red hair lay across dreamy shoulders where matching red weals showed the places the monsters had gripped her.

Tulley debated whether or not to chance it now, decided not to, and with the help of the others set about caring for the new arrivals.

When the girl opened her eyes—they were deep green flecked with gold—she flinched back. She said something no one understood, words all flowing syllables and liquid music. Pike smiled. He held her hand gently and said slowly: "Don't worry. We'll get out of this."

Again she responded with a tirade of words.

"Anybody understand?" asked Tulley of the company. No one did.

"That's no language I've ever heard before," said the man who held his wife closely. "And I speak three—French, Spanish and German, apart from English. Maybe it's Oriental."

"They don't make cars like that one behind the bamboo curtain any more than they do at Detroit," said Tulley laconically.

Once more the truck slewed, once more monsters spewed over the tail gate, once more dazed and incoherent captives were flung to join the others. This time they were a middle-aged couple with two teen-age sons.

Pike nodded at them. "They'll help, come der tag."

"Yeah," said Tulley. "I'm getting sore at these plug-uglies. What's worrying me is—." He stopped.

"What?"

"How do we get back?"

In his usual way of taking things as they came, even in a situation like this, Pike pushed that one away. "Let's get free of these pink-snail monsters first. Then we'll figure the angles. I wonder how much time we have."

When the truck stopped again and they tensed for a new attack they were instead herded out. They stood by the side of the road as the truck ground off onto the

grass verge. The darkness had lifted and pearly light struck rays down through the overcast. Half a mile away a building rose, a construction of pinnacled towers, turrets, lofty ramparts, all concentrating towards the central conical tower where flags flew.

"You ever seen a place like that in Kansas?"

"Never have."

The people from Earth and those from this new place stared in apathy and terror as the truck moved slowly forward. Once more that utterly black square of emptiness showed before the front fender. Once more the truck inched through, vanishing piece by piece. When it had entirely disappeared the monsters clubbed the people on. Tulley saw a console at the side of the black opening, with thick cables running to a square red-painted box with bright terminals. He heard a buzzing crackling. There was power flowing from that red box; floods of high-voltage power.

When he stepped into the black opening he felt a new and disquieting sensation that began within himself. He felt his bowels contract. He felt a sharp intense pain lance through his head. He yelled. He staggered forward.

He heard—clearly and with sickening force—a snapping pingging—*inside his own mind*.

Sickness surged in his inside. He swallowed down convulsively. He felt as though some insensate force of implacable determination had taken his head and trepanned a great chunk off and stirred up his brain with a white-hot sliver of steel like a cosmic cook stirring psychic soup.

"You all right, Roy? You look green."

"Of course I'm all right—especially in this set-up!"

"I didn't mean that—"

Sunshine slanted down on them. Around them a wide plain stretched, with the wink of a river and distant trees. A warm wind ruffled their hair. They blinked their eyes.

"But it's nighttime!" whimpered the scared blonde.

"It was—back where we came from."

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A line of dust sped directly towards them from the trees. They caught a glimpse of black dots at the head of the straight line of kicked-up dust, the wink of metal.

"Company," said Pike, shading his eyes.

Tulley was looking at the point where he had stepped into—well, he had to phrase it to himself in this way—where he had stepped into this world. He felt quite sure this wasn't the Earth he had known all his life.

The man with the leather flying helmet and tight dark brown clothes was finishing packing up the red box. As he flicked a switch the black square that had obviously served as the gateway to here from wherever they'd been before died. It disappeared like a light going out. The man picked up the red box and the console by straps, carried them to the cab of the truck. Even then, even in these moments of utter bewilderment, Tulley wondered how they contrived the trick of putting the console and power box through and then of retrieving them afterwards. He promised himself he'd find out—after he'd settled with the monsters.

The line of dust expanded in size. There must be at least four riders. Then Tulley gasped. Was there to be no end to the marvels he was encountering? He had expected riders—and he saw riders; but he had without thought expected to see horses, possibly cowboys, riding up to investigate the appearance of an articulated truck in the middle of the range. Instead—

"Oh, no!" yelled the blonde. "Keep them off!"

Four animals sped towards them, kicking dust. They had scarlet hides and big ferocious heads with lolling tongues and sharp yellow teeth. Their six legs hit the ground with pulverising force. Sitting in high ornate saddles winking with gems the riders presented appearances at once grotesque and formidable. Each carried a long heavy lance with a fluttering pennon. They slanted these down pointing at the people around the truck, and the tips looked extraordinarily long and sharp. But the

men—if men they could be called—attracted the most shocked disbelief.

Their legs were short and thick and curved to the shape of the saddle as though carved in one piece. Their bodies were totally disproportionate to their legs; big and bulky, heavy of chest beneath scale armour, bulging of shoulders beneath crested shoulder plates. And their faces! Brown, leathery, hook-nosed and with wide glaring eyes beneath immense black bars of eyebrows, those faces might have been carved on some mythical temple's protecting pillars in the dawn of time. They wore high-crowned helmets of golden scales with plumes of scarlet and green and yellow floating arrogantly. Around their waists and depending from straps fixed to their saddles they carried a weird mixture of weapons.

"Yowpl!" said Pike, drawing back. "Friendly—or hostiles?"

The monsters with their masses of bunched tendrils did not hesitate.

Silvery nets curled out into the bright air. The nets opened into palpitating circles, dropped about the four riders and their beasts. In a great thrashing of legs and clouds of dust the armoured men were dragged from their saddles and the beasts tangled up on the ground. The cudgels rose and fell. It took some time to quieten the strange bandy-legged men in their armour.

But quietened they were. Efficiently the tentacles stripped them of armour, of clothes and of weapons. All was tossed into the truck. Everyone was herded in, the silvery cords binding them. Tulley eyed the heap of edged weapons. Pike saw him and nodded. The truck started up again.

Very quickly the truck stopped and they were ordered out. The scenery looked the same. The red power box and the control console were set up. That black fathomless portal of eerie energy sprang into existence. The truck ground through on low gear.

"No more pickings hereabouts, I guess," offered Pike.

"They're going from one place to another snatching people. If I wasn't so fascinated I'd be screaming blue bloody murder."

"What do they want us for?" asked the blonde. She'd swabbed her face with the burlap and looked a sight.

"I've no idea." Tulley made it short. Trouble was, he did have ideas, unpleasant ones.

"This has all the earmarks of a slave raid," said the husband. He still looked scared stiff; but in these events continual fear was broken down by continual fresh occurrences. "History is my subject—I'm at the University of Kansas City—and the pattern begins to add up. I'm Bill Chilson—my wife, Betty—we were out for an evening meal—roadhouse—truck stopped—." He couldn't go on.

"We'll get out of this somehow, Mr. Chilson." Tulley spoke, meaning what he said, not knowing how what he said was to be accomplished. "There's got to be a break sometime."

"Just be ready to jump," said Pike with savage emphasis.

The four short-legged riders recovered consciousness with a speed that showed how close to barbarism they were, how recuperative their primordial powers were. At once they began to thrash about, struggling to break their bonds, to get at the monsters with their bare hands. There was a grim and elemental savagery about them that spoke eloquently of habitual command, of absolute undisputed mastery. The clubs beat down unemotionally. They were bludgeoned into line and forced through the black gateway.

As they approached that black blankness one of the riders was cruelly battered by a monster. He fell against Tulley. Tulley put an arm around the thick leathery waist, feeling the muscle, held the man up.

"Hold up, pal," he said in a voice he made as friendly as he could. "Take it easy. Our time will come."

The reply in a deep booming bass was quite incomprehensible. Tulley smiled. He put his personality into the

smile. Reluctantly, as though it pained him, the rider smiled back. His thin lips above the thick black bush of beard widened; creases deeply ridged the skin about his mouth.

As Tulley walked with the bandy-legged rider into the well of nothingness, so Pike walked with the redhaired girl from the shell-shaped car. All the strands of silvery rope binding them had become entangled; but the slack was sufficient to permit of individual pairing. The girl's male companion walked on her other side. He had not spoken. He looked completely beaten and defeated.

They stepped out into a world of colour. Brilliant hues beat down from walls of rock and from the lush vegetation clothing all the level spaces and sprouting from cracks and ledges in the rock. The sun struck them with furnace heat. The truck was grinding over loose boulders and scree, making an infernal noise.

There were eighteen people from three different places walking up the rocky pathway between the multicoloured cliffs. The truck did not stop but headed on for the saddle half a mile ahead. The man with the red power box and the control console walked as though the weights dragging on his arms meant nothing. But the pink skinned monsters with their rippling coils of tendrils made heavy going of the rock. Tulley watched in satisfaction as they tried to avoid the more gritty areas. He guessed that like snails they liked smooth glutinous places.

In their shared misery everybody helped the weaker ones to climb. They panted up the slope. Unobtrusively, Tulley, who was helping one of the young girls from Earth, bent and with his free hand picked up a chunk of rock. It was split and one edge looked sharp. He began to saw at his bonds. The silvery netlike stuff resisted.

He sorted out as best he could one strand at a time and began to saw through. The monsters were bending all their attention toward finding smooth places.

The truck ground over the saddle and sank out of sight. At once pandemonium broke out. The sound of gunshots,

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the crackle as of frying bacon, shrill screams and the frantic revving of the motor slashed into the silence of the rocks.

Immediately the monsters started out for the crest. Mucous poured in sticky floods from their open pores, lubricating their tendrils. They raced past the people. The man dropped his two boxes, jerked out a shiny object like a flashlight, started for the saddle at a dead run.

Tulley sawed and sawed with frantic desperation. The rock would not cut through the silvery ropes. Pike and some of the others followed his example. He broke through the first strand, started on the next. The gunfire from the other side of the saddle, out of sight, crashed to a fusillade and then died away in a scatter of shots. Flames lit up the bright sky ahead of them. Smoke rose, black and greasy. That was the truck blown up, Tulley reasoned.

Still entangled with his bonds Tulley looked up as men came over the slope. Then all his hopes fell. These men ran staggeringly, falling, slipping, chased by the monsters who beat them unmercifully. Swiftly they were rounded up, their clothes stripped from them, their wrists tied with that infernal rope he could not cut with his silly rock. A monster saw him. Emitting a blubbering cry of rage it struck him savagely, knocking the rock from his fist, knocking him headlong. His head struck a boulder. Amid a shower of sparks and the sensation of the world falling on him, Roy Tulley lost consciousness.

III

"Here, drink this," Pike's voice said from some misty place beyond the horizon's rim.

Obediently he sat up propped by Pike's arm. He kept his eyes shut. He sucked greedily at lukewarm water, rinsing it around his Sahara mouth, shuddering. His head

felt as though he lay in a bonfire. He ached all over.

At last he ventured to open his eyes.

Above them stars in constellations he had never before seen blazed down. The people, still naked, huddled in their bonds within a staked enclosure. A panikin of lukewarm water stood at his side. Pike sat back.

"I thought you'd copped it then, Roy. They clobbered you but good."

"I can feel it."

At his other side sat the bandy-legged rider, his savage face grim and unrelenting.

"This is Fangar," said Pike. "Between us we carried you in."

"Thanks." Tulley did not want to dwell on what might have happened otherwise. "Where are we?"

"They brought us to this stockade for the night. They seem to have used it before. There are bones piled outside."

No comment seemed necessary. Tulley took another sip of water. "The truck?"

"Blown up. I've not had a chance to speak to the men they captured then. But there's something different about them. Oh, they're men, all right. But they don't want anything to do with us. They keep to themselves."

"If they blew the truck up, maybe they're not so helpless as us."

"They are now."

Fangar said something in his ripsaw voice, then dropped it to his booming bass to finish on a query.

"If we could understand you, Fangar," said Pike, "it would help."

Fangar made a motion of slitting his throat, then cocked his head at the wooden palisade.

Tulley nodded. "Sure. But how?" He spread his hands.

Some time passed in fitful dozing on the hard ground. It was not cold and slowly Tulley regained his feeling that he might live. His head had been bruised, like his body; but no blood had been drawn. The clubs the

monsters used were remarkably effective. All speculation on the situation seemed fruitless. They just had to escape. That was the first priority.

In the morning as the sun rose a thin gruel was passed around in cans and Tulley gulped his portion with gratitude. He'd been starving. In the tanglement of silken threads binding the captives sorting them out was difficult. The monsters untied some prisoners and pushed and clubbed them into two long ranks. By falling and manipulation Tulley, Pike, Fangar and the redhaired girl were tied up together. They were thrust in line. Opposite Tulley walked a man from the group who had blown up the truck. Opposite Pike another. Opposite the girl and Fangar walked creatures who made Tulley blink his eyes. He could not describe them. They looked like some blasphemous cross between insects and crabs, with shells of hard chitin and stalked eyes. He did not look at them for long. Madness as a way out of problems had never appealed to Roy Tulley and he did not intend to succumb now; but sight of those creatures. . . !

He began to get ideas on what had really been happening. He had read widely in the literature had Tulley, and he was susceptible to suggestions that a less poised personality would have shrunk from in despair.

The man striding arrogantly along beside Pike just ahead of Tulley was big, a giant of a man, with a reddish moustache and a brutal face stamped with the ferocious air of command that echoed and yet was dissimilar to the authority in Fangar's face. His companions trailed him. The one beside Tulley was younger, big and tough, his body scarred; and his face, too, bore a scaled-down replica of the brutal authority of their leader.

So far they had not spoken. Now the man beside Tulley said: "My feet are killing me, Wayne. When are we going to make a break for it?"

Without turning his head, the big man said with a snarl that had no single smack of melodrama about it: "They'll get theirs, Corny. But good. I'll personally strip

all the tendrils off each and every one of these Tob'kliacs, so help me Siegler!"

The shock at what they said was heightened for Tulley by the fact he could understand them. At once he spoke out.

"Hey! Can you guys understand me? What's going on?" His excitement mounted. "Who are all these weirdies?"

"Wrap up, peasant," said the man at Tulley's side, unpleasantly.

"But, say, listen—" began Tulley with that enthusiastic thirst for knowledge upon him.

"I said shut up!" Corny didn't look across.

"Yes, but—"

Corny stuck out a leg and deftly interposed it between Tulley's. Tulley fell down to be dragged along as Pike, stumbling back, was in turn dragged on by Fangar. The man behind Tulley, the redhaired girl's companion, was dragged down in Tulley's fall. Bedlam broke out. The monsters, the things the man Wayne had called Tob'kliacs, coiled up blurring and bashing their cudgels at the tangle of arms and legs and heads.

Dazed and flailing his arms in instinctive protection, Tulley was dragged upright by yanking clawed tentacles, thrust back into line, set walking once more. They were following a dusty trail leading between scattered boulders. Vegetation rioted in damp cracks and crannies. The heat crushed down with physical force.

A thing came walking down along the lines. Tulley stared, prepared now for anything. He knew that the monsters and the strange beasts he had encountered so far were nothing extraordinarily special if taken in the context of a nightmare; unfortunately for that theory he had to face and overcome the fact that these things were real, that all this was a part of reality and that it was happening to him. He stared at the newcomer, appraising and calculating, storing away facts and impressions.

He made out there were two of it. The bottom half was a massive torso and legs, superbly muscled, naked

and lemon coloured, with a flat craniumed, idiot faced, diminutive head thrust forward between those magnificent shoulders. Riding the thing's neck sat a small goblin-like creature with a shrivelled body and legs but with a massive domed head and impressive features. Its crooked legs ended in long prehensile toes and these were thrust into its mount's ears. It wore a metal helmet of a bright golden colour that shone and flashed in the sunshine.

A smell of drying hemp accompanied this apparition.

Tulley gagged. Pike choked and said: "Take that stink away!" Wayne, in an angry, dominating, defiant tone said: "That's a filthy Dal-Lount! I've never seen one before—but I've heard tales."

The clothes worn by the goblin creature riding the neck of the large naked mount coruscated with gems and bullion. Tulley could see weapons there. In the mount's shrivelled left hand at the end of an attenuated arm a long switch cracked down on the backs of the captives.

The goblin Dal-Lount mouthed words, splutterings of syllabics, hard glottal consonants, long liquid falls of speech quite alien to Tulley. And then: "Move along you fodder! Get moving or I'll strip the hide off your miserable backs in the name of the Ebon Lord himself!"

As each group of captives heard themselves addressed in their own language a forward movement was discernible along the lines. The Tob'kliacs moved agilely out of the path of the Dal-Lount. Clearly, they respected the thing more monstrous than themselves. Tulley hurried along with the rest, dragged by Pike, dragging the man from the shell-shaped car.

Ahead a space opened out in the rocks. Here the Tob'kliacs began to marshall everyone into four lines, pushing them close together, battering at them to stand pressed close up. In the sweating mass Tulley watched the man in the leather flying helmet bring the red power box and the control console forward and position them with fussy precision over against a huge boulder blocking the end of the trail. He watched the sequence of

operations as switches were thrown, dials set, and saw the black formlessness of nothingness grow against the boulder. This time the opening onto another world grew only ten feet tall and seven wide. It pulsed there, waiting.

"As soon as you move forward, run!" shouted the Dal-Lount in the English section of his orders. "Run and keep on running! Do not stop or you die!"

Everyone could feel the tension. Everyone knew that they faced some incredible danger. Not knowing what that danger was, what kind of peril they were to enter, made the waiting terrifyingly claustrophobic. Pike glanced back at Tulley, swallowed, tried to grin.

Two of the Tob'kliacs, their tendrils flushing pink, vanished through the blackness. Then the captives began to run through, lashed by Tob'kliacs on each side, hounded on by the last at their rear. There were more captives than Tulley remembered having seen before the stockade; evidently the slave raiders maintained that as a depot. The Dal-Lount, too, must have been there. Tulley ran forward and plunged through the hole of darkness where a solid boulder should have been.

The heat of sunshine still beat down; but its quality differed in a subtle way. Shadows lay grotesquely wrong. The ground looked like loose silver sand, marked by the footprints of those who had gone before. High against the sky like a brazen bowl dark specks swung and swooped. In all that wide expanse there was nothing but the silvery sand and the dark dots moving menacingly in that brilliant sky.

They were all through. Tulley saw the leather-helmeted man race past carrying the red power box and followed by the man who had driven the truck carrying the control console. They were running as though demons trod on their heels. Evidently they were going ahead to set up their black gateway out of this world. Their jerky movements, the haste of the monsters, the shrill yells of the goblin-like Dal-Lount struck notes of terror into the scene. To get out of this world seemed the most im-

portant thing in all the worlds, then, to Roy Tulley.

The black dots pivoting above them swooped, struck.

The Dal-Lount lifted a weapon from his belt, aimed it. A purplish beam sprang out, crisped the diving things. What they were Tulley could not clearly see; but he could hear their high harsh cries. Their wings blattered against the sunlight, green and indigo, vigorous with purpose. He saw dangling claws at the end of unreeling tentacles, like dragline grabs. He saw one close over a captive, snapping the silvery netlike cords, snatch him, shrieking, aloft.

The feeling of absolute helplessness sweeping over Tulley drove his pumping legs over the sand.

The driver and the leather-helmetted man fired upwards.

Green-winged monsters fell from the sky, crisped and burning, screaming. But still they swept down trailing their unreeled claws. Still they snatched victims from the running lines of prisoners.

The leather-helmetted man tried to duck, stumbled, was snatched up. His head and legs protruded on each side of the closed claws, feebly moving. His weapon dropped to thud into the sand less than ten feet from Tulley.

Tulley didn't hesitate. With a great shout he dragged on his cords, pulled Pike and Fangar with him, hauled the man behind him along. Running, stumbling, he reached the weapon just as he felt the drag of his bonds seize him. He picked up the flashlight-shaped weapon, turned, was dragged back into line by the general onrush.

Wayne shouted at him. "Cut the cords you idiot!"

Running, Tulley looked at the weapon. A handle, a lens, a stud. Clumsily, so as not to hit anyone, he pressed the stud with the lens aimed at the ground and the netlike cord in the beam. The purple ray pulsed out, the cord shrivelled, fell away.

"Ours, ours, you numbskull!"

Pike was free. He cut himself free from the man follow-

ing, handed the weapon to Pike with a breathless: "Get Fangar loose!"

Wayne and Corny were raging at him. On their other side the other men of the second two lines shouted and yelled, holding up their hands. The line slowed. Green-winged monsters swooped and their claw-like grabs span dizzily through the bright air. Tulley ducked. The man behind him screamed, once, and then went whisking away into the air engulfed by a grabline.

"Hurry up!" shouted Wayne. The blood burned in his face. Pike ran along the line, cut Wayne free, cut Corny free, turned—and Wayne took the weapon from his fingers as a bully takes a candy from a child.

"Thanks, son—now it's our turn!"

Tulley had never thought to see that black blank orifice of nothingness as a haven of refuge. But when he saw it ahead of him, four square, black and inviting, with the driver beside it shooting up at the green-winged monster that had snatched his comrade, Tulley felt a warm regard and a desperate desire. He plunged on behind Fangar. Pike was half pushing, half carrying the redhaired girl. She had seen the man with whom she had been captured snatched aloft and her face had turned grey and broken with horror. But there was no time for gawping now, no time for regrets, no time for anything save to hurl forward and plunge through the blackness.

IV

Orange and ochre mists clouded his sight.

He could hear yells and shrieks, the dull clomping sound of giant jaws, could smell a fragrance of crushed orchids, could feel the tremble of the ooze beneath his feet. He hauled up in his panting run, almost colliding with Fangar in the mist. As soon as he stopped his feet began to sink into the ooze.

"Where the hell are we?"

"Nowhere they planned to bring us, that's for sure," panted Pike. "My guess is they panicked and set up their little black doohickey in the wrong place."

"Or put us through the wrong dimension," said Wayne savagely, looming out of the mist. He stood there blockily, fingering the purple-beam weapon. Corny, panting, joined him with two or three others of Wayne's men. Pike kept good hold on the girl, who, so Tulley saw, didn't mind at all that a strong young man wanted to take care of her.

"Dimension?" said Pike.

"Oh," said Tulley. "Yeah—well, it figures, doesn't it?"

They walked forward carefully over the oozing ground skirting pools of acrid water from which the coils of mist arose. Somewhere the noise still went on; but remotely, as though separated from them by veils of attenuating substance. Then Pike hauled up with a gasp, and his left hand around the girl's waist flung her back at Tulley who caught her deftly. Pike jumped at Wayne and pushed that big ugly man sprawling sideways.

"What fool's game!" began Wayne in his bullying voice.

Then they all saw the flower. It closed six feet tall petals. It lifted those petals where they had been arranged like a star on the ground, the stamen a single scarlet stem in the centre, clashing those hard petals together with the noise of cymbals. The girl screamed. Wayne staggered up, covered in mud, cursing, aimed the beam weapon and crisped the deadly flower into slimed ooze.

He was shaking. He ground the ooze of the ruined flower into the ooze of the ground.

He did not, as he had when he'd taken the weapon from Pike and there had been no need to, say a thank you. He went on grinding the ooze down. He did say: "You're quick, son, I'll say that. I didn't spot the beast. I won't forget."

The little party stared about them in the orange mists.

Tulley felt marooned. They could see more of the

flowers, their glossy leaves spread out over the ground, the inviting scarlet stamen erect and equivering in the centre. They skirted the petals very very carefully indeed. Now the booming sounds and that eerie scrunching of giant jaws were explained. How many of the captives had ended up meat for flowers?

"The Tob'kliacs made a mad mistake this time," said Wayne. "Any luck, Corny?"

The younger man stood at Wayne's words. He lifted his head. Slowly, he began to turn around like a weather vane. The look on his face Tulley could describe only by saying it was ecstatic—rapt in contemplation.

"Nothing." Corny came back from wherever he'd been.

"Hell." Wayne kicked the ooze. "Well, portals always clump together. There has to be another one around nearby. We'll find it." He turned to Pike and the girl. "I'm Djeen Wayne Gnurland delt'Fron. You call me Wayne. You?"

"Graham Pike—and this is Roy Tulley and this is Fangar."

Then, surprising Tulley, the girl spoke in her liquid tongue. She sounded distraught, still, shaken by a horror her civilisation had not led her to believe could exist.

"She says her name is Poylee. Her cousin was snatched by the things back there—I've no idea which dimension that was. Hey, Corny. Any ideas?"

"None. We're a long ways from Irinium, believe you me."

A string of curses ripped from Wayne. "Stranded in the dimensions!" he said bitterly. "It had to happen to me."

"You're not stranded, Wayne," Corny spoke up with a strange hurt in his voice. "I'm along, don't forget."

"I don't," grunted Wayne. "But I refuse to think of the other thing you suggest. That's indecent."

One of Wayne's men said: "At least we shook those Tob'kliacs and the Dal-Lount. I reckon they're flower fodder now. Haw, haw!"

That, surmised Tulley, was how these men were. They knew what the score was, unlike him, and their savage toughness could cope. Well, so could he, couldn't he?

Wayne stroked his reddish moustache. "I don't like to think what the contessa is saying right now. She was expecting me to bring back a load of—well, never mind. That's all gone back with those slavers, may Siegler rot 'em!"

Poylee clung to Pike now. She was exhausted. He bore her up manfully; but presently Tulley joined them and put her other arm over his shoulders. He could not help but see the way her breasts thrust up as her arms pulled. She was a dish, all right, and tricky old Gray Pike had stepped in. Well, surmised Tulley, there would be other dishes by the time they'd figured a way through the dimensions back home.

Corny stopped again and pivoted.

"What's he doing?" Tulley asked one of the men, a yellow-haired youth with a twisted mouth and a scar running from his navel to his left hip bone that looked as though the wound might near have killed him.

"He's seeking a portal, of course." Yellow hair was contemptuous. "We've got to find a way through the dimensions back home to Irunium—home," he added, with a cynical twist. "Irunium and the city of diamonds is all the home I have, now."

Maybe it was maudlin sorrow for past misdeeds; maybe it was the sudden yelp from Corny as he stopped rotating and fixed his staring eyes on a space between mists a few yards off. Everyone looked at Corny. And Yellow-hair stepped back and the quiescent petals of the giant flower licked up like hands in prayer and engulfed him.

A bulging struggle began within the flower. Corny had run ahead, following as though a blood trail. Wayne crashed after him with the rest of his men and with them ran Fangar. Yellow-hair had had no time to make a sound and the clashing slobbering of the petals had been drowned by the splash of feet.

"We've got to do something!" yelled Tulley. He slipped Poylee's arm from his shoulder and Pike caught her sagging body. The flower writhed. Tulley grabbed the top of a petal and hauled back. He dragged the tip down, felt it resist, then the sweat on his hands slipped and the petal clacked back.

"Curse it!" he gasped. He took another purchase. This time he rolled the petal down half way. He shoved his knee up, ledged it over the petal, tried to lever it down. Both his arms were stiffly pressing down, the veins standing out, the blood thundering in his head like a steam loco. He looked into the flower.

Yellow-hair was dead. Yellow-hair was already half eaten away by the acids secreted by the man-eating flower.

Yellow-hair lolled forward and his chest thrust against the edge of the bent-over petal and against Tulley's straining hands.

"Yaargh!" yelled Tulley.

With a fiendish grin of corpse-like ghouliness, Yellow-hair slumped down, his lower body deliquescing. He was wedged for a moment between the two adjacent petals. His head leaned forward towards the horrified Tulley. He couldn't move his fingers. Yellow-hair grinned at him with a lych grin. Something glittered with sparks in his hair. A jewelled band fell forward. With a shriek of pure horror Tulley dragged his trapped hands away. He caught the falling jewelled band and staggered back to flop into the ooze. He was shaking and sweating all over.

Pike helped him up.

"Roy! For God's sake!"

"I—I'm all right. It was just—just the sight of the poor devil—that happens to us all; but it happened to him too darned quickly."

"What's that?"

"He wore it in his hair." Tulley lifted the jewelled band.

"So all right, then." Pike snatched it. "It looks like it'll

buy enough for a pad in San Francisco, and a heap and maybe enough for us to put our feet up for the rest of our lives."

He cast about him, then, with a grimace, said, "No pockets in a birthday suit," and thrust the band into his hair around his head.

"Let's go catch up the others," he said.

Poylee said something in a sharp excited voice.

"What?" shouted Pike. "Hey, Poylee—I can understand what you're saying! Roy—she's making sense!"

At that moment Wayne turned from the mists, barely visible, a massive dark shadow wreathed in orange and ochre.

"Hey, Pikel You coming with us?"

"Sure thing, Wayne! Right with you."

When they joined the group and told the others of Yellow-hair's ghastly death, Wayne just grunted. He saw the jewelled band around Pike's head outside his hair.

"So you rescued his translator. Well, Pike, son, you keep it. It'll be more useful to you than decorating a bloodsucking flower, at that."

"Thanks, Wayne," said Pike. They all understood the value of the gift.

"Now bunch up. Corny's putting us through to a dimension he hopes will see us well on our way."

"I'm not sure where it is," said Corny. "We're not on the Myxotic Durostorum Agraving vector this way, I think. Still," he brightened, thinking professional thoughts. "If I can bring back some fresh dimensional loci to the Academy the academicians may—"

"Get on with it," rasped Wayne. "Just be thankful I trust you enough not to use a chain." He shook his head. "I must be mad to trust anyone—but as a porteurig academician you share the contessa's trust and her trust is good enough for me."

"There aren't many better than me," said Corny with complacency. "Even Soloman—"

"Get on with it!" roared Wayne.

Tulley, with his ankles lapped by ooze, had quite enjoyed the sideshow. But he felt keen delight at Wayne's tone. Corny was too cocksure of himself, clearly conscious of a position he held that put him in a different sphere from the others in Wayne's party. Just what was to happen Tulley did not know; but he had a nasty suspicion he could guess. They stood there in the floating veils of orange and ochre mist and, one by one, they disappeared. When it was Tulley's turn, immediately following Fangar, he abruptly and disastrously felt that same pingging snap in his head, the sense of dislocation, the feeling of horizons suddenly extending like rockets in all directions.

He sprawled into Fangar, who turned with the lithe ferocity of a cat to catch him in iron-band arms.

"What the blazes is up with you, Roy?" demanded Pike.

"My head!" Tulley felt those same sensations, as though his head was being puddled by demons.

The others were pushing on, following Corny across a grassy slope in this new dimension, heading for a stream. Helped by Fangar, Tulley followed. The sequence of events thereafter blurred for Roy Tulley. He was aware of pain and more pain, of the growing mountain of forces bearing down on his mind and yet, paradoxically, of forces seeking to prise open his head and liberate his mind to the winds of the world.

They went through a number of dimensions, and Corny grew more and more confident. At last, visible only through a grey mist shot with scarlet pain for Roy Tulley, they came out to a wide road with a city in the distance. Roofs and towers gleamed in the sun. People moved about the fields and animals trotted along the road.

"That's City Prime, in Brorkan," said Wayne with a satisfaction that brought his brutal smile into play. He laughed his gritty laugh. "We can find the contessa's agent there. You've done it, Corny—even if you've half killed this steechlo Tulley here!"

And Wayne guffawed his good humour to the sunshine of this familiar dimension.

V

A bath and shave, a huge meal of succulent meats and luscious fruits and brown crumbly whole wheat bread sent on its gulletting way by draughts of wine like liquid gold, a wide bed of comfortable pillows—and oblivion for ten hours.

After that, blinking awake in the afternoon sunshine of another day, Roy Tulley felt more like a human being. The pains in his head had receded, although they still growled with remote menace like hounds howling at dusk, and an aspirin, he figured, would clear them up. He jumped out of bed. They had been housed in one of the many guest chambers of the caravanserai—Tulley didn't know the Brorkan name for it—and he pushed open the glassed window pane to look down onto the courtyard. Sunshine splashed thick and yellow and friendly across the cobbles where straw and dung lay scattered and chickens and dogs either scratched or scratched. An ostler was patiently rubbing down some weird kind of animal that, judging by the saddle, was used for riding. Tulley didn't like the look of the thing's wicked eyeballs, nor did he like the way it kept flicking its tail around with a pointed barb at the tip. The ostler kept flapping his rag at the barbed tail, and going: "Tch, tch!"

The warm lazy afternoon smells rose up like a benediction. Tulley put his chin in his hands, prepared to watch and listen. A girl with flaxen hair in braids and wearing a long skirt and a bodice that left her brown arms free came out to the well. She clanked her buckets about, pumping the lever so that water gushed in brief shining jets. The ostler shouted something at her and, with a pert twist of her head, she replied to such effect that he flung his rag down and jumped on it.

Roy Tulley laughed.

THE CHARIOTS OF RA

If that twisty Gray Pike hadn't snaffled the translator band that he, Roy Tulley, had gained, he'd be able to understand these people. He felt no desire to rush off to find Pike, or Poylee or Fangar. Not right now. Now he just wanted to rest quietly, to recuperate, to let the events of this new world come to him.

He watched a man, wearing a long scarlet gown edged with gold lace that brushed the ground and with a tall mitre-like hat of white and scarlet and gold, walk sedately across the courtyard. He carried a book in one hand, open, and he read from it with writhings and pursing of his lips. He looked self-consciously superior, pompous, puffed up with the pride of the good things of the earth, in Tulley's book a bit of an ass, so square he'd never fit the plumbing.

He went into a small hut-like construction projecting at ground level from the main building's lathe and wattle construction. Despite this method of building, the glass panes were large. The ostler went on rubbing the creature and, in the way of ostlers, whistling thinly through his teeth. A cat foolhardily ventured into the yard and four dogs left off scratching and muscled after the cat, who leaped onto the roof of the hut wherein the scarlet-robed official performed his offices. Some kicking, banging and general fracas ensued, until a jolly redfaced personage with muscular forearms threw a jug of water over the cat.

Roy Tulley sat soaking it all up.

From the shadows against the down-sun side of the yard a man stepped out, looked about him keenly, walked towards the main gate whose open leaves lay folded back against the wall. He was just about the biggest man Tulley had seen in a long time. He wore a dark green shirt and a russet brown tunic with an abundance of flapped pockets. His heavy brown boots were laced to the calf—Tulley didn't have to be told of the quality of that footwear. The man wore crossed belts with many pouches, and more pouches graced his belt. In that belt

Tulley saw the butt of a Colt .45 automatic and the butts of other weapons that could, in his own limited experience, be anything. The man wore a large rucksack and he carried a thing that might, back on Earth, have been called a Tommygun; but here on Brorkan it was just as likely to be a fancy death ray of some nature. Among the welter of impedimenta that hung about this stranger one item struck Tulley with a note of incongruity. From the man's left side hung a long narrow sword.

At this distance his face gave the impression of square brown toughness, of a big beaked nose, of bright merry eyes; then he swung out of the gate with a long loping stride. Tulley stared. An odd customer. Then a girl rode into the caravanserai and people boiled from doors to attend her and her servants and the moment was broken for Tulley. The girl getting down from her mount was pretty enough but Tulley was in no mood—he had never been one to chase anything in sight, unlike some people he could name, he told himself with severity. As though on cue Graham Pike and Poylee came into the room.

They stopped talking to each other long enough to say a greeting, of which Tulley could understand only Pike's, and then went on gabbling away. Tulley pushed off from the windowsill and, yawning, said: "How's about breakfast?"

They laughed at him. Pike was dressed in some kind of sackcloth tunic and pants, and Poylee wore a long skirt and bodice like the girl Tulley had seen in the yard. Tulley realised he wore nothing. Mores had changed since the time when they'd traipsed through the dimensions mother naked. He jumped into the bed and drew the sheets up. "Well?"

"Dinner will be along soon, Roy, and you can call that breakfast. I've been learning. We've fallen into a sweet racket, and one that can make us rich if we play our cards right. Now, see here—"

Tulley lay back and closed his eyes. Graham was off on another get-rich-quick scheme. "You'd do better to

stick to electronics," he'd said, over and over; but Pike never listened.

"It seems there are a whole heap of dimensions—that's what Wayne and Corny call 'em—millions and millions of them and they're all around us, now, as we sit here."

Poylee nodded, and clasped Pike's hand. She looked a hundred percent more fresh this morning—no, this afternoon—and Tulley wondered if old Gray Pike had scored his usual success. Unscrupulous, Pikey boy, out for number one. To give him his due, he'd always done right by Roy Tulley; but Tulley had never been able to understand just why.

"To get from one dimension to another is pretty tough. We went through that black square opening and Wayne doesn't want to talk about that. But Corny is the most fantastic thing you ever heard! Corny is what they call a *porteur*."

"Like instead of Birmingham, Crewe?"

"No, you freaked-out heap of asthmal! He has the power to transmit people and things from one dimension to another through gates, or portals—that's the way we came here."

"I'm starving." Tulley was determined not to gratify Gray Pike's burgeoning sense of wonder.

"Don't that send you?" demanded Pike, incensed at this cool reception. "Ain't that mindblowing?"

"Sure, sure. I could do with some ham and eggs and a few pints of coffee."

"Aargh—I'll strangle you with my bare hands!"

At this Poylee jumped up, *molto agitato*, and they had to spend a few minutes explaining and calming her down. She was a serious, sweet little thing, and she obviously adored Pike. Privately, Tulley wondered just how much of all this she really grasped. Her cousin had been snatched by the unreeled claw grab of some crazy flying monster, now Pikey boy was drooling his undoubted charm all over her; she didn't stand much chance, really, considered Tulley. But—but he knew Gray Pike; the girl

would come to no real harm.

They went down to dinner in the main room of the caravanserai. Tulley wore a sack-like garment similar to Pike's. Wayne, too, wore one, and he did not like it. He put his awesome face close into the wabbling face of the landlord and puffed his cheeks out and opened his eyes very wide so that he looked like a Chinese devil.

"I can't walk about like a serf!" Wayne gesticulated graphically. "The contessa's gold and diamonds are not enough for you, it seems! No—you have to have more—well, let me tell you, if you don't provide better clothes for me—and my men—by tomorrow morning I'll have the contessa send you to her mines! No, by Siegler—she'll send you to the Big Green!"

"By the morning, yes, your excellency!" The landlord took himself off with a gobbling backward roll of his eyes. "You shall have the best City Prime can provide!"

"See to it!"

Wayne swaggered across to their table. He was at home in a tavern. He called for drinks. He pinched the rears of the serving wenches. Tulley wondered how he'd get on with the girls of women's lib; probably he'd coo and go quiet as a kitten. Then some shift of the dying sunlight through the wide-open windows caught Wayne's face, struck along the arrogant brutality of it, brought out all that brutal confident authority; and Tulley wasn't so sure about the well-being of the ladies of women's lib.

In the flagged room with its scrubbed tables and oaken benches and the winking light reflecting from copper and pewter pots, no one took overmuch notice of Fangar. He wore a sack-like garment that looked not unlike any of the others; the difference lay beneath, where the proportion of leg to body was so grotesque—and yet, and yet, Tulley felt no single qualm about Fangar's appearance, no shiver of revulsion. Fangar, he knew, was a man like any other—and then some. Pike laughed at some sally of Wayne's and Corny grunted something, spitting out a fishbone onto the floor. Tulley felt the skin around his

forehead tighten. Corny might be what Pike called a porteur; it did not make him any more of a man in Tulley's book.

The girl who had ridden into the caravanserai took her meal in her apartments aloft with her own servants. Tulley concentrated on the food, the wine and one of the serving wenches who looked like a southern peach. The name of the place, he learned, was the Inn of the Friendly Mouse. He liked its atmosphere. You could spend a holiday here away from New York, say, or L.A., that would tone up the old muscles and relax the grey grim pace of city life.

"A bunch of amateurs, if you ask me," Wayne was saying, leaning back, brutally genial, toying with a flagon of wine. "They only had five Tob'kliacs to handle us all. It was lucky for one of 'em they didn't tangle with us once I cut our bonds free."

Tulley glanced at Pike; but that devious character kept his arm around Poylee's waist and his eyes on the plate of nuts before him. He was cracking a nut one-handed and popping the kernel into Poylee's laughing mouth. Tulley thought that Poylee had shifted too far; she was shattered by these events and was now acting like an automaton, feeding on Pike and responding with the actions she anticipated he would expect from her. She'd recover once they got her back to her home, a place called Queran, and she could be treated by a doctor in familiar surroundings.

"We lost a lot of guys," said Corny. "And all the goods. The contessa—"

"You leave the contessa to me, Corny. Once we're back at strength again I can take a party in to recover the goods. I can find a porteur to backtrack, if you can't handle it."

Corny's mean face went meaner still. "I can handle it."

The genial hospitality of the Inn of the Friendly Mouse gibed with the character Tulley had assigned the landlord; but this discrepancy was explained as Corny went

on, complainingly: "I don't trust that landlord. He's new here. Last time we were through Brorkan there was old Fuzz-Puzz—you remember—when we smashed up that orange cart and ran the horses into the river and—"

"This landlord, this snivelling Jalonz, he takes the contessa's gold! He'll obey or by Siegler it's the Cabbage Patch for him!"

The vehemence of Wayne and the roughness of his companions brought only minimal observation from the others in the room. A mixed bunch, they were travellers staying for a night, people of City Prime in for an evening's drink and entertainment, some of them, possibly, boarded here. All in all a mixed bunch. Fangar and Corny were involved in some kind of argument. They could understand each other; but Tulley could understand only Corny. The argument rose stridently, silencing other noises, bringing annoyed faces around to the window table. The landlord, Jalonz, appeared wiping his hands on his apron. At his back two potmen appeared carrying billies. The Inn of the Friendly Mouse had its seamy side, then, like all of reality.

"You misshapen, monkey-tailed, goat-faced baboon!" Corny was shouting, banging the table so that the pots jumped.

Fangar's reply, all spitting and explosive plosives, sailed over Tulley's head. He glared at Pike. "Let's have that translator, Gray. I have to know what this is all about."

"Aw—I'm just enjoying a good slanging match."

"Give it here!" Tulley snatched the jewelled band and clamped it around his head. As he did so Fangar, who could move like an uncoiling spring, reached up and snatched Corny's translator band, jammed it on his own head. His black-barred eyebrows were jutting down and out over his eyes like toecaps.

"You contemptuous whipper-snapper! I'd roll you up and eat you for breakfast!" Fangar's own supreme assumption of authority broke down all Corny's more ma-

levolent spite. Fangar spoke with the certitude of a man who knew his place in the world. He was sure with the sureness of tested strength. His poise remained, even though he had snatched the translator and donned it. Now he could speak to all these people and let them hear that he was upholding his own code of honour. "I am not a servile man," he boomed out magnificently. "I serve those who serve me, in equal shares of labour and gratitude. I do not serve this squeaking little cur Corny for a handful of trashy gems from his contessa he is so frightened of!"

"You'll damn well do as I say!" yapped Corny.

"By the potency of Potent Pegu himself! You forget you speak to a Rider of Wilgegen!"

"Your little hick dimensions mean nothing to me! I'm a porteur for the contessa di Montevarchil! That's something big among the dimensions!"

"Shut your stupid trap, Corny!" raged Wayne. He rose mightily from the table. It toppled over. Corny tried to strike out at Fangar. Tulley leaped up. Fangar took one mighty wallop at Corny, knocked him six feet back on his seat, yowling. People milled and a few pewter pots caromed against skulls. Pike was laughing like a drain. Corny, his face abruptly changed in aspect, scrambled up somehow from all fours, ran scuttling out the door. Fangar, icy rage impelling him, followed.

"Hey, Fangar!" yelled Tulley, running out after the bandy-legged hunter. "We've only recently met; but we've been through a lot together. Take it easy on that skunk, old pal—he could come in useful."

Still running, Fangar rasped out: "He has insulted a Rider of Wilgegen and much as I appreciate your advice, Roy, my friend, this crawling klacki must be taught a lesson."

Down the street they ran, past the leaning fronts of houses, rounding carts just pulling in the gates of other hostelryes, the shadows throwing all one side of the street into gloom, the other side glowing red as though

drowned in copper strands. They dodged dogs and cats, leaped children immersed in their own fights, leaped to avoid the water buckets being carried by scullery maids. Fangar was gaining on Corny. Those little bandy legs could cover the ground at an amazing speed—as Tulley found out, panting and puffing to keep up. The others from the Inn of the Friendly Mouse bayed a rout after them. Corny raced on. Tulley could catch glimpses of him past Fangar. By putting on all the speed he could muster, Tulley caught up with Fangar, put a hand on his shoulder. He couldn't speak for gulping air.

Corny stopped. He whooped for breath. He looked back at Fangar and Tulley as they charged towards him. His face showed evil triumph, a blaze of crafty guile, a gloating appreciation of his own power.

"Oh, nol" stammered out Tulley between gasps. "Stop, Fangar, hold up!"

Fangar tried to shrug himself clear of Tulley's fingers. Tulley held on, dug in his heels and braked. His heels in their wooden sandals skated over the cobbles, clickkety clackkety click. He tanged himself up with Fangar.

"We've got to stop short!" he was yelling.

"Let me at him! I'll wrap his intestines around his collar—". Then Tulley's feet tangled with Fangar's and they went down. As they rolled Tulley saw Corny with shocked and horrified clarity. Corny gloated on them as they tumbled to the ground before him. Just what he did, what he thought, Tulley did not know, but—

Pain—a constricting and yet expanding flower of pain opening and closing inside his skull—a feeling of falling, a sense of disorientation, as though he was being blown down the winds of the worlds—and—

"He's porteured us through into another dimension! He's marooned us in another world!"

And then that new world came up and engulfed Roy Tulley in a gluey embrace.

VI

It was dark.

It was hot.

It was wet.

It was, in short, gluely uncomfortable. Tulley spat a mouthful of cold custard and rolled over, tried to stand up. His feet skidded on serried banana skins and he fell flat on his face again. At his side Fangar described with some anatomical exactitude the exact parentage, upbringing and eventual fate of Corny. Despite their predicament, Tulley shuddered. Fangar sounded so knowledgeably certain. He crawled in the general direction of Fangar's voice, slipping and sliding in pools and mounds of different consistency. The gluey stuff was cold to the touch, and yet the air and water were warm, uncomfortably so.

They clasped each other around the waist—at the incongruously different levels of each—and struggled upright. Smells of cold collations and hot stews, of rice and bananas and oranges floated tantalisingly about them. They could hear the continous murmur of running water and the sharper breakings of falls and rivulets.

"Where the ice-fanged Zitzimmas are wel" Fangar boomed his frustrated wrath at the night sky. No stars were visible behind the cloud cover. A warm wind swept across them and every now and then patters of dirt or sand flew across them, stinging their eyes, fluttering into the water like expended buckshot.

"Ice-fanged Zitzimmas," said Tulley, admiringly. "He sounds a right—"

"The mountains, towering to the sky and capped with everlasting snow, that ring the mouth of Hell."

"Oh."

"Not, friend Roy, that I believe we are there at this moment. We are, I truly believe, in a madhouse."

"If we aren't, then I'm beginning to turn into a likely candidate for one."

Tulley spoke no more than the sober truth. Now he fully comprehended what Wayne had meant when he'd told Corny, back there in the orange mists with the cannibal flowers, that he refused to think of the other thing, that it was indecent. Then Wayne had been stranded among the dimensions and was actively seeking a portal with a porteur along. What he had refused to contemplate was being stranded without a porteur.

That fate had now befallen Tulley and Fangar.

"I know nothing of these dimensions," Fangar was saying. "But it seems to me that people keep popping from one to another like lovers in a Froken farce—"

"Where I come from that's French farce."

"—so we're bound to meet up with some other dimensional travellers soon. Now our first priority is to find decent clothes, food and shelter, weapons—and a mount!"

"I suppose you Riders have a pretty close cultural link with your—hum—horses?"

"Horses—these translators are tricky things, Roy. We call our mounts oitas. The Riders of Wilgegen have ridden their oitas to glory for three thousand years of history and pre-history. In the thunder of hooves is heard the rallying cry of honour!"

Tulley was getting his mental second wind. "It's a thought," he said. "Primitive to some; but I guess I understand what you mean, Fangar, old pal. And thanks."

He understood, did Roy Tulley, what Fangar had been about. The supreme confidence the blocky man exuded did, in fact and truth, help buoy Tulley. Closer to the harsher side of reality in his own barbaric world, Fangar understood problems of immediate survival that Tulley, used to refrigerators and automobiles and tv sets and corner drug stores, would find almost insuperable. Almost—for Tulley had a certain deep sense of his own worth and fitness for survival. Now he vowed that he'd

face what was to come in that spirit and show this bandy-legged barbaric Rider that a guy from Earth could act like a man, too.

"My thanks are due to you, Roy."

"We're going to come through this little lot, Fangar. And we'll find a porteur or an electronically powered black gateway. And on the way we'll have a barrel of laughs." He wondered, then, if he'd overplayed the nonchalant tough bit. But Fangar took it as intended.

"I never apologise," Fangar said in that bass booming voice. "But I will own to some miscalculation on my part when I chased Corny—you spotted what I failed to see, that he would porteur us into another dimension as soon as he decoyed us to a portal."

"Forget that. We're here. What was that shopping list of yours again? Clothes, food, shelter, mounts?"

"Aye—and weapons!"

Supporting each other and moving with care they began to negotiate the slippery slopes and quaking pools. A low distant rumbling fretted the hot air. They stopped to listen, their heads cocked.

"If I was on Wilgegen now—". Fangar's voice sounded low and intense. "I'd swear that sound could be made only by the thunder of hooves!"

"Probably thunder."

"No—wait—look!"

Away through the blackness at a distance impossible to judge lights appeared. A whole streaming procession of lights of many colours poured through the night and as they crossed from side to side before them so the thunder of rolling hooves grew louder and louder, and then faded fainter and fainter like a patrol. The lights poured on in shining streams. The noise shivered against the night air. With a last winking star-like effect and a trailing diminuendo of sound, the apparition passed.

"Riders?" said Fangar, wistfully.

"Do you know of anything like this heap of glue on your dimension of Wilgegen?"

"No."

Out of a mingling sense of atmospherically drunken bravado, Tulley said: "Come on. If they were horses they couldn't gallop like that on this slop!"

"I'm with you, Roy. Lead on."

They plunged and staggered through the multi-scented stickiness until Tulley's foot struck a brick coping. He stumbled, regained his balance, bent to examine with his hands.

"A low wall—keeping the slop in. Outside—". They pressed on and knelt, feeling the ground. "Thin grass and dirt—where that stuff was being blown from."

"And," said Fangar straightening out, "there's a light."

They walked forward cautiously through the darkness. The light seeped through a rent in a curtain covering the single window in a small brick structure with a flat roof and no chimney. Tulley was storing away impressions. The warm air rustled about them. The door of plaited skins and wattle opened under Fangar's touch. They entered.

The light shone from a tallow dip in a dish set on the brick floor. Skins lay across it. A long spear and a clump of tridents of different sizes leaned against the wall. Utensils stood along the far wall. Against the left hand wall a heap of skins and rugs moved. A woman squealed. A man laughed. A thin white hand protruded, dragged a skin up, covering the poll of dark hair. The woman squealed again.

Fangar moved silently. Tulley saw that he had taken his wooden soled sandals off. He picked up the long spear, hefted it, nodded his head at Tulley. The young man bent down, shook the shoulder of the man in the skins, said: "Ah—excuse me—"

The man reacted with jackrabbit speed. Naked, he jumped up. The woman fell back, her mouth opening to scream, her face abruptly distraught. The long degutting knife in the man's hand swept without hesitation towards Tulley.

Skipping nimbly sideways and clattering on the bricks, Tulley saw Fangar bring the spear forward with a delicate precision of aim that halted the point two inches from the man's stomach. The sudden glitter as the knife fell from his opened hand reassured Tulley.

"Still, dalki, still," Fangar spoke with a quietness that astonished Tulley.

The woman let her scream go with a full-throated bellow.

"Quiet, woman." Fangar let the blade of the spear swing in a cunning arc, the flat slapped the woman across the thigh, returned in a twinkling to line up against the man's navel. Tulley surely admired that workmanship.

"What do you want? We are poor people—we tend the vats—"

"Ah!" said Tulley, jumping to some more conclusions.

"Spare us! spare us!" shrieked the woman. She dragged herself from the bed, a scrawny creature, flabby of breast and infirm of thigh; but animated now by a dread for the life of her man. "We are but linkles that crawl upon the face of Hamoun! We do no harm."

"The knife," said Fangar, still in that strange penetrating whisper. "Oh, woman, what of the knife?"

"We are afeard—there are bogles and demons that walk in the night—and robbers and bandits—". The man spread his hands. He lifted his chin. He had a pride, then, and Tulley began to feel differently about this bursting into a man's house at dead of night.

"They won't hurt us," he said, uncomfortably. "We must have given them an unholy fright. Right in the middle of it, too." He brightened. "Maybe they can help us."

"Yes," the woman said immediately. "I am no longer young, but—". She stood up, and the skins fell away from her body. "But I was once a charioteer, until an arrow severed the cords of my leg. Now we tend the vats. But I know what you want and I can pleasure you."

Fangar shook his head. He looked, observed Tulley

with fresh amusement, affronted.

"I am a Rider—" he began. He shook his head, again, angrily. He had to make his own adjustments to different dimensions, as had Tulley. "We need shelter for the night. And you must tell us what we want to know."

At once the woman said with forced brightness: "The great treasure of AmounRa is not booty lightly to be attempted. Many have tried and many have ended their days on the flat roofs of Apen with the birds tearing their eyes and their entrails from them, still living past a time for death."

Tulley swallowed.

"*Still living past a time for death,*" said Fangar. "Yes. I like that. I would hear the whole poem one day."

"Now how did you guess that came from a poem?" demanded Tulley.

Fangar chuckled. He lowered the spear. "As to that, ask in the pinnacled halls of Garazond! But you two," he went on, jerking his thumb. "Dress yourselves and give us a drink, if you would. We are not robbers. We seek no fabled treasure."

Tulley, thinking of Graham Pike and his aspirations and schemes, wasn't so sure about that last.

The man and woman, whose names they said were Jezd and Ratha of the Black Hair—her poll was indeed exceedingly dark and shiny—rose and dressed and set out earthenware cups containing a beverage at once sweet and mouth-cleansing. Cautiously, Tulley sipped. He wondered at the alcoholic content. Now was no time for drinking to fuddlement. Fangar quaffed his cup at a draught and banged it down, asking for more. Relieved, Ratha of the Black Hair refilled the cup. The atmosphere in the brick building lightened. Even Jezd lost his apprehensive scowl.

"No children?" asked Fangar jovially.

Jezd spread his hands. Ratha clicked her teeth. "In the good time, when and if AmounRa wills. It is a lonely life here, tending the vats. We see strangers seldom. If

you are not robbers—?" Her question hung.

Slowly, Tulley said: "Tell us of this land, for we are travellers from afar off."

Jezd narrowed his eyes and looked at his cup. Ratha, who clearly wore the pants in this household, looked askance. "You could not have come from the mountains, for the lions would have stripped the flesh from your bones long since—you carry no weapons." The last was said pointedly. Fangar had kept the spear close by. "And the great plain would not succour you. The river?"

"It could be," said Tulley, who firmly believed in keeping aces up his sleeve, having learned that from Pike. They had been pitchforked into this world with nothing but a sackcloth garment and a pair of wooden sandals each—those and their native wits. The beginning was inauspicious. But in Tulley was growing a sure faith in Fangar. He drank again, circumspectly, and waited.

"We seek service with the highest in the land," said Fangar, impressively. "For we muster great arts."

Ratha of the Black Hair spilled a little of the wine. Jezd drew his feet up under him on the skins covering the floor.

"Then you must go to Hamoun itself," Ratha said, shortly. "In the temple of AmounRa you will find those who can profit by arcane knowledge. We are simple folk."

Tulley caught some of Fangar's drift as the bandy-legged Rider said: "Do we not speak your language well?"

"Yes—is it not then your own? How can it not be?"

Fangar put a hand to his hair where lay hidden the translator band. His and Tulley's hair concealed the gems.

"Of course," he said, with a chuckle. "I exact service as I render service. For this wine and for food, for a night's shelter we will work a morning with you in the vats."

"Donel" said Ratha of the Black Hair at once. "Two

pairs of strong arms will mightily aid us, AmounRa be praised!"

That night Tulley and Fangar slept turn and turn about. In the morning, all golden and glorious, they stepped out, well-breakfasted, and followed Jezd and Ratha of the Black Hair back to the vats of ooze where they worked under direction until the sun stood high in the sky. Their legs were covered with pale lemon coloured gunk and their bodies smelled of bananas and oranges and strange nostril-dilating scents. All about them in wide pools the vats simmered beneath the sun of this dimension. All across the further horizon the great plain stretched, barren, clothed with thin grasses and the tiny stars of hardy yellow flowers, empty until it met the sky. On the other hand the river wound a sluggish way, feeding its warm waters into the vats. They saw no trees. On that horizon mountains reached up snow-covered peaks. They saw birds wheeling, high, remote, silent.

"You must follow the river downstream," said Ratha, handing them a bag of crusts and a leather bottle of wine. "Our possessions are meager; but we gladly share them with you. Say a prayer for us to AmounRa."

"We will," said Fangar gravely. He saluted them. "We thank you for your hospitality. We take it as a good sign." He turned away, and then, as an afterthought, swung back. "What do you call this whole world—this world that holds AmounRa and Hamoun and Apen?"

"Why," said Ratha of the Black Hair. "Ra, of course."

VII

"By the Potent Pegul" said Fangar. "This sun beats down more shrewdly than does my own sun of Wil-gegen!"

"Yeah," said Tulley, panting along in the dust. "It sure is hotter than a Texas drought."

They were following the curves of the river, unwilling

to strike across bends in case they strayed too far. The river—whose name their hosts of the night had not thought to mention—rolled sluggishly. It was all of half a mile wide, and its marshy banks grew sedges and tall reeds where waterfowl made a clamour. Yet the serenity of the great plain showed a dry contrast. The ground where they walked was hard, and their wooden sandals chafed their feet.

Tulley expanded his chest, breathing in deeply. He stared about, on the sky, on the river, on the birds, he wiped sweat away, he plodded on—and he felt a new fresh eagerness in him, an acceptance and understanding of what life could offer. How did this compare with huddling in a lab or an office, sweating over electronic circuits or plumbing a computer? How—wonderfully!

“Come to think of it,” said Fangar, breaking Tulley’s buoyant thoughts. “They gave us this bag of bread—that must be quite a gift in this culture.”

“You mean the fowl we had for breakfast, the fruits and vegetables from the vats, all indicate that wheat is grown—somewhere—but not here.”

“Precisely.”

The translators tended to translate near literally and Tulley had long since worked out that Fangar was no uneducated boorish barbarian; barbarian he may have been; but he, too, came from a culture that understood the finer things of life—poetry, for example. His speech showed him to advantage. What sword wielding naked savage chopping off heads from some fanged beast-mount would reply: ‘Precisely’?

Tulley laughed out loud.

Fangar glanced across, striding stoutly along on his bent legs with a barbaric roll to his sinewy body. “Yes, Roy, my friend; this day is made for laughing. For we are cut off from the worlds of our birth and yet we live and breathe, we have food, we have our health and strength—and we go forward in the sure knowledge that we will find a porteur and a portal to take us home—the

Potent Pegu would not have it otherwise."

Tramping on they talked over their experiences and what Jezd and Ratha of the Black Hair had told them of this dimension of Ra—precious little, now they came to examine her words. They fell to reminiscing about their own worlds, about Wilgegen and about Earth, and much of what they both learned gave them a better understanding of each other. Tulley spoke of Pike and of his concern for his friend—and for Polyee, too.

Fangar spoke briefly, then turned the conversation. "I think your friend Pike will be well able to take care of himself, Roy. I formed the opinion that he and Wayne were falling into a close association. That will take care of Polyee, too."

Respecting what was left unsaid, Tulley picked up the fresh thread. The river flowed by, the water fowl argued among the reeds, the warm breeze whispered across the great plain—and the sun shone. Fangar began telling Tulley about the different mounts he had ridden and the weapons of which he knew—already he understood there were more weapons among the dimensions than ever Wilgegen dreamed of.

At a time when Tulley would have sworn the sun should long ago have set but still remained obstinately at four o'clock in the shining sky, they halted and Fangar expertly caught a water fowl with a noose of plaited reeds, set a fire going by primitive but effective wood rotation, and cooked the bird with deft skill. Tulley offered no comment, but helped baste the bird in its own fat, and to eat it with relish. They drank from the wine bottle and ate the crusts. Licking his lips, Tulley looked up to see four men clad in scraps of armour over dirty white vests creeping from the reeds upon them. They carried short bronze swords and wicker shields and their scrub-bearded faces with hooked noses and bright glittering eyes bore the lust of coming slaughter stamped plain to see.

"Fangar!" yelled Tulley, scrambling to his feet, the

crust bag spilling one way and the wine bottle the other.

The bandy-legged Rider had needed no warning. He flung himself forward with a ferocious yell. Tulley saw him collide blockily with the leading would-be murderer and knock the shield aside with contemptuous ease, reach out and grab the sword wrist. The man screamed. Then Tulley was running like a maniac with two of the bandits in full cry after him.

Then ensued a mad chase. Tulley didn't see how he could follow Fangar's example. The barbarian was accustomed to swordplay. He understood about those things. Tulley could dream up a delicate electronic circuit and wire in transistors and impedancies and resistors and produce a marvellous gadget to do all kinds of wonderful things; but he had little skill with a sword. At least, he had previously had no skill; he saw that this was a thing to learn, if ever he had the chance. He remembered his young days with the boys' patrol and their thwacking about with quarter staves. Maybe that might serve. He ran on fleetly, blowing, sweating, looking for a suitable place.

His sandals had long since fallen off and now the hard earth of the plain slapped against his running feet. He spotted pebbles and small stones, but nothing large enough to serve—then a larger rock, a hollow containing broken shards of rock and brick, a tumbledown hut with rank weeds. He snatched up a brick, turned, pitched it as though the ninth inning depended on his aim. The brick missed. The running man howled and charged towards him, his bronze sword high and glittering. His companion followed. Tulley picked another brick; hurled it. This time it struck the leading man full in the face. With a cry he pitched forward. Another brick—another miss. A fourth brick—and the second man staggered back from a blow in the chest. Before he could recover Tulley was on him with a rock and bashing down.

All civilised thoughts fled. Sheer barbaric terror impelled his arm. His brain had been seized up. His mus-

cles responded to the adrenalin utter pain had shocked into his bloodstream. When he recovered himself the man was unconscious in a pool of blood. Fangar was shouting frenziedly at him.

"Roy! Behind you, Roy!"

He whirled, the bloody rock upraised. The first man had recovered, his face a red ruin, and was rushing on him with his sword lifted. Tulley jumped sideways, swung the rock. It crashed against the man's head. The sword whistled down through empty air. Again the rock struck. The man pitched forward and lay still.

Tulley tried to stop the shaking, drawing huge agonising gulps of air. He felt sick. The grease of the fowl he had just eaten belched into his mouth. Then Fangar was with him, shouting, brandishing a bronze sword slick with blood.

"You fought right well, Roy! Yet you told me you were no great fighter!"

"Uh—" gagged Roy Tulley. He sat down suddenly. He felt very peculiar indeed.

"You didn't kill them," said Fangar, matter-of-factly. "I'll have to finish them off." Which he did, efficiently.

This was civilised man with the thin trappings of civilisation stripped away. "They'd have killed us, Roy." Fangar was wiping the blade clean on a handful of grass. "I understand from what you have told me that you are not used to this kind of work. Where we are this work is necessary—however unfortunately you may regard that—if we are to survive."

Tulley couldn't speak. He sat shivering while Fangar collected weapons and armour and clothes, disposed of the rest. He sat with his head sunk onto his arms resting on his knees. From time to time a deep shudder wracked his body.

"We're in Ra now, not your Earth, nor my Wilgegen. In my world I would have dealt with this carrion meat in a different way—but they would have ended up dead just the same."

Tulley looked up. "In mine—the gas chamber—the electric chair—the hangman's noose—the guillotine. Yes, I suppose so. Justice and law—"

"We have to make our own. Ra is not an easy place."

They washed the dirty vests in the river and cleaned up the breechclouts. It was a messy business. Fangar sorted out the armour. Between them they put together two sets of harness consisting of link shirts, broken here and there and tight across their shoulders but not so uncomfortable they could not be worn.

"They hung on these thieves," said Fangar. "Mayhap the men of Ra sometimes grow to a size." The mail shirt came down to his waist. On Tulley it fell to his hips. They discarded some of the lesser items of armour; but Fangar strapped on a pair of greaves. They looked incongruous on his chunky legs; but they made a part of his kit and rendered him less outlandish. The hauberks could be let out by thongs in the back and now, as Fangar turned, Tulley saw the Rider's back stretched even the furthest fastening. There was real power packed in that long torso.

"Do we need to wear them now?" asked Tulley. "It's hot."

"Mayhap we will meet others of like mind."

"Um," said Tulley, and kept the mail shirt on.

They took two swords each and two wicker shields. The other two were shattered by Fangar's blows. They started off again—and still the sun stood at four o'clock in that brilliant sky.

"The day is longer here—" Tulley began.

Fangar grabbed his arm, drew him down. On the river a painted barge floated downstream, gilded and with banners and scarves trailing. Music wafted from the covered deck.

"They might be friends. They might not." Fangar kept under cover until the barge had wafted away out of sight.

Tulley began to think the effect of the sun on his bare

head was bringing on a king size headache. His head had been rumbling away ever since they'd started this mad excursion among the dimensions. At last he told Fangar that he'd have to rest and at the next ruined brick hut—they had passed a number apart from the one Tulley had used as an ammunition dump—they found a still standing corner and flopped down to rest.

Over by the river the banks had been scooped out to accommodate vats fed by the running waters; but now these had been abandoned and grew lank weeds, tangles of rotting vegetation in which strange subaqueous creatures squealed and splashed and fought.

They made themselves comfortable. "This place looks as though civilisation is running down," said Fangar. "And that's odd, from what Ratha told us. I gained the impression of a strong aristocracy—which may be good for a country—and a powerful army and a labouring class."

"I don't intend to be taken up as a slave again." Tulley squirmed more comfortably against the sun-warmed brick. "The Tob'kliacs cured me of that."

Fangar laughed. "Me, too. We do not use slaves on Wilgegen. But we understand the forces of labour."

Tulley told Fangar of some of the labour problems his father had had, back in Sharon, and went on to talk of football and boxing and watching the fights, of motor racing and jet travel, of the subway in New York and the Empire State Building and of nuclear submarines. It all seemed a very long way away as he spoke; and yet he knew that all that pulsing American life was going on all about him as he sat here in Ra, going on beyond invisible walls that separated off the dimensions one from another.

"You must visit me in Garazond, my home in Wilgegen," Fangar said. "I know a man can never know all there is to know of his world, let alone all the worlds of the dimensions. But I could show you a good time."

"I'd like that. And you could see the good old U.S. and

A, as my friends say. I don't know what you'd make of it."

The sun now, at last, was clearly descending. The heat abated a trifle; but they knew the night would stay warm. Before the light finally failed Fangar took their supper from the reeds and, this time with a cautious smokeless fire from the pith of twiggy reeds and handfuls of bone-dry grass, they cooked it. They ate and then slept. This second night on Ra they spent at ease in the ruins of a brick hovel, well concealed from prying eyes.

In the morning they were aroused by that long rumbling thunder as of thousands of hooves. They peered out from their hiding place to see a dust cloud moving across the face of the great plain beneath the early sunshine, with the many-faceted wink and sparkle of bronze glittering throughout that marching host. Ratha had been evasive about the phenomenon when questioned. Now the two companions stranded in the dimensions could see for themselves.

"Chariots!" exclaimed Tulley.

They passed in an endless stream, high fronted, tall wheeled, feather decorated, passing in smothers of dust, in a jingling of harness and chiming of bells. The animals drawing them seemed to swim above rivers of dust. Their backs undulated in long serpentine movements and the wheels of the chariots flickered with light. Roaring their power they rolled on across the great plain towards the horizon.

They were heading downstream, towards Hamoun and Apen, towards the fabled treasure of AmounRa.

"Do they go as friends—or enemies?" asked Fangar.

Tulley did not answer. He had the cold conviction that these charioteers meant to wrench the fabled treasure of AmounRa away from its time-honoured sanctuary and bear it as imperial booty back with them across the barren lands of the great plain.

VIII

For the rest of that march downstream they felt impelled to hurry. They found it impossible to talk about anything other than that river of chariots. The spectacle had engraved itself deeply on their minds.

With his barbaric instinct for warfare Fangar tended to share Tulley's irrational jump in belief that the chariots carried animosity towards Hamoun. Just what Hamoun and Apen—twin cities—had done to deserve this wrath they could not know; but increasingly as the river widened they came across clear evidences of a decaying civilisation. Abandoned farms, weed-choked vats, bronze farming implements half-buried and forgotten, burned huts; the landscape cried of violence.

They skirted the still-inhabited dwellings. At the moment they had no further wish to meet other human beings. The areas of cultivation extended and soon they had to make a choice of staying on the demarcation line of the great plain or of sticking close to the river bank. Fangar said: "We go by the river, Roy. Otherwise we would have to turn in through fields and farms to reach the city. This way we approach it directly."

Tulley was happy to acquiesce in Fangar's military ideas.

All that day they plodded on. Tulley's legs gradually came back to belong to him—his feet were still somewhere buried in burning pits—and his back grew relatively accustomed to the chafe of the bronze link shirt. Fangar grumbled about walking like a dalki; but nevertheless set a fast pace on his rolling bandy legs. Towards evening after a number of necessary stops to eat and rest, they saw the smoke.

Black and roiling it rose into the sky in wafts shot through with shafts of flame, flattened out as some higher wind caught it, rolled chokingly down upon them. The

speed of the smoke's growth convinced them that the cities had been recently fired. Now they hurried on close to the river and ready to jump in at the first sign of danger.

Away on their right hand across a jumble of abandoned fields they saw people hurrying, running and falling. Many carried bundles; others carried children, pots and pans, beds, chickens. No one that Tulley could see carried a weapon. They waited in a bed of reeds for the procession to pass; but it continued, a pilgrimage of terror.

Smoke blew down to obscure that scene then cleared in a flaw of wind. The people were scattering, flying, dropping their possessions. Tulley could hear their thin screaming. Then he heard the hard clip-clopping of hooves, the whirring of wheels. Chariots burst among the fugitives. Arrows flew. Bronze licked out. Smoke gusted along the ground, wavered, lifted.

"The gut-rotting klackis!" ripped out Fangar. The bronze sword in his fist lifted.

An old man with a streaming grey beard tottered towards them. His robes were filthy with mud. Supporting him in their terror-stricken flight two young lads tried to hurry him on as they cast agonised glances back. Out from the smoke burst a chariot, its wheels glittering, its feathers fluttering. Tulley caught quick chaotic glimpses. He saw the hard, ferocious, completely pitiless faces of the charioteers as they leaned over the parapet. One handled the reins with professional ease. The other drew a nocked arrow to his ear, let fly. The shaft kicked dirt at the old man's heels. He gave a cry, pitched forward. The two lads tried to lift him, their faces distraught.

With a deliberateness that chilled Tulley the archer nocked another arrow, lifted the bow, aimed . . .

With a reckless shout Fangar plunged up out of the reeds, flung himself forward.

Running with amazing speed on those squat unlovely

legs he covered the ground towards the chariot, whirling the sword about his head. Attracted by this completely unexpected apparition, the archer shifted his aim. Tulley clearly saw the Asiatic grip, saw the fingers and thumb loosen—and then Fangar let fly the sword and leaped sideways.

The arrow split air where he had been.

The bronze sword plunged clear into the archer's exposed throat.

Unable to cry, he jerked back, his head lolling, toppled half over the fancy rail at the rear of the chariot. It swerved, the animals snorting as the driver hauled up. The chariot skidded, its tall wheels screaming. It toppled over. The animals, tangled up with the shaft and traces, kicked and shrieked. Fangar was thorough. His second sword sliced twice and two heads rolled. When Tulley arrived, panting, Fangar was wiping his weapons on the driver's gaudy clothes.

Action, blood, fury and frenzy—and now it was all over.

The two young lads cowered back as Fangar approached.

"It is all right," he said in that strange soft voice. "But we cannot stay here. There may be more."

The old man looked up. The lines in his face had been graven by many years; but this day they had deepened with the horrors he had witnessed.

"I—I thank you—you are a robber and a bandit; but you have helped a fellow creature."

"No time for sermons," grunted Fangar. He reached down, hoisted the oldster up in his gorilla arms. "Let's get down to the river." He shouted back to Tulley. "Roy—grab the bow and arrows—swords, anything else useful. Leave the clothes."

Numbly, Tulley obeyed.

The chariot was being dragged on its side by the terrified animals. They were not horses but Tulley had no time to spend on them now. He snatched up the bow and the two quivers of arrows, a sword and three long spears.

Burdened, he turned away and then paused, shocked. The driver had been a woman.

Her body lay with blood still pumping. Around the severed neck a magnificent jewelled collar winked at him.

"Gray Pike would never forgive me," he said, and rearranged his burden to accommodate the jewelled collar. The warrior, too, him of the Asiatic grip, yielded a harvest of finery and precious stones. Running after the others, Tulley wondered why Fangar had told him to leave the clothes. The robes of pure white edged with bullion, the cloak of glistening feathers, the bronze helmet with its arrogant peak and visor, were far more suitable gear than the vests and link shirts they wore. The driver's corselet and shoulder plates of golden bronze looked as though they'd fetch a good price. But Tulley did as his companion had ordered, and left them.

Shivering in the reeds of the river bank they hid whilst the carnage went on. The whirr of wheels, the shrieks, the rumble of hooves, the thin yelling, gradually faded. They did not dare to talk but crouched down, staring wide-eyed at one another, fearful lest any second would bring destruction upon them.

At last Fangar stood up and looked about. Smoke lay flat above the banks. He coughed and rejoined them.

"It looks clear, now. They've gone."

"How can we thank you, bandit?" said one of the youths. He wore a plain yellow robe, girt about with a jewelled band. His light brown hair was cut neatly to frame his face and he wouldn't shave for a few years yet. He spoke with an odd formality, shyly, as though unsure of himself—a not unsurprising reaction in the circumstances. The other youth looked at once younger still and yet more mature. Dressed in the same way, his hair looked as though the barber had been in so much of a hurry he'd just slapped a basin over and set a lawn mower to work. His face was filthy.

"What's all this rubbish about robbers?" demanded

Tulley hotly. "We're not bandits. We're just simple travellers."

"Not so simple!" put in Fangar quickly and sternly.

"But you are dressed as robbers—"

"Ah! Yes—we had a little argument with some men who tried to slit our throats back there. We had to take their weapons and clothes."

The two lads' eyes opened. The old man made a waving motion with his hand. "I should never have listened to you, Akun. My place is at the high altar in the temple."

"They would have cut you down without a moment's thought."

"Better that than to live knowing I have betrayed my trust!" The old man's agony embarrassed Tulley.

The elder youth wouldn't be put down. "Hamoun has fallen on evil days; but that is not reason for us all to die. Hyktros will rue the day she burned Hamoun!" His face burned with shame and vengeful fury.

"I am very wet and uncomfortable." The second youth spoke in a soft melodious voice. The elder immediately lost all his passionate thirst for vengeance and began at once to assist the younger out of the river. Tulley observed the freshness of the face beneath the dirt, he saw the curve of lip and cheek, the length of eyelash—and he reached out a big friendly hand to help. He clasped the lad and lifted up, saying, "Here, lad, come on, I'll give you a hand."

That hand closed on firm soft flesh lifting in an unmistakable mound beneath the dragged yellow robe.

Tulley smiled. At last he'd met a bird who looked like no bird he'd ever met before. That would be one in the eye for tricky Graham Pike, sure enough.

She gasped.

"Keep it quiet until we are sure they're gone!" rumbled Fangar, annoyed. He crawled out with his arsenal of weapons, peered about, nodded to them to come up.

The girl favoured Tulley with a long look, then turned

away, lowering her eyelids, and colour mounted to her cheeks. Tulley, unashamed, cheerfully chuckling, crawled out after them.

Sights and sounds that met him sobered him. There was no time for dalliance now. They moved among the people lying on the ground doing what they could. The task was not pleasant; but the girl and the old man would not leave until they had done all they could.

Stretching tiredly, Tulley tensed. Through the levels of smoke the unmistakable sound of a chariot's wheels brought him quiveringly alert. From the smoke trotted four animals drawing a chariot. It contained only one occupant. Arrows were feathered into the leather of the chariot and one of the animals was wounded. They were small beasts, prick-eared, soft-muzzled, delicate and dainty. Their coats were soft and fine and their hooves had been painted a bright scarlet and polished to a dazzlement that still showed through the dust and blood.

The driver, a woman, threw up one arm.

"It is all over!" she called, her voice ragged. "The Hyktors have gone—and with them goes the life of Hamoun!"

The animals pulled up. Moving in a drunken kind of swaying, the driver alighted. She stretched out a hand. Tulley saw the ghastly smear of blood all down her left side. Her long fair hair descended in waves to her shoulders. Her bronze armour was dented and dimmed, scratched and buckled. She tried to speak and collapsed in a crumpled heap.

They attended her, washing her in water carried in a helmet from the river. When she opened her eyes the girl Tulley had assisted from the river said: "Oh, Nomee, this is an evil day for Hamoun and for Apen; but at least you still live!"

"And unless we get her back to the palace quickly she won't survive," said the old man, strangely practical. He bustled them about.

"Akun, you must drive. Lara, support Nomee in the chariot—somehow, you must contrive it. Ride for the palace. We will follow as best we may—these two men will aid me."

"Robbers?" said Nomee, faintly. "Surely—"

"Hush, Nomee, dear," said the girl Lara, pressing her white fingers over the pallid lips. "They are not really robbers. They are helping us. Now, hurry."

Tulley watched the chariot move slowly away, jerking its tall springless wheels and cruelly savaging the girl Nomee. The slender girl Lara tried to support the elder girl, tried to interpose her own body to the roughness of the ride. He frowned. Now what had he got into?

Lara and Nomee. Two of them. And this grey-bearded old patriarch—and the youthfully fierce Akun. Maybe Fangar was right. Maybe there were predictions they could make, ways of finding their passage home through the dimensions, a means of getting back to Wilgegen and Earth.

Helping the old man they set off through the smoke for the twin cities of Hamoun and Apen.

IX

"I still don't figure out why you didn't take any clothes off those charioteers," said Tulley, stretching on the wide comfortable bed in the next day's morning sunshine. "You didn't know we were going to fall on our feet like this."

They had been quartered in splendid if run-down apartments in the palace of Hamoun, a mammoth brick construction of many passageways and courtyards, of massive walls and towering sculptures. Soft rugs covered the floors. The breach in the main wall made by the men of Hyktros had served for their entrance. The fighting, so they had been told, had been short and bloody. Then the Hyktrosians had pressed into the inner sanctuary and

taken the great treasure of AmounRa. Tulley and Fangar had not been taken there yet. The people of Hamoun and of Apen after their mad flight were straggling back to the cities, one on each side of the river. Shady avenues and courtyards, lines of trees, many wells and the branching channels of the river artificially cut through the cities alongside many of the streets gave a tinkling coolness to life here.

Most of the smoke of yesterday had risen from the mile-long bridge of boats connecting the two cities across the River Oo. The Hyktrosians had burned that out of spite, old Amoundei had told them. The oldster had recovered swiftly from his experiences. His name, so Akun, the youngster, explained, meant in a language long dead: "Beloved and dedicated to Amoun." He was what this dimension of Ra acknowledged as a high priest, guessed Tulley, and wondered why his elation should be tempered by a chill breeze of unease.

For one thing, the whole place was run-down, going to seed, decayed. The people didn't seem to care. The men wore hang-dog looks, the women looked like slatterns. Many of the enormous buildings were sliding to ruin. Statutes, so high their faces had been sculptured proportionally oversize to compensate for the perspective, were cracking, their paint and gilding peeling. Damp crept in.

"Why didn't we take those charioteers' clothes?" Fangar chuckled. He had reacted to their changed circumstances with characteristic speed. "They were enemies. What would these people have done to us if they'd caught us wearing their hereditary foes' clothes?"

"I take your point."

Fangar guffawed and poured wine from a golden goblet.

"You'd have taken their points, I'll tell you that."

"Yes, so, you thought fast. But we've got to do a whole lot more fast thinking to benefit by this situation. For one thing, the Hyktros didn't plunder very much."

"I could understand that. They came for this fabled

treasure—now you can see what Ratha of the Black Hair meant. A few palace guards were sufficient to stop them wasting time on baubles when they had the main item.” He drank hugely. “I just wonder when the main body will catch up with them, assuming they changed direction at once. These chariot people aren’t Riders.”

The mass of lights Tulley and Fangar had seen on their arrival in Ra had been the massed chariotry of Hamoun and Apen rolling out—decoyed, so Amoundei said with bitter anguish—leaving the cities virtually defenceless. Swift chariots had followed them, directing them to chase, overtake and destroy the chariotry of Hyktros, to bring back the treasure of AmounRa.

In the days that followed, as the cities gradually regained their usual tempo of living and the citizens and slaves and the people of the palaces and temples awaited news of that inevitable battle out there on the great plain, Tulley tried to find out just what the great treasure of AmounRa was. No one he spoke to knew—or, knowing, would tell him.

He spent a good deal of time with Amoundei in his domed chamber upon the roof of the principal temple. Here were ranked clay tablets, leaves of ivory, papyrus books, all filled with a weird hieroglyphic kind of writing completely unreadable to Tulley. Here were strange contrivances of wood and bronze, retorts and jars, skulls and skeletons, amulets and charms that, if he believed what the high priest told him of them, would have not only cured everything everyone had ever suffered from but would have enabled him to whisk back through the dimensions to Kansas.

He grew to respect Amoundei’s wisdom and patient abnegation of self in his conception of his duty to AmounRa and his temples. Akun, as a high priest initiate, also became a good friend. Of the two girls, Nomee and Lara, he saw nothing. As he had expected, he discovered that they were not sisters. Apparently, his questions revealed, two kings ruled—one in Hamoun and the

other in Apen. So it had been for five thousand years. Lara and Nomee were the daughters of the kings. Their fathers and their brothers were out with the chariot host, chasing the chariotry of Hyktros. As for Hyktros itself, that was a vast and powerful empire many weeks' journey across the great plain.

"They would have a base camp somewhere out there," Akun said, savagely, clearly beset with the turmoil within him that he had not been more effective—all he had done was save the life of the high priest, Tulley said, trying to cheer him up.

"I would be a charioteer, like my family! But no—they set me in the temple."

"That is a good life, Akun," admonished Amoundei. "We have many secrets to learn."

"This base camp," said Fangar. "Stores, equipment, food and water—large carts and lots of nageres?"

Akun nodded. "They breed a good strain of nagere in Hyktros. But ours are better, swifter, more stamina—"

Fangar made a disgusted sound in his throat. Tulley knew what that meant. Fangar's disappointment at stumbling across a culture that possessed no riding animals had been amusing to Tulley, frustrating to Fangar, and pathetic if it hadn't been ironical. Fangar had not wanted the clothes of the charioteers; he hadn't wanted their nageres, either. He'd seen at a glance they were not strong enough in the back to support his own tough bulk. Tulley, having read in the literature, had his own ideas there and meant to talk seriously to Fangar when the time was ripe.

The men who had brought the fake message that had decoyed the chariotry of the twin cities out onto the great plain on a fool's errand had escaped. What would be done to them if they were caught made Tulley wince.

Fangar was teaching him the use of the sword.

How simple that sounded! Sweating away in the exercise yard, swinging and thrusting until the muscles of his whole body screamed, Tulley wielded the bronze

sword against dummies and against Fangar himself. He ached every night. He did manage to prove himself not a complete dunce at this kind of thing when Fangar brought out a compound bow and offered to show him how to shoot. Tulley smiled wanly. "I've done a bit of toxophily."

He'd had the archery passion a year or so ago and had invested in super fibreglass bows, all the gear, even sights. He'd found a knack of being able to loose and hit the gold without using the sights. Now he picked up the bow. Skilfully fashioned from laminated wood, bone and ivory, it was a compound bow with reflex curve. A typical weapon of the charioteer. He tested its strength.

"A hefty pull," he said. "But I think I can cope."

As a member of the National Archery Association, which traced its ancestry back to 1878, he'd often shot American rounds although preferring the more demanding and longer initial ranged York round. Now he nocked the arrow—again a finely fashioned artifact with firm erect feathers—cock feather uppermost. He began to push the bow out from his chin.

"No, no, no!" exploded Fangar. He grabbed the bow, clamped his finger and thumb around the arrow and string in the Asiatic grip, lifted the bow out. "Like this!"

The arrow flew accurately at the straw-stuffed target. "See?"

Tulley felt a surge of blood to his temples. Fangar's shaft had struck in the inner of the three black circles surrounding the white circles. The centre was coloured red. That discrepancy wouldn't put him off.

"If I put a shaft into the red—will you believe me?"

Obviously thinking of their sword practice, of what Tulley had told him of his life back in the good old U.S. and A., Fangar guffawed.

With a single speed motion, smooth as oiled steel, Tulley nocked a fresh arrow, using his accustomed European grip, lifted the bow and pushed it away from his

chin. As soon as the bow was fully drawn he loosed. The arrow struck full in the red.

"Now may the Potent Pegu himself witness my confusion!" shouted Fangar. He didn't know whether to be enraged or to hug Tulley, contenting himself with a mighty buffet on his shoulder that sent Tulley staggering. "Well done!"

Rubbing his offended shoulder, Tulley smirked.

Fangar had his revenge when he thwacked and whacked Tulley all around the exercise yard with their blunted bronze swords. Tulley, taking a warm bath and still suffering, promised himself a bout with the quarter staff—although probably Fangar would be a past master at that pastime, too.

Akun came running into the bath house, shouting and raging, waving his arms. His face looked dreadful.

"The army!" he was shouting. Heads popped out of doors to look and men crowded. These soldiers had not gone with the chariots and they thirsted for news. "The army is destroyed!" screamed Akun. "Both the kings are slain! The princes are dead! Broken are the chariots! All is lost! All is lost!"

X

Tulley knew enough now about the charioteers of Ra to understand how those terrible words: "The chariots are broken!" would strike more horror even than: "The kings are slain!"

The cities were in turmoil.

Citizens and slaves crowded to the gates as the pitiful procession of shattered chariots rode in. Tulley saw the wounds, the blood, the agony. He saw the limping nagers. He saw chariots with all their finery stripped away, broken, creaking, barely able to roll. He saw the débâcle of an army and of a people's pride.

"This could finish them off!" he whispered to Fangar

as they stood on a balcony with Akun watching that melancholy column.

"They've really taken a pasting." Fangar's brown hand clasped around the hilt of his sword in remembered calamity. "I know. The Riders of Garazond once fell foul of an ambush set by the Riders of Witzleln. We rode back drunk with exhaustion and loss of blood; but they were nothing compared to our shame." He banged the stone parapet of the balcony. "But we recuperated and rode out and we took the Riders of Witzleln apart!"

"And so we will take apart the chariots of Hyktros!" said Akun. His face still bore that ashy pallor and his eyes showed red and swollen. But he had regained his own icy pride; he had matured in the last hours.

Tulley looked at the youngster with sympathy and he wondered what he'd made of the word 'rider' over Fangar's translator. He had raised no query. It might even have registered as 'chariots.'

"But a start must be made." Fangar was rumbling on in an annoyed tone. Clearly, his own fighting instincts and codes of chivalry had been activated.

Down by the river front confusion prevailed. Because the bridge of boats had been burned the stream of men and chariots piled up there, coming in through the gates of Hamoun and milling now in efforts to secure ferry craft to take them across the flood to Apen. Chariots were being bundled up into discarded heaps. Nagares were being driven off haphazardly by brown-clad slaves. The warriors and drivers were struggling to secure seats in the swarm of boats plying for hire. It was not a pretty sight.

Fangar clattered off down the steps in the front wall of the building, ducking beneath curtains and rugs hanging over the ledges. He ran out onto the jetty. Tulley could see him gesticulating violently. He wore, as did Tulley, a yellow robe with a leather belt. Tulley could hear him raving at the charioteers, telling them they were poltroons, where was their sense of discipline, of

honour—this was no way to behave, casting aside their chariots, their weapons, struggling like a beaten host without pride. He tried to chasten them into a sense of pride. But the charioteers of Apen and of Hamoun were in no mood. They cursed him. They turned their backs on him. At last Fangar returned, his massive brows thunderous, declaiming of what he would do to them were they his men in Wilgegen.

“By the Potent Pegu they need a taste of the snows of the ice-fanged Zitzimmas!”

“Let them go, Fangar. Their spirit is broken.” Amoundei lifted his trembling hands in benediction over the shattered host.

Tulley could understand perfectly Fangar’s position. He equated it with his own feelings at seeing ignorant men smashing up electronic equipment because they could not understand it. Fangar was a warrior, with a warrior’s blood and spirit, and he would be sharing the stigma of defeat with these charioteers of Ra.

A slim black-haired slave girl in a clean brown tunic slipped up to Akun, whispered in his ear, vanished. Akun turned, smiling in a lopsided way that made his grief-stricken face even more woebegone. “Good news, a little, in the midst of sorrow. Nomee is recovered. She would speak with us.”

“Let us go then, and quickly, Akun!” snapped Amoundei. He picked up the skirts of his yellow gown and skipped off down the steps.

They walked rapidly through the streets of Hamoun, crossing fretted bridges above channels of the river, feeling the blue shadows dropping upon them, blinking as they emerged into the brilliant sunshine of Ra. The king’s palace had been built of brick with massive additions down through the centuries until it had become an enormous maze. Brown-clad slaves led them through the corridors. The people of Hamoun generally had fair hair whilst those of Apen were darker, and the insignia col-

ours of Hamoun were crimson over white, those of Apen being emerald over white.

The Princess Nomee of Hamoun reclined on a wide divan with carved legs in the form of leopards. Plump gaudy pillows supported her and slaves monotonously waved vast feathered fans through the warm air. Her tan showed patchy above her pallor; but her face was animated and agitated and her eyes showed a feverish lustre in the sunshine slanting in through ceiling vents.

"And what is to be done now, Amoundei, high priest of HamounApen?" She spoke fretfully, picking at the cloth of gold covering the divan.

"AmounRa in his wisdom has an answer for all things—"

"And what is his answer to a shattered army, a prostrate people, a bankrupt exchequer, a kingless throne? What is his answer to the machinations of Torozei who wishes to usurp my own throne, and that of Lara, too?"

This was the first Tulley had heard of palace intrigue and he felt a twinge of repugnance.

"As for Torozei, he is a blood relation, true. But he has no claim to the twin thrones while you and Lara live. And always, in the past, whenever the twin thrones have been occupied by a single king evil days have fallen on us. Until you take a mate and create a new king, as is right and proper and fitting in the sight of AmounRa and his people elect, then you rule in Hamoun."

"He plots his mischief with the nobles and warriors. He will blame my family for the disaster." Nomee's face tightened and she put a quick hand to her side. At once her attendant stepped forward, and, her body obscuring what she did, ministered to the healing wound in Nomee's side. Tulley felt impressed. This girl was high-spirited, tough, and determined to hang onto her throne—and she was doing all this with a gash in her side that would have hospitalised any man back on Earth.

Amoundei waited and then, with a respectful sigh,

said: "Your family, Nomee, consists now only of yourself."

It was a hard thing to say.

After a space, Nomee said: "We do not talk of the one thing that makes all else a mockery. Why do you evade the thought, Amoundei? Are you afraid to acknowledge to yourself the justifiable wrath of AmounRa?"

"What AmounRa deems fit as a punishment for my sins, to that I will submit. I am the high priest. I stand apart from and between the twin thrones. Without me you are as but bubbles on the surface of Oo—without you I but await the destruction from Hyktros or any other peoples wielding the bow and the spear from the fortress of their chariotry."

"You speak the truth. But we must speak of the ultimate truth, Amoundeil We must speak of the treasure of AmounRa and of its loss and of the doom that falls across all our lands!"

The shiver of dread that spread around the chamber impacted with a physical violence on Tulley's sensibilities. These people lived in the shadow of disaster. Their great treasure had been taken from them. The will to live had been cut down—and yet still that feverish hunger burned in the Princess Nomee. She, at least, still schemed.

In the hush that followed Nomee's baleful words Tulley stepped forward. He drew himself up.

"Tell me," he said. "For I would help you. What is the fabled treasure of AmounRa?"

At the indrawn breath, the frowns, the abruptly tensed gestures, he added quickly: "Know you that I have some powers, as has my companion Fangar. We feel your sorrow but we do not feel your despair. To utter the words of the sages and the wise men—while there's life there's hope. Think on these words. Ponder on them. Tell me of the treasure of AmounRa that we may aid you in your hour of greatest need."

He hadn't read in the literature for nothing, had Roy Tulley. For a boy from Sharon in the good old U.S. and

A he'd spied a right mouthful, then. Fangar was staring at him as though he'd sprouted fire from his nostrils and ears.

Amoundei and Nomee drew close together and spoke in low tones. They glanced at Tulley and Fangar every now and again. Then Amoundei summoned Akun.

"Go you and request the Princess Lara to join us. You may tell her what forwards here. Hurry."

Akun nodded and left the chamber at a run. The wait strung out; Tulley could feel his temples and wrists throbbing. If he'd played his cards wrong, then he might never get back to Earth. Fangar, clearly, was prepared to follow his lead. Yet most of what Tulley conceived of as possible had originated directly in what Fangar himself had suggested.

Akun returned, bowing as Lara swept swiftly in. She wore a long white robe that billowed and pressed enough to indicate she was a fully formed girl and no hobbledehoy young man. Her butchered hair had been partially covered by a diadem of jewelled magnificence Tulley swore couldn't be real—and then gasped again as he realised a princess in this culture wouldn't be wearing paste. She glanced at him, a single look beneath level brows, then without smiling sat down next to Nomee. Two princesses, equals in the sight of men and of AmounRa and all the gods, they conferred quietly together, with Amoundei from time to time speaking a low word of advice or caution.

Fangar whispered from the side of his mouth: "I hope you know what you're doing, Roy."

"I think so. These people have been shaken. They need a fresh focus to build back their shattered pride. You and I, Fangar, my sword bashing friend, are going to provide that focus."

The conference on the divan broke up and Nomee nodded to a giant bronzed slave standing by a gong whose disc reached above the giant's head. Reminding Tulley of youthful days at the movies, the giant rippled

his muscles and swung a hammer at the gong, breaking crashing ripples of brazen sound. Thrice the reverberating gong notes boomed out. Tulley and Fangar became caught up in a flurry of movement as two ornate litters were brought, Nomee and Lara were assisted to recline in them, the bearers started off at a trot and Amoundei, ignoring them, marched out stolidly, his face brooding. Akun caught Tulley's attention, slanted his head, spoke briefly.

"We go to the temple in Hamoun, since from thence was the treasure taken. In two days, with the dying of the moon, it would have been taken across the bridge of boats to the temple in Apen. Come."

They followed the procession which grew with amusing speed into a long line of slaves, acolytes, guards, dancing girls, and the yellow-robed priests who joined in, it seemed, from every pillared archway.

"They're prepared to do anything to forget the shame of today." Fangar grunted his words out in strange contrast to his usual bass boom. "I wouldn't like to be a charioteer of Ra this day, a soldier in the barracks, a slave who tends the nageres. But tomorrow—"

Tulley, for reasons bound up with childhood and Graham Pike and romantic dreaming ambitions, couldn't get the remembered sight of the princess Lara's jewelled diadem out of his mind's eye. He trudged along the hot streets and beneath the balconies where women clustered to watch the procession. He had a few good ideas, culled from the literature, and with Fangar's help he felt a buoyant confidence. There were pickings to be had in Ra—fat pickings that made his rapacious mouth water. Already the dead chariot driver's jewelled collar lay snugged in pieces in the pouch at his waist. That was a beginning.

The Temple of HamounRa reminded Tulley vividly of those massive-columned temples of his own Earth's Ancient Egypt. Much of Ra brought the Nile civilisation to mind. The temple of ApenRa would be similar. Between

them, on alternate months, they shared the fabled treasure of AmounRa.

The procession led by chanting priests and feather-fan waving acolytes and flanked by spear and shield bearing guards mounted the three hundred and ninety nine steps to the main portico. Statutes lived everywhere. Bird-headed, lion-headed, nagere-headed, they glowered down in rank on rank. Their paint and gilding glistened in the sun but with a lacklustre finish, as though no one any longer cared. Dust filled the corners of the steps. Chips and breakages disfigured the bases of the columns with their grotesque capitals in a tradition a thousand miles and unnumbered dimensions away from classical Greece. Tulley plodded up the steps and he felt his heart beginning to thump with excitement occasioned not only by the exercise.

The numbers in the procession dwindled as they progressed through hall after hall, courtyard after courtyard, until when they reached the tall bronze and gold doors through which lay their destination only the small group around the two litters and a half a dozen elder priests remained.

On the hidden clangorous sound of a gong the doors opened.

They stepped through into a vast vaulted space of shadows and mystery, of columns and pillars set like the trees of a forest, of a profusion of paint and sculpture dazzling to the eye. Flambeaux blazed everywhere. They advanced like ants over a forest trail. The flambeaux blazed from pillars and cornices and walls; but the shadows remained in the angles and the spaces between and would not be banished.

Amoundei moved forward slowly with his priests around him. Akun, significantly, remained with Tulley and Fangar and the other non-priestly watchers. The two princesses, Nomee and Lara, stepped regally from their litters and glided to twin golden thrones, set one each side of a space between pillars. A low ivory rail barred

off that space. Before the rail the priests stood, lifting up their arms, their faces in shadow, their robed backs and sparse hair drenched in the light of torches.

The whole space between the two pillars and the thrones was hidden by a great purple cloth that depended from golden rods high above. Silvery cords hung to the floor in ornate tassels. Younger priests, their yellow robes covered with bronze corselets, moved forward, grasped the ends of the silver cords, looked expectantly at Amoundei.

"Only the emptiness remains!" cried Amoundei in a high wavering voice. "Here revealed for the eyes of two unknown strangers who are yet men of honour and who seek to glorify AmounRa is the *Yonaphren* of the high temple of HamounRa. Empty and barren and without the light from the *Linaphren* is the holy place. Open! Open! Let the strangers see the glory and the shame of HamounApen!"

With a chingle of gold upon gold the purple draperies parted.

XI

As the drapes rustled back Tulley saw dark irregular stains upon the purple and knew them for blood.

Then his eyes, all his skin, the nervous endings all over his body, tingled as though with an electric current. He saw—oh, a blaze of gems, colour, forms and sinuous shapes of gold and silver surrounding an oval shape of darkness, a brilliance that dazzled and made him close smarting eyes. But—more than he saw, more than he felt, he experienced a pain, a physical paralysing pain impinging on his mind. He opened his mouth, gasping, yet unaware of mere bodily reactions. The pain penetrated him. Sheets and floods of pain disoriented him so that he stumbled against Fangar. He could not see, could not hear, could not smell. Aware only of the pressure that

insupportably tried to press his brains inward and simultaneously to lift his mind asunder from within, he lost track of the world.

And yet—and yet somehow, as though he peered through the fog of delirium, he became aware of a thin and intense spot of white light. It drilled him to the core of his being. He could not judge where it was, its distance, its location. Around this intense and burning centre he could feel—could feel!—a greenish haze, a flickering and uncertain coolness of colour. Then all vanished.

He found himself standing outside the temple, supported by Fangar, and with Akun looked anxiously at him.

Amoundei said: "Truly he was as one possessed. Transcendental manifestations undoubtedly were vouchsafed him. Blessed of AmounRa. Now I regain the faith I believed I had lost."

The pain had completely gone. Tulley felt fine. Being Roy Tulley, confidant of Graham Pike, he thought that old Amoundei was pitching it a bit steep, way out, man, a real crazy groofer. This was for real. Sniff a little secret of the universe, man, and set in swinging.

"You are recovered, Roy?"

"Sure, Fangar, sure. I don't know what came over me."

Fangar looked uneasy. "They say there are dark secrets attaching to the *Yonaphren*. Even without the *Linaphren* it possesses awesome powers."

Tulley began to get an inkling of what the fabled treasure of AmounRa had meant to these people. If the Hyktros had not stopped to plunder that fortune in gems but had merely snatched up the *Linaphren* and departed then what mighty and inconceivable power must that not contain?

This was no simple uncomplicated business of chiselling out an eyeball from an idol, however little or yellow or however far north of Khatmandu it might be. He'd been really sent back there in the sanctuary. That intense white core of light and its fuzzy cool greenness—

had he seen that? Had that been real? Glaring at him from the centre of the jewelled oval of blackness, had he felt, seen, experienced, *sensed* all that?

He had made up his mind what he was going to do and in conversation with Fangar and Amoundei he learned enough to make him feverishly push ahead with his plans. For what Amoundei told them bore most significantly on their dilemma among the dimensions. No one else had seen that manifestation within the sanctuary. Amoundei looked utterly shaken when Tulley asked him to explain.

"Our records go back four thousand years. Before that we can only conjecture. But we believe that our forefathers came to this land through the *Yonaphren* in this temple and the *Yonaphren* in the temple of ApenRa across the Oo. And in all that span of time no one has ever experienced what you experienced, Roy Tulley, stranger to this land."

Fangar, when they were alone, reasoned it out with Tulley.

"These people's ancestors must have come here through the dimensions! They must. That makes the *Yonaphren* portals to other worlds."

"Four thousand years!" said Tulley. "There have always been stories in my world about the Egyptians, a people not unlike these people of Ra, the darker ones, travelling across the Atlantic to my country. If they did so and penetrated to Kansas—and went through a portal to come out here—whew! It boggles, does that."

"But if you have this sort of civilisation in your dimension, Roy, then you would understand the chariot, and the sword—and—"

Tulley held up a hand. "Hold on! We've progressed in four thousand years. The people of Ra have not—and I know why. They don't have iron. It was the use of iron and steel weapons, which became cheaper because they were more plentiful than the bronze weapons, that brought about the end of chariotry and the rise of the

whole iron age." He had to be tactful in connection with Fangar's civilisation.

"The plentiful supply of iron weapons that could best the bronze, and iron armour that would withstand the charioteer's arrows, formed one reason. The other was the idea of mounting men on horses, to form cavalry. What you would call Riders. They licked the chariot hollow."

"Aye," grunted Fangar. "But these nageres are useless as riding animals."

"For you, maybe. But we've got to do something. It's clear that the *Linaphren* is the secret to operating the dimensional gateway. I hesitate to say this, Fangar; but I reacted differently from you or the others when we went through the dimensions. And now this business with the sanctuary. I'm frightened of the thought, I will admit; scared stiff. But I believe—"

"I believe it, too! You, Roy, you! You have this strange power to pass through the dimensions!"

"God help me," said Roy Tulley.

"We must get the *Linaphren* back. That means mounting a raid against the Hyktros. We've seen their chariotry. The only answer is to make these people of HamounApen fight again! Only they can help us now."

"What a hell of a situation." Tulley felt the pressures. "Stranded in the dimensions, and the only way of getting back is held fast in the middle of a hostile empire!"

That thought remained with him in the succeeding days as, with Amoundei's willing help, they put the plan into operation.

The first and most imperative need was to give back to these citizens of HamounApen a sense of pride and honour. Tulley perforce had to brush aside qualms that pride was an outdated emotion, nationally, and that to attempt to train a people to fight a war was an immoral act. The charioteers of Ra were fighting people. In the twin cities they had been humbled. They saw no future. They might as well all be dead. If only to save them as a

nation the project was a good one. So Tulley reasoned with himself and left to later liberals the squabbles he anticipated with his conscience. They had no difficulty in understanding the way the people called themselves the citizens of HamounApen or ApenHamoun. When the *Linaphren* was in the temple at Hamoun, they were citizens of HamounApen. On the next month the nomenclature reversed.

Akun was set to work rounding up clay vessels, pottery vessels, ordering slaves to prepare lengths of copper wire. Copper vessels were lined up in a quiet courtyard of Nomee's palace. They had been commandeered from the kitchens and the private apartments and were a motely collection. Tulley studied them. He'd investigated the city's copper manufacturing district and felt certain the coppersmiths there could turn out what he wanted. Akun took his orders without showing the surprise Tulley, with a little smirk, knew he felt.

"Pots of this size, so and so, made of copper, and with a little ledge inside." He nodded. "Very good, Roy. This shall be done with the other things you have ordered."

Tulley and Fangar, in his half of the deal, played up the authority Amoundei and the two princesses had given them. "If we were just purely mercenary, now, Fangar, my old Rider friend," said Tulley, bubbling with confidence, "we could take over this whole lot, lock stock and barrel."

"Of a surety, we could. I find the long legs of the women do not affront me as I surmised they would. I could find me a mate here and settle down—had they but oitas or other suitable riding mounts."

Tulley laughed and questioned Amoundei about the hot sulphur springs higher up the river in Skull Valley.

"The ground bubbles and there are evil odours. Sulphur bubbles yellow—"

"Right." Tulley gave his orders. He had had to come to terms with the general use of slaves. He found the system was not barbaric insofar as slaves graduated

through the social levels and harsh treatment was considered nonproductive. Still and all—slavery got up his nose.

He watched as carts trundled out from the city in a dawn of gold and rose across the great plain. Akun was too valuable to lose and so a priest who had been highly recommended led the sulphur caravan. The carts with their creaking wheels and ungainly proportions, drawn by paired nageres, were loaded with buckets and containers of all descriptions. Tulley wanted them to concentrate on the most recently formed sulphur springs. "Keep dipping in the buckets and standing them out to evaporate," he told them. "Keep on doing that. And be damned careful about the residue!" He warned the priest, one Semoun, a lank sombre man of few words. "Luckily enough I want only a fairly weak solution of sulphuric acid. You can't get a hundred percent strength by evaporating a solution—the stuff has a diabolical affinity for water. But, all the same, be careful."

"I hear you and in AmounRa's wisdom in your choice I obey," said Semoun, flicked his nageres, and the procession of carts creaked and groaned into movement.

Tulley frowned. "Hey, Fangar," he said to that burly man who had been eyeing the nageres with some disfavour. "You'll have to get some fat and grease the axles. I can't stand the din these chariots make."

Fangar nodded. "If I understood what you were about I might share yourr spirits with more confidence."

"Like that, is it? They always said great inventors were nut cases. As it happens, I'm merely doing something another man's brains invented. I'm going to make a Daniell cell. A whole lot of them. We put the earthenware porous pot Akun is having made into the copper pot. These folk use brass so they have zinc. We put a zinc rod down the centre of the porous pot. Then we fill the pot with dilute sulphuric acid—and that's about all Semoun will get, I'm thinking. Then we fill the copper pot with copper sulphate solution. I imagine there will

be quite a bit of sulphur as an impurity, but whereas normally you'd want to eliminate as much as possible in a blast furnace or something similar, some sulphur in the metal is necessary for my purpose. We can also put some crystals of copper sulphate on the pot's ledge, they'll help replenish the copper sulphate solution as it is consumed."

Fangar was sliding his sword in and out of its sheath. He was looking up at the sky, down at his feet, over at the departing caravan. He didn't, it appeared, particularly wish to catch Tulley's eye.

Tulley smirked. "Then we connect 'em up in series. One Daniell cell gives 1.1 volts. I aim to produce a nice sensible working E.M.F. I'll give you a shock—"

Fangar said something about seeing to the wheelwrights and walked off smartly.

Tulley called after him: "And I've a few ideas about these chariots, too. I didn't connect it before; but they're hopeless. It's all in the dates."

Fangar put his head down and vanished back into the city. Tulley laughed out loud.

"I'd really liked to have made Leclanché cells," he said. "Better E.M.F. at 1.5 volts; but I figure the manganese dioxide is a little beyond current resources. But you never know, you never know."

As he went back to that private courtyard in Nomee's palace he pondered with some concern on this intrusion of science into a community like this on Ra; but he and Fangar had to get back home and a beaten populace had to be given back their pride. What would follow then would lie in the hands of AmounRa.

Fangar was deep in a heated conversation with a burly, crop-eared, broken-nosed man who kept smacking his sword down across a woden table, twisting splinters out of the wood. Tulley walked in full of himself.

"Naturan says the chariots are all broken. The men do not believe HamounApen can be saved. The next time the Hyktros attack will be the end of all."

"That is so." Natunza spoke in a rasping voice that made Tulley wince. He wore bronze armour and a brave show of feathers over his crimson and white; but he shared the defeated air of all the warriors of Hamoun.

Thinking of his Daniell cells Tulley wanted to take this man, this Natunza, this last surviving general of chariots, and rub his nose in it all. Fangar spoke again, angrily: "The whole city is defeated, Natunza. It was defeated before this last loss. So was Apen. You are a people who lick-spittle dalkis—"

The sword lifted menacingly. "We are a proud people. The old days are gone. And now what can we do without the treasure of AmounRa?"

"We'll get it back." Tulley spoke heatedly. He would have gone on but Natunza strode out, swinging his sword.

Fangar puffed out his cheeks. "He's a good man. But he needs to be shown it is possible."

"I'll show him. I'll shock him but good!"

The main problem at the moment for Tulley was the lack of iron. Without magnets he couldn't perform half the tricks of his trade. But he had a few ideas, and with Amoundei's help he wired up sundry statues. He arranged cunning copper rods within the statue's palms. The main temple became for him something like a surrogate electronic circuit. And, that evening, a fresh occurrence brought him face to face with the problem of Lara and of Nomee. Of course, being Tulley, he fancied them both.

That evening he took a boat across to Apen—no one had the energy yet to rebuild the bridge—and in the waning light went up into the palace. Lara waited for him in a private chamber. Soft and feminine, she wore a loose white gossamer gown. They ate fruits and drank the light wine. She made conversation. The plan was going well. They would bring back the treasure of AmounRa. The cities would be rebuilt. Any mourning for her dead father-king had been postponed until once

more ApenHamoun was put to rights.

Lolling back on cushions, Tulley quaffed and ate and admired her soft curves. She wore a fortune in gems across her shoulders. Her hair, hastily cut to disguise her in that mad escape, was covered by more gems. Yet their hardness could not conceal her own lush femininity, the tremble of her lips, the liquid melting of her eyes.

"When all this is over, Roy, and the treasure is back in the temples of the twin cities, I shall need a king to sit beside me on the throne of Apen. I do not think I will need to look far."

He swallowed. He fancied her; but not in so permanent a fashion. She smiled languorously upon him.

"You have strange arts, I know. I have confidence in you. You saved my life. These are attributes of a mihar, a hero, one fit to share my throne."

"Let's get the treasure back first." Ludicrously, Tulley felt tongue-tied before a bird.

XII

In consultation with Amoundei, Tulley chose the day of Water Thanksgiving for the consummation of his plan in which all his hopes now lay. He had laboured long and arduously setting up serried ranks of Daniell cells and wiring them up in batches, series and parallel, to build a reasonable potential difference. He operated crude but effective switches, based on copper brooches, to conserve power. The day, as all days seemed to do on Ra, dawned fine and sunny. He went down to the temple in Hamoun with Fangar, wrangling about chariots and nageres and the spirit of the soldiery.

They both felt treacherously at home in Hamoun. Some of the feeling of desolation about the open places of Ra had seeped into them and given them a nerve to

advance that which the citizens of Hamoun and of Apen had forgotten.

What should have been a day of joyfulness and thank-offerings for the priceless gift of water promised to be just an empty ritualistic series of processions and genuflections. The people were too frightened not to perform their thanks to AmounRa; but they did so in a lackadaisical fashion dismaying to Amoundei and annoying to Nomee and Laura and downright insulting to Fangar.

The day's events wore on, the processions, the chanting, the ritual casting of water upon sacred objects. Tuley began to fret lest that nonchalantly flung water should spray his apparatus.

In the outer courtyards of the temple where the statues towered he had positioned himself with a control panel wired up in a way to make an electronics man open his eyes wide in disbelief. This day had been selected also because as part of the functions each man would grasp the hand of a statue and swear that he would always conserve and utilise for AmounRa's greater glory the water so freely provided by the River Oo. Priests superintended the ceremonies. Semoun was there, grim and lank, close-lipped about his part in bringing sulphuric acid from Skull Valley.

Amoundei addressed the charioteers' court. This was the key. If the charioteers of the army were convinced, the rest would follow. They milled, a little sullenly, a little shamefacedly, each man knowing what lay in his comrades' minds concerning their defeat at the hands of the Hyktros.

Amoundei warmed them up. He dwelt on their defeat, on the forcible rape of the treasure of AmounRa: for so he phrased it the better to ram the unpalatable facts home and enflame these men. "But AmounRa has not forsaken you. He has not taken the light of his solar disc from you. In his everlasting eyes you are still men, men of Hamoun and of Apen. On this day if he so wills he will give each of you a sign, a sign to prove that he de-

mands your respect and obedience as in older days."

There was no mention, here, of love of the gods.

"If any of you receive this sign let him go over against the court of Wrath, and if any of you do not receive this sign let him go over against the court of Last Things, that he may come again to the servitude of AmounRa." There was more, in the phraseology these people had used for four thousand years. Then the lines of charioteers, walking, grim-faced, uncertain now because of the new things their high priest had said, approached the statues.

The first was Natunza, the general of charioteers.

Him—him Tulley cut in a most beautiful voltage.

Natunza placed his palm in the palm of the statue with the eagle head—Natunza jumped. Natunza yelled. Natunza hung on and shivered and shook and couldn't let go. Tulley could have sworn fat blue sparks were crackling from his hair.

He cut the switches and Natunza pranced back, yelling.

The high seriousness of what he was doing, the knowledge that his life and his chance of getting back to Earth depended on success, could not stop Tulley from guffawing in the secrecy of his high platform among the pillars.

Fangar just didn't know what to make of it.

One by one, the charioteers stepped forward and one by one they received a nice tickle of electricity. Tulley had to parcel it out, for he wasn't at all sure how long his Daniell cells would run without some catastrophe.

All the statutes used in the ceremonies indicated to him by Amoundei had been wired up; the lines of charioteers moved fast. The sun was still high by the time that was over. The results began to flow in during the afternoon as Tulley left Fangar to go and report to Nomee.

He found her having her side strapped up and, backing out, was imperiously ordered to enter the private chamber.

"I have no secrets from you, Roy." She shushed her servants out and lay back on her divan. Dressed all in a

crimson shift, with diamonds scattered about her arms she looked a delectable morsel. Tulley thought of Lara.

"Amoundei tells me your magic called forth signs from AmounRa. Truly you are a great worker of miracles."

Tulley had forseen this development. These people couldn't conceive of a mortal man creating a power they had felt or witnessed; therefore he must have a magic that enabled him to summon a response from the gods. Having read in the literature, Tulley was aware of those baffling porous pots found in the ruins of Babylon—was it?—and the electric constructions placed upon them. He had planned to shoot big sparks about; maybe that wouldn't now be necessary.

They fell to talking. She was very different from Lara. All woman, she yet had a more open-air swing about her. Her tan was coming back now she could walk out into the sunshine again. She was the athletic one, the Diana to Lara's Aphrodite. Then Tulley chuckled. Wrong mythology.

"I believe we can shape the army into a force now, Nomee," he said. "Fangar is a great warrior, a mihar—"

"And so are you, Roy. When the treasure of AmounRa is safely back in HamounApen, when all is back to bright days again, I shall need a king. I am lonely. My body craves a mate. I think you, Roy Tulley, would be that one."

"Yowpsl" said Roy Tulley, to himself.

He'd always known it was folly to manage two at once.

He replied as he had to Lara. "Let us get the treasure back first."

She looked up at him keenly, then slowly sat up and her eyes burned upon him. "I am a princess of Ra. The only equals I acknowledge are the princess Lara, and Amoundei the high priest. The crawling stench over the face of the great plain that is the pretender Torozei I will crush and my chariots will roll over him. I need a mate who is worthy of me, and of my city and my treas-

ures. You have summoned a sign from AmounRa! You are such a man!"

Tulley tried to back up. Nomee took his hand in both of hers. "As a sign and a compact—" She pulled him towards her and laid his hand on her breast. He could feel the soft firmness and a crazy memory of helping Lara from the ditch jolted him. Nomee pushed her face close to his, holding him, kissed him long and passionately and wetly, shook him down to the heels. He at last pulled free and sat back. He looked at her with fresh admiration.

"Now go and marshal my army to victory, Roy! With you and Fangar to lead my chariots I fear nothing!"

The bright blazing spirit of this girl in such marked contrast to the clinging soft wiles of Lara impressed him; but he was sage enough to know he could never make a snap decision. How's-about a king with a polygamous pair of brides? One in each city? They'd just love that back in Ohio.

Fangar met him at the entrance to the charioteers' quarters, those assigned to this section of the palace. The organisation seemed simple. Chariots were divided up into groups of a dozen each, called a squadron. Six squadrons formed a regiment. Then, confusing to anyone who had been brought up on Earthly military lines, ten regiments formed a battalion. Tulley comforted himself with thoughts of the old 'battles' of the English archers and chivalry—just a mass divided for manœuvre. Fangar was talking with a squadron commander, a bronzed, fit looking young man, but a man whose hang-dog air merely aped the dispirited feelings of the army.

Tulley wondered if he was ever going to win out, when Fangar said: "This squadron commander, Lenoum, wishes to kill himself because AmounRa did not favour him with a sign."

"How many of you crossed over against the court of Last Things?"

"About two hundred." The feeling Tulley had there

was that Lenoum had said something about the equivalent of three regiments; but the translator sometimes did its own brand of sums in converting mathematics.

"Collect them all and return. Think that in truth AmounRa will look with favour upon you. Believe that the Hyktros will be utterly vanquished and the treasure return in triumph to HamounApen. Now, go—and believe!"

The sun glinted off the armour and the bronze, brilliant feathers floated in the warm breeze, scurries of dust rose where the water sprinklers had missed their eternal task of laying the dust, nageres stamped their polished hooves and jingled the brass bits. The impression of that moment as this fit, tough, bronzed warrior-charioteer obediently strode off to do Tulley's bidding would remain with Tulley. He sensed that. The sun, the bronze, the armour, the brazen chariot parapets and the tall wheels, the feathers and the whinnying nageres, all would rest in his memory until they screwed him down. The smell of the dust, of water, of dung, of flowers lazily open in the afternoon heat, the tang of leather and oils—all would remain fast locked in his memory.

Then Fangar said: "They'll be collecting in the courtyard, Roy—they had lost all hope."

"Right. I'll be on my way. Every man we save now will be worth two."

He felt no shame, no sense of cheating these men, as he switched in the Daniell cells and shocked them as they placed their palms in the palms of the statues. The act of obeisance and of homage was eons old; he was merely giving it a scientific twist.

Natunza reported in. He looked a new man. A fire in him, a determination, gave his thick body a more erect carriage and a decisiveness of movement. "The army is united in devotion to AmounRa and to his representatives in this life. A new spirit animates us all—and will reactivate the hope the gods have given us in the breasts of all the people, charioteers, warriors and drivers, foot

soldiers, suppliers, citizens, all who have the well being of HamounApen at heart—glory be to AmounRal”

Fangar began to outline to Natunza certain revolutionary ideas he had in the management of a chariot host. Natunza stroked his black beard—he was of Apen—and pondered.

“Your idea of envelopment from each wing is sound. We usually charge with the main force of chariots to try to break the enemy line. The infantry then go forward to make captures and advance, or to hold a line, in case of failure, behind which the chariots may reform. I like the idea of swinging in from the flanks; but chariots run best going straight forward.”

“That’s where I come in,” said Tulley. He asked them all to adjourn to the chariot exercise area, a wide plot scarred with tyre marks and nagere droppings, hot and dusty beneath the sun. Since that day he had convinced the army of its destiny he had felt capable of almost anything.

He had no audience who would understand if he mentioned the profound discrepancies between this land of Ra and the ancient Egypt of his own dimension. Where were the pyramids? Where the colossal stone monuments? These people built in brick, like the master brick-builders of Mesopotamia, and the rock they had was used for column and lintel construction in conjunction and not separately from the brick. Where was the idea of the king as god? No one who hoped to reach immortal life dare offend the god-king, discipline was achieved with a simple directness as probably at no other time. Where, then, was this in the mutual searchings of Lara and Nomee for mates? And so Tulley came out with his last and in some ways most profound series of suggestions for the Chariots of Ra.

He made Lenoum, now brisk and eager, swirl a chariot around the exercise court. Dust spurted from the tall wheels. Lenoum’s driver, a chunky-armed, wide-smiling girl, handled her reins with ease, swerving the four na-

gere's rumps as one. Now Tulley saw how that mysterious extra rein was used in practice. The chariot ran well in a straight line; but the girl driver had to allow a great deal of room to turn at each end of the yard.

"If these people did come from my dimension," he told Fangar, "they came about before—in my time—the chariot hosts of the Indo-European barbarians crashed down on the fertile crescent. The Indo-Europeans really were only the leaders of peoples they picked up on the way. But they introduced the chariot. And that was about some time shortly after 1700 B.C." Tulley looked at Fangar, who was doing his sky and land searching stunt again. "Briefly, then, Fangar, if these people of Ra have a written history that goes back four thousand years, they must have split from my dimension—if they came from there, which I now doubt—before the use of the chariot. See?"

Fangar said: "I am training men to ride these little nageres. But the chariots remain the prime shock force."

"Listen to me, and watch," said Tulley. He made the others look also, Amundei, Natunza, Akun. He drew with a pointed stick in the sand.

"Your chariots are brave and bold and dashing; but they are not true war chariots. The wheels are positioned in the centre of the floor. Now, in a war chariot the wheels are here, right at the back—"

"But," protested Natunza. "The chariot would not balance."

"Of course it wouldn't balance! That's the whole point. Some of the weight of the chariot is carried by the horses—sorry, nageres—themselves. And, another most important thing. Your wheels are much too big."

"We find large wheels run more easily."

"Sure. In a straight line. You make me a chariot like this drawing, with little wheels, and I'll show you how a chariot battle should be fought." He wiped the hand holding the stick over his jaw where his beard bristled. "I'm not going into the British chariot idea. Boudicca

and all that. I don't fancy showing you guys how to run out on the shaft and hurl a javelin. I'll stick to what I figure I can do."

Walking back to some much needed refreshment, Fangar said: "I still don't see how little wheels can be better than these fine tall wheels."

"You will, my old Rider friend, you will."

And so the days went by in construction of the new chariots, in fashioning fresh weapons, of instilling the necessary ardour into the charioteers. Fangar developed a small force of about a hundred men riding nageres. He taught them to ride as they had taught the men to ride who took part in the charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava. He chose light nimble men, and worked them up to a cavalry squadron that pleased Tulley. The day came when the first Tulley-type chariot was ready. He walked out to the chariot exercise yard feeling more than a little faint; but convinced now that everything he touched would go right.

He would show them how to manœuvre this chariot. He knew the theory. All he had to do was hold on and not fall off. With a flick of the whip the chariot sprang forward.

XIII

All he had to do was hang on and not fall off.

Hah!

The four nageres went off at a licking pace. They were harnessed quadriga fashion. Tulley knew that two horses were as good as four in a chariot of the style he had designed; but he wanted quadrigas for obvious reasons.

The floor on its unsprung axle jolted evilly. He was flung up and down, jolted from side to side, jerked backwards and forward. His kneecaps vibrated. His teeth chattered. It was like a surf ride. Trouble was, the surf had iron-fanged edges. He held onto the reins and was

bounced and jounced so that he lurched to his right. Immediately the chariot spun around on a dime and hared off in the diametrically opposite direction. He would have sworn the right wheel remained stationary as the left ran a complete semicircle about it.

"Me and Ben Hurl" he thought. But he knew the Roman chariots weren't war chariots, they were the mere equivalents of a Roman man-about-town's E-type Jaguar. And their racing chariots, by all accounts, were clumsy contraptions. The Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Mitannian chariot was designed for one thing only—war.

Even their lion hunting was a surrogate warfare.

He careered all over the yard, swerving and swaying. He kept whistling down parallel with the stone walls and trying not to shut his eyes. He began to get the knack of holding his body with a swing and a lift to the surge of the board—a buckboard would have been like a Rolls in comparison—and the understanding of when to lean and when to sway. He began to enjoy himself. He rollicked directly towards the group watching him open-eyed, at the last minute skidded aside, the whole chariot singing.

Eventually he drew up before them, the nageres shivering and snorting. A crazy, animal-pathetic idea crossed his mind that the nageres had enjoyed the run, too. Slaves ministered with blankets. Even in the sunshine of Ra the nageres steamed.

"Well?" he said, belligerently.

He jumped nonchalantly down from the chariot. It felt as though he'd jumped straight into a pot of boiling tar. Intensely hot pains lanced up through his calves, his thighs. His buttocks felt constricted. And his knee-caps fell off. Well—that's how he felt. He staggered and would have fallen but Fangar caught him.

"Well, yourself," said Fangar. And then he clapped him on the back. "Well done, Roy." Tulley knew enough about the Riders of Wilgegen now to value those words.

Natunza and Lenoum were beside themselves. Immediately they had their own nageres harnessed up and

drove in crazy zig-zags and circles about the yard, cutting the circles closer each time, racing around the square stone walls and trying to square the reverse and the corner.

"Success, Roy." Amoundei smiled. "The chariot is nimble."

"I think there may be a problem with the archery until the charioteers get the hang of it. It can't be easy to loose accurately when you're jolting along like that. They'll have to practice."

Natunza jumped down and Tulley smirked as he saw that even that bull-whip tough old charioteer winced as his legs and kneecaps took the strain. "I see your idea was from AmounRa himself. Only the gods could have imagined so noble and cunning a device."

"Yeah, well, sure," said Roy Tulley. Who was he to quibble over giving the gods their due? All he'd done was remember Assyrian and Egyptian drawings of chariots, use his knowledge of dynamics, and see just by looking that the Chariots of Ra needed updating. The chariot had, on Ra, developed from the cart in a more humble way than back on Earth, where the ferocious barbarian onslaught with its chariotry had driven stumbling infantry armies before it in panic and confusion. Well—now that little lesson would be taught the chariots of Hyktros. Science lurked in other artifacts of mankind than test tubes, atom smashers and computers.

Time slid by. The River Oo slackened in its flood and the sere plains browned. Now the stored agricultural produce would be doled out from the king's warehouses and from the temple warehouses. Some of the great nobles would also contribute. Life would go on through Ra—or this portion of Ra—until the rains came again and with them the time for creating fresh produce for the following season. There was a faint parallel to the Nile culture; but no deserts bordered the Oo, and no stone bluffs penned the flood, so there would be minimal flooding. The mountains away on the horizon, of course . . .

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As the days passed Tulley came to worry more and more about the nature of the Hyktros. He was now completely bound up in the way of life of the Chariots of Ra. The Hyktros lived across the great plain and they formed the dominating peoples of an empire vast and brilliant. Their chariots would come again to the River Oo and this time they would destroy all. Tulley and Fangar worked devotedly to build up the forces of HamounApen not just to resist that last attack but to take the attack across the great plains and attack Hkytros itself. Attack, attack, attack. They drummed the idea into the charioteers. With the new Tulley-type chariots they would run rings around the chariots of Hyktros. They would clump them up in huddled masses, unable to swing and swerve. They would loose a devastating stream of arrows into the mass. They would destroy the chariots of Hyktros!

Tulley sweated, and sometimes of nights he awoke, abruptly, streaming with sweat and quivering with nameless dread. He had found a complaisant little chariot driver, all soft curves and steel-spring muscles, with long fair hair and ripe firm breasts and long supple legs. Her name was Oolou—she had been named for the River—and he liked her sprightly humour. She was overawed at first at the idea of being his driver. Then she adopted him, took him to her bed—he made her move into the palace—and clucked over him like a mother hen. As a lover and mistress, he figured, they'd function better as a chariot team. He had to push the indelible memories of Nomee and Lara aside.

The two princesses knew of Oolou, of course, as they knew all that went on in their palaces; but a simple chariot driver was of no consequence. A man's appetites had nothing to do with high policy. So they believed. And, too, they must believe, Tulley reasoned, in the magic and charm of their own bodies to seduce him to their wishes. They could be right, at that.

He worked hard at developing springs for the chariots, using inflated bladders from farm animals, with hinged

flat boards pressing down. Trees were relatively scarce; withies and willow were chariot materials, with leather and bronze. In case the pneumatic springs burst if too hardly used he developed sprung-withies in parallel as alternatives. The chariots rode much better with the springing, and he soon caught the knack of riding with Oolou's driving and loosing his arrows, flick, flick, flick, into the targets.

Because he was not of Hamoun or of Apen he adopted clothes with both orange and emerald over white. He wore a clean white breechclout tucked up high around his thighs, with a white vest over his torso. He liked the free feeling this rig gave him, and his legs tanned beautifully. He also constantly wore bronze armour—corselet over a link mail shirt, shoulder pieces, a round peaked bronze helmet from which he removed all the feathers bar two—one orange, the other emerald. This rig gave him a wide-shouldered, high, arrogant look, tapering away to lean legs and sandalled feet. He tried not to strut when he donned his war gear; but the temptation remained strong, and Oolou chaffed him and rolled her eyes until he chased her into the bed and showed her her rightful position. She had interesting ideas there, too.

He carried also a fine bronze sword strapped at his side, with a matching shorter sword at his right side, and a long dagger snugged down the wrappings of his ankles. He manipulated a sword and wicker shield with Fangar and grew reasonably adept, drawing a grunted word of praise from Fangar—occasionally. He wanted to carry a quiver of arrows over his back; but drawing them out was hampered by his shoulder piece. He settled for slinging them under his left arm and half around his back. When he drew an arrow he tilted the quiver. He made quite a collection of bows. Eventually he settled on the one he liked best; the one with which he could plunk an arrow into the red from a speeding chariot nine times out of ten.

Thus geared, accoutred and equipped he would go

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riding out into the great plain with Oolou at the reins, swinging and sliding over the grass, joying in this new life among the Chariots of Ra. As for Oolou, she wore armour curved to fit and she disposed, beside her own sword and shield and dagger, of a long and exceedingly unpleasant spear.

Three spare quivers were strapped on the outside of the chariot and spare spears stood slanting out from over the parapet. If anyone got in the way of Tulley's Chariot of Ra they were likely not to live to regret the error.

They spent long evenings discussing with Natunza and his other newly created generals the strategy and tactics of the coming struggle. Fangar was elected to lead. "I will lead if you swear by AmounRa and all the gods to follow loyally. Otherwise I am not interested."

They promised. A tremendous and solemn ceremony was held in which all the generals and captains and squadron commanders swore allegiance. The two princesses together with Amoundei and his priests presided. The occasion was at once solemn and moving. A new spirit infused the people.

As for the infantry—Tulley could only see to their spears and shields, make sure they all had decent sandals and clothes, figuratively pat them on the back and bless them and deliver them up to the charity and mercy of AmounRa.

The slightly less warm and sunny period they called winter in Ra passed, the rains came, the Oo rose grandly, the cultivation of staples swung into gear—and Tulley looked forward to harvest. Then—after then—that was the traditional time for warfare. He did not sleep at all well.

The secret chambers behind the pillared portico of the temple in which he had installed his battery array were kept locked and sealed with a mystic curse. The wires remained in situ. Amoundei, with a frank and at the same time knowing expression, had said: "Leave them be, Roy. I understand how you summon the signs from

AmounRa by the closing and opening of the copper brooches. It may be that AmounRa will vouchsafe a sign to me, his humble servant Amoundei, in other days."

"Providing the Daniell cells stay charging—yes. I doubt they will, though."

"That is in the hands of AmounRa."

Tulley took the squadron under Lenoum beneath his wing. He wanted to call them his 'Devoted Guard' but he figured Fangar would guffaw and mock. They exercised together. Lenoum admitted to admiration for the way Tulley's chariot was handled and the unerring accuracy of his shafts. Just how much was abject flattery Tulley's amour propre didn't wish to know. He did know how many he could feather into the red, even when Oolou was skidding the chariot in the tightest of curves.

One day he loaded a cart with wine and bread and fine clothes, with a bag of the proto-money in limited circulation. He tied an ass to the back of the cart—at least, Nomee's slaves did all this for him, from the riches of the princess's treasury. A slave drove the cart.

"I'm going back up the river. I want to see how Ratha of the Black Hair and Jezd are getting along. We owe them something."

Fangar nodded. "I would come with you. But I am involved in integrating my Riders with the chariotry."

"I'll take Lenoum and my squadron. We'll be gone a week."

"May the Potent Pegu go with you, Roy."

They rode out one golden dawn and set their faces upstream. Tulley could have taken any one of the barges that plied the Oo; but he concentrated all his efforts on chariotry. He had to be good, if not the best, hadn't he?

They camped out as soldiers at night, and travelled long hours, and revelled in the fresh air. Their bows were seldom away from their hands, and they shot and shot, sending slaves to fetch back the shafts from the quickly selected targets along the way. Towards evening of the second day they approached the brick hut and the

vats where Tulley and Fangar had entered Ra. Tulley was feeling very happy and contented for life was very good to him. The experience of being one of the most powerful men in a nation came with a shock as being pleasant; being indisputably the greatest scientist he could take with more seemly humility.

Breeding's imposed modesty could not prevent him making the graphic contrast in his mind between his appearance and prospects now and those when he had first landed here.

He seemed to have collected a little headache.

Oolou said sharply: "Chariots!"

Across the great plain in the gathering darkness a whirl of dust puffed towards them. Tall wheels span. Lenoum shouted, hard and savagely, throwing up his bow.

"It is the thrice cursed would-be usurper Torozeil May AmounRa turn his face away from him."

The chariots came on at great speed and there was no mistaking their purpose. Tulley wondered if they were using this place as a base, and if so what had happened to Ratha of the Black Hair and Jezd. Then an arrow plunked into the parapet of his chariot. Oolou lashed the reins. The nageres sprang forward. With suicidal speed the two chariot groups closed on each other.

Tulley swallowed down, feeling the dryness in his throat, loosed a shaft at the oncoming mass. There must be twenty chariots out there. He had to use his superior manoeuvrability here, or they were all dead ducks.

They raced parallel with the vats. It would soon be dark. Arrows flew. Men screamed. Nageres whinnied. Dust plumed. Tulley let off five arrows, then the whole chariot lurched, swayed, set off madly at right angles to their course. He glanced at Oolou, shouting. She stared back at him with a ghastly grin, the blood pouring from her neck above the corselet where an arrow stood, stark and brutal.

"Ooloul! Hold on!" He reached for the reins.

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Arrows stood in the flanks of two of his nageres. They screamed and stampeded. He tried to haul back. The nageres milled, twisting, the chariot skidded like an insane animate being with a life of its own. One pneumatic spring burst. The chariot lurched. He grabbed for the rail and missed. More arrows feathered in deadly whispers about him, clanged from his helmet, his armour.

The chariot whipped over. He was flung headlong. He had the fear-crazed impression that he must get away, must get away, must get away. . . .

He could see the ooze of the vats coming up to meet him and tried to relax himself for the coming impact. He could see a spot of intense white light. The greenness of the vats surrounded it. His mind shrieked with agony and despair and defeat. This was the end and he was trapped, trapped, trapped . . . he felt his mind go with a pingging snapping . . . he couldn't sustain the pain . . . and then he was rolling head over heels on hard cobblestones and chickens and children were scattering from him.

He knew at once what had happened.

XIV

*"Hoshoo! hissed the Honshi, Hoshoo!
His chops all gargling b'ue,
Hoshoo, my brave, Hoshoo,
Hold still while I pubick you!"*

So sang Bobby Travers in a light melodious voice as he lovingly polished up the slender steel blade of his sword. He held it up to the light falling through the windows of the Inn of the Friendly Mouse, turning it this way and that, admiring the flash of the oiled steel and the way the gemmed quillons burned in the sunshine.

Roy Tulley sat morosely on a bench, propping his head up with his fists, his elbows offensively spread on

the table. A flagon of wine stood nearby and he meant to finish that one and follow it with a few more in short order.

His bronze armour lay in a corner of his bedchamber up above, next to Bobby Travers', and he wore a decent pair of trousers and a blue shirt, open at the throat. Of course he'd tried to find his way back to Ra. He'd prowled the street of City Prime in Brorkan like a madman searching for that betraying spot of intense white light with its halo of cool green—and failing.

Every day he spent most of the time just wandering about there so that the inhabitants, the children—even the chickens—looked askance upon him.

Bobby Travers looked up. He was singing softly, half to himself:

"My helmet spike needs a trophy bold—"

He broke off and looked not without sympathy at Tulley. Travers let his broad square hands still in their loving polishing of his blade. He was a pleasant enough looking young man with a somewhat petulant mouth and a chin that showed a rash of spots; but he seemed eager to make Tulley feel at home.

"They will be here soon, Roy. My brother is a pretty tough egg. When he and Wayne go off on a bender it's a little hairy. But they won't let us rot in the dimensions."

"I do appreciate your looking after me like this, Bobby. And I'm indebted to your contessa, too. But I must find my way back."

"You need a porteur for that, Roy. I suppose the one who tossed you through won't be coming to look for you!" Travers laughed at his own witticism. Tulley had been most reticent about the means of his arrival here in Brorkan; some lurking fear of being a freak made him hold his tongue. Travers nudged him. "Or what the boys have gone to get, a PPL—a Porvone Portal of Life. They put on an impressive display, I'll say that for them. The Ships of Durostorum and the Hunters of Jundagai are in for an almighty shock when Wayne's lads finish up!"

"Yes," said Tulley, hardly hearing. "And you are convinced you've never met Graham Pike?"

"Never have. My post is here, to ready the escape apparatus. Although, to be honest, I don't anticipate any trouble. Both Durostorum and Jundagai ought to be pushovers. Anyway, they don't know about the dimensions. Brorkan does. Brorkan is a fine staging place, believe you me."

That aroused Tulley's interest, inevitably. "The people here don't seem perturbed."

"Oh, the people! Who cares about them? It's the big bosses, the castle lords, the Slikitters and their kin, all the dimensional traders who count here."

A whole fortnight had gone by and still nothing had happened. Bobby Travers was making out with one of the serving girls and although the one Tulley had been interested in before Corny had shot him and Fangar into Ra had showed renewed acceptances of his proposals, his heart wasn't in the chase. Not after Oolou—to say nothing of the promise of Lara and Nomee.

That vicious arrow transfixing Oolou's soft shoulder above the corselet! She mustn't die! That couldn't be. Travers had promised Tulley that Wayne and his men would return with this PPL, which sounded a similar gadget to the one the Tob'kliacs had used, and with them would come the necessary porteurs. They'd help him get back to Ra. If Oolou had died—his journey would become meaningless, then. Oh, sure, they could get the fabled treasure of AmounRa back—but Oolou, Oolou. . . .

Tulley learned from Bobby Travers that much had happened since he'd left Brorkan. Wayne had been charged to obtain a PPL and one of the contessa's bargemen, by name Charnock, had been given the task of securing the other end of the portal and of conveying the whole out of Durostorum. Things, Travers indicated, would be different once the contessa had a PPL. It was a little disturbing, though, to find he knew nothing of Graham Pike. For that matter, he knew nothing of

Poylee and he was far more likely to remember her.

By the time Tulley had waited over a month Travers was beginning to tire of the serving wench. He had more time to share Tulley's frantic worry. Their anxieties did not stem from the same sources; but each day that passed increased their concern until Tulley felt he would go mad with the strain.

At last the tension broke. Incongruously a Land Rover rolled into the street before the Inn of the Friendly Mouse. Children scampered to stand and watch, wide-eyed; but few adults paid much attention to the vehicle. They were used to strange machines—and strange monstrous people—coming and going through the dimensions.

A six-wheeled armoured car followed the Land Rover. A forty millimetre machine cannon protruded from the turret, and a beefy faced, gesticulating man shouted at them from the opened turret hatch.

"Jump to it, Bobby! All hell's broken lose! Leave all your apparatus—it'll be safe. Hop aboard the Land Rover and let's get out of here!"

In the Land Rover sat a human being wearing a blue shirt and breechclout with a scarlet handkerchief wound around his head. From his belt protruded strange weapons. He was doing the driving. In the seat at his side sat a middle-aged man with a tired face and bald head, dressed in a grey sack-like garment. On his back a huge open eye had been stitched in glaring scarlet cloth stretching from shoulder to shoulder. Apart from the impression of resignation about this man something else struck Tulley as incongruous. From an iron collar about his neck a thin glittery chain extended to a bracelet around the wrist of the third man in the Land Rover. He wore fawn shirt and slacks with red tabs on the shirt's collar. His face was contracted and hard with a streak of some emotion that chilled Tulley. But—

But the being, the creature, who sat in the rear of the Land Rover took up his attention. Tulley gawped. The

thing looked froglike, with wedge shaped cheeks of grey and yellow with a lick of blue around the chops. It wore reddish armour and helmet, and from the top of the helmet's spike fleeced scraps of skin and hair. It sat looking stolidly ahead, holding upright a spear, its other hand grasping a bronze sword hilt.

"Uh—?" said Tulley.

Bobby Travers laughed. "I see you haven't met a Honshi. I suppose the Honshi Hymn I sing means nothing to you, then? They're all right. They're loyal to the contessa—damn good soldiers, too." He slapped the butt of the Colt .45 in his belt. "But they aren't allowed firearms, or any energy weapons. Savvy?"

"Yes, sure—"

The landlord, Jalonz, came running out followed by his serving wenches and potmen, waving his arms and bellowing.

"All right, all right, Jalonz!" shouted Travers irritably. "The contessa will settle your bill!"

Still arguing Travers and Tulley fetched their belongings from the Inn. At last Travers flung Jalonz a handful of golden coins—"I don't know what dimension they came from—but they're gold! If this is how you treat the contessa's goodwill towards you—"

Still protesting, Jalonz grabbed the money. Travers mounted the Land Rover beside the Honshi. Slinging his gear aboard, Tulley sat down beside the man in fawn. The vehicle started with a jerk and sped back up the road out of City Prime.

The armoured car snorted and followed, speeding up to take the lead outside the city limits.

Presently the tired man with the iron collar about his neck sat up. He said something to the driver. The Land Rover slowed, the driver blew his horn. The armoured car vanished.

It just went—pop!—and disappeared.

Tulley wasn't fazed. He felt excited, wrought up, disembodied. Where the armoured car had vanished he

thought—he *thought*—he could detect the faintest suggestion of a spot of light. There was no coolness of greenery about it—but he felt sure he was not imagining it.

Tulley experienced a curious jolt. It felt something like being kicked in the pants. Then the Land Rover was following the armoured car again and they were rolling through a wide swathe cut through a forest with a stream tinkling somewhere in the background. The engines made almost no noise. A hush hung over the forest. The Honshi sat up and the man at Tulley's side took out a flat heavy automatic and held it ready. The cannon in the turret of the armoured car swung from side to side, traversing the aisles in the forest where, so surmised an abruptly scared Tulley, unknown dangers might spring upon them.

"The contessa surely sends an expedition to pick me up," said Travers. He looked inflated, proud.

"The contessa looks after her own," said the man in fawn, whom the others called Zeppi. "You could not think she would leave you stranded among the dimensions."

"Why—uh—of course not!" said Travers, quickly.

"Look," said Tulley, reasonably. "I really want to go the other way—can't your porteur shove me through to Ra?"

"No time now, Roy," Travers sounded sincere. "But the ways through the dimensions aren't on a lineal scale. You can reach Ra from any dimension with a gateway to it. Wait until we're safe."

That made sense.

They passed through three more dimensions—desert, more rock and desert, a farming community—and came through to a dimension where for a brief and blinding moment of wonder Tulley thought he was back in Ra.

Then he saw the sea.

The open plain of grass whispering uneasily was curtailed by a thin strip of beach and then the sea began

and rolled on over the farthest horizon. Grey and queasy and ever moving, the sea sussurated and swayed and tore at the beach. The trail they were now following paralleled the shore. It dipped and bluffs showed ahead, pinching the trail between rising slopes on the right and falling slopes on the left. Below them the sea crashed against rocks. They mounted higher along the trail through the bluffs. Sea smell rose with the spray.

A dull sky deprived distant objects of clarity. Tulley spotted movements on the bluffs, higher, furtive, quick. The driver saw them also and shouted; but his shout was completely futile, a gesture of horror. The boulder toppled over as though in slow motion. It tumbled down towards the track. It made no sound on the moss and grass. It struck the armoured car fairly over the centre wheel. The car slewed off the track, turned over once before it struck the sea. It sank. A mass of bubbles frothed up as it disappeared below the water.

"What the hell?" Bobby Travers was shouting. "This is supposed to be a safe dimension."

The man in the fawn clothing began to fire his automatic up at the dark agile figures on the crest.

The driver snapped words, hard and contemptuous. "No dimension is safe unless you dominate it yourself. Here comes another one." He trod hard on the accelerator. The Land Rover's wheels spun, gripped, shot the car forward. It careened along the trail. The second boulder bounced where, moments before, the Land Rover had passed, rebounded, leaped out to plunge frothily into the sea.

Bobby Travers began to fire his gun upwards. The dark figures were racing down the slope, angling, trying to keep level with the vehicle. Greenish and purplish tints reflected from them in the dull light as though they wore scale armour. Tulley saw tridents. He took in the details of these people as the Land Rover bounced along the trail, swinging away from the sea and, reaching more open country, piled on speed and left the running, angrily

gesticulating fish-people far behind. He had been aware of the flung spears and tridents striking the Land Rover; but the noise of the guns had momentarily deafened him. Now he looked stupidly at the three tines that, smeared with blood, protruded from the porteur's neck.

The porteur lolled. The trident flapped indecently. The tines were each about a foot long, set about two inches apart, and their barbs flared with what would, in other circumstances, have been a classically pleasing grace. The shaft was something like four foot long, of some hard dark wood, the throwing place marked by wound bands. Tulley took all this in with a kind of mechanical expertise, as though by grasping essentials he could exorcise the reality. Those tines, for example, that had killed so efficiently, they were bone, scraped and darkened by some toughening process; but bone, bone of the sea, primeval, cruel, everlastingly dark with the dark secrets of the sea—he was maundering. He sat up and reached ahead to stop the porteur toppling from the Land Rover.

"Let him fall," said the man at Tulley's side, Zeppi. "A dead porteur is of no use to anyone."

"But how do we traverse the dimensions now!" shouted Travers from the rear. In the centre seats, Tulley and Zeppi were argued over back and forth between the driver and Travers.

The driver, who was called Chriva, drove very fast.

"We reach the contessa as soon as possible. She will not be pleased at the death of a porteur; they are difficult to find, expensive to train and undependable in service."

Tulley, who had been facing forward most of the time, now heard a long wheezing sigh, like an inflated tyre slowly collapsing, and turned. The Honshi was leaning sideways over the wheel. Tulley had no idea what his normal colouring might be; but the colour he showed now was so startlingly unreal as to be beyond doubt alarming. In the Honshi's right hand was a fishman's trident. The tines were smeared with a green ichor which smoked. Tulley saw the bullet in the Honshi's neck above

the armour and shut his eyes.

"Hoshool" said the Honshi. He dropped the trident. His head lolled forward so that the helmet spike and its fleeing scrape of skin and hair blew bravely in the slipstream. Then, with a last wheezing "Hoshool" the Honshi slid right over the edge and landed in a tumbled heap on the grass. He rocketted away from them as the Land Rover's speed carried it on.

"But—" said Tulley. He didn't remember opening his eyes. "You can't just leave him—you said he was loyal."

"He's dead." Travers drew himself away on the rear seats from the pool of green ichor. "Tough, the Honshi. I didn't even know he'd been hit. He must have pulled the trident out at once—animal and primeval and tough."

Tulley thought of the three tines and their barbs and shuddered.

"Those fish devils know where to hit a man, in the neck," said Chriva, viciously.

A hurtful stroboscopic picture of Oolou with the arrow in her neck dazzled Tulley.

Every mile they drove carried him further from the gate in City Prime in Brorkan in a geographic sense; but he could sustain himself with the knowledge that they were driving in the general direction of HamounApen. If this mysterious contessa's porteurs could find a gateway through to Ra close to the twin cities that would be an even better chance, for the dimensional portals connected dimension and dimensions without any heed to spatial displacement. What happened to other people—or, in the case of the Honshi, other monsters—in these dimensions as he struggled to return to Ra must on no account be allowed to affect him. His duty appeared to him crystal clear. If only he could reassure himself about Graham Pike then the rest would be perfect—once he was back in Ra.

Tulley knew he had no idea how to manipulate a portal himself. He felt a deep irrational fear of the power latent within him. He was some kind of freak! The idea that in

his mind some mutation, some quirkish coil of genes, some fantastic convolution of grey cells conferred on him a power so wildly beyond all that his life had led him to believe and expect, chilled and frightened and disoriented him. But if the only way to return to Ra was deliberately to use this power—then he'd use it—freak or no freak!

XV

"Wayne and Charnock should have come in by now," said Chriva, driving fast. "As soon as they meet up with the contessa and we're safely in camp we can all pack up and go home to Irunium."

A vagrant memory awoke in Tulley of the swamp and the giant man-eating flowers, and of the way Yellow-hair had spoken of his home in the city of diamonds, in Irunium, before the flower had digested him.

"I need to go to Ra," he said.

"Sure, sure, Roy," said Travers from the back seat. He was cleaning his gun, swaying with the vehicle's progress. "The contessa operates the best porteurs in the dimensions. She likes to run them around now and again."

Zeppi was putting a key back in his pocket. He'd unlocked the iron collar from around the dead porteur's neck. He coiled the glittery chain up along his left arm and placed the collar carefully in his pocket. Then he pushed the dead body over the side with his foot.

Tulley felt like a stone. But he remained mute like a stone, unmoving like a stone—and tried desperately to remain as unfeeling as a stone.

"You Valcini don't value the porteurs enough, Zeppi," said Chriva. "And you academicians are the worst. Doesn't Siegler teach what even the most elementary study of Black Naspurgo will show—tools should be kept bright and clean?"

"Leave Siegler aside, Chriva."

"Willingly. The contessa's bargemen have their re-

sponsibilities. I'm looking forward to seeing Charnock. He had all the luck, going back to Durostorum."

"The quicker we all meet up and go home the better," said Travers in a complaining voice. "My brother owes me a couple hundred dollars worth of gold—in any dimensional currency. He'd better pay up."

Tulley could understand. These men, tough adventurers among the dimensions, wanted to forget that the fate of the porteur, the fate of the Honshi, would one day come to them. The driver, Chriva, though, one of the contessa's bargemen, sounded as though he could see through the hollowness of his life to a reality he despised. Tulley looked more closely. He could see the driver's ears, from which depended gold rings, and was puzzled at the patches of lighter coloured skin as though something had covered them from the sun.

"We'll soon reach the valley," Chriva told Travers. "There was a foul-up and the plan for both parties to come back via Durostorum misfired and they had to return via Jundagai. So you weren't required. But the sooner we kick free of this dimension of Faddafreyev the better I'll like it."

"Yeah," said Travers. "Durostorum would have been easier—and the gateway was right on top of the Inn of the Friendly Mouse. This way means all this diversion. It's making my seat sore."

They did not seem to remember that the diversion had cost the lives of two human beings; the Honshi had got to Tulley, somehow, in the deeper seated emotions. He wondered what conditions must be like in their own dimension of Honsh to drive them out as mercenaries.

He said, distinctly: "*Hoshool My sword arm hires for rue.*"

Travers bellowed a laugh. "I didn't think you remembered!"

"I don't think," said Tulley soberly, "that despite all the other monsters and wonders I have met in the Dimensions, I shall ever forget a Honshi."

The open spaces of the grass plain that had reminded Tulley so treacherously of Ra trended into a smooth tableland that stretched to the farthest horizons. Only in the immediate foreground where the ground was broken and clumped trees grew was that vast openness given perspective.

"There's the valley," said Chriva. "The sea is just beyond." They drove down the trackless grass and Tulley wondered, not hearing waves, if Chriva meant the salt-water sea of Faddafreyev or the grass sea beyond.

A silken pavilion came into view partially hidden by rocks thrusting barely up through the soil. The track between showed undisturbed. Two of the contessa's bargemen stepped into sight holding weapons trained on the Land Rover.

Chriva shouted: "Montevarchil!" Then: "Hey, Goltan, Quendal! We're herel!"

The two bargemen stepped to the side of the vehicle.

They looked at the blood and the green ichor. Their faces betrayed sudden and intense fear.

"Where is the armoured car—the porteur—the guard?"

Chriva looked annoyed. "Those impertinent fish-people ambushed us. We lost them."

"The fish-people, the Xlotls! They are like to be the death of us all!" The bargeman who spoke passed a hand over his face. "The contessa—I shall not carry the news."

"Nor I!" said the other, quickly.

Chriva said: "What is it? Tell me—quickly!" He had stopped the vehicle and now he grabbed a shoulder, roughly, shaking. "Goltan—tell me!"

Goltan looked down, the hope in him crumbled. What he said surprised Tulley. "You'd better put your ears on, Chriva. If you tell the contessa improperly dressed she's likely to have a Honshi chop you as you stand."

"Nonsensel" snapped Chriva. "What has happened?" But he took from his pocket a pair of pointed ears made from flexible plastic and slipped them over his own ears.

"We cannot break through to Wayne and Charnock.

They are surrounded by the Xlots. The single communication we had with them told us their ammunition was almost spent and they could defend themselves but could not break out."

"I don't believe it—what about our own forces?"

"Soloman—." Goltan did not go on. A Valcini in fawn shirt and slacks was running up from the pavilion, waving his arms. "You'd better go in at once. If the camp believes we are saved—and then—hurry, Chriva—for your life, hurry!"

Zeppi was swearing away, about Siegler and Ottor and polysyllabic monsters. The newcomer started in excitedly, but Zeppi straightened him out with cutting venom. The Land Rover started and Chriva took it past the pavilion and around the rocky shoulder into the camp. There were perhaps half a dozen tents and the pavilion with a smokeless cooking area beyond. Tulley could see no Honshi. Chriva jumped out, men ran up, bargemen, Valcini, men in blue shirts and trousers like those borrowed from Travers by Tulley. A turmoil began.

"Hey! Roy!" Graham Pike's voice swung Tulley around.

He jumped from the Land Rover. The noise of shouting men and screaming women, the kicked up dust, the excited faces and gesticulating arms, all faded as he grabbed Pike, pummelled him on the biceps.

"Gray, you old horse thief! So you're all right!"

"Only just. Thanks to the contessa. She's a marvellous girl, Roy—absolutely fabulous! But for her I'd be dead and rotting back in Jundagai!"

They began gabbling out their news one to the other. Then a single golden bell note chimed over the raucous men and shrieking women. Everyone fell silent. They all stared dumbly as the silken pavilion's flap lifted.

A woman walked out.

Something frighteningly strange happened to Roy Tulley as he looked on this woman walking from her silken pavilion. He experienced a soul-purging jolt as though all the charges from all his Daniell cells back there in the

temple of AmounRa had discharged at once into his spinal fluid, into his belly, into every cell of his brain.

He stared. Dressed all in a white silken robe that fell sheer to the ground with shadows and creases falling away from the high-thrusting tips of her breasts, she dominated everyone and everything there. Her dark hair, expensively coiffed and sprinkled with a fortune in gems, shone with expert ministrations. Her white face, smooth and soft and perennially young with costly cosmetic attention, her violet eyes wide and seductive, her rosebud mouth so soft and scarlet sweet, all pressed in on Tulley with a physical force so that he caught his breath. He felt a pain stab him beneath his ribs. She rubbed her left wrist with her right hand with an absent gesture.

Her voice was syrupy smooth. "Soloman is the same. What is this noise?" She saw Chriva and Zeppi. She smiled and the sun rose. "Ah! So you are back. We can porteur once again."

Chriva knelt. He actually knelt in the dust. He lowered his head and Tulley guessed he could not look upon this woman as he spoke.

"No, contessa—my lady—I am sorry. The porteur—the fish people killed him—we could do nothing. An ambush—it was over before it began—the guard, too."

Her frown was like the sun sliding behind ice walls.

"The porteur is dead? But this cannot be. It cannot. I—I am the Contessa Perdita Francesca Cammachia di Montevarchi! Such things do not happen to me. Not among my dimensions! You lie! Say you lie."

Numbly, Chriva shook his head, strove to speak, swallowed, mumbled. "It is so, contessa."

She kicked him with one slippered foot and he rolled over. She caught herself. Her hands lifted, the fingers knotted, rose in the air as though she would intone a curse. The stillness of oncoming death hung over the valley. She stared for a long time upon the prostrate form. Then—

"I will not have you killed, Chriva, for you are a good

and loyal bargeman. You will be the more ready to give your life when we fight the Xlotls, for that is now our only salvation."

Zeppi, who had remained discreetly among the others, breathed a sigh of relief. Chriva unwound himself and staggered up right.

"I serve the contessa di Montevarchi with a devotion no one else may challenge. I shall fight and die—"

But the contessa di Montevarchi was turning away, was re-entering her silken pavilion. The flap fell with a sigh like the sussuration from a departing spirit.

Everyone walked quietly away to their tents.

Pike dragged Tulley off.

"We're in a hell of a fix, Roy. We were counting on the porteur to get us through to another dimension and bring the contessa's people—we're stranded here, now—stranded among the dimensions!"

In an odd, supercilious, experienced way, Tulley was not moved.

"I've been stranded among the dimensions, Gray. You forget that."

Pike bristled at once. "So you may have. But the contessa can't be beaten. She will find a way to get us back to Irunium and fetch her people—"

"Back to Irunium, Gray?"

"Of course. It's a fabulous place, Roy. The contessa has an organisation that would make the greatest capitalists of our dimension green with envy."

"I could do with a drink and a bite to eat. Then you can tell me what happened to you. Or I'll tell you first."

They sat around a smokeless fire and drank wines that Pike told Tulley had come from France, on Earth, and ate food from a dozen dimensions, delectable, expensive and smooth on the palate. Poylee joined them. Roy kissed her unashamedly, overjoyed to see her alive and well. She smiled and sat and entered the conversation in an animated way, wearing a translator band, that told Tulley eloquently of the fears she strove to master.

"I didn't think we'd see you again," Pike said to Tulley. "We couldn't get Crony to find the portal again. Wayne, to give him his due, tried. Anyway, Corny was killed and I was captured and sold into slavery in Jundagai." He frowned and his hands gripped into fists. "It wasn't pleasant. I was used as quarry in a hunt organised by a right bastard called Rov Rangga. I ran and ran, until I couldn't run any more, and they were after me with rifles. My feet were pouring blood. I was done for."

The memory of his experiences still weighed on him, Tulley could see. His sympathies were aroused; after all, nothing like *that* had happened to him.

"Then I saw some people, hunting, and shouted to them to help me. I promised the contessa would reward them—you've no idea of the power of her name among the dimensions, Roy. One of the men shot a hound dog that was about to bite off one of my legs. Then—" He paused. His face took on a strange transfiguring expression. "Then the contessa came through a dimensional portal and blasted the dogs and the hunters of Rov Rangga to dirty little pieces and I was saved."

"Wayne was there, and the bargemen. They all came to save me." He shook his head at the recurrent wonder of it. "We had lots of porteurs then. There were a couple of girls who rewarded the contessa's kindness by running away. They'd been trained at the Academy of Porteuring Science, Zelda and Jorine, they were. They owed everything to the contessa—and they betrayed her. We had this one message from Wayne and Charnock and they said the only porteur they had was Harllon. Even Charnock's porteur, a freak called Gangly, had gone off."

Tulley heard that word. *Freak*. No matter that these people of the dimensions depended absolutely on the porteurs; the people with that priceless gift of catapulting men and objects through from one world to another were still—*freaks*.

"I was in no shape to go on the mission—although I'd

have gone like a shot—and the contessa has been very good to me and Poylee.”

“You’re one of her bargemen?”

“Not yet. Wayne has a lien on me as a follower. But I want to serve the contessa.” He was back to normal, now, his smile as rapaciously genial as of old. “There’s loot in it, Roy. Untold wealth! You should see the size of the rocks the contessa digs out of her mines back in Irunium! Man—they knock your eyes out.”

“And,” put in Poylee. “The palaces there are wonderful. The sheer luxury of it all—there is nothing like it in my home dimension of Queran. I was not happy at home; life in Irunium with Gray—or among the dimensions—is what I want now. Yes, I, too, will serve the contessa.”

“She really has made an impression on you two,” said Tulley. And he was forced to admit the uncanny impression the contessa had made on him, in a breath.

“We’re in a bind now, though. Unless we can break through the fish-people and reach Harllon, we can’t get a porteur to take us out of this dimension. And there is no portal in the encampment with Wayne.”

“Well,” said Tulley, seriously. “I’d like to help—but I don’t see what I can do.”

“The contessa will find a way. No one doubts that. What you can do is tell us what happened to you.”

Tulley told them. But he did not mention how it was that he had happened to come flying through the portal from Ra back into Brorkan. Freak. . . .

At that, he was reasoning this thing out, maybe he really didn’t have the power. Maybe it was an accident.

That night he was lying in borrowed blankets when Goltan roused him out with an ungentle hand on his shoulder.

“Rouse out, Roy Tulley! The contessa wishes to see you—now! Hurry!”

Still half asleep Tulley put on his blue borrowed clothes and stumbled through the starless night towards the silken pavilion. Not a light showed in the camp. Yet

when the two flaps that formed a kind of airlock were thrown back and he stepped into the antechamber brilliant light flooded down. The silk walls of the pavilion contained some super-scientific device to block light, then.

She sat on a divan spread with a leopard skin to receive him. She was dressed as he had seen her earlier. A coppery tinted, half-naked sprite was just taking a chased golden goblet, and another was handing across sweetmeats. The perfume in the pavilion dizzied Tulley. From somewhere soft wanton music floated in, quarter-tone music, sensuous, immediately exciting but intensely forgettable. Being Roy Tulley he responded to the scene. He was handed to a cushioned seat by one of the coppery tinted maidens, given a goblet of the heady wine. He couldn't take his eyes off this woman, this contessa Perdita di Montevarchi.

A stray thought reminded him how he had seen the princess Nomee in a similar situation—except that she had a ghastly wound mending in her side. He thought of Lara and then of Oolou—and then he did not consciously think of them again for some time.

This woman's voice spoke softly and very pleasingly in this warm intimate atmosphere. The wine soothed Tulley. He'd never met a woman more alive, more full of promise, and yet more secretive, of mystery and subtle invitation.

"Gray has told me of your adventures in Ra, Roy. You seem to have enjoyed yourself. Poor Gray was not so fortunate."

"You rescued him. I won't forget that."

"Ah! I am so glad you understand gratitude, Roy. I am surrounded by those who take all and who refuse to give what little I ask. I am a woman, Roy, and have to resort to shifts and stratagems to retain what little I have. The difficulties I have had running my mines in Ironium—but I didn't ask you here to talk about me. You were sent into Ra by that idiot Corny?"

He nodded.

"And you were brought back to Brorkan by whom?"

The single word screamed in his head—*freak!*

He stuttered, began to ramble, pulled himself up. She was sitting looking at him with a melting fondness that turned his head. The copper-skinned serving maidens had gone. She advanced, lithe and lissom, bent over him, close, close, so that he could smell all the alive womanly intoxication of her. Her perfume maddened him. He reached up his arms, and she laughed and drew back.

"I like you, Roy. You seem to be a man to me. I have need of a strong man on whom I can rely. I must find my way home—I must summon help from my own dimension."

He shook his head. His throat hurt. He was sweating.

"But yes, Roy, yes! I know. Soloman knows. He is ill, desperately ill. But he can sense another porteur when that porteur is close—as you are close to him now, Roy!"

"Soloman? I don't understand."

"Roy—many people have this marvellous gift. But it is latent within them. They can live all their lives and never know. I remember a man I once asked to help me, a man called Robert Infamy Prestin. He treated me infamously. He and his friends, David Macklin, Alec Macdonald, Fezius, Scobie Redfern—all of them hate me and wish to destroy me."

"But—but—I don't hate you—I love—"

"Hush! Soloman will help you. I know you can do it, Roy. For it is necessary that it be done. You, Roy Tulley, are a porteur! On you our whole fate rests! You will porteur us all away from this dimension safely back home!"

XVI

Tumbled in a corner of the curtained alcove of the silken pavilion the ridiculous red velvet clothes and the

blue velvet cap with its brilliant feather broken at the tip lay spread in an untidy heap. On top lay the white ruff with its encircling iron band and the light glittery chain lay like a snake of light across the carpet. In the camp bed the blankets were drawn up tightly about the wizened, shrunken body. Only the gigantic head, bald, its skin seeming about to burst from pressures within, protruding above that small body beneath the blankets told of a human being.

Tulley stared, aghast, unnerved, despising his own feelings.

The contessa knelt in a whisper of draperies. She dipped a cloth in the bowl of water, wiped that enormous domed skull.

"Soloman—Soloman—my little vivi . . . speak to me. You are feeling better? Oh, Soloman, that you should do this to me!"

The wizened features, wrinkled with age and experience, convulsed. The eyes, those dark secretive eyes, closed. The blankets scarcely moved above the shrunken breast.

"Soloman—here is the latent! He is willing to help us—teach him, my little one, show him your art. For only through him will we return—we can bring the greatest doctors in the dimensions to you—all the medicines you need! Soloman, my dear vivi, listen and help me!"

In a voice like a mouse caught in a trap Soloman spoke.

"Yes—a latent—I feel it. He can porteur—if he will learn." The twisted lips ricked back, a gargle rose from the stringy throat. Tulley felt repugnance.

"Roy—Soloman is the greatest porteur in all the dimensions! He will show you. Now listen and learn and when I return then you will take us all away to safety!"

She left them together and with her going a light was withdrawn.

"Come—closer—latent."

Tulley bent over the little man. Moved by an impulse of pity he dipped the cloth, wiped away sweat from that

cliff of forehead, that contused naked skull.

"Can you sense the portal within this place?"

"Huh?" said Tulley, shocked. He looked about. He could see no intense spot of light, no surrounding sheath of green coolness. "No."

"Ah!" A froth appeared on the thin lips. Tulley wiped it away. "Try. It is there—by your left foot. It is a large portal, a gateway to Uphasarum—you must—you must be able—to sense it."

"Nothing."

"Tell me—a portal—what do you—sense?"

Tulley told him. Soloman groaned. "And you came from—Ra?"

"Yes."

"Your own world, your own—dimension?"

"Earth."

Soloman licked his lips. He asked more questions, and Tulley, conscious of the weight of his answers, responded seriously. If he was to be labelled a freak he'd be a good freak. But Soloman was telling he could not be. "I can help, Roy Tulley. My power is vitiated by my illness. I have no control—no control. But through you—Ra, you said?" His eyes rolled up. He breathed sterterously, as though in a trance. His body trembled beneath the blankets.

After a space he said: "Ring the bell."

Tulley picked up the golden bell, rang. A coppery skinned maiden glided in, looked at Soloman, went out. Five minutes later the contessa returned.

"Well, my little vivi? It is done?"

That great helpless head rolled. "He is a Polarised Porteur—"

"No!"

"From Earth, where he was born, to any other dimension." Soloman's voice gained strength. "And back to Earth from any dimension. And from Ra, the same. But—but no other!"

"I will not allow this!" The contessa's face was blood-

less. She stared with her wide violet eyes on Tulley and he was very conscious of his own shortcomings.

"I must get through to Wayne and Charnock! They have the Porvone Portal of Light! I must have it! I will have it! I have gambled too much to fail now. The Porvone do not know what I have done, they must not know. You must find a way back through the dimensions! *You must!*"

"To Ra—" whispered Soloman, his strength gone.

She rounded on Tulley. "Graham tells me you are chief of a great host in Ra. A great mass of chariotry."

He nodded.

She shook Soloman urgently. "Soloman, my life, my little vivil Tell me—quickly! Ra—the nearest portal to Ra from here! Where is it—it must be near. It has to be—Soloman, tell me—tell me!"

Slowly, with immense effort, the little man spoke. "There is a—portal to Ra. Two miles away—I can just—just sense it—far and feebly—but it must be a broad portal. Otherwise I could not—not sense it.—"

"Two miles!" said the contessa. She stood erect, firmly, proudly. "Soloman, you are the best there is in all the Dimensions, my little vivil"

She made the arrangements quickly. The Land Rover with Chriva driving, herself, with Graham Pike fully armed, with Soloman lying on a stretcher, and with Roy Tulley clad in his bronze armour of the Chariots of Ra, sped out of the valley. They travelled fast and a determination in them all drove them on. Tulley had had no time to think. Now he pondered. What was the contessa asking him to do?

She was a magnificent woman. In her he felt all that he had felt for Nomee and Lara and Oolou bound up in one superb body. Her spirit and fire matched Nomee's. Her lush voluptuousness bested Lara's. And her recklessness topped Oolou's. She was all woman and all women.

But—but she was asking him to divert the Chariots of Ra to serve her. She wanted all that hard-won chariotry

to drive through the dimensions to her aid. To serve her own ends she would use the chariots of HamounApen, and then—and then she might do anything. Pike had no doubts.

“To serve the contessa is the highest aim in life in the dimensions, Roy! Surely you see that!”

“She is—is—” Tulley shook his head. “But how can my chariots fight and overcome the might of Hyktros if they have been shattered in battle against the Xlotls? How can I ask them to serve strangers when the treasure of AmounRa awaits their full strength for its return? I would betray them, Gray, betray them foully!”

“Not betrayal, man! They would reform. You could get this treasure back—it’s not as though it was a material thing.”

“It is not a material thing you ask me to do now.”

The Land Rover bounced over this sea of grass that was not the great plain of Ra. Tulley watched directions. They were going in a direction that would be downstream in Ra, towards the twin cities. He cowered from making a decision. Traitor! First a freak—now a traitor!

“I can’t do it, Gray!”

“But think! Think of Poylee—and me—stranded. We’ve been buddies a long time, Roy. Would you desert me now?”

Somehow, Tulley knew without doubts, that if he agreed the chariotry would be there, ready, and they would follow him. They would not have forgotten the sign from AmounRa—the sign he had so deceitfully provided with his Daniell cells.

The contessa had been listening over the thrum of the engine and the jouncing of the vehicle. She turned. She smiled sweetly on Tulley.

“Think of the pride of your chariotry, Roy! Think of their prowess! These fish-people are infantry, they have tridents and spears and nets. They run on webbed feet and hurl their tridents from webbed hands. Their bodies are scaled and their fish faces stink! They hold me back

from my destiny among the dimensions! Is this right and proper, do you think? Do you not feel the stir in your blood, Roy Tulley? Am I not all woman? Am I not deserving of some small measure of loyalty and service from those I help better than anyone else in all the dimensions?"

His chariot squadrons could do it. Natunza and Lenoum—they could charge on to a quick victory. With the help of Wayne and Charnock and what fire power they had left, it could be done. A quick all-out charge, a wheel inwards from the flanks as they had practised and practised back in Ra, the huddle of the fishmen, the whickering arrow storm—by the Potent Pegu, it could be done!

That was it—that was the clue. Fangar, too, was of the dimensions now, and he would hurl his chariots and his Riders against those who sought to stop the contessa. "All right," he said hardily. "It will be done. And I just hope we are in time, for it is time now for my Chariots of Ra to move against their own enemy!"

The Land Rover stopped. Soloman was positioned comfortably on his stretcher. The contessa handed Tulley a strange weapon similar to those the Tob'kliac's masters had carried. "Fight for me, Roy! Charge with all your chariotry—and know that in serving the Contessa Perdita di Montevarchi you serve a higher purpose than you know!"

She spoke gently to Soloman.

Tulley could see the portal—an intense spot of white light with a large aura around it, greenly glowing. The gateway was large. He summoned up all the power in him, a power that Soloman had explained, had driven him into channelling. *He* could not explain how it was done. He felt that brief moment of violent pain; his mind shrank and expanded, a disembodied fraction of time—and he was standing once again on the great plain of Ra with the River Oo splashing along close by, and advanc-

ing towards him over the sere grasses came the host of HamounApen.

He had known it would be like this, for this was the way the contessa had planned it, and he had come to a belief in her that nothing now would shake.

Fangar hauled up his chariot.

"Roy?" he shouted. "*Roy!*"

It was the hushed hour before dawn. The last stars were fading from the sky. The sound of the host came faintly, the stamp of hooves, the jingle of bit, the muffled creaking of chariots. They had just broken camp.

"Ooloul!" shouted Tulley as Fangar sprang down from his chariot. "Ooloul?"

"She was sore wounded Roy; but she mends. She is in Hamoun now, resting, under Lara's personal orders." Fangar clapped him hard on the shoulders. "But you—by the Potent Pegu—we thought you had ventured beyond the ice-fanged Zitzimmas!"

"Yeah—well, I nearly did." He told Fangar then, did Roy Tulley. He told him it all. He did not hide a thing. "And if we aid this contessa, Fangar, she will aid us. She has given her promise, as I have given mine."

Fangar was staring at him. "Have you forgotten what the treasure of AmounRa means to the people, Roy? I know we travelled the dimensions; but this is our home—for a space, until we have done what we set out to do."

Fangar stroked his beard. His bandy legs reminded Tulley vividly of past adventures. Then Fangar nodded.

"It was you, Roy, who created this chariotry. I do not forget that, by the Potent Pegu, no! It was you who gave back to the people of HamounApen their self-respect. There is a debt." He chuckled, startling Tulley. "Fish-people, you say? Infantry? We'll cut through them like my Riders!" He swung and signalled a chariot. "Ho there! Summon Natunza and the generals! Call Lenoum!"

Brazen trumpet calls cut the dark air. The dawn breeze rustled the sere grasses. In a trampling of hooves the generals gathered. Natunza expressed his delight to

AmounRa that Tulley was returned to them. Lenoum jumped down and would have embraced Tulley; then he remembered and instead saluted with brilliant panache.

All Tulley told them was that a fresh enemy inspired by the demons of Hyktros lay between them and the treasure. "Once we have defeated and slain the fish-people, we can advance on Hyktros with bloodied swords! We will have the divine aid of AmounRa himself. For I know! He will send his lightnings and his thunders to aid us! Look!"

Tulley aimed the energy weapon, pressed the stud. Purplish fire crackled, cracked the earth, burned the grass, roiled into clouds of steam the waters of the Oo. "See!"

They were with him after that. He marshalled them. A chariot was found, a driver—a buxom girl with arms like steelbands—beside herself with pride at the honour. As he mounted up beside this young Latha he remembered Ratha of the Black Hair and Jezd.

"Safe," Fangar called. "Torozei escaped; but our friends were unharmed."

"That is good. Now—all—forward!"

He stood at the side of the portal. In an eerie mingling of wills he could feel Soloman aiding him. In the predawn hush he put the chariots in batches through the portal. After a time the pains grew so bad he felt he could support no more agony; then, as though practice had dulled the reception of pain or persistent effort was rewarded, the pains lessened, the knack grew in him. He flung the chariots through now, quicker and quicker as they pressed on, a great host of flashing hooves and tossing feathers, of blazing bronze and whirring wheels.

At last he could hurl his own chariot through. The dull sky of Faddafreyev lowered above. Latha yelped. He shouted at her to drive rapidly to the van. She flicked the reins over the backs of the nageres, they bounded forward. Tulley checked his gear. Four full

quivers slung on the outside of the chariot. Six slanting spears. Three bows in sheaths. Spare bronze swords on the inside of the chariot parapet. His own sword. And the purplish beam weapon from some unknown dimension. He shouted urgently and hurried Latha on.

With Lenoum and his squadron—his 'Devoted Guard!'—he roared into the lead with wheels churning the dust and the dull light flickering from wheels and hooves, from bronze and feathers.

The Land Rover led the way. If anything, the sight of that strange vehicle raging over the grass without help of nageres impassioned the belief in the chariot host of their own invincibility. The nageres pounded on. Now they could see the camp of the Xlotls ahead. Fishmen boiled from the encampment, began to line up with weapons spearing up, tridents catching that same dull light, gleaming ominously.

The fish-people formed regiments and divisions, shuffling into lines. Trumpet calls brayed from the chariotry. The outer regiments peeled off, curling swatches through the grass. Headlong on whirled Tulley. These were the tactics of chariot warfare which he had studied long and diligently. Almost up to the stolid lines of fishmen they careered then, at the blast of a trumpet, they cut sideways, paralleled the ranks, and from the chariots rose the arrow storm.

Shrieks and screams rent the dull air. Tridents flew to fall short. Again and yet again the arrow cloud burst upon that astonished infantry.

Tulley realised with a yelping grin of sheer astonishment that he was loosing arrows as fast as he could snap out the bow from his chest. He thrust the bow away, yanked out the energy weapon, played it down the fishmen's ranks. He boiled and whiffed them into nothingness. Then the weapon clicked dry. With a cry of disgust he hurled it into the bottom of the chariot and as Latha wheeled around in a roaring grass-cutting turn, slapped the bow back into action. Now he understood why the

contessa had not just attacked with her energy weapons. Against this sullen host of Zlotls the weapons would have given five minutes of superiority—and then the tridents would have drunk blood.

"They're clumping!" he yelled. "Drive, Latha, drive!"

Tridents clipped the grass about him. He poured in his arrows. The chariots wheeled like flocks of birds above a rotting carcass on the sea shore.

The fishmen began to give. Now he could hear gunshots. The whole mass surged. Chariots were everywhere, driving at breakneck speed, cutting in and out, and over everything the drenching arrow storm pulverised those scaled masses.

He saw an open fish face before him fall, go down beneath the wheels. The chariot jolted. Now they were in among the mass. He flung the bow down, grabbed a spear, began thrusting and stabbing. The nageres, maddened, leaped ahead.

Now he could see a rough barricade, earthworks, bundles and bales heaped up. Men were there, firing guns. He saw Wayne, gigantic in black armour, shooting at fleeing fishmen. He saw a swarthy man with hugh curled black moustaches and dressed in the remnants of armour wielding a truly enormous two-handed sword. Fish heads flew.

"By Black Naspurgo! The contessa has done it again! She has summoned aid from the dimensions!"

A dwarf with bronze-tinted skin and red hair was perched on a bundle, firing a Colt .45. "Yes, Charnock! The very dimensions spawn miracles!"

"Quit shouting and keep shooting, Stryka!" bellowed Wayne. Tulley swerved to avoid a trident, thrust heavily with the spear. The fishmen screeched and toppled back.

He saw Fangar go wheeling past. Following him rode the nagere-mounted cavalry. They made a fine sight, their lances low and levelled, scooping up screaming fishmen. The horror of it all would hit Tulley later; right now he was performing actions he had trained long to be able

to do instinctively. He had to shut out the bestiality, the barbarism, the sheer atavistic terror of what he was doing.

The rank tang of blood reached him; but suffusing everything the ripe rotten odour of fish stank in his nostrils.

A space cleared and he went back to his bow. His blood sang in his temples as he drew and loosed. He seldom missed. Latha handled the chariot superbly. He saw fishmen trying to clamber up the barricades, the last of their infantry making a final effort to reach the men inside. Fishmen hoisted themselves up behind the moustached man swinging the two-handed sword.

A man bare to the waist and displaying a fish-scale streaked torso of muscle and sinew and with thewed arms hacking and hewing with a long two-handed axe screamed a warning.

"Behind you, Charnock!"

Charnock whirled. The axe whistled down and fishmen tumbled back. But more climbed up, tridents flew, one grazed across the man's bare torso and he staggered back. His shaggy beard and unkempt hair disguised much of his face; but clearly Tulley saw the rage there.

"And you, Lacey! To your rear, man!" Charnock yelled.

Lacey swung the axe, barely parried a trident, staggered. The long two-handed sword thrust. A fishman shrieked, fell. More scrabbled up with their webbed hands and feet. Charnock and Lacey, hard-pressed, stood back to back. Then Latha swung the chariot around in a sizzling curve and Tulle feathered his shafts in the dully gleaming scaled bodies. Zlots tumbled down, tridents slipping from their webbed fingers.

"Thanks, pal!" called the man Lacey. He saluted with the long axe. It was of the Danish pattern, Tulley saw. Then he was wheeling off again and loosing into the mass of scaly backs as they fled.

Later he gathered at the barricades with Fangar and Pike and Wayne and Charnock and the others. The Land Rover drove up with Chriva beaming at the wheel.

Bobby Travers leaped out, rushed to Wayne, began shouting. The contessa dismounted in a swirl of white draperies. She came straight to Tulley. She was smiling with all the seductive sweetness of the honeyed vales of Arcady upon him.

"You have done nobly, Roy! My poor Soloman is unconscious—but he will recover. Wayne!" Her tones bit. "At last we are reunited. As for you, Charnock—"

She saw among the bundles upon the ground something that attracted her attention. She looked long and hard. Then she said: "And so you have at last brought me my PPL. That is good. That will atone for much. Now summon Harllon. We would return to Irunium."

Pike was holding Poylee around the waist. He said to Tulley: "I'd never believe it, Roy. What they'd say back in Sharon if they could see us now!"

Wayne was talking in a bull voice to Bobby Travers. "He was killed, Bobby. I could do nothing. He was shot by a snivelling cur called Cy Yancey. They were what fouled us up—this Yancey and his companion, Olan. They took the girls, Zelda and Jorine. I don't know how they got away or where they are now; but I hope Siegler will rot them to hell and gone!"

"My brother!" Bobby Travers was saying, dazed. "Dead!"

"We have many enemies in the dimensions, as you see, Roy." The contessa had grown, she breathed vitality. As she looked upon the men clustered about her they shrank back. Her smile so softly scarlet-sweet cloyed upon them. "You have served me well, Roy. I shall not forget. You and your friend Gray Pike. Through you two I am able once again to return to Irunium."

"And I must get my chariots back to Ra," said Tulley. He eyed the contessa askance. She had changed. Her languour had gone. He could sense a hardness of diamond where he had least expected it.

"Aren't you coming back to Irunium?" asked Pike eagerly. He laughed at Poylee. "Think of the future!"

"I must return my chariots, Gray!"

"Can you do it, alone, Roy?" The contessa sounded as though she might be interested. "I shall welcome you in Irunium—if you can manage to reach there through the dimensions. As for you, Gray, you shall hold a post of honour—with your Poylee."

"I'll do it, if it's the last thing I do—if it kills me!" said Roy Tulley heatedly. Natunza had driven up. "Marshal the host, Natunza. Collect the wounded. We are going back—and the treasure of AmounRa will soon be ours!"

"At least, Roy, take a gun with you," said Pike.

"No thanks. We rely on bows and arrows and chariots in Ra. With them we can defeat the Hyktros, never fear!"

Fangar stroked his beard. "We can, by the Potent Pegu, we can! But first we will need to reequip ourselves, the armouries must turn out more arrows and spears, more bows and chariots. This has set us back—"

"Yes, maybe! But it has given backbone to our people. It has shown them what the Chariots of Ra can accomplish. This has been only the beginning!"

When all was ready the Chariots of Ra positioned themselves by the portal. Summoning up all the power he possessed—all the power of a freak!—Tulley began to send them through the portal. When only he and Latha stood in their chariot, the last of the host, he said to the Contessa Perdita di Montevarchi: "I will hold you to your promise one day, contessa. But now I must see how Oolou is doing. And there are two princesses between whom I must choose a mate to make me a king. And Fangar is my comrade there. One day, perhaps, I shall return to Earth."

"But Roy!" said Graham Pike, astonished and chagrined.

"Goodbye, Gray. We'll meet up again."

He motioned to Latha and she flicked the reins over the nageres. With feathers waving and the bronze gleaming, the chariot moved forward.

THE CHARIOTS OF RA

Tulley flung up a hand.

"Farewell!"

In the blink of an eyelid Roy Tulley vanished from that world to return to his world and to the Chariots of Ra.

—the end—