

ace  
double  
76096 | 75¢

# THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

KENNETH BULMER



Storm warnings are up  
on the dimensional seas



WANTED: ONE ENGINEER  
FOR MANAGERIAL POSITION IN IRUNIUM.  
WAGES HIGH. DEATH BENEFITS SUDDEN.

"I am the Contessa Perdita di Montevarchi. Here in Irunium the only law is my will.

"I shall seek out another engineer. But this time he will be a real engineer from a dimension that understands these things, from Slikitter, probably from Earth. He will be treated with respect because his function is valuable to me. Almost inevitably he will terminate as this offal terminated, but that is to be expected of imperfect tools.

"He will not at first see the slaves in the mines and I do not wish him treated as a slave. My mines must continue to produce gems for my trade across the Dimensions. An engineer is needed so I shall find one. . . ."

---

Turn this book over for  
second complete novel

---

**KENNETH BULMER**

**novels available in Ace editions:**

**TO OUTFRAN DOOMSDAY**

**THE KEY TO IRUNIUM\***

**CYCLE OF NEMESIS**

**THE KEY TO VENUDINE\***

**THE STAR VENTURERS**

**THE WIZARDS OF SENCHURIA\***

**\* Books having the same characters as**

***The Ships of Durostorum.***

# **THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM**

**KENNETH BULMER**

**AN ACE BOOK**

**Ace Publishing Corporation  
1120 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, N. Y. 10036**

THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

Copyright ©, 1970, by Kenneth Bulmer

All Rights Reserved.

*Cover art by Jack Gaughan.*

---

ALTON'S UNGUESSABLE

Copyright ©, 1970, by Jeff Sutton

---

Printed in U.S.A.

## I

ALL THE Valcini stood up respectfully when the Contessa entered the high conference room. The fear and dread in which they held her showed gauntly in their nervously-stilled gestures, their too-brightly ingratiating smiles, the way the overhead fluorescents slicked on oily foreheads.

The room itself, its narrow windows gibbeted by black and gold walls, hung in long coral drapes, breathed an air of refined cruelty. The Contessa did not deign to notice the Valcini until she had seated herself at the head of the table, sitting in a carved golden chair splayed on dragon-feet. The Valcini sat in a nervous scraping of wooden chairs. She looked on them and was not pleased.

"So there has been another accident in my mines."

Her soft syrupy voice twitched ripples of fear along the men's nerves. They wiped sweaty hands furtively on their fawn slacks and shirts.

"The accident could not be helped, Contessa—" began a gray-haired Valcini sitting at her right hand, his bulky face taut with strain, his lips shining bluely.

"Could not be helped! Why do you think I let you live? Why is it that you Valcini live and batten on my bounty? For love of you?"

They could not answer.

Her white face smooth and soft with costly ministrations, her violet eyes wide and seductive, her rose-bud mouth too soft and scarlet-sweet, she glanced around the circle of men at the table with sugary venom. Clad all in white in a silken robe that fell sheer from her shoulders and with her dark hair high-coifed and sprinkled with a treasury of gems, she dominated that room of fierce and cruel men. She jerked the chain attached to a bracelet around her left wrist.

"We take delight in serving you, Contessa." The senior Valcini spoke with a humbleness past all toadying.

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

"I hope you do, Doeltor. For your sake."

"The accident was caused by a cave-in on the new workings." Doeltor gestured vaguely. "We Valcini employ out-world labor for mining and sometimes the labor is unintelligent—"

"Sometimes!"

Her disgusted exclamation followed by a vicious tug at the chain attached to her left wrist brought a whimpering cry from the creature bound by a necklet to the other end of the chain. His red velvet suit made him look a ghastly parody of an organ-grinder's monkey. His enormous domed head, partially covered by a blue velvet cap with a feather broken at the tip, looked lumpy and skin-tight over a massive skull.

"Quiet, Soloman!" Her sugary voice thickened. "Bring in the engineer responsible."

The double doors opened in a clash of bronze.

Honshi guards, their wide frog-faces staring, hustled in the cringing form of a man clad in a gray tunic. Smears of dirt and blood stained the gray cloth. The Honshi prodded him forward with their barbed spears, hissing: "Hoshool! Hoshool!"

"So this is the miserable specimen—look up, gandyschell, look up at me."

The engineer whose brown face showed a gray parched horror and a despairing dread turned his eyes up, the whites bloodshot. He licked spittle. One arm hung broken and unsplinted at his side. He moaned.

"Pynchon, isn't it? Chief Mining Engineer Pynchon? There has been another accident in my mine, Pynchon. Slaves are dead, Pynchon, slaves who cost a great deal to bring here across the Dimensions. Many weeks' work have been lost, Pynchon. What do you say, Pynchon, to me, about these bad things?"

"I am—sorry—Contessa."

"Sorry. I see. And?"

"The tools are bad, Contessa. Only the Erinelds know real mining. The slaves are unwilling—"

"You have whips and guards to use them. I hear the seam you were following turned and you did not allow for this and you undercut into the biscuit band and then you brought down the duricrust."

The engineer let his head droop in defeat.

"I shall not be cruel to you, Pynchon. Many people say I am wantonly cruel; but this is not so. I shall be kind to



## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

you, Pynchon." She gestured negligently to the nearest Honshi guard. "Kill him, now."

The short stabbing sword went in steel bright and came out blood red.

Pynchon grasped his spilling intestines and fell on his face, dead.

Honshi guards, the withered scraps of human hair and skin fleering from their helmet spikes, cleared away the mess. The woman in white did not look once, but sat, her fist knuckling her smooth chin, brooding.

Then she stared icily at the waiting Valcini.

"I," she said with conscious pride and arrogance. "I am the Contessa Perdita Francesca Cammachia di Montevarchi. Here in Irunium the only law is my will."

Sleekly oiled heads nodded eager confirmation.

"I shall seek out another engineer. But this time he will be a real engineer from a Dimension that understands these things, from Slikitter, probably from Earth. He will be treated with respect because his function is valuable to me. Almost inevitably he will terminate as this offal terminated; but that is to be expected of imperfect tools."

"Yes, Contessa."

"He will not at first see the slaves in the mines and I do not wish him treated as a slave. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Contessa."

She stood up, jerking the glittering silvery chain so that Solomon whimpered and jumped after her like a scuttling pug dog.

"Very well. My mines must continue to produce gems for my trade across the Dimensions. An engineer is needed so I shall find one. I shall take a guard and—ah—Charnock." She flayed them with her eyes. "And where best to look for a mining engineer than in a mine?"

## II

WHEN THE disaster sirens ripped the night sky apart all over Hodson, J. T. Wilkie was in no position to hear them. His position, apart from being highly undignified and ex-

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

tremely dangerous, was also extraordinarily uncomfortable.

Up top, the firetrucks, the ambulances, the rescue teams would be hurtling through the cold and raucous Canadian night toward the Old Smokey pithead where the flames would be shooting up like blasphemous flowers of evil. Up there all the taut nerve-pulsing drama of a major mine disaster would be unleashed.

Down below, J. T. Wilkie tried to pull his head out of the tracks of the Joy Continuous-miner by bracing his trapped arms against the warm metal tracks and the coal-encrusted clay floor. Coal dust and smoke filled his eyes and nose and ears and mouth and bells ding-donged in his head like deranged tramcars. Through the room and pillar workings of Old Smokey sharp dust clouds billowed on the skirts of the explosion shockwave that had hurled J. T. into his present ludicrous and perilous position.

He knew he didn't have time to feel fear; he had to get his head out before he choked to death. With a final tremendous pull that nearly tore his ears off he wrenched out and staggered back from the Joy to crash into the miraculously still-intact wall. The pillar thickness here had been fined down to its near-limits and a certain amount of goaf lay about. Inevitably, J. T. Wilkie crashed headlong over the waste.

Absolute blackness clamped down. Somewhere a man screamed; very soon that sound died.

His eyes felt as though grit the size of best nuts clogged under the lids. He fumbled around for the flashlight slung on his belt and blinked painfully as a shaft of white light cut into the swirling black miasma.

He endured a coughing spell, and spat gobbets of black. He felt as though someone had run him clean through the works of the Joy.

"Is that you, J. T.?"

The voice coughed up from a shining splintered pile of freshly-broken coal fallen from the roof. Dust coiled as Wilkie lurched across.

"Polak? Is that you, Polak?"

"Yeah."

The heap of coal heaved and like a minor subterranean explosion in itself the burly coal-blackened form of a man wrenched free. J. T. grabbed a thick arm and heaved.

"I might have guessed." He coughed, the tears running down his face and signally failing to cut grooves in the

sweat-packed coal grime. "It'd take more than a mine explosion to kill you, Polak."

"Damn right. Anyone else—?"

In the flashlight gleam Wilkie shook his head. "'Fraid not."

Polak shook himself and then switched on his own helmet light. All the main lamps in the road had died when the roof smashed down.

"We're cut off down here, Polak." Wilkie stated the obvious. "The bang went off down number ten road, I think. We caught the backlash." He grunted with furious resentment. "This ought to teach me to come to the face—"

"You're always too eager, boy," rumbled Polak. "You should've left the real mining to pitmen. You civil engineers and your fancy machines—"

"Go on, say it," Wilkie snapped back. He humped around and sat down heavily on the motionless Joy. Its multiple engines had long since stopped. "Blame mining machinery for this mess. If you'd been working with hand and pick, like you always talk about—this would never have happened—eh?"

"They had accidents back in the old country. By damn, J. T., we're in one hell of a mess!"

"They'll get us out. How far can we go back?"

The lights showed the answer to that. The square-cut corners of the room showed sharp through the dust on two sides. On the third the roadways lay piled roof-high with cascaded coal. The lights flicked around eerily as the dust settled.

Polak coughed and spat.

"We could try the conveyor—"

"That's out. It just disappears under a pile of filling."

They were stuck down here, in this small choked room, with only the Continuous-miner with its ripper head and cruel fanged chains for company.

Polak stumbled in the erratic light across to the sheer wall. He picked up a crowbar that had been flung so hard it had bent to a forty-five degree angle, and bashed against the wall. He waited. Then he bashed again. The concussions made J. T.'s head ache.

At last the big man threw down the bar disgustedly.

"Not a cheep—"

"They'll find us. They'll sink a bore down—it's the air I'm worried about."

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

"Polak grunted. "You're the engineer, boy, even if you're only still learning."

"I'm a mining engineer," Wilkie protested, stung. "I've got a diploma to prove it."

"Sure. A scrap of paper. Well, wave it now and get us out of here."

"Huh."

There followed a long period of waiting, punctuated by intermittent bashings of the wall by Polak. Each time they listened for any answering knocking and each time only blankness responded.

The canteen of warm water Polak produced tortured them with its fragility—so tiny a drop of water to last them in their dust and thirstiness for who knew how long. Wilkie began to wonder if he ought to feel really frightened.

The thing was, he told himself over and over again, he needn't have been down here at all. This Saturday night he'd fixed up that long-cherished date with Madge and everything was arranged. As a feckless young mining engineer who chased every girl he could he'd felt a strong fancy for Madge. She'd been different from Sheila and Toni and Marie. He'd been on to a good thing there. Polak, well, just because the husky miner had befriended him in a stupid brawl when he'd first come to Hodson—inevitably a fight over a woman in a bar—Wilkie had chosen to carry out the last checks when Polak was on shift. Then they were going to paint Hodson red.

Instead—

Instead, here he was, stuck down a pit in a major mining disaster. His training told him eloquently enough that this blowout was a big one. Probably a lot of men had lost their lives. The whole pit would be a shambles. They were stuck right up at the face in a small room cut off from the main workings.

"Oh, geeze, this is going to, be a lulu," Wilkie wailed sorrowfully.

"You said they'd be listening for us and boring for us," Polak said roughly. "Snap out of it, J. T."

They sat in darkness. Polak wanted to conserve his helmet lamp's battery—Wilkie's own helmet lay smashed beneath the Joy—and his flashlight wouldn't last long if they kept it alight continuously.

Once, Polak grumbled, "If I'd known this would happen I'd never have come to Canada, straight I wouldn't."

But for the most part they sat in silence as well as dark-

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

ness, occasionally banging the wall and hoping for a return signal.

The air began to taste foul with a foulness that did not originate in thick coal dust.

A trickle of coal dust ran down the face.

The sound sent shivers down Wilkie's back.

"The roof!" he said, jumping up and falling over a chunk of coal. He sat up and spat.

"Keep still!" Polak moved cautiously forward, switching on his lamp, probing the face with its beam.

More dust rivuleted down.

Then a chunk of coal dislodged from the top and tumbled down. Another followed. Both men backed off.

"It's them!" yelled Polak with sudden emotion.

"But that way?" asked Wilkie.

Before he could say more the whole face collapsed in a thunderous smother. Coal and chips and dust flew. A warm yellow glow sprang into being, shining refulgently through the gash in the coal seam.

Choking, gagging, the two men shielded their eyes as the light brightened.

The crack in the coal wall shattered down across the seam. Bright edges glinted. Chips flew.

Then—J. T. just didn't believe this—a squat brown naked man with a scarlet rag tied around his bald head squeezed through. He ripped a protruding slab of coal away with a small pick. His face shone with sweat. He looked frightened and yet, somehow, driven. His eyes rolled as he focused on the two pitmen.

"Who the sweet hell are you?" blurted Polak.

The squat man squeaked something in a language neither man recognized. Heralded by a fresh splattering of coal shards another squat brown naked man squeezed through. They stood, like Tweedledee and Tweedledum, staring at Wilkie and Polak.

"But they came through the face!" said Wilkie. He repeated that. "The face! They couldn't—it's all solid coal up there, right through the seam."

"They couldn't have, boy, but they did."

The two brown men, the streaks of coal on their skins strange, like ritual tattooings, beckoned.

"They—they want us to go through."

Polak humped forward.

"Well, of course. There's no way back—and these guys must have come from somewhere!"

"But—"

"You got any better ideas, J. T.?"

J. T. Wilkie swallowed. His mouth tasted of coal—as it would—and also of the dryness of fear.

"I suppose not."

Helped by the agile brown men Polak and J. T. forced their way through the crack in the seam toward the source of the yellow light.

J. T. Wilkie had never overbothered his head about much apart from chasing girls and learning all he could about mining. The two passions he recognized with inner glee were closely related. He remained young for his age. He glanced at big Polak as they straightened up on the other side of the crack before he dared to look at what they'd climbed into, and he saw that his comrade was taking all this in his stride as being in the natural order of things. J. T. wasn't so sure.

They stood in a small oval chamber quite unlike any room that a pitman would win from the coal seam. The mouth of an opening showed ahead, jagged and irregular, and the yellow light flooded from this softly, unlike the whiter brilliance of a helmet lamp.

"Well," said Polak.

"This is giving me the creeps," said J. T. Wilkie.

"If you're thinking, young J. T., that we're dead and this is hell, or that these odd pitmen here are—what d'you call 'em?—Trolls, then snap out of it. All kinds of men work the pits in Canada, you know that."

"Yeah. I work 'em." But J. T.'s repartee rang with a dank and hollow sound in the strange chamber.

Urged by their rescuers they ducked down to enter the tunnel and scraped and slipped along in the unchanging yellow radiance that broke in such strange reflections from the shining coal. With all his new-won mining engineer's knowledge so laboriously earned, Wilkie still could not sense the closeness of direction and distance that Polak intuitively knew.

Their joy had been working six degrees to the end; but here the tunnel had been driven straight through with little concern for the cleavage planes so that both a bord face and an end face showed in stubbily broken-sharded edges. The thin deposit of cleat spar scintillated with crystalline brilliance along the severed cleavage planes. J. T. wished for a cage to the elevator with the lever set to: UP-FAST.

The air grew colder.

"We don't seem to be going up," fretted Wilkie.

"Just so this damn tunnel gets big enough for a man," grunted Polak and then bashed his head into a projecting ledge of coal which brought on a shower of coal and curses.

A scampering up ahead indicated where more of these strange gnome-like little men crowded back down the tunnel. Evidently, their work in opening this short jagged tunnel to the trapped men over, they were on their way back to the surface.

Their shadows capered after them along the floor and walls in macabre parody.

The source of the yellow radiance ahead revealed itself as a shaft of light shining up through a jagged hole in the floor. The squat men jumped down through the pillar of radiance one after the other.

Swallowing, pushing on jocularly by Polak, Wilkie followed.

He landed awkwardly on a clay floor and sprawled over. Things moved in the edge of vision. Shadows writhed in the cavern. Hands pulled him upright. He squinted against the light which poured from a single enormous crystal pulsing now he was so close. He blinked.

He still didn't believe what he saw.

Beyond the glowing crystal the cavern opened widely, onto a vast columned cathedral-like space. The squat men scampered forward clearing the area in front of him.

Like an icon bathed in light the woman in white stared down enigmatically upon him.

He saw the sheer white dress, the high dark hair sprinkled with gems, he saw the soft white face and the rosebud mouth, he saw without understanding the little man-like thing that gibbered and capered at the end of a glittery silver chain. He saw; but he didn't believe.

In a syrupy soft voice she said, "I know you are J. T. Wilkie; but I do not know this other. Welcome, J. T. Wilkie. I have saved you from your mine disaster and you owe your life to me."

*This—under a coal mine?*

*This—deep in the subterranean bowels of the earth?*

No—J. T. Wilkie shook his head firmly—no, he'd been hit on the head by a flying chunk of coal and he was having nightmares or hallucinations—or else he was dead.

## III

THE WOMAN SAID, "I am the Contessa Perdita Francesca Cammachia di Montevarchi. You may call me Contessa." She jangled the chain which, J. T. Wilkie saw in his dazed condition, was attached to a bracelet around her left wrist. The likeness of the little mannikin attached to the other end by a collar around his neck escaped Wilkie. That big lumpy bald head, those ridiculous velvet clothes—he shut his eyes.

"You are not dreaming, J. T. This is all real, this is all happening. Come now, for we have a journey ahead of us."

A man's voice speaking a language Wilkie did not understand—all snarls and hisses and grunts—spoke with venom. He opened his eyes. The man wore a blue shirt and breech-clout and many weapons protruded from his broad leather belt. His swarthy face with its curled black moustaches looked indecently alive.

The Contessa snapped something tart in reply and the man's half-drawn sword snicked back into its scabbard.

"Who is this?" asked the Contessa sweetly.

"I'm Polak." Big Polak shouldered forward. He looked as though his face would explode.

"You may accompany us. Now—hurry."

At once everyone began a rapid march through the cavern. The glowing crystal, unsupported by anything Wilkie could see, floated through the air after them.

He shrank away from it. Hell, man! This couldn't be for real.

Polak nudged him.

"What a dish, J. T.!"

"Uh—sure. It's a funny old dream, though."

"I don't believe this is a dream, by damn."

J. T. Wilkie, too, was beginning to believe that insane idea.

They hurried on. The cavern came to an abrupt end as the clay walls swept around to join ahead of them.



## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

Everyone stopped. An air of expectancy settled on them.

"There's no way through here," rumbled Polak.

"A dame who can find her way down underneath a coal mine can find her way out of a cave," snapped J. T. with sour fear. If this was for real, then he'd damn well let it be and take it as though it was really happening.

"What now, Contessa?" he asked brightly.

She smiled. Some of the squat men flinched.

She saw that instinctive shrinking away.

"The Erinelds know when to dig and when to disappear. In you I see a sense of humor, J. T. I like that."

"It'll take machinery to dig through that lot," said Polak. He stared challengingly at the woman.

She stared back.

"We go—another way." She shook the chain sharply. "Soloman! Put us through—the crystal last."

He mowed and gibbered and then stood transfixed, as though suddenly smitten with paralysis.

J. T. Wilkie could have sworn there were more of the squat brown men—the Erinelds—a moment ago. They seemed to be thinning.

"It was extremely difficult to find a Portal close to an Earthly mine," said the Contessa. "Oh, there were some in Western and Eastern Germany and a few in Hungary and other of your confused petty states. But that part of your world is—" She cut herself off abruptly, as though annoyed.

An Erineld standing a couple of yards from Wilkie vanished.

He gasped.

Another Erineld moved up to the spot vacated by the first and before his second foot touched the ground he, too, silently, mysteriously, impossibly, vanished.

Only, moments after, the soft plop of air filling the vacated space told that anyone had been there at all.

Now the big swarthy blue-clad man vanished.

"You next, Polak."

The Contessa pointed and as though in a daze Polak moved up and right before J. T.'s eyes vanished from sight.

"I don't believe—" J. T. began.

He moved over to where Polak had been, feeling silly, feeling sick, feeling—feeling the soft touch of grass, wet with dew, feeling hot summer sun on his face, hearing the swarthy man in blue shouting something. He stood there on the lush grass of a great valley and then went bowling

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

over as the glowing gem materialized right where he was and struck him shrewdly in the back of the neck.

He yelled.

Moments later the Contessa and the little being she called Soloman materialized beside the crystal.

The man in blue shouted again, angrily, gesticulating.

Wilkie followed the direction of his pointing arm.

Around the lip of the great valley tiny black dots showed like a frieze against the burning sky.

The Contessa frowned.

"Palachi," she said. Soloman gibbered and capered, his gigantic bald head wet with sweat.

The sight of those enigmatic black blobs on the horizons upset the Erinelds, who clustered and began squeaking in their high-pitched voices.

"We must make haste through this Dimension," said the Contessa, shaking the chain.

Soloman began to lead on, followed by the others, with the crystal, now lifeless in the sunshine, drifting along in the rear. Soloman sniffed. His tiny wizened face peered this way and that.

Lashing at Soloman with words that, although not understood by Wilkie, yet made him wince, the Contessa goaded the misshapen little man.

At last, a hundred yards up the valley, he halted.

Once more the Erinelds began to disappear.

As they did so the black blobs on the valley slopes grew larger. Wilkie realized they were charging down toward the fast disappearing company. He could make out no shapes, but the menace that breathed from them gave an urgency to this fresh series of vanishments and he was happy to feel a sudden shift in the earth beneath him and to find himself dropped about a foot onto rough rock and scree. All about him reared jagged mountains, their tops cloaked in snow, with long falls of glaciers pouring in frozen whiteness to fantailed spreadings.

Cold bit into him.

They began to march again, this time directly toward a glacier. No one said much. This was a time for scrambling over loose stones, skirting boulders, for hugging oneself to keep warm.

At last Soloman stopped at the foot of the glacier.

"As you see, J. T., I have taken a great deal of trouble to rescue you from certain death," said the Contessa pleasantly.

"I'm duly grateful, Contessa. But, assuming all this is real, can't we get out of this cold? I'm freezing."

She laughed, a soft tinkle of uncanny merriment.

"This is real, J. T. We are making our way through the Dimensions back to my own land of Irunium. There, we shall rest and recuperate. But, now—" She tugged the chain cruelly and Soloman cheeped. "Put us through, little man, and quickly."

"Dimensions?" said J. T. Wilkie.

This time they slid between the Dimensions one by one until Wilkie's turn came. He didn't blink an eye. He was getting used to this by now—and that very thought gave him the screaming heebie-jeebies.

All around him now stretched a smiling sun-soaked landscape with an atmosphere very different from that of that first valley where the black blobs had crept down the mountainside with deadly menace. Woods clumped between rolling downlands. High clouds cavorted in a brilliant sky. The air smelled sweet.

Polak took in a deep breath. He looked across at a stream that tinkled musically away to itself.

"I could do with washing off some of this coal dirt," he said. "A pitman kinda gets—um—grubby."

The Erinelds were relaxing now, squeaking among themselves. The blue-clad man threw himself down on the grass, picked a long stem and began to chew the end reflectively.

The Contessa nodded.

"The next Gate is some distance. The ships will be here soon."

"Ships?" said Wilkie. "Gates? Dimensions?"

She laughed her silvery tinkle that, at the time, Wilkie with his passion for chasing pretty girls thought very attractive.

"You will understand everything soon, J. T. My agents on Earth were able to go directly up to Canada from New York. But I could not bring you back to Irunium that way. We have to take a roundabout way."

"That, I suppose," said the smart J. T. Wilkie with some acuity, "was because we were down the pit?"

Her rose-bud mouth looked very red in the sunshine.

"Don't forget that, J. T. You were down the mine—trapped and almost dead. The rescuers haven't even got near the end road yet."

"They'll try—" began Wilkie belligerently.

Then he stopped.

He had to believe. They'd come through the Dimensions to this place, he had to believe; they'd left Old Smokey and the disaster back on Earth, he had to believe; they were here in some outlandish otherplace—oh, sure, he had to believe now.

He had to believe.

The shakes hit him then and he put his hands over his ears and lowered his head and tried not to be sick.

"Now, J. T., for your information, your mine was a long way underground. We have come through these Dimensions where the ground level more or less corresponds with the level of the mineshaft, although we had to do some jinking here and there. But now we must go through to a Dimension where the ground levels are the same as on Earth and Ironium. Otherwise"—she sniggered as though at a private joke—"we'd come out in my country fixed fast deep in the ground."

Dully, Wilkie said, "That wouldn't be funny."

"Naturally." She sounded vexed. "I thought you had a sense of humor, J. T."

He had to believe—didn't he?

"I had Soloman pick a route relatively easy as far as natural hazards are concerned. All these Dimensions are Ironium-like—which means Earth-like, too, I suppose. I have a vast and incredibly beautiful chart of the Dimensions from which to plot my courses." She sniggered again, a sound this time that brought Wilkie's head up. "David Macklin would give his soul for that!"

"Who's—?"

But she went on: "So you have nothing to fear from unnatural Dimensions, from shifting ground and laval seas and distorted time-sequences, or anything like that. Look—the ships are coming."

Polak came back as Wilkie scrambled up. Water spun from the big pitman. Now he looked his topside self, beefy-faced, huge-muscled, dark hair wild with water-stiffened brilliance, his wide mouth and cheerful features making him the epitome of the man-of-action with no thought for the morrow.

"Have a wash, boy," he rumbled. "Water'll make a man of you."

"Look there, Polak," said Wilkie, pointing.

The ships slid through the air like shuttles. Steadily, un-deviatingly, they came on. Wilkie could see no wings, no propellers, no sails, no jets. Each ship looked to be just

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

a curved-ended, squared-off hull, with structures raised on the high decks without much thought for streamlining. They all sailed about five hundred feet above the ground, and as the land dipped and rose so the ships dipped and rose with it.

"I've never seen airplanes like those before," said Polak, vigorously rubbing his shining hair.

"They're not airplanes," began the knowing J. T. Wilkie. "They're—" But he stopped. He didn't know what they were.

"Ships," said the Contessa.

Each hull was about two hundred feet or so in length, broad in proportion, with high towering decks. There were eight of them, all brightly painted and gilded with a multitude of fluttering flags and banners.

Wilkie tore himself away from the fascinating sight at Polak's forceful remarks and went down to the stream where he stripped off and plunged in, gasping and shivering, and gave himself as good a wash as he could without hot water and soap. Then he put on his grimed pit clothes again and ran back to the group. The leading ship, still remaining five hundred feet in the air, had lowered a wicker cage on a rope.

The Erinelds took turns to be hauled up, two by two.

Polak went up alone and Wilkie went up with the blue-clad man whose fierce swarthy face showed a strange animation as they swept up into the air.

He said something with a low savage joy that both chilled and exhilarated Wilkie with its dark hint of promised action. They reached the boom swung out over the side and the wicker cage swung inboard. J. T. Wilkie stepped down onto the main deck of the ship.

The feel of it surprised him. Expecting a soft swaying motion he braced himself to the unexpected hardness of the ship's motion, her rock-steady undeviating progress. Whatever supported this ship in the air had no need of air currents or buoyancy tanks.

Men on the decks clustered to watch the arrivals. Clad in gay incongruous clothes with scraps of armor leather jerkins, bright open-necked shirts, they looked a cheerful raffish bunch with open laughing faces, huge moustaches, pointed beards, and with a liveliness and high spirit that obscurely pleased and comforted Wilkie.

At the Contessa's arrival they aahed and oohed and

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

Wilkie recognized bosom companions in the highest pursuit of all.

Without a glance for the bright eyes and laughing faces of the crew, the Contessa swept imperiously into the sterncastle. Four decks high, it spread upward with a stepped overhang. Many large lanterns decorated the rails. Any comparison with a sailing ship was shattered at once by the absence of masts and sails.

The man in blue shepherded Wilkie along.

The hunger in this man puzzled Wilkie. He kept glancing at the ship, at the crew, at the rows of ballistae that snouted out in broadsides from the ranked ports. When they reached the sterncastle they entered a low-ceilinged cabin furnished with benches and tables, couches and cabinets, all of solid workmanship. No thought seemed to have been taken to weight. Everything was solid and tough. Whatever supported this ship, then, appeared not to have lift/weight problems.

The Contessa halted at the foot of a staircase—not a ladder—sweeping up on the port side.

"I need rest and refreshment before we reach our destination. Charnock will see to you."

At Wilkie's blank expression she showed a flash of pert annoyance and then rapped out a couple of sentences to the man in blue. He nodded. The Contessa swept grandly up the staircase followed by Soloman hopping at the end of his glittering chain.

The man in blue shouted to an Erineld who carried a pack slung over his shoulders. Opening the pack, the man in blue produced a flat wooden box with brass fittings. From this he took a band that, to Wilkie, appeared to consist entirely of flaming jewels. He thrust this into Wilkie's hands. Wilkie looked at it. Furiously, the man in blue snatched it up and clamped it over Wilkie's head, the ends pressing in above his ears, the jewels lost in his hair.

"Now, for the sake of Black Naspurgo himself, do you want wine or water?"

Wilkie choked off his gasp. In some strange way the jeweled band translated what this man said. He could, at last, speak to him. And now, as the voices from outside rolled in, he could understand what the crew were saying, what the Erinelds were saying—he could communicate with these people.

"I—" he stammered. "Wine, I think."

This man, then, must be Charnock.

"And, listen, miner, we called for the ships to meet us there because we did not wish them to know we had come through the Dimensions. Do you understand? You will not mention this to the sailors."

"All right."

Polak shouted: "Hey, J. T. Can you understand what he's jabbering about, then?"

"Yes, Polak. Don't ask me how. There's wine on the way."

"That's my boy."

From an inner door a girl walked toward them balancing a silver tray on which rested a bottle with ice-cold patterns of frost misting on the glass. Three glasses nestled. Charnock nodded swarthy approval. He lifted the bottle by a wicker handle and began to pour.

Wilkie eyed the girl.

Young, with a high-colored, fresh face, she looked wholesome and clean—and not particularly intelligent. Her clothes were the usual mishmash worn aboard ship: a short skirt, a red shirt with a leather jerkin over it, a scarf over yellow hair.

Polak took his glass with a lick of the lips.

He lifted it.

"Well," he said. "Here's to the Contessa."

"The Contessa," said Wilkie, sipping.

Before Charnock could reply a loud and excited hail from outside dragged their attention away from the wine.

"Ships!" yelled the voice. "Ships! It is the accursed Corforan!"

At once pandemonium broke out aboard ship.

Charnock threw down his drink and dragged out his sword. His face looked bleak.

"Now we are in trouble!" he blazed. "The Contessa will not be pleased!"

## IV

EVERYBODY rushed out on deck.

The crew appeared to be milling in confusion and yet in a few moments Wilkie saw that each was in his place—

and he recognized that here a system of discipline operated which worked in a way that perhaps he had not yet in his young life encountered. Men stood to the ranked ballistae and began to wind up the twisted thongs powering each half-bow. Other sailors ran up with sheaves of bolts, their heads sharply-pointed or squared-off for the battering punch. Other men sprinkled sand and carried buckets and cleared away raffles of rope and gash wooden lumber.

The ship was clearing for action.

"Gulp!" said J. T. Wilkie. But he said it to himself.

Over the side and away across the brown and green land beneath, he could see, clearly and in frightening detail, the floating shapes of ten ships. In the line ahead, they bore down to cross the bows of the ship in which Wilkie sailed leading her own line of eight.

Someone breathed heavily at his side and he turned to see Polak standing there with a ridiculous steel cap on his head and an enormous cutlass-type sword in his fist.

"By all the saints, I'm going to enjoy this!" roared Polak. "I haven't had a good fight since the night we belted those steelmen for them dames in Clancy's Bar and Grill."

Wilkie remembered that night, and he shuddered.

"I like a good fight too, Polak. But, geeze, feller—this is for real! Like—with swords and guns and things—or at least catapults."

Charnock laughed evilly, his rapacious face alive.

"They are not catapults, miner, neither are they trebuchets or petraries. They're ballistae—as anyone who knows anything about artillery can see."

The words came clearly to Wilkie, in recognizable form, although what the original language made of them he couldn't know.

"Yeah, well," he said truculently. It was about time he warmed himself up for the fight. "I'm more used to a—a molotov cocktail myself."

"Oh?" said Charnock, staring wolfishly over the side. "Taste good?"

"Hoo, boy," said Wilkie, pleased.

"What the hell is he yapping on about?" demanded Polak. "When does the fight begin? I'm not too pleased at the idea of jumping across nothing to get at those guys over there."

Whenever J. T. Wilkie was out on the town with Polak supposedly chasing dames they always ended up in a fight.



## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

Bad company, J. T. had often sighed, was sapping both his morals and his supply of natural teeth.

He'd always remember his old mother saying to him, when he'd been about to set off for the wicked city and college: "Now, son, you be like your father and get a good trade in your hands."

J. T. Wilkie had always known what he wanted to get into his hands.

In the bright sunshine the two lines of ships sailed nearer on convergent courses. Clearly, now, the enemy—the accursed Corforan—would cross their bows. This should, according to all Wilkie knew of the subject, confer on them a great advantage.

"Can't they get any more speed out of this tub?" he demanded.

Charnock threw back a reply without looking away from the enemy line from which bunting and flags flew bravely. "I forget, you know nothing of the Dimension of Durostorum. The secret of the force that powers the Ships of Durostorum is known to few; but all know that they must fly at five hundred feet from the ground and they must travel at twenty miles an hour. These are unbreakable laws ordained by science."

"So we can't get above the enemy and chuck rocks on 'em, then?"

"No. That is why we have the tower." Charnock pointed back to the center of the ship.

Here, in the waist, men were erecting a wooden latticework tower, hauling it upright against the sun with long ropes over pulleys and blocks. At the top a walled platform showed two large holes in its floor.

"Archers shoot from those lofty ramparts," said Charnock grimly. "And rocks are thrown. But the enemy do the same."

Polak, looking, got the idea. "Charming," he grunted.

Wilkie could see the enemy line's towers, already erected and their tops crowded with fighting men. Even as he watched he saw baskets of stones being whipped up to provide ammunition. He swallowed.

"Perhaps," he said in a careless jesting way. "Maybe it might be a good idea if I found a helmet, or a coat of mail?" Polak looked at him. "A leather jerkin?"

Polak grunted.

"Well, let me borrow your miner's helmet, then, Polak. Since you're wearing that thing."

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

An abrupt and extraordinarily loud thwunk interrupted him. He jumped as though goosed. In the thick wooden bulwark before him the head of a ballista bolt showed a leering black metal grin through the yellow splintered wood.

"What the—!"

"They have begun shooting," shouted Charnock.

Now the air filled with bolts. Men screamed and died as the flying chunks of iron bit. Splinters of wood flew. A raucous order, shrilled above the noise, brought all the gynours of the ship to the ready.

Then the ballistae twanged with a singing reverbatory thwunking and the return flight of bolts winged toward the enemy line.

Wilkie jumped up and danced with glee.

"That hit 'em! They didn't like that!"

"Here comes the next broadside!"

At that moment of involvement an Erineld skipped up to them. The squat brown man's face showed stark fear.

"The Contessa says you must come indoors at once! At once!" he squeaked. "Do you hear? Come indoors!"

"My oath!" roared Polak. "Now? When we're going to have the father and mother of a fight?"

"By Black Naspurgo!" rasped Charnock. "We must go—but—the fight—the ships—"

"You know," said the diplomatic J. T. Wilkie as the second broadside thwunked and clanged about their ears, "it might be a good idea, at that, to get under cover."

They scampered on the heels of the Erineld up the deck and into the sterncastle. The Contessa met them in a foul temper.

"You incredible morons! You insufferable cretins!" She put a hand to her breast, the fist hard and clenched in anger. "Did I bring you, J. T. Wilkie, all the way from certain death underground to be killed in a stupid brawl on the ships of Durostorum? You imbecile!"

"Here, Contessa," bumbled J. T. weakly. "Steady on!"

"It is the Corforan who fight us, Contessa," said Charnock, his evil swarthy face alive. "We must—"

"You must do nothing that I do not tell you to do! I know you are of Durostorum, Charnock, even if you are not of these ships' peoples—but you must never forget that you are one of my bargemen, a high officer of my bargemen! If you do forget—" She did not finish that, but she smiled very sweetly.

Charnock lost all his swagger, his live eagerness for battle. He shrank. His swarthy face grayed.

"Yes, Contessa," he mumbled. "I do not forget."

"Soloman can get us out of this. We approach a Portal that will take us through to Myxotic. It is an unpleasant place, but we can pass through there and put ourselves well on the way to Irunium. Ah, how I long to be back in my own sweet Dimension again!"

"Yes, Contessa," nodded Charnock, completely cowed.

"Hold on a minute," rapped Polak, following the, to him, one-sided conversation. "Are we running out and leaving the fight? Leaving these guys to fight those fellows out there? They're outnumbered here, you know—ten to eight. And—"

She rounded on him, drawing herself up, her breasts straining the sheer white fall of her robe. She glared levelly at him, browbeating him into silence by sheer personality.

"What you do, Polak, is your concern. But Soloman here is the only Porteur for a hundred miles—a thousand miles—for all of Durostorum, for all I know. And I do know! If you stay here, here you will always stay. I want J. T.—not you."

"Here, now," said Wilkie, alarmed. "Come on, Polak. It's not our fight. We'd better stick with the Contessa."

"I don't like running out on a fight, but—"

"That is settled, then." She swung back into the cabin, making Soloman skip around her. "As long as you work for me, Polak, remember that I am mistress here."

Polak was left scratching his head.

Inside the cabin the Erinelds clustered, their squeaking cheeping down to silence as the Contessa entered. Charnock, Polak and Wilkie joined them. Soloman began to stiffen up and to take on that glazed look of complete absorption in otherworld affairs.

"Make it smooth and quick, little man, and remember this ship is moving all the time."

He bobbed his grotesque bald head and then his eyes unfocused and his body trembled into stillness and the Erinelds began to disappear.

They vanished fast. Sweat poured down the gigantic domed head. Polak vanished, followed by Charnock and then Wilkie found himself plummeted into what he took to be the Calgary Stampede on a fast Saturday night.

Hordes of hosts and herds of long gray backs humped and wallowed past. He clung to the remnants of a splintered log hut, gripping into the slivered bark with grasp-

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

ing fingers, and feeling each savage impact of tusk and horn as a personal blow aimed at his own personal liver and lights.

Polak clung next to him, bellowing: "Where the infected hell are we?"

The Contessa with the screeching Soloman hanging by his chain inches over the roaring flood of gray-backed beasts screamed dire warnings and threats. The Erinelds supporting her on the splintering logs scrabbled for footing. One slipped and immediately was swept away in the animal flood, a tattered crimson scrap.

The log hut lurched. It moved a foot bodily. Now Wilkie could see the wild pig-like eyes of the monsters flooding beneath. He could make out their tusks and their bristly whiskers. They ran over an invisible ground hock-deep in upflung dust.

The noise sounded like the downtown subway through an open door.

They clung on. Even J. T. could see that there was no way back. If Soloman put them back through the Portal they'd materialize five hundred feet up in the air. They didn't, as it happened, have any parachutes with them.

That, decided the disgruntled J. T., represented a reprehensible oversight on someone's part.

Part of the log hut's wall collapsed to be whirled away as matchwood. The roof had long since gone. The floor heaved like a bad Channel crossing in midwinter. At dire peril of his life Charnock crabbed across and helped the squeaking Erinelds to support the Contessa. Soloman was hauled up, choking, and he clung like a frizzled monkey to the others. They clung on.

After two hours of agonized expectation the flood of gray hogbacks dwindled, thinned and at last ceased.

"Whew," said Polak as the thunderous noise died.

"You can say that again," huffed scared J. T.

## V

ALTHOUGH HE had long since decided to believe that all that was happening to him was real, J. T. Wilkie gave a long sigh of relief and renewed exasperation as the helicopters slanted in to a landing. They had left that inhospitable land of Myxotic and crossed three more strange and eerie otherworlds through the Dimensions before coming out to a plain of grass where modern Italian-built helicopters awaited them.

Now, after a swift but boring flight southward, they were landing in this world of Irunium on an area that, if Polak's calculations were correct, would directly correspond in their own Dimension to Manhattan Island.

"Yes, J. T.," the Contessa said, striding ahead with Solomon skipping along at her side. "Right where we now are lies New York. But you could never cross over, though you tried all your life. You have to be a Porteur or possess a Porvone Portal of Life—" She broke off sharply as Charnock reacted. She laughed scornfully. "I know, Charnock, that the Porvone are more to be feared than the worst tortures mankind can invent, but they are not here now. Brace up, man!"

Charnock mumbled a reply. He didn't like the trend of the conversation, that was for sure.

They walked toward a long serrated wall, flushed with rose by the dying sun. Towers and minarets and spires rose in the sunset beyond. Sentries prowled the ramparts. Wilkie felt his tiredness dragging on him. He had been promised a bath and food and a bed. Right now that was all he wanted. Later, very definitely, he'd get back to the main pursuit. . . .

The small city within its encircling walls crouched against the grass plain. A river wended past, silent except for an occasional splash and no ships sailed its current. Within the walls the hush seemed to Wilkie a strange and indecent thing. Here in these wide squares and terraced colonnades and broad avenues should be laughter and lights, singing throngs of merrymakers. Instead, all was quietness and dimness, lit by occasional lamps as the sun went down.

"You will be shown your quarters, J. T. Polak may

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

share them. He, too, will be useful to me." She smiled as a small pneumatic-wheeled electric car circled up. She sat without a trace of fatigue. Soloman put his great head on her lap and went to sleep at once. "I will order everything you will need. There will be a selection of girls from which you may choose. But remember, everything you owe to me—your life, your continued existence—everything! And now, good night."

And the electric car hummed away into the dimness.

"Girls?" said enraptured J. T. Wilkie.

"There's a catch in this somewhere," rumbled Polak dubiously. He stared around at the silent city, frowning.

"Yeah, but, Polak—she did say girls!"

Polak burst out into a coarse guffaw. "You know, boy, I hate to admit this to you of all people, but after what we've been through I'm not too sure—myself—"

"Yeah," said crestfallen J. T. Wilkie. "Me as well."

Laughing, drugged with fatigue and released emotions, they staggered off after Charnock. He led them through vast dim rooms within what seemed to be a palace, although Wilkie was now too tired to care what it was, until they reached a cozy suite of rooms overlooking the river. Here he showed them where everything was and then retired.

As he went, he said, "You are an important man in Irunium now, J. T. Just remember that. The Contessa's word is absolute law here. That is even more important to remember. Good night."

"G'night," yawned Wilkie. Then: "Hey! What about the girls?"

But the door had closed firmly.

"That doohickey you've got over your head, J. T., is damn useful. Remind me in the morning to see about getting one for myself."

"Okay, Polak. It would be useful."

They bathed in warm scented water and ate a meal of fruits and soft buttered bread and drank some more of the fiery wine. Then, scarcely able to keep his eyes open, Wilkie said, "Even if the Folies Bergères pranced in here in the altogether I think I'd roll over and sleep. G'night, Polak."

"Well, J. T. We're in Irunium. Now," said Polak as he lay down on the other bed. "I wonder what the Contessa wants you for, boy? Hey?"

But J. T. Wilkie could not speculate on that fascinating

topic for he was fast asleep, his mouth open and his arms outflung, dead to the world.

Dead to all the worlds.

The following morning, after a shower in the superbly equipped modern bathroom and a meal served by a silent lad clad in a gray tunic, a meal of crisp bread and golden butter, of lavish helpings of eggs and ham, of toast and marmalade and coffee, they were escorted by Charnock, spruce and crisp in new blues, down to the private audience chamber.

Charnock now wore a scarlet cocked hat. It suited him. Its arrogant feather sprouted insolently.

They passed other men clad as he was in the halls; but none wore the scarlet cocked hat. They wore scarlet kerchiefs tied around their heads and from their pointed ears swung golden bells.

"The Contessa's bargemen," Charnock said. "Of whom I have the honor to be a captain."

"Bully for you, Charnock," said J. T. Wilkie.

"When do I get one of those translator things?" grumbled Polak.

Wilkie passed on the request.

"Well," said Charnock doubtfully, "I don't know about that. The Contessa has given no orders. . . ."

Polak kept tugging at the collar of his new gray shirt. They had donned the garments left in their room because their own pit-soiled remnants had been taken away. Now they both wore gray shirts and slacks, and hideous two-tone shoes with pointed tips. Their underclothes of nylon bore the mark of a well-known U.S. mass manufacturer but were comfortable.

Wilkie said, "We'll see about the translator thing when we see the Contessa, Polak."

Through halls and corridors and up long staircases they were led. They passed a number of men dressed in fawn shirts and slacks, and wearing the ghastly two-tone shoes, and Wilkie did not fail to notice the heavy automatics belted to their waists.

Also they passed numbers of men and women wearing gray tunics or shirts and briefs. These people did not wear guns. They wore sandals instead of shoes. They looked quiet, withdrawn, and they always stood out of the way as Charnock passed, with a swift genuflection.

Wilkie wasn't too sure of that arrangement, not just yet.

The conference room into which Charnock led them

might have been an electronically-organized operations room of some multi-billion dollar corporation's headquarters in New York. They sat in comfortable chairs indicated by a withered gray-haired man wearing a modish business suit. The boardroom's table shone with so much polish Wilkie had to avert his eyes. Electronically-programmed diagrams gleamed on the walls, a telephone complex stood in one corner and a teletype frame chattered beside it. Beside that, Wilkie could only conceive it, stood a Stock Exchange ticker—ticking.

"Shades of Thomas Alva Edison!" he said on a breath.

The men in the room, wearing fawn shirts and slacks and with automatics belted to their waists, rose as a far door opened and the Contessa walked in. As before, she wore a sheer white gown, her dark hair high-coifed and sprinkled with jewels, and Soloman capered at her side.

"You may sit down," she said, after she had seated herself at the head of the table.

Acute J. T. Wilkie could not fail to observe the unease of these men, their sweaty foreheads, the way they touched their mouths. The Contessa sat serenely and surveyed them.

"Gentlemen—this is J. T. Wilkie. He is our new Chief Mining Engineer." She gestured. "The other one will also be useful. He is called Polak. He is J. T.'s friend."

"Yes, Contessa," the sigh sighed round the table.

"J. T.—these are representatives of the Valcini—they are of this Dimension and they obey me. Your duties will be direct and simple. You will run my mines for me and, more particularly, you will instigate an accident-prevention program, and you will prospect for new diggings."

"Now just a minute—"

"What about my translator, J. T.?"

"Hold on, Polak. They want me to run their mines for them!"

Polak chuckled. "What's the ore?"

The Contessa, whose face had shown increasing ire at Polak's interruptions, softened. The Valcini cringed.

"Brak—find Polak a translator band!"

The withered man in the business suit rose from the notes he had been taking and went out, to return a moment later with a band for Polak.

"These bands are the latest models, a vast improvement on the old eight stud and lever types. We get them from Altinum. As to the ore, Polak—we mine for gems!"

As she spoke her whole face changed expression. An



## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

entranced inward look of complete absorption with a topic that obsessed her transfigured her face. Her violet eyes widened and then the soft rounded lids half-closed with a look of intoxicated pleasure.

"For jewels," she whispered. "Here in Ironium we mine for the most wonderful gems in all the Dimensions!"

"I'm—ah—more used to coal—" began honest J. T. Wilkie.

"Coal, iron, diamonds, opals—what difference is it to an engineer? When I discovered that your Old Smokey mine was the nearest to a Portal I had the engineers there checked out. You were the one that best fitted, J. T."

"You mean you *chose* me?" squeaked J. T.

"Of course." She brushed away his babbled incoherencies. "Now, J. T., I have to use labor that is unsatisfactory. We are given malcontents from other Dimensions' governments, runaways, criminals of the worst kind. Also we employ indentured labor—the Erinelds are our best pitmen—and our use of machinery is minimal. You will change all that."

"But I've a contract—"

"Any contract you entered into on Earth is invalidated by your death. For, J. T., and mark me well, you would now be dead but for me. You owe me your life. I offer you an opportunity such as few young men can ever have dreamed of. Here you have everything! Money—it is yours. Power—you have that as my Chief Engineer. Leisure—the nights here are wonderful with fiestas and parties and languorous loving—we have a fine amphitheater—there is the river—oh, yes, J. T. What I offer you can seldom have been offered to a man of Earth before!"

A fat Valcini with a sweaty face and mottled hands nodded. He ventured to say: "You can imagine all the delights of your Dimension's Imperial Rome, Arabian Nights, Forbidden City, Hollywood and the Restoration Court all rolled into one and multiplied by a thousand."

"And, my dear Ottorino, that would not convey a tithe of the sheer hedonistic pleasure available in *my* Dimension!"

Ottorino cringed. "Assuredly, Contessa."

Polak's face relaxed and his eyes uncrossed. "Sounds a big deal, J. T.," he whispered. "You ought to cut yourself a slice of this!"

"J. T.!" The Contessa's voice rapped over Polak's breathy rumble. "I have imperfect servants and they are not to be trusted—even my beloved Valcini know that the miners we employ hate us, in spite of all we do for them. So you must help me make my mines produce more for me."

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

J. T. Wilkie, for all his youthful eagerness, felt he was being swept up in a current of events and spilled along, head over heels. Did he want to be this enigmatic woman's Chief Engineer?

"My main concern here is diamonds. I do not, as yet, control all of Ironium—but I will, I will! Here a quirk of past geologic evolution has resulted in a fantastic pipe of diamonds being turned almost through ninety degrees, so that it runs almost horizontal—"

"Geezel" exclaimed Wilkie. "That sounds terrific!"

"It is, my impetuous young engineer! We have been working it for a long time and the work goes on—by hand. I feel that machinery can be brought in with advantage. That is where you come in."

"Ah—yes. . . ."

"You will also see to the accident-prevention program. After that, we know there are opals out in the desert, and many other precious gem stones. All this work is worth doing, J. T. It is a noble work! For it brings me—us—wealth and power beyond the dreams of ordinary mortals."

She checked. Her bosom rose and fell with a rapidity observant J. T. associated with extreme passion. This woman, clearly, was obsessed not just with gems but with the power such jewels would bring her.

She went on in a firmer and more clipped tone: "Ottorino, since you are so concerned over our new Chief Engineer you may take him on a tour of my city of diamonds. But, and mark me well, do not take him down the mines yet. You understand, Ottorino?"

He bobbed his head. "I understand, Contessa."

She rose and everyone jumped up rapidly. With a tinkle of Solomon's glittery chain she left the room.

That seemed to be that, then. J. T. Wilkie was hired.

Outside in the sunshine on the broad marble steps, Charnock excused himself and took off for the bargemen's quarters. Still Wilkie hadn't asked him what the Contessa's barges were. Ottorino, puffing under his corpulent weight, started them off down the main street leading to the central square. The architecture reminded Wilkie vaguely of a chaotic jumble of Egyptian and Assyrian buildings with their heavy columns and leafy capitals, their brilliant earth-coloring and ornate gildings. Many statues of impossible chimeras stood among other statues to which Wilkie could not give any name.

A long low building with the almost universal flat roof

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

set back from the pavement attracted Ottorino's first remarks.

"That is the Academy of Porteuring Science—"

"The what?"

Removed from the Contessa's blighting power of persona-reduction, Ottorino regained some of his habitual command. He must be a big man among the Valcini to be in the Contessa's councils, at that, Wilkie surmised.

"Soloman, the little mannikin, is a Porteur. He has the power to bring objects and people through the Dimensions. Many people have this power latent within them, unknown to them. Here, in the Porteur Academy, the Contessa trains and perfects chosen Porteurs in their Siegler-given talent. We trade all across the Dimensions."

Polak whistled. "We could be onto a gold mine here, boy—"

"A diamond mine, I think the Contessa said."

"And here is the hospital." Ottorino led them up the curving drive lined with shrubs toward the tall white buildings flashing a myriad windows at the day.

"You have a lot of sickness here, then?"

Ottorino spread his spotted hands. "No. But the Contessa is a stickler for the done thing. Any culture must have a modern hospital—it is necessary—and so we have this great and wonderful building." He stopped speaking, put his hand to his mouth and glanced around quickly.

"Don't worry about that, pal," said Polak grandly. "We have the same trouble back home. Millions spent on hospitals to cure people who wouldn't get sick if the cash had been spent on them first."

"If," fumed good old J. T. Wilkie, "you bring politics into this dream world we've found, Polak, I'll—I'll divorce you!"

"Huh!" scoffed the big pitman, a great smile disfiguring his face. "Dream world, is it?"

In the hospital they saw sterilely-clean wards with nurses in starched uniforms, medics with equipment at the ready, the latest surgical appliances laid out, and one elderly Valcini in an end bed suffering from varicose veins.

"It's an impressive place," said Wilkie. "Should be useful if there's an epidemic, or a war."

As he spoke an end door swung open and two creatures strode in. J. T. Wilkie jumped straight up in the air and lit running. He hared up the end of the ward, found the

door shut, climbed up on a bed and prepared to defend himself. Polak wasn't far behind.

"What's the matter?" shouted Ottorino.

Wilkie couldn't speak.

"Th-them!" rumbled Polak, his face gray.

Ottorino turned, puzzled.

"The Honshi? Haven't you met them yet?"

Both Earthmen dumbly shook their heads.

"They are loyal soldiers for the Contessa. They come from another Dimension. Now, please, come down off that bed!"

The Honshi hissed. Wilkie got the idea they were laughing. The sound pulsed obscenely in the sterile ward. He stared at the Honshi.

He saw their wide frog-like faces, the wedge-shaped cheeks of gray and yellow with a lick of blue around the chops, bent strutting legs, reddish metal armor and tall conical helmets with the scraps of skin and hair fleering from the spikes. He saw all this and sensed the ferocity in those five-foot-six-inch frames and he swallowed. He wouldn't tangle with a Honshi, or with one of their short leaf-shaped swords.

Reluctantly, Wilkie and Polak climbed down off the bed.

The door opened again and two gray-clad men came in carrying between them a man who lolled his head, lank black hair damply dripping, whose only clothing, a loin-cloth, showed dabs and splotches of the blood that matted his naked back. That back looked to be all bloody pulped flesh with no shred of skin remaining.

A Honshi guard pointed to a bed and the two gray-clad men carefully put the unconscious man face-down.

"What—?" began Wilkie.

Ottorino held up a hand. "A most unfortunate accident in the mine. This poor fellow had a diamond roof fall on him. You can see his back has been lacerated. But we will look after him."

"He looks—" Wilkie started to say, but Polak chopped him off.

"His back looks like he's been flogged!"

Ottorino nodded seriously.

"A very good description, Polak. Indeed it does. Now you can see why it is so important for J. T. to institute proper safety precautions and avoid terrible accidents like this. We go out this way."

Still perturbed by the incident, Wilkie followed Ottorino

and Polak out the door. As he went the Honshi guards closed up on the two gray-clad men.

"Hoshool Hoshool" said the Honshi and the men cowered back and then, obediently, ran off.

The door slammed.

The fresh air smelled good to Wilkie.

## VI

"WE LOOK after the welfare of our workers with the utmost concern," said Ottorino, leading them along the main street toward a strange rambling building of many thick columns and rounded domes. "And they repay us with hostility and hatred and suspicion."

"Most workers don't like the bosses," said Polak laconically.

They went up the marble steps, each one a good hundred yards wide. There were a hundred of them. By about halfway Ottorino paused for a breath, panting, his face turning an interesting green hue. Many Valcini passed them going up and down. None of the gray-clad menials was to be seen and no Honshi guards stalked. Wilkie had seen a couple more since that horrendous encounter in the hospital and he still hadn't got over that initial shock of revulsion.

"What is this place, anyway?" asked Polak. Ottorino gulped a few times and then stoked enough air to answer.

"This is the Temple of Siegler. We now stand on one of the most sacred spots of Irinium—to a Valcini."

"Oh," said Polak, losing interest at once. "I thought it might be a bar."

Lack of air alone slowed down the Valcini's indignant reply. J. T. Wilkie, good old tactful J. T., said, "I guess that's an interesting place, all right. I'm not one for fancy religions myself, much. But they sure come in handy at the right times—or, more likely, the wrong times."

Polak had the message by now. "Yeah, sure," he said, growling, and beginning to mount the stairs again.

The building's many domes floated on a host of thick and stalwart pillars. Lavish color and jewels and gilding glinted and glittered everywhere. Here, too, stood men on guard who, while manifestly Valcini, were clad in outlandish brightly-colored armor. Wilkie was reminded of ancient Japanese armor he had seen in museums. But each man cradled a heavy automatic rifle. There was no mistaking those weapons.

"We guard our own," Ottorino said complacently.

Not allowed by Valcini regional custom and religious law to enter the temple, they kicked their heels while Ottorino ducked in for whatever obscure rites were performed here. When he came out he looked more down in the mouth than ever. Wilkie nudged Polak, and the two Earthmen refrained from comment.

Still, Polak couldn't help saying, "Religion sure gives a guy a thirst, Ottorino."

"It will soon be time for lunch." Ottorino stumped down the stairs. "We ought to have time for a quick one first."

"That's my boy," rumbled Polak approvingly.

Ottorino cheered up when they reached the main avenue again. All he said was: "A girl Porteur vanished from the Academy some time ago. We have been unable to find her. Yet she must be in the city of diamonds somewhere. We have an intelligence system operating from the temple; they could tell me nothing." He sighed. "And I must report failure to the Contessa."

"It seems to me," said astute J. T. Wilkie, "if a girl can Porteur through the Dimensions you'd never stop her if she wanted to take off. I mean— Hell! She's only got to go up to a Gate and—bingo—she's gone!"

Ottorino spread his spotty hands. "No, J. T. It doesn't work quite like that. As far as we know all the Gates within the city and for a long distance around are known. No one could reach those Gates—which are Honshi-guarded—without discovery."

"Um. Well, there must be a Gate you haven't found."

Ottorino looked unhappy. "Yes. That must be it—I am very sorry to say."

Shrewdly, Polak said, "What did the dame want to take off for, anyway, if they're all so happy here?"

"I told you." Ottorino spoke more purposefully. "Many of our workers are scum, criminals, disaffected. They refuse to labor for what they receive—we have to feed and clothe and support them—and they steal from us and

run away. They laugh and scorn our attempts at friendship. Charity is a dirty word. Laziness and dispirit combine to make them lazzaroni of the Dimensions. They hate us—they hate us diabolically.”

“Maybe they figure they’re not getting a square deal,” put in Polak.

“It’s not that. There are certain persons who are continually attempting to destroy us. From other Dimensions.” He glanced at the two Earthmen. “From your Dimension. People who envy our wealth and power and our lives here. Who want to take it all for themselves. Already they have fomented a rebellion over in the Big Green among imported workers, and—”

“Big Green?”

“The Cabbage Patch. We had mines beside a vast tropical forest. Now we do not own them, although we have taken steps to deprive their products to those cowardly Dargan who took them from us. The man who leads this vile conspiracy against us—and against the Contessa—is one David Macklin. He—”

“Oh,” said Wilkie. “The Contessa said he’d give his soul for a map she has.”

Ottorino snorted. “The devil Macklin has no soul. He and his cohorts seek to destroy us. Any trouble we have always originates with them.”

Looking at his comrade, J. T. saw that Polak had made up his mind. Never one to believe anything he read in the newspapers, Polak, a strong union man, had reached his decision.

“Some guys are never satisfied,” he growled. “I’ve seen ’em—fouling up things for everyone else just for their own selfish ends. Scum—you’re right, Ottorino. Still—J. T. and me, we know how to make that sort of trash work. Hey, J. T.?”

“Uh, sure, Polak. But I’m just an engineer, remember.”

“You make the plans, J. T., and I’ll put ’em into execution. We’ll win the Contessa’s diamonds for her!”

Ottorino looked relieved. They were walking now toward a smart-looking building of verandas whose windows flashed in the sun.

“This restaurant is a favorite of mine. We can have that drink, Polak, and then we’ll eat.” He nodded to the pavement, composed of extraordinarily large slabs of stone. “All below here is honeycombed with the old workings, before they hit on the present pipe.”

Wilkie began to get an inkling of the history of these people as they went into the restaurant and found a table. The very mundaneness of this midday meal surprised him. He had expected exotic trimmings. And yet—why? For a working midday meal you needed a table, a chair, eating irons—and grub.

Polak drank beer he swore was as fine as any that had ever come out of Pittsburgh.

The feeling of being pushed about, of being hustled, left Wilkie as he digested a leisurely meal of steak and onions—very terrestrial fare—with all the trimmings and with a couple of cups of coffee to follow the blueberry pie. He ate with an appetite. Polak had made up his mind to throw in his lot with these people of another world, and J. T. Wilkie decided to do the same. His mining knowledge, so dearly bought, was going to pay off big. But big! He sweated a little as he thought of what this could mean.

The strangeness of the place, the repulsiveness of the Honshi guards, the eerie appearance of some of the people he saw, all combined, could not detract from that shining dollar-filled harvest he saw ahead of him. He would fly high on the proceeds of his stint in Ironium.

That afternoon they saw more of the city including the factory area and the amphitheater—an otherworld Colosseum—where, Ottorino said with a snigger, sometimes a small part of the Big Green could be let loose. A *small* part, he said, with another knowing giggle.

Polak just laughed and said he'd like to see that.

A great fiesta was planned for the evening and night, and Wilkie just had time to stop Polak from asking if it was in their honor. He had to acknowledge to himself that he'd stopped the big man in case the answer was "No!"—and that was an answer he did not want to hear.

"They certainly know how to enjoy themselves, these Valcinil" enthused Polak that night as the torches flamed over flowing fountains of wine, over the nude gilded bodies of dancing girls, over piled platters of delicacies culled from a hundred different Dimensions. The night rang with laughter and song. Music filled the streets and squares. Lounging crowds of Valcini, their sober fawn shirts and slacks discarded now in favor of a bewildering variety of exotic costumes, rioted through the streets in a blaze of color and enthusiasm that grew ever wilder as the night progressed.



## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

Polak took off after a sprite wearing nothing, and Wilkie, incensed, chased after them, looking for the sprite's sister. Gaily-painted women jostled among the throngs. Most of these women wore masks of grotesque and concealing intricacy. These were the Valcini women. Their paints made of them leaping flames of desire. No wonder, decided Wilkie, Polak had made his decision to stay—the big man had always had a good nose for dames.

A group of vivid Valcini clustered at the entrance to a narrow alley leading off from the amphitheater road. Tonight, everyone had been told in a tannoy announcement, there would be no games in the amphitheater. Groans and catcalls had followed this, to be immediately swallowed up in more riotous fun. Now Wilkie ran on to join the laughing cheering throng.

"Go on!" the Valcini were yelling.

"That's the ideal!" And: "Keep it up!" And: "You can do it!" And, other, less savory catcalls.

Wilkie looked. He blinked. After one horrified instant when he thought the man was Polak, he wrenched himself around and ran off. That, for sure, wasn't for him.

For some reason at the next intersection the lamps that brilliantly illuminated the rest of the city of diamonds were dark. Shadows engulfed him. He halted.

He thought Polak and the girl had gone this way, but now there was no reason to follow. He must find another girl. For himself.

About to turn back, he was arrested by a strange slithering scraping, a clinking rattle that baffled him.

He looked into the shadows.

Out from the shadows into the remnants of light crept a Honshi. His helmet was gone. Blood trailed along the flags of the paving. The Honshi was trying to hold his lower abdomen and at the same time to propel himself. His wide-eyed frog's face looked gray, glazed, dry like bark.

"Hoshool!" he wheezed in a croaking guttural.

J. T. Wilkie killed his first instinctive response. Instead, he jumped forward to the creature's assistance.

Three more Honshi ran back into the light. They looked fierce, mean, their swords wet with blood.

Two Valcini, not in fiesta clothes but clad in the ubiquitous fawn, followed. Their automatics fired with flat cracks back into that slot of darkness down by the amphitheater. Shrieks and screams ripped the night down there.

"What's going on?" yelled Wilkie.

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

He saw that the wounded Honshi wouldn't last long. A barbed spear protruded through his back, the haft snapped off and dragging on the pavement. Blood fouled Wilkie's hands nauseatingly. That blood smoked a green ichor in the lights.

"The scum have broken out!" yelled a Valcini. His dark face showed swarthy and vicious in the erratic lighting.

"They're trying to get out this way," shouted the other Valcini. He brushed a blooded hand across a bloodied forehead. "But we've got reinforcements coming."

"What about Polak?" screamed Wilkie, frenzied. "Did you see my pal—a big fellow, black hair, laughing—he was chasing a girl—?"

"No sign of him."

The Valcini reloaded. They seemed comforted by the lights, even though a barbed spear flew wickedly to clang into the paving between them. A file of Honshi trotted up, carrying wicker shields covered in leather, long spears low and leveled. They began to advance into the darkness. An electric truck whined up and a portable search-light burst into lurid life, plunged a dagger of radiance down the alley.

In that light Wilkie saw the crowd of ragged men and women screaming and dancing abuse, hurling spears that fell short. Some of them wore Honshi helmets, the scraps of withered skin and hair swirling giddily.

The Honshi line advanced at a trot, shushing their weird: "Hoshool Hoshool!"

Wilkie understood, now, why the Honshi were not issued with firearms.

More Valcini arrived, some still in fancy costumes, began to advance in rear of the Honshi. Ottorino was there. He thrust an automatic rifle into Wilkie's unwilling hands.

"Go on, take it, J. T.! They are killers in there, mad dogs who slaver for our vitals!"

Poetic, foul, unjust—but true. Wilkie took the rifle. He knew how to use it, all right.

The fight lasted a lot longer than Wilkie might have expected. Those ragged men and women up there fought like demons, hurling themselves at the Honshi like lions flinging themselves at Assyrian chariots.

Gunfire stabbed the night. Like a grotesque parody of a Goya, the Honshi and Valcini advanced. Some clutched sudden death as spears pierced them. Others screamed as flung knives tore into exposed faces. But the firearms, the

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

disciplined Honshi line, could not be overthrown. Steadily, the Valcini and their alien guards moved down the alley. They moved on. Amid smoke and blood and slaughter they moved on to clear up this minor and petty revolt sparked off by fiesta.

But J. T. Wilkie did not go with them.

He stood, graven, above the bodies on the paving.

The naked sprite was underneath, her arms outflung, her breasts thick with the blood that gouted from Polak's broad back. He had tried to shield her. Clearly, he had fought until he had been beaten down, near senseless. The bodies of ragged gray-clad men, wolfish of face and lean and hungry of limb, clustered where Polak had fought. Clearly, he had battled to the last and then, in those final despairing moments, had sought to shield this unknown girl with his own broad body just because she was a girl—and Polak always had known how to treat dames.

J. T. Wilkie just stood there.

Bereft, desolated, stricken J. T. Wilkie stood above the mangled body of his comrade.

Polak . . .

*Polak.*

## VII

POLAK had been pubicked.

J. T. Wilkie did not remember very much of the events following that awful discovery in the blood-choked alley.

Vaguely he was aware of running into the shadows and firing the automatic rifle empty at distant capering devils. He felt Ottorino's fat fingers on his arm, words spoken, pressures applied to draw him away from horror.

As the new day dawned and the city settled down and the workers were roused out for the morning shifts, Ottorino guided Wilkie back to that restaurant of shining verandas and on the ground floor sat him at a table and ordered strong black coffee.

"Pubicked," choked Wilkie, distraught. "Polak—he's dead, and—"

"I told you the workers were scum, J. T. But we know that some of Macklin's friends sparked off that revolt last night. It failed. But we did not capture anyone of importance." Ottorino's fat pig-like face gleamed with sweat. "Had we done so we might have discovered information."

"I can understand them hating you Valcini. But I'm just an engineer. Polak—Polak was an engineer. He didn't mean them any harm. We were going to help them!"

"Sieglar knows all things, J. T. The machinations of David Macklin, and his henchman, Alec Macdonald, and others of like kidney—they are the ones who really murdered your friend Polak."

"But that worker scum pubicked him! Now I know what those scraps of withered skin and hair are the Honshi wear on their helmets! Scalps—scalps just aren't in the same league."

"The girl too," said Ottorino. "She was one of them, yet she was kind to one of us, so they killed and pubicked her too."

"On my world," choked Wilkie, his head still roaring and the dizziness of horror still fuddling him, "they used to shave the heads of girl collaborators. And there's a connection for you. Oh, my God! Pubicked!"

"Drink your coffee." Wilkie drank, tasting the rich bite of a lavish spiking of brandy. He began to feel the bitterness and the vengeance in him driving out the sheer numbing horror.

"I'll make them work!" he said, his hands grasping the cup. His knuckles shone like skulls. "I'll work 'em! They'll bring up more diamonds for the Contessa than they've ever seen before!"

"Yes, J. T."

"And one step out of line, just one, and I'll set the Honshi on 'em. I won't forget!"

Charnock dropped by for coffee and a bracer. His swarthy face looked parched and he was near exhaustion.

"I've been up all night too. We've found out a little more. A bunch of Dargan came across the sea of grass from the Big Green. They—"

"Them!" exploded Ottorino as the girl brought Charnock's coffee. "I remember them!"

"They have to come far?" asked Wilkie, thinking.

"In your Dimension, J. T., the Big Green is about where Rome is—Rome in Italy, that is."

Charnock went on: "They were led by the hunter they call Todor Dalreay of Dargai—a very dangerous man. He is working for David Macklin now, of course."

"I'll have no mercy on any of them," said J. T. Wilkie out of his anguish and misery.

A golden blast of trumpets attracted everyone's attention. Chairs scraped back as men and women of the Valcini crowded out of the door. Ottorino smiled.

"The Contessa is taking her morning constitutional. It is quite an occasion for those who do not come into such close contact with her as I—or, us, I should say, J. T."

Charnock went out the door, evidently expecting the other two to follow him. Ottorino stood up and Wilkie, with a quick sipping motion, finished the last of his spiked coffee. Ottorino bent down to him.

"It will be of particular importance this morning. By her presence she will restore confidence."

Wilkie half rose to stand up and, bent over, his eye caught the serving girl who had brought the coffee. She clearly imagined everyone in the restaurant's lower floor to have crowded to the door. She wore the usual gray tunic with more of an air than most of those he had seen, and a bright scarlet flower nestled behind her ear. She was speaking quickly and savagely, frightened, not looking into the restaurant where she must have seen Wilkie looking at her, but toward a large wooden cupboard against the wall to the side of the serving counter.

"Now!" she said in that intent, savagely frightened voice. "The bitch is on her street-walking stunt again!"

Ottorino reacted.

He snapped erect. He moved forward arrogantly, his face stiff with hatred.

He grabbed the startled girl around and dragged her by her shoulder, forcing her down, so that she stared in appalled fear up at him. Wilkie caught a glimpse of shining brown hair, a pleasant round face with a snub nose very saucily upturned, and hazel eyes that darkened now in shocked surprise and horror. The girl's face drained of blood. She stared at Ottorino sickly.

"Now, my girl! You'd better explain yourself, and quickly!"

Wilkie stepped after Ottorino around the end of the counter. He experienced a chaotic mix of emotions; know-

ing that he should feel sorry for the girl he yet could feel only the thick hatred for her kind pulsing in him.

"So you're another one of the scum, the disaffected," snapped Ottorino with purposeful power. "We shall root you all out, very soon."

He stopped speaking.

The cupboard door had opened without a sound and a young man stepped out. The young man's rather sharply pointed nose, thin face and narrow mouth did not repel Wilkie as he might have expected, and this was perhaps because of the haze of freckles across nose and cheeks that lent him an open boyish air.

The girl said, "It's time, Tony—and it's down there! I'm sure of it! Tony!"

For the young man had pointed a small revolver at Ottorino. The gun shook.

Tony said roughly, "Shut your mouth, scum! I'll blow your guts out for two pins! Get in behind the counter—and move fast!"

A trapdoor had been flung up in the floor to the rear of the counter and a ladder revealed itself. Tony pointed down.

The girl said, "Get down, vermin! You should have gone out like the rest of the customers! Now you're likely to get killed."

Because there seemed nothing else to do Ottorino and Wilkie climbed down the ladder. The gun in Tony's thin and nervous fist menaced them all the time.

The cellar contained the usual racks and bottles of a restaurant cellarage. In the wall a dark opening showed.

"Through there, and step lively!" The gun jerked the command. "Val, where's the flashlight?"

The girl shone it down the passageway.

For a man at the wrong end of a gun, Ottorini, it seemed to Wilkie, acted with consummate ease and calm. He glared at Tony. "I should like to tell you—" Ottorino began.

Tony shouted excitedly: "Shut up! We know your sort. Valcinil Vermin! Get through there or I'll shoot you here and now and chance—" He cut himself off.

Ottorino glanced at Wilkie and ducked his head to enter the tunnel, saying: "Another revolt. It is tiresome. Invariably they will be caught and punished."

"We won't be caught this time!" the girl, Val, said in a kind of whining scream of triumph. They all went through and the flashlight picked out walls of hard-packed earth.

The covering to the tunnel lay thrown to one side, its outer face an exact match for the wall of the cellar.

"Old tunnels, left over from the days when the mines were near the surface here, as I told you, J. T." Ottorino still carried his poise. Wilkie sweated. "These poor deluded scum never learn."

"Shut your mouth, Valcini, or I'll shut it for you!" blustered Tony.

Wilkie began to wonder just how effective a threat that small revolver was. It shook wildly in Tony's thin hand. He guessed he hadn't fired yet because they were too near the restaurant and a shot would bring instant attention. Ottorino had made no attempt to unbuckle the flap of his holster. The further they went along the tunnel the greater their danger, then.

Tony said, "Is it near, Val?"

"It took me a long time to find. Just—" Now it was the girl's turn to revert to that fear-filled manner she had shown when first she had attracted Wilkie's attention. She looked uncertain, frightened, small and lonely. She shut her eyes. A feeling of strain emanated from her. She flicked her eyes open. "Ahead. You gave the message to Galt, Tony? He will be waiting? For they'll be after us soon."

Ottorino swore. "What is this? A Porteur? Here?"

Now, clearly, Wilkie saw the fear in the Valcini. The calm air vanished. Ottorino began to sweat again.

"I realize—this must be the girl Porteur who escaped! What the Contessa will say—"

Tony interrupted with vicious satisfaction. "To hell with the Contessa! All the time Val was working as a slave for you! Working in different places looking for a Portal. And she found the scent of one, right here, in the old mine tunnels."

"That's not possible!"

"Oh, yes, Valcini—to your eternal damnation and the glory of Arlan!"

Light from a source ahead showed them to Wilkie. He realized he and Ottorino had stumbled headlong into the middle of a carefully-laid escape plan. The man and girl wearing the gray—slaves, they'd said?—had waited for the ritual of the Contessa's morning airing to take attention away from them. Now they stumbled along to join the rest waiting for them. Tony had come to bring Val, the Porteur, and now—

And now here they were, eighteen or twenty men and

women crammed into a square room beneath the ground into which six old mine tunnel mouths opened. Lights glowed down. Tony and Val ran in, pushing Ottorino and Wilkie ahead. Tony waved his pistol, excited, his face working with his hatred of the Valcini, his pent-up emotions blazing.

"Val thinks it's here, right enough!" he shouted. The people fell silent. Their filthy faces peered with blind animosity. "These two Valcini must be dealt with."

"Hold on!" interrupted Wilkie violently. "I'm not a Valcini! I'm just an engineer—"

Wilkie felt the fear in this cramped room. This bunch of people in their drab gray tunics looked as though they would kill without remorse. They carried bags and satchels and blankets, many hefted swords and spears, and at least six carried rifles. They looked as though they intended to go on an expedition.

Val shouted in triumph. She pointed down a narrow mine shaft that looked abandoned and crumbling. A rope hung down into the darkness.

"Down there," a dark-faced, haggard man with a wild shock of black hair said with savage satisfaction. "Our way into another world! Our escape, away from all this!"

He spoke to a young, wild-looking man with a mop of tow hair and the look of a chained beast.

One by one the men and women slid down the rope into the shaft. Many carried lights and these flashed up and sent eerie shadows skittering. Val perched at the lip of the shaft and stared hypnotically down. A concentration of power coalesced in her face; all the immaturity, all the round cheerfulness, all the saucy piquancy had been banished as though her features had held no other than this taut intent gaze of absolute concentration.

The lights slithering down the shaft spurted one after the other, died. It was like throwing lighted matches into a pool. Ottorino was frenzied with fear now, his eyes alive and furtive like a weasel's. Tony kept the wavering gun pointed between the Valcini and Wilkie.

"We're getting away from this accursed place," whispered Tony. "The Valcini, the Honshi, all the vermin! We're getting away through a Gate into a new, fresh, clean world—a world where we can set up our own people, get back home, begin a new life!"

A heavily-bearded man crisped orders. "Nyllee, Carlo, Mina—go on down!"



## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

These workers were vanishing from this Dimension; through the power of this girl Porteur, Val, they were stepping from one world to another. J. T. Wilkie began to see that they might not take him with them, and they might not let him live to tell on them. Ottorino had reached the same conclusions.

Tony kept ranting on about the fresh clean start they would make in the new world, but Wilkie scarcely heeded him. The thought occurred to him that if Ottorino tried to draw his gun Tony might shoot at the Valcini and give Wilkie a chance to knock the revolver away. A slender chance; he could see nothing else.

The girl the black-bearded man had called Nyllee, a strong, red-haired, doughy-faced chunk of animal dynamism, mentioned something about a frog's bowels and jumped recklessly down the shaft.

"Tony!" shouted Val, her concentration held like a Christmas tree bauble on Twelfth Night.

Ottorino threw up his hands, screaming. J. T. Wilkie, heroic J. T. Wilkie, took a headlong dive for the far corner of the room. He rolled over and hit into the wall all asprawl. In a distorted vision he saw Tony leap down the shaft. Ottorino began to fumble with his holster. Val flung him a single look, a cold, hard, hating, *remembering*, look—and jumped.

Ottorino snatched his automatic out. He lumbered to the shaft, fired down, emptying the magazine. For all the good that would do, even Wilkie knew, he might as well have been blowing peas at a steel wall.

In a snarling rush of husky bodies and glittering steel and brandished weapons a party of Honshi and Valcini erupted into the subterranean chamber. Charnock in the lead yelled as he saw Ottorino and Wilkie.

"J. T.! Are you all right? Ottorino, what—?"

"Scum! They escaped!" Ottorino choked on his own suddenly released fear and vented anger. "They had a Porteur with them—down the shaft—"

"Get to the collegel!" rapped Charnock to a Honshi at his side. "A Porteur—we must have a Porteur down here at once!"

The Honshi slapped his spear haft, "Hoshoo'd" and departed at a dead run.

"The Contessa—" began one of the young Valcini.

"Let's get this sorted out first, before we think of any

more trouble," grunted Charnock. His fierce swarthy face glowered down the shaft.

Wilkie stood up, guessing that the girl, Val, had seen the onrushing Honshi before he had. A strange, vagrant feeling for her brushed his mind; then he swept it away with a single burst of hate. It was her sort who had murdered Polak and pubicked him.

The Academy of Porteuring Science stood nearby and moments later under the impact of the escape a Porteur pushed his way down the tunnel. Wilkie took a quick note of the man's grotesque appearance and then he snatched an automatic rifle from a startled Valcini, shoved up front. After the first fighting group of Honshi leaped down the shaft, their goggle eyes staring and apprehensive, to be snuffed out from this world, J. T. Wilkie shouldered Charnock aside and leaped.

He dropped down the mine shaft and then, with only the faintest of shudders through his body to denote he had passed from one Dimension to another, he tumbled on to strike in a blinding smother of whiteness. Cold bit into him. He could hear a frenzied screaming. He could hear gunfire. Directly before him a Honshi leaped up, flinging his spear away, to pitch forward and stain the snow with his green lifeblood.

Wilkie lost his balance on the snow slope, began to pitch down toward the howling fugitives below. Their rifles barked at him and their spears looked cold and hard and sharp in that frozen waste.

## VIII

BULLETS COUGED the snow at his feet. The snow half-blinded him. He chattered with the unexpected cold. The automatic rifle went skittering away somewhere. A Honshi fell on him and he writhed away, nauseated, green ichor staining his gray clothes.

All about him men shouted and fought.

Then Charnock grabbed him.

"It's no good, J. T." The captain of bargemen gasped. "They're picking us off—we'll have to go back."

A Valcini, his left arm dangling, screamed for the Porteur.

"We'll have to put on warm clothes! We can come back and hunt them down! But, for the sweet sake of Siegler, get us out of here!"

Valcini and Honshi began disappearing. Spitting out a mouthful of snow, J. T. Wilkie staggered upslope. Charnock half-pushed, half-carried him.

"I doubt if it will be necessary to come back. Those people will freeze to death in this dimension."

He sounded grim, purposeful, and—and? Wilkie wondered at the tone of Charnock's voice.

When he whipped back into the mine shaft a makeshift basket and rope hauled him back to the lip. He crawled out, to be followed by Charnock. Wilkie took a deep breath.

"Thanks, Charnock. You saved my bacon then."

Charnock's thin smile held no warmth that Wilkie could discern. "I did my duty. The Contessa would have been—displeased—had you died. Don't talk about it."

"Ah—yes," said deflated J. T. Wilkie.

Then, like an ugly revolver firing to reveal a cigarette lighter, Charnock said, "Anyway, I like you, J. T. And, remember, I'm not a Valcini. Nor are you."

Not quite sure how to reply, Wilkie said, "So that's the Porteur."

The Porteur, very obviously, was not a human being.

That is, J. T. Wilkie corrected himself, not a human being from Earth or any Dimension where people like Terrans lived. But that he was a human being possessing intelligence and spirit, that, too, was obvious. Despite the fact that he looked a simpleton, with a high bullet-shaped head protruding above a ruff of dark stringy hair like a monk's tonsure, dreamy eyes and smidgen of a nose and loose, foolishly-smiling mouth, flapping ears like barn doors and shambling gait, he must possess that special spark of intelligence reserved for species that come to dominate their environment.

"Gangly?" said Charnock, off-handedly. "Yeah—at least they sent us a good one."

Hearing his name, the Porteur rose from the lip of the shaft. All the men and Honshi who were coming back were back; the others would be left to the snow and the cold. He advanced with a lopsided smile.

"Charnock? Was it much of a panic, yes?"

"But yes," said Charnock, grimly.

Wilkie noticed that a small but alert-looking Valcini whose fawn shirt carried red tabs on the collar and whose pointed automatic did not waver from Gangly's midriff now relaxed. He coiled up the long glittery chain that depended from a bracelet around his left wrist. Around Gangly's neck the hard iron band's loop was snapped open.

The Valcini noticed Wilkie watching him. He laughed unpleasantly.

"There wasn't much chance that the Porteur would try to jump down and escape through the Gate. But we of the Porteur college have to be alert. So—" He rattled the chain offensively.

Wilkie decided he didn't like this one.

Charnock was speaking more easily now, watching the guards depart. "Gangly isn't his real name, of course. He comes from—hey, Gangly, just what Dimension do you come from?"

The Porteur's lopsided smile froze.

"You call my Dimension Lisifutz—it is a mild and pleasant place."

The impediment in Gangly's speech must be ironed out by the translator band, Wilkie guessed. The shambling man from Lisifutz had trouble with diphthongs and aspirates.

"I was brought here by the Contessa's men and I learned of my gift—my gift of catapulting people and things through the Dimensions." He spoke directly to Wilkie.

For a moment Wilkie wondered why; then he recognized that he wore a gray shirt and gray slacks, outstanding among the Valcini fawn. Gangly, too, wore a gray sack-like garment ending in a ragged kilt, cinctured by a broad leather belt. On his back, boldly stitched in bright scarlet cloth, a huge pictured eye, open and glaring, stretched from shoulder to shoulder. J. T. Wilkie sought for the parallel that sprang to mind from his own world; sought and failed to remember.

"I—er—uh," he said, quite unable to reply in kind.

Gangly looked disappointed.

Charnock chuckled. He had regained his own poise. "Those poor devils must all be frozen meat by now. And, Gangly, don't make a mistake. J. T. here isn't a worker like you—he's the Contessa's Chief Engineer."

"Oh!" Gangly looked crushed.

"Get on, scum!" rapped his guard. Together they went

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

down the tunnel, the huge shambling man with the bullet-head and the neat alert little Valcini.

"That's a strange one," remarked Charnock. "Come on, J. T. I need a drink. I think some of that damned cold got into my bones."

"Me, too," said J. T. Wilkie.

Ottorino, still clutching his empty automatic, joined them. He had not entered that cold other Dimension. Now he began to reload, blustering a little.

"They may not all be frozen, Charnock. I think the Contessa will order a full-scale search party."

"If she does, all right." Charnock led them back into the restaurant, which had been cleared of customers, and helped himself to a drink. "That's up to her."

Drinking a generous whisky, Wilkie said, "I think I'll volunteer to go. I owe those people something."

"Look, J. T.," said Charnock patiently. "You've got to forget your pal Polak. That's over. Like us all, you work for the Contessa. She decides what's to happen."

"And your job," added Ottorino pontifically, "is to win diamonds. You are, anyway for now, the mining expert we need."

So, for the next few weeks, that was what J. T. Wilkie was.

What the Contessa had told him of conditions here was absolutely true. He lived a life of sybaritic luxury. The wealth was prodigious. Anything the heart could desire was brought in from a hundred different Dimensions. Somehow, though, he couldn't arouse his old enthusiasm for chasing girls. Always when he saw a smooth leg, or a skirt swinging, or heard a girl singing, his mind flashed to memories of Polak. The hideous memory of Polak, dead and bloody, filled his mind. He dreamed ghastly dreams. He left the girls severely alone and devoted himself to mining.

The pipe of diamonds lent itself to machine excavation. He at last descended and saw Erinelds at work, their naked brown bodies sweating with exertion as they hacked with pick and shovel. He made notes, checked the strata, dreamed up plans. Finally he went to see the Contessa with his scheme.

They met in the room that Wilkie had tagged as the Thomas Alva Edison room. The Contessa was in a most foul and unbeautiful temper. She sat in her chair and scowled on the few senior Valcini as Charnock and Wilkie

entered. Wilkie felt the cold breeze of her regard chill him like that snow slope in that unknown Dimension had.

"I can't attend to you today, J. T.," she said with barely controlled civility. A man wearing what appeared to be bulky black armor and girded with a sword and hand-weapon of some outlandish pattern stood at her side. He wore a translator band and he looked hostilely at Wilkie.

The Contessa swirled a white hand. "I've just come back from a Dimension called Narangon—the fools! The blind stupid fools! Well, they'll pay, I'll see to that!"

"The Wizards of Senchuria are still alive, still standing across the Dimensions," said the man in the black armor. "We need a Portal, Contessa. That's for sure."

"And do you think the Porvone, God rot their perverted souls, will sell us one?"

"No, Contessa."

"Well, then, how do you propose we obtain a Portal?"

Charnock shook himself. The Contessa eyed him balefully. "I see you still do not relish talk of the Porvone, Charnock."

"No, Contessa." He spoke humbly. "They are worse than anything man can ever imagine. They keep their Porvone Portals of Life to themselves."

"And I want one! I want one!"

The black-armored man stroked his reddish moustache and began to say with heavy emphasis: "If the Contessa requires a Porvone Portal of Life, I will—"

"No, Wayne! I need you for the plans in hand. You know that." She looked with a frowning concentration on Wilkie.

He did not speak.

"Tell me, J. T. Why do you not pleasure yourself with the girls I provide? Are they not to your liking? You know we have the pick of the Dimensions."

"It's not that, Contessa." He swallowed. He thought of Polak, pubicked.

She smiled. The Valcini moved uneasily. She leaned forward so that her breasts thrust against the thin white stuff of her gown. Soloman clucked at the end of his chain. She smiled more widely, regarding him with her level violet gaze.

"Is it, perhaps, J. T., that you desire—me?"

He heard Charnock gasp. He saw the face of Wayne, the black armor sheening and softly clanking below, and

saw the frown clamp frozen on that brutal face. The Valcini were out of this, now.

How to answer?

He tried to smile—and failed.

"If I speak the truth, Contessa—"

Her abrupt displeasure flayed him.

"Those who do not tell me the truth do not live to lie again! Now, J. T., do you wish to sleep with me?"

He swallowed. Hell—what a mess!

"It would be—" He stopped and started again. "On my world we do not expect girls—" No, that was no good. Well—to hell with it, then. "Yes," said romantic J. T. Wilkie. "You must know that."

"Ah!" Her smile blossomed widely now. "You have at least a heart, J. T. But do you not know what happens to peasants who love a princess?"

Almost—but, mercifully, not quite—he'd blurted out, "But you're not a princess, you're a contessa." Instead, he said firmly, "I do not expect to and until now had not thought about it. The truth is—"

"Yes?" archly.

"The truth is that Polak—"

Her smile withered. "Your friend, the big bumbler who was killed? Well, what about him?"

He couldn't explain. He contented himself with: "I've been upset. I'd like to pubick all those—those—"

"Vermin?"

"Yes. Polak was a good friend."

She leaned back. The tip of a pink tongue flicked out to wet those scarlet rose-bud lips.

"You must forget poor Polak, J. T. He was a good man. But he is gone. His death is just one more price we pay for what we have. Now, J. T., remember, I promise you nothing. I hold out no hope of reward apart from my gratitude—and that has been enough, in the past, to make men move mountains for me."

Wilkie nodded, obscurely relieved. He just hadn't thought of the Contessa along with all the other dames he'd chased. They weren't in the same league.

Charnock moved abruptly at Wilkie's side, and was still again.

The Contessa nodded.

"My plans have been interrupted by this nonsense on Narangon. I had the Infalgon ready to wipe out the Wizards of Senchuria, but David Macklin and his accursed

cohorts interfered. I will deal with them, one day! But now I need a Porvone Portal of Life. Tomorrow I expect a messenger from a Dimension called Slikitter—a place where we buy many of our scientific requirements—and then we shall see!” She rose, dismissing them all. “Tomorrow, J. T., come to me. And I will tell you what we shall do.”

### IX

THAT NIGHT a girl came to Wilkie’s apartments. A slip of a thing with high breasts and rose complexion, with a tinkling laugh and wearing a silver gown that floated about her body, she pirouetted for him in the dusk.

“Don’t you like me, J. T.?”

“Sure, sure,” he said tiredly. “But not tonight, Josephine.” She pouted. “You’re mooning after the Contessa!”

About to snap a tart retort, he hesitated. He wasn’t, was he?

“It’s not that,” he said lamely.

She flounced around him, at once languorously appealing and vixenish. Then, abruptly dropping her artifices, she approached him closely, smiling up into his face. “There are many things about Irunium, J. T., and about the Contessa, you do not know.” She turned, smiling in a way that brought all Wilkie’s senses alert. She darted for the door, then paused on the threshold, smiling tantalizingly at him.

“Well, J. T., at least you’ve proved to me that you don’t chase girls, just as you told me today!”

And, with that shattering remark, she was gone.

J. T. Wilkie stared in baffled astonishment at the closed door. It couldn’t be! But—but those last gestures, that imperious voice, that reference to a conversation he had had with her today— Could that have been the Contessa herself? In some other guise?

Impossible!



But he remembered the whispered stories of the Valcini, of the Contessa's alter egos, remarks he had scarcely noted. But now . . . Now!

He did not sleep well.

Promptly on time the next day he met Charnock in the anteroom to the Thomas Alva Edison conference room.

Charnock, wearing a smart set of blues and with his scarlet cocked hat very rakish, was deep in conversation with another captain of bargemen dressed as he was.

"Look, Pontius, I know," Charnock was saying fretfully. "You know I'm a good bargeman."

"There is no room for anyone who is not a good bargeman, Charnock."

This man, Pontius, although dressed as was Charnock, carried himself with a more authoritarian air. From his pointed ears swung a sunburst of golden bells. If Wilkie had thought that Charnock's swarthy face was that of a devil, Pontius, with his scarred, leathery and evil visage must be the king of devils.

"You'll do whatever the Contessa wants, Charnock! By Siegler, you will!"

Charnock nodded stiffly. "I shall, Pontius. And I will still swear by the potent Black Naspurgo himself!"

The two men stood for a moment, toe to toe; then Wilkie's presence obtruded itself and they relaxed, turned to scowl at him.

"Ah, J. T.," Charnock ground out. "You are welcome."

Pontius grunted something half beneath his breath and swaggered off. As he went, he called over his shoulder: "Don't forget, Charnock. You're a loyal bargeman!"

"Confound that Pontius!" Charnock rumbled to Wilkie as they turned toward the door. "He gives himself airs."

The complaint, even Wilkie knew, among equals, was not without precedent.

This morning the Contessa, for the first time since Wilkie had known her, sat on her chair without her glittery golden chain and without her personal Porteur, Solomon, gibbering and clucking by her side. Her dark, high-coifed hair fairly shimmered with gems. Over her sheer white gown she had draped a very large fortune in gems. They sparkled so that Wilkie's eyes watered.

The Contessa, evidently, wished to impress more than she habitually did.

"These plans, J. T.," she began abruptly. "They are good

and workable. Someone will have to go through to your Earth to buy the machinery."

"I'll—"

"Your work, for the moment, is done. My agents on Earth can do the commercial trafficking. Everything is in your notes. You have been very thorough."

"Thank you, Contessa."

"You were not so grateful last night, J. T."

Was there a mischievous sparkle to her eyes?

Agonized J. T. Wilkie stammered.

"Oh, yes, J. T. The stories about my alter egos are quite true. But that would have been cheating you, would it not?"

"I—I—" He stumbled around the words, not knowing what to say, feeling cheap, feeling—truth to tell—extraordinarily frightened. Were there no bounds to the witchery of this woman?

Mercifully he was saved from a coherent answer by a burst of golden trumpet notes. The far doors swung open. A double file of bargemen entered, captained by Pontius. Front and center marched a being who drew Wilkie's fascinated gaze. Becoming accustomed to outlandish forms and figures, the shapes of aliens, yet each time he encountered a new form of alien life he could not but fail to respond. Now he looked with chill revulsion on the envoy from Slikitter.

Tall was the Slikitter, tall and thin as a concrete lamp-post. His skin color was yellow and his features constituted a countenance that might be called a face, if a nose-snout, pale watery eyes and a round funnel-shaped mouth could warrant such a mundane description of alienness. Clad all in a dazzling bright red scaly material that fell in shimmering folds and creases about his angularity, he stood, proud and composed before the white magnificence of the Contessa di Montevarchi.

Conventional greetings were exchanged translated through the facilities of the bands, and Wilkie watched with fascination as the relative stances of these two, unknown alien and the Contessa, were established. Here, he saw clearly, was a being from a Dimension of some power.

There was talk of some differences in the past, then in due time the Contessa said, "And the Portal?"

Without hesitation, the Slikitter said, "I regret, Contessa, entirely impossible."

Anger and displeasure flashed from the Contessa. She drew in a sharp hissing breath. "What have you to offer?"

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

"We cannot obtain the Porvone Portals of Life for our own use. I am aware that you know of our own casements, the Slikitter Windows."

"I know. I remember Palans Rodro—the Bold!—ha! the fool! Well?"

The Slikitter shook his head.

"We cannot make any available to other Dimensions, Contessa. It is against our law. One day, perhaps, the law may change—"

"Then change it today!"

"Impossible."

A senior Valcini, standing to the right of the Contessa's chair beside the black-armored Wayne, put his head forward in a suggestive thrusting movement. He looked as though he might have stepped from a Rembrandt portrait of a master butcher.

"Isn't it well known that the Slikitter Windows are fallible? That they have little power? That they, in truth, are nowhere as efficient as a Porvone Portal of Life?"

"Quiet, Pfitzner!"

But the Slikitter reacted. His funnel-shaped mouth reticulated. "We have a Slikitter Window in operation at the junction of our two Dimensions, between Slikitter and Iru-nium, a casement through which I have just come. We supply you with scientific devices far superior to those obtainable elsewhere. I have the new contract for your signature now. But I did not come here to be insulted."

They quieted him down. Wine was brought. Conversation broke out sporadically.

"Slikitter!" Charnock told Wilkie in a disgruntled whisper. "I prefer to get our stuff from Altinum or Earth."

"The Contessa will handle him all right," said Wilkie. "That girl can handle anyone!"

"But you have not come here entirely empty-handed," the Contessa was saying in her sweetest manner. "I am sure you appreciate the respect we have for Slikitter invention."

If a twitch of a nose-snout and a rolling of a funnel-mouth was a smile, then the Slikitter smiled.

"You have heard of Durostorum?"

At Wilkie's side, Charnock tensed.

"Ah!" breathed the Contessa di Montevarchi. "Yes, I have heard. And you—you confirm?"

"I confirm."

"Then we can bargain."

The bargaining passed in a complicated technical series

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

of legalities that spelled one word to Wilkie: greed; but he felt bewilderment at what they were bargaining over. Various consignments of jewels were mentioned and the Contessa was able, with a sidelong glance at Wilkie, to promise an unexpected increase in production. She did not specify any requirements for machinery. Wilkie felt relieved. He didn't relish working with Slikitters as mechanics down the pit.

At last the Contessa leaned back and took a gentle sip from her jeweled platinum goblet handed to her by a half-naked copper-skinned maiden. She reflected.

"Very well. We are agreed. You will tell me the exact location and the circumstances. For I own, indeed I do, that it is strange for the Porvone to venture to so backward a world—and yet—"

"They go where they list." The Slikitter put down his empty wine glass. "They are not to be trifled with."

"Don't worry about that on our score. I do not intend that I or any of my people shall even see a Porvone. I will have no truck with them. We shall not encounter them."

"That is a promise?"

"That is final"

"Thank Black Naspurgo for that!" rumbled Charnock under his breath. His swarthy face looked gray and parched at the horror of his own inner thoughts.

Wayne clashed his armor with unnecessary violence thrusting back his sword. His brutal face looked ugly and dissatisfied and petulant.

The Slikitter and the Contessa exchanged ritual farewells; then Pontius and the bargemen escorted the alien out. Wilkie caught himself. Hell, Pontius and most of the bargemen, the Honshi, even the Valcini, were aliens—as was Gangly. But, somehow, the Slikitter had breathed an aura of alienness transcending those.

Thoughts of the alien kept obtruding on J. T. Wilkie's existence over the following few days. He knew the Contessa was brewing up some grand scheme unconnected with diamond mining. There was much activity in the city. Skimmers were collected, their oval chassis and rows of seats covered over by plexiglass canopies, hanging unsupported in lines outside the walls. Purpose animated the city of diamonds.

Charnock told him: "We use your terrestrial helicopters a great deal, but recently Altinum has gained the contract

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

with its skimmers, sweet little craft. Your technology boys will have to extract their digits."

"I'm sure," gawked impressed J. T. Wilkie.

He gawked again when the Contessa, in a curtly brief interview, informed him that he would accompany her on the journey to Durostorum.

"Collect yourself safari equipment and a weapon; Charnock will help you. And, J. T., as your work is finished in replanning the mines here, you might think I can dispense with you." She smiled sweetly. "So I could. But I reward my faithful servants. Remember, J. T., you still work for me, and owe me your life and loyalty."

"I won't forget, Contessa." J. T. Wilkie, fervent J. T. Wilkie, meant every word.

The journey began early one bright day that Wilkie, whose reckoning had been shot, estimated to be a Friday.

A dozen large skimmers loaded with Valcini and Honshi set off due west, crossing the silent river, heading out toward the horizon-rimming mountains. Charnock joined Wilkie in the rear seats of a skimmer. Chained to his left wrist shambled Gangly.

"The Contessa is bringing a number of Porteurs," Charnock said briefly. "Insurance."

The glittery metal chain carried a molecular arrangement that would prevent Gangly from escaping Charnock through a Gate. Pressure of a button on the bracelet could shoot a painful electric current into Gangly's nerves. "To keep him in line," observed Charnock. He did not speak with any vulpine show of satisfaction at the information.

The first Portal through which they all went, skimmers and people, bodily, took them into a vast and open land of lakes and sea inlets, of pine forests and tundras. They flew for three hours due west. Wilkie had seen no sign of the Contessa.

"She is traveling in her personal barge, with a crew captained by Pontius." Charnock shook the chain reflectively. "I have you and Gangly here."

"She's entitled to a little comfort, surely," observed Wilkie. "After all, she is a woman."

"Yes," said Charnock, and said no more.

Wilkie learned that Wayne, still clad in his ominous black armor, was leading a parallel force to obtain the other Porvone Portal of Life that operated at the other end of the Gate from Durostorum. The mission was important

but, according to Ottorino, not as difficult as that undertaken by the Contessa.

"That's just like her," enthused J. T. Wilkie. "Trust her to take on the tough nut herself."

The skimmers traveled just like Greyhound buses; the sensation would have been dismayingly ordinary but for their helicopter-like ability to skim through the air and rise and fall easily through the airlines. The next Gate took them into a Dimension where the skimmers had to be abandoned. They had served their purpose in bringing the expedition over the longest physical distance and now the people would go forward on foot, slipping one by one through smaller Gates on the way to Durostorum.

Wilkie well understood that they wouldn't go back by the way they'd first come—those unending heavings of gray hogbacks in Myxotic. He thought of Polak, instinctively, and rejected the thought with passionate hatred for all the enemies of the Contessa.

Charnock, because he had charge of the Porteur Gangly, knew where they were going. In the next Dimension they popped out one after the other into a world where the air filled with blowing bubbles. Like those myriads of soap bubbles blown by happy children from rings dipped in detergent, the rainbow-glistening spheres flew and drifted and whirled about them. Wilkie became enchanted with their iridescent beauty.

A group of bubbles blew lightly into his face and burst and at each soft pop a single musical note of exquisite melody released itself as though from captivity and chimed in unison with all the other bursting bubbles. The safari party danced laughing through the rain of melody.

A pain lanced through Wilkie's head.

He saw Charnock rub his forehead, wincing.

The bubbles blew faster and thicker, bursting unceasingly now, each chiming note lost in the cadences of a hundred more. The sounds grew. Now the air rang with the tocsin note of thousands of breaking balloons of music.

Gangly yelled.

"They'll drive us mad!" He dragged at the chain.

Now everyone was running, their hands clasped uselessly over their ears, their eyes streaming, their heads ringing.

The infernal babel bludgeoned with sheer insensate music into Wilkie's head. He screamed. Everyone was screaming. They ran drunkenly for the next Portal.

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

The Porteurs flung the people through the Gate at top speed. Wilkie sprawled forward onto dry sand that gritted at once into his eyes and against his teeth and felt that infernal tocsin ringing still in his head.

The safari crowded on a reddish sandy beach and huddled, waiting for their senses to return.

At last they gained a semblance of control. Wilkie looked out to sea. He gaped.

The water out there looked—odd. It rolled sluggishly against the dry sand without wetting it. The sea looked sludgy, like ointment, like grease. The dryness in the air rasped painfully in Wilkie's nose and throat.

He heard the Contessa's rapid, controlled voice.

"This is a bad world. Soloman, get us out of it fast!"

The glittery chain tinkled as Soloman capered.

"The whole water content of this world has turned into polywater," said the Contessa. "All the water, all of it, is one giant molecule, balanced and perfect, and deadly."

"Polywater," said Wilkie. He'd heard of that, all right.

Gangly shouted: "There are two Gates!"

Soloman capered and began to lead off toward the crimson eye of the setting sun. Everyone followed. The Porteurs began to put the safari through, as usual now in their drill, a group of fighting Honshi first, then some Valcini, armored and carrying automatic weapons, then more Honshi. The sand burned through Wilkie's shoes in surging waves of heat. His eyes and throat and nostrils stung and pained with dry heat. The Contessa with Soloman came to stand directly behind him.

Charnock went through, followed by Gangly.

"Your turn, J. T.," said the Contessa, in this moment of scientific dread unconnected with aliens wielding swords, as superbly poised as ever. Ottorino, at her side, licked his lips raspingly and tightened his grip on his automatic.

Thinking what a gal was the Contessa, J. T. Wilkie went catapulting between the Dimensions.

He rolled over on stones and sat up. Immediately a net of fine silken strands entwined itself about him. He struggled and merely tied himself up worse. He started to yell and a club bashed him over the buttocks. He could see Gangly and Charnock tied up. Just ahead of him the rocks were stained with brilliant green ichor, and the bodies of half a dozen hideously dead Honshi showed where they had fought until death.

"The monsters!" Charnock was shouting frenziedly.

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

Wilkie saw—and shut his eyes and tried to keep from vomiting.

From a round and slimy body the size of a horse the aliens' upper members sprouted in a swirl of tendrils. They moved swiftly on another twin bunch of tendrils coiling across the ground. And their heads—their heads! Instead of heads a bunch of tendrils grew up from the top sections of their bodies. Each separate tentacle coiled and twisted with savage animate life. At the tips of some tendrils unblinking eyes glared at the newcomers, at others ears funneled in their screams, and at others wide pink mouths gaped with pointed jet-black teeth like buzz saws.

After that first brief fight the safari members had been overcome with the nets as, one by one, they had crossed into this Dimension.

"Oh, no!" yelled Wilkie. Ottorino had appeared, to be at once engulfed in a writhing net. "The Contessal!" screamed distraught J. T. Wilkie. "The Contessa is due to come through next!"

## X

"THE CONTESSAL!" screamed J. T. Wilkie, struggling unavailingly to free his hand and grab his new gun. "These things will trap her next!"

All around him the rippling motion of tendrils coiling across the ground sickened him. The skin flushed an unwholesome pink, with mucous running freely from open pores to lubricate the things' passage, like snails.

"She's got to be stopped!"

Charnock yelled. He dodged a club that beat down viciously at him. "Gangly! Do your stuff! Ottorino!"

Ottorino, still entrapped in the net on the spot where the Gate existed, vanished.

"Thank God!" breathed J. T. Wilkie.

He shuddered at the thought of the Contessa's white body clutched in the writhing tendrils of these vile monsters.



A cudgel descended with shrewder aim, knocked Charnock unconscious. Wilkie thrashed. He could reach his gun if—he felt the blow on the head as though from a long and hollow distance. The last thing he saw in this new and horrific Dimension was the coiling tendrils rippling along the ground beside his face, vanishing as a gray haze descended over his senses.

The things possessed extremities like the feathery limbs of barnacles. . . . Their sensory organs were carried on waving constructions like those of Plumose Anemones. . . . Their locomotion was carried on like enlarged and separated snails' lower rims. . . . Slowly, through nightmare and horror, J. T. Wilkie's senses returned.

Over the rocky ground a thin moist covering of algae grew with a livid and mocking greenness. The nets were jerked until their occupants groaningly understood and crawled erect to be herded into a line and prodded forward. Stumbling and tripping, the remnants of the safari jogged along the high shoulder of a mountain to descend with painful slowness into the spreading valley beyond. In all that panorama of algae-green rock and loose scree, of stunted pine and straggly gorse bush, not a single column of smoke, not a house, not a bridge, nothing told of human occupation.

Once off that high shoulder the rippling undulations of the things' tendrils slackened speed. They cautiously freed the nets and, stripping their prisoners of all weapons, stripped away their clothing also. Perhaps because they did not notice them in their hair the translator bands were left. Wilkie breathed deeply, feeling the cold damp bite of the wind. His flesh cringed and his goose pimples shuddered. Any fear he had left in him since being trapped down Old Smokey with Polak had been driven out by his subsequent experiences; but he knew he was afraid, deathly afraid.

Roped together by strands of the silky nets, the wretched people stumbled down the mountainside. Charnock, whose glittery chain had occasioned a thrumming keening of interest from their captors, perforce led Gangly, and Wilkie followed Gangly, to be followed in turn by a hideously frightened Honshi. After his "Hoshoo's," like those of his comrades, had been followed by savage beatings, he went on down, gasping and wheezing and cowed.

"Where is this, Gangly?" whispered Charnock.

"We took the wrong Gate from that world of polywater,"

said Gangly in his mangled words, the translator translating perfectly. "I don't understand what Solomon—"

"Don't think about it," advised Charnock.

"He is the best Porteur I know of in all the Dimensions." Evidently, Gangly's mystification would not be stilled.

The valley drew nearer and then, fragmentarily as they lurched down a widening trail, Wilkie saw the waiting monsters and their batch of captives. Strange creatures sat or lay huddled beneath the nets. He saw shapes he could not categorize, he saw human beings, he saw things he knew he would never forget. All, he surmised, to judge from the naked skins of the humans, had been stripped bare. That, obviously, was a sensible precaution when you were dealing with life forms whose offensive weapons were unknown to you. . . .

The two parties of captors and prisoners joined and then they marched on side by side. Across from Wilkie trudged a small, reddish-brown little man with the longest arms Wilkie had ever seen. He hugged the arms around his head so that for some time Wilkie thought he was an orangutan until he spotted the undeniably human cranium that—despite his pug-like face, all wrinkled lips and squashed nose and large shining eyes—gave clear indication that this little four-foot high person was a human being.

The little creature stumbled on short legs.

"Hold up, friend," said Wilkie sympathetically.

The wide eyes regarded him unblinkingly.

"I do not understand what you say, but you are in the same position as myself. We are to be eaten. It is very humorous."

Wilkie thought his translator band was playing him false. The punctiliousness, and the last snapper at the end. Humorous? Well, hell, yes, he supposed so, to be eaten by animate tendril-waving monsters. . . . Very funny.

Wilkie gave a big smile and shook his head vigorously. Then he jerked it sideways, and rolled his eyes.

"Escape? I would like to try, but these un-treed monsters hold us securely. My name is Councilman Mobril and I come from a world called Myrcinus—all beautiful trees and free swinging avenues between the branches."

"J. T. Wilkie," said the young man, thinking.

Just ahead of Councilman Mobril stumbled a white-skinned girl whose golden hair swirled down around her knees. Wilkie hadn't seen her face; all he could see was that long gorgeous mane of shining golden hair, her white arms

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

with the thongs biting into the wrists, her long and slender legs with blood already oozing from her feet. Ahead of her and to Mobril's rear trudged things whose anatomical descriptions would have invoked crabs and lobsters had queasy J. T. Wilkie been inclined for cataloging. He thought the girl—if she was human—must be very beautiful. She might have for a face a horror like that weirdness from Slikitter.

The march staggered on.

The sun took a long—a very long—time to set.

All that night they were given nothing to eat or drink nor were they released from their bonds. Wilkie worked on his, but the silk defied every effort to break it.

The night grew extremely cold and unpleasant. They huddled together for warmth and by morning after fitful and unsatisfying sleep, roused out to cudgel blows for the cruel march to begin again.

Again, in the order of their fettering, Wilkie marched alongside Mobril.

People began to fall down from weakness and were bludgeoned back into line. Some, refusing to rise, were separated and Wilkie did not see what happened to them. He was glad he didn't.

"You seem to understand what I say," Mobril said, once, as they traversed a valley seemingly identical with the one they had crossed the day before. "I fear we have not much further to go. The girl in front will not last the journey."

The girl, naturally watched by curious J. T. Wilkie, seemed to him to be swinging along well, but the telltale trails of blood oozing from her feet told their own story.

"Yes," he said, shortly.

About to renew his exploration of Mobril's statements and to express his ideas on escape, Wilkie stopped. Chaos broke out ahead. Screams shrieked into the air. The silken ropes tugged wildly and people fell heavily.

Mouths opened along the trail.

Horried, disbelieving, Wilkie saw a mouth open in the rock at his side, a vast, slit mouth like a mollusk opening its shell, like a horse chestnut splitting with spines inward, the stretch from side to side wide enough to gobble at a single gulp one of the crab-lobster people.

His exoskeleton cracked with a great snap as the mouth closed.

Charnock scrambled up, kicking a spray of loose stones

into the mouth at his side. Stupidly, Wilkie felt the silk rope slacken on his wrists and he turned. The Honshi who had been attached to him was just disappearing into a leering mouth with a final despairing: "Hoshool!"

All along the trail the tendrils coiled and flickered and cudgels rained ineffectual blows as mouths opened and closed. Some animal form who lived burrowed into the rocks and who showed merely a hungry mouth now fed avidly. Whether it was just one animal with a hundred mouths, whether it was a hundred animals, Wilkie didn't know but he jerked up and ran like a crazed maniac away. The rope attaching him to Gangly pulled, and then Gangly and Charnock were pell-melling downslope after him in a flying haze of loose stones. Mobril and the girl followed, shrieking. Other people were breaking free and, mixed with the tendriled monsters were leaping mouths, being caught and gulped, falling, scrabbling up, flying in lunatic panic.

"This way!" yelled the girl, the first words Wilkie had heard her speak. Her voice for all the fear held a throaty golden note. They leaped after her. Stones showered.

They raced on, the breath hot and hurting in their throats, their limbs heavy, the sweat blinding them. At last the girl fell heavily and her golden hair swirled about her like a shroud.

Wilkie dropped onto a knee beside her and brushed the hair from her face. J. T. Wilkie looked. Dame-chasing, heart-free J. T. Wilkie looked. . . .

"She saved us!" panted Charnock. "Those damn mouths are all downslope where we were going. They're gobbling up people like flies in a flysnapper."

Down there it looked like fleas on a griddle. With horrific rapidity the fleas were vanishing. . . .

"Here come the monsters!" yelled Mobril.

With pink-flushed tendrils undulating, the monsters streamed downslope, avoiding the greedy mouths, intent on recapturing their prisoners.

"A Gate!" said Charnock. His evil face showed a grim determination. "Gangly! A Gate—is there one near?"

"Quiet! I'm trying—" Gangly went stiff. He began to rotate like a plastered weathervane. Knowing the importance of the miraculous gift possessed by the bullet-headed being, Wilkie held his breath in suspense.

"A hundred yards, more or less—that way." Gangly pointed.

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

Wilkie hoisted the girl up, the silken cords still binding her to Mobril, began to run. They all ran.

"Hurry!" chirruped Mobril, apparently quite unfatigued by their privations and starvation. "Hurry!"

Of course, the fuzzy thoughts caromed around Wilkie's skull, Mobril would understand about Portals through the Dimensions for hadn't he said he'd come from another world? But the girl? She was a puzzle. . . .

"Here!" snapped Gangly. Now he was performing the task for which he had been trained and which he, among only a very few privileged individuals could perform, alert and professional and very much in command, ordered them into a circle. They wrapped their arms around each other's bodies and held on. Wilkie felt warm firm flesh beneath one hand and Charnock's leathery hide beneath the other and then he was falling, falling. . . .

"Where are we going?" yelled Charnock.

"It doesn't matter where—anywhere out of here!"

That last frenzied yell had been Wilkie's.

And now they were pitching helplessly through massive leaves that battered at them, cascading cups of water, sending insects buzzing swarmingly out of their way, falling and falling and falling helplessly through the breaking fronds of enormous ferns.

Wilkie felt a torturing wrench. The girl's body jumped in his arms. He flung a look upward. Up there Councilman Mobril with his long brachiating arms held onto a fern and looked down in agony as his newly-found and newly-lost comrades toppled away below him.

"I tried!" he screamed down. "The rope broke—"

He vanished above them in the massive ferns. As though being lashed by whips, Wilkie cried out as the fronds barbed his body. A cupped fern splashed water in a gout into his face and without thought, as greedy as those seeking mouths in that other Dimension, he sucked in water. His crackled lips and parched tongue throbbed at the contact.

"The Gates!" Gangly still held fast to Charnock and to the girl. "They are often—together—near—there is another—but we are falling fast—" He broke off to shriek as a fern whipped across his broad back.

"You've got to put us through, Gangly—you've got to!"

The girl fastened wide greenish eyes on Wilkie's face. He grasped her body more roughly, pressing her to him.

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

He smiled. She tried to smile back and gasped as fronds split past their entwined bodies.

The bump, when it came, drove all the breath from Wilkie's body in one savage whoosh. He lay on grass and guessed that every single bone in his body must be broken and smashed and ground to powder.

After a long raggedy silence during which a blue sky and a bright and cheerful sun and the song of birds seeped into existence around them, Gangly wheezed: "I think—I really do think—we are in Durostorum."

"Now may Black Naspurgo be praised!" exclaimed Charnock.

And he laughed.

Feeling every bone in his body vibrating, J. T. Wilkie laughed too.

"So, we got here!" he said, and laughed until he choked.

The girl lay quietly, unconscious, lax and altogether lovely under the brilliant friendly sun of Durostorum.

## XI

"HAVE YOU never cut your hair, then, Sharon?"

He took the translator band gently from over that flowing golden hair where she lay comfortably on the bunk and donned it himself. She waited until he was ready to listen.

"No, J. T. Never." She made of J. T., even through the translator, a soft sighing languorousness: "Zshaytee," so that that "J" became suddenly to Wilkie hard-edged and ugly. "No—except to trim the ends to stop them from splitting. It is not our custom where I come from in my Dimension of Leon."

About them the subdued noises of life aboard one of the ships of Durostorum carried on with none of the creaking of wood and slapping of water associated with any terrestrial vessel. Picked up at last and with Charnock's native knowledge to guide them, they were now en route

for a Durostorum Hold where they could think what next to do. All J. T. Wilkie wanted to do was know more and yet more of this golden girl who had so disastrously overturned the habits of a lifetime.

The translator band changed hands as they spoke; later they would obtain one for Sharon's own use.

"We of Leon know much of the Dimensions, but there is always more to learn. We care a great deal about the life sciences; perhaps we are tardy with physics and electronics. We trade across many Dimensions and I was a member of an advance party crossing into a fresh clumping of worlds—"

After Wilkie had made his obvious interruption, she went on, smilingly: "The Dimensions seem to tend to clump—rather like grapes on a vine. We know very many of our own bunch; the ones you mention are all new to me. The old idea of using the leaves in a book to illustrate the Theory of the Dimensions falls far short of the actuality. We find mostly human beings—people like you and me, J. T.—scattered across all the worlds. But there are—others."

"Yeah," said remembering J. T. Wilkie. "You can say that again."

"My party was ambushed by those—those Tob'kliacs—those horrible creatures."

Wilkie put a hand on her shoulder and pressed. Her wrists had been bandaged and so had her feet—and, to his intense surprise, so had Wilkie's. City-bred people were not adapted to clambering over rocks without shoes.

"Their trade is as horrible as they are themselves. One cannot hold their appearance against them, for that was nature's doing, and we of Leon understand these things. But the Tob'kliacs—well, I suppose the only way one can describe them is to say they are the Slavers of the Dimensions."

"Charming," said J. T. Wilkie, luxuriating totally in the radiance of her personality. All the Tob'kliacs in the Dimensions wouldn't part him from this girl—not now.

"We believe there must be other and superior intelligences at work behind these Slavers, instructing and dominating them." She pulled the sheets down around her shoulders; despite the ventilation the little cabin was warm. "But they are not of importance now. What is, is—how do we get home?"

"There's Gangly."

She handed him the band. "Yes. He is good. We have

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

our own highly-developed Porteurs. I am, I'm afraid, only a latent myself. There are many like me."

"I've a job to do for my Contessa," Wilkie said with some firmness. "After that I'll think about getting back. But you—surely your people will come looking?"

She shook her head, the doubt dimming the radiance of her face. Despair for her twisted in Wilkie's guts. Hell, he'd never felt like this before chasing dames!

Charnock put his head in the doorway.

"Feel better now?"

"Sure—say, Charnock, can't your pals rustle up a translator band for Sharon? This over-to-you routine is strictly out of the Ark."

"I'll fix up two-way transmission as soon as possible." Charnock looked a new man. Even his ears were different; then Wilkie saw the pointed tips were gone.

"Yes," Charnock nodded. "The Contessa's bargemen were recruited from the pointed-ear brigade and we normal men later on assumed that as part of the uniform. Uncomfortable."

"So I've been told," said Wilkie, thinking of home.

"Is Sharon fit enough to come on deck?"

Clad in a white shirt and a blue skirt, her feet in shapeless old felt slippers, the girl climbed the companionway. Wearing borrowed unharmonizing clothes, Charnock, Gangly and Wilkie stood with her at the rail.

The sky stretched away above, white and blue, for an immense distance. Beneath them the fields patterned the ground with cultivation. People, working down there, looked up and waved. Durostorum, clearly, was a wonderful world.

The air frisked their hair, combed and trimmed now, and blustered into their faces, making talk not difficult but zestful. Everything appeared larger than life here in Durostorum.

"Yes, J. T. This is my home Dimension." Charnock looked hungry, drinking up the scene, like an eagle surveying his kingdom. He had taken the glittery chain off Gangly and wore it coiled up around his left arm. "I'll go back to the Contessa. I owe her—well, never mind. She has strange powers, leave it at that. But I'm going to enjoy myself here, don't fret over that!"

"What about the damn Portal?" asked eager-beaver J. T. Wilkie.

Gangly grunted.

Feeling suddenly as though champagne bubbles had ex-



## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

ploded up his nose in his brain, Wilkie said, "What's that, Gangly, me old fruit? Do I detect the contempt of the hand craftsman for the soullessness of the machine product?"

"All I'm saying," said Gangly stubbornly, "is that a Portal is there, static. A Porteur can go from one Gate to another, freely—"

"Praise be," interrupted Charnock. "Look!"

"—and a Porvone Portal of Life takes up enough power to light up a villager!" finished Gangly with stringy obduracy. They all looked where Charnock pointed.

Rising from the checkerboard of cultivation a high mesa rose, a sheer-walled level-topped mountain about a mile across and a thousand feet in the air. The dots of flying ships moved to and fro at their five-hundred-foot high level, halfway up that sheer rock face.

Color and light and reflected brilliance broke from the city perched atop that massive bastion.

"A Hold of Durostorum!" Charnock smiled wolfishly. "And—luckily for me—a Hold with which my people are friendly right now. There we can talk business."

The ship bore on through the air, her flags fluttering bravely. The crew clustered to watch the approaching Hold.

"Just remember," Charnock said warningly. "My people of Durostorum do not know of the Dimensions. Traders from across the parallel worlds come and go without betrayal. You remember, J. T., how we waited for the ships when we took you to Irunium?"

"Yes. But all of Durostorum isn't like this, surely?"

"Of course not!" Charnock chuckled. "We have great seas and tropic forests, polar caps and chains of mountains; but all across our temperate areas you have this equable climate, these massifs where Holds can be built and cultivation protected, and we are not a numerous people, as yet." A far-off look took his eyes then, as though he entered a race-dream. "We are not the first intelligent species to live in Durostorum. We are indigenous to the world; but those before us built cities and communications networks and then destroyed themselves. All they left were the power sources for the ships—"

"Ah!" said knowledgeable J. T. Wilkie.

"The heart of every ship is the power box—small, compact, capable only of retaining almost any weight at five hundred feet and of being guided left or right and of going from speeds of zero to about twenty miles an hour—your measurements, naturally. How it works, when

if ever the power will fade, no one knows. We find the power chests at sites of the older civilizations. They are the most precious commodity Durostorum boasts—apart from the courage of its peoples. And, naturally, they are sought after and coveted above price.”

“You mean by that set of euphemisms that you can’t buy one, you have to find a new one or fight someone else for theirs?”

“Yes.”

“Could lead to a state of perpetual warfare—”

“Unfortunately, in the past it has. We have a written history of fifteen hundred years. But now, we are trying by union and conference to eradicate those old barbarous ways.”

The ship moved in a solidly sweeping bowbend to the starboard of another ship leaving the Hold. Flags waved and dipped. Wilkie could see the rows of ballistae snouting through the red-painted ports of the passing ship.

“Don’t forget,” Charnock said. “Don’t lose control of your tongues and babble of the Dimensions. You know what would happen if you talked like that on your Earth.”

“Yeah,” said world-wise J. T. Wilkie. “You wouldn’t touch the psychiatrist’s couch on your way to the nut house.”

“I have a lot to do to organize our transport to Hold Graynor, where I expect we’ll find the Contessa fuming at our lateness. She’ll have gone on through the correct Gates. Here.” He took off his translator and handed it to Sharon. They could still understand him. “You can borrow this until I get back. I don’t need it at home.”

“Amen,” said Sharon, with a swift and mischievous smile. “We have a cellular translator far more efficient than this clumsy jewelry contraption.” She pouted. “I lost mine back with the Tob’kliacs.”

“You’ll have to get some for us, Sharon,” said Wilkie politely.

She nodded with odd formality. “Agreed. We will sell you a supply of translators. We can bargain later for what you will pay.”

“Uh?” said fazed J. T. Wilkie.

“Don’t forget, J. T. We trade across the Dimensions.”

“Like Altinum?”

Gangly shook his bullet-shaped head. “No. Altinum’s wares are brought by middlemen. Altinum is rather like an advanced copy of your Earth, J. T. They don’t know of

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

the Dimensions—and we don't want them to. Suppose your overcrowded millions of Earth knew of Durostorum, or Irunium, or any other of these fertile Dimensions where the population is measured in the thousands? Wouldn't the stampede crush the locals in the rush?"

"Um," nodded Wilkie. "I won't argue that one."

When Charnock returned on board, his face showed a gleam of pleasure. He wore a brand-new translator band in his hair. He carried a bulging valise whose contents, spilled out in the little cabin, revealed fresh clothes, weapons, maps and money. Wilkie picked up the seven-sided angled coin and whistled.

"Neat, Charnock. How did you manage it?"

"I saw a factor here who trades with men from the Dimensions. The Contessa's name procured me all I required."

"Good old Contessa!" enthused loyal J. T. Wilkie. "She's not the gal to let a guy down."

Guardedly, they then had to explain just who the Contessa was for Sharon's benefit. Oddly, Wilkie couldn't seem to find the right words.

In their new clothes and carrying their new possessions, they paid off the ship's captain and went ashore. In the bustle of the city that constituted the living spaces within the perimeter of the Hold's massive walls they found lodgings until they could book passage on a ship heading in the general direction of Hold Graynor.

More and more Wilkie came to realize how self-possessed, how composed, how assured a girl this Sharon from Leon was. Cool, with her long flowing golden hair, she moved with feline grace and yet, he knew, her strength had been enough to sustain her in that ghastly experience with the Tob'kliacs when her city-accustomed feet had failed her. Well, his had too, hadn't they?

Bonds of friendship were being forged between the four interdimensional travelers. Gangly, it was clear, hankered after returning home to his Lisifutz. Yet, so Wilkie believed and wondered if he was a mere credulous fool for the supposition, Gangly wouldn't take off without them. He'd put them through a suitable Gate and get them home first. Or so Wilkie thought.

Wilkie pondered.

Gangly, from Lisifutz. Charnock, from Durostorum. Sharon, from Leon. And J. T. Wilkie, from Earth.

A strange bunch to be tramping the Dimensions.

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

Very strongly and with a chilling depression, Wilkie understood that this little waiting period in their search for the Contessa's Portal was very much the lull before the storm. What lay ahead of him he could not know. But there was Charnock, evil-faced, grim and to be relied on in a battle. There was Gangly, the Porteur, on whose fate all their fates hinged. And there was Sharon, the golden girl from mysterious Leon—whose fate, so J. T. Wilkie was with astonished pleasure discovering, he intended should in the future be bound up with his.

They lodged on the top floor over a wine house where the sheets were clean and the sanitary arrangements, run from the city mains, not too objectionable. With his bullet-head swathed in a huge turban-like scarf, a common enough form of headgear among men sailing the clouds, Gangly, with a braided corner half-drawn across his face, could pass without much comment. As a freak, he had passed muster on the ship, and no doubt would do so again.

Coming back one midday from a stroll along the battlements of the Hold's gray stone walls, Wilkie saw Sharon striding along the rutted street ahead of him. He quickened his steps, as always when he saw her, feeling the thump of blood through his body. She wore a new orange dress, but her golden hair was unmistakable.

"Sharon!" he called, expecting her to halt and turn.

She went striding lithely on. He ran, skipping over the cobbles, laughing, catching her arm, swinging her around.

"Sharon! You teasing minx! What—?"

It wasn't Sharon.

"Yes?" she said with pert acerbity.

"I—I'm sorry—that is—"

She looked just like Sharon. Yet, this close, there were minute differences: her hair was a darker tinge of gold, her nose not quite so straight, her mouth less warmly curved and her eyes—her eyes were brown.

"You must have made a mistake," the girl said with that frigid tartness. She jerked her shoulder away and marched off with just that lithe swinging walk of Sharon's.

"Well, I'll be!" said perplexed J. T. Wilkie to himself.

When he reached the lodgings Sharon was not there; but Charnock and Gangly in animated conversation looked up at once as he entered. Their faces showed excitement. Clearly, there was news.

"I have information about Leon," Charnock began at

once. "My trader friends tell me a party from Leon is in this city! That means—"

"So that explains the girl," exclaimed Wilkie. He told them of his encounter. "So Sharon will be—oh, hell!"

"She understood you?" said Gangly sharply. "Yes, she would."

When Sharon returned she did not at once mention that her friends had reached the city, and Wilkie could not bring himself to broach the subject. Charnock and Gangly had retired to the other room. She sat down, swinging one long leg over the other, leaning back so that a long and warm expanse of bosom showed between the cleaving edges of her red-dyed leather jerkin. Her breasts strained the calf. Wilkie eyed her moodily. She lost her laughter and frowned instead. She pointed imperiously at him.

"J. T.! Don't you like me, then?"

"Hah!" said J. T., who had half-invented the line.

"Now what's that supposed to mean? You saved my life and ever since you've treated me like—like—well, I don't know what. On Leon we'd say like a crèche-baby."

"You know how I feel about you, Sharon."

"Aah!" Her languorousness enveloped him with a headiness he found dizzying. He put a hand on her hair, stroking feeling the slender smoothness. She sank back on the bed among the rumpled pillows, pulling him with her.

"J. T. You silly boy! I don't know what you've been waiting for all this time." As his fumbling hands brushed aside the soft leather and his head bent, she arched upward, sighing suddenly. "Ah, J. T. You nearly lost me today!"

Then he closed her mouth with his, feeling the softness and ripeness of her lips, the warmth and forgetfulness of at last succeeding in the chase. She put her arms around him and, willingly, blindly, lustfully, he sank down.

She was, even J. T. Wilkie had to admit, very good.

Later on when she was in her room tidying up, Charnock and Gangly came back.

"I've fixed a ship," Charnock said, with an undercurrent of savagery in his voice that had been absent so far since they'd landed in Durostorum. "And I've booked for three."

"Hey!" said J. T. "Hold it, Charnock, me old warhorse. Sharon's coming with us!"

"Is she now?" said Gangly, smiling foolishly.

"Yes?" Charnock thrust his beak-face forward. "So I can book another one. So she is. Why, J. T., why?"

J. T.'s pure joy could not be undercut by embarrassment.

"Why—she's with me, now!"

"Yes?" Charnock's evil face leered. "That's nice for you, J. T. She's coming with us to risk her life at Hold Graynor for love of you? I'd like to believe it, J. T. I really would."

## XII

THAT NIGHT J. T.—all agog, all aglow J. T. Wilkie—went to Sharon's small room. She waited for him by the window so that the streaming radiance of Durostorum's moon shone pallidly on her sheer golden fall of hair, on her white body, on the liquid sheen of her eyes. He took her into his arms hungrily.

"Your people are in the city, Sharon. You could go with them."

"You would not come with me?"

"I have this Portal to obtain—for my Contessa."

The fragrance of her body overwhelmed him. "I think J. T., I will go with you if you will not go with me."

He didn't think of Polak until they lay together half side by side, half entwined in the narrow bed, breathing gently again, her breath a rose-petaled warmth on his naked shoulder.

How would Polak have handled Charnock now?

Coiling a strand of her hair between his fingers, trying to speak casually and yet not too distantly for a newly-enraptured lover, he said, "What do you think of Charnock, Sharon?"

"He is—strong. He is—devious. I think, too, that somewhere within him is a great evil. He suffers, does that one."

"That could be true. But—" And here the old crass J. T. Wilkie blew apart his detached reserve: "Do you like him, Sharon? Could you—that is—could you—?"

She tinkled a silvery reproof. She could, he realized with a dismaying too-lateness, have been extremely angry. "I love you, J. T. Haven't I proved that?"

"Yes."

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

"So forget Charnock. He means nothing between us."

So, perforce, J. T. Wilkie—besotted, love-blind, lustful, J. T. Wilkie—cataloged Charnock under the heading: "Outplayed rival."

A couple of days later they went aboard the ship that would take them all the way to Hold Graynor. More than one ship joined. A convoy formed. Their ship—*Jade Lady*—like all the ships of Durostorum was outfitted as a fighting vessel as well as a merchantman. A convoy of warlike materials dispatched by the city was en route for Hold Graynor. Charnock bit his lower lip fretfully.

"I don't think the Contessa envisaged the current situation," he told Wilkie. "If we're to grab that Porvone Portal somehow—"

"A bit of a dust-up might help us, surely?" said Wilkie. He had found, to his astonishment and then delight, that Charnock took absolutely no notice of the new relationship between Sharon and J. T. For a rivel, then, he played a clean game. "Give us a spot of cover?"

"You don't understand what warfare on Durostorum means, J. T. This could interfere with the Contessa's plans. And, J. T., she *has* to have that Portal!"

"Well, I know that, Charnock, me old flower. You can rely on me. I owe the Contessa a whole lot more than I can easily say. Yes—" He broke off, to think with more than a little vacuous grin, of the Contessa di Montevarchi's offer. It never rained but it poured.

"Just so long as we grab that Portal for the Contessa. That's our job. That's why we're here."

"Gangly?"

Charnock grimaced. "He's a funny old coot. He's adjusted to being a Porteur working for the Contessa. He's not a slave, you know, J. T. I think he's loyal to you and me, at any rate. We've been through a lot together."

"You can say that again."

"We've been through—" began Charnock, with one of his rare flashes of wicked humor. But Wilkie was used to that old gambit, and cut off the bargeman.

"Okay, Charnock, me old fruit. The Portal of Life—and then—home!"

"Which, though?" said Charnock, and this time the somber grimness of his question remained real and vivid.

J. T. Wilkie spoke as nature intended when Wilkie said: "We'll sort that one out when the time comes."

"This warring complication, though," Charnock fretted.

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

"I've heard about your Earthly wars, J. T. Our battles are more—" He hesitated, groping, then said, "More formal, although that's not right, either."

"I take it that there are no more powerful weapons?"

Charnock gestured to the ranked ballistae, the crewmen in their bronze and leather armor working over crossbows and spears and swords. "Only what you see."

"We could have done with a few automatic rifles."

"I, for one, don't want anything like that brought through to Durostorum—not yet."

"No, Perhaps you're right."

Nearing the uplifting massif on which perched Hold Graynor, Wilkie began to wonder if those sentiments were not those of wishful thinking. He speculated that perhaps the most rapid advance in weapon technology might not through inevitable evolution lead on to universal peace. Certain it was, even without gunpowder, men could find destructive ways of fighting quite adequate to sicken the squeamish and victimize the vanquished.

Hold Graynor lay sullenly at bay under siege.

Somewhere in those uprearing walls of rock, sheltered behind those massy bastions, a Porvone Portal of Life waited for them to come and find it and pluck it out for the Contessa. Looking on the scene as they swam nearer through the air, Wilkie saw the darting shapes of ships of Durostorum swarming at their five hundred foot level . . . barely halfway up the sheer slope of the massif. He saw rocks flung down by catapults, hurling brands of fire arching into the city; he could faintly hear the chirring storm of arrows and crossbow quarrels and the high thin yelling of fighting men. The distant sounds chilled him.

Around the flank of the massif a line of ships swept in deadly array. Green and black flags flew from every fighting tower and every poop deck lantern. The squared snouts of ballistae grinned through red-lined ports. From every vantage point aloft aboard the ships the glitter and gleam of weapons threw a challenge across the airy spaces.

"The Graynor!" shrilled the lookouts.

The crewmen, buckling final straps of their armor, snatching up weapons, rushed to their action stations. The gynours bent over their ballistae. The captain, a stout, armored, bearded man with a multi-flagon-capacity stomach, requested Sharon to go below. For answer she picked up a half-pike, sharp and balanced, and laughed in his face.



"Very well, young missy. But your blood be on your own head."

Other girls, clad in leathers and armor, perched along the outriggers of the fighting towers, bows in their hands, taut with the expected onslaught.

Wilkie swallowed down hard. "It looks, Charnock, me old fruit, as though we're going to carry on that fight we left off to go through into Myxotic."

"It is not the Corforan. Otherwise, yes."

The first bolts from the enemy ballistae began to sing into *Jade Lady*. Splinters whined cuttingly. Wilkie felt some comfort in his armor and his helmet, but he kept on wanting to duck.

The line of attacking ships, kept by their ancient power boxes at the same height as the ships they attacked, bore in to board stragglers. The convoy, although outnumbering the attackers, by that very concentration could not maneuver, could not be anything but the flock attacked. Bright shards of light arched beneath the sunshine as blazing arrows flew. The fire-fighting squads leaped into action with leather buckets and hoses, dousing down, cursing.

"When you fight a ship of Durostorum," Charnock yelled above the hubbub, "you seek higher ground. At five hundred feet up, if the ground under you is higher than your opponent, you can fire down on him."

"Yeah," said Wilkie, staring with a lopsided grimace at the crossbow a crewman thrust into his hand.

"Here," snapped Charnock. "Hook on, wind up, engage, unhook, bolt in, aim, press the trigger. Easy. Now you try."

Wilkie's first shot passed feet beneath the keel of an approaching ship. He cursed and, suddenly, seized with the antics of warfare, wound up the bow with an excess of energy. This time his bolt fell somewhere aboard.

At his side a man staggered back, hands to his ruined face, yelling as the blood pumped out, his burgonet tumbling onto the deck. More bolts flew. The air filled with the chirring arrow storm. Frantically, Wilkie reloaded, aimed, shot.

Riding disdainfully ahead, *Jade Lady* would in a few seconds crash stunningly into the beam of an approaching ship. Wilkie braced himself for the impact. When it came he was thrown full-length on the deck, his crossbow flying from numbed fingers. On his knees, Charnock cursed and surged up, dragging free his two-handed sword.

Staggering J. T. Wilkie crawled to his feet. Men leaped

the gap as the two ships swung together. Rocks smashed down from the towers, gashing holes through the decking, splintering planks, knocking fighting men into the air. Screams splintered like splintering wood as men fell five hundred feet to the uncaring ground below.

Now the ballistae on the broadside could be shot directly into opposing ballistae. *Jade Lady's* gynours had waited with loaded weapons, enduring the storm, until the right moment arrived. Then they loosed and with a hell-defying crash the tripled bolts and balls smashed and crashed and gouged their way into the vitals of the enemy.

A man with black and green armor jumped for Wilkie. The upraised ax looked exactly like a butcher's cleaver ready to degut a carcass. Wilkie yelled, ducking.

"Now Black Naspurgo take you!" shouted Charnock, hard, and his huge two-handed sword swung level with the deck, clove the black and green armored man. Straight on went that double-handed blow to lop the arm from an assailant who tried to pike Wilkie from the side.

"Come on, J. T.!" roared Charnock. "Get stuck in!"

Scrabbling up a short spear and using it like a rifle's bayonet, Wilkie managed clumsily to parry the swirl of sword-blows from his next opponent. Then, more by luck than judgment, he slipped past the guard and drove the spear point in.

Wilkie shut his eyes. He swallowed down vomit.

"J. T.! Duck!"

He ducked.

The decapitating blow passed an inch over his helmet.

He jumped up, incensed.

The fresh fighting man facing him grinned with a snaggle of brown teeth and cut again.

"Try to hit me when my eyes were closed, would you!" raged J. T. Wilkie. He jumped forward, caught the blow on his metal-bound spear haft, and thrust, hard. He jerked the weapon free, swung about cat-footed, spotted Sharon piking a man to the deck, and ran full-tilt at the leather-armored fighter who assaulted her from the side.

This time there was more science and less brute force about his thrust.

The deck swarmed with the contorted figures of struggling men. Blood made the planks slippery. From the fighting towers archers poured down their selective rain of death. An arrow glanced from his helmet, caromed to stick quivering in a splintered bulwark. He yelled and dived at

green and black knotted around Charnock's swirling blade. The great two-handed sword, fully six feet long in blade alone, shirled and whirled and cleft and clove. Wilkie added his spearwork and Sharon, a sprite of death, piked away at his side.

Minutes later, panting and yet filled still with that mad blood fever, Wilkie saw that the deck had been cleared.

The sudden surprise attack by the ships from Hold Graynor had failed to prevent the convoy from going through.

J. T. Wilkie threw the spear to the deck.

Revulsion gripped him.

He staggered to the side and emptied his stomach on the smiling land of Durostorum five hundred feet below.

"Right well you fought, lad," said the paunchy captain, cleaning his bloodied blade. "My thanks."

Sharon thoughtfully wiped her pike head. She looked at Wilkie's green and white face.

"It wasn't pretty, J. T.," she said with practical female logic. "But it was necessary."

"I—I suppose so."

"If not—" and she pointed.

The ship astern of them in the convoy flowered like a blazing bonfire. Sparks shot out and drifted downwind. Men, screaming, jumped. Other ships sheared away. That ship—doomed and destroyed, drifted funneling a waft of smoke and flame through the airplanes—might have been them. But they had fought a good fight, and they had survived.

Wilkie knew, vaguely, that he had fought for Sharon's sake, for the Contessa's sake—but, most of all, he had fought for his own sake. He wanted to live.

Other ships of Durostorum moved out to chase those marauding ships from Hold Graynor and at the universal top speed of twenty miles an hour conclusive action could be avoided until the rocks from the Hold rained down to chase off the chasers. The convoy had won through.

The ships tethered from a multitude of anchors and, looking down, Wilkie saw they were in the midst of an encamped host.

The marauding ships vanished into clefts in the rock of the massif.

Wilkie eyed that daunting ring of rock and masonry walls.

"In there?" he said.

"For the sake of Black Naspurgo himself, J. T.!" roared

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

Charnock, still with that fighting élan flowing through him. "We'll find a way!"

Like a ring of ants besieging a table for the jam laid out at the top, the men swarmed about the mighty Hold. Entrenchments advanced toward the foot of the cliff. Palisades concealed ballistae and catapults and mangonels. Rocks flew through the air all the time. Blazing brands arched upward like rockets. Ceaselessly, the circling ships of Durostorum prowled, hurling brands upward, in their turn being hit by return shots. The uproar stunned the eardrums.

Charnock soon had their status sorted out.

Among the thousands of men in the besieging host the presence of four more mouths made little difference if those mouths fed strong arms and backs and willing hearts, scheming brains.

The size of the encampment ringing the Hold astounded Wilkie.

"I don't know if it's good news or bad," Charnock growled after he returned from his investigations. "My own Hold is not represented here. It gives me a certain freedom."

Evidently, by her quick nod, Sharon followed what he meant, even if J. T. Wilkie did not.

"Why are they besieging this Hold?" she asked.

Charnock wiped a leathery finger over his moustache.

"There have been evil things happening. Men have been disappearing. Girls, too. From all the surrounding countries owing allegiance to the neighboring Holds. Where the cultivated land of one Hold meets the next there may be desert, rivers, uncultivated land, or a neat division with rock markers. Graynor has been acting with an unusual violence recently. The general saying is that there is an evil spell on the place."

Gangly clucked, taking off his ridiculous helmet that, perched on his turban, made him look ten feet tall.

"That's the Porvone. I don't like this at all."

"We will not meet a single Porvone," Charnock snapped wrathfully. "The Contessa promised that."

"I know they will be using human tools. They will not show themselves. But, still and all . . ."

"Graynor has an evil reputation because the Porvone are using this Hold as a base for a Portal of Life."

"That's like saying Hell stinks because the Devil lives there."

"We'd better pay off this ship and get our tents set up below. I've fixed up a place with the gynours."

"Why?" asked Wilkie, alert.

Charnock chuckled, good-humored but grim. "Because, my dear J. T., they are sapping their way in. They're driving tunnels through the rock up into the Hold. And you, old comrade, are a miner—a Chief Mining Engineer, no less!" His chuckle became a hoarse laugh. "You, J. T., are elected sapper consultant to the besieging forces!"

### XIII

WITH SWEATING, filthy, trembling hands J. T. Wilkie thrust the cold iron chisel into the cleft in the rock face and battered the burred end with the hammer, over and over. A loud crack signaled the obdurate rock's eventual shattering. He bashed the chisel from side to side, dislodging shards of rock, then knocked it free. He leaned back on his haunches and wiped a weary hand over his face. Then he picked up the chisel again and thrust it into the next crack.

Inch by inch they were burrowing their way through the solid rock of the massif. After a week of this intense and agonizing effort they had advanced a pitiable eight feet.

The debilitating cruelty of the effort involved shocked and depressed Wilkie. Gasping at each savage blow of the hammer he kept at it. A crude tallow dip, flickering and erratic and smoking, gave a mockery of light to his work so that he lived in fear of mashing his fingers under ever succeeding blow. Rocks fell to bounce from his helmet; the damn thing stifled him, yet to have discarded it would have been lunacy.

Naked save for a filthy breechcloth, he labored on for a full hour's shift. Then, replaced by a swarthy crewman from a ship of Durostorum, he crawled back to wash and rest and eat. He felt absolutely done in.

Charnock, spruce and military with his giant two-handed sword slung down his back, met him at the mine head.

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

Here, sheltered by a high work of stones bonded together on a natural shelf halfway up the side of Graynor's rock face, the sappers' camp had been formed and disguised as a mere assembly point for the assault troops who labored twenty feet higher up the slope.

Wilkie felt bemused at the long slanting rays of the sun. A cooling breeze laved him as he washed. All around sappers swore and refreshed themselves ready for the next shift.

"You all right, J. T.?"

Wilkie rubbed the rough towel over his chest with a dullness of spirit he couldn't shake off.

"Chief Mining Engineer!" he said, mocking and bitter. "So that's what I am! I've been digging in there—" He couldn't go on.

Charnock clucked sympathetically.

"I'm no miner, J. T. I'm a fighting man. I understand how to use weapons, how to fly a ship; mines give me claustrophobia. I hated going to collect you, you know."

"It's not as though we're doing any good. It's taking all this effort and pain—and when we get near the surface they'll sink a little shaft down and rub us out as they choose. Countermining, you know," he finished sarcastically.

"Well, what else can we do?"

Wilkie tipped the filthy water out of the bowl.

"As soon as the Contessa gets here—" Charnock said in a frail attempt to boost Wilkie's spirits.

"Yeah!" flashed disgruntled J. T. "When she does! What's keeping her, that's what I'd like to know. We could do with a whole triple shift of Erinelds down there."

"The Contessa's ways are the Contessa's ways. She will move in her own sweet time."

Wilkie couldn't answer. Everybody ducked as a rock whistled down from above, struck the parapet and rebounded over and down to the plain five hundred feet below in a splintering of rock chips. Apart from that reflective ducking no one took any other notice of the projectile.

"For a siege this is a washout!" burst out J. T. "Sharon's off shooting arrows, Gangly's digging on the other shift, you're strutting about with your damn great sword like a tail—and I'm cutting my fingers to the bone. I tell you, Charnock, I'm getting fed up!"

"Come and have something to eat and then you'll feel better. The tunnel's bound to get through to the surface."

"Hal"

Over a meal of crusty bread and burned meat from some dubious source and with a plentiful supply of coarse raw wine, Wilkie did, surprisingly, begin to thaw.

All around the massif as the sun set lights broke out in the camp of the besieging hosts. Lights twinkled down from the Hold of Graynor. Another night of siege began.

"If we could get machinery in there," Wilkie said, wiping his chin where the red wine dribbled, "we could go through a Gate and line up something."

"We can do nothing like that without the Contessa's decision."

When Gangly came off shift and joined them around their smoky fire in the rough lean-to they had built from scraps of rock and timbers, he looked excited, his smidgen of a nose wrinkling, his loose mouth slobbering. When he was cleaned up and feeding, he told them.

"I'm sure I sensed a Gate beyond the tunnel."

"A Portal—in the rock?"

He shook his high bullet head. "No, no. The massif must have been an extinct volcano; it's filled with detritus."

"That adds up," said Charnock. "The centers of the Holds slope up toward the walls usually."

"I think the Portal must exist somewhere beyond the ringwall, in the open. Maybe there's a wide funnel leading to the surface."

"I don't know Graynor," rumbled Charnock. "But we can find out!"

"And," added Gangly as Charnock rose to his feet, "the Portal is massive. Massive!" He shook his head in wonderment at what his special power had vouchsafed him.

"You said the Portals tended to occur near together, didn't you, Gangly?" Wilkie began to perk up. "It fits. The Porvone are using one, and there's this other."

Gangly grunted and reached for the wine. "I shall have to think of ways and means." He lifted the goblet with a distant air, as though already somewhere poised between the parallel worlds and out of the ken of ordinary mortals.

In consultation with the leaders of the besieging hosts who wished to tear down the evil spirits dominating Graynor, Captain Gobli of *Jade Lady* agreed to undertake the hazardous mission. Fighting men filed aboard the ship. Sharon joined, together with Charnock and Wilkie.

Gangly, in his element, checked over everything and everyone against some complicated calculations in his mind.

"You sure you know what you're doing, Gangly?" asked Charnock, fretting, pulling his great sword up higher.

"Perfectly. We will have to move physically in this Dimension of yours, Charnock. Then we can return. I know."

"I'm glad someone does," remarked Wilkie caustically.

Skirting the massif buttressing the Hold of Graynor they set off westward into the blue horizon band with the sun shining on their backs.

Steadily, at twenty miles an hour, they sailed onward.

Gangly became extraordinarily preoccupied, refusing to talk.

"Well," enthused J. T. Wilkie. "I figure the Contessa would be pretty proud of us if she could see us now!"

Sharon nestled up to him as they stood in the break of the sterncastle.

"Why are you so fanatically loyal to your Contessa, J. T.?" She smiled and, reaching over, nibbled his earlobe. "I really think you love her more than you do me."

He squeezed her waist. "You know better than that, Sharon. Sure, I owe her allegiance. She saved my life. My pal was killed and pubicked by people trying to injure her, and she's a wonderful woman—but, don't you see, there's no comparison." J. T. Wilkie, brash dame-chasing J. T., chuckled and grabbed Sharon and kissed her. "You and she will get along just fine. You'll see!"

For the expedition both Sharon and Wilkie had dressed in leathers and armor, bronze and flexible. They carried those useful and lethal short spears and swords hung at their sides. They wore burgonets, the flaps up now.

With a serious demeanor Gangly, somehow gaining in poise and stature and with nothing left of the clown, took up station amidships. He stood wide-straddled, his arms folded on his breast, his head high and proud.

With a sudden impatient movement he snatched off that ridiculous swathing turban and helmet. His bullet-head gleamed in the sunshine.

Wilkie experienced a sudden wrenching in his stomach, as though he had twisted a gut, and then the ship, with a lurch, righted herself and floated serenely in the air of a different world.

Overside, the long gray rollers of a sea that stretched from horizon to horizon poured in lacings and patternings of green beneath their keel.

"Where?" yelled a dozen voices. Shouts and shocked cries arose. Pandemonium threatened to break out.



## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

Captain Gobli, his paunch shaking, rushed frantically about, quite unsure what to do. Charnock grabbed him, quieted him down. Wilkie heard words like: "Special dispensation," and: "Perfectly natural," and: "No fear before the men."

At twenty miles an hour the ship bore due south.

Again Gangly positioned himself. His breast rose and fell as he breathed in deep measured preparation.

Once more that jerk, that wrenching of his stomach, told Wilkie they had traveled to another world.

This time he looked over and saw wheat fields, reticulated, stretching from horizon to horizon. A long concrete road cut the wheat fields, bordered by telegraph poles. At a crossroad he saw a large signpost, unmistakably what was a gas station, a few automobiles raising dust. He thought the printing on the sign—large and bold—could have been: WICHITA—TOPEKA. But he couldn't be sure at the height and distance. He felt faint. Kansas! Could it be? Could he be home?

At twenty miles an hour, five hundred feet up, the ship of Durostorum sailed serenely through the air of the Midwest and the only Earthman aboard sweated it out, waiting to be hurled away from his home world into another alien Dimension.

This time the lurch was more severe than before.

Wilkie glanced quickly at Gangly, forgetting in his entranced preoccupation with his mission among the Dimensions all thoughts of Earth.

Gangly looked ill. His face had shrunk. Great globules of sweat rolled down his flaccid features. His bullet-head looked as though a bucket of water had been hurled over it. He staggered and grasped the struts of the wooden fighting tower for support.

"You all right?" Wilkie asked, concerned. He and Sharon ran to Gangly. Charnock joined them with Captain Gobli.

Gangly swallowed with difficulty. "I am—all right. It is difficult, transporting an entire ship of Durostorum and all her fighting men. But I can do it!"

Sharon brought a cloth and bathed Gangly's forehead and bullet-head. He smiled thanks.

"I have to find large Portals. The ship is big to move. . . . But the next one will be the one! Durostorum! The Hold of Graynor!"

Only then did Wilkie think to look over the side.

The ship moved above low lying cloud banks, flushed

pink and rose by the early sun; through the gaps lakes and rivers and forests were visible and yet half-enwrapped in coiling arms of vapor. Concentrations of round-domed buildings showed by the rivers, and canoes flashed sparkling paddles, churning the water.

A man yelled, quick and high. The sound of crossbows being hurriedly wound clanked around the decks.

Wilkie looked up. He gasped. Boring in toward the ship flew cat-like creatures, all banded orange fur and white whiskers, with bat-like wings that rose and fell with a frenzied beat. Insensately the flying felines hurled themselves at *Jade Lady* to be met by hurtling arrow and singing quarrel, by flashing blade and deadly thrusting pike.

Like a mammoth of the snows surrounded by snarling sabertooths, *Jade Lady* struggled on. Wilkie joined in, thrusting with his spear, ducking, feeling the quick fear clogging his throat, panting, anxious to be gone from this unexpectedly hostile Dimension.

His spear slid ineffectually over the orange banded fur of a giant flying feline falling fully on him. He rolled, managed a dabbing sort of baseball bat swipe, knocked the thing off him, saw with profound gulping thanks the sure pike point come spiking down. Sharon laughed, hurling the still-struggling aerial cat overboard off the head of the pike.

"You were slow that time, meamorol!"

He struggled up. Unexpectedly hostile Dimension? Don't let anyone fool you—all the Dimensions, but all of them—were hostile.

"Tripped," he said snappily.

Charnock's two-handed sword a circled disc of silver disposed of two, three more felines with each whirling vicious revolution. Charnock chanted as he fought, the first time Wilkie had heard that.

Gangly, the object they strove to protect by their violent exertions, sagged against the wooden fighting tower. He cringed back as a cat smashed against a strut by his head. That only the forepart of the cat struck near him made no difference to his flinching fear. That, Wilkie saw with a pang, was not like the old stubbornly immovable Gangly. Shifting such a mass as *Jade Lady* through the Dimensions was telling on Gangly's Porteurig stamina. The flying swarm, spitting and snarling, fell away from the ship.

Sagging back himself, J. T. Wilkie giggled. "What will

those people down below say when it rains bits and pieces of flying cat?"

Charnock began at once to wipe his six-foot blade, his face blazing with the battle lust.

Gangly swallowed and managed to husk out: "One more time. We will come out within the Hold of Graynor. You must do—do what you must. Leave me. I—I shall need time to recover."

Abruptly, terribly, horrifically, J. T. Wilkie understood a stark fact he had overlooked before.

If anything happened to Gangly—then he, J. T. Wilkie, would be stuck in another Dimension for the rest of his life.

This Porteur, this funny old coot called Gangly, was the only Key to Earth that Wilkie could call on now.

In whatever Dimension they sailed now, Gangly, as the Key to Durostorum, could bring them halfway home. There was always Sharon. . . .

"Hey," he said, fighting his own emotive thoughts. "What did you call me back then—meamoro?"

She glanced up with the self-same swiftness displayed by the flying felines. "I called you that?"

"I know the translator bands vary, they leave proper names, they alter some things, and I know Gangly has a special band fixed—but you did say meamoro."

"Well," she flashed. "Don't keep on repeating it like a loon!"

Refusing to tell Wilkie what the word might mean—he had ideas, what with the old heat of combat and jazz like that—she cleaned herself up. They all readied themselves for this final leap back into Durostorum.

The care with which Gangly had mapped their journey had been apparent in the heights of the ground—and the one ocean—over which they had materialized. The largest drop had been about two feet. Fervently, Wilkie prayed Gangly had made no mistake this time. Everyone waited. The crewmen of the ship of Durostorum had given up wondering about what was happening; miracles, all tied up with the evil they had come to Hold Graynor to fight. Some chuckled coarsely: "We're fighting fire with fire!"

Silently, Wilkie suspected that what motivated their sword arms was the tempting thought of plunder.

Upward of a thousand men and women manned the ship, for the people of Durostorum seemed to accept their womankind in battle as part of the natural order of war. Many

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

waited impatiently below decks, between the ranked batteries of ballistae, four decks to a broadside. Their fierce buzz of conversation acted like a drug, spurring men on. Gangly poised himself, drunk with exhaustion, half-dazed, half-blinded, still forcing on those uncanny powers to hurl this whole war-machine and its crew through invisible walls back to Durostorum.

*Jade Lady* swung to a halt and hung, unmoving, above those low-lying cloud banks below.

"Now!" shouted Gangly, hard and high and with frenzied fanatical effort.

The ship shuddered. Wilkie felt his bowels contract. He kept himself upright, grasping Sharon, looking out with open eyes he would not let blink.

The sunshine vanished. They hung now within a dim space of shadows, a narrow funnel-shaped pipe that stretched upward to an arching roof of stones and rocks fully four hundred feet above their heads. They were inside the old cone of the volcano.

The ship of Durostorum moved beneath them.

Over the side, narrowly visible, was just discernible the ground—the ground a bare twenty feet beneath their keel!

The crewmen gaped. Captain Gobli gaped. Gangly slumped exhausted and unconscious to the deck, his work accomplished.

At first only Charnock realized the inevitable.

"The ship!" he yelled. His swarthy face showed demonic determination. "We're going *up*!"

Still giddy, Wilkie understood.

The ships of Durostorum, with their ancient source of power, always floated five hundred above the ground. Now the ground was twenty feet below. And above—above was a roof of rock and stone, crudely lit by fissures and glowing fungi, four hundred and eighty feet above them.

They were going up—they were going up like an express elevator.

And when they hit . . .

"Everybody below decks!" screamed Charnock.

The ship surged, rising like a cork, like a rocket, like a bubble of air released from a sunken wreck. Everyone began a stampede below, choking the companionways. Wilkie grabbed Sharon, began to run for the sterncastle.

"Gangly!" yelled Wilkie. Charnock scooped up the unconscious Porteur, began to run after Wilkie and Sharon.

The roof swept down like the lid of a closing cauldron.

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

Charnock cannoned into Wilkie, bashed him stumbling forward into Sharon. They collapsed into the open doorways as—

The ship struck the roof. . . .

### XIV

WITH SOME measurable fraction of the force of an underground nuclear explosion *Jade Lady* burst through the crust of rock in the center of the floor of Hold Graynor.

The floor split open from the central point of impact, cracking like a shattered mosaic, tumbling, roaring, fountaining dust and rock chippings. Like some nightmare Aphrodite rising from the waves, debris crowned, *Jade Lady* soared aloft through the shattered wreckage of that rocky shell to float five hundred feet above the invisible ground of the cone bottom. Movement away from the hole she had so catastrophically created would bring her over the inner Hold floor and then, inevitably, she would be flung up again to hover at five hundred feet.

Now she hung in a tangled mass. Smashed, her back broken, her stern and forecastles stripped and flattened, her fighting top crushed like a child's matchstick castle, she dribbled debris into the chasm.

Shrieks and screams tore from her. Men and women, their holds slipping free, tumbled over to fall away below. Timber, ropes, furnishings, barrels, stores of all kinds, spilled from her shattered sides.

*Jade Lady*, quite literally, was falling to pieces around her power box.

Soon, all that floated in the air five hundred feet above the ground would be that small enigmatic box.

Perhaps it was that the four hoboes of the Dimensions had not quite plunged bodily into the sterncastle and lay sprawled on the threshold that they were saved of the few who lived through that debacle.

They saw the sterncastle crush down like a carton be-

neath a foot. The roof of rock, before it split, squashed down on stern and forecastle and left, for a minute proportion of time, a free space over the waste between them. In that open area the four lived.

With rocks sliding away from the deck, stripping with them ballistae, men, women, barrels, ropes, planks, the uproar choked and deafened and blinded them. When at last, thankfully, *Jade Lady* rose into the sunshine streaming wreckage they could stagger up and gulp and look about them, dazed and bewildered—but alive.

Spitting dust, Charnock glared over the side.

"We've got to get off the ship and over that crust of rock before it all goes!" he snapped. Even as they watched more of the rock crust that was both roof through which they had burst and floor to the Hold cracked and fell away. Of the over thousand souls aboard *Jade Lady* perhaps four hundred now crowded to the shattered rails.

Planks, ropes, spars were thrown out. Rickety bridges were constructed. The area lay directly in the center of the Hold and above them in a complete circle towered the bastions of Graynor. Over the rocks toward them ran parties of fighting men, their weapons flashing.

"No time left now!" grunted Charnock. He grabbed Gangly, shouted at Wilkie, and charged for the rail.

Across a raffle of wreckage, all moving and swaying, their feet slipping and sliding with heart-stopping danger, they clambered across to solid ground. Others followed. A band gathered, ready weapons brandished.

"We've no time to get involved in a fight," gasped Wilkie. Gangly was reviving, rolling his eyes, moaning. "We came for that damn Portal—and that's what we'll get!"

"Right." Charnock pointed toward a cleft in the rocks a hundred yards off, away from that shattered cone opening. "Come on!"

In a bunch, Gangly being shoved along among them, they set off. Other people followed their move. A large, redheaded, beautiful girl with smooth clear features, ran with a young freckle-faced man whose brandished ax indicated clearly his capacity to use it. They hared after Wilkie, and the swarthy-faced crewmen of the destroyed ship of Durostorum chased after them.

The cleft led to a tunnel angling up toward the ramparts.

Captain Gobli, his paunch heaving, shouted: "To the shipyards! If we hold a berthing space for our own ships, we take the Hold!"

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

That had been the plan, to secure a landing stage within one of the clefts so that the prowling ships could sail in and their crews fight their way up the flights of stairs to the ramparts within the Hold. It might still work. Charnock drew Wilkie back and, with Sharon and Gangly, they watched the others roar off.

"They'll mayhap win their battle, but we've the Con-  
tessa's fight to win," snarled Charnock, his face showing his agony at this betrayal of fellow countrymen.

Up the stone corridors they ran, their feet slapping echoes from the walls. Once or twice Wilkie turned with vulpine sharpness, thinking he heard the following pad of feet, but each time the corridor returned an empty hollowness to his searching gaze.

Charnock hauled them into a stone-cut chamber with heaps of sacks piled at one end. Trails of corn ears showed golden tears in the lamplight.

"Right, Gangly. How do you feel? It's all up to you now—again."

Gangly swallowed. He rubbed a hand over his bullet-head. He shivered. "I—I wondered if I could do it. By thunder—but I did it, though! All that mass, a whole ship of Durostorum and crew—I moved it all through a Portal!"

"More than one Portal," said Wilkie softly. "But now, me old fruit, we have to find the Portal where the Por-vone have set up."

"It's about," nodded Gangly. "I can sense it near. They would have kept it well concealed. Very well hidden."

"But you can find it for us, Gangly, can't you?" The quick eagerness in Sharon's words, the intent thrusting posture of her head, the golden hair bound up now beneath the burgonet with still enough to hang down like a golden curtain about her ears, surprised J. T. Wilkie.

The Hold of Graynor had been thrown into confusion by that abrupt incursion of a ship of Durostorum. Men ranged within the citadel seeking the intruders. More than once the party had to skip quickly into shadowed hiding to avoid flaming brands and menacing weapons.

Yet Gangly led them on a straight path, following that uncanny instinct that told him the exact location of a Gate to another Dimension.

Inevitably, they met guards.

Whirling his great sword in two-handed combat, Charnock leaped forward. Blurring to dizzying speed, the long blade lopped through arms and upflung shields, decapitated,

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

sank deeply into inadequately armored bodies. Wilkie and Sharon with their spears went in hard, prodding and thrusting, clearing away the guards whose slaving attempts to pull down Charnock from the side all fell away in red ruin. Even Gangly, wielding a stump of pike shaft, cracked a few heads.

The guards, mere mortal men, gave way.

Only one, a giant wielding a sword that could have been the sister blade to Charnock's own, gave them trouble. Then the Contessa's bargeman showed his mettle. The long blades rang and sang as they clashed. In and out and round and round the fighters danced in their duel of death. Tough as was his opponent, the man facing Charnock did not possess that evil-faced man's sheer driven determination. Like a barracuda churning through a victim fish Charnock whittled his opponent down and then, with a final swishing blow, struck him to the ground.

As Gangly dived for the dropped two-handed sword, Wilkie saw Sharon pushing something back beneath her bronze armor. She smiled bravely at him.

"I thought, then—" she said, faltering.

"We're there," said Gangly, surging upright with the double to Charnock's sword gripped in his fists. "Through that oaken door. . . ."

Just what Wilkie expected inside the room he could not have said. Magic, sorcery, super-science, he just had no clear idea. What he saw, while at first glance seemed mundane, shrieked at him with the complete failure of their quest.

That square opening, about five feet tall and two feet across, showed the complete faceless blackness of utter nothingness. Blackness like that looked indecent. Set into the far wall the Porvone Portal of Life leered at them across the tessellated paving of the room. At its side a control panel, small, the size of a high quality tape recorder, sat on a spindly-legged table. From the panel thick cables coiled to the base of the Portal and to a power source keyed in to busbars and a frame fronting a dynamo and generator crouching in the far recesses of the room. With that rig running no wonder the stories of demons and possession were rife in the Hold.

But the thing that held J. T. Wilkie in a stasis of regret at complete failure was held in the hands of the three men who turned at this unceremonious entrance. Their



faces were not those of Durostorum. Smooth, well-fed, hard and merciless, they were the faces of scientists geared to an evil regime. Or, so shattered J. T. Wilkie considered with sick despair.

In their hands these men held unmistakable high-energy weapons, barrels of coiled baffles, cone-shaped muzzles, butts of plastic slick under the lights that were not oil lamps or rushlights but brilliant fluorescents.

Charnock, recognizing the death in those weapons, drew himself up, his bloodied sword high and glittering.

The men wore simple high-collared tunics with many jewels emblazoned in arcane patterns across their chests. They frowned now, as though interrupted.

"You know it is death to enter here," their leader said in a soft snake-like voice.

Through stiff lips, Wilkie blurted out: "Haven't you heard the racket outside? The Hold is taken! The enemy have broken through!"

"Still it is death for you—"

Directly to Gangly's rear, where he stood with his foolish great double-handed sword upraised, Sharon stood quietly, breathing shallowly, her face set and hating. Wilkie saw her reach into her armor where she had pushed something back and draw out what was, as unmistakably as the weapons held by these servants of the Porvone, a handgun. Chunky of butt, with a smooth flared barrel, the thing looked compact and deadly. She lifted it, leveled it, leaned around Gangly and fired three times.

Three lances of intense magenta light streaked out, making Wilkie blink the tears back. His vision coruscated with flashing afterimages. Where the three men had stood toppled now three cadavers with heads and arms and legs and not much else.

The stink of heat-flashed burning meat filled the room.

"You—!" shouted Charnock, shocked.

"That's my girl, Sharon!" yelled Wilkie, enraptured.

Sharon disgustedly wrinkled her nose. "You know I met my people, J. T. They gave me a weapon as insurance. It has not been necessary to use it before."

"Huh? Well, I suppose those fights we went through—no," he finished lamely. "No, I suppose not."

With an eagerness that sat strangely on his misshapen form, Gangly, the professional Porteur, crossed lumberingly to the Porvone Portal of Life. He put down the great

sword. He ran his hands over the control panel lovingly, yet disdainfully.

"This is it!" he said, with deep feeling. "This box contains all that is necessary. I was fully instructed by the Contessa. That Slikitter knew what he was talking about. The box takes power from there"—he pointed at the dynamo and generator—"and sets up a force that creates an electro-mechanical pathway between the Dimensions through a Gate."

"I wonder—?" began Charnock.

Gangly nodded. "Wayne will be waiting at the other side. He had the easier task. As soon as this Porvone Portal is disconnected, he will know we have succeeded."

He didn't bother to switch off the portable control panel. His thick fingers simply ripped out the connections.

Where the achingly black emptiness of that opening onto another world had been now showed merely a deeply-cut recess into the wall. Marks showed clearly where the wall had been cut away and built around the Gate.

Gangly took up the control box by its carrying strap.

"We have merely to position this by any Gate we choose, connect a power supply, and we have a working Porvone Portal of Life."

"Just what the Contessa ordered!" chuckled happy J. T. Wilkie with fatuous satisfaction.

"What the Contessa ordered!" repeated Charnock in a different voice. He shifted his great sword to his left hand, moved in a blurring of speed, took Sharon's little gun away with a single contemptuous twist. "Now!"

"Huh?" huffed shocked J. T. Wilkie.

"Oh, J. T.!" said Sharon, white-faced, rigid, frightened. "My people told me stories of your Contessa—stories I could not believe because you trusted her and I love you—oh, J. T. I think that now we—"

"What about the Contessa?" said J. T.

"My orders, J. T., from the Contessa herself. I am sorry. I find I do like you, J. T., and you, Sharon. We have been through a lot together; but—but the Contessa!" Charnock's evil face, that J. T. Wilkie thought he had seen through as merely a hard world-daunting mask to the essential man beneath, now clearly showed anguish and agony at what he must do. "I dare not disobey the Contessa! I must kill you, J. T., and you, too, now, Sharon. I must!"

"But why, Charnock? Why?" Wilkie pleaded. "I'm loyal

to the Contessa. You could go, take the Portal, leave us here—”

The bitter agony writhed on Charnock's devil-mask.

“No, J. T. You do not understand the power of the Contessa. Yes, she is evil, cruel, everything a man must hate, but she holds me in thrall. There are powers I do not understand, forces that compel me to act, to do things I shudder at doing! Oh, J. T., when I kill you, you will be a free man, unlike me!”

“For the sake of our comradeship, show us mercy!”

“For the sake of the Contessa di Montevarchi, I must kill you now!”

“No!”

“I must serve the Contessa! I must!”

“The Contessa—the bitch!” The new hating voice had no time to swing all their heads around in shocked surprise, so locked in their bitter and desperate argument and blind to the open door, before a man catapulted in and, bloody ax held high, charged straight for Wilkie.

In galvanic reaction Wilkie dodged and brought his spear up. The ax clanged against the metal haft, twisted, sent the men spinning.

“Tony!” screamed a girl's voice.

A sliver of steel hurtled through the air, cracked the gun from Charnock's hand. A redheaded girl bounded in, screaming something about a frog's more disgusting habits, took a great hack with a sword at Charnock, whose left-handed parry came up only just in time.

Sharon went diving for her gun. Gangly shoved himself back out of the fray. With a fending-off prod of his spear at Tony, Wilkie brought the shaft back and bashed the butt into Charnock's solar plexus. The big man grunted and, apparently not the slightest hurt or slowed up, started a lethal swipe at Wilkie's head. Desperately trying to duck that long blade, Wilkie thought his chips had finally ran out.

Charnock stilled. The blade hung, then, slowly, lowered. Panting, Wilkie scrambled up. The gun in Sharon's hand centered steadily on Charnock's midriff.

“No more, Charnock. And you two—still!”

“Now,” puffed Wilkie. “We can look at the situation more calmly.” He clunked his spear on the floor. “You,” he said to the freckle-faced man with the sandy hair. “I remember you, Tony. And you,” to the girl. “When you escaped down the abandoned mine shaft in the city of

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

diamonds in Irunium. That seems a long time ago! But—but you're different—different—"

"I'm Nyllee. Sure, we're different. We stayed with the Wizards of Senchuria. They change people—for the better."

Charnock moved and the gun flicked and he was still.

Tony said, "We were separated from those who escaped, Valcini. We were caught in a flood and found we were in a Dimension called Durostorum. Nyllee here always likes a fight and so we signed up. There didn't seem anything else to do—and we had an idea there might be some hocus-pocus with Portals going on here, give us a chance to get back. We saw you aboard *Jade Lady* and bided our time to kill you." He finished with bitter self-mockery. "We should have killed you as soon as we saw you, Valcini, and you, bargeman."

"I'm not a Valcini," snapped Wilkie.

"You work for the Contessa—"

"Do I?" He looked at Sharon. He thought a tumbled riot of new and painful thoughts. "I don't know—not any more."

"When we've finished telling you about her you'll hate yourself so much you'll slit your own throat."

"The Contessa will not be mocked," said Charnock, hoarsely. "She has ways of knowing what goes on in the Dimensions. She will squeeze you all so dry, you—"

"She tried to destroy the Wizards," Nyllee burst out violently, comparing the Contessa to a frog's debauched night affairs. "She is evil, vile, she may have succeeded, we do not know—we had weapons, but they exhausted their charge, the panecos. Our friends—" She sounded distraught in the aftermath.

"I heard her mention," said Wilkie, "that she failed to destroy the Wizards of Senchuria. She said something about—the Infalgon, was it? A man called Scobie Redfern. They failed."

"Ah!" Both Nyllee and Tony expanded, smiling.

Charnock ground out words like a Joy Continuous-miner spitting coal. "Are you going to kill me now, J. T.?"

That thought was not rollicking J. T.'s idea of fun.

Gangly, a silent observer, spoke softly. "Charnock dare not return to the Contessa without the Porvone Portal, J. T. As for me—" His ridiculous head moved as though dismissing his own importance.

"Yes, J. T. Kill me now. At least I will gain my freedom!"

"The Contessa," choked Wilkie. A blind fool? A de-

luded lapdog? A cretinous simpleton? Yes, oh, yes, he had been all those things—and more. But kill Charnock?

Sharon's blue eyes did not leave Charnock, but Wilkie knew she was leaving this decision to him.

"No," he said at last. "Gangly, you can put these people where they want to go." He turned to Nyllee and Tony. "Where—?"

"Montrado," said Tony.

"Narlingha," said Nyllee.

They checked, looked at each other, then, together, said, "Senchuria."

About to reply in his lumbering way, Gangly checked. His pointed head turned, long before the others heard the clap of air from the recess in the rock wall.

A man appeared through the Gate where the Porvone Portal of Life had been erected. A bulky, brutal-faced man clad in black armor, wielding a sword. In his belt over the armor power-weapons hung in holsters that swayed with the violence of his movements.

"Come on, you stupid steechla!" he rasped out.

From the glittery chain attached to his left wrist a young, pallid, half-naked girl drooped, her face twisted with pain. The iron necklet cut deeply through the wisp of pink silk at her throat. Her eyes were closed.

"Wayne!" shouted Charnock, high and savage.

"What! Traitors! Treachery!" Wayne's bull roar battered across the room. He rapped the sword away and with crackling speed drew an energy-weapon. He leveled it at Sharon. But that moment of weapon-change had been enough. Sharon fired first. Her magenta blast of power smashed the shadows from the room in a ferment of brilliance, missed Wayne, cut through the glittery chain.

"Put us back, filthy steechla!" roared Wayne. He reached a massive left hand for the soft shoulder of the girl. Her eyes flew open. Charnock jumped for the recess and on the way snatched the portal control panel box from Gangly's nerveless hand. Gangly fell back with a cry.

Wayne, the girl Porteur, and Charnock, vanished.

The silence smoked with drained energies.

Then a smooth, cultivated, easy-paced voice said, "You are quite all right, Sharon?"

Men stood in the doorway, men dressed in neat silvery-gray tunics and pants with calf-high boots, men with hard yet confident, friendly faces, men with heavier weapons

from the same stable as the magenta-beam weapon given to Sharon.

She laughed, a choked cry that released her tension and emotion.

"Oh, yes, Lybore, oh, yes, I am all right!"

They crowded into the room, these men from Leon, tough, patrician, in command.

"We seem to have opened up a whole new volume of Dimensions," said the leader, Lybore, smiling at Sharon. "A volume in which there are many trade opportunities. And there is this Contessa we warned you about, Sharon. Now you perhaps are ready?"

She looked at J. T. Wilkie.

"These people," she said to Lybore, indicating Nyllee and Tony. "We are obligated to transport them to the Dimension of their choice. This man, Gangly, is free to go where he lists."

"Ah, so. A Porteur, then?" said Lybore.

"Yes. And a friend."

"And this man—this rather ragged and frazzled specimen of humanity?"

Sharon laughed. "This is J. T. Wilkie. I imagine he wants to go to a Dimension called Earth."

"Well, now," said blossoming J. T. Wilkie. "The Contessa's got her Porvone Portal of Life. And I know her for what she is—or some of it, according to poor old Charnock. But he'll be okay now."

Gangly nodded solemnly.

"The Contessa—I feel regret, and yet, if she is so evil, if she's so, so—"

Gangly said gently, "She is, J. T."

"Well, then, I'm well rid of her. But—hell and damnation! I've lost all that pay that was coming to me."

"You were facing the ultimate double cross you were sure to get if you went back."

"Um. Yes. But—" He looked at Sharon. She lowered her eyelids, a most uncharacteristic and artificial gesture for her.

"I think, though, before you guys drop me off back in good old Hodson on Earth, that I'll take a little swing through the Dimensions with Sharon." He tried to look modest, did dame-chasing J. T. Wilkie. "We've a little unfinished business to attend to."

He took Sharon's hand. She squeezed it firmly.

## THE SHIPS OF DUROSTORUM

"Well," he said with a huge soulful sigh. "I guess that's my dame-chasing days finished."

They went out together, out from that Hold of Durostorum, to journey across the Dimensions to home—wherever that home might be, Leon or Earth.

**"MUST-READING" FOR FANS OF**

**MODERN SCIENCE FICTION!**

---

**91353 — 95¢**

**WORLD'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION, First Series**

edited by Donald A. Wollheim and Terry Carr

The first of this now-famous series of anthologies, featuring JOHN BRUNNER, PHILIP K. DICK, FRITZ LEIBER and many more top writers.

**91354 — 95¢**

**WORLD'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION, Second Series**

edited by Donald A. Wollheim and Terry Carr

Exciting tales of wonder by ARTHUR C. CLARKE, HARLAN ELLISON, CLIFFORD D. SIMAK, and a full dozen others.

**91355 — 95¢**

**WORLD'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION, Third Series**

edited by Donald A. Wollheim and Terry Carr

Top science fiction adventures by FREDERIK POHL, BRIAN W. ALDISS, R. A. LAFFERTY, and featuring two of ROGER ZELAZNY's finest novelettes.

**91356 — 95¢**

**WORLD'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION, Fourth Series**

edited by Donald A. Wollheim and Terry Carr

Tales of wonder and adventure by ISAAC ASIMOV, SAMUEL R. DELANY, LARRY NIVEN, and including HARLAN ELLISON's Hugo Award winning *I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream*.

---

Available from Ace Books (Dept. MM), 1120 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10036. Send price of book plus 10¢ handling fee for each copy.



**23140 — 60¢**

**FEAR THAT MAN** by Dean R. Koontz

**TOYMAN** by E. C. Tubb

**77710 — 75¢**

**THE SPACE BARBARIANS** by Mack Reynolds

**THE EYES OF BOLSK** by Robert Lory

**81680 — 75¢**

**TONIGHT WE STEAL THE STARS** by John Jakes

**THE WAGERED WORLD** by L. Janifer & S. J. Treibich

**12140 — 75¢**

**CRADLE OF THE SUN** by Brian Stableford

**THE WIZARDS OF SENCHURIA** by Kenneth Bulmer

**42800 — 75¢**

**KALIN** by E. C. Tubb

**THE BANE OF KANTHOS** by Alex Dain

**23775 — 75¢**

**TREASURE OF TAU CETI** by John Rackham

**FINAL WAR** by K. M. O'Donnell

**42900 — 75¢**

**KAR KABALLA** by George H. Smith

**TOWER OF THE MEDUSA** by Lin Carter

**66160 — 75¢**

**PHOENIX SHIP** by W. & L. Richmond

**EARTHRIM** by Nick Kamin

**89250 — 75¢**

**THE WINDS OF DARKOVER** by Marion Z. Bradley

**THE ANYTHING TREE** by John Rackham

<b>CODE DUELLO</b> by Mack Reynolds	<b>11360 — 60¢</b>
<b>THE AGE OF RUIN</b> by John M. Faucette	
<b>THE FALL OF THE DREAM MACHINE</b> by Dean R. Koontz	<b>22600 — 60¢</b>
<b>THE STAR VENTURERS</b> by Kenneth Bulmer	
<b>THE RIM GODS</b> by A. Bertram Chandler	<b>72400 — 60¢</b>
<b>THE HIGH HEX</b> by L. Janifer & S. J. Treibich	
<b>THE GREEN MILLENNIUM</b> by Fritz Leiber	<b>30300 — 60¢</b>
<b>NIGHT MONSTERS</b> by Fritz Leiber	
<b>IPOMOEA</b> by John Rackham	<b>37250 — 60¢</b>
<b>THE BRASS DRAGON</b> by Marion Zimmer Bradley	
<b>FEAR THAT MAN</b> by Dean R. Koontz	<b>23140 — 60¢</b>
<b>TOYMAN</b> by E. C. Tubb	
<b>THE SPACE BARBARIANS</b> by Mack Reynolds	<b>77710 — 75¢</b>
<b>THE EYES OF BOLSK</b> by Robert Lory	
<b>TONIGHT WE STEAL THE STARS</b> by John Jakes	<b>81680 — 75¢</b>
<b>THE WAGERED WORLD</b> by Laurence Janifer & S. J. Treibich	
<b>CRADLE OF THE SUN</b> by Brian Stableford	<b>12140 — 75¢</b>
<b>THE WIZARDS OF SENCHURIA</b> by Kenneth Bulmer	

---

Available from Ace Books (Dept. MM), 1120 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10036. Send price of book, plus 10¢ handling fee.

**81150 — 60¢**

**THE TIME MERCENARIES** by Philip E. High  
**ANTHROPOL** by Louis Trimble

**52500 — 60¢**

**MERCENARY FROM TOMORROW** by Mack Reynolds  
**THE KEY TO VENUDINE** by Kenneth Bulmer

**78370 — 60¢**

**STAR QUEST** by Dean R. Koontz  
**DOOM OF THE GREEN PLANET** by Emil Petaja

**14260 — 60¢**

**DERAI** by E. C. Tubb  
**THE SINGING STONES** by Juanita Coulson

**14280 — 60¢**

**DESTINATION: SATURN** by Grinnell and Carter  
**INVADER ON MY BACK** by Philip E. High

**42800 — 75¢**

**KALIN** by E. C. Tubb  
**THE BANE OF KANTHOS** by Alex Dain

**23775 — 75¢**

**FINAL WAR** by K. M. O'Donnell  
**TREASURE OF TAU CETI** by John Rackham

**42900 — 75¢**

**KAR KABALLA** by George H. Smith  
**TOWER OF THE MEDUSA** by Lin Carter

**66160 — 75¢**

**PHOENIX SHIP** by W. & L. Richmond  
**EARTHRIM** by Nick Kamin

---

Available from Ace Books (Dept. MM), 1120 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10036. Send price of book, plus 10¢ handling fee per copy.

Order by book number.