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**KENNETH
BULMER**

THE HUNTERS of JUNDAGAI

*Quest and quarry
are one in
the dimensional
steeplechase*

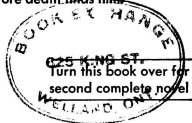


Cy Yancey dreamt of being a big game hunter adventuring in Africa. Little did he know that stepping into an alleyway outside his rifle club would lead him to the most important hunt in his life, a hunt that would take Cy much farther than Africa, a hunt through the worlds of the Dimensions, seeking, of all things, Earth!

For Yancey, in trying to grab a cab, ends up hitching a ride with Porteurs Zelda and Jorine—escapees from the power of the mysterious Contessa.

Fleeing with them, Yancey is bounced from one Dimension to another until he arrives on Jundagai, planet of the Hunters.

On Jundagai lies the answer to Yancey's dreams. The Hunt reigns supreme, though often one is not sure what the quarry is. But Jundagai holds still a greater attraction. Jundagai, Yancey's prison, holds the key to home. Yancey has only to find the right lock before death finds him.



THE KEYS OF THE DIMENSIONS

**Novels by Kenneth Bulmer
in this Series:**

THE KEY TO IRUNIUM

THE KEY TO VENUDINE

THE WIZARDS OF SENCHURIA

THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

THE HUNTERS OF JUNDAGAI

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HUNTERS
of JUNDAGAI**

ACE BOOKS

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I

Because he worked in a boring and body-destroying office all day, Yancey liked to go down to the club in the evenings and keep himself in shape with wrestling and karate and his eye keen with target shooting. He was good enough to be on the target and the judo teams and sometimes the fixtures clashed. Neither team wanted to drop him.

"Look, Cy," said Maxi Feldstein patiently, spreading his hands in the club lobby where lower Manhattan, through the glass doors, showed its stark black and white winter contrasts. "You can shoot over at the Y and then get back here in time. I'll hold back your event—"

"That'll mean a cab."

"So all right! The club can afford it. You'll be tangling with Tiger O'Malley."

"I owe him," said Yancey reflectively.

Feldstein beamed. "That's more like it, Cyl"

"Okay, then, Maxi. Count me in."

Timothy—a self-styled Tiger—O'Malley needed to be up-ended, and Yancey felt a warm, uncivilized glow at the prospect.

The team did well over at the Y, and Yancey notched up a personally satisfying score. The image of Tiger O'Malley lured him on, steadying his eye and brain as he looked through the sights. His rifle spat from a rock steady rest.

He even beat out Rocky, the team's champion fast draw expert, who was just as good with a target rifle, and that made Yancey feel brisk about the upcoming fracas with O'Malley.

Rocky kept a .423 Mauser in his room over in Brooklyn, and one day, so they'd idly gabbed together, they'd make it to Africa for some real man-size target shooting . . .

"Give O'Malley an extra thump for me, Cy," shouted Rocky as Yancey dived for a cab rolling up at the curb,

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his old Winchester Model 72, in its canvas duffle, tucked under his arm. The cab took off with a squeal of tires carrying the fare who'd entered from the opposite side.

"Blast!" yelled Yancey outraged. He stared about but, as always at times like this, he could see no other cruising cab. He put his head down into the bitter night wind and started off at a fast walk along the sidewalk. It wasn't all that far, especially for one in his condition, and the thought of O'Malley kept him warm.

He crossed the street and headed down an alley that would bring him out onto the next block and save going all the way around. He kept alert for signs of muggers, confident in his ability to cripple anybody who tried to molest him, hand-to-hand or with a sap. The loaded rifle under his arm would prove an unexpected argument to a clever guy with a gun, at that . . .

He did not expect what he saw.

He didn't believe it, not at first.

What he did see was a young girl in some crazy stripper's outfit abruptly topple from a doorway and go screaming and yelling across the wind-eroded alley.

A long, thin, glittery chain swirled from a collar about her neck.

Yancey gaped. Then the man at the end of the chain stepped into view. He wore a thick coat of furs, almost like a woman's, and a metal hat with a crest. His face, dark and shadowed, caught a vagrant gleam of light in each eye socket, and the eyes glittered in that light in a way that made Yancey stiffen and grip his rifle.

The man shouted something unintelligible to Yancey, his voice thick and hoarse, and he struck the girl across the face. The only word Yancey picked up was "steechla!" and then he jumped forward, yelling, knowing he was a hell-fired idiot for embroiling himself in something which had nothing to do with him but completely unable to stop himself.

The sight of the girl's white face, anguished and suffering, did something extraordinary to Yancey there in that night-choked alleyway.

The man pressed a stud on the bracelet on his wrist and the girl writhed, her back arching, her breasts thrusting, her mouth opening to scream.

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Again the fur-clad man shouted—and again the only word Yancey picked up was something that sounded like “Jundagai.” And again—“steechla.” If that wasn’t a term of foul-mouthed contempt, Yancey hadn’t spat out a few in his time. He lunged forward.

Then, then— Oh no, Yancey yelled mindlessly to himself, this was madness!

For the girl, the man—disappeared.

He looked about foolishly. They’d disappeared, vanished, gone without a trace. He knew what he’d seen, all right. Yet he looked into a dark doorway, crossed the alley to peer into the opposite opening. They couldn’t have made it, not without him seeing them move—and they hadn’t moved! One minute they’d been standing struggling there; the next, they weren’t.

People just didn’t vanish off the face of the Earth, did they?

The wind gusted cold and clammy. Yancey pulled the collar of his coat higher. There was no point in hanging about here. And Tiger O’Malley waited. But—but. . .

There was no point in calling the police. By the time they got here he wouldn’t believe the story himself. Proof, man, where’s ya proof?

He searched about the alley a bit, desultorily, half-heartedly. The girl might have dropped a bit of that stupid costume—all draperies and knickknacks and beads—but he did not expect to find anything and he did not disappoint this realistic expectation.

Looking down the alley, ready to leave, he heard a sudden footstep and swung about so violently he slipped and nearly lost his rifle.

Doing a panicky little juggling act to stop from toppling over and at the same time to hold onto the rifle, and in a reflexive movement to hold it so that it would serve as a weapon he could call on instantly, Yancey managed to regain his equilibrium. The man coming toward him had a hand in his pocket, and his face looked ugly and impatient and not ready to suffer fools lightly.

“Did you see anyone here just now, please?” asked the newcomer pleasantly. Yancey guessed that was his natural way of talking and the worry of something new had stamped that hard look over his face. He wore stylish, rimless spec-

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tacles, and his trim athletic figure dressed in an English overcoat moved with a supple ease eloquent of a man who hadn't yet broken training.

"Yes—no!" Yancey said, and then felt more of a fool.

The man's smile was really most pleasant. He said, "I see. So they whipped in here and whipped out again. Where, I wonder, where?"

The last, clearly, was a remark aimed at himself.

A fresh idea hit Yancey now. He swallowed. "If I told you I saw a man and a girl, oddballs, both of them, suddenly appear here and then—vanish—you'd think I was some kind of nut. . . ."

"Far from it. It's no good your telling anyone else, of course. No one would believe you."

"But you do?"

"Surely. Otherwise, I wouldn't be talking to you now, would I?"

Yancey gripped his canvas-wrapped rifle, feeling the irrationality, the sheer screwball nuttiness of all this, washing over him like the suds in a machine scourer.

"It's all that damn quarter-inch," he grumbled.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing."

Yancey stood five feet eleven and three-quarter inches.

In the few months before his twenty-first birthday he'd measured himself at least thirty times a day, running up the stairs of his parents' house back in Red Bank and climbing on the chipped scales to straighten up against the rule. Everyone knew you stopped growing when you were twenty-one, and for Yancey the magic of that extra quarter-inch meant something he could not explain: as though it would open magic casements onto a different sphere of imagination, as though it would in some way complete and transform him. He didn't bother to measure his height these days.

The newcomer stood back from Yancey and then began to look about the alley. He held his head a trifle to one side, and he reminded Yancey of a pointing dog.

"I'm Prestin," he said suddenly. "Would you please, Mister—?"

"Yancey," said Yancey. He wouldn't tell this guy, he wouldn't tell anyone that his name wasn't Cyrus, as every-

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one calling him Cy thought. Why his mother and father had called him Claud was part and parcel of why he'd never grown that damn quarter-inch.

"Mr. Yancey, can you tell me exactly where they disappeared, please?"

The insanity of all these goings-on gripped Yancey now. O'Malley could wait to be thrown headlong to the mat. This seemed to promise more excitement.

"Over here, I think," said Yancey doubtfully. "I was a trifle—bemused."

Prestin laughed gently. That driven sense of urgency still emanated from him powerfully, but under absolute control. He moved across to the point where Yancey had indicated and at once his face tightened up.

"Yes, Mr. Yancey. It was here. Thank you, you have been most helpful."

Prestin vanished.

"Oh, no!" yelled Yancey. He put his hands to his eyes. When he dragged them away, Prestin was still missing.

Either he was going to have to pay a quick visit to a head shrinker, or else the universe was imploding—something highly weird was taking place around here.

Up the alley came the sound of metal chinking against metal, footsteps, and a girl's voice, light and quick.

"I think Bob went this way; he's very good but he's still not too hot on sensing 'em out."

"Not like you, Sarah, you—" And then the words garbled into another language outside Yancey's comprehension.

He turned around to face them with a deep and fallible resignation.

Three people advanced toward him. Yancey just stood there and let it all happen.

The girl first—young, extraordinarily quick and lovely, with smooth honey-colored hair and soft, shy, innocent face—that must be Sarah.

The men—one short, about an inch taller than Sarah, but incredibly wide and tough—barbarically tough—with a tanned devil's face and twinkling, merry eyes, a walking bundle of dynamite, who wore some kind of armor beneath a heavy cloak of ruby red and hefted a long sword he looked capable of splitting enemies lengthways with. The other—quarter-inch short Cy Yancey had to tilt his head

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to look up at the giant, whose immense frame, clad in metal armor creaked the leather straps, and who lifted an ax so large Yancey mentally winced at the thought of that edge and weight biting through mere mortal tissue and bones.

They spoke to each other in what was obviously a coarse, rude, joyous way, the strange words flying between them like custard tarts in a silent film.

"Fezius! Offal!" reprimanded Sarah. "We're supposed to be following Bob not—"

The short man—you could not call him a little man—gabbled something in her ear which made her slap him on the shoulder and giggle. Yancey out of his open-mouthed astonishment noticed they all had a kind of jeweled band in their hair; and then the girl was saying politely to him something about a fancy dress ball.

"Oh, sure, sure," he said, standing stock still. He knew his legs wouldn't carry him. Where had these three come from?

"If you want to know if I've seen anybody here," he said, "the answer is yes. First of all there was this guy with the tin hat and the fur coat, and a girl with him, and then this character who called himself Prestin—"

"Ah!" Sarah said. "Good old Bob. He had to leave us a clue somehow."

"Clue?"

"Did you tell him your name?"

Panic flooded Yancey. "Yes," he said, feeling his heart thumping. "Shouldn't I have?"

"Of course. Now tell us."

"Clau—I mean, Cy Yancey."

"Right, Cy. I think I know where Bob went. It . . ."

Fezius rapped out something all hard and razory.

"Yes, yes, Fezius, my pet. We're on our way. I think Bob's gone to Zonsferah, or the Shosunate. We'll soon find out."

At the exact same spot where Bob Prestin and the fur-coated man and the chained girl had stood, these three vanished.

Yancey put his back against the wall, held the rifle in front of him, and dared anyone else to pop out of nothing-

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ness. His throat hurt. He must be losing his marbles! He must!

When the fur-coated man and the chained girl reappeared in the alley just a few feet from where he stood, he knew he was not going mad. This was real. This was happening. Incensed, he started off toward them, all kinds of words and phrases jumbling about in his mind.

The man saw him coming and dragged the chain cruelly. The girl cried out.

From the corner of his eye he glimpsed two figures materialize at the doorway where he had first seen the man and girl appear. Another man, clad like the first, and another girl, chained to him, popped out. For a moment the tableau held as they all stared at one another.

Then vicious words broke from the two men. They stabbed the buttons on their bracelets, and the two girls reacted, writhing, biting their lips, flopping like landed fish at the end of lines.

"Stop that!" yelled Yancey, not at all clear just what he meant, or even what he was going to do.

The girls screamed. The men backed up suddenly, moved away from him, bunching. Yancey looked back over his shoulder at the doorway where these people seemed to have come from. He looked—and his mind congealed.

Things were appearing there.

At first, but only for a flashing micro-second of deception, he thought they were extremely bulky men clad in long unfashionable belted raincoats and wide-brimmed floppy hats. Then he saw the deep, feral, hate-red pits where their eyes should be. He saw blasphemous clawed hands reaching out, hands covered in green and yellow scales, hands with two fingers and a stub thumb with long blood-red talons. He saw the curious violet edging burning around each scale. He saw those horrors reaching out—and knew they were reaching for him.

With a hoarse cry he stumbled back and crashed against the two fur-coated men. They collided with the girls. For a moment they were inextricably entwined, thrashing, and all the primitive fears of hell flooded and cascaded and drowned Cy Yancey as those feral-eyed monsters charged toward him.

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He tried to disentangle his rifle; but it was caught between the naked legs of one of the girls. He tugged. A confused roaring and screaming shattered the night sky all about him. He felt himself falling. He fell past where the alley pavement should be. He felt a blow splay shrewdly all up his back and then he was lying on riveted metal plates staring up at an orange sky and a blue, blazing sun.

II

He should have been knocked unconscious or killed by the violence of that fall. He lay winded, half-stunned, while the lights went off plopping in his head. After a time he tried experimentally to move his legs and arms and, last of all, his head. He felt a rational conviction that it might fall off if he jerked it too hard.

Beneath him lay one of the fur-coated men. His body felt limp and dislocated. Yancey's fingers dabbled in something wet and sticky; and he sat up with a groan as pain jabbed his elbow, wiping the blood off quickly on the dead man's fur coat. He felt lousy. Those damn bells and fireworks kept on fizzing and popping and ding-donging in his head.

He shut his eyes for a bit; but when he opened them again, reluctantly, that strange riveted metal paving and the bright blue sun were still there.

A soft, breathless voice said something in his ear and he jerked back as though a rattler had reared.

"Huh?"

The girl's face was strained and frowning, her blue eyes clouded with fear. The scanty rags of her clothes hung in tatters about her. The other girl, unconscious like the second man, had more clothes on; but they were of a flashy, trashy, beady and tinkly kind Yancey had never cared for.

The girl moved screwing up her face, feeling, Yancey guessed, the bruises of their fall. She fumbled about in the

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dead man's hair, dislodging the silly steel hat, and produced a band that winked jeweled brilliance in that blue sunshine. All their faces shone with a blue tinge, as though underwater.

She fitted the band around his own head, tucking it neatly into place, the feel of her soft hands not unpleasant, saying: ". . . she'll have her Trugs after us any time now and I'm so frightened of them I can't stand and poor Zelda lying there all blue and those two Valcini scum here and—"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," said Yancey, distracted. He put a hand to his head and winced. This wasn't real and yet he had the nasty suspicion that he wouldn't wake up comfortably in his own bed in his rented room, all ready for that god-forsaken office in New York. This, he felt sure, wasn't New York.

"But the contessa. . . ."

"This man," said Yancey, swallowing. "He's dead."

"Praise be to Uboth! Quick, the other Valcini is still breathing; quick, take this one's knife and slit his throat before he wakes up!"

"Do what?" Yancey saw the way her breasts heaved beneath the flimsy, silvery cloth. She meant every word she said. "You can't kill a man, not kill him—like that."

With an unpleasant throaty sound the girl snatched the long knife from the dead man's waistbelt and whirled to the man still alive. She flung herself on him, the glittery chain snarling up around her arm, holding back that deadly thrust in time for Yancey to roll clumsily over and grab her wrist.

"Hold it! For God's sake! What's going on?"

She struggled to free herself. The knife glittered evilly in that blue sunshine, the sharp edges dangerous.

Holding her writhing body he tumbled over onto the man. Yancey's flailing arm trying to get a grip on the girl's quicksilver form snicked down on the unconscious man's bracelet, depressing the stud.

The girl stiffened. Her hands snapped open like released springs. The knife dropped to tinkle on the metal floor. She arched her back, her face contorted, her body surging with uncontrollable agony. Hastily, Yancey heaved himself up and released the stud. As the girl collapsed with a despairing cry he scooped the knife up and, for want of a better

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place, stuck it down the waistband of his trousers. He noticed as he did so that all the buttons had been ripped off his coat

"You fool! When he comes around he will kill you!"

"Just, just wait a minute. Let me get my breath back."

"Fool!"

Yancey forced himself to stand up. He used his rifle to help him—an insult and source of possible damage he would never permit himself in more normal times—and stared about him. He caught his breath.

The riveted metal plates formed a great floor that extended as far as he could see on three sides. On the fourth they swept upward sheer into the air for what seemed twice the height of the Empire State Building. He blinked his eyes as the blue sun burned down. Not a cloud in the orange sky, not a sign of anything else apart from themselves on the metal floor, nothing at all met his watering gaze. He turned back to his new companions.

The girl, whimpering a little, had crept to the side of the other girl, the one who must be Zelda, and was trying to revive her. The glittery chains glowed blue-silver under the lighting. What color the girl's hair might be defied his description; it looked a pale blue, as of watered ink. She patted Zelda's face and hands, panting, obviously very frightened.

Well? Wasn't Cy Yancey as scared as all hell? That's right he was!

Zelda moaned. Yancey looked at her. Her hair which looked a deep plum color must really be auburn, a short crop around her ears, in marked contrast to the other girl's swirling, pale blue tresses. Her eyes opened. Deep brown eyes, eyes that had a profound effect on Yancey looked up as her head rolled and took in the scene. He had last seen that face, he had first seen that face, in the alley as this now dead man had struck her across the mouth and called her a "steechla."

"Come on, Zelda, come on. We've a real chance now. We've picked up a ninny who knows nothing of the Dimensions, and the Trugs are after us; the contessa will be goading them on; you know her!"

"What do you mean, a chance?" demanded Yancey truculently. He didn't like being called a ninny, even if he didn't

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understand the context. "If those things are after us. . . ."

"The Trugs!" said Zelda. She sat up. Her silly beads clattered and with a grimace she flicked them off and sent them clattering over the metal floor. She stretched. "But we do have a chance, Jorine, a good chance. Yet," she looked about again, a tiny frown cutting down between her eyebrows, "this isn't Jundagai."

"No, I think it's Torwalt, or maybe Kafarguelin. I felt the Portal there so quickly and the Trugs were coming and I—I just pushed us."

Zelda patted Jorine's hand. "You did right. But Soloman will soon smell us out. We've got to move, and move fast. This is the chance we've been waiting for for so long."

"What about ninny here?"

Zelda looked coolly at Yancey. He felt her regard smoking on his flesh, a physical contact he could not explain or understand, nor, desiring it, could he accept.

"The first thing to do is unlock these despicable iron collars and their chains," said Zelda firmly.

"Yes, oh yes," said Jorine.

They rifled the men's clothing urgently, found small keys that unsnapped the loops in the iron collars around their own necks. A second twist of the keys opened the collars themselves. Gingerly, the two girls took off the iron collars and pulled the wisps of pink silk free that had, however ineffectually, attempted to prevent the iron from chafing. Their necks looked red raw under the blue lighting.

Zelda breathed deeply.

"It's good," began Jorine.

"Yes," said Zelda.

"Now look here," said Yancey. "I want—"

Zelda looked at him indifferently.

"I suppose we can't leave him with these two Valcini scum. The Trugs will be here soon. I'm surprised Soloman hasn't got onto us yet. So . . ."

"There's one near, Zelda. I can sense it—over there." Jorine pointed toward the uprearing metal wall that seemed merely an irrational continuation of the metal floor.

"Yes," Zelda nodded. "A small one, but large enough." She bent, picked out the knife from her own dead man, took off his waistbelt from which hung a holstered automatic, a large and ugly handgun, and strapped it about her own

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slim waist, drawing the buckle up onto hitherto unused notches. Jorine did the same. As she did so her man, the man she had tried to kill, stirred and moaned. He opened his eyes.

"Oh!" cried Jorine, backing away. "I told you to kill him!"

Unconcerned now, Zelda took out the automatic. Yancey tensed. Then the girl leaned over and laid the gun alongside the Valcini's temple. He closed his eyes again.

"Did—did you kill him, Zelda?"

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. Come on." And Zelda strode for the enigmatic metal wall.

Jorine followed eagerly. Because there was nothing else to do, Yancey trotted along after them. Zelda didn't bother to turn her head to see if he came or not.

Looking at the girls from the rear like this, Yancy took time off to notice, stitched across the silvery filmlike material across their backs, the broad wide open eye in vivid scarlet cloth. He wondered what it meant. He was wise enough in his youth to know that everything that was happening now, despite all evidences to the contrary, contained a deep meaning, a meaning that would have life and death consequences for him in the near future.

Then he could not help seeing the way the heavy automatics dragged down the belts around the girls' hips, dangerously low, and the way the belts moved so interestingly as they strode for the wall. Here, of all places, Yancey could still keep his mind on the main subject.

He had decided, because there was nothing else he could decide, to go along with the girls and try to figure out what the hell had happened. He wasn't in any part of the world that he knew of. He didn't think he'd blacked out and could thus have been transported without his being aware of it. No, he'd been taken somewhere—some other place—some place of dream and nightmare. . . .

And the way he'd suddenly been able to understand Jorine when she put that jeweled band around his skull. That band must be some kind of language translator. Oh well, decided Yancey, he'd have to get back to the old office sooner or later, and with a couple of dames like this along it might as well be later as sooner.

That made him realize what the girls were doing.

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"Hey!" he yelled. "Just where are you going? There's only that silly wall up ahead—"

Jorine turned to answer him but Zelda grabbed her arm and hurried her on. Their slippered feet made no sound on the metal; Yancey's Massmart men's shoes clattered with the reminder that they badly needed repair.

Jorine was lifting her head now, turning it from side to side as she walked, like a weather vane in a gusty wind. Yancey was reminded of Bob Prestin, back in the alley.

Zelda bore straight on, angling now to cross the intervening space between them and the wall as quickly as possible.

Jorine gasped. "It's—I think it's the other side of the wall!"

"No, that's the big one. There's a smaller gate this side, just this side I think."

"Praise Uboth for that!"

Sensing increasing tension in this wild scene where every moment added further to madness, Yancey hurried to keep up with them. They surely were fit, free-striding birds. He sweated in his overcoat. But he wouldn't abandon it. Hell, man, New York was bitterly cold! But, but he wasn't in New York, was he? And not likely to get back to it if those Trugs were blocking the way.

He ran to keep up, tucking the rifle beneath his arm.

The thought of those horrific beasts from the pits of a diseased imagination made him look back over his shoulder. Nothing moved on that weird riveted metal plain.

The blue sun, shining from its orange sky, threw their hurrying shadows before them and thus revealed every meter of that strange wall in light. The girls were beginning to pant a little now, Zelda holding her side where, Yancey guessed, she had a stitch. How she'd recovered from that fall impressed him. He still felt woozy and his body ached with bruises. The dead man had been underneath—he'd saved them all.

"Portals are always close together; they told us so at the Academy," said Jorine, frightened. "I can't sense the little one, only the big one on the other side of the wall. Oh, Zelda—where is it?"

"It's there, but small, small. It's one at a time."

"What about the ninny?"

They had almost reached the wall. Yancey understood

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enough to know that this Portal the girls talked about was the way out of this nuthouse—that it might lead to another loony bin worse than this was a chance he had to take because there was no visible alternative. He had to make sure they took him with them.

"Look girls, you wouldn't leave a fellow here, would you? With the Trugs and all?"

"All right," said Zelda. "We'll take you, but if you make trouble . . ." She had no need to finish.

"It's there!" shouted Jorine. "I can sense it. We can escape!"

They started for the wall at a dead run, overcome by a dread sense that even now those Trugs would be catapulting into this world through the gate they had just quitted. They did not spare the time to look around.

A hairline crack showed in that blue, glowing wall.

A door opened, valving open like an iris, broadening and widening. In that opening crouched a gigantic metal frog-like thing mounted on stiff steel legs, crouched, its tentacular steel tongue coiling and uncoiling, its lensed eyes regarding them malevolently. With a whirring of suddenly released springs, it leaped through the air toward them.

III

With a disastrous, giggling feeling of absolute destruction Yancey thought of Tiger O'Malley. The immense metal frog-thing vaulted through the air, its stiffened legs jolting the massive body, its unrolled steel tongue flicking and snaking to scoop them up into its wide metal maw.

Jorine screamed and Zelda pushed her savagely on, straight at the steel juggernaut. Yancey ducked his head and dived after them. He saw Jorine disappear, then Zelda grabbed him by an arm; yanked, he spun forward—and was sprawling in mud with the rain lashing and splashing down all

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about him. Zelda crashed on top of him, once more squashing the air from his lungs.

They sat up, there in the half-darkness with the rain pouring down on them and the lightning crackling across the sky in eye-searing brilliance and the thunder booming and rolling amongst the cloud masses, and they laughed and laughed and laughed.

Around them a wild storm-swept expanse of forest tossed and lashed in the wind. The rain hissed against broad leaves and guttered down trunks that rose impossibly tall against the sky.

They had fallen into a muddied track between the giant boles and the mud sluiced and roiled with the violence of the rushing water, every minute increased by the millions of tons streaming from the sky.

Zelda stopped laughing before the others, the reaction to composure-shattering fear controlled in her with a stronger will, pushed her hair back. Lightning split the sky. The girls' flimsy clothes with those staring scarlet eyes on the backs were plastered to them; Yancey started to take off his overcoat and, with an odd little gesture, Zelda stopped him.

"I guess you're wet enough already," said Yancey uncomfortably.

"That was, was knightly of you, ninny. But we must push on through the Dimensions. The contessa will not let us go without a struggle; I know her!"

Yancey shook his head. Water plummeted down and stung his eyes. "Who's . . . ?" he began.

"Let's get out of the rain," said Jorine, fretfully.

They paddled through the rushing mud and water to one of the trees and stared doubtfully up. They could climb that seamed and cracked trunk and if the first branches were fifty feet off the ground, wasn't that all the safer? Jorine put her naked toes into the first ledge of the bark, her slippers tucked into the belt.

"No, wait," commanded Zelda. She considered.

Jorine, looking down, her face white and exhausted, exclaimed: "Can you sense a Portal, Zelda? I'm tired. I'm wet and I'm miserable. Can't we find a spot in the branches to sleep?"

"Would that be safe?" asked Yancey.

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"I was not talking to you, ninny," said Jorine pointedly.

"Look," said Yancey, exasperated. "My name's Cy Yancey, not ninny."

Zelda nodded, still looking about through the streaming lines of rain. The noise kept on expanding all the time, water tinkling and splashing down between the trees.

"There must be a Portal close by, I suppose. They always tend to be clumped. But, but not all Porteurs can sense what Dimension lies beyond the gates. I think this world is Myrcinus. The trees, the leaves—I was here once with the contessa."

"This world?" Yancey still felt this was no time to be awkward; but he could only go so far along the road that had led to his being called ninny.

"We are traveling between the Dimensions, Cy," Zelda said in her remote, cold voice. She obviously didn't give a damn about him, one way or another. "We have the power of transporting objects—and people—through from one world to another. You must have read about the parallel universes and planes of existence in books on your world of Earth."

"Sure. But that's, that's wild!"

"You're here, Cy. That's real."

He subsided. He was here. No argument.

"Are we going on or do we sleep?" complained Jorine.

"Over there. I think it leads to Yandarkar; at least, that's the way we came in when Soloman led us, that time with the contessa. We, we had her bargemen with us then. It was a big job."

"But if we do go on through to Yandarkar there's no guarantee we'll be safe. We don't know what fresh trouble we'll run into!" Jorine put another couple of yards between herself and the muddy ground.

Feeling the tiredness on him, Yancey was inclined to agree. But in the face of the resolve alive in Zelda, he did not voice his doubts. This girl impressed him, and the realization of that troubled him.

"The Trugs will sniff us out, Jorine. Inicon was a fool, like your academician, to think he could betray the contessa. Soloman wouldn't be fooled. If you wish to stay here, you and Yancey, you're welcome. As for me, I'm for Yandarkar—and then—home!"

Yancey took less than half a heartbeat to decide which of

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the two girls he would sooner be with. He stepped away from the tree, said firmly, "If you'll take me along, Zelda, I'd like to come."

"Oh well," sniffed Jorine, sliding down the trunk in an expanse of smooth thigh and a slithering of silvery, flimsy cloth. "If that's the way it is. . . ."

He had heard a lot of names and facts and intriguing information over the past hour or two and he had carefully filed each piece away. He knew as well as the next man how important names were, how they were vital if you wanted to get on in the world. Traveling between the Dimensions—between world and world—how much more important they were! If you fouled up on the memory bit hereabouts you not only weren't likely to get on, you were likely to get dead.

They trudged, splashing through the mud and rain between the trees. Water tinkled and trickled everywhere. The tiredness in Yancey was more than a mere physical tiredness for he could not only take his eyes off the girls' figures so blazingly displayed through the water-soaked silver tissue, he couldn't even imagine starting anything with either of them at this minute—the deadened area of rot in his brain must be fear, he thought, fear and dread and a horrible anticipation for what might come next. He tramped on, sunk in gloom.

The girls called themselves *Porteurs*, and they had the weird power of transporting themselves and others from one world to another through the planes of existence. Wild! Now they stood in a puddle by a tree which had been blasted by lightning some time in the past so that its bole thrust like a rotten tooth, smothered in fungus and quick-growing litter sprouting from the forest floor.

Jorine nodded quickly, like a caged bird.

"It's here, Zelda. But thin; and I can't sense where it goes."

Zelda frowned. Her rain-smeared face, white and exhausted, held the first faint tremblings of awareness of fear and defeat. She drew in a breath—magnificently, to Yancey—and spoke in a hard cold voice.

"It's not Yandarkar, I think. Sometimes a *Porteur* can sense the dimension through a gate easily, sometimes only

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with difficulty, sometimes not at all. It's nothing to do with Porteur aptitude, it happens to the best."

"You're the best, Zelda," breathed Jorine quickly.

"Maybe," she flicked that off, holding herself still. "It's a thin gate, very thin. We can do it, Jorine, together."

Zelda put her arms around Jorine's shoulders and her face grew white and masklike. Panic hit Yancey.

"Hey!" he cried, pushing up to them, knowing what they were doing, feeling the rain on his head, the suck of mud beneath his feet, the absolute alien terror of the giant forest about him. "Hey! Don't leave me!"

Zelda took an arm away from Jorine, put it over his shoulder. Hungrily, he put his arms around the girls' waists, caring not at all for the warm pliant feel of their flesh, caring only that they would take him with them out of this unknown world.

They pressed close together. Jorine's gun jabbed hard and painfully into Yancey's thigh; but he ignored the minor discomfort, too much aware of what might happen if they left him. He felt the girls tensing. He felt a quick, queasy surge of nausea in his stomach; and then he was standing holding onto the girls on a cobbled street with low-built houses of daub and wattle on each side, and a broad-faced strapping woman carrying two buckets of water on a yoke from the village pump screaming and running away from them, in a frenzy of billowing skirts, the buckets spilling their water over the cobbles in a loud cock-crowing dawn.

"Blatteraddle!" yelled Zelda, pulling them with her away from the street. They hared for an alley between sloping thatched roofs. "We *would* be spotted like that; now they'll believe all the demons from Hakim's Pit are after their immortal souls!"

For Zelda that was quite an explosion.

Running all atumble, they dived into a low opening as from the square and village pump a loud shouting and a clatter of wooden shoes over cobbles drove them on. Others had seen them, then. Inside, they dimly saw straw and harness and the glitter of brass. Buckets and brooms stood in the corner. High, archaic wooden saddles rode a beam. From their stalls, mild brown eyes regarded the intruders and long, vaguely horselike faces paused from chomping. Six spindly legs supported each brown and white barrel

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body, and the horselike faces rode atop snaky necks that craned down with simple curiosity. Tall pointed ears, tufty with white hair, pricked.

"Yowps!" yelped Yancey. "What in creation are those?"

Jorine giggled. Zelda nudged her fiercely.

"There's a back door. Come on!"

In some strange and altogether human fashion the sense of fear had altered in Yancey so that, in running away from a village of inflamed people wielding broomsticks and pitchforks, he had rejoined the normal world of human beings once again. This, he could understand.

The back door slapped open. A young man stood there staring stupidly at them. He wore coarse sacking garments and leather gaiters and his feet were bare and dirty, with bits of straw sticking between his toes. Him, Zelda grabbed, put her left arm around his throat and with her capable right hand showed him the knife.

"Not a sound, migo, or your throat goes phht, splat!"

The lad gargled, terrified.

"Stick him and let's get out of herel" said Jorine, dancing with impatient frenzy.

"Hey now—" began Yancey.

Zelda loosened her constricting grip. "What is this place?" she asked, making the knife glitter in a chink of light through a warped board.

The lad swallowed. His face was the color of winter morning fire ash. "Cocklehampton."

"Not the village, the whole world, ninny!"

He gulped. "Hanrumatt, and it please you."

"That'll be the name for all he knows of this dimension," sniffed Jorine. "Come on, Zelda, for the sweet sake of Uboth!"

Voices raised in loud shouts, excited squealing, hunting, roaring, reached them. The good folk of Cocklehampton rarely had sport before breakfast.

"D—don't kill me!" pleaded the lad. "King Frorx needs everyone for his levies and I'm to go. Jeannie will let me—it's important."

"Let him get killed in his stupid army rather than on your knifel" Yancey spoke more harshly than he intended.

She glanced indifferently at him. What he said could never sway her decisions.

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Jorine peered through a crack beside the door. Her back wiggled as she looked. The three of them looked like drowned rats, drying out slowly.

"They're heading this way; if we ran we could get back to the Portal before they reach it."

"All right," Zelda nodded firmly. With a speed that would have made her undisputed queen of the fast-draw team back at the club, she stowed the knife away and drew the automatic and, long before the lad had any idea of what was happening, she tapped him on the skull. She let him fall onto the straw as he listed, turning away at once. She did not return the gun to its holster.

"Get set," she snapped. "Run like the Hounds of Hakim's Palace were after you. As soon as we hit the gate we go through. And," she finished, not even bothering to look at Yancey as she spoke. "If you're not there when we go through, Cy, you'll be left here alone."

Yancey nodded. He didn't need to be told.

Then, because the ninny bit still smarted, he said: "Aren't there any other more convenient of these whaddyacall 'em gates, nearer here?"

Her contempt was a momentary flash of emotion only. She couldn't be bothered with his trivia now.

"No," she said. She stepped to the door, looked out. "Now! Run like Hakim's Hounds!"

They ran—like Hakim's Hounds, or like hell. It came to the same thing.

As soon as they hit the cobbles of the square the village people set up a triumphant squawking. Pitchforks glinted in the watery, early morning sun. Broomsticks waved aloft. Petticoats lifted and sturdy legs flashed. The whole peaceful village of Cocklehampton was out for their blood.

Dogs ran and snarled and animals of alien, misbegotten appearance howled and barked. The three companions ran for the invisible gate across the cobbles.

A dog nipped at Yancey's ankles and he kicked out wildly, staggering, gasping. He put his head down and tore after the girls. God knew what might happen to him if he was trapped here. The villagers would tear him to pieces as an emissary of their devil king, most likely.

They clasped one another at the gate, panting, their wet clothes and bodies already steaming. Hair straggled over

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their faces. They gasped for breath and then, with a nauseating churning of his stomach, Yancey went toppling with the girls onto mud and running water and saw once again the storm, lashing the trees of Myrcinus.

Sounds they had not heard in this Dimension before racketed through the downpour.

"Hoshool Hoshool"

Jorine screamed more wildly than Yancey had ever heard her do before. She squirmed madly beneath his arm.

Zelda's face told him that whatever it was was far more deadly than he could easily imagine.

Charging between the trees toward them ran a group of men—no, of beings. Barely five foot six inches tall, with wide froglike faces and wedge-shaped cheeks of yellow and gray with a lick of blue around the chops, with tall conical helmets with scraps of skin and hair fleering from the spikes; clad in reddish metal armor and running on squat bent legs, they brandished short leaf-shaped swords and they looked hell-bent on murder.

"They'll pubick us!" screamed Jorine.

"But if we go back—I" yelled Yancey.

They were caught between the Hounds of Hakim and the deep blue sea.

"I—" stammered Zelda. "We must . . ."

The final furious panic hit Yancey then. Zelda. Zelda had cracked!

IV

Thick dark blood flooded across Yancey's vision and for a wild moment he thought one of these creatures' flung spears had gashed his forehead. Then the darkness cleared, and it was as though he looked through a red-tinted camera lens.

"Hell!" he shouted. "I've had enough!"

He ripped the canvas away from the Winchester and

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snicked the bolt out and in. He had twenty Shorts up there ready and the .22 slugs might only tickle these monsters; but he'd make them keep off, give the girls time to think straight.

As the rifle kicked against his shoulder and the leading creature abruptly dropped its sword and slapped hands to its ruined face, Yancey heard the more powerful, flatter crack of an automatic. Zelda, with the gun clasped in both hands, fired again and a third creature fell.

Jorine was still screaming.

In the bedlam Zelda shouted roughly: "By your disgusting Uboth, Jorine! They're Honshi! Shoot them, you vlastaprangl!"

"Language, language!" said Yancey, firing again and again.

"As for you, migo, your last shot missed!" And Zelda cracked off three quick ones that cut three Honshis' legs from under them.

"Hoshool!" hissed the Honshi, still running forward on their squat bent legs through the rain. Four more toppled over—one still ran on with his intestines slopping greenly through the sides of his armor—but despite their losses they ran on with their short leaf-shaped swords low and ugly and ready for the upward gut thrust.

Now Jorine's automatic added its cracks to the thunder of their defiance; but despite all the fine warlike phrases the Honshi still came on. A couple of barbed spears flew up from the rear ranks of monster warriors, tufted into the mud of the forest floor.

"We'll have to go back!" yelled Jorine, the gun in her slender hands bucking. She missed with her first two shots and then caught a Honshi high on the chest. The big slug punched straight through. They were .45's, those guns, too big for girls, and yet Zelda hadn't missed a shot yet.

"Yes," said Zelda. She pulled the trigger and the gun went click and Yancey, triggering off his nineteenth shot knew the time had come to depart.

"They're only pitchforks and broomsticks," he said. "Not *this*!"

He felt warm, wet, silvery tissue crumple under his hand as he reached for Zelda. Jorine grabbed him. In a compact bunch they porteured through the interstice between the Dimensions. Nausea liquefied Yancey's insides; and then they

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were through and the early morning sun of Cocklehampton shone waterily down on them as they stood on the cobbles by the village pump.

The villagers had fled.

"We vanished—and they did ditto," grunted Yancey.

"But they'll be watching," said Jorine. "I know villagers. We've got to run!"

"Amen," said Yancey, and he started off toward the end of the village street where it disappeared from sight between two sagging houses to reappear further off on its winding way toward low rolling hills framing the horizon.

"I don't sense any gates that way!" rapped Zelda.

"Gates!" yelled Yancey. "I want to put as much space between me and those—those Honshi things, as possible! I don't trust this skedaddling about between worlds."

As Jorine started an angry exclamation, Zelda chuckled. "Very well, ninny. I think, this time, you are right."

A rotten apple flew from a darkened doorway, whizzed over Jorine's head. She swung about, her face white, and stood irresolute. Then, as a shadow moved by the doorway, she lifted her automatic, took aim, and—

And Zelda pushed the gun down.

"No, Jorine. These are simple people. Not Honshi. Let's be gone."

Jorine muttered to herself but began to trot along toward the end of the square. Shaking his head, Yancey followed. Now what had got into Zelda? Was she really a rough, tough, inconsiderate, single-minded fighting lady or could she have human emotions like anyone else?

Yancey remembered the way she'd writhed at the end of that glittery chain, and he rephrased his question.

The villagers crowded cautiously to the very edge of the houses and watched in dubious silence as the three walked along the dirt road, heading out toward the hills. Then, just as the first rise in the road took them out of sight, an oldster in a smock brandished a crook and shouted, "You wait 'til King Frorx hears about this!"

Yancey shouted back what King Frorx could do. Neither girl bothered to blush. They agreed.

As they walked along Yancey thoughtfully reloaded. He had a hundred Shorts and, because he liked to experiment, he also had with him a packet of Longs and a packet of

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Long Rifles. Because he wanted to be able to loose off as many as he could at one reload, he put in the full twenty Shorts. Reloading a tubular magazine was the tricky part. If they'd had to fight on back there, he'd have prayed for a box magazine that he could just slap on, crack, yank the bolt and be all ready.

"A nice little gun," said Zelda, watching. "But a toy. I saw what it did to the Honshi. And if it takes you that long to reload each time you'll be in trouble if we run into any . . ." she chuckled. "By Brother Gorje's crippled foot, yes!"

Yancey knew he had no right to argue. He'd seen her expertise with the .45 and knew this girl knew about firearms. At least it was nice to know something about her.

He still had the piece of canvas duffle and he started to wrap the rifle up again, thinking to clean it out later on. Zelda stopped him.

"No, Cy. We may need—here."

She did something quick and final to her dress and pulled out a long length of green silk ribbon.

Interested, Yancey tied it around the barrel and stock and contrived to sling the rifle over his left shoulder. He stowed his gear back in the pockets of his overcoat, which, very shortly he had to doff and carry slung over his other shoulder. The sun grew warmer. They strode out along the dirt road. Here he was, walking along a dirt road to nowhere in a world he'd not known existed a few hours previously, drunk with tiredness and yet walking out with two gorgeous birds in scanty clothing molded to their figures. Why, man, this was what Rocky and he had slavered over!

"Hadden't you better reload, too?" he asked.

Zelda didn't smile. "I have already done that, Cy. Have you, Jorine?"

Flustered, Jorine said, "No—oh, I forgot!"

Yancey hadn't seen Zelda reload. She was an expert all right. Jorine fumbled around, managing to drop a couple of rounds, picked them up to ram down on top of the magazine load. Zelda frowned.

"No, no, Jorine! There are bits of grit; they'll jam; here, let me do it!"

Looking at the flat automatics, Yancey didn't recognize

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their make; and that was strange enough, even if he didn't consider himself the firearms expert he'd like to be.

As they walked, they talked desultorily, odd scraps of conversation, bubbles of froth, their tiredness destroying coherence. When they spotted the patch of woodland dozing under the sun, Zelda summed it all up.

"We'll rest here. Cover our footprints to the woods. Spread a few leaves. We'll just have to go hungry until we find food."

"Yeah," glumly said ravenous Yancey. "I guess so."

"But what if," said Jorine, glancing back, "if the villagers, someone, follow us?"

"I'll hear them," said Zelda, spreading dry breakable twigs about their den beneath the splayed roots of a tree. They bent branches down to form an arbor. No thought of sex, at least no thought that meant anything at this time, entered Yancey's mind as he lay down and almost immediately was asleep.

He woke as the sun was about to drop below the horizon. He felt stiff and sore and bruised, and his stomach bore some resemblance to the cavity of Grand Central Concourse. He groaned.

"Here," said Zelda, walking across. She threw down what looked like a leg of chicken, tastefully browned and smelling heavenly. "Eat up. We move in half an hour."

"Huh?" said Yancey, pushing up on an elbow. He sank his teeth into the chicken leg and although it was not chicken, it tasted divine.

"Water in that leaf," Zelda went on. "Jorine's washing in the stream now. Your turn last. I'm all set."

"Well," said Yancey to himself—firmly to himself—"you would be, wouldn't you?"

A real no nonsense gal, Zelda.

After Yancey had washed and eaten and drunk and just before they set off, they held a council of war. As the junior member present Yancey was pointedly ignored.

"It is clear we cannot return to Myrcinus through that gate in Cocklehampton," said Zelda in her firm level voice. "The Trugs and the Honshi will have everything sealed off. Since those two fool academicians tried to betray her—as though they could fool that bitch!—she'll be so viciously angry she'll smile twenty-four hours a day."

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Yancey, clever Cy Yancey, said, "No sleep, then?"

Zelda regarded him icily. "In my world the days and nights are thirty-two hours long. Now please, Cy, shut your foolish mouth, hein?"

Despite her imperious order Yancey's mouth fell open.

Of course, it was obvious, but he'd never considered it in a clear light before, still and all. . . .

"You, you're not from Earth? My Earth!"

"Act your age, migo. How could I be?"

"No, I suppose not. Still. I'm sorry."

Jorine giggled.

Yancey felt inclined to throw her down and show her a thing or three; but with Zelda glowering at him his feelings shriveled.

"Now listen. Our only chance is to find another Portal. We are two expert Porteurs. It should not be an insuperable difficulty."

"The gates are often clumped," put in Jorine. "But there are lots and lots that are just singles. They trained us well at the Academy."

"Yes, they trained us well!" said Zelda with flat snake-like hatred.

Jorine shivered. "It was terrible; but we survived and now we're free!"

Yancey swallowed. "You girls come from the same dimens—uh, that is, world?"

"No. Jorine comes from Civastry."

"And you, Zelda? What world do you come from?"

She lifted her head. "I? I come from Ettore, the greatest world in all the Dimensions!"

"Um," said Yancey and wisely kept silent.

"We can find a fresh gateway and we can find our way back home."

"Where," interrupted Yancey, thinking, "Where do those Trugs come from? And the Honshi?"

Zelda tightened up her lips. "The Honshi come from Honsh, of course, where else? But only the contessa has the right contacts there as far as anyone knows. As for the Trugs," she shrugged delicately. "No one knows. If anyone did know I feel sure an extermination campaign would be mounted."

"You can say that again," said Yancey feelingly.

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"As soon as we find a Portal," said Jorine, picking the last of her pseudo-chicken from her teeth and spitting and immediately betraying her own disgust at her unladylike actions, "we can decide about you, ninny."

"Thank you," said Yancey, inflamed. "And how do I get back to Earth if you're gallivanting off to Civastry and Zelda here's hightailing it for Ettore? Hey?"

Zelda stood up, tall and altogether lovely against the last of the sunset. "We can settle all that when we're safe. Now we—" She broke off, one hand to her lips; but they could all hear the snorting of animals and the clink of metal from the road, the soft shush-shushing of tired beasts of burden swaying from side to side.

They crept to the edge of the little wood and peered out.

A column of cavalry passed by, details indistinct but sufficient to reveal the six thin legs of the mounts and their long snakelike necks with the quasi-horses' heads, and, ominously, the tall lances, black and slanted against the sunset glow.

When they had jogged out of sight and sound, the three inter-dimensional travelers relaxed.

"They're after us!" whispered Jorine, the panic returning.

"No!" snapped Zelda harshly. "Had they been, they'd have searched this wood. No, I fancy they're some of King Frorx's levies off to their war."

"So Jeannie did say goodbye to him, then," said Yancey, but softly.

"When a war has to be fought, migo, it has to be fought." Zelda patted the automatic at her side. "There is no room for emotion. We of Ettore understand that."

"Yeah," said Yancey, standing up. "So do we of Earth; but we don't like it."

"That is because you are basically weak and decadent."

"I've heard that before, too."

"If I can get back to Ettore safely—when I do—I shall arouse a great army to sweep back over the Dimensions. We shall root out the contessa utterly, destroying all her evil works, the Honshi and the Trugs and her bargemen and all her evil mines and palaces! Oh then, Cy Yancey, then will come the day of reckoning!"

"Sure, and what happens after all that? Do your con-

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quering heroes go home, meekly? Or do they go on swording it over all the other Dimensions? Huh?"

"You do not understand these things."

"Well," said Jorine with a ladylike sniff. "I'm sure we of Civastry want nothing at all to do with these horrid dimensions!"

Remembering how this girl had acted when they'd tumbled onto that riveted metal plain, how she'd demanded he stick a knife into that Valcini academician, Yancey came to the conclusion that these girls had gone through a very great deal at the taxing hands of this unknown and evil woman they called the contessa.

Through the breathing night they walked on down the road, alert for signs of the cavalry who must now be some way ahead of them, walking quietly, conserving their strength and questing for openings from this world onto another.

When Zelda said softly, "There is a Portal in front of us," Yancey started.

Jorine nodded. "It is a large one; but where does it go?"

Zelda shook her head. "I don't know. It is veiled. But we must go through. We have created too much stir in this place of Hanrumatt. Another dimension—we must soon find our way back onto the map!"

"Very well."

Together, they stood on the brink of the gateway into another unknown world—friendly or hostile?

V

"By Brother Gorje's pickled nose!" exclaimed Zelda impatiently. "This is no time to dillydally!"

But Jorine hung back.

"This place—it's quiet. Easy, we don't know what lies beyond that gateway."

"Of course we don't! If you like I'll go on alone, or I'll go and scout it, if you're frightened!"

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"I'll come with you," said Yancey at once.

"No!" Jorine squealed. "You can't leave me here alone. . . ."

"Very well, then. Come on." And Zelda disappeared.

Jorine cast a quick despairing glance at Yancey and her face began to tighten up.

"Hey!" yelled Yancey violently. He flung himself on the girl, gripping her body anywhere, and together they rolled on the grass beside the road. She squirmed and Yancey gripped tighter, spitting out a mouthful of her pale blonde hair. If he didn't mold himself to her, hold onto her, she'd vanish out of his arms like smoke.

A voice lashed down on them.

"Couldn't you wait to satisfy your carnal appetites? Is this what you get up to as soon as my back is turned!"

Jorine wailed and kicked Yancey painfully. He took one hand off her hip and the other one from the scarlet cloth eye stitched on her back and yelped.

"If you think I'm interested in you as *females*—!"

"Get up, both of you!"

It was still dark.

"Is this—?" began Yancey.

"We have gone through. But where we are Red Hakim alone knows."

"Praise Uboth nothing's happened!"

"You're a foul-mouthed couple, aren't you," quipped Yancey. Now that he was still with these girls he felt tremendous relief. Suppose they'd gone off and left him! They alone held the keys to open the gates between the Dimensions; they were the key to home for Cy Yancey.

They peered about.

Once Cy Yancey had resigned himself to being marooned among the Dimensions, he had tended to look at the chance of this hike in the company of two gorgeous girls as a romantic idyll. They'd stroll through sunlit glades, feast on the best the different worlds could supply them with, and he'd take his fill of love. . . . It wasn't working out like that.

"Come on, ninny! Stir your stumps. I think dawn's coming on this world already and we've got to find shelter. There's a strange scent on the wind."

Yancey could smell it, too, a weird, spine-tingling aroma, unpleasant, charnel house-like, bloody. He followed Zelda

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and Jorine as they crossed a sere plain, brown and barren beneath a starless sky. This was not an auspicious beginning to an adventure on a new world.

You had to remember your way around these Dimensions. You had to know which Portal led where. Once you were lost you might search for eternity to find the way home. These somber thoughts did nothing to cheer Yancey as they plodded over the desert plain with that charnel stink in their nostrils.

He wondered where he was now in relation to New York, to the club, trying to think back to his actual movements in space as distinct from his porteur-ing across the dimensions. His mind fuzzed, refused to sort it out. Oh, well, when they took the last Portal back to Earth he might come out in Brooklyn and give Rocky a shock, or he might appear over the sea, that would be unpleasant, to say the least.

That gateway through from Myrcinus to Hanrumatt had been—what had the girls called it?—thin. Yes, it had been thin. Yancey thought that did not refer to its physical dimensions, rather he surmised it had to do with its capacity to accept people and objects for transmission from one world to another. Maybe, just maybe, the Porteur putting the Trugs and the Honshi through after them might not be able to manage what Zelda and Jorine had done. Maybe . . . He glanced over his shoulder uneasily. There was no going back now, that was for sure.

Here he was, accepting all these outlandish events and planning how to get out alive when less than a day ago he'd been sitting at that damned desk in that damned office in New York. Soberly, Yancey wondered if he was so anxious to get out of going to the office.

It was all the fault of that blasted quarter-inch.

A strange and eerie sound to hear in these circumstances shrilled out of the night as they approached a darker blob in the encompassing darkness. They halted. Then, Yancey smiled, not understanding, but relishing. Unmistakable through the pre-dawn air the strident but skillful skirling of a tin whistle scattered the echoes. Cocky and confident shrilled that penny whistle in a rollicking tune that chased its tail in a maze of grace notes.

Zelda's automatic snouted.

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"By Red Hakim's rotten palace! What is that?"

"Nothing like that." Yancey moved on. "If you fancy a little light prancing, now's your chance."

"It's music," said Jorine seriously and with conviction.

"Music!" snapped Zelda.

"Sure thing." Yancey still moved on toward the dark shape that resolved itself into a ruined stone mound with a round opening partially choked with fallen masonry. "Maybe it's company."

"You may be familiar with the instrument making those doleful sounds," said Zelda firmly. "But that does not make the player an ally!"

Yancey checked.

"By old Uboth and old Hakim, you're right!"

The tin whistle shrilled most gaily.

They moved forward cautiously.

Yancey unslung his rifle.

A vagrant beam of sunshine pulsed against the eastern skyline, limning tall hills rearing against the lambent green and rose and lemon. A few streaks of chocolate brown clouds hung, flat and wreathlike. All to the west, broken lands, badlands, dry lands flooded with light as the sun rose. No gleam of water showed among those gullies and eroded rock faces, those dust bowls and patches of silica desert.

The tin whistle fell silent. An animal of a kind Yancey knew he'd never encountered before made a soft mewling sound deep in its throat, and there came the sound of kicking hooves or claws or talons or something Yancey didn't know.

A man appeared in the round opening in the stone wall, clambering agilely over the rubble, his face heavily bearded and his shoulders bunched with muscle beneath a hauberk.

He saw the three and froze. Slowly, his hand reached down to his belt.

"We mean you no harm!" called Zelda. She stepped forward firmly. "Had we wished to do so we could have killed you the moment you showed yourself."

For a moment Yancey wondered what had become of the lady tigress who killed first and asked questions second. He surmised that this man could answer those questions to some purpose.

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"Who are you? What do you want here?" The man's voice carried clearly to them, hard and confident. "They've all been killed. Why do you tarry?"

His hand had not stopped moving to his belt. Yancey knew he was in for some fancy shooting if Zelda didn't react soon. He half-lifted his rifle, gently, lifting the bolt and sliding it quietly out and in.

"We are travelers, new to this land," Zelda called. The ripening sun gilded her breasts and shoulders, drenched her auburn hair with flame. "We would talk to you."

Abruptly, like the lash of a whip, the man's hand snaked up from his waist. Before he could press the trigger of the gun he clenched in his fist Yancey's shot took him in the forearm, snapped his arm back, twitched the handgun onto the masonry rubble. Zelda swung and crouched, violent, angry, hating.

"You filth from Hakim's Pit!" she raged. "I'll—"

"Oh, Zelda!" wailed Jorine.

Yancey remembered the time back there when they'd faced the charging Honshi and he'd thought Zelda had cracked only to change his mind at once as she'd begun shooting with skill and accuracy. Now there was this. She'd been totally unprepared for the man to take a shot at them, as though in these circumstances, the menace of her own gun would overawe a lone man with a gun in his belt. Maybe, just maybe, the people of her Dimension of Ettore were fallible through the strict crust of their own military pride.

Zelda showed the man her gun and spoke with barely moving lips, jetting the words out through stiff jaws.

"You try anything like that again, migo, and I'll put a bullet in you so you'll lie out under the sun for hours before you die!"

Yancey picked up the man's handgun. He felt shock. It was a Smith and Wesson .38. Well worn, it looked to be a good few years old and probably with worn rifling that made it dangerously inaccurate.

The man held his wrist and a few drops of dark blood oozed between his fingers.

"Here," said Jorine in a new voice. "Let me."

She began to probe and wrap and medicate with a skill

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that astounded and then amused, in a friendly way, the watching Yancey.

Zelda took the Smith and Wesson away. "Crude," she said with contempt. "You'd better hold onto it, Cy."

"This gun . . ." began Yancey.

"Yes?"

He saw the man's dark eyes regarding him. "Nothing."

"You will answer questions," Zelda told the man. "That is merely a pinprick you have there, a .22 slug that couldn't kill a kintle. Where is this place and—"

The man had not winced once as Jorine doctored him. Now she flipped the slug out and cut across Zelda with, "I need boiling water."

"Yes, yes!" said Zelda, sticking to the point, "but—"

"This world is called Jundagai," the man said.

"Jundagail"

"Wheel!" exclaimed Jorine happily. "We're well on our way back!"

She went across to where the remains of a wood fire still smoldered and, in a most ladylike and refined way, began to gather wood and blow the embers into flame. The man fetched a pot of water. He had been wounded before, no doubt of that.

Zelda pulled Yancey out of earshot of them.

"This is good news, Cy," she said, her face close to him, her breath warm and fragrant on his cheek. "Jundagai was scouted by Wayne and our two fool academicians heard such glowing reports of it that they finally decided to make the break with the contessa. With any luck I can make my way back to Irunium easily from here."

"Jundagai," said Yancey, ignoring the rest. "I heard your academician saying that in that alley back in New York."

"Yes. I'm telling you this because—" She guiltily brushed a hand over her auburn hair. "I really don't know why I am telling you, ninny. But . . ."

Dryly, Yancey said, "Next time you've the drop on a guy make sure he knows it, too."

She drew away, trying to be haughty, trying, Yancey saw with affectionate amusement, to be herself again.

Suddenly, without thinking about it, without bothering to note that his old hormones had taken charge, he grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her toward him. He stared

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into her brown eyes. Their faces were so close he could see his own wild face in her eyes.

He drew back a fraction. Her lips looked soft and full and half-parted, moist, completely unlike the usual tightly knit mouth she habitually wore. Inevitably, then, Cy Yancey bent his head and kissed her. He felt the fire pulse out all over him, stabbing him in the loins, suffusing his limbs and body. For a long moment she kissed him back, passionately; then her mouth hardened, she put a knee into his stomach and Yancey whoofed and went crashing backward into the ruined masonry.

"You Hakim-rotten vlastaprang! You filthy, entrail-wrapped koochi-beetle!" She scrubbed a hand across her mouth. Her eyes blazed at him.

Yancey chuckled.

"You're quite a doll yourself—when you forget the rough tough tiger-girl act."

Zelda's eyes flicked in panic toward the fire. Jorine bent solicitously above the wounded man's wrist. Steam arose. They hadn't witnessed her disgrace, then.

"So you're going to get us back to this Iruni what's-it place you mentioned. So okay. How's about getting me back to Earth?"

"You may never get back! You may rot here for all I care!"

All caution had been lost by Cy Yancey now. He forgot how much he had subordinated himself just so that these girls would not desert him among the Dimensions.

"Come off it, sister! You liked it. I liked it. We could create a crafty little symphony together. Hell, girl, if you don't have a little fun in life where is the profit?"

"I don't know what you mean and it sounds disgusting, decadent and wholly revolting!"

He reached for her again. He got his hands on her shoulders, feeling the silvery tissue and the warm firm flesh beneath; and she brought around a right cross that would have done credit to a Lonsdale Belter and brought the thick taste of blood to his lips and tongue.

"Get away, vermin!"

He laughed again and moved back.

"Okay, okay. Maybe now isn't the time, at that. Just re-

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member, Zelda, a woman's role in life isn't just striding about the Dimensions shooting off guns. Check?"

But she turned from him, her smooth shoulders raised, went off to see about Jorine and the man's wound. Yancey considered. The enormity of what he'd done rose to torment him. He suddenly realized. Idiot! Cretin! Sex mad maniac! Now she'd go off, for sure, and leave him stranded!

Well, all that meant was that he'd have to stick to her like the proverbial baby to the blanket, and maybe think about her love life a little later on, at a more convenient point among the Dimensions.

Feeling more like himself than at any time since he'd been snatched out of New York, Yancey rolled back to the fire and poked about for something to drink.

"His name is Olan," said Jorine, looking up, "and he bears us no ill will." She looked down severely on the man, finished tucking the last of the bandage in—her clothes would never last at this rate—and said with a harshness that animated her face and amused Yancey exceedingly, "Now just remember, Olan. We're not running away from your friends. Next time don't be so quick. Why, we might have had to kill you!"

Yancey chuckled. Jorine had unsuspected depths.

Olan rumbled and swallowed. "The quarries were all slain, according to orders, and I was left to clear up. I finished the burning last night and this morning was just amusing myself waiting for the sun and you turned up. Naturally, I thought—"

"Yes, well," said Jorine practically, taking the cup of water from Yancey's hands as he was about to drink and holding it for Olan to sip. "You know what thought did." She sounded just like a grand lady dishing out her charity to the kids' soup kitchen.

Momentarily, Yancey wondered if he really liked that. . . .

By a saddle and a pile of blankets and other belongings lay a long sword. At its side a leather and fabric jerkin had been spread out neatly so that the badge emblazoned all across the chest was clearly visible.

The size of the thing fitted Olan comfortably over his hauberk; but for Yancey it would be a tight fit. He listened as the others prattled on, taking in the information and storing it away. The badge fascinated him. It had been

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stitched and woven in dyed wools and strips of cloth. It showed a weird-looking creature, all gaping scarlet beak and high-horned snout, flying with eagle's wings, and hard sharp talons clasp in one claw a sheeplike animal, in the other a lionlike animal. Five yellow stars in a cross splashed brilliant color above the blazon. Below it three horizontal red bands indicated, so Yancey guessed, some kind of rank.

Olan's eyes watched Yancey carefully as the Earthman inspected the jerkin.

When Yancey reached out to lift it to see the back, Olan said sharply, "Carefull Do not sully the blazon of Tov Burka or offer indignity to the badge of Olan!"

Looking at Olan carefully, Yancey bent, picked the jerkin up, turned it over. The same badge was repeated on the back although in a larger size. The leather felt soft beneath his fingers at the sides, harder towards the center of chest and back. He put it down gently.

"I'm sorry I pinked you, Olan," he said. "But we had to protect ourselves. We are travelers in a strange land, lost, and we—"

"Yes, yes, Cy," said Jorine impatiently. "I've told Olan all that. He's a vice-chief Beater for one of the Hunters of Jundagai and he knows we aren't quarry."

"Quarry?" said Yancey.

"In all this land," Olan told him, "there are no better Hunters than those of Tov Burka."

"I'll believe you," Yancey said easily. He glanced at the two girls. They had to be pushing on. He raised his eyebrows. Zelda turned away sharply. Jorine nodded. She pushed back onto her knees from where she'd been kneeling forward, then stood up. The firelight in the ruined tower played over the silver tissue half-covering her body. "It's been very nice meeting you, Olan. You can have that wound seen to properly when you get back home. But we really must be getting along."

Yancey smothered a smile. She sounded just like a guest about to leave a party.

Olan lifted his eyes to them. "May I have my gun back?"

Zelda took no notice, stalked impatiently toward the opening. Yancey felt rebellious. Jorine held her hand out. "Of course, Olan. Here, Cyl Give Olan his gun back this instant!"

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Like a schoolboy turning out his pockets for teacher, Yancey handed the Smith and Wesson across. Olan shoved it down inside his belt. He had no holster. A small canvas bag swung from the belt would contain cartridges, Yancey supposed. He half-lifted his Winchester, but Olan made no move to dispute their departure. Hard and hardy, was Olan, a compact nut brown seamed face that spoke of a life out-of-doors, a muscled body beneath the hauberk that hinted at other activities. Yancey glanced at the sword. Olan would know how to swing that with deadly skill.

All Yancey's calculating thoughts collapsed into a great clashing jangling in his brain, and he whirled toward the opening as though gripped in a giant's twisting fist as he recognized that clanging discordance to be Zelda screaming amid a clash of metal on metal.

He saw a massive, furry figure with three arms wrapped about Zelda, short hairy legs pumping the dry earth, saw the girl's body upside down over a hairy shoulder, her mouth open and screaming, her fists beating futilely on the beast's back.

The thing was carrying off Zelda at an incredible rate. Yancey knelt and took deliberate aim, knowing this was no simple championship shoot—this was for real.

VI

"You'll hit Zelda!" screeched Jorine.

"An Ikral" shouted Olan. He had snatched up his sword and now it hung, useless, from his knucky fingers.

This could be—was—the most important shot Yancey had ever made. He tried to steady his shaking at the horror that had snatched up Zelda. He breathed in and held it, creakingly, peering down the sights, easing on the pressure, bringing the sights down across the Ikra's furry back. He held off as he saw Zelda's upside-down face, her shrieks already diminishing as the Ikra bore her off.

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What the apelike thing wanted with her Yancey could not think, would not dare to think.

He lined up on those short thick legs as they scurried over the dusty ground. He held his breath, applied pressure, thought of nothing, and let go.

Immediately he ripped the bolt out and slammed it in hard. He lined up again, saw those pumping legs, appreciably further off now, loosed off again. Four times he fired. The Ikra emitted a bestial howling as though a burglar alarm had stuck. It lurched and flung one of its arms down to steady itself.

Yancey was up, running like a maniac, yelling, racing over the dry ground toward the Ikra which turned now, snarling white teeth back from greenish black gums, its pig-like eyes all red and inflamed, baleful on him as though daring him to snatch back this prize.

He ran like all the clappers of Hell were after him let alone the Hounds of Hakim. He was vaguely aware of Olan and Jorine following. The Ikra had been hit in the legs. It bent down a second hand and rubbed the hair which hung long and unkempt, brought its fingers away blood-smeared. It let out a long steam whistle of anger.

Yancey held the rifle up ready to shoot, to stab with the naked muzzle, or to bash with the butt.

The Ikra had a face like a hydrocephalic gorilla's. All black and green and bristly, with gaping red jaws and whitish yellow fangs, with lolling red tongue, and piggy blood lit eyes, that face hunkered down beneath massive shoulders rolling with muscle under the hair and screamed abuse at this running, puny human being.

Zelda's long white legs kicked in the air, bicycling madly. As though some idea that this puny human thing might have a connection with the nipping things that had drawn blood from its legs penetrated, the Ikra humped up and down in a fighting posture. Abruptly, it cast Zelda from its shoulder, lifted two of its four arms and charged.

Deliberately, Yancey halted, planted his feet firmly in the dust, loosed off as fast as he could tear the bolt out and in. He got off five before he skipped aside in a last minute, sliding rush.

The Ikra's fourth arm had been damaged, blasted and burned and now hung awkwardly by a shred of bone and

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sinew. It must have pained the creature past bearing until it numbed. Now more slugs tore into its chest, its belly, its face. Still it bore down.

An arm looped across Yancey's back, knocked him flat and breathless. He spat out a mouthful of dust, heaved up. The Ikra jumped up and down as though on springs, small trickles of blood oozing down its naked abdomen. It jumped on top of Yancey. He rolled sideways, lost the rifle, grabbed a stinking hairy leg, crossed his arms, yanked. The beast fell to earth, stunned. Yancey dived onto it, twisted one arm up and began to put a grip on when, without apparent effort, the Ikra tore its arm free and struck at him with the third. Only by a millimeter did Yancey duck that one.

He burrowed in close, seeking a better grip on the reeking body, thinking that this was like playing judo with a locomotive at full throttle.

A blow mashed against the side of his face, dizzying him so that the world reeled sickeningly. He couldn't take many more of those—correction, he couldn't take any more. He rolled, saw those whitish yellow fangs, drooling spittle, razor down past his face, jabbed his thumbs into the Ikra's eyes. Goo spurted. The beast roared inhumanly. Without compunction, seeing Zelda's collapsed figure in the way, Yancey hauled on the thing's ears, bent, bit hard and nearly gagged on the rank coarseness. He kicked and he struck and he bludgeoned.

An arm swept about blindly, knocked him sprawling sideways. About to leap back like a recoiling spring, he heard Olan's hard voice shout, "Keep still, Cy!" and then the crash of the Smith and Wesson, five times.

The Ikra arched up, one arm lifting as though in mock salute. Then it shuddered and flopped back. Yancey didn't care to look at the ruin of its head.

Zelda crawled to her knees.

"Well—" she said. She shuddered all down her lush body. "I feel—contaminated, defiled—"

Yancey, bone weary, shattered, bruised, near-ruptured Cy Yancey, said, "But you're not, Zelda. You're okay."

"Of course!" she stood up, wincing, feeling out bruises and scratches. "Thanks to Olan here, who shot the brute."

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Olan chuckled. "I finished him off, my lady. But Cy here, Cy was like a tiger!"

"Yeah, well," said Yancey, picking up the two bits of his precious Winchester and studying the interesting geodesic curve in the barrel. "I left my claws at home today, is all."

"Oh, Cy!" said Jorine, her hands to her breasts. Her automatic, Yancey noticed with acerbity, was still holstered.

"What is that thing, anyway?" asked Yancey, more to cover the dismayed panic he felt at the wreck of the Winchester.

"The Ikra?" Olan led them back to the ruined tower. No one felt inclined to cut a trophy from the dead beast. "It's a—well, it's an Ikra."

"Like a partially intelligent gorilla," said Jorine, shuddering deliciously. "But with four arms; did you see the damaged arm?"

Olan nodded. "I'll speak to Tov Burka about this personally. Someone didn't shoot straight and left the Ikra alive but wounded—and didn't have the courage to report his failure for fear of looking a fool. Well, that's the sort of thing the Burka Hunt will not tolerate!"

Yancey felt a little woozy. Hell! He felt as woozy as the passengers on the Holyhead-Dun Laoghaire night ferry. By the time they'd all recuperated a trifle and drunk some water and bathed the cuts and scratches and bruises, they all felt as though the incident had proceeded from nightmare.

When at last they left, Olan accompanied them as though he normally did, without comment.

"Wait until I tell Tov Burka about this!" Olan enthused. "A man takes an Ikra single-handed; man, that'll make a story!"

Knowing the tall tales of roisterers, Yancey said, "No one will believe you, Olan. You'll see."

"Humph!" sniffed Jorine.

"Anyway," finished Yancey, "the damned thing was half-dead. Smashed up arm, slugs all over it, bashed on the head by a rifle butt, eyes; no, it was no contest."

Olan laughed, a short ugly bark of sound. "Had the Ikra not been wounded, Cy, you would not be here now."

Yancey felt suitably chilled at the comment.

They shared Olan's rations during the midday halt and

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discussed plans. Olan had to report back to Tov Burka, his task cleaning up the remains of the hunt over. He seemed to take no notice of the .22 wound in his arm, and for that, Yancey, remembering the wonderfully welcome sound of the Smith and Wesson as the Ikra reared, was thankful.

"I can see by your weapons and by your apparel," Olan had taken the girls' near nudity with a strict composure Yancey had to admire, "that you are not quarry material. I think that Cy, here, could easily obtain a post with Tov Burka as a beater. As for you ladies—"

"We seek a way home, Olan, that is all."

"Yes, and I'm going with them," said Yancey positively.

"I am sorry. There have been strange things happening in Jundagai recently. Weird beings, soothsayers prophesying gibberish, disappearances, comets in the sky at night. I could do with a good companion."

Yancey thought, "Don't look at me, bud." But because this man had been shot in the arm by him, and had saved his life, he did not speak aloud.

"Although," went on Olan with a twist to his bearded lips, "I wonder why you did not use your knife on the Ikra."

"Huh?" said Yancey, his hand going to the hilt of the dead academician's knife in his belt. "I guess I'm not a 'cold steel' man. Although I've done bayonet practice."

After their midday halt, Yancey, with a sympathetic glance at Jorine's ruined slippers, insisted that she share the animal's saddle with Zelda. Yancey hadn't taken all that much notice of Olan's mount; after all, he'd had quite enough marvels and terrors as it was. Now, as Jorine mounted up behind Zelda and Olan strode on ahead, Yancey looked at the beast. It had four legs, which came as a relief. But its shape, although generally zebra-like, had too much of the feline in it for a strict herbivore. Its head, large and intelligent, had a small and dainty mouth and two deep blue eyes of remarkable liquidity and intelligence. Its body was covered by a long silky yellow hair, very fine. Its tail waved in a magnificent brush as it moved with loping grace.

A quorn, Olan had called it. Compact, with supple muscles, it looked to be a fast animal but, perhaps, not too good as a load carrier; yet Olan made no bones about the two girls riding.

With Olan up front, the girls and Yancey could talk.

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"That's the only real disadvantage with these new Mark Five Star translators," Zelda said, fully recovered now. "They're great in enabling you to speak to and understand an alien; but it does mean they can understand you when you don't always want them to."

"I'm glad our academicians were issued them anyway," said Jorine, yawning. "A lot of Porteurs and most of the bargemen have the old Mark Four—and they're really ancient."

"It's not easy for the contessa to get the latest models; her influence is only great enough to get the supply she does."

Yancey said suddenly, "What's your world like, Jorine?"

"Ah, Civastry is a wonderful place! At least, where I come from. We have desolate regions like this, of course; but my home—my mother is dead and I run the station for my father. We have better than five million sheep now. Our wool is the finest there is. I supervise the household, run the servants, organize everything." She sighed. "Then, once a month I go to our local market town; how I miss those meetings!"

"What goes on then?" said Yancey, with a knowing leer.

Jorine rebuked him with a flash of her blue eyes. "We have culture, Cy. We sing the latest songs, hear the newest poetry, we have parties and dance all night under the yellow moon. Oh, how I miss the parties!"

"It must be a rich world to support that number of head of sheep on one station."

"It is! My father was due for the Council this season. I was looking forward to being his first lady at receptions and balls; and now, and now—"

"My world," said Zelda, not turning back, deliberately choking off Jorine's abrupt realization of where they were, "is quite different. We have a hard world. We have carved a civilization from a hostile wilderness. We sink wells, create rivers, build dams and bridges, plant cities where there was only desert. We make the sand bloom. And we are a proud people. Our armies have never been beaten. I am an armored warfare instructor—"

"Bully for you, Zelda!" said Yancey with some genuine mockery. No wonder the poor kid was as she was.

"I was testing out the latest two hundred millimeter re-

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coilless rifle—I use your Earthly terms—when a flying oval landed in the desert and strange men scooped me up. I found afterward they were the contessa's bargemen. I was taken to Irunium as a slave until they found I was a latent—that is, I had the power of porteur-ing people through the Dimensions latent within me. I was sent to the contessa's Academy of Porteur-ing Science. It was not a happy time. I met Jorine there."

"And I," said Jorine, stifling a snuffle, "was at the beach when a little boat sailed in and netted me out of the water and carried me off to Irunium. It was dreadful"

For Yancey the girls' stories made him wonder if the many disappearances from his own Earth might not have similar sinister explanations.

The weight of the overcoat, the ruined rifle in its duffle, and his own leaden weariness began to tell on him. Olan strode on as though his legs were made of iron. Presently the vice-chief of beaters halted and waiting for them to come up with him, said, "We can either make a camp here or go on to the village of Ezerown. If we do that we will have to march after the sun has gone down and before the first moon is up."

Yancey pricked his ears. More than one moon?

"Oh, let us rest now!" said Jorine on a breath.

"I am not afraid of marching in the night," said Zelda with some of that military hardness, aroused by her memories, in her. "We do need proper shelter—"

Jorine rounded on her. "Oh, Zelda! Think of Cy and Olan! Cy's just about dropping on his feet and Olan's wounded."

Looking up, Olan flashed his teeth between his beard. "It was only a nick, my lady. The hauberk sleeve absorbed most of the force."

Jorine slid off the quorn in an interesting display of white thighs and rumpled silvery tissue. "We camp here. Cy can't march any more and I want to have another look at that little scratch of yours, Olan."

The other three gave in at this unexpected example of Jorine's management. Evidently the talk of home had brought with it a resumption of her normal capable no nonsense ways among the stock. Cy smiled weakly. He and Olan—stock numbered among the sheep, two among five million!

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They found a sheltered dell and soon had a fire going and water boiling, strong sweet-smelling cakes baking on a stone and what Yancey could hardly call coffee being handed around in tin cups, hot and strong and wonderfully welcome.

"This," said Cy Yancey, leaning back and sipping gratefully, the smell of the hot cakes in his nostrils, "is more like it!"

"Tell us about Tov Burka," said Zelda, and smiled with professional interest. "And the Hunters of Jundagai."

Between mouthfuls, Olan told them. The Hunters, it turned out, operated safaris from their civilized towns and castles into desert and barbaric country; they provided the very best in equipment, new firearms, new camping equipment, new telescopic sights, 16 mm cameras, bows and arrows, field glasses—

"And the game?" asked Zelda, chewing hot cakes.

Olan moved his hands. "You have encountered the Ikra already. There are strange animals like none ever seen before in this world—mayhap they come from Fazj's foul kingdom beyond death—and the great trophies like bull-python, zagrid and quemlash. Also, there is—" Olan paused, his head tilted, listening.

The sun had set and the fire cast hard red angles in his face and lit stars in his eyesockets. His whole pose betokened instant alertness. The girls froze. Yancey felt for his rifle and stopped instantly.

Before he could do any more, a dozen dark figures dropped into the dell, whooping madly, brandishing weapons.

VII

Olan's sword snickered as he drew.

Yancey heard Zelda's automatic go off once before he ducked the wide sweep of a blade and hurled himself into

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the midriff of the wild figure who brandished that deadly brand.

The Marquis of Queensberry would have shuddered.

Yancey left that one stretched out and sorted out the next in line.

He had a crazy mixed up vision of Olan battling three of their night attackers, and heard the girls' automatics banging away, and then he ducked the swing of a poleaxe and came immediately to handgrips. That one he left with a broken arm and dreaming a long sleep.

He heard Jorine screaming and the automatics had stopped firing.

"Zelda!" he yelled, kicking a dark figure in the guts and hurdling the sword of the next. "Jorinel!"

In the whirling darkness with Olan cutting and hacking away, Yancey looked desperately about. He could not see the girls. He could not hear them. Yet they had been screaming and yelling and shooting. A wild hairy man with a curved sword leaped foully at Yancey and, distracted, Yancey side-stepped, chopped his palm edge down on a filthy neck. The man went straight to the ground.

"Zelda! Jorinel!"

Olan was down.

Cursing, Yancey leaped a man shot through the breast and dived for the two who had Olan pinned. The Hunter's sword beat above his body as he sought to protect himself. He saw Yancey and yelled a warning, something about looking to his rear, so Yancey swerved and the thrown assegai splintered air over his shoulder. He ignored it, bore in on the left-hand man, smashed his linked hands down on the back of the neck, swung pantherishly to his right and smashed up against a neck and ear. Both men went down. Yancey turned.

The assegai thrower readied another cast.

Olan shouted, "Duck, Cy! Duck!"

Yancey saw that if he ducked that assegai would spear over him and sink into Olan, prostrate on the ground.

Yancey took a single quick gulp of air, poised, sprang.

His outstretched left forearm brushed against the flung spear just in time, deflected it. He felt steel burn ice-cold along his arm. Then he crashed full into the spear thrower and both tumbled to the ground.

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Off balance as he had fallen, Yancey could not stop a hairy fist as it banged against his head. Stars popped before his eyes. He ducked his head down, reached out seeking grips, kicking with his legs. The man quite evidently was accustomed to settling arguments by sheer strength. He clinched Yancey around the middle. Yancey had one arm free, the other was trapped; but one arm was enough. He went to work on the fellow and the man shrieked. His constricting arms fell away and Yancey could hit him flush along his bearded jaw.

"Well," said Olan. "You don't waste time, Cy. And, that makes us quits."

"Sure," puffed Yancey, peering about. "Any more?"

"No. They have run off." The tone of Olan's voice told Yancey.

"The girls?"

"I did not see. I was down, Cy, finished, until you dealt with those wild men. Your two girls—I am afraid they have been taken."

At that moment no clash of interest took place in Yancey. He felt profound shock and horror and a terrible sadness that the girls had been taken off to a fate he could only conjecture. Only afterward, when he began to think again, did he realize what this meant for him personally.

"We'll have to follow, Olan—"

Olan shook his head. He began to wipe his sword on the tattered cloak of the assegai thrower. "It is no use, Cy. They did not ride off. I heard no sound of quorn hooves, nor vanca pads, nor any sound of animal I could name. But, I did hear a—a whining, a humming, and I saw a great dark shape go up against the stars—"

He saw Yancey's expression.

"I should not have told you, for I know you will not believe me. This is all a part of the strange things that have been happening in Jundagai. I do not lie, Cy; but I do not expect you to believe me."

"On the contrary, Olan. I do believe you. And that's what makes it all the worse."

Suddenly Olan gave an exclamation. "By Fazj's foul kingdom! This is not a man!"

Automatically, Yancey looked. Olan stripped away the tattered cloak from the assegai thrower. Instead of the

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scarred, lean, naked wolfishness of the other wild men, this body showed neat blue shirt and loincloth. Around the hair was bound a red kerchief and small golden bells hung from the pointed ears. Now Olan indicated those ears.

"That is no man such as I have seen before!"

"Me either," grunted Yancey.

What did pointed ears matter in this arsenal of oddities when the girls had gone? His passports, his keys to the Dimensions had gone! He was really stranded now, marooned—not among the Dimensions but here, on Jundagai.

Olan put an arm on his shoulder. "There are mysteries here, Cy. But, but you saved my life. I shall not forget that. As for your girls . . ." He stopped. He knew, as well as Yancey, that there was nothing to say.

The enormity of it began to hit Yancey then and he sat down, plump on a stone, and shoved his head down between his knees and felt very ill and dizzy indeed. Very ill and dizzy! It sounded as though he'd had a night out with Rocky and the boys in the Village.

There would be no more Rocky, no more New York, no more Earth, for him, ever. . . .

"Olan!" he said harshly. "I do not know the customs of your country; but it seems to me if there are these wild men ranging, murdering and, and—we should have set a watch!"

The Hunter looked at him with sympathy and regret clearly written on that tough, bearded face. "The times are out of joint, Cy," he said slowly. "There are no wild men like this in these regions, none for five hundred miles at least. I said there were mysteries here. It was perfectly safe for us to camp as we did, otherwise I would not have suggested it; but as Jorine said, you were exhausted, and—"

"Don't blame it on me!"

"I do not. The blame lies with whoever brought these wild men here. I do not forget that, that thing which went up against the stars."

Yancey couldn't reply. He felt the injustice of his charge against Olan but out of his misery of spirit could not halt himself.

A little later on, Olan said musingly, "Again, Cy, you did not use your knife. . . ."

"Fingers were made before forks," said Yancey cryptically.

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"We had better move a little way off," said Olan. Listlessly, Yancey complied. He found a hole in a bank and crawled in and arranged his overcoat about him. Olan took time joining him and when he did he was wiping his sword again. Yancey, opening his mouth to ask the obvious question, realized, and shut his mouth quickly. This world was not Earth.

They slept fitfully. By morning, stiff and cramped, Yancey was glad to roll out. Olan's quorn had gone. They had a meal. Yancey felt the bristles of his chin and shrugged; they packed up, and trudged on. Now, Yancey had no meaningful objective in this world of Jundagai. Staying with Olan the Beater might be his best bet. The frustration that he could do absolutely nothing about the girls ate into him, but he had sense enough to realize that he must accept the situation. He was still alive. This world might offer a very great deal to a man determined not only to stay alive but to carve out—he paused. Well, why not? Why shouldn't he? Just think what Rocky would have done in similar circumstances.

They trudged into the mud and thatch village of Ezerown and the people, cowed, frizzly-haired, and so scrawny of body that their ribs would have done duty as xylophones, peered at them fearfully from their hut doors. Here the overpowering authority of Olan's insignia, the flying creature with the sheep and the lion in its claws, obtained for them fresh food supplies; but it could not provide what the village did not possess, quorns for transport. Perforce, then, the two men trudged on. Some way outside the village, near a straggly thornbush, Olan said, "Are you going to carry that useless rifle and ammunition much longer, Cy? It's slowing you down."

"Nonsense!" said Yancey vigorously.

But, seeing the sense of Olan's remark he poked around in the dirt, dug a hole beneath the thorn bush and buried the two pieces of rifle, the Tasco variable zoom scope, the remains of the ammunition, all firmly wrapped in the canvas duffle. Then he shuffled the dry dirt back over the top and stamped it all down.

"Just in case," said cautious Cy Yancey.

Olan chuckled. Looking up at him, Yancey felt a sudden breaking of the tension that had threatened to throttle him.

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He thought that perhaps he might come back this way and reclaim his belongings. Therefore why should he not reclaim the two girls, Zelda and Jorine? All was not lost, not really, not when the sun was shining and he had a good companion and they had food and drink—and a whole world lay waiting to be explored.

The countryside changed character as they went on, until they were marching through tall grasses, with trees, rivers and low rounded hills adding pleasant variety to the scene. They camped that night in a secluded glade and Olan, despite Yancey's comments that he ought to know if it was safe, insisted they sit watches.

"You saved my life, Cy. But I do not want either you to have to do that again, or me to have to repay you so quickly. That assegai—" He smiled with a lopsided grimace. "If you'd ducked it would have stuck me into the ground, all barbed as it was."

"Go to sleep, and I'll stand the first watch!"

Nothing of event occurred during the night and the next day they reached Undolini, a town of some little importance standing on a bend in the river. Here they could obtain mounts. "Tov Burka will surely take you into his service as a beater, Cy. By Quanchil! I'll sing your praises loud enough!"

Mounted on sturdy quorns, they cantered out along the bluffs above the river with the sun glancing off the waters and burning into their eyes. They swung away with the river behind them to head westward on their line of march, and the keen air invigorated Yancey so that he felt betrayingly keen and alert and at home.

As they rode Olan told him much of this country and of the Hunters of Jundagai. Piecing things together, Yancey came to the unsettling conclusion that a great deal was going on behind the scenes that none of the ordinary people of Jundagai could fathom, and least of all him, a simple castaway from another Dimension. The level of technology seemed barely above that of pastoral life; yet Olan had a Smith and Wesson .38, old and worn, yes, but still a gun that had been made back on Earth. Guns, to the men of Jundagai, were things very precious, given only to Hunters and Beaters and Bearers; even the military forces had a limited quota only, and Yancey had not failed to notice

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how Olan had gone for his sword in emergencies when Yancey had gone for his rifle or his hands.

All over this area of the world the castles of the Hunters dominated the towns and cities huddled or spread, according to local fancy, at their walls and, acting by mutual agreements which sometimes led to acrimonious quarrels, they leased out the wild lands for their safaris. From what Olan said and from what he did not say Yancey formed the shrewd conclusion that the Hunters' clients very often came from other Dimensions. He felt a tremble at the thought. It offered hope, slight, but real.

That old Smith and Wesson iron, now—that proved something.

They trended ever westward through pleasant country with many streams and good stands of timber and the sun shone and the air tasted like wine. In other circumstances Yancey would have felt marvelous. He had to keep telling himself where he was and what had happened and that his future, far from holding the prospect of a bright holiday as these surroundings would imply, contained the dark shadows of permanent exile.

"That revolver of yours, Olan," he said, shaking off his thoughts, getting back to the nub of information. "How come you don't have a holster?"

Olan grimaced. "Such luxury items are for the lords and Hunters. I have to have a hand weapon to carry out my duties as a vice-chief of beaters. I am trusted. The Hunt went back to the castle of Tov Burka directly southward across the badlands. I make this detour for obvious reasons and can explain it when I return." His frown appeared, sudden and grim. "Such would not have been the case with my father."

"Oh?"

"He was a loyal beater to Tov Burka; he made his way from a mere village boy. I am now vice-chief and hope to be chief some day. My father's weapon was old and yet he too had to have one besides his bow; and yet, they would not have trusted him as they do me for he was not a vice-chief. He is dead now."

Sniffing out clues, Yancey asked, "And his gun?"

"Old and worn. It was called a Colt—the names we are

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told but do not understand. I held it many times. It was a Colt percussion revolver, Model 1851 Navy—"

"Yum!" said Yancey, fascinated. "And now?"

"The Hunters of Rov Rangka raided us and they took it along with much booty. They took—" Again Olan's face expressed savage emotions at memories he clearly did not often allow expression. "They took my betrothed bride, my Olsaree, since when I have not married and trouble not about women except for the light frippery natural to a man."

Yancey did not say anything.

"We are friends with the Hunters of Rov Rangka now, or so they tell us. But I care not for the alliance. I do not like them."

"That figures," said Yancey softly.

They rode on westward.

After a period of silence, Olan said suddenly, "That was a long time ago."

Unable to hold back any more, Yancey said, "And where did you get your gun, Olan?"

"From the armory of Tov Burka, of course. Where else?"

"Where else indeed," said Yancey, disgruntled.

There were so many things he had to know if he was merely to survive in Jundagai, and this man, this Olan, was his interpreter. Without this good companion along, the picture would be so much blacker he wouldn't give himself much of a chance; his spirits, despite the sun and air and his own innate buoyancy, were low.

They passed a number of other travelers who greeted them in their several different ways. They trotted past a long line of ungainly six-legged pack animals, their soft padded feet plomping along in the dust. The quorns snorted and breathed a little harder as they passed.

"Vancas," said Olan at Yancey's query. "I do not wonder you do not know of them; they appeared recently in our markets and none knows of their place of origin."

"They carry a good load."

Toward the next evening they reached a hostelry set back among tall trees and here, weary, they settled for a meal and bed. Half-asleep, Yancey was aware of Olan rising and leaving the room, and he remembered the girl who had served them, all cheeky and flouncy with her short red

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skirts and plump arms, and he smiled and lay back. His turn would come.

The next thing he realized was being grabbed by hard ungentle fingers, being struck over the head, and being haphazardly thrust through the window to blackout beneath the stars.

VIII

The surprise to Yancey was that he recovered consciousness at all. His last despairing thought as he'd whirled into oblivion beneath the stars was that this was the end of the road. Now, jouncing along in a bundled sack slung alongside a plodding vanca in the early morning, he felt his head opening and closing at each stolid pad of the six feet. His mouth tasted like last night's cigar ash. He groaned. No one took any notice.

After a time he looked about apathetically. A line of vancas plodded along a dusty road with fields and trees on either hand. The sun shone, that mocking, friendly sun of Jundagai. Other bundles slung alongside the vancas held other captives, men and woman alike, and he guessed at once what, in this strange and hostile dimension, had happened to him.

"Well," he said to himself, with something of the old Cy Yancey fighting sluggishly to emerge, "I'd better fetch a good price, is all."

At midday the captives were unslung and, under a strict guard of hard-faced men carrying an assortment of weapons, allowed a little exercise to thaw out their cramped muscles, given some food and water, foul stuff, and let off for toilet necessities. Then they were hog-tied again and re-strung to the patient vancas's sides.

When at last the sorry procession entered the cobbled streets of a town through a thick and frowning gateway with watchful sentries armed with halberds at the ready,

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Yancey was, despite his position and discomfort, almost asleep. He let himself be carted through the shadowed streets, distantly observing the indifferent faces watching the caravan, let himself be untied and prodded down stone steps and so into a cell with malodorous straw where he toppled full-length and went to sleep.

He awoke to a sharp voice yelling, "I'll sort you lot of broken down has-beens out! You can't do this to me!"

Cy Yancey's experience of the Dimensions made him only too well aware that they—whoever they were—could do it and would do it, in fact, had done it.

He rolled over and sat up, swallowed, grimaced, shouted, "Wrap up, pal, I'm trying to sleep."

The cell lay in shadows except for one corner where that insolent yellow sunshine slanted in from the high barred window. Dust and filthy straw, a few discarded brown and black bones and a green crust of bread, completed the furnishings.

The high complaining voice snapped off. Then, the caution in it very obvious, said, "Who are you? I can understand you. Can you understand me?"

"Sure, sure," said Yancey. "I'm beat—"

"I'm not beat, not yet. But, how, I mean all these characters parley a francey I don't dig."

Yancey remembered the translator band. Tenacious, it clung to his head, buried in his hair, and seemed unlikely to be dislodged by any beatings he might endure. The thought comforted him, strangely. He had one advantage, then. He must not abuse that.

"I guess I picked up your lingo somewhere," he said.

"Oh?" The man in the next cell must be pressed against his bars, for Yancey heard them clank as he moved. "How could that be? Where I come from is a long long way from here."

"So do I," said Yancey shortly, and put his hands up to the translator. As the man spoke he lifted the band off.

"I just wonder," said the man. "I'm in a right two-and-eight about all this. Maybe you know where the Old Kent Road is, or Peckham Rye, perhaps?"

The words were completely understandable to Yancey after he had removed the translator band. He put it back on. He did not wish to be parted from it by chance.

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"Yes. But what's the good of that now? Where is this place? What are we here for? What's going on?"

"Stone the crows, mate! If I knew all that—one minute I'm—hold up! Here comes those twits again."

The clack of steel-studded feet on stone roused Yancey. He crawled off the straw and flopped over to the bars. Moments later the adjoining bars clanged, the sound of a scuffle, sundry ripe imprecations, and a final blow, heralded his new acquaintance's appearance upside-down and carried like a carcass by wrists and ankles, his hair brushing the stone floor. The guards, grim, indifferent men in brown sack-like garments cinctured at the waists by heavy belts from which swung long knives, clubs and short-handled axes, carried the prisoner just as though, in fact, he was a side of beef. He was a middling height young man, with brown hair rather long, and a sharp-featured, pleasant, unmollified face; and he was stark naked, the brown hair on his chest damp. He had a black eye. Unconscious, he was carted away.

Yancey sank back on the straw and pondered. So that poor devil had come from Earth, the Earth that Yancey knew. What, then, was he wanted for? Why was Yancey? Yancey knew the answer; it was painfully obvious, yet he shrank from admitting it to his conscious mind.

During his time of imprisonment Yancey was fed well. He ate well. He knew why he was being fed and he determined to keep fit, as his captors wished him to do, and to turn that very fitness against them when the time came.

One day—for the sunshine mockingly glinted from that single corner of his cell that received it—the guards brought his food and with them came a man clad in hauberk with a long sword belted to his waist and a revolver thrust into his belt. Yancey thought of Olan with yearning regret.

"You can use a sword, an ax, a bill?" asked this man in brusque fashion.

Yancey looked at him. His hard-seamed face with the thin-lipped mouth and the cold eyes stared back with the expression of a man doing his job.

"No," said Cy Yancey.

"Well, no matter. You will be given what is right and proper. You are fit? Not sick?"

"No. Not sick."

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The man did not smile; but his expression altered.

"We all have to live, son, and we all have to die, sooner or later. You will be given a fine send off—the last night—food, wine, women, songs. We take care of our own, don't fear."

"Yeah," said Yancey. "All in dandy country and western, I don't doubt."

The man produced a notebook, ordinary paper, ordinary cover, and a pencil. "Your name?"

"Yancey."

Laboriously, the man wrote something down.

"Tomorrow," he said. "They will fetch you tonight."

He reached over and felt Yancey's biceps. Yancey flinched back. The man's dark eyes held him. He pushed Yancey's stomach, and then spent some time examining his legs and feet. "You'll do," he said at last. "Tomorrow."

Each day Yancey had been allowed a couple of hours exercise in the narrow yard attached to the rear of the prison cells; on this day he was looking forward to it with a view to a final breakout. Now the man's words dashed that hope. The man stood up and, with a clash of sword, left the cell. The iron-barred gate clanged shut.

Yancey sat on the straw and felt sick. He couldn't eat the food provided. He knew what was coming tomorrow.

Four hours later he heard the clash of iron-studded boots clacking down the stone corridor. Mutinously, he set his back against the wall. He remembered that young man from Earth. He'd attempted resistance and ended up upside down being carted off like a side of meat. Cy Yancey would do the same.

The guards halted at the cell door; the lock grated; the barred gates swung open. Yancey stared.

Olan marched in, beaming a huge smile, grabbed Yancey, hugged him, lifted his tall body off the floor.

"You great nincompoop! By Quanchil! Why didn't you tell them your name before? Why didn't you ask for me?"

"Great," said Yancey, huffing and puffing and getting his breath back from Olan's bear hug. "So I'm in the pits of Tov Burka's castle, am I?"

"You uproarious idiot! Of course. Now, come on. You're going to see Tov Burka right away. I've requested audience. He'll soon take you on as a beater—you'll see!"

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Going out with his comrade, who seemed to have dropped in from heaven or Australia, Yancey said, "Well, hell, Olan, that'll be better than this cell and what's lined up for me tomorrow."

He felt light-headed as they mounted seemingly endless flights of stone stairs, crossed courtyards and, entering an ornate gateway flanked by sentries, went into a great antechamber where men and women in brilliant finery waited, laughing and chattering. A majordomo in a yellow and green tabard met them, banged his silver-tipped staff, ushered them through into a small room where a white-haired old man clad in rusty black, with the look of a crow about him and ink stains behind his ears, beckoned to them and, bent over and creaking, led them through the final door.

Yancey took in the scene. A long high room with lancet windows, the stone walls draped in faded tapestries depicting all manner of wild beast hunts, the room pointed up the despotic authority of the man who sat on a wooden chair, squat and unlovely, dominating the courtiers who stood about waiting on orders. Straight to the wooden chair the old bent crow of a man led them, halting to say in his creaking voice, "Vice-chief of Beaters Olan, for audience, your Highness."

Tov Burka stared down arrogantly.

Yancey stared back until Olan stamped on his foot. Yancey winced, glanced at Olan, saw that tough man inclining his head, rebelliously did the same.

Tov Burka's face remained stonelike throughout. He sat, squat and blocky, unlovely, clad in gorgeous raiment, smothered in emeralds and pearls and chunks of platinum, his brown puffy face discontented, one eye missing and covered by a diamond-studded patch. Huge rings splintered the light on his fingers. He held in his left hand the butt of what was clearly a machine carbine, the muzzle slanted up past his left ear. His right hand fondled a young girl in a gauzy gown who heaped before him refreshments, sweetmeats, drinks, cigars, who mopped his forehead and wiped his chin. Her face looked exactly like a white Chinese manikin, expressionless, frigid, dead.

Olan launched into a panegyric. At one point the courtiers hummed and the word "Ikra" could be heard, whispered with dread relish.

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When Olan had finished, Tov Burka opened his mouth, the dead-faced manikin popped in a grape, the heavy jowls masticated, a few pips spat, then, "Very well. This man Yancey may become a beater for Tov Burka. See to it. Remember what will happen to him if he fails me."

Plump petulant fingers waved dismissal.

Outside Olan turned to Yancey, beaming, slapped him on the back. "Your big chance, Cy! As a beater for Tov Burka you can begin the climb up. It's great to have you as a comrade."

"Yes," said Yancey, all his cynicism about to overflow. Then he hesitated. Olan, now, Olan was doing him a big favor. That was clear enough. Why spoil it for this man, this man he had shot at and pinked, this man whose life he had saved and who had saved his own? "Thanks, Olan," he said, gripping the vice-chief beater's hand. "Thanks a million." And he meant it, did Cy Yancey; he really meant it.

IX

The first safari on which Beater Cy Yancey had a chance to show he had absorbed the quick training given him by Olan had as its object the quemlash.

Olan led out a section of fifty men, all tramping stolidly behind his quorn, along the dusty road southward. Ahead, the mountains lofted against a sky burning with heat. In those vegetation-choked foothills, among the gullies and riverbeds, the small ridgelike hills in their serried ranks, the quemlash was to be found. When found, the beaters would do their work and risk their lives, and the quemlash would seek to escape and the hunters, led by the Hunters of Tov Burka, would find their fun. Cy Yancey put all that firmly into the foreground of his mind. He refused to think any more of what it was really all about. He would get back to Earth one day. As of now, if he wished to stay alive and

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healthy he had a job to do and he'd damn well do that job as though all the Hounds of Red Hakim's Pit were after him. Reflectively, he sighed at thoughts that brought up—and stifled them as Olan signaled to his men, turning in the saddle, hard and authoritative.

The men scattered to the sides of the dusty road.

A cavalcade trotted past them. Yancey gaped. First came a bodyguard mounted on quorns, tough compact men in hauberks, all wearing the blazon of Tov Burka and carrying lances and shields, swords and ex-U.S. issue semi-automatic M-1 carbines thrust down open scabbards. The hum of motors at low speed followed and two khaki-painted Land Rovers trundled through the dust. Men crowded the first, their rifles slanting upward. In the second the man sitting next to the driver attracted all Yancey's attention.

Sunburned of face, with white even teeth, this man lolled with the air of habitual authority clearly evident. He wore a white shirt, open at the neck to reveal a strong throat. His strongly bearded face held a composed alertness that aroused a measure of respect in rebellious Cy Yancey, so that he recognized in this man elements of character very valuable to survival under any conditions. A floppy-brimmed hat with a scarlet and emerald feather had been pushed back on his long dark hair.

Yancey's companion nudged him in the ditch.

"Taj Burka. Tov Burka's eldest son! It is an important hunt we are on, then."

Yancey didn't reply. He stared at the lilac-colored Pontiac that idled by, at the flashily dressed men and women lolling inside, at the whitewall tires, at the sheer incongruity of it all. He caught a glimpse of white laughing faces, of bright eyes, of silks and satins and the gleam of jewels. Then more quormen trotted past in their armor and weaponry, to be followed by the camp attendants in General Motors trucks piled with baggage. The dust took some minutes to settle.

Olan roused his men and set them on the march again.

"We must hurry," he shouted back over the ranks. "Tomorrow they will be ready for the quemlash. We must see they have quarries for their skill."

Yancey couldn't detect any sarcasm in Olan's tones.

As the hunt progressed, he came to understand that no

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sarcasm could be possible to these men who devoted their lives to hunting and the provision of quarries. His first shock at having to march behind his good comrade Olan astride his quorn had given place to a resignation he would have found distasteful at any other time. He was as a beater the lowest of the low in the ranks of the hunters. Marching with the others into the rough country the following morning, shouting and waving scraps of brightly colored cloth, extending out into line, the beaters all concentrating on every bush, every gulley, every possible hiding place, Yancey found a sudden, wholly unexpected and treacherous excitement bubbling in him.

Then a quemlash broke cover ahead, bounded giganticly over a ridge and vanished in the trees.

"Yowpl!" said Yancey, awed. "So that's a quemlash!"

The hide of the thing, all greenish and brown patterned in diamonds and lozenges, made it difficult to see beneath the dappled shade; but Yancey fancied it was about as large as an elephant on the rampage, with eight legs each of which could stamp through a foot of concrete, and with a blocky head like a rhino's equipped with an amazing array of curved tusks and serrated swordfishlike barbs. The thing let off a deep buzzing like a rip saw in flood. Smaller trees in its path snapped as a man's backbone would similarly snap. Yancey knew why the beaters looked at every small bush. Clearly, no small bush would hide such a monster if it stood erect on those eight pistonlike feet; but the quemlash possessed the charming habit of burrowing into the ground and sinking down with only its back and head showing. Then it could unreel the long tentaclelike whips set in a frieze around its neck and haul in its prey to those curved tusks, those serrated barbs. A pretty, charming, altogether lovely specimen to form the subject for a hunt. . . . Yancey swallowed and pushed doggedly on with the other beaters on the trail.

He did not see the first casualty. One minute they were waving their cloths and bashing at bushes; the next a man's scream agonized in the hot air, a scream that cut short with a crunch. Olan panted up, his face savage.

"Watch out! Watch out! There are more of them!"

Over the next ridge the trees thinned into coarse bracken and fallen, rotting tree trunks. The going was difficult and

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Yancey's new brown shirt was soon dripping with sweat and torn and shredded. His new hunter's boots, tough plastic of a kind he had not encountered before, stood up well to the harsh going. They labored up the ridge and saw the quemlash going like a driverless Pacific down the slope. Two others joined the first. Why they hadn't just lain doggo and snapped up the beaters like flies on a chameleon's tongue puzzled Yancey. Olan roared up and fired his revolver down at the fleeing beasts. He aimed high.

"If I was accidentally to kill one," he said to Yancey as they stood together for a moment, "Taj Burka would have my hide."

"I doubt," said Yancey sourly, "your .38 would even tickle him."

They halted on the crest. Now dots could be seen on the opposite crest. Yancey realized they were the heads of the hunters. He heard the attenuated crack of rifles. Some lunatic was even shooting a bow. The lead quemlash staggered but kept on at a dead run. The others bunched, closed in, bore for the ridge.

Olan smiled with satisfaction.

"A good beating," he said, nodding. "We came up on them at just the right time, early, when they were separated. It's up to the hunters now."

As far as Yancey could see, the hunters were making a mess of it.

One quemlash turned sharply at right angles, blundered along the gulley, was soon lost. The first quemlash still charged on. Its companion angled out a little and, with a rise in the rifle fusillade, humped up, swiveled, its eight legs pistoning, and rolled over. At once it regained its feet, bore on up the slope at an angle. Trees and bushes among the bracken were flattened. Yancey suddenly realized he wouldn't too much like to be up on that opposite ridge, shooting at those animated tons of bone and muscle charging up at him.

"They're running!" snapped Olan, as though he didn't believe it.

The hunters could be seen now, small galvanic figures that pirouetted among the trees and vanished.

"We'd better get over there fast!" Olan roared, waving his arms. "Come on! Follow me!"

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Not liking this at all, Yancey followed. He panted over fallen logs, waded through swishing bracken, fell into the river, spluttered out and staggered up the slope after the iron figure of Olan. He'd dropped his scrap of scarlet cloth a long time ago.

Up on the ridge it looked like two bulldozers had gone through. A man lay broken in half beneath a tree trunk. Without even thinking about it, Yancey picked up the dead man's rifle, an expensive and, caliber-wise, useless little toy. It wasn't even a Magnum—and in .28 caliber yet!

The other beaters, hallooing and shouting and waving their colored cloths, hared past. Olan, without a backward glance led them on. Yancey knew exactly what they were doing. He had to nerve himself. They were in there creating distractions, forcing their attentions on the rampaging quemlash, making the animals turn to attack these newcomers and so leave the hunters alone. Those beaters were offering up their lives to save the hunters! Yancey felt strongly that the scales weren't balancing out right.

He looked along the ridge as a voice hailed him.

A high, imperious voice, it held no note of alarm but of complete acceptance that whatever it said would be done.

"You, there! Come and get this log off me! Fast!"

A woman lay trapped beneath a fallen trunk. The loamy ground had saved her from serious injury for she lay in a kind of pit; but the log pinned her. Her khaki slacks and shirt were mud-spattered. Yancey ran across.

"Hurry, you fool! I don't want to miss the fun!"

"Some fun," grunted Yancey, heaving.

The trunk would not budge. He looked about for a long branch to use as a lever and the woman screamed, a high, shocked sound of disbelief and horror. Yancey spun around.

The quemlash who'd gone up the gulley barged up the slope directly at them, its tusks clashing, its long tentacles waving, its three ruby red eyes glaring murderously upon them.

The little toy carbine in Yancey's hands snapped up, the butt slapped into his shoulder, the sights lined up. He had to get off three, three sure quick rounds that would each take out an eye. He worked the bolt out and in and pressed the trigger and nothing existed in the world save

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his actions with the carbine, the three targets, and his skill.

One, two, three.

The quemlash racketed past, buzzing like a gigantic saw, its tentacles flailing trees and bracken and earth, its pistol-like feet stomping, blind and buzzing. Then it catapulted out over the reverse slope and fell all asprawl down into the gully.

Yancey put the carbine down and picked up a branch, stuck it under the log and heaved. After a time the woman with his help was able to drag herself out. She stood up and held her sides and said, "Ow!"

She looked to be really about forty years old; but a skillful and highly expensive cosmetologist had managed to give the impression she was a timeless twenty-nine. Her figure was taut and firm beneath the khaki shirt, her legs trim, and one of her false eyelashes had been torn loose and hung down like a drunken blind. She ripped it off with an imprecation. Her red mouth, hard and brittle, twisted. She looked as though martinis or a campari-soda along the Via Umberto, in all the best places of the Côte d'Azur, in a Manhattan penthouse, were her habitual mode of life. She looked smooth, expensive, professional, a woman of the beau monde. To Yancey, she was just a high-priced dame, out of his class, sophisticated and polished and spoiled.

She did not say thank you.

"What is your name?"

"Yancey."

"You call me my lady, Yancey."

Yancey didn't reply. Instead he turned as Olan and some of the hunters walked up. One of them, a short, florid man with a bald head drenched with sweat, angrily snatched the gun from Yancey's hands.

"You know better than that, beater! You'll be—"

"Yancey was helping me, Yussef. I do not think you would wish to question that."

Yussuf looked as though what he would like to do to this woman would best be done at night and in bed; but he harumphed and stalked off. Taj Burka appeared, calm, the professional hunter, soothing. They began to congratulate the woman on bagging the quemlash.

Yancey started to say something, and the woman said icily, "Keep quiet, Yancey."

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Olan favored Yancey with a long look.

"I shall have the whole incident investigated, Lana," said Yussuf, prowling back. He looked venomously at Taj Burka, who regarded him equably, poised, like a leopard in repose. "This ridiculous hunt provided quemlash—"

"Which, your excellency," pointed out Taj Burka, "was what we contracted to do. Why they were not shot as they should have been—"

The woman, this Lana dame, said sharply, "My weapon misfired. It is a Slikitter projectile gas operated 70-54. I do not think I shall buy from Slikitter again."

Taj Burka said softly, "You put three .28 shots clean through the quemlash's eyes, my lady. That is the only place such small slugs can kill. You are in no way to blame for this. I shall have to report all this to my father. Tov Burka does not permit inefficiency on his hunts."

"And poor old Quiddy has been killed, broken in half!" said Yussuf.

"I suggest we all return to camp." Taj Burka spoke brusquely to the gathered beaters and those bearers who appeared from the trees, white-faced and shaken. "The hunt is over for today."

X

In the four subsequent safaris on which Cy Yancey went with the Hunters of Tov Burka no such alarming incidents occurred as on that first excursion. His ideas of time garbled, each day seeming to attenuate into a mere period of work and sleep and, when the opportunity offered in camp in the evening, of drinking and singing and storytelling. Back in the stone and wattle town of Burkholm beneath the frowning castle of Tov Burka there was time between safaris for rest and dame chasing and wenching in the inns and taverns. Yancey did his share; but he did so as though sleepwalking, betrayed and seduced by the dreamlike un-

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reality within the realistic incident-packed frame of this new life.

Olan, despite his elevated status as a vice-chief of beaters, proved a good companion, joying in the excitements of the chase and the sport of a different kind they drummed up in the town's entertainment quarters. The life of the town pulsed quickly and thickly, and every single man and woman and child was very well aware that their livelihoods centered around the hunts. Without them, without the money and goods they brought in as fees, the people of Burkholm would have been poor and miserable in their pastoral cycle fate.

A strange assortment of people took part in the hunts. Obviously rich, spoiled, seeking thrills and kicks in big game hunting, they could find all that and more with the Hunters of Jundagai. Their clothes and weapons, their way of life eloquently told of other customs and mores vastly different from those of the people of Jundagai. The pride of the Hunters instilled a reciprocal pride in all their contacts, so that without surprise Yancey found himself involved in the latest hunt figures, the measurements of horns and tusks, the mounting of heads, the taking of trophies. Hunting was as much a single all-absorbing way of life to him now as it was to the Hunters of Jundagai.

He was promoted to beater sixth rank and issued a short stabbing spear that looked as though it would bend the first time he used it. But as a badge of his first step up the ladder he carried it proudly. He understood, dimly, that he was being subtly brainwashed; but he didn't care. Thoughts of Earth receded. He even forgot to slip off his translator in the presence of Hunters and their clients just in case one of those beefy-faced men with the expensive clothes and custom-made rifles should happen to have come through the Dimensions from his own Earth. He thought of Rocky a couple of times and wondered just how much that would-be white hunter would give to change places.

Of Jorine and of Zelda he thought infrequently.

Absorbed in this new and demanding life, Yancey remembered how back in New York he had gradually changed in his attitude to hunting. After those early eager conversations with Rocky about big game safaris in Africa, he had chilled. The idea of shooting in order to kill animals had

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nauseated him. His belief in shooting as a sport extended to target practice, snapshooting, the care and interest in weapons; he had grown to hate animal butchery. Now, he saw that if these giant and grotesque monsters of Jundagai were not kept under control they would ravage the countryside, destroy the villages and the people living in them who looked for their protection to the Hunters of Jundagai. Animals like the quemlash, the ikra, the zagrid and bull-python were not like the animals hunted on Earth: beautiful deer and stags, chirrupy little chucks and wild free-flying ducks. Their slaughter had seemed horrible to Yancey. But seeing a zagrid shot and knowing the destruction that unlovely monster could wreak in a peaceful farming community gave him no such qualms.

Without the Hunters of Jundagai, Jundagai as a place for human beings to live would be finished. If the Hunters made their living and profits from that fact, that seemed eminently justifiable to Cy Yancey, beater of the sixth rank.

Between safaris, Olan liked to show Yancey the town. Not, as Yancey told himself with a tolerant amusement he did not share with Olan, not that there was much to see. They usually wound up in a tavern called the "Zagrid and Zenosha." Yancey knew what a Zagrid was, all right; he didn't inquire after Zenosha. They were sitting at the scrubbed deal benches, watching a girl cavort and dance and clash her castanets and swirl her multi-colored veils like spindrift, when Yancey began to get ideas. The girl kept flirting her eyes at him, and that was always a promising starter.

He woke up next morning in the beaters' barracks where his low-slung bed took up the regulation twenty square feet of floor space with a vague idea of what had happened the night before. He washed up and ate breakfast with no appetite and looked forward to the time when he would be beater fourth class when he could lodge above an inn out of barracks. What the hell had happened last night? That dancing girl, now. . . . He went out into the courtyard, winced at the sunlight, and was about to turn back into coolness and shadow when Olan marched through the crowd around the tackle tables straight toward him.

Olan looked odd.

"I don't know how you've managed it, Cy," he began.

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"Oh no," moaned Yancey. "How did I do what?"

Olan drew him aside from the genial uproar of the morning as the beaters readied themselves for the next safari. They had the job of polishing and cleaning and oiling and putting the camping gear straight. The camp attendants were a servile bunch.

"Taj Burka sent the word down. You're to report—at once—to the Lady Kallipses Koltmann of Burntash. Smarten yourself up and get over to her villa on Clients' Row."

"Who?"

"You heard. Now, Cy, get moving. It's bad to keep clients waiting and it's even worse to keep a Hunter waiting."

"Kalli—what's it?"

"Kallipses Koltmann." Olan cracked a smile. His heavily bearded face was no more whiskery than Yancey's own. Yancey, owing to the lack of a decent stainless steel blade, had given up shaving. One of his lights o' love would trim his beard and mustache from time to time.

"I don't know—"

"Get over there, Cy. Move!"

Yancey put on his best brown shirt, tightened up the colan leather belt, straightened the softer leather apron-kilt, picked up his spear and trotted off. Olan yelled after him.

"By Quanchi, Cy! You're in for it now!"

Outside the western end of town, beyond the Fathma Gate, the road had been metaled and bordered on each side by wide-leafed plain trees and luxurious villas in a medley of architectural styles. Here vancas and quorns passed continually with vehicles intermingled that must have come from a variety of dimensions including Earth, for Yancey saw Land Rovers and Pontiacs, Fords and Morrisies, going about their masters' business. He found the right address and went in at the ornate gateway.

A guard in a hauberk and with a U.S. model 1917 30/06 Enfield handy checked him through. A short plump man, whose two most notable features—apart from his stomach—were a vast and quivering nose and a cummerbund of bright and eye-watering brilliance made of peacock tail colors, met him and urged him between colonnades and up marble stairways.

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"Hurry, Yancey, hurry. My lady does not like to be kept waiting."

Following those plump twinkling legs, Yancey trotted along feeling decidedly superfluous.

"I am Hasheem, the chamberlain to the household. Me you will treat with respect."

Yancey reserved his breath for trotting.

Outside a tall gold-encrusted doorway a hawk-faced man, wearing a white tunic and black trousers tucked into shiny boots and carrying a weapon Yancey didn't recognize, relieved him of his spear. He jerked that fierce face toward the door, opened it. Hasheem, followed by Yancey, twinkled through.

The room surprised Yancey. Soft rugs covered the marble floor, statuary stood about between fluted columns, cool air wafted from hidden fans, and elegant tables and chairs indicated this room to be laid out to impress. Yancey, rebelliously, was not impressed.

The woman who rose from a chaise longue and advanced toward him impressed him. She wore a smart two-piece, a vivid emerald, the skirt half calf length and very modishly cut. Her white hands glittered with jewels. Her hair, raven black and high-piled, shone with a hairdresser's personal ministrations. Clearly, she was a high-priced business tycoon's wife straight from blue book society, born to luxury, a millionaire-heiress married to more society wealth.

"Well, Yancey, you took your time," she said in that high penetrating voice.

"Uh," Yancey said.

He recognized her now. Lana. The dame he'd pulled from under the log and who'd taken the credit for his three bull's-eye shots. She hadn't even thanked him.

She waved a hand at Hasheem who bowed and vanished.

For a moment, so sudden and complete was the chamberlain's effacement, Yancey thought he'd gone through a Portal to another Dimension.

The Lady Kallipses Koltmann laughed gently.

"I am obeyed well, Yancey. Come, sit here." She patted a spindly chair two feet from the chaise longue. As he sat down gingerly, she resumed her she-cat pose on the upholstery. "I have been home since that last safari; my hus-

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band had some tiresome papers for me to sign; and I took the opportunity to buy fresh weapons. I did not like my feelings when I was under that log and the quemlash charged up the ridge."

"You and me both."

She smiled, a movement that only faintly disturbed the makeup around her mouth. "You are supposed to call me My Lady."

"Sure. It's just I'd like to know why you asked me to see you—"

"That is simple. I come from a place you would not understand. I hunt here for relaxation, for thrills. I do not expect to be trapped beneath a log. My husband is always very busy about his own affairs—he runs a corporation—you would not understand—"

"Try me."

The three tiny vertical furrows between her eyebrows smoothed out. Evidently, she'd given up asking him to call her my lady, and that proved something. Yancey began to bubble inside.

"I formed the immediate conclusion that you were not the same as the other beaters. I have reason to trust my instincts." She stretched and Yancey did not lower his eyes. "My husband is a very important man and has many business responsibilities. I am often left to make my own amusements."

Cy Yancey began to jump to conclusions; and, at that moment, he hoped he was wrong.

"I liked the way you handled yourself. I have decided to take you on my staff as a gun bearer. I have cleared this with Tov Burka. He was flattered." She smiled, not the same sort of smile at all. "You will act as my gun bearer, Yancey, and will take orders directly from me."

"Well, now, that's—"

"And remember! When we are with any one else, any one else at all, you treat me with the respect my rank is due. I am the Lady Lana Kallipses Koltmann of Burntash. You will call me my lady or my lady of Burntash. Is that clear?"

"Yes," said Yancey. "What do I call you when we're alone?"

Languidly she reached to a bellpress set in the arm of the chaise longue and, in the few seconds before Hasheem

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twinkle-popped in, said, "That we will find out when the time is ripe." Then, to the bowing Hasheem, "Take Yancey to the armory and tell Boroz to follow my instructions to the letter."

The last thing Yancey saw as he went out was the Lady Lana Koltmann lighting up the biggest cigar this side of Cuba.

XI

The whole setup was dynamite.

Yancey didn't know whether to feel the most intense gratification and joy or to hightail it for the nearest mountains and find a hole and pull the lot in on top of himself.

In the armory Boroz turned out to be a real weirdie.

His skin was white. Harsh and granulated, tough as sharkskin, his hide was as white as an albino's. Yancey could detect no flush of blood below the surface. The man looked as though he'd been dipped in white clown's make-up. He stood about six feet seven and must have weighed enough to tip the scales against a young ikra. Rolling muscles beneath the yellow smock he wore and the thickness and clenching power of his fingers made Yancey vow a solemn promise never, no never, to go up against this guy in an argument. The bald bullet head wore a kind of toupee made of yellow hair; but the effect made Yancey want to laugh, a course of action he felt inadvisable. Boroz's black eyes regarded him without interest.

The huge man handed him a yellow tunic like his own, a few sizes smaller. As Yancey put it on he said, "Don't I get a pair of trousers, then? This kilt is putting me to untold discomfort with the girls."

Boroz flicked his fingers. A girl appeared, a nice, normal, fair-haired girl with a flat chest and skinny legs who smiled a little foolishly and giggled and smoothed her hands down her yellow dress. Boroz nodded to her.

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"Oh—ah—trousers," said Yancey foolishly.

The girl giggled again and went out. When she came back she carried yellow trousers that fit Yancey pretty well. He waited until she was gone and then put them on. Then he looked around the armory. And whistled.

He wouldn't have liked to have been asked to estimate the cost of the weaponry stacked there. A lot of it was displayed in racks on the walls—shotguns, rifles, carbines, bows and quivers of arrows, pistols and weapons to which Yancey could not even give a name. One whole wall of the octagonal room was covered with swords of all varieties. The majority of the stuff was still in crates and cases, piled up about the floor, and the marks on those crates would have sent a Federal Arms Inspector wild.

The girl came back, smiling a little foolishly at Yancey, and then waited for Boroz. The white giant nodded to her. She said to Yancey, "My lady wishes you to have a handgun for yourself. You may pick what you wish. Boroz is her rear. So be careful."

Boroz walked to the door, picked up a rifle, began shooting the bolt in and out, click, click, click. Yancey took the hint.

"What do you mean—her rear?"

"You'll find out." The girl tinkled a laugh.

"What's your name?" Yancey picked up a Luger 9 mm and put it down. Not enough stopping power and too likely to jam.

"Foosy."

Yancey whispered, "Can't Boroz talk?"

"Of course. Only—not often."

He knew the kind of job he'd be called on to do as a bearer. He put down the Colt .45 Auto with a twinge of regret. "You like working for—uh—my lady?"

Her answer came very fast. "Of course! She is very kind to me; why, on Altinum I was never able to get a good job—"

Boroz came alive. One second he was idly peering through the sights of the rifle, the next he had lifted Foosy by the shoulders, swung her up and run from the armory with her. She squealed once and her thin legs waved. A grotesque memory of the ikra and Zelda hit Yancey. Boroz came back. He jerked a white finger angrily at the guns.

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"Pick yours and report to Hasheem."

He spoke as though a two-inch spike had been driven through his gullet. He spat as he finished speaking, swallowing convulsively afterwards, and resuming his stance by the door.

Yancey lightly touched a .44 Magnum—hell, he wanted to control his shooting—and the .357 Magnum wasn't as accurate as the .44. Then he spotted the sleek Smith and Wesson .41 Magnum with a six-inch barrel—there were three or four models on display—and he chose a model fitted with Goncalo Alves target stocks. The gun felt good in his hand.

"Ammunition?" he said. "I'd like some of both loads, high speed and low speed."

Boroz nodded to the stacked crates.

Yancey sighed, began to burrow. Finally he located the right cases and ripped up the boards, looked around for a receptacle, came up with his discarded clothing. He took a whole lot of double handfuls of cartridges of both kinds, ripping away the protective plastic wrappings.

Finally, as Boroz shifted impatiently, he shoved the gun down his colan leather belt and, with his ammo slung over his shoulder, went out to report to Hasheem. He felt like a gun runner.

Now what had that girl, silly gawky Foosy, said that had so upset Boroz?

He was shown to his quarters, a small room to himself in a wing attached to the main villa, right over the stables. The quorns tended to make a lot of noise; but Yancey figured he'd get used to that. Maybe he'd even get to ride one. He thought of Olan. He understood well enough that he'd merely moved from one form of servitude to another; but this one held promises a beater's never had.

The lady of Burntash maintained a regular little establishment on Jundagai, including servants, cooks, maids, chauffeurs, bearers and other men and women whose function was not apparent to Yancey. They seemed a cheerful enough bunch and welcomed him into servants' hall in a genuine spirit of fellow-feeling. Yet some of them, decided Yancey, didn't come from Jundagai. Alti something, Foosy had said. Maybe that wasn't on this world at all.

Altinum. That was it. Maybe that was another Dimen-

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sion. The thought gave the final impetus to Yancey's hitherto undecided plans. He'd string this Lana dame along until he could figure out the way to get back home.

A few days later, during which time Yancey practiced with the .41 Magnum on low speed loads, they received the order to ready for a safari. They were after najuck this time, and from what his fellows said Yancey figured the najuck to be a mean beast. A herd had been trampling all over a region to the south and west and the villagers were in despair. Tov Burka had the rights to the territory and was taking out a big hunt.

On the morning they were due to start they all lined up in the courtyard of the villa. Lana Koltmann appeared dressed in trim khaki and wearing a fetching safari hat. Boroz appeared at her back. He was not to leave that position until forced to do so, and Yancey understood why he was called my lady's rear.

The big man carried a rifle that made Yancey's eyes pop.

For only a fraction of idiot-time Yancey thought it was a big bore double-barreled shotgun. Without caring about the time or place he moved up, frankly studied the rifle. It was a big British double; a Westley Richards and probably a .600 Nitro Express, with ornate chasing and arabesque work on the lock and the barrels, and it looked a real beauty. In Boroz's hands and held against his massive chest it looked cut down to a normal man's .30-06 stock rifle.

"What loads are you using?" asked Yancey, fascinated. "Factory—or are you loading yourself? I'd like to get in on—"

"Yancey!" cracked Lana Koltmann.

Yancey jumped.

One of the gun room staff stepped forward and banged a rifle into Yancey's hands. Lana Koltmann frowned.

"You are here to carry a rifle for me, Yancey, not to chauffeur. I don't want to hear another word out of you until I give you permission." She swung down the steps and climbed haughtily into the lilac Pontiac. A number of her guests who lived in the opposite wing of the villa followed her and the cavalcade started off. At least, Yancey thought resentfully, I do get to ride. He climbed into the back of a truck and sat, feeling disgruntled, on the wooden

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slat seats. He put the rifle—it was a Marlin .444—down between his knees, too aroused to give the weapon the attention it undoubtedly needed.

Somehow, all his lulled instincts had been aroused by sight of that beautiful British double rifle. He knew now that Boroz, as my lady's rear, would follow her everywhere. In any macabre repetition of that charging quemlash affair Boroz would put the contents of both barrels into the beast and the two low velocity bullets, each about 700 grains or so, would smash their way through creating complete destruction. There would be no more .28 nonsense for my lady of Burntash.

But he began to think of Earth, of his home, with something of that old determination. The truck clashed its gears and rolled along the dirt road. The driver had little idea of driving. The sun began to make the interior of the truck insufferable, and Yancey leaned out to try to catch a breath of fresh air. The others with him sat stolidly. It seemed a characteristic of Lana Koltmann's entourage that they spoke seldom. Yancey's opposite number, a blank-faced man in the ubiquitous yellow shirt and shorts, carrying a twin Marlin .444, sat staring at his feet, his strong shoulders slumped.

Yancey tried to start a conversation going; but Brapa wasn't interested, pulled out a sliver of wood and sat silently picking his teeth.

The cavalcade passed the trudging beaters, and Yancey had a quick chance to wave at Olan, who flashed him a big white-toothed smile among the black beard. Maybe he'd been better off as a beater of the sixth grade, after all.

The hunt went off according to plan. Efficiently the beaters herded in the quarry and the hunters shot them down. Yancey stood to the side and rear of Lana Koltmann and handed her the Marlin as she emptied her own gun, reloading the four shells with quick practiced fingers, waiting for Brapa to do likewise, fitting into the flow of reloading and handing with ease.

The sun smoked down among the burned grass stems, the horizons extended, the little broken-down village by the river shimmered in the heat, and the najucks kept raging forward onto the guns. As sport it was scarcely worthy of the name in Yancey's book.

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Tired and thirsty they trooped back to camp and sat around the fires, eating and drinking and singing.

Some of the bearers for other hunters of the party began boasting of their employers' prowess; the Koltmann group remained silent. Yancey ate until he felt replete, looked about for his sack and settled down.

Four days later the trophies were loaded aboard the trucks, the camp was struck, the beaters were left to dispose of the carcasses, and the hunt went home.

Yancey felt let down.

Lana Koltmann, apart from extending her emptied rifle to him and taking the loaded arm, had had no contact with him at all; she had studiously avoided him. What gives? wondered Cy Yancey, as they trundled back to the villa on Clients' Row in Burkholm.

That evening the Koltmann entourage piled into servants' hall raring for food and drink, knowing they would be well fed as some sort of reward for their services on the hunt. The tables had been loaded with food, serving girls, flushed of face and with their hair straggling with their exertions, ran and carried huge flagons of wine. The men roared songs and horseplayed and skylarked. For any simple-minded man of Jundagai it must have been a seventh heaven.

Then sheer shock hit Yancey.

Staggering over the tiled floor, a young girl in a common sacklike garment, her bare feet raw, her face exhausted, carried an enormous bucket of water. She slopped some and men lashed her with curses. She flinched away. Her fair hair drooped over her face, which, sweating and frightened, remained as white as a guardsman's belt. Immediately, Yancey jumped up, went to grab the bucket handle.

"Hey! Foosy! This isn't your sort of work," he said, shocked.

Hasheem, portly in his sash and with his nose quivering, reared up, roared at Foosy, drove her with words out of servants' hall back into the kitchens.

"What's all that about?" yelled Yancey.

"Sit and drink your wine, Yancey. What my lady Koltmann orders is done. Don't bother your head about an imbecile girl!"

Disgusted, Yancey left the hall. He felt savage. So this

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Lana dame was a spoiled and dissatisfied society bitch; but that gave her no right to treat a kid like Foosy in that degrading way. Foosy's thin arms and legs were never meant for heavy domestic work. The fat, jolly, crude girls in the kitchen could sling that bucket of water around their heads with one hand; not Foosy.

He walked steadily and thoughtfully from the servants' quarters, past shaded lamps and up marble stairs, figuring out the way. A guard moved ahead, and Yancey took no time at all in making his decision. A silent spring, the pressure of hard fingers on neck, and he caught the guard and eased him to the ornate marble floor. All seemed silent. He figured he knew just what sort of chance he was taking now. Why he was doing what he was doing must all be tied up with that feeling of his own dissatisfaction with this life; poor little Foosy was just the excuse.

If he bumped into Boroz, now. . . .

He padded up to that tall gold-encrusted doorway in silent anticipation. The guard with his hawk face and white tunic and black trousers still stood there. Him, Yancey treated gently and deposited sitting up against the wall. He pushed the door open.

Shaded lights bathed that sumptuous room in inviting tones of gold and rose and palest green, deepening to pulsing emerald. Lana Koltmann rose from her chaise longue and snapped a switch and the small cinema screen died and rolled itself up into the ceiling. She stood, one hand to her breast, the other at her waist. She wore a white diaphanous robe and her hair was unbound and swirled ebony, shining around her shoulders.

With compelte composure, she said, "You realize I shall have to have you executed for trespassing here?"

"Maybe," said Yancey firmly. He stepped forward.

"You like punishing people, don't you—like poor Foosy. Just because she let it out you're from Altinum. Why, you don't think I'm from this lousy Dimension, do you? From Jundagai? That's a laugh!"

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XII

The lensed box with the professional grip and trigger guard in Lana Koltmann's hand clearly was a weapon. Yancey fought down the queasy sensation that threatened to erupt from his stomach past his back teeth and nodded to that enigmatic weapon.

"One of your little gadgets from Altinum? I'd guessed you were technologically advanced."

"Sit here, Yancey," said the woman in a catlike purr, very smooth, very sleek. "I shall have to investigate you more thoroughly than I'd intended. Dimensions, now. What the frack-pest do you know of the Dimensions?"

"Only that I've been through a few. And I'd like to get home."

"And where is home?"

Yancey considered. He had not forgotten what Zelda had so proudly said about Ettore sweeping through the Dimensions cleaning up. But he had little to lose now and all to gain. "Earth."

She laughed. "That dump! No wonder you were so interested in our weapons. I love that Dimension's antique technology—their old-fashioned artifacts. That revolver you have—how wonderfully archaic."

"It could make a nasty mess of—"

"Of course. But so crude; I believe you had revolving weapons back at the very beginning of firearms manufacture. I've seen a charming flintlock revolver in your Tower of London collection, and the whole double-action self-extracting, metallic cartridge revolver was perfected—if I may use that word of so imperfect an instrument—well over a hundred of your years ago."

"They still shoot."

"And they spray flames and smoke about, they rattle, they shoot six times and then it's squiggle, struggle, plop to reload them. Why do you think I chose a Marlin .444 rifle to shoot with? Fun. The same reason my husband chooses

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a bow and arrows. We like to recapture the primitive hunting scene—"

"The Marlin's a great gun! It can bang a big bullet—"

"Sure, sure. But until I find a Dimension whose productions please me more I shall stick with your funny old Earth's. That Slikitter piece I had that misfired and which—well, you know—that was a deliberately antiquated arm. Like any copy, it misbehaved under pressure."

"So you've been to Earth, then. I want to get back."

"Why should I help you?" She put the weapon down on the chaise longue and indicated a decanter and glasses on a tray. "I think a drink will aid us both, Yancey. I like you. I was not wrong in thinking you different."

"And," said Yancey, pouring, "I'd like you to let poor Foosy back onto a more suitable employment, like lady's maid. You should see the poor kid now."

"She disobeyed. The people of Altinum do not know of the Dimensions—and they must never know. My husband runs a most interesting agency selling our products to the worlds of the Dimensions. . . ."

"I get it," said Yancey, handing her her drink. He'd poured a triple Scotch each. "But what about me?"

"Oh, I think I can arrange it. But—" And she sank back, the drink in one hand, one arm over her head. Her geometrical pattern certainly interested Yancey. He took a deep breath, downed his own drink, said, "Brrr!" and moved in. Ten minutes later, breathless and a little fuzzled, Lana sat up and pushed him away.

"Take your time, Cy; I like a sophisticated man."

Yancey spat out a piece of lace from her gown and sat up. She was a toothsome morsel, sure enough, despite the cosmetic treatments she lavished thousands of bucks on.

"Sure. I'm no gigolo, Lana, and I use that old-fashioned term deliberately. I like you. You're a woman, all right. But, hunting on Jundagai isn't my scene, I now find."

"Well, you're stuck with it for a while. I am on holiday until my husband comes for me. I have no means of traversing the Dimensions—"

"You mean you don't have a Porteur in your retinue!"

She shook her head. "No." Obviously, it rankled.

Yancey rubbed his chin, eyed Lana's deshabelle again, felt his throat dry, and dived in. This time he kept on

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until he was satisfied; but Lana, as befitted a woman of her position and status, demanded more. Knowing that his only chance of getting back to Earth rested with her, Yancey obliged. He hoped that he'd have the strength to last out until her husband arrived with the Porteur.

"Whoosh!" he said when she lay back, smiling dreamily, and indicated she wanted one of her big cigars. He lit it for her and then, taking his new position for all it was worth, lit up one for himself. The fragrant smoke tasted good. "Earth?" he asked.

"Yes."

He thought he understood the pattern, did cynical Cy Yancey. Dissatisfied woman, rich and absent husband, sex-starved female instincts—she ought to be a pushover. Yet he found, strangely, that he genuinely liked her. She gave instructions later on that freed Foosy from her drudgery and restored her to a position where her thin fingers could do their proper work with needle and thread. They argued about weapons in the days that followed. Lana knew an amazing amount, telling Yancey things he'd never dreamed of—about weaponry as about sex—and the name of J. Dafte, the London gunsmith who made flintlock revolvers around the 1650s was thrown back and forth between them as a kind of goad.

"All lasers and death rays on Altinum, I suppose!" snapped Yancey once.

"Lasers? My dear, how passé can you get!"

And so on.

They went on two more hunts—zagrid and najuck again—and although Yancey never fired a shot he didn't mind that. He sweet-talked Lana into letting him take a Sturm, Ruger Blackhawk .357 Magnum for Olan, and then at the last minute changed it for a Smith and Wesson .41 Magnum with a six inch barrel, the same model as the one he carried, now in a proper holster, at his own waist.

"Hey, Cyl!" said Olan, awed, when Yancey handed him the gun. "You've fallen on your feet!"

"Or some other part of my anatomy," Yancey smiled. It was good to see Olan. "I nearly brought you a single-action; but you're used to S&W double-action, we both have the same. They're two sorts of loads—one for light stuff, 1100 feet per second, and the other for the nasty ones

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like a quemlash on the loose, 1500 feet per second. Its stopping power is pretty good, not as much as the .44 Magnum, of course; but then you're surer of hitting with this one."

Olan thanked him suitably and they wound up at the "Zagrid and Zenosha" where Yancey had to duck out from the attentions of his ex-lights o' love who wanted to smother this prodigal son with their attentions.

Back in his room over the stables, he sighed. When he got back to New York he'd sure miss old Olan.

One thing Olan had told him that, at the time, had disturbed him in his estimation of the Hunters of Jundagai.

"The Hunt of Rov Rangga," Olan had said, his mouth twisting in contempt. "They're staging a human run next week."

"Human?"

"Yes. It's obvious. We do it occasionally; but under entirely different rules from Rov Rangga, may Quanchi pluck out his black heart!"

When Lana told him they were going hunting special game; Yancey felt sick. Then, she added, "Kragor. Quick and lithe and with twelve-inch tusks they like to strike upward with and degut you. When one of them charges you, all slaving jaws and mad eyes, you have to hit with the first shot."

"I've not heard of them. Olan didn't mention them."

"They come from another Dimension, one called Venu-dine. They cost a lot to transport here for our sport."

That sport, as far as Yancey could see as the cavalcade set out to hunt, followed much the same routine as all the others. The only difference as far as he was concerned was that he visited Lana Koltmann's tent at night. She never seemed able to have enough of him. So far he was still enjoying it; but the thought of getting back to Earth kept him at it with a zeal he did not have to feign.

If he played his cards right he'd get back to New York and that office. He scarcely bothered these days to curse that lost quarter-inch. He felt he was growing toward it naturally.

Whether or not Boroz knew what was going on had at first worried Yancey; but soon he came to disregard the problem of the big white man. Boroz was never around

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when Lana and Yancey teamed up. On the third day of the hunt they were working a long shallow gulley between eroded cliffs. The gulley was choked with lush vegetation shielded from the wind and with a river providing ample sustenance and, so Yancey was told, was great kragor ground. Walking with the Marlin .444 loaded and ready, Yancey was ready to believe that. He kept looking at every flick of leaf, alert for every snap of twig.

Toward midday Boroz and Yancey, following Lana, had become separated from the rest of the hunt and, crossing an arm of the river, they came out onto an island where the trees grew to a greater height and formed a kind of cathedral space above them. Olan met them there, alone, shaking his head, puzzled.

"My beaters must have gone down the other arm of the river. But there are kragors around here, I feel sure."

The four people stared about the grassed open space beneath the canopy of trees. A man appeared at the far end. He ran drunkenly, zigzagging in exhaustion, his clothes ripped and in rags. Blood soaked his feet and ankles.

"What the frack-pest is going on?" snapped Lana.

Olan made a disgusted sound. "Rov Rangga, may Quanchi stifle him! That man is quarry run by the Hunt of Rov Rangga! They call that sport."

Men and dogs appeared at the far end of the open space, small and galvanic of movement, hallooing, hunting after the man staggering on. Weapons showed ominously. Yancey threw up his Marlin, and Olan barked, "Don't, Cyl! It is useless!"

"Still, Yancey!" cracked Lana Koltmann. "If you resist the Hunters of Rov Rangga now you will create a fresh feud between them and Tov Burka. And I will be blamed!"

It made sense—and yet, and yet that poor devil out there was being hounded to death. His white agonized face showed pleadingly. He lifted a gaunt arm, beseechingly.

Yancey gripped the rifle between constricting fingers. He felt small and useless and utterly contemptible.

"Help me!" the man screamed. "Help me and you will be richly rewarded." He paused to choke and breathe and run. "The contessa will give you wealth beyond your wildest dreams!"

"What is he saying?" demanded Olan.

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Lana said curtly, "What do you think? He asks help."

Unable to stand it any more, Yancey lifted the Marlin, sighted down the scope, picked out a lead dog whose fangs showed evilly white as the red tongue lolled. Bullets kicked dirt at the running man's feet. He lunged desperately on. He had no weapons of his own that Yancey had seen. Now Yancey pressed the trigger gently, the lead hound reared, yowling, was flung back by the big 240 grain bullet, kicked end over end.

"You imbecile!" blazed Lana. Boroz took the rifle away from Yancey, tangling his fingers in the lever, making him yelp at the cutting pain. The giant's strength brooked no resistance. Yancey put his fingers in his mouth, cursing.

The dogs were almost on the fugitive. He cast a despairing glance over his shoulder, screamed, lunged on.

And a man appeared suddenly from nowhere between the quarry and the dogs. A beam of violet light speared out. The dogs crisped and burned. More people suddenly appeared from nowhere. They popped out like—Yancey knew. They were coming through a gate, through a Portal; they were coming through from another Dimension.

He saw a giant of a man in some kind of black armor, with a sword swaggering at his waist, and with a glittery silver chain from his left wrist running to a half-naked girl. . . . He saw men in blue shirts and loincloths, with red kerchiefs tied around their jet hair, golden bells swinging from their pointed ears. . . . He saw a woman dressed all in white, a long white robe that swirled around her lush body, a woman with a sweet rosebud red mouth and haunting blue eyes, with dark coiffed hair ablaze with gems. He saw the glittery chain from her left wrist and the grotesque little man who capered at the end. . . . He saw all this and he tried to get his breath and choked. . . .

"Contessal" cried the fugitive in a loud, cracking voice.

"You did not think I would abandon my friends, did you, Graham?" asked the woman in a syrupy sweet voice.

The brutal-faced man in the black armor laughed very evilly, and fired his energy weapon at the hunters of Rov Rangka and they collapsed and frizzled and fried and burned there on the grass beneath the trees.

"Enough, Wayne!" commanded the woman. "Soloman, put us back at once. We have seen enough of Jundagai."

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The people out there began to disappear.
With a huge cry Yancey bounded forward.
"Zeldal Jorinel!" he shrieked.

But the travelers between the Dimensions vanished and long before he could reach the Portal he stood alone on the grass, staring at vacancy.

Two men still remained from the Hunters of Rov Rangka and these two ran back into the trees as though all the Hounds of Hakim's Pit were after them.

"Let us go away from this accursed place, and quickly." Lana Koltmann's face showed a blazing anger and a profound unease. "No one of you must breathe a word of this."

The four quickly retraced their steps, going back over the stream and following the other arm of the river where they were soon back with the rest of the hunt and the kragors. But Lana pulled out after the first few kills, pleaded a headache to the solicitous Taj Burka, gave a meaningful look at Olan, and took her party back to camp.

She had taken no notice of Yancey's impulsive actions, and had not referred to his shouts.

Yet Yancey could not forget the girl chained to that giant in the black armor. That had been Zeldal! He felt sure of it. And Jorine had been there, too, chained to the fawn-clad form of an academician. He was sure of it!

Or, perhaps, it had been the other way around. But the two girl Porteurs had been there and Yancey felt a cruel blaze of disappointment and excitement churning up inside him. So near, then, he had been. And now it seemed he was doomed once again to rot in Jundagai forever.

He felt relief that Lana did not summon him to her tent that night. He lay awake for hours, restless, tossing and turning, seething with resentment and stifled longings, unwilling to face the future that lay before him.

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XIII

All silly giggles and furtive looks, Foosy brought him a message the day they arrived back in Burkholm. He gave her a gentle pat on the cheek, thanked her, and dutifully ducked out and went off to the "Zagrid and Zenosha."

"It's all up with us, Cy," Olan said as they settled to a scrubbed deal bench, leather jacks of wine before them.

"What?"

"Those two men of Rov Ranga who escaped, may Quanchi pluck out their eyes! They saw. They reported. Your mistress, my lady of Burntash, will be all right, for she has the power and is a client. But for you and me, Cy, the word will be out."

The first thing Yancey had noticed about his comrade was the absence of the leather and fabric jerkin with that proud beacon of Tov Burka. Plain leathers over his hauberk wore Olan the vice-chief of beaters this evil day.

"What does that mean, Olan?"

"Tov Burka and Rov Ranga will come to an understanding. A sacrifice, a scapegoat—" He flicked brown fingers. "You and me, Cy."

"But surely Lana, that is, my lady, will protect us?"

Olan smiled without humor. "You, perhaps. Me, no. Why should she?"

Yancey could see that. He could not tell Olan that he had to stay with Lana for she was now his only hope of getting home. Yet even that hope appeared slender the more he thought about it.

"I think I shall have to leave Burkholm," said Olan heavily, and swilled his jack dry.

"Wait," counseled Yancey. "Give me until tonight."

That night, unsummoned, he went to the ornate room beyond the gold-encrusted door. Surlily, the hawk-faced guard let him in. Lana looked up languidly.

"Cy! I am surprised. I thought you would be away off into the mountains by now."

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Yancey opened his mouth as though a heavyweight like Boroz had right uppercut him in the solar plexus.

"I didn't kill all those guys and their dogs!" he yelped.

"Didn't you?" She drew gently on her cigar, puffed out a plume of smoke. "I've explained it all to Tov Burka, who managed to straighten it all out with Rov Ranga. I knew you had gone into town—Foosy is a sweet child if a little retarded—and I must admit I never expected to see you back here again."

"You rotten little—" began Yancey.

Lana's breasts rose and fell in a way that did not please Yancey. She stabbed the big cigar at him.

"You're a poor fish stranded in another world, Cy. We've had fun. I won't sell you to Tov Burka. But I don't want you around here any more. Understand?"

"One day, Lana, you and I will meet up again. Maybe then I'll straighten this out." He walked across to the chaise longue, reached down and yanked all her gown off. He stared down at her lush nude body. "You'd better watch it, darling," he said harshly. "You're running to fat."

He went out quickly. The cigar hit that gold-encrusted door and showered him with sparks.

He went straight to the armory where he loaded himself down, choosing selectively. He shucked off the yellow shirt of bearer servitude, found a khaki shirt and pants and took spares for Olan, checked around, took down a sword, and went out. He had to clobber two guards who wondered what all the monosyllabic swearing was about. From the stables beneath his room he selected four high class quorns, mounted one and led the others out past open-mouthed ostlers.

"It's all right," he shouted back. "My lady knows all about it. Sure, she knows *all* about it."

At the "Zagrid and Zenosha" he found Olan in a sweat.

"Come on, Cy. I thought you'd never make it. Let's get out of here."

"I've a feeling Tov Burka, if he owes you any loyalty at all, won't make it too difficult."

Olan grunted, half-convinced. "You must be right. Otherwise I'd have been arrested long ago. But we've got to get clear before sunrise."

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Outside the tavern Olan went toward his quorn. Yancey mounted up and Olan whistled.

"You've a string there, Cy. What—?"

"Parting gift, payola, a present from a satisfied customer. Now, come on."

Together, they spurred out of Burkholm.

Later, riding through the cool night with both moons high in the sky, Olan said, "I found out, I think, why that big brute of a guy in his black armor had to kill all Rov Rangga's men." He chuckled thickly. "Not that I object to that—"

"Why?"

"His name's Wayne and he's a Rov Rangga client. How he appeared like that I don't know. Probably they were all waiting in a hide for the hunt and it went wrong."

Yancey could well appreciate Olan's refusal to understand what his eyes had told him he had seen. To him, men could not just appear out of nowhere. He didn't know of the Dimensions.

"Well, two of 'em escaped. So Wayne's had some explaining to do."

"That must be it," nodded Olan. "He blamed us."

They jogged on through the night with Yancey content to let Olan lead. This was his world and he would know the best course to pursue. Once they had thrown off any pursuit, which Yancey felt to be easily accomplished from his reading of the situation, he intended to seek out Wayne at Rov Rangga's castle. There were answers to questions he must have, and the big brutal man in the black armor knew those answers.

After a time of jogging silence, Yancey said, as though casually, "Say, Olan, you don't seem too upset at leaving Burkholm. I mean, after all, it's your home."

Olan shook his head. "It has been no home to me since Olsaree was taken. I do not feel I have any real home. That is why I value the free life of a beater. I have my quorn and my tin whistle and my sword. They suffice."

"So you wouldn't mind moving right out of this area altogether?"

"I would not mind. It looks as though I may have to whether I mind or not."

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"You can say that again," said Cy Yancey, shaking the reins.

They rode most of the night, not hard, sparing the quorns, but pressing on and just before dawn Olan found a concealed dell in a wood, off the beaten track, where they could tie their animals and see about food. They doused the fire as soon as they'd cooked up the soft-dough cakes. Sitting back, feeling the soreness ease out of him, Yancey wanted to probe Olan's feelings again. But Olan shut his eyes. Then, opening them, he said, "If you really wish to seek this man Wayne at Rov Rangka's castle, you must either be a fool or an idiot. However, as I am just as much an idiot as you, I think I will accompany you."

"You don't have to, Olan. Just that I—"

"Enough. I tell you this, though. There have been strange reports from Rov Rangka's castle and his town of Rangholm that I think are connected with the eerie portents of the soothsayers. I heard a man say that he'd seen a man in Rangholm with a head made of gold."

"A head made of gold? Come off it, Olan!"

"That is what was said. A man in outlandish costume and with a gleaming golden head."

"Pull the other one." Yancey leaned back. "If you're coming to Rangholm with me, we'd better get the armory sorted out. I chose some choice gear there, old lad."

Olan nodded. "Such weapons I have seen in the hands of clients, hunters; I never dreamed I would handle them."

"I chose Earthly weapons, that is, huh, I mean, I chose guns we could understand." Yancey sweated that one out for a spot, and then added, "That's a Marlin .444. A real beaut. Fires a 240 grain jacketed soft point Magnum .44 at 2400 feet per second. Not too fast. A nice big bullet to crunch a few bones." He thought of Boroz's enormous Westley Richards and smiled.

"Beautiful," said Olan, gingerly operating the lever.

"And I also brought along a couple of longer range jobs—to start with. That's a Weatherby Mark V in .300 Magnum. With a Monte Carlo stock. And a 4 X Leupold scope. And Pachmayr recoil pad. That's a whole heap of cannon."

Olan whistled afresh.

"Yeah," said Yancey a little too belligerently. "Old Kal-

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lipses Koltmann, now, she'd rack all them in her cabinet with the woomeras and throwing spears."

"And this?" Olan asked, ignoring Yancey's remark. He did that now, letting his mind slide over what this new-found comrade said, humoring him. He picked up the Boss 12 bore double side-by-side.

"Gotta have a shotgun along," said Yancey. "And the English make the best there are. Nearly took a Browning autoloader; but we're out in the wilds and—well, you never know." He laughed suddenly at Olan, staring around at the wealth of Croesus in weaponry to that simple, uncomplicated man. "Red Hakim knows there's no such thing as one single gun perfect for all occasions. But we can't carry Harper's Ferry and Springfield around with us. So I had to make a quick choice; I was in a hurry at the time."

"And these?"

Yancey's smile tightened. "A couple of choppers may be necessary if we meet up with hostiles," he said and patted the Thomsons. "I just don't know what we're getting into."

He showed Olan what made a tommy gun click. "That's for the sticky bits, Olan. The rest is still sport."

When, toward evening, they saddled up and readied themselves to ride out, Olan said, "So you really mean to go to Rangholm?"

"Yes."

Olan nodded and sucked in his leathery cheeks. His beard bristled. "Very well. Then, with these khaki clothes you have brought, the quorns and the quality of guns you have, we can pass ourselves off as clients. I do not think anyone will recognize me or you. We were, after all, insignificant as a beater and bearer." He slapped his quorn meditatively. "The main problem is money."

"Isn't it always?"

They rode on, heading toward Rangholm.

"We can sell the Boss 12 bore. That'll bring a good price. It'll keep us for the time we need."

"Time we need for what, Cy?"

"I've got to talk to that Wayne guy. He knows some things I must know. I'll explain it all when he explains it to me. Right?"

"I do not," said Olan with quiet irony, "have any other plans at this present time."

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The character of the country changed as they rode westward. Lush vegetation thinned and the ground dried and grew hard. "We're skirting the badlands now," observed Olan. They pressed on, confident now that no pursuit had been mounted, traveling by day and sleeping by night. "Rov Ranga's Hunters had come a long, long way when we met them," pointed out Olan. "I think that man they were hunting must have been exceptional in running so far."

"Or something," finished Yancey. He was worrying away at what the girls, Zelda and Jorine, had told him. Something about Jundagai and its scouting. Certainly they'd given him a lot of information. They'd mentioned a woman called the contessa, hadn't they? An evil woman? Well, she'd come from nowhere to save that poor devil; so she looked after her own well enough.

The woods thickened into forests and the mountains began to march along the southern horizon. They pushed through forested glades and aisles between the trees, and leaving the badlands to their rear and north came out at last onto a prairie with isolated stands of timber and lazy rivers gleaming in the sun of Jundagai. Olan breathed deeply. He lifted in the saddle. He pointed ahead.

Yancey nodded.

"I see it. A damn great castle on a rock and a town beneath. Rangholm?"

"Yes. Rangholm."

"Remember, Olan. However much you hate these people and would like to destroy them all, we're supposed to be clients. We'll have to be pleasant."

"I know. It will be difficult. But I will keep the safety firmly on my rifle."

Yancey thought of the choppers and sighed. Yet if he had to use them against these Hunters of Rov Ranga, would he hesitate?

He thought of that man running with bloody feet and of his despairing face and the dogs and the spitting rifles of the men from Rangholm, and he figured that maybe that set of images would impel the strength of his trigger finger.

They rode into Rangholm beneath a massive gated archway in which rows of carved stone skulls grinned down in gargoyles' glee.

They had chosen the hour before nightfall. They were

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able to find a tavern and stable their quorns and go soberly to an upper chamber. They kept their revolvers close to their sides, bolted the door, and went to sleep confident that they had passed the first test as mere clients of the Hunt of Rov Rangga.

XIV

Cy Yancey, still stubbornly lacking that extra quarter-inch, was through with hunting. He loved firearms for their precision of workmanship, the demands they made on his intelligence to get the best results; but he no longer wished to be associated with them in terms of killing animals. Oh, sure, he'd drop a zagrid or a bull-python if the monster was ravaging simple villagers; but for sport, for Yancey, killing was out.

Now he had to face the unpalatable fact that he had to get Zelda and Jorine, that Wayne would be in the way, that the Hunters of Rov Rangga would seek to interfere, and that he might be forced to shoot at and kill not animals, but men.

One thing—the men would be shooting right back.

Olan breezed into their room the next morning with a big smile.

"I sold the shotgun. What a sensation that one made! And we've enough to live on comfortably for a while. Of course, if it is seen by any of my lady's people—"

"I aim to have my business finished by then. It's you I'm worried about, Olan."

Olan kept his smile. "Don't worry about me. I know Olsaree is gone forever, I have no romantic illusions about that. But if I can have a crafty bash at Rov Rangga's men I shall be happy. Afterward, well, Jundagai is a large place and good hunters are always welcomed."

"That's my boy," said Yancey. But he still worried.

They familiarized themselves with the town over the next day and saw plenty of Hunters and their clients. Wearing

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the neat khaki and with their bronzed, bearded faces, they aroused no comment. Rangholm had a more varied clientele than Burkholm, evidently. Yancey saw men and women who could only sketchily be classed as human and he marveled at the people of the town's calm acceptance of them. Still, it was all business, he supposed.

Strange rumors ran through the town. Portents had been seen. Weird flying carriages had swooped down in the night. Everyone expected some dread outrage to fall on the town. Yancey put all that down to Wayne and his monkeying around in the Dimensions. They went out to Rangholm's Clients' Row.

"If we are to play a proper part, Cy, we'll have to see Rov Rangga and rent a villa here. That will consume far more than the money we got from the sale of the shotgun."

But Yancey wanted to go about it a different way.

The girls had told him all about those glittery chains that bound them to their academicians. When he at last saw Wayne striding arrogantly into a high-class inn off the central square he was not at all surprised that Wayne was not wearing the chain. Accompanied by a group of drinking and wenching companions, he was evidently out for an evening's debauchery and entertainment. Yancey nodded to Olan.

"Now we make ourselves most agreeable to that vlasta-prang," he said, and chuckled, and stilled his laughter, and went determinedly into the inn.

Wayne and his cronies, sprawled around a wide table in the windows, laughed and joked and drank, their high-booted legs thrust out on the sanded floor. Serving wenches ran eagerly to do their bidding, bringing up the foaming jacks, laying piles of soft-dough cakes on platters, laughing and giggling and having their rears pinched and ready to be whatever was needed; evidently Wayne paid well.

"I can't understand a word they're saying," grumbled Olan as the two comrades found a corner shaded settee.

Cautiously, Yancey levered up the translator band. The men in the window seats talked in a fizz of syllabics he did not understand—except for one granite-faced man with brushed iron gray hair, a bitter mouth, and broad square hands that fondled the Colt automatic at his belt. This man spoke English. Yancey felt a jolt strike through him. So! He

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pulled the band back over his head where his luxuriant hair well-concealed it, and listened to the idle conversation.

He reasoned that these men wore Mark Four translators—probably intentionally—so that they could converse amongst themselves and not be understood by the people of Rangholm. Maybe they even had a new model, a Mark Six, that enabled them to switch on or off as the occasion required. Wayne seemed an important enough man to warrant that. He still wore black: shirt and trousers and high boots; but he had doffed his ominous black armor for the night's revels.

The gaiety of the revelers showed in marked contrast to the general air of anxiety that had been souring the otherwise carefree lives of the people of Rangholm. Their unease had lately been spreading to the other local hunting holms; everyone believed some dread fate hung over Jundagai.

From the odd significant remark dropped into the general conversation between Wayne's companions Yancey drew some interesting conclusions. These men were employed by Wayne on a personal loyalty basis and from the way they talked he gathered that, impressed and, indeed, frightened by the contessa though they were, they were in this game for their own ends first. They were doing a job for the contessa. They were, in a very real sense, condottiere, mercenaries, men willing to fight for a price.

They had originated in many different Dimensions. They were here on Jundagai in order to obtain something they casually referred to as a PPL for the contessa. Wayne had to wait until the time was right before going up to Rov Rangga's castle and taking this mysterious PPL. Yancey drank quietly and listened; Olan drank and watched the girls.

Yancey gathered further that they were growing impatient. They wanted action. Also, they considered that their numbers were too few to adequately force a passage into the castle against Rov Rangga hunting strength. All that then remained for Yancey to do was to play his cards right and the opening would be made.

His opportunity came when he neatly tripped a laughing serving girl on his way back from outside and cascaded the vinous contents of her flagon into the lap of the bitter-mouthed English-speaking man.

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"You stupid bastard!" yelled this gentleman, leaping up and mopping ineffectually at the ruby stain. The girl cowered back, aghast.

Yancey jumped in, swabbing with a kerchief.

"A thousand pardons, my friend! It was all my fault! I apologize most profoundly! Please allow me to refill your cup—and your clothes, of course, I will pay. . . ."

Ten minutes later, joined by Olan, they were all shouting and laughing and guzzling. Yancey had not failed to notice each man's hand casually go up to his hair, and to see the way fingers reached in, obviously to switch on circuits in the translators that rendered the wearers understandable to their auditors. Definitely, Mark sixes.

"We're here for the hunting," said Yancey expansively, putting on his pseudo-Rocky act. "But it's a drag. We could do with some more hectic action, if you follow."

"We know where that could be found," said the Earthman, who gave his name as Travers, without a first name. He laughed coarsely. "Hey, Wayne, how's about taking these two on? They look tough enough—and they have guns."

Yancey could scarcely believe it all went through so smoothly. He went on worrying for the rest of the riotous evening and even Olan, chuckling, could not completely put his mind at rest. Things like this never happened easily for Cy Yancey, lacking his quarter of an inch, they never had and he couldn't see that they ever would.

"We're in with a gang, Cy, that's all," Olan yawned, back in their room. "What an evening! They're up to some mischief. What your interest is I must confess I've not the slightest idea; but—"

"But we're in, Olan! That's the thing."

"They all look a mean bunch; but that one they call Travers is something again."

"Yeah. I thought he was going to shoot first when I chucked that wine over him." Yancey hit the pillow and rolled over. "G'night, Olan. We'll find out more tomorrow."

"If they're going to raid Rov Rangga, then I'm all for it, Cy. By Quanchi, yes! G'night!"

In the days that passed Yancey well understood these men's tough irritation at the delay. He did not know what they were after in Rov Rangga's castle—this mysterious

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PPL—and he did not care. He had his own targets—two luscious ones—in sight now and he'd do anything, he promised himself, to free them from Wayne. They must be kept in Wayne's villa on Clients' Row for he never saw them about Rangholm. He had rejected at once any idea of breaking in for the place was far too well guarded.

The men closest to Wayne, adventurers like Travers and Chi'ing Parva, and the bronze-tinted dwarf with red hair the others called Stryka, kept close-mouthed about the plans; yet they all seemed anxious to recruit more men. Three or four more hardened free-lance hunters and bearers were taken on in the following few days, and Yancey worried no more about his and Olan's ready acceptance. He was realistic enough to know that once the job was done Wayne and his cronies would ditch the hired help very rapidly indeed.

Once or twice, in flashes of surprising homesickness, Yancey had thought of Earth and of where he now was in relation to the United States. Every time they'd traveled in a physical direction among the Dimensions, as opposed to going through from one world to another, they'd headed it seemed invariably westward with a touch of south in the heading. Musing, interested only that he felt relief they hadn't gone eastward—that would have meant they'd have materialized back on Earth over the Atlantic—he figured they must be around Missouri now, perhaps as far west as Kansas City. The soreness in his rear testified to the miles they'd covered.

Unlike his direct approach with Lana Koltmann, of whom he seldom thought these days, as she had served her purpose, he felt reluctance to let Wayne know that he was an interdimensional traveler. The cases were different. Olan, now—again and again Yancey fretted over the fate of that tough, bearded man with the core of sorrow and the tin whistle.

Wayne ordered a midnight gathering where all weapons would be checked out and he was cunning enough to choose an isolated and tumbledown old barn on the town outskirts so that nothing untoward could be observed on Clients' Row. So that was another opportunity denied Yancey. The broad-shouldered, bronze-tinted dwarf, Stryka, was most impressed with Yancey's and Olan's tommy guns. He fondled

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them as though they were belly dancers at the end of the act.

"We'll need them, Stryka," said Yancey, dryly. Reluctantly, the dwarf handed them back. Travers entered the barn, his hostile face animated by an emotion Yancey found repellent. Glancing at the hired help, he motioned to Wayne and then put his fingers in his hair. Wayne did the same.

"Well?"

"The message has come. The contessa confirms. Charnock has got through. Tomorrow night. They've had a hell of a time on Durostorum and it's still touch and go. They had trouble with finding suitable Portals. Charnock knows exactly what to do—"

"He ought to," Wayne grunted. "We've been waiting here and keeping the PPL under observation until the time was right. We'll still have to wait until they make the snatch in Durostorum."

Listening, Yancey felt sober satisfaction. They had no idea he could understand them, of course, and he had to make his face blank. But with all the tomfoolery about this mysterious PPL going on he ought to be able to snatch Zelda and Jorinel. He would, by Red Hakim's Hounds, he would!

"As soon as Charnock has it wrapped up there we'll go through to him. Rov Rangga will not be pleased—hal—he'll be livid! We might fight our way clear; but going through to Durostorum will be easier and cleaner."

"Check."

Travers looked at the hunters cleaning and oiling their weapons in the old barn, and his bitter mouth twisted in macabre pleasure. "We can leave these dimwits to handle Rov Rangga. It's almost a pity to miss seeing that."

Wayne laughed in his gritty, ugly way. Yancey realized afresh what a charming couple they were.

Wayne adjusted his translator band, called everyone together, and gave a brief explanation of the plan.

"We shall be going to places that may bemuse you; but I've picked you as a bunch of men who will not easily be frightened. Once we are in the castle there will be loot enough to make you all rich for life." The hunters and bearers and free-lances laughed appreciatively at this—poor

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deluded boobs, thought Yancey in sorrow and contempt. "Don't hesitate to shoot. No mercy will be shown to any one of you by Rov Rangka if you are caught, and if you let me down then rest assured I shall show you none."

If any of these wolfish men thought about the way they would escape from Rov Rangka's castle they did not voice that question. Evidently, they assumed they would go out the way they had come in. They did not know of the Dimensions.

The next evening they all assembled in the carpark flanking Wayne's rented villa. Only one moon was up shedding a lemon-colored light that made everything look rimed and ghostly and washed out. Silently the men filed aboard a vehicle that, at first, Yancey thought must be a Greyhound Bus. Absence of wheels made that conception untenable; but he sat in a plush seat with Olan, thrust forward stiffly, and then winced as the bus took off, skimming up through the air silently.

"What!" began Olan.

"It is all right," snapped Travers, contemptuously. The passengers quieted. "We fly and so save your legs."

"This must be one of those flying carriages," breathed Olan.

"Yes," said Yancey shortly. Olan had insisted they each take their Weatherby Mark V .300 Magnum, and they wore them diagonally across their backs, leaving both hands free for the choppers. He felt bowed down with ammo; although he still marveled at the amount he'd managed on that flight from Lana Koltmann's armory. The old adrenalin had been pumping that night, for sure; just as it was beginning to pump now. They soared through the night beneath that solitary yellow moon and the land lay dark and alien beneath them.

Up by the driver's seat sat a man Yancey had not seen before, a short, squat, fat little man with a frizz of white hair and a round-faced, moonlike countenance that oozed sweat. He, Yancey noticed grimly, was chained to Chi'ing Parva with one of those glittery chains. Despair hit Yancey. He'd expected . . . then, he saw that chains ran from both Wayne and Travers, connecting to two figures shrouded in somber black cloaks that completely concealed them; he stared through the lightless flying machine. Were those

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enigmatic figures Zelda and Jorine? His throat felt dry and his back itched. He'd gambled that the two girl Porteurs must be along; and now here was a third. . . .

Forward movement halted and the machine sank to the ground.

"Go on, then, you stupid steechlas!" grated Wayne. "All together, if that's the only way you can manage it."

Yancey felt the bump.

A thin Portal then.

But, but enough to porteur through the flying machine and the twenty desperadoes riding it. They retraced their flight path and this time three orange moons blazed in the sky and the air smelt of sandalwood. Yancey knew with a lift of feral anger that he was traveling in another world. . . . When the machine stopped once more there was some dickering with positioning. The seats jerked beneath them as the machine moved gently. At last—"Now!"

The nausea effect as they portoured from one Dimension to another hit Yancey; he gasped; and then he looked out of the windows and saw stone walls and tapestries and the long lift of a groined roof.

"All out!" snapped Wayne and, dragging on the chain, he jumped from the flying machine. Everyone followed.

They stood in the vaulted passageways below Rov Rangga's grim castle.

Yancey had to admit that Wayne had maneuvered it well. The raiding party had to assume that they had been brought here by normal means, entering through some secret gateway above the moat wall. Now they followed Wayne as he led off up the corridor. The truth would be beyond their comprehension.

"If anything moves," Wayne said in the time-honored formula, "shoot!"

Trying to keep up near the front so that he might get some word, some message, across to those two enigmatic figures he just had to assume were the girls, Yancey found himself in the press of men jogging along the stone floor. Olan stuck by his side. They ran on silently. At the first flight of stairs leading up two guards turned suddenly—turned and died. The raiders ran on.

Up and up they climbed. Now a hullabaloo broke out. Rov Rangga's Hunters knew now that an invasion had hit

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them. Guards boiled from corridors. Guns flashed and spat and the acrid stink of cordite filled the gaunt rooms and chambers. Three or four of the raiders fell. Under Travers's curses and blows the others ran on, left the wounded. They debouched into a long corridor fronted by narrow windows and tall doors. Wayne raged to one door where a symbol of crossed double axes indicated even more than the bolts and locks that entry here was forbidden.

The violet beam of high energy destruction lanced from Wayne's weapon, sloughed the locks and bolts. His booted foot kicked the door in. Travers knelt quickly, dragging the chained black-cloaked figure down, fired a long rippling burst in a swathing arc of destruction through the opening. The Schmeisser in his broad hands burped hysterically. He fired the magazine off and yelled, "Tommy gunners!"

Yancey and Olan leaped forward. Smoke gushed from the shattered opening. Figures moved in there and a lance of purple fire splintered the architrave, showered molten globs of stone at random. Olan did not hesitate. His chopper clattered. Yancey aimed low and let rip. Then Travers smacked in another magazine, his Schmeisser burped again and Stryka, ducked even lower, bundled through with his Colt .45 hammering. Everyone was in the room. The smoke cleared, one or two men coughed; but in that room only the raiders lived.

Wayne was yelling orders. Men ran to stand guard at the smashed door. Yancey looked at what was left of the men who had been in here. Proud of face, they had been, austere, wearing high-collared tunics with arcane patterns of jewels, now all splotched and ripped across the front. Their energy weapons, all baffled of barrel and coned of receiver, lay laxly in limp hands. In the confusion he bent, retrieved one, stuck it down inside his shirt.

Olan whispered, "What in Quanchi's name is *that*?"

Yancey looked. *That* was an opening against the wall about two feet wide and five feet tall, a panel of utter blackness, of inhuman emptiness. Cables led to a small tape recorder sized control panel on a table. Somewhere the sound of powerful generators and dynamos trembled the floor beneath their feet. A chill breath of uncaring authority breathed from this macabre apparatus.

Wayne and Travers sorted order from the chaos. Guards

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watched the corridors. The short fat little man with the frizz of white hair, chained to Chi'ing Parva and thus a Porteur, ran his hands thoughtfully over the control panel.

"This is it," he nodded, chuckling. "That Slikitter spoke the truth. The contessa will be pleased. This is the Porvone Portal of Life."

"All right, Harllon. We do nothing now until Charnock takes his end." Wayne bulked huge and dominating in his black armor. He drew his sword. "Durostorum is a sword-oriented culture, so be ready. And Charnock had better hurry."

"Rov Rangka will be gathering his men to rush us," said Travers. He patted the Schmeisser. "Let him come."

A few moments later the black opening onto nothingness flickered, wavered, stepped down in intensity so that Yancey thought he could see the stones of the wall through that opaqueness. Travers let out his breath with a whoosh.

"Charnock's done it!" rapped Wayne. He jerked the glittery chain. "The contessa will need less of you stupid steechlas now!"

The figure in that black swathing robe twisted and fell. The chain cut cruelly. A sharp cry, the flash of white arms and legs, and Zelda tumbled all asprawl out of the black cloak across the floor. Wayne cursed and pressed the stud and Zelda contorted, her breasts thrusting against the thin white material of her blouse, her arms and legs rigid and her body surging with agony.

Yancey leaped forward, thumped Wayne away, tried to grab the chain's bracelet. Wayne snarled and backhanded him across the face. Yancey felt his lips bruise. He crashed into the wall and felt his head ringing. He spat blood and tried to claw up and Travers showed him the muzzle of the Schmeisser.

"Stupid bastard!" said Travers, with satisfaction. "What's your game, pal?"

Yancey shook his head. He'd fouled it up! He'd done it all wrong. Sight of Zelda, like that, had snapped all his self-control. He tried to rise and Travers pushed him down with the gun.

"Speak up, pal. Tell us what it's all about, and then we'll half kill you and toss you to Rov Rangka!"

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He'd made a complete wreck of it all. The Schmeisser barrel rapped him across the head and he jerked back and cracked his head against the wall. Various constellations cavorted before his eyes. He felt sick. His rifle was strapped uselessly across his back and his chopper lay on the stone floor. Long before he could draw either his Smith and Wesson or the strange energy gun inside his shirt he would be dead, riddled by Schmeisser bullets.

The dwarf, Stryka, held a weapon pointing at Olan. Olan did not move. But his eyes—his eyes showed a deep and hungry promise.

Zelda moaned again and clawed up. She saw Yancey.

"Cyl!" Her white face showed distress and non-comprehension. "How, how did you get here?"

Travers laughed. "D'you get it, Wayne? This must be the guy the wild men said was with the two Porteurs. D'you know, Wayne, the fool must really be trying to rescue them!"

Wayne and Travers and the others laughed like cess-pools at the idea.

"We had our own Porteur, Harllon, on this mission. But having the gift of two more—two runaways from the Academy—caught by the wild men under orders from the contessa's bargemen—why, that was gravy. And now," Wayne chuckled again, swinging his sword so that the steel flashed. "And now we have you two."

Yancey licked his lips and slobbered out, "No! Olan has nothing to do with it. He doesn't know anything."

"But you do, hein?"

Yancey remained silent.

A guard put his head inside the doorway.

"They're getting mighty frisky out there. Rov Rangka's got hundreds of men—" Then, as though the thought had occurred for the first time, "How do we get out of here?"

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Wayne tossed contemptuous words over his shoulder.

"You'll get out. Fighting. Take what you want. The loot of the castle is yours. But you wait until I give the word."

"Sure—but—"

"No buts, chum. Now get back to your post."

Chi'ing Parva looked up from the control panel where his Porteur, fat little Harllon, was busily disconnecting and packing away. "We're all set to go, Wayne."

Travers sneered at Yancey. Jorine, at the end of his chain, pushed the black cloak's hood away with a tired gesture, stared emptily at Yancey and Olan and Zelda. Defeat drew her soft lips down slackly, clouded her eyes.

"It's hotting up out there all right, Wayne," said the dwarf Stryka. "We'd better—"

"Yeah, Stryka! When I say so we will. Put that cannon away, all of you, put your guns away. Get your swords ready. Remember what we've been told of Durostorum."

As Wayne dragged Zelda across to the Portal the last of the blackness died; Harllon had finished up. Now only a blank stone wall showed. But Yancey knew that there was a gate leading to another world. Wayne prodded Zelda.

"Put us through."

Wayne, Zelda, vanished.

In that moment as Chi'ing Parva pushed Harllon up to the gateway, saying in his chirrupy, glottal voice, "And so we say farewell to Rov Rangka's famed hunting lodge," and giggled, Yancey locked his eyes with Jorine's. He flicked his eyes desperately at the chain that bound her neck to Travers's wrist.

"I'll have great pleasure in doing what I said," said Travers. He looked mean and ugly and was clearly thoroughly enjoying what he was doing. "Rov Rangka will take great delight in parting you from your hides slowly."

He had transferred the Schmeisser to his left hand in half-obedience of Wayne's orders, and now he drew his sword with his right. He rose, ready to thrust that sword into Yancey.

Jorine screamed and hauled sideways on the chain, gripping it between both her slender hands, jerking with her head and neck, her scream a scream of genuine agony.

Travers stumbled sideways.

Yancey got the Smith and Wesson .41 Magnum out and

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put two of the big slugs into Travers. The ugly man vomited blood. He toppled sideways on top of Jorine.

"Grab his key!" yelled Yancey.

The dwarf flung up his .45 and Olan cut his legs from under him. Chi'ing reached for his gun and Yancey missed with his first shot, cracked the second into the thin man's leg.

An abrupt, raging roar bellowed from the gateway.

Wayne materialized, cursing, at first unaware of the tableau this side of the dimensional barrier.

"Traitors! Treachery!"

Zelda popped out, and then another man, a big, swarthy, evil-faced man with black curled mustaches, smashed through. He hit the floor and regained his poise with cat-like balance. He wore bronze and leather armor; in his left hand he carried a control box that was a twin to that carried by Harllon and in his right an enormous two-handed sword, red with blood.

Then for a brief, impossible microsecond a silence and a stasis hung in the chamber.

Yancey saw that Zelda's chain had been cut as though by a great force, the ends dribbled into globules of metal.

"What's going on here, Wayne?" shouted the newcomer. He lifted his great two-hander in that one gripping fist. "There's no way back; you know that!"

Yancey lifted the Smith and Wesson. There were two shots in the cylinder. Olan snouted the tommy.

Yancey chuckled. "Seems that when a sword and a gun culture meet there are some advantages to the latter. Still!" Wayne's hand hovered over the weapons in his belt.

The savage-faced newcomer spat. "I've been through hell and gone, by Black Naspurgo! I've done things for the contessa I've got to live with all my life—and now you foul it up this side!"

"Shut up, Charnock! You were in trouble your side, weren't you?"

"All I know is the contessa has got to have this Porvone Portal of Life."

Jorine rose and flung the iron collar from her neck.

Zelda joined her. Carefully, Yancey picked up the tommy and then, as carefully, put it down, reloaded his revolver, stowed that, and took up the chopper again.

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"Olan—we're getting out now. You two girls—with us. Any of you guys move and I'll cut your guts up like lights on a butcher's slab!"

They moved to the door. Chi'ing Parva kept on gabbling and screaming, holding his shattered leg.

Charnock looked at them with smoky hunger. "By Black Naspurgol! Another one like old J.T.! I hope *he* gets out of it with a whole skin—and Sharon and Gangly."

In the corridor Rov Rangka's men were pinned by the fire from Wayne's desperadoes. Running as though all the Hounds of Hakim's Pit were after them, Olan, Yancey, Jorine, and Zelda hared up the passage in the opposite direction.

"Window!" puffed Yancey. "Any sign of a Portal?"

The girls, saving their breath for running, shook their heads.

They found a window and managed to squeeze through the slot in the stone, crabbed around a ledge on the face of the wall, did not look down; the night wind yowled and the ground and the town of Rangholm were far, far below. Cumbered by their weapons, they made slow going; but at last they reached a buttress. Here Olan paused, shoving his slung Tommy gun to one side, took out his revolver and drawing and firing in a motion, plastered the angry head and arm that thrust from the window behind them.

"They won't come through that way again," he said above the bluster of the wind.

"Now what do we do?" shouted Zelda.

"Find a damned great Portal and get off this world of Jundagai fast, that's what."

"What was that, Cy?" asked Olan.

"You'll find out, old son, as soon as we're safe."

"I can't sense a gate anywhere," panted Jorine.

"I thought you said they often clumped—there must be one somewhere!"

"Wait," whispered Zelda. "I think—"

"Hurry up, for the sake of Uboth and Quanchi and Uncle Tom Cobley and all!"

He was getting light-headed, for sure—and no wonder!

Lights appeared on the ramparts above them. The wind tried to scour them from the face of the masonry. Yancey held on with fingers that felt like sticks of ice.

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"We can climb down to the lower battlements," he gasped out. "We can't hang on here much longer."

"All Rov Rangka's men are after us now." Olan sounded as though he might relish that. "Yes. We go down. Then these marvelous Thomas-bang-bang guns can be used again." He laughed, recklessly. "If only my Olsaree had known the son of Thomas when these devils of Rov Rangka prowled."

They crabbed down, thankful that the generous batter on the walls gave them an angled slope. They landed on the lower rampart walk and looked about urgently. Shadows and night wind, the clank of armored men and the clang of weapons. . . .

"Still no Portal, girls?"

Jorine wailed: "Nothing, Cy."

Zelda said nothing. Her head was questing in that peculiar Porteurlike manner that she so seldom employed. She was straining every faculty of that marvelous and uncanny gift to its utmost. Her face blazed white and lovely beneath the waning yellow moon. She began to return to a spot in mid-air five feet from the battlements and about ten feet below their level.

Yancey saw that look, saw the expression on her face, understood what it portended; and he shivered and felt his guts contract and then go loose.

Hell! They couldn't—could they?

They clustered in the shadow of a merlon. "Listen," said Zelda carefully. "When we were taken by those wild men and the contessa's bargemen we learned a great deal of what is going on between the Dimensions right now. When we came here we had to go up and down. You remember the world of the three orange moons and the scent of sandalwood?"

Yancey nodded. Olan kept very silent.

"That world Charnock came from. That was Durostorum, and as far as any Porteur knows, that is the only what we call 'end of the line' Dimension. From Durostorum you keep coming back to the other Dimensions clumped hereabouts. All right. I cannot tell where that gate leads to—the one that's out there in mid-air—"

"Oh, Zelda!" moaned Jorine. "I thought I detected one there; but you can't—we can't—we'd be jumping off into thin air! If we missed the gate—"

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"We'd squash on the ground down there."

"And if we go through, where—"

"I don't know!" Raggedness harshened Zelda's voice. "But it's that chance or the non-chance of being caught by Rov Ranggal!"

Yancey looked over the edge of the battlement and gulped. It was a long way down. He didn't fancy jumping off blind.

"Isn't there any other—?" he began.

"No!" snapped Zelda viciously.

The menacing clump of boots cracked along the stone. Metal gonged. Lights flickered and flashed. Shrieks and shouts rang out and the harsh staccato of gunfire blasted the night.

"There's your answer, Cyl!"

He hitched up his weapons and gear. He punched Olan lightly on the bicep. "There's nothing to it, old son. You just stick with us. We'll all jump together and we'll all go through together."

"Through?" said Olan. "Jump out there to our deaths?"

"No, no! You'll see. Zelda! Jorinel! Let's get to it while I've still enough courage to fill a thimble. I'll not be able to do it if we hang about."

"Me, too!" whispered Jorine from stiff lips.

They put their arms about each other. Then, as a unit, they braced their feet on the stone battlement, leaned—and leaped.

They tumbled all asprawl out into the wind-blustering night air, falling through space, seeing the world swirling about them, this strange world of the Hunters of Jundagai, falling and spinning and whirling about, still locked together in a drowning embrace.

The fear made sick vomit thick in Yancey's throat. Yet that strange phenomenon that characterized many falls between the Dimensions began to afflict him. It was like running down the spiral stairs of the Eiffel Tower. You laughed. You couldn't stop yourself. So Cy Yancey began to laugh as he spun between worlds. And Olan was laughing too, and Zelda, and Jorine, chortling away as they tumbled between the interstices of the planes of existence, knowing they might pop out into a new world trapped forever in the

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solid earth, or fall to splash on hard ground, or spin head over heels into any one of a million unknown perils.

Brilliant sunshine slashed across their eyes.

Olan's laughter switched to a yelp of absolute disbelief.

They dropped perhaps five feet and plunged into warm fresh water. Gasping and choking they paddled to the surface. A shadow leaned over them before the sun.

A cheerful voice sang out, "Hullo there! Looks as though we're too late. The balloon's gone up!"

Blinking water from his eyes, Yancey saw the trim green-painted catamaran bearing down on them, her sails furled, her motor chugging, the water plinking gurglingly against her hulls. He spat water and strong arms hoisted him over the side. He lay for a bit, completely done in, sprawled all awkwardly on his array of weapons, and gazed up in mild curiosity at the strange contraption mounted above the cat's center section.

"I say! That beard and all; but aren't you—?"

Another voice, a girl's, light and laughing and soft, "Of course it is! How interesting. And how different he looks, all bronzed and bearded and savage. But—that's Cy Yancey all right."

"By Mac the Black! If he's here—then he's no simpleton griff fodder! He's a Dimension traveler!"

"You great buffoon!" roared another joyous voice. "Everyone has to start, don't they!"

The cheerful, pleasant, first voice said, "You directed us all into the wrong Dimension, that night back in the alley in New York. We checked afterward. The others must have gone through an adjacent gate—you evidently didn't remember the exact spot at the time. . . ."

"And no wonder!" said Sarah, laughing.

Wearily Cy Yancey sat up, dripping water onto the snowy deck. Olan was looking as though Quanchi had stepped out of Fazj's foul kingdom in all his glory. Zelda and Jorine were trying to arrange the clinging drenched material of their clothes that did nothing to make their curves less curvaceous.

"It's all over back there in Jundagai," he said firmly. He nodded toward the contraption like an extended crane on a tripod. "If you hoped to reach Rov Rangga's battlements with that through the gate, forget it."

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"But—"

"The contessa's boys have done what they came to do."

"They've got it, then?"

"Whatever it is, yes."

The remarkably tough and athletic man with rimless spectacles was Bob Prestin. Yes, Yancey remembered. And the girl was Sarah. Now there were three luscious beauties on deck. The tremendous giant of a man with the ax was Offa. And the short one—Yancey recalled how you could never call that bundle of dynamite small—was Fezius. He had guessed with no possibility of error what they were doing here.

Prestin began to unbuckle his belt from which depended a variety of lethal weapons. "Dave will be disappointed. If the contessa has her PPL it means she's one up on us." Prestin dangled his belt from one gripping fist—then suddenly laughed. "Still, we'll live to fight another day. You look as though you could do with a drink, Mr. Yancey. And these young ladies—clothes, I suggest, would be in order. And as for your barbaric friend—"

"Treat Olan gently," snapped Yancey. "We've got to explain all this to him. Where are we, anyway?"

"Querquetian. A rather large inland lake, one or two friendly fishlike people, and a whole lot of most unfriendly unfishlike monsters."

"Well, Olan doesn't know about the Dimensions."

"But you do, eh, Mr. Yancey?"

"You can say that again."

"We'll explain. Then we'll see about getting you all home."

"Ettore," said Zelda.

"Civastry," said Jorine.

"And Olan?" asked Sarah, smiling, her left hand and arm entwined with Fezius's arm, her head a bare inch below his. Yancey remembered he'd forgotten about his own missing quarter-inch. It was unimportant, now. . . .

Olan shook his head, wiping water from his beard. "I care not. So long as I fight alongside Cy, here, and have the use of this weapon of the son of Thomas."

Fezius and Offa frowned a little, and Offa fingered his ax and Fezius slapped Peaceful in its scabbard at his side. Olan saw and understood. He, too, slapped his sword. "I have witnessed the meeting of two cultures, as Cy said,

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there on my home of Jundagai. I believe I know which to choose."

As they went below to drinks and a change of clothing, amid laughter and growing friendship, Prestin said to Yancey, "One day, Cy, when the contessa—when this is all over—we'll all have to go on safari with the Hunters of Jundagai."

Yancey paused. He thought. Then, carefully, but with no regret, he said, "You go hunting all you like, Bob. But, for me—my hunting days are over."

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