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THE KEY TO VENUDINE



by KENNETH BULMER

On his Earth, knighthood was still
in flower—but with a difference!

Rodro's men were pushing past, were blundering with reeking weapons into the room to kill and take the princess away.

Lai half stretched up from the princess's restraining arms. The room was empty of other life apart from Sir Fezius and the two knights now lifting their swords, ready to cut down Lai.

A popping noise sounded like a drum bursting.

A man appeared in the middle of the room.

One moment he was not there; the next he stood there, holding a bulky stick in his arm, peering about with a white face. He said something that sounded like "Skeet."

The next instant the room resounded with an avalanche roar and a hellfire blast of scorching flame.

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THE KEY TO **VENUDINE**

by KENNETH BULMER

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I

NATURALLY, GRIFF TOWER WAS HAUNTED.

Of course it would attract weird legends of apparitions around its ancient bulk from the very nature of its appearance and its isolated situation.

To Fezius, rustling through the evening air on his griff, Honorable Lord Sunrise, the darkly shining sweep of the river below formed a bow for the upthrust shaft of the ancient tower. He had not intended to fly this close but the tower lay athwart their course to Parnasson, where they would fight in the tournaments to mark the marriage of Red Rodro the Bold.

"If the wild griffs down there get a scent of us," Offa yelled across the wind-rushing gap between their griffs, "you'll be sorry you didn't wait until morning."

"We'll be all right if you close your big mouth, Offa, you great buffoon!" roared back Fezius joyously. "All your hot air will blow the tower into the river!"

"And you're so tricky you'd sail it like a boat!"

Fezius and Offa—Fezius, once of Fezanois, the short-legged ex-armoror joustabout, descended of noble blood but

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disinherited by trickery and murder; and Oag Offa, the giant, mighty-thewed man of battle, Offa of the Ax—Fezius and Offa, comrades who earned a living battling in festive tournaments and turned their backs on no man.

Now the marriage tourney of the notorious Palans Rodro of Parnasson lay ahead. During the week of jollity they would need to fight well to earn their share of gold, for, as Fezius was uncomfortably aware, apart from the pinch-penny attractions of the Three Free Cities of Tarantane, the year stretched fixtureless toward winter.

The wind whispered past them as their griffs' wings beat with such apparent leisure, up and down, up and down. The moon rose in a rotundity of orange light, a burnished copper pan against the night. Night sounds reached them faintly from the sleeping earth.

Men whispered that there was witchery in the marriage of Red Rodro. Up and down the great river they were saying that no great king from the Far East with a thousand thousand vancas beating the endless grasslands to dust would marry his daughter to a mere Palans with one castle and a dubious hold on fifty miles of the river. Whatever the truth of it, Fezius who disliked the nobility and the knighthood with the joyful passion of a bloody past, could still earn his crust from the trappings of ceremony.

For sorcery in general he had the genial contempt of the fighting man. Metal and leather, a sword and an ax, a griff or vanca to bestride—these things a man could grapple with and master. But rumors of the Princess Nofret's sister fumed from a world he could never enter; let the fool Rodro marry into a witch family as he would.

Fezius had heard of the Princess Nofret's sister in her apple-green gown and her cut-glass voice, and he was conscious of feeling the lure of the utterly exotic. But he knew that a plain armorer, a down-to-earth fighting man, could scarcely be farther from a glamorous witch-princess.

His ugly face broke into that cynical smile that turned his features suddenly into the semblance of a devil's countenance.

He was a noble; at least, he had been nobly born, and

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on the death of his father he would have automatically assumed the ranks and titles of that great and distant personage if the occasion had not been one of war, pillage, destruction and death. Now, instead of being Sir Fezius, Gavilan of Fezanois, Palans of the Inner and Outer Isles and of Vectis, Lord Protector of the Guild of Fletchers, Favored of Amra and the Great Spirits, he was merely a barrel-bodied, short-legged, wandering ex-armoror and tournament competitor—for a time, at least.

Anyway, he would never have to cut the fine figure a Gavilan must always cut. They stood next to the Princes of the Blood, next to the King himself and in comparison a Palans was small beer.

Offa bawled into the rushing night wind.

"There's someone moving down there."

Fezius followed the direction of the giant's pointing arm.

At first in the orange-drenched ruddy light he could make out nothing in the shadows, then a glint of steel reflected a spark and he glimpsed the shadowy mass of horses and riders clumped on the trail by the river bank.

"Just late travelers, like ourselves," he shouted back at Offa.

Whoever they were, they would have seen and heard the two griffs long before the griff-riders had spotted their horses. For a moment more Fezius watched them, wondering idly why they chose to follow that trail to the Griff Tower so late. He leaned forward along Sunrise's feathered neck to pat him gently, and to whisper gentle endearments into the feather-buried ear.

A blue brilliance broke sparkling into light that pulsed into his eyes. He gave a short cry and sat back, half-blinded.

When he could make out vague forms again he saw Offa's griff, Honorable Prince Spearpoint, spiraling down toward the ground. His wings extended stiffly, rigidly, and the glide angle steepened every foot he dropped lower.

All around Offa and his griff the bright blue sparkles glowed and crackled like a dancing skin of fire.

Fezius nudged Sunrise and the griff nosed down.

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A welter of impossible impressions and ideas showered on Fezius. All the old stories of the Griff Tower crowded back. What eerie force was this that could encircle a man and his griff in blue sparkles and drag him out of the sky?

The ground rushed up, a dark marshy mass, with a few sparse bushes, long ranks of sedges and rushes bending in the night wind. Offa's griff seemed paralyzed. His wings extended as though splinted.

"Offal" called Fezius. The fear and panic in him began to get out of hand. Offa could crash full-tilt into the ground, like an armored knight jousting at full gallop against another, although this time the unyielding ground would prove uncontestably the victor. "Offal" he screamed again. "Pull up!"

But Offa sat silent and still, a massive hump of flesh and bone and muscle, motionless on the back of his griff.

"Pull up, man! You great buffoon, Offa! *Pull up!*"

But the giant man and giant griff slanted down toward the ground with the blue sparkles of fire breaking out around them like a garment of violet madness.

Fezius dug his knees into the feathered sides of Sunrise and drove down—and a tongue of blue fire slashed from the darkness below and whickered past his wingtips like a scintillating sword of destruction.

He ducked instinctively. Sunrise's wings ceased their steady beat, the rhythm grew ragged, the big prock dipped to one side, and Fezius sagged against his harness straps. Desperately he wrenched at the leathers, in uncharacteristic force pulling savagely at the griff's fangs, hauling up the long-toothed head.

Honorable Lord Sunrise continued to spiral down, one wing rigid, the other beating ever more slowly as the sense of balance in the griff's brain adjusted to the impossibility that had occurred. Fezius clung on and swore.

He saw Offa and Spearpoint hit the ground in a smother of wings and talons and metal. The blue sparkles vanished in the moment before impact and as he himself sank below the level of a clump of bushes growing raggedly between

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the tower and the river the blue sparkles vanished from Sunrise's wing.

Then he had struck the ground, been flung over sideways, and was sitting up with his mouth full of mud and slosh.

Offa cuttingly said, "What in the name of Amra happened? How the hell did we get down here?"

Fezius spit.

"Witches and warlocks!" Offa said, again trying to shift his prock. The big male griff lay half across his legs. Probably no female griff—a marun—existed that would comfortably carry Big Oag Offa. Fezius went across and helped the giant extricate himself.

"No witches," Fezius said savagely. "You had a touch of the blue sparkles. I don't know what it's all about, but those horsemen did it." He looked angrily down the trail, black and orange in the moonlight.

"We were flying along, minding our own business, and they brought us down here!" Offa's chest bulged beneath the leather. Like Fezius he wore leather harness, his plate armor lashed in oiled wrappings beneath his griff. "I'd like to ding their heads together!"

Some imp of cupidity, of devilry, of that native long-headed caution so often in despite, seized Fezius then. He shook his barrel-body back into good humor. "We'll wait for them at the Griff Tower," he said. "I want to know what this is all about." He nodded genially to giant Oag Offa, whose white teeth gleamed in the moonlight. "Bring your ax, Offa. Nobody shoots me down off my griff and goes without paying."

Their two procks were quickly made comfortable in a bed of reeds by the riverbank. "Don't chain their wings down," Fezius told Offa. The gilded wing-chains remained braided up as they patted their mounts into a semblance of docility. "So near the Griff Tower it wouldn't be fair—or wise. And we might need them in a hurry."

"Too true," grunted Offa, unpacking his ax and ignoring his shield.

"Did you bring your shield for baggage, Offa?"

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"I know, I know," grumbled Oag Offa.

It was an old argument between them, the swordsmen and the axman, the value of a shield in combat.

A screech owl shrieked, a long shuddering scream scything from the darkness.

"Go on, Offa!"

"Did you hear that?"

"You're not frightened of a screech owl, are you?"

"That was no—"

"All right, so it was a wild griff. Now get on."

"A wild griff . . ." Offa hefted his ax, his whole posture eloquent of his thoughts.

In that wild light compounded of darkness riddled by streamers of orange moonlight the two men carried their shields on their left arms, Fezius with his sword bared and Offa with his ax poised, moving cautiously down the soggy trail between massy clumps of bulrushes toward the tower. Their feet made small sly sucking noises. Every pool of water seemed to be colored orange from the moon's glow.

The rushing sound of griff wings filled the air above them and both men half-ducked and twisted to stare upward as a skein of wild griff slanted down toward the tower. Kings of the surrounding countryside, they had finished their forays for the day. One after another, like beads tumbling from a string, the griffs left their formation and vanished into the darkness of the hides at the tower top.

"If those griffs spot us—" Offa said softly, uneasily.

"They won't if you shut your great mouth, you atrocious buffoon!" Offa took pride in Fezius' calumnies of him; he savored them as a child savors a pickled onion.

A wild griff could degut, debrain and tear a man asunder so fast he'd be across the Silver Mountains before he woke up.

The clink of metal on metal jangled the first warning.

A moment later the sound of horses' hooves sucking over the mud told of their riders' forethought: for horses, unlike vancas, ignored griffs as objects impossible in nature and had no fear of them. The long-necked and six-padded vancas, on

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the other hand, barely tolerated griffs. Horses always seemed out of place in Venudine, like those odd shiny artifacts caravans occasionally brought in from the rim of the world or ships carried across the unknown sea.

The low rumble of men's voices followed hard on the sounds of horses and harness.

Fezius put a hand on Offa's arm and in the orange-tinted darkness both men shrank back. Behind them lay the placid water of the river, moon-glowing, rippled faintly now and then by some nocturnal life, unhurrying.

The horses came on. The men's voices grew louder. Whoever they were, they felt confident in their own strength. From aloft a shrill griff whistling caterwauded down. A hard-edged, diamond-bright voice said, "Enough noise. We don't want the wild griffs to warn them."

Offa shook himself and Fezius gripped his arm.

"I know, I know," he whispered softly. "That's Palans Rodro—I'd know Red Rodro's voice anywhere."

Offa bent down so that his giant head came on a level with Fezius'. "What's he want here?"

"Go out and ask him if you're consumed by curiosity."

"Funny."

From the shadows they watched the small cavalcade approach. Fezius had no feelings of incongruity in regarding as a potential enemy the Palans to whose marriage celebrations he had come in the course of his profession. The fact merely confirmed his jovial hatred of the nobility. He would act for himself and for Offa in this, for no one else—or so he believed.

Also, he wished to know what that devilish blue fire that had sparkled over them could be.

A darker shadow passed over the river and Fezius looked carefully, his eyes straining to pick out the wisp of harder darkness glimpsed in the shrouding orange reflections over the river. Offa, beside him, sensed his comrade's tensing, and looked also.

At that moment, silently, like some phantom barge from

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olden myth, a long low boat glided across the moon's orange pathway over the water.

Black-etched and fretted, silhouetted as though punched from cold iron against the furnace glow of the water, the boat glided on.

"It's making for the tower," breathed Fezius.

"And Red Rodro's waiting for it!

"The pattern begins to emerge," said Fezius with satisfaction. "Ghosts and ghoulies and objects that go plomp in the night! Rubbish! *We're on to something!*"

II

OCHER and reddish brown streaks of cloud began to grope over the surface of the moon. Soon the satellite would lift in the sky and shed that smoky orange glow as a dancer of Siflis sheds her veils until the whole round milky whiteness of her becomes visible.

Dividing his attention between the slowly approaching barge and the knot of armed men, Fezius felt very conscious of the thick and eventful past that must have acted out many a tragedy at this spot. The tower itself must once have guarded a river crossing, probably a ford that the river's winding had destroyed, possibly a bridge long since fallen and forgotten. The stones of the lower courses, although much overgrown with algae and green-growing plants, still retained here and there a hint of their natural glowing rose-pink hue. Fezius knew without feeling much awe at the thought that those stones must have been laid three thousand years ago, when the rosebowl quarries still yielded their stones of wondrous color and hardness. Now the rosebowl quarries were dead.

The upper stories of the tower must have been built and destroyed and built again on the same unchanging founda-

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tions rooted deeply in the marsh. Gray stone of portballin indicated that the last rebuilding had taken place something like seven hundred years ago.

Standing in squelching mud and water, fearful lest he make too much noise and so attract Red Rodro and his knights, Fezius stared up at the crumbling pile without the slightest interest in its structure but with a fresh and lively anticipation of the reaction of the denizens aloft.

"Why don't they get a move on?" Offa grumbled, chafing.

"The griffs are uneasy," fretted Fezius.

Up there the wild griffs had made their hides in the fractured stones of the parapet and upper towers and like bulging sacks draping down on all sides the hides supported a whistling, sniffing, snorting gaping crew of griffs and their young. Long-toothed beaks, gaping feathered membranous wings forever rustling as they sought more comfortable perches, spatulate tails flicking, talons clawing and ripping the hides' straw and bracken coverings, the great beasts slowly settled down. Not even a full-grown kragor would lightly attack a prock.

"How'd you like to fly one of those?" whispered Fezius.

Offa shook his shoulders. "How they were first tamed and broken to riding mounts always amazes me. By stanslaughter! The man who broke the first was a man!"

The barge grounded, its muffled oars plashing softly, its mahogany hull grating against a sagging stone jetty, onto which vaulted a youngster. Clad from head to foot in deep blue, his sword swinging from a baldric, the man appeared to be an athletic twenty year old. Following him came the cloaked figures of two women and then, lastly, casting off the barge and pushing it free into the water, came a bulky man in long cloak and helmet. The halberd he used to push off the barge was no ornamental badge of office but a keen-edged fighting weapon.

They made a strange company. Clustering together for mutual support and protection, they hurried, enveloped in their cloaks, toward the tower.

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The silence of Red Rodro's men was more chillingly ominous than their low rumble of voices had been.

The group of newcomers from the barge made straight for the tower and would thus pass directly by Fezius and Offa. The two comrades had Palans Rodro on one side and the unknown quantity of the newcomers on the other. The orange glow perceptibly faded from the sky and the myriads of tiny pool-mirrors in the marsh. Offa moved his shield on the point of his shoulder and swung his ax loosely, a stark shape of absolute menace.

"Don't start, Offa, unless there's nothing else to do," warned Fezius on a breath.

"There will be."

"We know nothing yet. We must wait and watch."

"You said something was in the wind. I want to know why I was dragged out of the sky to this hell-hole."

"You know Red Rodro's reputation. The man's evil. If we jump wrong we could end up with our heads on pikes over his gateway."

"By Mac the Black! I know what stories they tell of Red Rodro the Bold."

The two comrades quietened and shrank back into the shadows of the bushes as the group passed them. Offa's foot squelched muddy water.

"What was that, Haro?" The taller of the two women spoke in a noble's voice.

The thick-bodied man with the halberd rumbled a reply: "I heard naught, my lady."

"Lead on then, Jeremy."

The blue-clad youth with his fragile sword pressed on.

"We must not fail now." For all her nobility of speech, the woman addressed as "my lady" sounded distraught, desperate, driven.

At once the other, slighter, woman took her arm.

"Once we are inside the tower I shall find it—for I am assured it exists there. Bear up, my sister, and be brave." Her voice held a thrilling intensity of purpose clear and hard, chiming like cut-glass. "*We will succeed!*"

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The clashing politeness of peoples' desires had always appeared to Fezius as petty precisely because his own in-driven desire since the day his parents had been murdered had been merely to survive. Any ambition beyond that smacked of aggrandizement and paranoia suitable to a mad tragic king.

The reality of the moment finally proved itself beyond all doubt as in a great clattering of hooves and rattling of equipment Palans Rodro's men swirled down the trail. Frightened screams broke from the women. Young Jeremy swore lustily and threw up his sword. Haro's halberd point droppped and, quick as dwinkling a shellfish, speared the leading knight from his seat.

In the weird mixture of orange and silver light Fezius clearly saw Rodro lagging in the rear and urging on his men with drawn sword. His armor declaimed who he was even though the raised visor obscured his pig-like face.

"Take the princess alive!" he shouted. "Princess Nofret is mine! As for the others—they are sport for your blades."

Already Jeremy was down, scrabbling on hands and knees for the sword struck from his grasp by one contemptuous blow. He rolled, avoiding a second slash, found his blade, whipped up with it sliding beneath the half-armor his opponent wore. The knight screamed.

"By Mac the Black!" Offa shoved up against Fezius. "They're putting up a brave fight, the old man and the boy! Let's—"

"Kerrumpitty, man!" Fezius wanted to charge out, but caution, a lifetime's habits, held him. "That's Palans Rodro—Red Rodro the Bold!"

"So?"

"So the old man and the boy will lose and so will we and then where will be our future? You know what Red Rodro does to prisoners."

"It'll happen to him one day."

"But not necessarily today. I didn't anticipate this when we started—"

"My ax is thirsty!"

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Fezius had no fear that Offa would go berserk and rush crazily into the fight; as professionals they did not work that way. But no one could deny Offa's feelings. And, Fezius had to admit with an angry self-contempt for his own shortcomings, the big man had a case.

The girl who had been identified by Rodro as Princess Nofret ran toward the tower. Her arms held before her in the moon-haunted illumination, she let fall her cloak, so that her body showed tall and proud and curved in the full quick movements of her running.

"Grab her, you dolts!" roared Red Rodro.

"Betrayed!" called the princess, as though to some spirit of the tower. "We have been betrayed. Oh, Amra help us now!"

Her sister, the girl who could only be the legendary witch-woman, stood where she had stood the moment Rodro's men charged. Her dark cloak dropped to reveal her apple-green gown, a weird, wild color in that eerie illumination. A knight, his lance in its bucket and becketed to his elbow, his visor up, his body half-bent ready to scoop her up, galloped toward her. She stood still, save that her hand lifted and pointed at the charging horseman. Then, with a smooth skip of her green gown beneath the cloak, she stepped to the side to allow the obviously dead knight to fall clumsily from his horse as the animal charged blindly on.

Offa gulped.

Fezius said, "What the—?"

"She's the witch-woman all right!"

"I saw no blue sparkles, but that knight's carrion meat."

The princess had almost reached the tower. She cast a glance over her shoulder and Fezius could plainly see her face, the eyes enormous, the mouth open and gasping; he could hear her distressful breathing, each breath a dragging triumph of will over body.

Two knights pursued her, avoiding the witch, swinging down from their mounts as they came up with her.

Fezius had already made his decision: as a professional he hated this, but as a man he could do nothing else.

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Jeremy was down and was not moving. Haro ran full-tilt at one of the knights about to seize the princess. The other swung his shield up, blocking the halberd. Slowly, Haro tried to reverse his direction, but the knight's sword bit into his side. Haro gasped, but did not fall. The sword lifted again.

Fezius said, "All right, Offa. I can't stand any more. Let's go!"

"We've already delayed overlong!" And Offa, with only the sound of his feet squishing in the mud pools, hurled himself into the fray.

The sound of screaming women, a retching man choking out his life blood, the clang of weapons, the harsh angry roars of Red Rodro, all formed a cacaphony against which Fezius sprang out from the tower. He slid his point into the knight grasping the princess.

The man looked sideways, saw Fezius, saw the sword in his side, said, "Oh," in quite a gentle voice, and died as Fezius withdrew.

"Into the tower, princess—and keep as quiet as a mousel" Fezius pushed her shoulder and, after one imperious look at him, the Princess Nofret obeyed.

"Now," said Fezius to Offa, who had disposed of the other knights as though they had been made from butter, "let Rodro and the rest of his men fight their way past us to get at the girl."

Jeremy lay where he had fallen. Haro swayed like a pine before the gale. Then, like a man drunk on new wine, he staggered toward the tower. Offa caught him, lowered him down. He still held his halberd.

"What about her?"

Fezius followed Offa's gaze. He hadn't really wanted to think about the girl in the apple-green gown, half-hidden now beneath her dark cloak.

"I think," he said carefully, "she can take care of herself." He hesitated, then added, "But we'd better call her in here. Rodro can't be far."

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For the sound of the Palans' voice roaring and cursing reached them clearly from the night.

Like a wraith the princess stood at Fezius' side.

"Lai!" she called. "Quick, my sister, in here with us."

As though she walked in sun-filled woodlands amid the joys of birdsong, the witch-girl called Lai sauntered toward them. Fezius felt the dryness of his mouth, the overlarge feel of his tongue. His palms were wet.

"I fear we are doomed," Lai said in her breaking-glass voice, "for I have no charges left."

Fezius didn't understand that part.

"Can you not send me now, Lai? Are the situations too wrong?"

Lai shook her head. Fezius still could not get a full idea of her looks; a dark shadow in the hood of her cloak, she remained an enigma still.

"I do not know the exact spot—and with that bellowing fool Rodro and his men interfering I have no chance to find it." She sounded, despite her crystal-glass voice, very weary.

"Then we are finished, indeed."

Fezius had to admire this princess, this mysterious girl from the Eastern lands of romance: here for some remote purpose of her own, she was set upon by the man she had come to marry, and rescued by other men who must to her have sprung from the ground; yet she continued to plan and think only of her own course of action. It proved her to be a princess, at the least.

And just what was the witch-girl Lai up to?

Fezius felt very wary of her.

For one thing, she was only a single inch taller than he, and that made a girl extra dangerous.

Sounds of horses stamping and the jangle of metal reached them from the deeper darkness beyond the tower. In this tower chamber, crumbling, cobwebbed, dusty with the presence of bats a reminder of those other, far more powerful, flying creatures at the tower top, they crouched and awaited what doom Red Rodro would next fling upon them.

Lai began to move her head gently from side to side.

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Fezius watched her. She reminded him of a dog scenting the air. The hood shadowed her face, and the odd, unsettling thought came to Fezius that the draped robe moved like a sacred altarpiece veiled against the profane eyes of unbelievers. Standing, she rotated slowly with her arms extended horizontally.

Fezius believed she had placed herself in a trance.

The hard sound of men-of-war trampled closer. Offa lifted his stained ax. The hard sounds changed occasionally to moister sloshings as the warriors forged through the puddles.

Wondering why he was where he was proved a novel form of thought to Fezius. Once, for a tiny fraction of time, he had been Sir Fezius of Fezanois; now he was merely Sir Fezius Without—but since then he always known why he had chosen to be where he was. Not now.

Haro tried to rise and slumped back with a despairing groan. Fezius listened with all his professional skill working for him.

"More men," he said harshly. "At least six, probably eight."

"I make it eight." Offa nodded. His ax gleamed red-black and silver in the moonlight.

"We are lost, then," whispered the princess. No self-pity sounded in her voice, no weakening of her own strengths. "I am sorry for you, my dear sister."

"I think," said Fezius with great care and delicacy. "I think that Offa and I can dispose of eight opponents. If they are not too clever. If they give us the fragment of a chance. If Amra strengthens our arms."

"Amra will," said the princess, her voice lifting. "He knows what I have suffered, he knows to what indignity I was committed. Lai—"

"Yes, my sister?"

"Lai, have you found it?"

"No." Lai's bright voice sounded an incongruous note there in the darkness and dust of a funkhole in a crumbling tower. "But it is near—so near . . . if I had help, I could reach further, sound the fathomless traces more deeply, for the *place* must be near—it must—"

"They come," growled Offa, lifting his ax.

Fezius swung his shield up and forward; being so short gave him tremendous advantages, provided he remembered always to keep his shield well up. His sword felt good in his hand. He had not often thought of the blade in the recent past, doing most of his fighting with one of the specialized weapons of the tourney; but now he gave thanks to Master Armorer Gyron's forethought in providing him with a blade forged by the near-legendary Master Smith Edwin, the true blade Peaceful.

The soft moist trampling sounds of men came nearer.

All his instincts told Fezius that Palans Rodro meant business this time; this time he would finish them off and take the princess.

He became obtrusively aware of the gasping breathing of Lai; the girl, whose face he had still not fully seen, breathed as though in labor and the Princess Nofret cradled her, trying to ease her hoarse gulping for breath. They moved together to sink down in a heap by the farthest angle of the chamber. Lai's head rested on her sister's breast.

"Come, Fezius," said Offa gratingly. "Let us form our pyramid."

Without a word Fezius swung forward to stand erect beside Offa, his shield up, his sword slanted forward, all protected by the larger shield of Offa, by the swing of the giant's ax. No one would slide beneath Offa's guard while Fezius stood there, and no one would cut down Fezius from above while Offa covered.

A torch flared from the darkness. Its white oval of light splashed down gray lichened walls, across ink-black pools, canceling out that dying orange and growing silver light of the moon, brutally slashing whiter than whiteness into the night.

A voice: "There they are!"

Another voice, diamond-bright: "Kill them and take the princess!"

A mass of bodies, shield-covered and armor-protected, moved forward purposefully, in spear-bristling phalanx; the

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might of Rodro's men swung against Fezius and Offa there in the tower doorway.

In the instant of time before weapon clashed against weapon Fezius heard Lai's thin scream, climbing up the scale into inaudibility; heard the Princess Nofret cry out in reciprocal alarmed pain and fear. Lai screamed, "I need help! Help! And help is near—so near—strange unearthly help. . . . *Give me the strength!*"

Then Offa's ax split the leading shield and biting on sank deeply into a shoulder, scattering shattered pauldron parts. Fezius thrust upward, seeking for the lightly mailed groin of his opponent. He felt a blow on his shield and thrust back. His sword slithered and gripped and he thrust savagely, feeling the point nudging mail out of the way, feeling the sword go in.

Offa's ax thunked twice and an arm holding a mace fell to the ground, a helm crushed inward like an overripe orange. The armor to which his ax was opposed could not withstand the gigantic effect of his blows. And how Offa fought! Not as he fought in the lists with cool professional disdain; but rather with some of the wild dark fear-someness and courage of his barbaric ancestors: his face inflamed, his mind supple and quick and every reflex a thrumming song of power and control, Offa fought. *Offa fought!*

A bright blue fire broke out all over his leather jerkin. Blue sparkles radiated from him.

Fezius, bundled back by a falling body into whose visored eyepiece his sword tip had just penetrated, fell back, twisted awkwardly under his shield.

He could hear the witch-girl Lai screaming.

Offa stood, a statue around whose giant limbs blue fire twined, like vine leaves aflame.

The fall twisted Fezius around; as Lai screamed once more he looked back into the room. He knew Rodro's men were pushing past Offa, were blundering with reeking weapons into the room to kill and finish the task and to take the princess away. A mailed foot trod on him as a knight rushed over his prostrate body.

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Lai half stretched up from the princess's restraining arms. The room was empty of other life apart from Fezius and the two knights now lifting their swords, ready to cut down Lai.

A popping noise sounded like a drum bursting.

A man appeared in the middle of the room.

One moment he was not there; the next he stood there, holding a bulky stick in his arm, peering about with a white face. He said something that sounded like "Skeet."

The next instant the room resounded with an avalanche roar and a hellfire blast of scorching flame.

III

FLAT on his back beneath his shield, Fezius was momentarily blinded by that abrupt and awful gushing flame; when next he could see, the knight who had stepped on him lay crumpled up and the other knight lay athwart him, like carcases tossed down in the shambles.

Fezius blinked his eyes, which were running with scalding tears. He could still hear his head ringing like a tocsin. He looked at the man who had appeared—*appeared!*—in the room. From whence had he come? From what far hell had he risen, spawned like an evil miasma solidified?

A raucous bull roar at the room's entrance brought Fezius around swiftly, in time to thrust himself up on his short legs and run, shield high, at the two knights pushing past the rigidity of Offa.

Whatever had happened must be left to decipher after Palans Rodro's men had been discomfited. Offa's hopeless immobility meant the end for them all; but Fezius was never one to give up until past all rational hope. His sword rang against the newcomers' shields and their weapons beat against his own protection. Sly in battle and using one of his favorite techniques, he dropped on a knee and was able, swiftly and

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with deadly accuracy, to thrust upward beneath the nearest knight's shield. The man croaked a glottal scream and fell backward.

On his knee with the second knight towering above him with upraised sword ready to slash down, Fezius could only follow through and roll with his shield uppermost.

A giant noise spurted behind him like the bronze doors of a temple closing against invaders. Brilliant ruby-orange fire cascaded across the room, reflecting from the stone walls to blink red against his closed eyelids.

The knight staggered and fell on Fezius, who thrust him off with a shove and, turning, opened his eyes to try to see. The—man?—who had appeared held his thick stick pointed. Lai screamed something and the man relaxed.

Fezius could not understand what the witch-girl said until she switched to the speech of Venudine, to say, "This man is our friend, also, like yourselves. He has a weapon to defeat the beasts outside."

"All right." Fezius panted. "Let him step forward."

Lai spoke and the man shook his head. Fezius, clearly, could see the fear on his face.

Then, with a single gesture, the man broke the thick stick in half.

"So that's your answer!" shouted Fezius, enraged. He could hear the next knights raging at the door; he knew Offa could do nothing. And yet this miserable weakling with a weapon of fire and thunder broke the thing in two!

The stranger took a bright red cylinder from his pocket and held it to the break in the stick; the cylinder vanished. Then, with a jerk which involved a rictus of his shoulder, the man made the stick into one again. He pointed it at the door and Fezius could see that it was composed of two long metal tubes with a curved wooden handle at the end. The man thrust it into his shoulder.

"Offa!" shouted Fezius, lunging.

He tried to thrust the bulk of Offa aside; but the giant was not to be moved by a man with even the strength Fezius possessed in his barrel body. Lai screamed something in the

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outlandish tongue and the man, reluctantly, advanced to stand by Fezius in the door's mouth.

Thinking he had come to help pull Offa in, Fezius laid on again; but the man lifted his weapon-stick and pointing it outside into the darkness suddenly moved his finger.

This near, the noise shocked Fezius; but behind the blast the fire did not disconcert him so much. The blue sparkles vanished from Offa's leather clothes and, as though he had not stood idly for moments on end, he went on with his ax stroke, the bright blade whistling through empty air.

"By Mac the Black!" Offa gaped. "Where did he go?"

Once more the roaring blast and the lick of flame crashed out and this time Fezius observed the flame to spout from one end of the metal tube. Distinctly, he heard a knight fall, screaming.

"Get on with it, poltroons!"

"That's Rodro," Fezius said. With abrupt certainty he suddenly felt good, happy, confident.

He smiled brightly at the young man who had appeared from—well, Fezius would deal with that later. He'd find the trapdoor in the room, he'd find it if he had to look all night. People just didn't appear from *nowhere*.

"What the infernal mischief is going on?" yelled Offa.

The young man could find no smile, it was evident, in return. Nervously, he once more broke his stick in two and pulled out the red cylinders, to replace them with two more from his pockets. Fezius observed the man's dress. It struck him as curious and impractical. He wore a coat, with a collar and sleeves, but it terminated almost at his sides; certainly it came around his abdomen not much more than three-quarters, exposing a woollen garment with a V neck which, in its turn, revealed the white collar of a shirt. He wore sloppy-looking gray trousers of a felt-like material, and on his feet brown, heavy-looking shoes with soles a full half inch thick. He snapped the stick together again. His face appeared quite unremarkable to Fezius, accustomed to rough, tough faces, the visages of men who had been knocked about in life and who in their turn had done brutal things. This young

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man's face showed an open page ready for the hand of experience to write.

"He's learning something now," Fezius said, and then, to Offa, "Don't ask me what it's all about! But we've got help—and with a weapon of power. And you, you great buffoon, you've had another attack of the blue sparkles!"

"I know nothing of that," snapped Offa, visibly shaken.

A rustle behind him made Fezius swing about, his sword point ready.

Lai said, "It is only me. You are Fezius, yes? And you are Offa? Thus you call each other. I am Lai—"

"I heard, too," said Fezius.

"The witch-woman!" said Offa, but he did not sound afraid.

"Something vitally important is going on," Lai continued. "Palans Rodro the Evil must not take my sister the Princess Nofret to wife—"

"As to that," Fezius interrupted, "I share your opinion."

Lai smiled, and now he saw her face and now he knew, cursing and hating himself, that he, Sir Fezius of Fezanois, ex-armoror, tournament joustabout, was hooked, scuppered, landed, sunk—done for.

Her face, wary in the erratic light, smiled with a sudden soft tremulous uncertainty. She drew back. His face must have revealed more of his thoughts than he had realized. He forced a smile, a painted abortion of a parody of a smile and said, "The most important thing at the moment is get us out of here, alive."

Fezius had been having ideas on that. He peered cautiously out of the door opening; in the moon-drenched darkness, he could dimly make out the grouping of silver moon reflections that told him armored men waited.

"If Haro hadn't pushed the boat out—"

Offa said, "He pushed it against the stream—not that there is much current on this reach of the Black River. I think the barge is within swimming distance."

"I'll go." Fezius took command without thinking about it. "Lai, this man whose tongue you speak must shield you and

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the princess with his strange weapon. Haro and Jeremy are done for, I'm afraid. You can rely on Offa—if he doesn't have another touch of the blue sparkles."

"Watch your tongue!" growled Offa, offended.

"I'll swim for the barge. When I'm almost at the jetty you must all run for it—run for your lives! Offa . . ."

"I," said Offa with his immense dignity, "will bring up the rear."

"So be it," said Lai, with a searching look at Fezius.

They could hear the knights talking among themselves and the angry hysterical voice of Rodro riding over them, begging, cajoling, threatening. No wonder the knights were reluctant to attack: they had lost ten or more men with nothing to show for it. They faced the witch-woman and her pointing stick that killed, and now they faced another stranger with an even bigger stick that blew a knight's breastplate through his backbone. Life, for them, had become very complicated. Fezius chuckled. "Amra rot them!" he said—and ran.

His shield high on the point of his shoulder, his sword in his scabbard, his short legs pumping up and down like a drunken beetle's, Fezius fled down the moon-sodden path to the river.

The knights saw him. They gave tongue and chase. Their heavy mailed feet trampled down after him. The sharp, slightly more distant cracking noise behind him, the screams that followed, told Fezius that the stranger had taken some of the opposition off his back. Lai had said something about no more charges when her stick no longer worked; Fezius wondered with the cynical knowledge of a professional how long the stranger's stick would work.

His legs sloshed through puddles, skidded on mud, threatened to turn any minute on diabolically treacherous stones.

Long before he reached the river he was panting and gasping, not so much from the effort of running as the convulsive humping movements he made, expecting any moment to feel the point of an arrow embed itself in him. On the brink he cast away his shield and without stopping dived

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headlong into the water. It struck cold at him so that as his head broke the surface he gasped and at once began beating with his arms and hands, swimming clumsily but strongly for the barge.

The boat had been pushed back by the current past the jetty and had half lodged in rushes fifty yards downstream. He had at once discarded any idea of running directly to it, for the ground there was more liquid than solid, a swampy, spongy mass jutting into the river, smothered in rushes and rank sedges and fungoid growths.

The river helped him as he plunged on.

A last few strokes brought him up to the barge and with a convulsive heave of his arms he scrambled aboard, the water dripping from him, his devil's face alive with the vibrancy of the moment. He grabbed the punt pole from its becket along the gunwale and began to thrust the barge back upstream with leaping heavings of his whole body. Slowly, waveringly, the barge punted upstream.

If the fugitives didn't start running at the right moment they could be cut off by the knights before he could get them aboard. He leaped and swayed on the punt pole like a dangling marionette, but the barge surged through the dark water.

Lai organized the retreat. The group, with the stranger and his weapon that bellowed and dealt death at a distance following, reached the jetty as Fezius, with a last long thrust, sent the barge nuzzling the stones. The boat swayed and lurched as the people jumped aboard. With the whole operation over in a matter of seconds, Fezius sent the barge surging out into midstream.

The knights with Red Rodro with them—although not in the van—reached the jetty as the barge cleared water.

The stranger lifted his stick, but the Princess Nofret touched him on the shoulder, smiling into his face, saying, "No!"

Lai spoke quickly in the incomprehensible language. The stranger lowered his weapon. He put a hand into his pocket

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and said something to Lai, who nodded thoughtfully, her fine large eyes shadowed.

Ignoring the byplay, Fezius threw down the punt pole and sitting down with Offa began to ply the oars. The barge was a long, shell-shaped craft with a raised and canopied poop, much gilded and carved, a luxury boat for sailing tranquil waters on afternoons of golden summer. Offa and Fezius pulled lustily.

"They'll gallop . . . down the bank. . . ." Fezius grunted in time to his strokes. The water tinkled in greenish eddies around the oar blade.

"The marsh will halt them once we have cleared Mugu Point." Lai, as always, sounded absolutely confident—and then Fezius remembered her agonized pleadings for help in the tower room. Whatever help she had implored, that help had come. The stranger with his firestick sat as living proof of that.

Princess Nofret seemed to have shrunk up within herself since the arrival of the stranger. Her face had shown stark disbelief, and then acceptance—bitter acceptance. Fezius, pulling his oar, wondered.

Lai told them the stranger was named Shim. "He is Shim Gahnett."

"What kind of name . . . is that . . ." puffed Fezius.

"I will explain what I can to you, Fezius, when I can, later." Lai sounded hesitant, surprising Fezius. "But now—now we must escape those horrible men."

"The marsh will stop them for sure. By the time they round it—if they bother to do that; it's a tough marshy ride—we'll be well away downstream. They could cut across the open and try to catch us on the next bend—I'm hazy as to the exact distances. Or they could launch a boat and pursue us. But we will have a fair lead and could probably hole up in the bank. So . . ." Fezius paused and, with a nod to Offa, stopped rowing, letting his oar slant up into the air, a shining blade of silver in the moonlight, shedding liquid silver drops. "So," he said, putting it to them, "we escape. But

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where to? What do we do from now on? What are we about?"

The Princess Nofret took over.

"I shall never marry that—that thing called Palans Rodro of Parnasson! Never!"

"So that means we don't go back," rumbled Offa.

Lai said, "We can go on. Where the river empties into the unknown sea I have friends—I think—I am not altogether sure. But we must forget Parnasson. We must go on to the coast and the delta—"

The agreement to do that sounded a fine free thing until Fezius, dryly, said: "And what of Offa and myself?"

"You will come with us, naturally," said the princess with her regal charm.

Lai, who sometimes produced an invincible charm, looked up and said, "My sister means, Sir Fezius, that you will be very welcome to join us and offer us your protection if so be Amra's will."

Offa, before Fezius could speak, said, "That's putting it fairly."

Fezius cut him off. "But we have a living to earn—the tournament for your sister's marriage to Red Rodro may still be held. I know the ways of these things. We—"

"I—I do not know—" began the princess.

Lai said with a flash of her broken-glass voice, "If you value that above our lives, then go back! I need to go but for a different reason; my charges are all gone. But if you leave us now we will never see you again!"

Fezius, for one, didn't want never to see Lai again.

"We'll try to get you through to the coast," he said at last, rubbing his chin, feeling the bristles. "After that, I don't know."

"That will be sufficient," Lai said, and then added for her sister's benefit, "There is another place I have heard of—the Theater of Varahatara."

The Princess Nofret nodded in understanding.

Fezius thought his own thoughts about that. He went to the rail and whistled the high, penetrating whistle that would

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bring Honorable Lord Sunrise flapping across the water to him. Offa whistled for Honorable Prince Spearpoint. No warrior liked to be parted from his mount for too long, even if he bestrode only a six-padded vanca with tiny head and clumsy body.

Fezius glanced at Lai. He remembered her screaming about the place not being near enough, about needing help, about *unearthly* help. He and Offa could risk their lives getting these people through to the coast and then they could be ditched, thrown away, scrapped, forgotten. She looked sweet and demure in the streaming moonlight; he could see her pale gown in that light, her face that had ravished him at a glance—he looked and he for one, made up his mind he would not be abandoned.

From the high-raised poop Offa's sudden voice boomed with the force of doom.

"They come! They come!"

Fezius rushed aft. He scrambled along the narrow scrap of deck flanking the poop house and, holding onto the scrollwork, peered aft over the stern. High up the river behind them a light twinkled. Beneath the light the shape of a boat, long and sleek, came into focus like a deadly splinter that would thrust itself beneath his flesh and destroy him.

IV

THE ANSWERS to many questions were urgently demanded by Fezius; at this moment in the rocking boat, however, he knew he must think only of ways to dispose of that skulking threat higher up the river. The following boat creamed down after them, her stem grinning; she had a whole hipjoint in her teeth.

Offa shouted, high, "They'll overtake us easily!"

Lai said vehemently, "They are too soon on our track!"

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There is now no time left to seek shelter on the bank!"

Fezius glanced one more time back at the pursuing shadow, long and low on the river, turning now so that the length foreshortened as the prow turned toward them, showing white water. The single lantern burned over the poop.

The poop of the fugitives' barge had been constructed for the loving dalliance of long summer afternoons, so the wood had been thinned down, forms had been fined, and there was no strength anywhere. Fezius vaulted up onto the coaming and stood, lithely balanced on his short legs, to look forward. The prow of the boat struck the ripples gently. Offa, after a single gesture, had seized his starboard side oar. He stared up at Fezius.

"Ho! Get going, Fezius! We must pull!"

Fezius shook his head. "No use, my gigantic friend. They have a dozen oarsmen, at the least. We must think."

The stranger, Shim Gahnett, said something to Lai, who tossed her evil red hair back—all witch, she—and shouted up to Fezius, "Shim says he'll blow them out of the water if they try to board."

"They'll have archers," Fezius said, shortly.

Lai spoke in a diminuendo to Gahnett. Princess Nofret had sunk down on her pile of silken cushions in the poop house under Fezius's feet.

And still that pursuing shape of menace closed the gap.

Think! Fezius told himself desperately. He felt like a rat in a trap—not an original observation, he knew, but one which more than adequately summed up his position. Swimming to shore would merely invite a blow over the head with an oar. Staying to fight it out would mean enduring the arrow shower, then the hand-to-hand, with Offa and himself against what—ten, twenty?—foemen. Shim Gahnett might make his noise, but an arrow would soon feather itself in his guts.

Parley, then: the only course.

Parley . . . *and treachery!*

Sir Fezius of Fezanoi, disowned Gavilan, had no love

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for the king, or the king's men, or the Palans Rodro of Parnasson, a king's man. Treachery then, it would be. He went down the gilded ladder to the deck between the oar thwarts, to tell Lai what to do.

Before he did that, though, he asked, "Lai, what do you know of the blue fire? The eerie blue sparkles that have twice now covered Offa and turned him into a statue?"

Lai made a moue. "I know—the blue fire is an apt name. It is a Slikitter device—as is my little weapon."

"Slikitter?"

Lai laughed, grimly. "A slang name for an almost unpronounceable real name. Slikitter—a fit word for the slimy devils. The blue fire is a paralysis device—"

"Like the palsy?" Fezius asked.

"Something like that. Science in Venudine is crude and backward. You people live by weapons, swords and armor, griffs and vancas; you know nothing of the wider world and the possibilities of science—"

Fezius knew the word, of course. It meant, among other things, the sums sappers did when they invested a fortress, in laying out their approaches, the saps and parallels, they used science to tell them the correct angles so that the defenders should not shoot down into the trenches behind the fascines. "But science as a discorporate thing, Lai?" Fezius frowned. "I do not understand."

"I will tell you one day"—her violet eyes laid a sweet command upon him—"if we live tonight."

"We'll live." Fezius wanted to know more. "Can the blue scientific fire be used against us from that barge?" Offa drew in his breath sharply.

"If there is a projector—a shooter—aboard, yes."

There on the dark river with the silver footprints of the moon touching each succeeding ripple and with the musky nighttime odors rising, and only the far-off boom of some nocturnal river animal to break the water-chuckling stillness, there Fezius and Lai confronted each other and their futures, and both, so Fezius had the comforting impudence to think, recognized the inevitability of what must follow.

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"If they have a blue fire proj-shooter—then you must tell Shim here to deal with that first." Fezius tore his eyes away from Lai. "I don't want to have to fight again with Offa out of it."

The great ax moved silkily in the moonlight.

When Fezius had finished giving his instructions, Princess Nofret cried out, "But that is treachery!"

"I know." Fezius' grim face bent lower. "I have no honor in dealing with knights and nobles. All my honor ran away down into the sewers with the blood of my mother and father, when the king's nobles murdered them!"

Lai shuddered. Princess Nofret drew back.

"You are"—she spoke huskily—"you are a terrible man!"

Offa boomed his great laugh, and then everyone took up their positions, directed by Fezius with great care.

Now began the waiting.

Lai had said this Shim Gahnett could do it. Oh, certainly, Princess Nofret had stopped him from blowing the knights, including Rodro the Bold, to Amra's dark kingdom, but . . . And it was a big *but*—this time Fezius himself would shout the order. His cynical devil grin crossed his face. He'd seen men do things they'd never dreamed they could under the twin goads of fear and a sudden firm command.

The water tinkled past the hull, gently, the barge drifting with the current. Down the river the pursuing boat glided swiftly on and now everyone could plainly hear the thunking splash of the oars.

Just a single fair chance, that's all they needed. . . .
A voice hailed them.

"Hol! You with the Princess Nofret! Haul up! We are going to board you!"

Now was the moment for part one. Fezius nodded to Lai. She half lifted behind the gunwale.

"The princess welcomes you! Why are you so long in coming? Hurry!"

Fezius chuckled. "That should make them think."

In a moment after that the boats nudged each other, slid, the mahogany screeching wetly, clung.

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Judging his moment to a nicety, Fezius indicated Lai to go on and then lifted his own hand behind Shim Gahnett's back. The stranger crouched behind the gunwale next to him, his face a white knot of misery.

Lai shouted, "What are you waiting for? The princess does not take kindly to shiftless serving men!"

A surly voice answered, "We are here to rescue the princess. What—?"

Fezius gave him no time to finish. He clapped Gahnett on the back in the universal signal for action and the stranger rose, his thick stick pointing, and the crash of fire and thunder that followed smashed across the night like an open hand across a cheek.

The side of the boat caved in; a hole as big as a melon opened and at once filled with white water rushing in.

Offa, with a single fluid motion, rose and pushed with the punt pole, thrusting the two barges apart.

Everyone dropped flat.

The arrows thunked and plinked wickedly about them. One feathered itself into the mahogany at Fezius's ear—and he laughed.

"Too late, you blind credulous fools!" he yelled, beside himself with evil glee.

He risked a darting glimpse and saw the other barge already low in the water. No more arrows whistled. A voice, instead, was heard shouting, "All bail, you nincompoops! Bail!"

Offa and Fezius laughed openly.

The Princess Nofret started to speak from her poop shelter: "The Palans Rodro—"

"He wasn't with them, you can take my oath for that!"

Offa said, "You seem very concerned for Rodro, for one who refuses to marry him." Offa, like Fezius, did not put much store by princesses.

The answer, at least, made them look more closely at the tall, dignified girl called the Princess Nofret.

"I do not wish him to be killed by any other hand."

"Oh," said Fezius. He smiled his sly smile. "I see."

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"Now," said Lai firmly. "We row." She sat down at a bench and picked up the oar from its becket.

From the river upstream came sounds of splashing and of swimming, cursing men.

"You can't row!" exclaimed Fezius, taking the oar.

"Why not? We must reach the delta with all dispatch."

Fezius liked that. "You must be tired and hungry. Rest in the poop house. We'll call you when we need you to row."

Lai did not argue. Her slim figure in the draggled apple-green gown drooped as she turned away. As she went in to join her sister, Fezius heard her say something firm and decisive about the charges she wanted.

Mugu Point had been left far upstream. Now they entered one of the long curving swings of the river that would bring it back from the eastern mountains and the lands of the vancamen right across Venudine and the desert before it meandered back again with many a kink and turning and forgotten ox-bow lake. All the way to the delta and the unknown sea the river wandered back and forth, bearing many names, carrying much swift traffic, washing the granite feet of many proud cities and castles. In the watery maze they should be relatively safe now from griff patrols; the danger would come from vanca or horse cavalry, beating the banks.

Even out of his domain Red Rodro could still operate a swift cavalry force, logistics being taken care of by griff supports, his men prodding and searching for his absconded bride. Fezius and Offa bent to the oars with a weary will, spurred by unpleasant thoughts of Rodro's notorious torture chamber.

Shim Gahnett huddled uselessly. At last Fezius told Offa to rest and pressed Gahnett to the oar. The man rowed as though dazed, awkwardly, but with sufficient force with the help of the river current to speed the barge adequately downstream. After a time Offa rumbled up out of a sleep and told Fezius unpleasantly to go and lie down.

"But—" said Fezius.

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"Rest, little man!" snarled Offa. Fezius recognized comradeship and embarrassment and a solid determination to make him rest; and he complied. Offa was the best comrade any man could possibly have. The feel of a blanket and a cushion under him, the thoughts whirling in his mind, the soft plash of oars . . . He was vaguely aware as his thoughts spiraled to blackness of wondering where the hell the fellow Gahnett came from, what were the Slikitters Lai talked about, what was the blue fire. . . .

Offa's large hand shook him roughly. He sat up, spluttering, his hand already in motion to draw his blade.

"Honorable Prince Spearpoint!" howled Offa. His moon-like face showed a congestion of blood. "He was the finest prock in the whole of Venudine! I'll strap that witch! Spearpoint! Gone!"

"Huh?" observed Fezius with great presence of mind.

"Gone!"

"Griffs as well-trained as Spearpoint don't fly off by themselves," growled Fezius. He shivered, then swallowed and stood up. The night glimmered ghostly about them, the moon high and riding beneath tattered cloud veils.

"I know! The witch has taken him!"

"Lai?" Now he was wide awake.

The Princess Nofret joined them, drawing her cloak about her, her face pinched and hollow-eyed. "Lai—the headstrong fool!" Nofret blazed with a noble indignation. "She was always the same. No forethought! She wants new charges, so she flies back to Parnasson to get them—"

"Back to Parnasson! Oh, no!"

The situation dissolved from a night alarm to a tragedy.

Offa began to lead off about his prock, about stupid jumped-up wenches supposed to be princesses, about ideas of gratitude. Fezius, about to cut him off and yet wholeheartedly agreeing with him, hesitated, and the Princess Nofret's impassioned words silenced them both.

"You do not understand the way a princess's mind works! What halt, what hindrance, can be put on such as we? If

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my sister chooses to fly back to Parnasson, that is her prerogative!"

"A prerogative to get herself killed!"

"Then you must see that she is not! Your duty is to fly after her immediately and protect her—"

"Do what?" Fezius felt outraged, debased, cheated.

"You have so little understanding of a noble's code—"

Fezius exploded. "Wrap it up, you whining little princess! My father was a Gavilan—I understand only too well the way the kings operate! I would decapitate all kings—aye, and queens and their broods too! Don't talk to me of honor!"

She shrank back, her face a pallid knot, all color fled, her breast rising and falling as she struggled to contain her own anger. Fezius felt contaminated. He whistled back over the dark water for Sunrise.

Offa gripped his arm. "You're not going?"

Fezius shook him off. "I know what chivalry means, to a woman, even if not to a princess! She deserves to be put across my knee and lathered! I'll find her!" he snapped at Nofret. "I'll find her and I'll bring her back—if Rodro hasn't got her staked out and the sport for his warriors!"

Princess Nofret shuddered.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

Fezius brushed all that aside. "Offa, you shelter in the bank; if I'm not back in good time, you'll have to try to get on downstream to the Theater of Varahatara as best you can. These two women are supposed to have friends there."

Nofret, after her outburst, had shrunk, and kept trying to speak words Fezius didn't want to hear, words of contrition, of pleading, of a still-powerful royal command.

Fezius could only see that his life had once again been drastically changed; and this time by a redheaded chit of a witch-princess. And yet, and yet he did not feel against her the rage he might have expected. His rage was directed toward the blind forces that had pushed him into this predicament.

Lai.

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Well, he would see . . .

Lai and her sister had been interesting to Fezius as specimens: that offhand way they had of talking, as though a half-spoken command would be immediately and eagerly obeyed, that lazy air of superiority, that broken-glass talk they could assume with devastating effect—yes, they were specimens of a moribund society to a joustabout like Sir Fezius Without.

Offa had been rumbling like a volcano with the lava plug all alive; now he shook his massive head and growled deep in his chest. "Fezius! You're not crazy enough to go back! What does chivalry mean these days?"

"I'm not worried about the chivalry of the thing. I'm worried about Lai!"

"Ah!" said Offa. But he looked unhappy and resentful. Then: "You're not going alone!"

"Please, Offa. The girl means nothing to you. The princess here needs protection—"

"Her! And, Fezius, the girl does mean something to me, through you. . . . All right, all right. But if you come crawling back to me with your guts hanging out and your head cut off don't say I didn't warn you!"

Princess Nofret shuddered.

Offa flounced to the thwart, cracked down with a slap. ". . . tripes trailing out . . ." He picked up the oar and slammed it into the rowlock. ". . . fool head hanging by a jugular . . ." He gouged water. ". . . hung, drawn and quartered and expecting me to spit on the bits and stick them back together. . . ." Gahnett plunged in his oar and the barge straightened downstream.

All that was left for Fezius to do was mount Honorable Lord Sunrise and fly off into the darkness. He felt cold and small and shriveled. Offa, turning with an oath and a shout, bawled, "You'd better come back to me in one piece, Fezius, or Amra help you!"

Dawn would soon break russet and gold over the eastern deserts. Sunrise forged grandly on through the lower levels.

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The dominating idea that he would find Lai at the castle of Parnasson drove Fezius on. It could only be a shrewd guess; but her charges were to be found where men of war gathered. The wind rushing through his hair and blowing his leather clothes into long wrinkles about his barrel body and short legs sharpened up his thinking.

Above him the sky went through a blaze of ruddy light and then began to grow that translucent hue of pearl as the sun rose and blotted out strident color. Wisps of iron-gray and sedge-brown clouds clumped along with their bottoms ruled as though razored off. Below him the land spread fat and rich and shining, with dusty roads all leading toward the town and castle of Parnasson.

A group of vancas passed beneath him, their long thin necks eternally twisting and turning, their six great pad-like feet clomp-clomping below, their bulging bodies loaded with merchandise, their masters settling them down for the last march into the town. He was looking down. He heard the beat of griff wings and looked up in time to jerk desperately at Sunrise's fang-anchored reins, swerving to miss the long-cast javelin.

Three griffmen swirled about him, their mounts' wings blurring with short strokes as they sought to maneuver for the kill. The warriors wore light mail, as did most of the hired soldiery employed by Palans Rodro—only his knights being wealthy enough to afford plate; but against them Fezius' sword, the true blade Peaceful, would be ludicrously useless. Long weapons were needed for aerial warfare. Another javelin whickered past his head. The second warrior swooped down, swinging an eight foot blade, clumsy in unskilled hands, but deadly when laid with the wind and swing. It could take a man's body and head and kiss them goodbye forever.

Fezius kept his sword in its scabbard. He gripped more tightly with his legs astride the slender forward section of Sunrise's wedge-shaped body, the griff's taloned legs tucked up aft, his surging wings beating past Fezius' heels. From a pannier Fezius took a sprag and shook out the three foot

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long ropes with leaden balls fastened to their ends, four balls and ropes forming a freewheeling cross. He whirled the sprag once around his head and hurled it with contemptuous accuracy. The leaden balls flew apart. The ropes spread-eagled and revolved into the charging griff. The four leaden balls spun devilishly and wrapped themselves about the griff's wings. The beast fell, whistling and snorting in terror. The warrior hung onto his harness all the way to the ground, but he dropped his eight foot blade some way before that.

The second warrior, undismayed, swerved his mount around to hurl another javelin. Moving with a liquid ferocity that looked graceful, Fezius drew his dagger and hurled it like a lightning bolt. The warrior slumped back in his leathers, the dagger buried to the hilt in his face. He dropped the javelin.

The third warrior's griff scorched past in a wild beating of wings. Fezius touched Sunrise. The great prock responded and rose, his wings thundering. Fezius lifted a hand and the warrior ducked, putting his own mount's body between him and Fezius. Fezius laughed and swirled Sunrise up and away.

Scant seconds had elapsed. The last griff warrior urged his mount away and Fezius, with a coarse laugh, imagined what he would say to his commander about going for reinforcements. Fighting and killing as ends in themselves had always appeared to Fezius as idiotic pastimes. Even so, Sunrise had contributed to the fight magnificently.

Griffs' intelligence varied with their breeding and their blood lines and a warrior griff with a high name—all quality griffs possessed honorable or lordly names—would be the most intelligent animal known to man, with, perhaps, the rare exception of a prize corfey—and they were rarer than a pail of ice in sunshine. Fezius had listened to tall tales of flying mounts, usually gigantic birds, who remained vicious and only half-tamed in captivity and who took every chance of pecking, killing and devouring their riders, only the rider's supposed miraculous aptitude for flying such an apocryphal beast saving him from momentary destruction.

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These tales amused the knights and men at arms who flew griffs to battle. If the utmost confidence could not be placed in his mount by a man, if there did not exist complete accord and mutual sympathy, then a flying mount proved useless. The involved evolutions required in aerial combat, the quick decisions, the snap judgments, all depended on absolute cooperation between man and griff. If Sunrise hadn't answered when Fezius touched him, Fezius, instead of that warrior, would be smashed on the ground. Any nonsense about half-tamed, let alone half-trained mounts, with whistles to control them or not, was greeted by flying warriors with guffaws of mockery around the camp fires as the tellers of stories tried to rally interest and gold and silver.

Fezius scanned the air about him as he neared town. Plenty of griffs skeined through the levels, but now he could slip in as merely another flier, a cloth half-covering his face.

The buildings in most of Venudine had not been created with any particular idea of catering especially to griffs; stables for vancas figured as prominently. The griffs would normally be quartered in castles and palaces, their aeries rising above the fighting and portal towers, their untidy hides hanging down like bulging sack-panniers over the edges.

Fezius ignored the hides on the castle towers and headed for a dusty square behind a certain dropsical inn in a side turning he knew well from previous visits. Townspeople did not always see eye to eye with the folk of the castle.

Fezius, with his devil's grin, had often helped that misunderstanding along.

He had heard of the dungeons of Parnasson. Down in the deepest pits, down past a narrow spiral stairway, down below the water level of the adjoining river so that water oozed and dripped dankly between rotten stones and forced its way up through sagging flagstones of the floor, down on the lowest level but one of the castle there lay, as was to be expected of a proper castle, the torture chamber.

For any man with sensitivity in his spirit the idea of torture could make him feel sick.

For a man like Fezius, frankly owning to a love of arms

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and armor and yet as clearly seeing that violence as an end in itself is worse than useless, to such a man the thought of torture would come with extra and bitter irony. Suffering inflicted within the purpose of an avowed grand aim was bad enough; but wantonly inflicted in the dank torture chambers of the mind it took on the habiliments of the devil.

Fezius knew of the existence of Palans Rodro's torture chamber and of his little experiments therein.

Fezius cherished a profound wish never to be introduced to that place.

He touched down in the square with a shudder shivering his small body. What a credulous nincompoop he was being, to be sure!

With a soft monologue of comfortable talk for honorable Lord Sunrise, he threw the reins over the saddle-bow and knotted them loosely. He braided up the gilded wing-chains.

"There, Sunrise," he whispered close in his mount's ear. "There, old fellow. If I come for you, greet me and take me eagerly aloft. But if others come for you, strike with your talons and your fangs!"

The long narrow fanged mouth and the round bright intelligent eyes seemed to reassure Fezius, for he swaggered into the inn as though he owned the place. In the sagging dilapidated pile of loose plaster and rotten lathes he slaked the dust in his throat with a pint of golden ale. This was the sleazy part of Parnasson. Sunrise would be safe only as long as he could use talons and fangs. Loose property, whereabouts, vanished.

Fezius reached the outside edge of the moat surrounding the castle without attracting attention. There was no hope of swimming across.

During this marriage period of feasting and laughter a light wicker bridge, all swaying and chuckle-bringing from the servants who used it, had been slung across to a postern hard by the kitchens. The main use for the low arched opening was during a siege as a sally-port.

Fezius waited as a group of servants carried slopping wine-sacks across and then, picking a sack of flour from the wait-

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ing pile, crossed after them, giving the last man plenty of room, having his heels trodden on by the man following, carrying a haunch of venison. They all trooped through the low doorway into the castle as though they all had a right to be there. Fezious smartly half-wheeled into the pastry cook's domain.

Here in the cool dimness, with flour dusting up into the sunshine streaming in all barred from the narrow window, he dumped the flour sack, and, straightening, heard the plump pastry cook speaking with half-inarticulate excitement to a serving wench.

"Bold as brass! Just as though she'd be welcome here!"

"Garn!" observed the serving wench, beginning to look at Fezious. He slouched down by the flour sacks.

The conversation had evidently been long in coming to any resolution, being one of those lengthily dwelled on items of news to be much cherished.

"Yers. Terrible witch—that's why the cakes didn't rise yesterday, you mark my words!"

"Garn!"

"Still, she'd get her just deserts; that sort's bound to come to a bad end. Her with her red hair and her green dress."

In the dimness by the flour sacks Fezious listened, terrified, horrified, fascinated.

The pastry cook rambled on, savoring every mouthful.

"I'm glad they caught her! That poor princess, a shame, but the Palans will see to it. This witch-woman will pay for it. *She'll burn!* You mark my words. . . . *They'll burn the witch!*"

V

THE WORDS meant everything and nothing.

The flames, licking like evil beasts around Lai's slender form, her red hair crisping and turning black and falling,

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her great eyes anguished—yes, everything and nothing . . .

She should never have gone.

Silly woman—letting herself be caught.

Witch-girl—ha!

Clad in a stolen white apron and flat porter's cap, Fezius hurried along the cobbles of the outer bailey beneath the gray stone walls. Stupid woman! Caught—they'd caught her—the words chattered inside his skull. They were going to burn her.

His sword had been thrust clumsily down under the apron and the restraining white cloth stretched against the scabbard at every move, hobbling him with a grim mockery of his short legs. He'd always liked a long sword, thinking that it gave him some redress in the matter of height, although knowing only too well that the short sword can usually beat the long in an affray. Master Smith Edwin's handiwork was not overly long, but to carry it concealed presented a tricky problem.

The plates of buns on the wooden tray resting on the tall white padded cap didn't help much, either.

He had liberally dusted flour over his face, with a smidgen of soot down a cheek to add a natural camouflage factor, and he was hoping with some despairing hope that he could pass for a very short, very fat brother of the pastry cook.

Ha!

Hurrying through into the inner bailey, he had to dodge smartly to avoid a vancaman who sloshed past, kicking his booted feet out in the stirrups. The vanca twisted its long thin neck so that its head avoided the stones at the side of the archway. Fezius did not look up; but the image of the murdering holes above struck him with sudden force, forebodingly.

Once inside the inner bailey with the ground now wholly covered by cobbles or flags he had a second story of windows leering down at him; he had the living quarters of the knights and their ladies on either hand; he had the dining halls and the knight's kitchen, the chapel and the inner

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armory, the treasury, all before him—and he had the entrance to that dungeon of which he had heard.

He walked around the edge of the open area, keeping on the shadowed side, walking as though he had every right to be there.

About him moved the general business and usage of the castle: men and women, knights and ladies, grooms and pages, all with something to do, passed and repassed. The sound of music reached him from the refectory and in deep counterpoint the sound of chanting from the chapel. Maybe Amra was watching him right now. If so, Fezius thought, willing to concede reality to the gods if they would concede him their help, then let him protect a loyal servant now.

The door to the dungeons stood closed, its old seamed oak twisted with age, the iron bolt heads that deep grape-purple that tells of natural weathering.

He pushed at the door and, not without surprise, he felt it open. After all, torturers must eat, mustn't they?

Inside a round high window lighted a circular stone stairway descending vertically into the ground. Each tread sprang from a central stone pillar and was arranged around it like a fan. The inner part of each tread, where it joined the pillar, had no thickness at all, and the outermost sections could scarcely accommodate a human foot. A diabolical mantrap, that stairway, as it was designed to be.

Fezius went down, hugging the side, his tray awkwardly askew before him as with one hand he tried to keep the bun plates in place, with the other half held the tray, half pressed the dank wall. If his sword didn't trip him neck over crupper to the bottom he'd be eternally surprised.

At the first landing, which he reached with a grateful breath, a guard lounged on a wooden three-legged stool. The guard wore a hauberk of mail and a steel cap and carried an iron-hafted spear, which he thrust playfully at Fezius.

"Here, boy!"

Fezius hoped the flour and soot he had smeared over his bristly chin would be sufficient to deceive the guard this close in the erratic light. The word "boy" gave him hope.

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Passing the guard, he kept his head down, clasping the tray above his apron to conceal the sword. The guard chuckled, belched, took a handful of the buns. "If I don't take 'em now I'll never get any. Bless the good Palans Rodro! He knows how to look after his men."

"Yiss," chirruped Fezius, like a castrato, and hurried on down the steps, his heart thumping.

The sheer desperateness of this venture, of his behavior and of his reckless uncaring appalled Fezius; this madcap folly—as in his present abandoned mood he could visualize the troubadours calling it—was so radically unlike his own cool professionalism. He lived in a heightened world where every color seemed supercharged with radiance. His footsteps down the spiral stone stairway echoed with a beating resonance like martial music.

He came out onto a second landing, where the guard's three-legged stool lay on its side and the iron-hafted spear leaned lazily against the wall. Fezius hurried on past.

Somehow or other he had to get back up here.

He knew what to expect below: the torture chambers of any high-blasted-born noble reeked. Why even back in Fezanois his father's torture chamber had been used every now and again—and the Palans Rodro's had acquired a ghastly notoriety. He went on down the spiral stairway and came out onto a flat area faced by two heavy oak doors. In front of the right-hand one a guard stood up and looked at him sharply.

"Buns?"

"I dunno nuffin!" chirped Fezius. "I'm to take the buns dahn sturrs!"

"Well, you can't go in here. That's that, laddie. I'm surprised you were allowed so far down."

"But I must!"

"Go on, boy! Back up them stairs!"

Fezius sighed. The guard was obstinate and for that he might lose his life. Throwing the wooden tray of bun plates in the man's face, Fezius snatched up his spear and drove the blade hard against the man's body in a thwacking series

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of blows that culminated in a slashing cut to the head. The guard dropped, senseless.

Fezius opened the door.

He did not understand where he was.

Rodro's torture chambers, he guessed, would be dark and evil-smelling with the rank tang of blood spilled from indescribable mechanisms. There would be cobwebs high in the vaulted ceilings. On the walls chains and iron hoops would dangle. Cold eyed extractors of information, cowed in the scarlet and black of the Guild examiners, would stand with arms akimbo, whips trailing their knotted lashes on the stained stone floor. The place would choke with horror.

The brilliance of the light that slashed down on Fezius' eyes made him blink.

His eyes filled with water; the world turned orange and green. He blinked and could see—he could see but he could not understand what he saw.

The room was large; that was not in dispute. The room was tall; likewise. On every wall row after row of little knobs surrounded large panes of glass, tiny levers set in level ranks surmounted and flanked little clock faces that were not, he could see, real clocks at all.

Thick snake-like ropes, smooth and unplaited, draped here and there about the room.

And the whiteness? And the cleanliness! Incredible!

The men who regarded him, startled as was he, dressed in white gowns like women's nightdresses, taken aback, moved with purposeful rapidity. Before he realized they were not attacking him but running away he had clumsily raked out his sword from the white apron and, flexing his legs, had adopted a fighting crouch—not that he had ever needed to crouch much in fighting normal-sized men.

He could not understand where he was. He half-turned to exit through the still-open door. Undecided, he hesitated, and a clump of guards ran across the dazzling floor toward him, their weapons bars of light in the violent illumination.

He lifted his own sword. The blades clashed and rang. The work of Master Smith Edwin once more proved its

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worth. Feet slithered and gripped. He thrust and cut, parried and lunged. Men fell, screaming. He took a quick reversed cut on the leather shoulder of his tunic and felt the sharp bite of steel. He moved away swerving, slicing his attacker's feet from his knees.

He fought. He faced the guards and fought and, as always, he fought well.

But somehow he took no joy from the fight this time.

He fought as though operated by strings, like a child's toy, he fought as though prodded by levers. He fought absently. All the time he could think only that Lai was not here. Lai was not here in this room and any effort expended here, any outpouring of energy, wasted and dragged him down and weakened him for his real purpose. He must find Lai, not spend time frolicking with guards.

He stepped over a body to his front, ducked a wild swing, thrust, recovered, skipped to his side and, momentarily isolated, glanced swiftly back at the open door, scarcely breathing more heavily than usual.

Figures moved at the door and he caught the deadly glint of plate. Against hauberk-clad guards, hired soldiery, his good blade Peaceful could wreak a fearful harvest and still ring true; but against the full panoply of plate worn by the knights who now burst through the open doorway, his blade was by far too delicate an operating tool. He needed a mace, or a bec-de-corbin, the great war hammer that could ding through solid plate, or he needed an ax—an ax . . .

Offa's ax!

There was no Offa now to guard his back with a burnished circle of steel.

He swung the blade at two guards who darted at him as though to finish the job for which they were paid, before the knights—their employers—had to take a hand.

Parrying their savage succession of blows, Fezius glanced about desperately. The clang of sabatons on the floor rang louder. He was going to be taken ignominiously—and Lai had not been found!

He needed a mace and the quickest way to get one was

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to grab it from an opponent. Lithely, like a kragor at bay, he swung his blade at the two guards forcing them back and then leaped away from them, spinning as he jumped, landing with widely-placed feet and flexed legs. The true blade Peaceful snouted up and seared through the first knight's mail deep into his groin.

The knight screamed, the echoes strangely tinny in the closed bascinet, bubbling.

Peaceful slid all bloody into the scabbard, wiping itself clean against the fur lining the scabbard mouth. Fezius grabbed the knight's mace where it swung at his belt, knocking the drooping man's drooping sword away with his left arm against the flat. The man collapsed in a clattering uproar of metal clashing against metal. Trouble with a full suit of plate, even today and as far as armorers like Master Gyron had gone, was that betraying section of mail braconniere. One day, Fezius had often promised himself, he'd see about plating that fully, when he had his own armory as a going concern.

There could be no way out through the knight-filled doorway onto the spiral stairway. Striking with all his power at anything that came within range, Fezius shambled off in the opposite direction, away from the door, looking among the ranked boxes filled with their incomprehensible mumbo jumbo for another way out.

The lights in here blazed with the power of the sun itself; the whiteness of everything struck skewers of light into his eyes. He saw other white-coated men pushing each other out of the way, cowering in corners as he passed. The room seemed to him enormous; he could see no sign of water seepage, yet his common sense told him he must have run far enough to have passed beneath the moat. The knights followed, clanking.

He began to feel like a wild animal run breathless by vancas, swerving drunkenly from side to side and prodded this way and that under perfect invisible control until at last it sank senseless in its cage.

"Traitor! Give yourself up! There is no use in resisting!"

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"Get lost," growled Fezius, looking everywhere for the other opening rational thought showed must exist for these strange boxes and masses of incomprehensible things to have been brought in here. They could never have been carried down those narrow slippery spiral stairs.

Immobile though he might sometimes be in the pyramid of combat he had often shared with Offa, when he fought alone Fezius turned into a nimble quicksilver gnome of speed and bounding energy. Now he padded the length of this cavernous underground room looking for a way out; every-time a guarding soldier or a knight came at him he turned with his mace dinging accurate and deadly blows, his short legs and barrel body skillfully eluding the return blows. Did these stupid knights think they could corner him, then? He stood off capture even as he ran.

He reached an arched opening in which stood the largest pane of glass he had ever seen.

Realization that this was a door followed immediately and he thrust against it with quick urgency. It slipped sideways and away and he staggered, momentarily caught off balance. Then he stepped through with a touch of his old bold swagger.

The same brilliant lights cascaded down. The same tessellated floor cracked back sharp echoes. But the men—the beings—differed in impossible ways from the white-clad people he had driven before him.

Fezius gaped.

He stopped running and gaped.

His impressions fell on him with the sound of bronze gongs.

Tall. These—things—were as tall as Offa; thin, thin as a beggar at a seldom-used gate; yellow-faced—if that nose snout, those pale eyes, that round, funnel-shaped mouth, could constitute a face. Their garments were of a dazzling bright red scale material that fell in shimmering folds and creases about their tall angularity. A primitive might have abased himself, as at the fount of godhood; he might have considered himself in the presence of messengers from Amra

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the Bright. Fezius could not believe that. He could rather conceive of these things as being devil-spawned from Amra's dark kingdom beneath the ebon sea.

With a high thin yell, he charged them.

A blue curtain fell before his eyes and for a queer moment he saw everything as though peering up through azure-tinted water; then he was surging on and feeling thin cold hands around his wrists and ankles and neck dragging him back, and feeling the harsh grate of stone against his back.

He blinked. He was not charging those devil-monsters. He was chained up against a grimy stone wall staring out at Palans Rodro and his men, who jeered at him under the lights, with the devil-monsters standing at their side.

"You can't believe it, can you, you traitorous little Amra-spawn!"

Rodro stood, hands on hips, bullet-head jutting forward, his black beard pointed and bristling with spite, his small pig-like eyes flushed with wine and good living and triumph. Clad like his men in half-armor, he stood and taunted Fezius, who was hanging from his chains by leather thongs that cut cruelly into his wrists.

"Get lost," Fezius said. The effort was scarcely worth it. How in the blue blazes had he got *here*?

Reasoning told him the answer: the blue curtain that had fallen before his eyes, the blue fire that had struck Offa into immobility. He had suffered a touch of the blue sparkles and before he'd woken up they'd got him all neatly chained and thonged. Nasty.

He'd been caught.

Surprise could hardly figure in his reactions; after all, he'd been well aware all along of the chances he was taking and only his—concern?—for Lai had driven him like a madman. But surprise at the manner of his capture curdled in him, for he could slump in his chains and actually look at and study those creatures from a demented nightmare.

Palans Rodro and his men took scant notice of the things. Laughter and coarse jests flew in the air; the knights were

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pleased they had taken this little devil and they looked forward to sport. Blood sport.

The things spoke among themselves and Fezius felt fresh surprise that their voices sounded so normal, sounded so—reasonable.

Rodro observed Fezius' sick look with jovial villainy. "So you don't like the look of our Slikitter friends, hey?" He laughed coarsely and his men laughed with him. "They'll tear you into pieces and have you for breakfast, Amra-spawn!" Everyone laughed.

Everyone except Fezius. He wondered if there could be any truth in the idea—no, no! Of course not.

But the things—Slikitters—looked singularly fierce and, somehow, grunchy. Lai had warned him about Slikitters. But she hadn't warned him about *this*.

He looked uneasily about the room, wondering what they would do to him.

If Lai had come here in search of charges for her paralysis gun she had pushed her head into a terrible noose. He wanted to shriek out and ask about her, if she was here, if she was still alive; but he did not want to admit knowledge of her just yet, in case that small fact could be turned to advantage, and also because he did not want to give Rodro extra satisfaction in whatever torture was to come.

He needn't have bothered.

A tall, gleaming metal frame was pushed into the room. Fezius looked—and shut his eyes.

Full of his own good humor, Palans Rodro said jovially, "I flatter myself that I do not adhere to the usual and boring details of torture scenes so beloved of the troubadours. You are here. My possible sister-in-law Lai is here. You are both fettered. You know what I want to know. I think"—Rodro sounded so very sure of himself—"that you will tell me without trouble."

In the tiny pause that followed Fezius opened his eyes.

Then, like a final signet impression stamping down on the hot wax, Rodro said, "Otherwise . . ."

All his life Fezius had prided himself on being a fellow

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who laughed at the world, saw a joke in everything, had a merry quip for everyone. He and Offa joked as the swords flew about their eyes, as the axes rang against their armor. Now every instinct in Fezius demanded he laugh at the preposterous strutting fool dubbing himself Red Rodro the Bold. But against that free healthy instinct his own tortured fears for Lai circumscribed his emotions, tore him with cruel griff-talons of agony. *Lai—Lai!*

Tied on her metal frame with her apple-green dress half torn away, Lai said, "Ha! My gallant knight-errant! My bold rescuer! So you slew no dragons, then? They took you, too, little man!"

Fezius warmed at that "little" so strongly accented by Lai. She was not, he thought, one to mock a man for physical peculiarities over which he had had no parental control. By stressing the little she warned him that she would disown him and thus, she hoped, save herself from torture in Rodro's design of breaking *him* down. For, of course, at the first beginning of her torture he'd tell anything Rodro wanted to know. He was no fool even though he might be dubbed a coward.

"Get lost, witch," he grunted, sweating.

"What's this?" said Rodro, fingering his beard, amazed and chagrined.

"Do not let them bedazzle you, Rodro."

A Slikitter spoke. He spoke the Venudine tongue with a hard crusty knightly accent. He sounded just like a man Fezius would have been proud to have struck from his saddle in the lists. Rodro answered angrily:

"Bedazzle me, Fislik? I'd like to see them try!"

The weird thing who answered to the name Fislik made a humming, droning sound from his nasal tube. Fezius wondered if the thing was laughing at Rodro's braggart stupidity.

"The girl calls the man little and the man calls the girl a witch. They do not deceive me. They sweat for each other." Fislik hummed again. "They will tell us what we have to know."

Fezius, just then, wanted to put the point of Peaceful

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against Fislik's unnatural belly and run the blade in to the hilt.

Rodro approached Lai. He ripped some more of the apple-green gown away. Holding Lai, he half turned to speak to Fezius. "Tell me, little man. Tell me where Princess Nofret, my bride-to-be, has run away and hidden herself!" He gripped his fingers and Lai gasped.

Fezius did not hesitate.

"I'll tell you anything you want to know. But first let the witch-girl alone. You might," he pursued, "cut us both down to start with."

Rodro barked a contemptuous laugh. "I like your nerve!"

"Why, thank you!" Fezius thought that one had been spoken smartly enough. But Rodro said, "I don't have to smack you across the face for your insolence, little man. I need only do *this*"—he tweaked his fingers again and again Lai jerked and gasped—"and you are punished!"

Rodro barked again as Fezius sweated. Then Fislik whispered something in his ear and with a sudden cock of his head across at Fezius, Rodro let Lai go. He swaggered across to stand before Fezius.

"Tell me, then, dwarf!"

Fezius knew he wasn't as short as that. He choked back his first words, then said, "I can tell you anything you want to know, but I don't know the name of the place where the princess is." Then swifter than Rodro's lifted hand, he added, "But I can take you there."

"A trick, Fislik?" asked Rodro carelessly.

"I do not think so. The man is chained by the woman."

"You idiot!" Lai blazed at him.

Fezius couldn't help it. He just sweated some more.

Any idea he had that Lai would argue and try to convince him not to talk dissipated. She, too, knew the limitations of the human body.

"Are you going to cut me down?" asked Fezius. "I doubt if I'll be able to walk as it is—"

Rodro jerked a hand. Men came forward to release Fezius and Lai. "Any more insolence and I shall cut your

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tongue out. You can't tell me, only show me, what I want to know, so your tongue will be no loss."

Fezius drew in his breath as though he had plunged into ice-cold water.

Rodro finished meanly with: "You can't escape. If you try you'll be punished."

Again, Fezius could make no reply.

As he had expected, he fell down when he tried to stand up. His hands didn't feel anything; he checked to make sure they were still attached to his wrists. Thinking like that, almost back in the old familiar way even in these impossible circumstances, showed how much better he felt merely for being cut down and unchained.

Lai stretched herself, her face calm as the blood flowed back, adjusting the sketchy rags of the apple-green dress.

Knights stood about ready to cut down any attempt to run. Rodro laughed harshly. "Shall we go? And if you fall down we can carry you on a pike—the point!"

Fezius intended to take his time, for only fools rushed to do as they were bid from fear. Lai whispered, "Are you really going to—?" Then a hard, iron-bound spear thrust between them and a granite voice said, "Keep apart! No whispering."

"If I have to," said Fezius to Lai, over the spear point.

"No!" she said, suddenly appalled.

The guard lifted a hand. Lai saw and her own hand went up in mute defense. Fezius kicked the guard in the groin. He hurt his toes on the mail, but the man grunted and doubled up. Fezius doubled up, too, and the second man's blow sizzled over his head.

"Stop that, you imbeciles!" raged Rodro.

"Tell them to stop, Rodro—or I'll be dead."

Fezius staggered upright, panting, watching the guards. They regarded him as though wishing to spit him on their spears.

Rodro clung to the shreds of an authority that obviously had been surrendered to Fislik and his Slikitter friends.

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"Stop that! All right. There will be no more nonsense like that or I'll have you chained up like a wild beast."

Fezius remained silent.

During that brief moment he was doubled up he had seen a small, narrow, coppery colored door set a little back from the line of the wall, surrounded by masses of those strange clock faces and knobs he had seen before. A lantern glowed a dull emerald over the lintel. Narrow though the door was, tall for its width although overall small, it opened in two leaves, each with its own ornate handle fashioned like a griff, the bronze glowing a deep fiery color. That door spoke eloquently to Fezius.

He had to do this thing just right.

Rodro was enough of a fool to let him get away with it, but his narrow-headed stupidity would react with vicious cruelty should Fezius bungle it. He took a good firm grip on his nerves. Lai would have to jump into this thing cold; but by now Fezius was prepared to believe she could do anything.

Ignore the weird Slikitters, ignore the reasons why and what and when, ignore the knights in their panoply of plate and the guards in their mail hauberks and their iron-hafted spears. Ignore them because he had to. He must fine down his consciousness so that it included only two things, two items in all the world: Lai and the door.

Then, and only then, when his heartbeat had steadied, when his breathing ruled out smoothly and evenly, only then could he jump.

He jumped.

Red Rodro the Bold received a foot in the abdomen.

Even then, Fezius could not stop to take any sort of satisfaction.

As Rodro doubled up, too breathless to howl, Fezius grabbed Lai, jerking her cruelly toward him, spinning, turning himself and scrabbling over the tessellated paving.

He grabbed the fiery bronze griffs and hauled. The door opened smoothly, with the semblance of great weight in bal-

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ance. The emerald light above the door changed suddenly to yellow and began to blink.

A voice, high and strident, panic-stricken, called, "Not that door, you fool!"

But the valves were swinging open and beyond was no brilliant intensity of lighting but a soft mellow grayness, a dim greenness very comforting after the lacerating probing of the other lights.

Fezius, half-dragging, half-carrying Lai, vaulted through.

Someone threw a spear and the iron rattled, pathetically, against the door.

The last thing Fezius saw was the light changing to an angry ruby red and pulsating so fast it blurred into a wash of fire.

VI

IN THE green-gray dimness Lai clung to Fezius, her soft-firm body pressing against him both seeking and giving comfort. Her voice had a strange waver.

"I know, Fezius—I know! That was a *place*!"

"A place?"

She shivered. "Such a place as I sought at the Griff Tower. But different—different—strange—"

"You'll have to tell me all about that fandango at the Griff Tower," Fezius said in his tough voice. "But not right now. If we came through that door then so can Rodro and his knights! We've got to get away!"

"Fezius—"

He rushed on, unheeding. "There must be some stairway or something to get back to the surface. We must be a long way under the moat, that's obvious, so we'll stand a good chance of getting into Parnasson without being spotted. I've a griff waiting by an inn—we can be back with the barge in no time—"

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"Fezius—oh, Fezius! You just don't *know!*"

"Know what?" He had no time to be offended. He began to walk ahead through the dimness, seeing huge vague shapes rising on every side, feeling the floor through his shoes as soft and yielding, a strange sensation for a man accustomed to stone floors, as though he walked an indoor carpet of grass.

She caught his arm.

"They have no need to chase us here! You just don't understand." Shaking his arm in annoyance she yet clung to him for reassurance. "We came through a *place!*"

Fezius didn't understand. He admitted that freely enough.

He looked up. The roof showed no opening, no friendly chink of light to guide them out. But his common sense told him that the door must lead somewhere and they only needed to walk on until they found the door leading outside. There was a door out.

There must be—

A slithering from the shadows between those dim gargantuan shapes brought him up, quivering with shock, tensed, silent. He held Lai close, cautioning her.

Half a dozen Slikitters passed, their tall angular bodies grotesque in rapid movement, like a child's skittles magically animated. The way the name must have grown crossed Fezius' mind. The strange creatures, with their red-scaled clothing, passed rapidly into the farther shadows. They had said nothing. In their hands—mere angular sticks of bone—had been held other sticks, more potent bulged sticks of power that Fezius, for one, recognized with dread.

"We'll have to go back," Lai said.

The startling unexpectedness of that took Fezius' breath so that for a moment he could not answer her. When at last he thought he could speak without too great a blasphemy, he said, "Why?"

"We have come through a place, through a gate, Fezius."

She was trying to explain something to him.

"We are no longer on the same world."

"Same world!"

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"Yes, yes." She nodded her head vehemently, the coppery hair flying. "We have come through some strange gate that I can sometimes sense, sometimes find where one exists, and we are no longer in our own world."

"There's only one world," said Fezius, sensibly.

"Then where have the Slikitters come from?"

It was his turn to hesitate. "Why—spawned from Amra's dank depths, where else?"

"They're not supernatural, Fezius. They're flesh and blood like ourselves. But they are *different*—different in a way that a vanca or a griff isn't different. They belong to another world."

Fezius tried to follow her argument. Truth to tell he didn't really fully believe in Amra—Amra be praised!—and had tended to shrug off that unpleasant thought.

But if what Lai was trying to tell him was true, then . . .

"Where is this other world?"

She spread her hands. Helpless, she looked at him, their eyes almost level; it was a quizzical look that, for the first time, made Fezius wonder if she could come to regard him as a fellow human being.

"I don't know!"

She spoke as though it were all his fault.

He put a hand on her arm and this time the touch, different from when just recently they had clung together for mutual support, exhilarated him, gave him a surge of confidence.

"Kerrumpitty, woman!" he said boldly. "You almost had me believing you. We'll soon climb up out of here and then we can fly our griff back to the barge." He stopped. "Unless—"

"Unless what?"

"There's been no pursuit. Unless that's just what Rodro wants us to do. That must be it!" He took fire with his new idea. "He's let us think we've escaped. We'll rush off on our griff to the barge—and he'll have half his griff force skeining after us. Oh, ho! The cunning krogar!"

"I don't think," Lai said, "that it's quite like that."

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"We'll work on that assumption. Come on. Best foot forward."

They moved cautiously on. Lai had given up her attempts to persuade Fezius to turn back. They reached the far wall of the vast underground room and found it lined with a soft resilient material. A small square door, perhaps ten feet tall and ten wide, stood open in the wall. They stepped through, peering about in the dim light.

Behind them steel grilles clashed shut.

They whirled.

"Trapped!" shouted Fezius, springing to the steel gates and shaking them. "Trapped!"

Then, as they stood there, a strange and weird sensation gripped them. Fezius felt heavier. He staggered. His stomach and bowels threatened to fall downward. He swallowed and his ears did funny things.

"The floor!" gasped Lai. "It's moving!"

"It's going—up!"

After a few unbelieving moments fresh unpleasant sensations hit them. Fezius felt his stomach rise up into his throat; he felt he was going to lift off like a young griff, he felt light and sick. Then, with a remote clang and a large loud click, everything became still.

The steel gates slid open with a clatter.

They revealed a mahogany paneled door. As Fezius and Lai stood, petrified, this wooden door slid in half sideways and bright friendly sunshine poured in.

"Let's get out of this crazy box!" shouted Fezius. He darted forward, followed by Lai.

They stood to look out on a scene that Fezius, despite all his confidence and cheerful sanguinary outlook, could not, could never in a lifetime, believe belonged to his own familiar world of Venudine.

The rays of sunshine poured down through an overhead latticework of beams and girders; when Fezius looked more closely he saw that these were stairways and high aerial platforms and gangways filled with throngs of people—not people—Slikitters. He caught Lai's arm. The sunshine poured

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down through this tangle of crossing walking-ways and reflected back from moving clouds of smoke or steam through which strange shapes rose, larger counterparts to those dim shapes they had passed in the underground room. Blocky, angular, massy, the dark shapes rose silently from the moving, light, never-still clouds of vapor. The black buildings shouldered up out of the silvery wisps coiling above the sun-drenched mass of cloud.

"We must be standing on one of those buildings," Lai whispered. She took a step forward to stand against a thin grilled railing. She glanced down.

At her side Fezius looked down also—looked and reeled back. Far, far below, revealed in an eddy of the white clinging vapor, he had seen—or thought he had seen—a chasm open into the very heart of darkness. How far down he could see past the flank of the building Fezius did not know; he felt that he had not looked all the way down to the ground.

"Where are we?" he cried to Lai, turning to her in an agony of fear. "Oh, Lai—what has happened to us?"

She put a hand on his arm. She patted him, as one might pat a refractory vanca.

"I told you, Fezius. We have just come through a gate into another world." She frowned. "I have been through before. But I have never been to the Slikitter world before and"—she swallowed and her hand tightened—"and I do not like this. I am frightened."

"You've been to—another—world, before?"

"Yes. To a place called Sharnavoy. It is nice there. Very nice."

Fezius still didn't know if he should believe her.

"I have friends in Sharnavoy."

"I wish we were there, then."

"Oh, Fezius—what can we *do*?"

He had to admit it: "You were right. We'll have to go back."

Reluctantly, he turned around. The view from all sides of the blocky building was the same. The air held a fresh

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smell he found invigorating, not unpleasant. Faint whiffs of burning reached up as wisps of smoky mist coiled over the edge of the building. They were standing on the flat roof. The box stood behind its wooden and metal gates, which had remained open. He took a step toward it.

A whirring, chuffing, chugging sound from the sky snapped his head up. He stared, paralyzed.

From the sky, dropping down through a gap between those interlacing pathways of the upper air, spun a haloed object, at once bulbous and yet fragile, roaring and spinning a circle of light that reminded him of Offa's bright defensive ax. The thing dropped down and wind rushed and blustered away from beneath it, blowing scraps of discarded paper, wood and sawdust in a boisterous circle. The thing touched the roof of the building with its legs, half hidden beyond the cover of the moving-box and a row of chimneys. The halo crowning it began to make different noises and to whirl apparently more slowly until at last, with a chop and a shiver, revealed itself as merely three thin droopy slats.

The sunshine glinted from windows in the thing. It looked like a narrow single-story house with its edges smoothed off. A door opened.

Running and stumbling, Fezius dragged Lai down behind the shelter of one of the chimneys—he thought they were chimneys, but in this crazy world they could have been anything. They crouched, staring.

From the door of the flying house Slikitters descended to form a watchful group as crates and boxes were unloaded. Fezius looked at the things doing the unloading.

He didn't want to—he most certainly didn't like to—but he was having to admit to himself more and more that Lai's absurd story could be, must be, true. Once again he stared at another, different, form of life.

The things were only about four feet high, which made Fezius look tall by comparison. He looked at the nearest one pushing a box along on a trolley. It had a thumb-shaped body where head ran down into chest without neck, and the trunk finished flat on the ground, without legs; a glimpse

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of four pads on the round flat bottom as it had got out of the flying house told Fezius the thing used those for locomotion. It had two human-looking eyes about a foot down from the cranium, each with a sharply upward-angled eyebrow. Its arms and hands were as thin and twig-like as a Slikitter's. It was covered all over in a mustard-colored fur and around its middle it wore a sash formed from the same red-scaled fabric worn by the Slikitters. It didn't seem to possess a nose or mouth.

Lai shoved closer to Fezius.

"I've never seen those before—those thumb-like things."

"Dumpy beasts, aren't they." Fezius swallowed.

When all the crates and boxes had been taken in, the box descended into the depths of the building. Fezius and Lai remained crouching by their chimney. Every now and again Fezius glanced up at the overhanging tracery of pathways and stairs and hoped no promenading Slikitter up there would notice the two humans hiding on the roof.

The dumpy thumbblings returned to the flying house, the Slikitters followed them, the long droopy slats began to revolve with a great roaring, blurred into that silver ax-like circle, and the house took off like a griff when the spurs were jabbed in.

"I understand a little more, now," breathed Lai shakily. "This is where my paralysis gun came from—I took it from a warrior who tried to rape me and who is now very dead—where the charges are made; it's where the torches the nobles use come from . . ."

"I got mine from a merchant who said he'd had it from a consignment of goods from over the unknown sea—"

"This is far further than the sea, Fezius. The blue fire weapon is made here, too. The Slikitters trade through that door to Palans Rodro's castle dungeons. They take their goods in; what do they take out?"

"Gold?"

She laughed, a gentle mockery. "I don't think gold interests these things—these people, I suppose we must call them."

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"Well," Fezius said irritably, "I don't know."

Lai stood up.

"We are on the roof of a warehouse. The controls for that door down there must also be in here, together with some way of making it work. I do not know a great deal about the mechanical *places*, the artificial methods of crossing through the gates. I use—" She paused, shook her head. "Never mind."

"Why didn't they come after us?"

"It must be because their passage, like mine, is gained only at cost. You have to recuperate your energy. As soon as the gate is ready to open again the Slikitters this side will know, and then they will hunt for us."

Fezius sat still, thinking. He was used to being chased and hunted; the experience had lost its novelty if not its terrors.

"Then that man," he said at last, "Shim Gahnett—he came from . . . from another world?"

"Yes." Lai looked down on Fezius. Her face showed indecision. When she spoke a new and gentle note in her voice made Fezius glance suddenly up and catch the sunshine bursting around the glory of her coppery hair so that she rose above him like an angel. "I was trying to send my sister across to Sharnavoy. I felt there was a *place* at Griff Tower; but Rodro the Evil would not let us out of the castle—"

"No one seemed to have seen the princess and we'd only heard of you as the witch-girl—"

"Stories put about by Rodro, but I suppose—"

"Suppose nothing," said Fezius, wickedly, falling in with her mood. "You are a witch, that's obvious enough."

"But not a bad one, Fezius. Not really—"

She bent above him.

"Why did Princess Nofret agree to marry Rodro?"

Lai sighed. "This I do not understand. Since our father died times have changed and the vanca herds grow less. We are a rich proud people, living freely, never settling too long in any one of our cities. But Rodro has a hold, and the Slikitters are part of it."

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"With Slikitters as friends he can laugh at his enemies. Your people are strong; but Rodro, aided by Slikitter weapons, could vanquish you and all your vanca cavalry."

"He aims, I am sure, to burst out of the valley and conquer us all. It is an insane ambition—"

"Dreams of conquest usually are."

She said with a meaning only she could follow, "We had such wonderful times in Sharnavoy."

Fezius had wide experience of armor and of tournaments and probably in consequence his ideas of merchandizing remained hazy. Cautiously, he asked, "If there are gates from here into Venudine, may there not be a gate to Sharnavoy?"

Caught up with the idea, he went on quickly:

"They must trade with Venudine into other places besides Rodro's castle. Your man Shim Gahnett—he came through from the Griff Tower. There must be other gates; there must be!"

She tried to catch the liveliness of his mood.

"There must be, of couse. But—but, Fezius—that man, Shim Gahnett; he did not come from Sharnavoy! That is what filled me with despair—that the *place* was wrong. It did not lead to Sharnavoy but to some other world—"

"But you spoke to him!"

She smiled and put her hands to her long hair. Fezius stared as she pulled out a small and compact band held in place by pads. It looked like a tiara, for it glittered and shone with gems in the sunlight.

"Not jewels, Fezius. I do not know the real name for this; I took it from the gallant knight who was so intent on raping me he did not notice I had a weapon myself. When you wear it you can adjust it—here—"

She showed him a thing like a compass, embedded in the band.

"Eight points, and a pointer. Each point with a symbol beside it. The same symbols are repeated in this line of eight studs." She laughed ruefully. "I have no idea what they all are, but this one is Sharnavoy, and this one is Venudine,

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and this one, I suspect, Slikitter. You press the stud for Venudine and you turn the pointer to Sharnavoy and you can understand and talk to a person from Sharnavoy. I twisted the pointer when Shim Gahnett—arrived—and found his symbol.” She pointed. “I don’t understand what it says.”

“Nor do I,” rumbled Fezius, appalled and shaken by the mysteries she was revealing to him. “This is that science you spoke to me so scathingly about?”

“Yes.”

“Put your translator back on, Lai. Only”—he spoke grimly—“you had better adjust it to Slikitter from now on.”

“You have called it a good word, Fezius, translator. But it is more than that, too—”

A shadow fell over them.

They glanced up, at once terrified.

Another flying house descended; but this time there was no shiny ax-halo of light from spinning slats, no vast and windy roaring. This time the flying house let down through the air silently and with stealthy purpose.

Shrinking back against the chimney and watching the Slikitters and their thumbling workers as they unloaded more boxes and bales of merchandise that would be taken through the gate and sold in Venudine, Fezius remembered what Lai had said and he came to a decision.

“We’ve got to get back to our own world, Lai. We’ve got to! And we can. From where we are in this world of Slikitter we can go in the same direction and the same distance that, in our own land of Venudine, would take us to the Griff Tower. Then you can take us through the gate there—”

“But I don’t know if that will work! I may not be strong enough now and—”

“We can’t just stay here and be caught, Lai. We must get down to the ground—we can use one of the outside stairways and ladders—and we must start walking. We’ve got to, Lai! Think of your sister! Think of her as I’m thinking of Oag Offal!”

She nodded her face pale, her eyes violet pools of pain.

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"You're right, Fezious. We can't just give in. Together, we can do it . . ."

"That's the style," he said. "We'll do it, together."

VII

WHATEVER they might one day do together—and for Sir Fezious of Fezanoi that day couldn't come quickly enough—clambering down the exposed and naked ladders to the mist-shrouded ground was one activity they would certainly never forget and, buffeted by shrewd winds and clinging for dear life, might never even accomplish.

The wind seemed to take delight in lulling them into laxness and then screeching in lunatic glee, coming rampaging around the sharp corner of the black building, blustering and shoving and bellowing, jovially seeking to pry them loose and hurl them into the abyss.

Fezious clung to the iron rail and clung to Lai and swore luridly that by all the devils in Amra's black kingdom he wouldn't be blown off. He'd damn well claw his way down this ladder and fight to the place in this world opposite the Griff Tower in Venudine, Kerrumpitty, yes! If he had to leave strips of his skin all the way, on hands and knees, sobbing—he'd do it. By the sacred name of Amra, he'd do it.

He had so far seen no direct connection from the interlacing walkways above and the squat buildings below. He thought of the buildings as squat only because they appeared so in those portions rising above the mist. He knew they must in reality be exceedingly tall structures. Lai tugged his arm. He looked, unable to hear her voice in the tumult of wind that that moment hurled itself on them from around the corner.

A single thin walkway stretched from the narrow landing

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beneath them. Like a wire, it extended out from this building to the next, a long thin strand of spider-silk bending to the winds, swaying, sagging, bobbing. Every now and then parts of it vanished as mists clouds rose to envelop the open space with vapors.

He nodded. The pathway pointed in the right direction. If they could cross that swaying bridge over the gulf they would save precious time. Visions of crossing the entire great conglomeration of buildings in this fashion taunted Fezius—taunted him with the enormous effort required.

He grabbed Lai around the waist and she did the same to him. Clipped together, heads bent, their outside hands grasping the slick and moisture-laden outer rail, they started to cross.

If descending the ladders had been a bellowing triumph of fortitude, crossing that hidden and mist-shrouded gulf by that single cable-strand of bridge represented a howling success. The wind did everything to them except hurl them off the bridge. Feeling sick and dizzy, staggering, Fezius held onto Lai and held onto the rail and forced himself to go on, step after step, step after step. He went on.

After what appeared to him a very long time Fezius, leaning against the wind, staggered headlong, taking three or four little steps to regain his balance, grasping the rail and holding fast to Lai, who pitched forward with him. Some time passed in relative silence before Fezius realized he had striven forward against a wind that no longer tore at him. They had reached the other building and for a precious moment were sheltered from the blast.

This building differed from the last.

In ziggurat form it rose above them and vanished in mist below. The parallel platform surfaces had been planted with trees; waterfalls fell in tinkling profusion, finely glinting against the sunlight; birds and strange flying creatures wheeled, all iridescent scales and plumed headcrests; the gleam and glint of glass alcoves and nooks shone everywhere. The place could have been a paradise.

Sheltered from the wind, looking back across that awful

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gulf, the two unhappy travelers realized how fortunate they had been in their choice of building. Higher above them than ever the lofty trceries of the Slikitters stretched an aloof web. Down here the terraces of this ziggurat palace swarmed with the mustardy colored thumbings, all moving and gesticulating in their weird upright stance, their twig-like arms moving spasmodically.

"They look stupid," growled Fezius. "But they're dangerous. I'm sure of that."

They thanked the eternal mists that had cloaked their arrival, and they sprinted fleetly for a clump of shiny-yellow-trunked trees with drooping sad purple flowers. They burrowed deep and then flung themselves down, panting, feeling the wash of the wind on that frightful bridge sweeping over them again in reaction.

"We're getting on," Fezius said, speaking with what he hoped was a gay and grim tone of confidence. "Another bridge or two and we'll be getting near the Griff Tower."

If he expected her to rally to him or to speak disconsolately, he was disappointed. He turned sharply.

"Lail What is it?"

She gazed straight at him, blindly, without seeing him, her violet eyes enormous. She whispered, softly, so that he had to bend close to hear.

"A *place*—a *place* is near—I can tell . . . It must be the way—it must!"

"So high in the air?" asked Fezius doubtfully. He had formed his own conclusions about the gates.

"I do not know why I have this strange gift," Lai said, still in her soft voice. "My grandmother was a fey woman with strange dark powers. But I did not ask for this evil gift. I did not ask to be cursed."

"Can we reach it?"

"I think so. I did not ask to be a witch-woman, Fezius, derided and scorned, feared and abhorred. My sister, the Princess Nofret, is a simple stern housewife—or will be as soon as she is married . . ."

"Not to Rodro?"

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"No. She has her man. A prince, of noble blood—"

Acutely, almost without reason, Fezius said, "A prince—of Sharnavoy?"

She turned on him like a tigress, like a krogar, like a griff with young.

"If you speak of that to anyone you are a dead man!" He flinched back.

"Very well, witch-girl, but there is no—"

"There is every need! Now watch your tongue."

Fezius sighed. "I was only going to say there's no one here who can profit much from the information."

She closed her eyes. When she opened them again she had command of herself. "I feel we can find this *place*—if you do exactly as I tell you."

"Don't I always?"

They worked their way through the strange trees and across an open space and so into another shrubbery. Many of the diminutive thumbings passed in their odd upright waddle. A fever of impatience gripped Fezius. He thought he could understand many things now, and the knowledge filled him with an urgent sense that time was wasting. He could follow the clues laid before him as well as any clever blasted knight or noble; Lai had to be protected against herself.

They ran and stood stock still; they darted into shadows and sprinted across dangerous sunlit open spaces; they ran, they were fugitives. One of the silent flying houses soared down to land on a projecting platform some hundred yards ahead. From it stepped Slikitters in a compact body. They carried weapons. Immediately the thumbings began to run toward them and a distant hullabaloo began. Then, with the final note of doom, thumbings appeared among the gardens carrying weapons: paralysis guns similar to Lai's and large knobbed sticks of menacing aspect and fearsome unknown powers.

"The hunt's really on now!" Fezius said. "They've come through the gate from Rodro's castle and now this whole world is searching for us—"

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"Searching for us to kill us!"

They crouched lower in the greenery, sweating, frightened, watching with cautious eyes the bustling activity as thumbblings armed with weapons searched for them.

"The gate is near," breathed Lai. "I'm sure of it."

They began to work their way through the shrubbery, cautious about any betraying movement of the foliage. Ahead stretched the low long facade of a columned building jutting from the rear of the ziggurat step. A pale ivory in color, its stone looked more weathered than the stone of the rest of the wall. Steps led up to it and shrubs in pots flanked the stairs, lending an exotic look to what was essentially a plain facade.

"We'll have to go around," Fezius said.

"No." She shook her head. "It's in there—I'm sure of it!"

"In there!"

"That's right. We've got to get in."

About fifty yards from the steps the shrubbery ended. A smooth open expanse of marble offered no cover. Fezius swallowed.

Feet sounded slapping the marble and a group of Slikitters marched past, their voice high and shrill, in marked contrast to those other Slikitters Fezius had heard. They carried weapons and they had armor buckled over their red scaled clothing. They looked and sounded angry.

A line of thumbblings began to sweep across the marble space, keeping their line and moving on with the obvious intention of ferreting out every living soul among the shrubbery. Fezius swallowed. He looked about him desperately. His mouth, despite swallowing, remained dry and hurting. In that moment of black despair capture seemed completely unavoidable.

Lai gripped his arm.

"Can't we risk it up a tree?"

He glanced up. Certainly the glossy green leaves and the sad purple fruit of the trees offered cover; but they stood out from the rest of the shrubbery. "It's taking a risk—"

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"Anything's better than being caught now that we are so near."

Two small people, they climbed the tree slickly and without disturbing the foliage. Ensconced aloft, Fezius peered cautiously through the leaves. The facade of the building and the steps showed tantalizingly near. A crashing and thrashing of branches dragged his attention back to the shrubbery. Below them a thumbling stepped out of the bushes into the tiny clearing around the tree in which they hid, trembling. The thumbling looked up.

All Fezius could do was fall out of the tree full on the heap of mustard-colored fur.

The weird creature collapsed under him like an emptying wineskin. It lay without moving, silent, its great human-like eyes closed.

Glancing up, Fezius saw Lai's white face peering down through the leaves. She motioned to him urgently.

In reply he gestured for her to come down.

As soon as she had joined him, she whispered, "Why come down? Hadn't we better get up again?"

He shook his head. "No. This was a sweep line. They meant to flush us out. But we've broken through the line. I think we can make a run for it now—"

She nodded, excited. "Yes, of course."

Looking at her, Fezius saw her pert face suddenly tauten, grow hard and ridged, and her violet eyes glare with shocked horror. He whirled about.

A man had stepped into the clearing. That was the first thing Fezius noticed: a *man*.

He held a stick in his hands, and Fezius knew by now that this stick with sharp projections was no stick. The tube lifted to point. Silently, Fezius charged. He clapped his hand down to draw Peaceful and his hand slapped an empty scabbard. A terrible dismay gripped him that, so close to breaking through, they had been captured in the last moments—by a human being.

The man caught him by the leather tunic. Fezius tried

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to hit him. The man chuckled and lifted. Fezius found himself suspended in air, kicking.

In a deep melodious voice the man spoke words Fezius could not understand. After a moment, Lai spoke, again in words that meant nothing to Fezius. The man answered.

"He says," Lai said with a smile in her words, "that if you promise not to kick or bite he'll put you down."

Never in his whole life before had Fezius felt so humiliated.

He managed to grate out, "All right!" But the bile in him prohibited anything further. He was plunked down on the ground and he stood, breathing deeply and hard, glaring at Lai and the newcomer, who stood talking together as though they were old friends.

"Who is this buffoon?" Fezius at last demanded.

"Fezius! He is a man, a friend. He is called Sam Rowf."

The stranger was a big man; he would have made three or perhaps four of Fezius. He wore tight trousers and heavy brown boots laced to the calf. His massive chest and shoulders were covered by a dark green shirt and a russet brown tunic with many pockets, all flapped down. His belt contained a large number of pouches, and two more similar pouched belts crisscrossed his chest. On his back a large pack was strapped, with bulky packages appended to it. Many odd sticks and implements hung about him, cases dangled on his chest, and what Fezius guessed must be weapons were holstered at his sides. He also wore a sword that, to Fezius, was of a proper length but was of an incredible thinness.

Over all, as though crowning the final glory, he wore a floppy wide-brimmed hat with a tiny iridescent feather in the band.

As to his face . . . Fezius saw a genial, ruddy face with a fine beaked nose, a pugilist's jaw and a pair of bright brown eyes like a cheeky bird's. He thought of Offa and shuddered at any contest between these two.

Then Lai, who had been carrying on a bright conversation during Fezius' inspection of this scarecrow, swirled

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around. "He came through the gate! There *is* a gate here! Sam came through!"

Jealousy made Fezius say, "I expect his coming through took all the gate's energies for a couple of weeks!"

"Oh, Fezius!"

"Well, I'm not staying argy-bargy with a grinning idiot like that. Come on, Lai—"

Lai interrupted as Sam Rowf spoke. "He says the place seems to be stirred up. Can he be of help . . . ?"

"Tell him," said Fezius briskly, grasping Lai's arm, "to get lost."

As he spoke he felt a mean little sensation of shame that the bronzed stranger could not understand what he was saying. Lai drew her brows down and Fezius saw that the thunder was going to break out there. Trust any woman to be bowled over by a handsome stranger. It was always the way.

Sam Rowf lifted the weapon in his hands with a quick savage motion. Watching him, for one horrified instant Fezius thought he was going to shoot both Lai and himself; then a brown finger pressed and the stick weapon coughed like a barking marlimet. And, like those banded wild animals of the wastes, the weapon's power of destruction lashed out with demoniac force. Whirling, Fezius saw a file of thumbings breaking through the shrubbery fall away, their twig-like arms clutching and groping.

"He's telling us to run!" Lai shouted as Rowf snapped strange words at them. "He says he'll cover us."

"Come on then!" Fezius started to run and then, in the midst of that mad hurly-burly of action, shouted back, "Thanks, Sam!"

Lai shouted the two words back and Rowf, his weird stick weapon snouting for more customers, shouted something back that Lai pointedly did not translate.

Looking back over his shoulder, Fezius was not aware of any obstruction until he felt his ankles collide with a soft unmoving bulk and he pitched over onto his side. At once, like a cat, he was on his feet.

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"Wait, Fezius!" screamed Lai. Swiftly she bent to the prostrate form of the thumbling. Fezius saw her deft fingers removing the thing's weapons and then she was up and running with him.

In ten strides they had burst through the end of the shrubbery. All across the open marble space thumblings and Slikitters were running and gliding toward the opposite end of the bushes. For a single flashing instant Fezius glimpsed Sam Rowf running.

Ahead lay the long columned facade, with it the stone walls buttressing the higher ziggurat levels towering behind it. Running with the breath clogging his throat, forcing Lai along, Fezius ran.

A single Slikitter stood on the steps.

Fezius gave him no chance.

He hit him low and hard, with a sharp-edged shoulder nudging in where it would do the most good. The weird creature screamed and collapsed, striking its head against a step and dislodging a band that sparkled in the sunshine.

Without breaking her stride Lai stooped and lifted the translator band. She ran at Fezius' side as they climbed the steps and raced into the blue dimness between the columns.

The chill of the place fell on them like a spray of ice.

"This way!" panted Lai, running like a wild nymph of the woods, her apple-green gown now mere appendages at breast and waist. Sweat had run down Fezius' face to mingle and streak the soot and flour. His tunic showed scratches and tears, the apron he had worn for that fleeting small-boy disguise was long since ripped away, and his empty scabbard was flapping at his heels. They presented an appearance of jocund simpleness, two waifs strayed in from the country, still with the marks of the haystacks on them.

"Where?" he shouted, his voice ringing among the tall columns, sending blue-gray birds wheeling below the eaves.

"I'm trying to find it, but it is hard—there are conflicting currents—"

"Didn't that buffoon tell you where, then?"

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"Yes, but—but—"

The tramp of steel-shod feet clanged from the marble floor.

"Slikitters! They're coming this way! Hurry, hurry!"

"I can't find it—I can't . . ."

"Try! Try harder!"

"The door—the door—the *place*!" She was sobbing and panting and gasping with mental effort that overshadowed the strain of her physical exertions.

"Look for a door like the other one!"

"It's not here! I can't find it!"

He stopped the running. He bundled her into a space between two columns, away from the sunshine. He gripped her biceps. He shook her. He shook her until her coppery hair, sullen in that blue-shadowed dimness, fell and flowed over her face, to brush against the tears and the grime.

"Think, Lai! Think! That man Rowf came through here—unless he was lying. *He* came through; *we* are going back the same way!"

"Yes, Fezius. Oh, yes—*please*!"

He took a breath and stopped shaking her.

"Use your brains. Let your power or whatever it is flow out. *Feel!* Feel, woman, *feel!*"

"I—I . . ." She hung her head.

He put a hand beneath her chin, snapped her head up.

The sound of Slikitters approached. Steel ringing against steel and iron against marble, the executioners came to finish their work. Fezius slowly moved her head to and fro, sideways, gently.

"Think, Lai. Think where the *place* is. Think of those you love, your sister, think of all that we're trying to do." He breathed harder, shorter, with the sound of trampling metal louder in his ears. "Think of me, Lai—"

Lai stiffened. A distant, trance-like look transfigured her face, so that for a moment Fezius thought he held an angel. He took a pace back, awed and terrified and sweating.

"I can feel . . . for your sake, then, Peredur, for your sake."

She pivoted like a compass needle.

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She began to walk away from him, slowly, rigidly, her legs taut, her arms lifting to a dramatic pointing gesture that commanded absolute obedience. Fezius followed. Deeper between the maze of columns they moved, leaving the sunlight in shrunken shafts on the marble. Lai halted. She half tilted her head. Coming up close to her, Fezius put a tentative hand on her arm.

"Now," she whispered. "This is a *place*—one of my gates. It is not a mechanical artificial door; it is natural and free and ready to receive us if only I will it so—"

From the tail of his eye Fezius caught feral movement. Dark shapes moved against the distant column-obscured brightness. Metal clanked against metal. Feet slithered on marble. Slikitters and thumbings, both, were searching the unending rows and ranks of columns.

The columns rose into blue darkness. Spaced evenly about the floor, in every direction, they hemmed in every physical action, hemming in thought as well.

Lai sighed.

"Hold me," she said dreamily.

Holding her, feeling the firm softness of her against him, Fezius still could not shut his mind to those evil shapes sniffing through the forest of pillars.

"Hurry!" he said with a grunt.

He felt the tenseness in her as a twin current, a separate but conjoined stream with the mystic dreaminess and the magical aura. He had a flashing idea that she was putting her witching knowledge to use with a very practical grasp of the world. He felt a strange and queazy sensation. Lai gasped and screamed with a single sudden high-pitched shock of sound.

Everything went black.

Wherever he was, Fezius knew he was no longer in the same world.

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VIII

IN THE fraction of a second before he opened his eyes and brilliant lights made him blink, Fezius asked, "Who the hell's Peredur?"

Clasped in his arms, Lai said, "What?" in a shocked and distant tone.

He opened his eyes and looked to see where he was.

He stood in a room. A large room, furnished in a style completely unfamiliar to him, it yet was clearly luxurious, filled with precious objects and pictures and fine furniture, the floors covered by soft carpets and deep-pile rugs, the windows one single wide sweep of glass. Fezius had never seen so much glass in one unbroken pane before.

Lai moved in his arms and, reluctantly, he let her go.

At once she crossed to a great stuffed armchair and sank down, putting her hands to her head, her face white and drawn.

A man's voice said something in a language unfamiliar to Fezius. He looked at the man, seeing him starting up from a chair opposite Lai's, his face white and shocked and affording a strange parallel to hers.

Fezius knew now, without doubt, they had not gone through Lai's gate back to Venudine. He had really known he would not all along, ever since he had worked out the height of this gate above the ground, and the arrival of the man Sam Rowf had merely confirmed his guess.

Slowly, ignoring the others, Fezius moved across to the long window. He looked out, not eagerly; he looked out for information.

His eyes told him what he was seeing; but the truth of what he saw took time to sink in. Incredible, it reminded him somehow of the towers of Slikitter; but here no vapors

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coiled to obscure the ground. Spearing into the sky tower after tower of glittering windows reached fingers up to heaven. Below, the narrow streets were choked with moving people, with carriages that moved like black beetles without horse or vanca to move them—down there everything crawled with motion. A high sky with fluffy clouds rested over this great collection of towers. The windows in the flanks of the buildings winked cheerfully at him. A flying house, smaller than those he had seen in Slikitter, and making a distant noise, settled onto the flat roof of a tall blade-sectioned building where giant hieroglyphs caught the sun.

Lai said, "Here, Fezius. These people are friends. Put this on."

He turned to take the jeweled band from her. She helped him adjust it on his head, clucking away to herself as his clumsy fingers tilted it.

"There. Now we can talk."

He said, "I think we have great need of going back to Venudine. I am thinking of Offa, and of your sister the Princess Nofret."

The strange-looking man who had been so startled at their appearance now looked fairly beside himself with excitement. His hair shone thick and white in the sunshine pouring into the room, and his face, thin yet with rosy cheeks and a charming smile, made Fezius believe for an instant that he must mean them well. The man wore a strange outfit of some yellow and white and black material, small dots of the color reminding Fezius of nothing so much as the pepper and salt Offa would strew on the scrubbed wooden table on which he'd beat and roll a tasty loin. The man moved with a pert briskness, a finicky yet perfectly controlled series of mannerisms that would, in other circumstances, have made Fezius smile.

Lai said, "No, this is not Venudine, Fezius—and neither is it Sharnavoy."

"Not Sharnavoy!" Now real disappointment hit Fezius. "I had thought we'd—"

The stranger said, in a firm but faded voice, "I'd like you

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to tell me your names, and what dimension you have come from. We'd just been using this Portal and that perhaps attracted you—yes? I should say at the outset that I wish to be friends and would welcome you to Earth—specifically, to New York City.”

At first Fezius didn't take in the ironical fact that he was listening and talking to this man as though they both shared the same interests. “I don't care where we are,” he said truculently. “How do we get back to Earth—I mean, Venu-dine.” Only then did he realize that he was speaking with the aid of the jeweled band on his head and the translator equated Venudine and Earth—as, he suspected, it would also equate Sharnavoy and Slikitter with Earth.

“Gently, gently.” The man chuckled, walking across to a cabinet against the wall. He poured out two glasses of liquid. “Drink this. It'll help.”

Fezius drank quickly, impatiently, and spluttered a little. The stuff warmed but tasted vile.

“I'm David Macklin. I've been working on theories of the dimensions for years. I have—reasons—for knowing. But this is tremendous: two people from another dimension actually coming through here! I must tell Alec and Sarah, they'll be delighted.”

At the least, Fezius had expected surprise, dismay, even outright horror, when he and Lai materialized in another world. But this man took it all so calmly—Fezius reasoned that if he had just sent Sam Rowf through, then the sight of someone else coming back would not carry the same tang of shock.

Lai yawned. She had recovered from that abrupt fit of depressed weariness and now she began to prattle enthusiastically to David Macklin. The older man warmed to her alive femininity. Fezius, too, felt better and more able to handle his tiredness and he suspected some potion had been put in the drink.

The spot where he and Lai had entered this world had been marked, he now saw, by white tapes forming a circle on the carpet. He crossed over to a chair and sat down.

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The door opened and two people came in: a big bear-like man and a slip of a girl no bigger than Fezius himself. Shyly, she stood half a pace back from the big man, and her face showed a smooth innocence that Fezius, after the machinations of people all his life pushing him about, found strangely touching. He felt compelled toward this girl Sarah.

"Alec!" said Macklin, bubbling with good humor. "May I present—" Then he stopped.

Smiling, Lai . . . , "I am the Princess Lai of Farvanca and the Smiling Herds. And this is—ah—Sir Fezius Without."

The accent she put on the *sir* amused Fezius.

Shyly, Sarah came forward to be introduced.

Lai looked down at her. "What you must think of me! We do not all dress like this in my brother's kingdom."

"Princess!" said Macklin, with a sly smile at Alec. "Well, now—"

"It'll be one in the eye for the Contessa."

"Let us hope," Macklin said with a grim starkness, "she never has that pleasure."

Sarah said in a light, pleasantly modulated voice, "They both look very tired. I can feel that plainly enough. I think they need a rest before—"

Macklin nodded. "Quite right, as usual, Sarah. I don't know what we'd do without you." He turned to Lai. "I am right, am I not, in assuming you are the Porteur?"

Lai shook her head, smiling. "Porteur?"

"Why, it is your power that brought you through the Portal."

"Oh, that—yes."

"Well—?"

"And," Lai went on, "I do need sleep. We've been on the go without a rest for two days and a night—"

"So the days and nights keep pace in Venudine with those here." Macklin nodded. "I thought you'd come from Irunium, for a moment."

"Come with me, Lai." Sarah smiled, holding out her hand.

Obediently, Lai went.

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Alec looked down at Fezius, who, as when with Offa, refused to crook his head up sideways.

"Come along, Fezius. Or should I say Sir Fezius Without?"

"Fezius will do."

"And just what, may I ask," cut in Macklin, "are you without?"

"Without my rank, my castles, my lands, my people. Without the honor that money cannot buy." Fezius felt his tiredness now; this kindly old aristocrat's drink potion had served a transitory purpose, and Fezius didn't much care any more. "I was a Gavilan—" He thought he'd said that; but the word came out "Duke." Odd. "Now I am merely Sir Fezius Without."

"A true free lance," said Alec. He glanced across at Macklin. "I think Todor Dalreay of Dargai would like to meet this Sir Fezius."

"Maybe he will," Macklin said sourly. "The Contessa will soon know of this nodal point. She has her ways, the bitch." He nodded with a sudden access of weariness. "Go along with Alec, Fezius. We'll tell you all about it when you've rested up."

Fezius tried to protest. Acutely aware that Offa would be frantic with worry by this time, he had to assume that the big man would decide to go on down the river. Safe though they may have been beneath the vegetation of the bank from prying griff patrols for a few hours, that illusory safety would be shown for the sham it was by the first foot patrol that swept through. He had no idea he would be—detained—so long before returning to his barge.

That's what chivalry does for you, he told himself, as he followed Alec. He felt his tiredness now and his protest died. He'd just have to get back to his own world somehow and find Offa; he could not imagine life without him.

He slept on an impossibly comfortable bed in a bedroom of breathtaking luxury.

When he awoke Alec brought a tray filled with strange but immensely appetizing foods for breakfast. "If Offa could

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see these now, he'd break his heart." And he fell to, a huge appetite clearing the tray without delay.

In the large room with the picture window view of New York they sat to discuss what to do. Now it was night and the tall towers—skyscrapers—glittered with light like immense glowing insects preying on the night.

That glitter beating through the steady glow excited Fezius. He felt restless. He stared at the circle of white tape pinned to the carpet and he wondered.

Macklin said, "Sam should be well on by now."

Alec added, "If he got through."

Lai, butted in. "We spoke to Sam. On the other side of the gate—what you call the Portal."

Macklin nodded. "I assumed he'd crossed. I meant after. But now—"

Sarah lifted her head. Everyone looked at her.

"I think," she said, so softly, so tremulously, it sounded like a maiden's prayer, "I think Perdita is on to us."

Macklin stood up. Alec set his jaw. Lai, wearing one of Sarah's ultra-short dresses—a bright blue and orange zig-zag pattern that shot sparks into Fezius' eyes—said, "I can feel—this is most strange—I can feel something like a spider's web brushing against—against—ugh!" She covered her face with her hands. "It's disgusting! Horrible!"

"I know," said Sarah calmly. "I can feel it, probably more strongly than you."

That snapped Lai's head up. "What?"

"What you can sense is the clumsy attempt by a not-particularly-adept Porteur to seek out this nodal point." She nodded her pert head at the white-taped circle. All her shyness was stripped away from her, Fezius realized, when she spoke of Portals and Porteurs and incredible visits to other dimensions.

Lai held her shoulders up. Her face expressed surprise. Fezius smiled. Lai—his Lai, the witch-girl—had met a termagent here in the form of this simple, slim, shy young girl.

"I can—what do you call it?—Porteur people across to

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Sharnavoy without trouble. I brought Fezius and myself here. I would say I was quite adept."

Sarah's face showed absolute agreement. "Of course. I was commenting on your lack of knowledge of other Porteurs. You must have been operating on your own all the time."

Lai nodded stiffly.

"Are they close?" demanded Macklin.

Sarah lifted her head. She did not adopt the trance-like stance that Lai affected. Judicially, she said, "They are fumbling as though operating outside Manhattan. They're off the island, I'm sure of it. They could be in a helicopter. But they're coming closer."

"They'll find this place for sure," said Alec.

"And then Perdita will let her Trugs loose."

"Those beasts obey her in an uncanny way." Macklin was clearly apprehensive. "I don't like tangling with them. Remember what Bob Prestin told us about them? Ugh!"

The air of menace in the room penetrated with an unpleasant stealth to Fezius. He knew these people stood in deadly fear of this strange Contessa Perdita and her Trugs. But the most frightening thing of all to Fezius was the way in which this fear and this menace threatened them: at second-hand, relayed to them from the air by a slip of a girl, coming to them from the mysterious regions of the mind. Used as he was to the shock of combat and the ring of sword on plate iron, Fezius found a deeper dread in these insubstantial terrors.

He had been given a smooth thin shirt and a pair of trousers that were far too large for him and had to be tucked up and belted in. He had insisted on wearing his own sword belt with the empty scabbard swinging from its lockets. Now his hand strayed down to that useless gaping mouth with the blood dried on the fur. He would have to renew that at the first opportunity.

"What do we do?" asked Sarah. "I'll give them at least four hours before they hit the block. After that they will probably be quick."

"We'll have to leave. It's a good thing Sandy's really gone

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away; no complications there." Macklin spoke with authority now. "They may not know we are here. If they do, we shall find out soon enough. If they don't, then perhaps we can use this place again, later, when they are gone."

"We'll have to," Alec said, "unless Sam finds another way out."

Fezius cleared his throat. "I do appreciate that your good selves have problems," he said. Even as he spoke he knew he sounded trite and insincere; but he had to go on. "But Lai and I have to get back to Venudine fast." He explained the situation briefly as he saw it, aware that Lai had given her own views. "Offa won't wait forever, and I wouldn't want him to, not with skeins of griffs everywhere."

"We've got to get out of here," said Macklin. "I'll fetch a map—" He crossed to a drawer and took out a folded sheet of paper which he spread out. "Here's a map of New York—"

Fezius felt shock at the number of streets, at the sheerly swarming scale of the place. Yet this penthouse apartment here in New York was coexistent in the dimensions with the ziggurat level just above the cloud mass on Slikitter. Fezius had thought the black bulky buildings were tall and he had been right.

"Here." Macklin pointed. "Here we are." He put a finger down on one of the rectangles that in bemusing frequency occupied the whole space of the island. "Now which way from here is this Griff Tower of yours?"

"It's about here," Fezius began—and then stopped.

Lai gasped.

Of course. They'd come through two dimensions, not one. They'd been trying to reach the Griff Tower—how far they had come? Which way around had they been turned during that grisly chase, fleeing from the thumbings and the Slikitters? Fezius looked helplessly down.

"Well, Fezius?"

"How far did we get, Lai?"

She cocked her head, looking down her nose. "I guess—

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I can only guess—one of those black buildings must have been as big as a block here. But that bridge—”

Fezius did a spot of mental arithmetic—not his strong point—and said, “I think we’d barely begun. We’d crossed from one bridge structure to another. Here.” He put his finger on the map. “This is where the Griff Tower is.”

The map contained a number of small red crosses; not many, perhaps a dozen. When Macklin had told Fezius where they were he had put his finger on a red cross. Now Fezius had indicated an area without a red mark.

“A new one!” said Sarah. “That’s interesting.”

“Each red cross represents a nodal point,” Alec explained. “I know what you’re thinking, Dave.”

“Well . . .” Macklin was obviously at a loss for words.

“It must be a helicopter,” said Sarah sharply. “They’re swinging nearer much faster now.”

“That horrible fingering sensation.” Lai shivered.

Fezius warily glanced at her and felt concern at the strain lines around her eyes, the down-droop of her lips, the way that glorious red-copper hair seemed somehow scragged back, giving the front of her forehead a domed look it certainly should never have had. The lights blazed brightly in the room, where warmth and luxury showed in every appointment and Fezius saw the stark contrast with the dark outside beyond the windows, the dark formless night from which came terror.

The shave which he had performed with some miraculous silvery razor blade in a little handle, the wash, the new clothes, the food, all these things could only weigh down a little in the scales against the clutching cold of the terrors stalking in from the formless night.

He shook himself, and turned back into the brilliantly lit room. These fantasy nightmares were for men who were unaccustomed to a sword swinging at their side.

Before they left, Alec gave a coat to Fezius, one of Macklin’s, which was still too large for him. “You’d better take off that scabbard, Fezius. The New York cop is a trifle leery of that sort of thing.”

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Sarah checked the translator band in his hair, which, thick as it was, hid the narrow strap. Reluctantly, Fezius unbuckled his sword belt. He held it in his hand. Clucking, Sarah found a newspaper and wrapped the scabbard for him so that it looked like an innocuous parcel. With a light coat for Lai supplied by Sarah they were ready. Lai touched the paralysis projector in a purse borrowed from Sarah. "We might need this," she said to Fezius in a low voice.

He nodded. "Just so long as our friends are still all right. I'm worried Offa will do something silly."

Only as they descended in a smaller version of that moving box of the Slikitter building did Fezius think to wonder at the calm way in which David Macklin and his friends had accepted the story told them and acted on it to help them.

"It's an elevator," Alec was saying to Lai. "Or, if you're in England, it's a lift. We commute pretty freely. As for old Bob Prestin, he was a fairly representative example of the mid-Atlantic jet set."

"I'm sure," said Lai. Fezius hid his smile. Trust his little witch-girl to keep her end up in any company.

"Did you say *was*, Alec?" asked Sarah.

"Well . . . he'll be back, I don't doubt—but—"

Surprising them all and making them jump, Macklin suddenly burst out, "Alec! The clothes—Lai's and—"

"I know, I know. Calm down, Dave." Alec soothed him. "I burned them all. Disposed of the ashes. It's okay."

"Burned them!" said Fezius, bewildered.

"The Montevarchi will be sniffing around the apartment before long. Everything must appear normal. We've lifted the taped circle—we know the dimensions—and the place looks as though no one has come through a nodal point. Our contessa is shrewd, but I don't think she'll realize we've been there already."

The elevator stopped, the doors opened and, in a compact body, they shouldered out into the New York night.

Fezius didn't like the smells and the sidewalks felt hard

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after the softer stone of Venudine; but he had to admit that this place held a rushing surging life that could catch a person up. As he went along, he learned proper names, reasons, people, shops, stores, signs. By the time they had walked four blocks, quite deliberately so that the two people from another dimension could absorb the life of the city, Fezius and Lai, besides knowing a great deal more, also walked with three tired companions.

Alec hailed a cab without undue haste and they all piled in. The sensations of the ride churned around in Fezius' stomach. He thought he had gone white and, not wishing Sarah—or Lai—to notice, he kept his nose pressed against the window, looking out. The cab fled downtown.

Alec said, "I should have thought after riding one of your flying birds—what d'you call them, griffs?—a jaunt in a cab wouldn't worry you at all."

"They're not birds," Fezius said shortly.

Still and all, what was there to worry over this? They had explained that energy was manufactured by the engine in the front and this turned the wheels. Griffs used their own energy to flap their wings. Griffs ate food to produce energy and this cab thing used gasoline. It all added up to the same thing in the end. So thought Fezius.

The cab driver cocked an eye back at his fares with the obvious thought in his head that he was carrying a load of nuts. Sarah burst out laughing. Alec and Macklin chuckled. Lai smiled brightly. Fezius held on to the side and thought of Offa.

The whole of life wasn't hating and fighting and warring. These people of Earth had accepted Lai and him, helped them, given them food and lodgings and clothes, cared for them and were now trying to assist them back into their own dimension. That proved something that Fezius, for one, had thought had run down into the sewers with his parents' blood. You could look, he had thought, for true friendship only from the most minute handful of people from the broad masses, for all the nobility were rotten to the

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core. It took years to know anyone and years more to trust them. Offa, he trusted—who else?

These new friends from Earth? Lai? Well . . .

He'd like to go kragor hunting with them. That sorted out the men from the boys and friends from sycophants. Most men used a kragor-spear with wide wings, the famous quilloned kragor-spear of legend; but recently a new crop of young men, and chief among them Fezius himself, had taken up the lunatic-dangerous sport of kragor hunting with swords. You stand there with a sword, even a true blade like Peaceful, facing the slaver jaws and the twelve inch tusks of a kragor, tusks that could disembowel in a single flashing twist of the blunt head, and you'd know who your friends were.

He looked around the cab. Discounting sex and age, he had a strange and unsettling idea he could count on them all—even Lai.

As though following his line of thought, Fezius heard Alec say, "I'd really like to come through with you, Fezius. See a little action." Fezius expressed his surprise. Surely these people of Earth couldn't hear his own thoughts, could they?

"You're needed here, Alec. Sam's taking care of the rough stuff. If the Montevarchi catches up with us—"

"Yeah, I know." Alec sighed. "I'll tangle with her again. But I sure am tired of hearing all about these wonderful adventures and not being able to go and have a basinful myself!"

Sarah smiled wickedly at him. "You behave yourself, Alec, you big bear, or I'll porteur you to a world of dusty fusty old men in bathchairs sitting in an abandoned city by a dried-up sea. That'd cure you."

Alec pretended to be terrified. "You wouldn't, would you, Sarah, my little sex-bomb?"

She looked around for something to throw at him and then the cab stopped and they all got out, Macklin paying off the cabbie, who regarded them as though they'd just emerged from the pit engulfed in sulphur and brimstone.

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"The Montevarchi," said Macklin, straightening up, his face mottled color under the street lighting, "will catch up with us; it's not a question of if."

"Still and all." Alec sighed. "Just to put on a complete suit of steel armor, all the panoply of plate, and try a few hand strokes with your adversary—"

Fezius laughed dryly. "We don't wear suits of armor—what a strange word! We wear harness. And armor is made from iron, pure hard iron, not steel. You'd have much to learn, friend Alec."

Alec took the corrections in good spirit. "I know, I know, it was sloppy language on my part. But the idea of it all, that's what gets me." He patted an inside pocket of his suit. "I have to stick to the weapons I know."

"From what you've told us about the sudden emergence of plate armor, and the horse, and the stirrup," Macklin said as they walked on, "I'd guess that someone from our world went through to Venudine during the time of our own armor-dominant period—perhaps just after so that all the glory of armor could flower without those horrid archers and handgun men cutting down the flower of chivalry."

"Flower of chivalry," said Fezius. "Ha!"

"As to the horrid caliver men," put in Alec. "I'm—"

"Of course, Alec!" chimed Sarah saucily. "We all know!"

Everyone laughed—even Fezius. He warmed to these new friends. But he had to say, "The halberd and bill men are able to chop down their knight, quite adequately."

"You do have the poleax, then? And the pole-hammer?"

"Yes. They tend to mangle armor—and the man inside."

"Your chivalry's a dead duck, then, just like ours."

"And that's why," said Macklin, "your Palans Rodro—we'd say Baron Rodro, I suppose—wants this deal with the Slikitters. He could dominate your whole world."

"Do you think the Contessa is in with him?" asked Sarah.

Fezius noticed the way these Earth people looked when they spoke of this uncanny woman—the Contessa Perdita Francesca Cammachia di Montevarchi—a look composed of fear and hatred and loathing and deep contempt.

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"If she is," Macklin said gravely, "then God help Venu-dinel"

Sarah lifted her head, a hunting look on her face, sharp-pointed, eager.

"You'd better tell Fezius about the Porvone," said Alec.

"As to those fiends," said Macklin, still in his serious, slightly faded voice. "They are animate objects to be avoided at all costs. They are terrible. A man's spirit cannot stand against—"

He broke off as Sarah clutched his arm, leaving Fezius with a deep unknown dread of these Porvone, a dread formed from impressions of other persons' fears.

"What is it, Sarah?"

"I think . . ." she said. "I am almost sure. Lai—do you sense a Portal here, a nodal point?"

Lai shut her eyes and extended her arms. Sarah smiled. Shaking her head, Lai said, "I can feel no *place* here."

"It's got to be!" Fezius said positively. "If this is near the point I saw on your map."

Macklin gestured up and down. Lights burned, men and women walked about their own business, cars thrummed on the street, noises of a great city sounded in the night. "This is the point."

Baffled bewilderment struck at Fezius. If this was the point, near enough to the Griff Tower, then why couldn't they find it? He felt trapped in quicksands, dragged down, engulfed, sucked in like a strayed animal down by the Black River.

"The Griff Tower's *got* to be here, somewhere!"

Alec looked about on the sidewalk, his craggy face crinkled. "You said this fellow came through here?"

"Yes. He said he was called Shim Gahnett." Lai's face showed the strain under which she suffered. "I think," she said, hesitantly, her arms wide and rigid, "I think it *is* here, somewhere close."

Sarah nodded quickly. "Yes. It's below us somewhere. Beneath our feet!"

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They all looked down at the sidewalk, at the paving stones, hard and unyielding, laid on top of the primeval basalt of Manhattan Island.

IX

"BUT THAT'S all rock! You told me!" Fezius stared down stupidly, his mind's eye surveying the thick and close-packed strata of rocks right down into the earth. "How could Gahnett have been down there?"

Both Sarah and Lai remained adamant. They could feel, albeit faintly, a nodal point in the rock beneath them.

Macklin had Fezius tell him exactly what had happened in the Griff Tower, as Offa and Fezius had fought off Red Rodro the Bold's men while Lai tried desperately to send her sister, the Princess Nofret, through the gate to Sharnavoy. Sarah listened intently.

"But instead of sending your sister through, you brought this man Jim Garnett back?"

Jim Garnett. Shim Gahnett. Different worlds, different pronunciations.

Lai looked mutinous.

"I was trying for Sharnavoy, a place to which I had often gone and taken Nofret with me. She is the eldest sister, she is the princess, the princess prime. We went there a lot, especially after my father died and the world became so much harsher to us."

Around them now the lights and sound and movement of downtown New York thumped blindly to the overcast sky. No nights had ever been like this in Venudine.

Lai went on: "It was difficult. Even when I found the place I couldn't move Nofret. Then"—she paused and her eyes widened and Fezius knew she was recalling those dramatic moments in the Griff Tower—"then it was as though

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I had received help. Someone else—some power of which I had no inkling—helped me, nudged me, pushed—”

“Pulled, I think you mean,” said Sarah judiciously.

“Well, it wasn’t *me* who brought this Shim Gahnett through. But he came. And this is the *place*!”

Alec walked back from where he had wandered off, smiling. “Mystery explained!” he told them cheerfully. “That sporting goods store there—I remember the setup from a couple of years back. They’ve a gallery down in their basement and it must extend through under the street, no doubt avoiding power lines and sewers.” He made a face. “I had had unpleasant thoughts we might have to go crawling through the sewers—”

When the concept of *maxima cloaca* had been explained to Lai and Fezius they, too, thinking of their castle moats, pulled relieved faces. They all walked across to the store display window.

“Look!” said Fezius, pointing, excited. “Those things there—the two tubes, and the wooden handle. Gahnett had one of those—”

“Shotgun. No wonder he messed up armor-plated knights.” Macklin nodded as Alec spoke.

“We’ve got to do something. The Contessa will be here soon. We can’t break into the store, yet we’ve got to get in to use the Portal in the shooting gallery—”

“Checkmate,” said Alec, with a lift of eyebrow at Sarah.

She shook her head at once, annoyed with the big man.

“No! You could open this can—isn’t that your disgusting expression?—in five minutes.”

“My tools don’t happen to be on me, sexy.”

“Oh!” She glared at him, clenching her fists.

Fezius had no time for this pretty byplay of characters. Apart from not catching the drift of Alec’s jocular categorization of Sarah, who appeared to him eminently desirable, he wanted to get into this store.

“You say we’ve got to go down into this place’s basement?”

“That’s right, Fezius,” confirmed Macklin. “And it’s locked up tight for the night.”

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Fezius couldn't see the problem.

Without taking note of the others' expressions or reactions he took off the coat lent him, wrapped it into a large clumsy bundle around his right fist, and with a quick snake-like striking of arm punched his fist clean through the glass.

In the riven tinkling of glass and the smashing cascade of larger pieces tumbling and smashing onto the sidewalk Alec exclaimed, "I don't believe it!"

Fezius, without bothering to reply, kicked the lower triangular jags loose and clambered into the lighted window. Lai followed at once. The three people who belonged to this world of Earth gaped after them.

Lai turned, knocking over a stand of the shotguns and looked at Sarah with a face emotionally descriptive of a pathetic appeal for help. "Sarah—pushing people through the gate directly from Earth to Venudine is harder than either to Sharnavoy or Slikitter—perhaps they are farther away among the dimensions—but I do not think I can manage alone. Will you help me?"

At once Sarah cocked her legs over the glass shards and joined Lai in the window.

Fezius blundered through the back, knocking things over and blinking as the lighted window gave way to the gloom of the shop interior. Macklin and Alec, like men who watch their griffs take off without them, exchanged looks of helpless confusion, and then leaped through the window after the other three.

"The cops will be here in nothing flat," said Sarah, sweetly to Alec. "I hope you'll have a convincing story ready for them."

"I don't intend to see the fuzz," growled Alec. "As soon as you do your dinky dimension-trotting work we're running—fast!"

Fezius, searching for the stairs, heard Lai whisper, "I can sense the gate now! It is here, Fezius, it is!" Then they were racing down the stairs into darkness. Alec followed them, producing lights by touching knobs on walls. In a body they ran into the shooting gallery.

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"You'll have to pay for that window, Davel!" said Sarah, the laughter in her voice making Fezius, for a brief moment only, believe that she was about to be hysterical. He saw she was enjoying the whole affair hugely.

Macklin took slips of green colored paper from his wallet. "I'll leave it here. Yes, Alec?"

"You're the financial wizard of the organization."

"Come on!" shouted Fezius, cross with them. Money—well, easy come, easy go. One tournament could pay a quarter's expenses, another lose twice as much. He moved on and then halted, frowning. "Where exactly is the gate, then?"

Sarah's amused glance swept him, and he felt a sudden quick ridicule flow from her, as rapidly stifled. "It's not as—ah—easy as all that, Fezius."

"All I know is that Offa might—"

"There's the fuzz!" interrupted Alec. A strange rising and falling moaning became audible, sifting down from the street. "Make it snappy, you girls!"

"Men!" sniffed Sarah, with a glance at Lai.

"Yes, and that'll attract the Contessa," observed Macklin sourly. "Would it be too much to ask you two young ladies to increase your valuable exertions? I don't mind paying for the window our recklessly gallant friend knocked out; but I do object to becoming mixed up with the police over the matter."

"Don't worry so much, Davel!" advised Sarah. She changed her tone of voice, saying sharply to Lai, "Here?"

Lai nodded.

Fezius realized that all the banter covered a deep and dangerous purpose.

"You're tough enough, anyway," Alec told Fezius. "I wouldn't have believed you could have smashed a plate glass window like that—especially with your point of impact muffled—if I hadn't seen it."

Fezius replied off-handedly: "When you've been trained all your life to batter through plate armor you develop tricks of striking. It was only glass, anyway."

"Yes, Sarah?"

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"Yes, Lai!"

Lai grasped Fezius. Outside the pool of light falling onto the shooting end of the gallery, leaving darkness to cloak the targets, shadows moved. Harsh feet clumped down the synthetic stone steps.

"Here comes the fuzz!"

"Hurry, girls!"

"Hold onto me, Fezius. *Tightly!*"

Fezius clipped his arms around her waist, drawing her to him, feeling her breasts crush against his own chest. The blood pounded in his head. Footsteps clattered nearer.

"Sarah!"

Lai's call echoed.

From the shadows large men in dusty blue uniforms and shiny badges threw themselves on Alec and Macklin, who did not resist but seemed, somehow, to position themselves before the couple so closely embraced.

"What's going on down here?"

"Why'd you break that window, huh, punk?"

"Hurry, girls!" shouted Alec again, clumsily colliding with two of the policemen.

A third policeman shoved David Macklin out of the way. Macklin's parchment-white hair glowed beneath the lights as he staggered away. Sarah screamed.

"What is this, an orgy or somethin'?"

"It's opening!" screamed Lai.

The policeman grabbed for Fezius' shoulder. Fezius half turned, ducked his head, and still holding Lai battered the policeman's hand away with the hard crown of his head.

Something bright flashed falling before his eyes.

Alec jumped. He grabbed the policeman by the collar and pulled him back and, in almost the same movement, it appeared to Fezius, pulled a stumpy metal object from his inside pocket and threw it at Fezius. Fezius lifted his left hand and caught the metal, still warm from Alec's pocket. Then queasy sensations fluttered in his stomach. He bent his head sharply, feeling Lai's reciprocal movement against him.

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He imagined he was being tilted end over end like a man on the wheel.

Blackness showered blood red drops over his skull.

The whistling clacking of griffs spiked down from overhead and echoed eerily in the stone chamber.

"We never even said thank you and goodbye!" said Lai, half laughing, half crying.

Fezius still held her.

Her voice sounded odd.

Holding her like this, all the softness of her in his arms, knowing they were back in Venudine beneath the old stones of the Griff Tower, feeling the slow sucking of released emotions in his guts, he found a single bright mental image of Sarah flashing on his inward eye. Sarah. She was not an inch taller than he was.

"Let go, Fezius! I'm not anxious to be caught here."

He opened the circle of his arms and Lai stepped back, shivering her shoulders. He could just make her out by the scattered moonlight filtering through the crumbled door opening.

The last time he had been here he had readied himself to make his break for the river and the swim to bring the barge back. Then he had had Offa's bright ax to cover him. He had felt very naked, very insubstantial, without Offa's familiar presence.

He looked cautiously out of the shattered door.

The muddy pools threw back silver reflections. The path showed dark between masses of sedges and rushes, rutted and potholed, each rut and each pothole a slice of silver against the dark. The overcast sky leered down on them; occasional stray arms of vapor fled across the fat fair face of the moon and threw the land below into a deeper dusk.

"It looks clear." Fezius beckoned.

After his sleep and his shave and his massive breakfast, after a clearer overall picture of what this was all about, Fezius felt confidence within him stronger than at any time since this disastrous series of events had begun. He had met Lai and he had met Sarah and her friends. Now he must

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turn all his thoughts and attentions to the friend he knew without question, knew with a certainty dearer than life itself, that he could trust. For Offa, then, he must imperil Lai. . . . Was this the only course open to him?

Roughly, he made a decision.

"Lai, you'll have to wait by the tower. It should be safe enough."

She began to protest, but he cut her off sharply.

"Listen! We've got to reach the barge. Now that may be where we left it; or Offa, or even your sister herself, may have made the decision to move on downstream toward the Theater of Varahatara. So we're going to look pretty silly trying to walk there."

Lai, after a quick glance at Fezius, had remained silent, listening with a half-smile that Fezius refused to allow to infuriate him.

"So we'll need transport. There are no boats available here. I could walk into Parnasson either to pick up my own griff or to hire others. But—"

She overrode him. "Two points: one, it's going to take you a hell of a time to walk to Parnasson; and two, you could be arrested there so fast your feet wouldn't touch the ground."

"I know. I'm not going to walk to Parnasson. I'm going to fly there."

She laughed gently. "I don't see feathers or membranes on your limbs."

He knew, really, that he had been talking only because he was deathly afraid of what he was going to make himself do. Had he been the stuff from which the troubadours' true and parfait knights were cut he would simply have got on with it, instead of talking all around it. And—he had to admit this, being essentially honest with himself—he had half hoped, half feared, that Lai would talk him out of it.

"You wait here, Lai. And don't stray. Rodro's men will still be searching, unless—"

"Unless they've already found the Princess Nofret. I know."

He sloshed through mud to the rushes, where he selected a stem of a thickness and strength suitable for the task

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ahead. Alec had given him a knife and he cut the reed slantwise into a sharp and highly dangerous point. After he had cut a sheaf of thinner and more slender reeds he began to beat the ends out on a stone from the path and then to strip them down into long strings. Lai shrugged and sat down beside him and started in on helping plait the strings up into ropes.

"Make them good and strong," he said curtly. "Plait five ways and then five ways together. If they bust I could break my neck."

If she had divined what he was going to do—after all, it did not need any great intelligence to do that—she gave no sign. She must, he considered with some acerbity, regard her sister the princess as a person of superlative importance.

"That's about enough." Fezius stood up and looped the lengths of plaited rope around his left arm.

Quietly, Lai said to him, "You'll need my paralysis weapon."

Without questioning the continuation of their thoughts, he replied, "Won't that kill?"

"Not on reduced power. The charges I took from that thumbling in Slikitter give me back my own sense of values again, here in our own world." She stood up, brushing the last few strands of reed string from her bare knees. "I'll help."

He accepted her offer without thought. "Your paralyzer, then, and I'll do the rest." He added softly, "Or try!"

"You're taking a chance—a mad chance!" She had concealed her concern admirably. "If it weren't for Nofret . . ."

Almost, almost Fezius had said roughly, "It isn't. It's for Offa." But he did not speak. Now was no time to antagonize her, unstable in her reactions as he had found her, witch-like in very truth.

Fezius cocked his head back and looked up.

He'd lost his spurs somewhere along the way, but he felt no regrets over that. Apart from the difficulties imposed by his short legs, he had always thought spurs a little impractical for riding griffs. Spurs as another emblem of the knightly

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code and chivalric life had come in about the same time as horses and plate armor, and Fezius, with his new knowledge and David Macklin's hunch, realized that spurs were another Earthly import suitable for horses—and in this dimension vancas, too—but not particularly admirable, like the lance, for griff work. He tucked his sharpened stick under his arm.

Erratic wavering light pierced down from the moon as hurrying cloud masses spilled across the sky. A wind blew the sedges into rippling hissing motion. Up there on the tower wild griffs hissed in reply, whistling and clacking fitfully as they sought more comfortable positions in their hides.

Fezius began to climb the old worn stones.

He had tucked the sharp stick along with Lai's paralysis weapon into his belt and he felt the things digging into him as he climbed. As a climb, a mere exercise in gaining height, the ascent presented few difficulties. He could find plenty of hand- and footholds, and provided he didn't look down or lose his balance or do anything else stupid he wouldn't fall.

The problem he faced was getting over the top of the tower fast enough to avoid the first griff attacks.

Southerners trimmed their griff's talons, unlike Northerners, who were prepared merely to have them half-knocked; up there on the tower the griffs had no such precautionary measures taken against them and their talons would be hard and sharp and incredibly vicious.

Only subdued snorts and a diminishing whistling of wheezy notes floated from the draped hides of the aerie. The griffs had mostly settled down for the night. Lords of the surrounding animals of the countryside, answerable only to men for their misdeeds, the griffs had no need to post sentries, although often doing so in a probable behavioristic hang-over from earlier days. Fezius hoped this crew didn't have a sentinel watching.

He had chosen the downwind side of the tower. He was sweating enough to stink in the nostrils of a man with a seven day cold. He kept his jaws firmly clenched. If he didn't he'd chatter so much he could stop himself only by screaming

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blue bloody murder. Inch by inch he crawled up the riven slabs of stone, past the rose-pink algae-smothered stones from the long-dead rosebowl quarries, up past the newer, seven hundred year old gray stones of portballin, up higher and higher until he hung panting directly beneath the odoriferous bulge of a hide.

Now that the dire moment had arrived he hung there beneath the bulging reeking swag of the hide. For that moment he could not move. He could not have moved, not in that moment, if all the griffs in the world had come pecking and slashing at him. When that moment of frozen immobility had passed and been filed away with the rest of the lost moments of his life, he was ready to climb on and out and up over the hide, clinging to handfuls of grass and reeds, old sacking robbed from men, skins of animals, all the miscellaneous building materials griffs used to construct their aeries. The strength in his arms gave Fezius the capacity to swing out with his legs dangling free, hand over hand, until he reached the bulged lip of the hide.

Fanciful thoughts had entered his head of choosing his griff. He would carefully inspect and select. Choosing the right griff had been an indispensable part of his early childhood training, just as it was for every young noble. Details of wingspread, of chest development, of musculature; feeling of talons and fangs, of body fat and of hair and feather conditions; the right proportions of membrane to feather, one for speed the other for lift; the aspect of the bone-hooded eyes, which should be large and liquid and with the unmistakable light of intelligence deep within them—all these instructions he had painfully learned to carry out.

Now he was going to grab the first griff to hand.

He remembered the griff saddler he had been dodging around the camp. Ironic, strange, pathetic—the one thing he wanted now above all others, with the exception of a trained griff, dammit-all-to-Amra, was a griff saddle. He climbed on, ridiculing the pranks fate plays on the buffoons of life.

This hide contained half a dozen griffs, a family unit,

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he supposed, with the big prock griff snuggled down in the center, three little ones near their mothers, who in their turn snuggled down by the father. The prock was out, for a start. He'd be so rough it wouldn't even be a contest.

That left one of the females, for the young ones were too young. Some debased tribes far out to the west flew three year olds, so Fezius had heard; but a young griff could be broken down if ridden too early. With everything that hung at stake on this gamble, Fezius still found nothing strange in considering the welfare and handling of griffs as figuring largely in the scale of ethics. He'd never been a true knight, anyway, in spirit. They'd sometimes ride a griff to death for a wager.

He carefully eased a leg up to the thick rim of the hide, chesting himself with bulging muscles, until he could free his hand and reach for the paralyzer weapon.

A young griff snorted and a wing tip flicked fretfully. Fezius stiffened and remained stiff.

The griff whistled and its mother clapped her wing across it. In a smothering series of grunts and whoofles the griffs quietened down.

Fezius could feel the cold dampness of his forehead in the breeze. He felt sick. He shut his eyes, swallowed, and then opened his eyes firmly. So it would be the other marun griff. Maruns in general, except during breeding times, were more amenable than procks—which merely meant that they were not quite so savage; it certainly did not mean they were friendly.

He pointed the weapon and pressed the stud Lai had indicated. He wasn't quite sure what to expect and enormous visions of a gigantic flapping of wings and a gargantuan whistling filled his dizzied mind. The prock made a grunting noise and the little ones did nothing at all. The marun of his choice looked in good condition and he was able to harness his pathetic bits of plaited reed rope without trouble. He used the jacket David Macklin had given him as a saddle, tying it firmly with a cinch of reed rope; he tied a running slipknot, subsequently to be pulled tight and further down

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below the chest when the griff rose. The correct positioning of the girth so that it would not foul the wingbeat naturally figured large in all griff-training for if you muffed it it was a cinch you'd fall off.

He'd given up swallowing now; his mouth tasted as dry as an ashpit. Lai had said the paralysis would last ten minutes at the setting she had selected. Clumsily, he sat himself down on the recumbent griff, well up over the chest to the rear of the neck and clear of the wings.

In those last few moments he thought with an appalled clarity of his casual remarks to Offa about riding a wild griff, and of Offa's gruff: "By stanslaughter, the man who broke the first one was a man!"

He was no man, he was just a crazy idiot.

There was still time to get off and climb back down the tower.

Still enough time remained to get out of this without a broken neck, with a whole skin, with two eyes . . .

Those stupid tales the troubadours sang around the camp fires of vicious, half trained birds flown by mythical warriors in other times and other places—little they reckoned with the facts of flying animals, the nice degree of precision required, the very near symbiosis necessary if man and mount were not to crash in tangled confusion to the ground. Well. In a way, now, he was going some distance to proving those idiot storytellers right. . . .

If he did it, of course.

He felt a quiver in the beast beneath him.

No! he told himself. *I can't do this! I'm getting off!*

He slid his foot out of the reed and rope stirrup and the griff unleashed a wing and flapped once, like a single crack of thunder.

The big craggy old prock came back to consciousness first. One round wicked eye surveyed his family and his hide and Fezius, clinging and holding as still as he could, recognized that to the griffs no time would have elapsed. The griff beneath him stirred again, no doubt wondering how one of her children had got itself so tangled up and on top of her.

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The other wing banged. Fezius leaned along the neck, pulled the ropes tied to the griff's fangs left and right, and stuck the sharpened reed in firmly below.

With a whistling whoop and a gigantic flurry of slurred wingbeats, the griff rose. Fezius jabbed again.

Somehow or other his feet were in the stirrups again. He held on, pulling both ropes hard up, making the griff lift her head, jabbing foully with the stick. The griff snorted, whistled, screamed—and responding snorts and whistles cacophonied from the other hides. The aerie was waking up.

Wind brushed against Fezius' face. The wingbeats had straightened out now. The griff hadn't realized yet what had happened. She flew with a drunken amaze. The weight on her back, the thongs attached to her fangs and pulling her up and this way and that, the incredibly sharp and painful sting that nicked her flanks, all these impossible sensations remained still discrete. When she had sorted them out, made a picture of them, Fezius knew he was in for aerobatics such had never graced any flying academy of Venudine before.

Below him he caught a glimpse of Lai staring up. She waved.

"Get inside, you little idiot!" he shouted down. "Kerrumpitty, woman! I don't want you for griff-fodder!"

She waved again and turned for the crumbled door. Then the marun woke up.

The sky revolved, the earth did crazy things, the darkness wheeled with a dozen revolving moons. Wind slashed at him from all directions. The bright fangs twisted and turned as the griff tried to reach back. His forearm muscles hardened as he held back on the ropes. The cinch remained tight. The London-made jacket remained unripped. He was battered to and fro, swung up, swung down, twisted and re-twisted, jounced.

Down toward the earth they plunged, air blustering past them. At the last moment the marun smashed her wings down against the thicker air, flung herself up and all in the same instant threw herself over on her side.

Hanging in the ropes, clinging on remorselessly, Fezius

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deliberately jabbed in the stick on the lower side. The griff screamed. He jabbed again. He did not like this work; but if he was to ride this griff she must know he was the master.

Wild griffs were wild; she fought and lashed and screamed. He felt sick—he was sick, all over her glossy black coat and feathered and horned head. He held on and refused to be tricked, browbeaten, cajoled, thrown off. He held on.

The tip of the sharpened reed showed red-moonlight-black.

At last, and with a feeling of disbelief, he felt the griff flying upright and steadily, strong heavy wingbeats thrashing the air with level purpose. In the same instant the feeling of pride and power possessed him a rush of wind buffeted down on him and in a flashing microsecond of terror and instinctive reaction he ducked. The prock's talons raked air past his head.

The marun's mate was fighting to rescue her!

The male griff swooped in again with deadly purpose and only a savage nudge from Fezius thrust the marun aside to avoid that clashing wing-to-wing collision. Despair flooded Fezius. He had broken the marun to the saddle in fair contest. He had won—and now the odds had been devastatingly stacked against him. With his limbs shaking with weariness and his eyes clogged with fatigue he could never hope to hold off a prock, one of the most formidable fighting beasts of all Venudine.

The stark shadow swooped down from the moon again and he managed to stumble the marun aside.

Sweat clustered thickly and threatened to blind him. He gathered the reins into his left hand and dashed his right against his forehead. He saw his doom reversing across the face of the moon. Then—fool! Blind, stupid, idiot fool!—he snatched out the paralysis weapon, aimed it clumsily and with a snatched thought of Amra pressed the stud.

The prock half folded his wings and glided down.

For good measure Fezius shoved the weapon away and jabbed the griff he bestrode with the tip of the sharpened reed. She shuddered. Then he leaned forward and as though

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speaking to Honorable Lord Sunrise began to whisper into the feather-buried ear.

He surprised himself. Some fugitive fragrance of Lai and of Sarah scented his words and his harshness softened. The griff kept a level steady course for the stretch of river past Mugu Point. And all the time as they cut their way through the air he talked to the griff and petted her and did not use his jab again. But he kept it thrust down his belt, the red-denied tip black in the moonlight.

By the time the creamy moonwash of the river showed below he felt that he and the griff, whom he had named Lady Midnight in celebration of their raucous meeting, had arrived at a better understanding. He was under no illusions that she would not immediately leave for the Griff Tower the moment he set her free, and without wing-chains tethering her might present insoluble difficulties, nevertheless he gained in confidence minute by minute. He would tie her up somehow while he searched for the barge.

The barge first had been his decision; landing in Parnasson on a wild griff at night would attract far too much unwelcome attention. The river gleamed empty beneath. He touched down and at once, without giving Lady Midnight a chance to rake him, threw the rope over a clump of bushy trees and knotted it fast.

"There you little witch-griff! You start to chew through the rope. I just hope I'm back before you break free."

The night closed in on him with the muddy green river smell and the invisible rustle of vegetation. The moon illuminated the patch of riverbank and bushy overhang beneath which the barge should be moored. He hurried across, feeling the muscles jumping in his legs, the feel of the griff still hard and compressed between his thighs.

The barge was not there.

He acknowledged, looking down at the still water dark as old iron beneath the bank, that he had not expected the barge to be there. But it came as a shock. The blow had been half expected, partially anticipated; but after all, he had hoped—now he must fly Lady Midnight back to

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Parnasson despise himself. He must pick up Lai and together they must fly for the Theater of Varahatara.

That is—unless the occupants of the barge had been taken by Red Rodro the Bold.

X

LADY MIDNIGHT tended to cooperate less reluctantly the longer Fezius rode her, his chunky body bouncing on the London jacket, his spurless feet kicking when necessary, the sharpened reed now rarely used. Less reluctantly, yes; but thinking of Lai, Fezius guided the griff away from the Griff Tower—at which she put up her most determined resistance—and aimed her for Parnasson.

Dawn couldn't be far off, anyway. He had recovered from his sickness and felt hungry. Through the level air he flew, a short, bedraggled scarecrow of a man flying a griff only temporarily condescending to lend him her wingbeats, with plaited reed rope for harness and a jacket for a saddle. He reached Parnasson before false dawn and left Lady Midnight sketchily tied up on the assumption that if he had not returned by the time she had chewed through the rope she would not hang around for him. He put on the jacket. He fingered the paralysis weapon. He started walking.

"Praise Amral" he said as he entered the courtyard behind the inn. A savage whistling snort began with a clanking of chains. Honorable Lord Sunrise waited for him, praise be.

He roused the sleepy landlord with the knife at his throat, a ghost shape in the darkened bedroom.

"Tell me, and quickly: the Princess Nofret . . .?"

"I know nothing, nothing!" the man goggled, his three chins like mobile fungi. "She has not been seen and there is talk—the soldiers search—but I know nothing—nothing!"

It was not fully satisfactory; but there was no time to wait for more. As he took off astride Sunrise with his own

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familiar wingbeat threshing the air, he felt that the chances were good. He picked up Lady Midnight, and when Sunrise understood his master was to ride her and scented the wild musky outlawry of the marun, he whistled a bubbling snort and curvetted around the sky. Fezius quietened him down and hightailed it for the Griff Tower.

Lai met him with a pallidly drawn face, purple smudges pouching her eyes, and a listlessness that made Fezius feel a sharp compassion with his pity for her. The pace had sharpened, had accelerated; everything was moving more rapidly now and it took a sharp and alert person to keep pace. The weak would fall listlessly just as the strong took renewed effort. He told her about the barge.

"They won't have had time to reach the Theater of Varahatara yet. They'll still be on the river."

The sun rose in splendor and they took off into a spreading light that picked out harness and glistening feather and polished steel. From time to time other polished steel glittered with menace as a skein of griffs patrolled over the horizon and then they would drop down with frightened alacrity to the dun concealment of the ground.

"They'll be on the river—but they'll be hiding under the bank!" Fezius said, angry and frustrated and frightened.

Simple calculations told him that the barge could have covered only so much of the river before daylight and the time Offa would have to hole up under the bank. The two griffs carried them fleetly over the same distance and they peered down hopefully. The river glistened emptily.

Then Lai shouted and pointed down.

"Look!"

On the river Fezius could see a wide shallow boat with a high-curved stern, without sail or oars, her deck covered by brilliantly attired men. The strange boat moved swiftly toward the bank. Fezius blinked.

"Where the blue blazes ning-tailed nabobs did they come from?" yelled Fezius. "Kerrumpitty, the river was empty!" He slanted Lady Midnight down.

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The strange boat nuzzled under the bank's drooping vegetation, vanishing from sight. The griffs touched down and Fezius tumbled off and burst his way through the overhanging bushes and trees toward the river. He slid the last section on his trousers. He heard a familiar rumbling basso roaring out, "By Mac the Black! In that case you're very welcome, then!"

Fezius broke down through the last of the vegetation and half fell, half jumped into the princess's barge. The other strange boat lay alongside. At the thump of his arrival on deck Offa swung on him. Then his ruddy face split into a giant guffaw. Offa—a huge single smile—roared at him with joy.

"Fezius, you old griff-fodder, you! By stanslaughter, I'd given you the benefit of a free flight across the Silver Mountains!"

"Offa! You great buffoon, you!"

The man from Earth, Shim Gahnett, sat with his hands holding his head, a fossil of waiting dejection. The Princess Nofret spoke with feverish animation to the people on the other boat. Fezius looked at them.

Swarthy men crowded the boat, red kerchiefs tied around their jet hair, golden bells swinging from their pointed ears, their eyes and teeth liquidly flashing brilliance. Many strange weapons bristled in their belts. Silently, in blue shirts and loinclothes, they crowded the boat.

Fezius ignored them. He took in with an intense clarity of detail the woman who stood on the poop decking, her white face smiling and soft, the long white draperies depending from her shoulders moving with a faint rustle in the little dawn breeze. Her dark coiffed hair glittered with sprinkled gems. Her mouth invited in its rosebud shape and softness and repelled in its very vividness of redness and moistness.

She smiled and held out her hand, very emotionally, a gesture at once impulsive and gay.

"More friends, my dear Nofret?"

The princess turned. Her body moved with an odd heavy

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awkwardness. "No—that is, yes. . . . We are in their hands—I do not know—"

The woman's smiled dazzled. "You are safe with me now, dear Princess!"

The smile dazzled, but Fezius ignored it. He stared, puzzled, trying to identify what it was chained to the woman's wrist. The chain, a light glittering thing, was fixed to a metal band around the creature's neck and at first Fezius thought it might be a corfrey. The thing stood bowed on the deck at the end of its chain, clad in dark red velvet, with a white ruff around which the metal band showed a more ominous darkness. Then, in mounting horror, Fezius realized the thing was a man, a small man—smaller than himself—with a gigantic bald head for his size, crowned with a ridiculous blue velvet cap with a brilliant feather, broken at the tip.

"Who are these people?" Fezius said to the princess, more harshly than he intended. She did not reply.

Offa said, "They just arrived. The lady says she's going to help us get away from Rodro. She doesn't like him."

A crashing in the bushes and a curse or two heralded the landing of Lai, scratched and fuming. She embraced her sister with a little sob of released emotion. Fezius stroked his chin, wondering.

"We shall have to move into the center of the river," said the woman, with a brisk nod to her crew. Somewhere a low-keyed thrumming began, a spluttering puttering, and white water surged bubbling from the stern of the boat.

Fezius lunged forward. "Wait! We can't go into the river! Rodro's patrols are everywhere! They'd spot us at once!"

The woman laughed. "I'm afraid you don't understand. The princess has been trying to get through to Sharnavoy and I can take her there—"

"You can!" blazed Lai, her eyes dangerous.

The woman turned. "Of course. The Princess Nofret is a most important person; Red Rodro is not fit for her. What do you know of—" And then the woman stopped and

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jerked the chain so that the little man jumped and squealed. She said to him, "Quiet, Soloman, for you are in the presence of another Porteur—the witch-woman, the Princess Lai."

The boat and the barge had begun to move with a purpose for they angled upstream across the river. Fezious could see no way for them to be propelled but by some similar mechanism to those powering the cars and helicopters of Earth, the flying houses of Slikitter. He glanced up. A skein of griffs wheeled ominously.

Early morning freshness had already burned off the earth and Venudine had in prospect another hot, sun-filled day. The boats cut into the river and the griffs banked and swung.

"You idiot!" Fezious blazed at the woman. "Now Rodro will catch us all!"

She laughed, not musically but in a cynically amused way. "Keep your own stupid observations to yourself, little man." She had been watching him and Lai. Now she said, slowly and with heavy menace, "I see your clothes, you and the witch-woman, the poor simpleton! I know where you have been. Do not cross my path or you will rue the day!"

Lai laughed.

Offa said quietly to Fezious, "I'm danged pleased to see you back, Fezious. But there's a fight coming on. We'd better get the women under cover."

Fezious regarded Offa with a warm affection. The big man's single-mindedness reminded him of his own defects.

"I think, Offa," he said carefully, "that it won't come to a fight of the sort we're accustomed to." He jerked a thumb at the woman, speaking louder so that Lai and the Princess Nofret, too, could hear. "That's no ordinary woman you've palled up with, Offa. That's a real krogar of a female. That's the Contessa Perdita Francesca Cammachia di Montevarchi herself!"

Lai nodded a grim assent.

Offa, blandly, said, "So?"

And Fezious laughed. He hurt himself laughing.

The boats had reached near the center of the river and the skein of griffs diving below the level of the trees bored

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on over the water full at them. Fezius made out the leader, a bullet-headed man with a black beard. He stopped laughing.

"That's Rodro himself!"

It was the turn of the contessa to laugh again. "Have no fear of Rodro the Bold, little man. He is as nothing compared to me and to the powers I wield."

She jerked the glittering chain and her creature, the man Soloman, jumped and danced and cackled. His great bald head shone under the little blue cap and the ridiculous broken-tipped feather. Fezius saw his face. A hot flush skewered down inside him that so much pain and indignity, so much sheer cruelty could reduce a man to nothingness, to a cipher figure with a face of writhing lines blandly expressing nothing. Soloman cackled.

"Here is my power," the contessa said cruelly. "This silly posturing imp of a half-man. A Porteur, one of God's gifted—and gifted to me! She touched a stud on the bracelet holding the chain to her wrist and Soloman shrieked and wriggled like a fish at the end of a line. "A little reminder, Soloman! A little jolt to freshen your memory!"

Fezius felt nauseated. Lai, at his elbow, said, "They must have brought the whole lot—boat, crew, the contessa—through a gate. But I can't sense it!"

The contessa shouted an order to her crew and the boats surged and backed up. Offa said, "The current is quicker here than we expected—"

"They've drifted too far down river!" said Lai, excited, relieved that she had not lost her powers.

The creature Soloman shrieked again as the shock from the contessa's bracelet shook him. He pointed upstream with a wrinkled hand, gobbling his fear. Slowly the boat and the barge moved against the stream.

The griffs were so low over the water an occasional wingtip chain clipped spray.

A frown marred the soft prettiness of the contessa's face.

"Hurry, you fools!" she said, the words a spiteful spit.

Indecision bracketed Fezius in uncertainty. He guessed

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what the Montevarchi was going to do and he weighed that potential imponderable against the hard fact of Rodro's vengeance.

A touch on his arm drew his attention to Lai and he felt the breeze of a fresh alarm at the change in her face. She looked pinched and distraught.

"I don't think—" she gasped. "I don't know—" She clung to him. "I can sense the gate, a massive hole through the dimensions, but I don't think it leads to Sharnavoy!"

The contessa laughed cruelly. She tossed her head back, her eyes like flints. "Sharnavoy!" she said in a different voice. "You creeping slimy scum! I need the Nofret woman and I intend to have her. But my power does not rule in Sharnavoy . . . not yet!"

The Princess Nofret stared up wildly. "You all want me! You know—you know!" She appealed to Lai, holding up her arms, her face haggard. "Lai! My sister Lai! Take me away, take me to Sharnavoy!"

Dumbly Lai shook her head. Two great tears grew beneath the closed lids of her eyes.

Fezius guessed that this gate, huge though it was, extended to just one dimension—and that one not Sharnavoy. Soloman, the grisly little Porteur, would put them all through into the contessa's own private hell world. So David Macklin had told him back there in New York City.

An arrow plunked into the deck by Soloman's feet and he shrieked and convulsed, foam flecking his lips, and the chain clinking and glittering.

"Quiet, manikin, quiet," the contessa advised him with venom in her voice.

Remembering what Macklin and Alec had told him about the Montevarchi Fezius was surprised at her lack of disguise and her disdain of the sugary sweet sexual allure she could so obviously distill. Fezius hoped she was rattled and anxious with this unlooked-for delay because of so simple a natural fact as the current in a river. And the warrior griffs of Palans Rodro flew swiftly on.

Better, perhaps, a swift tussle with Rodro, using Lai's

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paralyzer, than the eerie unknown of another dimension. Fezius returned Lai's pressure, leaning to whisper, "Lail Use your paralyzer on Rodro. Offa and I will deal with what knights we can—but it will depend on you."

She returned his grasp and he felt the quick pressure of her hand with relief and gratitude. Now the whistling of the griffs and the soughing chop of their wingbeats reached them clearly.

Palans Rodro the Bold was not the first knight to touch down on the deck.

They handled themselves well, Fezius was forced to admit. One after another the knights and men-at-arms slid their griffs down, dismounted and with a smack sent their mounts back up to the griff-minder who circled aloft. Any display of technical efficiency, even among foes, excited Fezius' admiration. He wished that Rodro had come within range earlier; the wily Palans dismounted with a flourish and then, surprising Fezius, performed a deep and courtly bow to the contessa.

She simpered.

Now comes the sugary bit, Fezius surmised, bitterly.

"My dear Palans Rodro! How pleased I am that you have arrived. I am just a poor woman and I have caught your princess for you—you have just this minute come to our rescue!"

Sugary, bitchy and calculated to inflame.

"You look as charming as ever, Perdita. I see you have fallen in with Nofret and also—ha!—the traitor knight and the witch-woman! So, so!"

Rodro patted his scabbard. Fezius followed the movement, saw a familiar hilt. Rodro laughed.

"Your blade carries many virtues, renegade."

"One day it will drink your guts," Fezius said casually. "Righto, Lai. This had gone on long enough."

Lai aimed the paralyzer and pressed the stud. Rodro flung up an arm and his face congested with fearful alarm. The Montevarchi laughed richly, sarcastically.

"It doesn't work, Fezius!" gasped Lai.

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"Of course not, you simpletons!" The contessa's voice screeched like an uncoiled lock. "Do you miserable cretins imagine for a single moment you could gain any advantage over me? My world knows how to provide technical protection. We are enclosed by an electromagnetic field that completely cancels out that Slikitter weapon."

Fezius had to hand it to her. Caught by the current and unable for the moment to slide back with the princess to her own world, she had calmly greeted Rodro as an old friend. Quite obviously the two had been working hand in glove; and now the Montevarchi—who needed the princess for her own devious ends—was pretending to have captured her for her accomplice. The situation was rich in irony, at least, to a man like Fezius.

But however much humor he took from the situation he looked to be killed any second. That would be amusing, too, in his present bloody frame of mind.

Offa moved ponderously up to his rear and his ax hung head-down, ready. He felt the presence of Lai on his other side. Then Lai spoke:

"Rodro and the contessa will fight over my sister—"

"It won't do us any good," he whispered back. He could not fail to be aware of her there, now. "They'll dispose of us first of all."

Rodro and the Montevarchi had been exchanging pleasantries quite clearly not concerned now with the physical removal of the irritating grits that had clogged their plans. They would leave the killing of Fezius and Offa and Lai to their warriors. Gahnett, too, would be killed.

"I had missed you, Perdita." Rodro's silky-smooth voice caressed like a wind zephyr before the hurricane.

"I had business elsewhere," the Montevarchi replied with unconcern. "My affairs are conducted over more than this dimension, as you well know. You wanted my help to operate your own Portal equipment—artificial or organic—and I have helped. I have brought you the Princess Nofret and—"

Rodro's face turned red and he burst in sharply, "Yes, enough of that!"

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Lai said to Fezius, "Nofret is no Porteur—what?"

Nofret overhead, for she turned her eyes, full of anguish, to her sister, and she sobbed heartbreakingly.

"Well, let's be getting back," Rodro said briskly. He motioned to the captain of his bodyguard at his side. "You dispose of those scum."

The captain said in a neutral voice, "The man Offa is notorious, my lord. He will—"

"Feather a few arrows in him, you fool!" snapped Rodro. He turned away and advanced on Nofret, smiling widely, his beard bristling, his face full of loving passion. "Ah! My bride-to-be! So long have I missed you and now you have been found!"

The Princess Nofret gave a moaning shriek of despair.

Rodro kept his toothy smile. "Help her aboard a griff!" he said through his teeth.

With a feline grace the contessa said, "You will not, I think, Palans, kill the witch-woman?"

"Why not? She is a Porteur, that I found out when she and the traitor knight vanished into Slikitter. But she would never work for me, even I know that. She is not what I want, not when I have Fislik and his machines."

"Thank you, Rodro."

"But—"

"I shall remember your gift with great gratitude, Rodro."

"All right." He gestured. "Let the witch-woman go."

In an appalled instant Fezius experienced an apocalyptic vision of Lai chained like Soloman.

Lai burst out in a single cry and then stopped, her lower lip caught between her teeth. Fezius put his arm about her. She was trembling like a young griff after flying too heavy a load too far.

Soloman began to jump about the deck, chittering and clattering, his chain clinking.

"All right, all right, manikin!" snapped the contessa.

Lai said in a gulping voice in Fezius' ear, "We've about reached the gate. It's a big one." She seemed to draw herself up, to concentrate some hitherto dissipated essence so that

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Fezius could sense the charged emotions in her. She struggled to speak. "It's a big gate, big—but there is another one, smaller, a crack—a tiny gate beside the big one . . ."

Around them stretched the river, sliding between the low banks and the trees and shrubberies. The boat and the barge breasted the current. The piratical crew aboard the Montevarchi's boat and the massed knights of Rodro the Bold aboard the barge stared inward to where their leaders conversed. The prisoners stood to one side isolated, ready for the killing to begin.

"Bring the girl!" rang the contessa's clear voice.

Lai gripped Fezius.

Offa lifted his ax. "It will take many arrows before I can no longer fight," he growled.

In that bright scene of river and banks and boats with their occupants locked in a miasma of mistrust and hate . . . through that scene, interpenetrating it, invisible, unfelt, unheard, lay a gate to another dimension. And alongside that huge gate, so Lai cried, existed another smaller opening into another dimension.

"Hurry!" chimed the Montevarchi.

Soloman rattled his chain.

Two knights advanced to wrest Lai away.

"As soon as I'm on board, Soloman will porteur us all through the gate—the princess my sister too!"

"I know. What about this other gate you've sensed?"

"It's small—small—but it would take a person—"

"Where does it go?"

"I am not sure—*how should I know?*—Slikitter, Earth, Ironium, Sharnavoy—some other hostile dimension? Who can tell?"

"Can you manage the others, all our party?"

She did not answer and for a moment of horror Fezius thought she had passed out. Then, in a stronger voice, she said, "It is Sharnavoy!"

The joy in her voice uplifted him. She sang with a new and terrible power. "The force—the strange force that

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pulled Shim Gahnett through from Earth—is no secret to me any more!”

A number of things happened simultaneously. Fezius became aware of actions as slow-motion underwater objects.

The boat containing the contessa and her crew wavered like a reflection and the Montevarchi screamed obscene abuse and jabbed her bracelet button again and again so that Solomon screamed and chittered and jumped and dragged helplessly on his chain.

Rodro leaped for the Princess Nofret, scooped her up and stood with her, facing the contessa, jeering.

The two knights reached out for Lai and Offa lifted his ax.

Gahnett disappeared.

Bedlam broke out, compounded of shrieks of fear and rage, shouts of anger and agonized death cries as Offa's ax bit twice.

“Duck!” yelled Fezius.

He ran and rolled over and over. Arrows plinked and plunked into the wood about him.

Offa, his ax high, charged into the serried ranks of the knights.

“No!” screamed Fezius, feeling all his strength drain away, feeling emotion like a hot thick porridge in his throat. “No!”

Bows bent, fingers gripped feathered shafts, loosed arrows spat toward the mighty charging bulk—

Offa disappeared.

The arrows speared water in flowered cups of foam.

“The witch-woman!” yelled Rodro, his face putty-colored. He grasped onto the princess.

Seemingly magical events were taking place around him, yet Fezius knew the explanations and could appreciate them; still an icy feeling in him demanded a fear-filled reaction. Rodro drew the true blade Peaceful. With his bride-to-be dragging around his legs, he swung the sword up to cut down Lai.

Lai gasped, “I can't send them together—it is not—he won't help me for *that!*”

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Clumsily Fezius dragged himself up. He knew if Peaceful came down it would be the end. The weight in his pocket reminded him and he dragged out the squat metal gun Alec had thrown him. There was no time, no time to remember what Alec had told him, back there in a penthouse apartment in magical New York. Safety off, that he remembered. He ducked into Rodro and put the revolver's muzzle against Rodro's belly and pulled the trigger three times.

The Princess Nofret vanished.

He leaned out with his left hand. A familiar hilt ridged itself against his palm. Red Rodro—the Palans Rodro the Bold of castle Parnasson—was bubbling and spluttering blood.

"You wanted too much, Rodro," shouted Fezius. He started to pull the trigger again and Offa shouted at him and he almost fell over onto a wooden platform.

"No, no, Fezius! Put down your sword!"

He stood on a wooden raft just offshore of a golden beach with palm trees fringing the shore, and with purple mountains in the background. The air tasted like wine. Bronzed young men and girls swam and disported in the water.

Standing there, sweaty, with Rodro's blood fouling him, he felt a soft body collide with him and he pitched head-first into the water.

Coming up spluttering, still holding the sword and the revolver, he saw Lai staggering back on the platform and laughing at him.

"You want to move along when we're coming through sharply, Fezius!"

"So this is Sharnavoy!"

They all went ashore on canoes, laughing, talking to their new friends. "They expected us to come through by the Griff Tower," Lai explained. "The prince will be here soon." The excitement in her made her tremble in quite a different way from the shakes of the past fear-filled days.

Fezius couldn't understand these people and he asked Lai if she had another translator. His had been lost in the scuffle in the shooting gallery back on Earth. "I'm sure they'll find some for us." Nofret had gone no farther than

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the first soft patch of sand. She sat down gratefully. "You go on, Lai. I know how you feel."

"And I, Nofret, know how *you* feel!" said Lai, severely and yet with an artless affection.

All the others sat down, not quite sure what had happened, not quite sure they were still alive—but quite sure they were in another world.

A skein of griffs slanted down toward them and men jumped off. They hurried over the sand.

"The people here think highly of our griffs," said Nofret. She stood up, her face full of wonder and rapture.

He strode over the sand in a very masterful way. Tall and blond, with a handsome face and broad shoulders, dressed in white and crimson with a flaring cloak and a jewel-encrusted sword at his side, her prince swept the Princess Nofret up into his arms.

"Happy ending," said Fezius, with a slow look at Lai.

She was walking back over the sand with her arms around a smaller edition of Nofret's prince. Fezius looked and his stomach notched up another spasm. He didn't need to be told.

"So this is Peredur!" he said

"I'm sure you two will get on!" said Lai, her eyes fixed on Peredur.

Offa sniggered.

"If the contessa tries to come to Sharnavoy," said Nofret's prince in the most princely way, "she will be met by fire and steel and destruction. This she knows."

"He sounds just like a legislative pronunciation," said Fezius vindictively.

Offa guffawed—but gently.

Somehow Fezius felt pushed out, and not only because various girls around him were pairing up and he was not included in the general festivities. He wanted to know what was so almighty special about Nofret. He asked.

Lai laughed a tinkle of amused delight. "I told you about my grandmother and you know about me—"

"I know about you."

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She colored delicately and that made Fezius feel better. They all listened, ready to fill in what they each knew.

Lai seemed possessed by an impish spirit that Peredur no doubt was going to get to know pretty well.

"The ability to pass people through the gates into other worlds, the ability of being a Porteur within the dimensions, was apparent in our family. The prince here, also, comes from a family thus blessed—or cursed—"

"I think you're lucky, Lai," Fezius said evenly.

Everyone was listening now, sensing more behind the words.

"Well," Lai said. "You're a good sport yourself, Fezius, even if—oh, well—you know. So the prince's and Nofret's child should be pretty expert—"

"Child!"

"Of course. Where did you think I was getting the help from? In the Griff Tower he helped out; but being a bit young—"

"He's still in the womb, woman!"

"—he muffed it. But just now he did a great job. Together we porteured the lot of you through that little gate, left the contessa and poor old Soloman high and dry by their big gate. Hal"

"So that's why Rodro wanted to marry Nofret! And the contessa was in on it from the beginning. He wanted to break free from his dependence on the Slikitters, and she wanted—well—"

"The Montevarchi wants everything!"

"Yeah, well," said Fezius, glaring at the Prince. "I didn't notice you come flying through to help out!"

Offa shifted his ax. Lai drew in her breath. Peredur put his hand down onto the hilt of his little sword. Nofret smiled to calm them down. "The gift runs in the family. The prince, like myself, is not a Porteur. His mother was. She is dead, to my sorrow."

Fezius felt appropriately boorish.

"Well, hell—" But he didn't really know.

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"Where's Shim Gahnett?" he inquired brusquely. "I've still got a job to do."

Lai's concern was very pretty. "I can send Gahnett back to Earth, Fezius. You don't have to go."

"That's true. But Offa can stay here a bit until it's safe to go back to Venudine. We've the tournament of the Three Free Cities of Tarantanea coming next. If Rodro's gone there ought to be a new setup back there. We'll be in the clear."

Gahnett slouched over, trailing his shotgun.

"First I'll need a translator set to understand English." Fezius sounded businesslike.

"But," said Lai, perplexed, "you can stay with us for the weddings. You don't have to go back to Earth."

"That is very sweet of you, Lai. But you just find the Portal that opens through the dimensions to Little Old New York and send Gahnett and me through." He chuckled. "I'll send you back a wedding present."

"That will be kind of you." Clearly, Lai was still genuinely puzzled and Fezius drew a warm amusement tinged with affectionate irony from that.

"You going to be all right on your own, Fezius?" demanded Offa. He hefted his ax. "I'm missing some action."

"Find yourself some nice Sharnavoy girl and start to live up to your boasts, Oag Offa!"

Offa smiled and twirled his ax. "I never boast, Fezius!"

"But," said Lai, persisting.

"Find the gate to Earth, Lai. Then we can say goodbye. Oh—and you can probably spend some time thinking up a wedding present for me."

"For you!"

"Yes—for Sarah and me."

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